

New Scholars

**THE ROLE OF WORKER ORGANIZATIONS
IN DEVELOPING GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY:
THE EGYPTIAN CASE**

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ABSTRACT

Unions through their representative processes and practice of collective bargaining rights not only create a voice for employees within companies but also enhance democratic attitudes in the society. In the context of the 2010 Tahrir Square movement in Egypt, this article attempts to observe and report the role of unions and non-union worker organizations in developing grassroots democracy and general awareness of rights in Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian, nonegalitarian, and undemocratic regime. The article finds that Egyptian worker organizations have long been part of the economic, social, and political fabric of Egyptian society. Due to this profound involvement, Egyptian worker organizations became the vanguard in expressing social and political malcontent. In conclusion, the article argues that to secure a democratic and somewhat liberal future for Egypt there is a need to further aid the development of unions, improve their organizing capacities, and train them in democratic institutional principles.

Scholars argue that unions through their representative processes and practice of collective bargaining rights not only create a voice for employees within companies but also enhance democratic attitudes in the society (Kerr, 1964; Lipset, Martin, & Coleman, 1956; Voos, 1994, 2001). In the context of the current social movements in several Middle Eastern countries, this article is an attempt to

observe and report on the role of unions and non-union worker organizations in developing grassroots democracy and general awareness of rights in authoritarian, nonegalitarian, and undemocratic regimes like the Hosni Mubarak government in Egypt. The overarching goal of this article is to highlight and assess the hitherto ignored role of unions and non-union worker organizations in enhancing democratic tendencies in Egypt, and to initiate a discussion on how this role can be further strengthened.

Egypt, as we will discuss in the following sections, provides a singular opportunity to study the role of worker organizations in creating democratic values. Egypt is situated at the axis of the Arab world (Mirza, 2011). It has a sizable population of about 82 million, and it has the largest industrial base in the region. It has a long history of foreign rule, ending in the mid 20th century (Mirza, 2011). But at the same time, first under British rule and then under the subsequent nationalist authoritarian regimes, Egyptian workers and their organizations have had a long and impressive history of stubborn activism.

One fascinating aspect of worker activism in Egypt is that worker involvement has gone beyond the mere economic representation of workers; they have also been deeply involved in the political and social aspects of Egyptian society. This profound involvement has made it possible for Egyptian worker organizations to develop and enhance democratic values at the grassroots level. This special role of worker organizations is quite evident in the case of the recent political agitations in Egypt, in which they became part of the larger social movement; often used social movement tactics; and, as we will discuss in the following sections, were in many ways the vanguard in expressing social and political malcontent.

The article begins with brief literature reviews on unions and their link with democracy and “new social movements” (NSMs). The discussion of the social movement literature is intended to enhance our understanding of NSMs and that will help us better assess the role of worker organizations in Egypt. Then I discuss economic and political conditions in Egypt, highlighting the difficult conditions in which workers and their organizations have operated and survived. This is followed by a discussion of historical evidence that sheds some light on the history of worker organizations in Egypt, with an emphasis on their economic and political activism over the last century. Next I discuss the recent demonstrations in Egypt and present some evidence on the tactics, strategies, demands, and role of unions and workers in these demonstrations. The article ends with a detailed discussion and a conclusion.

The secondary data for this article come from scholarly articles, books, and newspaper articles; the web sites of international organizations like the ILO, IMF, and UN; Gallup polls and surveys; and reports from international organizations like the OECD and the UNICEF and several other web sites. The primary data come from an in-depth interview with an ILO official who has worked with Egyptian union leaders and has conducted seminars and training and awareness workshops in Egypt. He has also been a member of ILO delegations to Egypt and

has a deep understanding of the union role in Egypt before and after the Tahrir Square agitations. The interview was conducted over the telephone and was recorded with the permission of the interviewee. The duration of the interview was about 45 minutes.

An interview with an Egyptian trade unionist would have made the study much more comprehensive, but unfortunately, even with strenuous efforts it could not be achieved due to the volatile political situation in Egypt in general and the persecution of worker leaders in particular.

CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Unions and Democracy

Kerr (1964), a pluralist industrial relations scholar, argues that worker freedom and voice are the central issues for unions and that American unions have contributed to a democratic industrial society. Unions create a two-party system in a workplace in that, in their presence, employers cannot make unilateral decisions. They also create a system of grievance, which brings the judicial process into industrial life and produces new centers of power, all of which allows workers in the unions and the unions themselves to take a united stand against other established power centers. Kerr declares that a “rough balance between private and public power centers is the essence of a pluralistic society” (Kerr, 1964: 26).

Unions “provide workers with a voice both in the workplace and the political arena” and “can and do affect positively the functioning of economic and social systems” (Freeman & Medoff, 1979: 70). Voos (2001, 2004) adds to this by arguing that unions have directly impacted the workplace by enhancing workplace democracy and have also indirectly benefited societal democracy by training workers in democratic traditions of associating and organizing, electing representatives, understanding their rights and duties, and increasing political awareness by being more active in general politics to represent their interests. Finally, according to Voos, unions also increase political democracy by increasing wages. Some measure of economic equality is essential in a society in order to establish political equality. Societies with huge income gaps are societies with large majorities of disenfranchised people (Stiglitz, 2000).

The pluralistic industrial relations view presented above has taken its theoretical construct from the concept of pluralism in political science. Robert Dahl (1998) initiated the concept of a modern democratic state (i.e., a polyarchy) ruled by multiple minorities. Clegg (1975) takes the concept one step further and argues that pluralism was developed as a criticism of the doctrine of sovereignty. Pluralists believe that in a pluralist system there are many groups with their own interests. There can be no unilateral decisions made by any single authority, and compromise, cooperation, and consent prevail. To Clegg, the essential characteristics of a pluralistic system are the right to assembly and speech,

the right to be consulted, the right to secure sympathetic legislators, and the existence of rules restricting the activities of pressure groups (to restrain the abuse of power).

We can see, therefore, that there are certain similarities between political science pluralism and the industrial pluralism that was instituted in the United States in the 1930s. But there is also a major difference, which lies in the interpretation of the term “pluralism.” In the political science version, the interpretation is that there are many parties and groups with the ability and the right to participate in decision making. The goal of the system is to provide certain laws and rights that will ensure the ability of individuals to form groups and assert their interests. The U.S. industrial relations system, on the other hand, has been more like a corporatist system in which there have been three compulsory or mandated parties (employers, employees, and the state).

All in all, conceptually, industrial pluralism, though in a manner limited in scope as compared to that of political pluralism, unions cannot be separated from the ideas of voice, representation, and the democratic self-expression of individuals. In the next section, I discuss one of the ways in which worker organizations can express themselves, promote democratic values at the grassroots level, and influence social, political, and economic imperatives in the society at large.

New Social Movements

The main purpose of this section is to better understand new social movements (NSMs) so that we can classify and comprehend the role played by worker organizations within the larger context of the recent Egyptian social movement. The literature discussed in this section does not encompass all of the important scholarly works on NSMs, but it does include several important perspectives on them.

Social movements are not a new phenomenon. Originally, social movements represented the discontent of individuals living on the fringe of the society (Tilly, 1978). They have existed throughout human history and over the centuries have evolved into a powerful force in society. As a form of collective action, social movements were dominant from the 18th century to the early 20th century (Gamson, 1990; Tarrow, 1998).

Since the 1960s, social movements have emerged as a different form of expression, i.e., in the form of the NSMs. The emergence of the NSMs has been linked with the consolidation of state, the emergence of a common identity in the population of societies, and the availability of an opportunity to organize (Tilly, 1978). This new expression of popular will has moved social movements from the fringes of society to the mainstream.

