

# Empowering Egypt's workers revolution

Tuesday 26 April 2011, by [MONKS Kieron](#) (Date first published: 25 April 2011).

**Since the fall of Mubarak, union members formed a new political party and struggle to nationalise their company.**

Protests from textile workers have resulted in a landmark court case, which could see their foreign owned company nationalised [Mona Dohle/Al Jazeera]

It has become a familiar scene in Egypt. Security forces attempted to hold back the crowd, but were swiftly overwhelmed by the chanting masses.

The setting was a small, provincial courthouse in Shubra El-Kom, an industrial town 70km north of Cairo, but the modest surroundings disguised a case that will shape the course of Egypt's ongoing revolution.

April 19 marked the latest showdown in a battle between the Indonesian owners of one of the country's largest textile firms (generating \$4bn annually), and their disgruntled employees.

Furious over lay-offs, a lack of safety provisions and imposed changes in working hours, workers have called regular strikes since the Indonesian takeover in 2007.

"It is no problem to have foreign owners," says textile engineer Dom Atteya Mahmoud, "but they make us slaves, as dogs."

## **Battle for nationalisation**

Their demand is for public ownership to return. If it succeeds, a precedent would be set for hundreds more companies to be nationalised, as was a hallmark policy of Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalist government in the 1970s.

The case rests on establishing the illegitimacy of the Indonesian's ownership contract, which the workers' lawyer, Dr Sayid Mohammed, claims to be riddled with corruption. "They bought the company for \$3mn when it was worth \$174mn. They have lied about conditions and refused external evaluation of the contract, which is illegal," he said.

In this case justice was to be deferred, as the court declared a new ruling date of May 10. Yet the crowds were not placated, and they spent the next hour in the courtyard repeating the classic songs of the uprising, "thowra thowra huta nasr" (revolution, revolution until victory). While factory employees were out in force, they were joined by others with a keen interest in their success.

The newly-former Workers Democratic Party (WDP), inaugurated in March, was on a recruiting mission with their slogan "the workers must be united".

As the crowd finally left court premises, they were syphoned into a new march leading to the party's informal headquarters at a local club. Party manifestos were passed around, passionate speeches promoted rights and freedoms for workers, and a complimentary lunch was served.

As the September parliamentary elections loom into view, various ideological and religious groupings are jockeying for position, and the WDP see a gap in the field.

“There is no party to represent the workers,” said Kamal Khalil, the party’s chief spokesman. He rejects the Social Democrats as remnants of the former regime, and believes the youth parties as too inexperienced.

His members are concerned that Islamist success will undermine Egypt’s secular character, and he does not trust the Muslim Brotherhood’s claims that they are not seeking to monopolise power.

Khalil has a three-point strategy for tapping into support from Egypt’s 25 million workers: They will visibly identify with workers’ struggles like the Indonesian textile firm, showing their grass-roots credentials; they will pour their resources into the areas of highest worker concentration, to maximise their reach; and finally, and most crucially, they will help to establish and promote the formation of independent trade unions.

### **New unions**

In Mubarak’s recently concluded era, trade unions were a state plaything, a semblance of representation that was used to coerce workers into accepting appalling pay and conditions.

Now, in the aftermath of revolution, a new Egypt Federation for Independent Unions has been launched.

Similar to Britain’s Trade Union Congress (TUC), the Federation would serve as an umbrella alliance of worker’s co-operatives in all industries. Their first mission statement includes demands for welfare, social security for all and a new minimum wage of about \$200 per month.

This agenda represents a valuable opportunity for the WDP, who aim to boost their grass-roots credentials with backing from the new federation. They have already secured an endorsement from the Public Transport Authority, Egypt’s largest workers union.

Within the WDP, there are some concerns about the relationship becoming too close.

“Unions aim for instant interests,” says meteorologist and party member Ahmed Shalaby. “We must be building for the future and be practical to include as many people as possible. We cannot reflect any orthodoxy.”

The foundation of WDP policy is the belief that removing Mubarak and his regime was just the first step toward fundamental reform of Egypt’s institutions.

Khalil demands a “a real economic, democratic and social revolution”. Their positions on taxation, housing, pensions and health care are all slanted to better protect Egypt’s working class majority, as well as proposing a more ‘enlightened’ model for education.

### **Class politics**

While the enemy remains the remnants of the former regime, the WDP accept that they must work with the system to an extent in order to develop.

While some socialist organisations have called for a boycott of the September elections for fear that they give an unfair advantage to the established, more organised parties, Shalaby feels such an action “would cut us off and give us no base with the people”.

Khalil acknowledges the elections are sooner than he would prefer but: "We will have candidates. We will be happy to win many seats, but the main aim is awareness and building for the future."

For now, the party have enough on their plate to keep them busy. They are focusing on the fight to nationalise the Shubra El-Kom plant as a strategic step toward wider nationalisation, with a further 230 private companies targeted.

The WDP is not opposed to private ownership in principle, but seeks to reverse the exploitation of resources that began under former president Saadat (and grew rampant in Mubarak's era) with commercial assets being sold off for a fraction of their value, at the expense of Egypt's working class.

Although membership numbers are currently in the single thousands, Khalil is in no doubt over the strength of their movement, which was shown during the revolution. "I do not say we were the leaders, but in the last days, from February 9 to 11, it was the workers who made the government helpless. The seeds were planted with the (textile) strikes over the past five years," he said.

Khalil feels the next battle - to implement the national minimum wage - will prove decisive. "If we succeed in this law, the workers will believe in their power," he says.

Workers have a voice now, he said, and if the party and unions can harness enough of the forgotten 25 million workers, they will have Egypt's foundations shaking again.

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\* From Al Jazeera, Last Modified: 25 Apr 2011 15:09:

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/04/20114221812915532.html>