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Egypt

Independent trade unionism asserts itself

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In the framework of the revolutionary process that Egypt has experienced since January 2011, workers and the trade union movement have played a big role. The demand for a trade unionism that defends the interests of the workers has been expressed even more strongly.

Having existed for a long time, the current that contests official trade unionism and its structure, which was founded in 1957 as one of the pillars of the military regime, has never completely ceased to exist. It was however rather weak and was often limited to small networks of opposition activists. With the revolution and the major upheavals which the country is going through, the will to build an independent trade unionism (in Arabic *mostaqim*) has reasserted itself.

Shortly before the fall of Mubarak, the country began to experience an impressive wave of strikes and protests by workers. In the beginning, the reasons for these mobilizations were often economic, around questions of wages, bonuses, work contracts for those in precarious employment... But very quickly, the question of trade-union freedom and the denunciation of official trade unionism arose.

Powerful strikes affect very diverse sectors: the iron and steel industry, textiles, the Suez Canal zone, transport, hospitals, education, not forgetting journalists, bank workers and Imams. Police demonstrated for higher wages, going so far as to set fire to a building in the quarter of the Ministry for the Interior, a real fortified zone in the centre of the capital, known as Lazoughli from the name of the district where it is located. In the official press, denunciations of corruption are numerous. There are even demands for the resignation of newspaper directors (*Al Ahrām, Rose Al Youssef, Al Gomhoureya...*). Women take part in strikes, in particular in the textile and health sectors. Sometimes there are more than 3,000 strikes at the same time! There are two burning questions: the insufficient level of wages (a minimum wage of around 70 euros...) and big price rises. Unemployment is also high: it is estimated that there are seven million unemployed, that is to say 10 per cent of the labour force. Four million citizens do not have any social rights.

At Al-Mahalla Al-Kobra, the strike was about wage increases, but the workers also demanded the dismissal of the manager of the company. They obtained what they were demanding, and one of the workers' leaders was appointed as manager. They also obtained payment for the days on strike. They agreed to increase productivity to make up for the hours lost...

The project of setting up an Independent Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions was launched during a meeting on Al-Tahrir Square on January 30, 2011 in the context of the powerful demonstrations that were taking place and the start of increasingly sharp criticism of the official trade unions and their leaders. That evening Kamal Abu Eita, leader of the independent trade union of land tax collectors, announced the new federation and evoked the fall of state-controlled trade unionism. Slogans denounced the leader of the official Federation (EFTU) Hussein Megawer.

On March 2, the Independent Egyptian Trade Union Federation held its founding conference at the headquarters of the journalists' union. Entitled "what the workers want from the revolution", the meeting brought together several hundred trade unionists from different towns and sectors of activity. The pillars of the project were the autonomous unions that had recently emerged: the unions of land tax collectors, of health technicians, the pensioners' union and the independent teachers' union. Among those participating were representatives of telecommunications workers, textile workers, the iron and steel industry, the Workers' University of Cairo, as well as those from the "new" cities of Al-Sadate and the 10th of Ramadan and from the provinces, like the trade unionists of Al-Mahalla.

The military authorities have tried, very often, to put an end to these struggles. They announce the prohibition of

strikes and meetings of workers... In spite of that, this wave is far from being finished. The army is launching a confrontation with this powerful social movement. It resorts to the media, seeking to convince public opinion that the continuation of strikes and protests represents a danger to the "democratic transition". In the same way, it affirms that it is urgent to get the economy going again, etc. They are trying to discredit the demands of the workers, which are presented as sectoral, therefore in opposition to national requirements. The workers reject such an argumentation and affirm that their demands form an integral part of the demands of the revolution. There is a lot of anger about the nomination of Isma' el Fahmy, former treasurer of the ETUF, as Minister for the Labour Force and that of Samir Sayyad to the post of Minister of Industry and Trade. Sayyad, a former diplomat, is also the managing director of one of the largest paint companies affected by strikes.

The conference proposed two principal demands: the dissolution of the official confederation with the seizure of its buildings, files and funds, and the legal recognition of the new federation. The government was asked to put a stop to recruitment to the official trade-union structures. Furthermore, a precise timetable for implementing these demands was demanded, as well as the establishment of real collective bargaining. An appeal was addressed to trade unions all over the world, asking them to express their solidarity and to support the demand for the dissolution of the official trade unions and their exclusion from international federations.

The interventions of leading figures of the autonomous trade-union current should be noted [1]. They evoked the grievances addressed to the state and their demands. So we heard Ahmed El-Sayyed, president of the Federation of Health Technicians, Salah Abdel Salam, president of the trade union of land tax collectors, El-Badry Farghali, president of the Union of Retired Workers and Mohamed Balah, a member of the independent teachers' union. Each in their own way, they insisted on the strength of the workers' movement, denounced the betrayals of the ETUF and affirmed the need from now on to rebuild a social system freed from corruption. The revolutionary process is far from being finished and the building of an independent trade unionism is part of it. The example of the battle conducted since 2007 to legalize the union of land tax collectors was given prominence. Unionization and independent action were the two central ideas.

Kamal Abbas, a former worker in the iron and steel industry and one of those responsible for the Centre for Trade Union and Worker Services [2] denounced the leadership of the ETUF and Hussein Megawer. After having evoked the declaration of the ETUF on January 27 supporting the regime and denouncing the demonstrations, he asked for the seizure of the documents and files of the official Federation and a judicial enquiry against the corrupt leaders. According to him, the nomination of Ismail Fahmy, the former treasurer of the official Federation, as Minister of the Labour Force, was aimed at protecting the ETUF.

The documents of the new federation combine the democratic spirit of the revolution with economic and social demands. It has received many messages of support and solidarity from trade-union organizations and from international bodies like the International Labour Office (ILO) and the International Trade-Union Confederation. In a sign of the times, the official Federation was officially forced to recognize that it accepted the right for people to form their own trade unions!

It is hoped to bring together the series of autonomous structures which have started to appear in various forms: leagues, unions, trade unions and federations, outside the ETUF. So we find militant groupings active in a series of companies such as the textile company of Al-Mahalla, the Public Transport Authority which involves bus drivers, train drivers, mechanics, engineers and employees in Greater Cairo, the steelworks at Helwan, the industrial workers of Naha' Hamadi in Upper Egypt. In the same way, the organizers hope to open out to the broad layers of Egyptian workers who have been engaged organizing and supporting the powerful mobilizations that have shaken the country.

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The strength of the mobilizations is so great that for the moment the regime is playing for time. The possibility of an

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independent and combative trade unionism sinking roots will depend of course on the level of engagement and the ability to influence the situation. The aspirations for democracy and social justice are from now on closely overlapping.

Chedid Khairy is a Marxist activist involved in solidarity with the Arab region.

[1] Information drawn from reports in the Egyptian press and accounts by participants.

[2] The Centre for Trade-Union and Worker Services, (CTUWS), was founded in 1990 in Helwan by progressive trade unionists. It aims at supporting the defence of trade union and social rights, at training of trade unionists and at affirming the need for an independent trade union movement. The Centre was able to extend its intervention to other cities (Mahalla, Alexandria, October 6, Nagah Hamadi...), in spite of many difficulties, including being banned. See its site (mainly in Arabic): <http://www.ctuws.com>.