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## PALESTINIAN RED CRESCENT PUNISHES STRIKING WORKERS, CHARGES LABOR ADVOCACY GROUP

April 23, 2007, Ramallah, and Washington DC: The Democracy and Workers Rights Center (DWRC), a prominent Palestinian labor watch-dog, has accused the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PCRS) of taking reprisals against workers who went on strike last month, and appealed for support from international labor unions.

According to a DWRC communiqué, several hundred PCRS workers went on strike in the Gaza Strip on March 25 in an effort to secure back pay and the right to organize, as promised by the Society last year. The DWRC has offices in Gaza City and Ramallah.

The Red Crescent workers were persuaded to suspend their action by representatives of the Fatah political party in Gaza, on the understanding that their grievances would be addressed by the Red Crescent management and that there would be no reprisals.

But, says the DWRC communiqué, the Society immediately broke its promise. "After the strike was ended, the PRCS administration opened an investigation against some of the workers, transferred others from their workplaces and deducted sums from the wages of the workers who had been on strike, while alternating threats and promises to the workers' committee."

The dispute is one of several to have disturbed political life in the Gaza Strip recently. While intensely irritating for the Palestinian Authority, they are evidence of the vitality of the Palestinian labor movement even at a time of economic hardship and siege.

The Red Crescent was drawn into the dispute because it stopped paying wages in the spring last year and resisted efforts by its 1,300 workers in the Gaza strip to unionize. The workers went on strike and secured a written agreement from the administration on May 31, 2006 to pay back wages, create a provident fund and allow workers to form their own labor committee. The workers asked the DWRC and Health Services Union, an officially-recognized union, to act jointly on their behalf.

The workers went on strike again on March 25 this year, charging that the Society had only partially fulfilled its side of the bargain. They erected a protest tent in Gaza City, and marched to the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Swiss agency which partners with national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. The workers again agreed to suspend their action after obtaining a commitment that the issue would be resolved within two months.

Meanwhile, the DWRC met last week with a visiting mission from the Geneva-based International Labor Organization (ILO) and asked for support for independent Palestinian

unions. The mission will report to the ILO's annual meeting in June and is likely to influence the policy of the international labor movement towards the OPT.

The Advocacy Project (AP) has recruited a graduate student from Columbia University, Eliza Bates, to serve as a peace fellow with the DWRC in Ramallah this summer. Ms. Bates has worked for unions in New York and California. While working for the Service Employees International Union in the Bronx (New York) she negotiated wage levels and helped to coordinate the Union's response to Hurricane Katrina.

AP's Director, Iain Guest, analyzed the growing movement for independent unions in a recent report for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

- For the DWRC communiqué, visit <http://www.dwrc.org/>
- For Iain Guest's report on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) visit: <http://advocacynet.org/files/839.pdf>

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