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International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts

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## Contact

[workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk)

## Website

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## Letter from the editor

The seventh issue of *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts* is a special issue built around the dossier “Labour Activism in the Middle East and North Africa”. The guest editor responsible for this issue is Peyman Jafari, a researcher who teaches global politics and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Amsterdam.

Mohamed-Salah Omri revisits the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11 and the ongoing transition with a view to investigate the role of local agency in radical change and protest movements over several decades. He argues that the Tunisian General Union of labour (UGTT) served as a focal point, not only for the working class but also for society as a whole, impacting the revolutionary process and the ensuing transitional period in significant ways. Claudie Fioroni analyses the rationale behind Jordan Phosphate Mines Company (JPMC) employees’ mobilisation within the context of the Arab popular uprisings. Derek Alan Ide explores the multifaceted dynamic that existed between the Egyptian Marxist movement and the Egyptian state under Gamal Abd al-Nasser, focusing heavily on the two periods of repression against the communist movement from 1952-1956 and from 1959-1965. The issue is completed with a review article by Brecht de Smet of several books on the Egyptian revolution and the Arab uprising.

*Workers of the World* is the journal of the International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts (<http://www.iassc-mshdijon.fr/>).

Articles for *Workers of the World* should be sent to the executive editor at [workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk).

António Simões do Paço  
Executive Editor

## **Introduction: Against all odds - labour activism in the Middle East and North Africa**

*Peyman Jafari*

If class politics and labour activism in the West have been relegated to the margins of academic research and public debate in the last two decades, they have been almost entirely ignored when it comes to the analysis of the Middle East. Hence the awarding of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet, in which the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) is the leading force with over a half million members, is one of the rare moments the labour movement in the Middle East has received public recognition, albeit in a partial and distorted manner. As Joel Beinin, the eminent historian of labour in Egypt, recently commented, "most of the international media...followed the [Nobel Prize] committee's lead in constructing a narrative that ignored the leading role of the UGTT in the Quartet and the intense social struggle that forced Ennahda from power."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Nobel committee "sanitized" the Tunisian Revolution by stressing "peaceful dialogue" and "consensus-based solutions" and

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<sup>1</sup> Ennahda is a moderate Islamist party that won the elections in October 2011 (37%), nine months after a revolutionary movement that had started in mid-December 2010 had ousted president Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali. After Ennahda formed a government, protests continued, including hundreds of strikes and occupations by UGTT. When two leftist political leaders were assassinated by a Salafist group in February and July 2013, the UGTT reacted with general strikes and demonstrations, pushing Ennahda towards compromise with the Quartet (formed in late August 2013). In January 2014 a new government was formed and a new constitution guaranteeing equal civil rights and acknowledging Islam as the country's official religion was adopted.

excluding the role of labour struggles in the form strikes, sit-ins, and occupations that fuelled the political transformations.<sup>2</sup>

Denial of the significance of labour activism and its “sanitization” have a long history, of course. The mode of knowledge production, in the West as well as in the Middle East, has played its part. In the West, Orientalist essentialism has reduced various social and political aspects of the Middle East to a particular understanding of Islam, obscuring the role of social class. In the Middle East, this approach has been introduced by colonial agents as well as self-Orientalizing intellectuals, but the major contributors to this trend have been the two most influential political projects of the twentieth century in the region, nationalist and Islamist populism.<sup>3</sup>

From the 1920s onwards, various nationalist populist leaders attempted, often in a post-colonial context, to craft a notion of “the people.” Writing about the Kemalists who laid the foundation of modern Turkey, Erik Zürcher notes “their denial of class struggle, their calling for national solidarity and their ruthless suppression of class-based organizations...”<sup>4</sup> The same could be said about the nationalism of Kemal Atatürk’s Iranian counterpart Reza Shah. Although less of a populist, he also cracked down on Iran’s growing labour movement in the 1920s and 1930s as part of his passive revolution aimed at industrializing the country from above.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, added populist rhetoric and institutions to his father’s nationalist modernization project, stressing the importance of workers’ contribution to the nation and attempting to incorporate them through yellow trade unions.

Similar processes were visible in the Arab countries, where varieties of nationalism combined industrialization and populism through corporatist arrangements, material concessions, and symbolic gestures to incorporate

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<sup>2</sup> Beinlin, Joel, “Sanitizing the Tunisian Revolution,” 12 October 2015, retrievable at <http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2015/10/sanitizing-the-tunisian-revolution.html#more>

<sup>3</sup> For interpretations of the main forms of Islamism (political Islam) as populism, see Abrahamian, Ervand, “Fundamentalism or Populism.” In *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993); Colás, Alejandro, “The Re-invention of Populism: Islamist Responses to Capitalist Development in the Contemporary Maghreb,” *Historical Materialism* 12,4; Chris Harman, “The Prophet and the Proletariat,” *International Socialism Journal* 64, Autumn 1994; Jafari, Peyman “Rupture and Revolt in Iran,” *International Socialism Journal* 124, Autumn 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Zürcher, Erik-Jan, “Ottoman Sources of Kemalist Thought.” In Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: Intellectual Legacy*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Atabaki, Touraj and Zürcher, Erik-Jan (eds.), *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

workers and other subaltern groups in grand state-building projects. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most workers were working as servants or were occupied in small shops, weaving cotton or carpets, spinning wool, reeling silk, or making shoes, but the emergence of railways and other modern transport systems (Suez Canal), ports (Alexandria, Izmir, Abadan), telegraph and telephone lines and an increasing number of manufacturing plants (textile), mines and oil facilities increased the number of workers.<sup>6</sup> The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the emergence of mass urban politics, in which workers had an active part. Their struggles, often directed against the colonial structures, inspired the urban educated elite to approach workers as potential members of a modern nation, if they were provided proper education.

The first significant strikes appeared in this period, for instance between 1908 and 1910 in Egypt by tramway workers and railway workshop workers<sup>7</sup> and the first modern trade unions were organized, for instance the Anatolian Railway workers' union and Tehran's print shop workers union, both established in 1907. Nationalist intellectuals and political leaders welcomed these struggles, as they provided ammunition against foreign powers, for instance during the Arab Revolt of 1936-38 in Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Although liberal nationalism had a great influence on these movements, particularly in Egypt through the Nationalist Party in the 1910s and the Wafd Party in the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>9</sup> social radicalism had a significant presence as well. Thus many strikes were not only targeting foreign domination, but also domestic tyranny and social injustices, and socialists and communists were at the heart of the emerging workers' organizations.

Many of the trade unions were initiated by communist workers and intellectuals, and their influence increased following the Russian Revolution. In the late 1920s, for instance, the communist activist Yusuf

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Quataert, Donald, *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1950*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994; Quataert, Donald and Zürcher, Erik-Jan (eds.), *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Beinín, Joel and Lockman, Zachary, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of labour activism in historic Palestine and the attempts to create unity among Jewish and Arab workers see Lockman, Zachary, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Beinín, Joel, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 75-90.



Eftekhari helped to form a number of underground cells among the 11,000 oil workers of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in Abadan. Despite arrests and repression, oil workers protested on May Day 1929 demanding higher wages, shorter hours, and recognition of their trade union. A general strike on 4 May was repressed, but as Stephanie Cronin has argued, it signified the arrival of a new social force in Iranian politics, demonstrating the potency of a new type of protest, the industrial strike.<sup>10</sup> Strikes like this linked social demands to nationalist aspirations of independence and development. Another important aspect of these strikes was their potential to transcend ethnic divisions and unite workers around social and anti-imperialist demands. Writing on the historiography of labour in Iraq, Eric Davis observes, “In none of the strikes and worker demonstrations that I have examined did ethnolinguistic or confessional differences play any significant role dividing worker loyalties. Indeed, Western diplomatic records, largely of worker demands, underline the tremendous amount of worker solidarity throughout strikes and demonstrations despite the use of armed force to bring them to an end.”<sup>11</sup> Examples of other strikes, such as the 1946 oil strike in Abadan that was marked by ethnic tensions – instigated by the British authorities – between Arabs and the communist led union, show class solidarity not always won the day, but it was a significant force nevertheless.<sup>12</sup>

By weakening and distracting the colonial powers, the Second World War created the conditions in which labour radicalism increased in the 1940s and 1950s as the following examples demonstrate: the Shubra al-Khayma textile workers’ strikes in 1946 and 1951-52, the 1951 strike of the 71,000 Egyptian workers employed by the British in the Suez Canal Zone, the first industrial strike in Bahrain in the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) in December 1943 followed by the formation of the General Trade Union a decade later, oil workers’ strikes in Iran in 1946, the legalization of twelve of the sixteen trade unions in Iraq in 1944-46 followed by strikes of Iraqi rail workers in 1945 at Schalchiyya railway workshops, oil workers’ strike in Kirkuk in 1946 and at the K3 pumping

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<sup>10</sup> Cronin, Stephanie, “Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46,5, 2010, pp. 699-732.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, Eric, “History for the Many or History for the Few? The Historiography of the Iraqi Working Class.” In *Working and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> On the 1946 Abadan strike see Abrahamian, Ervand, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 361-62.

station near Haditha in April 1948, and the formation of the Aden Trades Union Congress in 1956 in South Yemen.<sup>13</sup>

The rise of nationalist populism in the 1950s and 1960s in the Middle East was the continuation of the anti-colonial struggles of the previous decades as members of the new middle class, often in military uniforms, attempted to realize national independence through post-colonial state-building. Nationalist populism, however, was also in a way the recognition of the power of the working class and at the same time an attempt to neutralize its social radicalism by denying working class subjectivity and instead promoting the notion of the “people.”<sup>14</sup> Inspired by the Soviet Union’s the state capitalist path to industrialization, nationalist populist leaders combined anti-imperialism with state-led industrialization and social reforms that aligned workers and landless peasants with the state bureaucracy.

These political projects, referred to as “Arab socialism,” became manifest in Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, in Syria under Ba‘thist rule after 1963, in Iraq under the Free Officers following their military overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and then the Ba‘thist rule after 1968. Post-colonial, nationalist, authoritarian populist regimes were also established in Tunisia and Algeria, although in weaker forms, and even the Shah of Iran was developing his own populist style in the 1960s through what he called the “Revolution of the Shah and the People” (White Revolution). While banning independent trade unions, these regimes promised to further the cause of workers through the strategy of import-substitution. The incorporation of trade unions could go very far, as in Tunisia where Ahmad Ben Salah, the main union secretary general, became minister of economy in 1961 and “advocated imposing austerity in order to build socialism.”<sup>15</sup> In Egypt, labour activism resurfaced in the early 1970s following Nasser’s death, but the trade union leader’s loyalty to the state maintained the corporatist break on strikes under al-Sadat. In Iran, strikes and other labour protests decreased following the crack down on the labour movement and the Left after the 1953 coup d’état against the nationalist

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<sup>13</sup> On Egyptian workers’ protests in this period, see Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, pp. 285-363. On the 1946 Abadan strike see Atabaki, Touraj, “Chronicle of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946” (forthcoming); On Iraq’s oil strikes see Batatu, Hanna, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba‘thists, and Free Officers*. London: Saqi Books, 2004 [1978], pp.622-27.

<sup>14</sup> Peasant revolts in a number of countries, most importantly Egypt and Syria, had the same effect.

<sup>15</sup> Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, p.137.

Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, and during the economic growth and the social reforms of the 1960s. The only country going against the grain was Turkey. As Ronnie Margulies and Ergin Yildizoğlu write, “The 1960s witnessed the transformation of a young and inexperienced working class into a very militant and highly organized sector. The number of unionized workers increased in leaps and bounds, reaching the one-million mark at the end of the decade. Strikes involved larger numbers of workers and were more prolonged, particularly in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.”<sup>16</sup>

The nationalist populist regime’s subordination of independent labour movements in this period didn’t meet any significant resistance from the Stalinist parties that due to their two-stages theory conceived these regimes as the first necessary stage and deferred socialist class struggle to later. By the 1970s, however, these regimes were stagnating or falling into crisis due to the limitations of import-substitution development. The demise of secular nationalist populism and communism opened up a bigger space for the growth of Islamist movements that had emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly as reactions to imperialism. Just as the nationalist populist movements, Islamist were forced to recognised the significance of the working class, but they too tried to subordinate the labour movement and neutralize its radicalism by denying its autonomy and subsuming it under the Islamic “ummah.”

In Egypt, for instance, Muslim Brothers were involved in the formation of the Shubra al-Khayma Mechanized Textile Workers’ Union in the late 1930s. In the 1940s they started to pay more attention to social issues and established the Workers’ Section of the Society of Muslim Brothers to exert more direct influence in the workers’ movement.<sup>17</sup> While promising to establish social justice and improve workers’ living standards, the Muslim Brothers denied class-based politics. Ayatollah Khomeini, who stood at the head of the Islamist current in the Iranian Revolution and founded the Islamic Republic, explicitly adopted a class-struggle and social justice vocabulary, using terms such as “mostazafan”, the downtrodden, to refer to a mixed group that included not only the poor and workers, but also pious merchants. But in Khomeini’s Islamist populism that shaped the state-society relations in the 1980s in Iran, workers were praised and promised benefits, but they were denied the right to organize independently. The

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<sup>16</sup> Margulies, Ronnie and Yildizoğlu, Ergin, “Trade Unions and Turkey’s Working Class,” *Merip Reports* 121, February 1984, pp.15-31.

<sup>17</sup> Beinlin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, pp.363-394.

similarity with nationalist populist approach to labour activism doesn't stop here. The Islamic Republic of Iran were trying to follow the path of import-substitution and state-led development, before introducing liberalization policies from the 1990s onwards, and marginalizing even the recognized labour organizations.

### **From neoliberalism to the Arab Revolutions**

If nationalist and Islamist narratives obscured the importance of labour activism, the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s has tried to obliterate the labour movement socially, organizationally and discursively. The *infitah* policies adopted in Egypt in 1974 signalled the introduction of privatization and liberalization in all most all Middle Easter countries in the following two decades; in Tunisia and Morocco in the late 1970s as the government enthusiastically adopted the “structural adjustment programmes” of the IMF and the World Bank, in Turkey after the military coup in 1980, and in Iran from the early 1990s onwards. These policies that unravelled the populist arrangements and undermined the position of even the yellow trade unions were met by labour protests, which were subsequently represses.

At the same time, the developments of the previous decades had started to reconfigure the working class. Most importantly, rapid urbanization expanded the shantytowns and the numbers of people working in the “informal sector” as unemployment, underemployment, precarious labour relations, and unpaid labour increased. These workers lacked the experience of collective organization and rarely joined trade unions. This reconfiguration was also prompted by the expansion of the service sector and the stagnation of the industries, which led to a slight increase of female labour. The possibility of labour migration, induced by the oil-boom after 1973, formed another obstacle to labour activism. In the mid-1980s, there were over 5 million migrant Arab workers in the Persian Gulf countries and some 2.5 million North Africans were employed in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

As neoliberalism marched on in the 1990s and 2000s, class politics became out of vogue and the importance of labour activism was widely denied. Labour unions were at best seen as civil society organizations that should promote workers' rights within the free market. The Arab Revolutions of 2011, however, have brought labour activism back into the

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<sup>18</sup> Beinun, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, p. 151.

spotlights, not only due to important role they played in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, but also due to a broader return of the “social question” that has preceded these revolutions. One can for instance point to the revival of labour activism in Iran since the early 2000s, and the increasing attention for the plight of migrant workers in the Persian Gulf countries and the deepening of social inequalities globally and in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

The Arab Revolutions have stimulated a number of new publications on labour activism in the Middle East. In the opening article of this special issue of *Workers of the World*, Brecht de Smet reviews a number of publications centred around the issues of social class and labour activism in the Middle East, reflecting on the revolutions that swept the region in 2011. In his timely article on the Tunisian General Union of Labour, Mohamed-Salah Omri counters the assumption that “the Arab world was incapable of producing agency, which is neither military tribal, factional, or in the form of exceptional individuals whether secular or religious,” and sets out to explain the relatively successful course of the Tunisian revolution, which he partly contributes to the significant role played by the trade union.

Labour activism, of course, most often comes in small acts and non-revolutionary situations. In an ethnographic study of the Jordan Phosphate Mines Company, Claudie Fioronie explores the motivations behind workers’ protests, tracing their roots to their everyday experience in the workplace. Finally, Derek Alan Ide provides a more historical perspective, looking at two episodes of repression of communist workers and party members under Nasser’s nationalist populism, highlighting the problematic relationship that existed between Nasserism and communism in Egypt.

Together, these articles remind us that labour activism has played and continues to play an important role in the Middle East and North Africa and that it provides the best hope to challenge neoliberalism, foreign domination and ethno-religious sectarianism.

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<sup>19</sup> On Iran, see Andreas, Malm and Esmailian, Shora, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War* (London, Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2007); Moghissi, Haideh and Rahnema, Saeed, “The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran,” in *Socialist Register* 2011, pp.197-218; Sina Moradi, *Labour Activism and Democracy in Iran. Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. Working Paper 22*. The Hague: Hivos, 2013.

## No Ordinary Union: UGTT and the Tunisian path to revolution and transition

Mohamed-Salah Omri

Taking initial stock of the “Arab Spring” early in 2011, Michael Hudson enumerated five cases of “conventional wisdom” about Arab and Middle East politics before the uprisings: authoritarianism in the region is durable; democratization is an inappropriate goal and is impossible to reach in the Arab world; populations are passive either due to rentier state policies or coercion; Arab nationalism is dead; the Middle East regional system is essentially stable.<sup>1</sup> These assumptions, Hudson suggests, have led analysts and academics to focus on the system as such and on the state, with the consequence that “the strength and durability of protest movements” were ignored.<sup>2</sup> This could be due to “group-think, theoretical tunnel vision, ideological agendas, insufficient attention to the work of Arab intellectuals, and a lack of multidisciplinary approaches”.<sup>3</sup> In addition, one could even speak of *de facto*, and often willing, academic and media collusion with authoritarian regimes in the region and with their supporters abroad.<sup>4</sup> Pascal Boniface goes even further and talks about forgery in his book, *Les*

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<sup>1</sup> HUDSON, Michael. "Awakening, cataclysm, or just a series of events? Reflections on the current wave of protest in the Arab World" in BSHEER, Rosie and ABU-RISH, Ziad (eds.). *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: end of an order?* London: Pluto, 2012, pp. 26-27. His comments were first published on 16 May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. “Arab and Islamic Studies in the Context of the ‘War on Terror’ in Britain and the United States” in TEMIMI, Abdeljalil (ed.). *Al-jami’at wa labahithun al-arab: bayna al-hurriya wa mumarasat al-raqabah* [Universities and Arab researchers: between freedom and the practices of censorship], Tunis: FTRSI, 2011, pp. 79-98 (in Arabic). See also the comprehensive sociological study: GUESSOUMI, Mouldi. *Mujtama’ al-Thawra* [The Society of the Revolution] Tunis: Faculty of Letters, 2015.

*intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge*, which analyses the French scene. He shows the bias and the implications of such expertise: “These intellectuals have explained to us how backwardness, which they consider germane to these societies, made them immune to democracy, which justifies the recourse to war to free these peoples from their dictators”.<sup>5</sup>



Mohamed Ali Square, where the headquarters of UGTT are located. This iconic square in the heart of Tunis, named after the founder of the first union in 1924, has served for decades as a focal point for demonstrations, sit-ins, hunger strikes and assemblies. The square is decorated with the flags of the union and the country and the pictures of the founding fathers of unionism in Tunisia.

In my view, the lack of attention to local intellectuals underlies a wider point, namely, an assumption that local organized agency is absent from the region, or that agency is limited to political parties or the military. The underlying premise is that the Arab world was incapable of producing agency, which is not military, tribal, factional, or in the form of exceptional individuals, whether secular or religious, hence the academic and media attention given to issues of identity politics, radicalism, terrorism and

<sup>5</sup> BONIFACE, Pascal. *Les intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge*. Paris: Jean-Claude Gawsewith, 2011, p. 83 (my translation).

political Islam in general. Moreover, it betrays a widely held assumption that Arabs have not produced reflection and analysis or knowledge on their societies, which are worthy of consideration. They are considered known or knowable rather than producers of knowledge. Yet, it is striking how local academics have had a very different view of the events.<sup>6</sup> And much of the current essay is in fact based on local analysis and sources, mostly written in Arabic, and on interviews of key figures in Tunisia.<sup>7</sup>

A number of mysteries and question marks surround the Arab Uprisings in general and the Tunisian revolution and its outcome, or the so-called “Tunisian exception”, in particular. Before 2011, Tunisia was in fact the rule rather than the exception in the thinking outlined above in a number of ways: stable, growing steadily, homogeneous, functioning well, and a hot tourism destination. What made Tunisians rise up? Why was the Tunisian path to transition different from Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen? Why has it been hailed as a “success story”? Would it not be more appropriate to ask: a success story for whom? For the march of the market economy and liberal democracy – hence the immense interest from the United States in particular? For the revolting masses? For political Islam? Only a nuanced, well-informed analysis of pre-2011 society and its politics would provide a proper understanding of the revolution and its aftermath.

In a paper titled, “Why the Tunisian path was singular and why does it matter”, I argued for a number of factors which could account for this singularity: the movement of protest was from country to city, the role of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the special issue of *boundary 2* where Tunisian scholars and activists assess the revolution in their country: <http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/content/39/1.toc.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> These local sources include: Temimi’s numerous works, most notably *marsad al-thawra al-tunisiyya* [Observatory of the Tunisian Revolution] in 3 volumes (1500 pages); TIMOUMI, Hedi. *Khud’at al-istibdad al-na’im fi tunis; 23 sanah min hukm bin Ali* [The Deception of Soft Dictatorship in Tunisia: 23 years of Ben Ali’s rule] Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2012. For the events themselves and chronologies, see, for example: WESLATI, Salah. *Democracie ou guerre civile*. Tunis, Nirvana, 2012. This book chronicles in detail 90 days (January 14- March 14, 2011), with background to the 2011 revolution. Part of the relevant archive of UGTT is still at the Ministry of the Interior because of police raids during various occasions in the confrontational relationship with the state. Some of the archive may never be recovered because it has been either lost during raids by the secret police or destroyed in the chaotic weeks after January 2011. I also interviewed Sami Tahri, the director of *al-Sha’b* newspaper and spokesperson of the UGTT, 17 April 2014 at *Al-Sha’ab* newspaper. Some ideas in the present paper have been published in my previous articles, see in particular: Trade unions and the construction of a specifically Tunisian protest configuration. *OpenDemocracy*, 13 September 2013. Retrievable at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mohamed-salah-omri/trade-unions-and-construction-of-specifically-tunisian-protest-configuration>; This is not a jasmine revolution. *Transnational Institute*, January 2011. Retrievable at <http://www.tni.org/article/tunisia-revolution-dignity-and-freedom-can-not-be-colour-coded>



the military was limited and the labor movement was strong.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Egyptian revolution, which was mostly urban, in Tunisia one can speak of a rural revolution. It started in the interior and moved towards the Northern cities, prompting local historians to talk about the invasion of the city by the country in a recall of the 1864 revolts.<sup>9</sup> By rural, however, I mean towns located in rural areas, with a mainly agricultural economy but which have, due to the specificities of nation building in Tunisia and compulsory and universal education, the same problems as well as similar structures of resistance as big cities. Along with these reasons, there was the well-known story of an early activation of social media, particularly in terms of circulating information. Mobile telephone became the main medium, reversing the regime's success in cutting off and isolating the 2008 rebellion in Gafsa from public view. Social media enhanced the speed and extent of information circulation within the country at first, and then to a wider audience. As a result of this, by January 14, most world media, including al-Jazeera, France 24 and even the BBC had already been to and reported on the killings in Kasserine, Regueb, Thala and elsewhere in the interior, which took place January 8-10.<sup>10</sup> The participation of women and lawyers, an important and historically active body of resistance in Tunisia, led the way in many parts of the country, and articulated – and even raised – the demands of the people to a more political level. Much of this is well known. What is less known is that activists in The Tunisian General Union of Labour, better known by its French acronym, UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), Tunisia's main trade union organization, played a

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<sup>8</sup> OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. "In What Ways is the Path of the Tunisian Revolution Singular? And Why Does this Matter?" Paper presented at the conference "The Arab Springs: How do we understand the popular movements and political changes in the Middle East" at Sophia University and The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, Japan, 29-30 January 2012. The army is a key element in any argument about the Tunisian path since, unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, it was never in government and was never powerful politically. Its role, to be neutral and even protective of the revolution, proved to be a key factor in the way things turned out.

<sup>9</sup> JDEY, Ahmed. « Pour une histoire de la Tunisie du 14 Janvier 2011: la fin d'un dictateur et l'amorce de la construction démocratique » in *La Tunisie du XXIème siècle: quel pouvoir pour quels modèles de société*. *EurOrient*, no. 38, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Bowen, the BBC Middle East Correspondent at the time, notes in fact how complacent and inattentive major media outlets had been to Tunisia specifically because of the success of the image promoted by the Tunisian state and the uncritical acceptance of it around the world. He says: "I realized the significance of what was happening in Tunisia only when I was prompted by an email from a Tunisian academic at Oxford University in early January asking why the BBC was not taking the uprising seriously." BOWEN, Jeremy. *The Arab Uprisings: the People want the fall of the system*. London, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012, p. 38.

leading role in spreading information and participating in the early responses to the Bouazizi self-immolation.<sup>11</sup>

All these elements taken together have been determining factors in the revolutionary process. In addition, the elements of the transition were, in my view, embedded in the dynamics of the revolution itself. This is in contrast with Egypt where such demands and thinking about a post-revolution transition were, in a way, controlled, not by the protesters or civil society, but by the army. In the present essay, I would like to zero in on what might be called the labour union factor, which is truly an exception, but was overlooked by Tunisia observers until recently.

Tunisia has an organized labor movement that is unique in its history and social dimension. The UGTT, I argue, has been the most influential *structured* and *structuring* force of resistance and social contention in independent Tunisia. And while social contention in the country has been neither the most vigorous nor the most radical in the region (Algeria has far more riots for social demands than Tunisia and several other Arab countries – Yemen, Libya, Sudan - have had more radical movements in recent history), the organized labor movement sets the country apart and explains much of the way things have unfolded in 2011 and since.<sup>12</sup> In other places, I develop an argument for the intersections between the labor movement and the culture of dissent as whole.<sup>13</sup> Here, I pursue the argument by revisiting the history and the dynamics before and after 2011, with a view to this character and role of UGTT, that is, as a *structured* and *structuring* force, noting as well the ways in which such a force may have contributed to curtailing revolutionary ambition. In light of the regressions registered in the revolution, for a complex set of reasons which range from the rise of identity politics to violence, foreign intervention and the weakness of the alternative parties, I ask: in what ways and to what extent has the weight of UGTT or what I call the Tunisian unionist ceiling of ambition, contributed

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<sup>11</sup> Bowen notes that the first information on the self-immolation was passed to the international media by local UGTT activists, who also organized the first demonstration to protest it the next day. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> For a view of the role of workers and unions in the Egyptian revolution, see, ALEXANDER, Anne and BASSIOUNY, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom and Social Justice: workers and the Egyptian revolution*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. “Intersections between the Labour Movement and the Culture of Protest in Tunisia” in *Bread, freedom and social justice*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, CRASH, July 11-12, 2014.

to taming or regulating the revolutionary process? In other words, was the revolutionary process *structured* as (at?) the image of the UGTT in a way?<sup>14</sup>

### **From incubator of protest and refuge for dissent to powerbroker**

Trade unionism in Tunisia goes back to the early twentieth century and has had both local and international aspirations since its inception by Mohamed Ali al Hammi (1890-1928), founder of the General Federation of Tunisian Workers in 1924.<sup>15</sup> But it was with the charismatic and visionary Farhat Hached (1914-1952) that a home-grown strong organization would emerge. Hached learned union activism and community organizing within the French CGT for 15 years before splitting from it to start UGTT in 1946.<sup>16</sup> His union quickly gained support, clout and international ties, which it mobilized in order to pressure the French for more social and political rights for Tunisia, and to consolidate the union's position as a key component of the national liberation movement. And it is specifically because of its birth in the midst of the struggle against French colonialism that the union had political involvement from the start, a line it has maintained throughout its history and guarded vigorously since. The unions' charter reflects this orientation. Its aims include: "building a socialist and nationalist economy, independent and free from all forms of dependency; calling for fair distribution of national wealth in a way which guarantees the aspirations of all workers and lower sections of society; defending

<sup>14</sup> The legalization of the revolutionary process led by the Ben Ashour committee, which would result in the National Constituent Assembly, was sponsored and protected by UGTT. The spelling of all Tunisian names of people and places follows French convention. For example, the name of the founding member of UGTT is normally transliterated in English as Farhat Hashad, but is kept as Farhat Hached. The essay is dedicated to "al-Ittihad".

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed Ali Al-Hammi was self-educated, travelled extensively, including spending some time in Germany where he studied political economy. Upon his return, he called for the establishment of workers' cooperatives across the country. The details of the founding were recorded by al-Hammi's friend and collaborator, Tahar al-Haddad in his book *al-Ummal al-Tunisiyun wa dhuhur al-harakah al-naqabiyyah* [The Tunisian workers and the rise of labor unionism] (1927). Tunis: Dar Bouzlama, 1987.

<sup>16</sup> A sizeable number of studies document and analyse Farhat Hached's legacy. See MANSOURI, Salim. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956* [The Mission of the Tunisian General Union of labour: 1946-1956. Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2013. This publication gathers the editorials of the newspaper *Sawt al Amal* written by Hached from 1947 and 48 and by Ahmad Ben Salah in 1955 and 1956; MOKNI, Abdelwahid. *Farhat Hached: al-mu'assis al-shahid wa al-qa'id al-shahid* [Farhat Hached: The founding witness and the martyred leader]: (Tunis: Samid, 2012). This publication makes extensive use of Hashad's speeches. See also BEN HMIDA, Abdessalam. *al-harakah al-naqabiya al-wataniyya li al-shighhila al-tunisiya, 1924 to 1956* [The Nationalist labour movement of the Tunisian working class], vol. 1. Tunis: Dar Muhammad Ali, 1984.

individual and public liberties, and reinforcing democracy and human rights; supporting all people struggling to reclaim their sovereignty and determine their destiny and standing in solidarity with national liberation movements across the world”.<sup>17</sup>

These aims were articulated, among others, in Hached’s address to workers on 16 May 1947, to mark the Bardo agreement of 1881, which surrendered the country to French rule. He says: “the workers’ struggle to improve their material and moral conditions is then tightly linked to the higher interests of the country, because such improvement requires a social change which cannot be obtained as long as the nation is subjected to the colonial system”.<sup>18</sup> There are global resonances to this strategy, as he explains: “If union movements in free nations fight big capitalism and the governments which support it, it is incumbent upon the workers of colonized nations to combat that system which is really the exploitation of an entire people for the benefit of foreign capitalism”.<sup>19</sup>

With such early credibility and closeness to the interests of the wider population, UGTT has enjoyed continuity in history and presence across the country, which paralleled and rivaled the ruling party at the height of its power under President Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, that is, from 1956 to 2011. With 150 offices across the country, an office in every governorate and district, and over 680,000 current members, it has constituted a credible alternative to this party’s power and a locus of resistance to it, so much so that to be a unionist became a euphemism for being an opponent or an activist against the ruling party.<sup>20</sup> This geographical reach and popular presence carved out a breathing space and provided institutional structuring for dissent. And it is in this sense that one can argue that UGTT has been the outcome of Tunisian protest and resistance movements and their incubator at the same time.

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<sup>17</sup> UGTT. *Al-Nidham al-dakhili* [Internal Regulations]. Tunis: UGTT, 2007. One of the main tools in defending these goals is the right to strike. The Charter states: “The strike is a legitimate right in union struggle and is part and parcel of union rights included in the constitution (p. 100). The new Tunisian constitution stresses this point in article 36, stating that union rights, including the right to strike are guaranteed. See *Dustur al-jumhuriyyah al-tunisiyyah* [The Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia]. Tunis: Official Press, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> MANSOURI. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956. Op.Cit.*, p. 81. Hached also stresses, in the second newspaper of UGTT, *sawt al-‘amal* [Voice of labour], that while the union does not intervene in party politics, it assumes its responsibility in matters of public concern.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> From 1956 until 2011, the ruling Neo-Destour party and its successor, RCD, dominated completely political life in the country with a structure which penetrated even the smallest of towns and lowest sections of society. The party became synonymous with the state.

For example, in 1984 the union aligned itself with the rioting people during the bread revolt; in 2008, it was the main catalyst for the disobedience movement in the Mining Basin of Gafsa; and, on December 2010, the UGTT, particularly its teachers' unions and local offices across the country, became the headquarters of revolt against Ben Ali. The fit between the revolution and UGTT was almost natural since the main demands of the rising masses, namely jobs, national dignity and freedom, had been on the agenda of the union all along. The union was also very well represented in the remote hinterland, such as in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine where the revolution began. Events, which started as spontaneous, were soon framed by local trade unions. This became a strategy by which sectorial strikes, particularly by teachers, soon turned into regional general strikes, starting from the South and moving northwards. An extremely important one was that of Sfax on 13 June 2011 where the largest demonstration until then was organized and articulated political claims, peacefully, in front of the UGTT local office. The culmination of such series of protests was the 14 January strike in Tunis at which point the head of the regime collapsed.

For these reasons, successive governments tried to compromise with, co-opt, repress or change the character of the union, depending on the situation and the balance of power at hand at any given moment. In 1978, UGTT went on general strike to protest what amounted to a coup perpetrated by the Bourguiba government to change a union leadership judged to be too oppositional and too powerful. The cost was the worst setback in the union's history since the assassination of its founder in 1952. The entire leadership of the union was put on trial and replaced by regime loyalists. Ensuing popular riots were repressed by the army, resulting in tens of deaths.<sup>21</sup> More recently, in 2012, UGTT sensed a repeat of 1978 and an attempt against its very existence. On 4 December 2012, as the union was gearing up to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of its founder, its iconic headquarters, Place Mohamed Ali, was attacked by

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<sup>21</sup> The ruling party attempted to install a parallel trade union under the pretext of "rectifying the direction" of a UGTT whose leadership was judged to be openly hostile to the ruling party and government policies, and a nest for left-wing dissent. One justification for this move was put forth by an important leader of the government loyalist group, Abdessattar Al Chennawi: "[the UGTT leadership] turned the Union into an open field for the opposition of all orientations except Destouri unionists, for the Destour Party is not represented in the union while known and prominent opposition figures hold high offices in UGTT. For this reason, 90% of 'the honourables' come from the Destour party". AL-HADDAD, Salim. *al-ittihad al-am al-tunisi li al-shukghl wa al-nidham al-burguibi [The Tunisian General Union of Labour and Bourguiba's Regime: Between Harmony and Confrontation]* Vol. 2. Tunis: UGTT Documentation and Research Unit, 2011, p. 286.

groups known as Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. The incident was ugly, public and of immediate impact. These leagues originated in community organisation in cities across the country designed to keep order and security immediately after 14 January 2011, which were later disbanded, and become dominated by Islamists of various orientations. On 26 August 2013, a group of trade unionists founded the Tunisian Labour Organization, which aims according to its leaders at correcting the direction of UGTT. To the attack on its offices, UGTT responded by boycotting the government, organizing regional strikes and marches, and eventually calling for a general strike on Thursday 13 December, the first such action since 1978. To the founding of a parallel union, Sami Tahri, the UGTT spokesman, reacted with dismissal, arguing that this was no more than the reaction of losers who could not win elected offices in UGTT and failed to drag the union into the “house of obedience”, referring to the new organization’s ties to the Al-Nahda party.<sup>22</sup> Tahri’s confident tone and political statement are backed up by history, which demonstrates that the UGTT has warded off several attempts at takeover, division or weakening over the past sixty years or so, as I mentioned above. This time, too, it prevailed.

Despite antagonistic relations with governments before and after the revolution, or perhaps because of them, UGTT remained arguably the only body in the country qualified to resolve disputes peacefully, but also to offer mediation albeit with a view to defend its own positions. After January 2011, it emerged as the key mediator and power broker in the initial phase of the revolution, when all political players trusted and needed it. And it was at the initiative of the union that the committee regulating the transition to the elections of 23 October 2011 was formed.<sup>23</sup> UGTT’s role was crucial in framing debate, steering decision-making in the chaotic period, starting the Council for the Protection of the Revolution, and serving as meeting place of all the parties at a time when parties were either small, insignificant politically or formed recently.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, UGTT used its leverage

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<sup>22</sup> On the attack by the Leagues, see Tahri’s response: <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2012/12/779396.html>.

<sup>23</sup> The so-called Ben Achour Committee named after its president, the constitutional scholar Iyadh Ben Achour, was called initially the Higher Political Reform Commission, set up on 17 January 2011. UGTT was instrumental in its expansion and constitution as a body to control the interim government and run the transition to the election of the National Constituent Assembly, under the new name, The [Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition](#) as an amalgamation between the original commission and the Council for the Protection of the Revolution set up by UGTT, political parties and civil society organizations. See testimony by Ben Achour dated 30 April 2011 in Temimi. *Observatory Vol. 1*, pp. 181-208.

