

## **Social Workers for a Free Palestine: World Social Work Day Online Event, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024.**

Napoleon Bonaparte is credited with saying ‘a good sketch is worth a long speech.’ During the past seven months words have lost some of their power to convey the visceral horrors of the genocide unfolding in real time in Gaza. As social workers on World Social Work Day, we understand the significance of life stories and of validating the lived experience of those we work alongside. However, in times of conflict, we also know that the first casualty is often the truth, and narratives are easily distorted or silenced. Accordingly, the newly formed campaign group ‘Social Workers for a Free Palestine’ hosted an online event to afford our Palestinian colleagues a space to use their own voices and their own words to describe the current challenges faced by practitioners in Gaza and across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. We heard powerful and moving testimonies which tethered lived experiences to material reality and framed the easily uttered internationally held social work values of social justice and freedom against the backdrop of a bloody genocide. In the words of a social worker in Gaza, Mohammed Sharif: ‘We Die Every Day’.

From the UK, legendary film director and activist Ken Loach, UNISON Scotland member and anti-Zionist social worker Naomi Junnor, and retired social worker and activist Mick Bowman who recently walked 2500 miles from Calais to the West Bank, each contributed to a commentary on the historical suffering of Palestinians and the current failure of the international community to prevent the genocide. They called for solidarity; for the evidence of Palestinians to be broadcast and shared, for awareness-sharing and for witnessing; for an end to the negative portrayal of Palestinians in the media as terrorist sympathisers, haters of Jewish people, or uncultured or uncivilised victims lacking agency; for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement to be fully supported; for ongoing conversations about antisemitism and Jewish solidarity; and for politicians to be held to account for allowing the dehumanisation of a population which justifies their oppression and collusion in war crimes.



*Ken Loach, legendary Film Director and Activist*



*Naomi Junnor (UNISON Scotland)*



*Mick Bowman (Walked 2500 miles from Calais to Palestine)*

Palestinian social work colleagues delivered harrowing first-hand accounts of their experiences of living through the genocide either through their presentations on the night or through the words they shared with Raed Amira from the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists, and Arab Federation of Social Workers, introduced by Guy Shennan in a video [rb.gy/8ac9sa](https://rb.gy/8ac9sa) voiced by UK social workers which encourages practitioners to take a stand against genocide. Raed contextualised the current genocide with 70 years of occupation and aggression, destruction, displacement, lack of accountability and apartheid and called upon the International Federation of Social Workers to take a more assertive stance on social justice and freedom, not to normalise colonialism and to challenge genocide. Noor works at Aida Youth Centre in Aida Refugee Camp, where 6000 people occupy 0.7 acres of land and struggle with overcrowding, poor infrastructure, proximity to the apartheid wall and a range of interconnected vulnerabilities requiring educational, psychosocial and humanitarian support which preserve their dignity in a self-directed manner.



*Raed Amira, Palestinian Union of Social Workers & Psychologists*

Noor introduced Munther Amira who spoke to us from Aida Camp as it was being raided by Israeli soldiers. Munther shared a disturbing and profoundly moving account of his experiences as a social worker and activist, focusing on his recent experience as a prisoner under administrative detention without charge, trial and indefinite sentence, which he later shared on Channel 4 news. [rb.gy/sj9lyl](https://rb.gy/sj9lyl). Director of the Board of Trustees of Aida Youth Centre and former General Secretary of the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists, Munther is also a vociferous campaigner for prisoners' rights, for farmers, and against the occupation via civil disobedience. He works to amplify the voices of prisoners and raise awareness about the genocide in Gaza, again with a focus on the hypocrisy of the international community which continues to ignore what is visible. He spoke of his own experiences of lack of food, space, beatings, abuse, isolation and the fragile hold this leaves many prisoners on their mental health, sometimes leading to suicide attempts. He told us about the lack of hope many prisoners now face, but emphasised that they are fighting for the right to live, that nothing will break them, they will continue the struggle for freedom. However, he urged all the free people to join them in their fight, since Palestinians 'cannot do it alone,' another exhortation for UK

social workers to reconnect with their values and ethics and side with oppressed, marginalised and vulnerable people around the world in pursuit of freedom, equality and justice.



*Munther Amira, Director of Board of Trustees of Aida Youth Centre.*

‘Stars of Hope’ is a charity working with disabled women and girls in the West Bank and Gaza. Regional Coordinator Kefah Abu Ghoush described the difficulties facing field workers in times of displacement when the ongoing bombing, lack of technology, lack of food, water, specialist medical care, shelter, transport has led to an increase in new or additional disabilities across the populations. We heard about the increasing psychological impact on practitioners and civilians if they survive occupation and genocide.



*Kefah Abu Ghoush, Regional Coordinator ‘Stars of Hope’*

The event concluded with Sarah Sturge, social worker and one of the founder members of the Palestine-UK Social Work Network, introducing a pledge for social workers, a call for action in line with the principles the International Federation of Social Workers states as central to social work, those being social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities.

### **Social Workers Pledge for Palestine:**

As social workers and social care workers, including students, academics and retired workers, in line with our values and ethical codes, in solidarity with the Palestinian people and to support our social work colleagues in Palestine, we pledge:

- to support the Palestinian people's struggle for freedom, justice and equality, and to refuse to support activities which normalise and justify Israel's illegal occupation and colonising of Palestinian land;
- to raise awareness of Israel's apartheid against the Palestinian people, among our colleagues and in our organisations, and to encourage colleagues and others to act in solidarity with Palestine;
- to heed the call from Palestinian civil society for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights;
- to continue to do all of this, **until Palestine is free.**

For more information about how to sign the pledge, please send an email (and/or join our mailing list) at [sw4palestineuk@gmail.com](mailto:sw4palestineuk@gmail.com).

**Social Workers for a Free Palestine**  
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