

STRIKE COMMITTEES AND THE 2016 PALESTINIAN TEACHERS'  
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by

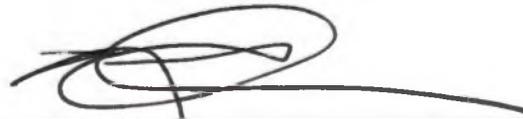
Robert Michael Noonan

San Francisco, California

2019

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Strike Committees and the Palestinian Teachers' Strike of 2016* by Robert Michael Noonan, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Political Science at San Francisco State University.



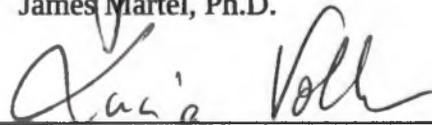
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# STRIKE COMMITTEES AND THE 2016 PALESTINIAN TEACHERS' STRIKE

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San Francisco, California  
2019

This is a study of the Palestinian teachers' strike of 2016. The month-long strike, involving 35,000 teachers, was conducted outside of and against the will of the official union, the GUPT, and the Palestinian Authority. This study asks how the teachers were able to mobilize on such a scale and for such a sustained period. A dozen interviews were conducted with a selection of rank and file teachers, veteran activists, and union officials. Using this material, as well as qualitative analysis of news reports and other documents, the strike is analyzed through the lens of contentious politics. The results suggest that the decisive feature in the teachers' strike was the use of democratically-elected strike committees, a social movement organization rooted in the experience of underground teachers' union activists before the Oslo period.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this Thesis



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Chair, Thesis Committee

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey in Palestine began in Birzeit University's Palestine and Arabic Studies (PAS) program where I shared a course of study, lodging, and friendship with international students from the U.S., Europe, Australia, Japan, and many other countries.

My road from Birzeit to engagement with Palestine's activists was furnished by a stroke of great luck. Through Gabriel Polley, a PAS student and now a Palestine scholar in his own right, I was introduced to Tali Shapira of Anarchists Against the Wall, and Boycott From Within. She became my guide and interlocutor in the weekly demonstrations known as the Popular Resistance in the villages of Bil'in and Nabi Saleh. She introduced me to Palestinian activists and shared with me the stories of the better part of a decade of her own activism. To this day she remains one of my greatest friends and her home is a crucial way station in my visits to Palestine.

Through Tali, I was introduced to the village of Nabi Saleh, where I met the brave, energetic, and indomitable extended family of Bassem Tamimi, rightfully the symbol of intransigent nonviolent resistance to the Occupation thanks to their innovative strategic thinking and use of social media. I'm proud to know Bassem, Najji, Boshra, Manal, Bilal, Janna, and many other activists in Nabi Saleh. Bassem graciously offered me a place to stay and work any time, and in the Summer of 2016, Bassem Tamimi and his wife Nariman, Ahed and Waed, and Selim and Abu Yazan took a bedraggled American into their home during Ramadan. Upon hearing my research goals, Bassem pointed me in the direction of another Nabi Saleh resident, his cousin Murad Tamimi.

Among the list of names, without doubt, the person who deserves credit and

gratitude for making this study possible is Murad. Along with his family, Murad graciously hosted me during the Summer of 2016, the Winter of 2017, and the Summer of 2018. Murad's connections through his role in the teachers' union and his reputation with activists and actors from all sides, both past and present, form the foundation of this study. Murad became my fixer and translator, taking me from site to site and introducing me to all of his connections. With my laptop in hand and phone recording, Murad facilitated my questions and translated the responses of teachers, principals, union officials, and administrators. Together we did twelve interviews with participants in the strike and union officials. Perhaps as important, after each interview, we discussed and analyzed the dynamics of the strike, the union, and the Palestinian Authority as described each participant. Any of my work that reflects the experience of Palestinians in the 2016 strike was made possible through Murad's efforts as fixer, translator and co-thinker. In addition, I am thoroughly grateful to my advisers Nicole Watts, James Martel, and Lucia Volk for their generous help and patience. Not least, I would like to thank my family, Bob, Katie, David, Darcy, Rachel and Aodhan for their support, of all possible sorts, during this M.A. program.

## **Introduction**

From February 14 to March 12, 2016, 35,000 Palestinian teachers in the West Bank government-run school system held a dramatic strike whose reverberations were felt throughout the Occupied Territories. Teachers and their supporters flooded the streets of Ramallah with signs and bullhorns in mass demonstrations, some of the largest since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 (*Ma'an* Feb 22, 2016). Moreover, the strike was directed by committees of striking teachers, against the will of the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT), the official teachers' union. President Mahmoud Abbas was forced to directly address the issue of the strike via a televised speech. With their issues acknowledged, and promises from Abbas obtained, the teachers chose to demobilize their month-long strike, putting an end to this cycle of contention.

The scale of this episode was remarked upon by many of the participants, from all sides of the conflict. While there have been much larger mobilizations by Palestinians in the West Bank against the Israeli occupation, the teachers strike was certainly one of the largest mobilizations by Palestinians against their own governing body. The strike was an earthquake that revealed fractures in the economic, social, and political fabric of the West Bank, all of which will most likely play a role in the future. Why did this large and sustained social movement erupt in the first months of 2016? How was such a movement sustained against the wishes of the PA and the official teachers' union?

I argue that the crucial factor in the ability of the teachers to mobilize was a particular social movement organization: democratically elected strike committees. These committees, elected ad hoc from various schools in all of the governorates of the West Bank, provided an organizational framework and a leadership body parallel and in contest with the official union. The strike committees' responsiveness, democratic structure, and openness to initiative were key to sustaining the strike over the course of the month. The committees also enabled the strike's demobilization once the leadership of the committees felt they had exhausted all available options to push their demands further.

The strike committees used by the teachers are an innovation with roots in prior social movement organizations, committees that were active during the period of direct Israeli military occupation. The committees' democratic features only became possible under the greater degree of civil liberty introduced by the PA. The democratic innovation in the strike committee organizations enabled teachers to feel a closer relationship between their interests and the committees and to maintain a sustained mobilization. I argue that this innovation in social movement organization, built in various episodes of contentious politics over the previous decades, was crucial to the scale and staying power of the mobilization that characterized the teachers' strike.

In examining the strike committees' history we can also see how a leadership that embodies this aggregation of choices in movements can decisively impact episodes of contentious politics. The committees were launched after the beginning of the strike, by a

group of veteran teacher activists who had decades of experience organizing both under the direct Israeli military administration and under the PA. These activists were participants and innovators in strikes in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s whose organizational forms prefigured the 2016 strike committees. These activists were prepared with a plan of action to respond when a political opportunity emerged, as it did in early 2016.

What accounts for the timing of the strike and its vast scale? I argue that a gradual shift in the prevailing strategy of the PA in relation to the GUPT created a political opportunity for the emergence of the strike movement in 2016 with such dramatic force. In 1994, with the establishment of the PA, the PLO brought a host of organizations, including unions, with it to the West Bank and Gaza. Unions like the GUPT assumed their role as representatives of the workers, primarily because of their close links with the PA. However, the officials who were appointed were not pushovers vis a vis the PLO officialdom. Until 2006, the PLO under Yasser Arafat preferred a style of administration that was authoritarian but also relied on strong-willed personalities who could respond to and represent members' grievances, and sometimes deliver harsh rebukes to PA officials, even Arafat himself. The GUPT, for most of its existence was governed by such a figure, Jamil Shadi, who was respected by activists both within and outside of the GUPT.

The prevailing strategy of the PLO shifted towards the exclusion of such strong personalities after 2006, the death of Yasser Arafat, and the ascendance to power of Mahmoud Abbas. While the shift was already underway, it played out in increasingly

dramatic fashion in the ranks of the GUPT officialdom after the death of Jamil Shadi in 2011. One after another, the general secretaries after Shadi were ousted and replaced through carefully coordinated elections and lucrative reassignments. This shift in prevailing strategy constrained the unions' capacity to address members' grievances and fostered disillusionment among the teachers who looked for another path to express their discontent. The path they found was to take strike action themselves, and organize in the committees to extend and sustain their movement once it had begun. The GUPT, in the face of this mobilization, was unwilling or unable to stand up boldly to the PA, and therefore was incapable of containing the movement.