<sup>24</sup> UGTT called for this council on 15 January and hosted it. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

to secure historic victories for its members and for workers in general, including an agreement to secure permanent contracts for over 140,000 temporary workers and pay raises for several sectors, including teachers, as well as a rise in the minimum wage for the agricultural sector.

As Tunisia moved from the period of revolutionary harmony in which UGTT played host and facilitator, to a political, and even ideological phase, characterised by a multiplicity of parties and polarisation of public opinion, the union was challenged to keep its engagement in politics without falling under the control of a particular party or indeed turning into one. But, due to historical reasons, which saw leftists channel their energy into trade unionism when their political activities were curtailed, UGTT remained on the left side of politics and, in the face of rising Islamist power, became a place where the Left, despite its many newly-formed parties, kept its ties and even strengthened them.<sup>25</sup> For these reasons, UGTT remained strong and decidedly outside the control of Islamists. But they, in turn, could not ignore its role and its status, nor could other parties, particularly the newly formed, centrist party, Nida Tunis. At the grassroots level, Islamists kept their membership and took part in UGTT-led labour action, and continue to do so today. At the level of leadership, and after attempts to weaken it by supporting a parallel union as I mentioned above, they were compelled to settle with the fact that the organization held the key to social peace in the country.

It is remarkable, but not surprising, that during the crisis of 2013, which resulted from the assassination of the Leftist leader Chokri Belaid and the pressure on the Al-Nahda-led government to resign, the balance of power and much of the rational management of the deep political crisis depended on the UGTT and its partners, the Tunisian Association of Human Rights, the Lawyers' Association and the UTICA (the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Traditional Crafts), known as the Quartet. All parties spoke through the UGTT and on the basis of its initiative which consisted in dissolving the government, the appointment of a non-political government, curtailing the work of the ANC (National Constituent Assembly), reviewing top government appointments and dissolving the UGTT's arch enemy, the Leagues for the Defence of the Revolution.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The Executive Bureau of the UGTT emerging from the Tabarka congress held on 25-29 December 2011 was dominated by the forces which make up the Popular Front (specifically, the Patriotic Democratic current; the Pan-Arab nationalist parties and the Workers' Communist Party).

<sup>26</sup> MHENNI, Mrad. "Fa'aliyyat al-mujtama' al-mahalli wa al-thawrah al-tunisiyya: qira'ah fi tajarib al-lijan al-mahalliyyah li himayat al-thawrah" in Temimi, Abdlejalil (ed.). *Al-*

Union leaders are known to be experienced negotiators and patient and tireless activists. They honed their skills over decades of settling disputes and negotiating deals. For these reasons, they were able to conduct marathon negotiations with the opposing parties and remain above accusations of outright bias. This is not an isolated initiative or a new one by UGTT. In fact as early as 1951, the union served as leader and convenor of Tunisian civil society against French rule. On 12 May 1951, it invited the General Union of Tunisian Farmers, The Tunisian Craftsmen's and Tradesmen' Union and the Neo-Destour Party to help set up The Committee for the Defence of Constitutional Guarantees and Representation of the People.<sup>27</sup> Hached also represented Tunisia at the United Nations in 1952, months before his assassination.

### **UGTT between post-revolution dynamics and limited ambition**

With a labour movement engrained in the political culture of the country, and at all levels, a culture of trade unionism has become a component of Tunisian society. Yet, there has not been a proper sociology of this despite the important implications to Tunisia as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Protest culture in Tunisia has been deeply affected by labour unionism, which has been tenacious, issue-oriented, uneven and mostly organized. But UGTT has also been affected, in turn, by the political left, the student movement and women's movement, as I will demonstrate below. The unevenness runs largely along the degree of unionisation and militancy. For example, the education sector tended to be the most vocal and most organised. Agricultural workers and white-collar workers are also unionized, and even intellectuals had to work within the confines of or in synch with unions. For the political Left, one challenge after 2011 has been in fact how to move away from being trade unionists and become politicians; in other words, how to think beyond small issues and using unionist means in order to tackle wider issues and adopt their attendant methods. This meant finding different and broader bases for political alliances and laying out projects for society at large, rather than for sectors or sections of it. Yet, it is remarkable

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*thawra al-tunisiyya wa al-rabi' al-arabi: ahammiyat al-tahawwulat al-juyusiyyasiyya*. [The Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring: the importance of geopolitical changes]. Tunis: FTRSI, 2012. pp. 171-192.

<sup>27</sup> See the manifesto issued by this meeting in the Tunisian Office for National Liberation in New York in *Farhat Hached: Tunisian labor leader, patriot, martyr*. [New York: the Tunisian Office for National Liberation, 1953], pp.30-31.

<sup>28</sup> It was remarkable how during my field work in *al-Sha'b* newspaper and the UGTT local offices, people came to the union to look for jobs, financial aid, or even to solve personal disputes. This was no new trend, UGTT officials assured me.



how post-2011 alliances have broadly kept the same patterns operating within UGTT before the revolution. The Popular Front, which is made up mainly of the parties that have affiliation within the executive bureau of the UGTT, has not had much success in recruiting members from outside its union bases.<sup>29</sup> Even their interlocutors in Nida Tunis, which leads the current coalition government, are also trade unionists, most prominently Tayeb Baccouche, a former Secretary General of UGTT from 1981 to 1984.

The interface between UGTT and the student and women movements which are both exceptionally active in Tunisia has been significant and not without paradoxes. There have been close relations between the main student union, the General Union of Tunisian Students (Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie, UGET) and the wider labour movement both in activism and in membership, as the university tended to be a training ground, which prepared leaders to be active in UGTT once they leave education. The UGET, which was founded in 1952, has worked closely with the UGTT since then and both would gradually move away from the ruling party, albeit at a different pace. The radicalisation and even what might be termed the leftist turn in unionism in fact finds some of its roots in this flow, as the university in Tunisia, particularly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s was a space of radical activism and left wing politics, which was barred from open political organization under successive governments.<sup>30</sup> It supplied the UGTT with its most radical elements at the low and middle-levels of the organization.

With regard to women, a key paradox of the UGTT has been its support of women's causes, but reluctance to promote women to its own leadership. The widespread practice of limiting women's access to the glass ceiling does not truly apply to other aspects of civil society institutions in Tunisia. Women have reached the presidency of UTICA, the Journalists' Association and the Magistrates' Association. While the absence of women in the leadership of UGTT could be explained by the very nature of trade union work, which requires time and presence in public places which are not

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<sup>29</sup> For a full view of the Tunisian Left, see MOULDI, Guessoumi. "The Map of the Tunisian Left". In KLAFFAT, Kalil (ed.) *Mapping the Arab Left: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Morocco, Algeria*. [Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2014], pp. 16-42. On the Popular Front and its composition, see the same publication.

<sup>30</sup> On the early history of the student movement, see DHIFALLAH, Mohamed. *Al-madraj wa al-kursi: dirasat hawla al-talabah al-tunisiyyin bayna 1961 wa 1981: nash'at antalligensia* [*The amphitheater and the chair studies on Tunisian students between the 1950s and the 1970s*]. [Sfax, 2003] (in Arabic); and CHAGROUCHE, Tahar. *Le mouvement étudiant tunisien, 1961-1981: genèse d'une intelligentsia* [Unpublished thesis, Université Paris VII, 1984].

friendly to women, such as cafes, this remains a serious lacuna of UGTT, which is challenged to be at a step with, if not leading, in this area. In Tunisia, this is particularly important as the role of women has been a marking feature of the society at large and of its protest culture in particular throughout the post-independent period, within and outside the labor movement.

The union has also been accused of bureaucracy and corruption at the top level, which triggered several attempts at internal reform and even rebellion over the years. There is in fact considerable power and money associated with being a top union official in Tunisia, which, in a climate of rampant corruption led many leaders to collude with businesses and the government; the discredited former Secretary General Tayeb Sahbbani is an example of this. But this had less effect on grass-root support, local chapters and the middle cadre of the union. Since 2011, UGTT seems to have regained the cohesion it lacked during the Ben Ali period when the gap between the leadership and the grassroots was wide. Yet, the practice of democracy and plurality in Tunisia over the past half century was almost the exclusive domain of the university and the trade unions. Both had electoral campaigns for office, sometimes outside the control of the state, as was the case in the university during the 1970s and 80s. In fact, the state stepped in specifically to quell such practices when the outcome was not in its favour. Two memorable incidents testify to this.

The first one was in 1972, when the majority of students defeated the ruling party lists and secured the independence of the UGET. The second was in 1978 when the ruling party was overruled by the UGTT leadership, as I mentioned above. In both cases, the government proceeded to take over or ban the unions. The type of democratic practice in these two institutions was also in place in the Lawyers' Association and some other minor civil society associations which were all severely repressed, notably, the Judges' Association, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Journalists' Association. It is no surprise that two of these have led the reconciliation effort and that all four worked in concert and at the forefront of preserving the aims of the revolution, particularly freedom, dignity and the right to work. The coming together of these associations has, I argue, mutually affected all of them, not only in terms of widening the field of protest, but also in terms of bringing to the fore the wider issues of human rights and freedoms. Democratic practice was therefore linked not to the normal running of society, i.e., as a practice of citizenship, but as an opposition or resistance activity. This gave democracy a militant edge, which it did not lose, but which also affected its character. It was in a sense a democratic act

to protect the union against non-democratic dominant forces, including and chiefly the ruling party and its student and labour arms. The practice of citizenship was not possible during the authoritarian rule of the one-party system while elections in the UGTT and other key civil society organizations were not aimed necessarily at producing the leadership most capable of advancing union professional interests and demands, but to keep the ruling party at bay. Hence the weak presence, if not outright absence, of ruling party members in most union offices for decades.

The gradual coming together of these strong civil society institutions shaped a critical mass whose weight was impossible to ignore. Attempts to dominate this coalition aimed at shaping the future of the country and its revolution as a whole. The Al-Nahda party, for example, ignored this coalition for a while, but ended up accepting the solution the UGTT and its partners negotiated, when they realized that an open alliance of the UGTT with the opposition in a coalition would become hard to beat. A key moment was when the UGTT declared a national strike in the aftermath of Belaid's assassination at a time when Al-Nahda was accused of having a hand in the killing.

### **Conclusion**

A combination of symbolic capital of resistance accumulated over decades, a solid record of results for its members and the working people as a whole, and a well-oiled machine at the level of organisation across the country and sectors of the economy, made the UGTT unassailable and unavoidable at the same time. It has been a key feature of Tunisian political and social life and a defining element of what some have called the Tunisian "exception" in the MENA region. For this reason, in times of national discord, the UGTT has been capable of credible mediation and power brokering. It also remains a key guarantor that social justice, a main aim of the revolution, would remain on the agenda. Yet, the UGTT faces an unprecedented situation where a separation between politics and unionism is likely. Its own challenges are to remain the strongest union at a time when three other splits union have emerged, and to maintain a political role now that politics has been largely turned over to political parties. But the realignment between liberal and the main Islamist party in a strong coalition, changed the game altogether. The UGTT is now trying to find its feet, especially now that its driving activist force, Leftists, are in a minority political opposition.

There are many who regret the reluctance on the part of the union, which was a powerful king maker in the early months of the revolution, to step in and take control of the country. They argue that by failing to do so it had effectively handed over power to its own enemies, namely neoliberals or Islamist parties. On why the union did not form a labour party, although the moment was ripe for it, Abid Briki, spokesperson of the UGTT in 2011, commented in March 2011: “This may weaken the UGTT, and may push us to real union plurality. The strength of the UGTT comes from the presence of all political factions within its ranks. If we were to rush into founding a party, the union would turn partisan, which would weaken it and encourage other parties to form their own unions”.<sup>31</sup>

So far the union continues to be held together and is active in the on-going social protests, but its political role has been reduced considerably. The balance of political power in the country has not yet been settled, but the latest elections moved it towards the centre in a combination of the old guard, rising Islamists and business. No major economic and social gains have been made to address grievances supported by the revolution and the UGTT, making strong trade unionism much needed today. Whether the revolution would mark the end of the political dimension of the UGTT, or whether it would consolidate a *de facto* alliance with Leftist parties, remains to be seen. The UGTT is no ordinary union. It has determined the character and impact of the labor movement and affected Tunisia as a whole since the late 1940s. It impacted significantly the 2011 revolution and the transition period, and is likely to play an important role in the future of the country. In this, it is unparalleled elsewhere in the Arab world. And it is largely because of it that one may confidently say that Tunisia is not Egypt, or Syria or Libya or Yemen. Before 2011, the confluence between a largely secular and humanist opposition and an engrained labour activism have been, I claim, the main bases of a Tunisian formation, which allowed the development of a culture of resistance to authoritarianism with a specific humanist and social justice content. At the same time, the UGTT, and the culture it nurtured, were perhaps not revolutionary enough to provide the leadership and the ambition necessary to turn the 2011 uprising into a workers’ revolution. Instead, it took part, a constructive one, in *structuring* the transition to a political phase where it may see its own role curtailed, a phase in which radical politics could be freed from the political limitations of trade unionism. The challenge facing the UGTT is to maintain the independence

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<sup>31</sup> Testimony by Abid Briki, spokesperson of UGTT during the period of the revolution on 26 March 2011. See *marsad al-thawrah al-tunisiyya* [observatory of Tunisian Revolution]vol. 3, Tunis: FTESI, .p. 271.

and appeal of the organization as a sure, and necessary, refuge should neoliberalism or Islamists win the day and should plurality in organized labour follow the fractious political field.

# From the Everyday to Contentious Collective Actions: the protests of Jordan Phosphate Mines Company employees between 2011 and 2014

*Claudie Fioroni*

## **I**ntroduction

Workers' struggles in the Middle East have raised little attention in academic literature. The Middle East remains on the fringes of labour movement literature. The study of social movements in the region has focused mostly on identity-based mobilisations, human rights movements and the range of actions countering dispossession from urban mass protests to "quiet encroachment".<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, however, that the region has been spared from labour protests. Labour organisation and activism can be dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the magnitude and the motivations of labour activism have, indeed, greatly varied depending on national and local contexts, governmental policies and economic conjunctures. During the struggles for independence, labour activism was closely intertwined with the nationalist cause. After independence, however, authoritarian politics in the Gulf and the rapid growth of employment opportunities in the public sector after 1973 hampered the development of labour movements in most Middle Eastern countries. Yet, one can observe the resurgence of labour protests since the mid-1990s in different countries including Egypt, Iran, Jordan and the Arabic Peninsula among others.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> BAYAT, Asef. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> LOCKMAN, Zachary (ed.). *Workers and working classes in the Middle East: struggles, histories, historiographies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Among authors who noticed the increase in labour protests see DUBOC, Marie. "La contestation sociale en Egypte depuis 2004: entre précarité et mobilisation locale." *Revue Tiers-Monde*, Hors série, 2011, pp. 1-21; CHALCRAFT, John. "Labour Protests and

the context of the popular uprisings in 2011, thousands of workers and employees took to the street to protest with their colleagues.<sup>4</sup> The large mobilisation of workers and employees during the so-called “Arab Springs” invites us to take a closer look at the motivations behind these labour protests.

This article provides new empirical insights in labour activism in the Middle East based on the analysis of the contentious collective actions of workers at the Jordan Phosphate Mines Company (JPMC). The mobilisation began in April 2011, shortly after popular uprisings erupted in the Arab region. A group of approximately thirty employees launched a three-day sit-in in front of the company’s headquarters in Amman. On the signs held by the demonstrators, one could read slogans denouncing corruption and mismanagement, asking for new bylaws, a new personnel system and the fair treatment of employees. Significantly, the General Trade Union of Mines and Mining Employees (GTUMME) did not take part in the sit-in. After three days, the company’s managers met with sit-in leaders and trade union representatives, reaching an agreement with the trade union that failed to meet demonstrators’ expectations. In response, sit-in leaders announced the establishment of the independent union on Labour Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. They then visited JPMC production sites in Hasâ,<sup>5</sup> Abyiad and Shyiddyieh and the fertilizer complex in Aqaba to mobilise and prepare employees to strike. The first general strike was held in June 2011 and was followed by a second in February 2012. All production sites took part in the strikes. The company had never witnessed any major strike before. Such mobilisation was unprecedented in JPMC. How do we explain this sudden upsurge in JPMC employees' activism in 2011?

Literature examining what drives recent labour protests in the Middle East usually implicates globalisation and neoliberal economic

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Hegemony in Egypt and in the Arabian Peninsula.” In: MOTTA, Sara C. [and al.] (eds.), *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 35-58; BAYAT, Asef. “Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East.” Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2000 and ALEXANDER, Ann and BASSIOUNY, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Workers and the Egyptian Revoultion*. London: Zed Books, 2014. On Jordan see, ADELY, Fida. “The Emergence of a New Labor Movement in Jordan.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 264, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> BEININ, Joel. “Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011”. *Le mouvement social*. 246(1), 2014, pp. 7-27.

<sup>5</sup> The transliteration of Arabic words follows the IJMES transliteration system with the exception of the following letters that are translated as follows: â for ا ; ḍ for ض ; ẓ for ظ ; ṭ for ط ; ḥ for ح.

reforms.<sup>6</sup> Since the implementation of the first structural adjustment programmes (SAP) under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank during the 1980s, workers and employees have experienced privatisation, casualisation of work, a decline in real wages, price increase and cuts in subsidies. In this context, labour struggles have been predominantly interpreted as “defensive”<sup>7</sup> aiming to defend developmentalist era rights and entitlements now threatened by neoliberal reforms. In her well-known article, Posusney<sup>8</sup> demonstrates that the moral economy argument according to which protests “erupt when the feelings of entitlement have been violated”<sup>9</sup> best explains labour protests in Egypt. Are labour protests always defensive? As Duboc and Beinon rightly note, the “concept of moral economy only partially explains the dynamics of labour protests... [Since] it overlooks initiatives to challenge state-controlled unions and denounce corruption and bad management”.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the mobilisation of JPMC employees defies assumptions underlying the moral economy perspective on labour movement in the Middle East. Demonstration leaders did not seek to preserve existing rights, but rather to overhaul the long-established management system that, according to them, resulted in the unequal treatment of the employees. Yet, JPMC employees did experience economic liberalisation and budget austerity. Crippled by unsustainable level of debts, the Jordanian government initiated market-oriented reforms as early as the mid-1980s. This shift was further supported by a series of IMF and the World Bank agreements during the 1990s. However, observers agree that the most substantial reforms were not undertaken until King Abdallah II acceded to the throne in 1999.<sup>11</sup> Analyses of the political and economic consequences

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<sup>6</sup> See among others: BAYAT, A. “Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East.” *Op. Cit.* ; DUBOC, M. “La contestation sociale en Egypte depuis 2004: entre précarité et mobilisation locale. ” *Op. Cit.* ; CHALCRAFT, J. “Labour Protests and Hegemony in Egypt and in the Arabian Peninsula.” *Op. Cit.*; BEINON, J. “Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011. ” *Op. Cit.*

<sup>7</sup> BEINON, J. “Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011.” *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> POSUSNEY, M.P. “Irrational Workers: The Moral Economy of Labor Protest in Egypt”. *World Politics*. Vol.4, n. 1, October 1993, pp.83-120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>10</sup> DUBOC, Marie and BEINON, Joel. “A Workers’ Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012.” In: BEINON, Joel and VAIREL, Frédéric (eds.), *Social Movements, Mobilization and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2nd edition, 2013, p. 208.

