

SCOTTISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS

**STUC General Council
Delegation
to Palestine and Israel 2009
Delegation Report**

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**UNIONS
WORK**

Report of the STUC Delegation to Palestine and Israel 28 February – 7 March 2009.

Introduction

At STUC Congress 2007 a resolution was carried which called on the General Council to explore the merits of the calls for boycott, disinvestment and sanctions (BDS) against the state of Israel until it complies with international law and agreed human rights principles. In September 2007 the General Council agreed a process for considering the BDS calls. A crucial part of this process was to visit the region and discuss BDS directly with trade unions from Israel and Palestine. A delegation of eleven trade unionists from the STUC visited Israel and Palestine in Spring 2009.

Delegation

The delegation consisted of the following individuals:

Terry Brotherstone	President	University and College Union Scotland
Joy Dunn	General Council	PCS
Liz Elkind	General Council	Edinburgh TUC
Mike Kirby	General Council	UNISON
Phil McGarry	General Council	RMT
Robert Mooney	General Council	Community
Ken Ross	Scottish Secretary	Fire Brigades Union
Mary Senior	Assistant Secretary	STUC
Drew Smith	General Council	GMB
Fiona Smith	General Council	UNISON
Grahame Smith	General Secretary	STUC

Acknowledgements

The delegation would wish to record its thanks to Histadrut, and Avital Shapira-Shabirow, its Director of Industrial Relations Department; and the Palestine General Federation of Trade Union, particularly Ghada Abu Ghalyoun, Coordinator Of Youth Department, who liaised with the STUC on the arrangements for the visits.

The delegation would wish to note that a number of the meetings held in Israel and Palestine were facilitated by interpreters.

Itinerary

Saturday 28 February 2009

Early evening Depart Scotland – delegation meet Heathrow
22.30 Depart Heathrow for Tel Aviv

Sunday 1 March 2009.

05.00 Delegation arrive Ben Guiron Airport, Tel Aviv
Travel to hotel in East Jerusalem
Rest in hotel.

13.00 Visit to Yad Vashem

16.00 Political tour of Jerusalem

Monday 2 March 2009.

07.30 Depart for Tel Aviv

09.30 Meeting with Histadrut Chairman Mr Ofer Eini,
Histadrut Headquarters.

10.30 Drive to Jerusalem

11.30 Meeting with Welfare Minister Mr Yitzchak
Hertzog, Welfare Ministry.

- 12.30 Drive to lunch
- 13.00 Lunch hosted by officials from the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Canela Restaurant.
- 14.45 Drive to Jerusalem Municipality
- 15.00 Meeting with the Jerusalem Municipality Employees' Committee.
- 16.30 Return to hotel.
- 17.00 Meeting with Breaking the Silence, Jerusalem Hotel.

Tuesday 3 March 2009.

- 07.30 Drive to Sderot
- 09.00 Meeting with local official Sderot.
- 10.00 Tour of Sderot.
- 10.30 Visit to chicken factory Of Kor, Sderot.
- 12.00 Meeting with Mr Yitzhak Moyal, Chairman of the Construction and Wood Workers Union.
- 13.00 Drive to Jerusalem.
- 14.30 Free time to explore Jerusalem Old City.
- 17.30 Meeting with B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories).

Wednesday 4 March 2009.

- 08.00 Depart for Nablus
- 09.30 Arrive at PGFTU Headquarters
Meeting with Mr Shaher Sae'd, General Secretary, and the PGFTU's Leadership.
- FBU meet with Palestinian Fire Fighters' Union
- Meeting with Palestinian Public Sector Unions
- 12.30 Meeting with the Women's General Federation.
- 13.30 Lunch at PGFTU.
- 14.30 Meetings with individual unions / youth section
- 16.30 Tour in old city of Nablus
- 18.00 Return to Jerusalem.

Thursday 5 March 2009.

- 08.30 Depart for Ramalah
- 09.30 Meeting with Dr Samir Abdullah, Minister of Planning .
- 11.00 Visit to Al Haq (Palestinian Human Rights Organisation)
- 12.00 Visit to the tomb of Yasser Arafat
- 12.30 Delegation splits
Excursion to visit a village, Nilin, near the wall
- Visit to Birzeit University
- Meeting with members of the BDS Campaign

Friday 6 March 2009.

- 09.30 Visit to the ILO office
- 10.30 Visit to St George's School in East Jerusalem
- 13.00 Free time to explore Old City.

Saturday 7 March 2009.

- 03.30 Depart for Tel Aviv Airport.
- 07.30 Depart for Heathrow.
- Early Afternoon Depart Heathrow for Scotland.

Visit to Yad Vashem, Sunday 1 March

The delegation participated in a guided tour of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem. The museum has graphic images, artefacts and documents which relate the horrific mass murder of Jewish people in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. The delegation walked through the memorial to the children that were killed in the holocaust. Our guide was London-born and ended our tour by saying what we had seen in the museum would help to explain why such regrettable actions had to be taken today to defend Israel.

Political Tour of Jerusalem, Sunday 1 March

The delegation participated in a "Political Tour of Jerusalem" with a guide from the tour group Alternative Tours which was based at our hotel. The guide, Abu Hassan, spoke of "colonies" rather than "settlements", and how colonies were taking over Palestinian agricultural land.

He spoke of the fact that people of Jerusalem had the same mayor and paid the same taxes but those in East Jerusalem received a worse service, for example there are 12 swimming pools in West Jerusalem, and none in East Jerusalem. It was also stated that Palestinians pay 20% of the taxes collected by the City of Jerusalem but get back only 5% of the expenditure on services. Our guide advised that citizens of Jerusalem who were resident out with Jerusalem for a period of twelve months lost their right to citizenship. He pointed out that in order to accept Israel's offer of citizenship for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem they were required to give up the right to reside in the Occupied Territories. This means that many families are separated. We saw the "security wall", and told that this was built inside the 'Green Line' and therefore inside Palestinian territories. His view is that the wall is to impose a new border by force, to enable Israel to control water supplies, and is part of the Zionist State's aggrandisement policy, with emphasis on the acquisition of land rather than working for peace. We passed through checkpoints on the tour, and at one saw an ambulance with flashing lights being stopped by officials.

During this tour, and throughout our time in Jerusalem, we saw the construction of the new tram line which we were told is to link the Jewish settlements in the east of the city with other such settlements and with workplaces in the west, bypassing areas where Palestinians and Arab Israelis live. We were shown a refugee camp on the hill side, enclosed with a single gateway and with cramped squalid accommodation, which contrasted starkly with the smart buildings of the unlawful settlements in East Jerusalem. We saw the Palestinian village of Jaba, and where the only route into the village had been closed off, cutting the villagers off from their land. We were taken to visit a Palestinian woman who had been thrown out of her house by forced possession under occupying forces regulations, and now lived in a tent on wasteland. She told us that her husband was dying of cancer at the time they were evicted from their home. She was being supported by her neighbours, who also faced imminent eviction.