Following the Marxist view that “class consciousness” is the basis of collective action, Touraine (1985) argues that social movements are an expression of conflict

between the masses and the elite of a society, aimed at social control of the basic cultural characteristics such as knowledge, laws, and ethical principles. He further argues that NSMs have become more pervasive as in recent years the human capacity to self-produce and restructure has become boundless due to the advancement of technology. Therefore, the novel aspects of NSMs are that they can mount an organized and sustained attack on more powerful opponents through their enhanced ability to collaborate by utilizing modern means of communication and resources (Tarrow, 1998).

Offe (1985) argues that the NSMs represent socioeconomic groups acting on behalf of ascriptive collectivities. They have a broad agenda and represent the new middle class, the old middle class, and people outside the labor market like students, housewives, and the unemployed. They value autonomy and identity; and they are organized internally through informality, spontaneity, and a low degree of horizontal and vertical differentiation, and externally through protests. These features make the NSMs a vehicle for social change, as collaboration and social networks bring people together in collective action and reduce their fear of being alone.

The common features among NSMs do not mean that all NSMs are identical. Broadbent (2003) argues that a social movement is not the same in different venues, even though it may be similar. Thus, the social movement in each setting is generated in accordance with the specific milieu in which it exists. Finally, the findings of Zhao (1998) suggest that under suppressive control, agitation and expression of its voice by one group can mitigate fear in all other oppressed groups.

The discourse above has made it clear that the scope of NSMs is quite broad. Some salient points for our purpose are as follows:

- NSMs have come to exist in the gap created between the state and the individual, as individual concerns and needs are not being looked after fully by state institutions.
- NSMs differ from old social movements in that they have a greater ability to access and mobilize resources (Tarrow, 1998); are more pervasive (Touraine, 1985); want to reconstitute society; have new tactics based on new technologies; are made up of various segments of society (Offe, 1985); have an “ideology (identity) orientation” (Pichardo, 1997: 425); and are more decentralized, participatory, associational, and focused on issues of identity (Heckscher, 2006; Zald, 1988).
- As each social movement develops, its features and tactics differ from others based on its unique context.
- Finally, protests and agitation by one group in suppressive social and political conditions can lead to greater awareness and lessening of fear in other discontented groups (Zhao, 1998).

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN EGYPT

After World War II and before the political and economic restructuring of the 1980s regimes, most of the Arab world could be divided into nationalist-populist (including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Turkey) and pro-Western rentier states (including Iran and the Arab Gulf states) (Bayat, 2002; Biblawi, 1990). Funded by either oil or remittances, nations in both categories were able to maintain high levels of economic growth (Bayat, 2002). During the same period, these states, in order to get support from the lower and middle classes, indulged in social welfare but they were at the same time patriarchal in nature and wanted to control all democratic tendencies (Bayat, 2002). Therefore, these states dominated their economic, political, and social spheres of life, and by necessity and by their very nature became authoritarian, leaving very little room for any type of democratic expression (Bayat, 2002).

The social dominance of the state apparatus started to change with economic liberalization under IMF-sponsored economic and structural reforms (Bayat, 2002). While these reforms improved access to consumer products, they led to greater economic disparities in many countries (Adams, 2000; Bayat, 2002). Furthermore, the state in most of these countries began retreating from its social programs, belying its earlier role and populist character (Bayat, 2002). This vacuum set the stage for social unrest.

In Egypt's case these patterns are quite evident. Since its independence from Britain, Egypt has had three rulers: Gamal Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak came to power in 1981 after Anwar Sadat's assassination (Paciello, 2011). The Mubarak regime could best be described as a "Neo-Authoritarian" regime (Beinin, 2009; Paciello, 2011) that started off rather tolerant but became increasingly repressive as it came face to face with more opposition and demands for liberalization (Paciello, 2011).

By the 1990s, evidence of increased repression could be seen with the passage of laws, such as the 1993 Syndicates Law, the 1995 Press Law, and the 1999 Nongovernmental Associations Law, that curtailed the freedom of association and the press (Paciello, 2011). Later, in the early years of the 21st century, due to political activism and protests by opposition parties, there were some political reforms and, ostensibly, the political atmosphere became more tolerant of plurality (Paciello, 2011; Schenker, 2011). However, in the direct presidential elections in September, 2005, the National Democratic Party (NDP), which was also Hosni Mubarak's party, retained its control over who ran for election (Dunne, 2006), and Hosni Mubarak managed to win a resounding majority of 87% of the votes in 2005 (Paciello, 2011). Additionally, in the parliamentary elections of 2005, the NDP retained its two-thirds majority but still intimidated political opposition (Sullivan, 2009), resulting in the lack of representation of any diverse views in the parliament (Paciello, 2011; Schenker, 2011).

In sum, political opposition was kept weak in Egypt through repressive laws that curtailed freedom of expression, general harassment through the machinery of government and an “emergency” law that had been in place since 1981 curtailing civil rights (Paciello, 2011), and blatant violations of human rights including torture, extrajudicial killings, and the nonavailability of due process (Schenker, 2011). The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was the party that offered the greatest opposition to the NDP, but the Brotherhood maintained a not too confrontational stance toward the regime so as to remain politically viable (Pioppi, 2011). Unlike the MB, the secular parties remained divided, inadequately organized, and lacking a large social base (Holger, 2005; Pioppi, 2011). These conditions led to mass political exclusion (Schenker, 2011).

Economically, Egypt’s favorable economic growth belied deepening inequalities. Egypt maintained a high real GDP growth rate in the early years of the 21st century, 4.9% in 2004, 6.8% in 2005–2006, & 7.1% in 2006–2007 (OECD, 2008) and sustained a high foreign investment rate due to economic liberalization under IMF conditions (IMF, 2010; Paciello, 2011). Despite these favorable macroeconomic indicators, the newly created wealth was not equitably shared by the middle and lower classes (Clifton & Morales, 2011; Eliesh, 2004; Paciello, 2011). For example, although the consumer price index (CPI) drastically increased to more than 20% by 2008 (Paciello, 2011), the incidence of absolute poverty increased from 16.7% in 2000–2001 to 23.4% in 2008–2009 (UNICEF, 2010).

The government, due to the IMF conditionalities, also retreated from its welfare role, and life became intolerable for most Egyptians (Eliesh, 2004). As a result, of all this, there was widespread poverty, inequalities of wealth, and a serious rise in the levels of unemployment, especially among university-educated youth (Paciello, 2011). For those between 15 and 25 years of age, unemployment rates soared to 28% in contrast to the 9.8% overall unemployment rate in 2000 (Eliesh, 2004), and since 1993 an average overall unemployment rate of 10.11% (Trading Economics, 2011).

In addition to political repression and economic mismanagement, the Mubarak regime was also notorious for its incompetence and for the corrupt practices that permeated every level of government (Eliesh, 2004; Schenker, 2011).

In sum, the Mubarak regime maintained itself through a mixture of political repression and socioeconomic exploitation (Paciello, 2011). Economically, like most authoritarian regimes, the regime basically concentrated on its own consolidation by rewarding its supporters, i.e., the elite. Eventually, the combination of these intolerable conditions—economic hardship, political exclusion, the continuous decline in quality of life, and the lack of hope for a way out at home or from abroad—led the Egyptian masses onto the road of revolt.

The above discussion highlights the difficult conditions in which workers and their organizations had to survive. In the next section, I discuss how Egyptian worker organizations maintained their worker identity and at the same time acted as a social and political force.

