

# Egypt's Workers After the Revolution

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Port Said sits on the northern Mediterranean coast of Egypt. The seafront boasts wide, sandy beaches lined with fish restaurants. Offshore, dozens of tankers and freight ships wait to make the trip through the Suez canal, about a mile away.

Mohsen Abdul Ghaid works as a crane operator at the port. He, like many workers in Egypt, has a lot to complain about these days: wages are low, inflation is high, and unemployment stands at more than 20 percent. So, Ghaid knows exactly why he's going to the polls.

"I'm voting for better living standards, democracy, and freedom of opinion. I'd also like better pay and better health care."

But few parliamentary candidates have made these issues front and center. Egypt's workers were a powerful force in bringing down the government of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt's revolution. But now those workers are feeling the pinch of economic stagnation, as the country's instability, and the global recession, have put a halt on Egypt's once growing economy.

And with the Islamic parties winning a majority of votes in the first round of parliamentary elections, the working class doesn't appear to have anyone who represents their interests.

It's surprising, since 20 percent of Egyptians live below the poverty level, and Egypt's 4 million industrial workers have struggled for years to create a national minimum wage. The Egyptian electoral law even allocates 50 percent of the parliamentary seats to workers and farmers.

"We didn't have time to make our own party, or to organize behind any one candidate and none of the parties represent workers," said Bakr Hassan Bakr, a labor activist and lawyer in Port Said. "The parties didn't consider the labor constituency when making their platforms. The workers haven't even been part of the political debate."

The apathy toward workers' issues isn't a fluke. While there have been unions here for decades, the country's dictatorial rulers outlawed organizing in the western sense. The state run labor unions were the only ones allowed until just a few years ago. Hossam el-Hamalawy, a leftist activist and member of the newly created Democratic Workers Party, said from the very beginning, state-run unions offered few benefits.

In 1957 Nasser established the general federation of trade unions that has been acting as the state's arm when it comes to mobilizing the working class, and states arm in controlling the working class. Membership was obligatory, they deduct the fees from your salary every month.

After Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was ousted earlier this year, the new government allowed independent unions; there are now nearly 150. But human rights activist Hossam Bahgat said they're still in an embryonic stage and were unable to effect the elections.

"They are fighting for better work conditions, for the right to organize independently, and they have been truly consumed in this fight," Bahgat said. "And I don't think they have really contributed in the way we expected to on the wider political scene."

Organization has been key so far in Egypt's parliamentary elections, and – as expected – religious parties are dominating. The Muslim Brotherhood has won around 40 percent of the vote, and the ultra-conservative Salafi parties has won 25 percent.

Both groups have long-established social and charitable networks.

The parties did pay lip service to workers issues and ran on platforms of social justice that appealed to many poor and blue-collar voters. Bakr Hassan Bakr, the port Said labor activist and lawyer, said the Islamists' messaging, networking and years of charity work have distorted voters' ideas about what's good for them, and for Egypt.

"These are the slogans that every single party uses and everybody's saying," Bakr said. "What do they mean by social justice? The Muslim brotherhood uses that vague slogan like they do their charity. The party gives people cooking oil, rice, bread and social justice. But from the leftist perspective, what I view as the honest way, our vision is to give people work, equal chances of getting good jobs, and equality before the law."

But the Muslim Brotherhood says they do have plenty of plans to improve Egypt's economy.

"The first thing we would do is to have schools to teach people industry," said Mohamad Khodari, a Muslim Brotherhood official. "We tried this with a school called Mubarak school. It used to train the students to work in a factory. And then after that they would go work in factories. It worked well. The students learn something and the factories benefit. It creates a partnership between schools and factories so they can serve each other."

Khadari said the Muslim Brotherhood also wants to modernize the fishing industry, which is a big part of the local economy. The Brotherhood's can-do business attitude is not surprising. The group is traditionally pro-business but not necessarily pro-worker. They have historically been critical of strikes.

Labor advocates worry a brotherhood dominated parliament wouldn't support legislation workers have been pushing for since Egypt's revolution. Among them are new a labor law, which would dismantle the old state run union and enshrine Egypt's newly independent unions in the country's legal codes.

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