

Lebanon: Smash the Banks in Order to Nationalize Them - Interview With Beirut Marxists

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The following is an interview conducted by *Bidayat Magazine* with a group of Marxist organizers working to form a revolutionary party in Beirut, all of whom played an important role in the recent “Nationalize The Banks” campaign. They include Elia El Khazen, Maya Zebdawi, Sleiman Damien, Pascal Damien, Myriam Helou, Inas El Kadiri, Amer Jbeili, and Tina Lawandos.

Lebanon is witnessing yet another wave of protests filling its streets with angry workers who are exasperated by the COVID-19 epidemic lockdown and the inability of the new counter-revolutionary government to find solutions to the economic catastrophe. The demands for decent living standards and an end to the country’s unapologetic austerity measures that manifested in the October 17 revolution have not died out.

Lebanon’s economic crisis comes as no surprise: it was the inevitable result of the country’s entrenched neoliberal policies that produce hyper-financialization, privatization, and deregulation. The Central Bank has attempted for years to keep the Lebanese pound pegged to the dollar at a fixed exchange rate through dubious financial mechanisms at the expense of the working class. The commercial banks have been the biggest beneficiaries of those financial measures as they lend to the Central Bank at very high interest rates, basically acting as loan sharks. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the private banks own the largest portion of the country’s massive debt or that their main shareholders can be traced back to the ruling class currently in power. Thus, the state’s inability to repay its creditors hampers any effort in building a productive economy. Instead, the country heavily relies on imports of necessities including vital medical supplies and food produce. The dollar crisis has made these imports much more expensive as suppliers are usually paid in dollars, adding to the struggles experienced by the country’s inhabitants, especially its non-Lebanese inhabitants, who are denied human and civil rights. Additionally, and in order to retain their deposits in foreign currency, the banks have imposed a series of unjustifiable restrictions on small depositors withdrawing their own money and/or sending their money abroad to family members in diaspora, of which there are many. Furthermore, the remittances that the population has been forced to rely on for subsistence could no longer be withdrawn in dollars.

The virus came at a time when working-class families were already suffocating. The lockdown measures only added more strain onto a crisis whose burden was felt most by those who could afford it least. It also comes at a time when the government has a new “foreign entity” to blame its failures on, combining xenophobia with racial hierarchies by portraying Syrian and Palestinian refugees as vectors causing the epidemic’s spread. The state has used this pandemic as an excuse to halt demonstrations and revitalize its weakened clientelistic networks by providing aid to parties’ corresponding districts. However, the increasing unemployment rate, slashing of the already limited social expenditures, and refusal to provide aid to workers on zero-hour contracts were more than

enough reason to defy restrictive measures. Tripoli, the second most populous region and one of the poorest in the country, stood up against this mounting socioeconomic hardship and state repression. During the last weeks of April, protesters in both Tripoli and Saida and other parts of the country demonstrated their frustration and anger by smashing banks and by gathering in large numbers in Nour square (Tripoli). The Lebanese military responded with teargas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition, and shot one of the protesters, Fawwaz Fouad al-Seman, aged 26, leaving him dead at the hospital the next day after rumors of hospital malpractice.

The Lebanese ruling class's ruthless neoliberal policies, violent military apparatus, and systemic impoverishment of the most vulnerable have only exacerbated the existing tensions, driving more people to gain political awareness of their position in society and of the structural problem that is the Lebanese bourgeoisie's laissez-faire capitalism. In the context of the Lebanese October revolution, the campaign to nationalize the banks regrouped orphaned leftists and Marxist organizers who understood the need to redefine the very concept of nationalization as worker-led and worker-controlled rather than state-controlled, and who understood the need to address the impending economic and monetary catastrophe overwhelmingly induced by financialized capitalism and Lebanon's role in the region as one of the centers of Gulf capital reproduction.

Bidayat - Were you expecting the October 17 movement to happen? In your opinion, why did it take place, and what caused it to gain much traction on a geographical and people's level? Consequently, how would you define it? Is it a series of protests, a popular movement, an uprising, a revolution? How do you describe the participating social segments?

It was quite clear that neoliberal policies, including extreme fiscal austerity and privatization, imposed since the end of the civil war, might lead to mobilization addressing these particular issues. However, no one could have anticipated the clientelist networks' failure to maintain their economic dominance and patronage. This resulted in a collective detachment from sectarianism in both a spontaneous and decentralized manner.