### **Teachers' Strikes in the Age of Austerity**

Public school teachers' strikes have become a global phenomenon in a world where most states are engaged in applying some sort of austerity measures, cutting state budgets that support social benefits including education. These austerity measures take place within a wide variety of political situations, power relations, and historically inherited conditions. Nevertheless, they have become enough of a phenomenon that various scholars have called attention to austerity and the social movements it engenders as a site for increased investigation (Khasnabish and Haiven 2014; Fominaya and Cox 2014; Della Porta 2015). Public school teachers face austerity from both directions, as employees of the state and as consumers of social benefits. Perhaps for this reason, teachers are at the center of anti-austerity struggles (Weiner 2008).

Strikes in the Middle East, especially in most of the Arabic-speaking countries, have been high stakes affairs, rarely confined to the purely economic realm. As Ellis Goldberg (2019) points out, this fact is linked to the historic integration of unions with states originating in the state-directed industrialization process central to the program of nationalist regimes. Labor unions in the Middle East were historically disoriented and disarmed by their integration into the nationalist project as for the most part unions had been founded in opposition to colonial enterprises and unionized workers saw their struggle as workers as part of the national struggle (Bianchi 1986; Bayat 2019: 60-61). With unions integrated and linked to state institutions and nationalist parties, economic struggles by unionized workers present a direct challenge to state policy and the ideology of national unity, therefore economic struggles are met with heavy opposition up to and including repression by nationalist regimes. The development of Palestinian trade unions follows this pattern to a great extent in spite of the failure of Palestinian nationalism to achieve a state, let alone a substantial industrial sector, state-run or otherwise.

In spite of the stakes, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a marked increase in the number of strikes in the Middle East. The generalized austerity and economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s undermined the nationalism-labor compact and nationalist movements and parties were faced with opposition by the populations they claimed to represent. In hindsight, the Arab Spring seems to have been presaged by a rising tide of strikes, especially in Tunisia and Egypt where after a slowly building wave of labor activism both

countries were rocked by major strikes in 2007, 2008 and 2009 (Beinin 2011, Marzouki 2011). Austerity-driven political protest was not limited to the Arab Nationalism-derived regimes. Episodes of political opposition driven by austerity occurred elsewhere, as in the 2006 demolition by protesters of the Halabja monument in Iraqi Kurdistan, a symbolic attack on a symbol of the Kurdish parties' nationalist mythos (Watts 2012, 2014). Across the board, austerity measures have created new political opportunities for contentious politics to play out.

A brief survey of teachers' strikes in the Middle East shows that they are a widespread part of this ongoing wave of social protest. Algeria's five major teachers unions called a strike in February 2018, months after hundreds of teachers had already walked off the job themselves (*Reuters* 2018). In early 2018, thousands of teachers in Iraqi Kurdistan struck alongside doctors and other civil servants who were seeing their salaries cut by as much as 25 percent (Rasool 2018). On January 9, 77,000 primary and secondary school teachers in Tunisia struck against government cuts to education (*Middle East Monitor* 2019). In the Summer of 2018, Jordanian teachers went on strike, joining a general movement against austerity that forced the government to reverse cuts to subsidies (Najjar 2018). Most recently, teachers have been at the heart of the movements to overturn long-standing authoritarian regimes in Sudan and Algeria (Nossiter 2019; *Radio Dabanga* 2019).

Teachers strikes are not just a feature of contentious politics in the Middle East. In recent years, they have also made a remarkable impact on politics in the United States, Britain, and France, either on their own or as part of broader mobilizations against state policy (Blanc 2019; France 24 2019; Richardson 2018; Shelton 2018). Clearly, teachers' strikes are an important feature of contentious politics on a global scale in the current period. This study serves as a contribution to the study of the comparative dynamics of these movements in the context of Palestine.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study relies on the contentious politics framework of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015). Contentious politics provides a narrative framework in which mobilization and demobilization are examined against the backdrop of political opportunity structures. The Palestinian teachers' strike clearly fits into their framework as an example of "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims or third parties." (7) This framework allows for the examination of the dynamic interaction of the strikers, the strike committees, and the GUPT and PA.

To explain the success of the teachers in mobilization and demobilization via the mechanism of the strike committees, I use McCarthy and Zald's (1977) concept of a social movement organization (SMO). This concept readily describes the role of the

strike committees as resource-organizing and maximizing structures, stimulating moral contestation with the GUPT, and transmitting movement repertoires from past struggles.

The strike committee SMO was able to tap into the organizing experience and expertise of non-teachers including volunteer lawyers and experienced activists who are either retired or have ceased teaching but maintained an identification with teachers' struggles. A number of studies, examining a diverse set of circumstances, have shown the role of similar resource-mobilization by social movement organizations (Parkin 1968; Inglehart 1977; Melucci 1980; Offe 1985; Kriesi 1989).

The strike committees not only played a role in mobilizing material resources for the strike, they contested the GUPT officialdom for moral authority. In this sense they mobilized moral resources, raising questions of legitimacy, another distinctive role of SMOs as pointed out by Snow and Cress (1996).

Above all, the key role of SMOs in cycles of contention that is most relevant to this study is their role as a transmission belt for organizational and strategic methods employed during past cycles of contention, providing a historic continuity of struggles (Oliver and Marwell 1992). The strike committees fall neatly into this pattern as they played a facilitating role in allowing teachers to focus and mobilize their discontent, also providing technical support and connecting striking teachers with resources. In this way, SMOs can play a role as "movement mentoring organizations" (Nownes and Neeley 1996). The strike committees did all of these things in relation to the teachers' strike.

In addition, I examine the shift in the PA's prevailing strategy. The concept of prevailing strategy is drawn from the work of Hanspeter Kriesi who argues that a decisive aspect of political opportunity structure in social mobilizations is the relationship of society to the state via the content of the state's prevailing strategy (1989, 2015; Kriesi and Koopmans 1995). The state's prevailing strategy is defined by Kriesi as "prevailing strategies of political elites in dealing with challengers" (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak and Giugni, 26). While the PA is not a proper state, it retains state-like functions vis a vis the population, marked by networks of patronage stretching back to the days of the PLO in exile (Brynen 1995, Frisch 1997). Prevailing strategy forms a relatively variable part of the structural backdrop which underlays the opening of political opportunity structures. (Rucht 1990; Della Porta and Rucht 1995; Gamson and Meyer 1995) This framework is a refined version of what F.W. Scharpf (1984) calls the "dominant strategy" of the state, focusing closely on relationships between the state and groups within society, excluding the shared cultural values or myths that F.W. Scharpf includes in his definition. There are other approaches that deal with similar issues, such as that used by Moore and Salloukh (2007), who contrast "contestation" and "coordination" in what they call "association-state" relations. This terminology, however assumes more formally constituted relations than the ones that we are dealing with here. The use of Kriesi's definition of prevailing strategy allows us to narrowly examine actions and attitudes of state elites within a context such as Palestine in which the national ethos and

organizations produced by the national struggle are the medium within which this cycle of contention plays out, where the shifts occur informally as much as formally.

Prevailing strategy can be identified as operating between two poles – exclusive and integrative. According to Kriesi, Koopmans, Duvendak and Giugni (1995), “The informal procedures and prevailing strategies with respect to challenges are either *exclusive* (repressive, confrontational, polarizing) or *integrative* (facilitative, cooperative, assimilative)” (34). The distinction between exclusive and integrative prevailing strategy is useful in the context of this study for explaining the marked evolution of the PA and GUPT relationship, a relationship that did not change structurally, but grew increasingly exclusive due to the choices of the PA leadership.