Meeting with Ofer Eini, Chairman Histadrut. Tel Aviv, Monday 2 March

The delegation met Ofer Eini at the Histadrut headquarters in Tel Aviv. Mr Eini indicated that Histadrut valued its relationship with STUC. Grahame Smith explained the purpose of the STUC visit to Israel and Palestine. Ofer Eini told us that when he took up his post in 2006, PGFTU criticised Histadrut for not respecting a financial agreement which was valid since 1993. Talks were brokered by Guy Ryder from the ITUC between Ofer Eini and Shafer Sae'd, and a final agreement signed in June 2008. Ofer Eini stated that this created a new positive relationship between the two organisations, and now any Palestinian in Israel will be able to get legal support as if a member of Histadrut.

He acknowledged failings in the approach of the previous Histadrut leadership to relationships with the PGFTU. He stated that he was committed to a constructive and practical relationship with the PGFTU and spoke about the joint employment and training initiatives being developed by the two centres. He stated that he believed that this cooperation could be a model for wider cooperation between Israel and Palestine.

He said it was ridiculous for trade unions to have a boycott, when he is leading a clear path of co-operation and support to Palestinian employees. He suggested a boycott would lead to the closure of factories. He claimed PGFTU are focussed on co-operation not boycott. He outlined the missile attacks Israeli people experience on a daily basis, blaming Hamas and the influence of Iran. He believed the path to peace is economic, and this means more employment for Palestinians. He emphasised the importance of trade union links between Israeli and Palestinian workers. He stated that a boycott would weaken Histadrut in its efforts to work with the PGFTU and to influence the Israeli government on the issue of Palestine and the rights of Palestinian workers. He argued that boycott would also weaken the PGFTU.

He stated that the Israeli Government does not have a partner to work with in Palestine, criticising Hamas. Whilst supporting a Palestinian state, he argued strongly that boycott is a one sided approach.

The STUC thanked Ofer Eini, and Avital Shapira-Shabirow, Director of International Relations Department, for all of the assistance received in facilitating the delegation. Grahame Smith presented Ofer Eini with a small token to commemorate our visit. The delegation was given an information pack from Histadrut.

Welfare Minister Herzog, Welfare Ministry, Jerusalem, Monday 2 March.

Welfare Minister Yitzchak Hertzog welcomed the delegation and indicated that his grandfather was from Glasgow, and his father was born in Belfast and had lived in Dublin. Minister Hertzog is a member of the Labour Party in Israel. He urged us to look into this issue humbly, as we may be operating adversely to the ones we wish to support. He spoke of the historical context, of UN resolutions of 1947 and 1967, and of the bold decision at Camp David in 2000 to divide Jerusalem. He pointed out that Arafat rejected this and turned to bloodshed. He used a phrase we heard several times from the Israelis, that the Palestinians “never missed a chance to miss a chance”. Mr Herzog stated that Israel had shown it is willing to work for peace, by signing peace with Egypt and Jordan, and in 2005, when he was the Housing Minister, Israel pulled out all of the settlers from Gaza.

He observed that in 2006 Hamas assassinated hundreds of people, alienated Fatah and created a rift within the Palestinian people. He accused Hamas of being controlled by Iran. He said that 80 per cent of the Israeli public would sign a deal today if it meant real peace, but the suicide bombers mean that peace cannot be achieved. We were told that the physical barrier built by Israel has brought a 100 per cent reduction in suicide bombings and meant that economies can be revived. He spoke of the positive work Tony Blair is doing on behalf of the Quartet.

He spoke of the culture of hate and Hamas’ use of civilians as part of the “war”, and claimed the PGFTU are not sorry that Israel confronted Hamas. The Minister praised the strong co-operation between Histadrut and PGFTU, and the strong civil rights laws and the Supreme Court of Israel. He indicated that Israelis feel that the world does not understand them, and underlined the importance of respecting Israel’s right to exist as a state.

The delegation asked him about his obligations as Welfare Minister to Palestinian people. The Minister spoke of East Jerusalemites explaining that they vote in Palestinian elections and municipal elections, have full social security and labour law rights. On the domestic political situation in Israel he explained that with Kadema not joining the coalition, Labour may join as a neutralising element, given the right wing coalition deemed zealous.

Foreign Affairs Officials Lunch Meeting, Monday 2 March

This was the most uncomfortable meeting for the delegation. We met three of the officials: Rafael Barak, Simona Halperin, and one other official over lunch. Initially we heard similar views as from our meetings with Histadrut and Minister Herzog, that Israel does not have a partner to work for peace with, that Iran and Qatar are very real threats and do not accept Israel's right to exist, and that Palestinians "never miss a chance to miss a chance". We also heard of the Hamas missile attacks on Israeli civilians.

One of the officials then spoke in more detail about the recent "war" in Gaza. She set out a map on the table to show us how every precaution had been taken to avoid civilian casualties. She explained that where they were unsure if civilians were in a building, Israeli military had fired on the corner of the building as a warning shot to enable civilians to escape. She criticised the European Union for not doing more in its oversight of the last Palestinian elections, for example not including clauses that political parties must renounce violence.

The delegation questioned the officials on Israel's failure to comply with UN Security Council resolutions, on the high number of civilian deaths and casualties, the political timing of the attacks on Gaza, and Israel allowing the ceasefire with Hamas to expire. We did not receive any satisfactory answers to these questions.

Jerusalem Municipality, Monday 2 March.

We met three trade union officials from the Jerusalem Municipality Employees' Committee. They stated that although the individual union representatives held their own political views, political questions, such as the issue of BDS, were kept out of the business of the Committee. They spoke of the diverse population of Jerusalem, including large Jewish, Arab, secular and Orthodox communities; their role in translating employment related papers to Arab employees who don't speak Hebrew; and their role in diminishing tensions following the war in Gaza. The shop steward Jamal explained that the poorest employees in Jerusalem are Palestinian, and that the country is facing a recession, so boycott will harm the weakest within society such as Palestinians and the poorer Jewish people. He said that instead of boycott he wanted to see dialogue.

Another shop steward, Sam, said boycott should not be an issue for the union, it should be for government, saying if governments boycott it will have an effect and help us all. The third shop steward, Jacob, said that boycott will hit one million Palestinians in Israel. He added that the Israeli action in Gaza had a hawkish result, in that people had voted for right wing parties in the elections. He said that the Israeli Government is trying to increase the proportion of Jews in Jerusalem, but in his personal view he didn't see himself as more important than his colleague Jamal.

Breaking the Silence, Monday 2 March.