<sup>11</sup> EL SAID, Hamid. “The Political Economy of Reform in Jordan. Breaking Resistance to Reform?” In: JOFFE, George (eds). *Jordan in Transition (1990-2000)*. London: C. Hurst&Co, 2002, pp. 254-277; KNOWLES, Warwick. *Jordan since 1989. A Study in Political Economy*. New York: Tauris, 2005.



of neoliberal reforms in Jordan stress the growing tensions between East Bankers and Palestinians. As the main beneficiaries of the state welfare system, the former bore the brunt of cuts to subsidies and public sector downsizing whereas the latter, historically confined to the private sector, benefited from the reforms.<sup>12</sup> Yet, these conclusions usually rely on macro-level analyses and little is known about how ordinary Jordanians perceived and responded to on-going transformations.

For JPMC employees, structural adjustment policies resulted in the privatisation of their company. On closer inspection, however, JPMC employees' experience did not match with the neoliberal prophecy of rationalisation, efficiency gains, and casualisation. JPMC holds the monopoly on phosphate mining in Jordan. It was publicly owned from 1953 until 2006. The privatisation of JPMC was particularly controversial for two main reasons. Not only did the government sell 37% of its shares to Kamil Holding Ltd., an offshore company registered in the tax haven of Jersey, UK,<sup>13</sup> but also Walid el Kurdi, the brother-in-law of the late King Hussein, was personally involved in the process of the privatisation and became the head of the company in 2006. Hence, for many Jordanians, JPMC was not privatised but rather taken over by the Hashemite monarchy. In addition, the injection of private capital did not lead to major reforms in management practices and labour organisation. The company remained largely overstaffed and, thus, the workload was relatively low. In fact, while remaining on the payroll, many employees simply did not work. The sale agreement prevented the new owner from dismissing any employees after 2006 and employees' social and financial benefits increased between 2006 and 2010. Whereas no other recently privatised companies – some of which had experienced cuts in jobs and management rationalisation – witnessed protests of the same magnitude, JPMC became a hotbed of labour protest in 2011. To understand the emergence of protests at JPMC, it is thus important to take a closer look at how privatisation affected the employees' lived experiences of the workplace.

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<sup>12</sup> This view masks the fact that the reforms were tailored-made to best serve the interests of the ruling elite from among which the majority considers themselves as East Bankers (See EL SAID, H. "The Political Economy of Reform in Jordan. Breaking Resistance to Reform?" *Op. cit.*).

<sup>13</sup> Source: JFSC Companies Registry Website. URL: <https://www.jerseyfsc.org/registry/documentsearch/NameDetail.aspx?Id=31488> (accessed on 18 July 2015).

Based on an ethnographic study of JPMC employees' mobilisation efforts, this article explores the motivations driving these workplace-based protests. More specifically, I examine the role of everyday workplace experiences shaping the motivations and aspirations of employees. I argue that, behind the denunciation of privatisation, corruption and favouritism, JPMC demonstrators were divided between two contrasting demands: the claims to meritocracy, on the one hand, and claims for a larger share in the wealth allocation, on the other hand. I argue that this divide was rooted in the everyday experience of the workplace. I focus on the emergence of mobilisation efforts rather than their later developments, paying particular attention to employees' morality of employment.<sup>14</sup> Hence, I share with the moral economy approach particular attention toward the role of everyday life in shaping how employees differentiate good from bad, fair from unfair, and right from wrong, and in turn intimately fashioning the nature of their demands and actions. This constitutes the frame of reference through which they define their demands and actions. In this respect, I pay specific attention to the workplace because it constitutes the shared framework of reference through which employees formulated their demands.<sup>15</sup>

Section one depicts some of the distinctive traits of the employees' everyday experience in the workplace by focusing more specifically on their daily encounter with management practices that allow many employees not to work. In section two, I explain the emergence of employees' protests in 2011, highlighting how employees' grievances converged upon a critique of privatisation, corruption and favouritism associated with Walid el Kurdi. Firstly I examine how employees associated their frustrations with the privatisation of JPMC and, secondly I demonstrate the central role the "Arab Spring" played in defining demonstrators' desires and strategies. Section three unravels the contrasting views and experiences that divided the employees between those who aspire to meritocracy and those who emphasised the allocation of wealth. These differences shaped how employees formulated their grievances, interpreted the consequences of privatisation and articulated their demands and expectations.

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<sup>14</sup> By morality of employment, I mean the set of values on which the duties and entitlements inherent to the employment relationship are grounded.

<sup>15</sup> The workplace is not the only locus of the production of the employees' subjectivities. The latter is also shaped outside the workplace. See THOMPSON, Edward, P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966. The study of factors outside the workplace, however, goes beyond the scope of this article that aims to explain how the workplace shapes the mobilisation of the employees.

## 1. Setting the context: the everyday encounters with management practices

It's 9.30 am. I am at the `Abyiad mine to meet with an employee who played an active role in the strikes. We are sitting in one of the offices of the administrative building. Shortly after our discussion begins, two employees join us and the initial interview turns into a lengthy group discussion on working conditions in the mine, privatisation and the strike as well as religion and cultural differences. A thick coat of dust covers the furniture and the office equipment. It has probably been a while since someone has sat here. The discussion goes on for hours. Around 1pm, we hear the call to prayer and the three men leave the room. After their return a few minutes later, the discussion continues, but is not as lively as before. Everyone looks tired. Some are close to dozing off. The three employees keep checking the time on their mobile phones. At 3.30pm, they decide to move towards the main gate to clock-out. It is half an hour before the end of official working hours. None of them was requested to work at any point during the day.

In the `Abyiad mine, as in other facilities of JPMC, many employees simply do not work. According to the mine directors, between 60% and 80% of the workforce is unnecessary. The fact that some employees do not work at JPMC results from overstaffing and a lack of rationalisation of the labour organisation. Recruitment practices aim not only to hire skilled and efficient labour, but also to provide for livelihood, to fuel clientelistic relations and to co-opt those who are too openly critical of the company. In the 1970s, JPMC started to hire Jordanian citizens exclusively. In the mines, JPMC used to recruit largely from neighbouring populations, who usually occupied low-skilled positions, such as guards and drivers, whereas high-skilled employees were predominantly from the northern and urban areas. According to a former General Director of JPMC, the hiring among the local population aimed to contain unemployment and, thus, to prevent the migration of southern population to the poor urban areas in northern Jordan.<sup>16</sup> The company also recruited local leaders, such as members of parliament and tribal leaders, who played a role as intermediaries between the company and the community. However, overstaffing was not restricted to low-skilled labour. During the 1980s and 1990s, when access to Gulf markets was closed to Jordanian labour,<sup>17</sup> JPMC started to recruit more

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Amman, July 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See BEL-AIR, Françoise. "Politiques d'immigration de travail et construction nationale en Jordanie (1975-2002)." In: JABER, Hana and METRAL, France (eds.), *Mondes en*

widely among engineers and geologists to reduce unemployment among high-skilled Jordanian labour.

In this context, there was no need to mobilize the entire workforce. While the sociology of work usually assumes that managers aim to put employees to work, at JPMC managers do not need to mobilize the entire workforce to achieve production objectives. For this, they could rely on a few skilful employees. In fact, managerial practices provided few incentives for employees to work. The best and brightest employees were often compelled to work longer hours with no adequate compensation whereas absenteeism was rarely punished. Yet the lack of incentives to work did not mean a lack of rules or hierarchy. While most employees' productive capacities were not tightly controlled, their freedom of speech was. Managerial practices prioritized the ability to mobilise social capital and obedience rather than hard work, and those who were too critical of management were given disciplinary transfers. Most employees believed that it is more efficient to rely on personal connections than on hard work to be promoted or to obtain a salary increase. The management vacuum in controlling employees' productive capacities provided a wide room of manoeuvre for the employees which resulted in an uneven allocation of the workload between employees. In practice, a complex combination of factors influenced who did and did not work, such as the nature of the job, employees' qualifications and personality, the personality of his superior and the location of the workplace.

The impact of the privatization on the workload was ambiguous. Prior to privatisation, the Board of Directors ceased hiring after 1999 and the company launched an early-retirement scheme in 2000 (known as the *hawâfez* 2000; *hawâfez* literally means incentives) to reduce the number of employees. As a result, between 1999 and 2010 the number of employees decreased from 6,425 to 3,767. However, this did not result in an increase in workload. In 2013, most of my interlocutors associated privatisation with a diminution of the workload. In the mining sites, workload reduction was a direct consequence of an extension of the company's outsourcing strategy. Outsourcing was not new to JPMC but has significantly increased since 2010, to the extent that JPMC teams are completely replaced by contractors for mining activities. The production departments in the mines were the most directly affected by this evolution. This situation has created resentment among employees who used to be committed to their job and

who found themselves useless after the privatization. In addition, many employees at headquarters felt isolated by a concentration of decision-making power in the hands of those working closely with Walid el-Kurdi. However, while some departments were deprived of activity, others such as the maintenance department remained understaffed. This resulted in the increase of the workload for some employees who were already working hard.

JPMC management was compelled by two imperatives. It needed not only to produce phosphate, but also to sustain a certain kind of relation between the sovereign and the population based on the considerable allocation of wealth through employment, subsidies and other material benefits. This duality of the management system shaped the employees' everyday experience of the workplace characterised by an unevenly allocated workload, favouritism, and a failure to recognize hard work. They realised that access to jobs, as well as better salaries and positions depended less on qualifications and experience than on the ability to mobilise social capital. As the following sections demonstrate, JPMC employees' protests reacted first and foremost to the immediate experience of the workplace. However, while all employees shared a sense of unfairness, they expressed contrasting moralities of employment and, thus, diverging demands.

## **2. Converging grievances: the uprising against favouritism, corruption and the privatisation**

### ***The uprising against favouritism***

To rally the workers, strike leaders circulated the pay slip of Walid el Kurdi's son, who is also the King's maternal cousin, and who was paid five times more than experienced engineers despite his lack of experience and qualification. For employees, this represented an extreme case of favouritism whereby some employees obtained special benefits according to their personal relations. This strategy of circulating the pay slip was very successful for two main reasons. First, the inequity of Walid el-Kurdi's son's salary echoed the employees' everyday experiences of unequal treatment. When asked about the reason for unequal treatment, the employees have no word but "*wâstah!*" In this context, *wâstah* takes on two different but interrelated meanings. First, in spoken Arabic, the term *wâstah* (literally "the middle") refers to the person who mediates or intercedes on

behalf of another person.<sup>18</sup> In the context of JPMC, the *wâstah* might act as a mediator during the recruitment process. In this case, the *wâstah* is the individual, usually a member of parliament, a tribal leader or other official, who intercedes on behalf of the job seeker. The *wâstah* might also interfere in decisions regarding the personal situation of an employee such as promotion, transfer, leaves and housing among other things. In this case, the *wâstah* is a superior. The *wâstah* as intercession, however, has a negative connotation. This leads us to the second meaning. The term *wâstah* is more largely employed as a catchword for any action that is considered unfair. My interlocutors often used it to discredit decisions and behaviours that put them at a disadvantage. This entailed a wide range of practices that did not necessarily involve the intercession of a *wâstah*. Most of the time, it implied decisions based on personal relations (*âlaqat shakhsieh*) such as, for instance, the hiring of Walid el-Kurdi's son in JPMC. In this sense, the term *wâstah* implied favouritism more than intercession. JPMC employees used it to refer to any decisions or practices that resulted in the unequal treatment of the employees.

In addition, by targeting the head of the company and his relatives exclusively, the leaders of the independent union revived the employees' frustrations with regard to privatisation. Privatisation of JPMC remains highly controversial. The decision was taken in the utmost secrecy fuelling rumours regarding the new owner and the potential consequences for employees. The owner of Kamil Holding Ltd., the major shareholder of JPMC, remains unknown. In addition, the fact that the new head of JPMC, Walid el Kurdi, had matrimonial ties with the Hashemite monarchy nourished suspicions of corruption. Employees largely shared the opinion that JPMC was taken over by the ruling family rather than privatised. A number of Walid el Kurdi's decisions further enhanced suspicions of corruption and embezzlement. Not only was he concurrently holding the function of both Chief Executive Officer and President of the Board of Directors, but he also suspended most of the standard decision-making procedures. He personally appointed new recruits. The deals he concluded with several contracting companies were regarded with great scepticism. In this context, the pay slip of Walid el Kurdi's son exacerbated existing evidence of corruption. In 2011, employees united against Walid el-Kurdi, who had become an emblem of the corruption associated with JPMC's privatisation. Moreover, such accusations directed toward Walid el Kurdi hinted at the perceived corruption of the Palace. Given the matrimonial ties,

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<sup>18</sup> See CUNNINGHAM, Robert, B and SARAYRAH, Yasin, K. *Wasta. The Hidden Force in Middle East Society*. London: Praeger, 1993.

many observers interpreted the protests against Walid el Kurdi as an indirect attack on the King. This dimension was explicit in the narratives of some of JPMC employees who took part in the strikes, showing that these grievances had been latent at least since the privatisation. Why did the employees not launch protests earlier? To understand the timing of the protests, it is necessary to look at them in light of the regional and national context.

### The “Arab Spring” effect

In 2011, the Arab region experienced some of the most momentous changes in its post-colonial history. Whereas Arab societies were perceived as crippled by political passivity, Ben 'Ali, Mubârak, Qadhâfi and Sâleh, who had ruled for decades, suddenly fell under the pressure of popular protests. In Jordan, social and political tensions were palpable before 2011. The mobilisation of the daily workers in the agricultural sector in 2006, the Aqaba port strike in 2009, and the government teachers' campaign for union representation in 2010 paved the way for the organisation of the independent labour movement in 2011.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Manifesto released by the National Committee of Military Veterans on 1 May 2010 marked the first infringement of the “red lines” that had spared the Palace from direct criticism until then. In the wake of regional uprisings, street protests started to mount in January 2011 with youth activists, leftists, nationalists and the Islamist movement demanding political change. The leaders of JPMC employees' movement took the decision to launch the sit-in in this context. The latter were certainly inspired by the on-going events. Yet the organisation of JPMC employees' protests in the midst of the popular uprising was not self-evident. The context in itself does not explain why JPMC employees took to the street with their colleagues. They did so because their shared experience in the workplace constituted the common ground through which they related to the slogans and grievances shouted out by other protesters. Ordinary people construe and construct their understandings of the state through lived experiences and through the narratives about the state and their rules.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the matrimonial ties, the

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<sup>19</sup> ADELY, F. “The Emergence of a New Labor Movement in Jordan.” *Op. Cit.* ; TELL, Tariq in ABU-RISH, Ziad. “Jordan's Current Political Opposition Movements and the Need for Further Research: An Interview with Tariq Tell (Part 2).” *Jadaliyya*. Web. 24 August 2012. URL: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7007/jordans-current-political-opposition-movements-and> (accessed on 18 July 2015).

<sup>20</sup> GUPTA, Akhil. “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State.” *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), 1995, pp. 375-402;

narrative of corruption surrounding the privatisation of JPMC and the employees' daily encounters with management practices were instrumental in forging the employees' representation of a homogeneous ruling elite crippled by corruption, from among which Walid el Kurdi was only an example.

Two dimensions of JPMC employees' lived experiences found particular resonance in the "Arab Springs." First, like many other Jordanians, they dared to take to the streets to protest in 2011 because they considered the *nizâm* (lit. regime or system; it usually refers to the ruling regime or the state) weakened. This belief was reinforced by the fact that, unlike previous labour protests and strikes, the labour protests were not violently disrupted in 2011. In Jordan, the possibilities for labour protests are restricted by the tight legal and security controls over labour. Jordanian law requires the workers to express their demands through the trade unions only. Since the 1970s, however, the official trade union structure had more often served to hamper labour protests than as a voice to raise employees' concerns.<sup>21</sup> Beyond institutional and legal constraints, JPMC employees also felt insecure to talk inside the workplace. As one employee explained to me: "Kurdi was a very strong man and he is the husband of the Princess... So, no one can talk, really!" The connection between the head of the company and the ruling regime nourished fears among the employees. In this context, not only JPMC employees' protest demands, but the act of protesting itself, challenged the company's management rationale. For many employees, the sit-in held in front of the headquarters in April 2011 broke the "wall of fear" that prevailed in the workplace. The employees did not express their grievances before 2011 because the institutional constraints, the authoritarian nature of management practices in JPMC and the connection to the King prevented them from doing so. In this context, the "Arab Spring" effect provided them the opportunity to voice their demands by relieving the fear of punishment.

Moreover, the employees identified their struggle with the "Arab Springs" because, beyond the claims against corruption and favouritism, they were challenging the establishment. This transpired at two levels. First, they defied Walid el Kurdi himself. Under the pressure of the protests, Walid el Kurdi left the company in March 2012 and was tried for corruption in June 2013. For the leaders of the ITUP, toppling the head of the company

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GUPTA, Akhil. "Narratives of corruption: Anthropological and fictional accounts of the Indian state." *Ethnography*, 6(1), 2005, pp. 5-34.

<sup>21</sup> AL-HOURANI, Hani. *The Jordanian labour movement*. Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002.



was their revolution. Second, they challenged the official trade union structure and the control of the General Intelligence Department over labour organisation by establishing the first independent labour union in the phosphate sector. Unlike other parts of Jordanian civil society, labour representation did not benefit from the relative political liberalisation after 1989.<sup>22</sup> In the mining sector more specifically, the GTUMME was regarded as crippled by corruption and the co-optation of its leaders. It was increasingly cut-off from the employees' daily concerns. This perception was solidified in April 2011 when the president of the GTUMME decided to stand on the side of the managers during negotiations. The official union's illegitimacy in the eyes of employees facilitated the establishment of the independent union. On Labour Day 2011, the leaders of the independent union in the phosphate sector joined labour activists from other sectors including daily-workers in agricultural sector, electricity sector, municipalities, printing industry and medical industry among others to announce the establishment of the Federation of the Independent Labour Unions. The labour activists soon got drawn into another struggle whose scope extended beyond the workplace, namely the struggle for the right to pluralism and freedom of association for labour. In JPMC, the employees' protests turned into a competition between the two unions over the claim for legitimacy to represent the employees.

