

Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco... The Middle East's Working-Class Revolutions?

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Cairo,

During the demonstrations in January and February that led to the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Sabr Barakat, a retired steelworker and veteran labor organizer, witnessed groups of workers spontaneously marching from industrial areas outside Cairo toward Tahrir Square. Through his work with the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, established in 2010, Barakat maintains close ties to labor activists throughout Egypt. He believes workers' presence in Egypt's January 25 Revolution, as it is known, was expressed in its most popular slogans: "Dignity, Democracy, Social Justice"; "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice"; and, most direct, "We Want to Live! We Want to Eat!"

Similar demands for bread and social justice were frequently raised during the 4,000 strikes, sit-ins and other collective actions involving millions of workers since 1998, after the Egyptian government seriously began implementing the privatization program it agreed to in 1991. The program reduced public sector employment and promoted early retirement to make enterprises more attractive to private investors. Buyers sometimes carried out mass dismissals, although this was nominally illegal. "There is continuity between those strikes and the 2011 revolution," said Khaled al-Khamissi, author of the bestselling novel *Taxi*.

Kamal Abbas, general coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services, agrees: "It was a revolution against poverty and tyranny and for freedom and social justice." Abbas and others established the CTUWS in 1990, after he was fired for leading a strike at the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company.

In contrast, Ahmad Maher, a 30-year-old engineer and a leader of the April 6 Youth Movement, a key player in the Tahrir Square uprising, claimed, "The workers did not play a role in the revolution. They were far removed from it." Maher's inability to perceive the role of workers is only partly attributable to class prejudice. After 2000 there were two largely parallel movements, of workers and the urban middle class. Only a handful of journalists and committed leftists maintained regular contact between them. The workers' movement was far larger and more sustained, but workers had no national leadership or unified program. They rarely made direct demands for democracy or regime change, as middle-class activists did after the Kifaya (Enough!) movement burst on the scene in late 2004. Only in late June of this year did the April 6 Youth Movement begin to embrace key economic demands of the workers.

The conflicting assessments of Khamissi and Abbas, on the one hand, and Maher, on the other, reflect a continuing battle over the narrative and political import not only of the revolution in Egypt but of the insurgent movements throughout the Arab world. Are they simply rebellions demanding dignity and democracy? Or are they also movements for social justice?

The global neoliberal capitalist model was test-driven in Chile after the 1973 coup against democratically elected socialist President Salvador Allende. Subsequently the International

Monetary Fund and the World Bank began installing the model throughout the global South. Just as elsewhere, there was popular resistance in the Middle East and North Africa.

Egypt led the way. Nationwide riots against IMF-inspired cuts in subsidies on basic consumer goods in 1977 compelled the government to restore the subsidies, but they were reduced stealthily over the next thirty years. In response, workers launched strike waves in the mid-1980s and early '90s. Labor protests have proliferated since 1998. In Tunisia the General Federation of Labor called a general strike in 1978, and there was widespread anti-IMF rioting in Tunisia in 1984. There were strikes by Moroccan workers and students in 1981, riots in poor areas of Casablanca in 1990 and protests over increases in the price of bread in 2008 that forced the Moroccan government to back down. There were food riots in Jordan in 1989. Algerians erupted in rage when the government voluntarily adopted an IMF-style economic program in 1988.

Job insecurity due to privatization of public enterprises, high rates of unemployment concentrated among youth, poverty and inflation have fueled mass dissatisfaction with authoritarian Arab regimes. Vegetable prices in Egypt increased 51 percent in September 2010 over the previous month, while meat and poultry prices increased 29 percent. Abu Mohamed, a garlic seller, told the liberal daily *al-Masry al-Youm*, "A family can't afford to buy tomatoes...can you imagine? The government has to do something about the economic problems of the people because this is how revolutions start."

