

# U.S. LABOR AGAINST THE WAR



## Presentation by Monadel Herzallah, President, Arab American Union Members Council To the USLAW Leadership Council, December 6, 2008

Brother Herzallah introduced his perspective on the struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination by relating his personal journey.

He came to U.S. in '78 to study and planned to return home. He got involved in the student movement (Organization of Arab Students) and Palestine Human Rights Campaign. 1982 was a turning point in his life. He discovered that there is a huge gap between where Palestinians are - how they see things in Middle East - and how the situation is seen in the U.S.

He became bitterly angry when hundreds of Palestinians civilians were massacred in Lebanon's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps (Sept 17<sup>th</sup> 1982). The PLO had left its Beirut bases after an invasion by the Israeli military. While the massacre was taking place, people were told they had to "hear both sides" - equalizing between the victim and the victimizer.

In his early twenties, realizing the inequality in resources between Palestinians and Israelis, and how the "difference" narrative shaped public opinion, Brother Herzallah interrupted his studies. He could not find anyone in the U.S. who saw Palestinians as having a just cause worthy of support. He decided to abandon his education and to buy a one-way ticket to the Middle East so that he could be closer to his family in Jordan.

But his roommate Mazen Asaad convinced him to buy a roundtrip ticket, saying that things might look different once he arrives there.

He returned to Sacramento State to finish his degree in Public Administration. A few months later an African American community leader and peace activist running for office in Sacramento was attacked for being "pro-Palestinian." Despite the attacks, Grantland Johnson was elected to the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors. It was small but a clear indication that good people will support good causes no matter how long it may take.

He said, "I look back but move forward. I don't ask you to take a specific position (on Palestine) in the labor movement. I ask you to be truthful to our support of working families wherever they are and to support those most impacted by the current policies of corporate greed that dominate the politics of the world today."

After the 1987 Intifada resistance to military occupation, Palestinians enjoyed tremendous support around the world. The just cause of Palestinians, he said, made it possible for poor Arabs across the Middle East who have no space or democratic means to oppose their own governments or ability to pursue their own demands for social justice to be able to register their protest against a brutal illegal military occupation of Palestine. It was also an obvious just cause for labor unions in other Arab countries around which to mobilize their members. Some governments (Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt) would find it difficult to move against them.

Referring to the earlier presentation by Amjad Ali of the General Federation of the Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, Brother Herzallah said, "I appreciate Amjad's relating the history of Iraq. People who are oppressed don't have short memories. They remember everything." They remember, he said, when Britain was in control of the Iraqi army. They also had control of the Jordanian and all other armies under British rule. All those armies that were supposed to be so opposed to Israel in 1948 were all under British command.

"Why do Palestinian activists in the US shy away from talking to union members? I did a lot of work in the restaurant industry and was a member of HERE and became organizer with SEIU. Union leadership are vocal in supporting Israel. They are unwilling to challenge the establishment's well orchestrated and unconditional support for the state of Israel, unchanged since the 50's. The gate keepers in this case are the current union presidents and the traditional labor leaders who rely on politicians instead of the other way around.

"Americans need to see Palestinians face to face just as we have seen Iraqis face to face when they toured the US in 2005 and 2007. The other side has access to the media to tell the story of Israel. I ask only that you understand the narrative of Palestinians.

"We just want to tell our narrative and continue organizing. We are determined to continue organizing for justice wherever we are."

At this point Brother Herzallah showed a Power Point slideshow to supplement his presentation. His presentation was followed by questions and answers:

Q: How can unions get our money out of being invested in Israel bonds.

A: This requires a systematic (educational) campaign on the issue of bonds. Unlike some European and Canadian unions, we are not ready to divest from Israeli bonds. First we need to talk about it from an economic point of view. And ask the knowledgeable workers to invest in bonds that are socially responsible and that also provide a better return.

In general, we should not get into debating whether there should be two or one states. It is like putting the carriage before the horse. The two-state solution might have been viable in '87. Now when you look at all the illegal settlements that have been built and the separation wall built inside Palestine that effectively creates walled off Palestinian Bantustans, a Palestinian state would look like Swiss cheese. Bush talks about a viable state, but not about real *sovereignty*. His administration has been talked about "democracy" in the Middle East. Where are we now after eight years?

Q: Histadrut did not allow Palestinians to join it. Palestinians want the right to form their own unions in Israel, but the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions is not allowed to represent Palestinians in Israel.

A: Yes, this is true. One of the disputes between the Histadrut and the PGFTU was about a general fund that was generated from dues deducted by the Israeli union federation from wages paid to Palestinian workers in Israel without providing any representation for Palestinian workers. Now Palestinians have earned recognition by ILO to represent their own workers and form unions to protect their rights.

