



Palestine: A new Union is born.

The New Unions are officially recognized as trade union confederation

Saturday, March 19, the Palestine New Federation of Trade Unions (New Unions) celebrated their official recognition as trade union federation by the Palestinian Authorities, and at the same time held their annual congress, voting for a new union council and executive committee.

There are a number of requirements in Palestine to be met to be recognized as a nationwide union. The Union must cover several geographic areas and branches, and include a sufficient number of local unions. New Unions has been working for several years to be registered. Today the confederation is uniting 26 local unions in all of the 10 West Bank districts and represent around 10 000 workers from all sectors.

The founding congress event was packed with a large number of representatives from the members of the New Unions, and representatives from a large spectrum of political and social forces addressed the New Unions with their messages of support. There were between 200-250 people present, of them about 25% were women, and many were youth.

The **Palestine Committee of Norway, the Trade Union Section/Workmates**, participated with seven guests, representing also three big Norwegian Trade Unions.

After hard work, a lot of toil and many obstacles, the New Unions finally reached an important goal. The recognition gives them a completely different voice and greater influence in the trade union discussions now taking place in Palestine, where the struggle for Palestine's social legislation, the Social Security Act, is one of the central issues.

Everybody stressed the hope that the New Unions will bring new force to the class struggle in Palestine and strengthen the national struggle for self-determination.



A short background

The origins of New Unions dates back to the land workers' Union, the General Union of Workers Associations in the Food Industries and Agriculture, in Tulkarem. This is a union with a long tradition, from back in the 50's.

In 1990, an agreement was signed between the different political parties, stating that the various labor movements should unite in Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) under PLO frames. The management of this unified trade union movement was put together with a representation divided between the political parties, according to strength. This coordination did not go so well, partly because it did not take into account the democratic life of the various unions'.

The Land Workers Union in Tulkarem was appointed a new leadership from the party Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). It was PGFTU who was selecting the leaders, without considering the leadership which the Land Workers Union had elected themselves. The strategy of PGFTU's was to appoint leaders from any political party in the PLO that managed to handle the union and have control. This undemocratic method did not fall well with agricultural workers. Union activists with desire for a democratic and member-controlled grass root organization had enough of this political dictation. Therefore they summoned a meeting in Tulkarem in 2006, where they established the first union in New Unions.



The Palestinian labor movement has a long and proud history. From its inception in the early 1920s, and until the Nakba 1948 it grew in strength. Palestinian unions fought both for the rights of Palestinian workers and against the Zionist discrimination. During the great rebellion in 1936, "the longest strike in history", and during the different phases in the later occupation, the Palestinian trade union movement played a leading and vital role in the popular resistance against the occupiers.



New Union considers itself as bearers of this tradition, and they raise the critically important question whether it is possible to rebuild struggling unions. The need for a union that is independent of the political parties in Palestine is certainly true. Today's unions and workers need highly skilled, dedicated and determined trade unionists, with both a trade unionist and a national agenda. They need unions working against the occupation, not party-appointed bureaucrats who are dependent on the government.

Reason for celebrating

New Unions has so far succeeded. If we look at what they have achieved, in strikes, in reaching out to the working people in Palestine, we admire and congratulate the union workers with their new status as recognized player in Palestinian trade union struggle. The founding Congress was therefore held with fanfare and great atmosphere.



Muhammad Jawabreh, a long standing unionist and one of the co-founders of the New Unions, gave the opening remarks of the congress and declared the birth of this new progressive trade union, which works to achieve the right to a free life with dignity for all workers and keeps committed to the legacy of the Palestinian national and class struggle for justice, democracy and freedom

Nasser Qatami, deputy of the Ministry of Labour, congratulated the New Union for the official recognition as a trade union confederation. He wished them success and expressed the readiness of the Ministry to cooperate in all areas of trade union work, and facilitate the work of the union in order to achieve the goals they have been established.

He emphasized the importance of trade union pluralism in order to support the national and social project and support the Palestinian people.

Bassam al-Salhi, secretary-general of the Palestinian People's Party, PPP, emphasized the development and support of the union work to strengthen its role in defending of the interests of workers and to improve their living conditions and the achievement of social justice. He underlined that there is no contradiction between a diversity of unions and confederations and unity in the class struggle.

