

Egyptian labor in the revolutionary struggle

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The Egyptian labor movement has a long history of resistance, but the current repressive regime is coming down hard on independent trade union organizing.

When Egypt appears in the international press nowadays, it is commonly about [mass incarceration](#), [torture](#), [stifling of dissent](#) and [white elephant projects](#) by its megalomaniac military dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Unfortunately, the situation of industrial politics and the near-impossible conditions for labor organizing are seldom mentioned.

More than a decade after the January 25 revolution in 2011, basic civil liberties — including the right to the freedom of assembly, to unionize and to form associations and political parties — remain non-existent. In such a hostile environment, Egyptian labor unions are struggling to survive and maintain the independence they built through years of struggle.

Some of these, such as the syndicates of property tax collectors, Bibliotheca Alexandrina workers, health technicians and ambulance personnel, as well as the Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services — a longstanding NGO devoted to training and supporting independent trade unions — are affiliated with [Public Services International](#), which offers them [support](#) in building a trade union model that allows them to survive regime oppression and to defend workers' rights.

In the current repressive environment, international support for, and solidarity with the Egyptian labor movement is a critical factor that may provide a breathing space for some organizers in the workplaces, enhance their experiences and enrich union traditions. Above all, this solidarity may help deter the regime — whose legitimacy partially stems from Western sponsorship — from abusing and crushing the tiny margin left for independent trade union resistance.

A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

Most of the literature dealing with the 2011 Egyptian revolution tends to highlight the [role of social media](#), the [significance of Tahrir Square](#), or the [liberal “youth” movements](#). Except for some content produced by left-wing journalists and academics, the role of the Egyptian working class before and during the revolution, remains largely undiscussed, despite the fact that it was the industrial actions which [paved the way](#) to the revolt and essentially brought down the former dictator Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

Historically, the Egyptian labor movement played a central role in the early-20th century movement for independence from British colonialism. It participated strongly with mass strikes in the first half of the past century, most notably the mass strikes of [1919](#) and [1946](#), which shook the foundations of both the British colonialists and the local Egyptian elites. In 1977, a [national uprising and a general strike](#) against neoliberal decrees, [almost toppled](#) the regime of President Anwar Sadat.

The labor movement also provided activists who filled the ranks of the armed *Fedayeen* movement, which targeted foreign occupying troops in the Suez Canal in the 1940s and '50s.

The 1952 coup and the rise of President Gamel Abdel Nasser's populist politics, had a contradictory effect on the working class. On the one hand, the regime nationalized the industries and introduced some level of welfare for the workers and their families. But on the other hand, the regime imposed a brutal crackdown on any form of independent organizing or action by the workers beyond the structures and redlines dictated by the authorities.

By 1957, the regime established the state-run [Egyptian Trade Union Federation](#) (ETUF), effectively nationalizing the unions and putting them under direct state control. The pyramid-like structure was similar to what existed in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. Staffed with bureaucrats, security agents and "friendly" workers, ETUF sought to police the workplace, rather than represent the workers' interests.

ETUF officials never endorsed strikes and — in coordination with the security services — regularly intervened to disrupt industrial actions and threaten labor activists. Moreover, ETUF was effectively the regime's arm when it came to mobilizing the working class — most notably in busing public sector workers to the polling stations to rig the vote in favor of the ruling party, or by mobilizing workers to stage pro-regime "protests."

As the neoliberal onslaught went into full gear by the beginning of the 1990s, ETUF failed to resist austerity measures and privatization policies. Instead, it promoted these new policies and encouraged workers to opt for early buy-outs.

THE ROAD TO REVOLT

In 2004, despite being hit hard on all fronts, the labor movement was gradually reviving in industrial politics, partially aided by [the increasing margin for political dissent](#). The turning point came in December 2006, with the strike in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla.

The strike at Mahalla launched the [Winter of Labor Discontent](#), which quickly engulfed virtually all textile plants in the Nile Delta. The industrial militancy which had started in the textile sector soon spilled over to other sectors of the working class.

ETUF officials played a negative role in the strikes, doing their best to sabotage the industrial actions, collaborating openly with State Security Police and the factory management. On occasion, they were attacked by angry strikers, like in the case of [Kafr El-Dawar](#) in February 2007, when the strikers locked their union officials up inside the factory to force them to join the sit-in.

As the [strike wave](#) continued, turning into the longest in Egypt's modern history since 1946, the [property tax collectors](#) started a series of protests over work conditions and pay, culminating in an 11 day sit-in in front of the ministerial cabinet headquarters in the heart of Cairo. An unofficial committee coordinated the [national strike](#), which at its peak involved more than 30,000 civil servants. Most of the strike committee members were not affiliated with ETUF, whose officials continued to oppose the strike and tried to sabotage protest plans. By the end of the sit-in, it was the unofficial strike committee which conducted the negotiations with the Finance Ministry officials, sidelining ETUF. Following the victory, the strike committee decided not to disband itself, and instead started building a new independent union.

START OF THE REVOLUTION

International solidarity was a cornerstone of the independent union organizers' strategy. The independent trade unionists tried to enlist the help of their comrades around the world, asking for solidarity statements and recognition from international union bodies. Their aim was to send a strong message to the Egyptian regime that there are international actors monitoring the situation

— lest a security blow might fracture the emerging union — and to send a message to their fellow civil servants in Egypt that they were not alone in this historical fight.

