

Palestinian Workers Are Bearing the Brunt of the Pandemic

BY

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Palestinian workers play a vital role in Israel's economy, but they've been left exposed to the danger of COVID-19 without any support from the Israeli authorities or their own leaders. The pandemic has exposed the harsh realities of life for workers under Israeli occupation.

After the initial discovery in early March of seven COVID-19 cases in the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel swiftly imposed a security lockdown on the West Bank. In parallel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) declared a state of emergency, which has now been extended until June 2020.

The pandemic has compounded the problems of an already deteriorating economy, characterized by high levels of unemployment and the loss of wages for working families due to the lockdown measures.

Those who work in Israel's construction industry are one of the worst affected parts of Palestinian society. For decades, Israel's systematic de-development of the occupied Palestinian territories has pushed hundreds of thousands into this sector.

These workers don't just come from the West Bank (and Gaza before the siege). They also include many Palestinian citizens of Israel, and constitute a cheap, captive, and ultimately disposable labor force for Israeli contractors and construction firms. Their experience of the pandemic encapsulates many of the key aspects of Palestinian life in the shadow of Israeli domination.

Occupation and Exploitation

In 2019, Palestinians from the West Bank accounted for more than one-fifth of Israel's 300,000-strong construction workforce, and generated around two-thirds of the sector's \$35 billion contribution to the Israeli economy. There are also more than 90,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel who work in construction.

Studies have identified a large pay gap between Palestinian workers and their Jewish Israeli counterparts, which reflects the division of labor within the sector itself, where Jewish Israelis occupy managerial, engineering, and planning positions, while Palestinians and (increasingly) foreign workers perform labor-intensive jobs.

Israeli companies profit by paying Palestinians less for working in unsafe conditions. In 2018, Israel ranked third among OECD countries for deaths in the construction industry, with the overwhelming majority of the victims being Palestinian (thirty-one out of thirty-eight, with sixteen from the West Bank and East Jerusalem and fifteen Palestinian citizens of Israel).

The construction industry is also notorious for the lack of clear contractual agreements. This makes it easy for employers to evade their obligations, including the provision of health care and compensation in case of injuries on the job.

For West Bank workers, Israel uses an insidious permit system, similar to the South African pass system, to regulate their integration into the Israeli labor market, and to monitor and control their movements.

Only those who are over the age of twenty-one, married, and possess a biometric ID card can apply for a work permit. The authorities issue permits in industries where Palestinian labor poses no competition to Israeli Jewish labor, and only with the approval of Israel's security apparatus.

Rich Pickings

In 2019, as the construction sector was booming, Israeli officials issued a record number of permits, the majority of which (65 percent) were for construction workers. Of the 141,000 West Bank Palestinians working for Israeli employers that year, 72 percent had permits. Israeli employers cannot "legally" hire workers without permits, but frequently do so anyway under especially exploitative conditions.

The permit system, which ties Palestinian workers to a specific employer, offers rich pickings for Palestinian middlemen and Israeli contractors who pocket some \$34 million annually

through black-market trading in permits. According to conservative estimates by the Bank of Israel, Palestinian workers purchased about 30 percent of all permits issued in 2019, at a price of \$570 each.

In addition, Israel deducts income tax and health insurance from the wages of Palestinian workers. The Israeli authorities are supposed to transfer these deductions to the PA on a monthly basis. However, they routinely pocket a huge proportion of these taxes: between 2006 and 2013, Israel withheld a total of \$180 million directly from workers' wages, and \$59 million in health care fees.

In the wake of the pandemic, we saw a clear indication of how central Palestinian labor is to Israel's construction sector when the Israeli Builders Association called for government action to facilitate the continued entry of Palestinian labor into Israel. The Association lamented that a shortage of Palestinian workers could lead to monthly losses of \$2 billion, and jeopardize the employment of more than 125,000 Israelis.

Lockdown

Israel's strategy for curbing the spread of COVID-19 has involved a near-total shutdown of nonessential industries and the imposition of a full security lockdown over the West Bank, which means further restrictions on population movement, access to work, and health care. While thousands of Palestinian workers immediately lost their jobs, there were special arrangements put in place for the continued entry of workers in sectors classified as essential, such as construction, agriculture, and health.

By mid-March, Israel and the PA had reached an agreement allowing the entry of 55,000 Palestinian workers from the West Bank who were employed in these sectors, on condition that they wouldn't return home for at least a month. This was a significant increase on the 15,000 West Bank workers who had previously been permitted to remain within Israel overnight, supposedly on the basis of security considerations.

The Israeli authorities did not issue any clear guidelines about on-site health directives or standards for adequate housing and health care. For all practical purposes, employers were left with a free hand to exploit the dependence of their workers on these jobs.

Construction workers had to sleep on their sites — workers in settlement Industrial Zones factories were even told to sleep in empty fridges! — and there was no inspection of working

conditions. Workers showing symptoms of COVID-19 did not receive tests. In some cases, their employers simply dumped them at checkpoints and left them to fend for themselves.

