

What have workers gained from Egypt's revolution?

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CAIRO — Since June 12, half of the 18,000 workers who operate and service the Suez Canal have been on strike. They are employed in maritime services by seven subsidiary companies of the Suez Canal Authority in Suez, Isma'iliyya, and Port Said. In contrast, those employed directly by the canal authority have always received higher wages and better benefits. Long before January 25, 2011 subsidiary company workers raised the demand for parity, effectively a 40 percent wage increase.

Management of the subsidiary companies accepted this demand in April, an expression of the new possibilities of the post-January 25 era. But the interim government has maintained that wages and working conditions of public service workers are established by parliamentary legislation, and therefore, no changes can be made while the parliament is dissolved. The strike expresses workers' rejection of this logic.

Egyptian workers have achieved increased strength and self-confidence in the course of the revolutionary movement. This is expressed by the capacity to sustain a five-week-long strike in an industrial sector linked to the economically and strategically critical Suez Canal and by insisting that economic demands be met despite the absence of the legal framework established by the old regime. Labor unions continue to rebuff myriad accusations in the press and by some of the "revolutionary youth" that workers' economic demands are narrow "special interests" rather than "national interests." In this respect, workers share the achievement of all Egyptians who heeded the revolutionary call, "Lift your head high. You are an Egyptian" — the recovery of their human dignity.

The removal of former president Hosni Mubarak and the top layer of his regime empowered Egyptians to find their voices and demand "dignity, democracy, and economic justice" — a popular chant during the occupation of Tahrir Square in January-February and since then. This was not an entirely new experience for millions of industrial and white-collar workers. Many of them won substantial economic gains, like those demanded by the Suez Canal Authority subsidiary company workers, during the movement of over 4,000 strikes, sit-ins, and other labor collective actions that began escalating in 1998 and continue today.

During the three days before Mubarak's departure on February 11, workers visibly contributed to the revolutionary process by engaging in some sixty strikes, some with explicitly political demands. Strikes and sit-ins have continued regularly since then at the rate of several per week. The total of perhaps two-hundred workers' collective actions for the first six months of 2011 is at the same order of magnitude as the pace of labor protest since 2004.

This has allowed workers to consolidate several gains. The most important institutional achievement is the consolidation of the right to organize independent trade unions.

Since its establishment in 1957, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) has been an arm of the Egyptian state and a key institution in its repressive apparatus. ETUF enjoys a legal monopoly on trade union organization established by Law 35 of 1976 and subsequent amendments. ETUF elections, especially the most recent in 2006, were rigged. State Security Investigations arbitrarily

disqualified oppositional political elements of any stripe - from Communists to Muslim Brothers - from running for union office. ETUF and most of its local officials stood aloof from or actively opposed the workers movement of the last decade.

Before January 25, three independent unions unaffiliated to ETUF were established. The largest and most important was the 35,000-member union of Real Estate Tax Authority (RETA) workers. A dramatic sit-in strike of 3,000 RETA workers in front of the Ministry of Finance in December 2007 resulted in a 325 percent wage increase. Kamal Abu Eita and other strike leaders used the momentum of this victory to establish an independent union in December 2008. In April 2009 the government recognized it as the first non-ETUF affiliated union since 1957. The independent RETA workers' union was a founding member of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), whose existence was announced at a press conference during the Tahrir Square occupation on January 30.

Among the newly-established unions affiliated with EFITU are eight unions and a city-wide 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. A largely non-unionized labor force was only one of the generous incentives to private investors offered in special economic zones established in the new satellite cities of Cairo. Another is that in Qualified Industrial Zones, if 10.5 percent of a product's assessed value comes from Israeli sources, it receives duty-free and quota-free access to the United States.

EFITU and the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), a non-governmental organization established in 1990 to promote trade union independence, successfully resisted the imposition of the original candidate of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the former ETUF treasurer, as Minister of Manpower and Migration in the transitional government. Instead, they proposed Ahmad Hasan al-Burai, a professor of labor law at Cairo University who had publicly advocated trade union pluralism for years. SCAF accepted the nominee of the independent workers' movement.

Minister al-Burai argues that the legal basis for the registration of independent unions is that Egypt has ratified International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions guaranteeing freedom of association and protection of the right to organize (No. 87) and the right to organize and bargain collectively (No. 98). These international treaty obligations supersede national legislation. With al-Burai's approval, the Ministry of Manpower and Migration has formally registered about twenty-five independent unions not affiliated to ETUF. Dozens of other independent unions are in the process of formation.

Some independent unions — like the Cairo Joint Transport Authority union of bus drivers and garage workers and the RETA workers' union — are quite large and command the loyalty of a great majority of the potential bargaining unit. Others have only fifty to one hundred members in factories employing hundreds or thousands. The pensions and social benefit accounts of some public sector industrial workers are tied to their membership in ETUF-affiliated unions. Minister al-Burai has indicated his willingness to sever this connection, which could dramatically increase the number of independent unions. But the financial procedures involved are complex.

Meanwhile, the EFITU, the CTUWS, and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR) have filed a court case seeking dissolution of ETUF and sequestration of its assets. Their legal brief argues (correctly) that, like the dissolved National Democratic Party, ETUF was an institution of the Mubarak regime. This coalition has also drafted a new trade union law to replace Law 35. The Ministry of Manpower and Migration has held three rounds of discussion on the draft law, the latest with the participation of representatives of the ILO. Kamal Abbas, the general

coordinator of the CTUWS, is optimistic that a new trade union law will be enacted before the parliamentary elections this fall.

