



# Why trade unions should not break their links with Israel's Histadrut

**W**orkers' Liberty believes that, for Israeli and Palestinian workers, uniting around a democratic settlement to the national conflict between the two peoples is essential if they are to successfully fight for socialism. Both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs are distinct national groups. Both have the right to self-determination. We advocate two independent states as the most immediately democratic settlement to the national oppression of the Palestinians that is consistent with Israeli Jews' national rights. Only a framework based on mutual recognition of self-determination can provide the basis for working-class unity and any future single, merged state.

We support Israeli workers in their struggles against their bosses and their state, and we believe that British trade unions should develop and build links with them. This is why we oppose proposals for British unions to sever links with the Histadrut, the mainstream trade union centre in Israel (roughly analogous to the British TUC or American AFL-CIO). Harry Glass and Ira Berkovic explain why.

## Isn't the Histadrut a pillar of the Israeli state?

**I**n the decades after Israel was founded, the Histadrut was one of the central institutions of the society – arguably a state within a state. In the early decades after independence, while Labour was the main force in government, ex-Histadrut leaders were elected to some of the highest offices of state and others elected to the Knesset.

Histadrut was a major employer, controlling at one point around a third of the economy and employing over three-quarters of workers. It owned or part-owned the Solel

Boneh construction firm, the dairy enterprise Tnuva, Koor manufacturing firm and Bank Hapoalim. Its holding company, Hevrat Ovdim managed large swathes of industry. The Histadrut was also central to the provision of pensions and health services through the General Health Fund.

However the Histadrut lost this central role after Labour lost power in the late 1970s. Most of its industries were sold off and in the 1990s it lost its role in the health service. Its membership fell from around one and half million members to around half a million. It became for the most part simply a trade union centre.

It no longer plays the same central role it once did in state administration. However, even when it was much more enmeshed into the state apparatus, that did not devoid it of its fundamentally trade-union character. The involvement of trade-union bodies in various aspects of state administration – including administering welfare services or even overseeing employment – is not uncommon in social-partnership models of capitalist administration. They are models that socialists oppose, but they do not mean that trade unions that engage in them cease to be trade unions.

The Histadrut, like all mainstream trade-union centres, has a bureaucratic and conservatising influence on the class struggle in Israel. Recently, national Histadrut officials have intervened in a railworkers' strike against privatisation to undermine the democratic control of the dispute by a shop stewards' committee. But it does mobilise workers against their bosses.

Most recently it organised a four-day general strike to demand the levelling-up of pay and conditions for temporary workers employed in the public sector - a degree of industrial and indeed political radicalism practically inconceivable from any of the British unions who are reviewing their links with the Histadrut.

## Isn't the Histadrut a racist, apartheid union, exclusively for Jewish labour?

**T**he Histadrut was founded in 1920 as the General Confederation of Hebrew Labour in the Land of Israel as a exclusivist Jewish labour organisation. It did play an important part in the creation of the state of Israel.

In the 1950s, the Histadrut decided to allow Palestinian Arabs in Israel to become members. They were however restricted to an Arab department headed by a Jewish official. In 1966, the Histadrut changed its name to the General Confederation of Labour in the Land of Israel. However it did not campaign against the exclusion of Palestinians from some strategic industries, where military service was a condition of employment.

In 2008 the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) signed an agreement with the Histadrut. The Histadrut reimbursed some of the money deducted from Palestinian workers and agreed that at least 50% of the representation fees paid by Palestinians working for Israeli employers will be transferred to the PGFTU.

Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot join the Histadrut. The Histadrut says that to allow Palestinians there to join would legitimise the occupation and that the Palestinians own unions organise them. In 2009 the Histadrut decided to allow migrant workers to join for the first time.

In its attitudes to Arab workers within Israel, the Histadrut has often been reactionary. Reactionary attitudes to migrant workers, workers from ethnic minorities and workers from dispossessed indigenous groups are sadly all too common in the history of the workers' movement across the world.

But it is simply a lie to say that the Histadrut remains the exclusivist Jewish organisation it was before 1959, and politically lazy to say that, because of its reactionary attitudes towards Arabs, it should be boycotted.

Socialists fight within all working-class organisations for socialist politics; a knee-jerk policy of boycotts and severing links does nothing except to leave the control of the Israeli workers' movement by social-partnership bureaucrats with conservative attitudes on questions of ethnicity and immigration totally unchallenged.

## **Isn't the Histadrut politically terrible against the Palestinians?**

**T**he Histadrut is on the record in favour of two states. It says it is "committed to the existence of two sovereign, independent and democratic states existing in peace and mutual respect". It has called for the illegal settlements (what it calls "outposts") to be dismantled. It has opposed security checkpoints and provided some assistance to Palestinian transport workers facing these restrictions by the Israeli state.

