

Self-organization in the 2016 Palestinian Teachers Strike

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From February 14 to March 13, 2016, 35,000 Palestinian teachers in the West Bank government-run school system were on strike. The teachers' goal was to hold the Palestinian Authority to the terms of a 2013 agreement between the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT) and the Ministry of Education, an agreement the Palestinian Authority had reneged on for three years running. (*Ma'an News*, Feb. 16, 2016)

The strike was enormous, mobilizing mass demonstrations involving up to 20,000 teachers and supporters who flooded the streets of downtown Ramallah with signs and bullhorns. (*Ma'an News*, Feb. 22, 2016) According to Murad Tamimi, the International Relations Coordinator for the GUPT, "I've never seen anything like it; I thought it could be the end of the P.A." These mobilizations were met with unprecedented repression on the part of the Palestinian Authority, which set up checkpoints to intercept teachers traveling to Ramallah and used violence and intimidation to try to suppress the movement. (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 11, 2016) The strike ended when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas announced his support for honoring the 2013 agreement, a statement that the teachers accepted. (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 12, 2016)

How did the Palestinian teachers mobilize on such an unprecedented scale? The answer lies in the form of organization that the teachers used to mobilize: democratically elected strike committees that took the lead of the strike away from the official union apparatus.

Moral and Material Grievances

Teachers in the Palestinian government-run schools work under horrendous conditions that make education nearly impossible. According to one teacher from Hebron who participated in the strike, his current salary is 3,900 shekels (\$1,000) per month, although he has worked as a teacher for 23 years. At the same time, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reports that the average budget of a West Bank family is 5,091 shekels (\$1,333). (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 1, 2016) It is no surprise, therefore, that most teachers have a second job. The absolute insufficiency of teachers' salaries was a major theme in all of the speeches, signs, slogans, and messages teachers used to represent themselves in their mobilizations.

The Scope of the Strike

The strike was a spontaneous reaction on the part of the teachers after three years of petitioning the Palestinian Authority to honor the 2013 agreement, which, however insufficient, stipulated yearly wage increases to keep up with the cost of living. According to strike committee member Wasfi al-Bargouthi, "The strike happened accidentally. [The strike] was not planned. After the teachers announced the strike, the strike committee began to organize, committees at schools, meetings, and many things. No one planned [the strike]. It was an explosion without leaders." (interview with the author, July 27, 2016)

On Monday, February 15, 4,000 teachers marched to the Prime Minister's office, where they were met with stony silence. (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 11, 2016) Protests escalated, and the next day, 20,000 teachers and supporters demonstrated in Ramallah. After that, protests were met with repression by armed security forces, and ultimately 22 teachers as well as two school principals were arrested. (*Ma'an News*, Feb. 18, 2016)

The repression on the part of the Palestinian Authority included the official use of police violence and checkpoints, repressive techniques associated with the Israeli occupation forces. In addition to the official repression, there are indications that threats were made to bus and taxi drivers that their licenses would be revoked if they facilitated teachers reaching the protests. (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 2, 2016) This repression is deeply embarrassing for the Palestinian Authority. The authorities claimed that the checkpoints were "not to deny teachers entry to Hebron," but were there to "ambush fugitives." (*Ma'an News*, Mar. 1, 2016) The official story does little to obscure the naked fact that the Palestinian Authority brought a new level of repression down against the population it supposedly represents.

The GUPT Caves In

The teachers organized and sustained the strike by forming strike committees elected from the ranks of the teachers. The formation of the committees during the 2016 strike was a direct response to the default of the GUPT in its formal role representing the teachers. According to Anwar Awad, a teacher from Nablus,

The general union didn't do right by the teachers. They put them down, humiliated the teachers, and didn't give them their rights, so [the teachers] started this kind of strike. And because the government has a policy not to give the union anything and make it so weak, [the teachers] tried to do something on their own, away from the union or any official body or institution. (Interview with the author, July 22, 2016)

