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APPOINTMENT OF NEW LABOR JUDGES PROMISES JUSTICE FOR PALESTINIAN WORKERS



West Bank, Occupied Palestinian Territories: Palestinian workers who are wronged by their employers now have a better chance at justice, after the appointment of several labor judges in the West Bank.

The announcement came last week (July 13), when the new Palestinian Labor Minister, Dr Ahmad Majdalani, reached an agreement with the President of the Higher Judicial Council assigning specific judges to labor cases in Ramallah, Hebron and Nablus. Palestinian construction workers. Photo credit: Willow Heske

The move is a major victory for the [Democracy and Workers' Rights Center \(DWRC\)](#), an Advocacy Project (AP) partner in Ramallah that defends Palestinian labor rights. AP has sent three [Peace Fellows](#) to the DWRC, and all have helped the group develop advocacy tools - such as press releases and a website - to amplify the voices of Palestinian workers (shown at left).

The DWRC sees the new judges as a positive step towards the creation of a dedicated labor court - a longtime demand on the part of trade unions and labor organizations: "We consider this effort to be a crucial first step toward establishing a specialized labor court where judges with an expertise in labor rights and protection preside," said Mohammed Amarnah, the DWRC's Legal Unit Coordinator. "Without a specialized labor court, the struggle to expedite labor cases and ensure workers' rights will undoubtedly continue."

The absence of specialized labor courts in the Territories has forced workers to file complaints against their employers in regular courts, which are not suited to handling labor cases and are

also plagued by huge backlogs of cases. This served as a major deterrent for many workers.



In 2007, the DWRC analyzed a sample of 200 labor cases filed in Palestinian courts. The study highlighted the extreme slowness in processing labor cases, which makes it difficult for workers to obtain legal representation. Many lawyers decline labor cases due to their duration and meager financial returns.

The DWRC will monitor the work of the new judges in the three West Bank cities through its Legal Aid and Human Rights Protection Unit. DWRC is also calling on the Palestinian Ministry of Labor to better enforce labor legislation, and improve its labor inspection department. Checkpoint near Bethlehem. Photo Credit: Rianne Van Doeveren

Overall, Palestinian workers face a stagnant economy, exacerbated by the Israeli occupation and severe limitations on the movement of people and goods (such as the checkpoint shown at right). According to a [June 2009](#) report by the International Labor Organization (ILO), the unemployment rate was 20 percent in the West Bank and 45 percent in Gaza last year. These numbers have likely increased following the Israeli invasion of Gaza in January.

AP is helping the DWRC to bring Palestinian labor issues to an international audience. Earlier this week, Mira Said of the DWRC visited New York for a [radio interview](#) on WBAI's "Wake Up Call" program. She later spoke on the Palestinian labor movement at the New York office of 1199SEIU, a health care workers' labor union. Ms Said's visit was organized by [Eliza Bates](#), who volunteered as an AP Peace Fellow with the DWRC in 2007.

[Willow Heske](#), who followed Ms Bates as the 2008 Peace Fellow with DWRC, has returned to the Occupied Territories after completing her Masters degree at Columbia University, and resumed her work with Palestinian civil society. Ms Heske is exploring the possibility of supporting disabled workers in the West Bank with job creation and skills training.

Meanwhile, this year's Peace Fellow with the DWRC, [Rangineh Azimzadeh](#), is helping the organization reach out to independent workers, who are particularly vulnerable because they are not affiliated with the formal union structure.

- Read the [blog](#) of 2009 Peace Fellow Rangineh Azimzadeh
- Watch an [interview](#) with DWRC Founder Hassan Barghouthi
- Learn more about the [DWRC](#)
- Read the [ILO report](#)