

Workers' Education in Palestine

La formation des travailleurs en Palestine

Wajih Elayassa

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Article abstract

Due to the political context and the restrictions placed on general freedoms and trade union activities, workers' education in Palestine remained informal and largely reliant on oral memory until the early 1990s. For decades, it was an integral part of political education. Workers' education only became a stand-alone field after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, when the change of circumstances enabled the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Palestine to focus on developing training materials and curricula specifically aimed at strengthening the Palestinian labour movement. First inspired and modelled on materials and courses taught internationally, the Centre's labour education program has grown to encompass many locally produced materials and seeks to address specific challenges that face unions in Palestine.

WORKERS' EDUCATION IN PALESTINE

WAJIH ELAYASSA *Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre, Palestine*

ABSTRACT. Due to the political context and the restrictions placed on general freedoms and trade union activities, workers' education in Palestine remained informal and largely reliant on oral memory until the early 1990s. For decades, it was an integral part of political education. Workers' education only became a stand-alone field after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, when the change of circumstances enabled the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Palestine to focus on developing training materials and curricula specifically aimed at strengthening the Palestinian labour movement. First inspired and modelled on materials and courses taught internationally, the Centre's labour education program has grown to encompass many locally produced materials and seeks to address specific challenges that face unions in Palestine.

LA FORMATION DES TRAVAILLEURS EN PALESTINE

RÉSUMÉ. Jusqu'au début des années 1990, le contexte politique et les restrictions imposées aux libertés générales ainsi qu'aux activités syndicales étaient la raison pour laquelle la formation des travailleurs en Palestine soit demeurée informelle et largement tributaire de la mémoire orale. Durant plusieurs décennies, cette dernière était une partie intégrante de l'éducation politique. En fait, la formation des travailleurs est devenue un domaine à part entière à la suite de la création de l'Autorité palestinienne lorsqu'un changement de circonstances a permis au Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre, en Palestine, de se concentrer sur le développement de matériel de formation et de programmes visant à renforcer le mouvement ouvrier palestinien. Si, dans un premier temps, le Centre s'est inspiré et a calqué son matériel et ses cours sur l'offre internationale, le programme de formation des travailleurs a évolué de manière à inclure de nombreux contenus pédagogiques locaux. Il cherche aussi à répondre aux défis plus spécifiquement rencontrés par les syndicats en Palestine.

It is not easy to talk about workers' education in Palestine without taking into consideration major historical developments in the past hundred years (the British mandate, the creation of the State of Israel¹, the period of Jordanian rule in the West Bank and Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip, and the Israeli occupation²). These developments have clearly affected all aspects of people's lives in Palestinian society, at the political and social levels. Trade union work has not been spared by these sufferings, although union organizing started early in Palestine, arguably before it appeared in many other Arab countries. Palestinian trade unions have led many struggles during which the line became blurred between union, national, and political demands. This did not give the opportunity to the trade union movement to focus on other aspects, including workers' education.

For decades, for reasons related to the successive occupations of Palestine, the Palestinian trade union movement was unable to develop normally, and most efforts were concentrated on national liberation and building the dream of establishing an independent and democratic state in Palestine. Thus, workers' education, like trade union work, remained associated at various periods with political action as it was the only narrow window for spreading national, political and trade union education, and a culture of free education and volunteer work, which began in the 1970s and spread among young people at that time.

For the most part, workers' education in Palestine also relied on oral memory, particularly regarding the history, activities, and struggles of the trade union movement for labour legislation or for solving problems faced by workers. This cannot be dissociated from the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupying power throughout this period, especially after 1967 and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel did not allow the establishment of new trade unions in the occupied territory, in addition to prohibiting all trade union activities in the Gaza Strip. Until the 1993 signing of the Oslo agreements between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, books and publications on workers' education were scarce and it was not easy to gain access to them. In this context, trade unions played an important role in disseminating basic workers' education that relied on practical knowledge, that is, their experiences, and their political and cultural backgrounds. The quality of the teachings depended very much on the life-course of the unionists involved in workers' education. Workers' education was also affected by the fact that public assembly was forbidden, and that trade union offices were often raided and closed.

From a theoretical point of view, workers' education was not a priority for trade unions, political parties, or other civil society organizations. Trade union education was not a stand-alone field, it was considered part of political education. In most cases, workers' or youth education focused on general national issues, and no one saw the need for developing workers' education

curricula that would address matters related to the world of work and focus on empowering workers to achieve their labour and social rights. This appears clearly in the literature issued during most of these years. A majority of writings researched the history of the labour movement, mostly from an academic or a mixed political / trade union perspective. Educational materials were translated from external sources and mostly produced by Palestinian communists, who had played a central role in developing the trade union movement. At the time, Palestinian trade unions were linked to the World Federation of Trade Unions. Thus, the publications that were issued were influenced by socialist and anti-imperialist political ideology and focused on topics such as the concepts of working class, trade union, and global union solidarity.

