



Democracy & Workers' Rights Center - Palestine

مركز الديمقراطية وحقوق العاملين - فلسطين

WORKERS' RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

The effects of Israeli measures after October 7, 2023, on Palestinian workers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and findings of DWRC's rapid assessment

1. General situation

In the aftermath of October 7, 2023, the occupied West Bank has been subjected to a level of violence and restrictions to the movement of people and goods by the Israeli occupying power that had not been reached since the worst months of the second Intifada. In addition to the constant deadly Israeli army raids, hundreds of additional barriers and checkpoints, destruction of infrastructure and houses by the Israeli army, acts of violence by Israeli settlers with the Israeli army's protection and active support have increased exponentially. Since 7 October 2023 and as of 19 March 2024, UN OCHA recorded "658 Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians that resulted in Palestinian casualties (59 incidents), damage to Palestinian-owned property (524 incidents), or both casualties and damage to property (75 incidents). Almost two-thirds of these incidents took place between October and December 2023"¹.

Commuting to and from work when residing in another locality has become a nightmare for many, with delays that can take hours due to closure of roads, checkpoints and barriers. In August 2023, UN OCHA reported documenting "49 checkpoints constantly staffed by Israeli forces or private security companies, 139 occasionally staffed checkpoints, 304 roadblocks, earth-mounds and road gates, and 73 earth walls, road barriers and trenches. Additionally, 80 obstacles, including 28 constantly staffed checkpoints, segregate part of the Israeli-controlled area of Hebron (H2) from the remainder of the city; many checkpoints are fortified with metal detectors, surveillance cameras and face recognition technology, and with facilities for detention and interrogation. Combined, there are 645 physical obstacles, an increase of about 8% compared with the 593 obstacles recorded in the previous OCHA closure survey in January-February 2020."². Now, many of these checkpoints and gates are regularly closed, especially at main junctions and when people are commuting, and more have been added. In some areas, armed Israeli soldiers are everywhere, and moving around is time-consuming and always risky for Palestinians, because of the Israeli soldiers and armed settlers, who sometimes close down roads and attack Palestinians, their vehicles and their property.

"I work for a non-governmental organization in Ramallah and live in a village nearby. I have to pass through the checkpoints every day since October 7, 2023. The checkpoint

¹ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-142>

² https://www.ochaopt.org/2023-movement?_gl=1*b34qb4*_ga*MTczNjEzOTE0Ny4xNjkzNDg4MDk1*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTcxMDkzMzcyMS4yMC4wLjE3MTA5MzMjEuNjAuMC4w

blocking direct access to my village was closed with an iron gate, and the road was diverted to another road, which is Rawabi Road. Iron gates were also placed at the checkpoint to which we were diverted. People from all the villages north of Ramallah, such as Beit Rima, Al-Nabi Saleh, Sinjil, and other villages, have to pass through this checkpoint, as well as those coming from the Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, and Tubas governorates. The Israeli army deliberately closed this checkpoint in the morning for two hours, and in the evening also for a period of two to three hours, and sometimes a whole day. This has led to me and many of the female workers arriving late to our workplaces. We also suffered from a very bad situation, when we were stopped at the checkpoint. Sometimes, we would be removed from the car and photographed, and this affected us psychologically. The army also deliberately uses dogs, when searching cars.”

Due to the cancellation of most permits to enter Israel after October 7, and additional restrictions on crossings between the rest of the West Bank and Jerusalem, East Jerusalemites have been further isolated from other Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories.

