

**The Conference “Palestinian Workers Challenging the Occupation”, organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) was held in London on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2006.**

Amongst the sponsoring unions were UNISON, GMB, TGWU, PCS, CWU, RMT, NATFHE, NUM, ASLEF, TSSA, UCATT, NUJ, FBU, CYWU, Community and SERTUC. The combined membership of these unions represents the overwhelming majority of workers in the 6 million strong TUC.

The Conference, which was held at Congress House, the headquarters of the British Trades Union Congress, attended by 250 trade unionists and sponsored by major British trade unions, was addressed by a number of eminent speakers including Frances O’Grady, Deputy General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress which represents over 6 million trade unionists in Britain. She invited the PGFTU to meet with the TUC to discuss what support could be given to the PGFTU by trade unions in Britain.

Shaher Sae’ d, General Secretary of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) spoke and welcomed the holding of the Conference. He outlined the problems facing Palestinian workers as a result of the inhuman policies of the Government of Israel. He said that whilst official figures state that over 35% of workers are unemployed the truth is that by the time the Apartheid Wall is completed in 2007 it could be as high as 50%. He explained that over 60% of Palestinians are now living below the poverty line. The Apartheid Wall and the many checkpoints set up by the Israeli Government prevent Palestinian workers getting to work.

He called for an international campaign of solidarity with the Palestinian people to demand that the Israeli Government immediately withdraw from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem which they illegally occupy in contradiction with international law and United Nations resolutions.

Shaher received a standing ovation from the delegates present expressing the solidarity of British trade unionists and showing the determination of those present to respond to his call.

Willy Madisha, President of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) who is also President of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) drew comparisons between the situation for the Palestinian people and the situation in South Africa under Apartheid. He said, “Apartheid was characterised by killings, hangings, disappearances, arrests, exile, confiscations, inferior education, rapes and the creation of Bantustans. All this was like a Sunday picnic compared to what is happening to the Palestinian people.” He went on to say that Apartheid was a brutal and repressive regime but those fighting Apartheid had not faced attacks by F16 fighter planes and helicopter gunships nor had there been a repressive Wall like the one that now stole more and more land from the Palestinian people.

Willy quoted Archbishop Desmond Tutu who said, ““I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at roadblocks. It reminded me of what happened to us in South Africa, where they battered us and heckled us, and took joy in humiliating us. My heart aches.

Have my Jewish friends forgotten their own history?  
Have they turned their backs on their own profound religious traditions?"

These words by Desmond Tutu, made after his visit to Israel, summarise the vivid parallels between Apartheid Israel and the erstwhile Apartheid South Africa.

Willy Madisha asked, "Why are all the things done to Apartheid South Africa not being done to Israel?" He continued, "I say with confidence that Israel is an Apartheid state. The trade union movement must move beyond resolutions, otherwise history will look back on us and spit on our graves."

He called for an international campaign of economic sanctions and boycotts against the Government of Israel like the ones that had been used against the racist South African Apartheid regime.

He concluded his remarks by recalling a promise he had made to the late President Yasser Arafat. Willy called for an international Conference in solidarity with the Palestinian people and pledged his union's support for the calling of that conference.

The Conference was addressed by Nadia Hamdan Saad, for the Women's Department of the PGFTU. Nadia spoke about the particular situation of women under the Israeli illegal occupation. She said that Palestinian women are at the very centre of the circle of human struggle, calling for a resolution by peaceful means of this long-standing conflict.

She said that women in the PGFTU believe that the new Palestinian government should:-

- respect human rights, women's rights and labor rights.
- take steps to reduce poverty, and unemployment
- Strengthen women's participation in political life.
- Promote Gender Equality and equal job opportunities.

In addition to the Conference hearing from speakers from the occupied territories, the plight of Palestinian refugees was also recognised and there was a clear call for the right of Palestinian refugees to return. Amongst the speakers was Jafar Farah of the Mossawa Centre who told the Conference about the treatment of Palestinians who live inside Israel. He described how there was institutional discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, less opportunities in employment, education, housing and many other fields of society. He said that it was important to remember all Palestinians – those in the Occupied Territories, those in the refugees camps and in exile worldwide and those inside Israel who had not been driven out.

Frances O'Grady said that she wanted to "reaffirm the TUC's commitment to and friendship with the PGFTU. We are eager to deepen and strengthen our mutual relationship. I would like to invite Shaher and the PGFTU to meet with the TUC formally, in the next few months, to discuss what form that deeper solidarity should take."

She said that the TUC supported the right of the Palestinian people to a viable independent Palestinian state and for a negotiated settlement.

She said, “This is an important time for Palestine and Israel. Palestine has just held democratic elections and Israel will do the same later this month. Many may regret the result in Palestine. But the result must be respected. Democracy is and must remain a matter for the people - it is not for other governments to pick and choose. In turn, Israel's right to exist must be respected. And alongside securing peace, we must demand that both governments, of course, respect workers’ rights – including their right to free and independent trade unions.”

The Conference was also addressed by a wide range of leading British trade unionists who all expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people. Many of the speakers called upon the British Government to make sure that money was paid by the British Government and European Union to the Palestinian Authority in order to maintain the jobs and services provided by the 150,000 staff employed by them. All condemned the theft by the Israeli Government of the money that belonged to the Palestinian Authority and called for the immediate return of that money to the Palestinian people.

Amongst those who spoke many came from trade unions which had been supporting the Palestinian cause for many years. Keith Sonnet, Deputy General Secretary of the one and a half million strong UNISON, representing local government and health workers in Britain, described the work that his union had undertaken with their sister union in Palestine. Ruth Winters, President of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) spoke about the links between the FBU and firefighters in Palestine.

In a powerful speech in support of the Palestinian people Barry Camfield, Assistant General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, which has over 800,000 members, condemned those who accused people who supported the cause of the Palestinian people of being anti-jewish. He spoke about the long record of the British trade union movement with its history of fighting fascism going back over 70 years right up to the present day. He said that those who fought injustice against Jews inflicted by the Nazis should also be fighting the injustice imposed on the Palestinian people by the Government of Israel.

Billy Hayes General Secretary of the Communications Workers Union (CWU) declared his support for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and called upon all those present to join PSC and affiliate their union branches, regions and national unions to the campaign. He called on the British Government to engage with the newly elected Palestinian Authority adding that the “official boycott must end”.

Hugh Lanning, Deputy General Secretary of PCS, highlighted the need to mobilise for a change in public opinion around the world in order for the campaign to succeed. He said the so-called balanced reporting of the British and Western media of an unbalanced conflict which has, at best, confused readers and viewers and, at worst, given them a skewed understanding of the Palestinian/Israeli situation because of bias towards Israeli views.

Bernard Regan, Trade Union Officer of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, said that the attempt to stifle those who defended the Palestinian people was like the McCarthyism of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. He criticised the British Government's notion of "even-handedness" and said that there was no equality between the occupiers and the occupied. He pointed out the long history of collusion between the British Government and the state of Israel going back into the 1950s when the British Government had assisted the Israeli Government in setting up the Dimona nuclear station and had sold plutonium to the Israeli Government in 1966 behind the backs of elected Labour Government ministers.

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign presented their statement to the Conference and asked those present to take that statement with them and consider how to build on it. The conference supported the call for more action in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

(Palestine Solidarity Campaign intends to publish a full report on the Conference including the full texts of all the major speeches at the Conference. Please contact the PSC for full details about membership, affiliation and activity and for copies of the Conference pamphlet.)