Labour rights infringements against Palestinian women workers in Israeli West Bank settlements
A report for Women Working Worldwide
By Sarah Irving, www.sarahirving.net
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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Summary
3. KavLaOved and its work: an interview with Salwa Alinat
4. Case study 1: Mishor Adumim
5. Union membership
6. Trade union work in the West Bank: an interview with Wael Natheef of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions
7. Case study 2: Palestinian workers in the Jordan Valley agricultural settlements
8. Settlements
9. The future of Palestinian labour in the West Bank: an interview with Daoud Hammoudi of the Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign
10. Case study 3: sacked women from the Royalife bedding factory, Barkan Industrial settlement
11. Options for action and the boycott context

1. Introduction

This report gives details of a series of interviews carried out with Palestinian women workers from several different Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The interviews were carried out in April 2009 with the help of KavLaOved, an Israeli labour rights organisation which works with Palestinian, migrant and marginalised Israeli workers in both Palestine and Israel. Salwa Alinat, co-ordinator of KavLaOved's activity with Palestinian workers employed in Israeli settlements, arranged and translated the meetings. It also includes interviews with Salwa herself, with a trade union official from the Jericho branch of the PGFTU, which deals with many workers in both industrial and agricultural settlements, and with a campaigner for Palestinian rights who has also been researching settlement labour.

Salwa Alinat stated that she was extremely pleased with the opportunity presented by my and Women Working Worldwide's interest. Although groups of women workers have united to sue or campaign against their employers, it has been rare for Palestinian women workers from the settlements to organise, and they are under-represented in trade unions and in the workshops and meetings which KavLaOved organises, mainly as a result of cultural restrictions on women attending mixed events. KavLaOved is keen to work with women workers as women, and Salwa took the opportunity to use these meetings as a way of demonstrating to the women both that people internationally were interested in them and their situations, and that KavLaOved would support them in organising themselves in a gender-specific way.

The position of Palestinian women workers in Israeli settlements is extremely complex. The Israeli military occupation of the West Bank means that Palestinian lives are dominated by the actions, often unpredictable, of the Israeli Defence Force and associated security agencies, and politically active people often face additional restrictions. Palestinian workers in settlements are subject to security reviews by the Israeli authorities, which means that many people – especially men – are excluded from the work because a high proportion of Palestinian males have 'security records.' The
power differential between the women workers and their Israeli employers is not just, therefore, one of employer/employee, but has additional political aspects.

In addition, attitudes to women working outside the home or neighbourhoods varies in Palestinian society. While women from cities may find it reasonably easy to be employed away from home, several of the women interviewed, especially those from rural villages, noted that it was not regarded as respectable for them. The fact that they are working in settlements exacerbates this social disapproval, and this impacted on their social status and marriageability. Although the structure of Palestinian society means that there are often strong family ties and a high level of economic support for family members with no incomes, individual circumstances do lead to some families falling through the social gaps, and a number of the women interviewed here belong in this category.

*The names of all the women workers interviewed have been changed for their own protection, and the photographs accompanying this report do not show their faces. The one exception to this is Fatmeh, one of the Mishor Adumim workers, who is open about her campaigning activities and has been featured in the film 'Strangers in their Own Land,' available to download via www.kavlaoved.org.il.*

2. Summary

According to the women workers interviewed for this report, and to the KavLaOved and trade union activists also interviewed, male and female Palestinian workers in Israeli settlements in the West Bank routinely face a range of labour rights infringements. These include

− routine payment of wages well below the Israeli minimum wage, which a 2007 Israeli Supreme Court decision stated should apply in settlement industries;
− employment via local middlemen who subtract a significant percentage of pay before it is passed on to the workers;
− failure to provide proper documentation of work, such as contracts and payslips;
− failure to provide secure employment;
− casual hiring and firing of workers, including sackings for union activity and for requesting legally-established labour rights;
− poor health and safety conditions including inadequate protection from machinery and from industrial and agricultural chemicals, long periods standing or sitting in uncomfortable conditions and a lack of air conditioning and heating;
− punishment for workers not coming into work due to sickness, including being laid off for days or weeks without pay;
− an absence of social benefits including sick pay, payment of work-related medical bills, maternity leave or paid holidays, including for major Islamic holidays;
− fear of sexual harassment, although cultural concerns prevented this issue being explored in depth;
− threatening behaviour from employers and middlemen towards workers involved in campaigning for their rights.

3. KavLaOved and its work: an interview with Salwa Alinat

KavLaOved (Workers' Hotline) was established in 1991, mainly to support Palestinian labourers working inside Israel prior to the Oslo peace accords. Its work expanded to include migrant workers (mainly Thai, Filipino and Eastern European) working inside Israel and now also Israeli workers on limited incomes, especially in the security sector. As well as working with the specific needs of
each group, it tries to take an overall perspective on the ways in which workers are exploited in the Israeli economy, and the way in which such exploitation has shifted between groups.

Salwa Alinat has co-ordinated KavLaOved's work with Palestinians working inside Israeli settlements since 2005. There are an estimated 35,000 Palestinian workers working in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, many of them working without proper permits or security permissions. The latter means that the true number is unclear. The industries involved include agriculture (field labour and export processing), food and textile manufacturing, industrial recycling of waste metals, chemicals and used domestic gas canisters, manufacture of gas masks and industrial cleaning. The main areas where KavLaOved works are Tulkarm, Mishor Adumim, Barkan and Jenin, where there are industrial zones, and the Jordan Valley agricultural area.

There are also no gender disaggregated statistics on settlement workers, but it is known that women form a significant proportion of settlement workers and that they work in a range of manufacturing roles, including sewing and food manufacture, in industrial services such as large-scale laundries, and in domestic and industrial cleaning.

“According to the Israeli High Court from 2007, Palestinian workers should get the same rights as Israeli workers,” says Alinat. “Labour law in the Israeli settlements is Israeli labour law. The equality principle. But in the field we see that this principle is not applied.” Minimum wages are rarely paid, she says, and social benefits such as health insurance and social security are rarely applied to Palestinian workers. “Israeli companies come to the settlements and the industrial zones in order to have cheap labour. And so they use it. There is no enforcement. The Israeli authorities do nothing. From 1967 to 2006 no inspectors came to the settlements and checked what is going on there. So it is like a jungle; the employers decide whatever they want there and they can pay workers according to what they like.”

