

German unions silent over their state visit to Israel

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A forty-person delegation from the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) travelled to Israel at the end of October to meet with its counterpart, the Histadrut, in Tel Aviv. The occasion was the fiftieth anniversary of cooperation between the two union federations. The DGB carefully concealed the trip from workers in Germany.

The DGB delegation, led by its chairwoman Yasmin Fahimi (Social Democratic Party, SPD), participated together with the Histadrut leadership in the first conference of the “Fritz Naphtali Forum”, which took place on 29 and 30 October at the Hotel Dan Panorama in Tel Aviv and was officially dedicated to “labour relations in times of crisis”. The conference was followed in the evening by a celebration marking the fiftieth anniversary of the partnership. On the second day, the delegation visited the Re'im memorial site, where the Nova festival had been attacked on 7 October 2023.

However, the German public, let alone the working class, did not hear a single word from the DGB regarding the entire visit. There were no press releases, no public discussion of it, not even a mention in the news. All enquiries by this author to the press departments of the DGB and the individual unions in the DGB went unanswered. “I know nothing about this visit”, wrote the Hesse regional press spokeswoman of the service union Verdi—one of many contacted, and the only one who replied at all.

Yet the visit was of an entirely official character. It was attended not only by functionaries of the DGB and its individual unions, but also by government representatives and the German ambassador. According to the publication *Global Histadrut*, participants included the German State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Kerstin Griesse (SPD), Martin Schulz, President of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a former SPD chairman and candidate for chancellor, and Steffen Seibert, Germany's ambassador to Israel since August 2022. Before that Seibert had been a television journalist for ZDF for many years, and then for eleven years, government spokesman and head of the Federal Press and Information Office in Berlin.

The visit served a definite purpose. It took place at a moment when the state of Israel, after more than two years of persecution, starvation and the mass murder of the Palestinians, finds itself despised across the world and stands isolated as a pariah state. The genocide continues to this day—not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank, where brutal attacks, expulsions and murders are daily occurrences. The Netanyahu government continues to pursue the

aim of a “final solution to the Palestinian question”.

In this situation, the DGB clearly aligned itself with the Zionist Histadrut and against the Palestinian trade unions, which had urgently called for boycott actions against the genocide. It also opposed workers around the world who—supported by Israeli workers and by Jewish people across the globe—are organising strikes and boycott actions against Israel internationally.

Addressing the Histadrut leaders present, Fahimi said: “In the past two years, the international trade unions have not made things easy for you. But for us you are a sister union, and it was always clear that we would offer you our support.”

The DGB chairwoman delivered the second main address in Tel Aviv, alongside Histadrut head Arnon Bar-David, and she also spoke at the evening banquet. The newspaper *Davar*, which published a photo of the handshake between the two union leaders, quoted Fahimi as saying:

You of the Histadrut are our colleagues. ... You are neither the government nor the state. Therefore, it was always self-evident for us in the DGB to extend our hand to you, and that will also remain so for the next fifty years.

This statement is revealing, and it makes clear why the DGB prefers to stay silent about its appearance in Israel.

The Histadrut is by no means merely a union federation. In Israel, it is a state institution, a pillar of Zionist rule. Founded in 1920, the Histadrut played a decisive role in the creation of the Israeli state. It provided both the founding ideology of the state of Israel, Labour or workers' Zionism, and Israel's first head of state, the then Histadrut chairman David Ben-Gurion. For a long time, it controlled the service sector, housing construction, schools, health insurance funds and insurers, numerous medical facilities and the state bank.

What the Histadrut and the Zionist leaders in Palestine sought to establish was not a democratic, egalitarian society, but a state founded on occupied land, through expulsions and war. Thus, the Zionist utopia of a refuge for persecuted Jews from Nazi Germany became a police state which, in civil war and in war against the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states, itself resorted to fascistic methods.

