



University and College Union

REPORT OF THE PALESTINIAN FEDERATION OF UNIONS OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS AND EMPLOYEES DELEGATION SPEAKING TOUR OF THE UK 20 – 30 APRIL 2008

1. Background to the tour

1.1 The proposal for a speaking tour of UCU branches and local associations by Palestinian academics developed in response to the interest in Palestine expressed at the inaugural Congress of UCU. Motion 30 called on the NEC to 'organise a UK-wide campus tour for Palestinian academic/educational trade unionists.' The Strategy and Finance Committee and its International Advisory Group worked to give effect to this proposal.

1.2 UCU had already been in contact with the representative organisation for university staff in Palestine, the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees (PFUUPE), and the Federation was invited to send representatives to tour the UK and inform UCU members of the

conditions of life, work and study for Palestinian academics. As the name implies, PFUUPE is a loose federation of academic and non-academic staff at each university in the West Bank. PFUUPE organises only in the West Bank, because a different union organises staff in the four universities in Gaza, and this has arisen for historical reasons. This structure and the constraints on movement in the West Bank, the isolation of each town and university in the West Bank, and the virtually total sealing off of Gaza by the Israeli authorities, were factors affecting the organisation of the tour and dialogue with PFUUPE. The journey for Palestinian academics to other countries is fraught with difficulty and is time consuming, requiring departure and return via Jordan, and two of the four delegates who came experienced difficulties with visas or entry to the UK resulting from these constraints.

1.3 The uncertainties surrounding the viability of the tour meant that it had to be organised at relatively short notice once the invitation to participate was accepted by PFUUPE. Branches and local associations were informed of the planned tour and invited to propose local meetings, which were then fitted into a schedule planned nationally. In addition plans were made for the delegation to meet relevant national bodies concerned with Palestine. Four PFUUPE representatives were invited with a view to constructing tours for two teams of two, in order to cover all the institutions where interest had been expressed.



The tour begins at Liverpool with Hala (left) and Samia (right) flanked by Brian Everett on the left and Martin Ralph, Liverpool UCU president

2. Participants and itinerary

2.1 PFUJPE sent four representatives:

Dr Lisa Taraki
Dean of Graduate Studies
Bir Zeit University

Dr Hala Yamani
Department of Education
Bethlehem University

Samia Al Botmeh
Director of the Development Studies Center
Bir Zeit University

Saed Jamal Abu-Hijleh
Director Center for Global Consciousness
and lecturer at An-Najah National University.



Paul Bennett, second from right, escorted our Palestinian guests to a meeting with FOBZU's London oOffice

All arrived in Manchester on 20 April and were hosted at the outset of the tour by UCU Manchester (Hale) regional office.

2.2 Between Monday 21 and Thursday 24 April, Lisa and Saed visited and gave presentations at the universities of Leeds, York and Sunderland, in Durham County Hall, Glasgow Caledonian University, and Bristol University. During the same period, Samia and Hala gave presentations at Liverpool and Manchester universities, and the universities of Brighton, Sussex and Kent, and had an evening meeting with the branch officers at the College of North East London (CONEL), which has established twinning links with Aizaria a town on the West Bank. This included a very useful exploration of initiatives FE branches could take including pursuing contacts with vocational training organisations. They went to Cambridge University on 24th April.

2.3 All four members of the delegation met in London at the offices of the Friends of Bir Zeit University early evening on 24 April, and had a fruitful discussion with the Chair and Development Director of FOBZU on areas of work which might be developed. They went on to dinner with the President and General Secretary, and Simon Steyne of the TUC International Department at the National Portrait Gallery (Unfortunately Phyllis Starkey MP, who had been invited, was unable to join them at the last minute). On the following day, the delegation met Bernard Regan of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Hala and Saed left the tour after this meeting. Lisa went to Lambeth College and Samia to the University of East London, and came back to Britannia Street for a substantial discussion with the Strategy and Finance Committee at the end of its formal business. Lisa and Samia organised their own programme with UK contacts over the weekend. On Monday 28th, they met Owen Tudor, Head of the TUC European Union and International Relations Department, and then went to Warwick and Birmingham Universities. On 29 April, Lisa and Samia addressed a lunchtime meeting at London Metropolitan University and an evening meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Following a debriefing with the UCU staff involved in the organisation of the tour on 30 April, the tour concluded.

