

Husni Salih al-Khuffash, *Hawl Tarikh al-Haraka al-Umaliya al-Filastiniya*. Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organisation Research Centre, 1973 (pp. 62-66). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.¹

The Establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Workers

Following the call from Cairo for Palestinian workers to unite, efforts at unification began. Obstacles stand in the way of all popular unification projects, especially those aimed at workers' unity, and this was no exception. People taking the path of unity must be patient, committed and persistent in order to overcome difficulties, endure hardships, and ensure the success of their endeavour.

This opinion can be considered a general principle, especially in developing countries or countries under colonial influence. Yet the obstacles and hardships multiplied in the case of the Palestinian people in general, and Palestinian workers in particular, as a result of their separation and the oppression they face under the laws of the Arab countries where they live. Therefore the establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Workers wasn't as easy as some might imagine. Rather, it faced many difficulties, and Cairo played a key supportive role.

The Founder of the Union Flees to Cairo

Cairo was for thousands of years, and still is, a beacon for science and knowledge in the Arab World and the world at large. It was, and still is, a focal point for Arab struggle and its leaders. The Arab Nation's positive or negative fate depends on the Egyptian people.

Accordingly, the glorious 23 July revolution of 1952 directly affected Arab and African countries. Especially when the revolution managed to eradicate a reactionary, oppressive, feudal regime and replace it with socialist, unionist and democratic rule.

Cairo and the Egyptian people became an impregnable fortress of the Arab liberation movement, and a cornerstone of the socialist tide sweeping the region. Arab workers naturally recognised the importance and necessity of Arab unity, the ultimate goal of the Arab masses and the most effective tool

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for fulfilling Arab aspirations to a dignified life. It was important that Arab workers take the initiative to achieve unification as a symbol of their nation's unity, and to lead the national struggle. Cairo was chosen to host the headquarters of the resulting International Federation of Arab Trade Unions (IFATU), which would evolve into a bulwark of trade union freedoms and a vital centre for Arab struggle. It thus came as no surprise that the General Union of Palestinian Workers was inaugurated at the General Secretariat of the IFATU.

The Story of the General Union of Palestinian Workers is as follows:

On 28 May 1957, Palestinian trade unionist Husni Saleh al-Khuffash came to Damascus as a political refugee from Jordan. He fled Jordan in the aftermath of 28 April 1957, when the CIA led a successful coup against the Jordanian national government. On 31 December 1962, the separatist government in Syria forced al-Khuffash to leave Damascus for Cairo. There, like hundreds of other free Arabs displaced by political circumstance, he was met with honour and reassurance. Four months after settling in Cairo, on 20 May 1962, he sent a letter as a trade unionist to the Secretary General of IFATU Mohammad Asa'ad Rajeh. In this letter, he explained the need for an experienced Palestinian worker, capable of explaining the Palestinian cause and expressing the aspirations of Palestinian workers, to join the IFATU's ranks and activities. He also requested that a representative of Palestinian workers be included in the General Secretariat.

After a long discussion with Asa'ad Rajeh about the possibility of organising Palestinian workers and establishing a union for them, Husni Saleh alluded to his trade union background and his vision for the highly connected Palestinian and Arab causes. Mr. Asa'ad Rajeh agreed to his proposal and promised to place all the General Secretariat's powers at the service of the Palestinian cause.

On 25 May 1962 the "Workers of Palestine Unite" statement was published and signed by the General Committee for Palestinian Workers.

Naji al-Koni joined Husni Saleh in publishing a weekly newsletter under the banner of the General Committee for the Palestinian Workers. This newsletter was disseminated to hundreds of Palestinian workers and representatives, especially in Gaza Strip and Arab countries where communities of Palestinian workers resided. The newsletter called on workers to organise and struggle to liberate Palestine, exposed all imperialist reactionary manoeuvres in the

region, and sincerely expressed Palestinian workers and people's aspirations to returning to their homes and commitment to the goals of the Arab Nation.