“In March 2009 an Israeli newspaper published a report about Palestinian children working in the Jordan Valley,” describes Alinat. “We helped them with this. In this report – it is very interesting - the employers didn't deny that they pay less than the minimum wage, they justify that by saying that in the West Bank, they pay less so we will pay less. The journalists interviewed a lot of employers and all of them said ok, we break the law, we don't care, we compare our payment to what is paid in the West Bank. So this shows you how it is, there is no shame, no enforcement, they can do what they want and they are proud of that. This is in general. In 2008 we sent a letter to the [Israeli] Ministry of Labour with the names of 40 factories which don't pay the minimum wage and don't give payslips, and until now we've heard nothing.” Alinat also states that in 2007 and 2008 KavLaOved persuaded the Ministry of Labour to conduct inspections in 3 factories, but again no reports have been forthcoming.

Other widespread problems identified by Alinat include the use of Palestinian middlemen by the Israeli employers. These take a cut of the already low wages and may charge up to a third of workers' salaries for transport and other services. Workers are often unaware of the terms of their employment, who their actual legal employer is, and what rate of pay the middleman is actually getting for their services. Although the actual employer is legally responsible for their workers' conditions, when confronted in court many simply pass the blame on to these middlemen. Workers are often not given payslips with their wages, and there are, says Alinat, cases of employers giving fake payslips which indicate that workers have been properly compensated for both standard and overtime hours, when in fact they may not be paid at all for overtime, or not at special rates. The length of the working day may also not be fixed, with workers arriving at 6 or 7am and working up to 12 or 13 hour days without knowing when they will be allowed to go home. And health & safety standards also go unregulated, with workers handling agricultural pesticides and herbicides, components for gas masks, industrial recycling solvents and industrial cleaning chemicals often
operating without gloves, face masks or other protection.

KavLaOved's first step when working in a community is to hold public meetings where Alinat or other members of her team, Arafat Amro, in Jenin, Raed Abu Yousef in Hebron, and Mahmoud Tamer in Qalqiliya area, start by explaining to workers their legal rights. When meetings started in 2005, attendance was minimal, but as the project's reputation has grown they now attract 60 or more workers. Often, say Alinat, “when I tell them about the minimum wage, wow, they are so angry... I listen, listen, let them get the anger out. Part of our work is to understand the dynamic of what is going on inside the work, what is the relationship between the middleman and the workers and the employer. Especially in agriculture, the workers have no direct contact with the employer, they don't know his name, they see him as 'above,' and they don't speak the language, so they have no contact. It takes a lot of time for them to understand that this employer who is very distant is responsible for their conditions.” KavLaOved also encourages workers to record their working hours and real wages, building up a body of evidence as to the nature of infringements.

If the workers choose, KavLaOved will then support them through methods such as writing letters to the employers. These, according to Alinat, are met in various ways, ranging from ignoring them, or paying out small extra sums to try and reduce workers' concerns, to hiring lawyers and responding with counter-accusations and even threatening and firing workers, either en masse or selected individuals taken as scapegoats. In one Mishor Adumim factory other methods – including trying to establish a representative committee to negotiate with the factory owners – were also used. In some cases KavLaOved then supports the workers in suing their employers, either after being fired or while they are still in position. In one case, a woodwork factory in Barkan industrial zone, a group of 35 workers succeeded in having many of their grievances addressed and their rate of pay increased via a court case, whilst also keeping their jobs. But the lack of legal enforcement from the Ministry of Labour means that court actions are generally a last resort, and in the Mishor Adumin case it took the workers 2 years of other approaches to decide that this action was appropriate.

“In another success, depending on your perspective, we have Soda Club,” says Salwa Alinat. “It's a Swedish international and they have a factory here in Mishor Adumim. Last November a Swedish paper interviewed me about Palestinian workers in their factory, about how they don't get minimum wages and the bad conditions. The employer came to our Tel Aviv office and promised to pay them according to the law, and until now he stays with this, they get payslips and their salaries went up 150% and now that has created competition, because other workers want to go there.” Before this, according to Alinat, “he said me, I am proud that I have many cultures in my factory, Russian, Sudanese refugees, Palestinians. And I said, ok, you have many cultures, but you don't pay them the same, you pay Russian workers according to the law, and Africans and Palestinians less.”

KavLaOved's work is also complicated by the situation in the West Bank. Israeli citizens are forbidden by Israeli law to enter 'area A,' the areas technically controlled by the Palestinian authority, which covers most of the Palestinian urban areas of the West Bank. Alinat had a pass for these zones for her first 6 months of work, but attempts to renew it have been denied. This means that at some checkpoints she has to take 'alternative' travel routes to avoid questioning or, potentially, arrest. As an Israeli organisation, though, KavLaOved is able to offer services unavailable to Palestinian NGOS and unions, which is one of the reasons the PGFTU has been keen on their partnership. Unlike Palestinian groups, KavLaOved can help instigate court cases and contact the Israeli Ministry of Labour and other Israeli government bodies. “The problem is not always with the courts or the governments, though” says Alinat. “It's with human rights and development organisations which come and take photos and make reports, and then nothing happens for the population. And they've created old ideas amongst some people, that we will come with money, so we have to start by saying we don't come with money, we don't have a magic wand, and we're not a government organisation so we can't force things to happen. Sometimes then people
leave, but enough stay...”

4. Case Study One: Mishor Adumim

Suheir, Jamilah and Maha all work or worked in the Familia sweet factory in Mishor Adumim settlement, part of the Ma'ale Adumim settlement bloc which extends east from Jerusalem and is a major component of the wider division of the Palestinian West Bank into two sections between which it is extremely and increasingly difficult for many Palestinians to pass. These women were interviewed at the regional offices of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions in Jericho. The women reported that the sweets they made were for the Israeli domestic market and also for export to Jordan, Turkey and the USA.

