

# **Policies to Improve the Labour Movement's Participation in Public Policy Making**



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**Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute**

**2007**



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- ♦ Evaluating economic and social policies and their impact at different levels for correction and review of existing policies.
- ♦ Providing a forum for free, open and democratic public debate among all stakeholders on the socio-economic policy-making process.
- ♦ Disseminating up-to-date socio-economic information and research results.
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### **Policies to Improve the Labour Movement's Participation in Public Policy Making**

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## FOREWORD

The Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) is pleased to present this study which attempts to introduce policies aiming to improve the capacity of trade unions in public policy making. Trade unions are considered a main pillar in the institutional fabric of the Palestinian society as they represent a significant segment of the productive labour force and have a major developmental role to play. This study is an important contribution to the Palestinian literature, which until the present day did not give sufficient attention to the issue of enhancing the role of trade unions in public policy making.

I would like to thank the research team and everyone who contributed to this considerable effort, which was done with great objectivity and neutrality. I would also like to express my appreciation to all trade unions and their members who were generous in their contribution with information and constructive comments. Finally, my special thanks go to our partners, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, for their support to quality research at MAS.

Dr. Samir Abdullah  
Director General



## **Executive Summary**

This study has set out to address the role of trade unions in public policy making. To achieve the objectives of this study, the research sets out by providing a mapping of the main trade unions and discusses the history of the formation of those unions within the economic and political context of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The most significant feature of the Palestinian economy has been its domination by Israel over the past four decades and the repercussions of this domination in terms of limited scope for trade, a divided labor market, restrictions on the use of natural resources and hindered development.

The study also tackles issues of theoretical concern in order to provide a conceptual framework for the research. Within this framework, the role of trade unions is discussed both on the micro and macro levels, that is, their role in defending the rights of workers, but also in terms of playing a role at the policy making level.

The study reviews the five major trade union federations in the WBGS, with a focus on the Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions. Thirteen trade unions work under the umbrella of the Federation with a membership of 170 thousand workers. Interviews were conducted with the federation and trade unions over a period of two months. SWOT<sup>1</sup> technique was used in analyzing trade unions. The evaluation covered the structural organization of these unions, their elections, services, financial and administrative systems, decision making process, transparency, and membership as well as their role in pushing forward legislation regarding workers.

Meetings also took place with the Ministry of labor, Centre for democracy and workers rights. A workshop was conducted where all parties were brought together for discussion of the findings of the study.

### **Weaknesses**

1. Domination of the federation by political factions: All federations are dominated by political factions. For example, members of the executive committee of the Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions are selected from the main factions based on a set quota, with the largest

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<sup>1</sup> SWOT technique stands for: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

representation reserved for Fatah. Those members are appointed by the factions rather than through a democratically elected process. The repercussions of this situation are grave, as the trade unionists are held accountable by their factions rather than the workers.

2. Centralization of power in the hands of a few individuals: The Palestinian trade union movement is dominated by a number of individuals who act as if those institutions are their private estates. This is true of all the federations, including the Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions and Federation of Palestinian Workers, where elections of the chairpersons have not taken place for more than 20 years. Consequently, much of the conflict within the Palestinian trade union movement, which in many cases led to the breakaway of one union or another, has to do with clashes between certain characters rather than any development in the structure of the labour market or workers' needs and requirements.
3. Minimal participation of workers in the trade unionist movement: Although federations and trade unions boast about the numbers of workers registered within their ranks, most of these workers are registered to qualify for health care insurance. According to trade unionists, more than 80% of the workers registered with trade unions have done so to access free health care, introduced by President Arafat in 2001. The rest of the workers join the unions once they encounter a problem in their workplace. Accordingly, workers have not actually been involved in any real trade unionist activities. Mobilisation and organization of workers into a lobbying power with issues, concerns, ambitions and a role to play in the socio-economic and political life has not been one of the trade unions roles in Palestine.
4. Lack of transparency and accountability within the upper levels of the trade union movement: this is particularly true when it comes to financial matters and decisions to nominate trade unionists for training and travel abroad. The personal and factional links with the upper levels of the federations, are the factors that determine who actually benefits from training, or who actually gets to travel abroad for conferences. This also applies to financial matters; annual financial reports have not been published for years.
5. Absence of real trade unions' elections. Although the Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions have run elections this year, these elections have reproduced the same set of people and did not result in the

introduction of new faces into the movement. A number of junior trade unionists have indicated their dismay at these results, since it will result in no significant changes for the movement as a whole.

6. Limited services: Although useful, the two services provided by the various trade unions tend to be very limited. These services are centralized in health care and help with some work disputes. So, basically the membership is limited to receiving some services and not involved in unionist activities.
7. Weak legal framework: the trade unions law has not been ratified by the Palestinian Legislative Council yet. Thus trade unions have been functioning in an ad hoc legal environment where the laws applying in the West Bank are different to those in the Gaza Strip. Trade unions have been pushing for the ratification of this law, yet more pressure has to be exerted in this respect.

### **Strengths**

1. Trade unions have a vast network of offices and links to the local communities and different workplaces, which could facilitate a more coherent and effective movement. This is particularly true of the Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions which has offices in every governorate in the WBGS and well established trade unionists on the ground.
2. Trade Unions and Federations tend to have a well structured set of bylaws, constitutions and systems. Those represent a good starting point for further improvement of the movement.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations that the study put forward centres around the notion that the trade union movement needs to tackle its weaknesses before it is able play a more active role in policy making. A real and proper representation of workers has to be introduced, transparency, accountability, and democracy has to become part of the functioning and conduct of the trade union movement. Only then would the movement have the credibility and weight to represent workers and become part of the policy making bodies within the WBGS, including the legal, political and economic domains. More specifically, for the trade unions movement

to enhance its role in public policy making, it has to work on the following issues:

1. Promoting the independence of trade unions from political factions: to ensure an effective trade unions movement, it has to operate independently from the domination of Palestinian political factions. That does not mean that trade unions should distance themselves from political life, rather, its foremost purpose should be organizing, serving and mobilizing workers. Accordingly, it should utilize political life to serve the interests of workers rather than fulfill the agenda of the various political factions through the trade union movement.
2. Promoting the independence of trade union movement financially from the PNA: reliance on funds from the PNA, mostly in the form of salaries for some members of the trade unions, imbalances the relationship between the trade unions and the PNA in favour of the PNA.
3. Adhering to the different bylaws and systems set forward in the constitutions of the various federations and trade unions: issues of transparency, accountability and centralization of power in the hands of a few individuals should be resolved through adherence to constitutions of these unions.
4. Better organization and representation of workers through mobilization, conducting elections with true representation and the involvement of experienced trade unionists. The strength of the movement lies in its capacity to involve workers, not just in providing a few services, rather, it needs to become a force which can make a difference to the lives of workers.
5. Improving the links between the various PNA institutions, including ministry of labour and the various employer groups within the WBGs. Also, working on building links with organizations involved in worker's rights and mobilization, including international trade unions, UN organisations and Arab worker groups.
6. Exerting pressure on the Legislative Council to ratify and issue the trade unions' law to organize the work of the movement and enhance its capacity to fulfil its role.