The Workers' Movement in the Egyptian Uprisings

Lillian Johns
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Introduction

The Workers' Movement played a pivotal role in fueling the 2011 Uprisings in Egypt, advocating for workers' rights reforms that had declined since the neoliberal shifts of the 1980s. The aftermath of the initial protests would spark a period of political instability as multiple regimes cycled in and out of power. The Workers' Movement would fail in positioning itself as a major political force, and it still struggles to have its demands met under the authoritarian regime to this day.

The Arab uprisings of the 2010s shook the Middle East and stand as a pivotal moment, one that irrevocably altered the region's trajectory as a whole. The implications of these events were felt differently in each country, but in Egypt, they saw the most dramatic change: the fall of a regime. Under the leadership of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's prominence as a leading Arab nation started to decline (Anderson 2011). His rule has been described as stagnant, corrupt, and authoritarian. And discontent with the Egyptian government had been growing among the population for decades. In the wake of the dramatic popular uprising in Tunisia, seen as the initiating event for the rest of the Arab uprisings, the Egyptian people decided it was time to act (Cleveland and Bunton 2018). It was the younger population leading the revolutionary charge, organizing the 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square and calling for the institution of democracy and the end of the regime (Meijer 2016). A protest was planned for January 25, 2011, and hundreds of thousands of people would attend. Over the rest of the occupation, that number would climb to nearly 1 million (Cleveland and Bunton 2018). The Mubarak regime carried out a violent opposition, but nothing was able to quell the masses of protesters (Gelvin 2023). As the demonstrations in Tahrir Square persisted, the Egyptian army took matters into its own hands, and formal executive power was taken by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which placed

Mubarak under house arrest, effectively forcing the issue of his resignation (Cleveland and Bunton 2018). Following this, the SCAF would make a public announcement stating that they would hand over power to a civilian elected government (Gelvin 2023). This brief timeline highlights the key points of the uprising, but behind each pivotal event were countless groups, diverse in background, that provided the manpower for such a feat. One such group was, of course, the labor movement, whose participation predates January 2011 in their efforts to lay the groundwork for revolution and open the door to challenging the opposition.

Historical Context

It was during the 1980s that Egypt undertook a series of neoliberal reforms and entered into agreements with several Western foreign entities. These agreements included lowering customs tariffs and taxes on imports, opening markets to foreign investment in various fields, and privatizing public sector companies. As the new economy adjusted, the regimes sought to cut debt and reduce public employment (Hartshorn 2016). The impacts of neoliberalism manifested in low growth rates, low investment, growing unemployment, increased exploitation of cheap labor, and an increased dependency on foreign aid (Meijer 2016). These rapid economic changes were detrimental to the workforce, resulting in mass layoffs and wage decreases (Beinin 2012).

A wave of strikes swept over Egypt in the mid-2000s in response to the outcomes of the economic reforms. Workers' rights activists sought to better their situation but faced the challenges of organizing under a repressive regime (Hartshorn 2016). Some key moments during this period were the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company strike carried out in December 2006 by nearly 22,000 employees (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012), and the April 6 strike of 2008, which focused on the creation of a national minimum wage. The April 6 strike brought with it a demonstration at government buildings in Cairo. Workers chanted "a fair minimum wage, or let this government go

home" and "down with Mubarak and all those who raise prices," a harbinger for what was to come. Each of these was semi-successful, with parts of their demands being met while others were ignored. Looking at the numbers, you can clearly see the mounting climate of protest that was building within the workers' movement, years before the people would take to the streets in Cairo. In 1985, there were 33 workers' protests recorded; in 1998, 114; in 2004, 264; and in 2007, over 600 (Meijer 2016). Between the years of 1998 and 2010, it is reported that almost 4 million workers participated in hundreds of strikes and other forms of collective protest (Beinin 2012). Raising the minimum wage was the top priority for protesters during this time, but as that was refused, they started to shift focus to calling upon a reshaping of the economic policy of the regime (Meijer 2016).

An important player in the pursuit of workers' rights is the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). Established in 1957 as an instrument of the Nassar Regime, the ETUF has always acted as a state-affiliated union that has served its purpose as a controlling entity rather than a representative one. A law passed in 1976 determined that the ETUF could be the only trade union, making any independent unions technically illegal (Beinin 2012). Workers recognize the ETUF for what it truly is, a puppet of the regime, and this has left many distrustful of the apparatus. The ETUF has consistently failed at keeping the disgruntled public sector in check and has failed to quell their protests both during and prior to the uprisings (Abdelrahman 2014). An important dynamic shift regarding trade unions occurred in 2007 in the midst of a growing climate of activism among workers. The real estate tax sector would carry out a strike over wage disparities, gathering in downtown Cairo, 8,000 strong, and were successful in achieving a 325% wage increase. Riding on this success, protest leaders came together and created the first independent trade union that Egypt had seen in decades, the Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers, which claimed to

represent 30,000 employees. Following their lead, several other independent unions would pop up, including ones representing health care technicians and teachers by 2010. This was in direct opposition to the aforementioned 1967 decree, serving as just another example of the destabilization of the authority of the regime (Beinin 2012).