Therefore, the protests of JPMC employees can be seen as a manifestation of the "Arab Spring" effect in two respects. Not only did the "Arab Spring" enable the protests by reducing a sense of fear, but it also provided the frame of reference in which the employees embedded their struggle, namely the struggle against corruption and authoritarian rules. During the general strikes in 2011 and 2012, favouritism, *wâstah* and corruption were the rallying cry. These three words encapsulate the sense of unfairness shared by employees. JPMC employees, however, did not all share the same views regarding what constituted fair treatment. In the following section, I discuss two contrasting views prevalent among employees. The first one, which was expressed by the leaders of the sit-in and their followers, alludes to meritocratic values whereas the second one emphasises the fairer distribution of wealth and opportunities.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

### **3. Diverging moralities, diverging aspirations: tensions between meritocracy and equal allocation of wealth**

#### *Diverging moralities of employment*

The initiative for the sit-in came from a small group of employees who used to sit together in one of their offices to kill time. Among the four who took the lead, three were engineers and one was a geologist by training who had been working as an IT expert since the late 1990s. Besides religious differences (they are Muslim and Christian), the instigators of the sit-in shared similar backgrounds. Originally from the northern part of Jordan, highly educated, they belonged to the urban middle class. As members of their respective professional associations, each had previous experiences in collective action. Some were politically close to the Trans-Jordanian nationalist left, yet in 2011 they made the strategic choice to keep the independent labour movement distant from any political label. Each of them joined the company in the early 1990s working together in the Shyddiyeh mine. They were transferred to the headquarters at different times after the privatisation. At JPMC, transfer from the field to Amman is usually regarded a promotion. For the four employees, however, it was a disappointment as they were appointed to a position that did not meet their skills. In 2011, they were all posted to the exploration department where they had nothing to do. Nasim<sup>23</sup> was one of the engineers who led the protests. When I asked him about his personal motivations to launch the sit-in, he told me: “We can’t take our salaries for doing nothing!” “The right to work,” he continued, “is a matter of dignity!” In JPMC, there had always been employees who worked and others who did not. After the privatisation, however, it became a matter of contention for those who felt excluded from their previous tasks. These frustrations pointed to a certain morality of employment. “Some people don't want to work. But others, without job they can't find themselves, they lose their confidence. Now I can't imagine how I would be able work again.”<sup>24</sup> This is the testimony of one of the employees who took part in the sit-in in April 2011. Like the four leaders of the protests, she had been appointed to a position where she had nothing to do. In this testimony, she expressed her desire to work. For her, working was a means of achieving personal fulfilment. In JPMC, this view was more widely shared among the skilled employees, including high and low skills, who took (or used to take) part in JPMC activities. Moreover, among my interlocutors, those who were compelled to work long hours did not

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<sup>23</sup> To ensure anonymity, I changed the name of my interlocutor.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, Amman, March 2013.

complain about the workload itself, but rather about the lack of recognition of their hard work. They denounced the fact that some employees who did nothing were promoted to higher positions whereas others who had worked hard were not rewarded. When they described what they believed the company *should be*, they usually referred to meritocratic values. For them, the company should hire, promote and allocate rewards based on the qualification, experience and commitment of an employee. This view builds upon a certain idea of modernity as the rational, technocratic and democratic organisation of the workplace. It is possible to trace the genealogy of concepts regarding modernity in Jordan back, at least, to the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan in the 1920s when the supporters of parliamentary rule were opposing the chieftaincy-like ruling practices of the King.<sup>25</sup>

This meritocratic ethic of employment stood in sharp contrast with another ethic, equally shared among JPMC employees, which saw employment as a form of wealth distribution. In this perspective, employment was not necessarily linked to work. Employees who grew up in the mining basin more often, but not always, expressed this view. The prevalence of this morality of employment among JPMC employees has to be seen in relation to recruitment practices in which access to jobs was not necessarily tied to qualification and where managerial practices did not force employees into work. This morality of employment, however, was not specific to JPMC employees. Like the meritocratic one, the morality of employment as a form of wealth distribution emerged from the historical trajectory of the Jordanian modern state. Its origins can be traced back to recruitment practices in the army and in the public sector that served to enforce the authority of the ruling regime over the population. This was particularly significant in southern Jordan where the public sector reached up to 90% of total employment in the late 1980s.<sup>26</sup> These practices have shaped the morality of employment in two ways. First, the experience of employment was disconnected from hard work and effort. It was rather perceived as a means to secure income and to be entitled to several rights. Second, public employment sustained a certain type of rulers-ruled relationship by which the state sought to induct the population into the system of wage labour and thereby introduce economic dependency on the

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<sup>25</sup> See ARURI, Naseer. *Jordan: A Study of Political Development 1923-1965*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1972; TELL, Tariq and ROGAN, Eugene (eds.). *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*. London: IB Tauris, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> See BAYLOUNI, Anne Marie. "Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy." *Middle East Journal* 62(2), 2008, pp. 277-303.

public sector. In this perspective, employment as distribution represented a “relation of explicit hierarchy”<sup>27</sup> between the rulers and ruled that created certain obligations for the rulers based on habits and customs.<sup>28</sup> For employees who shared this morality of employment, the motivations to join the strikes were different from those expressed by the protest leaders. They did not want to overhaul the management system, but rather to seek further benefits from JPMC.

The divide between “those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment” and “those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution” in many ways maps onto the sociological divide between the “urban northerners” – considered to embody modernity – and the “Bedouin southerners” – considered to embody tradition.<sup>29</sup> This overlapping mirrors the fact that JPMC was, to a certain extent, the receptacle of tensions that shaped Jordanian society more broadly. But JPMC was not solely the receptacle of these tensions. The “urban northerners” / “Bedouin southerners” divide, which is the most common key for reading Jordanian politics, cannot account for the numerous employees who stand as exceptions to this determinism. As a matter of fact, the proponents of the meritocratic morality of employment were actually found among employees who belonged to tribal families from the South whereas many of the “urban northerners” felt threatened by the demands for a meritocratic system. Furthermore, the divide between those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment and those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution did not match with the hierarchical organisation of JPMC. Both views were shared by employees at all levels of the labour organisation, from the workers to the engineers and managers.

Looked at it more closely, the divide between employees along the two moralities of employment can better be explained by the divide between the employees who were qualified for their job (low-skilled and high-skilled alike) and those who were not. The former aspired to work and to be rewarded in accordance with their labour. The latter, however, had little to contribute to the performance of the company. There would be no place for

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<sup>27</sup> GRAEBER, David. “On the moral grounds of economic relations: A Maussian approach.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14(1), 2014, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Graeber defines the logics of the hierarchy as follow: “Whenever the lines of superiority and inferiority are clearly drawn and accepted by all parties and relations involve more than arbitrary force, they will be regulated by a web of habit or custom... In other words, any gift to a feudal superior was likely to be treated as a precedent, added to the web of custom and as such expected to be repeated each year in perpetuity.” Ibid. p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> MASSAD, Joseph. *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

them in a meritocratic system. They could nonetheless justify their position in JPMC based on the mutual expectations between the rulers and the rules with respect to subsistence. This suggests that the divide among JPMC employees, between those who aspired to a meritocratic system and those who viewed employment as distribution of wealth, did not reproduce the identity divide between Southerners and Northerners, but was rather “manufactured” in the workplace. It reflected the divide between the skilled and the unskilled employees. By allowing some employees not to work while compelling others to work for long hours, the management system made possible and, to some extent, encouraged the coexistence of two opposite moralities of employment among JPMC employees.

### **Different interpretations of the consequences of the privatisation**

The tension between the meritocratic morality of employment and the one that regarded employment as a form of wealth distribution was further increased by the consequences of privatisation. On the one hand, the experience of privatisation further increased the frustrations of the employees who shared meritocratic values. Privatisation was not a mere transfer of capital from governments to private investors. It also entailed certain notions of how private companies should function, including the rationalisation of the labour process, technification, profit maximization and heavy workload. This idea was well embedded in the minds of JPMC employees. The project of the privatisation raised fears for the employees who worried for their rights and entitlements; but it also raised hopes for those who were aspiring to a more rationalised mode of management. Contrary to employees’ expectations, however, the privatisation of JPMC did not lead to an increase in work pressure. On the contrary, many departments were deprived of their productive activities. While privatisation did not introduce substantial material and managerial changes to the company, it widened the gap between the employees’ lived experience in the workplace and their notion of how things *should be*.

On the other hand, the privatisation of JPMC reinforced the economic exclusion of the population living in the mining area. If JPMC employees were not personally affected, those who grew up in the mining area shared the opinion that the company should further support their community. In this respect, employment was a key issue. While JPMC used to be the primary employer of the population living in the mining area, the company stopped hiring among this population after 2000. The victims of this decision were not the employees themselves, but their sons and relatives

who struggled to find a decent job. As mentioned above, the employment relation in JPMC used to sustain a relation of explicit hierarchy between the sovereign and the local population. From the Maussian perspective, this means that through privatisation JPMC sought to absolve itself from obligations stemming from the tradition of hiring the local population. This tradition referred to the rulers-ruled relationship and, thus, this obligation would stand annulled as soon as the rulers step out from the company's ownership. For the local population, however, the company was still under the control of the ruling regime. In other words, they considered that the privatisation of JPMC did not disengage the company from its obligation. The employee resentment was further fuelled by the fact that, despite the closure of the regular recruitment process, Walid al-Kurdi did nevertheless appoint a few hundred employees between 2006 and 2011. Moreover, during 2008 and 2010, the profits of JPMC skyrocketed as the result of the sudden peak in phosphate market prices.<sup>30</sup> While newspapers were reporting the excellent results of their company, employees found it increasingly unfair that Walid el Kurdi earned millions while themselves and their families remained poor.

### **Diverging aspirations and further challenges for the JPMC employees' movement**

Employees' expectations regarding the outcome of the strikes reflect the different moralities of employment and different interpretations of the privatisation. Like the four leaders of the movement, many employees went to the streets to request the complete restructuring of the company. They prioritised implementing new by-laws, restructuring the organisational chart to cancel redundant positions and revising the human resources management system based on meritocratic values. Those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution, however, did not want to reform the management system. They hoped to obtain higher salaries and, eventually, a job for their sons. Besides these two contentious groups, JPMC employees also included a minority group that decided to stand on the side of the managers. These included employees who had long been co-opted by the establishment, such as the active members of the GTUMME, as well as employees who believed in order and hierarchy. Hence, the politics of the workplace in JPMC cannot

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<sup>30</sup> Phosphate prices increased from 35 USD/tonne on average in 2007 to more than 400USD/tonne in 2008. Source: Jeune Afrique, *Au royaume des phosphates*, January 11th, 2011. Link: [http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articleimp\\_ARTJAJA2607p076-078.xml0\\_au-royaume-des-phosphates.html](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articleimp_ARTJAJA2607p076-078.xml0_au-royaume-des-phosphates.html) (accessed on April 28th, 2014).

be reduced to the struggle between owners and workers. On the contrary, the mobilisation of JPMC employees suggests that the divide between the two moralities of employment discussed in this article (meritocracy vs. allocation of wealth) superimposed a further division on those already imposed by virtue of the hierarchical organisation of labour. This explains how high-qualified employees – who would be expected to occupy managing positions such as engineers and geologists – could become leaders of the employees' movement in 2011.

This divide constituted the major weakness of JPMC employees' movement. In February 2012, after the second general strike, the leaders of the independent union had strong legitimacy among the employees whereas the president of the GTUMME, Khaled Zaher Fanatseh, was completely discredited. They had just reached an agreement with the head of the company.<sup>31</sup> This agreement was seen as the most generous collective agreement in the history of JPMC. The leaders of the independent union were aware that the restructuring of JPMC would not be sufficient incentive to rally all the employees and, thus, they had also included a set of financial and material benefits to their demands. The agreement thus included three sets of clauses. The first set of clauses was related to the restructuring of the company and met the initial demands of the strike leaders. The second set of clauses included financial and social benefits for the employees including an increase in wages, a 16th month of salary, the raising of the end-of-service allowance, scholarships and the extension of health insurance after retirement among other benefits. The last set of demands was related to the establishment of an early-retirement scheme, known as the *hawâfez* 2012. This was not part of the initial demands of the employees, but appeared in the outcome of the negotiations.

Two years later, in May 2014, JPMC witnessed a new general strike. This time, however, the strike was not led by the independent union but by Khaled Zaher Fanatseh, the president of the GTUMME! The latter rallied the employees against the restructuring plan and the new personnel system that were put in place by the company as part of the requirements of the agreement of February 14, 2012. To end the strike, the company decided to withdraw the changes recently introduced. In the meantime, it pulled the rug

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<sup>31</sup> The leaders of the independent union played an active part in the discussion, but they were not allowed to sign the agreement since they were not considered as the official representatives of the employees. The agreement was signed in February 14, 2012 by the representative of the company, the president of the GTUMME, the representative of Ministry of Labour and several Members of Parliament who signed on behalf of the independent union.

from under the feet of the independent union and secured the *status quo* within the company.

### Conclusion

Based on the assumption that contentious politics is grounded in the everyday life of workers, this article analyses the rationale behind the mobilisation of JPMC employees in 2011. It discusses the claims of the protestors in light of the employees' lived experiences of the workplace. In the context of the Arab uprisings, like many other Jordanians, the employees of JPMC united against corruption, favouritism and the authoritarian rules. More specifically, they protested against the privatisation of their company that brought an individual closely related to the Hashemite monarchy to the head of JPMC. In this context, the "Arab Spring" effect played the role of catalysing the protests and provided a common frame of reference for demonstrators. Behind shared feelings of unfairness, however, JPMC employees were divided between those who hoped for a management system based on meritocratic values on the one hand, and those who asked for a larger share in wealth allocation on the other hand. These contrasting aspirations reflected divergent moralities of employment: one viewed employment as a medium for personal achievement through work, whereas the other considered employment as a form of wealth distribution. This divide was also manifest in the way employees interpreted the consequences of the privatisation: for the former the privatisation widened the gap between their expectations and the reality while the latter denounced the increasing economic exclusion of the poorest.

The study of the mobilisation of JPMC employees, thus, shows that the politics of JPMC was structured around the broad divide between the logics of meritocracy and the logics of wealth distribution rather than around the workers/owners divide. This has important consequences for the study of labour movements as it forces us to question the meaning(s) of employment that underlie labour demands. Moreover, in light of the latter development of JPMC employees' mobilisation, the coexistence of different moralities of employment in the workplace appeared as its major weakness. It hampered the possibilities of the emergence of working-class consciousness. In this respect, the case of JPMC employees provides some insights into the *non*-making of the Jordanian working-class. Finally, the origins of the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide can be partly explained by the socio-historical trajectory of the Jordanian state. It reflected tensions between modernisation policies and chieftaincy-like ruling practices that



have shaped Jordanian politics since the establishment of the modern state. The demands of JPMC employees suggest that ideas of modernity and chieftaincy-like ruling practices penetrated spheres of the social life beyond the realm of the state by shaping the way ordinary people related to the world they live in.

Sociologically, however, the divide between those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment and those who regarded employment as a form of wealth distribution cannot be reduced to the “urban northerner” / “Bedouin southerner” cleavage commonly invoked to explain Jordan politics. Even though the two often overlap, there were many exceptions among JPMC employees. The article argues that the dynamics in the workplace better account for the employees’ divide along the two different moralities of employment. Empirically, the meritocratic morality of employment was widely supported among the qualified employees (low-skilled and high-skilled employees alike) whereas employees who were poorly qualified shared the morality of employment as a form of wealth distribution. This divide can be traced back to recruitment and managerial practices that allowed for a large proportion of employees to not work in JPMC. This means that the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide in JPMC was manufactured in the workplace itself. In this respect, the study of JPMC can contribute to a better understanding of Jordanian politics by showing how the cleavage between the “urban northerners” and the “Bedouin southerners,” which is usually construed as an identity-based cleavage (and which, in relation to work, often alludes to the myth of the “lazy Bedouin”), is (re)produced in the workplace.

## From Kafr al-Dawwar to Kharga's 'Desert Hell Camp': the repression of Communist workers in Egypt, 1952-1965

*Derek Alan Ide*

### **I**ntroduction

“On November the 4<sup>th</sup>, at dawn, policemen and members of the secret police... broke suddenly in the room of my father’s apartment in which I was sleeping. Major Achoub threw me out of bed and started his inquiry... ‘You are a communist, a traitor to the country. Me, an officer of the army will show you what you deserve...’”<sup>1</sup> So begins the letter from an unnamed “young comrade” in Cairo’s Central Prison. It was 1953, and the first wave of post-revolutionary repression against the communist movement was in full swing. All political parties were forcefully dissolved by the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) on January 18, 1953. A month before the RCC passed a law abolishing the right to strike, just months after a large-strike had erupted at Kafr al-Dawwar, which the Free Officers dealt with harshly.<sup>2</sup> They hoped by repressing independent political elements, especially communist organizers of trade union movements, it would facilitate the fostering of economic and political relations with the United States. Thus, the property of all parties, especially offices and printing presses, were confiscated and leaders of political parties were arrested and put under house arrest pending trial.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, “Letter from a young comrade sent from Cairo’s Central Prison,” folder 159, Egyptian Communists in Exile (Rome Group), International Institute of Social History. Unless otherwise noted, all documents with folder numbers come from the same archives. My sincerest gratitude goes to the archivists at IISH, whose help was immensely valuable.

<sup>2</sup> Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, 5, folder 182.

<sup>3</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society – The Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser*. New York: Random House, 1968, p. 91; MOHI EL-DIN, Khaled. *Memories of a Revolution*. Cairo: American University in Cairo, 1995, pp. 136-7.