TRADE UNIONS IN EGYPT

History of Activism

Within the Middle East, Egypt represents a unique testing ground for the link between unions and democratic values. Politically, for nearly all of its 5,000-year history, Egypt has been under autocratic systems. For half of its 5,000-year history, it was under foreign rule (Solidarity Center, 2010). In the modern era, Britain took over Egypt from the Ottoman Empire and ruled until 1952 through a “semi-independent constitutional monarchy,” until Colonel Jamal Abdul Nasser staged a coup, becoming the first Egyptian to rule Egypt in over 2,500 years (Solidarity Center, 2010: 4). From 1952 to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the basic autocratic nature of Egyptian governments remained intact. Economically, Egypt is the largest industrial economy in the region (Mirza, 2011), with a relatively large population of about 82 million (CIA, 2011) and large metropolitan cities such as Cairo. Historically, it is an agricultural country, but manufacturing is the second largest sector (Solidarity Center, 2010). Finally, Egypt, as we will see in the following discussion, has had a long history of politically conscious worker bodies. These always resisted foreign rule, standing alongside nationalist parties against imperialist rulers, and they have striven to create space for workers’ voices under subsequent indigenous yet autocratic regimes (Mirza, 2011; Solidarity Center, 2010).

The labor movement in Egypt has been largely influenced by four factors: (1) government has always been the largest nonagricultural employer; (2) the Egyptian economy has been subordinate to European capital and supervision, especially before 1952; (3) the labor unions have had close relations with political parties, both before and after independence from Britain (Solidarity Center, 2010); and (4) like the union movement tradition in Middle East, the Egyptian union movement emanates from colonial traditions, which means that unions are state controlled and independent unions are prohibited (Bayat, 2000; Read, 2011).

In terms of recent history, Egyptian union activism can be divided into three eras: British rule, the constitutional monarchy created by the British, and the nationalist governments since independence in 1952. Under British rule, Egyptian unions fought on two fronts: against the British and in favor of nationalist parties; and for worker rights. They have a history of strikes under British rule in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Beinin & Lockman, 1987; Solidarity Center, 2010). These strikes were sometimes for worker rights, as in the strike demanding the passage of the first labor protection law in 1909, and they were sometimes in favor of the nationalist Wafd Party; for example, after World War I, the crackdown on the Wafd Party led to a wave of union strikes from 1919 to 1921 (Beinin & Lockman, 1987). In this era, in general, unions maintained a formidable presence in Cairo, Alexandria, and the Suez Canal region with membership around 20,000 (Beinin & Lockman, 1987).

In 1922, the British declared Egypt a semi-independent constitutional monarchy and the Wafd Party established its first government. For the next 20 years, different political parties supported their pet unions. The strength of the unions ebbed and flowed with every governmental transition. In 1933, based on the recommendations of an ILO commission, Law 48 was passed, which gave women and children basic protections related to hours of work and working conditions. But one important factor in this period was that unions were not legalized and therefore needed political patrons (Beinin & Lockman, 1987; Solidarity Center, 2010).

This deficiency was addressed to some extent when, in 1938, 32 Cairo area trade unions established the General Federation of Labor Unions in the Kingdom of Egypt (GFLUKE) (Solidarity Center, 2010) and fought for union legitimacy and recognition through such methods as hunger strikes (Beinin & Lockman, 1987). Eventually, the Wafd government legalized unions but not without extensive powers to control them, like the banning of national unions (Solidarity Center, 2010). Even with its limitations, the law resulted in a rapid expansion of unions in Egypt; by 1944 there were 350 registered unions with 120,000 members (Beinin & Lockman, 1987).

In 1952, the Egyptian monarchy was dislodged by Gamal Abdul Nasser's nationalist revolt. Unions that had constantly championed the workers' cause during World War II and between 1945 and 1952 (Beinin & Lockman, 1987) welcomed the Nasser regime. The new regime ostensibly represented social justice, independence, and antifeudal sentiments (Solidarity Report, 2010), but it was antiunion at the core, standing against union militancy and independence (Clement, 2009). Under Nasser, union activism was considered a counterrevolutionary act and was dealt with in the severest of ways. Even the Marxist parties supported worker repression based on this argument (Clement, 2009).

In 1961, the Nasser regime created the Egyptian Workers' Federation (EWF) out of necessity, as the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) had been established in 1956 and had called on Arab oil workers to support the 1956 nationalization of the Suez canal, and there was no union federation to represent Egypt (Solidarity Report, 2010). Yet, the government retained tight control over the leadership of the EWF, ensuring the government's own rule (Solidarity Report, 2010). In 1962, the EWF was reorganized and renamed the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) but essentially remained a government-controlled institution (Clement, 2009; Posusney, 1997).

Since 1952, under three different regimes the attitude toward unions and workers has mostly remained exploitative (Solidarity Center, 2010). Unions were either directly suppressed or indirectly pressured into serving the interests of the political system (Bayat, 2002). As a result, under these regimes, the unions remained controlled, but at the same time they remained active, with protests occurring through the 1970s and 1980s (Solidarity Center, 2010) and with the height of union activism and political activism coming in the late 1990s and the early years of the 21st century.

From the above discussion, it is quite evident that the Egyptian unions historically agitated and used strikes as a tool. But it is necessary to briefly discuss the right to strike in Egypt. While the strike was a useful tool, the Egyptian worker organizations never actually gained an unrestricted right to strike. The Egyptian governments ratified ILO Conventions 98 and 87, on the rights to organize and bargain collectively, in 1954 and 1957 respectively. In 1954, Egypt also ratified ILO Convention 11, which gave the right to associate to agricultural workers (ILO, 2012). But more importantly, Egypt signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), drafted by the UN to promote human rights and adopted in 1966 (UNHCHR, 2011). But compliance with ILO conventions in many cases becomes a matter of choice rather than necessity, as the ILO lacks a process to ensure that its conventions are truly implemented (Ali, 2011). Therefore, ratification of these conventions did not have much effect on the right to strike in Egypt (Solidarity Center, 2010).

The Egyptian unions won the right to strike in 1994, but it was curtailed by government regulations (Bayat, 2002); for example, union strikes under these regulations were legal only if they were approved by a by a two-thirds majority of the relevant union executive committee and ratified by the ETUF executive committee (Solidarity Center, 2010). As already discussed, ETUF and its offices have always been controlled by the ruling regime. In the last 30 years or so, ETUF has approved only two strikes (Solidarity Center, 2010).

In sum, Egyptian workers have not just been politically and economically active but they have been active in the most adverse conditions in which they could not legally go on strike and had to fight against suppression at varying levels and against different forces, both foreign and national. In the next section, I discuss how unions, under suppressive conditions, adopted new tactics and played an active role in creating grassroots awareness in the recent social movement in Egypt.

Union Strategies and Effectiveness in the Recent Social Movement

The recent protests were in response to worsening economic conditions under neoliberal policies. Egypt embarked upon an Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP) under its agreements with the World Bank and the IMF. Under the ERSAP, in 1991 the Egyptian government decided to privatize 314 enterprises, a move that ETUF approved. This policy of privatization continued into the early years of the 21st century and resulted in regular layoffs in the privatized firms before they were sold into private hands (Solidarity Center, 2010). Layoffs, bad economic conditions, high inflation, and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor resulted in a flurry of strikes in the mid-1990s (Solidarity Center, 2010). As economic problems and income inequality

continued to increase, the unemployment rate rose to 12% in 2002–2003 (CIA, 2011). The global recession of 2007–2008 exacerbated the situation.

Against this economic backdrop, an unprecedented wave of strikes hit the Egyptian government (Beinin, 2009). The economic factors were exacerbated by the fact that there was almost no other outlet for political expression and catharsis among the disgruntled Egyptian workers or the public at large (Eliesh, 2004; Paciello, 2011). Two important aspects of the wave of new strikes have been the tactics and strategies used by the unions; and the continuation of union activism under difficult and suppressive conditions.

