

PALESTINIAN DEMOCRATIC UNIONS UNITE

Friday and Saturday 27/28 July 2007 saw a conference in Ramallah, where the new 50,000 member Coalition of Democratic and Independent Trade Unions was formed. Mainly in the last 4/5 years, workers in Palestine have been forming independent, and democratic unions, usually at first by forming workers councils in individual workplaces, and then by uniting these councils, to form sector unions. They have often done this, with the assistance of the "Democracy and Workers Rights Centre" (DWRC). These unions have been meeting with some older democratic unions, and have now come together to form a coalition of such unions. They represent workers in finance, health, pharmaceuticals, higher education, kindergarten, telecommunications, municipalities, electricity, and the unemployed.

Friday 27th

The opening ceremony was held in the Ramallah Cultural Palace. The opening speaker for the new unions, Abdel Hakim Aleyan, said they did not want to carry out factional activity, but to try to advance workers against those who exploit them. Then National and Islamic Parties PLO Executive member Saleh Rafah said trade unions should ensure political plurality, and he called for unity of unions, but on a democratic basis. He also demanded a state based on 1967 borders, with no concessions, and called for Hamas to give their arms to Abbas. Hasan Barghouti for the DWRC, facilitators of the conference, called for the protection of "the dignity of the people." Ahmed Tawfiq, the Director of Labour Relations at the Palestinian Ministry of Labour, said that they have relations with all federations, and this one consisted of real professional unions.

Speaking from Oxford and District Trade Union Council, Tony Richardson welcomed the formation of the new democratic unions, said that democracy was not a choice, and described the bureaucratisation of the long established British trade unions. He called for the new unions to control their leaders, and for them to make sure this bureaucratisation doesn't happen to them. He said their main support from outside would come from those fighting in their unions against these bureaucrats. Tony also brought support from the National Twinning Network, which would help establish relations with their local counterparts in the UK.

The Conference then moved for their business to the Rocky Hotel. Throughout the day there were constant votes and vociferous discussion. The first issue was how the voting would take place. Some of the unions are quite long established, like the Hebron unemployed, and others very new. Nobody wanted to find themselves voted down, so there were tensions. After about two hours it was agreed that voting in resolutions would require a two thirds majority; this vote was almost unanimous. It was then agreed that as far as the rest of the constitution was concerned the groups would all give their opinions to a sub-committee, which was then elected. Another long discussion took place over the name, and it was agreed to keep Coalition, rather than federation. It was agreed that new affiliations would go before the full Executive. There would be a 15 person Executive, and 45 person National Council, the latter on proportional representation according to the size of the union. There were 105 delegates to the Conference. There had been much pressure from political parties and the "official" unions against attendance.

Saturday 28th

The National Council met to elect the Executive. Some people had met overnight, and made suggestions for a list. Here all kinds of tensions arose, some insults were exchanged, and a health union delegation walked out. Finally 18 names came up and everybody had 15 votes each, an Executive was elected, and the new coalition was formed.

Some problems:

Gaza, which could not participate, and where there are clearly problems with functioning as trade unions;

Women: Only one woman spoke at the conference proper, although one, Khouled Asmar chaired the opening. There are also only three on the Executive. This is clearly a problem reflecting the society, but from my knowledge not so much in some of the unions, so hopefully this will change. I know many strong women in these unions.

Some comments:

This clearly is historic and democratic, these are the reasons for the tensions, they want to form a body that does things, and most of the unions have been on strike recently, and all are risking a lot, with the occupation, and a violent authority and opposition. Although these unions have only limited experience, this means they are not yet bureaucratized, and so this could be a qualitative development. All praise the DWRC for facilitating this activity, they are trying for moves in this direction in Jordan, and their affiliates also in Egypt. All trade union activists should praise this development, and get connected with their Palestinian counterparts to see if they can be of assistance. The DWRC website is www.dwrc.org

Tony Richardson
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