In short, all this did not help in the accumulation of knowledge and expertise in workers' education and contributed to the absence of a labour culture among Palestinian society, which itself led to a lack of awareness of the importance and necessity of workers' education in Palestine.

This situation continued until the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993 and a change in local circumstances. This was followed by the establishment of many democratic and independent trade unions, non-governmental organizations, and other human rights organizations, which played an important role at the local level. The Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Palestine (DWRC) was established during this period, and remains to this day the only organization that focuses on workers' education. It aims to develop the right to this form of education on the premise that workers' rights are human rights. This opened the way for trade unions and unionists to become acquainted with various forms of workers' education and training and get access to training of trainers (educators) specialized in workers' education.

It was not an easy task to develop workers' education in the absence of literature related to labour culture, especially in Arabic. Thus in the mid-1990s, the DWRC set itself the daunting task of translating several works relating to trade union work into Arabic and adapting educational materials to the domestic situation, as well transferring Arab and international experiences. This process started before the IT revolution, before the internet enabled unions and workers' education organizations to share their materials online.

In the post-Oslo period, Palestinian trade unions and workers became able to focus on union education, which also allowed the recognition of workers' education as a social science that can be taught in universities (although it is not yet taught in Palestinian universities). The right to workers' education was finally stipulated in the Palestinian Labour Law No. 7 of 2000 that entered into force in 2001. This law states in article 76 that "the labourer is entitled to a one week paid labour educational leave a year arranged through a decision by the Minister" (Ministry of Labour [Palestine], 2002). However, a vast majority of enterprises still do not apply this disposition of the labour law,

and thus most workers' education programs have to be implemented during week-ends and off-days.

The DWRC's vision of workers' education, its experience in this field, and the education methods and tools that are used are intimately connected with the recent evolution of the Palestinian trade union movement and the organization's humanistic values and rights-based approach. It can thus not be considered as neutral education since it serves a clear social purpose and is placed at the service of the organization's mandate: to promote democracy, social justice and equality.

The DWRC's philosophy regarding workers' education revolves around the motto "Education for Organizing and Social Change." It has developed its training and education program to help achieve a number of objectives, including defending freedom of association and the right to organize, improving work conditions in workplaces, training workers' committees and unionists to represent workers at workplace level, assisting workers in exercising their rights and empowering them to access justice, providing technical assistance and advice to workers' committees (particularly those under establishment), and strengthening workers' committees (and through them the labour movement). A lot of emphasis is placed on strengthening democratic grassroots organizing.

The DWRC kick-started its program by translating and adapting materials produced by the global trade union movement. It has been able to keep abreast of developments in the field of labour education through its active involvement with the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA). The accumulated experience and feedback obtained from participants in its training and awareness sessions (between 1997 and 2012, about 7500 unionists and labour activists have taken part in more than 430 courses, and over 63,000 workers and unionists in awareness sessions), as well as other activities undertaken with trade unions have enabled DWRC to assess the evolving educational needs of Palestinian unions and workers. For over a decade, the DWRC has produced materials in collaboration with local trainers, academics and lawyers to help unions in developing their representation and bargaining power in the difficult context of state-building under occupation, ongoing colonization, and an economy that has been made subservient to that of the occupying power. These materials address a variety of topics, such as local labour legislation, collective bargaining, advocacy and campaigning, basic administrative skills, good governance in trade unions, media skills, statistical analysis, national budget analysis, social dialogue, gender equality, and political (civic) and socio-economic education. In addition, the Centre has collaborated with trade unions in developing awareness brochures on occupational health and safety, addressing risks at work in various sectors.

Four education levels have been adopted by the DWRC. The first level focuses on cognitive or informational education, that is, imparting knowledge. It involves the provision of information and developing the knowledge of trade unions and unionists about labour legislation, in addition to providing direct information. This form of education is supported by awareness materials and publications that use non-academic language and are based on content developed through the DWRC's curricula along with the accumulation of experiences among trade unions and workplace representatives. Information is provided in a simple and direct manner that is accessible to all. Technological tools are used in addition to relying on direct communication with workers. Education methods were adopted to develop the skills of trade unionists and train them on mechanisms for using acquired knowledge, such as how to use legislation to defend workers' rights, submit complaints, manage trade unions at the workplace level, follow up on violations of occupational safety and health, organize workers, organize union meetings, submit demands and organize activities through practical training, role-play and group discussion among participants in training sessions.

The second level of education concerns capacity-building of union leaders and decision-makers in trade unions and trade union federations, in particular democratic and independent trade unions. It aims at building the capacity of leaderships in decision-making, managing trade unions, and organizing activities at the sector or national levels. It aims to connect them with labour policies and their position on issues of public interest and governmental policies, such as taxes, social insurance, the national budget, and so on. In other words, this focus hopes to influence socio-economic policies in Palestine. Emphasis is placed on specific issues such as using statistics, advocacy work on legislation, the social protection system or other important topics. Union leaders are also introduced to Arab regional and international labour conventions and how they function, in addition to exposure to experiences of trade union work in other countries.