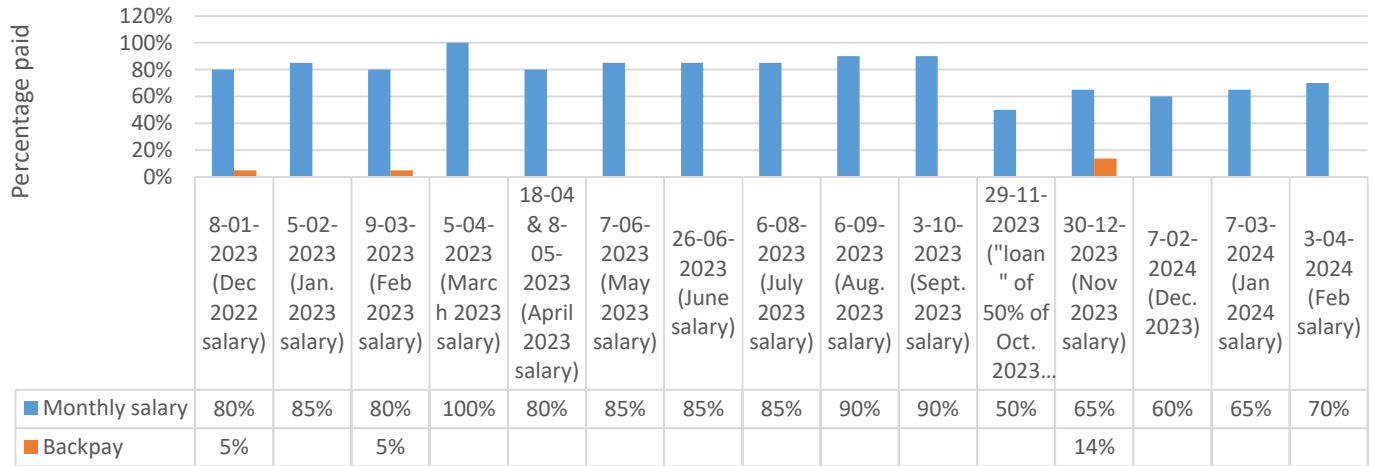
PCBS has estimated that 29% of the total number of establishments in the West Bank have witnessed a decline or stopped their production since the war on Gaza started. This has resulted in loss of jobs and other violations of labor rights for Palestinian private sector workers. In many ways, the overall socio-economic situation is worse than during the Covid-19 sanitary crisis due to the Israeli government's decision to prohibit Palestinians employed in Israel from returning to their workplaces. In the third quarter of 2023, 19.3% of employed persons in the West Bank were working in Israel and Israeli settlements, and only a few thousands have been able to return to their jobs after October 7, 2023, and in very precarious conditions. Their average daily wage used to be 3.5 times higher than the Palestinian daily minimum wage and twice the average daily wage of those employed in Palestinian workplaces in the West Bank. Palestinian workers in Israel & settlements used to work mainly in construction (64.4%), mining, quarrying and manufacturing (13.5%), commerce, restaurants and hotels (11.5%) and agriculture (6.7%)³.

Furthermore, the fiscal deficit crisis faced by the Palestinian Authority due to Israel's refusal to transfer Palestinian tax revenue in full or partially, and accumulated illegal withholding of important amounts, has deepened after October 7, 2023. Concretely, this means that Palestinian governmental employees have faced even higher wage deductions, and more irregular payments. Unpaid salaries over the last 6 months total 290% of monthly wages (see chart below). Due to accumulated arrears from former years, the backpay owed governmental employees has reached about 508.58% of their salary as of 31/03/2024⁴, except for those paid extremely low wages of 2000 shekels or below, who were paid fully most months.

³ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023. Labour Force Survey: (July- September 2023) Round, (Q3/2023). "Press Report Labour Force Survey. Ramallah - Palestine.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=736319958708114&set=a.387410973599016>

Palestinian governmental employees salaries payment schedule & amounts from January 2023 until April 2024 (as per Finance Ministry announcements)



2. Findings of the rapid assessment undertaken by DWRC with working men and women in the West Bank

In order to better understand the socio-economic consequences of Israeli repression and collective punishment measures on workers, DWRC has undertaken a rapid assessment in March 2024 with **150 persons employed in various sectors in the West Bank, 32% of them women, on the situation after October 7, 2023.**

45.3% reported that their work conditions and circumstances have changed after October 7, 2023.