In addition to the above, the newsletter had the following permanent sections:

- a- News from the occupied territories
- b- Exposing racist Israeli policies, such as discrimination and prejudice, as well as Israel's role as a military base for global imperialism gravely threatening Arab and African liberation movements
- c- Updates on various Arab trade unions' activities.

Saleh and al-Koni published the newsletter alone for several months. Hussein al-Husseini subsequently joined them, followed by Rawhi al-Zamer.

The editorial board then consisted of four members, who noticed that many Arab brothers did not clearly understand the Palestinian cause. They also noticed that wide segments of the Arab masses, in most Arab countries, did not realise the full dimension of the Zionist threat occupying the land of Palestine. The editorial board set out to explain the Palestinian cause in all possible ways.

On the 24 July 1962, the committee took the opportunity to send Husni Saleh and Naji al-Koni to participate in a cultural seminar for Arab workers organised by IFATU in Cairo. Saleh and al-Koni were to give daily lectures that explained the roots of the Palestinian problem and exposed the Zionist imperialist plan, Western greed for the Arab World's resources, the Palestinian armed resistance, and the role of Arab reactionary forces in implementing the partition plan in a manner that was worse than what the United Nations had decided on.

On the 27 October 1962, the Secretary General of the IFATU issued a decision that put Husni Saleh in charge of publishing *Arab Workers*. Articles in the IFATU newspaper began to highlight the Palestinian cause.

Establishing the Gaza Branch

Based on the belief that a political resistance organisation should have an independent Palestinian personality and be built on the strong foundation of the land of Palestine, and since the Gaza Strip was the only part of Palestine that enjoyed a local administration with a Palestinian character, the people working to establish the General Union of Palestinian Workers made it their goal to organise workers in Gaza Strip into syndicates. This was in order to make the Strip as the main center and the headquarters of the General Union.

In order to achieve this goal the General Secretariat of IFATU dispatched Husni Saleh to Gaza on the 3rd of August 1963 to examine the conditions of the workers and the possibility of organizing them. Previously in Cairo I met Mr. Qusai A'badleh who was a young intellectual activist and also a magistrate in Gaza. Since I didn't know anyone in Gaza at that time I went to his house seeking his advice.

He kindly gave me important information that helped me in my movements and communications. I submitted a reliable report. I spent 6 days in Gaza Strip. In those days I made contact with workers, farmers and several free reliable intellectuals such Dr. Haydar Abd el-Shafi, Fayez Abu Rahmeh, a lawyer, Said Felfel, Ahmed al-Astal, a lawyer and others.

I came out with these conclusions:

- 1- There is an exploitive capitalist class that controls Gaza Strip economically and socially.
- 2- In Gaza Strip there is no recognition of workers rights and their rights to organise. Workers are treated like workers used to be treated in the 18th century.
- 3- The workers are afraid of the oppression of the businessmen and some administrators cooperating with the businessmen. This fear prevents them from trying to organise.
- 4- I found communities of workers suitable to be the foundations a healthy trade union. Such communities can be relied on to be a main center for the General Union of Palestinian Workers.

These communities are:

- 1- Drivers, they are estimated to be 5,000.
- 2- Trade, construction and other related trades workers, they are estimated to be 10,000.
- 3- Agriculture workers, they are estimated to be 10,000
- 4- UNRWA workers, they are estimated to be 3,000
- 5- Workers in the International Emergency Force's camp, they are estimated to be 7,000.
- 6- Workers in metal industries.

There are also small worker communities such workers in soda water, textile and mechanics factories as well as retailers and hotels. They are estimated to be 1,000 workers. I'm convinced that we need to fight on two fronts: convincing the administration and the Legislative Council to pass legislation for work and workers; and contacting the workers to convince them to

organise. For this end I submitted a report of my study of the Strip's general conditions and the workers specific conditions to Mr. Mohammed Asa'ad Rajeh. I asked for his help in removing the administrative obstacles that stand in the way of workers organisation. I made repeated visits to Gaza, expanding my contacts with workers especially with Abd el-Rahman Darbeih who was one of the most enthusiastic people for establishing a trade union.

