

# **The Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) (Egypt)**

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The Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), established in 1990, and supported by Oxfam Novib since 1993, is an independent civil society organisation whose role is to provide support, facilitate and assist the activation of an Egyptian independent labour movement capable of defending labour rights through lobbying, negotiation, influencing policies and having a clear voice in the society. By giving workers a voice, CTUWS aims to empower marginalised and vulnerable groups to develop their own collective movements and organisations, enabling different social groups to claim their basic rights. It provides training to trade union members and leaders of the workers' movement, gives legal advice in labour conflicts, informs workers about matters related to international labour law and its application in Egyptian law, and gives, if asked, advice and support in formulating demands of workers of their employers in protests and strikes.

The head office of CTUWS is in Helwan, an industrial area near Cairo and it has four local branches. CTUWS is one of the Egyptian few organisations, which dares to speak out on the right of workers to organise independently and on democratisation of the Egyptian labour movement. In August 2005, the Director of CTUWS was severely beaten during a peaceful demonstration for democratisation in Egypt.

Over the past few years, CTUWS has worked intensively on setting up a training centre in Helwan for labour rights activists. The centre organises seminars and publishes on issues of importance to workers. CTUWS has played a vanguard role in campaigning and lobbying on, for example, the 2001 trade union elections, the draft labour law, and amendments to the trade union law. CTUWS has also participated in training sessions for trade union members and activists. The centre maintains contacts with a wide network of international trade unions and human rights groups.

In recent years, Oxfam Novib has supported contacts on labour rights between CTUWS and the Dutch trade union federation Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV, The Federation of Dutch Labour Movement). CTUWS was also active in the NGO lobby against a new, restrictive law on non-government organisations. Between 2001 and 2004, it worked on three major projects: developing workers' skills, monitoring, supporting and promoting labour rights, and addressing the negative effects of globalisation. CTUWS' core activities are carried out within the framework of these projects and include legal aid, publishing, training and representation of interests. The centre also publishes a quality magazine on cases related to labour rights, Kalaam Sanaiye, with a circulation of 3,000. The Centre needs to strengthen its capacity to address more systematically the issue of child labour and the needs of female workers.

CTUWS actively participated, with 25 other organisations, in monitoring the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005. This NGO election monitoring committee documented a number of violations (voting rights, space for the opposition, the right to stand as a candidate, for example) that took place during the presidential and parliamentary elections and shared its findings with the media and the judiciary club. At least two TV stations covered some of the violations.

Most of the campaigns supported by CTUWS led to satisfactory agreements between the workers

and the companies involved. For example, the Union Committee of the El Nasr Steel Pipes Company reversed the decision of the General Union for Workers of Engineering, Metallurgical and Electric Industries to stop their activities regarding two disputes between workers and the management. This enabled the Union Committee to again exercise its union role.

In April 2007, an Egyptian Ministerial decree was issued to close down the headquarters of CTUWS in Helwan. This followed the closure of two other CTUWS branch offices in Naji Hamadi and Mahalla el Kobra in the previous month, without any clear reason. CTUWS raised a legal complaint at the local court against the decision to close its branches but in its view this was not primarily a legal issue but was motivated by political reasons. Thirteen representatives of Egyptian NGOs, political parties and independents organised a solidarity conference in Mahalla and sent a joint protest letter to the Egyptian authorities.

In the months before the closures, CTUWS followed closely the trade union elections in Egypt and provided legal aid to candidates and voters. CTUWS called for the elimination of the administrative restrictions that were an obstacle to workers claiming their right to stand as candidates. CTUWS reports demonstrated clearly the nature of these restrictions, in particular the restrictions caused by the Trade Union Membership Certificate.

CTUWS is a member of the National Civil Society Alliance to Monitor the Elections. In this capacity, it also reviewed the results of the recent referendum regarding the amendments to the Egyptian constitution. This process also covered the constituency in the Qena Governorate. The members of CTUWS trained in monitoring elections took part in this process. CTUWS published a report about the results of the referendum. Particularly in Qena, the election monitors reported problems. It may be that this prompted local authorities to give the order to close the local CTUWS branch in Naji Hamadi.

Recently, there have been a number of protests, particularly in the Egyptian textile sector. CTUWS was often in the news in December 2006 and January 2007 in this regard. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation attacked CTUWS harshly in the media and accused it of being responsible for the strikes. The Egyptian government issued accusations about the creation of disturbances. CTUWS reacted that it has the obligation to defend the rights of workers, including their right to strike. CTUWS stressed that it had no role in creating unrest and called for social dialogue in order to prevent unrest but instead the organisation itself is now being subjected to an escalating series of threats.

CTUWS has tried in the past to register, in accordance with the NGO law, but did not succeed. At the beginning of 2007, CTUWS began again the registration process. In July, it received an official 'receipt' from the Ministry of Social Solidarity, indicating that their application for registration as an NGO has been accepted and that within 60 days they should hear more. Later, an administrative decision was taken to refuse to register CTUWS as a non-government organisation, citing security reasons. CTUWS took this to court and on March 30, 2008, the Administrative Court ruled in CTUWS' favour, stopping implementation of the administrative decision and clearing the way for CTUWS to be registered. This should strengthen their case against the closure of the headquarters and branch offices by government officials.

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## **P.S.**

\* This case study was written as a contribution to the development of *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008. It is published in order to share widely the results of commissioned research and programme experience. The views it expresses are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam International or its affiliate organisations.

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