

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Minimum Wage Boost in Palestine Big First Step for Workers

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Mohammad Badri, Executive Committee and General Secretariat, PGFTU

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington D.C.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

We're the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future. Like workers everywhere, workers in Palestine want a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, but many people in Palestine, as around the world, are paid too little to support themselves and their families.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Unions in Palestine are working to change that and they are making significant progress in boosting the minimum wage and pushing lawmakers and recalcitrant employers to establish and honor a wage floor for all workers. Here to tell us more is Mohammad Badri. Mohammad works in the West Bank at the Palestinian cellular firm, Jawwal, where he heads up the union at the company.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

He has been deeply involved in union campaigns to raise the minimum wage and recently was elected to the executive committee and general secretariat of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions or PGFTU. The PGFTU is the umbrella federation for unions across the West Bank and Gaza.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

A couple of notes before we start. Mohammad will refer to the 48th Region, and these are the lands of historic Palestine, which became Israel in 1948. And this episode on the Solidarity Center Podcast will be published in both English and Arabic language versions on this feed. Please enjoy the upcoming English language version of today's show. Now, let's hear from Mohammad.

Mohammad Badri:

I would like us to thank you for this opportunity to this interview, and I would like to thank our partner, the Solidarity Center. My name is Mohammad Badri, I started working at Jawwal in 2000 and I'm still working there. I started my job, I worked at the union for workers at Jawwal company for eight years.

Mohammad Badri:

There are 400 female and male employees there and we have 18 branches in the West Bank and Gaza with a total of 1,000 female and male employees. So in 2012, we started the National Union for Post Communications and ICT, and this included different companies' unions of employees, including Hadara and the General Federation for Palestine Workers.

Mohammad Badri:

They worked and achieved the minimum wage as a demand for the workers. Also, they worked on the extra hours demand. They also worked on the representation of female workers in Jawwal and they've

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reached a percentage or a quota of 35 of the total workers at Jawwal are female, and also, they worked on the implementation of all provisions of the Labor Act for Jawwal.

Mohammad Badri:

In this federation, because of the achievements we have worked on, other unions were encouraged to join. So we have 11 unions joining us in the West Bank. And in Gaza too, we became one national federation that represents all the unions of those working in the different companies in the post telecommunication and ICT sector and we are covering now 4000 female and male workers in Uzbek and Gaza strip.

Mohammad Badri:

In 2021, the General Federation for Workers in Palestine held its sixth congress in Jericho. There were 6,000 female and male participants from the different unions, from the different member unions and from the general secretariat where the election took place and I ran for elections for the executive committee and the general secretariat for the federation.

Mohammad Badri:

I was lucky to be elected and I'm now a member in the general secretariat and the executive committee. And now I'm the head of the legal department for the General Federation for Palestine's Workers. In March 2021, there was a conference for dialogue between the different production entities and those responsible from the unions of Palestine and the workers, the Ministry of Labor and those in charge.

Mohammad Badri:

And the discussion was that this minimum wage that was already reached in 2012, which equals \$400, almost \$450 was not enough for workers to cover or afford their living, it was not good for them to lead a life with dignity, so it needs to be increased. So the struggle in 2021 was to raise or to increase the minimum wage, the monthly minimum wage, which is almost \$450, compared to the minimum wage in the 48th Region, which is \$1,298 per month, where the same living conditions almost prevail and the same prices too.

Mohammad Badri:

But the minimum wage in the Palestinian territories is much slower than that. In a recent study produced by the Palestinian Central Bureau for Statistics in 2020, they reported that the poverty line is at 1,976 shekels, which is almost \$550 per month, and the poverty line is 2,470 shekels, which is almost \$700 per month.

Mohammad Badri:

And compared to the minimum wage that is prevailing since 2012, there is a gap between the minimum wage workers receive and the poverty line. This is why we work to increase it. We called for an increase until it reached at least 2,000 new Israeli shekels, which is almost \$600 per month so that employees or workers can cover or afford their living.

Mohammad Badri:

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And by the end of this dialogue conference, we have reached following achievements with the Ministry of Labor, the government and the employers that attended the conference, and that was a great achievement for the General Federation for Palestine Workers and other national unions.

Mohammad Badri:

These three most important achievements that we managed to get was to increase the minimum wage to 1,880 shekels, which is almost \$750 per month. And also, we connected this achievement with activating labor courts to look through the labor and workers cases that are delayed at the courts.

