

Egypt: First May Day Since Uprising

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Egyptians celebrate first May Day since popular uprising

By Yassin Gaber

Egyptians today join together in Tahrir Square to observe May Day as workers who plan to celebrate their new found union freedoms continue to demand social justice.

May 1, 2011 — Ahram online — Three months after the beginning of the Egyptian popular uprising which eventually led to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and top officials of his regime, the country's workers and labour activists are celebrating May Day.

Absent from the festivities, however, will be the president of the republic and the chair of the official Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), both under investigation for charges of corruption and illicit gains. May Day, celebrated by socialist and communists all over the world since the late 19th century, was officially embraced by the Egyptian state in 1963 under Nasser, following a massive wave of nationalisations in 1961, and the founding of the Arab Socialist Union in 1962.

Nasser's populist regime viewed Egypt's working class as a necessary partner in its attempt to economically break away from colonial dependency and achieve self-reliance. During the 1960s the conditions of the Egyptian working class witnessed a great improvement in terms of wages and social benefits.

Kamal Abbas, head of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) in Helwan, says this year's celebrations are "historic" as they mark a new era of independence from the state-controlled ETUF. Workers from many industrial centres in the country, Abbas says, will join in today's celebrations, alongside figures from the newly ormed Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EITUF), and representatives of the International Trade Unions Federation (ITUF). According to Abbas, apart from celebrating the recent triumph of workers, today's May Day celebrations will focus on three key messages. First, the free will of Egyptian workers to form independent trade unions. Second, "Besides having independent unions free from state control", says Abbas, "we are calling for the dismantling of the ETUF".

Third, workers will be calling for a structural readjustment of wages, raising the ceiling of minimum wages and linking it to prices increase.

The EITUF is not however the only organisation raising the banner of the working class in Egypt. A number of socialist parties are under construction at the moment, including the Workers'

Democratic Party (WDP), the Socialist Popular Alliance (SPA) and the Egyptian Socialist Party (ESP). These parties are working hard to articulate a socialist platform and to rally various leftist groups around them.

Among the issues most hotly debated in the meetings of these socialist parties is the role of the state in the economy and its development.

The WDP, for instance, has made strong calls for the renationalisation of a substantial part of the previously privatised industries. The SDP, on the other hand, is not calling for unqualified renationalisation. According to leading economist and SDP founding member Ibrahim El-Issawi, "The private sector has a role to play in autonomous development, but this role should be performed in accordance with a national plan."

Nationalisation, however, is not the central demand of workers who have, in the spirit of May Day, been making vehement calls for better working conditions and an increase to the minimum wage, currently at LE400 (\$70 a month), demanding at least LE1200 (\$200 a month).

According to a 2010 report by the Solidarity Center entitled "The Struggle for Workers Rights in Egypt", the basic monthly minimum wage was set in 1984 at LE35 or about \$6 at the current exchange rates.

After much pressure by workers and legal action by Nagi Rashad, a worker at the South Cairo Grain Mill, [who] sued the government over its 2008 decision not to increase the national minimum wage, the minimum wage was increased in October 2010 when the National Council for Wages decided to push the wage up to the current LE400 (\$70 a month) which is just above the World Bank's moderate poverty threshold of \$2 a day.

Calls for better wages and working conditions are at the heart of May Day's origins. The history of May Day stretches back to the late 19th century when US workers' struggled for an eight-hour work day. The conditions of workers was dire with days stretching on for 16 hours or more in hazardous environments as men, women and children died in the thousands — many in their early twenties.

In 1884, the Federation of Organised Trades and Labor Unions, the predecessor of the American Federation of Labor, announced in Chicago that by 1 May 1886, 8 hours would constitute the legal work day.

Two years later on what would later become May Day, hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets across the US, peacefully demonstrating for social justice. Within days, violence broke out and police began shooting into crowds of civilians. The "Haymarket affair", which saw several people die, ended in the public hanging of four of the event's organisers.

These events and the subsequent celebrations of the "Haymarket martyrs" deaths eventually led to marking May 1st as international workers' day.

In recent Egyptian history, May Day would traditionally see Nasser give a presidential speech, highlighting the importance of social justice and the necessity of increased industrial production.

The president, generally attending celebrations in one of Egypt's focal industrial towns, would hand out his 15-day bonus to the great pleasure of workers who would interrupt their leader, chanting slogans of support and calling for further social rights.

Under president Anwar Sadat and even more so under Mubarak, the celebration became less and less about social reforms and more about the vanity of the state.

In an interview with Al-Ahram Weekly ahead of the 1999 May Day celebrations, Kamal Abbas stated, "[The annual bonus] is LE120 this year. Some people will get it in bulk as it was always dispensed. However, this year it also became optional for management to pay the amount in LE10 monthly instalments. It is like putting an end to the idea that this day should be celebrated at all. It defuses the relevance."

El-Issawi of the SPA notes that "The workers are celebrating [their new union freedoms] on the 1st of May and of course they want to preserve these gains and transform them into legislation."

He continues to explain that the these new found union freedoms are "new mechanisms for the working class to obtain their rights and protect their rights; the only way to do this is to affirm their right to negotiations".

Appropriately, the May Day celebrations will begin with a 20-minute play on the central EIFTU stage which, according to Tamer Fatah, the international relations coordinator of the CTUWS, will serve to explain and educate workers on "freedom of association...and how independent trade unions can serve as a solution to worker's [woes] by strengthening their collective bargaining powers."