2.4 There were 18 general meetings for UCU members and 6 other specialist meetings, as well as a number of sessions with members of the UCU secretariat, during the course of the tour. Approximately 550 UCU members participated in the meetings, most of which engendered lively discussions. Students were also admitted to two meetings.

2.5 Throughout the tour of institutions, the PFUJPE delegates were hosted by local branch / LA officers and in some cases, UCU branch administrators, and Linda Newman, the President, accompanied Saed and Lisa on their northern tour and chaired those meetings as well as those in Birmingham and Warwick and the concluding meeting in SOAS. A number of NEC members assisted on legs of the tour and chaired meetings, and the officials responsible for international work lent support throughout. The administrative arrangements made by Helen Sidlow in the Manchester (Hale) regional office and Steph Lang in Egmont House worked almost without a hitch and were much appreciated by the delegates, and contributed significantly to the successful completion of a gruelling schedule.

3. The key issues for PFUPE

3.1 The PFUPE delegation had agreed among themselves a form of presentation for each of the meetings. They made a presentation regarding the conditions under which Palestinian academics and students have to work. Contrary to any ideas that a peace process was under way, the Israeli government was still taking more and more Palestinian land, and by the fragmentation of the remainder or by seizure of water supplies rendering unviable much of what remained in Palestinian hands. The delegates focussed on the severe economic and social conditions imposed by the Israelis who still de facto control day to day

life, and who have created a fragmented landscape in which travel within the West Bank is chronically restricted, economic life is almost at a standstill and the academic community is isolated – from one university to another, and from the outside world. Hunger and malnutrition, and high and increasing infant mortality which were never features of Palestinian life in modern times, are now serious problems. The huge and aggressive Wall had made conditions substantially worse. Palestinian civil society was despairing as the only outside intervention was to ameliorate the terms of Palestinians' effective imprisonment, not to challenge the situation. Samia summarised these conditions as 'the Israelis cage us and the international community feeds us.'



UCU members at Lambeth College

3.2 Specific issues relating to academic life which the delegation focussed on, were the targeting of Palestinian teachers and students by the Israeli army for harassment, ranging from the use of checkpoints and travel restrictions to make travel any distance to a campus almost impossible (a journey which could take 20 minutes becoming a 3 to 6 hour ordeal) through to administrative detention without charge or any term being set to the length of confinement. The delegates also raised the problems of travelling to international conferences and seminars, and maintaining links with academics at other institutions. They pointed out that as a very small higher education system, the Palestinian universities depended on a cooperative approach to cover all disciplines and the restrictions made this impossible, for example if you could only access Bethlehem University you could not study engineering. Indeed, the situation continues to deteriorate in the sense that the travel restrictions mean that students can increasingly only gain access to their local university, and the diversity of the student body is therefore diminishing.

3.3 The West Bank universities faced serious problems of renewal as it was becoming increasingly difficult and unattractive for foreign passport holders to take posts at Palestinian universities, but they were still dependent on overseas qualified PhDs to take senior academic posts and sustain graduate programmes: there was a need for help from universities outside the region to boost the supply of PhDs. The delegation highlighted the far worse conditions in Gaza where electricity and fuel restrictions as well as the incursions and attacks of the Israeli military, made any semblance of normal academic life impossible. The delegation has promised to provide us with contact details for the union organising in the four higher education institutions in Gaza. They also referred to the plight of the 1 million Palestinian citizens of Israel who lived as second class citizens (and at one meeting a UCU member of Palestinian Israeli origin who had been educated in Haifa described what this was like).

3.4 The PFUPE delegates contrasted these chronic conditions with what was in their view, complacency and even complicity by Israeli academics and universities. While acknowledging that there were some brave individuals in Israeli universities, overwhelmingly the higher education system supported and benefited from the policies of Israel towards Palestine. Dissent in Israeli universities had declined to an insignificant level. Israel regarded the universities as an important national asset and their participation in the global – and particularly the European – academic community as a key sign of legitimacy. In turn the European and international academic community favoured Israeli universities and academics and their relationship with the Palestinian universities, which desperately need their help, was often at best, formal

and tokenistic. Yet Israeli universities and academic staff are heavily engaged in the repression of Palestine. University-trained personnel and academic staff help design and build the Wall and the Settler roads and infrastructure, and staff the military courts and the apparatus of repression, and design Israeli military and security hardware. Students and staff serve in the armed forces whose main day-to-day task is the repression of the Palestinians.