Mohammad Badri:

And there are bottlenecks at courts that may reach 10 years, so we wanted this to be accelerated and to give the workers the rights. And the third was that there will be penalties for employers who are not committed to the minimum wage that is approved by the end of the dialogue conference.

Mohammad Badri:

And we were very glad with the achievements that we were able to achieve during this conference because we thought that this is only a starting point. \$650 per month was only an achievement that we wanted to build on and to have more efforts that cumulatively will bring about more changes. And this is why by the end of the conference, the government in August 2021 had a resolution to raise or to increase the minimum wage to \$650 per month, and that is effective by January 2022.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Mohammad just described successful efforts by unions to push for increases in the minimum wage so wages reflect the reality of what it costs to buy food, pay rent and send kids to school. But for women in Palestine, the hill is also still pretty steep. Women continue to make significantly less than men and routinely earn below the minimum wage in sectors like healthcare, education, textile and apparel and public services, as Mohammad will tell us after the break.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

The dire situation in Ukraine is front of mind for so many people and I want to encourage you to join us in supporting humanitarian relief efforts there. The International Trade Union Confederation has an emergency fund and is working with Ukrainian partners that are providing support to families who desperately need assistance with food and water and medical supplies. The labor movement has dedicated itself full time in Ukraine to providing emergency assistance to people seeking refuge from the war.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Workers at Nova Poshta formed the union there a few years ago and are working 24/7 to deliver essential supplies like medicine and food. The train conductors are carrying refugees to safety, healthcare workers are caring for the wounded. So many of these tireless heroes are union members and their unions are stepping up and supporting Ukrainians in need. You can find links to these organizations and more about what unions are doing during the Ukraine crisis on the episode notes for this program.

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Mohammad Badri:

And now we are in March 2022, and after the announcement of the increase on the minimum wage in two months, some employers committed and followed this resolution, but others did not. So this is why we at the federation are trying to follow up and to have action against those who are not committed to the resolution and to enforce it on all employers so that it is applicable in all labor facilities or by all employers.

Mohammad Badri:

So we launched a campaign in cooperation with the Solidarity Center to first raise the awareness and educate workers and different working or factories or all different companies and institutions about their rights and that their employer should work on increasing and giving them the new minimum wage that the federation worked on and that the government decided that it should start by January 2022.

Mohammad Badri:

We distributed leaflets brochures, we worked on social media platforms and different pages on Facebook, we worked also with media figures to raise the awareness of the different female and male workers about their rights and that their employers should commit to this resolution and that they should be paid the new minimum wage approved by the government.

Mohammad Badri:

And also, we worked in our different legal departments at the federation in the different governorates and offices where we had appointed legal advisors who would work for free for any female or male worker who would contact them and say that they are not paid the minimum wage. And also, we opened a hotline for complaints from female and male workers to document any violations and to take legal actions against those who are not committing to this resolution.

Mohammad Badri:

Although we are working on all of these levels, but unfortunately it is still very slow because part of the employers are very greedy. They did not commit to this resolution and they don't want to give higher salaries for their workers.

Mohammad Badri:

And this is also made worse because of the slow procedures at the Ministry of Labor through its inspectors and those who are going to the factories or the different premises and they have the judicial capacity because they can act like they have this police capacity where they can impose penalties on the different factories who are not committed to the minimum wage. But unfortunately, they are slow, there are limited actions and it's not working as we want it to be.

Mohammad Badri:

Within our strategic plan for the third quarter of 2022, we want to reach the percentage of 50 percent of employers committed to paying the minimum wage for female and male workers. And unfortunately, we are not sure if that would work or not because the Ministry of Labor and the government did not yet form the labor courts that we were calling for so that they can look through the cases of workers who are not getting paid the new minimum wage.

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Mohammad Badri:

And also, the government did not yet enforce the criminal regulations on the premises or the factories that are not committed to paying the minimum wage as the demands that we agreed with them on. We also have another challenge that is facing us, which is the fear of the female and male workers.

Mohammad Badri:

They are reluctant to report their employers for not committing to paying them the minimum wage. They say that they are afraid of getting fired and that they will lose even the \$350 they are getting now per month and this is why they are not that much encouraged to do so.

Mohammad Badri:

What we are doing is that we are trying to work with them to convince them and to encourage them that they would complain because otherwise we cannot work. If there are not complaints made, if female and male workers do not raise their voice and we receive their complaints, we cannot act and there will be no action to put an end for this violation.