Such changes have included:

- Reduction and/or non-payment of wages and indemnities, irregular payment of wages; a respondent also mentioned the cancelation of the annual raise and refusal to pay indemnities that have accumulated for the past two years
- Reduction of working time: this includes a reduction of working time/hours due to irregular payment of wages (from 8:00 a.m. to 1 p.m.), reduction of working days “we work according to an emergency plan, 3 days out of 5”, “working hours adapted to the current situation” and change of work contract to part-time
- Reduction of work load, production, sales, expenses, work opportunities: “I work as a taxi driver and the work load decreased to less than a quarter [of what it used to be]”; “Not more than 10% of normal work ... Everything new stopped... current work has continued very slowly and sometimes stops totally”; “interruption or sharp reduction of work due to difficulties to move around and roads”; “Due to the security situation, the roads were closed. Some female students were unable to reach the center due to checkpoints. Some female students were absent due to the financial situation, because some of their families were prevented from working in Israel and did not pay the installments. The center’s income stopped. Furthermore, many countries donating to the center have stopped their support because of the situation”.

- Difficulties for employees to reach the workplace, emergency leaves and attendance issues: “The repeated raids on the city of Tulkarem prevent the staff from arriving and leaving on time... and it raises alert levels”;
- Longer working hours / more work load: “Due to the closure of roads, we work longer hours, and it is difficult to move around”; “Sometimes we have to increase working hours to provide services to workers and follow-up with them”; “There is more work, more expenses, but no salary and debts have been accumulating”
- Unemployment, lack of job opportunities: “All permits have been stopped, there is no work currently”; “Decrease in employees due to the low number of students”
- Other changes: work nature, salary and transportation; change of position (from maintenance technician to messenger), change of place of residence; “A state of emergency was put in place to organize work at the hospital in the event of an [Israeli army] incursion”

One respondent reported that the situation was already bad before October 7.

29.3% of respondents have reported that their employer reduced their work days and hours due to the bad financial situation, and 5.3% were forced to take a leave without pay. 12.6% reported that salary benefits were deducted after October 7, 2023, either transportation allowance, health insurance allowance, or provident fund. 12.6% of respondents have been deprived of their annual leave, and 6.6% of other leaves.

Violations of rights related to wages have affected 60% of respondents, and include: partial payment of wages with retaining all rights to the remainder (24%), decrease of wages (13.3%), delays in payment of wages (16%), wages are no longer paid (3.3%).

50.6% have faced restrictions in seeking to reach their workplace or returning home. Most have cited Israeli checkpoints as a major obstacle to movement, as well as closure/blocking of roads and localities, Israeli army incursions into Palestinian localities, lack of means of transportation or higher cost of transportation, and traffic jams caused by the checkpoints or roads closure. Details about such restrictions include: “the main road has been destroyed by the Israeli occupation army, we have to take an alternative road”, “stifling traffic jam at Qalandia checkpoint”, “searches at checkpoints”, “[Israeli army] incursion of my area of residence”.

24.6% reported having been targeted or deliberately attacked by Israeli soldiers. Examples given by respondents were being shot at, being handcuffed, confiscation of property, detention, abuse and searches at checkpoints: “I was injured at the container checkpoint and went to the hospital for treatment. I suffered a laceration in my genitals as a result of the beating”; “I and a number of young men were stopped in a vehicle at a checkpoint between Ramallah and Nablus, searched, and mistreated”; “Our vehicle was stopped in the middle of the public road, we were violently taken out of the vehicle and humiliated, and the vehicle was searched in a destructive manner”; “I was ill-treated and detained in the Kafr Laqif area and repeatedly detained at checkpoints”; “[I was attacked] while heading to work on my agricultural land”, “I was assaulted by settlers”.

10.6% reported being assaulted by Israeli occupation soldiers at work / in their workplace; they reported being beaten (8.3%), arrested, stopped (33.3%), being forced to remain in a painful position (shabeh torture – 12.5%), verbal or physical harassment (8.3%) and other forms of assault (not defined).

12.6% of respondents reported that they have been arrested by the Israeli occupying forces, and subjected to an interrogation on political grounds.