I wrote several letters to the eternal leader the President of the United Arab Republic Gamal Abdel Nasser and to Mr Kamal el-Din Refa'at, the minister of labor at that time, calling on them in the name of Gaza's workers to ask the Egyptian Military Governor of Gaza to agree to pass legislation for work and workers.

In that period the committee succeeded in organizing several Palestinian workers in the United Arab Republic especially in Cairo and Helwan. The committee now had a workers base. To facilitate organizing the workers in Gaza and in the other Arab countries I decided in 1963 to announce the establishment a general union for the Palestinian workers and publish its constitution. The constitution included the goals of the union. The General Secretariat of the General Union of Palestinian Workers applied for membership in the IFTAU.

The Establishment of the Branch in Lebanon

Determination had to win and the march had to advance. From the beginning there has been contact with a big number of trade unionists, workers and Palestinian political figures through leaflets. One of the most prominent figures contacted was Ahmad al-Yamani, who was a veteran trade unionist from the early Palestinian trade union movement in the early 1940s. He was among the cadres who organised public sector workers in Palestine in a trade union. He became the director of Yafa Branch after the 1946 split. I knew him as a trade union activist taking many stands on many occasions. I remember in late 1950 after the trade union activities increased in the West and East Banks; Ahmed at the that time was a principal of one of the schools in Nahr al-Bard Refugee Camp in Tripoli, Lebanon. At that time we used to write each other every once in a while. I sent a letter asking him if he was ready to work in the trade union movement and to contribute with his brothers to rebuild it. He agreed immediately and came to Nablus. He left his family and children behind him in order to serve his country and its citizens through trade union activity. He continued to work along his brothers the leaders of the labor movement in Nablus for 1 year before he had to travel back to Lebanon.

Once again brother Ahmed answered the call when we invited him to Cairo to study establishing a branch for the General Union of Palestinian workers in Lebanon. He gave his blessing and returned to Lebanon. He quickly managed to organise a branch for the Union there. The branch soon became one of the strong foundations of the General Union of Palestinian Workers.

West Germany Branch

The Union's General Secretariat learned that there was an organised community for Arab workers in West Germany headed by Husni al-Swed. As a result of the importance of the efforts of Arab and Palestinian workers to gain friends inside the anti-Palestinian western camp, especially in West Germany, the General Secretariat was quick to contact them. The Secretariat sent the following letter:

Cairo, 28 July 1963

Dear esteemed brother Husni al-Swed:
Sincere Arab greeting,

Greeting of Palestine that is calling on its sons to liberate it from the occupiers. I send the greeting to you from Cairo to greet you and your Palestinian workers colleagues for your continued struggle and cooperation towards your country's and your own good.

I was lucky to have met one of the Palestinian brothers studying in Germany. He gave me your address and told me about your movement.

We have been working for a while to unify the Palestinian workers to defend their interests and their right to return to their country and to clarify their cause to the entire world. I hope this letter will be the beginning of continuous contact and cooperation between us for the greater good.

God is behind our intentions.

Sincerely yours,
Husni Saleh al-Khuffash
General Chairman of the Committee

Brother Husni al-Swed answered the call and the contact between them and the General Secretariat continued. When the first conference for the General Union for Palestinian workers was held two representatives of the Palestine

workers in West Germany were invited on the basis their organisation became a branch of the General Union. The two Representatives were Fahmi Shatat and Adnan. This is how the West Germany Branch was established.

The Union's Branch in United Arab Republic (U.A.R)

At the same time the committee directed its attention at organizing Palestinian workers in Egypt. Brother Naji al-Koni, with help from Husni Saleh, took the responsibility of contacting the workers directly. Truth to be said Brother Naji al-Koni made tremendous efforts to organise the workers in Egypt. He sacrificed his time and rest and was really devoted in his work for the Union.