There is a great deal of political science dealing with Palestinians and their social movements, social movement organizations, and interaction with the political structures of the Palestinian Authority (Craissati 1996; Helman 2015; Jamal 2001; Khawaja 1994; Robinson 2004; Saba 2017; Sullivan 1996). However, there is a paucity of material related to Palestinian labor unions and workers’ struggles in particular. The problem is compounded when looking at the history since Oslo. Where Palestinian workers’ struggles have been closely examined, it is generally within the context of the national movement against the Israeli occupation and the First Intifada (Roy 1995, Hiltermann 1993). This research validates and reinforces the genealogy of social movement organizations put forward in this paper, showing the roots of the strike committee SMO

in past struggles, especially during the 1980s. However, as these studies are focused on the role of labor in the national movement, they do not examine the tensions and conflicts between Palestinian workers and the PA and the PLO organizations that arrive as a result of Oslo. Where this question is taken up, it is in a journalistic manner (Sovich 2000) without exploring the dynamics of tension between strikers, committees, and unions. In the case of the Palestinian Teachers' strike of 2016, one article has appeared in MERIP, a mixture of first-hand account and analysis by authors Moghli and Qato (2018). Their brief analysis draws the lines too sharply between the grassroots committees and the GUPT without taking into account the fluidity with which the activists relate to one or the other over time. This study sheds a bit more light on this particular struggle, and with it an under-examined aspect of Palestinian politics, the struggle of workers against employers carried on within that embattled nation under occupation.

### **The Scope of the Strike**

The teachers' strike of 2016 was the largest mobilization by Palestinians against the PA since it was formally established in 1994. With over 35,000 teachers on strike and a million students out of school, the strike constituted a major disruption of daily life in the West Bank (*Ma'an* 2016). According to Murad Tamimi (2016), the International Relations Coordinator for the GUPT, "I've never seen anything like it, I thought it could be the end of the PA" There was an element of intentional hyperbole to this comment, but it is nonetheless revealing. It points towards the wide-spread feeling that the strike's

depth and breadth was remarkable when compared to other mobilizations by Palestinians against the PA.

The strike and the demonstrations in support of it were met with intense hostility by the PA. On Monday, February 15<sup>h</sup>, 4,000 teachers marched to the Prime Minister's office where they were met with stony silence (Mulder 2016). Protests escalated and on Feb. 16, 20,000 teachers and supporters demonstrated in Ramallah (*Ma'an* 2016). The following Tuesday, another protest was scheduled with the same goal of mobilizing masses of teachers and supporters. This protest was met with repression by armed security forces and ultimately 22 teachers as well as two school principals were arrested (*Ma'an* 2016).

The repression leveled against the mobilization on the part of the PA included the official use of police violence and checkpoints. The deployment of checkpoints was a novel technique used by the security forces, one that they were initially hesitant to own up to. According to *Ma'an* news (2016), authorities claimed that the checkpoints were "not to deny teachers entry to Hebron," but there to "ambush fugitives." In addition to the official repression, there are indications that threats were made to bus and taxi drivers, that their licenses would be revoked if they facilitated teachers reaching the protests (*Ma'an* 2016). One activist teacher from Hebron reported receiving threats on Facebook and through her cell phone, calling on her to stop supporting the strike (*Ma'an* 2016).

Official repression failed to end the mobilization, and the Ramallah-centered demonstrations gave way to localized actions. Teachers and supporters held sit-in protests in traffic circles in many cities and in front of the Directorate of Public Education in Hebron (*Ma'an* 2016). In these demonstrations, economic demands and moral condemnation were mixed with political criticism. According to *Ma'an* news, demonstrators mobilized in greater numbers “in reaction to the PA’s harsh response to strikers, with some informally calling for Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah's resignation” (Mulder 2016).

The movement had severe consequences for the GUPT officials who neither called, nor supported the strike. On February 18<sup>th</sup>, GUPT officials announced an agreement with the PA to honor the 2013 agreement by the end of the year. The PA and the GUPT hoped this would put an end to the strike and satisfy the teachers by reversing the policy that triggered the strike. This tactic backfired as the strike committees rejected the offer. When the striking teachers roundly rejected the proposed agreement, the GUPT central committee was reorganized and the General Secretary, Ahmed Anis, resigned amid widespread rumors of bribery and corruption (*Ma'an* 2016). However, by March 12, the strikers found themselves at an impasse. They finally decided they were willing to accept a practically identical proposal to the one they had recently refused, this time made publicly by President Mahmoud Abbas in an official speech, and the movement demobilized.

## **Material and Moral Grievances**

The grievances of the striking teachers were framed in both material and moral terms. In material terms, teachers' conditions are insufficient to support the basic daily needs of a Palestinian family. According to one teacher from Hebron who participated in the strike, his current salary is 3,900 shekels (\$1000) per month, although he has worked as a teacher for 23 years (*Ma'an* 2016). At the same time, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reports that the average budget of a West Bank family is 5,091 shekels (\$1333). It is no surprise therefore that most teachers have a second job. According to one rank and file teacher, Anwar Awad,

“A teacher must work a second job because the salary is so low. Rent, home, telephone, transportation, electricity. I have worked many jobs, taxi driver for example. Many teachers in computer science have stores for phones and other electronics” (2016).

The absolute insufficiency of teachers' salaries was a major theme in all of the speeches, signs, slogans, and messages teachers used to represent themselves in their mobilizations.

The question of salaries isn't just a material question, there is a moral claim made by teachers against the PA. Jobs are not simply measured against sectoral standards. Government jobs are measured against each other. Teachers make far less than officials who work behind desks in the various ministries. As one teacher said sarcastically,

"I thank the prime minister for being generous enough to offer a 4,747 shekel (\$1,218) salary to a 20-year employee of the Ministry of Education... Give me this salary and I would go back to my job starting tomorrow" (*Ma'an* 2016).

As members of the Palestinian national community and employees of the PLO-administered PA, teachers feel this status as a moral affront.

The second jobs that teachers are driven to take have drastic consequences for their self-worth. Some teachers find themselves driving taxis for their students, or serving them tea and *argileh* in cafes and clubs (Tamimi 2016). Moreover teachers struggle to put their own children into college so that they can obtain the same level of education as their parents (Awad 2016). For these reasons, the word "dignity" recurs in slogans and statements. As Hebron teacher Ayed al-Azzeh puts it "We are not looking for a life of luxury, we only want to live in dignity" (Mulder 2016).

The framing of the strike in terms of dignity for teachers has a deep resonance. In the many pictures taken of teachers in demonstrations, the slogan "Dignity for Teachers" is a recurring image. Its resonance is made especially clear in the slogans of other demonstration participants including students, showing that the teachers strike thereby gave expression to a widely-held sentiment in Palestinian society (*Ma'an* 2016).

## **Part I: The Committees**

The strike committee SMO utilized by the teachers enabled them to organize, sustain and eventually demobilize over the course of the strike. In this sense, the strike committees precisely fit the definition of SMOs as specified by McCarthy and Zald, “a complex, or formal organization which identifies its preferences with a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals” (Walker, E. T., & Martin, A. W. 2018:167). The strike committees were formed by well-known teacher activists in response to the strike. They rose to meet the opportunity that the strike presented, to give shape to the wide spread sentiment of frustration felt by the teachers. They set the maintenance of the 2013 agreement as a minimum goal, in line with the wishes of the teachers. In doing so they presented the teachers with an alternate structure to the existing union that more closely fitted their goals and needs.

