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## Trade Unions and Dictatorship in Egypt

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Between 6 and 14 July 2015 Brecht De Smet and Seppe Malfait organized an intensive summer school in the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC), which took “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice” as its central theme. Some twenty-five Egyptian and foreign students from different disciplines and walks of life attended. Three of the summer school speakers agreed to a brief interview for *Jadaliyya* on the current state of the labor struggle and trade unionism in Egypt. Heba Khalil is a director and researcher for the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social rights (ECESR). Wael Tawfiq is a journalist and a leader of the trade union for independent journalists. He is also in charge of the peasant and worker section of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party (SPAP) and works as a counselor for independent unions and organizations related to workers and farmers. Labor activist Fatma Ramadan is the president of the trade union of the public sector workers in Giza. She was once one of the main leaders of the Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), but has frozen her position in its executive office for the time being.

### The Impact of 30 June

After the 2012 presidential elections, Wael Tawfiq foresaw the rise of the current dictatorship. “It was evident from the results that any candidate who would come to power would be sitting on a bomb. The three main candidates who somehow represented the revolution got around thirty-seven percent of the vote. In the second round, a lot of people voted for [Mohamed] Morsi, who was the conservative mask of capitalism, to prevent old regime candidate [Ahmed] Shafiq from taking office. On the other hand, Shafiq received many votes out of fear of a conservative Islamist



**Egyptian workers march to Shura Council at on May Day 2013.  
Photo by Gigi Ibrahim]**

presidency. It was clear that the elected president would face an explosion of the masses at a certain point. After Morsi was inaugurated, the workers' movement immediately expanded its demands and protests to call for Morsi's exit."

In November 2012 Morsi issued a constitutional declaration, which put his decisions above the law and shielded the Islamist dominated Constituent Assembly from dissolution by the courts. A wave of demonstrations by supporters and opponents followed the audacious move, and did not end until Morsi's downfall. Opposition groups ranging from liberals and leftists to *fuloul* (remnants of the Hosni Mubarak regime) joined forces against what they saw as an emergent Muslim Brotherhood dictator(ship). In April 2013, *Tamarod*, a self-proclaimed grassroots movement, reported that it succeeded in gathering millions of signatures on a petition demanding Morsi's resignation and early presidential elections. As Morsi defiantly clung to power, millions took to the streets on 30 June 2013. The generals proclaiming themselves as the protectors of that movement, ousted Morsi, and deflected popular mobilization by instituting a top-down transitional framework that gave them the upper hand. That development was consistent with previous political patterns since the ouster of Mubarak. The divisive question of transition has been used to contain politics within a state-led process to the marginalization of bottom-up street and workplace politics. How have these developments impacted on the labor struggle and the independent trade unionism that blossomed after the 2011 uprising?

The military takeover of 3 July 2013 has thoroughly shaken the developing workers' movement. Wael Tawfiq discerns a twofold strategy that the regime used to divide the workers' movement. "First, they try to get rid of the agitators by coopting them or designating them as Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers. Then they turn to the masses of the movement." Repression and restrictive laws have limited the workers' room for maneuver. Fatma Ramadan: "Initially, the 3 July Coup affected the workers deeply. Both the protests and the right of organizing independent trade unions were hindered. Although workers who protested or organized sit-ins faced violence before 30 June, the killings on the streets after the military takeover sent a clear message to the workers that this regime would continue its violent measures."

"Since the ouster of Morsi, the military, the police, the businessmen and the judiciary have all been lining up against the workers. The repression and the restrictions in the public space have fragmented the labor movement from within. The country was under a state of emergency which disheartened workers from taking to the streets because they faced laws that criminalized them and an increasing number of arbitrary lay-offs", Heba Khalil adds.

In addition to the oppressive tactics, the nationalist propaganda of the government, which depicted workers actions as treason, had a discouraging effect. Workers were urged to keep the wheel of production turning in order to save Egypt, which, according to the state narrative, was under attack by foreign powers. Wael Tawfiq argues that this weakened the spirit of the workers. Fatma Ramadan agrees: "In the aftermath of 30 June, the workers put off their demands until the battle for stability was over for two reasons. First, they hoped the new regime would improve their conditions and called for patience. Second, they were afraid of a Syrian or Iraqi scenario. Private sector capitalized on this to take away gains that the workers had won before. In order to do so, they sometimes laid off workers to break strikes."

The polarization between the Islamist and the pro-military camp has deeply scarred Egyptian society. Wael Tawfiq argues that this cleavage has had no clear effect on the labor struggle: "At no point was there a split within the workers movement between a pro- and anti-Morsi groups. Throughout the history of the Islamist movement, it has been very far from the workers' movement. In contrast to its large influence in the professional syndicates, the Muslim Brotherhood only had small groups of sympathizing workers." According to Heba Khalil, however, there was a split within the workers' movement, albeit limited: "The Brotherhood tried to exert influence in the unions, but they had little impact because they did not concentrate their efforts."

### **The Bumpy Road to Independent Trade Unionism**

The military takeover also thwarted the nascent independent trade unionism. Before the 2011 uprising, militant labor action had produced four independent trade unions, representing the interests of the real estate tax collectors, the pensioners, the health technicians, and the teachers. The revolutionary movement in the streets accelerated and expanded the struggle for independent trade unions, leading to the formation of trade union federations, such as the EFITU in 2011 and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress in 2013, and countless smaller, more localized and informal trade union networks.