With regard to union tactics and strategies, generally speaking, newer unions, especially those that have been formed in the last 10 years, have been organized according to a bottom-up strategy, which means that member participation has been high in these unions (Alexander, 2011). As a result these unions are highly democratic in structure, so much so that the “basic sovereign body of most unions is a mass general assembly of delegates representing workplace committees, and union officials are elected for no more than a year at a time” (Alexander, 2011: 1). In short, after years of suppression, these unions sought to maintain power at the grassroots level. The tax collectors’ strike campaign starting in 2007 is a good example of grassroots organizing. It was initiated and run by Kamal Abu Aita, a veteran union leader who has been in jail 18 times for his efforts to organize workers (Owens, 2011).

These unions are not only democratic but also inclusive. The Democratic Workers Party (DWP) claims that “all those who work for a wage can join, as can peasants. . . . It is called the Democratic Workers Party as it takes up the demands of the oppressed across Egypt. We stand against the oppression of Nubians, Coptic Christians and the people of the Sinai” (Khalil, 2011). The DWP also claims to represent a change in worker representation tactics. Unions had previously supported or allied themselves with political parties, but the DWP is a party expressly interested in promoting the well-being of the working people of Egypt. The DWP’s strategy includes a wider worker rights’ agenda that goes beyond any one union or industry. Therefore, the DWP supports and coordinates strikes between different workplaces (Khalil, 2011).

Most large unions have coordinated with each other during the strikes and during the protests at Tahrir Square. They have also created federating bodies to coordinate efforts (Owens, 2011). But the coordination and organization are at an embryonic stage as the ILO official has remarked:

They [unions] were there as independent unions and not as [an] organized group. . . . In terms of independent unions there was only the two or three independent unions with an organized structure. . . . They were organizing but it was still [at] . . . infancy [level].

In most cases these unions have demanded more wages, better working conditions, the right to organize and strike, and more stable and permanent jobs.

Some of these unions have demanded the renationalization of some of the sectors that have been privatized since the 1970s, e.g., the transportation sector, and the removal of bad managers (Crowe, 2011; Owens, 2011). According to the ILO official, the union demands were centered on working conditions and a voice for the workers:

Usually the first demand . . . was to dismantle the Trade Union Committee as it did not represent them [workers]. . . . It was both [conditions and voice], that's why . . . in these demonstrations in 2006–2007 . . . the second demand was improved wages. . . . The trade union committee was the arm of the regime.

With regard to union resilience, to begin with there is one important change in the recent strikes: i.e., strikers from the private sector have increased up to 40% as opposed to public sector strikers, who had been the main sector participating in strikes since the early 1970s. The recent strikes and protests are the largest in the last 50 years (Solidarity Report, 2010). From 2004 to 2008 there were almost 1,900 strikes involving more than 1.7 million workers (Lee & Weinthal, 2011; Solidarity Report, 2010). The wave of strikes from 2006 to 2011 has been acknowledged as the most powerful expression of worker activism in the last 60 years in Egypt (Kamel, 2011). These strikes demanded better working conditions and pay, along with the freedom to organize and strike (Alexander, 2011).

The 2007 strikers came from both the public and private sectors, spanning both blue and white collar workers from several industries, including Cairo underground Metro workers, oil workers, textile workers, transport and building material workers, and civil servants, e.g., municipal tax collectors (Lee & Weinthal, 2011). The only official union allowed to exist under the Mubarak regime, ETUF (Paciello, 2011), did not support these strikes. ETUF supported privatization until the ground-breaking strike by the tax collectors' union in December 2007, which resulted in a 10,000-strong sit-in and eventually the creation of the first independent trade union outside of ETUF (Lee & Weinthal, 2011; Solidarity Report, 2010).

In order to get some idea of the unions' tactics and how they remained active even under suppressive conditions, let us briefly discuss the efforts of two important actors in the independent trade union movement in Egypt, i.e., the Property Tax Inspectors' Union (RETAU) and the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) (Kamel, 2011).

RETAU was the first independent trade union established in Egypt in 2008 (Kamel, 2011). RETAU had existed as a worker body under governmental control but was banned in 1974 for attempting to collect taxes from the mother of the then finance minister (Owens, 2011). In 2010, it went on strike against the government's decision to disproportionately tax the poor (Jackson, 2011). RETAU's sit-in went on for many days with active support from the local population. Eventually, the government gave in to its demands. There were two other

important achievements of the strike: the fact that it was conducted democratically through rank and file involvement (Jackson, 2011) and the fact that it led to the further proliferation of dozens of independent unions that participated in the protests at Tahrir Square (Alexander, 2011).

The ILO official explains the creation of the tax collectors' union in his own words, stressing the social movement tactics used by the union, i.e., using ILO Convention 87 to achieve their objective:

It was in late 2008 the real estate tax collectors started to get together and form their own union and to split from the umbrella of the ETUF. . . . In 2009 April or May . . . they managed to submit during a high level technical assistance mission from ILO visiting Egypt to the ministry [their] papers to register as an independent union.

The ILO official added, to further emphasize the utilization of social movement tactics, that

Egypt had ratified [ILO] Convention 87. . . . They [tax collectors] used that as a basis for establishing an independent union. . . . The government was silent; they did not allow the union. They did not reject it formally; they were just silent so it was never published in the official gazette . . . so the independent unions came out and they said that they have submitted the papers according to the 87; we have established an independent union . . . and then the tax collectors also joined PSI [Public Service International], the global union . . . and started their negotiation with the ministry of finance and they managed to get a lot of benefits for their members.

It is clear from the above that the tax collectors' union did not restrict themselves to the level of workers and their voice but they invoked ILO Convention 87, which is one of the eight ILO core conventions representing fundamental human rights. In sum, the tax collectors' union presented and defended their demands for a voice, representation, and the formation of unions as a basic human rights issue.

A further example of the suppression and struggle of an important organization that supported workers' rights is the case of the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS). Formed in 1990, CTUWS had a close relationship with RETAU, the first independent union in Egypt in more than 50 years (Parks, 2011). CTUWS remained active despite 20 years of suppression by the Mubarak regime (Read, 2011; Solidarity Center, 2010). However, due to its support of the 2007 textile workers' strike, CTUWS faced increasing harassment by government agencies and ETUF, forcing it underground until it emerged in 2011 to support the widespread street protests (Read, 2011). CTUWS stood for independent trade unionism, workers' rights, women's engagement in the workforce, the ending of child labor, and the fostering of cooperation within Egyptian unions and between Egyptian unions and international labor bodies. Due to CTUWS's links with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the ILO, and the European

Trade Union Federation, the Egyptian government saw it as the instigator of union strikes (Solidarity Center, 2010).

In sum, the Egyptian unions stood up against a politically and economically repressive regime, espoused useful new strategies, and based on their broader demands brought together the political and economic aspects of unions (Alexander, 2008; Bassiouny & Said, 2008).

Union Effectiveness in Egyptian Protests

Some scholars argue that in the Middle East, worker organization and union strikes have not been very effective, and generally unions have had a limited role (Bayat, 2002). There are many reasons for this perspective, beginning with the fact that strikes are banned in most Middle Eastern countries. Worker organization and action is also hampered by paternalistic labor relations, dictatorial and suppressive regimes with restrictions on unions, and the fact that organized labor represents only a small portion of the overall labor force—which includes difficult-to-organize self-employed persons and workers in the informal economy (43% in Egypt) (Bayat, 2002).

