

Background briefing:

# THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT IN EGYPT

The fall of Mubarak in 2011 was preceded by a half decade of intense activity by worker activists, including levels of sustained strike action not seen in Egypt since the 1970s.

The waves of strikes and social protests from 2006 onwards also resulted in the first major changes to the organisational landscape of Egyptian trade unionism since the founding of the state-backed Egyptian Trade Union Federation by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1957.

Despite its name, the ETUF was not in any meaningful sense a trade union. Its bureaucracy was controlled and appointed by the ruling party, and elected officials in the lower levels of ETUF were unable to exercise any influence at all over the policies of the federation's leadership.

During Nasser's rule ETUF played an important role in managing workers' access to social benefits tied to their employment, such as subsidised housing and health care.

There was also a conveyor belt from the upper reaches of the ETUF into the Ministry of Labour.

Until the 1980s the post of Minister of Labour and that of ETUF president were combined, and even after that date the minister's job was frequently taken by senior trade union leaders.

ETUF also played an important role in the electoral system. Under the constitution then in force, at least half of the seats in parliament were reserved for 'workers' and 'peasants'. In order to stand as a 'worker', candidates were required to present documents from ETUF proving their union membership.

The federation thus policed entry into electoral politics for the ruling party which controlled its machinery



Doctors protest police violence against their colleagues | Photo: Egyptian Medical Syndicate

and mobilised public sector workers to vote for the regime's candidates, bussing them to the polling stations and election rallies.

This helps to explain why, when the Egyptian government moved towards neoliberal economic reforms which aimed to shrink the size of the public sector and reduce the direct role of the state in providing social services and welfare, ETUF did nothing to organise or express opposition.

### Several waves of strikes engulfed the public and private sectors during the six years before 2011

The federation continued to back the regime's economic policies while hundreds of thousands of its members were transferred out of the public sector or forced into early retirement.

These economic policies created a crisis for ETUF itself: the federation

lost hundreds of thousands of members and the social benefits which it had previously distributed to its members (providing a strong incentive for continued membership) were being removed, reduced or threatened by cuts and privatisation.

Another source of the ETUF's crisis on the eve of the 2011 uprising was the result of action by workers themselves.

Several waves of strikes engulfed the public and private sectors during the six years before 2011.

The numbers and duration of strikes began to rise in 2005, partly in response to the intensification of neoliberal reforms by the Ahmed Nazif government.

The movement was transformed by a stunning victory by textile workers in the huge public sector mill in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006.

These strike waves mobilised millions of workers and gave birth to workplace organisation completely outside the ETUF's structures.

State officials were compelled to negotiate with elected strike committees, with the ETUF officials either joining management and the security forces on the other side of the table, or excluded from negotiations altogether.

The first independent union grew out of these conditions. It was formed by the leaders of another important successful strike by property tax collectors in December 2007, and launched in December 2008 with a founding conference in the Journalists' Union building attended by thousands of tax collectors representing a national membership of over 30,000.

Teachers and health technicians followed the same path, and a fourth union of retired workers was also created.

According to Egypt's trade union laws, the new unions were illegal as they were not part of the ETUF's structure. There were clear signs of a split in the ruling party's ranks on how to deal with their challenge, however.

The ETUF bureaucrats did their best to crush the new unions, sending thugs to beat up their organisers and prosecuting them in the courts.

But the Ministry of Finance, desperate to avoid further strikes by the property tax collectors, was prepared to negotiate over pay and conditions with the independent union leaders.

The success of the first independent unions reinforced the lesson of the strike waves for tens of thousands of worker activists across Egypt: collective action organised outside and in opposition to ETUF was the way to force concessions from the state and employers.

## The 2011 uprising and beyond

Workers' strikes paved the way for revolution in 2011, along with political protests against repression and for democratic reforms. And a new strike wave played a key role in forcing the removal of president Hosni Mubarak by the military at the culmination of the 18 day uprising which began on 25 January.

The independent unions were still a new and relatively weak force in the massive popular movement which erupted, however, and subsequent years would bring difficulties as well as opportunities to expand.

The four independent unions which had declared themselves before



**Mahalla workers on strike** | Photo: Nasser Nouri

2011, formally founded the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in Tahrir Square at the height of the uprising.

The collapse of the ruling party and the disarray at the top levels of the regime encouraged activists in hundreds of workplaces to form their own unions.

In some cases, such as the Postal Service or the Cairo Public Transport Authority, the declaration of an independent union reflected several years of clandestine strike organising.

In other workplaces, unions were set up from scratch, usually in the process of organising strikes and protests aimed at clearing out the regime's 'little Mubarak' from their jobs as bosses across the public sector.

Although there were ominous signs that the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) wanted to crack down on the workers' movement by banning strikes, workers were encouraged by changes in legislation which allowed a form of legal recognition for independent unions for the first time by granting them permission to register with the government.

The contradictions of the regime's policies towards the workers' movement reflected the fact that the strikes were now too widespread to easily stop.

