

Israel Railways accused of racism over sacked Arab workers

'Hebrew labour' principle lives on

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Global Research, April 06, 2009

6 April 2009

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A decision by Israel's state-owned railway company to sack 150 Arab workers because they have not served in the army has been denounced as "unlawful" and "racist" this week by Arab legal and workers' rights groups.

The new policy, which applies to guards at train crossing points, is being implemented even though the country's Arab citizens — numbering 1.2 million and nearly one-fifth of the total population — have been exempt from serving in the military since Israel's establishment.

Ahmed Tibi, an Arab member of the Israeli parliament, complained to Israel Railways and the attorney general last week, arguing that the move was meant "to cleanse the railways of Arab employees".

"It is an especially grave matter as this is a public company whose operations are meant to benefit all citizens," he said.

The Laborers' Voice, a workers' rights group based in Nazareth, said the new condition of employment was designed to reserve rail jobs for Jews, most of whom are conscripted for three years after finishing school.

It added that Israel Railways was following dozens of other major Israeli firms and thousands of small businesses that keep jobs off limits to Arab workers by defining the roles as security related.

Israel Railways announced last month that all crossing guards would be required to produce a discharge certificate from the army or face dismissal. The first 40 Arab workers received their notices last week, taking effect almost immediately.

Taher Jayousi, 32, from the Arab village of Qalansuwa in central Israel, where 20 of the fired guards live, said they had been told their job would now require them to carry a gun and could therefore be performed only by former soldiers.

One commentator in Haaretz, a liberal daily newspaper, ridiculed the attempt to characterise the guards' role as security related. "A dreamed-up security demand is one of the oldest tricks to reject Arab candidates in job interviews," wrote Avirama Golan.

That assessment is shared by Adalah, an Arab legal group, which has threatened legal

action against the transport ministry for violating the sacked workers' constitutional rights.

Adalah said it was relying on a ruling three years ago in which the courts rejected Haifa University's decision to reserve student accommodation for those who had served in the army.

The position of crossing guard was created in 2006 to increase rail safety after five people were killed and more than 80 injured when a train collided with a stranded car at a crossing point. Nearly two-thirds of the 260 guards are reported to be Arabs.

Such other railway jobs as engineer and station staff are already reserved for Jewish workers, said Wahbe Badarne, director of the Laborers' Voice.

Assad Salami, 35, another of the sacked guards from Qalansuwa, said: "Until now, the company could find few Jews who wanted to do guard work for the low wages we're paid.

"But with an economic crisis looming it has the chance to get rid of us and offer our jobs to Jews."

In a statement defending the new policy, Israel Railways said it was intended to provide job opportunities for army veterans, a social benefit the company described as "significant".

Another of the former guards, Ibrahim Nasrallah, 25, said: "What does that say to us if the company is only concerned about reducing the unemployment rate among the Jewish public?"

He said the use of security as a pretext to avoid hiring Arab workers was one he and his family were familiar with.

"My brother is a chef and has been unemployed for the past eight months. Every time he goes to a restaurant and they see he's an Arab they tell him they are only hiring workers who have served in the army. It's crazy — you need to be a former soldier to cook food in Israel!"

Mr Badarne of the Laborers' Voice said he has heard similar stories from other Arab workers.

"Laws against discrimination exist in Israel. The problem is that there appears to be no interest in enforcing them.

"If I go to the shopping mall, even the notices in the windows asking for sales assistants require army service from applicants.

"At least in these cases we can prove that it is racism we are dealing with.

"More sinister, however, is the more recent practice of employers telling Arab applicants that a position is already filled to avoid the threat of legal action. There the racism is veiled."

Large sections of the economy are officially off limits to Arab workers because they fall

within what Israel defines as its security industries, especially weapons manufacturers, the airports and national airline, ports and refineries, and the various security agencies.

But he said many large state-owned corporations that are not involved in security fields were also reluctant to employ Arabs, sending a message to smaller firms that discrimination was legitimate.

According to figures provided in 2004 by Nachman Tal, a former deputy head of the Shin Bet, the domestic security service, only six of the 13,000 employees of the Israeli Electricity Corp were Arabs.

Ehud Olmert, Israel's former prime minister, admitted racial discrimination was rife in a speech to the parliament in December. "It is terrible that there is not even one Arab employee [out of 900] at the Bank of Israel."

Of the civil service, he added: "There is no arguing that some government ministries did not hire Arabs for years."

Government statistics show that 12.5 per cent of all Arab college graduates are unemployed, nearly four times the figure for Jewish graduates.

Even those who do work are often forced into low-paying and menial jobs, Mr Badarne said.

Mr Salami, who trained as a schoolteacher, said that, among the 20 guards from his village, four were lawyers.

Mr Badarne pointed out that the long-standing Zionist principle of "Hebrew labour", or Jews employing only other Jews, still had great influence in Israeli society.

He was especially critical of the country's trade union federation, the Histadrut, which has traditionally also been one of the country's largest employers.

It did not allow any admission of Arab workers until a decade after Israel's creation and even then it set up a separate, and marginal, Arab section within the organisation, he said.

"Unusually for a trade union, poor workers, and that means, overwhelmingly, Arab workers, are simply not on the Histadrut's agenda. It is there to protect the jobs and good salaries of workers in the large state corporations and government offices."

He added that his organisation, which offers Arab workers support services and legal advice, was currently seeking redress for many Arab workers who had been sacked after attending demonstrations in January against the Israeli army's attack on Palestinians in Gaza.

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