Suheir, from Jericho, is 37 years old and worked in settlements for 10 years, with 4 years at the Familia factory. She has also worked in agricultural settlements in the nearby Jordan Valley area. “I used to live with my father and mother but they died in 2008. For some months I lived alone and my brothers were married and I lived alone, and somebody engaged me and I decided to have a rest and decided to leave my job in Ma'ale Adumim because I suffered there, I worked hard but I didn't get a good salary, I had a conversation with the boss and he said that you have no rights because you leave the work because of your marriage, and she said no it's not because of my marriage it's because I didn't get a good salary.”

Suheir reports that when she started working at Familia she was paid 65 shekels (just over £10) per day, rising in increments to 100 shekels per day by the time she left. The normal working day extended from 6 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the evening, 5 days a week.

Suheir reports that men in the factory were paid more than women, but that wages were rarely discussed:

“When I sued the factory I explained to others that my case in the court will help them to get more salary and they start to talk and we had a meeting in my home and I invited other workers, my brother also was involved, and they start to discuss the issue of salaries and some of them said they get 110 shekels, 112 shekels, 120, 150 – this is the salaries of men, and they also started to argue that there is some new workers that work 6, 7 months that they get 120 shekels and why they get more than the others, that have more time in the factory?”

Suheir also reports that the workers are supposed to be paid on the 9th of every month but that the manager often takes an extra month to pay so that workers who leave may be compelled to take the factory to court to get their final month's pay.

“I asked the factory to pay me my rights but they said that I should get nothing and I came to the union and explained my case, also other workers from the industrial zone advised me to sue the employer, factories like Soda Club they advised me to sue because they didn't give me my rights.”

One of the other problems reported by Suheir and her colleagues was being given jobs perceived as below their skill level. Women who worked on the production machinery were apparently regularly ordered to clean the factory after they finished their allocated work, which they accepted. But, Suheir reports:

“Last September the manager asked me to leave my work and go to clean, and another worker came and worked on my machine, and then the manager said I should work as a cleaner and I refused because I work by machine for a long time, and he said if you don't work as a cleaner you will stop working, and my brother got involved because he learnt here [at the union] and from KavLaOved about the law. He said I should ask the manager, if he want to fire me, to give me a letter stopping my work, and when I told the manager this he brought me back to work.”

Although Suheir described her role when she left the factory as 'supervising,' this meant checking the sweets themselves for quality. No women, she reported, had the opportunity for promotion or career advancement; the only Palestinian perceived as senior in any way was Darwish, the Palestinian male intermediate boss, who stood between them and Mark, the Israeli manager.
The workers reported that relations between themselves, Darwish and Mark were often difficult. “I didn't complain to Mark,” says Suheir, “because at my factory I have to complain to the Palestinian boss, and I was afraid if I didn't talk directly to him I will get fired.”

She also described how the Palestinian intermediate boss used a 'divide and rule' regime in his relations with workers, being polite to some and allocating them easier work, and speaking rudely to others and sending them to clean or do heavier work.

Suheir reported that she is the only woman who has demanded her legal pay and conditions from the factory, but was told that because the factory perceived her to be leaving to get married she had no rights. Their response was also, she says, culturally inappropriate: “When I told the factory I wanted my rights and I wanted to get married, the manager advised me, if you want to get your rights you should get married and stay at the factory and stay until you get pregnant, and then you can sue the factory. The others said why should he advise me like that? It's too personal.”

**Jamilah** still works at the Familia factory.

“There are other factories that give rights, but here [at Familia] we don't get any rights. I get 65 shekels a day and I've worked there 5 complete years and I came to the factory for the first time 12 years ago, I work and leave and work and leave for 12 years.”

Jamilah also reports that, although they are not permitted to take holidays at busy times even if they fall during Islamic holidays or the Ramadan fast, they are compelled to take unpaid leave during Passover, when some Israeli industries close down for the religious festival and sometimes for vacations following it.

“Two weeks ago [in March 2009, prior to Passover starting on April 8th] the boss, the Palestinian middle boss, he made us stay at home because we started to ask about holidays. He wanted to send us on vacation because of Pesach. We started to ask who will pay us for this time at home, so he brings other female workers from Azariyya, from other villages, in order to continue to work. Every year we have a vacation, in March or April, unpaid. Most of the year we are working very hard, and there is a lot of work so the manager doesn't let us take holidays.”

Jamilah reports that it is “very easy” for management to fire workers at Familia, and that health and safety conditions at the factory are poor:

“We don't have protective clothes or air-conditioning, but if the Israeli Ministry of Health comes to the factory the factory is very clean, we have uniforms. Also we have a problem with the WC – we are 11 women to one WC and there is no small room for resting or anything like that, we feel like we are in jail, and we feel like we should wait for each other, because only one person can go to the WC at a time. The men have better conditions, they have 3 WCs, they have also possibility to have showers, they have a big room to rest in.

“If we are sick at home we are not paid for sickness, and if a worker gets sick and didn't come to work she gets punished, if there is a lot of work to do. If there is not a lot of work the manager doesn't care. Ten days ago a female worker had an accident to her finger and nobody gave her any care, she went to a pharmacy, they just sent her to a pharmacy, and after she finished work she went to a doctor and he gave her medical attention.”

**Maha** also still works at Familia, and reports that she suffers from problems with her hands from repetitively wrapping the sweets. She has worked at the factory for seven years and has been on the same salary, 120 shekels a day, for the past four years.

She also reports that since some workers have started to demand their legal rights in pay and conditions, factory management have started raising fears that the factory could be under threat: “The managers told one of the workers that the factory might be closed, the workers are afraid that they will lose their work, but at the same time he wants to build another 2 units for other products, so on one side he wants to widen his factory and on the other side to close it, so it's like he's telling stories to make us nervous.”

**Fatmeh** worked in a range of agricultural and industrial settlements from the age of 15 and was one
of the leaders of a group of women who sued their employers at Mishor Adumim. She worked at this employer, Barbur Laundry, until 2006. Although the court case for payment against Barbur for payment of illegal wages and poor conditions was successful, the owner of the factory, which is still operating, registered as bankrupt and a follow-up court case is ongoing to establish that he can and should pay the workers their compensation. The case has now taken 3 years and is far from over. Fatmeh now works for a Palestinian employer in Jericho.

