

A new Labor Day for Egypt: Independent unions plan celebrations, set demands

Sunday 4 August 2013, by [WALEED Hatem](#) (Date first published: May 2011).

For the first time in its long history, Egypt and its working class celebrate Labor Day with independent unions, said Kamal Abbas, a worker and general coordinator for the Egyptian Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services, at a press conference Thursday.

The press conference was held at the headquarters of the newly founded Egyptian Federation for Independent Unions, now home to at least 12 labor unions. The federation prides itself on being the umbrella for all independent unions created before and after the 25 January revolution in reaction to the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Unions Federation.

The independent federation is marking the day by organizing a gathering on 1 May in Tahrir Square, which was home to the 25 January uprising. Abbas said the day will open with words by members of the independent federation, followed by a poetry readings and a concert.

“We invited the prime minister, the minister of manpower, the minister of social solidarity and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces,” Abbas said.

A loose coalition of independent unions, human rights groups and labor campaigns also called for the celebration of Labor Day in Tahrir Square on 1 May. In a call sent out Thursday, they pegged the celebration with a list of demands including the preservation of labor union independence, the implementation of a national minimum wage and the consolidation of permanent employment.

The call also included the nullification of a law criminalizing sit-ins and industrial actions. The law, ratified by the SCAF on 12 April, 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.”

“The organization of the working class is a pillar for democratic transformation and the civility of the state,” said Akram Ismail, member of the Association of Progressive Revolutionary Youth, one of the groups organizing this year’s Labor Day.

For Ismail, the debate about the civil state was incarcerated in a religious versus non-religious binary, which misses the point. “A civil state is one where people turn into interest groups who lobby for their rights through political structures. The organization of the working class in this context is indispensable for the civility of the state.”

Another message relayed by Labor Day organizers is that national stability lies at the heart of workers’ prosperity.

“This is a historical celebration. The workers of Egypt are the builders of Egypt. They are the ones who can safeguard its stability,” Abbas reiterated.

Organizers have also insisted on extending Labor Day to include all those who work for a wage.

"The demand for a minimum wage and, more broadly, the restructuring of the national wages scheme, is one that brings together everyone who works for a wage. Doctors and professors are at the forefront of this battle, not only industrial workers," said Salma Saeed, an activist and member of one of the parties organizing Labor Day.

The coalition will also call for demands that include benefits, amending the labor law to limit the powers of employers, protecting rights for unemployed and irregular workers and resuming work in places where employers have fled the country.

More generic demands were also made, such as stopping the trials of civilians before military courts and putting an end to the emergency law.

The official federation, in the meantime, announced last week the cancellation of Labor Day celebrations since its chairman, Hussein Megawer, faces corruption charges and is undergoing investigations.

The interim chairman of the federation, Ismail Fahmy, had previously told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the federation may mark the event by paying a visit to the tomb of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose socialist agenda was closer to workers' demands.

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