He was successful in organizing a considerable number of workers in the following governorates: Cairo, Helwan, Kafr el-Sheikh, Sohag, Qena, Alexandria, al-Buhayrah and Tanta.

When more branches for the Union were established in various Arab countries it became possible to double our efforts to organise the workers in Gaza strip. It also encouraged the workers to be more interested in establishing trade unions for themselves. Brother Abd el-Rahman Drabeih and the lawyer Ahmad al-Astal were the most prominent figures among those who showed interest in establishing trade Unions.

The conference of the Union of Arab Workers in Gaza

The administrative committee updated Asa'ad Rajeh on everything they did and learned. Finally it was decided to hold a workers' conference in Gaza to increase the workers interest in organizing and to support their demands to pass legislation for the workers.

On 28 February 1964 the conference was held and it was named "Palestine Conference". The members of the general secretariat's office of the Union of Palestinian Workers and some workers from Gaza strip made great efforts to ensure the success of the conference. As a result of the countermeasures taken by Palestinian capitalist forces and some administrators as well as the great hostility and the intellectual terrorisation Mohammed Asa'ad Rajeh almost weakened. One of the signs of this weakness that As'ad agreed to one of their requests to bypass Husni Saleh, the Secretary General of the Union of Palestinian Workers, and to introduce a young speaker called Osama Sharab to speak in the name of the Union instead of Husni. Sharab had no relation

what so ever to the Union or the Workers. It was natural that my colleagues and I strongly refused this request.

The conference was attended by representatives of the various Arab and international trade unions such as: a workers' delegation from U.A.R, Sudan, Syria, Aden, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Kuwait, Mr. Dahian Abd el-Aziz representing free Saudi Arabia workers, representatives from Arab immigrants organisations, a delegation from the Arab Workers Association in England comprised of Mohammed al-Fahhal, Naser Qasem Jhesh, a delegation from West German headed by Mohammed Shatat, and from friendly countries such as People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Cyprus, and the African Association.

Movement after the Conference

Holding the conference in Gaza undoubtedly encouraged Palestinian workers to accelerate organizing themselves in Gaza Strip on one hand, and to move into other Arab countries on the other hand. The workers in Gaza started working to form their own trade unions.

Establishing a Branch for the Union in Iraq

On 1 June 1964 the Secretary General Husni Saleh al-Khouffash travelled from Cairo to Baghdad. He paved the way for his travel by calling Darwish Sheha, who was a former Palestinian trade unionist. Darwish Sheha was deputy secretary of the union's Lod branch before 1948. After fleeing Lod he was elected a member of the administrative committee of the branch in Nablus between 1949 and 1950.

He contributed very positively towards serving his displaced brothers. With help from Brother Darwish Sheha, Saleh met with several colleagues who were following the Union and its activities and were ready to work under its banner. Following several meetings with groups and individuals a meeting with all stakeholders was held on 4 June 1964.

After discussing the idea and the Union's journey and everyone's agreement to consider themselves members of the founding committee of the Union's branch they elected a temporary administrative committee for the branch. The temporary committee will work to register the greatest number of Palestinian Workers in Iraq and then hold general elections. Sa'id Ahmad Khalil, Zuheir A'lam al-Din, Abd el-Rahim al-Dele', Sa'id Abd el-Rahman A'bdeen, Sa'id Mohammad Deeb, Mohammad Khamis Mujahed and Mou'ayad Qandilo

won the elections for membership of the branch's administrative body. Darwish didn't nominate himself as he worked as a tailor and employed a few workers. He considered himself an employer not a worker. However, our colleagues decided to elect him as an advisor for the administrative committee.