14.4% of respondents have also faced violence from civilians or clients/users. They mostly indicated being subjected to verbal violence, including due to frustration about low quality of services and/or financial difficulties faced by clients/users.

Other issues that respondents reported include **being teargassed inside their workplace** by the Israeli occupying forces (“My workplace is close to a point of contact; we suffer from teargas during confrontations as the interior of the workplace is targeted”), **restrictions to movement and harassment** (“Continuous raids and the difficulty of the road from the workplace to Hebron due to checkpoints, inspections, and rough roads” “Field interrogations, when passing a checkpoint” “Siege and closure are the biggest violation of rights”), restriction to freedom of expression (“All my sites have been deleted”), deprivation of possibility to find work (“Cancellation of permits”), **insecurity and lack of support** (“There is a lack of safety in general due to the [Israeli army] raids, and a lack of appreciation of some colleagues for the plight of those, who are suffering to reach their workplace. The situation has become psychologically, materially and morally bad, and the lack of sufficient personnel is partially to blame.”

Professions most at risk:

Since October 7, 2023, **health sector workers** have been particularly at risk and have also been targeted by Israeli occupying forces in the West Bank. Israeli attacks against Palestinian paramedics, ambulances, medical facilities and personnel have increased exponentially. The World Health Organization has documented 403 attacks on health care in the West Bank, which have affected 48 health facilities and 275 ambulances. It says that 58% of the attacks have occurred in the Tulkarem, Nablus, or Jenin governorates, in the north of the West Bank⁵.

Journalists and media workers have also been repeatedly targeted while on the job to hamper their ability to cover unfolding events and situations, and arrested and detained while working, at checkpoints or from their homes. For instance, in its report for February 2024, MADA reported that the vehicle of a journalist working for Reuters was “hit by two bullets fired by Israeli occupation soldiers, while she was there to cover the occupation forces' storming of the city of Tulkarem at dawn on Thursday, February 1”. They reported about many other incidents of attacks against journalists, detention, beatings and abuse. Among them is the ordeal of the Palestine TV crew on Feb. 19th, 2024. The report mentions that “Occupation soldiers abused Palestine TV crew in Jericho Governorate after they were intercepted by settlers. They

⁵ Impact of Health Attacks in the West Bank, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=808183524683946&set=a.481411510694484>

...tied their hands, blindfolded them, kicked and beat them, and detained them for about nine hours near an army camp on Monday morning”.⁶

3. Consequences of the situation for workers’ rights in the Palestinian labor market

The sharp deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the West Bank due to the measures taken by the Israeli occupying power has had negative effects on employment and respect of labor rights as guaranteed by Palestinian legislation. DWRC’s Legal and Human Rights Protection Unit has monitored a prevalence of the following issues:

- **Termination of services:** Some establishments have resorted to terminating the service of some of their employees, alleging being affected by the economic situation after October 7. We have also learned through the Palestinian Ministry of Labor that many establishments have initiated restructuring procedures due to financial loss, based on article 41 of the law, for this reason. For fear that a large number of workers would be laid off, as happened during the Covid-19 crisis, the Ministry issued internal instructions to labor offices to try to mediate between workers and employers to find other solutions than until we emerge from this crisis. However, cases have been monitored of termination of the work relationship on grounds of losses and difficult economic conditions that befell establishments. The compensations offered to workers in such cases, if any, are not necessarily in accordance with the law, as demonstrated by the case below.

(A.’E) worked for an audit company and was surprised to receive a notification of dismissal for economic reasons. The company did not conduct a restructuration. The employee was offered an end of service compensation from which all days during which she did not work during her entire period of employment of two and a half years were deducted. These absences had not been considered an infraction by the employer at the time, and had not been sanctioned. Furthermore, the company does not have a sanctions by-law approved by the Labor Ministry.

- **Deducting from worker’s annual leaves:** many female and male workers have faced deductions from their paid annual leaves to compensate for the days on which they were unable to reach their workplace due to closures of roads / governorates and without notifying the employee.