### **The Formation of the Committees**

As January 2016 began, rank and file teachers felt deeply frustrated by the GUPT’s inability to keep the PA to the terms of an agreement that, in and of itself, didn’t do much more than maintain teachers’ already disagreeable conditions. According to Anwar Awad, a teacher from Nablus,

The general union didn't do right by the teachers. They put them down, humiliated the teachers, and didn't give them their rights, so they started this kind of strike. At that time, the union lost control. Compared to other ministries, the teachers did not receive similar rights and salaries. So, all

of the teachers, even the committee, used to be union members. And because the government has a policy not to give the union anything and make it so weak, they tried to do something on their own, away from the union or any official body or institution (2016).

The strike began as an explosion of resentment among teachers based on the grievances outlined by Awad, and the committees were quickly set up to organize this activity. According to strike committee member Wasfi al-Bargouthi, “The strike happened accidentally. It was not planned. After the teachers announced the strike, the strike committee began to organize – committees at schools, meetings, and many things. No one planned it. It was an explosion without leaders” (2016). The committees’ success was in giving a direction and a framework to this explosion, enabling the teachers to mobilize their resources to sustain the long and difficult strike. According to another strike committee member, Naim Aruri,

All of us try to do his best, because it is not easy and you don’t have anybody for the teachers. You don’t have any union and the union is against you. The PA is also against you. You have to work under these conditions. You have to try to do something and in spite of that I think we succeeded (2016).

The strike committees were able to play their role as a SMO precisely because the teachers felt that neither the PA nor the GUPT were on their side.

## **The Structure of the Committees**

The strike committees had their starting point at an ad hoc meeting held in Ramallah shortly after the strike began. Wasfi Al-Bargouthi (2016) recalls that, “After the teachers started the strike, we began to organize. A week after that we tried to organize committees at schools, directorates, several meetings, and many things.” According to Naim Aruri, (2016) “We made a meeting in Ramallah for the teachers and at that meeting Nabeel Samara told the teachers to choose a representative from his school. Then we made a meeting at United Nations Field.” Wadaad Sofi (2016), a teacher from Ramallah district, recalls that “Most teachers were ready to do anything. First we struck, then we went to Ramallah. They divided us into groups there, and each leader gave the instructions to each school according to facebook and social media.” Strike committee member and GUPT Birzeit local official Salam Ramahi recounts the structure of the committees that developed after the meeting in Ramallah,

“The structure started from the school. For example, there are 40 schools in this district. Each sent a representative and we got together and elected two representatives for our district. Each district did the same and they got together and elected representatives: Four in Ramallah, two females two guys. In the other governorates – three or four. It was done in a really democratic way. Each school had a representative, each district sent two representatives to the central committee, and each city sent three or four.

The central committee elected an executive committee of fifteen or so (December 2017).

Teachers like Anwar Awad, already on strike, began to orient themselves towards the committees thanks to communication with their colleagues via phone calls and social media. According to Awad,

I would call the colleagues I know and we would get together. After that we elected a representative from each district or school... not official persons to be in charge, just to represent the teachers as delegates (2016).

This last point, the committees' representative nature and democratic functioning, gave them their particular legitimacy. As Awad puts it,

The five were not decision makers. They had to go back to the 150, and discuss with the 150. So we have 150 representatives. If they want to do something they go to the 150 and discuss it, then they go to the other governorates and take the decision. The 150 representatives met whenever there was anything coming from the government (2016).

Wadaad Sofi, like Awad, describes her engagement with the strike and the committees, starting with messages from her colleagues via social media,

First I heard about the strike from social media. At first I didn't think it was going anywhere because in the past whenever we tried anything it was crushed. But after that I got convinced. Each school has a representative,

each doing different things. Of course the GUPT tried mediating, diminishing the demands, changing demands, putting things off. It's because politicians got inside and interfered. Legislative council members went in the middle of things. That's why the committees tried to arrange the strike itself (2017).

The democratic structure of the committees made teachers like Anwar Awad and Wadaad Sofi feel that they were represented and could therefore follow its direction. They were, after all, the ones who had already taken the decision to go on strike, and they were looking for a way forward in their mobilization.

### **Mobilization of Resources**

The strike committees, aligned with the sentiments and grievances of the teachers, thereby enabling a mobilization of resources on an otherwise unprecedented scale, especially for an ad hoc organization. As Naim Aruri puts it,

I can tell you that the biggest demonstration in this country was made by teachers in January, February and March. When you talk about 30,000 people that is something huge. In our society we have organizations that supposedly represent social groups, and they fail to have a demonstration of 1,000 people. We did it ourselves. You didn't apply for anyone to come by force, you didn't have to give money. They did it themselves. They came

and they paid money, and the majority of teachers are in debt. When you come from Hebron, from Tulkarem, you have to pay 100 shekels (2016).

The striking teachers, from their own pockets and their own willingness to act, were thereby able to mobilize on a scale that none of the institutionalized organizations, including the GUPT, could have mustered in spite of substantially greater resources.

Committee-organized activities did not just include the major demonstrations and mobilizations. Teachers formed committees that organized their own day to day activities and mobilized supporters who volunteered their aid to the teachers' strike. The widespread support for the strike was remarked upon by strike committee participants. As Naim Aruri (2016) puts it, "I think the majority of Palestinian people in the West Bank here supported us. And also the students themselves. And many of them were in our demonstrations." Awad recalls how this support was organized,

We elected committees and one of these committees is responsible for media. So when they have something they just post it on Facebook. Other committees included legal, negotiation, different things... We had 200 attorneys who volunteered to support the strike in the courts. We know our government will not give anything. We agreed on that – if the government does not apply what it promised, we will do different activities, including the strike (2016).

Thus, in spite of its ad hoc nature, the committees were able to mobilize and maximize the resources of individual teachers. The committees had the confidence of the teachers to the point where they were willing to risk safety and livelihood to participate in the mobilizations. According to Naim Aruri,

Many times our security forces held checkpoints to prevent us from coming to Ramallah, the center of the country, to demonstrate. They threaten us and try to tell us what we can do, that we could be fired from our jobs, and many other things. But our teachers are brave and they continued until we told them to finish (2016).

The consequences for participation in the strike activities did not only fall upon the teachers who were involved. According to Ramahi,

The way the PA managed the crisis and dealt with it was by using their security forces. They also had preachers from the mosques push students to go to school and demand to be taught, and the Ministry of Transport threatened to revoke bus drivers' licenses if the drivers bring teachers to the demonstrations (2017).

With bus and taxi services as the primary mode of transportation in the West Bank, and a substantial source of employment, these were severe threats to participants and supporters of the strike. Nevertheless, the demonstrations called by the committees were attended by thousands of teachers and supporters.

### **Which Side Are You On?**

Not all of the committee activists involved in the strike were positioned outside of the union structure. This aspect of the strike is important to note as the history of the strike committees is intricately connected with the history of the GUPT. There are no clean lines between participants in one or the other except by their activities during events such as the strike. According to Salam Ramahi,

In 20 years of my career, each year we roughly had the same demands and activities against the PA to get some rights. I'm talking as a member of the secretariat of the Birzeit branch of the union, and a member of the last strike committee (2017).

In spite of his participation in the union, Ramahi became active with the strike committees during the movement because, as he puts it,

Out of my experience with the union they always pull themselves back and stay on track with the PA. That's why we tried to organize a strike away from the union because of that experience. We wanted something independent to go all the way (2016).

This sentiment was eloquently echoed by an anonymous female teacher who interjected during a union meeting, "The union follows after the strike committee. It has a big army but doesn't lead" (Noonan, August 2017).

For teachers, whether those of the rank and file like Awad or local union officials like Ramahi, the committees were a dividing line between sides and everyone demonstrated by their actions which side they are on. As Ramahi says,

“In the beginning, as a coordinator for the strike committee and because the teachers knew I was on the secretariat of the Birzeit branch of the GUPT, they felt suspicious. But when I joined the demos and the teachers saw me on TV and as a big supporter, they started dealing with me as a striker and a member of the strike committee (2016).

The events themselves not only clarified the loyalties and the preoccupations of the participants, but also the union and government officials. According to Ramahi,

The movement that happened among the teachers uncovered many negative things within the union as well as how the PA manages and deals with movements. So actually out of the experience it showed many things for us (2016).

