Written evidence submitted by the Trade Union Friends of Israel

The UK’s Development Work in the Middle East

Executive Summary

This submission is from Trade Union Friends of Israel (TUFI) and we are delighted to be able to submit relevant evidence to this important and timely inquiry. We are particularly interested in the terms of reference to look at building relationships between Israeli and Palestinian organisations as part of conflict resolution, as well as the important task of state building for the Palestinians.

TUFI exists to forge a better understanding in the UK of the Israeli and Palestinian trade unions. We also work towards developing relations between the Israeli trade union centre, the Histadrut (Israeli equivalent of the UK TUC) and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU).

TUFI and our supporters believe that supporting and developing a working trade union relationship with practical measures is essential for long lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Trade unions have a historic role in uniting workers across political divides and national borders, and we believe current work and future projects based on trade union cooperation should be supported by DFID.

This submission looks at the existing relationship between the Histadrut and the PGFTU, past and present, and will make recommendations for future work and financial support. Trade Union friends of Israel (TUFI) calls on the Department for International Development to consider funding and supporting the following Histadrut and PGFTU projects:

1. Translating and publishing of the new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) in the construction sector, which hopefully will be signed in 2014, into Arabic to ensure Palestinians working in Israel’s construction industry are fully aware of their full benefits of employment;

2. Financing vocational training regarding the rights of the workers and health and safety in the construction sector for all Palestinians employed by Israeli employers through the joint cooperation of the Histadrut and PGFTU (following PGFTU’s request of assistance from the Histadrut in September 2013);

3. Financing vocational training regarding the rights of the workers in the construction sector for all PGFTU officers, enabling them to be acquainted with the Israeli labour law, the CBA, and health and safety regulations;

4. Financing vocational training regarding skills to negotiate and attain the first CBA in the construction sector for Palestinian employees which are employed in the Palestinian Authority for PGFTU officials.

5. Supporting a TUC initiative to bring Israeli and Palestinian trade unionist to the UK for training and development.
1. The Histadrut and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU); A force for mutual recognition, peace and the two-state solution

The Histadrut

- The Histadrut is the Israeli trade union centre and the largest NGO in Israel with 700,000 members.

- The Histadrut is one of the strongest NGO supporters of the two-state solution.

- The Histadrut is publicly committed to the existence of two sovereign, independent and democratic states, a secure Israel alongside a viable Palestine, two states for two peoples, existing in peace and mutual respect.

- The Histadrut has called on the Israeli government ‘to make concessions and take courageous and concrete steps towards attaining peace.’

- The Histadrut has worked with the PGFTU and the International Transport Federation to make the lives of Palestinian drivers easier at checkpoints.

- The Histadrut distributes information material for Palestinian workers in Arabic.

- The Histadrut assists Palestinian workers employed by Israeli employers. It is also anchored in an agreement between the two federations.

- Petitioned the Israeli high court to extend Israeli labour law to apply inside the settlements. Palestinian workers have not opposed this, benefitting from improved terms and conditions regarding the minimum wage and health and safety, mandatory pension, etc. compared to the weaker Jordanian labour laws under which the West Bank was ruled previously.

Talking to the Histadrut

Avital Shapira-Shabirow is the Director of International Relations in the International Department of the Histadrut, the Israeli TUC has commented;

“We strongly support the two state solution and we will back an agreement when the legitimate parties, the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, reach one. Our practical deeds promote and protect the rights of the Palestinian employees. We do not “support the occupation”; we support the Palestinian employees. We act as a trade union federation which treats all the workers in Israel whether they are Israelis (Jews and non-Jews), migrant and of course Palestinian equally. We believe the authorised bodies to solve the conflict are not the trade unions but the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. We call on both to resume their negotiations and to reach a final settlement which will resolve all the bones of contention, including the issue of the borders”.
The Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)

The PGFTU is a national trade union centre with an estimated membership of 290,000, and is affiliated with the ITUC. The union in its current form is historically aligned with Fatah, but other parties have also worked within its organisation.

The PGFTU traces its modern history to 1965, under Jordanian control of the West Bank, as the successor to the Arab Labourers Society that had been set up in 1921 in Haifa. Its current general secretary is Shaher Sa’ed, who has held the position for many years. The PGFTU consists of 13 national unions, each with regional and local organizations, in sectors such as Hotels/Tourism, Healthcare, Textile/Clothing and Construction.

2. Growing Cooperation after the Oslo Accords

Cooperation between the two federations started in 1993 after the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO.

In 1995 the Histadrut and the PGFTU signed a precedent-setting agreement that the Histadrut would provide legal representation to Palestinians working for Israeli employers. The PGFTU were to receive 50 per cent of all trade union fees collected from Palestinian employees working in Israel.

However, the arrangement froze due to the deteriorating political and security conditions at the end of 2000. Differences emerged between the two parties about how much money the Histadrut still owed the PGFTU. This became increasingly difficult to evaluate over time as the number of Palestinians working in Israel significantly dropped during the second intifada.

