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Israel-Palestine delegation builds understanding and support

by Rory Gill

In July, I was part of CUPE's first international solidarity delegation to Israel-Palestine. Our goals were to learn about the situation facing workers, to understand the impact of Israel's military occupation on Palestinians, and to hear how the Palestinian people have resisted repression and maintained the struggle for their land and self-determination for over 70 years.

We traveled throughout Israel-Palestine, to large cities and many smaller communities including Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin community in the West Bank facing demolition. We met with activists and leaders in the labour movement, legal advocates, civil

society and human rights activists, academics, Canadian government officials, and representatives of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

With few exceptions, the message was clear and unequivocal. The Palestinian people live under a regime intent on displacing them from their land as the original indigenous inhabitants of the region. A sophisticated system of segregation and discrimination is used to achieve this goal, denying Palestinians their most basic human rights including their right to self-determination.

The best-known feature of the occupation is the over

700-kilometer-long wall built by Israel in the occupied territories. Constructed on the pretext of enhancing security, the wall is a tool of intimidation, separation and annexation. In Gaza, nearly two million Palestinians are living under a blockade and prevented from leaving.

The day-to-day reality for people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories includes restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrest and detention, confiscation and destruction of property, segregation of transport, denial of basic services and resources, and disproportionate military response to even the mildest forms of protest and resistance.

Palestinian citizens of Israel have also suffered a severe erosion of their civil rights. In late July, the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, approved the Jewish nation-state Basic Law. This legislation removes the official language status of Arabic, legalizes housing discrimination based on ethnic, religious, or national background and denies Palestinians the right to self-determination.

Workers in Israel are struggling in an economy shaped by reforms that led to the privatization of the public sector and the transfer of state assets to a few wealthy families. The social and economic system that has developed over the last two decades is fuelling enormous income inequality. Israel has a high rate of inequality according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). More than a million workers live below the poverty line. Young workers, migrants and Arab workers are



Palestinian union leaders meeting with CUPE's delegation at the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Ramallah, Occupied Palestinian Territories.

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Solidarity against repression and privatization in Guatemala



Shawna Quinn Blue and Abner Pérez López, Coordinator of the Free the Rivers campaign.

by Shawna Quinn Blue

In May, I represented CUPE on a Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence (BTS) delegation. BTS coordinates delegations to Guatemala to express solidarity and to learn firsthand about the peoples' struggle. We arrived during a period of heightened repression, with the intent to meet as many human rights activists and community leaders as possible.

CUPE has a partnership with the Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA). CCDA is a Mayan peasant farmer and rural workers' movement that works to defend the rights and culture of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala. During the short time that we

were in the country, three CCDA community leaders were assassinated. I want to name and remember Mateo Chamán Paau, José Can Xol and Luis Arturo Marroquin. These courageous men were very active in their communities struggling to defend their land, territory and rights.

We met with several community members who told us that the Guatemalan government provides more protection to large plantation owners who control the land using violence, rather than protecting the majority of the people who rely on the land to simply live.

We also met with Abner Pérez López, coordinator of the Free the Rivers campaign against water privatization. CUPE is supporting this campaign through the Global Justice Fund. Guatemala faces a significant water crisis due to climate change and the growth of industrial-scale agriculture and mining in the country. There are extended droughts in some regions and extensive flooding in other regions. At the same time, plantation owners are illegally diverting rivers from their natural course to irrigate expanding sugar cane and African palm mono-crops. Communities used to rely on these creeks

and rivers for drinking water and crop irrigation. They have been left high and dry. The CCDA and other rural organizations are campaigning to free the rivers for public use, and to have access to water recognized in Guatemala as a fundamental right.

During my visit to the CCDA headquarters, I found similarities between Guatemala and Prince Edward Island. Islanders are protesting the *Water Act* and any legislation or actions that compromise or deny access to safe, public water for everyone. One example is water rights and access being limited when tourists and large corporations buy land.

The CCDA is just one of many groups we met with in Guatemala who are fighting for their rights and for justice. I have taken back lots of stories and experiences that I will never forget from meeting the wonderful and courageous people of Guatemala.

Shawna Quinn Blue is a member of CUPE 3260, representing PEI educational assistants and youth services workers. Learn more about BTS at breakingthesilenceblog.com

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Defending the right to health care across borders



CUPE 204 Grace Hospital members Myrna Antonio, Clem Abaya, Rufo Fabregas, Debbie Boissonneault (local president) and Nandie Almario with Robert Mendoza.

by Debbie Boissonneault

In May, Robert Mendoza, President of the Alliance of Health Workers Philippines (AHW) came to Winnipeg on a CUPE-sponsored visit. It was a great pleasure for me and my members to spend time with him.

The AHW empowers Filipino health workers to promote and protect their economic and democratic rights. The Alliance also defends the peoples' right to health by advocating for "a comprehensive, accessible, appropriate, affordable and humane health care system."

Mendoza travelled from the other side of the world to meet with CUPE members, learn about our struggles, and share the struggle of health care workers in the Philippines. Even though we are thousands of miles apart, we have common struggles as

workers. Government cut-backs are driven by money, and hurt patient care. Front line workers are not consulted about changes in the workplace or in the health care system, and workers are often fighting for better standards of care.