February 2011 saw more episodes of strike action than the whole of the previous year.

Strikes by teachers, textile workers and public transport workers in September brought out an estimated 500,000 workers demanding pay increases, permanent contracts and a

purge of ruling party officials.

Levels of strike action continued to rise in 2012 which saw more strikes than the total for the previous decade, a record was beaten again in the first few months of 2013.

Yet the independent unions also faced a number of serious difficulties in getting workers' demands onto the agenda of national politics and in forcing major concessions from the state.

Many strikes were organised at a workplace level, and sometimes by coordination across different branches of the same firm or government department. There was little effective coordination across sectors or at a national level.

The national leaderships of the independent unions did work together through the independent federation to issue joint statements and calls for solidarity, but they did not manage to organise coordinated action over long-standing demands such a rise in the national minimum wage, or the repeal of laws restricting trade union freedoms.

One complicating factor was the fragmentation of the independent union movement: in July 2011, former steel worker Kamal Abbas, who was the director of an important labour NGO, the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services, left EFITU and helped to set up a second federation of independent unions, the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC).

A number of other, smaller federations also emerged alongside EFITU and EDLC. The partial revival of ETUF was also an unwelcome development for the independent unions.

## Workers and the generals: repression and austerity

The mass mobilisations of summer 2013, which led to the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohamed Morsi, were supported by many activists in the independent union movement.

Many independent trade unionists had been infuriated by the Brotherhood's support for the repression of strikes and their proposals to introduce reforms restricting union independence.

There were also widespread hopes among workers that a new government



would move away from neoliberal policies and use the power of the state to ease the social crisis, whether by reinstating welfare benefits and services or by directly creating jobs.

The appointment of Kamal Abu Aita, president of EFITU, to the position of Minister of Labour following Morsi's removal by the military, and his announcement of a long-awaited rise in the national minimum wage, seemed at first to vindicate those who called for support for the military's coup.

Yet it rapidly became clear that Minister of Defence Abdelfattah al-Sisi was more interested in securing the political support of labour movement activists for his brutal campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, including mass arrests, torture and massacres of pro-Morsi protesters, than he was in delivering on vague promises of 'social justice'.

A steel workers' strike which defied Sisi's call for a 'voluntary' halt on industrial action in the interests of 'national unity' was broken up by the army in August 2013.

Moreover, the crushing of the Brotherhood's protests over the coup was followed by the reinstatement of a raft of neoliberal economic policies which had been temporarily disrupted by the 2011 uprising.

Sisi's economic strategy, far from reviving the state 'socialism' of the 1960s, was resolutely neoliberal in design.

The lynchpin was a close relationship with the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, which provided billions of dollars in grants and loans to the new military regime.

Restoring Egypt's attractiveness as a destination for investment from other countries was also a key priority, and this meant meeting demands from the IMF and World Bank for austerity and neoliberal economic restructuring.

Sisi was able to push through cuts in subsidies on fuel and basic foods in 2014 and the following year restart the privatisation programme which had ground to a halt in 2011 as a result of workers' resistance.

The government also passed legislation aimed at preventing legal challenges to privatisation contracts, while at the same time a new law giving the government powers to override court decisions to repossess privatised assets came in force.

Since mid-2015 Sisi has made it clear that restructuring the civil service is another central priority.



Protesting outside the journalists' union building on 4 May | Photo: Revolutionary Socialists

Neoliberal economic reforms since 1991 have reshaped public sector manufacturing and transport services by forcing hundreds of thousands into the private sector or early retirement.

A new law which came into force in March 2016 is seen by independent union activists as a signal that Sisi intends to do the same to Egypt's large civil service workforce.

The law removes key legal protections on workers' employment, and gives employers discretion over promotions.

Sisi has openly said that shrinking the civil service workforce is a key policy goal, claiming that the country only needs 1 million civil servants out of the 7 million currently employed.

Hussein Ibrahim of the Independent Teachers' Union hit back at government claims that without meeting the demands of international lenders there will be no money to pay wages.

"Why does the government want to borrow when we have rampant corruption and corporate tax evasion? How can the state let billionaire Naguib Sawiris off paying 7 billion pounds, and at the same time ask the poor to pay up? The biggest problem is that the poor know these donations won't even reach them and their families but will benefit particular groups who have received pay increases after 30 June 2013: the army, the police and the judiciary."

## Resistance continues

Trade unionists face constant repression as they organise. Strikes are frequently broken up by force and organisers arrested in dawn raids. Trade unionists are hauled before the courts, sometimes facing military judges, while key activists involved in defending workers' rights, such as labour lawyer Haitham Mohamedain, have been arrested during security crackdowns.

Nevertheless, strikes and protests

by workers continue to erupt. The exclusion of millions of public sector workers and the whole of the private sector from a rise in the national minimum wage in February 2014 prompted strikes in textiles, transport, health, the civil service and dozens of protests by private sector workers.

