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Israeli and Palestinian Trade Union Centres Meet to Develop Cooperation Agreement

Brussels, 14 April 2005 (ICFTU Online). At a meeting in Brussels today organised by the ICFTU, Shaher Sae'd, General Secretary of the the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) and Amir Peretz, Chairperson of the Israeli trade union centre Histadrut, discussed a series of key issues facing the trade union movements in Israel and Palestine and agreed to move forward quickly on finalising a joint cooperation agreement between the two organisations. Key issues for the agreement include access for Palestinian workers to employment in Israel, relief funds for Palestinian workers and their families, action to prevent and resolve cases of exploitation of Palestinian workers, implementation of a March 1995 Cooperation Framework, and perspectives for future cooperation between the two organisations.

The two organisations reiterated their commitment to the "Road Map" for the achievement of a comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestine, based on the existence of two sovereign, independent and viable states, and plan in the near future to adopt a formal Cooperation Agreement following further consultations within their respective structures.

The situation of Palestinian workers has deteriorated substantially in recent years, since the beginning of the second intifada. Thousands of Palestinians who had previously been employed in Israel lost their jobs, adding to the already heavy economic and social cost of the conflict. Restrictions on the flow of relief funds into the West Bank and Gaza have further compounded the economic crisis, and many Palestinian workers have little or no protection under labour law.

75% of Palestinian workers are currently unemployed or cannot reach their workplaces due to security restrictions, and 62% of the population lives below the poverty line of US\$ 3.50 per day. Palestinian women are hit particularly hard by the combination of the conflict and discrimination within the Palestinian labour market. More than two thirds of Palestinian women work in informal and unprotected jobs, and poverty rates for households which depend on women's income are one-third higher than the average. A recent ICFTU interview with PGFTU representative Mahmoud Amer (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221501&Language=EN>) sets out the crisis facing Palestinian workers in more detail.

While Economic conditions in Israel are substantially better than in the Palestinian territories, Israeli unemployment is very high at over 10% for men and around 13% for women. More than a quarter of Israelis now live below the poverty line. Those most vulnerable to poverty include Arab Israelis, Orthodox Jews, the elderly and single-parent families. In 2004, Histadrut launched a series of protests at the policies of the then government, including a public sector general strike in September.

"Today's talks were conducted in an extremely positive atmosphere, and we are convinced that the new start in cooperation between the Palestinian and Israeli trade union movements will bring real and much needed benefits to working people in both places in the near future", said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder. "A just and sustainable peace can only be brought about if the economic situation, particularly of Palestinians, is drastically improved" he added.

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>

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