Yehuda Shaul, a 26 year old Jerusalemite from the Breaking the Silence organisation met the delegation in our hotel. He explained he was an orthodox observant Jew, and aged 18 he joined the Israeli Defence Force, as Israel drafts all men into its army for three years, and women for two years. He had spent two years in the West Bank and just over a year in Hebron. He explained that he and his army colleagues realised that they were carrying out this activity (the military occupation), not the uniform they wore or the weapons they carried, and felt it was important that people at home knew what they were doing.

They exhibited photos in Tel Aviv in June 2004, and were telling the story of the occupation from the eyes of the occupier. Breaking the Silence collects and publishes testimonies of soldiers, developing educational work. Yehuda explained that they don't deal with big solutions, their focus is on bearing witness, to force Israeli society to recognise the moral cost of the occupation. As such, Breaking the Silence did not have a view on BDS.

He stated that all of his generation has abused a Palestinian, he spoke of the use of Palestinians (including children) as human shields, and the militarisation of Israelis. He said Breaking the Silence wants Israeli society to be responsible for what is being done in its name, and emphasised the need for Israeli people to know what is happening in Palestine.

The delegation was given information and DVDs about the work of Breaking the Silence.

Visit to Sderot, Tuesday 3 March.

The delegation was taken to Sderot, a town on the border with Gaza because Histadrut wanted us to see for ourselves the effects of attacks from Gaza. We were welcomed into a bunker, and received a presentation from a representative of the Sderot Municipality. We were told Sderot was established in 1951 with its population coming from Iraq, Iran, Khurdistan, Morocco; in the 1960s new immigrants from Romania and Russia; and in the 1980s Ethiopia.

Since April 2001 8000 Kassam rockets have been fired at the town, and in 2004 these started to kill people, including small children. We were told that Sderot's population only gets a 15-17 second warning of a rocket attack, and to run for shelter. We were told the rocket attacks happen every day, up to 5, 10 or 20 times a day, and that rockets are shot especially in the mornings when children are going to schools. Ten people have been killed in Sderot, and 15 people killed in the surrounding area. Over 200 apartments have been damaged by Kassam rockets, and over 4,000 people have left the town.

We were told that after the Oslo Agreement the borders between Gaza and Israel were opened and people from Gaza came to Sderot for work and shopping. However, Hamas were now teaching their children to be terrorists. We were told that Hamas wants to destroy Israel, they don't want peace and so Israel cannot negotiate with a terrorist organisation or this fanatical Islam. The delegation asked why Gazans elected Hamas, and we were told that many people in Gaza live in refugee camps where Hamas keep the camps and people under their rule.

The delegation was shown a video made by residents of Sderot to illustrate the impact of rocket attacks, which was referred to as "Muslim Terror". The delegation was also given an information booklet about Sderot and the Kassam rocket attacks.

We were taken on a tour of the town of Sderot, where we observed sites where Kassam rockets had hit buildings, and killed people. We also noted the reinforced concrete roofs on the school and kindergarten; along with a number of bus shelters which lead to underground rocket shelters. We were told, however, that the government has been asked to provide more concrete shelters for homes and public places, but this had not been done. We were taken to the police station where we observed the shells of the home made Kassam rockets. We were taken to a hillside overlooking Gaza to observe Gaza and to see its proximity with Sderot.

Visit to Food Factory, Tuesday 3 March.

The delegation was taken to visit a chicken processing factory on the outskirts of Sderot, we were accompanied by Eliezer Belo, Deputy Chairman of the Food and Pharmaceutical Workers Union and David Azoulay, Chairman of the Sderot Regional Labour Council of Histadrut. We were shown around the factory and observed the place where a worker was killed by a Kassam rocket. We were told that the factory did not have a shelter for workers, and noted that the area where the meeting room and office was had a reinforced concrete roof. We had the opportunity to meet with union representatives from the factory. They told us how

frightening rocket attacks are, but how everyone in the factory gets on together whatever their background.

We asked why people still worked at the factory, given the threat of rocket attacks. We were told that this was a problem, but people feared unemployment and needed the work. We asked why the Government or employer had not provided a shelter for the employees, and we were told that the cost of building a shelter was so expensive that if funded by the employer would make the factory unviable and it would have to close. We did not get a satisfactory answer as to why the Government did not provide a shelter. We explained the purpose of our visit, and the shop stewards, of Arab and Jewish backgrounds, said that they did not support a boycott, and that they worked together well, whatever their heritage. We were told that the food processing factory was part of a larger company which did export products.

Meeting with Itzhak Moyal, National Union of Building, Wood, Ceramic and Glass Workers, Tuesday 3 March.

Itzhak Moyal, President of the National Union of Building, Wood, Ceramic and Glass Workers came to the food factory to meet with us. His organisation is affiliated to Histadrut. He spoke to us of the partnership work his union is pursuing with the PGFTU, in developing a project to up-skill Palestinian workers to Israeli standards in “wet trades” for the construction industry, to enable them to be employed in Israel.

He told us that a pilot initiative involving 60 Palestinians had been undertaken and it was hoped that funding of 1.5million Israel Shekels could be obtained through the Building Workers International and German unions to up-skill 500 Palestinian workers.

He emphasised the importance of partnership and dialogue, rather than boycott. He mentioned that Histadrut had persuaded that Israeli government not to levy the US\$500 employment tax companies pay if they recruit migrant workers on companies recruiting Palestinian workers providing opportunities for Palestinians to obtain employment in Israel to replace migrant labour.

Delegation members were each presented with a watch to commemorate our visit.

B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories Jerusalem, Tuesday 3 March.

We met Risa Zoll, the Director of B'Tselem. She explained B'Tselem was founded in 1989 at the beginning of the first Intifada, on the basis that if Israelis were aware of the human rights violations against Palestinians, they would stop. It became apparent that it was not sufficient to provide information, and B'Tselem now provides advocacy and engagement with policy makers, journalists, diplomats and decision makers. B'Tselem employs a team of field researchers to collect testimonies and corroborate them; and information is only published when they are 150 per cent certain it is accurate. Information is analysed in the context of international Human Rights laws, and debunks the claimed security agenda of the Israeli Government. B'Tselem has a new approach of providing 130 cameras in Palestinian homes in high risk areas, to provide first hand evidence. Risa told us that this has increased the number of investigations by the security forces and been empowering for Palestinians, particularly women and children. B'Tselem has recently opened an office in the US to target Washington decision makers. B'Tselem receives funding from foreign governments and religious organisations, with approximately two thirds of funding from Europe and one third from the US.

In Gaza B'Tselem has put witnesses in touch with journalists, and is calling for an investigation into the breaches of human rights in Gaza, particularly in terms of distinguishing between civilians and combatants, and on the issue of proportionality. Risa also indicated that there is also a question of the use of permissible weapons, such as white phosphorus, and artillery (which hits a wide area). It was also noted that whilst the Israel Defence Force may have given warnings of attack to Gazans, there was no where for people to seek refuge.