Scapegoating Workers

After experiencing this blatant disregard for their rights and lives, many Palestinian workers started returning home, and the number of those doing so increased when the PA urged them to down tools and return to the West Bank. However, despite having issued these calls, the PA itself did not organize adequate testing for the workers, and simply asked them to self-quarantine.

The workers were coming back to crowded homes, putting themselves and their families at risk. In fact, apart from initial cases linked to the tourism industry, the great majority of cases in the West Bank (74 percent) have involved construction workers employed in Israel or those in close proximity to them. The first recorded COVID-19 death in the occupied territories was the mother of a Palestinian worker from East Jerusalem who was employed at a settlement Industrial Zone factory.

Returning workers faced vilification as key vectors of the virus. In daily press conferences, besuited PA officials referred to the workers as Palestine's "loose waist," accusing them of endangering people's lives. Yet the same officials let the occupying power off the hook for its own actions.

The use of such rhetoric, presenting workers as a public-health hazard to be controlled through security measures, had predictably lethal consequences, as a Palestinian security officer shot a man on his way to work.

These workers don't have the financial means to endure a long-term lockdown without wages, and the PA has done hardly anything to support them. The PA and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) eventually set up a meager fund of \$11 million to support workers who lost their jobs, but they made no specific arrangements for those who had been employed in Israel. There were also the usual problems of transparency in the distribution of official funds.

Coordination

The decrease in the number of Palestinian laborers dealt a heavy blow to Israel's construction sector. By the end of April, only 15-17,000 Palestinian construction workers remained on site, which led to the halting of work at 9,000 out of 22,000 active construction sites.

Israeli financial losses, coupled with the PA's inability to support these workers, led the two sides to strike a deal allowing 67,000 workers, mainly in construction, to reenter Israel and its illegal West Bank settlements. This was on the condition that they would not return home from the moment of entry on May 3 until the end of Ramadan.

The deal restricts movement for workers and entrusts Israeli contractors with monitoring their location. Taking full advantage of the situation, Israel expanded the use of a cell-phone app called Al-Monasiq ("The Coordinator"), which gives the Israeli military access to a person's location, microphone and camera, as well as all stored data.

Although in theory it is not mandatory to use the app, in practice workers have little choice, as it has become the main tool used to apply for permits and check their validity.

Structures of Complicity

The experience of Palestinian construction workers since the COVID-19 outbreak began doesn't just illustrate Israel's colonial relationship to Palestinian labor. It also underlines the PA's malign developmental trajectory (or lack thereof). In 2019, Palestinians working for Israeli employers made up almost one-fifth of the West Bank workforce, and generated 14 percent of the PA's GDP.

The PA's bloated security apparatus speaks volumes about the prioritization of security — mainly Israel's — over support for sectors like health care, education and agriculture. In 2019, for example, the PA allocated just 10 percent of its budget to health care, while it devoted 22 percent to ramping up its security apparatus.

Indeed, the pandemic began in the midst of a Palestinian doctors' strike, protesting against low wages and the appalling state of the health care infrastructure in the occupied territories. There had also been an earlier round of strikes by teachers over wages and pensions, organized outside the umbrella of the official General Union of Palestinian Teachers. The PA moved to suppress the strikes, claiming that they were against the national interest.

The pandemic has also revealed how little support Palestinian workers can expect to receive from the official trade-union movements on either side of the Green Line. The Israeli union

federation, the Histadrut, is happy to deduct membership dues from these workers directly from their salaries. However, its priority is always to help sustain Israel's exploitation of Palestinian labor. The federation hasn't even tried to remind Israeli contractors of their obligations concerning the health and safety of workers.

While this is no more than would be expected from the Histadrut, in view of its long history as a colonial institution, the chronic weakness of its Palestinian counterpart, the PGFTU, has also been strikingly evident in the face of the crisis. Palestinian workers from the West Bank cannot join a union of their choice, and are forced to pay dues to the Histadrut. 50 percent of the collected fees are supposed to be transferred to the PGFTU, which is held responsible for delivering services to workers.

This system establishes a relationship of financial dependency between the PGFTU and the Histadrut and leaves Palestinian workers in a most precarious situation, with no organization that really defends their rights or struggles for the improvement of working conditions.

Reconstructing Resistance

As the economic situation is likely to deteriorate even further, pressure will mount on Palestinian workers. Land confiscations, harsh conditions inside refugee camps, low wages in the informal sector, and rising levels of unemployment mean that an increasing number of Palestinian workers will have little option but to seek jobs from Israeli employers.

This will be a critical moment for Palestinians to start rebuilding effective labor structures that are not mired in the logic of "normalization" set in motion by the Oslo Accords, or the dangerous culture of factionalism and nepotism that has grown in that soil.

It will be also crucial to break down the divisions created by Oslo and its sequels, which have created legal and physical barriers between the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian citizens of Israel and refugees living in exile. As the story of the construction sector demonstrates, Israel exploits and discriminates against Palestinian workers regardless of their geographical location or identity papers.

None of us can claim to have an exact blueprint for rebuilding the structures of resistance in the Palestinian labor movement. However, it's possible that the present crisis may be the catalyst we have long needed.

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