A number of critics of Israel within the trade union movement, especially in the UK and Ireland, emphasised the disagreement; repeatedly using it as a justification for promoting trade union boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions against Israel.

However, throughout even the most difficult times, the two organisations continued to have dialogue. In time, improved relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority led to better union to union cooperation. At the Histadrut’s 2007 annual Congress, the PGFTU was officially represented and the delegation present affirmed its commitment to maintain and extend constructive relations.

In October 2007 the Histadrut successfully petitioned Israel’s High Court of Justice for Israeli labour law to be applied in the occupied territories. Nine judges ruled that Palestinians working for Israeli employers in West Bank settlements should be given the same work benefits provided to Israeli workers by Israeli law.

In another program of joint cooperation, over 20 Israeli and Palestinian transport union representatives signed a number of agreements at a bilateral meeting organised by the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) in June 2007.
In February 2008, both parties agreed to facilitate the passage of professional drivers at checkpoints and road blocks in the West Bank.

3. In 2008 an historic agreement was signed between the Histadrut and the PGFTU with the full support of the ITUC.

On 24 July 2008, a landmark agreement was reached between the Histadrut and the PGFTU. Facilitated by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to which both are affiliated, the agreement 'aimed at increased protection of Palestinian workers and advancing fraternity and coexistence between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.'

The agreement's key features:

- Settlement of all financial issues between the two federations. The Histadrut paid the PGFTU the outstanding balance of trade union fees paid by Palestinians working for Israeli employers since 1993, and agreed to transfer 50 per cent of such fees to the PGFTU ongoing.

- Provision of legal assistance by the Histadrut to Palestinian workers employed by Israeli employers, to improve their working conditions, and to support the PGFTU in handling such cases.

- Organisation of educational and vocational training courses and workshops, particularly in the areas of workers’ rights and occupational safety and health.

The agreement involved planning for joint projects:

- Palestinian and Israeli truck drivers training project, covering labour rights and occupational health and safety.

- Israeli and Palestinian Construction workers unions project providing for Palestinian workers to have their skills upgraded and be employed by Israeli construction companies.

- Israeli and Palestinian Transport Workers Unions partnership with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) to create an “Emergency Hotline” to help Palestinian Transport Union drivers at checkpoints. It is noteworthy to mention that the substantial reduction in the number of checkpoints and road blocks in the West Bank which has eased the transport of goods and movement of people.

- ILO support to the PGFTU to ‘improve capacity to provide legal support and advisory services to workers, in cooperation with the Israeli federation Histadrut, through the establishment of a legal clinic.' ¹
The 2008 Histadrut-PGFTU Agreement was supported by Global Trade Union movement

At the 2010 ITUC Congress there was a resolution that said "Congress welcomes the landmark agreement between Histadrut and the PGFTU on the rights of Palestinian workers, which was finalized with the assistance of the ITUC in August 2008, and initiatives by Global Union Federations in their sectors to support cooperation in defense of workers' rights. This agreement and other actions to promote decent work and end discrimination are crucial to building the basis for just and equitable economic development…[Congress] support the strengthening of cooperation between the Palestinian and Israeli trade union movements…'

The ITUC Secretary-General Guy Ryder hailed the agreement as 'tremendously significant, at a time when the political authorities in Israel and Palestine and the international community are failing to find just and lasting solutions to the political impasse.' Ryder continued: 'It means that the PGFTU will be able to ensure much more effective representation for Palestinian workers, while those working for Israeli employers will also benefit.'

'The agreement calls upon the ITUC and its affiliates to continue to support future cooperation, and we are fully committed to do this.'

PGFTU General Secretary Shaher Sae'd hailed the agreement as good for the Palestinians. 'This removes a key obstacle to future cooperation and the full respect of the rights of Palestinian workers. Decent work is a foundation stone for political and economic justice, and we will now be in a position to devote even more attention to tackling the appalling state of the Palestinian economy and playing a fuller part in the quest for justice, fairness and democratic rights in the building of a Palestinian state.'

Histadrut Chairperson Ofer Eini hoped the agreement would be the first step towards a greater unity. ‘Every worker, whether of Israeli, Palestinian or other origin, must have full rights to the protections offered by international labour standards. The outcome of our dialogue with the PGFTU can only help achieve this, and help lay the foundations for future cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian trade unions and progress in our shared quest for justice, peace and prosperity for all in the region.”

In the UK, the then TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber praised the two federations for “carving a path that political leaders could now follow”.

The International Labor Organisation (ILO) hailed the agreement as ‘displaying hope on the way to peace’ and a “unique example of cooperation providing a basis for reinvigorated partnership.’

1 (ILO 2009:29)

The Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group noted in their 2010 report that ‘The rights of Palestinian workers have been strengthened over the last two years with increased cooperation between the PGFTU and the Histadrut.’