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<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/11128/Egypt/0/Egyptians-celebrate-first-May-Day-since-popular-up.aspx>

Egypt's May Day celebrations end on sour note

By Yassin Gaber

After hours of peaceful May Day celebrations, the evening's main events were cut short after dozens stormed the main stage.

May 2, 2011 — Ahram online — Egypt's first independent May Day celebrations ended early today after dozens stormed the event's main stage. The celebration organised in part by the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) took off around midday as different initiatives, parties and representatives from newly formed independent unions took their places in Tahrir Square and hung their banners, readying themselves for the day's events.

Representatives of the Workers' Democratic Party (WDP) alongside members of the Revolutionary Socialists and various unionists marched from Talaat Harb Square to Tahrir Square, chanting, "A workers' revolution against the capitalist government." Various voices called for renationalisation while others called for setting a minimum and maximum wage.

In one corner of the square stood the members of the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP) waving their red flags with the hammer and sickle emblazoned in the middle. Hazem Arif, a member of the ECP, stated: "We are here both to celebrate May Day and the founding of our party on this day in 1921."

However, the evening's main events, which were to be held on the EFITU's central stage and were to include speeches by union figure heads, poetry readings and a musical performance by Ali El-Haggag, ended in an ugly manner. Soon after speakers began to take to the stage, dozens of people,

demanding an end to the celebrations, forced their way onto the stage.

The crowd, cursing and pushing their way through shocked bystanders, began yelling "Go away, go away" and "How can you celebrate when martyrs died here?" as they jumped on stage and began dismantling sound and light equipment. Kamal Abou Eita, head of the Independent Union for Real Estate Tax Employees, and Kamal Abbas, head of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), were among the union leaders forced to leave the stage. Abou Eita made several attempts to bring focus back to the now chaotic crowd.

Chanting against de-facto leader Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and for the release of political prisoners could be heard from elements of the gathering mob. Groups of inquisitive onlookers came to discover the source of the turmoil though no general consensus could be reached as to the identity of the new arrivals.

After the situation reached its high point, military police began to occupy the stage while even more walked through the hundreds still gathered, attempting to disperse them and force through oncoming traffic.

Today's celebrations saw representatives from many groups, including the Socialist Popular Alliance (SPA), the Popular Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, a small gathering of anarchists, the Wafd Party and various independent trade unions. The presence of workers, however, was hardly felt. While unionist figures from various industrial sectors came to celebrate, the anticipated presence of tens of thousands of workers was nowhere to be seen. A Mahalla textile worker stated that the industrial centre would hold another celebration for the workers on May 5.

In addition to lacking any significant presence by Egypt's millions of workers, the events were light on the commemorations generally associated with International Workers' Day (or May Day)...

Nevertheless, spirits earlier in the day were high as thousands of activists and unionists called for "Dignity, freedom and social justice." The most voiced demands were those for the restructuring of wages, the trial of corrupt union heads and legislation that would legitimise the formation of new independent trade unions.

Meanwhile the Egypt's pro-Mubarak General Federation of Trade Unions marked Labour Day in a celebration held under the auspices of Field Marshal Hussein Tantawy, head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

The celebration was attended by Ahmed Hassan El-Sebaay, the minister of manpower, Abdallah Ghorab, minister of petroleum, Samir El-Sayad, minister of trade and industry, Mohsen El-Nomany, minister of local development, Ayman Abu-Hadid, minister of agriculture as well as Cairo's governor, Abdel Qawy Khalifa and Ismail Fahmy, the acting president of the workers' union...

Meanwhile, Essam Sharaf, Egypt's interim prime minister, marked the day with a speech stressing the importance of social equality. Sharaf described social equality as one of the revolution's main demands. He added that to accomplish the revolution's demands the people should work with the government to help the country through a democratic transition which will guarantee all social backgrounds will have equal opportunities to express their demands. Sharaf also stressed that the government is working hard to rebuild the country's economy, encourage investments and increase job opportunities.

The interim prime minister explained that the government's current projects will include reforming the wage system by synchronising the minimum wage with the maximum wage and tying wages with productivity and merit, increasing trade union freedoms and increasing the role of small and

medium enterprises.

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<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/11188/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-May-Day-celebrations-end-on-sour-note.aspx>

Egypt Celebrates International Workers' Day for First Time Since 1952

May 2, 2011 — Democracy Now! — In Egypt, thousands of workers and activists poured into Cairo's Tahrir Square May 1 for the country's first independent celebration of International Workers' Day since 1952. People in the square celebrated the formation of labour unions independent of state control and the newly created Egyptian Federation for Independent Unions. A group of labour leaders and activists also announced the formation of a new political party called the Democratic Labor Party. Party member and journalist Hossam el-Hamalawy laid out some of its main demands.

Hossam el-Hamalawy, journalist and activist: *"The main demand is definitely the re-nationalisation of all the privatised factories, a complete halt to the neoliberal program. The complete freedom must be given to the Egyptian working class to establish its independent unions. I mean, the workers in some sectors are still facing the old managers, who are trying to sabotage their attempts to establish independent unions and the national minimum wage. We have fought so long to raise our national minimum wage to at least 1200 Egyptian pounds a month. I would like to see those demands achieved as soon as possible."*

* <http://www.democracynow.org/2011/5/2/headlines#10>