The escalation in the streets, workplaces, and later, banks was due to the amplification of contradictions and animosity between classes. These contradictions prevailed in several previous movements, including the 2011 campaigns to overthrow the sectarian regime, the 2012 teachers strike, and the 2015 protests during the garbage crisis.

The mobilization was a result of the clientelist networks' unsustainability, highlighted by their oppressive nature as they concealed people's demands through the use of force and violence, from which political awareness was created, and the organizations' momentum was strengthened.

Since then, we have seen numerous attempts by the ruling class to avoid responsibility by shifting the blame of the financial and economic crises it created onto the working class. The efforts were executed in stages: they began by imposing the kafala system (a sponsorship system that pegs migrant domestic workers to a Lebanese sponsor granting the sponsor full control over the lives of migrant workers) onto workers of Syrian nationality, which was integrated with the imposition of harsh and racist conditions onto Palestinians. Both actions were justified by the ruling class "to protect" Lebanese workers in a contradictory and deceptive manner. Their scam, however, was revealed in the growing austerity measures targeted at future workers in the labor market as well as university students, who began to mobilize at the Lebanese University (LU) in the buildup to the

revolutionary momentum unleashed in October 2019.

We must, therefore, recognize the simultaneity in applying predatory policies against workers of all nationalities to displace crises, culminating in the October 17 movements and reaching its momentum based on the political awareness that it inherited and resulted from the 2015 campaign.

Two notable slogans arose in this movement. One about putting in place a government of technocrats that are independent of the ruling parties, and the other one about having a transitional government arrange early elections. What are your thoughts on these slogans and on the capabilities of the forces of this movement to achieve any of them?

Firstly, we must understand and analyze the dimensions of the term “technocrat” before we can answer this question. Should we consider Lebanon’s economic and social problems a result of “technical” weakness within the ruling class, or rather a structural and systematic issue that is inevitable under the capitalist system, especially in the vicious neoliberal form it has taken in Lebanon? Do we consider that the political ceiling of our demands must be limited by the insistence of replacing dictators by specialists to manage the oppressive machine more efficiently? Are we forgetting that the most aggressive, fierce, and failed bureaucrats in power are the ones who appointed the specialists in the first place? If we concede to the controversy that the real battle is against corruption (which is an abstraction of the actual fight), are we then considering that the solution to treat privatization is more privatization?

Secondly, we must reevaluate our understanding of the parties. Directing the battle exclusively towards them is also an abstraction of the struggle that results from a superficial and false analysis of the material conditions that have allowed them to take and maintain control. Taking a closer look at what is called political party work in its contemporary form in Lebanon, we find a parasitic pattern of behavior in general. They use every opportunity arising from the current economic model to destroy and suppress attempts at building a productive economy. This allowed them to create extensive networks of patronage and clientelism and develop their economic and cultural hegemony, to reproduce the current economic model and, hence, themselves. Obviously, this is not the only part of the equation, but it shows us that solutions cannot originate from the system itself. In reality, we need to dismantle the whole system.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the demands and slogans that have led to the clarification and amplification of the contradictions resulting from the capitalist system in Lebanon simply because they are reformist in nature. For example, our campaign to nationalize the banks (بنوك لبنان للبنان) or the campaign of the Lebanese University students for free education, along with other campaigns contributed to demonstrating the dimensions of the actual battle through their intrinsic relationship with the daily struggles of workers.

Consequently, we view the demand for a government independent of the ruling parties and the insistence on early elections as an empty slogan that does not call for change unless they are placed within a revolutionary framework opposed to the existence and shape of the regime itself.

What are the most notable achievements of the movement? In your opinion, was it meant to achieve specific results/reforms, and to what extent? In your opinion, what were the most prominent living demands this movement was seeking to achieve?

One of the most prominent achievements of the October uprising was the substantial participation of workers, in particular, foreign and migrant workers. What is interesting is that the uprising created a critical interactive space between workers from different sectors, on the one hand, and the Lebanese public on the other. In this regard, the uprising witnessed various organizational attempts

aimed at targeting the reality of the exploitation in its racial and legal form. The most remarkable achievement in this regard may be the organizational attempts of migrant students and workers to establish broad networks of relationships that help protect and stimulate the participation of non-Lebanese (that are part of the exploited classes located in Lebanon) within the revolutionary action on the ground. Despite the endeavors' modest numbers and poor organizational continuity, their most significant victory was their ability to drive out the racist discourse from the realm of humanitarian and moral solidarity. In its place, they instilled the struggle against fascism in individual and collective political action to realize the rights of workers and refugees.