Omar Shehadeh, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, PFLP, conveying the greetings of Secretary General Ahmad Saadat and his deputy, Abu Ahmed Fouad. He underlined their full support to the New Unions and the establishment of the new confederation. This will form a concrete step towards bringing the trade union movement in Palestine back on the right track and to reinforce the international solidarity with the Palestinian people and working class. Shehadeh emphasized the importance of the Palestinian uprising and its goal, and that the struggle will continue till the end of occupation and settlements.

Thomas Grønn from the Palestine Committee of Norway and the Trade Union Solidarity activists in Norwegian 'Workmates' addressed the congress reiterating their support for the New Unions. He promised and emphasized that the Workmates will continue to support the struggle of the Palestinian people and their resistance to the occupation and the settlements, through boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns. This includes efforts to build a boycott campaign in Norwegian Trade union movement of the Israeli trade union confederation Histadrut. This organization has historically and up to today played a key role in supporting and facilitating Israeli policies of discrimination and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people and occupation and colonization of their land.



Adnan Dagher, a veteran unionist, reminded the congress of the long history of the Palestinian labour movement and the role played by the trade union movement in the national and social field. He called the members of NU to learn and recover union work to achieve the rights of the workers. He expressed confidence that the New Unions may recover the leading role of the workers struggle and trade unionism within the national movement and may revive the class struggle within Palestine.

Finally, **Mohammad Bladi**, the President of the Constituent Committee of the NU thanked the audience and the participants and everybody who has contributed to the establishment of the New Unions, and who provided support to NU until this conference, all those that over the years have dedicated their time and struggle and energies in the long process. He outlined the past and current work of the union to defend workers' rights within the factories, at the Israeli workers crossings and in the court systems.



Bladi, in his closing remarks, talked about the stages of the establishment by adopting the workers' issues, how the official unions have abandoned them, which pushed for the need to build a new trade union organization. He stated the program of the new union, as depending on the working class, volunteerism, democracy and independence, which would enable the workers to struggle in order to stop the violation of their dignity and disregard their rights, and stop unwarranted fees for those who are working in Israel. New Unions will be set to retrieve the member fees collected by Histadrut and shared between the Histadrut and a number of Palestinian trade unions.

Bladi emphasized that they want unions that can struggle in order to apply the labor law, the minimum wage, the reduction of fatal work injuries, the creation of a labor court and a Social Security Act which is fair and just.

He reminded everybody of the mission of the union and to always keep in mind: Defend and achieve labour and national rights for the Palestinian working class and its principles of unity, class consciousness, democracy and autonomy.

After the opening, a large number of its members held their annual Congress, and there was serious discussions about the statutes and rules of procedure for the union, which was approved unanimously.

At the end of the congress, the Palestine New Federation of Trade Unions elected their new Council comprised of 31 members and the new executive committee comprised of 17 members, of them four women. Muhammad Bladi was reconfirmed in the vote for the Secretary General of the union.



New Unions, new life, new challenges.

After the founding conference the life goes on, but at a higher level. Their status has changed, the tasks are the same, but their needs are growing.

New Unions express their thanks to the trade unions and Workmates for their support in an email dated March 12th:

“Dear comrades

Your presence to witness the establishment of our conference is a great honor for us, and we know very well that you are going to do all your best for promotion of NU nationally and internationally. We also appreciate that you will increase and strengthen your support to continue the boycott of the Histadrut and all other Israeli products through the BDS Campaign.

The new situation will be completely different from previous stages where NU will be represented officially the institutions Palestinian Authority. And we will continue our recruitment of new members. Coming up there will be a meeting with a group of Palestinian trade unionists to introduce NU for them.

But you know that the next stage is a very serious for us, especially that all what has been achieved based on a voluntary work without providing any support, only pushed forwards with the possibilities that we have. So we look forward to start new relationships in order to provide the necessary support to build NU institutions and provide places for headquarters in other governorates in the West Bank, where there is only the headquarter of Tulkarem at present. So we need at this current stage to provide support for the logistics, such as offices, furniture and computers for the headquarters and part time jobs for some of trade unionists presence and the completion of the capacity building project where we are now in the second level.

With best wishes

*Mohammad Bladi
NU”*

The oppression of the occupation is depressing at present, with detainments, arrests, confrontations, shootings, blockades, checkpoints and destruction and house demolishings, and it is growing worse. In this situation we find it very positive, indeed, that there are people who want to fight for and build a future, with hope and belief in the Palestinian working people. They both need and deserve our solidarity and support.

If you want to support New Unions – contact us!

If you want to meet them in Palestine to get to know them – contact us!

Norway March 13th 2016

In solidarity, Workmates International
Harald Haukaa Fjørtoft