In Palestine, where a myriad of connections link individuals to networks of patronage and power, the clarification that Ramahi describes is profoundly important for the facilitation of a movement such as the teachers strike.

### **Demobilization**

The strike committees enabled the teachers to demobilize on what they felt were their own terms. Paradoxically this meant accepting an agreement on March 12 that was

technically identical to the agreement offered by the GUPT on February 18<sup>th</sup>, a return to the terms of the 2013 agreement. In February, this was largely seen as a maneuver. As Nabeel Samara says,

The union at that time, tried to ride the movement itself by making a new agreement with the government. But the teachers were not cheated by this. General Secretary Ahmed Anis brought this agreement to the teachers but the teachers rejected it, and demanded the general secretary must leave” (2016).

By March 12, however, Samara and the other strike committee leaders believed that this was as far as they could take things. This was especially made clear by the speech of Mahmoud Abbas which spelled out the terms of the agreement and ordered the teachers to end their strike. According to Nabeel Samara,

Now we talk about politics, what can we do? The teachers have needs, ok, but when Abu Mazen talks to all of the unions, what can we do? This is our responsibility for many years but we cannot do more (2016).

Accepting this agreement was not felt as a defeat by participants like Awad. According to him,

The government gave us some rights – a raise for living and some financial demands – they put it as payments. The last payment

will be by the end of this month. So they promised to solve many problems by the first of the coming year (2016).

In addition, the act of striking was itself a victory. As Awad states,

The most important thing is that we sent a message and our voice was spread all over, especially to the government, our voice as teachers. The other thing, the Palestinian people and other people heard about the teachers rights and they know that the teachers need rights (2016).

Not all teachers were happy with the results, in spite of their support for the strike committees. According to Wadaad Sofi (2017), “It was a shocking ending. The strike didn't end by the teachers but by president Mahmoud Abbas. The procedure from the beginning was terrific but overnight we end up with nothing. It was like a light switch.”

Salaam Ramahi also has criticisms of the way the strike was conducted,

Why did the strike fail? First, because all the people trusted the leadership in these committees, but actually these committees did not fully take the pressure they received from all over. They didn't have the experience to lead in that way (2016).

Veteran teacher activists like Omar Assaf had their criticisms as well. Assaf relates his assessment of the strike,

I think in this final strike, the leaders didn't have experience. They were carried away! We can do anything, they said. We can fire Abu Mazen! I said to them, figure out what you want. Because if the PA breaks the strike it is very bad (2016).

Nonetheless, these criticisms remain internal to the committee participants and supporters. They do not criticize the committees but rather the outcomes that they achieved. For them, future struggles are projected to take place by and through the committees. As Ramahi (2017) states, "We are keeping the fire under the ash until we see what's coming from the government." For Ramahi, the experience of the strike is not lost in spite of the outcome as, "The weaknesses were on all sides. The weakness of the strike committee will be its strength for next time and its strength will be the weakness of the PA."

### **The Genealogy of the Strike Committees.**

As a SMO, the strike committees are themselves a product of a history of mobilizations and organizational innovations. In 2016, the strike committees were presented as an organizing framework by veteran teacher activists. In this sense they functioned as movement mentoring organizations (Nownes and Neeley 1996). Salaam Ramahi recalls that,

The idea to [form a strike committee] came from the old guys. As you can see they are intellectuals, educated. They know what

democracy means. They know you have to go from the ground up.

As you can see, each level was elected. It's not a new idea, it's an old one. We take credit from our own teachers (2016).

During the period of direct Israeli rule, such committees were underground, constituted by self-selected activists. According to veteran teacher activist and historian of the teachers' movement, Omar Assaf (2016), the committees have a history stretching back decades: "The strike committees have their roots in the underground committees organized during the period of direct military occupation from 1967-1993." During this time, the Palestinian parties and especially the left wing parties worked underground, forming hand-picked committees to carry out various activities including union work. Abu Fadi, a retired teacher and organizer during the 1980s recalls his experience,

When we began in 1981 to achieve something for the teachers, the salary was not more than 100 dollars at that time. It was a very bad amount you see and after that we made a strike for two months. We closed the schools. Not by the organization as it is no, not by a teachers' union. Our organization at that time was called teachers' general committees. You see, we made a committee in Nablus, a committee in Ramallah. There was a committee in every governorate. And we made a general committee. We choose one from here, one from there, and so on. It was 22 persons I think and we made meetings. They had to be secret meetings, you see. We made

a strike two months in 1981... The activity was inside the teachers' committees at that time and only later did it move to the teachers' union (2016).

The repressive conditions necessitated a clandestine committee structure. Another veteran of the teachers' movement of the 1980s, Daud Al-Barghouthi, relates his experience of that period,

We decided to make a strike for one day on 14 December, 1980. On that day we made a march towards the headquarters of the Israeli military administration. We were about 3000 teachers. We walked in the street, but about a half a kilometer, before we reached the headquarters, we found the soldiers on the ground with their weapons ready to shoot and kill. We weren't afraid so we advanced towards them. About ten or twelve soldiers advanced towards us and started to beat us with their guns. They did not shoot. They beat anybody who came, in their face, with the guns. After that we had a meeting in Al-Bireh girls' school, as the general committee. We were surprised to find the meeting surrounded by the Israeli security. They said by loudspeaker, "You should give up!" so we surrendered. They took us, threw us in prison, and some of us were dismissed from our jobs as teachers (2016).

The committee SMO was marked by this sort of clandestine character until 1991 when the Oslo agreements started to have an effect on developments on the ground in the Occupied Territories. New official PLO unions were introduced. According to Omar Assaf,

In 1991, the PLO established ,from above, unions for everyone. Women, teachers, laborers, etc. The PLO established its own organizations. The political parties were apportioned seats. There was no democratic representation. The sector and the leader didn't correspond. The PA wanted to catch all the people, and Fatah made unions here, there, and everywhere. Other parties maintained their activity in the committees (2016).

During the Oslo period, some activists remained outside of the GUPT while others responded to the PLO directives to join the official union, but in both cases they kept organizing in committees. Unlike during the period of direct military rule, these committees could function in the open with broader participation and elections. Naim Aruri, recalls an important teachers strike in 1997,

So, the first meeting was here in the park in 1997. They contacted each school and said you have to send one representative per school; One from each school in each governorate; A democratic way. They chose a

committee for each city or governorate. Through the governorate committees they chose the top committee (2016).

This expanded committee structure developed a further innovation. Elections were held to fill open positions on the committee so that “If one of us got arrested, we would just elect someone else” (Aruri July 2016). Unlike in the period of direct military occupation, the conditions of Oslo enabled teachers to meet openly and elect representatives rather than relying on clandestine appointment. The strike leaders such as Nabeel Samara, Naim Aruri, and Wasfi Al-Bargouthi are the inheritors of this experience and it is due to this genealogy that the strike committees could emerge in 2016 as a social movement organization with the features that they expressed.

## **Part II: The Union**

It is impossible to understand the successes of the strike committees without simultaneously taking into account the inability of the unions to contain the teachers’ discontent. The experience of the GUPT in relation to the PA shows a marked shift in prevailing strategy by 2006. The PA under Arafat, from 1994 to 2006 pursued an integrative strategy characterized by “procedural integration; formal and informal access; weak repression; possibility of veto but no substantive concessions” (Tarrow 2011:175). After 2006, the PA shifted gears and began to operate in an exclusive manner, using “formalistic inclusion; strong repression; veto possibility but no substantive change”

(Tarrow 2011: 175). The political opportunity which facilitated the emergence of the teachers' strike lies in the shift from one prevailing strategy to the other.