The upper middle classes have expanded because of neoliberal growth in "success stories" (by IMF standards) like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan, but their conspicuous consumption is a slap in the face to the majority. The capacity of non-oil producing states—and even oil-producing countries like Algeria and Egypt—to deliver basic social services and a secure existence to their people has been undermined by budget cuts and privatization schemes demanded by international financial institutions.

The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) was established on January 30 as an integral part of the revolutionary process. Before the outcome of the uprising was certain, these unionists boldly challenged the legal monopoly of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), a key institution of the Mubarak regime. EFITU emerged from two decades of work by the CTUWS and the inspiring example of the Real Estate Tax Authority workers. In 2008 Kamal Abu Ayta led 35,000 RETA workers in establishing the first trade union independent of the Egyptian state since 1957, repudiating the labor-control apparatus of three successive regimes.

Khaled Ali, a labor lawyer and director of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, carefully noted, "The workers did not start the January 25 movement, because they have no organizing structure." But, he adds, "one of the important steps of this revolution was taken when they began to protest, giving the revolution an economic and social slant besides the political demands." He was referring to some sixty strikes in the last days before Mubarak's departure on February 11 and the first few days afterward. Workers have continued to strike and protest ever since.

Some ninety unions, most of them newly established, have affiliated with EFITU. Among them are eleven unions and a citywide labor council in Sadat City, where 50,000 workers are employed in 200 enterprises, mainly textiles, iron and steel, and ceramics and porcelain. There were only two unions in Sadat City before this year.

The lack of a national organization, leadership and detailed economic program has allowed personal rivalries and minor differences to weaken Egypt's independent labor movement. In the past, despite principled calls for the rule of law, local networks of trust were the primary weapon in defending

workers and sympathetic NGOs from constant threats and close supervision by the Mubarak regime. The legacy of this “small picture” outlook shapes the conditions in which the various labor alliances are scrambling to assert their influence. Even ETUF has established new unions—an apparent effort to demonstrate that it can meet criteria the International Labor Organization has established for legitimate trade unionism.

In Tunisia, as in Egypt, mobilizations of workers and their families and neighbors years before the mass uprising were a vital element in the social pressures that culminated in President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s January ouster. Tunisia’s national unemployment rate was 13-16 percent in the 2000s but as high as 40 percent in the southwestern phosphate mining basin of Gafsa. More than 70 percent of Tunisia’s unemployed are under 30; indeed, youth unemployment is a key factor in popular revolts across the Arab region.

The Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT), established in 1946, participated actively in the struggle for independence from France, achieved in 1956. These historic credentials allowed the federation to resist total subservience to founding president Habib Bourguiba. In 1989, two years after he pushed aside Bourguiba and seized power, Ben Ali imposed a collaborationist leadership on the UGTT. While continuing to defend collective-bargaining rights in the workplace, the federation abandoned its decade-long resistance to the neoliberal agenda and supported Ben Ali in successive fraudulent elections. However, pockets of radicalism persisted among teachers, postal workers and civil servants.

In January 2008, nearly three years before Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation ignited the firestorm of protests in Tunisia and across the Arab region, street demonstrations erupted in Gafsa and nearby Redeyef. Workers accused the state-owned Gafsa Phosphate Company of nepotistic recruitment practices in collaboration with local UGTT leaders. The protests spread throughout the Gafsa governorate, with teachers, women, street youth and some local union branches joining in, demanding not only fair recruitment practices in the mines but a comprehensive jobs program. The oppositional press, radical students in the more prosperous coastal cities, and diaspora Tunisians in France and Montreal expressed support. The protests were brutally suppressed, but support for the people of Gafsa spread nonetheless. Clashes continued for months, culminating in the killing of two demonstrators by militarized police. Internet activists publicized the events in the mining towns. In desperation, the regime shut down access to Facebook in August of that year.