We were told that the settlements are at the heart of most human rights violations, and the taking of private Palestinian land for settlements.

The restrictions on movement, particularly within the West Bank, the checkpoints and the “flying” checkpoints, were mentioned. We were told that the separation barrier has 61 gates which are meant to be open but are not. Of the roads, 130km of roads have restricted use, and Palestinians are completely prohibited to use 137km of road. It was noted that these are all systemic problems.

Risa Zoll emphasised the importance of B’Tselem’s human rights approach to the occupation in Palestine. On the issue of boycott, as a human rights organisation B’Tselem does not support, or call for, boycotts because they include some form of human rights violations. When asked about targeted boycotts, for example, against companies involved in “illegal” activity, Risa Zoll said that B’Tselem’s position would be the same although such a boycott would not carry the same risk of human rights violations as a blanket boycott.

The delegation was given reports and information from B’Tselem.

Meeting with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions, Wednesday 4 March.

We received a warm welcome at the PGFTU’s headquarters in Nablus, and were met by Shaher Sae’d, General Secretary. Shaher emphasised how much PGFTU valued our visit after the aggression in Gaza. He spoke of the political, social and economic situation of being under Israeli occupation, and of the checkpoints as being a normal feature of life. Our delegation had been stopped at the checkpoint outside Nablus, and forced to leave our minibus and walk through the checkpoint and get taxis the other side to get to the PFGTU offices. We were advised that this was because our minibus carried an Israeli registration and it was claimed that our safety could not be guaranteed in Nablus. We were told that there are 596 checkpoints in the West Bank at the main entrances to villages and cities, and 112 checkpoints around Nablus, so it is impossible to leave without a military inspection. There are no buses between Gaza and the West Bank so it is impossible for Palestinians to travel between these places.

We were told that the building and construction of the apartheid wall makes the situation worse, with the wall depriving people from hospitals, schools, their farms and families; the wall has ruined the social and economic life of Palestinian people living at the site of the wall. By the end of the year, Jerusalem will be surrounded by the apartheid wall, with regulations restricting Palestinian people from entering the city. The wall and the political situation since 2000, has dramatically decreased the number of Palestinians working in Israel, resulting in higher unemployment (36 per cent), and greater poverty (52 per cent living under poverty line of US\$3 per day).

Nearly 26,000 workers work inside the settlements, in 2000 it was only 9,000. Shaher indicated that this is a dangerous development as there are no health and safety inspectors, no minimum wage and long hours are rife, because the unions cannot organise inside the settlements. He told us that the taking and controlling of land and 80 per cent of the water in the West Bank is affecting industry and developments within the West Bank.

We were told that the situation in Gaza was miserable and disastrous before the war, and that those people affected are the workers. Employment has dropped below 50 per cent. In the recent attacks the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has said 480 factories and workplaces, where 13,000 people worked, have been totally destroyed. There is no chance for Gazan workers to come to the West Bank, only those who needed medical treatment were allowed to travel. PGFTU officials cannot meet their Gazan colleagues as they are not permitted to travel between Gaza and the West Bank. Since the war it is estimated that 80 per cent of workers are unemployed. Shaher said that the Sharm El Sheikh meeting and the reconstruction of Gaza cannot work unless the siege of Gaza is removed.

Shaher said PGFTU has told Histadrut that the Israeli army is acting against our people, and that is why international organisations are raising the issue of BDS. Shaher told us that PGFTU cannot advise against this, it is organisations' own decisions, and they must decide what they really believe. He acknowledged that companies could be the object of attention due to their engagement in unlawful activities, such as the construction of the wall.

He also acknowledged that many sections of Palestinian society were calling for boycott, particularly the boycott of goods from illegal settlements.

He pointed out that the main market for the benefit of Israel is Palestinian people, and that Palestinians have to transport many things through Israel, and Gaza depends on milk products from Israel. Shaher indicated he was pleased that, due to Histadrut's work with the PGFTU, Israeli companies are planning to employ and train 500 Palestinian workers, as this helps 500 families.

He underlined the position of the PGFTU as being against violence, but noted that the same position was not seen from Histadrut, they did not denounce the recent aggression in Gaza nor have they spoken out against other violations of human rights.

He noted that the situation is getting more complex with the Israeli elections, and the division of the Palestinian people between Fatah and Hamas enables Israel and the US to ignore our rights.

Grahame Smith specifically asked about the issue of boycott, and Histadrut's view that boycott would undermine the relationship between PGFTU and Histadrut, and jeopardise the projects between the organisations. Shaher spoke in detail about the relationship between PGFTU and Histadrut. He said that PGFTU was committed to cooperation with Histadrut to protect Palestinian workers. He stated that since 1995 PGFTU had called on the international trade union movement to intervene to require Histadrut to fulfil its obligations under the agreement signed in 1993. No progress had been made under the previous Histadrut leadership. However, with the assistance of the ICTU leadership, dialogue had taken place with the new Histadrut leadership under Ofer Eini. Ofer Eini had approved the implementation of the agreement. He said that the PGFTU had no reservations about the need to cooperate with Histadrut as it would help protect Palestinian workers in Israel and create more job opportunities for them. He said that Histadrut could do more in cooperation with the PGFTU.

Shaher said that PGFTU has stated from the beginning that it is keen on its continuing relationship with Histadrut, but that it cannot determine what STUC, or other international organisations decide to do in relation to a boycott .

In terms of the project in the construction sector he indicated that there are talks about this between Histadrut, German unions and PGFTU. There are proposals to train 500 Palestinians in new skills in building and construction so after the training they will have chance to work inside Israel. It was underlined that these are just plans, in Shafer's words 'only dialogue,' and nothing has happened yet. He also stated that such a project must create job opportunities for Palestinians to remove the pressure for them to leave Palestine.

Grahame Smith thanked PGFTU, Shafer Sae'd and Ghada Abu Ghalyoun for all of the help and assistance in facilitating our visit. A token to commemorate our visit was presented to Shafer. PGFTU gave STUC a small plaque and each delegate a PGFTU scarf.

Meeting with Firefighters in Nablus Fire Station.

Ken Ross, accompanied by Drew Smith, met with the Fire Chief of Nablus Fire Department and with numerous firefighters in the Fire Station. A number of Fire Service issues were discussed in relation to such matters as incident procedures and equipment.

The various pieces of equipment in the Fire Station were of a reasonable standard and were mainly from European or American manufacturers (ie: Breathing Apparatus, Hydraulic Cutting Equipment, etc). Unfortunately, the Fire Station did not have the compliment or equipment that you would expect from a station of its size, covering the area and population that it does. All servicing of equipment was done locally, but all parts were attained exclusively from Israel, as they were unable to get direct access to manufacturers in Europe or America. The biggest single need that the firefighters' cited was that of training. Areas such as basic Firefighting Techniques, Road Traffic Accidents, Urban Search & Rescue and Instructor Training were all discussed. Ken Ross will be working with colleagues in the UK to arrange for this training to be undertaken.