### **Jamil Shadi, a Well-Respected Leader**

The GUPT was brought to the West Bank from Tunisia along with the other PLO organizations in exile that would make up the PA. In its approach to state-union relations, the PA was following after the corporatist model of the Arab nationalist regimes Fatah shared ideological roots with, especially the Egyptian model, establishing politically-loyal unions primarily by appointment (Goldberg 1992). From its earliest days, the PLO had co-opted unions and peasants organizations into its leadership council, though not in substantial numbers, and the Palestinian national movement always regarded such organizations as integral to establishing a future Palestinian state (Hamid 1975).

The history of the GUPT in its early years is dominated by a striking figure, the first general secretary of the teachers' union, Jamil Shadi, a member of the ruling Fatah party. Shadi may have been an appointee, yet he was widely respected by activists including those who remained aloof from the GUPT and continued organize through the structure of the strike committees. Abu Fadi relates his memory of Jamil Shadi,

A very good person came, his name was Jamil Shadi. He was the general secretary, an old person, maybe he was more than 65 or 70. I respected him because he was with all the organizations, you see. He was Fatah but

he respected all the organizations. And he said to me, I want all the colors to be here under the shade of the union (2016).

Shadi, though appointed to his position by Yasser Arafat and the PLO's ruling party, was willing to stand up against those forces in the interest of demands from below. He had to do this, as there were divisions between those who had been active in the West Bank and Gaza, and those officials like Shadi who had returned from exile. As Mohammed Sewan, the general secretary before the return of the exiles, states,

Jamil Shadi used to be head of the union. But there were really two unions – one in exile and one inside. Abu Amar (Arafat) told us, ok Jamil Shadi is in charge of the teachers in exile and you are in charge of the teachers in Palestine (2016).

Abu Fadi relates the tensions that unfolded when Shadi returned and Arafat ordered the unification of the PLO unions in exile and on the ground,

When the authority came here, those who were outside became leaders. Mohammad Sewan, he refused to be the second one. He refused to be the second person. So he worked alone and for a while there were two unions. When Sewan left, I was there at the conference. It was not a good conference (2016).

Ultimately an accommodation was reached, and Shadi became general secretary while Sewan represented the union at international conferences and gatherings.

Shadi's willingness to accommodate and include the activists on the ground extended beyond competing PLO officials like Sewan, and enabled him to unify the GUPT under his leadership. Many but not all of the activists who had been active underground during the days of direct Israeli military occupation, activists who would generate the strike committees, also joined the GUPT. They respected Shadi's willingness to express their discontent to the PA, and to Yasser Arafat himself. Abu Fadi described a meeting in which Shadi confronted Arafat,

I was with him in this meeting, when Abu Amar said "let them come here to the district." Abu Amar said, "Jamil Shadi, stop the leaflet you are circulating!" Because, we activists were asking for a strike at that time. Abu Amar told him to stop us from agitating for the strike at all. Jamil Shadi said to him, "I am the honest secretary. I can't cheat the teachers. Excuse me, Abu Amar, I cannot stop the strike." You see? To Abu Amar it has a meaning for Jamil Shadi to stand up to him. And we began the strike, you see. And we took something! Maybe ten percent to the salary. It was good at that time. A raise from Abu Amar, himself. Ten percent. It was enough to cover our transportation to and from the villages. We can say this was a good outcome (2016).

It wasn't only Shadi who was responsive to the needs of the rank and file, upper PLO leaders showed an inclusive attitude in spite of their management style that was

authoritarian above all. Abu Fadi recalls a meeting with PLO leader Abu Jihad, responsible for internal activities within the Occupied Territories.

After the big strike in 80-81 we went to Jordan. Abu Jihad came and sat with us and we spoke with him about salaries. After Abu Jihad spoke with us about how to do our work, when we left the office of PLO, he said to the PLO official did you pay them something for the hotel or something for them to buy something for their families? You see, when the leader is a leader how does he think? Before leaving the office he thought about how we would fund out stay in Jordan. They gave us 150 JD each, so we were very rich at that time (2016).

It is important to note that the respect for Jamil Shadi was shared, even by Nabeel Samara, the prominent spokesman of the strike committees. According to Samara

Jamil Shadi had a wish, that he wanted the union to be strong. He used to be an honest guy. He used to coordinate with us all the time. It didn't matter if you were from the People's Party or the DFLP. He had a wish just to end this life with honor, to say thank you, I got something for the teachers. He wasn't a greedy person. It was his personal wish. So this person was one thing, and we faced other things from from Fatah and the PA (2016).

In this way, Samara detaches the figure of Shadi from the PA's prevailing policy which has shifted away from the more pliable policy that Shadi's presidency of the union expressed.

### **The Struggle for a Syndicate**

While the activists who launched and propagated the strike committees found themselves increasingly in opposition to the GUPT officialdom, their ultimate aim was always the incorporation of their activities into the union and ultimately the reform of the union structure. The goal of the committee activists was the creation of a syndicate, a union within the union, in order to clearly express and agitate for the needs of public school teachers. As Wasfi Al-Bargouthi states,

You know each one has his own syndicate within the GUPT, higher education, private schools, but we public sector do not have our own syndicate. We only have the general secretary of the union to represent us. So we used to have this demand in all strikes. We need our own syndicate, but it's not there (2016).

An agreement between the strike committee leaders and Shadi seemed to be on the table in 2000. According to Al-Bargouthi,

We had meetings with the general secretary at that time, Jamil Shadi, and we got an agreement from him to form a committee called the Demands Committee, that would be part of the union. And all the parties agreed –

even Hamas. So Jamil Shadi he got everyone in the union. There were 24 members, and we called it the Syndicate for Public School Teachers. It was the first time we had a syndicate for public schools. And we got an agreement that in October 2000 we were going to have an election for all the public schools leading to a big conference in January (2016).

Historic events interceded to disrupt the diplomatic efforts between the strike committee activists and Shadi's GUPT. As Al-Bargouthi recalls,

In September we got the Second Intifada. So we lost the communication and we didn't contact each other and all the people were concerned about the Intifada and they weren't concerned with the teachers or any sector (2016).

Perhaps if the agreement between Shadi and the committee activists had been carried through, the committees might have become contained within the union structure. The activists may not therefore have been present and prepared in opposition to the union to propose strike committees to the striking teachers in 2017. This, however was not the course of events and the PA began to change its prevailing strategy.

### **The Shifting Policy of the PA**

Once the dust settled from the Second Intifada long enough for the teachers to get their bearings and for the activists to return to their preoccupations with the union, the prevailing strategy of the PA was beginning to shift and the style and methodology of

leaders like Jamil Shadi were starting to give way to a more exclusive, less responsive prevailing strategy. According to Al-Bargouthi,

In 2004, we started small strikes under the leadership of the Demands Committee, but then came 2006 and Fatah refused to deal with the Demands Committee. Jamil Shadi had no problem with this committee but Fatah did, and they said no (2016).

Just when it looked like the committee activists were going to find a way to make an agreement with the union, the tables turned and everything was further upset by the election of Hamas to the PA in 2006. The fateful election of 2006 began the governmental split between Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah-dominated PLO in the West Bank, casting its shadow over politics within the teachers union. According to Samara,

In 2006 when Hamas got elected we refused to have a strike until the beginning of the teaching year. There were financial problems because the international donors stopped giving money. I wanted to make this part clear, because of the financial problems at this time, we didn't want to get involved in the politics. We saw the limits, the problem is international (2016).

However, the split also opened up some opportunities for maneuver. In October 2006, the Demands Committee launched a month-long strike demanding transportation fees for teachers to get to work. According to Samara,

We were at a dead end road, and it was all for nothing. The teachers didn't even have the transportation fees to arrive at their schools. So we announced an open strike. And we put the charges or responsibility on both governments. So the slogans used to be "Give us transportation fees to get to our schools" (2016).

Samara recalls the bitter negotiations between the Demands Committee and the PA, and how the party divisions created possibilities to play one party off against the others. .