A shift has occurred from the sphere of civil rights discourse to the approach of collective political rights towards self-determination on a classless basis. The uprising in camps, which had lasted for over two months in 2019, might have been the main driver in evolving this class consciousness beyond the stereotypes of fascist nationalism. Once the movement of camps intersects with migrant worker's organizations, such as the case of the October uprising, it will establish the building block for a class discussion that transcends the axes and diameters of national identity and the codified exploitative system that surrounds it. Perhaps it is this intersection of political actions that will help develop a critical awareness against the reactionary Lebanese legal system.

What are your thoughts on the “we are demanding, and not negotiating” slogan? Is there an alternative to authorities applying policies and the movement protesting?

The October 17 uprising is part of a wave of a wide range of movements that shook the region, from Iraq, all the way to Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan. The Sudanese overthrew al-Bashir while chanting “victory or Egypt.” Ironically the remnants of the regime pushed for a course of action towards settlement negotiations under the auspices of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi himself, who had turned against the Egyptian revolution.

The Sudanese people, with all its might, rose up against al-Bashir's Islamic neoliberal government. Committees were formed all over the country, from the peripheries to the capital, demanding a decent standard of living. The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) was established, which was semi-clandestine as it had no public representatives. It created a connection between most of the revolutionary forces. The association succeeded in polarizing the youth because, unlike other opposition groups, it did not succumb to the political game of negotiations under the tyrant regime. Additionally, its unionized nature allowed a firm and close connection with the protests.

The SPA was a crucial component in the process of organizing the movement and in directing its demands; refusing to negotiate was one of its features. Al-Bashir tried to use his repressive regime and bloodthirsty militias, but the insistence of the revolutionaries was not compromised. A military coup took place, and although al-Bashir was overthrown, the squares remained full. The demands shifted to overthrowing the new military government, but the response to that was the Khartoum massacre by the “Rapid Support Forces.” Subsequently, an “Investigation Committee” was formed, and the opposition forces (including the SPA) entered a phase of negotiations that ended with a settlement that enshrined the military government's role in return for some gains. However, decent living was no longer up for discussion.

It is possible to benefit from the experiences in our surroundings, and the Sudanese struggle is a good example. The revolutionary flame was not extinguished in Sudan. The experience of the SPA emphasized the importance of union organization consistent with social demands outside bureaucratic structures. Concurrently, however, this organization will not be enough without an integrated view of the approach and principles to organize the militants. The flaws in the consensus among the opposition forces were revealed after the overthrow of al-Bashir and the SPA going above ground, allowing reactionaries to exploit these internal contradictions.

Thus, it is possible to say that the slogan, “we are demanding, and not negotiating,” has some inevitability and ambiguity in it. Negotiating with a dominant class requires a precise balance of power if we are to achieve anything. This is where the importance of organizing comes in. Organizing a workers’ movement based on actual demands can threaten the interests of the ruling class from the streets and the workplace, but when it is built on solid principles. The system in Lebanon acknowledges the threats of such an organization. Over the decades, for example, it has sought to entrench and reproduce. One of the most prominent manifestations of this extortion is its hegemony over the main union confederation (CGTL), transforming it into an apparatus for sectarian repression against the working class.

Who are we negotiating? What are we negotiating? Negotiation requires setting a vision as well as organizing the movement. The demands become effective when this organization paralyzes the reproduction of the regime. Our principles will not be subject to negotiations. Recalling the warning from Sudan by the radical Muzn al-Nil, that “the counter-revolution lies in the lines of agreement.”

What has changed in the youth’s role between the uprising of October 17 and that of summer 2015 (can you paint a picture describing the youth’s organizational process)? The demands of the youth and students developed during the October 17 movement, what were the most important ones?

