



نقابة "صوت العامل"
للدفاع عن حقوق العمال والعاطلين عن العمل

October 7, 2008 – World Day for Decent Work

Arab Women Textile Workers in the Galilee, Israel:

NO BREAD AND NO ROSES

In the past decade, more than 30,000 textile workers lost their jobs in the Israeli textile industry, and most of them are Arab women. In the first half of 2008, another 850 employees were made redundant as a result of the continued outsourcing of textile manufacturing to cheap-labour countries and the falling shekel-dollar exchange rate. As of today, the Israeli textile industry still employs approximately 16,000 workers, and World Day for Decent Work is an appropriate day for their stories to be told...

The textile industry has been the main source of employment for Palestinian Arab women inside Israel ever since the rapid industrialisation during British-Mandate times (1920-1947) and the dispossession of the Palestinian people from their land by the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The nature of the textile and garment industries as a highly labour-intensive trade traditionally occupied by women has always abetted exploitation and inequality: for instance, a census conducted in Palestine in 1937 – at the height of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 – indicated that on average, the salary of a Jewish worker was 145% higher than that of his Arab colleague; in tobacco factories, it was up to 233% higher, and in textile factories employing women it was 433% higher. At the same time, historic labour struggles in the textile and garment sectors have shaped both the international labour and women's movements. It is a history of great suffering and of great struggle, including the women textile workers in New York City, who demonstrated for a shorter work week on March 8, 1857; the fire that killed 140 women workers in the same city in 1911; the first call for Bread and Roses by women workers from Massachusetts in 1912; and the mass demonstrations of Russian workers on International Women's Day 1917, which sparked the Revolution. Today, the textile and garment industries are among the most globalised and make up the largest source of industrial employment in the world. Most of the approximately 30 million textile workers around the globe are women, and no matter whether they work in Mexican Maquiladoras, in South-East Asian EPZs (Export Processing Zones), in Jordanian and Egyptian QIZs (Qualified Industrial Zones), or in the few remaining workshops in the Northern hemisphere, their working conditions are likely to be far from decent.

For Palestinian Arab women in Israel, the outsourcing of textile manufacturing to neighbouring Arab countries was one more step into the vicious circle of unemployment, cheap labour and poverty. For thousands of Arab women and their families from the Galilee, a region in northern Israel predominantly inhabited by Palestinian Arabs, this is the "peace dividend": watching Israeli textile

factories and local workshops close down, pack up their equipment and ship it to Jordan, where Qualified Industrial Zones provide cheap labour and tax and quota-free export to the United States for joint ventures between Israeli and Jordanian companies. These Qualified Industrial Zones – or QIZs – were established in Jordan and later in Egypt, as part of the Middle East peace process and normalisation with Israel, upon the initiative of the United States. As a result, the Israeli textile industry was largely outsourced, leaving the local workforce – predominantly Arab and new immigrant women – unemployed, and in many cases also without social protection, such as severance pay and pension insurance. At the same time, workers from South Asia migrated to the QIZs in Jordan where they produce clothes for small wages and under poor working conditions. A Jordanian government report from 2006 confirmed workers-rights violations in the QIZs, stating that inspectors found sub-standard conditions in housing, sanitary facilities and workplace safety and non-observance of holiday and overtime pay.



Activists of Sawt el-Amel's Women's Platform distribute information brochures to workers in local textile factories

Thus, the remaining textile workers inside Israel face a tough competition, which their employers certainly keep reminding them of constantly. Since its establishment in 2000, Sawt el-Amel has handled close to a hundred cases of textile workers from the Galilee, who either lost their jobs without severance pay and other benefits or who still work in Israeli textile factories, below the minimum wage and under sub-standard working conditions. A major problem among Arab women textile workers is the lack of organisation and trade union activity, resulting in low levels of awareness about their rights as workers and a high fear factor. In 2008, grassroots activists of Sawt el-Amel's Women's Platform started a campaign among textile workers including the distribution of information brochures inside the factories.

The following two stories are examples of the lives of Arab women working in Israel's textile industry:

Dalal H., 33, from the Galilean village of Deir al-Asad

Dalal became a textile worker at age 14, supporting her family with her monthly income. For the past several years, she has been in and out of work, as one textile factory after the other closed down in the Galilee. With the decreasing demand for manpower on the one hand and a growing number of desperate jobseekers on the other, Dalal learned to make

ends meet – and not to be too demanding herself. The local job office sent her from one textile workshop to the next, often only for several weeks, which were then declared as an unpaid training period. Another employer told her and her colleagues that he would call them in case they were needed in the factory, and they should wait at home for his call. After weeks of waiting, they had lost both their monthly wages and the allowances from the job office, as they did not report to their case managers.

Dalal is a woman of high principles and quite aware of what her rights are, even if she has never heard about labour law and social security regulations. Therefore, a flyer from the Women's Platform caught her attention, and she decided to attend one of Sawt el-Amel's information events in the village, where for the first time in her long work life she learned about her rights as a worker.

She immediately realised that for her two things counted: one is to seek compensation for past violations of her individual rights, and the other is to talk to her colleagues and friends and to encourage them to be more assertive of their rights, individually and as a group, in the Women's Platform.

Today, Dalal is one of the most active organisers in Sawt el-Amel's Women's Platform, campaigning among her colleagues from the textile factories and in her home village. Dalal's own case is currently pending in labour court. Dalal had never been involved in any public activities before, and when asked why she decided to join Sawt el-Amel, she usually replies: "Fear is our [Arab women workers] worst enemy, and only together, we can overcome this enemy. With the Women's Platform, I feel safe."

Zahra A., 55, from Nazareth

Ms. A. worked as a seamstress for more than 30 years. She is not married, and her income supports herself and her parents. In March 2008, she lost her job at the US Textile Services company in Upper Nazareth, the Jewish town overlooking Nazareth, which is the largest Arab population centre in Israel. The factory was closed down, and the employees were dismissed without severance pay and other social benefits, such as holiday and overtime pay or pension insurance.

Then, Zahra A. contacted Sawt el-Amel with a profound feeling of injustice. After investigating the case, Sawt el-Amel's lawyers prepared a claim of 26,000 shekels (USD 7,500; EUR 5,500) on her behalf, an amount that equals unpaid holidays and the severance pay and pension insurance she is entitled to according to her salary and years at the work place.

In November 2008, the labour court will decide on her case. In the meantime, 15 more women, who used to work in the same factory, have already contacted Sawt el-Amel with similar claims. So, if Zahra wins her case, many more women workers are likely to assert their social security rights.

The Women's Platform activists are well aware that knowing and exercising one's rights as a worker does not bring the textile factories back to the Galilee. But it does bring dignity to those who are still working in the factories and self-confidence to start making demands from employers and politicians – and the prospect that one day they will join forces with the workers from the QIZs.

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