The Philippines has a two-tier public and for-profit health care system, something we are trying to keep out of health care in Manitoba. After hearing about the impact it has on people in the Philippines, particularly the poor, I feel inspired to keep fighting for public health care.

CUPE members appreciated hearing about the challenges facing Filipino health care workers. For several members, this discussion allowed them to receive an update about the situation back home, where many

grew up and still have family. Mendoza was clear that the conditions of unemployment and lack of access to health care mean many people live in poverty or are forced to migrate to other countries in search of work.

The AHW believes that the right to health care is a right for everyone in the Philippines, and there is a great deal of solidarity within the membership to achieve this goal. They face powerful pushback from their government, and know they need to unite to be able to win their fights.

At a rally protesting the closure of a hospital emergency department, Mendoza was surprised we were not harassed by security, and that police did not remove our campaign material from the public spaces.

I felt uneasy knowing we have the right to campaign and protest when these rights are repressed in the Philippines. I also felt that facing repression has built a stronger sense of solidarity within the AHW membership.

After spending time with Brother Robert, I believe that fighting for your life means you will fight harder, and maybe there are things here we should fight harder for as well. He was able to make important connections with CUPE members and reminded us how important it is to fight public sector cuts and privatization.

Debbie Boissonneault is the president of CUPE 204, representing over 7,000 health care workers in 20 health care facilities across Winnipeg and Manitoba.

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particularly vulnerable to the weakened social safety net and inadequate recognition of labour rights that coincided with these reforms.

Workers in the occupied territories are extremely vulnerable under these conditions. They share the same experiences of precarity felt by workers around the world, but the occupation makes their work experience

doubly precarious. Many are forced to work in the illegal settlements or in Israel, where protection of rights is limited. A permit is required to work outside the boundaries of the occupation. Revocation of this permit is used to threaten workers who resist in the workplace, but also in their communities where a tremendous amount of violence and intimidation takes place.

Women are particularly at risk of harassment and exploitation.

The situation in Israel-Palestine is best summed up in the words of Fayrouz Sharqawi, coordinator of the Grassroots Jerusalem Community Mobilization. She told us that “the struggle of the Palestinian people is not a historical event, it is happening now, please do your best to help people understand its reality.”

Our delegation is committed to sharing our experiences with CUPE members across the country and will work to increase our understanding of, engagement with, and support of the Palestinian people.

Rory Gill is the president of CUPE 709, representing Calgary's foremen, and is the Alberta Regional Vice-President on CUPE's National Executive Board.

Colombian leader Berenice Celeita: I am alive because of solidarity

Berenice Celeita, leader of CUPE's partner in Colombia, NOMADESC (Association for Research and Social Action), attended the CUPE BC convention in April. She sat down for an interview with CUPE just months before the right-wing government of President Iván Duque Marquéz was elected to power. The situation facing social movement activists was dire at the time. The election of Duque makes the situation worse – and the need for solidarity even more urgent.

This is a condensed version of a conversation between Berenice and CUPE Communications Representative Dan Gawthrop. Steve Stewart of CoDevelopment Canada provided simultaneous translation. Read the full interview at cupe.ca/globaljustice

DG: One of the most alarming stories is the targeting of trade union leaders for assassination. Has the situation changed?

BC: No, unfortunately—though the targets have changed to an extent. Before it was trade union leaders, then journalists. Now it's community leaders protecting territories. Since December 2016, when the peace accords were signed, 285 community leaders and human rights activists have been assassinated.

DG: Are trade union activists still at risk?

BC: Yes. In Cali, in the western region, about every six or eight months, a threat gets issued that usually has a list of people, that includes union leaders, and people from NOMADESC, saying, 'We're watching what you're doing, if you keep this up we're going to get you.'

DG: What's driving all this?

BC: The economic model on which the government is basing its development and its agreements with international corporations, which is incompatible with the development models of the campesino, Indigenous and

Afro-Colombian communities.

The shift to targeting territorial activists is linked to the conflict with the transnationals starting to come in and wanting to operate in those territories. From 2010 until now, the Colombian government has signed 17 free trade agreements. The first one was with Canada.

DG: How dirty are Canada's fingers in some of this activity?

BC: Canadian capital has been expanding in Colombia since the trade agreement, obviously the largest area is in mining, but they've also been investing a lot in privatizing public services. For example, water services holding companies are buying up things like dams or mining concessions. They have capital from Canada but also from many other countries and they are put on the stock exchanges.

This doesn't necessarily mean that they're ordering the killings or that they're

directly involved. But if they're operating in the areas where the violence is happening and they're saying nothing, well, they're covering it up.

DG: What can CUPE and activists do?

BC: For Colombia, it's very important to make visible at the international level what is going on since the peace agreement was signed, and to insist to the government that communities and social organizations be incorporated into the peace process. We need activists to insist with the Colombian government and the Canadian government that the concept of free, prior and informed consent be respected when engaging in territories that will affect communities' livelihoods.

We need to continue to support the work of training youth and community activists to carry out research and community organizing and it's very important to keep sending labour delegations to Colombia to visit us and see with your own eyes what is happening. I am convinced that I am alive today because of the actions of solidarity.