We received a complaint from (‘E.J.), who used to work in the Ramallah governorate, while residing in the Jericho governorate. During the events, especially in the first period, the Jericho governorate was subjected to closures by the Israeli occupying forces, and the worker faced difficulties in reaching his workplace. He asked the administration to transfer his work to remote work (electronically), but he received no response to his request and his days of absence were deducted from his annual leave days.

- **Deducting general strikes’ days from workers’ leaves or wages:** many workers have faced deductions of annual leave days or wages due to closure of the establishment on days of general strikes (i.e. strikes decided by political forces as a form of protest and/or for mourning, which can be localized in a city or a governorate, or apply to the entire West Bank, including East Jerusalem). In such situations, workers should not have to bear the financial costs of employers deciding to comply with general strikes days and closing their establishment, since they have no say in the matter. We monitored a

case of a company in the West Bank, which deducts the days of absence due to general strikes and the closure of the establishment from the wages or annual leave days of its employees, on grounds that the employer is not responsible either for general strikes days.

- **Reduction of wages or deduction from wages:** Many employers have resorted to reducing the wages of their employees without consulting them or agreeing with them that this is a temporary solution. One example of the cases we monitored concerns a delivery company in Ramallah. The company's employees were surprised to find out when they received their wages that the company had deducted the equivalent of half of their wages under the pretext of the current situation. The administration did not react to the workers' objections, which led two workers to submit their resignation.
- **Changing terms of work from full to part-time employment:** One of the cases we monitored through meetings with workers and employers concerns a change in the work relationship from full time to part-time employment without initiating any prior procedures, such as restructuring for example, and moreover, without paying attention to the necessity of settling a worker's legal entitlements for his/her previous work before changing the employment terms to part-time. This directly affects the amount of the end-of-service compensation that is calculated based on a worker's last wage.
- **Changing terms and conditions of work:** the issues generated by the situation has led some employers to propose arbitrary changes to terms and conditions of work.

(R.H.), who works for a company in Ramallah, was surprised when the company's management offered her three options that would either change the terms and conditions of her work, or terminate it, pretexting the current situation and closures between the governorates, as she lives in another governorate (despite her commitment to remote online work), which did not affect productivity and the continuation of her work. She was given the choice to either accept to go on an unpaid leave for an unspecified period, or to submit her resignation, or to set a sales minimum (which was not agreed upon) and accept a wage reduction if she was unable to reach it.

Another case monitored by DWRC concerns three employees for a dairy company, who live in Ramallah, but work in another governorate on products' distribution. The company gave them three options: move their place of residence to the governorate, where they work, or submit their resignation, or accept deductions to their leaves or wages for the days they are unable to reach the other governorate. One worker changed his place of residence from Ramallah to Jenin, because he cannot afford to lose any part of his wages; the other two stayed in Ramallah, but are unable to work every day and are thus facing wage deductions.

4. Conclusions

The economic crisis caused by Israeli collective punishment measures and repression in the occupied West Bank is likely to have more profound repercussions on employment and business activities than the Covid-19 pandemic, from which Palestinian businesses were barely recovering. Palestinian workers are exposed to unprecedented levels of violence on their way to and from work and inside workplaces. Commuting from their homes to their places of employment has become a hazardous journey, and many workplaces are not safe either.

Restrictions to mobility, lengthy commuting times and unsafe roads are likely to have a negative effect on women's ability to keep their employment outside of their immediate place of residence, in addition to affecting the operating and marketing capacities of women's businesses and cooperatives. Furthermore, working mothers with younger children are once again affected by the fact that governmental schools only provide in person schooling two to three times a week (three times a week for pupils from grade 1 to 4, and final high school year students), and the remaining days children should follow their classes online. The number of male job seekers has risen exponentially, and this could also lead to a gradual replacement of women workers in several sectors, not solely agriculture, since culturally men continue to be perceived as the primary breadwinners, as well as a more flexible and less costly workforce, and are routinely preferred to women job seekers with similar or higher qualifications. It could also drive wages down due to the sharp imbalance between available job opportunities and job seekers.