Mohammad Badri:

I would like to highlight that women and female workers are suffering more than the male workers because they are working in certain sectors like services, kindergarten and others where they are paid even one-third of the previous minimum wage, which is almost \$280 per month. They are also reluctant to report this and they are suffering more than any other sector of the workers.

Mohammad Badri:

Other major reason why our female and male workers suffer in Palestine is that we don't have the Social Security Act or law and that the president froze the draft law in 2018, 2019. If that law was enacted or enforced, then those who are now unemployed or are suffering from all of these difficulties, not having a job, they could have been secured or at least have this type of security during these hard times.

Mohammad Badri:

And this is why we are now calling in the federation for more efforts to endorse the social security law so that it's not only for the payment of their retirement, also it is to provide them with the life, with their dignity and also to provide them with their, if there are health benefits, different benefits that the law would ensure.

Mohammad Badri:

And just to inform you that those who worked against the Social Security Law or Act in Palestine and that was public are the employers because they did not want to pay more and to increase the minimum wage, because also they did not want to pay the end of services for their workers, and also because they don't want to disclose information related to the salaries of their female and male workers.

Mohammad Badri:

We at the federation also are working now on amending the Labor Act No. 7 of 2000. That means this law was not amended or revisited since 22 years, which is a very long time. It was not updated, there were so many provisions that are missing and needs to be added, especially taking into consideration

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the new norm after corona, which is, for example, working remotely or from home that is being used by some employers to decrease the salaries of the workers. And this is why we need to revisit this Labor Act and to take all of these points into consideration in the new amended version.

Mohammad Badri:

We will keep struggling and working at the federation and we will not give up the labor rights and we will protect the rights of our workers. We will not give up because even though the circumstances are hard and we have also the financial crisis, which makes things even worse in Palestine, but we will keep working until we achieve what we are planning to.

Mohammad Badri:

In Palestine, the political solution is actually tied or connected to the financial solution. But that doesn't mean that we will accept employers to take advantage of our workers and not to pay them their salaries and that they use them for their own purposes. We want to have this clear that we will stand by the workers against employers until they get their rights.

Mohammad Badri:

And also, we appreciate our partnership with all of our international partners, especially the Solidarity Center, for their different types of support that they have provided in terms of the minimum wage campaign, the media team, the different workshops, education and raising awareness of our female and male workers and we look forward for more cooperation and more interventions together so that we can benefit more of our male and female workers.

Mohammad Badri:

Working in a union is actually voluntary work. I believe in this type of work because I believe in the principles of democracy, labor rights and also helping and supporting people, especially standing with those who are suffering from injustice or unjust treatment from their employers and also to bring back rights to their holders.

Mohammad Badri:

All of the different experiences around the world also showed that workers, female and male workers, are contributing and laying the foundations of any state. This is why I believe that the union work is the way to all of those people's efforts combined to contribute to building the state

Shawna Bader-Blau:

In January 2022, Palestinians got a minimum wage increase, but their unions are not stopping there. Too many people are still excluded from these higher wages, among them women, young people and informal workers. For years, many Palestinian workers were paid less than poverty level wages, like so many workers around the world.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Unions in Palestine have an especially high hurdle to ensure workers are paid a decent wage, because getting a minimum wage agreement with the Palestinian Authority is only the first step. Mohammed

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describes a tedious, time consuming process that involves connecting with individual employers, many of whom are hostile, to ensure workers are paid the new wage.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Workers' fear of losing their jobs or being punished by their employers if they speak out about injustices—like not receiving the pay they are owed—is real in Palestine and in workplaces worldwide. As Mohammed showed us, unions are the best way to fix this power imbalance. And of course, Palestinian workers face more than just government bureaucracy or unscrupulous employers.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

For decades, Palestinians have lived under occupation and the economy has been battered by politics, conflict and corruption. And yet through it all, there's at least one fact that is universally true: Working people everywhere, regardless of country or circumstance, should be paid wages that enable them to live with dignity, to support their families and to take part in their communities.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I've visited all the great cities of the West Bank—Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jenin. Through their unions and across all that land, workers in Palestine are standing up to the odds, standing up for decent wages and a decent life they deserve, and we are so proud to stand with them.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thank you, brother Mohammed Badri, for bringing to light all the good work happening in Palestine and for showing how unions are the voice of workers advocating for fair wages and social protections like unemployment compensation.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau, thanks for listening.