



Yussef Abu Kameel, carpenter and Sawt el-Amel's field worker in Gaza, writes about his experience working in the Erez industrial zone.

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A Tour de Force: From Working in the Settlement of Erez to Accessing the Israeli Courts

By Yussef Abu Kameel, Gaza City

I started working in Erez in 1997.

The company, which is now among the biggest companies in Israel, used to be a small carpentry workshop with no more than 40 workers. Production was low, and we started working for a mere 5 shekels (USD 1.30) per hour. Then we began increasing the production and improving the quality, and by 2004, the company employed 350 workers. We worked together as friends; there was no difference between Arabs and Jews.

The company covers the whole range of carpentry business in large numbers, from bedrooms to dining rooms to children's bedrooms. We worked up to 18 hours a day, and we knew no rest, working on almost every known holiday. Even when we were sick, we were not allowed to leave and were forced to work. When one of us [i.e. the Palestinian workers] had a work accident, we were not allowed to get treatment inside Israel; we had to get treatment in the Palestinian territories, at our own expense.

With the beginning of the intifada in 2000, the situation got more and more complex, and going to work became a suicide mission because of the threats at the Israeli checkpoints, frequent bombardments, random arrests, searches and humiliation no matter whether you were young or old, man or woman. We were forced to take off our clothes in the winter, not allowed to bring a jacket, food or drinks, clothing, shoes or mobile phones. And because of the specified times of entry and exit, we could not leave by ourselves. Only groups of 10 workers or more could pass.

Many workers were injured by [Israeli] soldiers, and some of us, like Wa'el Ajour, were randomly killed at the checkpoint. However, we endured this hardship and we continued working despite all the difficulties because we had no other choice. Difficulties, risks and closures increased, arbitrary and unacceptable, as they [the Israeli army] began to identify persons who entered the industrial zone and started to arrest workers for investigation with the Israeli intelligence service.

The number of workers in Erez increased to more than 7,000 after [Gazan] workers who had worked in Israel were denied entry into Israel. Among the methods of daily provocation used against the workers was random denial of entry, so sometimes we worked no more than 10 days per month.

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I want to mention that we did not know that one day in April 2004, the industrial zone was to be evacuated. It came as a total surprise to us when the factory owner told us to finish the job and dismantle the huge machines. Then the checkpoints closed and we could not get the rest of our salaries. We returned to Gaza and did not know what to do.

With the industrial zone shut down, all the workers were sitting at home, because there were no workplaces in Gaza for the 7,000 workers as Gaza was suffering from repeated closures and a shortage of raw materials. After the closure, some of the big companies moved to Israel, and we workers from Gaza were denied entry by the Israeli government, so the companies employed workers from the West Bank in our place. Other companies moved to the settlements in Gaza, Gush Qatif, but they were agricultural settlements, not industrial. Moreover, young workers were denied entry, so only very few of us got a permit. Work there [in Gush Qatif] continued until the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and we have been out of work until this day. We suffer from the lack of activity in Gaza and are living off the assistance provided by UNRWA and some foreign institutions.

Looking for the compensation we are entitled to like any worker in any country, we went to the labour office in Gaza because it is responsible for us as workers, and here the tragedy continued. The labour office told us that it was not able to provide any assistance without giving us any justification for not being able to help. One of the big problems we face is the absence of an official address in the Gaza Strip that can restore our rights, and the events that have happened in Gaza are also a major cause of our problem.

We went to lawyers inside Israel; some were prepared to help and others refused to even talk to us because our cases were not profitable for them. We are also aware that many workers were robbed of their entitlements by some lawyers inside Israel, who exploited the fact that we are not allowed to enter Israel.

In this difficult time, I accidentally came across Sawt el-Amel union in the city of Nazareth. I asked them for help and they did. After consultations between us [the workers] and the union [Sawt el-Amel], the union agreed to help us claim the benefits the Israeli employers have stolen from us, and we got down to work, sending all the necessary papers, power of attorney, pay slips and work permits in order to raise the issue with the employer.

At home, we prepared ourselves to raise the fees for lawyers and the court, knowing that we have been out of work for more than four years that our economic situation is very bad and that we depend on foreign aid. But the union has not asked us for any money, and things started moving.

It is also important to mention that some employers have left the country, others changed their name, went bankrupt or deny that we have ever worked for them.

Then the psychological war against us began. In their reply to the labour court, the employer's lawyers used dirty methods and accused us of terrorism and held us responsible for capturing the soldier [Gilad Shalit] in Gaza. Moreover, they argued that we had left our workplace for no reason even though they knew that all our work permits expired on April 17, 2004, and we never received a notification of lay-off. Then the employer offered us a small amount of compensation, and when we refused, the employer's lawyers asked the labour court to demand a security deposit of 1,500 shekels (USD 400) from each of us to compensate for the company's expenses and inconveniences in case we lose the case.

In conclusion, we are in a serious crisis and we call upon all concerned people and compassionate hearts to help us obtain the sums Israeli employers have stolen from us.

Thanks.

(English language editing: Sawt el-Amel)