

## **What is the Egyptian labour movement's position with regard to Egypt's current politics?**

Q&A: Egypt labour remain thorn in the side of autocrats, despite lethargy

Thursday 18 December 2014, by [BASSIOUNY Mustafa](#), [HUSSEIN Marwa](#) (Date first published: 11 December 2014).

**Since Morsi's ouster, the labour movement has been regressing, but since this past May it's been on the rise. What is the Egyptian labour movement's position with regard to Egypt's current politics?**

The role played by the labour movement in the ouster of Islamist President Morsi, ascension of former army chief Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to power, or other major political developments in Egypt over the past year, continues to be a subject of debate.

Labour remains a force to be reckoned with, argues Mostafa Bassiouny, a Cambridge-published journalist and researcher. Bassiouny believes that government policies, including the cutting subsidies, the rise in inflation and the deterioration of basic services will force working classes to react. He looks back to 2006, when major industrial action in Mahalla City, west of Cairo, empowered the opposition against Hosni Mubarak, and continued to be a thorn in his side till his ouster in 2011.

Mostafa Bassiouny, worked as industrial correspondent for Egyptian and regional press for almost two decades. He reported on mass strikes by textile workers in Mahalla El-Kubra between 2006 and 2008 among others. Bassiouny also wrote the book "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice" in collaboration with Anne Alexander, a research fellow at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge.

*Ahram Online* conducted an interview with Bassiouny to gain a sense for the labour movement's position on recent and future developments in Egyptian politics.

**Ahram Online: The labour movement has been going at a slower pace during the last year. Is that a consequence of the relative calm on the political sphere in general?**

Mostafa Bassiouny: The labour movement is part of the political situation. It affects it and of course gets affected by it. Since November, the Egyptian workers movement has been rising with 12,000 workers at the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company (public) who were just on strike. Last month, another 6,000 workers at El Nasr Co for Coke and Chemicals were striking among other industrial action. Compared to 2008, 2012 and 2013, the movement is in regression but, with respect to the recent period between May and October, it is rising and I believe it will continue to do so.

Besides, the movement does not really follow a descending or ascending curve. Industrial action is seasonal nature. In February 2014 there was a wave of strikes following the implementation of minimum wage in the public administration. At the time more, than 250,000 workers were striking

and demanding to receive the same treatment as public employees. Pressure was so strong that the regime removed El-Beblawi's government. The recent wave coincides with profit share distribution. There is also season of primes that coincide with state budget implementation, etc.

**AO: What makes you believe; the movement will rise and not decline?**

MB: We have two important factors; first, the protesting movements among Egypt's workers have not stopped during the last few years; it goes up and down but it does not disappear. The second factor for a possible rise is the social and economic policies of the state itself.

Over the last year, several pieces of legislation supporting businesspeople versus workers have been issued. In fact, court sentences of renationalisation of private companies were not only enforced but the state added a clause to the investment law, which prevents a third party from challenging any contract concluded between the state and investors.

**AO: Why would such politics result in a rise in the movement? Isn't it possible that the negligence of their demands would give the workers a feeling of despair and worthiness of their movement?**

MB: The economic policies adopted by the state represent a real burden on the working class and lower classes in general. The fuel subsidies cut and the inflation that resulted from it were tough on these classes which makes them more prone to react to those pressures. Even if such policies lead to despair, this despair will take some time but will not last. In the end, there are facts of life and needs that are not being addressed. The people want to feed their families, send kids to school, get health care and decent housing. Those facts will always be cause for pressure. People might feel despair or assess that their movement does not pay back but after a while, they will react on those politics.