In 2009 the Israeli government tried to impose a tax on Palestinian employees employed by Israeli employers. The Palestinian unions asked the Histadrut get campaign against it, which they did – eventually succeeding in forcing the government to back down. In the transport sector, the Histadrut and PGFTU set up a telephone "hotline" project to facilitate communication between Israeli checkpoint guards and Palestinian truck drivers. It helped Palestinian drivers, who were not able to cross the checkpoints, to go to work.

Histadrut could do a lot more to support the Palestinians. Like virtually all unions, it is bureaucratically run and politically reformist. But even if it was much worse in its attitudes towards the occupation of Palestinian territories (in fact it is one of the few mass organisations in Israeli society even notionally committed to Palestinian independence and opposition to illegal settlement building), that would not make a policy of boycotts and link-severing helpful or correct.

## **But the Histadrut supported the assault on Gaza and the attack on the flotilla.**

**T**he AWL opposed the Israeli state's attacks on Gaza. Our members mobilised against the attacks and some were arrested on demonstrations in 2009. Our members in various universities were active in the wave of occupations and sit-ins in solidarity with Gaza, and at the University of Sheffield were integral to launching and building the UK's second-longest Gaza solidarity sit-in in March 2009.

The Histadrut press releases supporting the attacks were wrong and we said so. But severing all links with an organisation is not a meaningful way to oppose a particular policy.

The British and American trade union movements have a far-from-perfect record when it comes to opposing "their" states' imperial adventures. The links between sections of the American labour movement and the US's inter-imperialist Cold War machinations are well-known, and a recent WikiLeaks bundle showed that the British TUC's International Department still regularly informs the US Embassy of all its activity!

Would any of the British trade unionists who call for unions to break links with the Histadrut call for international unions to boycott and break links with the TUC because of its pro-imperialist policies?

## **The Palestinians call for a boycott. We have no right to question the means through which they choose to fight; we should take our lead from them.**

**T**he official BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign is backed by a significant layer of Palestinian civil society. Its trade-union arm (PTUC-BDS) has support from many organisations, including affiliates of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU, the main Palestinian union centre).

But just because a particular demand has a lot of organisational backing does not make it right. Many of the Palestinian organisations signed up to the BDS campaign have little active support, political life or even a real organised presence in Palestinian society. Even if the BDS demand had much more, and much more verifiable, mass support, that still would not make it right. For socialists, demands, tactics and strategies are assessed by what impact they have on the class struggle overall, not just on how popular they are.

Workers' organisations such as the PGFTU (at its "national" level), Sawt el-Amel (the Labourer's Voice), Kav LaOved (the Worker's Voice), the Workers' Advice Centre (WAC/Ma'an), Koach LaOvdim (Power to the Workers), the Mossawa Centre, and One Voice do not support the boycott of the Histadrut (even though some of them support the general boycott of Israeli goods). A delegation from the British trade union Unison, dispatched to Israel/Palestine in 2010 specifically to "critically review" Unison's links with the Histadrut spoke to all these Palestinian and Israeli organisations. Its report concluded:

"All the organisations we met during the delegation including the PGFTU, the new Israeli trade unions and Israeli NGOs are or have been critical of the Histadrut in the past for various reasons. However, they all stressed that the Histadrut was a legitimate trade union and with over 700,000 members was clearly the dominant trade union in terms of members and collective bargaining coverage. Even the new Israeli unions accepted that the Histadrut had been responsible for Israel's strong labour and employment protection legislation. They also recognised that the Histadrut remained influential, although less so than in the past, with the Israeli government.

"Neither did any of them call on Unison to sever its relations with the Histadrut, in fact the opposite. The PGFTU in particular said that Unison should maintain links with the Histadrut so that we could specifically put pressure on them to take a more vocal public stance against the occupation and the settlements."

## **But doesn't COSATU call for the boycott? They should know about fighting against racist states...**

**C**OSATU, the South African trade union federation which played a central role in the working-class struggle against apartheid, has indeed been a vocal advocate of boycotting the Histadrut. They have drawn the analogy with apartheid. Given Israel's links with the South African apartheid regime (which they maintained until 1987, much later than most other nations), COSATU's view, and basic hostility, is understandable. But the analogy is false.

The class structure of Israel is different from apartheid South Africa. In Israel, the Israeli-Jewish ruling class exploits some Palestinian and Israeli-Arab labour, but its economic power rests fundamentally on exploiting Israeli-Jewish workers. In apartheid South Africa, a tiny white caste ruled and exploited the majority black working class. There was a tiny layer of poor whites, but it was negligible and both socially and economically insignificant compared with the Israeli-Jewish working class.

## **Breaking links with the Histadrut is increasingly an accepted, mainstream position in the British labour movement, particularly on the left. Why swim against the stream?**

**H**igh-profile and vocal campaigns in a number of unions, including Unison and the University and College Union (UCU) for boycotts of Israel have given the impression that there is a burgeoning rank-and-file groundswell within the British labour movement for breaking links with the Histadrut.