In terms of how the occupation affected them, one key element that they cited was in terms of their emergency responses to the outlying villages surrounding Nablus that they cover, which are located beyond the wall surrounding the city. When they are mobilised to incidents in these areas, they need to go through the checkpoints. Despite being en route to an emergency call, with blue lights and horns, they are always stopped at the checkpoint, told to get out of the appliance, and in many case, to empty the lockers, so that the soldiers can “search” the vehicle. This can delay their response to incidents for up to an hour. This has clear direct and detrimental affect to the safety of the residents of these villages.

When asked if BDS would have a detrimental affect on their Service, they were unsure. Privately, however, from a personal and political perspective, they were fully supportive of sanctions. It was clear that they were very committed to their communities and were extremely concerned how the occupation was compromising their ability to safeguard the people of Nablus.

Meeting with the General Union of Palestinian Women Nablus, Wednesday 4 March.

We met with Dalal Salameh, Chair of the General Union of Palestinian Women, and her colleagues, and she gave us a general introduction on the aims of the union of creating equal rights between men and women, and promoting the rights of Palestinian women. Dalal spoke of the first elections of the Palestinian Authority where she was one of five women elected. In the following elections quotas were introduced, and the 17 women elected were all elected through the quota system. Dalal explained how Hamas is not part of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and that the system of elections of 50 per cent lists and 50 per cent names enabled Hamas to dominate in the “individual” part of the ballot, as the PLO votes were spread amongst other parties.

The women indicated that they supported the campaign for a universities’ boycott, and that they believe the world is biased towards Israel.

They spoke of the effects of living under occupation, its damaging effects on children's education, health, and women who risk dying in child birth when they are stopped at checkpoints. They outlined that the wall and the settlements are a violation of human rights, and so sanctions are very important. They told us they support a boycott of Israeli products, and pushed hard for the European Union to distinguish settlement products. They told us of their concerns about cancer, and the high rates of cancer in Palestine, which they suspected was due to the burial of waste on Palestinian land.

The women we met were very clear in their support for boycott and sanctions against Israel, because of the human rights violations their people were experiencing.

Mary Senior thanked Dalal and her colleagues for the meeting. Joy Dunn, on behalf of our delegation presented the women with a commemorative plate from PCS.

Meeting with the Youth Section of PGFTU, Wednesday 4 March.

Drew Smith, (STUC Youth Committee) and Mary Senior met with Ghada Abu Ghalyoun, (PGFTU Co-ordinator of Youth) and young member Aisha. We were told that the PGFTU was happy to have links with the STUC Youth Committee. They said that there is a high proportion of young people in Palestine, a lot of graduates, but significant suffering for young people experiencing unemployment, and imprisonment. We were told of a project from the Canadian trade union centre CLC, which began in 2008, which is helping to strengthen young people in terms of developing the skills and competence needed to participate in the labour force, and also to support young women.

Aisha told us of the high proportion of young people who are arrested, particularly aged between 12 and 22, and put into jail for between 5 – 10 years, often without being able to defend themselves.

This presents considerable problems in terms of missing an education, and being unable to get employment. Aisha underlined that international law says you should not go to jail at such a young age, and that there are harsh conditions in prison. PGFTU is attempting to address the problems faced by young people who have been imprisoned. Aisha also spoke of the need to raise awareness amongst women and young people of their rights, including employment rights. PGFTU is trying to provide this information to young people through workshops. Aisha told us that she has not been to Jerusalem since she was a child, because of the restrictions on movement.

Meeting with National Palestinian Transport Union, Wednesday 4 March.

Phil McGarry, RMT and General Council member met Nasser Younis the General Secretary of the Palestinian Transport Union and Suhail S Khader, Executive Committee member of the PGFTU.

Nasser told us that he had spent five years in a detention centre in 1978/79 and had been arrested 22 times in 1991 for defending and supporting his members. All the problems stem from the occupation, whether it is the checkpoints, the settlements, compulsory demolishing orders of Palestinian properties to the electric fences and the current wall extension. He referred to the continued harassment and disruptive practises used at the main and mobile checkpoints from the Israeli army, resulting in long queues thus causing frustration and anger.

Nasser continued by advising that his Union was directly affiliated to the International Transport Federation (ITF) and that a delegation led by its General Secretary, David Cockcroft, visited Israel and Palestine in February 2008. He mentioned the problems his members face on a daily basis. Some 3,000 taxis are in use in Nablus, but only 200 have permits to leave the city, however, they have to travel the longer routes because of the road restrictions. Rigorous checks are made to scrutinise travel and work permits thus causing long delays. Some 70 per cent of Palestinians are denied access to their neighbouring towns, cities and villages because they have had a "run in" with the Security Services often on spurious and trivial allegations.

This in effect meant that ordinary citizens were prisoners in their own environment and had no freedom of movement. Many people were actually shot for arguing with the army, the Israeli Defence Force, and the checkpoint Security Services.

During the ITF visit it emerged that there was a complaints procedure in place, however no one was aware of this, or did not choose to use it for fear of reprisals. The ITF suggested setting up a helpline with the support of the Transport Authorities which would benefit both Israeli and Palestinian transport users. This has not materialised to any effect. The “Freedom of Movement” for taxi drivers needed tackling urgently, and it was suggested a special checkpoint be instituted similar to the Freight one.

Phil thanked Nasser and Suhail for the very informative discussion and stated he would initially report back to the main STUC delegation. He also promised to raise these matters with his own General Secretary as he was an Executive Committee member of the ITF.

Tour of Old City of Nablus, Wednesday 4 March.

Shaher Sae'd and his colleagues came with the delegation and showed us around the Old City of Nablus. This was a vibrant city with market stalls, narrow streets, and Shaher was particularly proud to show us the Turkish Baths which have been recently restored, after being destroyed by incursions of Israeli tanks into the narrow alley ways. Rebuilding work included the town hall, and offices on the main street which had been destroyed by Israeli military attacks since the last STUC delegation in 2001. We saw a number of places which had memorials painted on walls to individuals who had been killed in the Intifada – these individuals were referred to as martyrs. We also saw places that had been attacked and destroyed by Israeli air strikes. We saw an amusing if discomfoting scene with a number of small children attempting to carry a heavy table through the streets. We were then told that the children were copying the practice of carrying a coffin in a funeral procession.

Because of two hour delays at the usual checkpoint it was suggested that we depart from Nablus through a checkpoint that is usually used for heavy goods vehicles, rather than the busy checkpoint that had delayed us when we arrived. We did get through this checkpoint, after showing our passports, along with a document we were given by Histadrut, and were able to collect our minibus to return to Jerusalem.

