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PALESTINIAN WORKERS CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS IN GAZA AMIDST VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL CHAOS

March 29, 2007, Ramallah and Washington DC: Last summer, after working without pay for several months in a former Israeli settlement near the town of Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip, Ibrahim Tabasi decided it was time to claim his rights.

Mr. Tabasi and several hundred other laborers organized labor committees and marched on the headquarters of their employer, the Palestine Economic Development Corporation in Gaza City. After they contacted the local press and lobbied the Palestinian parliament, the workers began to receive their back pay.

Ibrahim Tabasi is part of a growing number of workers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) who are prepared to take action and even go on strike, even though two thirds of all Palestinians are living below the poverty level. He told his story to the Director of the Advocacy Project who visited Khan Younis last December.

By their actions, independent workers like Mr Tabasi are also challenging official unions, particularly the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). The PGFTU claims to represent over 250,000 workers but is widely viewed as ineffectual and undemocratic, as well as controlled by the Fatah political party.

Hassan Barghouthi, director of the Democracy and Workers Rights Center (DWRC), a Palestinian human rights organization in Ramallah which has trained scores of shop-floor initiatives, estimated the number of independent Palestinian workers at over 40,000. "By pushing the official unions to be more democratic, they are helping to building democracy among Palestinians," he said.

Mr. Barghouthi added that workers' democracy is catching on elsewhere the Middle East, thanks to the International Federation of Arab Workers' Education Associations in the Arab Countries (IFWEA/AC). The Federation has affiliates in Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine and Lebanon.

Palestinian workers have been particularly active in Khan Younis, which is better known for the kidnapping of foreigners than shop-floor democracy. Last summer, over 400 employees of the Khan Younis municipal Council went on strike after the Council refused to pay them for three months. The Council conceded within 5 days. In December, workers from the Palestinian Red Crescent also went on strike for the right to organize.

The largest confrontation to date occurred last summer in 7 former Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip which were turned into an agricultural project after the Israeli settlers withdrew from Gaza. The Palestine Economic Development Corporation hired 4,200

workers, including Mr Tabasi, but withheld their pay after Israel blocked the export of 10,000 tons of fruit and vegetables from the project.

Ayed Abu Ramadan, the project's former manager, said that the Corporation ran out of money to pay the workers. But Mr. Tabasi and other workers disputed this, saying that the corporation was backed by the government and that it was unfair to expect workers to bear the brunt of the crisis. The strikers enjoyed widespread support from ordinary Palestinians, he said.

In spite of their democratic credentials, these independent unions receive no recognition or support outside the country. Organized labor in Europe and North America and the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO), continue to recognize the official Palestinian unions, in spite of their poor performance and lack of transparency.

* To contact the [Democracy and Workers Rights Center \(DWRC\)](#) email info@dwrc.org

* To read Iain Guest's report on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, visit: <http://advocacynet.org/files/839.pdf>.

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