At the time, PSI-affiliated [trade unionists](#) around the world sent solidarity messages to their brothers and sisters in Egypt, which were translated into Arabic later and disseminated among mainstream media outlets and activist websites. Others visited Cairo and kept contacts to exchange experiences.

On the eve of the 2011 revolution, there were only three independent unions (property tax collectors, health technicians, pensioners), while strikes across the different sectors of the economy became [daily news](#).

The revolution which started on January 25, 2011, took the heaviest toll of fighting on the first day in the industrial city of Suez. The workers in Suez shut down the factories in solidarity with the uprising early on. Though in the rest of the provinces the workers fought the police and ruling party thugs, it was only by the end of the first week of February that workers across the country broke out in a [spontaneous general strike](#), which forced the military to give up Mubarak, for fear of a total collapse of the regime.

The strike wave, however, continued. The [common aim](#) of these industrial actions was job security and to rid the workplaces from corrupt managers who were closely linked to Mubarak's regime. Amidst these struggles, the question of independent union representation was regularly brought up.

A FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONS

The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) was declared in the heart of Tahrir on January 30, 2011, in the midst of the 18-day uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak. At the time, the EFITU was spearheaded by the property tax collectors — led by their charismatic Nasserist activist Kamal Abu Eita — and some militant labor organizers from the different industrial actions in other sectors of the economy, especially those sectors in which ETUF officials had been particularly adamant in their opposition to the unofficial strike leaders.

Despite claiming more than a million members by the end of 2011, the EFITU's union affiliates varied from one sector to another in terms of experience, militancy, skills and consciousness. Some of its members — both individuals and unions — played a central role in their respective sectors in the different waves of industrial mobilizations between 2011 and 2013.

In some of these struggles, there was a degree of remarkable political maturity among the strikers, linking their bread and butter demands with the general revolutionary context. They put forward demands against the militarization of the aviation sector, or against the presence of retired police generals as highly paid consultants for the public transport authorities.

But all throughout the revolution, the EFITU suffered from organizational inexperience and lack of workplace seasoned cadres.

The other problem was the EFITU's leadership [separating political from the social questions](#) despite the presence of veteran political activists among them, including its president Abu Eita himself. This resulted in a failure to mobilize during crucial turning points of the revolution, like the failure of the call for general strikes during the first [Mohamed Mahmoud Street Uprising](#) in November 2011, or to pull together an anti-ruling military junta general strike that was planned on February 11, 2012. Both events were officially endorsed by the EFITU but the impact was dismal.

COUNTER REVOLUTION

The July 2013 military coup led by the current president Sisi was a further setback, if not a fatal blow, for the labor movement and independent unions. The head of the pro-state ETUF, Abu Eita, assumed the post of Labor Minister in the post-coup government, which oversaw some of the worst massacres in Egypt's modern history. Abu Eita regularly denounced both industrial actions as well as his former comrades in the struggle, meanwhile working hard to ensure discipline in the workplaces as the counter revolutionary government launched a full onslaught first against Islamists and later targeting liberals and leftists, squashing the different social movements, including the labor movement. As a result, industrial actions plummeted.

Sisi was officially inaugurated as the country's president in 2014, and after that his regime's "war on terror" only escalated, crushing the remaining pockets of dissent. The independent unions were dealt a [series of blows](#) in 2015, with anti-strike legislation and more repressive regulations in the civil service. This was followed by the [NGOs law](#) which was approved by the president in August 2019 and allowed the state to dissolve the board of any organization for a wide range of "violations" and impose hefty fines.

Today, the EFITU still exists, and so do a number of independent unions beneath it, but they are largely paralyzed by legislation and repression, putting them in a state of clinical death, awaiting a revival of the labor movement.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

In recent years, PSI has worked with its local partners in Egypt, reflecting a core belief in the organization regarding solidarity with labor rights campaigners in the Global South. Since 2013, several projects have been planned and implemented, trying to strengthen the capacities of Egyptian independent trade unionists to peacefully face state repression, develop communication skills and increase mutual coordination.

ROAR spoke to Hosni and Mohamed,* two leading EIFTU officials who stressed the importance of the legal support provided by PSI and its local partners, to overcome the local authorities' tactics that regularly obstruct the creation of independent trade union bodies. "The more international solidarity we get, the safer we are in the current circumstances," one of them said.

The PSI projects supported logistical capacities of the affiliates in engaging in virtual platforms and meetings, organizing advanced training of trainers and capacity building through e-learning platforms and/or webinars.

The PSI also helped develop materials for local campaigns to defend workers' rights, and discuss gender-related issues. Through training workshops and print materials, "PSI and its local partners have helped raise awareness about gender discrimination, and how to resist violence against women in the workplaces," said Hanaa an independent trade unionist in the informal sector.

Another independent trade unionist, Tarek, an ambulance medic, highlighted the importance of in-depth studies on the Egyptian workers, produced by the PSI and its local partners, to fill a knowledge gap. Such research was needed, Tarek added, to empower activists, enabling them to devise concrete campaigning strategies.

PSI also tried to strengthen connections between the local Egyptian organizers and their regional and international comrades, via seminars and workshops, held mainly online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter was also a subject of awareness campaigns throughout 2020 and 2021.

Such projects may be a drop in the ocean of solidarity needed by the Egyptian working class during these tough times. At the end of the day, only an upturn in the industrial struggle on the ground can

carve out a space where workers have the freedom to organize and unionize. Yet, till this happens, the activities of PSI and the solidarity of labor organizers and activists around the world serve to safeguard the remaining pockets of resistance in the trade union scene.

Hossam el-Hamalawy

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