

# Labor Unions Under Attack in Morsi's Egypt

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While many have focused on Mohamed Morsi's recent actions toward the Judiciary and Constituent Assembly, the Egyptian president has quietly consolidated power over institutions affecting the lives of millions of workers, namely, Egypt's labor unions.

A day after giving himself vast new constitutional powers on November 22, Morsi amended the country's 46-year-old trade union law. The decree represents a major shift in a fundamental Egyptian institution. It also suggests the continuation of the Muslim Brotherhood's growing influence on a movement it has long ignored.

## Targeting Trade Unions

At first blush, Morsi's amendment may seem benign. It limits board membership in trade unions to those under sixty years of age. It also extends current union boards for an additional six months after which new elections will be held. In the interim, the Minister of Labor will be allowed to fill any vacancies.

These amendments present a serious challenge to the trade union system. In several unions the majority of board members are over sixty. In addition, the Minister of Labor is a member of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the Minister has since promised to appoint no more than four Muslim Brothers to any board, this has done little to quell fears of a takeover and has, instead, reinforced concerns that appointments will be made on a political basis. In short, this law opens up the possibility for a Brotherhood takeover of Egypt's government-affiliated trade unions.

While Morsi's constitutional amendment dealt mostly with the judiciary, the amendments to trade unions were the first laws to be issued by the newly empowered President. With so many institutions up for grabs in post-revolutionary Egypt, one may wonder why trade unions were among the first targets of Morsi's most recent spate of executive decrees.

Like many post-colonial states, Egypt incorporated its trade union movement into a centralized apparatus, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which was tied to the single party state. Egypt's first President Gamal Abdel Nasser established this centralized authority and took over both corporations and trade unions in socialist reforms of the 1950s and 60s.

Independent trade unions were effectively banned, and have only emerged tentatively in the past several years. After the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, a competing trade union federation called the

Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, organized for the first time. This federation remains at a very nascent stage, leaving the ETUF as the most powerful labor organization in the country.

## **Egypt's Labor Institutions During and Since the Revolution**

The ETUF is an umbrella institution for twenty-three different trade unions. It has worker's training academies, labor research facilities, land holdings, recreation centers, medical centers, and a number of impressive investments. It is also able to mobilize, direct propaganda at, and garnish wages from its millions of members.

While western media focused its attention on the Tweeting and Facebooking upper middle class youth in Tahrir Square, much of the 2011 revolution took place in the fields and factory floors among Egypt's working poor. The Land Center for Human Rights, a leading human rights NGO focused on workers and farmers, described the general strike of Egypt's industrial and port workers on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011, combined with the farmers' protests, as a "knockout punch" to the Mubarak regime.

After the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) came to power on February 11, 2011, Ahmed Hassan Al-Borai was appointed Minister of Labor. Al-Borai was popular with both activists and the international community, as a former member of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Committee of Experts and lawyer for the independent union movement, newly organized unions outside the ETUF structure that had been agitating for official recognition since 2008.

In his new position, Al-Borai sought to disband the ETUF and usher in an era of trade union pluralism in Egypt. To this end, he appointed a new caretaker board for the federation. The new board was composed of members of the old regime, independent labor representatives, revolutionary youth, and for the first time, Muslim Brothers.

While, historically, the Muslim Brotherhood has focused on Egypt's professional syndicates, interest in their working-class cousins sharply rose after the revolution.

In line with the fighting and divisions that gripped post-revolutionary Egypt in 2011, most of the ETUF board's independent and youth members resigned in frustration. The Board president, who has ties with the Mubarak government, replaced them with more members of the old regime.

Despite having only three members on the board, the Muslim Brotherhood took this opportunity to make its presence felt inside the ETUF. Brotherhood members openly discouraged labor militancy and assumed the powerful position of ETUF treasurer. In a sign of tensions between the old guard and new Muslim Brotherhood officials, one long-standing ETUF official went so far as to describe the Brotherhood as a "cancer" in the organization.