It would be misleading to compare the two as unrelated mass events when they undoubtedly form two parts of a decade of broad popular movements in the Arab region, particularly, and more generally on a global scale. During this prolonged decade (between 2010 and 2020), the Arab world has witnessed an accelerated process of cumulative mass protests, which are nearing their peak in determining a more precise position of the existing statist (socio-economic) system. For this reason, transformations in young people or students can only be described in terms of the collective actions that connect both peaks in the movement. Thus, we must first understand the sporadic protests that connect the decline of the 2015 protests with the peak of 2019’s uprising.

Before the decline of the 2015 movement, the squares were left with less than 10 coalition groups that included party formations outside of the government’s composition (such as the “**لبنان مسؤول**” campaign on accountability). Others that were made up of civil society groups and NGOs (such as “You Stink!”). The discourse that accompanied the birth of these campaigns swayed between calling for a halt in privatization policies underlying the economic system of the Lebanese bourgeoisie and calling for treating corruption as the root cause of the government’s failure. Despite having the youth component present in all of the groups above, it was clear that they were subsumed in the dominant discourse with little, or still underdeveloped, space for a comprehensive understanding of the vital areas in which the youth experience is felt the most, such as in universities.

The core of a student movement in LU began to materialize as the movement began to falter after 2015. Affected by the tyranny of the fragmented reformist discourse as a response to the public protests across the country, the start of the student movement was confined to small organizations that dealt exclusively with the LU’s issues and its corruption. It began to evolve systematically through various collective initiatives between student groups and clubs as opposed to sectarianism and the corruption that mires their university. However, in early 2019, and in parallel to the movement of Palestinian workers in the camps, the oppositional students’ discourse started to follow a more incited political language. They linked the Lebanese University’s marginalization with the neoliberal rentier economy model of the country as a whole, which was reflected at the beginning of that year by the decision of the Cabinet to reduce the Lebanese University’s budget. The protests reached their pinnacle when students declared their full solidarity and stood at the forefront of the battle announced by the Lebanese University professors league. Although the league’s campaign ended in some compromise, the opposing coalition continued its protests and began to consolidate

organizationally in a student bloc called the "Lebanese University Student's Bloc." At the first test, the bloc declared a boycott of student elections for two reasons. The first is the futility of an electoral system that reproduces the student body's dependence on the university's administration and the Lebanese state. The second is its adherence to the regime's exclusionary logic that deprives non-Lebanese students of the right to vote. Thus, the student movement took its first steps towards identifying with the revolutionary action on the ground against Lebanese neoliberalism and its fascist rhetoric.

The above took place one week before October 17. During the uprising, the LU movement worked on intensifying its coordination with political youth organizations to spread the student discourse outside of the public universities' institutions and interact with student bodies in private universities. It also involved graduates (especially those unemployed) and, most importantly, engaged with young workers as a public declaration of its position on the left. It was a new political, organizational step that is not without substantial technical and political flaws related to the extent of the student body and its alliances' radical depth. It appears that LU students (the left-wing opposition) were at least able to reach a milestone in student political organization that has been nonexistent since the 1980s.

The student claim today is centered on the development of an integrated political discourse that illustrates the position of the student movement concerning the Lebanese system in its entirety. Hence, it was compelled to regard the private educational sector as a pillar of the neoliberal economic order. However, until that political awareness is strengthened rhetorically and organizationally, we can be confident that the journey of the student protests in Lebanon has shaken the indifference, fear, and compliance in the public university in the 2015 wave. With the October uprising, it is now entering an organizational phase to try to emerge as a representative of the youth on Lebanese territories by taking an oppositional position to the Lebanese regime's neoliberal economy and fascist logic.

Given your position as a young group of people, what are the most important demands that the movement should focus on?

Our main demands are the following:

- Abolish the kafala system and grant foreign workers their full human and civil rights.
- Grant Palestinian, Syrian, and other refugees their full human and civil rights.
- Grant women and the LGBT community their full human and civil rights.
- Release all prisoners with minor offenses, disarm the Internal Security Forces, and demilitarize civilian areas.
- Nationalize the medical sector and pharmaceutical companies to provide free and full healthcare to all residents, regular and irregular.
- Return looted public property, such as maritime regions and Solidere, in addition to nationalizing all sectors that have been privatized by the ruling class.
- Nationalize private banks to recover the looted money by writing off public and people's debt, freeing up more than a third of the public budget to be used to improve services and care, and reveal all of the country's financial history.
- Restructure the tax system to make it progressive, affecting the wealthiest and alleviating the burden on the working class.

