

Where Were the Egyptian Workers in the June 2013 People's Coup Revolution?

Sunday 4 August 2013, by [El-SHAZLI Heba F.](#) (Date first published: 23 July 2013).

Contents

- [The workers on the road to \(...\)](#)
- [What was the situation of \(...\)](#)
- [Where were the workers on \(...\)](#)
- [After Morsi](#)
- [Challenges Ahead](#)

"We started the 2011 revolution and the rest of Egypt followed," is a statement Egyptian workers make with great conviction when discussing the movement for change in their country. Accordingly, in order to continue what began in January 2011, the masses of workers were out yet again in the streets and squares of Egypt before and on 30 June, and in the ensuing days until former president Mohamed Morsi's removal from office on 3 July. This might seem surprising, given that there were no signs or banners on 30 June indicating workers' participation. In fact, this was based on a prior agreement among the organizers of the protest, the youth-led Tamarod Campaign. Protesters were to hold up only the Egyptian flag, in addition to homemade signs, but not organizational insignia. So you did not see workers marching under the banner of their union or profession on 30 June. Yet the workers were out in droves in every city and town in Egypt protesting as an integral part of the June 2013 people's coup revolution. In certain industrial towns such as al-Mahalla al-Kubra, the Tenth of Ramadan and Sadat cities - they were the majority, and leading the marches.

The workers on the road to the January 25 Revolution

For several years before January 2011, under ousted president Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian workers had been organizing into independent movements and networks, protesting regularly against the continued daily life hardships and horrendous working conditions. Workers held "wildcat" strikes not only against private employers, but also against the government, which is the "public sector" employer of record, and against the official Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), a government sanctioned labor federation of twenty-three trade unions established in 1957. The ETUF's main role was to suppress workers' demands for better working conditions and wages, ensure that they toe the government line, and thus keep them in their place as loyal supporters of the regime.

"Between 2004 and 2008, more than 1.7 million workers participated in contentious collective actions. In the absence of a credible body representing Egyptian labor, strikes and demonstrations had become the only influential tools for labor to exert pressure on employers (in the private sector) or the government (in the public sector)." The economic policies implemented by Ahmed Nazif's government (2004-2011) further fueled worker's discontent. Increased labor activism began in 2004 as a result of his government's neo-liberal economic policies of economic growth and dispensing away with any modicum of social justice creating mass injustice for the working class. In total, there were approximately 3,000 workers' strikes and protests between 2006 and the January 2011

revolution, and about 1,100 from May 2011 to April 2012.

Egyptian workers also played a significant role in the struggle for political change. The workers gradually broke down the “barrier of fear”, namely the widespread fear among many citizens of protesting against the regime and being subjected to a harsh police response. Even though the workers’ discourse in their labor actions called predominantly for economic and social rights, this was ultimately a defiant courageous political act. These workers’ protests were a training school: a trial run for what was to take place in Tahrir Square and around the country in early 2011. The strike that took place in December 2006 with 25,000 workers protesting poor working conditions, another in September 2007 and then a third on 6 April 2008, all in al-Mahalla al-Kubra’s garment and textile factory, were the first of many cracks in the established wall of fear. “The 2006 Mahalla strike was the candle that lit the way for workers all over the country, showing them that a peaceful strike is possible, that we can stand in the face of injustice and against corruption,” said Kamal al-Fayoumi, one of the strike leaders. According to him, the 2006 strike paved the way for the 6 April 2008 strike. Then December 2008 saw the establishment of the first independent union in Egypt since 1957, that of the Municipal Real Estate Tax Collectors Authority employees (RETA). This gave a huge confidence boost to other workers in differing economic sectors, also keen to demand their long-lost rights.

It is clear that the independent labor movement regularly contested the regime’s power for many years prior to January 2011. This movement was disparate and not necessarily united under one umbrella organization, thus disputing classic Social Movement Theory (SMT) accounts that emphasize mobilizing structures. [1] “Thus, years before the January 25 Revolution, a social movement of workers, their families, and their neighbors had established their presence. Through strikes and other collective actions, workers had made substantial economic gains, teaching many Egyptians a crucial lesson: Engaging in collective action, previously regarded as a losing game by all but committed middle-class activists, could achieve something of value.” [2]

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly have proposed “a new path to the analysis of contentious politics: neither through the stamping of the same general laws onto all the world’s contention ... but through the comparison of episodes of contention in light of the processes that animate their dynamics” [3] while including the historical and social context. Classical SMT focused on mobilizing structures, framing processes, opportunity and threats, and repertoires of contention—a structuralist approach. [4] A push beyond this toward an interactive dynamic model is the optimal way of assessing the Egyptian independent labor movement pre-2011. It reveals that the precedents set by Egyptian workers, as a dynamic social movement not necessarily organized under a mobilizing structure, paved the way for the massive January 2011 uprising resulting in the removal of the Mubarak regime.

