

Egyptian Labor Activists Assess Their Achievements

*On August 3, the AFL-CIO presented its Meany-Kirkland Human Rights Award to the workers of Egypt. It was the first time in the award's 20-year history that the recipient was from an Arab country. In its award resolution, the American labor federation cited the remarkable burst of Egyptian worker activism that began in late 2004, with wildcat strikes in the textile sector. The ensuing strike wave crested in 2006 with militant actions in the Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra, and culminated in the April 2009 formation of the first independent trade union in Egypt in more than 50 years, the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers. Egyptian unions were incorporated into the state under the post-monarchy regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and for almost all of the intervening period, it has been illegal to strike. The strike wave of the 2000s was notable for its rate of success, as unions across the country won higher wages, better retirement packages and other benefits. In many workplaces, workers were protesting planned selloffs of public-sector enterprises. The tide of labor militancy coincided with considerable political ferment in the country, from the rise of pro-democracy movements like Kifaya to the electoral gains of the Muslim Brothers in the 2005 parliamentary contests. Accepting the award on behalf of Egyptian workers were **Kamal Abu Eita**, president of the new tax collectors' union, and **Kamal Abbas**, a long-time labor activist who directs the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services in Cairo. Lauren Geiser spoke with Abu Eita and Abbas on the morning of the award ceremony.*

Why did the initial scattering of strikes become a strike wave?

Abbas One of the reasons was the huge increase in consumer prices in 2006, and the corresponding decline in real wages and purchasing power. The state-controlled trade union structure, which had already been about 80 percent non-functioning, became more like 100 percent non-functioning, in the sense that it would not or could not defend workers' interests in the face of this inflation. Another catalyst was the new protest movements taking place in Egypt, like the Kifaya movement. These movements contributed to reducing the level of fear that people had about protesting. The idea of going into the streets and protesting was not as scary as it used to be. This dynamism had started to surface in Egyptian society in 2004. At this time, many things were happening—Kifaya, increased activity on the part of various NGOs and a proliferation of independent and opposition media (especially newspapers), with the loosening of government restrictions. There's another very important point: The first strike that took place in 2006 occurred in December, right after the trade union elections in November, which had been marred by an amazing amount of corruption.

Does that mean the strike wave was “political,” as opposed to being limited to bread-and-butter issues?

Abbas If you're asking if the workers' protests were calling for free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, then the answer is largely no. But if you're talking about the distribution of income and economic wellbeing in Egyptian society, then the answer is yes. Workers, of course, benefit from a redistribution of wealth and income, and the workers in these actions were aware of the larger picture. The majority of the strikes resulted in wage increases and betterment of working conditions and services for workers. We should also note that the protests and strikes in the industrial sector encouraged people in many other sectors of the economy to go into the streets. And different sectors supported each other, with teachers, for example, marching alongside other workers. Breaking the barrier of fear was very important. And something else is currently in development in Egypt: It's normal for a given group of workers to concentrate on its specific demands at first. But after a while, the workers will transcend basic issues of self-interest and widen their interests to encompass some of the traditional political demands. Then they might be able to build alliances with other groupings within society.

One example of what you're talking about is the spread of militancy into workplaces not as well known for job actions as the big textile mills. How did the tax collectors' effort evolve?

Abu Eita Originally, we [tax collectors] were under the Ministry of Finance, but we were moved under the supervision of the Ministry of Local Municipalities. In one stroke, we lost

all the benefits that we had while working under the Ministry of Finance. We've been suffering like this since 1974. Isn't it customary to get equal pay for equal work? Not so for us. Our colleagues in the Ministry of Finance who do the same amount of work make ten times more than we do. We prepared our demands and presented them through the official channels to the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, but they refused to stand by us. So we resorted to going on strike outside the trade union structure. We were able to achieve up to a 300 percent increase in our salaries.

It took a few months after this successful strike movement to take the structure of local organizing committees, which we had organized for the purpose of striking, and transform it into an independent trade union. All the committees that were created all over Egypt for the strike were turned into local unions, and they came together to establish an independent nationwide trade union for real estate tax collectors. I believe that our sector has the highest number of union members of any in Egypt—at 85 percent of the people who work in our job classification. We have 40,000 members out of a total possible membership of around 47,000. The official trade union structure, which uses mandatory dues and other forms of coercion to gain members, has nothing like this rate, with only 3 million members out of a work force of roughly 25 million.

We are pressing ahead on the strength of our people, not of the law, which is not our protector. There are parts of the Egyptian constitution that are on our side, along with international conventions, and we are pleased to count on the moral support and technical assistance of all our friends and supporters around the world. We've become members of Public Services International, a global federation of public service unions. And we are very happy to be receiving the Meany-Kirkland Human Rights Award, which is another form of solidarity.

Why have only the tax collectors been able to establish an independent union?