A report by an Egyptian NGO documented over 1,000 separate protests and strikes by workers in February 2014, followed by 321 in March.

Civil servants also began to mobilise in response to the new law threatening their job security in summer 2015, with around 5,000 civil servants from the departments of General Taxation, Sales Taxation, Customs, the Ministry of Finance and Property Taxation rallying outside the Journalists' Union headquarters in central Cairo.

Bus workers from some Public Transport Authority garages joined the rally and took strike action on the same day, also in protest at the law. The security forces did not intervene directly on 10 August, appearing to have been taken by surprise at the scale of the mobilisation, which was well-organised on a national scale with delegations joining the Cairo rally from Alexandria, the Canal Zone cities, Daqahiliyya province, Fayyoun and Bani Soueif.

Police intimidation and threats were more successful in restricting numbers at subsequent protests, but activists in the civil service and other unions are continuing to organise against the law through a the Solidarity Coordinating Committee (Tansiqiyyat al-Tadamon).

Doctors are another important and well-organised group to have taken strike action in 2016, following on from previous national strikes in 2011 and 2012.

In this case the trigger was police violence against health workers.

Doctors at Matareya Hospital in Cairo walked out on strike for a week in defence of colleagues who were assaulted by policemen for refusing to write false medical reports.

In response to the incident, medical staff walked out on strike, closing the hospital for a week. Although the two doctors were reportedly forced to drop individual complaints about police intimidation, following pressure from the Interior Ministry, they won strong support from the Egyptian Doctors' Union.

Thousands of doctors crowded into the street outside the union's headquarters in central Cairo for an emergency general assembly on 12 February. The assembly called on the minister of health to resign, demanded the prosecution of police officers guilty of violence towards health workers and agreed an escalating plan of protests and strikes.

Hospitals and clinics across Egypt saw protests on 20 February as part of a day of action under the slogan "Dignity for Doctors". Banners and posters on the pickets also called for the prosecution of the Matareya doctors' assailants, and condemned the lack of security in hospitals.

"How can we treat our patients in hospitals which are not safe?" asked one banner, according to a report on the Doctors' Union website.

## Journalists fight back

The intertwined issues of repression, police violence and the right to work in safety have also sparked major protests by journalists. On 2 May, police stormed the Journalists' Union building in central Cairo and seized journalists Omar Badr and Mahmoud al Saqa from inside, arresting them on a range of charges including incitement.

Thousands of journalists joined protests to defend the union over the following days, while the union's executive invited representatives of the other professional associations including doctors and lawyers to a special general assembly to discuss common action over the attacks on freedom of expression.

Meanwhile government supporters threw rocks at the assembled journalists and chanted "Butcher them, Sisi". After China, Egypt is the second-worst jailer of journalists worldwide, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Meanwhile other groups of workers have continued to take strike action over a range of demands.

In March 2016, transport workers in Alexandria, street cleaners in Aswan, textile workers in Samanoud near Mahalla in the Delta and Damanhour and civil servants working for the Ministry of Religious Endowments were among those who went on strike.

The following month 3,000 workers at Beshay Steel held a sit-in over bonus payments while hundreds of nurses in Shibin al-Kom walked out demanding pay increases and the resignation of the director of nursing.

## Repression backed by Britain

The support of European governments is crucial to the Egyptian regime. Germany, Italy, France and the UK have backed Sisi's repression through trade deals or arms sales and security cooperation.

David Cameron rolled out the red carpet for Sisi when he came to visit London in November 2015 and the UK government signed a new round of agreements over cooperation over security issues and higher education.

Yet when Giulio Regeni, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, was killed, following torture which human rights activists say bears the hallmarks of the Egyptian secret police, the British government was strangely quiet.

Only months later after a petition by Giulio's friends and colleagues gathered over 10,000 signatures did the government officially call for a "full and transparent" investigation into his death.

Find out more about the campaign for justice for Giulio online at [www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/justice-for-giulio](http://www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/justice-for-giulio)

# SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Worker activists and defenders of trade union rights are constantly under threat in Egypt.

Join the campaign in solidarity with labour lawyer and activist Haitham Mohamedain, who was one of over a thousand arrested in the crackdown over protests against the sell-off of the Tiran and Sanafir Islands by the Egyptian government to Saudi Arabia in April.

Haitham is one of Egypt's best known labour lawyers, and an activist with the Revolutionary Socialists.



Haitham Mohamedain  
Photo: Gigi Ibrahim

He has worked tirelessly to defend striking workers from attack by the state and employers both in on the picket line and in the courtroom, representing bus workers, health workers, steel workers and rail workers as well as victims of police torture and abuse.

He was arrested

previously in September 2013 while on the way to represent steel workers in Suez who had been arrested after the police attacked their sit-in, sparking an international solidarity campaign supported by the leaders the UK trade union movement.

### Take action now

- Sign the statement in solidarity with Haitham and other political prisoners online at [www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/haithamstatement](http://www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/haithamstatement)
- Download leaflets and posters for your workplace from our website

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