“The conditions in general were very bad, bad treatment, very hard work and also the salaries are not good, and we worked 8 hours standing. I started working there in 1995 and all the time I asked for more salary. In 2003 [during the height of the Second Intifada uprising against Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza] we had difficult work because we should clean all the stuff from the army, from hospitals. We had to work for 8 hours and more, also in the prayer times we cannot rest because we have to work. If somebody is late to work there is always punishment like waiting 2 hours at the door outside the factory, and sometimes also punishment like being sent home for 2 weeks without pay, and the salary was very low – up to 2800 shekels a month for 12 or 13 hours per day, 7 days a week, with no paid break.”

“The male workers were on higher salaries. They get higher salaries, they work less hours, they work 8 hours and get good salaries but we work 13, 14 hours and get 200, 300 more only. 2500 shekels for 8 hours and we work 7 days, 13, 14 hours and get 2800 shekels.”

The workers sued the factory because after a series of appeals and strikes they still weren't paid legal or adequate salaries. Fatmeh herself was fired during the strike after women workers were told to do the heavy work done by men and she, a slight woman little over 5 feet in height, refused.

“And also I demanded a day off, that Saturday should be our day off, all the time I talk with workers about that and the employer punished me, told me I am a troublemaker and didn't let me work for 3 or 4 days without pay.”

Fatmeh also reports that safety conditions in the laundry were inadequate. “I worked on a machine that was very close to the cleaning machine with the chlorine so I'm sensitive in my eyes, even until now, specially my nose and eyes, I'm very sensitive because of this chemical material. I left in May 2006, after the strike, but until now I'm still sensitive from the chemicals. I saw a doctor and he said yes, you are sensitive now in your nose and eyes. I also have problems with my legs because I worked long days and I told the manager and he didn't do anything.”

Although Fatmeh no longer works at Barbur, she remains involved in labour activism and reports that “I know that now the salaries are still very bad and management took from them the papers of ours [explaining their rights] and they don't have magnetic cards and they get the salaries in installments, in pieces.”

5. Union membership

Although Fatmeh is very aware of labour rights and the legal situation and remains involved in campaigning, union membership is not important for her, although uniquely amongst the women interviewed in Jericho she is a union member. None of the women interviewed in Jiftlik or Salfit were union members, and they were often surprised or confused at being asked about this.

Fatmeh originally heard about workers' rights at a workshop in her village in the early 1990s, when she was 17, run by Wael Natheef who is now General Secretary of the PGFTU in Jericho. Other women heard about their rights in KavLaOved workshops, meetings run by trade unions or from other workers who had taken legal action against their employers, for example at Soda Club.

But union membership is for Palestinians primarily a political declaration rather than a measure to protect one's position as a worker. The various trade unions tend to be associated with political parties such as Fatah or the PFLP. During the Second Intifada the main service provided by unions was medical care for people wounded by Israeli forces, rather than support for workers. “When we
started our work in this project more workers came and got involved in labour rights but they didn't decide yet if they want to join the union, and on the other side the union didn't do a lot to encourage workers to join,” says Salwa Alinat. “It's not the same as in Europe or Israel where you pay the union and get services. It's an open project, anyone can be a member of the union, but anyone living here can come and get support as a worker – they don't have to be a member.” So women like Suheir have benefited from union advice and support but have not chosen to join the union itself.

Salma – see below - lives close to the union offices in Jericho and is very interested in labour rights, having sued her employers at Moshav Tomer. She regularly visits the PGFTU offices and has helped family members who continue to work in the settlements with information about their rights. She has an interest in other local politics – but she still hasn't joined the union itself.

As Salwa Alinat explains the situation, trade unions in Palestine have largely failed to engage and attract the trust of workers because of the political, rather than worker support, nature of their work. KavLaOved has worked with the largest trade union, the PGFTU, which is associated with Fatah, since around 1994. As Alinat sees it, KavLaOved's work has given some of the workers it has engaged with a new sense of ownership of the union and made it a more accessible source of help for them, and has also helped to change the culture within the union. In partnership with KavLaOved, according to Alinat, PGFTU officials have started to go and meet with agricultural workers in the Jordan Valley settlements, rather than waiting for workers to come to them.

European Union projects led by Belgium and Denmark are also, she says, working on increasing democracy and accountability within Palestinian unions, although she is not sceptical about the impact that these external interventions will have.

Daoud Hammoudi of the StopTheWall campaign is even more sceptical about Palestinian trade union. “The unions here are bad,” he says bluntly. “Since 2005 we've run labour rights awareness campaigns but they are not very active in these. Somehow we managed to get them to join us in the boycott campaigns, but again they are still not really active. The [Palestinian] unions and NGOs in '48 [within the state of Israel] are more active than here.”

In Israel, the main trade union body is the Histadrut. Salwa Alinat – in common with other Israeli labour organisations such as the Workers Advice Centre – is critical of the Histadrut, saying that “they don't support weak workers. Because they are paid a proportion of the salaries of workers inside Israel, they are not interested in workers on low salaries because the amounts are so small, they are interested in strong workers like the electricity industry. Inside the settlements they are not interested at all – firstly because Palestinian workers are not Israeli citizens, and secondly because they don't pay Histadrut fees. In one of our first meetings the workers said, we should go to the Histadrut, so we wrote to them and got this reply – they are not Israeli citizens, and they don't pay fees, we are not interested.”

6. Trade Union work in the West Bank: an interview with Wael Natheef

Wael Natheef is the General Secretary of the Jericho branch of the PGFTU and member of the union's Executive Committee. The branch was established in 1993 after the Oslo accords, although some of its activists, including Natheef, operated as underground unionists prior to this, when the West Bank was still under direct Israeli rule and all meetings or political activities had to obtain permission from the Israeli authorities. All of the union officials heading the sections in the Jericho branch are male, but the only paid worker in the branch is the secretary, who is female.

Internationally, the PGFTU is affiliated to the ITUC.
The PGFTU's Jericho branch, which covers the Jordan Valley area, has 8 divisions, the largest being the agricultural sector. It has 4,000 members in the various sectors. Despite this, union resources are small, as only 50% of the membership can afford to pay the 25 shekels a year (currently around £4.20) asked for in fees.