What was the situation of workers between February 2011 and the June 2013 revolution?

There are two main independent trade union federations in Egypt that include about 1,000 independent trade unions in total. These are the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC). In March 2011, the former Minister of Manpower Ahmed Hassan al-Borai, after consultations with leaders of the independent unions, hosted in Egypt the former Director General of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Juan Somavia, and together they publicly unveiled the declaration of trade union freedoms that gave life to the creation of independent trade unions in Egypt. This declaration was a first step in putting Egypt back on track in terms of respecting the fundamental international labor standards of freedom of association, the right to organize, and collective bargaining.

Since that declaration, Egyptian workers have been forming hundreds of independent trade unions, though not without resistance. Employers have not always welcomed them with open arms, nor recognized the validity of the 2011 declaration, in spite of a 2012 State Council ruling. In fact, there have been more strikes in the post-2011 period and up until June 2013 than in the several prior years combined, according to Kamal Abbas, Coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS).

The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights' 2013 report to the United Nations Committee on Economic and Social Rights highlights the increasing need for trade unions in Egypt, "because it is becoming ever more difficult for workers to advocate for their rights. It is not uncommon for both the owners of private businesses and the government to resort to violence in dealing with the demands of workers." The report details several examples of this from 2012: "For instance, the workers of Faragello, a food and beverages company, and of Titan, a cement company, were assaulted by police and were cornered inside a mosque to be attacked by police dogs before 18 of them were arrested." The report also criticizes the law passed in early 2011 banning the right to strike, to which these workers reacted with demonstrations: "The law, ratified by the SCAF on 12 April 2011, has angered many as it stipulates prison sentences and fines of up to LE500,000 'for anyone who organizes a protest or an activity which may result in preventing or slowing down the work of a state institution, a general authority or a public or private workplace'."

Where were the workers on the days before and after 30 June 2013?

When the Tamarod Campaign began in April 2013, petitioning for the resignation of Mohamed Morsi, the independent labor movement eagerly signed on. Why were the workers so eager to sign onto this campaign? They had endured a difficult year of daily violations of worker rights. There had been no progress on a new trade union law that guaranteed freedom of association, and the right to organize and to negotiate and bargain collectively. Unemployment was on the rise, with no plan in sight for job creation projects. Strikes were condemned by the government and workers were attacked figuratively and literally.

So workers collected hundreds of thousands of signatures, endorsing the call for early presidential elections. The Center for Trade Union and Worker Services, a mainstay in the independent labor movement since its establishment in 1990, used its six offices around the country to collect the Tamarod petitions. The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC) both actively encouraged their members to come out and protest on 30 June. Meetings were held at their respective headquarters, provincial trade union federations, and local union offices, all to encourage members to show their support for Tamarod Campaign principles and protest former President Morsi's rule.

Even before the appointed day of 30 June, workers' protests were already taking place. For example, in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, after the first shift at Ghazl al-Mahalla textiles factory on 27 June, thousands of workers went out on a protest march. They were outraged at the speech that former President Morsi had given on 26 June, and at the general policies of the Muslim Brotherhood, and its political arm the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). They chanted that Morsi should "leave" (irhal). The same day, FJP member Mohamed al-Ganayni called for the dismissal of the head of the board of directors of the Ghazl al-Mahalla company, Engineer Mohamed Ibrahim, for not stopping the march. [5]

Before 30 June, the major players in the independent workers' movement: EDLC together with CTUWS and EFITU set up "operation centers" in their offices to monitor workers' presence in the protests and any incidents of violence or harassment. These operation centers were also in direct

communication with the Tamarod Campaign headquarters, in order to coordinate activities such as meeting points for workers to begin to march towards Tahrir Square, and to al-Ittihadiyya Presidential Palace. In addition, tents were set up for workers at each protest location. These served as resting stops as well as meeting points for protesters to get news updates. [6]