In contrast, scholars also argue that a long history of union protests has made the unions realize that strikes are a useful tool to affect policy even under repressive regimes (Paczynska, 2006). Labor has been effective in the Middle East under corporatist leadership, owing to the fact that all types of leaders have to listen and respond to the rank and file inhabitants of the country sooner or later (Posusney, 1997). For example, in Egypt, though unions have always been controlled, labor protests have been a major hindrance to the implementation of IMF conditions (Alexander, 2008; Bayat, 2002; Paczynska, 2006), and unions in Egypt presented the most serious threat to the state-run union federation (Alexander, 2008). When we talk about labor activism in Egypt before the emergence of the recent independent unions, we are not talking about ETUF—the state-controlled union federation—but about worker organizations not recognized by either ETUF or the Egyptian government.

Another vitally important function is fulfilled by union activism in Egypt, i.e., providing a voice to people and giving them the awareness and confidence to stand up for their rights against a dictatorial and exploitive regime. Not long ago, in the 1990s, Hosni Mubarak's name was "only whispered," and political conversations were avoided (El-Hamalawy, 2011). Compare this to the recent uprising with millions of Egyptians rising up against a dictator to demand social and economic justice. The ILO official, who was, for understandable reasons, unable to quantify the effect of unions in creating awareness and prompting others to resort to the expression of their demands, remarked that

I think it is very difficult to [quantify]. . . . But these protests [union strikes] were the first protests at this level and it had never happened before at this

scale. . . . [Once the revolution started] the workers were there on the ground with the people and the unions were also quite active.

He added:

I think, and this is my personal view, that the workers started protest in 2006 and there were a lot of people that came out to protest asking for demands . . . sometimes the government . . . would go and agree with these demands [and this] encouraged the society a little bit to see that you can raise your voice and speak. I think it was very important. . . . When people read about the real estate assessors' union and that they are getting their demands heard . . . [that] was encouraging . . . people to move in that direction.

Supporting evidence also comes from several other scholars (Alexander, 2008; Bassiouny & Said, 2008; El-Mahdi, 2011; El-Hamalawy, 2011). These scholars discuss the workers' strike in 2006 at Mahalla textile mill, which is the largest textile mill in the Middle East. The strike was successful and had a profound effect on the proliferation of subsequent strikes in the textile industry. The whole struggle in the textile industry attracted a great deal of media attention, and the "images of strikes, aired via both social and mainstream media meant that millions of workers could gradually overcome their fears, and organize protests inspired by victories of strikes in other sectors" (El-Hamalawy, 2011).

El-Hamalawy (2011) also reported that many workers were greatly encouraged by what the Mahalla strike had achieved. He added that the strikes had a political core and aimed at furthering the agenda of greater political rights for Egyptians, as in 2010 workers surrounded the parliament and attracted the attention of the media, which dubbed the venue the "Cairo Hyde Park" (El-Hamalawy, 2011). The Mahalla and textile strikes also led to the dissemination of strike tactics to other suppressed workers (Alexander, 2008; El-Mahdi, 2011). For example, before Mahalla, strikes were much shorter and used the tactic of the "work-in," which meant that workers would protest after working hours so as not to disrupt production, a tactic that was based on Nasser regime propaganda stating that the public sector belongs to the people and stopping production would negatively impact worker living standards, while Mahalla and the subsequent strikes were longer and placed the workers in direct confrontation with the owners and the authorities (Bassiouny & Said, 2008).

Obviously, this transformation was not achieved in one day or even in a few years. The process was going on for almost a decade, in which unions played a central role (El-Hamalawy, 2011; Lee & Weinthal, 2011). We can trace the sentiments leading to the January 2011 protests to those expressed in the early years of the 21st century (Paciello, 2011) and, most notably, to the resurgence of the workers' struggle in 2004 (Mirza, 2011). The activism of the last 10 years can further be attributed to a long history of activism by Egyptian worker organizations in the realm of worker rights and social justice. In fact, the very first strike in history took place in Egypt about 3,000 years ago (Alexander, 2011). In more

recent history, Egyptian unions and other worker organizations remained defiant against British rule in the colonial era and continued struggling against various indigenous governments including a monarchy, a nationalist government, and neo-corporatist governments. The first decade of the 21st century has seen a wave of strikes against a corporatist and dictatorial regime in Egypt, with economic and social justice as its core demands (Alexander, 2011). The ILO official I interviewed, who was directly in contact with Egyptian unions and was familiar with the unions' struggle, remarked on the number and independence of these strikes:

Since 2006–2007, there was this unprecedented number of strikes and protests by workers in Egypt, calling for better wages, better working conditions. . . . The numbers [of strikes] went up to something like two or three a day. . . . Some NGOs recorded 600–700 of these protests and strikes a year. . . . These [strikes] were by no means controlled by the Egyptian Trade Union Federation [ETUF] . . . even though they [ETUF] would have liked to play a role in controlling these strikes but they were unable to.

In sum, contrary to many portrayals of these protests, unions and other worker organizations were vital—unlike political parties and other organized opposition forces—in attracting an unprecedented number of people (Paciello, 2011). The workers' organizations consistently played an important role during the January 2011 protests till the very end, with strike waves on February 9 and 10 across Egypt and the Mubarak regime ending on February 11 (Khalil, 2011). The impetus and strength given to the January protests by union support is described by the ILO official in these words:

When the revolution started on the 25th of January these people [unions] were part of the demonstrations out there in the street, and at one point in the demonstration after a couple of weeks they started to talk about going on civil disobedience and the workers would go on strike and everything will stop completely . . . and I think this was one of the many factors that tipped the balance at the end of the revolution . . . and I think this started to scare the people in power.

The protests have, in many ways, indelibly changed the Egyptian people. They have made the people of Egypt aware, not only that they have rights, but that they can stand up for them. Kamal Abbas—the coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), an organization that played a crucial role in organizing thousands of workers once the January protests started (Read, 2011)—remarked that “The policy-makers of Europe and America have been shown that the people in the Middle East are not satisfied with dictatorships. This revolution has really forced them to acknowledge that the people themselves can act in their own interests” (Read, 2011). This comment reflects the fact that most of the Middle Eastern dictatorial regimes were supported by Western nations.

The protests have also removed Mubarak's regime and its concomitant culture of fear. Here we can take the example of the Mahalla strike. In December 2006, the workers in the Mahalla textile mill, the largest textile mill in the Middle East, went on strike (El-Hamalawy, 2011). The strike was successful and led to a proliferation of strikes, first in the textile industry and then in many other industries. The mitigation of the fear factor is supported by the many workers' comments that the Mahalla strike encouraged them to fight for their own rights (El-Hamalawy, 2011). It has been rightly pointed out by Lee and Weinthal (2011) that perhaps the role that has gained the least attention from the media in the January protests has been the role of the workers and their unions, but the fact is that they have played a vital role in the whole process.

DISCUSSION

In the last two years, the Middle East has undergone profound changes that are still unfolding. For the first time in decades, ordinary people have risen to claim their right to self-expression. Most foreign and U.S. media have characterized these recent events as nothing less than revolutions. Some compare the significance of these events to that of the 1979 Iranian revolution (Schenker, 2011). Though the optimism regarding these events is understandable, the result of these recent revolts—some of which successfully ousted long-standing leaders—remains uncertain. Currently, none of these revolts, especially in Egypt, yet qualify as revolutions, as will be discussed later in this section. A more constructive discourse would strive to understand the impetus for these events as well as to chart a progressive program to establish permanent democratic change.

For a better understanding of the Egyptian unions, it is useful to study them in a social movement context and compare their tactics and structures with the discussion in the section on NSMs (see above). The evidence in this regard is not conclusive, but based on what we have we can say the following: first, Egyptian unions have always existed in the gap between the state and the individual. Egyptian unions have always represented the people who have not been looked after by the state; especially in the recent activism, we can see that the spontaneous outbursts were in support of and on behalf of the downtrodden in the society.