Establishing Kuwait Branch

On the 7 June 1964, I left Baghdad to Kuwait. I have already contacted Mr. Fayez Feddah who was a Palestinian trade unionist before Nakba. I met him in Cairo and proposed the idea to him and he agreed to take the responsibility of establishing a branch in Kuwait. Unfortunately when I arrived in Kuwait on the 7 June 1964 he didn't manage to recruit a single worker. I started to make extensive contacts and I held several meetings with groups of workers proposing my idea and explaining the goal. I continued to work until I managed to recruit some of the workers who accepted taking the responsibility of establishing the branch.

On the 16 June 1964 I held a meeting with the brothers who agreed to consider themselves members of the branch's founding committee. At the meeting an administrative committee was elected. It included Mr. Fayez Rashid Feddah as Secretary General, brother Yasar al-Karmi Deputy Secretary General and brother Amin Fayez al-Khouffash as Treasurer.

It is worth mentioning that former colleagues such as Othman E'isa and Ibrahim E'layan who refused to take part of the administrative committee attended the meeting. Later I learned that they didn't want to cooperate with Fayez Feddah.

Through the Union's newsletter, which was sent to the Palestinian worker on Failaka Island in Kuwait, the representatives of the union and the representative of the workers, headed by brother Yousef Mahmoud Yousef, met. They managed to organise themselves in an association and expressed their desire to join the Union.

The following is the letter they gave to me:

Dear Secretary General of the General Union of Palestinian Workers:

A true Arab greeting,

We, the Association of Palestinian Workers, Failaka Branch – Kuwait, hope that you approve our membership in the General Union of Palestinian Workers and to consider us an active association towards liberating our occupied country. Here are the names of the administrative committee:

Yousef Mahmoud Yousef – Secretary

Zuhdi Motee' Khattab – Treasurer

Ahmad Abd el-Malek Khalil – Deputy Secretary

Mohammad Fathi al-Basha, Khaled Hussein Abd el-Hafiz and Abd el-Lattif

Mohammad Odeh – Members

Long live Palestine free and Arab, Long live the Union of Palestinian Workers, Long live the Union of Arab Workers.

Signatures

Through these formations the union had bases in the countries where communities of Palestinian workers existed except Syria. The establishment of a branch in Syria came at a later stage and we will address that later.

It was essential for the Union's strength and unity that it enjoys a democratic life. For this democratic life to exist it was essential that the representatives of all the branches meet each other and meet the General Secretariat. In the meeting it would be agreed upon the principles, goals and methods that would govern the path of this organisation and its members. For that the general Secretariat of the General Union of Palestinian Workers took the opportunity of the General Secretariat of the Federation of Arab Workers invitation to the leaders of Arab trade unionists to participate in an educational seminar. I submitted a request dated on 11 July 1964 to Mohammad Asa'ad Rajeh to include 11 members of the Union of Palestinian Workers in this seminar. Six of those 11 were from Arab countries while the other five were from Egypt and Gaza. I explained to Mr. Rajeh the reasons behind this request and their importance:

- 1- Holding a wider meeting for the representative of the various branches in order to elect an executive committee.
- 2- To unify the participants political and cultural visions.

Mr. Rajeh agreed to my request after the number was reduced. Once the rest of colleagues arrives we held several meetings and eventually agreed on the following:

- a- Agreeing on the temporary constitution of the Union
- b- To consider the attendees members of a temporary higher council
- c- Electing an executive committee from the attendees
- d- Electing a Secretary General for the Union
- e- The committee would work to hold a general representative conference as soon as possible.
- f- To consider the General Union of Palestinian Workers a foundation of the various foundations of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and notify the PLO in writing.

Colleague Husni Saleh al-Khouffash was elected as the Union's Secretary General, and the following were elected to the executive committee: Naji al-Koni, Raouhi al-Zamer, Ahmad al-Yamani, Abd el-Rahman Drabeih, Younis al-A'rqaq, Fadl Abu Shahla, Zuheir A'lam al-Din, Khadir al-Barti and Fayez Feddah.

With this formation the union would have passed the stage of establishment. It starts now the difficult stage of beginning. This stage didn't pass without obstacles, dangers and hardships.