This is still a long way from being the case. Nearly all British unions in Britain have links of some kind with the Histadrut, including the more "left-wing" ones. Alex Gordon, president of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers' union (RMT) said at the TUC Congress in 2011: "My union has welcomed the Workers' Advice Centre/Ma'an to our conference in previous years. We've supported class struggle that is going on now by workers in Israel, and we fully intend to continue to support struggles by Israeli workers, by Palestinian workers and by Arab-Israeli workers who are fighting for peace and workers' rights. We are concerned about the implication of a review of bilateral relations with all Israeli organisations. Our view is that we should be supporting the Israeli peace movement, and we should be supporting the Israeli trade union movement where

it stands up for Palestinian national rights. That is the best route to peace in the Middle East.”

Many rank-and-file activists who support breaking links with the Histadrut, whether as part of a general boycott campaign or not, do so out of an entirely understandable and positive desire to “do something” – anything – to “help” the Palestinians, who they rightly see as oppressed and brutalised by the Israeli state. But breaking links with the Histadrut, or boycotts in general, are not a good “something” to do. Even on their own terms, they are a blunderbuss, indiscriminate tactic that stand to harm ordinary Israeli workers as much as – if not more than – they harm the Israeli state.

Breaking links with the main trade-union organisation in Israel, however bureaucratically-run and politically collaborationist it is, makes it much harder for British trade unionists to engage with Israeli workers’ struggles. If we want to play any role in helping socialists in the Israeli labour movement fight for a more progressive attitude towards the Palestinians, we need more links – not less. Breaking links with the Histadrut will fuel the Israeli right’s attempt to whip up a “siege mentality” and clamp down on domestic dissent by claiming that the world is “out to get Israel”.

The “break the links” position, and the boycott perspective in general, also has an anti-Semitic logic. Israel, home to nearly 50% of the world’s Jews, is exceptionalised in a way that no other imperialist or colonial power is related to by the far left. Russia’s occupation of Chechnya, the Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi occupation of Kurdistan, the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and indeed Britain’s occupation of Afghanistan are all brutal and oppressive, but no-one on the left suggests boycotting goods produced in these countries or breaking links with their labour movements because of this. The boycott can easily be turned into a tool to vilify Jewish communities, which are perceived as (usually correctly) as centres of support (however loose and notional) for the state of Israel.

Imagine if someone argued that Chinese student societies should be banned if they did or said anything that could be interpreted as support for the Chinese government (a far more powerful and oppressive imperialist centre than Israel). Such an argument would be rightly denounced as reactionary and racist. But some “socialists” have in the past argued for Jewish Societies to be banned from campuses because of their support for Israel. Jews are required to take a loyalty test not required of any other ethnic, cultural or national group: distance yourself from, and condemn, “your” state or face boycott and proscription. Thus the boycott becomes more

about vilifying Jews than it does about doing anything concrete to help the Palestinians.

Against the counterproductive and anti-Semitic logic of the boycott, Workers’ Liberty proposes a positive politics of international working-class solidarity. We believe British trade unions should make concrete links – through exchanges, branch twinning, awareness raising and financial support – with working-class organisations in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. They should support any attempts to unite Israeli and Palestinian workers in common struggles against exploitation and injustice, and for a just settlement based on mutual respect and acknowledgement of national rights.

Financial and material support should focus on the independent workers’ movements, including those organising outside the Histadrut and amongst groups of workers (precarious workers, migrant workers, women workers) traditionally sidelined by mainstream labour movements. British unions should also support Israel’s small but significant radical left, organising in solidarity with the Palestinians against the occupation and against racist discrimination towards Arabs within Israel. But breaking links with the Histadrut does not make it any easier or more possible to support those radical elements; it does, however, make it much harder to support those within the mainstream of the Israeli labour movement attempting, in extremely unfavourable conditions, to win their movement to a more radical, internationalist position on the national question.

Ultimately, the boycott (both in general and in terms of its “break links with the Histadrut” manifestation) only makes consistent sense if one believes that the Israeli-Jews have no national rights and that the Israeli-Jewish working class either does not exist or has no progressive or revolutionary potential. Root-and-branch boycotts of Israeli society and Israeli workers’ organisations go beyond the framework of attempting to defeat the Israeli state’s colonial project and help the Palestinians win national independence and into a politics based on delegitimisation of the Israeli-Jewish national entity.

Workers’ Liberty rejects those politics. The Israeli Jews are a national group with a century-long history in the region and no colonial centre to “go back” to. Any progressive settlement cannot be based on exceptionalising Israel, demonising Israeli Jews or attempting to rewind history but can only be based on working-class unity between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian-Arab workers. Breaking links with the Histadrut is part of a political logic that can only serve to hinder attempts to build that unity.