The strike committee method was transmitted by veteran activists of past strikes. Nabeel Samarra, a former teacher, veteran activist, and one of the renegade school principals who spent time in jail during the strike, relates his role in the 2016 strike: "We held a big meeting, and we said every school should choose one teacher ... and form a committee in each governorate." (Interview with the author, July 27, 2016)

Anwar Awad was part of a committee formed in response to the meeting in Ramallah:

We chose one representative from each of the 150 schools in Nablus, and then we chose five to represent the governorate. The five were not decision-makers. They had to go back to the 150 and discuss with the 150. So we have 150 representatives. If they want to do something they go to the 150 and discuss it, then they go to the other governorates and take the decision. The 150 representatives met whenever there was anything coming from the government. (Awad interview)

The committees facilitated the mobilization of teachers to carry out various roles in the strike movement. The committees formed subcommittees to deal with negotiations, legal affairs, and communications. Everything was posted on Facebook or other social media for the rank and file teachers to engage with and was widely disseminated through professional, social, and family networks. (Awad interview)

The Role of Political Leadership

The political leadership of veteran activists was essential to the organization of the strike committees. According to Omar Assaf, a veteran teacher activist and historian of the teachers

movement, the committees have a history stretching back decades: “The strike committees have their roots in the underground committees organized during the period of direct military occupation from 1967 to 1993.” (Omar Assaf Interview with the author, July 29, 2017)

During the period of direct Israeli rule, such committees were underground, constituted by self-selected activists. The Palestinian political parties that make up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) actively facilitated the creation and extension of underground unions among other popular organizations. During this period the union activists framed their mobilizations in terms of nationalist demands directed against the Israeli occupation, as well as demands for union rights and material gains. As Omar Assaf relates,

We had three main demands during that period. We wanted a curriculum that reflected Palestinian history, culture, and identity, with adequate libraries, sports, and other programs for Palestinian youth. We wanted the right to have a legal union, a human right, and finally we wanted higher salaries, smaller class sizes, and shorter hours of work. (Assaf interview)

While the PLO was encouraging these struggles as part of the nationalist project, it was simultaneously preparing their absorption into the hoped-for project of state-building.

During the Oslo period, these formerly underground activists found themselves in conflict with the Palestinian Authority. The teacher activists confronted the officialdom of the GUPT, part of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), which was founded in 1965 with links to the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Along with the PLO, the PGFTU returned to the Occupied Territories and, according to Assaf, “established from above unions for everyone: women, teachers, etc. The political parties were apportioned seats based on their political importance in the PLO. There was no democratic representation. The sector and the leader didn’t correspond.” Of course, this is not an anomaly in the history of nationalist movements in the Middle East or elsewhere.

The current GUPT, part of this Oslo apparatus, is no more democratic today than in 1994. The union’s general secretary and central committee are elected by 10,000 teachers, electors hand-picked by the current GUPT leadership and ultimately the PLO. Furthermore, the union is funded by the PLO rather than by dues collected from its membership. The union’s general secretaries tend to receive lucrative diplomatic appointments from the PLO after serving their time. All of these factors make it difficult for Palestinian teachers to see their interests reflected in the activities of the GUPT.

During the Oslo period, many activists remained outside of the GUPT but continued organizing committees when conflicts erupted. Unlike during the period of direct military rule, these committees could function in the open with broader participation and elections. One of those activists, Naim Aruri, recalls an important teachers strike in 1997:

So the first meeting was here in the park in 1997. [The activists] contacted each school and said you have to send one representative per school. One from each school in each governorate. A democratic way. They chose a committee for each city or governorate. Through the governorate committees they chose the top committee.