Second, Egyptian unions have traditionally not just championed the cause of workers but also aligned themselves with other political causes. For example, unions vociferously supported the freedom movement against British rule and the constitutional monarchy established by the British, and after complete independence the unions also opposed the dictatorial nationalist and corporatist regimes. Finally, in the recent political upheaval, the unions played an important role and gave the movement great impetus.

Third, though the evidence is again not conclusive, the unions have used modern media for their purposes. One example is the use of print media in the strikes in the textile industry. Fourth, the Egyptian unions have a broad agenda and

are inclusive. The unions and the political parties supporting unions are inclusive and do not represent just one segment of the society. The goals and demands of unions concentrate on changing the existing suppressive economic and political system. In most cases they are spontaneous, decentralized, and based on the ideology of democratic rights.

Fifth, unions have not only tried to entrench themselves in the social fabric of the Egyptian society by supporting popular causes and aligning themselves with the overall political needs of the people in general, but they have also used social movement tactics. For example, they have involved outside parties like the ILO—to achieve the right to strike. In their recent activism they have also been able to catapult the employee right to bargain collectively and the right to representation to the level of basic human rights by invoking Convention 87 of the ILO, in a manner similar to that of the Service Employee International Union's (SEIU) social movement tactics during the Janitors' Strike in Boston in 2002, a strike in which the rights to bargain collectively and organize were expressed and supported by the SEIU as basic human rights and not just workplace rights.

On the one hand, Egyptian unions have represented the interests of the common people; raised issues that the state has not been able to address; used new technology; been more inclusive yet decentralized; and have risen as a spontaneous protest against economic and political injustice. On the other hand, Egyptian unions have not been all-pervasive and they do not seem to have the means or the organization to reconstitute the society.

In sum, there are similarities and dissimilarities between the Egyptian union movement and the universal concept of NSMs. Therefore, I agree with Broadbent (2003) that each social movement develops in its own unique way based on its distinctive context, revealing the need for an in-depth study of the Egyptian union movement to improve our understanding of its imperatives and make it possible for the international community to enhance workers' role in creating grassroots democracy.

A further important issue is that of the role of unions and worker organizations in the recent Egyptian political turmoil. What has their role been? Have the unions helped in creating democratic values and political awareness at the grassroots level? Before we consider these questions, it is necessary to point out that though Egypt is a very old civilization, it did not have self-rule for a long time until the mid 20th century. Additionally, since independence almost all Egyptian governments have been opposed to independent unions and have tried to control them, thus making it difficult for worker organizations to exist and operate and at the same time train in democratic tendencies a population that has had very little exposure to them.

Bearing all this in mind, it is indeed laudable that unions in Egypt have had a long and very vigorous history of activism. Egyptian worker consciousness has existed for a long period and has been strongly expressed at many times in Egyptian political history, including the following: (1) under the British, striking

in 1899 to establish a cigarette roller union (Beinin & Lockman, 1987); (2) supporting the nationalist party in 1909 (Solidarity Center, 2010); (3) under the British, striking in 1919 and 1921 in support of the Wafd Party; constantly resisting the antilabor governments under the constitutional monarchy; in 1938, after being frustrated by the antiunion nationalist government, establishing GFLUKE and fighting for union legitimacy and recognition; protesting on behalf of the workers from 1945 to 1952 for better conditions and wages; protesting and striking in the 1970s and the 1980s; and finally, conducting a massive wave of strikes under a very repressive and dictatorial regime from 2004 to 2008.

The evidence on the effectiveness of worker organizations is not irrefutable but it does show that worker organizations in Egypt have played a significant role in Egyptian political and social life and that this role has largely been ignored. In the last 10 years or so, we have seen that worker organizations in Egypt have been able to attract unprecedented numbers of people and have, under suppressive conditions, been able to conduct an aggressive campaign against a corrupt regime. This fight, mainly in the shape of strikes and campaigns, has been seen by some as creating awareness in the general public and in general giving people the courage to oppose a dictatorial regime (Kamel, 2011). In short, worker activism has left an ineffaceable mark on the minds of the general public and has lessened the fear of opposing the regime in other discontented groups.

In addition to the above, worker organizations have constantly fought for the right of representation; demanded the right to a voice; organized themselves on the democratic principles of providing an internal voice and inclusive union structures; supported the agenda for a greater political voice for all Egyptians; and have constantly campaigned for more democratic workplaces. These efforts must have created some awareness of rights among the workers and must have trained them in democratic traditions, though this conclusion is not yet unequivocally supported by data.

This brings us to the next, vital question: why is it important to study, understand, and support the role of unions and work organizations in creating grassroots democracy in the Egyptian context?

Let us begin with the negative evidence, that is, the evidence against the Egyptian unions. Eliesh (2004), while discussing the role and potential of unions and NGOs in Egypt, concluded that unions lack an understanding of the issues related to employee insecurity resulting from a number of factors like the informal economy, technological changes, and so forth. Eliesh added that the unions have played an ineffective role in monitoring and implementing existing labor laws and that “they do not have the capacity to mould worker behavior” (Eliesh, 2004: 14). In short, unions have several deficiencies.

There are also some political factors that do not really worker organizations in general. A report based on a recent Gallup Poll (Gallup Poll, 2011) conducted by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, titled “Egypt from Tahrir to transition,” tries to outline Egypt’s journey toward stable democracy. It also tries to map out a U.S.

strategy that can help Egypt in this endeavor. The report does not directly address the role or future of unions in Egypt but it does give us some facts that generally do not support a future important role for unions in Egypt. According to the report, Egyptians want freedom of expression and democracy but they are heavily influenced by religion (96%). They want a theocracy but also “a democracy informed by religious values” (Gallup Poll, 2011). Thus, 69% of Egyptians want religious leaders to have an advisory role in drafting national legislation.

Another vital finding of the poll is that currently in Egypt there is a leadership void and a situation of political uncertainty. But the leadership gap mentioned by the report is not likely, as of now, to be filled by unions. There are four potential ruling parties: the MB; the NDP; the Wafd Party; and the Wassat Party. The Muslim Brotherhood has the most support (15%). But the support for the Muslim Brotherhood is not much higher than that for the NDP (10%), which was Hosni Mubarak’s party and represents the remnants of the old regime.

All this makes it imperative for us to take a closer look at Egyptian politics. In this article, it is argued that what happened in Tahrir Square was indeed a major political upheaval, but not a full-fledged revolution, because it has not yet completely replaced the existing political order with a new one. The recent elections have given Egypt its first elected president, but only time will tell if this victory will lead to fundamental political changes.

Looking at the reasons for the argument outlined above, in the current political scenario there are three main actors: the military, the Islamists, and the coalition between different types of liberals (a distinction that will be discussed later), leftists, and workers (Ottaway & Korany, 2011). At the time of the Tahrir Square agitations the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), due to its self-control and support of the agitators, gained popularity among the masses, but since then, SCAF has shown clear intentions to control and dominate the Egyptian political transition to safeguard its substantial economic interests—5% to 40% of the Egyptian economy (Ottaway, 2011b, 2011c).

To achieve domination, SCAF, initially, after presenting a schedule for the political transition (Brown, 2011a; Ottaway, 2011a), remained silent on the point of when the presidential elections would be held. The reason for this might have been that once presidential elections were held, SCAF would have to transfer its considerable constitutional powers to the elected president, resulting in reduced power to influence the new constitution and protect SCAF’s own interests (Brown, 2011a; Ottaway, 2011a).

SCAF also tried to control the eventual drafting of the new constitution by putting out the “Supra-Constitutional Principles” (Brown, 2011a). The Supra-Constitutional Principles, also known as the Selmy Document, guarantee the absence of oversight of the military budget by the civilian government, and curtail parliamentary power in the formulation of the constitution by allocating seats on the 100-member constitutional commission to organizations controlled by Mubarak-era leaders (Ottaway, 2011a).