Abu Eita Our union was born of the womb of our strike. We were able to win our demands and build on the momentum to form our union. But independence is not an idea unique to the tax collectors; our model has inspired other groups of workers who are in the process of establishing their own independent unions, such as the teachers and many others. We consider Egypt to be free of unions. What is called a “union” in Egypt is a tool in the hands of the employers. Naturally, all Egyptian workers need to have unions that represent us effectively, but we are in the process of forging this right for ourselves.

Various unions have demanded a raise in the minimum wage to 1,200 Egyptian pounds (about \$210) per month. What is happening with this demand?

Abbas Well, this is not an easy demand. Achieving it would

require a period of organization on the part of many unions from many sectors. The real success that was achieved was that the demand to raise the minimum wage moved to the top of the list of concerns for public opinion. The fact that the minimum wage became so important in public opinion gave it much more momentum than before, and put pressure on the government. Now the dispute centers not on whether the minimum wage will be raised, but on the amount of the hike. Some say 400 pounds per month is enough; others say 600, and still others 900.

Is the labor movement slowing down?

Abu Eita No, it's not. And as long as there are bad working conditions and low wages in Egypt, it will not. The movement is progressing even though there may be fewer huge protests in front of Parliament and in other public spaces. Actually, in some ways, the relative absence of public protests may be a step forward. The movement is evolving and taking stock of which types of protests work and which fail.

During one of the last strikes, there was a mass demonstration outside Parliament by textile workers asking for improved wages. The workers broke down the gates of Parliament, and

the security forces took them down. Everyone was running all over the street; it was chaos. Since that time, this type of action is less popular, but it remains important because it helped to make way for new and more effective means of protest. One of the tactics that has been developed subsequently is to deliver the message of unity by means of six simultaneous smaller-scale protests happening all over Egypt.

Another example of evolution is the telephone equipment workers' strike, in which the workers occupied a highway in Helwan, blocking it and causing traffic to back up. After a while, the local residents, who have been suffering for a while from a high rate of accidents on this stretch of highway, adopted the strikers' tactic and threw up their own roadblock! So workers are developing different strategies, seeing what works and what doesn't.

Abbas It is normal and natural that the labor movement will come in waves, some days up, other days down. The same pattern prevailed at the peak of the strike wave in 2006. It doesn't mean anything if a few months pass by without any major actions. The widespread anger of workers has not vanished, and the official labor institutions are as unresponsive and unrepresentative as ever. ■

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China, by the best accounts, is nowhere near a decision to attempt a challenge to the global military supremacy of the United States. Beijing is content, like Europe and Japan, to reap the benefits of US force projection capability—chiefly, the Fifth Fleet's protective hug of the petroleum jackpot in the Persian Gulf. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy, moreover, depends in large part on consumption of Chinese manufactures in the world's largest market, meaning that Beijing has a strong interest in US financial health as well. Still, the bipartisan post-Cold War project of extending Washington's sole superpower status indefinitely requires that US strategists peer far into the future to identify contenders for the throne. The anti-Chinese aspect of AFRICOM is of a piece with the "area access denial" maneuvers of the Cold War era. Even if Washington cannot establish a foothold in Africa, it should endeavor to deny one to Beijing. Such aspirations give new meaning to Moeller's quip that the command is working on "African time."

Moeller was also at pains to counter the criticism, advanced by Resist AFRICOM and others, that AFRICOM will impinge upon the domain of the State Department. He assured critics, for instance, that officers visiting African countries from the command's headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany will report to the ambassadors. Most important, he said, AFRICOM does not make policy. This statement, again, has the double value of being banal and deeply misleading. US foreign policy is not made in any single government office, certainly not in the State Department, but through a constant push and pull of lobbying

of the White House (which has its own predilections) by actors inside and outside government, and inside and outside the United States. Not only is the military one of these actors, it is an extremely powerful one, providing hundreds of thousands of jobs and marshaling loyal support in Congress, among other advantages. The reason to fear "excessive militarization" of US policy in Africa is not that AFRICOM personnel will call the shots, but that the orders coming from Washington will already have been shaped by the Pentagon's prerogatives and promises to deliver results where diplomats can only talk.

To Ferguson and his ilk, the US empire is necessary as the praetorian guard of the liberal capitalist order and the only power that can bring stability to, or at least contain instability in, unruly places like AFRICOM's area of operations. Past empires built railways and schools; today's nab pirates and transfer technocratic know-how. Empires, Ferguson believes, should invest what it takes to do the job, even if it means cutting domestic spending. The costs of imperial intervention to places like Africa do not figure.

For most of the American elite, the relentless expansion of the national security state is simply business as usual. In Aspen, Niall Ferguson was asked why it matters if the country he chides for being an "empire in denial" loses some of its clout. "Having grown up in a declining empire," he replied with characteristic dry wit, "I do not recommend it." He instructed his audience that the US is approaching another dangerous moment of truth: In five years, the cost of servicing the national debt will be larger than the defense budget. When that happens, he warned, empires fall. ■