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019/030205

New Trade Union World Briefing (16 pages)

Women trade unionists in Palestine: battling on all fronts

Brussels, 8 February 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Although generally well qualified, Palestinian women remain on the margins of the labour market. Yet within the current climate of mass unemployment and increasingly precarious, underpaid jobs, they bear the brunt of the crisis, playing an essential role in the coping strategies of their families and communities.

This new Trade Union World Briefing (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221250>) underlines how labour market segregation penalises Palestinian women, who remain largely concentrated in the industrial zones, domestic work and, primarily, agriculture, a sector where the work they do is all-too-often unpaid. Curfews, roadblocks and border closure which characterise the occupation have led to the bankruptcy of various industries traditionally employing women, such as the textile sector. As a result, the majority of Palestinian women have turned to some kind of home-based employment in an attempt to escape poverty. But the work done at home is not considered official, is not protected by any laws, and does not provide them with a proper salary. "Because they are the first to lose their jobs, women accept deplorable working conditions, making pickles, for example, or other food products in their homes. But how can we defend them when they are not considered as genuine workers by the law?" explains Abla Masrueh, women's coordinator of Palestine's general federation of trade unions, PGFTU, an ICFTU affiliate.

In addition to discrimination in the labour market, they also have to cope with negative trends in Palestinian society, manifested for example in the rise of conservative ideas and the upsurge in early marriages arranged by families who, driven by mounting poverty, are anxious to be freed of mouths to feed. Furthermore, those women employed outside the home all-too-often carry the burden of moral disgrace, a factor deterring others from even looking for work after leaving school. The young women who do, nonetheless, enter the labour market often see their careers come to an end when they have children, such are the difficulties in combining work and family responsibilities given the appalling lack of childcare facilities.

"For all women, it is a daily battle to meet the basic needs of the family. Getting to work, to school with the children, to the market, to the hospital or to the houses of friends and relatives ... is like trying to get round an assault course, with all the roadblocks and military operations. The day-to-day struggle is the same for women trade unionists... But, on top of all this, they have to battle to carry out their "normal" trade union work, such as visiting the workers, holding meetings, negotiating with employers, lobbying the authorities on trade union issues, or fighting for gender equality both within society and the labour movement itself," explains Masrueh.

In this new Trade Union World Briefing, women trade unionists from Palestine explain how they are fighting to innovate, to counter male resistance, the lack of information for women, the many demands on their time, and the lack of resources in general. Home visits, first aid solidarity services, and joint initiatives with the Palestinian women's movement are among the many examples illustrating their determination to develop original and alternative strategies.

While the recent election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the Palestinian National Authority has brought new hopes of progress, this

new briefing follows on from the solidarity mission of the ICFTU Women's Committee, which visited Palestine and Israel last year and fervently expressed the desire that women trade unionists from both sides of the conflict might play a role in advancing the cause of peace.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0232 or +32 477 580 486.

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