Q: How should members proceed in unions that are influenced by Zionism?

A: Start with a fact-finding delegation. Seize this moment in history. Change can only happen if we are part of it. Send a delegation to visit workers in Palestine and in Israel to see for themselves. Send rank and file workers, not union fancy officers.

Q: John Sweeney talked about terrorist attacks on civilians in Israel but the issue of state terrorism (by Israel against Palestinians) is hard to discuss. Equating attacks on civilians in Palestine gets us nowhere. The other side doesn't listen. Usually those who advocate for Palestinian Rights are portrayed as shrill and extremist.

A: In San Francisco, for example, 25-30 years ago the same thing happened. This would not happen now. Circumstances are changing. Yet labor, which should be leading, is not. We need to challenge this.

We can tell people that the establishment of the state of Israel was intended to solve a problem (giving Jews a safe haven after the Holocaust). Was it solved? Let's hear it not only from Palestinians but also from progressive Jews who are questioning today more than ever and in a growing numbers and influence, questioning the credibility of the state of Israel as whether it fulfills the aspirations of the Jewish people and their struggle for peace and justice.

Comment by delegate: We should bring a delegation of Palestinians and members of Histadrut (the Israel labor federation) to talk about the costs of Israeli occupation. The cost is eroding Israeli society. In the Jewish community, Obama's election has opened a dialogue. Now there is have J-Street (an anti-zionist lobby) challenging AIPAC (the pro-zionist lobby). Obama's campaign spent an hour on the phone with the Presbyterian Church, which opposes the Israeli occupation, talking about what his position ought to be.

Comment by delegate: Subsidizing Israel costs US taxpayers \$200 billion annually. We need to look at where and how the money is being spent. Let's create alliances by exchanging delegations.

Comment by delegate: My son went to Palestine for several months in 2005. There he was in constant communication with members in our CWA local and he made a DVD about why he is going and what is going on over there. What they saw was state terror. It's like fascism. Now it's a humanitarian disaster in the making.

We had no problem having that conversation in the local when we informed members about what was happening to Palestinian working people. Members' hearts were opened.

We can build pressure on Histadrut to do the right thing. Recently some cracks have developed. There was a gathering in Cyprus between Histadrut and the PGFTU. They talked about checkpoints and about the dues that Histadrut collects from Palestinian workers in Israel. They had agreed to remit to the PGFTU but had not.

But we must build solidarity and unity to tear the wall down.

Comment by delegate: Let's not deceive ourselves about opposition we will get. We must think through how to do it. We are the logical group to do it, based on labor solidarity. We should have union people go (to the Middle East) and bring people here to tell their own stories.

Comment by delegate: This conversation makes me realize the huge job we have to do to educate ourselves and then take it to the labor movement. We have to figure out how to educate the US labor movement about empire. It ties this all together. What are the costs of the empire to US working people and workers around the world?

Comment by delegate: One vehicle of struggle that oppressed national minorities and women have availed themselves of is the AFL-CIO constituency groups (Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, A. Philip Randolph Institute, Pride at Work, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, Labor Alliance for Latin American Advancement). African Americans began this in 1972. The last union did not give up its exclusionary clause (barring African American members) until '66. CBTU was formed in 1972. By '78, AFT became the first union to call for divestiture from So.Africa. Then all the other constituency groups came on the scene. Maybe it is now appropriate to form a Middle East workers alliance in the AFL-CIO like the others.

Monadel Herzallah closed by urging unions to send messages of support to workers in Egypt who have been fighting against privatization and to tell the Egyptian government, that has arrested them, to release them. He also proposed that the Egyptian government be asked to ease pressure on Gaza. (Egypt controls one of the access points to Gaza. Israel controls all the others.)

He also suggested that unions identify members who are Arabic speaking and urge them to become part of the AAUMC network. These members can serve as an educational resource in unions for discussions about the Middle East.

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*At its 2007 Steering Committee conference, USLAW created a Middle East Peace Task Force. As its first project, the task force developed a set of "[Guiding Principles](#)" to govern how USLAW and its affiliates should approach the issue. These [guidelines](#) were adopted by the Steering Committee in January, 2008. The task force will next develop a list of educational resources that local unions and other labor organizations can use with their members. Another project for future development is organizing a fact finding delegation of union leaders to visit Palestine and Israel, meet with union leaders and members in both places, and report back to the American labor movement on their observations.*

<http://uslaboragainstwar.org>

[info@uslaboragainstwar.org](mailto:info@uslaboragainstwar.org)

1718 M Street NW, #153, Washington, DC 20036