Another workers' achievement is an increase in the minimum wage. In 2010 Nagi Rashad, a worker at the South Cairo Grain Mill and a leading figure in the workers' protest movement, successfully sued the government over its 2008 decision not to increase the national minimum wage. Khaled Ali, director of the ECESR, was the lead attorney on the case. As a result, the minimum wage was raised to £E 400 (about \$70) a month - still a woefully inadequate amount that would leave the average Egyptian family of five with two-wage earners well below the World Bank's poverty line of \$2 a day. It is also far less than the consensus demand of £E 1,200 (about \$200) that has emerged from the workers protest movement since 2008.

The interim government promised a further increase to £E 700 (about \$120) monthly, effective July 1, 2011. However, the state budget for the fiscal year that began on that day reduced the amount to £E 685. Workers and their supporters continue to press the demand for £E 1,200.

The minimum wage, however, applies only to those employed on permanent contracts (the equivalent of tenure). The private sector operates primarily on the basis of indefinitely renewable "temporary" contracts lasting one-year or less. The "informal sector" is unsupervised by the government. Therefore, the minimum wage applies primarily to public sector workers on permanent contracts.

Struggles to obtain permanent status for public sector employees have escalated. For two weeks in June, some 200 workers on temporary contracts at Petrojet, an oil services firm, conducted a sit-in demonstration in front of the offices of their employer, the Ministry of Petroleum. Although access to the offices was not blocked, five workers were arrested. On June 29, they were convicted in a military court and received suspended sentences of one year in jail. This is the first implementation of SCAF's Decree 34 of March 24, which established penalties of up to £E 500,000 (about \$83,400) and up to one year in jail for participating in a "disruptive" strike or demonstration.

The suspended sentence suggests the delicate balance SCAF must maintain. It seeks to minimize the political and economic changes that occur under its watch and until it can hand off power to a legitimate civilian government. But the SCAF cannot repress all popular demands and remain legitimate in the eyes of the people.

The April 6 Youth Movement and other "revolutionary youth" groups that emerged from the Tahrir Square occupation from January 25 to February 11 were, at first, reluctant to embrace specific economic demands, despite the popular chants demanding "social justice." Since the mass demonstrations of July 1 and July 8 and the reoccupation of main squares in Alexandria and Suez as well as Tahrir in Cairo, the April 6 Movement has raised the slogan, "The families of the martyrs and the poor first."

Economic demands have become more prominent since clashes between families of the martyrs and thugs of the Ministry of Interior in Cairo in late June. A large banner overlooking occupied Arabain Square in Suez supported the general demands of the current phase of the revolutionary movement. Speedier public trials for Hosni Mubarak and the high officials of his regime accused of corruption and purifying the Ministry of Interior, which commands the police and other security services, are high on the list. The banner also demands a jobs program for youth - unemployment is especially high in Suez - and a national minimum and maximum wage. The later demand has been adopted by those continuing to occupy Tahrir Square.

In addition to SCAF's reluctance, there are many obstacles to fulfilling the revolutionaries'

aspirations for social justice. Personnel, practices, attitudes, and institutions of the old regime are entrenched throughout the country.

For instance, a manager at the Suez Maritime Arsenal, one of the subsidiary companies of the Suez Canal Authority, coordinated with military intelligence and then imposed his presence on an interview with a striking worker on July 11 (1,200 workers of the Maritime Arsenal are currently on strike). The same manager reported to military intelligence that he and others had intervened in the Arbain Square sit-in on July 8 to force those occupying the square to retract a “stupid” statement they had made. (One journalist shared with me his inadvertent recording of the conversation between the manager and a military intelligence officer.)

On June 7, one hundred women formerly employed at the Mansura-España textile firm tried to collect their monthly wages for April, ranging from £E 250-300 (about \$42-50), from the United Bank offices in Mansura. In 2008 Mansura-España, a private-sector firm established in the 1980s in the Nile Delta town of Talkha, across the river from Mansura, went bankrupt. United Bank, its largest creditor, acquired most of its shares. In November 2010, the bank sold its interest in the firm without paying legally required severance compensation to the workers remaining on the payroll.

Among the workers seeking their salaries was Mariam Hawas, a 44-year-old mother of three. United Bank employees refused to pay the women, taunted them, and told them, “Go and block traffic in the streets if you want your rights.” So they did.

A traffic policeman urged one truck driver who could not move his vehicle through the ensuing traffic jam, “Run them over. The blood money for each one is £E 50 (about \$8).” The truck ran into Mariam Hawas and another woman, Samah Isa. Mariam died on the way to the hospital and Samah was badly injured.

Neither has yet received any compensation. The truck driver who ran into the two women has been charged with causing wrongful death and injury. But he was released without bail, an indication that he may be treated leniently if he can be located at all when the trial begins in late July. The traffic policeman has not been found.

Ten days after Mariam Hawas died United Bank paid severance packages to Mansura-España workers at the rate of 2 ½ months’ salary for every year of employment. The total cost to the bank was \$62,000.

The lives of Egyptian working people are still cheap in the eyes of a great many policemen, government officials, and managers of firms in both the private and public sectors. What has changed, and this is the most important gain of the revolutionary movement, is that workers no longer accept this.

Recovering in the hospital, Samah Isa asked, “How can a life be worth 50 pounds? I don’t see a future until I get my rights. That’s what I want.”

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P.S.

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