

Teachers take strike action against Palestinian Authority

By Jean Shaoul
12 March 2016

On Tuesday, thousands of striking Palestinian teachers took to the streets of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, defying checkpoints erected across the West Bank by the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security forces.

The PA was seeking to prevent the demonstration from taking place and the strike from getting out of control. Workers have been joined by parents, students and supporters. The strike by 35,000 teachers has left more than one million children out of school.

The four-week long teachers' strike has provoked a political crisis for the corrupt business clique around Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, his Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) that has long dominated Palestinian political life.

Teachers' basic starting salary is NIS 1,700 (\$434) a month plus additional payments that bring the total to NIS 2,400 each month (\$615). The figure is so low for a teacher that many of those with a family to support have to take on a second job to make ends meet. Paid less than other public sector workers, teachers also have limited annual increments and fewer avenues to promotion and higher salaries.

Their strike began with a two-day walkout, organised reluctantly by the teachers' union, to demand an expected backdated pay rise, part of a settlement agreed in 2013 and far less than the rate of inflation. It has developed into one of the largest mass strikes ever seen in the West Bank, with three thousand more teachers joining the strike following the PA's use of the security forces.

In February, the PA used armed security forces to set up roadblocks at the entrance to towns and cities to prevent people joining demonstrations, seizing and questioning many of the teachers. Al-Haq, the rights

organization, said that at least 20 teachers had been arrested. A number had been detained or mistreated and their homes searched without a warrant by PA forces.

Teachers forced trade union officials to resign following talks with the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), accusing the union of working against their interests and boosting the government position. Nabil Samara, principal at the Beitunya boys' high school resigned from the union, which is part of the PLO and whose leader Ahmed Suhweil is close to Fatah, the PLO's dominant faction.

He told *Al Jazeera*, "The government and the union wanted to get the teachers to accept a smaller raise now and increase it over a longer period of time to try to limit the teachers' demands."

The teachers followed this up by demanding the immediate and full implementation of the pay increase, included backdated pay, as agreed in 2013, and insisting on the right to elect a new organisation to negotiate with the government. Teachers elected representatives in each district, but PA officials have refused to recognise them as a union or to negotiate with them.

The PA has responded with threats, intimidation, and smear tactics, calling on mosques to urge the teachers to return to work and saying that it will organise "administrative measures," that is, mass sackings, of strikers. The PA is the largest employer in the West Bank, and the loss of a job is a grave threat in this area, where thanks to Israel's crippling occupation, 23 percent of Palestinian men and 36 percent of women are unemployed. Nearly half of youth between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed and 25 percent of Palestinians live in poverty.

The Palestinian Legislative Council has sought to intervene as a mediator, while the Ministry of

Education has offered to pay part of the salary increases due since 2013 and to negotiate over their other demands by September—provided the teachers return to work immediately.

The teachers rejected this, saying that they have no guarantee the government will keep its promises given that it has repeatedly claimed that it does not have the money to meet their demands. Indeed, the PA and United Nations made a joint appeal for \$571 million in food aid, so desperate is the situation in Palestine. Last October, a US official said the economic aid to Palestine would be cut due to “unhelpful actions,” meaning the spate of lone attacks on Israelis by desperate Palestinians. At the same time, an Israeli official said that US defence aid to Israel would be stepped up.

The teachers point out that the biggest single item of government expenditure is for the security forces. More than half of all public employees are in the security forces, which for decades have acted as subcontractors for Israel in suppressing all dissent to Israel’s illegal and brutal occupation.

Even the US State Department’s latest annual report on human rights reported that under the PA, there are “restrictions on freedom of speech, press, and assembly” and “limits on freedom of association and movement.”

The PA’s intransigence has antagonised parents, students and the working class, whose anger at its craven capitulation to every one of Washington’s dictates, collaboration with Israel and refusal to lift a finger to defend Palestinians from Israel’s shoot to kill policy, has reached boiling point. Calls for the prime minister to resign have surfaced on social media.

Since the current unrest began last October, Israeli security forces have killed around 187 Palestinians. These were in response to lone attacks on Israelis that have killed around 30 people.

The oppression of the Palestinian people is not just the result of Israel’s military strength but of the failure of the perspective of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, articulated by the PLO, of establishing a Palestinian nation state via an agreement with imperialism. The Oslo Accords, signed with much fanfare in 1993 after decades of struggle, instead brought to power a corrupt clique of Palestinian businessmen. Hostile to the interests of the workers, they sought an accommodation

with the major imperialist powers and the Zionist regime.

The teachers’ strike has brought the class issues to the fore. Under conditions of a globally integrated economy, only the perspective of socialist internationalism can provide a way forward. That requires a determined struggle to unite Palestinian workers with their class brothers and sisters, both Jewish and Arab, across the entire Middle East, as part of a common struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression.

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