3.5 In the face of this huge disparity, and continued international indifference to the ongoing Palestinian humanitarian crisis and the injustice done to them, PFUPE says that Palestinian civil society organisations are calling for a programme of 'BDS' – boycott, disinvestment and sanctions, targeted at Israeli institutions. PFUPE's part in this is to call for the academic community to boycott Israeli universities. They were concerned to emphasise that this is not intended to target individuals. Thus a seminar or journal based in an Israeli institution would be a legitimate target, but not an Israeli academic based in Exeter or the Sorbonne. They also argued that debate about boycott was itself a valuable weapon, which had led to considerable concern within the Israeli government, academic community and media. The delegation also pointed out that PFUPE were keen to develop a range of cooperative policies, some of which are identified in the next section.

4. The outcomes of the tour

The UCU secretariat in discussions with the delegation, made clear that PFUPE must take the lead in identifying the priorities on which it would like us to work with them and also that there was a need to limit the number of proposals which was feasible for them and for us. A number of potential areas for cooperation and support were identified some of which would require policy decisions and some of which could be relatively easily put into effect (for example, discussions have already taken place with the TUC regarding easing visa requirements on delegations of this sort and on Palestinian academics more generally, item vii below). The delegation were very conscious of the need for PFUPE to build its own capacity to tackle some of these issues before it would be possible to work in partnership with them. They also recognised the need to spread their campaign to education unions in other countries. They were already in the process of thinking how to do this, and the UCU secretariat has agreed to give them contacts and guidance on this.



The following is a list of issues which were identified and on which the delegation will have discussions with colleagues in PFUPE:

- i the debate on the boycott - in their view an end in itself, although the evidence that this is causing the Israeli authorities or academic community to re-examine their existing positions needs to be identified. The need to spread this debate to other HE unions was also identified
- ii exchanges and twinning of academic and support staff and students - a possible electronic information exchange or directory?
- iii collaborative research work including co-sponsorship of academic or trade union seminars or conferences
- iv consideration of EI membership
- v funding: the question of EU funding and the present favoured status of Israel; unlocking frozen Palestinian funds; and opening up routes for Palestinian universities to access EU funds without the requirement that they have an Israeli partner institution. Obtaining access to the Blair Foundation funding to sponsor PhD students from Palestine in UK universities

- vi a UCU membership survey of existing practical links and support for Palestinian academics / institutions at all levels
- vii work on visas and entry / exit / mobility issues, on which the TUC is already working
- viii addressing / publicising the US funding requirement that institutions / academics seeking funds must sign a very general renunciation of (US defined) 'terrorism', which none of the Palestinian universities have agreed to sign
- ix provision of information on the Bologna Process
- x a particular concern for Gaza - possible symbolic attempts to contact academic representatives in Gaza and invite them to the UK.

5. Conclusion

The tour was successful but consideration will need to be given to further steps which might be taken in response to the approaches which may be expected from PFUJPE, in the light of UCU policy and priorities on international matters, and the resources available.

Paul Bennett, Brian Everett, Rob Copeland
UCU International Team, May 2008

These are edited reports of the tour received via organisers, staff, and from the activists' list

The names at the end are contributors.

Liverpool

A good start for the tour at Liverpool. About 20 in the meeting but at 10.30am we did not expect a big turn out. We made one recruit for the union as they wanted to attend and joined at 10am this morning! Three UCU branches were officially represented, all in Liverpool.

The two Palestinian speakers, Samia Al Botmeh and Hala Yamani gave a very good account about life in Palestine under occupation. All who attended expressed support for the tour and wanted to go ahead either with student exchanges, linking research with institutions, twinning etc.



Hala and Samia make their presentation at Liverpool

York

There were 40 approximately in attendance, and the meeting lasted for two hours which pleased the visitors.

Liverpool and Manchester

Attendance of 20 and 40 respectively. Our Palestinian colleagues are enjoying the opportunity to speak frankly about their experiences. What they are saying is:

Boycott Israeli Institutions not individuals as they are part of an Occupying force and Israeli academia is complicit and complacent about it.

Call for an EU moratorium on research and other support for Israel

Capacity building and support for Palestinian academia through twinning, exchanges research interaction etc.

