

Egyptian Labor Joins in Protests

Saturday 12 February 2011, by [BRADLEY Matt](#) (Date first published: 9 February 2011).

CAIRO — Egyptian labor contributed its presence in streets across the country on Wednesday, as workers protested low pay and injected a new variable into an uprising now in its 16th day.

Workers at companies in the textiles, cement, chemicals, transport, telecom and tourism sectors joined in wildcat strikes in Cairo and smaller cities throughout the country, blocking major highways and shutting factories.

Estimates of the number of laborers varied, ranging from as low as 5,000 to tens of thousands nationwide.

The central demand for most of the laborers is an increase to Egypt's minimum wage, which has remained unchanged at 35 pounds per month since 1984—about \$6—and the legal right to form independent unions.

By law, individual Egyptian trade unions are organized by the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which is an arm of the state.

Egypt's labor movement has been the sleeping giant of the past two weeks' protests, and its involvement could amount to a real fillip for the antigovernment demonstrations. The workers bring experience at protests and organization to the youth-led protest movement, whose efforts to extract major concessions from Egypt's government was beginning to stall as it entered its third week.

"People were always asking why [laborers] don't join our protests," said Ayman Nour, the head Egypt's opposition Al Ghad Party in an interview on Wednesday night. "Today, it was the right timing that both parties will become one. We're organizing with them from now on."

Nour said he and other opposition leaders had been "coordinating" with laborers. But just as the wider protest movement began without a clear central authority, the laborers' decision to strike on Wednesday can't be traced to a single source.

Most Egyptian companies were closed last week due to the nationwide unrest. Employees trickled back to factories and offices early this week emboldened by news of the sweeping protests.

The decision to strike was taken separately by individual companies, said Rahma Refaat, a programs coordinator for the Center for Trade Unions and Workers' Services, a Cairo-based nongovernmental advocacy organization. Ms. Refaat said her organization helped organize the walkouts.

"It helped that the factories had been closed and the workers were saying they couldn't find anyone to represent them," said Ms. Refaat. "But we did not expect that it would be everywhere like this. Every hour we hear about a strike in another place."

Before the latest antigovernment demonstrations began more than two weeks ago, Egyptian laborers were among the few civil society blocs capable of winning concessions from Egypt's ruling regime.

Egypt has seen an increase in the number of labor strikes over the past five or six years, with many

ending in concessions in workers' favor.

In 2008, about 10,000 property tax collectors camped out in front of Egypt's parliament for nearly two weeks before lawmakers awarded them a 325% increase in their base pay and the right to form one of the country's only independent unions.

A year earlier, 24,000 workers of the Misr Spinning & Weaving Co. in the northern Egyptian city of Mahalla al-Kubra staged a series of walk-outs that forced the public-sector company to award workers bonuses and hazard pay.

One of the Mahalla al-Kubra strikes, which was scheduled for April 6, 2007, gave rise to the 6th of April Youth Movement—an activist organization that was instrumental in planning the Jan. 25 protests that sparked the uprising.

By Matt Bradley

P.S.

* From the Wall Street Journal, FEBRUARY 9, 2011, 5:19 PM ET:

<http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2011/02/09/egyptian-labor-joins-in-protests/>