Ministry of Labour, Ramallah, Thursday 5 March.

The delegation was welcomed to the Ministry of Labour, by Dr Samir Abdullah, Minister of Planning for the Palestinian Authority, based in Ramallah. The Minister commended us on our interest in Palestine. He explained that Palestine was really the only colonial system left operating on earth, but that its not a classical occupation, it's a system that is trying to exclude and drive us out of our own country. He referred to the emerging Israeli Government coalition which he said wants to kick Palestinians out of their own country. He said that Gaza was a reminder of the atrocities of 1948, whereas in 1967 and 1973 Israel avoided targeting civilians in general. He said that the Israeli atrocities are feeding an extremist and fundamentalist movement.

He spoke of the aggressive settlements, road blocks and checkpoints, and that this fundamentalism is being driven not only by Israel's actions, but also by the foreign policy of the US.

The Minister spoke of some of the positive changes in terms of the new US Administration with a new strategy and determination to resolve the situation in the Middle East. The fact that George Mitchell is the US Middle East envoy, and the Administration is speaking up on the area was seen as very positive. However, there are negative developments given the anticipation of an Israeli government that doesn't believe in peace.

The Minister said that Israel is making money out of the occupation, and that the Palestinian market is business for them. 95 per cent of imports and exports are with Israel, and Israel has taken 85 per cent of Palestinian water and is now selling it to them.

He said that Palestinians feel that the US is not acting fairly, and is supporting Israel in its violations of human rights. He told us that the main reason for the rise of Hamas is the decline of the peace process, and people no longer believe in a moderate peace strategy. However, he said that negotiation is still the only way to achieve peace. He recognised that Islamic extremists are as dangerous to the Palestinian cause as the Israeli Government.

Whilst welcoming the Sharm El Sheikh conference and political and financial support which has been pledged, he emphasised the influential role of the US on attitudes to the region. He saw it vital to lobby the international community on the UN resolutions to make peace happen. He drew comparisons with South Africa and the important role of public opinion and the boycott of the apartheid regime. He said that this will be the most effective means of changing Israeli policy: Israel must realise that it is doing bad things to Palestinians, and be isolated from the rest of the world. If Israeli business is hit, this will make the politicians in Israel think about their policies.

He then spoke of some of the programmes to re-educate workers, support the unemployed and address employability issues in the labour force, especially in Gaza, underlining the problems of unemployment in the region. He said that we should not believe that Palestinian workers will suffer under a boycott of Israel. Where Palestinians are employed in Israel it is because their labour is required, it is not charity. He mentioned that Palestinian workers are employed in construction and services, rather than production for export. He said that Palestinians are prepared to make economic sacrifices for the sake of the political objectives.

The delegation asked the Minister about the viability of a two state solution, and the impact of the wall and the settlements on such. The Minister responded by indicating that the cost of the war in Gaza had exceeded US\$1bn, and that the cost of the wall was less than that. He believed that the settlements can be removed and can be discussed as part of a deal and are not an obstacle to a deal; and emphasised that Palestinians are ready for a two state solution based on the 1967 borders, East Jerusalem, and a passage between Gaza and the West Bank.

Meeting with Al-Haq, Ramallah, Thursday 5 March.

The delegation visited the offices of the Human Rights organisation Al-Haq, meeting with Al-Haq's Director Shawan Jabarin, and Rabie Abulatifah, their Media and Communications Officer. We were told Al-Haq was the first organisation established in the Middle East in 1979 by Palestinian lawyers with a focus on respecting the rule of law and human rights, particularly International human rights law. The organisation has field workers who provide credible evidence of human rights violations in Palestine.

We were told that Al-Haq is pursuing a case against British Ministers in the High Court in London, which focuses on the UK's obligations under international law, and their failure to censure Israel for breaching international laws. Al-Haq is claiming that Israel has breached the Geneva Convention as an occupying power to protect civilians in times of war.

Article 146 of the Geneva Convention includes the obligation of the Convention signatories to undertake sanctions against the signatories that breach the Convention. A separate case on the British trade in weapons to Israel was taken to the High Court in 2007, an Appeal failed in 2008, and is now being pursued in the House of Lords.

Shawan Jabarin explained that the occupation is the root of the human rights problems, and that the only way to improve human rights is to address and end the occupation. He also said that without respecting and implementing international laws, a just peace cannot be achieved. Al-Haq attempts to look at trends and policies behind the occupation to tackle human rights problems, for example how checkpoints are part of the wider policy of control, and the annexation of more land. He also spoke of how permits are part of the system of control, pressure, isolation and punishment. He explained how he himself has been unable to go outside the West Bank since 2006. He mentioned that, later that day, the appeal against the rejection by the Israeli authorities of his application to leave the West Bank to visit the Netherlands to receive an award in recognition of the work of Al-Haq, would be considered by the Israeli Supreme Court. The delegation was later advised that the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal.

In terms of the boycott he said that it is not a new discussion, but believed that boycott is something that individuals do on a personal basis. He emphasised that Al-Haq is asking for sanctions from third state parties which are obligated under international law, explaining that if a state continues to commit crimes against humanity, there are legal procedures for dealing with this. He also said that disinvestments are legal, and that there are UN guidelines on this matter, in terms of not helping the occupation by investing in the occupation. He reiterated that Al-Haq is speaking about sanctions and disinvestments, but is leaving the issue of boycott to others, such as trade unions and politicians.

Shawan Jabarin explained that there is an important role in strengthening civil society to enable it to play its role, that because of the policies of the UK Government Israel continues its crimes. He spoke briefly of cases in Canada where two companies which have a role in the construction of settlements are being pursued, and in Sweden, where Veolia lost a contract because of its activities in Israel. Veolia was targeted as the contract managing agency for the Jerusalem railway/tram.

The delegation was given leaflets and information from Al-Haq.

Tomb of Yasser Arafat, Thursday 5 March.

The delegation were taken to the tomb of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, where we were able to lay a wreath in the mausoleum. From this site we were shown the house of Yasser Arafat where he was kept under house arrest for years, and his offices. Arafat's quarters had been rebuilt since their destruction by Israeli shells in 2002.

Meeting with the Villagers of Nilin, Thursday 5 March

The delegation met with four villagers from Nilin who have seen the direct impact of the illegal settlements on their daily lives. We were given a presentation on the establishment of the settlements and we were shown a photographic exhibition which has tracked the expansion of the settlements in this rural area.

The photographs made powerful comparisons between the atrocities that took place against the Jews during the Second World War and the atrocities that are taking place now against the Palestinians. The villagers, however, made the point that they were not directly comparing the Holocaust to the situation faced by the Palestinians, but were asking why they were being made to suffer because of the persecution of the Jews prior to and during the Second World War. As well as the establishment of two settlements within a few kilometres of their village which have been built on prime agricultural land, we saw at first hand the building of the separation wall between the village and the illegal settlements, one of which had a population of 30,000 and was referred to by the Palestinians as a City.