Their presentations about life in Palestine are very moving, but they are also listening to us. My early impression is that the tour will be very successful and we will have good contacts in PFUUE to talk to about future campaigning and working together.

Leeds

Around 40 members attended a lunchtime, ticket-only meeting today to hear Lisa Taraki and Saed Abu-Hijleh, both academics from Palestine, speak about the daily difficulties faced by students and teachers alike in going about the daily business in Israeli occupied West Bank. The road blocks, the horrendous wall, the daily assassinations, the general and systematic, brutal harassment. The background of the killing, torture, injuries and disappearances, not only of students, but of women and children too, together with the extent of the land grab and the destruction of the remains of Palestine being the context. In particular, the perhaps controversial role of the Israeli academy was brought out and discussed at the meeting.

Sunderland

10 attended an interesting academic discussion at end about whether contact between children of both sides should be brought together and on the issue of "Is there only one truth?" And do the sides have to understand each other's truth before peace can emerge. Led by woman with experience of Sri Lanka.

Durham

10 at the evening meeting. One present raised the question of why this is an issue to UCU and the question of cost, but the rest of the meeting was OK.

Brighton

Two successful meetings in Brighton. At 6.30 in the Pavilion Parade site of the University of Brighton, 68 people attended. The meeting finished at 8.15, and our guests were delivered to the station in time for the 8.45 train. Earlier in the day, there was another meeting at the University of Sussex where attendance was only 17, but where there was an excellent discussion of the situation and of what we can do to assist them.

Glasgow

17 were present, though not all were members as the meeting voted to that effect just before we arrived from lunch. The meeting was good natured, but the Scottish leg was a very tight schedule.

Kent

Good but small meeting - 22 people.

College of North East London (CONEL)

There were about 15 people. Two of the CONEL branch committee had just got back from a trip to Palestine and so they reported on possible educational twinning plans with schools, colleges and universities (Haringey has a formal twinning arrangement with the town of Aizaria and so a lot of the initiatives stem from this). The CONEL branch secretary made the point at the beginning that in FE, UCU members needed to show practical solidarity with Palestinian colleagues

The twinning proposals received a positive response from Samia and Hala – who encouraged them to focus on links with vocational colleges – and if possible on disadvantaged learners (such a disabled students) in marginalised areas of the West Bank (i.e. away from Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem).

Samia and Hala also restated the importance of general solidarity acts – i.e. visiting Palestine and lobbying MPs etc. Overall, the event was a real success and a good example of local branches getting involved in Palestinian solidarity (and the tour) in imaginative ways

Cambridge

Another good meeting though small - about 15 UCU - but excellent presentations and good discussion and ideas to build on.

University of East London (UEL)

Most of the questions were supportive of Samia's call for an institutional boycott, including from two Israeli academics. One person did ask a critical question about 'how has the boycott debate helped Palestinian academics'.

The meeting was informative and productive. Samia Al-Botmeh from Bir Zeit gave an account of life on campus in the West Bank and Gaza that included much new detail, including the impact of military occupation upon women in education, on academic networks, and on student aspirations.

She observed that fragmentation and "localisation" of the West Bank through closures and check-points is seriously damaging the tertiary education sector. Many students are unable to take courses of their choice because they cannot reach the appropriate campus. Academic staff are rarely able to travel to other universities - it is easier to meet in London than in Ramallah or Jerusalem. Higher education as a culture of learning is being profoundly affected.

Samia also observed that discussions in the UCU have had a substantial impact in Israel.

Lambeth

What was different at Lambeth was a contribution from an Arab Israeli who is a lecturer at the college. She spoke about her experience as a student at Tel Aviv University - a University with a liberal reputation compared with other Universities like HUJ or Bar-Ilan. She recounted the regular humiliations she endured from Jewish students (both Israeli and overseas) and the consistent refusal of any academic to come to her defence or condemn the harassment. It was a compelling description of day-to-day life in Israeli universities.



Lisa Taraki speaking at Lambeth College

Contributors

Martin Ralph, Liverpool; Gavin Reid, Leeds; Tom Hickey, Brighton; Dennis Hayes, Kent; Phillip Marfleet, UEL; Mike Cushman, Lambeth; Linda Newman, UCU national president; Paul Bennett, UCU; Brian Everett, UCU; Rob Copeland, UCU