Unemployment in the Jericho area is, according to Natheef, around 15%, and within employment incomes are low. The restrictions on access and egress to and from Jericho means that its main industries – tourism and agriculture – have been hit hard. Tourists are discouraged by the difficulty of accessing the city and by the knowledge that they may face questioning from the Israeli authorities when they leave the country if it is obvious that they have visited the West Bank. Although the Israeli government cites considerable percentage increases in tourism to Jericho from 2008, the actual numbers involved are just a few hundred people per year.\(^1\) Agriculture faces significant problems from the checkpoints around the city too, as produce may be held up beyond the point where it is suitable for consumption.

As a result of these restrictions, an increasing number of Jericho and Jordan Valley residents have taken jobs in the Israeli agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley and in the industrial settlement at Mishor Adumim.

The agricultural work is mainly for export and is seasonal, focused on the grape harvest in May-June and the date harvest in September-November. Around 4-6,000 workers from the area work on agricultural settlements year round, with this number rising to over 20,000 during the harvest periods. During the harvests especially, child labour is common, rising to up to 7-10% of workers, and starting with children as young as 10. Children, according to Natheef, are mainly used to pick onions and watermelons in the fields. Accounts of how the children are paid vary: Daoud Hammoudi at Stop the Wall thinks they are paid the same rates as adults, while Wael Natheef says that some are paid around half of the adult rate, 20-30 shekels (around £3.50-£5.00) per day. Women workers represent around 40-50% of the agricultural workforce, Natheef estimates.

One of the main challenges for the union is the subcontractor system, which means that workers are used for short periods in many different places – in the fields and in packing houses – and who their employer is remains ambiguous to them. Many agricultural employees don't know the names of their Israeli employers and receive no contracts or other paperwork, and there is no opportunity to undertake collective bargaining. The union also faces the problem that its activists are barred from the settlements and often from entering Israel itself, and therefore cannot support workers in court cases or by contacting the Israeli authorities – hence the value of working with KavLaOved as an Israeli organisation. Union activities with workers now, therefore, tend to focus on education of workers through meetings and workshops, translating Israeli legal documents into Arabic and informing workers about employers' responsibilities which are often neglected, such as offering proper training in the use of dangerous machinery and chemicals.

7. Case Study Two: Palestinian women workers in the Jordan Valley agricultural settlements

Salma is 45 and comes from Duyuk village in the Jericho area, and was interviewed at the Jericho PGFTU offices alongside the women who worked at Mishor Adumim. She has been married for 7 years but has no children. She started working at 16 years of age, mainly on settlement farms but also in industrial settlements and in a Palestinian textile factory in Jericho city. She had to work because her father was elderly and could not support the family and her brothers were younger than her and also unable to earn a living. Her brothers often prevented her

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from working in industrial settlements because of the social stigma attached to them.
Her main settlement job was at Moshav Tomer in the Jordan Valley, where one of her sisters has
also worked seasonally for 8 years. Unlike the industrial settlements, many married women
continue to work in agricultural picking and processing.
“I got 3,000 shekels a month and we worked from 6am until 7.30 in the evening, I was very tired,
sometimes we got into work before 6am.” Men and women were paid the same rates, Salma
reports, and the majority of the workers in the packing house were female. Experienced workers
who had been at the Moshav for 5 or 7 years were, she reported, given no pay rises and there were
no opportunities for promotion.
Salma's job at Moshav Tomer was weighing, cleaning and packing herbs for international export,
she believes to Europe. Moshav Tomer is also listed on US organic certification documentation as
an accredited organic packing operation. Salma did not know the name of the actual company
employing her, only the first names of Israeli managers such as Eitan and Moshe. This, according to
Salwa Alinat, is a common situation amongst agricultural workers.
Salma reports that the herb processing work was physically demanding and caused health problems.
“On the Moshav all the time we stand, they didn't allow us to sit, we have problems with the legs
and with the back. We also have a problem with high temperatures in the greenhouse. With work
accidents we couldn't complain. Once when we had a lot of work they came and made us sign that
we gave up any rights if we are involved in accidents, they are not responsible. All the time we
work with knives, have many problems with cuts on the fingers, a lot of workers have cuts on the
fingers. And I know somebody who was in an accident in the Moshav, and I know him more than
20 years, he cannot work but he gets nothing, and until now he goes to hospital.
“In most of the factories married women are not accepted, they want girls, because the married
woman she works limited hours, girls can stay whatever, can work extra hours. And also,
physically, married women cannot work like unmarried women, she cannot sit so long,” says
Salma. “But it's not only in the settlements there are bad conditions, also in the sewing factory there
are bad conditions, very long days and cheap salaries, paying salaries late and also there was no air-
conditioning in the factory. Sometimes Palestinian employers are worse than Jewish employers.”
Salma was amongst a number of Palestinian women who sued the Moshav employer:
“We had information from Salwa that we should get 20 shekels per hour but we get 5 shekels per
hour. Its a lot of difference between the minimum wage and what we get, and sometimes we finish
work at the evening, and after I came back home I have to take care of my father and mother, clean
our home and give them their medicine, sometimes my mother was very sick and she has a lot of
time in the hospital. After I and other women sued the employer, they now give every worker 1000
shekels compensation after a year of work.
Salma reports that she is now looking for work inside Jericho. “As an unmarried woman it's ok, I
can work and move,” she explains, “but when you're married it's difficult to work and society
doesn't accept married women who are working.”

In Jiftlik village in the Jordan Valley, seven women who work at the Jordan Plains date packing
factory agreed to be interviewed as a group. Aged between 20 and 45, they were all married and
several had young children with them.
The factory is “jointly owned by the Jordan Plains Regional Council and Agricultural Society, and
the farming community within the region.” After the interviews we passed the plant on the way
back to Jericho, but our Palestinian driver was too frightened of being observed by the Israeli
authorities to allow us to stop and photograph the factory.
The women reported a normal working day of 6am to 4pm with a half-hour breakfast break and two
more 15 minute breaks. The standard pay appeared to be 90 shekels per day, although some women
were said to get less. Some male workers were said to be paid more, but this was partly attributed to

2 Agrior Ltd ‘Certified Organic Operations’ list, undated, downloaded from www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?
dDocName=STELPRDC5068233 in April 2009
the fact that they had further to travel so this was possibly in the nature of a travel subsidy. Most workers did not appear to have discussed rates of pay amongst themselves and there was disagreement on many of the details of who was paid what.