Currently, the ETUF is facing both internal tensions and external challenges. Former regime officials, some of whom have been involved in the ETUF since the Sadat era, are working cheek-to-jowl with newly appointed Muslim Brotherhood members. At the same time, the organization is facing a sustained challenge to its legitimacy from the independent union movement, which has highlighted the ETUF's history of corrupt elections, worker suppression, and unwillingness to stand up for fired and suspended workers.

Despite the challenges facing the ETUF, the Muslim Brotherhood has so far been unable to use its power to successfully penetrate trade union structures at the grassroots level. The ETUF-affiliated

unions have largely continued to operate as before, despite developments at the top. If the Brotherhood was to change the boards of individual unions, this could have serious consequences, not only affecting policies toward strikes and management relations, but also financial accounts managed by each union.

## **The Lessons of History**

To understand the implications of Egypt's new trade union structure, it is instructive to look to the past.

Morsi is not the first Egyptian president to behave autocratically toward the trade unions. If anything, such behavior has become a hallowed executive tradition. Gamal Abdel Nasser recognized the threat an unrestrained labor movement could pose, and began his regime with the execution of two recalcitrant labor leaders who dared to hold a strike under his rule.

Anwar Sadat further centralized trade union control, setting up the pyramidal, corporatist structure of the ETUF. As workers pushed back against the waves of privatization and globalization lining the pockets of the President's closest allies, Hosni Mubarak's legal and security establishment worked to infiltrate the ETUF, in order to suppress trade union activists throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Even the SCAF banned strikes in one of its early decrees after coming to power.

History demonstrates, however, that Egyptian laborers are unafraid to retaliate. Even in periods of formal corporatist control, when unions were given the carrots of socialist wages and price controls while being threatened with the stick of a near-limitless security service, unsanctioned worker strikes were common. In the final years of the Mubarak regime, labor union activities foreshadowed the street mobilizations that eventually brought down the government.

Signs of a Brotherhood takeover of the ETUF will, as such, most likely encourage members to organize strikes and demonstrations. Opposition to Morsi's new labor union law is already growing. While the amendments only affect ETUF unions, this is because independent trade unions are considered illegitimate by the government – according to the Minister of Labor such unions “do not enjoy legitimate status.” Needless to say, this characterization has been rejected by the independent trade unions themselves.

While not being targeted directly, the independent trade union movement has protested the government's heavy-handed approach toward the ETUF, rightly assuming that if members of the Brotherhood lead the official trade union federation, the Muslim Brotherhood-led government will have little interest in dealing with the independent unions. Both main independent labor federations, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Conference (EDLC) have called for joint protests, while threatening targeted and general strikes.

## **Conclusion: The Opposition United**

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of Morsi's declaration has been to unite both independent and ETUF unions behind a common goal: resisting the Brotherhood. While the ETUF has long stated that the independent unions are illegitimate and a product of international meddling, both groups now face the prospect of being challenged by an empowered Labor Minister.

Some activists have suggested that ETUF unions and independent unions are engaging in back-channel communications, eyeing joint actions if not full reconciliation. Certainly the retirement

clause weighs heavily on the minds of independent union leaders, as much of the leadership is at or approaching sixty years of age.

Morsi's decree also comes at a delicate time for the independent trade union movement. While the movement split into the EDLC, headed by long-time activist Kemal Abbas, and the EFITU, directed by Real Estate Tax Union head Kamal Abu Eita, both groups have recently formed a common front. This uneasy peace, brokered by several eminences grises, including Former Minister Al-Borai, will be tested by the new law and any strikes organized to counter it.

In sum, Morsi has managed to do what no one else could. He has united Egypt's fragmented labor sector in opposition to him. Violence has already escalated in the restive factory town of Mahalla, and plans are currently under way for strikes in other cities. With independent unions already working closely with the left-liberal alliance of parties opposing Morsi, this increases the possibility for more mass mobilizations. With a fragile economy, an IMF loan in the balance, and memories of labor's "knock-out" blow to the Mubarak regime on the minds of all activists, President Morsi must tread lightly in the coming days or risk a new round of regime destabilizing general strikes.

**Ian Hartshorn**

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\* Muftah, Nov 30, 2012:

<http://muftah.org/labor-unions-under-attack-in-morsis-egypt/>

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