So at that time we already had an agreement to have a kind of salary or payment in order for the teachers to pay for transportation to their own schools. We put pressure on Hamas to pay. We said the left wing is willing to pay but as Hamas you go back on the agreement. They agreed to pay 1000 shekels (2016).

However on the question of the public school teachers' syndicate, neither Hamas nor Fatah were willing to budge, especially as the acrimony between the two parties rose to the level of armed conflict. According to Samara,

We had agreed to have 25 well-known teachers in the Demands Committee and I have documents. It was a big surprise that two days after signing, Fatah and Hamas called me and they were out of everything they signed. It was all cancelled, stopped, nothing! It was all gone. After that we were here only in the West Bank as a Demands Committee. In this

period instead of holding elections for public sector teachers to the GUPT they just appointed a few people by party. No election (2016).

While Jamil Shadi was still in control of the GUPT, the doors had been slammed to the activists of the committees, at the same time that the PA overall was changing its prevailing strategy. As Samara wryly explained,

After 2007, the general secretariat of the union – there were 13 members and including the general secretary Jamil Shadi, 8 of them were from Fatah. They can do what they want. Where's the democracy? This is a one party state. Until this day it is the same. They are afraid of holding any elections, real elections, anywhere. And any elections without Hamas, Fatah will win so they refuse to have them (2016).

The shutting out of the Demands Committee from forming a public school teachers' syndicate within the GUPT during the mid-2000s all but guaranteed the activists' presence outside and opposed to the union and prepared the conditions for the oppositional mobilization of 2016 against the GUPT. However, with Jamil Shadi still in charge, many teachers could still look to him and to the GUPT as generally representative of, and willing to stand up for their interests as he had historically demonstrated.

### **The Death of Jamil Shadi**

Jamil Shadi died in 2011, leaving the post of general secretary to be filled by new administrators, essentially appointed by the PLO. The character and quality of Shadi was

already out of sync with the changes in prevailing strategy demanded by Mahmoud Abbas' PLO. By the time of his death in 2011, Jamil Shadi was considered persona non grata by his colleagues in Fatah. In a striking demonstration of this fact, Nabeel Samara recounts the story of Jamal Shadi's funeral.

When Jamil Shadi died, we have a tradition that those who have a close relationship with a person, when they die, they line up to pay their respects. So when Jamil Shadi died it was shocking. Fatah members like [future General Secretary] Ahmed Anis were not in the line! Fatah abstained from Jamil Shadi's funeral. They didn't give him respect, as it should be, so we had discussions with Fatah, and we from the committees stayed for three days to pay our respects to this guy (2016).

Clearly, from this anecdote, one can see that a demonstration was being made, especially by the incoming general secretary, Ahmed Anis, that the attitude and policy of Jamal Shadi would not be the future attitude and policy of the GUPT.

One of the first acts carried out by the GUPT once Jamil Shadi had died was the reorganization of its general secretariat. The ranks of the general secretariat were expanded and the number of officials appointed from above by the government was increased. According to Wasfi Al-Bargouthi,

When Jamil Shadi died they elected 15. But then they expanded it to 23 by orders from the president, Abu Mazen. They did it to give Fatah supporters

positions. They don't have a real election; they just pick one from this school, one from that school, where they have a base. The general secretary was Mohammad Sewan until January 2013 and after that came Ahmed Anis (2016).

No longer could the committee activists look to a union headed by a sympathetic figure like Jamil Shadi, as Nabeel Samara explained,

After 2013, and all the political interference and the lack of any real elections, from this moment we began to think of what to do. You know, the leadership of the union was Fatah so any decision taken at this time was with the agreement of the PA. Until now, the union has just been an agreement with Fatah (2016).

The shift in prevailing strategy was underway even during the last years of Jamil Shadi's life and tenure as general secretary, and it would be fully realized with the next administration of the GUPT under Ahmed Anis.

### **The Brief Ascendance of Ahmed Anis**

Ahmed Anis was elected by the general secretariat of the GUPT to lead the union after a brief period in which the GUPT was managed by Jamil Shadi's second in command, Mohammad Sewan. As general secretary, largely seen as a PA appointment, Anis suffered a major backlash when the PA reneged on the 2013 agreement which he had signed. It is, however, too simple to look at his role and decide that he was simply a

pawn of Mahmoud Abbas and the PA. In fact, as many of his colleagues pointed out, Anis had a history of participation in the union and teachers struggles. The PA, with its shift in prevailing strategy was preparing to make sure he would not become another intransigent leader like Jamil Shadi. This played out with a combination of punishments and rewards for Anis.

Ahmed Anis began his activity in the teachers' union after returning to the West Bank from exile in 1995. According to Anis,

I became a teacher in Palestine for the second time under the PA. So I noticed with a group of friends that the teachers' salaries were low. So in Kuwait I used to be active with Jamil Shadi and the general secretariat in exile. So in 1995 we had an election in the West bank and Gaza – in the branches. So for the first time, I became a member of the executive board of the Ramallah branch. At that time we had many back and forth confrontations with the government. Sometimes we gained something and sometimes we lost something (2016).

Anis does not recall the interactions between the committee activists and the union in as appreciative terms as Nabeel Samara or Wasfi Al-Barghouthi.

So in 2000 I was appointed to the general secretariat by Yasser Arafat. We worked for almost five years with the general secretary Mr. Jamil Shadi.

At that time many activists became active against the union, calling themselves the coordination committees (2016).

Nevertheless, activists such as Abu Fadi recall that Anis had a history as a leader.

According to Abu Fadi,

The teachers do not know Ahmed Anis. He had been a leader! During a strike he brought his teachers to Ramallah. When he came to the union he doesn't have anything to do, just got to conferences in Egypt and stuff.

They didn't see him when he was strong. They brought him to the union to make him weak (2016).

In 2013, Ahmed Anis signed an agreement that would put him between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand the 2013 agreement, a series of salary increases which did little to keep up with the cost of living and did not equalize teachers' pay scales with other PA employees, was grudgingly accepted by teachers. On the other hand he was identified with the government which later failed to meet those salary increases, claiming financial hardship. As Anis, recalls

The 2013 agreement isn't a great agreement but it had some things. Three main items, pay scale, promotions, and salaries. But the way the government tried to implement it, slowing down and going back and forth, the teachers started to say there's something going on. So we contacted the government and they said nothing, The snowball started rolling five or six

months ago when the strike started. I lost control and I felt I couldn't influence the teachers. So I said I have to respect myself and resign (2016).

According to Abu Fadi, Ahmed Anis had the chance to act, perhaps, as Jamil Shadi would have in a similar circumstance. Abu Fadi recalls a confrontation he had with Ahmed Annis on the eve of the strike,

Ahmed Anis didn't do something good for the teachers. He couldn't stand and speak for the teachers. I confronted him that night. I said, "Ahmed, my friend, there is a meeting tomorrow in front of the ministry." There was 20,000! From Hebron, from Nablus, from Jenin. all the teachers came. I told Ahmed, "This is your chance. Go and stand with the teachers. Tell the teachers you are with them only. Tell them you are with the strike." This is the big mistake he made. At that time, if he went to the teachers and spoke with them and closed the union and said all of the members of the union now are out... but he didn't do it. This is the biggest mistake (2016).

As Abu Fadi noted, the union had already changed the role of the general secretary. Oftentimes, even as general secretary, Ahmed Anis was out of the country representing the PLO at conferences. Anis was rewarded for not taking the path he might have by these lucrative assignments. After his resignation as general secretary, Anis was assigned

as representative of the Arab unions in Damascus, and later Egypt when conditions in Syria made that location too dangerous. As Abu Fadi (2016) states, “They rewarded him with a red [official] passport”.

### **The New Union Officialdom, A Continuing Trend**

The new officialdom that emerged after the strike deepened the PA’s prevailing strategy of exclusive administration of the unions. The general secretary who was picked to follow Ahmed Anis, Said Irziqat relates his perspective,

I’m with the teachers rights, but these have to be under the law so when it is organized you will see results. If it is not organized, it’s going to be a mess. The general secretary needs to have his own plan and everybody needs to stick to that plan (2016).

