

16 June 2010, Bournemouth

## **TUFI Speech at Unison Fringe Event 2010**

Brothers, sisters, guests, welcome to the TUFI Unison fringe event.

Thank you for coming. I must start by expressing my regret that TUFI has been barred from exhibiting at Unison's conference for the second consecutive year. We are a moderate organisation that wants to see a two-state solution and to galvanise support for both Israeli and Palestinian workers. We aim to disperse this pro-peace message and argue against extreme groups that propagate that Israel doesn't have the right to exist. It is unfortunate that Unison's executive has gone out of its way to try and censor this message.

In a long standing tradition, international trade union solidarity has been about that, solidarity, campaigning for peace, co-operation, economic development and education.

This is most acute in the Middle East where all efforts should be exerted towards solidarity between Israeli and Palestinians who support the peace process.

This is the policy being supported by almost all trade union centres around the world. Support for a boycott is diametrically opposite to this.

Unfortunately, Unison has another very negative motion on the agenda this year, calling for boycotts and criticising the Histadrut (the Israeli TUC). It is such a shame that a great union like Unison is pursuing these non-constructive efforts to help. This is not the right, especially when there's real progress on the ground between Israeli and Palestinian trade unions.

It is a bit bizarre that UK unions are calling to boycott Israel at the same time as co-operation is gathering pace between Israeli and Palestinian trade unions. TUFI's recent trade union delegations have visited Nablus, Ramallah and Tel Aviv, and we see clear evidence, in spite of all the well known problems, of trade unionists co-operating together and overcoming long standing obstacles.

This co-operation is not a phantom tale, but the reality on the ground. In August 2008, Israeli and Palestinian trade unionists signed a landmark agreement to base future relations on negotiation, dialogue and joint initiatives to advance "fraternity and co-existence". The historic agreement was negotiated under the auspices of Guy Ryder, the General Secretary of the world-wide International Trade Union Confederation.

The Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions and the Histadrut have both said publicly that they want to continue working together.

A recent agreement invites world unions to contribute to a joint training seminar between the two transportation workers unions signed last year. And further recent developments between Israeli and Palestinian construction unions to give apprenticeships to Palestinians alongside their Israeli counterparts will provide the vital skills needed to develop the infrastructure of a future Palestinian state.

Whilst this is not a panacea to end the conflict, they are building blocks for trust and confidence towards a long-term peace settlement and crucially have the full endorsement and approval of the Palestinian unions. A boycott would prevent these kinds of initiatives and prevent Palestinians from attaining vital skills for the future.

16 June 2010, Bournemouth

It is the irony of the boycott campaign that a boycott would harm the very people it is ostensibly being carried out for. A boycott would stop all economic and social engagement between Israelis and Palestinians – hurting many communities, workers and their families.

It's another irony that the Histadrut is now being targeted when it has an impressive history of democratic, free trade unionism and does exemplary work for its members. Last year alone it negotiated a five percent wage rise for all public sector workers and pension cover for the entire private sector workforce; something which the majority of trade unions across the world could only dream of.

These attacks on a fellow trade union federation are nothing more than the next cynical tactic by some UK groups to further delegitimise Israel whilst also attempting to thwart the budding PGFTU-Histadrut relationship. There is no doubt that this relationship is seen as a threat to the UK trade union boycott campaign. It seems they are willing to go to any length to wrench the two federations apart.

Don't be fooled. The Histadrut unites hundreds of thousands of union members, regardless of religion, race or gender. Palestinian-Israelis make up twenty percent of its membership and the head of the International Department, Nawaf Massalha, is a Palestinian-Israeli. The Histadrut has also taken high court action to win higher pay and union rights for West Bank workers.

The Histadrut is not an unwavering supporter of everything the Israeli government does. It has called for an end to settlement construction and only last week it called for the blockade of Gaza to be lifted.

Rather than baseless attacks, British trade unions should be voting for solidarity with their fellow workers and the leading democratic trade unions in the region.

Where are the motions in support of the trade unionists under attack in Gaza? Soon after seizing power in Gaza, Hamas stamped down on trade unionism, taking over the PGFTU headquarters, removing all existing slogans and flags, and raising a Hamas flag over the building. The Deputy General Secretary of the PGFTU had to flee to the West Bank after coming under attack and when public sector unions called for a strike in Gaza at the end of last year, Hamas threatened to sack everyone that took part.

The timing of the boycott calls could not come at a more inopportune time with President Obama's careful and systematic steps to revive the peace process gaining traction. His personal commitment is clear and the engagement of Senator Mitchell, who played such an important role during the peace process in Northern Ireland, could reap dividends in the coming months.

There have been reports in the news recently highlighting the progress in the West Bank under the prime ministership of Salam Fayyad. This progress does not get reported much, firstly because it is a slow incremental business and secondly because Gaza, under its Hamas leadership, has produced all the spectacular news of late. But the fact is that under a better a more peaceful security environment, the West Bank economy has grown substantially in the last three years ago and shows what is possible.

We at TUFU invite all unions to co-operate with their Palestinian and Israeli counterparts. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union, for instance, hosted their Israeli and Palestinian

16 June 2010, Bournemouth

counterparts at their last conference, where they pledged to work together despite their differences.

The hypocrisy is that this kind of initiative is ignored or even openly opposed by elements who profess to support Palestinians, but instead support the Hamas position of a boycott, the delegitimisation of Israel and sectarian terrorist aims, not trade union solidarity!

This is no time for negative actions. We should be aiming for closer links being forged on the basis of support for a two-state solution. Security and economic well-being for the region is surely the way ahead.

Simplistic negative efforts in the form of misguided resolutions is not the right approach for British trade unions to help, especially when there are positive actions that can express practical solidarity.