Finally, SCAF tried to support elements of the Mubarak regime and reintroduce them into Egyptian politics by allowing Mubarak's NDP to participate in the elections (Ottaway, 2011a), and more recently, by supporting Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's last prime minister, in the presidential elections against the MB's Mohamed Morsi (Ottaway, 2012a).

To the surprise of many analysts, Mohamed Morsi of the MB won the presidential elections (Ottaway, 2012b). Does this mean that the "revolution" is complete? To present a final verdict at this point would be presumptuous, but let us look at two pertinent facts. Under the guise of conducting a "transition process," SCAF has tremendously strengthened itself by protecting the military from civilian oversight, by giving itself ultimate authority over the writing of the new constitution (Ottaway, 2012b), and after the presidential elections by amending the "Constitutional Declaration" to curtail the power of the newly elected president—the president is no longer the commander-in-chief and thus has no oversight over the army (Tadros, 2012).

Adly (2012) argues that the steps taken by SCAF to remain the sole arbiter of power during the transition are in fact the enactment of a plan that was envisaged by Hosni Mubarak and Omar Sulieman—Mubarak's chief spy. It was an iterative legalistic plan to solve political issues in Egypt and contain the upheaval of the revolution (Adly, 2012). Abdul-Magd (2012) declares it a legitimized constitutional coup in which "Morsy [would] inherit a highly militarized state where retired army generals and colonels occupy almost every high-ranking position in the bureaucracy and the public sector. This is in addition to the fact that the military runs massive economic enterprises" (Abdul-Magd, 2012).

Islamists are not a monolithic group (Ottaway & Korany, 2011), but all Islamic parties have deep connections with each other as there is agreement between these parties at many levels (Ottaway & Korany, 2011). Additionally, under the Mubarak regime, the MB had a consensual and conciliatory stance toward liberal and secular parties and used the slogan "participation, not domination" (Brown, 2011b). But after its big wins in the November 2011 elections, the MB is now trying to dominate rather than increase participation and consensus with the liberals (Brown, 2011b).

This tendency was manifested by the MB when it tried to influence the allocation of reserved seats to "Brotherhood friendly" groups (Tadros, 2012). Also, since the presidential election win the MB still has not shown much inclination toward alliances with liberal groups, though such an inclination has been claimed by Morsi (Ottaway, 2012b). Finally, it has also been alleged that the MB has generally supported SCAF's legalistic approach to a power grab (Adly, 2012), and the recent presidential address by Morsi, in which he saluted the Egyptian military and said, "Only God knows how much love I have in my heart [for it]" (Abdul-Magd, 2012), ominously directs attention to the possibility that Egypt will be run by a military junta (Abdul-Magd, 2012).

The liberals, as already pointed out, consist of several groups: young liberals, leftists, workers (Ottaway & Korany, 2011), and those liberals who can be called “illiberals” due to their fear of Islamist domination (Ottaway, 2011b), as will be seen below. These groups are the least organized and the most idealistic—as they generally support equality, human rights, and democratization (Ottaway & Korany, 2011). They lack popular support in the rural areas (Ottaway & Korany, 2011) and have almost no experience in dealing with governmental, political, and constitutional issues (Ottaway, 2011b; Ottaway & Korany, 2011). These groups, who collectively initiated and sustained the Tahrir Square movement, are perhaps in the weakest position to take advantage of it.

Unions that represent the most democratic tendencies among liberals are facing suppression even after the “revolution,” which makes it difficult for them to fill the leadership gap in Egypt. The toppling of the Mubarak regime was not just the result of the actions of the groups that occupied Tahrir Square, but in a very significant way it was also due to strikes and industrial action in key sectors like public transportation in Cairo and the Suez Canal area (Charbel, 2011). The revolution brought some benefits for the unions such as the following: the first independent union was formed; a new trade union law was written (though not implemented), which guaranteed freedoms and organizational plurality; the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) was established; and, after the establishment of the first independent union, there was a proliferation of dozens of independent unions created by workers who were ETUF members (Charbel, 2011). But on the other hand, there have also been serious violations of union rights, such as the following: proposed laws that will curtail union freedom of association; and the issuing of a law that will make illegal any strikes that may disrupt or damage the national economy. These strikes can result in heavy fines and imprisonment, and offenders will be tried in military tribunals. There is also the failure to issue the new trade union law; and generally, there has been a disregard of labor rights, with “unpaid bonuses, mass lay-offs, factory closures, and lockouts; and [a] crack down on strikes with hundreds of workers arrested” (Charbel, 2011).

All of the above has led to the largest wave of strikes since 2007–2008. The most prominent strikes have been observed in the public transportation sector, and among doctors, textile industry workers, and teachers. The strikers have generally focused on wages and working conditions, but these strikes have also aimed at getting workers their voice and rights (Charbel, 2011). In this struggle the media have played a largely negative role. Before the revolution, strikes were given little coverage. But even since the revolution, the news that has come out regarding the strikes is largely that the country is losing millions of dollars due to them, and that the strikes are in fact “halting the wheels of production.” This is a gross distortion of the reality, which has been that workers have more than any other group stood up for social justice and freedom (Charbel, 2011).

One important example of the problems facing the workers’ struggle is the new draft law that prevents workers from organizing more than one union in one

enterprise. This means that there cannot be union plurality within enterprises. Workers' committees will be allowed to affiliate with only one union federation and no other union will be allowed to establish itself (Dale, 2012). This is a major blow for the 2 million workers who have recently founded independent unions after leaving ETUF. It essentially means that most of these new independent unions will have to merge with ETUF, because if they are unable to win a majority of the votes from the workers they will be dissolved (Dale, 2012). ETUF supports this law based on the argument that at this point in time the Egyptian economy needs stability in a period of transition, and this law would provide stability along with union freedoms (Dale, 2012). However, the Freedom of Association Committee of the ILO has established in 20 separate decisions that the right to freedom of association allows for plurality of unions in enterprises (Dale, 2012).

Coming to the "illiberals," the change in stance by the MB from a policy of participation and consensus to one of domination of the political process can to some extent be explained by the fact that some liberals who generally support democracy also fear that fair and free elections will bring the MB or Islamist parties to power, and therefore, they have supported the undemocratic actions of SCAF (Ottaway, 2011b). This undemocratic tendency in liberals has been exemplified by the divide in liberal views on when the new constitution should be written, i.e., before or after the elections, or in other words by an elected body or by SCAF (Ottaway, 2011b). Further evidence comes from the support by most secular parties of the "Extra-Constitutional Principles," which in the opinion of these secular parties might stop the Islamists from declaring Egypt an Islamic republic if they win elections (Ottaway, 2011c).

Another reason for some liberals' support of undemocratic actions could be that the liberals due to lack of organization and political structures will probably never be able to gain enough popular support to win elections. But if they support the military then there is a chance that they will get something in the bargain.

The road to a stable democracy in Egypt is still not clear. Egypt is going through an interim stage that is dominated and controlled by the army (Paciello, 2011). The transition is either badly designed or still does not have a clear roadmap (Brown, 2011a). The protests, as we have discussed, were spontaneous and even the union strikes and union role were not very well organized. Since the protests it has become evident that most of the democratic elements lack political training and political acumen (Brown, 2011a). The reason is simple: that in a country where freedom of expression did not exist for a long time it would be difficult to achieve a well-developed, well-equipped, and adequately trained and organized civil society.

Additionally, as already discussed, there are not many political parties available and one of the major parties is a remnant of the old regime. In the recent elections, Egyptians elected a new president, but the military junta is not easily going to give up its dominant position in Egypt's future political development. The army, which is controlling the transition, is by its very nature and training not open to democratic values and might maintain the old top-down political system, leading

to a clash with the general population (Paciello, 2011). There is also a possibility that the recent political movement will eventually become dominated by the military or some other old, undemocratic power base, which would eventually result in a more organized and perhaps a bloodier revolution in a few years from now.