The Egyptian monarchy, installed by the British, was quickly and bloodlessly swept from power in July, 1952 by an ideologically diverse but largely middle-class cadre of military officers. In the years preceding the coup the legitimacy of the monarchy had continually declined as concession after concession was made to the British occupiers. The Free Officers, as they came to be known, ran the gamut ideologically and included a fiery mix of Egyptian nationalists, members of the Muslim Brothers (*Al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen*), communists and fellow travelers, quasi-fascists who had admired the Axis powers, and pro-American elements.<sup>4</sup> The group was organized largely through the secret labor of Gamal Abd Al-Nasser, who had flirted with nearly every conceivable organization and ideology throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Acting first as the nexus through which the officers came together, Nasser eventually assumed the foremost role within the RCC, outmaneuvering the relatively popular Mohammed Naguib, who was a last-minute addition to the Free Officer plot meant to maintain control and discipline over the military in the post-coup era. The RCC guided Egypt during the tumultuous period after the revolution, and proved to be a constant site of struggle between the two major personalities, Nasser and Naguib. This lasted until March 1954, when Nasser took the reins of power. Despite their differences, both Naguib and Nasser largely converged from the outset on the necessity of stomping out independent communist activity. Naguib was adamant that “from the very first we had done everything that was necessary in order to eliminate the chief causes of Communism in Egypt, namely, a corrupt monarchy, an unjust system of landownership, the general contempt for the rights of workers, and the hated foreign occupation”.<sup>5</sup> Nasser’s formula for dealing with labor accented Naguib’s formulation: “The workers don’t demand; we give”.<sup>6</sup>

Under the RCC, dozens of left-wing militants were rounded up during 1953, most to be tried by the ad hoc revolutionary tribunals established by the ruling officers. On January 18 alone, security forces

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<sup>4</sup> The left was represented by Khaled Mohi-al-Din, a sympathizer of the communist movement, and Youssef Siddique, a member of the communist DMNL. Of those who were most explicitly pro-American and business-oriented in their foreign and economic policy approach was ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Amin. Many of the Free Officers were less ideologically and politically tied to the United States, but were more than willing to work with them to meet desired goals. Thus, Nasser and others were obstinate that any references to “Anglo-American” imperialism, common in the communist lexicon at the time, be removed from Free Officer materials.

<sup>5</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...* Op.Cit., p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 73-4.

rounded up 101 political leaders, 48 of them communists.<sup>7</sup> On August 10, 1953, state security forces arrested twenty-one leaders of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), and in December fifty more members were arrested.<sup>8</sup> In early November, the leaders of the umbrella National Democratic Front, spearheaded by communists like Ahmed Taha, were also arrested. As Gamal Abd Al-Nasser was maneuvering his way into power at Naguib's expense in the spring of 1954, some 254 leftists were arrested and sent to prison camps. Sixteen leftist officers were removed from duty.<sup>9</sup> Both the Free Officers who had been most sympathetic to the communist cause, Khaled Mohi el-Din and Youssef Siddique, faced repression as well. On November 8 of that year, some thirty people were arrested for belonging to the Egyptian Communist Party.<sup>10</sup> In April of 1955 Nasser ordered the arrest of thirty leading leftists who were interned at the Abu Zaabal prison camp.<sup>11</sup> By the first half of 1955, the Communist Party of Israel suggested that some 750 communists were imprisoned in Cairo alone.<sup>12</sup> This first wave of repression was aimed at crushing the vociferous labor movement led in large part by communist workers.

The following article attempts to articulate a detailed account of the two periods of repression targeting the communist movement under Nasser. After a brief glimpse at working-class communist militancy prior to the July revolution, the first major section explores the limited demographic data available on communist prisoners in Egypt during the first period of repression from 1952 to 1956. The importance of the demographic data lies in the social and economic base of the prisoners; a significant portion can be identified as working class. Following a brief period of cooptation (July 1956 to December 1958), the next major section returns again to the demographic evidence available during the second period of repression. This period extends from January 1959 to April 1965, when the communists dissolved their organizations. This data suggests a decrease in the percentage of communist prisoners who are identifiable as working class.

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<sup>7</sup> BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1987, p. 433; EL-DIN, *Memories*. Op.Cit., p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA'ID, Rifa'at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990, p. 75. At the time the DMNL was the largest communist organization in Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Report, "Conditions De Vie Dans Les Prisons D'Egypte," Folder 167.

<sup>11</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> BEININ, Joel. "The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt". *The Middle East Journal*. vol. 41, no. 4, Autumn 1987, p.575.

Although this episode in Egyptian communist history is important in its own historical right, it also is increasingly pertinent to reflect upon in the aftermath of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's ascension to power in July 2013. While the Egyptian left continues to struggle with the appropriate relationship between nationalism and communism, a resurgence of nationalism has taken place under Sisi's reign over the last two years which has been once again resulted in both repression of the independent left and the cooptation of the traditional communists. This is especially true within a framework of anti-*Ikhwaan* sentiment amongst significant elements of the Egyptian left. However, it is likely that dissolution into Sisi's nationalist-military political project would prove even more disastrous for the left than it was under Nasser. Not all segments of the left have followed this path, however. After a brief period of flirting with the idea of a "third way" between the military and *Ikhwaan*, the Revolutionary Socialists have recently advanced an invitation to the Muslim Brothers to form a united front against the military government.<sup>13</sup> Given the political nature of both the Muslim Brothers and the brief presidency of Mohammed Morsi, this is a strategy ripe with risk as well. Whatever happens next, the lessons of the Egyptian communist movement from the Nasser years are more relevant than ever.

### Labor Militancy before July 1952

Prior to the 1952 revolution, Egyptian society had been partially destabilized in the post-World War II era by a series of strikes and nationalist demonstrations. In the immediate post-war period the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS, *al-Lagna al-Wataniyya li'l-Ummal wa'l-Talaba*) was formed on February 18 and 19, 1946 to channel both class-based and nationalist demands.<sup>14</sup> Representatives from the General Nationalist Committee of Shubra el-Kheima workers, Cairo tram workers, printers, the Congress of Private Sector Trade Unions, the Preparatory Committee for an Egyptian Trade Union Congress, and the Association of Egyptian Working Women, among others, were present.

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<sup>13</sup> See both "Egyptian socialists say 'third way' has crumbled amid uptick in attacks," *Middle East Eye*, July 28, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egyptian-socialists-say-third-way-has-crumbled-amid-uptick-violent-attacks-1085613474> as well as "Brotherhood agrees to form a revolutionary front with socialists," *Middle East Monitor*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/20151-brotherhood-agrees-to-form-a-revolutionary-front-with-socialists>.

<sup>14</sup> The NCWS was formed after the Egyptian army opened fire on the students as they attempted to cross 'Abbas Bridge and demand King Farouk stop negotiating with the British. See Beinín and Lockman, pp. 340-1.

Within days they had called for a general strike labeled “Evacuation Day.” Up to 100,000 workers and students demonstrated, of which 23 were killed by security forces and hundreds more were wounded.<sup>15</sup> The formation of the NCWS challenged both the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood for nationalist leadership, and augmented leftist presence within the nationalist leadership.

A series of attempts to establish trade union unity were also present during this period, most notably the Preparatory Committee for a General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (PCGFETU, *al-Lajna al-Tahdiriyya li'l-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal Misr*). The DMNL initiated the formation of the committee in 1951 with Ahmad Taha acting as its general secretary. As Joel Beinin notes, the PCGFETU assumed “the dual character of a trade union federation and an expression of working class nationalism”.<sup>16</sup> Tareq Ismael and Rifa‘at El Sa‘id contend that the PCGFETU represented some 65,000 workers in over a hundred unions, roughly half of all unionized workers during that period.<sup>17</sup> Due to its gravitas in the formation of the federation, the DMNL and its cadre were “unquestionably the leading force in the trade union movement in 1951”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, by this period workers were prominent in the communist leadership: Ahmed Taha, Anwar Makkaar, Muhammed Shatta, and Muhammed Ali Amer. Through both the NCWS and the PCGFETU, communist influence and leadership represented one of the primary sources of independent political leadership during this period.

### **The first wave of repression: Kafr al-Dawwar to the Suez Crisis, 1952-6**

By late July 1952, the Free Officers were desperately grasping anywhere they could for both legitimacy and foreign capital. One week after the coup Law No. 138 from 1947 was adjusted, reducing a requirement stipulating that corporations be composed of 51 percent Egyptian capital to only 49 percent, allowing foreign capital a majority share.<sup>19</sup> Securing

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<sup>15</sup> BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 341-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 408-9.

<sup>17</sup> ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA'ID, Rifa'at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt. Op.Cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the “influence of the communists in the nationalist movement was not as broad as it was in 1946” at the time of the NCWS, in large part because of the 1948 Palestine partition decision, discussed below. See BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 406-7.

<sup>19</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, pp. 88-9.

American aid was one of the primary goals in the immediate post-revolutionary period. During his stay in prison, the unnamed young comrade mentioned earlier recalls how the Military Police explained to him that the communists “had been arrested to pay the price for american [sic] aid”.<sup>20</sup> The last thing the governing officers desired was independent, uncontrolled labor agitation, even if it contained within it nationalist aspirations or support for the revolution. The captain in charge of the inquiry threatened to send the prisoner to the Revolutionary Tribunal, which had been established in February 1953, if he did not “confess everything”. To the questioner the young comrade was accused of being a “dirty sionist, homosexual, son of a dog, etc”.<sup>21</sup> The captain extolled the prisoner to “be thankful to god... that you are under 20 years of age, otherwise we would have hanged you”. The threat was not entirely empty, as the two strike leaders from Kafr al-Dawwar, Mustafa Khamis and Mohammad Hasan al-Baqari, were hung for their involvement.

On August 12, just weeks after the Free Officers had assumed power, a strike at Kafr al-Dawwar became the first test for the new rulers. The small industrial city located some thirty kilometers from Alexandria was composed of two large textile factories, with some ten thousand workers at the Misr Fine Spinning and Weaving Company, the site of the strike. Immediately clashes occurred between the workers and the police, and finally the army was called in to quell the strike, ending in the death of a number of workers and two soldiers. Hundreds were injured.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the workers had declared their strike “in the name of Muhammed Naguib and the revolution,” yet it was Naguib himself who was adamant that the workers be dealt with harshly.<sup>23</sup> Both Khamis and el-Baqari were accused of being communists and a kangaroo court sentenced both leaders to death. Khamis and al-Baqari were executed by the military government on September 7, 1952. Khamis’ dying words were, “I am wronged, I want a retrial”.<sup>24</sup>

Naguib was adamant that “from the very first we had done everything that was necessary in order to eliminate the chief causes of Communism in Egypt, namely, a corrupt monarchy, an unjust system of

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<sup>20</sup> Letter, “Letter from a young comrade,” p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 1. Despite having opposed Zionism ideologically throughout much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Egyptian communist movement, following the Soviet line in 1948, overwhelmingly accepted the 1947 partition plan for Palestine-Israel.

<sup>22</sup> Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

<sup>23</sup> BOTMAN, Selma. *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988, p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, p. 423.

landownership, the general contempt for the rights of workers, and the hated foreign occupation”.<sup>25</sup> What Naguib fails to mention is that despite the hand-outs from above, it took an immense amount of state repression to smash the influence of the communists. In September of 1954, twenty four high profile communists, including Ahmad Taha, were sent to a Revolutionary Tribunal and all but three were charged with propagating communism. All together the twenty one defendants were sentenced to 101 years of forced labor and fined 1800 Egyptian pounds. One month later, in November, 30 members of the Egyptian Communist Party were arrested. In July 1955 the government brought 21 DMNL leaders to trial for the crime of desiring to establish in Egypt a “social plan” similar to the Soviet model. Another eight military officers were accused of having relations with the organization.<sup>26</sup> One detailed report from the period suggests around 550 communists were being held in various prisons and concentration camps. This number did not include those who had been deported to the Kharga desert camp.<sup>27</sup>

Although 550 is a nominally smaller figure in relation to other organizations targeted during this period, such as the Muslim Brothers, it represents a much higher ratio of imprisoned communists relative to their strength. Nasser himself estimated that in 1956 there were “almost five thousand Communists in Egypt”.<sup>28</sup> Joel Beinin, citing figures provided by “several former communists,” suggests that in July of 1952 the DMNL had around 2,000 members, Workers’ Vanguard another 300, and al-Raya (associated with Fouad Morsi) had yet another 100, totaling half the figure Nasser presumed.<sup>29</sup> Walter Laqueur is more generous, citing a total of 7,000 communists in 1954.<sup>30</sup> As the largest organization of communists in Egypt, the DMNL bore the brunt of repression during this period.

According to one report documenting the biographical data of some 42 arrestees, a third of the communists were workers, including five textile workers, three mechanics, a carpenter, and a shoemaker, among others. Although students and traditional middle class elements formed most of the remaining communists, it is clear that by 1953 communists had made

<sup>25</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> Newspaper Clipping, “Une Nouvelle Grande Affaire Communiste,” July 1955, folder 284.

<sup>27</sup> Report, “Bref Expose Sur les Methodes de Tortures et les Conditions Actuelles Dans les Camps de Concentration, les Prisons et les Bagnes Egyptiens,” folder 150.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 307.

<sup>29</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 573-4.

<sup>30</sup> LAQUER, Walter Z. *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*. New York: Praeger, 1957, p. 50.



significant inroads in many working class communities and trades. The *Daily Worker* reports that in September of 1953 some 800 workers were arrested at Shurbagi's mills in Shubra el-Kheima.<sup>31</sup> These statistics, though not conclusive, suggest first that during this period the communist movement had a large working-class cadre and general working-class support.

Walter Laqueur could be considered half correct in 1956 when he proclaimed that "The Communist movement in Egypt never was (nor is it not at the time of writing) a working-class movement..."<sup>32</sup> Prior to World War II, the communist movement had never established a mass working class base, but by 1952 at the time of the coup and immediately after, the communists had transcended their insular status, recruited vital working class cadre into positions of leadership, and secured a relatively large working-class membership and sphere of influence. Joel Beinin's analysis of the class composition is more nuanced. He maintains that while the communists "did have significant working class support in the period 1952-4, by the mid-1950s the university-educated intelligentsia was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level".<sup>33</sup> This "significant working class support" for the communists amongst the most politically active working-class elements meant that the communists were to receive the most vitriolic attacks during the first wave of repression.

Some examples of those repressed include Sa'id Khalil Turk, secretary-general of the transportation workers' syndicate in 1952. Forty-three year old Mohammed 'Ali Amer, earlier the secretary of a branch of the Wafdist Youth and then president of the Textile Workers' Union in 1947, was also arrested.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps one of the most notable trade union leaders other than Ahmed Taha imprisoned during this period was Mohammed Shatta, a textile worker and member of the mechanical weaving syndicate of Shubra el-Kheima. Shatta was notably active in textile work at Mahalla el Kubra (1932-40) and Kafr al-Dawwar (1940-3) before arriving in Shubra el-Kheima, all three historic sites of militant trade union struggle. He was a member of the NCWS as well as founder and secretary general of the General Committee of Shubra el-Kheima Workers where he helped lead a

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<sup>31</sup> Newspaper, "Nightmare for Neguib," *Daily Worker*, October 1953, folder 284.

<sup>32</sup> LAQUER, Walter Z. *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East. Op.Cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> BEININ, Joel. "The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt". *Op.Cit.*, pp. 569-60.

<sup>34</sup> Report, "Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratres Egyptiens," July 1957, folder 168.

45-day strike in early January of 1946, one of the longest strikes in Egyptian history up to that time.<sup>35</sup>

In September of 1954, Ahmed Taha was one of the 21 communists sentenced to five years hard labor.<sup>36</sup> Taha was a member of the Progressive Liberation Front (*Al-Gabhat al-Tahrir al-Taqadomiyeh*, or GAT), the relatively small splinter organization that broke off from the DMNL in 1948 and rejoined the organization in 1950. He held a leading position on the DMNL's Central Committee<sup>37</sup> prior to his arrest in February of 1953 and he had previously been Chairman of the Committee of the Preparatory Congress of Unions of Middle Eastern Countries, a leader in the National Committee of Workers and Students, and the Egyptian delegate to the World Trade Union Federation. At the time of his imprisonment, one report listed Taha as 27 years old and in normal health.<sup>38</sup> Before the military tribunal in 1954 Ahmad Taha made a courageous speech denouncing the "agents of Anglo-American imperialism":

The agents of Anglo-American imperialism want to keep me in prison because I defend the workers who have elected me and whose sacrifices and history struggles for the national cause fill me with pride... We remember with pride the work done by the National Committee of Workers and Students which led the demonstrations of February 21, 1945, as a result of which the imperialists had to pull out of the towns and remain in the Canal Zone... I represented the Egyptian workers at the meeting of the General Council of the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1951. I shall never forget the message of solidarity which came to us from the peoples of Korea, Vietnam, and Iran... The improvement of the living conditions of the workers, protection against unemployment, sickness, and old-age require a national and popular economic policy, peaceful relations with all countries on the basis of equality, and the repudiation of the designs of U.S. imperialism.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Report, Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners, folder 158. For information regarding the strike, in which some six hundred workers were arrested, see BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 338-40.

<sup>36</sup> Newsletter, *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163. Although 21 were sentenced, 24 had stood trial. Three were acquitted.

<sup>37</sup> ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA'ID, Rifa'at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt. Op.Cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Report, Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners.

<sup>39</sup> Report, World Trade Union Movement, "The Courage and Dignity of Our Brothers," January 1955, folder 285.

In early June, 1955 Ahmed Taha and some 500 other prisoners<sup>40</sup> were deported to the prison camp “in the middle of the desert,” roughly twenty kilometers outside of Kharga Oasis.<sup>41</sup> At least 60 of these were communists.<sup>42</sup> Without too much hyperbole, the *Daily Worker* referred to it as “Desert Hell Camp,”<sup>43</sup> giving an indication of the analysis by the international communist movement of the Nasser government during this period.

The Kharga prison camp was administered directly by the army. Most of the prisoners had been condemned by military tribunals and sentenced to hard labor. One report suggested that “the terrible conditions under which they have to live put also their lives in danger”. These conditions included: twenty prisoners to a tent which did “not protect them either from the burning sun or from the sand storms,”<sup>44</sup> one bucket of water per day for every twenty prisoners, low quality and insufficient food, a camp area infested with snakes and scorpions, and little to no medical care.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, another communist prisoner who went by the initials “A. A.” explains that “mosquitos buzz and sting in daytime; scorpions and rats make a nightmarish ballet at night... food is scarce and disgusting enough to keep the prisoners alive until the next day. No visitors are allowed and no parcels may be sent by families”.<sup>46</sup> The result of such horrendous living conditions was “chronic dysentery, violent headaches, widespread Asiatic flu, severe undernourishment”.<sup>47</sup> A letter dated September of 1955 notes that Taha’s weight had dropped from 65 to 50 kilos, and that his “health has become so bad that he has been transported to the Tourah convicts hospital towards the end of June,” but that he had been “re-transferred, towards the middle of August, to Kharga’s camp, without having undergone any medical treatment”.<sup>48</sup> A letter from Taha himself dated June 21, 1955 confirms this: “I am alright, but my health is deteriorating... You know well that the medical treatment is insufficient and even bad, but what to do?”<sup>49</sup> Taha remained resilient, however, declaring: “Don’t worry about me, you know me well my friend, I will pass this crisis physically and morally

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<sup>40</sup> Report, “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

<sup>41</sup> Letter about Ahmed Taha dated “Paris, 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1955,” folder 76.