This expanded committee structure developed a further innovation. Regular elections were held to fill open positions on the committee so that “if one of us got arrested, we would just elect someone else.” (Interview with the author, July 27, 2016)

Accepting the Unacceptable

The strike committees are the crucial component that enabled teachers not only to mobilize for the 2016 strike but also to demobilize without feeling defeated. On February 16, the GUPT under

General Secretary Ahmed Suhail met with the officials of the Palestinian Authority and brokered a deal that would secure an implementation of the 2013 agreement by the end of 2016. The teachers, through the strike committees, flatly rejected the agreement and maintained the strike. However, on March 13, after a month of the strike, President Mahmoud Abbas announced his plan to settle the strike under the same conditions, and on that day, the strike committees accepted those conditions. For the teachers, the element of victory lay in the fact that they had presented such a visible force in the face of the Palestinian Authority, and that the strike committees could be called upon again to organize another round of struggle. As Anwar Awad puts it,

The most important thing is that we sent a message and our voice was spread all over, especially to the government, our voice as teachers. The other thing, the Palestinian people and other people heard about the teachers' rights and they know that the teachers need rights. ... If the government does not apply what it promised, we will do different activities, including strike as well as going to the court and pressing charges." (Awad interview)

Likewise Naim Aruri sees the movement as a success in spite of the demobilization. According to him,

You have to try to do something. The union is against you, the P.A. is against you. In spite of that we succeeded to do something to tell the Palestinian people these are our problems, and we need this and that. The majority of the Palestinian people and the students themselves supported us. Many of them were with us. (Aruri interview)

Wasfi al-Barghouti adds,

The biggest demonstration ever in this country took place in this strike. There were 20,000 people in the streets of Ramallah! No one was paid. No one was forced. And many teachers came even though it cost them money! The security forces set up checkpoints and threatened us! But our teachers were brave and we continued until we told them to finish." (al-Barghouti interview)

Omar Assaf, speaking today as an adviser and ally of the teachers, states, "Until you establish a true union, the problem will continue. Democratic, independent, and unified. I think the movement is active because the teachers' situation is bad and the union does nothing. And the teachers write on Facebook and Twitter. It's not finished." (Assaf interview)

Reviewing the Movement, Looking Forward

The Palestinian Authority's renegeing on the 2013 agreement provided the trigger for the mobilization in 2016. The unwillingness or inability of the GUPT to impose the conditions written into the 2013 agreement created a situation in which it was possible for the teachers to act through the strike committees, sustain their movement, and finally demobilize.

The reaction of the Palestinian Authority to the strike has been to reshuffle, but ultimately strengthen, the union bureaucracy. On March 14, the PLO appointed a new Central Committee of the GUPT, led by General Secretary Said Irziqat. On October 2, the Palestinian Authority announced that teachers engaged in any new strike action would be subject to layoffs. (*Ma'an News*, Oct. 3, 2016) The minister of education has visited the GUPT offices repeatedly since the strike, aiming to enlist the union itself in monitoring and disciplining teachers who are engaged in organizing. (Murad Tamimi interview with the author, July 15, 2016) Even after the strike, teachers have faced continued intimidation including violence. (*Ma'an News*, Apr. 7, 2016) During my interview with Nabeel Samarra, our volunteer translator, an English teacher from Ramallah, broke off halfway

through the interview and excused himself because the content had become too alarming for him to translate.

The teachers' relationship to the GUPT and the Palestinian Authority is only one facet of changes between Palestinian society and the Palestinian Authority. Elections to municipal positions were to be held in October 2016, however these elections were called off by the Palestinian Authority at the last minute when it appeared that their favored candidates would be challenged by Hamas-linked candidates as well as by a joint list of the left-wing parties. (*Ma'an News*, Oct. 2016) Official avenues of contestation are being closed off, and dissident voices are being disciplined.

The future is far from certain, but everyone involved in the strike anticipates more conflicts over the same issues. The teachers do not feel defeated, and they don't feel that the story is over. As Anwar Awad said, "We have the committees ready to go; they are just sleeping." Of course, a real solution to the problems the teachers face is wrapped up in all of the political problems of the Palestinian situation, beginning first and foremost with the Israeli occupation. The importance of the strike committees is in demonstrating that self-organization on a class basis is a latent force that can shake the foundations of oppressive power structures, potentially shifting the balance of forces that seem so overwhelmingly arrayed against the majority of ordinary Palestinians, both within their own society and in conflict with the Israeli occupation. Viewed from this angle, the experience of the strike committees will be to the credit of future struggles of all sorts.

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Footnotes