There was no solution to the country's internal economic

problems, and today, bitter social inequality prevails in a country that is (wrongly) praised as “the only democracy in the Middle East”. Around twenty families own half of the Israeli stock market and a quarter of all companies. According to an OECD report, Israel has the second-highest level of social inequality among all states after the United States; it has the third-highest poverty rate after Bulgaria and Costa Rica, and more than 27 percent of the population and more than one third of all children live in poverty.

The Histadrut has no programme to mobilise the working class against this. Like the DGB, it relies on nationalism and class collaboration. It is no surprise that the Histadrut—like the DGB—suffers from declining membership. In the 1970s, with 1.8 million members, up to 85 percent of Israel’s workforce was organised in the Histadrut. Today it is said to be around 800,000, many only on paper. Arabs and migrants are excluded from membership and Palestinian Israelis are only second-class members.

The Histadrut is first and foremost committed to the state of Israel. In recent years it coordinated closely with Netanyahu during the strikes against the judicial reform, ensuring that unrest was kept under bureaucratic control at every stage.

Like the Labour Party (formerly Mapai, today Avoda/Democrats), the Histadrut has always been closely tied to the Israeli military, the IDF. There was a time when it was even connected with the most extreme Zionists around Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky. At decisive turning points in the Palestine-Israel conflict, its methods have always adapted to those of Likud and all the hardliners, and it has worked closely with them.

This is also the case in the latest war and genocide in the Gaza Strip. The Histadrut has supported the mass slaughter and ignored calls by the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza for international solidarity action. It divides Jewish and Arab workers and does everything possible to undermine resistance to the government’s murderous policy.

Arnon Bar-David, the Histadrut president whose hand Yasmin Fahimi enthusiastically shook in Tel Aviv, was previously a commander in the IDF. On 23 November 2023 he personally signed a rocket in the production halls of defence contractor Elbit Systems that was intended for use in the Gaza Strip. He is said to have added the cynical inscription: “Long live the people of Israel! Greetings from the Histadrut and Israel’s workers.”

It is no wonder that the DGB is trying to keep its pilgrimage to Israel secret from the working class in Germany. It is not only recently that it has been working closely with Zionists, the DGB has supported the Histadrut for decades and celebrated this with a joint commemorative event in Berlin in April this year.

Particularly since the outbreak of the open genocide in Gaza, the DGB has aligned itself with the Histadrut and with Israel. A few days after 7 October, it expressed its “deeply felt solidarity with Israel in view of the brutal attacks by Hamas”. As the World Socialist Web Site wrote at the time:

The far-right Netanyahu government could not carry out its brutal genocide against the Palestinians without the support of the German government, and the German

government could not maintain this support without the close co-operation of the Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB, German Trade Union Confederation) and the leaderships of all the individual trade unions. Thus, the trade unions are directly involved in the worst war crimes.

The DGB stands firmly on the side of the Zionist Histadrut and this is no accident. This reflects its alignment with the pro-war policies of the government and of German big business.

While the German elites are reorganising society for war, rearmament and a war economy, the trade unions have also been transformed. Whereas in the past they negotiated social compromises within the framework of a so-called “social partnership”, today they are actively involved in implementing social cuts and mass layoffs. No plant closure, no redundancy plan, no agreement on wage cutting takes place without the signature of a works council, of IG Metall, Verdi or another DGB union.

However, two years of genocide in Gaza have changed the working class. More and more workers understand the broader dimension: a ruling class that supports such a brutal genocide will trample over the “own” working class in pursuit of profit. To drive an unwilling population into war, it is also prepared to revive fascism.

The struggle against social devastation is inseparable from the struggle against war. The first step for workers in Germany must be a break with the DGB and its member unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Fourth International, which have fought for decades, since the founding of Israel in 1948, for the unity of Palestinian and Israeli workers, have called for the mobilisation of the international working class to stop the genocide in Gaza. We call on workers in all workplaces to form rank-and-file action committees independent of the DGB. Only in this way can they defend their own interests, their workplaces and their lives.

The DGB and its unions stand on the opposite side. The visit of the forty-person delegation to Israel has once again made this abundantly clear.



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