The 2008 Gafsa revolt was the most important social movement in Tunisia since the bread revolt of 1984. The difference was that in 1984 the UGTT supported the protest, while the 2008 movement was initiated by rank-and-file workers, the unemployed and their families, with both the UGTT and the regime targets of protest.

The next great wave of protests in Tunisia came in December 2010, after the suicide of Bouazizi. That month the UGTT leadership began issuing statements opposing repression of demonstrators, but it came out in full support of the movement only days before Ben Ali’s demise. In a January 10 speech Ben Ali dismissed his opposition as “hostile elements in the pay of foreigners, who have sold their souls to extremism and terrorism.” That day thirty workers stormed into the Gafsa regional UGTT office, demanding that the local leadership support the protests. Ben Ali’s insensitivity impelled the national federation to authorize regional general strikes in Sfax, Kairouan and Tozeur on January 11, followed by a general strike in Tunis on January 14, the day of Ben Ali’s departure. Working-class neighborhoods of Tunis rioted in celebration that night.

After trailing behind their constituency for more than a decade, the UGTT leaders have played catch-up in the new era. Three representatives were ministers in the first transitional government. Their resignation after only one day, on the grounds that members of the former ruling party, the

Constitutional Democratic Rally, retained too much influence, led to the formation of a new government and the party's dissolution on March 9. In the run-up to Constituent Assembly elections scheduled for October, many trade union activists are aligned with the "modern democratic alliance" of leftist parties.

In the monarchies of Bahrain and Morocco, workers and trade unions, though less successful than in Egypt and Tunisia, have been an integral part of the democratic movements.

Since its establishment in 2004 the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions has been a thorn in the side of King Hamad, who presents himself as a business-friendly reformer while maintaining the absolute rule of his Sunni dynasty over the country's Shiite majority. GFBTU's sixty company-based unions represent 22,000 of Bahrain's 140,000 local workers in construction, textiles, insurance, petroleum, aluminum, airport services and other sectors. The federation has an exemplary record of opposing sectarianism and defending the rights of contract migrant workers, a large portion of the workforce. It advocates the unionization of domestic workers, mainly South and Southeast Asian migrants, who are inadequately protected by labor laws in all Arab countries. Thirteen of its union committee members are women.

On February 14, the tenth anniversary of a referendum on the National Action Charter of Bahrain, which has not delivered on its promise of democracy, young activists occupied Pearl Square in the capital of Manama. Security forces violently attacked them at dawn on February 17. The GFBTU supported the protesters by calling a general strike for February 20. The strike was suspended on February 21, after security forces withdrew from the roundabout. When the king requested military assistance from neighboring countries, the federation again called for a general strike. Thousands of workers struck on March 13-22, as Saudi and mercenary troops using US-supplied weapons occupied Bahrain and brutally suppressed the democracy movement. More than 2,500 workers have been fired for joining demonstrations or participating in strikes (seventy have since been reinstated, but without their seniority). GFBTU leaders have been especially targeted—fifteen members of the executive board and more than forty union leaders, including the heads of the teachers federation, the nurses association and the Bahrain Petroleum Company union, have been sacked.

The GFBTU challenged the dismissals but cautiously agreed to participate in the "national dialogue," convened by the king on July 1, after three months of martial law. But after royal allies blocked even consideration of reinstating fired workers, the federation withdrew, following the lead of the Shiite-oriented Wefaq Party, the largest in Bahrain.

On April 21 the AFL-CIO filed a complaint with the US Labor Department. "The egregious attacks on workers must end, and the Bahraini government's systematic discrimination against and dismantling of unions must be reversed. These actions directly violate the letter and the spirit of the trade agreement," said AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka when the complaint was filed. "Workers must be reinstated to their jobs and the elected union leadership must be allowed to function without fear of reprisals. Failure by the United States to intervene to support workers and their democratic institutions would make a mockery of the labor protections included in the free trade agreement." The Labor Department is conducting a fact-finding investigation.

