

## PALESTINIAN UNIONS CRITICIZE “BLACKMAIL” BY DONORS AND CALL ON HAMAS TO PROTECT WORKER BENEFITS

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May 3, 2006, Washington DC: Seventeen powerful Palestinian trade unions have accused Western governments of “blackmail” for withholding aid from the Hamas-controlled Palestinian National Authority (PNA), while demanding that the PNA continue to pay full salaries and provide social protection for unemployed workers and their families.

In a May Day statement on behalf of the unions, the Democracy and Workers Rights Center (DWRC) in Ramallah says that donors should have exerted “real pressure” on Israel to withdraw from occupied territory, instead of punishing Palestinians for exercising their right to vote. The suspension of Western aid could cost the PNA up to a billion dollars this year – over half its total revenues.

As well as criticizing Western governments, the statement from the DWRC – a partner of the Advocacy Project – calls on the new Hamas government to take nine steps to protect worker rights and benefits. They include paying the salaries of public sector employees, paying the pensions of local authority workers, and exempting unemployed workers and their families from health insurance and tuition fees.

The May Day statement is uncompromising in its tone, and suggests that labor unions and human rights groups will press their demands with the new Hamas government even at a time of national crisis.

Labor rights advocates like the DWRC repeatedly challenged the former PNA Chairman Yasser Arafat to permit independent unions, and pressed the PNA to adopt progressive labor laws. One law (the Unified Pension Law) that was passed last May promised \$100 a month to all needy Palestinians over the age of 60. This was subsequently criticized by the World Bank as “unrealistic” and detrimental to the general Palestinian public.

One question is whether the funds exist to meet these latest demands. The Palestinian government found it difficult to pay full benefits in 2005 – when the economy rebounded, donors were generous, and Israel re-opened the door to Palestinian workers. It will clearly be harder this year, with the PNA under siege and facing bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, another Palestinian partner of the Advocacy Project, Middle East Non-Violence and Democracy (MEND), has also criticized the donors for withholding aid and warned that it could lead to despair and even violence.

In an open appeal to the international community and international civil society, MEND calls on donors to end their “economic blockade” of the Palestinians and pressure Israel

to pay tax revenues on the earnings of Palestinians working in Israel. An average of 66,000 Palestinians crossed into Israel to work each day last year.

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