The women were aware that the products they packed were for export but were not sure to which countries.

The women from the Jordan Plains factory reported tensions between themselves and other workers, including Russian women, who were said to represent perhaps 10% of the workforce. Work was extremely seasonal, with only a few hours available throughout most of the year but a very intense period of work during the date harvesting season from September to November, when many of the women reported working for seven days a week and sleeping for as little as four hours per night once they had fulfilled their domestic responsibilities after work.

One of the main grievances expressed by the women was the lack of respect with which they are treated. According to Tahirah, “this last year there's a lot of non-respect to us, very bad treatment, they're all the time shouting at us and we are not used to this treatment, before it wasn't the same. There is all the time pressure on us to work harder. It's our job to sort dates on a moving conveyor belt, and there are a limited number to sort everything and they are all the time shouting at us and saying that if we don't work as we want we could easily replace you.

“We don't know what is the source of the difference, maybe it's the effects of the political situation, we don't know the direct reason, but many of the bosses are Russian and they treat us very badly and they want to bring Arab Israeli citizens to replace us, it's a kind of pressure on us to work harder. I asked one of them why he treats us very bad and he said now I'm responsible, I'm boss, so I should treat you like this, but I am not convinced, because he was a boss before and he wasn't like this. There are more and more Russian workers so maybe this is the reason of this bad treatment.”

The women also reported poor working conditions, including having to stand for up to 3 hours at a time. They also said that there was no place for them to eat, so they had to sit outside under the trees, whilst the Russian workers were given their own rest room. Palestinian women reported that they had no access to cold drinking water, and that they had to work in close proximity to large, noisy machines which they feared would affect their hearing in the long run.

The women also reported being unhappy with toilet arrangements. The facilities were said to be a long walk away from some of the sites where they worked, but despite fearing harassment they were only allowed to go one at a time to save on time lost.

One woman, Abia, reported on an accident she experienced at work:

“I was pregnant... a box fell on me, on my hip, I was four months pregnant, and I was a week at home and the factory didn't pay me [for her time off sick], but the Palestinian subcontractor paid me this week because he was afraid he would pay more if I reported about it.”

Women reported that if they were pregnant during the date harvest season they had to carry on working because there was no maternity allowance or other social benefits and their families could not survive without the income from this period. Abia herself reported working in the factory right up to the birth of one of her children. “No women can afford to stay at home,” she commented. “We are lucky if we are pregnant in February.” Many of the women's husbands work in the agricultural and other sectors within Israel, if they can get security passes to do so, but often cannot earn enough to support their families throughout the year.

Three of the seven women all reported having chronic back problems, although none knew if these were attributable to their work.

All of the factory managers at Jordan Plains were said to be male, as were the two main Palestinian subcontractors who directly organised the women to come to work. Some female Israeli supervisors were brought in during the packing season. The women also complained that some of the Russian workers behaved as if they were supervisors, even though they were not formally in higher positions.

8. Settlements
For those not familiar with the status of Israeli settlements, it is difficult to give a 'neutral' description of them. The following – from Wikipedia, and edited for context - comes reasonably close:

“Israeli settlements are communities inhabited by Israelis in territory that was captured during the 1967 Six-Day War. Such settlements currently exist in the West Bank, which is partially under Israeli military administration and partially under the control of the Palestinian National Authority. International bodies, including the United Nations Security Council, the International Court of Justice, the European Union, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and some legal scholars have characterized the settlements as a violation of international law. Israel, the Anti-Defamation League, and other legal scholars disagree with this assessment. Israeli policies toward these settlements have ranged from active promotion to removal by force, and their continued existence and expansion since the 1970s is one of the most contentious issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

There are a range of different types of settlement, ranging from small religious communities to large towns of tens of thousands of people. There are also settlements established for primarily economic, rather than residential, purposes, including the two industrial settlements discussed in this report, Barkan and Mishor Adumim. In the Jordan Valley area, which extends the Israeli-controlled border between the West Bank and Jordan, extensive agricultural settlements have also been established which are both economic and residential in nature and are similar to the Moshavim and Kibbutzim to be found within Israel. Significant grants and tax relief are available to companies locating factories in the settlements.4

According to the Palestinian Authority, settlements, their associated Israeli-only walled roads and security zones around them dominate up to 40% of the land area of the West Bank, which is supposed to be the area which would form the core of any proposed Palestinian state. Israeli human rights organisations state that there was a 60% increase in the rate of settlement expansion in 2008.

9. The future of Palestinian labour in the West Bank: an interview with Daoud Hammoudi of the Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (www.stopthewall.org)

StopTheWall's Daoud Hammoudi, based in Ramallah, has been researching the future and wider context for Palestinian labour in West Bank settlements, as well as working with workers currently employed in the settlements.

“In reality what you have here is selective ethnic cleansing,” he claims. “If you are educated to a high degree you are not wanted here, if you are not educated, if you are low skilled ... they want to keep a small minority of low skilled Palestinian labour in a specific way for their benefit.” World Bank and other international proposals for the economic viability of the West Bank and a future Palestinian state based there are, Hammoudi alleges, based on plans for between 9 and 12 special industrial zones situated along the border. This in itself is an ambiguous term, since the 'borders' of Palestine and Israel in this respect have never been defined and is still a subject of conflict, but the Israeli state defines many of its settlements – even those deep inside the West Bank – as 'border' territory, and has defined the 12 major industrial areas it currently has in settlements as being on the border. There are, says Hammoudi, 17 industrial areas in various settlements, 12 of them categorised as 'major.'

There are also 3 joint industrial zone projects: Jenin, funded by the German government; Hebron, funded by the World Bank and the Turkish government, and Jericho, funded by the Japanese government. In Jenin some site planning has been undertaken but nothing has yet been built. The

Jericho project has been the subject of a feasibility study which should have been published in November 2008. In Hebron there is disagreement with the Israeli authorities over the site so no work has commenced.

New settlement industrial zones are also growing, says Hammoudi. At Tulkarm, some work has begun. The French government is also planning to fund a new tourist industries industrial zone near Bethlehem.

World Bank plans for the West Bank are based, says Hammoudi, on the use of Palestinians as a cheap, mobile labour force. “They say that Palestinian salaries are too high, too expensive,” he says “They say they need to reduce this expense, compare it to Jordan and Egypt and so on.”

