

APARTHEID ISRAEL AND THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Statement by Australians for Palestine.

Deep in the Palestinian heartland of the Occupied West Bank a family is about to lose its livelihood.

The process will begin when a group of well-armed Jewish settlers and their mobile homes descend without warning on a Palestinian farm. The settlers will either be newly-arrived immigrants to Israel or belong to organisations such as the Hilltop Youth, composed of young men and women who have left the settlements of their parents to establish their own “outposts” on Palestinian land.

Plucking up his courage, the farm’s owner will approach his new neighbours to ask why they have chosen to settle on his land. Their response will be rude and threatening. The land is theirs, not his, they will say. God gave it to the Jewish people in the first millennia BC and they are merely redeeming it. As an Arab, he has no place in the country and he should go to Jordan.

The following day the Israeli army will arrive to investigate the situation. Although the settlement is technically illegal, a squad of soldiers will encamp on another part of the farm, since Jews cannot possibly be left undefended in a Palestinian area. Meanwhile the settlers will demand that the army connect them to the electricity grid, claiming that without electricity they will not be able to operate their *mikveh* (ritual bath). Without a *mikveh* the settlers will be unable to carry out their religious obligations. Quietly, the settlement will be connected to Israel’s electricity, water and telephone grids.

If the farmer has the money to hire an Israeli lawyer, he may apply to the courts to have his land restored, but the Israeli legal system is notoriously ponderous in the resolution of such cases and only very rarely rules in favour of the Palestinians. While the courts deliberate, the Israeli Government, Christian fundamentalists and Jewish millionaires such as Melbourne Rabbi Joe Gutnick will funnel funds to the settlement. Although the Israeli government is officially not building new settlements in the Occupied Territories, it will claim that the settlement is not new, but merely an “outpost” or “new neighbourhood” built to accommodate the “natural growth” in population of an established settlement two or three kilometres away.

To connect the settlement to other settlements, the army will build a “bypass road” through the farmer’s land, which Palestinians will be banned from using. Gradually the farmer’s fields and those of his neighbours will be expropriated by the settlers. His livestock will be stolen or shot and his children stoned on their way to school. As tensions rise the army will declare a 400 metre “security zone” around the settlement from which all Palestinians are banned. Eventually, like every other colonial enterprise in history, the settlement will trigger a defensive reaction, which Israel calls “terrorism” that will necessitate the destruction of all trees and houses that might afford cover for an attack on the settlement or its bypass road.

As the years pass, new outposts and bypass roads will push the Palestinians, their farms and villages into the background of the landscape as land and other resources are expropriated for the settlements. Settlers in the West Bank are allocated 235 litres of water per person per day to keep their swimming pools full and their lawns green, while their Palestinian neighbours are forced to survive on as little as 30 litres a day. Each year, 5 million cubic metres of untreated sewage flows from the settlements into what remains of the Palestinians’ lands.

While colonial regimes in other parts of the world have been dismantled since World War II, successive generations of Palestinians have been turned into refugees through an ongoing process of colonisation and displacement. Today all that remains of Palestine is a patchwork of ever-shrinking enclaves, which a growing number of observers, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former US President Jimmy Carter have compared to the “Bantustans” that apartheid South Africa created as “homelands” for its black population.

Israel’s response has been to angrily reject such comparisons. The expansion of Jewish settlements is merely an expression of their “natural growth.” Israel’s violence towards the Palestinians is an expression of its right to defend itself and its citizens. The root cause of the conflict is that the Palestinians refuse to “renounce violence”.

The logical conclusion of such thinking is to be found in Israel’s current blockade of the Gaza Strip, a tiny walled-in ghetto of humanity on Israel’s Mediterranean shore. Four fifths of Gaza’s population of 1.5 million are refugees whose homes have been confiscated by Israel. It’s only natural resource – its offshore gas fields – has been taken over by Israel. Since the militant Hamas party seized power in Gaza in 2007, Israel has used its control of Gaza to restrict food supplies to 60% of what is required to feed the population. Today 10% of Gaza’s children are stunted and anaemia is running at 35% among pregnant woman and 65% among newborns.

In January the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions called for an international campaign of boycotts against Israel in solidarity. In response, the South African, Irish and Scottish trade union congresses have all passed boycott resolutions. Last week the British Trade Union Congress passed a resolution calling for the boycott of settlement products, while individual British, Canadian and European unions have adopted stronger boycott resolutions against Israel.

Israel’s supporters within the trade union movement have responded by establishing Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine (TULIP), an organisation dedicated to halting the rising tide of trade union boycotts and that rejects any comparison of Israel and apartheid South Africa. Despite having no association with any Palestinian union, TULIP presents itself as a bridge-builder “between Israeli and Palestinian workers and their unions.”

According to international law apartheid is defined as inhumane acts “committed in the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.” In the twentieth century the Australian trade union movement rallied in solidarity with the South African people by boycotting South African products and institutions.

Today Australian unions are confronted with a choice between international action in solidarity with the colonised and brutalised people of Occupied Palestine or joining Israel’s apologists who want the plight of the Palestinian people buried and forgotten.

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<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=864899>

Read the Reporters blog on his story at
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