



Book Review

Employing the Enemy: The Story of Palestinian Labourers on Israeli Settlements. Matthew Vickerey. 2017. London: Zed Books. 152 pages, ISBN 978-1-7836-0995-6. Paper (\$24.95)

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Aymad is an electrician from the Palestinian village of Nahhalin in the occupied West Bank. He works in the nearby Israeli settlement of Beitar Illit, building houses for Jewish settlers on land confiscated from Nahhalin and two other Palestinian villages. “We, many of us, are working on land that has been stolen from our own families, from our own villages,” Aymad explains. “Land that has been taken by the settlements or by the Wall. It fills me with shame” (Vickery 2017: 49). In *Employing the Enemy*, journalist Matthew Vickery tells the story of Aymad and the tens of thousands of other West Bank Palestinians who work in Israeli settlements. It is an uncomfortable story that rarely gets told; a story of humiliation, exploitation, and complicity. Vickery challenges the Zionist myth that settlement employment is both an attractive option for Palestinian workers and a space of reconciliation where Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis can build positive relationships. And he counters the Israeli assertion that Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns actually harm Palestinian workers. In fact, Vickery demonstrates, settlement employment constitutes a form of forced labor that exploits and intensifies the vulnerability of Palestinian communities.



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Working in Israeli settlements is highly stigmatized in Palestinian society. The Palestinian Authority has even declared (but cannot enforce) a ban on settlement employment. Within this context, Vickery sets out to explain why Palestinian workers would accept these jobs. Over and over again, he quotes Palestinian workers insisting that “We have no other choice” (4). As one worker explains, “I hate this work. And I know there are people that have this idea that I am a traitor for it – and I understand it, I agree with it even, but I don’t have another choice, I have to do this” (59).

Vickery explains that Israel has created the conditions that force Palestinians to accept work in the settlements. To begin with, Palestinians are required to obtain a permit from the Israeli military authority to legally work inside Israel or the settlements. The military uses these permits to punish resistance and reward subservience. Palestinians with marks on their security record, for instance, are systematically denied work permits. And the military restricts the overall number of permits during periods of heightened resistance. Moreover, work permits indicate where a person is allowed to work and what type of work they can do. Palestinians, therefore, are only allowed to work when and where the state decides. And Israel now directs more than 50% of work permits to the settlements.

Along with the 20,000-30,000 Palestinians with permits to work in the settlements, another 10,000 Palestinians work in the settlements without permits. Workers without permits are particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse. Yet, as Vickery explains, Israeli labor laws are rarely enforced in the settlements. This means that all Palestinian workers are subject to wage theft, beatings, verbal abuse, summary dismissal, and other forms of racial capitalist violence. 80% of Palestinian settlement workers earn less than minimum wage; some earn just 30% of the legal minimum. Most are denied legally guaranteed medical and unemployment benefits. And Palestinian women and children, some as young as eleven years of age, confront the most extreme forms of abuse and exploitation.

Vickery points out that Israel also funnels Palestinian workers to the settlements by stifling economic development in Palestinian villages. The Israeli military systematically denies Palestinian applications for permits to build factories, quarries, greenhouses, roads, and even wells. And the state suppresses Palestinian agricultural development through its control over land, water, and access to markets. As a result, Palestinian villagers depend on jobs in Israel and the settlements to survive.

In addition, Israel has created captive labor markets by fragmenting the West Bank into dozens of isolated Palestinian enclaves. The Israeli military controls Palestinian movement between these enclaves through a system of permits enforced at military checkpoints throughout the West Bank. Because it is extremely difficult for Palestinians to travel long distances for work, proximity has become an important prerequisite for employment. This means that Israeli settlements have a captive labor market in nearby villages. Vickery’s discussion of these captive

markets – which he calls “precincts of potential employment” – is one of his most trenchant observations.

A second important discussion is Vickery’s description of Palestinian labor brokers. Serving as middlemen, these brokers hire teams of Palestinians to work in the settlements. Using a middleman allows Israeli employers to avoid signing contracts with Palestinian workers, protecting the employers from accusations of abuse. As Vickery explains, “It is the job of the middleman, not just to hire and fire workers, but to make the whole process as ambiguous as possible” (24-25). Labor brokerage is an extremely lucrative yet highly controversial business. Because of their close ties with Israeli employers, labor brokers can obtain work permits and help Palestinians find jobs. But they are generally detested as complicit with the occupation. As one labor broker told Vickery, “I consider myself a criminal” (28).