Immediately after 30 June, workers participated in the call to end Morsi's rule in a more organized manner, such as conducting acts of civil disobedience: "For example, some municipal council workers did succeed in totally shutting down local government institutions in the provinces in co-operation with the protesters in the streets. This happened in Daqahiliyya and Beheira provinces." Meanwhile, leaders of major labor organizations appeared on major television talk shows to encourage workers to make their voices heard and to establish their presence on the political scene. [7]

After Morsi

The transitional constitutional declaration issued by interim president Adly Mansur on 8 July does not expressly mention the right to strike, a major issue of contention over the past two and a half years. The 2012 constitution gave the trade unions the right to organize, but former Morsi government neglected the formal law that governs trade unions' operation.

Nevertheless, EFITU has already announced that its members are ready to work day and night for Egypt and to support its new interim government. According to its statement, EFITU members fully support the road map and workers and peasants are at the service of the new government: "They are the heroes of the strikes against the two previous governments and now they will be the heroes of hard work and production for the nation. They only want in return to feel like human beings and not second class citizens." While EFITU's language is reminiscent of the nationalist jargon of the 1960s and 1970s; it still shows EFITU's commitment of its members to get back to work to rebuild Egypt.

Meanwhile the EDLC and its support organization, the CTUWS, issued a press release on 4 July calling on Egypt's workers to continue to work towards achieving the revolutions' "core demands of social justice and ensure their freedom of association, and to be included within the priorities of the next phase." This language is more measured and reflects the pragmatic nature of EDLC and its support organization, the CTUWS. There are already apparent differences in the public declarations of the two major labor federations. While competition and diversity of labor federations are welcome and needed at this stage of Egypt's developing industrial relations, one hopes that these do not lead to additional unnecessary enmity and fracture within the independent labor movement. On fundamental principles of freedom of association and the right to organize and bargain collectively, we need a united front.

Challenges Ahead

As of 2010, Egypt's labor force numbered twenty-five million. The independent labor movement is going to have to insist on a role in the next phase of Egypt's democratic transition. Meanwhile, Egypt has an unemployment rate of 13.2 percent: this is only the number of people still actively looking for employment as a percentage of the workforce, which can be deceptive in terms of the actual number of those without the means to earn a living. The actual rate of those not working is much higher, so job creation is an essential first step for the interim government. Next, labor's representatives will have to be included in the drafting of an amended constitution. The right to freedom of association, i.e. the ability to establish independent trade unions, the right to organize, to

bargain collectively and to strike, will have to be included in the constitution as fundamental socio-economic rights.

A positive development took place on 16 July, with the appointment as Minister of Manpower of EFITU's president and former head of the first independent trade union of real estate tax collectors established in 2008, Kamal Abu-Eita. This will give the workers a vocal and experienced voice within the Council of Ministers. Indeed it is well known that Abu-Eita will push for a new trade union law based on internationally recognized principles and the ILO conventions that Egypt has signed. He has already announced that his first priority, which he specified as a condition before accepting the post, is the implementation of the minimum wage and a law for trade union freedom of association. It is therefore not surprising that those in opposition to Abu-Eita's appointment were members of the Mubarak regime's sanctioned ETUF.

Workers are at the core of any assessment of Egypt's economic situation and proposed solutions to its economic woes. Today, there are organizations that truly represent workers, in contrast to the ETUF, so we can hope to see a tripartite level of deliberations between government, labor, and business representatives. This would be an auspicious beginning indeed to a new chapter in Egypt's transition to democracy.

Heba F. El-Shazli, Jul 23 2013

P.S.

* <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/13125/where-were-the-egyptian-workers-in-the-june-2013-p>

Footnotes

[1] Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14-15.

[2] Joel Beinin, "Workers and Egypt's January 25 Revolution". *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 80 (Fall 2011), 192.

[3] McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 314.

[4] *Ibid.*, 48.

[5] CTUWS, Press Release, "After the Company Workers' March, Brotherhood MP Threatens to Fire Ghazl al-Mahalla Company Head," 27 June 2013.

[6] CTUWS, Press Release, "Important and Urgent," 29 June 2013.

[7] Kamal Abbas, General Coordinator of CTUWS, Appearance on ONTV, 1 July 2013.