These plans aim to employ 50,000 Palestinians in the first stage – the currently existing settlements – and to add 40,000 to this in the planned developments, growing to half a million in 25 years time.

The legal situation for these workers remain ambiguous, with the intention apparently that the ‘border’ situation of the zones will allow employers to evade Israeli labour and environmental regulations, which should be “negotiated.” Currently, according to Hammoudi, Israeli proposals are that Jordanian labour laws from 1956 should apply, “a very disgusting and dumb law.” As with many of the Palestinians currently working in Israeli settlements, it is also being proposed that many should be allocated only tourist visas, so that again they are not protected by labour legislation and have no benefits such as health insurance or maternity leave.

The proposed salaries for workers in the new settlements are, says Hammoudi, around 1500 shekels per month, against an Israeli minimum wage which works out at about 4000 shekels per month for an average working week, and an Israeli average for Jewish labour of around 7000 shekels per month.

And, Hammoudi points out, “all the technology and raw materials will come from Israel and all the exports will have to go via Israel.”

Japanese-funded plans for the Jericho area also, says Hammoudi, include a large agroindustrial area in the Jordan Valley, currently a major horticulture area for Israeli settlement producers, including many organic farms. The joint agroindustrial zone is projected to employ up to 20,000 Palestinians in high season, but with all raw materials and water supplied by Israeli companies. The produce will be handed directly to Israeli export companies currently working in the area, such as Agrexco, who will set the prices and quantities required. The Jordan Valley area used to produce around 25% of the West Bank's vegetables but, after a process of settlement expansion, was cut off militarily in 2004 so that movement of Palestinian produce from the area to the rest of the West Bank is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Produce from the new agroindustrial zone will also, says Hammoudi, be exclusively for export and forbidden to West Bank and Gazan markets, despite increasing health problems in these areas related to a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The other main problem which Hammoudi identifies in the plans for the agroindustrial zone is that “they are talking about this zone as family-based business, so it's father, mother and children working. The Jordan Valley as a district has the highest child labour rate in the West Bank and Gaza. More than Gaza, even. 42% of these are working in agricultural sectors and this number is rising. In 2004 it was 3.1 of the labour force. In 2007 it became 4.6%. So the number is increasing because of what Israel is doing there, and because it's a closed military zone by the Israeli army it's very difficult to chase either Israeli or Palestinian companies for using child labour. Which is why the Japanese government ignored all the open lands in the West Bank and went to the middle of a closed military zone for this project.”

And, he says, this is a gendered problem. “It's likely that 70% of child labour in the Jordan Valley is female. For 40 years, Palestinians have not been allowed to build houses or schools or new roads or electricity or water systems in the Jordan Valley. So the poverty is high, but also it's a long distance to the nearest school – down to Jericho or up to Tubas, even. So it's expensive to send children to schools, so what they are doing is sending girls to the farms and boys to the school. You know the mentality here – if someone has a chance for an education it will be the boy.”

“Last year the Women Against the Wall Campaign started building,” says Hammoudi. “Women-only committees, working in different areas on different issues such as the boycott, some
demonstrations. In the Jordan Valley, it's very complicated work, because if you go to any family they will tell you ok, what's the alternative? In 2007 we launched a big campaign about school construction and we received the first permit to build a school in 40 years. This is a women's school in the Jordan Valley. It started as a tent and then as a traditional mud building.”

And at Bethlehem, a French government funded project was signed by Sarkozy in a visit in 2008. It will, says Hammoudi, be “an industrial zone along the border where Palestinian professionals in crafts and manufacturing will go and become cheap labour for Israeli tourist products.” The usual market for Palestinian craft products in Bethlehem – direct visitors either staying in Bethlehem itself or visiting from Jerusalem – will be removed by Bethlehem's enclosure by the Separation Wall and walled settler roads and by anticipated security measures that will make it extremely difficult for tourists to visit Bethlehem except through Israeli tour companies.

Progress on plans for the industrial zones has, says Hammoudi, been slowed by recent events, including the war in Gaza and the election of a right-wing government in Israel.

10. Case Study Three: sacked women from the Royalife bedding factory, Barkan Industrial Settlement

These four women were interviewed at home in Kufr al-Deik village in the Salfit governorate in the centre of the northern half of the West Bank. They all worked at the Royalife bedding factory in Barkan until August/September 2008, when they were fired in response to an ongoing court case against their employer's pay and conditions.

Royalife is an Israeli company which makes bed linen, bedcovers etc for export to a number of countries including the USA, Spain, Germany and Turkey.

Several of the women from Kufr al-Deik described extremely poor home situations.

− Umm Raed, 50, stated that her husband has not worked for 24 years due to health problems; she worked at Royalife from 2005 until she was fired. These may, she believes, have been brought on by magic and for 10 years the family had to live in a ruined house in the hills. They have seven children and at one time received a poverty grant of 1,000 shekels from an international relief organisation. Despite this situation, her two daughters who work at Barkan are thinking of giving up their jobs because they fear that working in a settlement will stop them marrying.

− Umm Ahmad, probably in her 60s, unwilling to give her age but appearing substantially older than Umm Raed, also has a husband who is unable to work due to health problems. Prior to Barkan she worked in the agricultural sector in Israel and she was at Royalife for four years.

− Dalal, in her 20s, reported that her father was unable to work and that she was one of 10 children, with one brother at university. She had worked at Royalife for five years.

− Kalila, 35, had worked from the age of 16, including in various settlements. Her mother's medical care is expensive and her brother has been denied a security pass so is unable to work in the settlements so Kalila is the only one bringing a cash income into the family.

Dalal reports that when she started working at the factory she was paid 6 shekels an hour (against an Israeli minimum wage of 20) and that although she repeatedly asked for a raise, this was always refused. The rest of the women confirm that the normal rates of pay at Royalife were between six and eight shekels per hour for women, with men receiving nine to twelve shekels an hour. They report receiving no benefits such as paid holiday, sick pay or maternity pay, and they were given no payslips. Despite this, the women said that Royalife is regarded by some Barkan workers as a desirable factory to work in, offering better pay and conditions than others. Umm Ahmad reports that on one occasion she made a mistake in her work and was made to stay behind and repair the work without pay. On occasions when workers failed to come to work due to sickness, the manager made them spend their first day back at work sitting in a room in the factory, unpaid.
The normal working day was said to be 6.30am to 5pm, up to seven days a week when large orders needed to be filled, and although extra hours were paid for this was at the standard rate, not with any overtime bonus.

