

Labouring with old demands

# Egypt: Workers take to the streets to demand social justice on Labour Day

Monday 6 May 2013, by [ABDEL-BAKY Mohamed](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2013).

**On 1 May unions were joined by several political forces in protests across the country to press for a minimum wage and a new law guaranteeing the independence of labour unions.**

As *Al-Ahram Weekly* went to press, workers were marching from Al-Sayeda Zeinab to the Shura Council to protest against recently issued legislation they say harms workers' interests. The protests were organised by the Egyptian Union for Independent Syndicates, Egypt's Workers Democratic Conference, the Trade Union's Freedom and Rights Coordinating Committee and the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU).

President Mohamed Morsi met with workers' leaders at Al-Qubba Presidential Palace rather than the International Conference Centre where Hosni Mubarak used to attend a ceremony to mark Labour Day.

According to the president's office "workers' leaders" were invited to attend the event along with a number of political figures. Labour rights activists announced that they would boycott the presidential ceremony.

"What can the president say to us? He has done nothing for workers since taking office," says Kamal Abu Eitta, chairman of the EFITU. "Workers were at the forefront of the 2011 revolution. It is time for them to have rights restored that have been eroded over the past three decades."

Yet the current "regime", says Abu Eitta, is continuing with Mubarak-era policies that deprived over 20 million workers of their basic rights.

Youth for Freedom and Justice, No to Military Trials Movement, Drop Egypt's Debts campaign and the Revolutionary Socialists Movement all took part in the demonstrations. Many opposition parties also announced they would participate in the protest, including the Socialist Popular Alliance, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Strong Egypt Party, the Egyptian Communist Party Al-Tagammu, Al-Karama and the Workers and Peasants Party.

"Egyptian workers were denied their rights by businessmen assisted by Mubarak, and now President Morsi is doing the same," said a statement issued by the organisers.

The protesters' demands include implementing a comprehensive strategy to reduce unemployment and the setting of minimum and maximum wage limits.

Last July a minimum wage was set but it applied only to permanent government workers.

Workers also demanded the implementation of court rulings restoring privatised companies to public

ownership.

Over the last two years the Egyptian Centre for Social and Economic Rights (ECSER) has secured verdicts returning several companies such — the Steam Boilers Company, Omar Effendi, Ideal, Assiut Cement, Nile Cotton Ginningy, Shebin Al-Kom Textiles and Tanta for Flax and Oil — to the public sector. The government has so far refused to implement the court orders.

“The government prefers to protect the interests of corrupt businessmen who stole these companies and fired workers,” says Kamal Abbas, coordinator of the Egyptian Union for Independent Syndicates.

He added that the protests would serve as a reminder to the president and the Muslim Brotherhood not to “betray the revolution” which was ignited by the workers struggle.

In November Morsi amended Law 35/1976 which regulates workers unions. The controversial changes allowed the Ministry of Manpower and Migration to appoint the leaders of the state affiliated Egyptian Trade Union Federation.

Saoud Omar, an advisor to the Egyptian Union of Independent Syndicates, argues that the new constitution marginalises workers’ rights.

“The 1971 constitution respected the rights of workers, especially their political participation,” he says. “Now workers aren’t even invited to political and social dialogue sessions.”

In 1942 Egypt’s workers won the right to form unions. Following the revolution of 1952 Gamal Abdel-Nasser allowed the formation of larger federations in an attempt to enhance the legitimacy of his fledging government. Nasser’s successors, Anwar Al-Sadat and Mubarak, tended to limit the independence of labour unions, keeping them under tight control.

Approximately 28 per cent of the Egyptian workforce is unionised, with the majority of members employed in the public sector.

Wednesday’s protests follow thousands of strikes by workers across Egypt over the past two years. A report published by ECSER records 1,969 protests by workers in both the public and private sector in 2012. Thirty-six per cent of all industrial actions were for improved wages. The report listed 111 protests against corrupt or failed management.

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