<sup>42</sup> Report, “Conditions de Vie Dans Les Prisons D’Egypte,” folder 167,

<sup>43</sup> Newspaper, “Egypt opens Desert Hell Camp,” *Daily Worker*, folder 284-5.

<sup>44</sup> Report, “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Newspaper, “My Five Years in Nasser’s Desert Prison Camp,” *Reynold News*, April 26, 1959, folder 176.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Letter about Ahmed Taha dated “Paris, 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1955.”

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Ahmed Taha dated “Cairo, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1955,” folder 76.

successfully, because I love so many things, wider than our narrow world”.<sup>50</sup>

### The period of cooptation, 1956-8

Although Taha himself did not have the opportunity to experience the brief respite from repression that other communists enjoyed, the period from mid-1956 until the end of 1958, known in much of the literature as the “Bandung Period,” was a time of relative relaxation for the communist movement as Nasser’s *realpolitik* gravitated towards the USSR. Yet, as Anouar Abdel-Malek maintains, it is impossible to stamp the Bandung conference (April 1955) as the end of repression for communists in Egypt. Economic talks with the United States over the Aswan High Dam continued until 1956. It was not until Egypt received the Czech arms deal, guarantee of Soviet funding for the Aswan High Dam, and the Suez Crisis that a period of cooptation and an easing of repression against the communist movement could occur.<sup>51</sup> During this period many communists were released from prison.

Not all were freed, however. A letter dated August 25, 1957 explained that “all the internees held in concentration camps have been released, but... most of the convicted prisoners are still at Kharga Oasis Camp... and their material conditions are getting worse with the worsening of the general economic conditions in Egypt”.<sup>52</sup> Another report from a month earlier cited many well-known communists in Kharga, including Ahmed Taha, Fouad Habashi, Mohammed Shatta, Zaki Mourad, and Sa‘id Khalil Turk, among others.<sup>53</sup> A May 1957 letter written on behalf of 150 communist prisoners addressed all voters, citizens, and candidates on the occasion of the upcoming electoral campaign: “some of us are in the Central Prison in Cairo, others in Tourah Prison, the vast majority has Kharga Oasis Prison”.<sup>54</sup> Of the 73 communist prisoners known to be at Kharga, a sizeable number, almost a quarter (18), were listed as “workers”.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, a well-

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anouar. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Joyce Blau to Roger Baldwin, International League for the Rights of Man, August 25, 1957, folder 167.

<sup>53</sup> Report, “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratres Egyptiens,” July 1957, 3, folder 168.

<sup>54</sup> Appeal, “Appel Des Prisonniers Communistes Exiles A L’Oasis De Kharga A L’Occasion De La Campagne Electorale,” May 1957. Found in solidarity Bulletin “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratres Egyptiens,” July 1957, folder 168.

<sup>55</sup> Report, “Kharga,” folder 167.

known labor lawyer and communist Youssef Darwish<sup>56</sup> was arrested in 1957 after the government shut down his law office.<sup>57</sup> As Joel Beinin explains, even during the period 1956-8 “there was never any chance that [Nasser] would legalize the communist organizations or permit them to establish an independent base of political power which might challenge his own rule”.<sup>58</sup> Abdel-Malek confirms that as “early as the autumn of 1958, the machinery of repression and propaganda went into action, progressively increasing its pressure on the left... Trade union leaders were rearrested barely a year after they had been released from Abu Zaabal. The military tribunals resumed jurisdiction over Communist defendants”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the “Bandung Period” can only be understood as a period of openness in relation to the periods immediately preceding and following it.

The independent trade-union movement had been largely subdued during this period. In its place the official, state-sanctioned Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was established in 1957. The ETUF was a highly centralized structure whereby the higher the position in the bureaucracy the more state-screening the individual was exposed to. By 1961 the ETUF had nearly 346,000 members, and by 1964 it had nearly 1.3 million.<sup>60</sup> Nasser likewise initiated top-down social reform for workers, increasing wages and benefits in exchange for relative obedience. As Marsha Pripstein Posusney has argued, the “etatism” of the Nasser government “cemented, among workers, belief in a moral economy<sup>61</sup> in which their wages and benefits came to be viewed as entitlements in exchange for their contribution to the cause of national economic development”.<sup>62</sup> The establishment of ETUF was coupled with “repressive controls” on the hierarchically structured federation. However, as Posusney points out, “this structure was not one imposed from above on reluctant unionists. Rather, significant segments of the labor movement, including the communist forces who played a key role in establishing many of the unions, advocated the singular, centralized

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<sup>56</sup> A leader in the New Dawn-Workers’ Vanguard current.

<sup>57</sup> Faiza Rady, “Yousef Darwish: the Courage to Go On,” *Al-Ahram*, December 2, 2004. Retrieved at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/719/profile.htm>

<sup>58</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 579.

<sup>59</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>61</sup> E.P. Thompson asserted that “collective actions are a response to anger generated by violations of norms and standards that the subaltern class has become accustomed to and expects the dominant elites to maintain.” Posusney posits that this framework adequately captures the patron-client relationship established between Egypt’s working class and Nasser. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

structure as the best way for unions to advance workers' interests".<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Nasser's state capitalist reforms initiated a new social contract, from which a "moral economy" blossomed that allowed workers to ameliorate many of their material conditions in exchange for a level of acquiescence. The subjective capacity of working class struggle was not entirely eliminated, but it did not present the same level of threat to the government's legitimacy in the immediate post-coup days.

The situation prevailing during the "Bandung Period" changed dramatically by the end of 1958 vis-à-vis three developments. On January 8, 1958, three weeks before the proclamation of the United Arab Republic,<sup>64</sup> all the main currents of the Egyptian communist movement merged to form the Communist Party of Egypt, a significant accomplishment for a movement marred by internal schism.<sup>65</sup> Second, a week prior to this merger marked the end of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, held in Cairo from December 26, 1957, to January 1, 1958. The communist left was at the forefront of this initiative, and their enormous influence threatened the regime's legitimacy vis-à-vis the third world nonaligned movement.<sup>66</sup> The final, and most important event, was the Iraqi revolution of July, 1958, which brought General Abd al-Kareem Qassem to power with the backing of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). During this period the ICP was one of the most influential and best organized parties in Iraq, and far larger than its Egyptian counterpart. Qassem represented an alternative to Nasser, and the ICP as well as Qassem rejected Nasser's leadership, instead calling for a federal structure that united the Arab nationalists along pluralist lines. Most importantly, the ICP refused to liquidate itself as per Nasser's strict hardline requirements to avoid the fate of the Syrian Communist Party under Khaled Bakdash.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>64</sup> The merger of Egypt and Syria that lasted until 1961.

<sup>65</sup> For detailed information regarding communist mergers, see ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 126 and BEININ, Joel. "The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt". *Op.Cit.*, pp. 579-80.

<sup>66</sup> See ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 126.

<sup>67</sup> Bakdash and the SCP were also hesitant throughout the 1950s to join with Nasser. Under popular pressure, however, they reluctantly agreed. However, Syrian communists were arrested with their Egyptian counterparts in 1959, and continued to face repression until the dissipation of the UAR in 1961.

### **The second wave of repression: from the New Years' attack to dissolution, 1959-65**

“In this letter we will try to give you a brief idea of the situation that followed the unexpected attack of the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. Many of our best cadres were taken.”<sup>68</sup> Thus begins a letter dated May 12, 1959 from Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi to the group of exiled communists in Paris, detailing the renewed attack on the communists in the beginning of 1959. New Year's 1959 represented the “surprise attack” by the Nasser government in which many of the “best cadres were taken”.<sup>69</sup> Nasser had utilized his speech at Port Said on December 23, 1958, the anniversary of the victory against the tripartite aggressors, to presage this second wave of repression a week before it began. According to Nasser a host of “new enemies” who purportedly rejected “Arab nationalism and Arab unity” were putting forward what “amounts to a call to Zionism to infiltrate itself into Arab nationalism, a call to the reactionary elements to return and exploit our country”.<sup>70</sup>

The second wave of repression began in the early morning hours of January 1, 1959. Some 280 shocked communists were arrested, rolling back the political advances they had made vis-à-vis unification.<sup>71</sup> Between January and April 1959, some 700 communists were imprisoned, with more rounded up throughout the year.<sup>72</sup> Posusney maintains that throughout 1959 around 1,000 communists were arrested.<sup>73</sup> Abd al Halim and al-Guindi explain that the “second blow that took place at the end of March was a severe blow”.<sup>74</sup> One report maintains that as a result of the second wave of repression there were “more than 2,000 new prisoners in Egyptian concentration camps; plus 1,000 in the Syrian camps”.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Letter, Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi to Henri Curiel, May 12, 1959, folder 67.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 128.

<sup>71</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 581 and ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 128.

<sup>72</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 582.

<sup>73</sup> POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> Letter, “Dear Comrades.”

<sup>75</sup> Letter, “Lettre du Caire,” folder 176.

The communists bore the brunt of this second wave of repression. From 1959 to 1960, at least nine communists died in prison,<sup>76</sup> including prominent communist leader and editor of the communist paper *al-Gamahir* (The Masses), Shuhdi Atiyya al-Shaffi, who was beaten to death in Abu Zaabal prison camp, and two prominent textile union leaders, Ali Metwalli el-Dib and Sayed Amine.<sup>77</sup> On March 21, 1959, 153 political prisoners were sent from the Citadel to Kharga.<sup>78</sup> One of them, Dr. Farid Haddad, “the doctor to the poor” who served communist patients at his free clinic in a working class district, was tortured to death at Kharga after refusing to give up patient names and political affiliations.<sup>79</sup> In October and November of 1959, two large trials were held against communists: one group of 64 leaders of the Egyptian Communist Party and another group of 48 leaders who had broken away and demanded that communists work inside the National Union.<sup>80</sup> In December of 1960, the repression continued when three prominent leftist figures, Abu Seif Yussef, Ismail el-Mahdawi, and Ahmed Salem were arrested along with 200 other militants.<sup>81</sup>

One report maintained that at the end of April there were 1,185 political prisoners: 400 in the Citadel, 80 in Cairo Women’s Prison, 87 in Cairo Central Prison, 168 at Kharga, 350 at Fayoum and Keneh prisons, and around 100 at various local police stations.<sup>82</sup> By July this number had been adjusted to 1,230 total prisoners.<sup>83</sup> Demographic reports of the communists under trial during this period appear to confirm Beinín’s argument that whereas the communist movement had “significant working class support in the period 1952-4,” by the mid-1950s, especially during the period of “reconciliation” between 1956-8, “the university-educated intelligentsia was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level”.<sup>84</sup> Of the “trial of 64” defendants only nine (14%) were workers. Similarly, in the “trial of 48” less than a dozen were workers.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the trade unions had been reconstructed and reoriented during

<sup>76</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, Beinín, p. 582.

<sup>77</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 134.

<sup>78</sup> Newsletter, “Les Seviles et les Tortures des Detenus Politiques,” Document No. 7., folder 176.

<sup>79</sup> Newsletter, *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

<sup>80</sup> Report, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

<sup>81</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 134.

<sup>82</sup> Newsletter, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

<sup>83</sup> Newsletter, *Solidarity*, July 1959, folder 176.

<sup>84</sup> BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 569-60.

<sup>85</sup> Report, “Qualques verities sur les process d’Alexandrie,” folder 176.



this time. Trade union leaders loyal to Nasser meant that independent working-class activity posed less of a threat during this period than after the tumultuous period following the 1952 coup.

By 1957, the Nasser government was already in the process of subduing and coopting the labor movement vis-à-vis the formation of ETUF and the beginning of an improvement in their material conditions. Law 91 of April 1959 paved the way for the reorganization of the labor movement into 65 federations along industrial lines and united into a single confederation, a number that would later be reduced to 21. Although some right-wing elements within the government opposed the confederation model on the grounds that centralization would augment labor's strength, as Posusney explains, "the incarceration of the communists weakened the arguments of the security forces against consolidation of the confederation".<sup>86</sup> As a result, "Egypt's leftist labor activists, who had first proposed the idea of a confederation in the period before the coup... were virtually completely excluded from the labor movement when the organization was finally formed".<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the 1959 re-imprisonment of the communist working-class leadership allowed the state to take full control of the labor movement via the Egyptian Trade Union Federation.

Intractable trade union militants were still desirable targets for the Nasser government. One report cites the names of 30 trade union activists in prison, including veterans like Ahmed Taha and 51-year old Mohamed Ali Amer. Mohammed El Sayed Younes, a textile worker involved in NCWS, had been arrested and condemned to prison under Farouk in 1949, was released in 1952 and rearrested in August 1953, sentenced to 5 years yet again, released in June 1958 and arrested for third time in the January 1959 round-up.<sup>88</sup> Some new names appeared on the list, including Mohamed Youssef el Medarak, secretary of the hotel and restaurant workers' syndicate, Mohamed Abdel Wahid, secretary of the National Spinners' Syndicate in Alexandria, and Anwar Mahmoud, vice president of the Federation of Construction Workers. Textile workers formed the majority of those listed: Ahmed Kheidr, Azzab Shatta (Vice President of the Shubra union), Abdel Mohsen Hamaoui (Kafr al-Dawwar), and many others.

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<sup>86</sup> POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>88</sup> Report, "Liste et quelques Biographies des inculpés du process des 48," folder 176.

Transport workers, mechanics, hotel and restaurant workers, oil workers, and a variety of other trades were listed.<sup>89</sup>

During this period, the ticket collectors of the Egyptian railways in Lower Egypt attempted to strike for better living conditions and higher pay and were met with harsh repression. Some two hundred were arrested and the leadership was given prison sentences. The union's president and vice president were each given two years in prison, while other executive committee members were given anywhere from one- to two-year sentences.<sup>90</sup> Officials from the Union of Arab Workers, such as the non-communist Fathi Kamil,<sup>91</sup> were removed from their positions if they did not follow directives and openly declare their hostility to communism and the communist movement. Similarly, even lawyers who themselves were non-communist, such as Ahmed Al Badini, a non-leftist nationalist, were arrested simply for appearing on the communists' defense council.<sup>92</sup>

This wave of repression lasted until 1964. Throughout March and April 1964 all of the communist political prisoners were released from the various concentration camps in anticipation of Khrushchev's visit to Egypt.<sup>93</sup> One year later, in 1965, both the United Egyptian Communist Party and the DMNL, which had once again split from the UECP, decided to voluntarily dissolve themselves and join Nasser's Arab Socialist Union (ASU) as individuals. Thus, by 1965 the communists had been neutralized and their influence over the labor movement had been largely eradicated.

### Conclusion

The military government of the Free Officers launched their attack against the communists in January of 1953, only months after the strike at Kafr al-Dawwar. Within months the government had rounded up hundreds of communists. Prior to this wave of repression communist elements, particularly the DMNL, had been relatively successful at organizing the working class and establishing a working class base, with many workers becoming important cadre, through joint nationalist-class initiatives such as

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<sup>89</sup> Report, "Nouvelles des Syndicats Egyptiens," folder 176. Also see Folder 182, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News."

<sup>90</sup> Newsletter, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News," folder 182.

<sup>91</sup> For more on Kamil's story, see POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt... Op.Cit.*, pp. 64-9.

<sup>92</sup> Newsletter, *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

<sup>93</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society... Op.Cit.* p. 350.

the NCWS and the PCGFETU. The somewhat limited demographic evidence available on communist prisoners suggests that a significant portion, anywhere from one quarter to one third, were working class. Most were young, in their twenties, and had some limited organizational experience, either in the NCWS, the PCGFETU, the NDF, or simply as local trade union militants in Kafr al-Dawwar, Shubra el-Kheima, or elsewhere. Likewise, the numbers suggest that the level of repression directed at the communists was amplified far beyond what their numbers would dictate. Although repression never subsisted entirely from July 1956 to December 1958, this period did mark a relative easing of repressive controls over the communist movement. At the same time, Nasser and the Egyptian state instituted various reforms, including improved labor conditions the institutionalization of the trade union movement with the establishment of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in 1957. A new social contract had been established in which workers envisioned themselves in a moral economy where they exchanged their loyalty to the Nasserist project for improved material conditions. Beginning in January 1959, in the wake of communist unification, the growing influence of the left, and the Iraqi revolution of 1958, a new wave of repression was launched that focused more on communist intellectuals than working class cadre. By this period, Nasser had effectively neutralized the communist control over the trade union movement and the communists had lost the support they had won for themselves in the post-World War II period.

# Dreaming about the lesser evil: revolutionary desire and the limits of democratic transition in Egypt

## *Review article*

*Brecht de Smet*

Abdelrahman, Maha. *Egypt's Long Revolution*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2014.

Achcar, Gilbert. *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. London: Saqi Books, 2013.

Alexander, Anne and Bassiouny, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Workers & the Egyptian Revolution*. London: Zed Books, 2014.

De Smet, Brecht. *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt. Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution*. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Hanieh, Adam. *Lineages of Revolt. Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2013.

**I**n early 2013, growing discontent with the policies of Muslim Brother president Muhammad Morsi among political activists, revolutionary youth, forces from the old regime and broad layers of the Egyptian population led to the mass movement *Tamarod* (Rebel), which collected millions of signatures calling on the president to step down. The campaign gathered huge numbers in the streets that rivaled those of the uprising on 25 January

2011. However, unlike that episode, the popular movement was immediately infiltrated and appropriated by sections of the ruling class and state apparatus – especially the military and the Ministry of Interior. *Tamarod* launched the 30 June Front to organize protests against the president on the day that commemorated his first year in power. Already on 28 and 29 June 2013 preparatory demonstrations turned violent when they clashed with pro-Morsi supporters. Massive demonstrations and strikes mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in the streets erupted on 30 June, demanding nothing less than the resignation of the president. When the mass protests entered their second day on 1 July, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, head of the Armed Forces, issued an ultimatum to both camps to solve the crisis within 48 hours – if not the military would intervene. After two more days of deadly clashes between pro and anti-Morsi protesters, the 30 June Front met with military leaders, and shortly thereafter the president was arrested and removed from his position. In the following period, Muslim Brother anti-coup protesters were intimidated, detained, tortured, and killed by the security forces.