The women all reported poor health and safety standards. One of Umm Raed's daughters suffered a broken leg in an accident in the factory in 2006. She and the manager were carrying a large roll of nylon which he dropped, and it fell on her legs. According to Umm Raed, no ambulance was called and her daughter was sent to a local hospital in Salfit by private car. For three months the manager refused to acknowledge the accident and did not pay for any of the medical treatment or special transport she needed. Umm Raed reports that during the 4 months after the accident she urged other workers to support her daughter but the management threatened her and her other daughter who worked there. Eventually the injured woman was given 3,000 shekels compensation in return for signing a piece of paper to say that she had been given all her legal rights. According to Umm Raed, more than two years later her daughter still has pain in her legs.

Generally, the women reported that cuts to the fingers were common because the job involved cutting fabric and thread, that the machines they used had no proper protective guards and they were not aware if there was any first aid equipment in the factory. The factory was reported to have no heating and to be bitter cold in winter, and to have no air conditioning so it was simply left open in summer, allowing animals such as mice to get in. The job was also said to involve standing for long periods of time, so that some women had problems with their legs. On one occasion the women report that they had to drink dirty water for a week, because a fault meant that there was no clean water supply to the factory.

As with the women working in other settlements, the Royalife women were also unhappy about the manner in which they were treated in the factory, reporting that managers frequently screamed and shouted at them, tried to push them to work harder all the time, and had considerable powers to fire them on the spot or to force them to stay at home, unpaid, for days or weeks.

These four women are some of a larger group who in summer 2008 tried to take action to improve conditions in the factory. They started by writing letters to the factory and then went on strike. They were all fired for this, and in August 2008 KavLaOved succeeded in getting a court order demanding that they were reinstated. This was achieved and some workers dropped their court action. Those who refused to do so were fired again and reinstated, and Salwa reports that around 30 female workers and 3 male ones have remained in the collective action. Umm Raed, Umm Ahmad, Dalal and Kalila were all fired yet again and have given up obtaining court orders to be reinstated. They say that the manager has repeatedly offered them large sums – between 5,000 and 20,000 shekels - in settlement of the case but they are holding out for a formal ruling on their rights. Some of the workers involved have been visited by the Palestinian subcontractor, who has allegedly used a combination of bribes and threats to try and persuade families to make their wives or daughters give up the case. Umm Raed reports that at times her children have had to go 3 days without proper food and that they are now desperate but no work is available in the village. New workers, not involved in the court case, are said to have been employed at Royalife on rates of up to 13 shekels per hour, on the condition that they sign documents saying that all their legal rights have been respected (this sum is still only 2/3 of the minimum wage to which they are legally entitled).

In March 2009, the fired workers, including Kalila, tried to open a sewing factory of their own in the village but the subcontractor threatened to burn the building down. Dalal also reported that he has threatened her and people with whom she has sought employment in her village. According to Salwa Alinat “The subcontractor is from Hares village and he is well-known as a collaborator with Israeli security and he has high status, so he is taking the thing very personally, that these female workers are 'breaking his word.' And at other factories where he is a subcontractor now they are
demanding their rights so he is fighting very aggressively.”

Kalila and Umm Raed both reported that they faced criticism from wider Palestinian society for ‘supporting’ the settlements by working in them, and that they were criticised both for working outside the village – even though they couldn't find employment within it – and for working in settlement. “Women who work inside settlements didn't get married easily,” Umm Raed noted. It was also felt that this might be the reason that their case had received little attention from the Palestinian or wider Arab media. Despite this, Salwa Alinat sees the struggle at Royalife as a kind of wider success, in that the women there have led the court case. “They came from different villages around the area, which have very sensitive social relations,” says Alinat. “Women should be very silent, and suddenly women start to sue, it's like a revolution. Beside the labour case there is another level of social violation, because men can easily get up, but until now a group of women continue and it's big factory.”

The women reported that all the managers at the factory were male and there was no opportunity for advancement. The one positive note they struck was that one of the main managers did respect their cultural position as women, forbidding men to harass or insult them as women – male managers, including this one, were still said to shout at and threaten them as workers, but unlike women workers at Jiftlik they said they felt safe from sexual harassment. Umm Raed stated that on an occasion when a male worker did 'insult' her in this way the manager did intervene. The women attributed this to the fact that the manager was a Jew of Iraqi origin who, they felt, was familiar with their cultural values.

11. Options for action and the boycott context

Cases such as the Royalife women present opportunities for action such as letter writing, while labour conditions for workers in agricultural exports coming into the UK from the Jordan Valley area is a subject on which the major supermarkets could be engaged.

However, the campaigning situation on workers' rights in the settlements is complicated by the ongoing blanket boycott call made by Palestinian Civil Society in 2005. This calls on international consumers and businesses, as well as academic and cultural institutions, to boycott Israel on broad human rights grounds, including as a means to pressurise the Israeli government into ceasing its expansion of and support for the settlements built on Palestinian land. The Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign for example, where Daoud Hammoudi works, is an active member of the boycott call campaign and believes that consumers shouldn't be buying Israeli produce at all.

Salwa Alinat insists that KavLaOved takes a classic workers' rights approach to the subject, only calling for a boycott if this is what the workers themselves directly request as a last resort. It should also be emphasised that it is an Israeli organisation and, although there are radical Israeli groups which support the boycott call, KavLaOved works throughout the Israeli labour system. As Alinat puts it: “At KavLaOved we are a labour organisation, we talk about equality. We cannot provide the workers with new places to work if they decide not to work in the settlements, and we know they work in settlements because they have no choice. They should be getting paid like the Israeli workers, they should have the salaries, good treatment and heath and safety. So if the employers pay them according to the law maybe they will choose to leave the settlements. But now we have a reality, the numbers of Palestinian workers in the settlements is going up, because Israel now is closed to most of them. So this is the reality, you should as an employer pay the minimum wage.”