

Worker sets himself on fire in Gaza amid strike against mass layoffs

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A laid-off worker set himself on fire Wednesday amid a general strike and protests against the destruction of hundreds of jobs by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN agency tasked with assisting impoverished Palestinian refugees in the Israeli-occupied Gaza and West Bank, as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

In addition to 125 workers who saw their contracts terminated outright, another 800 were reduced from full-time to part-time positions, or transferred to other programs.

UNRWA claimed that the layoffs were made inevitable by Washington's recent massive cut to US funding for the agency. Earlier this year, the Trump administration ordered the suspension of more than half of the annual funding provided by the US to the refugee agency—\$65 million out of \$125 million.

The action was taken, however, after UNRWA announced that the agency's budget deficit had been reduced from \$466 to \$217 million and as the World Bank signaled that it will increase its annual funding for Gaza's and the West Bank's economies from \$55 to \$90 million.

For the workers protesting the layoffs, the destruction of jobs by UNRWA is seen as an arbitrary and reactionary decision that condemns hundreds more families to joblessness and hunger.

The cuts have been ordered under conditions in which the official unemployment rate in the blockaded coastal enclave stands at 56 percent, and destruction of infrastructure by successive Israeli wars and bombings has led to 18 hours of power blackouts on most days during the intense heat of summer.

Nickolay Mladenov, the UN's special coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said in a statement Wednesday that Gaza "is on the verge of a total

economic and social collapse."

Security forces used stun grenades Monday against protesting Palestinian workers who had surrounded the office of UNRWA's Gaza operations director, Matthias Shamali, blocking him from leaving.

Workers have charged that, while the layoffs will barely make a dent in UNRWA's deficit—saving barely \$4 million—it will have a wide impact on extended families who depend upon the jobs that are being eliminated and cut back.

The UNRWA cutbacks are also taking a severe toll in the West Bank, where the refugee agency said that it will terminate its employment program in the Israeli-occupied territory by the end of this month, while the distribution of food coupons will be halted by the end of the year. The agency is also shutting down its psychological assistance program at the end of August and its mobile clinics by the end of October.

The attacks on jobs and social conditions in Gaza are unfolding under conditions of escalating Israeli aggression and collective punishment of the people of Gaza. On Wednesday, three Gazans were killed by Israeli shelling east of Gaza City. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed that the attack was in retaliation for shots fired at its troops along the security fence separating Gaza from Israel.

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman convened a special security meeting Wednesday night in Tel Aviv to discuss operations against Gaza with senior IDF officers. There is mounting speculation that Israel is on the brink of launching yet another major war against the besieged territory.

Earlier this month, Israel shut down the Kerem Shalom crossing, the only commercial conduit between Israel and Gaza, allowing in only basic food and medical supplies. It cut off all fuel supplies to Gaza for

one week. While the blockade has been slightly eased, it can be retightened at any moment.

The slashing of US funding to Gaza and the West Bank is part of a deliberate US strategy, elaborated in close collaboration with Tel Aviv, to starve the Palestinians into submission.

The Trump administration, with the backing of the Democratic Party, has given unconditional support to the Israeli state as it has carried out the massacre of unarmed protesters in Gaza, where at least 142 have been gunned down by IDF snipers and thousands more have been wounded.

The latest death from the March of Return protests, in which tens of thousands marched to the border fence, demanding their right to return to the lands from which Palestinians were driven out 70 years ago, came on Tuesday, when Majd Suhail Akil, 26, died from gunshot wounds inflicted by the IDF on May 14. More than 60 Palestinian protesters were killed outright that day, which was when the US opened its embassy in Jerusalem, in defiance of international law.

The Trump administration has also given a green light to the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, with a nearly three-fold increase in the number of new settlements since it took office.

Behind the unconditional US backing for Israeli aggression against the Palestinians lies the drive by Washington to forge an anti-Iranian axis with Israel and Saudi Arabia, along with the other reactionary Persian Gulf oil monarchies. President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal in May from the Iran nuclear accord signed in July 2015 by the US, Germany, France, Britain, Russia and China has set the stage for a military confrontation, even as Israeli warplanes are carrying out airstrikes against Iranian assets in Syria.

The Trump administration assembled what amounted to a war council against Iran on Thursday, with National Security Adviser John Bolton summoning top Pentagon and intelligence officials to the White House to discuss strategy, just days after Trump tweeted that if Iran dared to threaten the US, it would “SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE.”

Citing senior government officials Thursday, the Australian media reported that the US is preparing to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities as early as next month,

and that Australia's top-secret Pine Gap spy base would be used to help select targets.

The head of Iran's Quds Forces, Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, made a speech on Thursday, warning that the US may “start this war but we will be the ones to impose its end,” and stating that Iran is prepared to wage an “asymmetric war” against US forces.



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