Whereas some activists and observers hailed the popularly supported military coup as liberation from an incompetent and authoritarian “Islamist” rule, others deplored the disposal of Egypt’s “first democratically elected president”, which signaled the end of a bumpy yet genuine process of democratic transition. They claimed that, although not as smooth a path as in Tunisia, the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011-12 represented a real movement toward democratization of the Egyptian regime. The so-called “Arab Spring” corrected the anomaly that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region had been left out of the “third wave of democracy”,<sup>1</sup> which had brought bourgeois democracy to formerly authoritarian regimes, ranging from Greece, Portugal, and Spain in the 1970s to the Latin America military dictatorships in the 1980s and the Eastern Bloc countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Either the MENA nations were latecomers to the “third wave”, or they were the forerunners of a “fourth wave”, which would lead remaining authoritarian regimes – Iran? China? – into the fold of bourgeois democracy.

Four years after the MENA uprisings, however, the regional process of “democratization” appears to have been botched through counterrevolutionary coups and interventions (Bahrain, Egypt), civil war

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Huntington, Samuel. *The Third Wave: Democratization in Late Twentieth Century*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

(Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen), and preemptive transformations from above (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco). In Egypt, nationalists, liberals, and a large section of the left, especially traditional socialist and communist activists, have played a nefarious role in supporting the military as the “lesser evil” against the Islamist danger of the Brotherhood. However, Brotherhood supporters and a part of the left that has become disillusioned with the revolutionary process have also blamed more radical groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) for rejecting *both* military rule and the Brotherhood-led “democratic transition”.<sup>2</sup> According to this narrative, the RS overestimated the reach of the Egyptian revolution, believing that the process could move beyond a mere democratization of state institutions. Emphasizing the role of the working class, the self-organization of Tahrir and the popular committees, the interpenetration of political and social struggles, the persistence of the “deep state” – the military, bureaucratic, and security apparatuses at the core of the regime, and the nature of Egyptian capitalism, the RS suggested that a transition toward a Western-style bourgeois democracy was both impossible and undesirable and that 25 January represented a real opportunity to create an alternative from below.

With the advantage of hindsight, contemporary skeptics dismiss the possibility of such a “permanent revolution”, claiming that representative democracy was the horizon of the revolutionary movement and that even this modest objective was squandered by gauchist leftists who played into the cards of the military apparatus by undermining the process of democratic transition that was going on. Yet the narrative that embraces the Brotherhood’s “democratic transition” as the lesser evil is based on an unsavory cocktail of political naivety and cynicism, which fails to take into account crucial elements of the revolutionary process. The four monographs that are discussed here have contributed significantly to a more in-depth understanding of the limits and possibilities of the revolutionary process.

Moving beyond the teleological paradigm of “waves of democracy”, modeled on a Western ideal type of representative democracy and free-market capitalism, the 25 January uprising expressed a popular desire for change that went far beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy. On the first page of the introduction of his aptly named book *The People Want*, Gilbert Achcar stresses that the very slogan of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hamad, Charles S. Democratic revolution and the Arab Spring: addressing the myth of permanent revolution in Egypt, *IS Network*, 17 December 2014. Retrieved at: <<http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/international/537-democratic-revolution-and-the-arab-spring-addressing-the-myth-of-permanent-revolution-in-egypt>>

“al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam” (“the people want the fall of the regime”) expresses the will of the people *without intermediaries*. The idea of popular sovereignty through direct democracy was not restricted to revolutionary discourse, but it took concrete form in the practices of organization and governance in Tahrir and the popular committees that emerged spontaneously throughout the “18 Days” of revolt. Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny rightly refer to Tahrir as the “Republic of Dreams”, because popular self-organization allowed ordinary Egyptians to dream about much more than representative democracy. As I explain in my own book, the occupation of Tahrir Square was not only a weapon against the Mubarak regime, but it also projected a new society, which inspired movements throughout the whole world. Tahrir was the measure of the whole revolutionary process, expressing its hopes, ambitions, and desires. The “transition process” that followed the removal of Mubarak from office was engineered from above – a counter-revolution in democratic form that was completely alien to the vibrant dynamic from below.

Moreover, the slogan of “bread, freedom, and social justice” chanted by the masses indicated that the 25 January uprising represented a high point in a struggle for *both* political and social emancipation. Abdelrahman unravels the tangle of political and social movements that preceded the insurrection: Egypt’s “long revolution”, which created the networks, alliances, and organizational culture that rendered 25 January possible. Despite its short length, her book lucidly and concisely shows how, apart from democratic campaigns such as *Kefaya* that mobilized urban middle-class activists, “workers, farmers and almost everybody else” were drawn into protest movements that challenged the repressive security apparatus as well as the economic base of the regime. In a reference to Marx, Alexander and Bassiouny elaborate on the revolution’s “social soul”, especially the independent workers’ movement, which often remained out of the spotlights of the mass media, but nevertheless played a crucial role in mobilizing and organizing ordinary Egyptians, and paralyzing the state apparatus. Alexander’s and Bassiouny’s book offers one of the most complete and detailed accounts of the development of the workers’ movement in contemporary Egypt. Furthermore, it is written in a lucid language that orients itself to an activist audience, avoiding the pitfalls of academic jargon. However, like Abdelrahman’s effort, it does not profoundly reflect on the theoretical dimensions of the revolutionary process. Alexander and Bassiouny are to be commended for deploying a nuanced understanding of class, state, and revolution in their study, but it remains unclear how, in return, the Egyptian experience may further develop these concepts theoretically.

All the same, their work demonstrates that before, during, and after the “18 Days” the ebb and flow of the struggle from below was determined by both a political and a social current. The struggles for democracy and social reform are closely intertwined, as Abdelrahman, and Alexander and Bassiouny underline, drawing in a similar manner as myself on Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of the “mass strike”. Workers, farmers, small shopkeepers and other groups who are defending their livelihoods and rights are directly confronted with a repressive state apparatus that openly serves the interests of specific state and private fractions of capital. In order to achieve their demands, the oppressive state has to be confronted and dismantled. In this sense, “the economic struggle *is* political”, as Abdelrahman concludes. Equally, democratic movements are faced with the issue of class power, which hides behind the domination of the state, and, importantly, with the question of forging a broad popular alliance to successfully challenge the “deep state”. Without a program of economic transformation, democratic movements cannot rally the masses behind their project, remaining powerless – as happened with *Kefaya* in the mid-2000s. As Achcar and Hanieh argue, there is a strong correlation between the strength of the workers’ movement and the success and failure of the MENA uprisings.

In Tunisia, the left wing within the state union UGTT played a leading role in the uprising, which led to the most stable outcome of the revolts in the region. In Egypt, fledgling independent trade unions were unable to play such a central part, but they still influenced the revolutionary process in important ways. In Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, strong workers’ movements were absent, opening up opportunities for ethnic, sectarian and tribal actors. The role of workers’ movements is crucial because they directly confront the political and social dimensions of authoritarian neoliberalism, for example, by demanding affordable public services and a national minimum wage, the right to strike and to organize themselves freely, etc.

The interpenetration of the political and the economic struggle appears not as a quixotic ultra-leftist demand, but as a *strategic necessity* and *logical condition* to dismantle the Egyptian dictatorship. First the Brotherhood interregnum and then the open return of the military dictatorship in the form of al-Sisi’s presidency illustrate the validity of this premise, for it is precisely due to the absence of a coalition between democratic and social movements that both the old regime and the Brotherhood were able to bind fractions of the revolutionary camp to their essentially counterrevolutionary projects.



Conversely, the idea of a purely democratic transformation of the regime on a neoliberal capitalist base is deeply flawed, as both Hanieh and Achcar argue from different theoretical angles. Going back to Marx's famous *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Achcar's point of departure is the MENA's long history of "fettered development". Unlike authors such as myself, Achcar argues that the uprisings were not a local expression of a general crisis of global capitalism or of its neoliberal form of appearance, but a *regional* crisis caused by an enduring blockage of development. The success of "developing" nations such as Chile, India, and Turkey in neoliberal times illustrates that the Egyptian uprising is not a simple effect of neoliberalism. Naturally, neoliberal policies have worsened the predicament of the masses in the MENA, but these were implemented by states that were already in place. For Achcar, the "peculiar modality" of capitalism in the MENA is the patrimonial rentier state. Neoliberalism merely added a new layer of oppression and exploitation to this historical setup, channeling public resources more strongly into the hands of a select group of oligarchs. Democratic reform that does not tackle the neoliberal-patrimonial rentier state is out of the question. As the Brotherhood leadership is just as much involved in rentier activities as the state elites, they could not offer a democratic alternative.

In contradistinction, Hanieh analyzes the Egyptian case from a more global perspective, taking into account the internationalization of capital, class, and state and, following Lenin, the role of imperialism as a geopolitical, military, and economic force. Hanieh rejects the simple binary between foreign and domestic capital and points toward the entanglement of different fractions of capital. More than Achcar, he stresses the connection between global, regional, and national "ebbs and flows of accumulation". Instead of just adding a new layer on top of an existing regime, neoliberalism has fundamentally altered the nature of state and class in the MENA region. This idea is also developed by Alexander and Bassiouny, who highlight changes in the Egyptian working class, caused, for example, by the expansion of the privatized and informal sector and the growth of smaller units of production. Moreover, Abdelrahman, Alexander and Bassiouny, and Hanieh agree that neoliberal accumulation goes hand in hand with an increased authoritarianism of the state. The breakdown of the "social contract" between state and population leads to a loss of hegemony and an increased reliance on violence and coercion – a theme that I developed myself. Hanieh concurs with David Harvey that the neoliberal project is not about freeing the market from the state, but it exists to reinforce capital's class power through liberating state power from popular

control. The notion of a global “third wave of democratization” since the 1970s becomes much more complicated and ambiguous when cast in the light of neoliberal deregulation, globalization, financialization, and debt control. As postcolonial states wrestled themselves from the grip of military dictators, their new democratic governments found themselves restricted in their social and economic policies by the US or supranational institutions such as the IMF, which used debt as leverage to enforce local economic transformations to the advantage of global finance capital.

The global dimensions of Egypt’s political and economic crisis that led to the 25 January uprising highlights another aspect of “permanent revolution”: the Egyptian regime is not merely an ensemble of “national” class and state forces, but it is also the playing field of regional, international, and transnational actors. Therefore, the popular demand for the fall of the regime and the democratization of the state implicitly involves a confrontation with Saudi capital, US power, and financial institutions such as the IMF. In order to succeed, the revolutionary dynamic of Tahrir had to be permanent or uninterrupted, not only in the sense of ceaselessly moving from the political to the economic domain and vice versa, but also by expanding geographically. The demand for democracy addresses the role of the military in Egyptian society, which in turn calls into question US support for this authoritarian institution. The demand for welfare (bread and social justice) directly challenges not only domestic corruption and “crony” capitalism, but also the priorities of IMF-induced austerity programs. In this regard Hanieh’s work paints a clear picture of the fundamental interconnectedness of domestic, regional, and global relations of power.

The Tahrir uprising ignited global desires from Occupy in New York to the *Indignados* in Madrid, discontented Greeks in Syntagma Square, the Gezi park protests in Istanbul and to mass protests in Brazil. Interestingly enough, the “Arab Spring” did not lead to a “fourth wave of democratization”, bringing bourgeois democracy to countries such as China and Iran, but to protest movements in core countries of neoliberal capitalism. The truth is that these nations have suffered – obviously to a lesser degree than MENA nations – austerity measures backed up by increased state authoritarianism, which threaten both popular sovereignty and “the commons”. The global expressions of a desire for change that followed the MENA uprisings show that the significance of 25 January 2011 went beyond a mere democratic revolt. Unfortunately, the authors pay insufficient attention to the global impact of the “Arab Spring” and its potential long-term historical and political meaning.

In conclusion, the story of the Egyptian revolution is much more than a bland dream of the lesser evil, a sham-democratic outcome that would merely veil the real relations of power. The rude awakening by the 2013 coup does not discredit the popular desire for societal change expressed in Tahrir, but, on the contrary, it shows the inadequacy of the limited, uninspiring, compromising, and elite-driven politics conducted by Islamist, liberal, nationalist, and socialist leaderships after the fall of Mubarak. The failure of the MENA uprisings as domestic and global game changers cannot function as proof for a rejection of the logic of “permanent revolution”. The reciprocity between and fusion of political and social movements and between domestic and global scales is not only an analytical possibility and necessity, but also a conscious strategy: a call for intervention and a program for action. Hence the work by Alexander and Bassiouny is important because instead of making broad generalizations about “permanent revolution” or “democratic transition”, it specifically deals with the concrete organizational and ideological obstacles that have impeded such an “uninterrupted” revolution in Egypt. Their sober analysis addresses a central question of our time, which I also touched upon in “A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt”: how to develop a methodology of political intervention that connects the humble state of affairs “on the ground” to the grand tasks at hand? If the “Republic of Dreams” has projected an image of solidarity, and perhaps even of an alternative society, moving beyond capital, class, and the state, how can we develop current forms of organization, consciousness, and practice to “get there”? The MENA uprisings did not only encourage us to remember to dream or want, but also to transcend fundamentally passive theoretical activities such as critique, deconstruction, or genealogy, and to construct what Marx called in his *Theses on Feuerbach* revolutionary, practical-critical activity: theory that guides revolutionary action, and revolutionary action that is reflected in theory.

## Our authors

**Brecht De Smet** is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University, and organizer of the 2015 Summer School on Bread, Freedom and Social Justice at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo. De Smet has written on the workers' movement, the concepts of hegemony and passive revolution, political pedagogy and social and political protest in Egypt. His recent books are *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt. Gramsci, Vygotsky and the Egyptian Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) and *Gramsci on Tahrir. Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

**Claudie Fioroni** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies (GIIDS) in Geneva and visiting scholar at the Middle East, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) Department at Columbia University, New York. Her PhD research project investigates the employment situation in the phosphate sector in Jordan. Her research interests also include international development, civil society and Middle East politics. She is the author of *Société civile et évolution de l'autoritarisme en Syrie* (Graduate Institute Publications, 2011).

**Derek Ide** received his M.A. in history from the University of Toledo in May 2015. His M.A. thesis was titled "Socialism without Socialists: Egyptian Marxists and the Nasserist State, 1952-65." He focuses on modern leftist and Marxist movements in the Middle East. He was also a founding member of UT's Students for Justice in Palestine, and was a leading member of the #UTDivest initiative. He currently resides in Toledo and teaches two courses at UT.

**Mohamed-Salah Omri** is Associate Professor of Modern Arabic Literature and Tutorial Fellow at St. John's College, University of Oxford. His publications include *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); a special issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* (2007) and "Towards a theory of confluency – *tarafud*" (in Arabic).

He has published on Tunisian and North African history and culture, including “Literature, History and Settler Colonialism in North Africa” (2005) and “A revolution of Dignity and Poetry” (2012). Omri is member of the British Academy Advisory Panel on the Middle East and North Africa and the international research network, Arab Revolutions and New Humanism. His current project is a study of authoritarianism and culture in the Arab world, supported in part by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship. He contributes on Tunisian affairs for *OpenDemocracy*, *Jadaliyya*, *The New African*, *The Guardian*; and is a frequent commentator on Tunisian affairs in Anglophone and Arabophone media.

**Peyman Jafari** has been affiliated to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and now teaches global politics and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on labour and the political economy of Iran. He is the co-editor of *Iran in the Middle East: Transnational Encounters and Social History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). His other publications include “Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s,” in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (fall 2013); “The Ambiguous Role of Entrepreneurs in Iran.” In *Civil Society in Syria and Iran : Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012); *Der Andere Iran: Geschichte und Kultur van 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010); “Rupture and Revolt in Iran,” in *International Socialism Journal* 124.

## Abstracts

Mohamed-Salah Omri

### **No Ordinary Union: UGTT and the Tunisian path to revolution and transition**

Through interviews with local actors, original research in Arabic, French and English, this article revisits the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11 and the ongoing transition with a view to investigate the role of local agency in radical change and protest movements over several decades, something which has been ignored by analysts and academics alike. It argues that the Tunisian General Union of labour (UGTT), the main trade union in the country, founded in the late 1940s under French colonial rule, has had the institutional structures, popular appeal and undeniable record to play a structuring role for protest and resistance to the state for decades. It served as a focal point, not only for the working class but also for society as a whole, impacting the revolutionary process and the ensuing transitional period in significant ways. The article argues that this move goes some way towards explaining what has been described as Tunisia's particularly promising path in the unfolding Arab revolutions.

Claudie Fioroni

### **From the Everyday to Contentious Collective Actions: The Protests of Jordan Phosphate Mines Company Employees between 2011 and 2014**

This article analyses the rationale behind Jordan Phosphate Mines Company (JPMC) employees' mobilisation within the context of the Arab popular uprisings. It discusses the claims of the protestors in light of their lived experiences of the workplace. It shows that the politics of JPMC is structured around the divide between the logics of meritocracy and the logics of wealth distribution rather than around the workers/owners divide. The origins of the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide can be traced back to the socio-historical trajectory of the Jordanian state. Yet, the article demonstrates that rather than merely reproducing tensions that shape Jordanian society at large, the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide is

manufactured in the workplace itself, notably due to management practices that enable many employees not to work.

Derek Alan Ide

**From Kafr al-Dawwar to Kharga’s ‘Desert Hell Camp’: the repression of Communist workers in Egypt, 1952-1965**

This article explores the multifaceted dynamic that existed between the Egyptian Marxist movement and the Egyptian state under Gamal Abd al-Nasser, focusing heavily on the two periods of repression against the communist movement from 1952-1956 and from 1959-1965. This article contends that the potential in Egypt for a significant communist presence with a working class base, in contrast with other writers who posit the “inescapably middle class” nature of the communist movement, was weakened significantly by a combination of repression and nearly uncritical acquiescence to Nasserist nationalism. The first period of repression was characterized by the imprisonment of a large portion of working-class communists. This was less true of the second period of repression since by 1965, when the communists voluntarily dissolved their organizations, Nasser had effectively neutralized communist control over the trade-union movement. Furthermore, the communists had lost the support they had won in the immediate post-World War II period. This was something they would never regain.

Brecht de Smet

**Dreaming about the Lesser Evil: Revolutionary Desire and the Limits of Democratic Transition in Egypt. Review article**

Abdelrahman, Maha. *Egypt’s Long Revolution*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2014.

Achcar, Gilbert. *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. London: Saqi Books, 2013.

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Hanieh, Adam. *Lineages of Revolt. Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2013.