The third education level is civic education, and concerns the monitoring of elections to ensure their impartiality, transparency, the code of conduct for trade unions, in addition to other topics related to civil society and democracy, accountability, and human rights.

The fourth level of education, in cooperation with trade unions, aims to form labour educators in each trade union and union federation through a specialized training of trainers program. The training material for this, the first of its kind in the Arab region, was initially prepared in the mid-1990s with the assistance of foreign trainers and based on a training manual from the Canadian AutoWorkers union. Many sections were adapted to the Palestinian context, and the material now continues to be updated and used on a regular basis in order to train educators who will be able to spread labour education in all areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

One of the main challenges that we face nowadays is how to use social media and distance learning methods for workers' education, while many workers do not yet have access to the internet or are not computer literate. On the other hand, internet use is growing rapidly and it is important to occupy this crucial space for learning and exchange that is privileged by the youth. Like unions elsewhere in the world, Palestinian trade unions need to engage the youth in trade union work because the future of the labour movement is at stake. With wide segments of the labour force still unorganized (professional and trade union affiliation levels of employed persons stood at 15.5% in 2011 according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [2011]), the energy, dynamism and determination of youth are needed to conquer additional sectors. It is thus a priority to educate them on labour issues and provide them with the skills and knowledge that will allow them to play a decisive role in shaping the present and future of Palestinian trade unions. Already, the space occupied by youth union leaders in independent and democratic unions is growing. In sectors like information technology, post and telecom, finance, pre-school education, or health, young unionists have played a significant role in developing trade union work and conducting struggles to improve work conditions and circumstances. They are also crucial allies for spreading workers' education.

Imad Tmeizi, the young president of the Palestinian Postal Service Workers' Union, which was established three years ago, holds the view that:

developing workers' education in various fields, in particular those related to human rights and trade union work, enables workers to obtain their rights and protect themselves from oppression by employers. Workers' education also has a positive impact on workers' professional career, as they have a better chance to gain advancement due to improved knowledge and skills, and a better capacity to obtain their rights. In addition, training and learning in the field of occupational health and safety protects lives and contributes in reducing work-related accidents. In our field of work, post and logistics, which is fairly recent in Palestine, workers' training needs in occupational health and safety have neither been assessed nor met so far, and employers have no information on the matter. (Personal communication, 30 April 2013)

Not everyone yet understands the multiple benefits and ramifications of workers' education, and it remains a challenge to convince workers and their representatives in certain sectors of the importance of workers' education regardless of their profession. At the same time, the growth of the independent and democratic trade union movement, nurtured by workers' education, has generated an exponential increase of educational needs. DWRC faces the challenge to develop its relationship with its partner trade unions, especially democratic ones, and to equip them with needed skills to spread workers' education in order to promote and strengthen the role of trade unions in workplaces. This means that more labour educators from within the unions have to be formed, and resources have to be mobilized to enable unions to undertake regular edu-

cational activities. Most Palestinian unions have extremely small budgets and rely entirely on volunteer work from union members and representatives. At present, they do not have the means to finance workers' education programs, nor do they benefit from any local governmental subsidies for this purpose. International trade union solidarity and support is thus extremely important to ensure that Palestinian workers continue to have access to labour education opportunities, and that unions develop their capacities in this field.

NOTES

1. After the First World War, the UK obtained a mandate over Palestine (which it had occupied since 1917-1918) from the League of Nations. The British Mandate for Palestine officially started on September 29, 1923, and ended on May 14, 1948, in the midst of a civil war that had started in 1947. On the same day, the Jewish leadership declared the establishment of the State of Israel. This was followed by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. For Palestinians, the year 1948 is the year of the "Nakba" or catastrophe, during which more than 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from their towns and villages, and became refugees.
2. From 1948 until the 1967 war, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was under Jordanian rule, and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian administration. The 1967 war resulted in the occupation of both territories by Israel.

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WAJIH ELAYASSA worked as an Education Coordinator for the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre (DWRC) in Palestine from 1997 until August 2013. He has a Master's in Economy and Planning of National Economy from the Peoples' Friendship University, Moscow, Russia, and a diploma in Trade Union and Industrial Studies from Northern College, Barnsley, United Kingdom. He has dedicated much of his professional life to developing workers' education in Palestine. You can reach the DWRC at extr@dwrc.org and at <http://www.dwrc.org>

WAJIH ELAYASSA a occupé le poste de coordonnateur à l'éducation pour le Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre (DWRC), en Palestine, de 1997 jusqu'en août 2013. Il détient une maîtrise en économie et planification de l'économie nationale de l'Université russe de l'amitié des peuples, située à Moscou, en Russie et un diplôme en études syndicales et industrielles du Northern College, Barnsley, au Royaume-Uni. Elayassa a consacré la majeure partie de sa carrière à développer le domaine de la formation des travailleurs en Palestine. Il est possible de communiquer avec le DWRC au extr@dwrc.org ainsi qu'au <http://www.dwrc.org>