- Direct capital towards economically productive work, in which workers have full and collective control over production and democratic processes in the workplace.
- Develop sustainable agricultural policies that protect the environment, improve farmers' earnings by seizing accumulated agricultural lands, and encourage and strengthen agricultural worker cooperatives.

What were the lessons learned from your experience with this movement?

1. Organization is essential and necessary for continuity. One of the main failures of the first wave was the lack of organization and the selfishness of groups. Leftist and communist parties should have been ready to receive, understand, and utilize such a popular movement. Unfortunately, they were not prepared.
2. There is no place for stars and stardom in popular revolts. Unfortunately, this was not accepted by some parties and their supporters. We found them promoting whoever they wanted at the expense of the cause and the movement. It led to the personification of issues and deviated them from their popular and inclusive path.
3. Work on developing working-class organic intellectuals and leadership from below and not petty-bourgeois stars.
4. On the ground, coordination was supposed to take place with neighborhood residents. Unfortunately, it was often otherwise. 'Keyboard supervisors' were usually found planning and deciding for the revolutionaries in the streets.
5. There was no compromise in the slogans from any of the groups that were present. Raising the ceiling includes not only the revolution's demands but also unacceptable alliances where the Palestinian flag, for example, would cause a riot. Building a radical integrated discourse and a unified vision strengthens that alliance.

Between blocking roads and regaining land area confiscated by the state, setting up camps, and inhabiting them, collaborative action originated in various Lebanese squares. It took on the task of securing all technical and in-kind logistics, including blankets, food, drinks, and first aid. Unfortunately, the absence of an integrated and centralized (or unified) organization allowed unpopular entities to enter the squares under the pretext of charity. The uneven distribution of logistics between and within regions appeared and contributed to indirect dependency on such consumption patterns, on the other.

This incident proved the need for popular committees concerned with grassroots organizing capable of preserving the process of resilience without drowning in dependency or subordination to other entities. The emergence of organic uniformity will help in the fight against the culture of clientelism that crawls into collaborationist organizations in mass gatherings whenever possible. These gatherings are thus transformed into a market of commodities and services that inhibits class solidarity.

To surpass these obstacles to the development of class solidarity, popular committees must be established. They should also be the forum to overcome the nationalistic character that usually dominates the discourse and rhetorical approaches in the squares. Slogans such as "the right of a Lebanese citizen to a decent standard of living" contribute to normalizing the systematic exclusion of non-Lebanese, such as refugees or migrant workers, from the revolutionary masses. The popular committees, once organized (and even in the process of organizing), will help overcome the "nationalistic mindset" towards class consciousness that transcends citizenship. In other words, it is

only through the popular committees that the squares can be organized as spaces for knowledge and interaction to:

Option 1: fortify the revolutionary groundwork against the slippery slopes of isolationism.

Option 2: prevent the revolutionary groundwork from slipping into isolationism.

In summary, the popular committees become the answer to the question 'how do people remain resilient in their battle against the regime?', where the meaning of resilience goes beyond its in-kind logistical characteristic and towards its interactive and intellectual dimension.

6. There is a need to achieve a productive alternative economy that provides employment opportunities for everyone, regardless of nationality. Its implementation must benefit its workers rather than accumulate profits resulting from private ownership. We must demand that the sectors be made public, supported by sustainable and productive policies and that the infrastructure facilitates their achievement. Agriculture is a priority to reduce dependence on food imports, ensure food security, and, subsequently, food sovereignty to all of the country's inhabitants. It is through agricultural development and the nationalization of the banking sector that we can envisage a productive industrial sector. An economy that normalizes exploitative social relations of production may develop and contribute to market prosperity in the short term. However, it will inevitably lead to more severe crises in the long run. Workers' rights to manage their production and to receive their full wages, as a priority, that result from their work remain the basis of the democratic economic system that we aspire to achieve.

P.S.

- Spectre. July 6, 2020:

<https://spectrejournal.com/smash-the-banks-in-order-to-nationalize-them/>

- Bidayat is an Arabic language intellectual and cultural quarterly publication that aims to make a significant contribution in the on-going struggles of Arab societies towards self-determination, citizenship, democracy, secularism, social and economic justice, guided by the values of equality, freedom and humanism and recognizing ethnic, gender and cultural diversity. Launched in 2012, it is available at <https://www.bidayatmag.com>