This wall is still under construction and work was ongoing on the day we visited. We heard from the villagers how their olive trees along the line of the wall have been uprooted and stolen from them. Every Friday the local people march from the village to demonstrate at the wall and this has often led to clashes with the army and three villagers have lost their lives including one ten year old boy who was killed when he sustained hit head injuries when hit with rubber bullets.

One of the community leaders had his five year old son with him and we boarded the mini bus at the village to proceed to the Olive Grove Orchard. The boy thought we were going back to Ramallah. When he saw we were going to see the wall, he became agitated and started to cry. We asked the villager what the problem was only to be told that his son was taken forcefully from his father's arms during one of the marches and demonstrations in the village by a soldier of the IDF and thrown into a large cactus shrub, whereby the spines inflicted injuries to the boy. The young boy obviously remembered and was traumatised by this experience. We were told that the boy won't go near the Olive Groves now which was once a playground for the children of the village.

The villagers stated that, before the construction of the wall, they had mixed with the settlers who had attended events in the village. They said that there had never been any "security" problems between the villagers and the settlers.

Meeting with the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions Campaign, Ramallah, 5 March.

The delegation met with the representatives of four Palestinian NGOs which form part of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions Campaign based in Ramallah: Hamid of the Executive Committee of the Independent Unions of Palestine and the Global Coalition against Poverty, also the Secretary of a Youth Activity Centre in a Refugee Camp; Jamal, the Co-ordinator of the Stop the Wall Campaign; David from the Palestinian Academic Boycott of Israel; and a representative of the Anti Apartheid Wall Campaign.

David told us that few speak of the major violation of 60 years ago, with the complete theft of the land and the eviction of Palestinian people, and that this action was illegal. He said that this ethnic cleansing continues today and that the wall is maximising the taking of land and water away from Palestinians. He asked why the Palestinians are paying the price of the Holocaust. He objected to the division of the country on religious grounds, arguing that Christians, Jews and Muslims had all lived together as Palestinians. He hoped that the world's eyes had been opened by Israel's action in Gaza, and that Israel had been above the law for 60 years. He explained that most Palestinians take non violent action to oppose the occupation, and that it is important for the world to understand that it is not about being against Jews or Judaism as a religion, but its about being against the Zionist project. He highlighted the irony of the arguments on the primacy of academic freedom, when universities were closed and teachers not allowed to teach in Palestine.

Jamal confirmed that the wall was making a new map of the area, giving Israelis control of agricultural land and water. He said that Palestinian people don't have any hope in the US or Israel, their only hope is from international solidarity action from people, universities, trade unions and human rights organisations. He believed that the international boycott will help. He criticised Histadrut for not condemning Israel's violence in Gaza, and suggested that the international trade union movement should have agreed standards that its members have to meet. He told us that we have a responsibility to change the views of our own government and the European Union, and to ensure international laws are respected.

He said that he had more hope from trade unions' work in Palestine than from the recent Sharm El Sheikh conference, and recommended that people work with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Jamal explained that people in Jenin are surrounded by the wall and settlements so most workers are now unemployed, he said that Histadrut has not spoken up for Palestinian workers who were fired from jobs in Israel. He emphasised that the daily life of Palestinian workers is bad, and that people's main hope was in an international BDS campaign.

The delegation also heard from this meeting that Histadrut had established two offices in the settlements in the West Bank.

Birzeit University, Thursday 5 March.

A small group of the delegation, Mary Senior, Terry Brotherstone and Liz Elkind travelled to Birzeit University, close to Ramallah, to meet with the BZU Union of Professors and Employers. We met with Amira Silmi, Saminda, Dr Islah Jad, Sami Sha'ath, Lisa Taraki, and Tania Kassis, in a staff room of the Institute of Women's Studies within the modern Birzeit University Campus.

Saminda spoke on the Right to Education Campaign, explaining that the university was closed for four years during the first Intifada, but that it didn't stop functioning as students met in various locations off campus. Education has been hit particularly hard by the occupation with all schools and universities closed in 1988. The existence of checkpoints is affecting where students are able to travel for study, 20 per cent of Birzeit's students are from Jerusalem, but the delays at the Qualandia checkpoint present real difficulties for students. We were told the restrictions on movement are affecting the national identity of institutions, with students tending to go to the nearest university. Between 2001-2003 there was a permanent checkpoint outside Birzeit University, a number of foreign students are denied entry, and students may not be granted visa renewals preventing them from completing courses. The University is unable to offer teachers from outside positions, as they don't know if they will be allowed to teach there. There are currently 80 students in prison, 40 of these have not even been charged with a crime.

All student societies are banned, and since 2004 five members of the student council have been arrested. We were told that Birzeit students are twinned with Edinburgh Students Association.

Sami said that he hoped we would consider supporting a boycott. Whilst Histadrut may talk about peace, he can't talk about peace when students and professors are harassed and can't work because of the checkpoints and restrictions. He said that when they talk about Israel, the academics are not separate, every person in Israel has been militarised through the military service. Sami explained we are the occupied, Israel is the occupier. His mother died 10 years ago and he was not allowed to go to see her when she was dying, nor attend her funeral. Six months ago his father died, and again he was not permitted to travel to see him. Sami said rights are acknowledged by the international community, but they do nothing to uphold them. We were told of a student Omar who was shot in Ramallah by an undercover Israeli Defence Force soldier.

One of his colleagues explained that she was raised in the US, but is Palestinian, and teaches in Birzeit. She said Birzeit is like any other university in many ways, but is different in other ways, in that you have to remember where your students come from. In her class of 20 there are 17 young women and only three young men (who have all served in prison). There are more female than male students because young men are targeted in a way that girls are not. As a lecturer she has to be a social worker and a psychologist. She said that this is not just about solidarity, but understanding the Palestinian experience, and she must take account of the anger and humiliation with which some students arrive in class after experiences at the checkpoint on their way to the University. The control has nothing to do with state security, and everything to do with the Zionist project in Palestine – this is colonisation.

Her colleague told us that there is a most urgent and practical need for boycott. She said that Histadrut is involved in the "peace business", and that this is a camouflage for the cruel reality on the ground. She spoke of the threat of charges of anti-Semitism, and said that people forget the context, and claims of anti-Semitism simply distort the facts; that this is a classic colonial situation.

She said the case for boycott was that decades of dialogue had brought no result, and negotiations had not achieved anything, other than creating a “peace industry”. Israel has the great powers on their side, and the peace process is an illusion, as nothing has happened for 10 years. She said that there are a range of measures within BDS and communities should do what they can within their own circumstances. She appreciated the solidarity, but said Palestine needs political support. Parallels were again drawn with South Africa, where she said it took 20 years to work – but Israel has to be isolated.