**AO: To what extent does the political movement affect the labour movement?**

MB: This relation has always been sophisticated and is marked by expediency and pragmatism. For example, in December 2006, the political reformist movement was in a very difficult position as the Mubarak regime managed to amend the constitution and set the plan to pass rule on to his son. The regime managed to organise the situation as he aspired and defeated the political reform movement that could not even increase the democratic margin, despite all its efforts. Then 24,000 textile workers in Mahallah went on strike for three days and the state ended it by submitting to them and accepting their demands. That action gave an impulse to the ambitions of the political elite, which saw another force rejecting Mubarak's regime. That strike in particular was followed by a rise in the labour movement nationwide, especially in Mahallah. The climax was the April 2008 strike that gave its name to the 6 of April movement. The youth movement saw a chance in the movement of such a big number of workers and called for a general strike on April 2008, even though the Mahallah strike had its own labour demands.

After the revolution, a real crisis appeared. The workers played an important role during and before January 2011 revolution, however, the labour movement and demands faced intensive hostility and negligence from the state, the military council and political movements tool. Workers' demands were referred to as sector demands and the political movement was hostile to the workers' movement. The gap between the political movement and the labour and social movement increased while the political movement was pressing on the labour movement to adopt its demands.

**AO: How should the political movement deal with the labour movement?**

MB: The political movement should take more seriously the labour movement and build on it instead

of imposing its slogans on the workers, even if those slogans are politically correct. Workers demands are, in fact, political. Asking for the removal of the emergency law is a political demand and 24,000 workers striking under the emergency law is a defeat for the law and a de facto removal of it.

**AO: Do you think the Islamic movement has had any effect on the workers' movement?**

MB: I believe it has no direct effect. The labour movement was active between 2006 and 2011 under Mubarak. Then, it continued rising under military rule, right after the revolution. At the time, it has been said that the Muslim Brotherhood was influencing workers to pressure on the military. However, the highest rate of strike was during the Muslim Brotherhood regime who assumed that the National Salvation Front influenced the workers. Currently, once more, some repeat that the Muslim Brotherhood is behind the workers but all of this is not true. In fact, over that period of time, labour leaders remained the same.

**AO: Industrial action in the private sector has increased over the last year, will the workers of this sector play a bigger role in the labour movement?**

MB: There has always been a movement in the private sector but 10 strikes in the sector are hardly equivalent to Mahallah strikes. The private sector, by nature, does not have big labour pools. So, if we look at the numbers, public sector movements are considerably larger than private. The confrontation with the state and its policy is also clearer in public sector action. However, the economic impact of the private sector is larger as it is the sector leading development and economic activity. In the public sector, workers ask for the benefits that they used to get regardless of the company's profitability whereas employers in the private sector make their decisions on an economic basis. The private sector measures the economic cost and benefit of responding to workers' demands verses enduring work suspension for a period of time. The comparison between the two sectors is not obvious as many factors should be taken into consideration, including the difference in the laws ruling the public and private sector.

**AO: At one point, we saw a high level of coordination between workers in different work places and even actions in solidarity with other companies, is the absence of such movements a sign of regression?**

MB: That is an experience that will not disappear; it is lesson learned. This was obvious in the movement of property tax employees in 2009. The practice was later adopted by Egypt post workers and teachers. Then we saw workers of different companies synchronising their actions, the biggest example was in the textile sector. In the coming wave of the labour movement that practice will be recalled.

**AO: Would the implementation of a new labour code, judged by labour activists, to be more restrictive of workers' rights, influence the movement?**

MB: I do not think there will be a direct reaction to a new labour code from workers. It does not mean a great deal considering that the existing law is often not respected by the employers. The law is not the real regulator of the working relations. The bill in discussion might be a regression compared to the actual one but it does not introduce a fundamental change. The big change was the law of 2003 that liberalised work relations.

**Marwa Hussein, Thursday 11 Dec 2014**

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\* "Q&A: Egypt labour remain thorn in the side of autocrats, despite lethargy". Al Ahram. Update 23:17 Tuesday, 16 December 2014:

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/117619/Business/Economy/QA-Egypt-labour-remain-t-horn-in-the-side-of-autocr.aspx>