Vickery’s analysis of construction work provides another set of important insights. As I indicated above, Palestinian construction workers express intense guilt and shame for participating in the expansion of Jewish settlements on confiscated Palestinian land. Vickery argues that the ultimate humiliation is experienced by Palestinians who have no choice but to accept work building settlements on land that once belonged to their own families. Moreover, he points out, construction workers experience waves of contradictory emotions that “ebb and flow depending on the Israeli government’s decisions regarding the expansion of the settlements” (52). When Israel announces plans to expand a settlement, Palestinian construction workers in nearby villages understand that it might mean steady employment but that it will also mean further land confiscations and home demolitions.

Overall, therefore, Vickery argues that settlement employment is a harsh reality imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli state. With few other options, vulnerable Palestinian villagers depend on low-wage jobs in nearby settlements to survive. Settlement employment is not a space of growth and dialogue, but rather a space of ruthless abuse and racist exploitation. Vickery concludes by arguing that Israel should be held accountable for violating the International Labor Organization’s convention on forced labor.

Employing the Enemy contributes to the small but growing literature on the economic dynamics of Israel’s occupation. Vickery’s vivid descriptions and accessible arguments are the hallmarks of a good journalist. But his arguments would be stronger with more attention to the historical, global, and settler-colonial contexts.

To begin with, Vickery does not discuss the historical tension between the exploitation and exclusion of Palestinian workers. Until the 1920s, Zionist settlements prioritized the exploitation of low-wage Palestinian workers. Later, the Labor Zionist movement fought to deny work to Palestinians in order to reserve jobs for Jewish settlers. Yet many Jewish-owned businesses – before and after the formation of the state – continued to rely on Palestinians for low-wage work. And after occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, Israel incorporated the occupied

Palestinian population into the Israeli economy. Offering wages that were higher than Palestinians had seen under Jordanian or Egyptian rule, Israel encouraged village residents to take jobs in Israel and the settlements. This provided Israeli firms with a source of cheap labor and enabled the Israeli government to confiscate village lands that were not being cultivated.

The dynamics that Vickery explores only emerged in the 1990s, when Israel used neoliberal restructuring to engineer the disposability of the Palestinian population. By reducing Israeli dependence on Palestinian workers, neoliberal restructuring enabled Israel to carry out its colonial project of concentrating the Palestinian population into zones of abandonment: the besieged Gaza Strip and the fragmented enclaves of the West Bank. Settlement construction is one of the only remaining sources of work for West Bank Palestinians. Palestinians from Gaza do not even have this ‘opportunity’; they have been almost entirely excluded from the Israeli labor market since at least 2006. An analysis of neoliberalism would add depth to Vickery’s analysis of Palestinian disposability. It would also enable Vickery to situate the experiences of Palestinian workers in relation to the global expansion of surplus populations. While the dynamics are context specific, neoliberal capitalism combined with racial domination has produced disposable populations in many parts of the world. Attention to these global dynamics is helpful for resisting the tendency to treat Palestine as exceptional.

Finally, Vickery’s singular focus on the West Bank settlements risks occluding the broader settler-colonial context. Vickery justifies his focus on the settlements by claiming that West Bank Palestinians stigmatize employment in the settlements but see employment inside Israel as “acceptable in general” (18). This suggests that Palestinians view the settlements as the real problem. But most Palestinians reject that notion, arguing that the West Bank settlements are but one manifestation of Israel’s broader settler-colonial project. The BDS movement, for example, calls for a boycott of all Israeli products, not just settlement products. The movement articulates three basic demands: an end to Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; full legal equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel; and, the right of return for Palestinian refugees. These demands highlight the fact that all Palestinians – whether in the occupied territories, inside Israel, or in the diaspora – confront the same overarching system. Situating the West Bank settlements in relation to the larger Zionist settler-colonial project would add depth and nuance to Vickery’s analysis.

Despite these limitations, *Employing the Enemy* offers important insights into the coercive dynamics of settlement employment. It provides a powerful rebuttal to Israeli claims that boycotting settlement products hurts Palestinian workers. And Vickery’s discussions of labor brokers, precincts of potential employment, and the contradictions of construction work are particularly valuable.