The 2008 Histadrut and the PGFTU Agreement calls on the international trade unions to build links not break them.

The Histadrut and the PGFTU made a direct appeal to the international movement in their 2008 agreement. Clause 5 states ‘It is agreed by the parties that relations between the Israeli and Palestinian trade unions shall be based on negotiations, dialogue, and the conduct of meetings and joint projects (e.g. professional courses and workshops) that will promote the rights of Israeli and Palestinian workers and pensioners and will advance fraternity and co-existence between the two peoples.’ Crucially, for UK trade unionists, clause 6 ‘call[s] for support from ITUC and its affiliates throughout the world, and other trade unions throughout the world and other international organisations in order to fulfil the provisions of the clause

4. Histadrut Statement for Peace and Co-operation with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions, backed by ITUC (September 2009)

The Histadrut released a statement to the world-wide trade union movement outlining its support for a two-state solution, Israeli and Palestinian workers’ rights and its developing relationship with Palestinian trade unions.

The Histadrut urges “the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to immediately resume their negotiations,” and says it understands and is concerned “by the effects the restrictions on movement and the security fence/wall can have on the lives of Palestinian workers and their families”. The federation says it supports the decision to remove security checkpoints in the context of the renewed security situation and calls upon the “Israeli government to dismantle all illegal outposts”.

The statement goes on to say that the Histadrut recognises these problems and steadfastly works with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) to mitigate them whilst negotiations on the wider issues take place.

Israeli and Palestinian trade unions have been successfully working together and signing co-operation agreements over the last few years, and the Histadrut’s statement says it is their duty, as trade unionists, to be involved with the peace process and serve as role-models.

The Histadrut says: “The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine is very complex and our goal is to reach an understanding and to look for common denominators. We believe that the only way to overcome the hostility is through peace and trust, such as that which exists today between the Histadrut and the PGFTU.”

Guy Ryder, the then ITUC General Secretary hailed the Histadrut statement as “an important and welcome call for dialogue and progress to achieve the objective of two states co-existing in conditions of peace and security, and full respect for the rights of all working people.” He said Israeli-Palestinian trade union co-operation has an important “contribution to make in promoting peace and mutual understanding in the Middle East.”

After meeting with senior Israeli and Palestinian trade unionists in Israel and the West Bank, Guy Ryder said ‘with the peace process effectively in stalemate at present, the ITUC’s working together with our Israeli and Palestinian affiliates is especially important.’

5. Recently

In the years 2011-2013 the Histadrut has continued to set as a primary goal the enhancement of the ongoing relationship with PGFTU. Throughout all these years they have provided legal support for Palestinian workers (in Arabic), encouraged participation in educational and vocational training workshops (particularly in the construction sector where the majority of Palestinians are employed), and distributed brochures printed in Arabic outlining their rights. Most significantly, a new joint Histadrut-PGFTU project for providing legal assistance for Palestinians employed by Israeli employers was set up. The project allows Palestinians legally employed by Israeli employers to lodge complaints with the PGFTU who addresses the Histadrut’s Legal Department who manages the cases opposite the Israeli employers and if necessary in the Israeli Labour Courts.

Throughout 2011-2013 the Histadrut continued to fulfil its financial obligations set out in the 2008 landmark agreement with the PGFTU, according to which half the trade union fees collected by the Histadrut from legal Palestinian workers employed by Israeli employers are transferred to the PGFTU.

The Histadrut also continues to assist and provide solidarity to the PGFTU in any additional ways it can. For example, in 2011, the Histadrut, upon the request of the PGFTU, assisted the Scottish Fire Brigade’s Union in transferring humanitarian aid in the form of fire engines, lifesaving firefighting equipment and uniforms to the Nablus fire station.

In 2013 PGFTU requested the assistance of the Histadrut in finding employment opportunities in the Israeli construction sector for Palestinian workers who are PGFTU members and the Histadrut is currently implementing this venture.

Specifically in the construction sector where the majority of Palestinians are employed, over the last year the Israeli union has been hosting a senior grievance committee which settles all labour disputes between employees and employers. In the framework of the cooperation between the Histadrut and the PGFTU, the Histadrut requests the participation of PGFTU representatives in meetings where disputes between Palestinian workers and Israeli employers are discussed.

In addition, they also allocated in the construction union headquarters an additional attorney, an Arab citizen, who provides legal consultation specifically for the Palestinian employees. The union also provides vocational training to thousands of Palestinians and migrant workers on the topic of health and safety in working on skyscrapers.

6. Conclusions

The history of the relationship between the Israeli and Palestinian trade unions demonstrates a willingness to work across the divide of this long standing conflict. Therefore we would
welcome the committee to recognise the work that exists and make recommendations for support of future work that we have outlined in this evidence.

Trade Union Friends of Israel

January 2014