The military, the Islamist parties generally, and the “illiberal democrats” present tendencies that are detrimental to a democratic transition in Egypt (Ottaway, 2011b). The support of the military rule or the extension of its rule by the illiberals could further unite all shades of Islamist opinion and make the Islamist parties more radical and opposed to secular Egyptians (Ottaway, 2011b). On the other hand, the MB might be willing to accept SCAF as the principal actor in Egyptian politics.

Egypt is a plural society and needs to reach a compromise to develop a balanced constitution (Ottaway, 2011b). But if democratic and liberal groups are to be given an important role in a constitutional transition, they need to be more organized. The democratic groups that were able to bring hundreds of thousands of protestors out into the streets have not been able to organize themselves into political parties (Brown, 2011b). Even the unions, which played a vital role in giving the movement its impetus, have not been able to create an effective workers’ party (Brown, 2011b).

The answer to the question raised earlier—why do we need to study the role of unions in developing grassroots democracy in Egypt?—is that unions and other worker organizations represent democratic and liberal tendencies in Egypt. The unions have also shown considerable democratic potential historically and in the recent agitations. Therefore, by studying the role of unions in developing grassroots democracy in Egypt, the international community can find ways to help them in their endeavors. In sum, there is a political vacuum in Egypt and as of this moment the liberal and democratic groups, which have mustered considerable support, do not have the wherewithal, i.e., the structure, organization, and resources, to fill that gap.

The last important question is what can be done to enhance the role of unions in Egypt’s democratic transition? This question can be divided into two parts. One, what can the international community of nations do to support unions in Egypt? Two, what can the Egyptian unions do to enhance their future contribution? Most countries, especially the Western nations, have supported the recent uprisings in several Middle Eastern countries against their dictatorial and corrupt regimes. But we are interested in unions being supported as independent democratic institutions in the Egyptian context. In this regard, ITUC has supported unions in Egypt and publicized their struggles by reporting on their efforts. ITUC has also given some training in organization techniques to Egyptian union leaders and has campaigned in favor of the Egyptian unions. As the ILO official declares,

ITUC is present in Egypt and they are trying to help the independent unions at the moment.

The ILO has also been active in supporting the unions' efforts in Egypt. According to the ILO official, the ILO supported the recognition of independent unions in Egypt and also put pressure in this regard on the Egyptian government when the tax collectors' union campaigned for it. The ILO has also been extending various kinds of technical support to Egyptians unions. According to the ILO official,

The ILO through its supervisory mechanism was already putting pressure on the Egyptian government to open the door and to comply with the Convention 87 that they have ratified. . . . We also had a technical cooperation project that was working on promoting negotiation and the right to collective bargaining, the right to have genuine worker representatives . . . so we were on the ground training people and raising awareness, spreading the message, and this project started in 2008.

Even given all that is being done, there is a need for more. But most Egyptians do not believe that the United States and other Western nations are interested in a democratic Egypt (Gallup Poll, 2011). If that is the case, then helping Egyptians is a bit of a slippery slope for Western countries and international organizations and union federations that are mostly seen as representing Western interests and culture. In this situation it is important to support the people and not individuals or power bases that represent the status quo. Some useful steps could be supporting Egyptian union leaders and generally training them in negotiation, collective bargaining, and organizing unions. The ILO and international union federations could go beyond technical support and, by using the modern media, give global exposure to what the unions have been doing in Egypt and how they have created grassroots democracy through their campaigns, thus creating worldwide support for unions in Egypt. The Western nations could encourage and sign trade agreements that support crucial industries and economic areas. Finally, all countries should support a democratic transition and the propagation of democratic values in Egypt.

So what can the unions do? It has been opined that that the Egyptian unions are not very effective, that they have not been able to monitor the implementation of labor laws, and that they do not have the capacity to mold worker behavior (Eliesh, 2004). The unions also lack organization and political structure. And perhaps due to this deficiency, even with their vanguard role in the recent events in Egypt, the unions do not command as much influence as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood does.

Based on the above, I propose two strategies. El-Mahdi (2011) states that in the past five decades unions have mounted several protests but these protests have been spontaneous, and mostly isolated incidents with limited impact outside a specific plant or factory. El-Mahdi (2011: 399) further argues that "social movements (including labour) need to build alliances and exchange experiences with, and benefit organizationally and politically from, other entities within civil society

and the wider political sphere.” This author’s work also suggests that there is a need for unions to increase coordination with other worker bodies and develop collaborative networks with other liberal elements with a special emphasis on young people and women—who have mostly been underrepresented but have been highly active in the recent protests starting with Mahalla and the other textile strikes (El-Mahdi, 2011). This strategy will not only provide unions with useful allies but it will also increase awareness among Egyptians of the importance of unions as grassroots democratic institutions and also highlight the union role in the recent movement.

A second strategy is that unions should place an emphasis on bringing about institutional changes. The Egyptian unions have not been able to establish a formidable workers’ political party (Brown, 2011b). Therefore, this article suggests that the first institutional change should be the creation of a workers’ party that represents workers and their collective interests. The second institutional change involves the constitution and the labor law. Article 4 of the 1971 Egyptian constitution gives importance to “the preservation of workers’ rights” as one of the bases of the national economy. Article 26 puts worker representatives on the boards of directors of public sector units (Egypt State Information Service, 2012). The problem is that in the Egyptian constitution, specific workers’ rights are not clearly enumerated and, therefore, are not protected. Additionally, worker representation on boards of directors of public sector units does not mean much given the long history of a state-controlled union federation. Finally, the Trade Union Act, No. 35 of 1976 creates a system in which trade union pluralism is not allowed; trade unions’ right to “organize their administration in full freedom” is not recognized; and the right to strike is not fully recognized (ILO, 2011). Starting with the constitution, workers’ rights as identified in the eight ILO core conventions should be clearly enumerated and protected so as to create a sound basis for the development of subsequent labor laws.

CONCLUSION

The political scenario in Egypt is very vague. We can see that there are many forces and power bases competing with each other to dominate Egyptian politics with the intent to either steer the transition in their favor or carve out a dominating role for them in Egypt’s future. The problem with this tug-of-war is that most of the forces at play in Egyptian politics do not represent democratic principles.

I argue in this article that in the current power struggle, Egyptian unions can play a pivotal role in creating a more democratic Egypt. Historically, workers in Egypt have always been active. They have also played a significant, though largely undocumented, role both before and during the Tahrir Square movement. Unions also represent democratic forces, as they have not supported the military; at least, there is no evidence so far that they have done so. In sum, unions have shown democratic potential and are probably the most organized and

internally democratic of all the liberal groups. Therefore, to secure a democratic and reasonably liberal future for Egypt, it is necessary to further aid the development of unions, improve their organizing capacities, and train them in democratic institutional principles. Additionally, unions themselves must improve their visibility and acceptance in Egyptian society by collaborating with other democratic groups in the country. They should also create an effective workers' political party and bring about changes in the new Egyptian constitution

Finally, this article proposes that in order to help and further develop unions it is important to understand how they have developed so far. The discussion above shows that unions in Egypt historically and especially in recent years have operated less like traditional unions and more like social movements. This could be due to the many environmental factors discussed in the preceding sections, but for the purposes of future strategy it is important to further understand the factors leading to their mobilization (social, cultural, ideological, and economic), channels of mobilization (media, social network, and ecology), and organizational and structural factors. We need to gain a better understanding of all these factors to help develop the Egyptian unions in a more meaningful way.

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