In response to the strike, the union officials launched a plan for restructuring its branches.

According to Irziqat,

The first thing we are doing is restructuring all of the branch secretaries and empowering them to represent the teachers. We will have elections in all the branches and elect good leaders. With the elections the branches will be under personal control of the general secretariat (2016).

As far as the strike is concerned, Irziqat states,

In the strike there was no plan, just a mess – an anarchist thing. Because there was no plan and no goal, and everyone was allowed to just do random things (2016).

The veteran activists of the teachers movement have harsh words for Irziqat. According to Abu Fadi (2016), “The new one? He's a kid. You know Karzai in Affghanistan? He's a leader like that.” Nabeel Samara (2016) puts it like this, “Under the pressure of the teachers’ movement, Ahmed Anis withdrew, but he came in a new form – the new guy is the same. What’s his name? Said Irziqat. Only the name has changed.”

After the strike, the GUPT officials attempted to make a gesture towards inclusion by coopting members of the strike committees onto the general secretariat. Hilme Hamdan, DFLP member is one such activist. According to Hamdan,

The most important thing is to protect the union, the teachers union, because it’s one of the PLO institutions, and to reform and strengthen this union. There was a demand from the first of the strike – to force the leader of the union to step down. After that the snowball started moving and other demands started showing (2016).

Hamdan says he is fighting in the central committee for some of the views of the strike committees, particularly the demand for new elections in the union and a separate syndicate for public school teachers. According to Hamdan, (2016)

So, we tried to have the election – a real modern election to have the percentage of representatives by school, with a certain quota or something. Otherwise if we don't go to all the teachers to get their votes, we'll just have the same percentages from the different parties - each with its own quota. So the elections are very important. The other part that is that there are people who are still active and trying to have a syndicate, parallel to the union. We are still negotiating with each other - some say they want to be under the union, and some say we need to stay separate. We try to convince them to be with the union, inside the union, to change the rules of the union (2016).

According to Naim Aruru, one of the outside activists that Hamdan is referring to, Hamdan's presence is merely a token gesture. He states that,

After the strike, one or two each from the small left parties – one or two from PFLP, one or two from DFLP, they share seats in the union. And they have a representative in the central committee, Hilme Hamdan. They tried to say that Mr. Hilme was in our movement. It doesn't work. I called him to ask why he did that? He tried to explain but there's no good explanation. They are captives of the central committee (2016).

Hamdan's activity is further complicated by another aspect of the GUPT's functioning. Hamdan is at once an official in the union, and also the director of a center for teacher

training, a lucrative appointment from the Ministry of Education. He finds himself in the contradictory position of fighting the Ministry of Education and being a part of it as director of the center. According to Hamdan,

I am a Ministry of Education employee and a union official, so I am working as an employee and as the director. It is wearing two pants and two hats being in the ministry and the training center, it is a mixed thing and not easy to figure out (2016).

According to Said Irzaqat, the union is planning to be more involved in these sorts of training centers and projects.

We are planning to provide services for the teachers through the general secretary and there's lots of projects, including economic projects, for the teachers. These projects are going to cooperate with civil society, not just the ministry. First, the union is working to maximize the salary of the teachers, but the other project is a strategic plan, and this strategic plan involves all the branches and the general secretariat, and we will have training and professional development for all the teachers in the union. We are also partners with the educational ministry, preparing a modern curriculum which is open-minded for teaching the students and showing different cultures (2016).

It isn't hard to hear in these words, as Hamdan also suggests, a situation in which GUPT officials are becoming more and more involved in government-funded projects that attach the officialdom materially to the funding structure of the PA and make it less responsive to the membership.

### **The Union Today**

The prevailing strategy of the PA via its representatives in the union today is one of total hostility to the strike and the committees that led the strike. Gone is the willingness of an official like Jamil Shadi to balance the force of the teachers, including those led by the committees, against that of the interests of the PA. The PA tried to give Anis's resignation an air of democratic reform as, indeed, it was the will of many teachers that he be replaced. The statements of Said Irziqat indicate, however, that the policies of the PA vis a vis the GUPT will continue exactly as they have, if not more so. This is what's at stake for the union, now. According to Naim Aruri,

This point is a big conflict between us and Abu Mazen. They change some people and then other people show up. Abu Mazen promised to change the mistake, to build the union and do this. But this is only words. I asked him, "What did you correct?" Nothing! They brought another Ahmed Anis! What is he now? Ambassador! What is this policy? For me, this is the same policy as from 1967 and 1982, of the Israeli occupation to forbid unions (2016).

Overall, the shift in prevailing strategy is like a tightening valve, the pressure within the system is increased as the social situation heats up. This creates opportunities for contentious politics when one or another affront by the PA or union officials provides an opportunity for teachers to engage in further cycles of contentious politics.

### **Reviewing the Movement, Looking Forward**

The strike committee SMO remains ready at hand for Palestinian teachers. Activists like Wasfi al-Bargouthi, Naim Aruri, and Nabeel Samara who are still engaged with the teachers' issues, embody past strikes and movements, providing a reservoir of organizational experience, able to transmit the strike committee organizational form in moments like the 2016 teachers' strike.

The PA's renegeing on the 2013 agreement provided the trigger for the mobilization in 2016. Due to the shifts in prevailing strategy on the part of the PA, the GUPT was unable to impose the conditions written into the 2013 agreement, creating a situation in which it was possible for the teachers to act en masse through the strike committees, sustain their movement, and finally demobilize on their own terms.

Looking toward the future, there are a few possible roads that the actors in this drama could take. On the part of the strike committee leaders, their goals are clear. They would prefer an incorporation of the strike committee democracy into the structure of the existing union as a public school teachers' syndicate, to transform the GUPT from an

instrument under control of the PA to an instrument that teachers feel represents their interests. Proposals for the reform and restructuring of the union were widely circulated by strike committee leaders in the wake of the strike (Samara 2016). If this path were taken by the PA, it might result in the subsumption of the strike committees within the GUPT and their disappearance as a social movement organization.

The reaction of the PA, however, has not been encouraging for those seeking greater democracy in the GUPT. The new central committee is loyal to the PA and hostile to the activists of the teachers' strike. While the honoring of the 2013 agreement was promised, on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, the PA announced that teachers engaged in any new strike action would be subject to layoffs (*Ma'an* 2016). In Irziqat's promises to strengthen the branch secretaries' control over union locals, one can see that the prevailing strategy of the PA vis a vis the GUPT play out. According to Murad Tamimi (2016), the Minister of Education visited the GUPT offices repeatedly in the months following the strike, aiming to enlist the union itself in monitoring and disciplining teachers who are engaged in organizing. Even after the strike teachers have faced continued intimidation including violence (*Ma'an* 2016). There was a palpable fear of retribution on the part of individual teachers. During my interview with Nabeel Samara, our volunteer translator, an English teacher from Ramallah, broke off halfway through the interview and excused himself because the content had become too alarming for him (2016).

Nevertheless, the teachers' strike of 2016 might be exceptionally important as an experience of contentious politics, and not just for Palestinian teachers. The teachers' relationship to the GUPT and the PA is only one facet of the changing relationship between Palestinian society and the PA. This paper has focused on one constituency engaged in contentious politics, that of the teachers in public schools. However, it would be useful to apply a similar model to observe conflicts in other sectors whether or not they reached the scale and importance of the teachers' strike of 2016. What other forms of mobilization might we see in the future? The prevailing strategy of the PA may yet generate new political opportunities. There is a deep resonance within the population for struggles that demand dignity. For the teachers, it remains to be seen if and when the strike committees might be re-engaged and lead to an upset in the status quo. As Anwar Awad said, "We have the committees ready to go, they are just sleeping." (2016)

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