The regime made it clear that it stood with the state-controlled General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU) and against the independent unions. Several government figures noted that it would solely deal with the GFETU. "Even the minor issues that the independent trade unions handled before 30 June were taken away from them", Fatma Ramadan points out. "Whereas company managements used to negotiate with the independent unions in 2011 and 2012, the independent unions are not formally represented in any council, board or company nowadays." Wael Tawfiq contends that the absence of laws regulating the freedom to establish independent unions impeded workers' ability to organize. "At the administrative level, for example, the ministry of social welfare rejects the documents of independent unions or refuses to look at them."

The collapse of the independent trade union federations cannot solely be blamed on government actions and inactions. Heba Khalil elucidates some internal difficulties in the organizations. "In 2011, everyone wanted to defend the young project of EFITU. However, it lost legitimacy early on. It could not gather the necessary logistical and financial capacity. This weakness prevented it from connecting the local trade unions. The appointment of its leader and founder Kamal Abu-Eita as minister of manpower in the military-backed government in 2013 dealt a decisive blow to the EFITU. The EDLC on the other hand still exists and has a base membership. From its inception, we have criticized the EDLC because it receives foreign funding. This can have corrupting effects on young organizations, particularly trade unions. This affected workers in other unions who wondered why they did not receive the same financial and logistical support."

Though she sees no reason to be optimistic about the near future, Heba Khalil is very hopeful that, in the long run, the learning process many laborers went through in the past years will culminate in the emergence of a strong independent federation from below. "The workers who went through the trial and error period in the last five years have learned a lot. They experienced that you can organize and have an impact. I hope that small-scale local unions will be able to learn from the struggles with EFITU and come together to build a stronger project. Whether this will take ten years or more, I cannot say."

## **Frenemies**

In order to radically transform the political-economic underpinnings of Egypt, it is necessary for the workers to overcome their spatial separation and isolation from political struggles. In the decade before the 25 January uprising, journalists, rights activists and political parties offered assistance to the labor movement to some extent. How has this nascent collaboration evolved since 2011?

"There are certain relations, but only on a personal level. The SPAP and the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), for example, are working together with the workers. Yet they are no longer engaged with the independent trade unions. When the EFITU collapsed, their relations were discontinued," Wael Tawfiq notes. He is currently preoccupied with trying to push politicians back towards workers. "After the revolution, a lot of rights activists became involved with the workers' movement. One of the main problems of the Egyptian workers' movement was the substitution of politicians by rights activists who contented themselves with defending the workers' direct demands. The ties between the rights activists and the labor movement remain relatively strong."

Heba Khalil sees the mutual distrust between political and labor activists as one of the main impediments for the necessary entwinement of both struggles. "The relationship between political activists and workers has been problematic in the past years. This is one of the reasons that the independent trade unions have not been able to make use of experienced people in setting up their organizations. The workers themselves are wary of cooperating with political parties and activists because they consider themselves a neutral movement. This is a double prejudice, because there are attempts by political activists to speak on behalf of the workers. At the end of the day, however, when the workers needed support to create unions and collect money, political and civil society activists would have explained why and how to organize. Political parties did not offer this technical assistance. Due to the mutual prejudice, we have kept ourselves and our struggles separate."

The regime's continued efforts to drive a wedge between both lines of the struggle is another important hindrance for their entanglement. "That is why, in 2008, the government cracked down very violently on the Mahalla protests which was the meeting point of both forces. Furthermore, they tarnish the image of any political figure that tries to get involved with labor figures", Fatma Ramadan explains. Wael Tawfiq regards the state-led attacks on NGOs as another tool to weaken their ties with the laborers.

Finally, organized wage laborers should be able to connect with other marginalized actors such as farmers and workers in the informal sector. However, the relation between the independent unions and the informal sector is almost nonexistent, according to Wael Tawfiq. Yet Heba Khalil observes that the attempts to organize informal sector workers have continued. "On the one hand, they are very outspoken when they come together. This comes out of a feeling of vulnerability and a position of risk with regard to the state or other people. On the other hand, the trade unions for domestic workers, *zabaleen* (garbage collectors), street vendors and *tuk tuk* drivers were not sustainable and failed to reach out to other workers in the same sector. These organizations go into hibernation after an action. One exception are the street vendors. They managed to transcend their specific workplace and connect with other street vendors." She argues that the situation of the temporary workers is different because this category does not share a consistent workplace or community. The resulting fragmentation makes it more difficult to organize these workers.

In conclusion, despite the political victories of the military-led counter-revolution, which created organizational setbacks, defeats, and obstacles for the social struggle of workers, farmers, and the urban poor, the Egyptian workers' movement is still developing itself through often local, everyday struggles. Below the surface of political society and the media, the Egyptian revolution continues in a more fragmented and downbeat shape. The only option for political forces seeking genuine democratization "from below" is to ally themselves with these popular forms of resistance.

Conversely, the main challenges for the movement are its technical organization (without falling into the trap of bureaucratism), the creation and sustaining of horizontal coalitions between different workplaces, sectors, and subaltern forces, and the politicization of trade unionism.

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