On August 4 the AFL-CIO executive council reaffirmed its support for the popular uprisings in Bahrain and across the Arab world and called on the Obama administration "to make a clean break with past practice and strongly support freedom of association, human and workers' rights in all its policies in the region as a matter of urgent priority.... It is incumbent on the international community and the United States in particular to follow the will of the people who are risking everything for better futures."

Morocco's February 20 Movement for Democracy, which was launched with the participation of some 200,000 people who demonstrated throughout the country, was supported by several trade unions affiliated with the largest federation, the Moroccan Union of Labor, and the entire Democratic Labor Federation (CDT). The latter also joined the February 20 Movement and others in advocating a boycott of the tightly controlled July 1 constitutional referendum. Members of both federations supported a Casablanca sit-in on May 1, International Labor Day, though the CDT presence was more substantial.

Meanwhile, a strong counterrevolutionary wind is blowing in Egypt. On March 24 the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued Decree 34, establishing harsh penalties for engaging in strikes and demonstrations. It was implemented on June 29, when a military court sentenced five workers at Petrojet, an oil and gas services company operated by the ministry of petroleum, to one-year suspended prison sentences. Their offense: sitting in for two weeks in front of the ministry to demand that 200 workers employed for many years on a temporary basis be granted permanent status.

Well over 100,000 people defied scorching heat to demonstrate throughout Egypt on July 8, the largest protests since Mubarak's ouster. In Tahrir Square protesters raised the slogan "The Poor First" and endorsed the key demands of the independent labor movement: revoke Decree 34, dissolve ETUF and enact the new draft trade union law. The main squares of Cairo, Alexandria and Suez remained occupied throughout July, as millions of Egyptians rebelled against the SCAF's vast repressive apparatus and demanded more thoroughgoing democratic change linked to social justice. But on July 29 this liberal-left-social Islamist current was overwhelmed by a massive display of hyper-conservative Islamist political strength, when the Salafi movement bused several hundred thousand supporters from all corners of Egypt to Tahrir Square, routing all other forces by raising provocative and divisive slogans ("Sharia Law Now!"). Some observers have remarked that many observant Muslims were turned off by the excess; if that reflects widespread sentiment, the rally may be the high-water mark of post-Mubarak radical Islamist influence.

As if to confirm this, three days after the Islamist rally, workers scored a major victory: the cabinet nullified the fraudulent 2006 ETUF elections. Minister for Manpower and Immigration Ahmad al-Burai, who was nominated for his post by the CTUWS and EFITU, initiated this action. The ETUF executive committee has been disbanded, but it is unclear whether this will result in the well-deserved institutional demise of ETUF or simply its reorganization after new elections.

Of all the movements of the Arab Awakening, Tunisia's has the best chance of achieving a viable democracy with a strong voice for working people. That country's UGTT represents about 14 percent of the labor force of 3.8 million. It is the largest civil organization in the country, and its membership has increased 35 percent since January. Its members were a decisive force in the democracy movement. Their leadership, despite its history of collaboration with the old regime, is now on a progressive trajectory.

The importance of workers to the regional uprisings can be judged by their absence in Yemen, Libya and Syria, where fragile, state-controlled union federations have not joined the resistance. In Yemen and Syria, unions are politically weak because of the small number of urban workers, high rates of unemployment and labor migration. In Libya and Syria, state repression and the ever-present threat of violence, even before the 2011 opposition movements emerged, prevented workers and unions from developing independent social power.

The success of the Arab Awakening movements correlates well with the strength of their labor contingents: the more workers involved, the more likely a democratic outcome. (There is a lesson here for American democracy as well.) But workers have rarely demanded democracy in the

abstract. As a February 19 declaration of Egypt's emerging EFITU proclaimed, "If this revolution does not lead to the fair distribution of wealth it is not worth anything. Freedoms are not complete without social freedoms. The right to vote is naturally dependent on the right to a loaf of bread."

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P.S.

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