They impressed upon us the urgency of the situation, given 91 per cent of Israelis supported the attacks on Gaza. They believed that the transfer of Palestinians is on the agenda. Amira claimed that checkpoints were being funded (unwittingly) by the French and other EU countries who had given money to develop roads for Palestinians.

International Labour Organisation, Friday 6 March .

A meeting was arranged with the ILO representatives in East Jerusalem where the delegation met Mounir A Kleibo (ILO Representative West Bank and Gaza Strip), and Joe Connolly (an Irish national who has worked throughout the world).

Mounir spoke of the capacity building programmes that the ILO is taking forward in Palestine with the Ministry of Labour, the trade unions and the Chambers of Commerce, where the main aims are creating good governance structures. He explained that the capacity is good, but the political situation is disabling. The occupation, the wall and the elections in Israel present challenges. The ILO also focuses on employment as a tool for development, with PGFTU their main partner. Mounir referred to the issue of Palestinians working in Israel, and welcomed the new entitlements and finance for these workers, but expressed concern about human rights.

Joe Connolly explained his presence in Palestine was to look at how to create employment in a post conflict situation. He said that the issues in Palestine differed from work he’d pursued in Africa.

He explained that in Palestine there is the money (and noted that EU taxpayers have paid for the reconstruction of Gaza on previous occasions), and a well educated and skilled population. But he felt that this is a sophisticated war, controlled by bureaucracy and security to make Palestinians feel useless. He referred to Gaza as a prison, and that given 50 per cent of its population is under the age of 24, it is hardly surprising that Hamas is able to find recruits.

The recent Sharm El Sheikh conference and resources were noted, but Mounir suggested that the funding will only be useful if things change, and this needs to be targeted at human rights issues.

The delegation asked about Hamas' understanding of trade unions, and Mounir told us this is another challenge. He spoke of the "golden era" 1994 – 2000 where there was room for co-existence and understanding and an enabling environment, but how the second intifada destroyed all of this.

The ILO does not have a view on BDS.

Visit to St George's School, East Jerusalem, Friday 6 March.

The delegation visited St George's school in East Jerusalem that is run by de la Salle Brothers. Suleiman Rabadin, the Director of the school spoke with us. He explained that the city is deteriorating and that the school tries to do the best it can to educate children, as this is the only hope the children will have. He spoke of the social challenges of drugs, family disintegration, unemployment, low pay and poverty which are rife in the city. We were told there are four types of school in the region, those run by the Israeli Ministry of Education, the Palestinian Authority, the UNRWA, and those operated by the private sector. He said that most of the privately run schools were run by Brothers or Sisters and accepted students from Muslim and Christian backgrounds and were a good example of positive relations between the faiths.

Schools face issues of teacher shortages, are over-subscribed and need funding for new buildings (and have to pay for a permit to be able to build). The school teaches in four languages, French, English, Hebrew and Arabic, and teaches the English curriculum and qualifications to equip students to study at home or abroad.

The delegation asked him about the issue of drugs, and he explained a key challenge is Israel's lenient policy on drug dealers, the lack of resources (social workers) to deal with this. We also asked about the tuition fees to study at the school, and were told that fees provided 40 per cent of the schools running costs. The school engages in fundraising, and some support is available to help students from poor backgrounds.

We were told that the taxes paid by citizens do not seem to be spent proportionally for services for Palestinians in Jerusalem. He said teachers' salaries in Jerusalem are about 85-90 per cent of those in Israel, but significantly higher than in the West Bank. He did say that the cost of living in Jerusalem is more expensive than London and Washington, and rents take up all of teachers' salaries.

Suleiman told us that the Wall and the checkpoints are problematic for students and teachers, causing delays to journeys, lateness and humiliation.

Tour of Old City of Jerusalem, Friday 6 March

The delegation spent some time on the afternoon of Friday 6 March exploring the old city of Jerusalem.

Conclusions

It is clear that Histadrut and those trade union bodies under its aegis are opposed to BDS for reasons ranging from political considerations, to not considering it necessary because of good personal relationships amongst all religious/cultural groups. Histadrut claimed that boycott would be damaging to the relationship between the Israeli trade union centre and the PGFTU, for the international trade union movement and for Israeli and Palestinian workers. It should be noted that although there was some reference to a two state solution, at no time did Histadrut acknowledge that the West Bank is occupied. Most of the references were to Gaza and the legitimacy of Israel's actions.

While the PGFTU as an organisation did not feel it could advise other trade union centres what to do, it was clear from meetings with representatives from its constituent parts and from the Minister of Planning, that there was strong support for BDS amongst Palestinian trade unions and civic society.

In fact it was made clear that it was imperative and urgent that international trade union colleagues act. While a boycott of Israeli goods, especially settlement-produced goods, could have an impact on Palestinian workers, it was emphasised by the Minister of Planning that the situation for Palestinian workers was so bad that a boycott could not do real damage, and that Palestinians were not employed in the sectors of the Israeli economy which would be most affected by a boycott.

Throughout our meetings with the PGFTU in Nablus and Ramallah, with the Minister for Planning in the Palestinian Authority, with both human rights organisations B'Tselem and Al-Haq, the BDS Campaign in Ramallah, and at the school on our last day in Jerusalem, the issues were discussed in terms of violations of human rights: in policies and their implementation, and in practice, in the large and small violations of individual rights on a daily basis in the ordinary lives of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories. Al-Haq in particular is calling for sanctions against Israel in the light of violations of the Geneva Convention; their legal actions in the High Court in this country are targeting the UK government's complicity by not taking sanctions.

The delegation ended its visit with a strong sense of the injustice and human rights violations experienced on a daily basis by ordinary Palestinians. The urgency of the situation was also made very apparent to us, in terms of the ongoing construction of the wall, the growth of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the removal of Palestinians from their homes. Indeed during the visit the delegation heard several reports of Palestinians receiving orders to vacate their homes in East Jerusalem to make way for an archeological project and for a park. It was very clear to the delegation that the daily violations of human rights, were as a direct result of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories.

In the light of what we witnessed and heard in our meetings in Israel and the Occupied Territories, it is the delegation's view that the General Council should recommend to the Annual Congress the need to take a position of supporting boycott and disinvestments, and calling for sanctions against Israel because of the Israeli state's violation of human rights.

The delegation also wishes to encourage positive investments in the occupied territories, and greater dialogue to build solidarity and understanding of the situation facing Palestinians. The delegation recognises that it is vital to take forward more work on this campaign, to raise greater awareness of all of these issues, to make any BDS campaign meaningful for trade union members in Scotland, and appropriate for their own workplace situations.

*STUC General Council Delegation to Palestine and Israel
April 2009.*