Prior to the 2011 uprising, the workers, for the most part, were not operating in the pursuit of democratization; they were focused on economic reform. The long history of labor activism in Egypt started in response to the neoliberal reforms at the turn of the century, but as a culture of protest started to take shape during the 2000s, it started to chip away at the stability of Mubarak's regime (Beinin 2012).

Workers' Movement in the 2011 Uprisings

The workers' movement has been hailed in many regards as laying the foundation for the uprisings due to their consistent and prolonged activism in the years predating 2011(Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). Workers all over Egypt saw the Arab Uprising as an opportunity to improve their working conditions. Their demands included better workplace security, improved wages, and a relaxation of the government control on trade unions. They also hoped that in the case of a regime change, a new leader would emerge sympathetic to the demands of the working class (Hartshorn 2016).

The labor movement operated without nationally recognized leadership, financial and organizational resources, an economic or political program, and international support. But even with these factors in play, workers managed collective actions in the mid-2000s and were very quick to mobilize in the early stage of the 2011 uprisings (Beinin 2012). Initially, this participation was on an individual basis due to the disconnect with the ETUF (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). The

presence of such people was documented as early as January 25th. These were people from multiple sectors, many of whom had activist experience from earlier strikes and protests. Group participation was limited at this time, and what there was consisted of small blocs from the few independent unions. It was not until the very end of the uprising that there was any kind of large-scale participation on behalf of the workers' movement. This was due to the fact that at the beginning of the uprising, workplaces were shut down by the government, further inhibiting organization and group mobilization (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). However, once workplaces were reopened on February 8th, workers in almost all 29 of Egypt's governorates were able to organize and stage disruptions in the form of strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations (Abdelrahman 2014). At this point, the protesters now included a mix of first-timers and those who had been active in the actions of the early 2000s (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). The predominant tools of protest, being strikes and workplace sit-ins, allowed workers to flex their societal importance, showing the regime that if they stop working, the nation stops functioning (Meijer 2016).

There was both a political and a social side to these protests, with the workers representing the latter. More political efforts were entangled with the pro-democracy advocates known as the Kefaya. The 2011 uprisings brought the two dimensions together (Meijer 2016). But the two entities did not always operate cohesively. Claims were made that the workers' movement was narrow-minded in its demands, focusing too heavily on workplace issues and economic ones instead of the larger call for democracy. However, the work of the labor movement could be inherently political without explicitly saying so. They took their protests to government agency buildings, pushed against the regime's repression on the formation of independent unions, and endorsed the demands of the pro-democracy activists (Abdelrahman 2014).

During the uprisings, the workers' movement was at constant odds with the ETUF, which served a purely counter-revolutionary role (Meijer 2016). This led to yet another hit to its authority. On January 30, 2011, the few already established independent trade unions would form the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), another violation of the 1976 law (Beinin 2012). This action inspired numerous other sectors to establish their own independent unions, and by 2013, they claimed to represent over 1,000 (Meijer 2016). They announced their formation at a rally in Tahrir Square (Hartshorn 2016) and passed out leaflets sharing their support of the revolution. Their formation came with demands for workers' rights, social security, and an increased minimum wage (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). Their creation also played a crucial role in the mobilization that occurred after February 8th, as they were a leading voice calling for strikes that would continue until Mubarak stepped down (Beinin 2012).

Post-Revolution Political Transitions

As the SCAF took control and a post-Mubarak Egypt began to take shape, there was a refusal of the protesters to organize around a leader or to establish some kind of hierarchy. They didn't form political parties; they didn't identify a candidate for the upcoming elections (Anderson 2011). This inaction in the time immediately following the fall of Mubarak would be a critical error among the revolutionary forces (Abdelrahman 2014). But the change in power from Mubarak to the SCAF did not mean a halt in the workers' protests. They persisted with at least 150,000 participating in 489 strikes in February 2011. With the momentum they had, EFITU tried to advocate for substantive democracy during the regime change. Some members met and drafted a proclamation, "Demands of the Workers in the Revolution," wherein they sought the right to form independent trade unions, the right to strike, and the dissolution of ETUF (Beinin 2012). The EFITU did not approve of the SCAF's appointment of Isma'il Ibrahim Fahmi as interim minister

of manpower and migration because they saw him as just an extension of the oppression of the prior regime. Their ability to nominate and get appointed their own proposed candidate, Ahmad Hasan al-Bura'I, was one of the labor movement's most notable achievements post-uprising (Beinin 2012). There seemed to be some hope for the workers' demands, especially as al-Borai was perceived as a friend of unions. He attempted to reorganize the ETUF and offer the independent unions some freedom to organize. However, political disagreements over his support for the independent unions would lead to his eventual resignation prior to the upcoming elections, and before his ideas could be implemented (Hartshorn 2016).

The SCAF did not respond kindly to this newfound gusto of the workers' movement, and they issued a fine to any participants in actions that interrupted the flow of work. By the end of 2011, it became clear to many of the revolutionaries that the SCAF did not seek to fulfill the goals of the uprising. Instead, they simply struck when the iron was hot to take and consolidate power for themselves, answering only the most basic demand of the protests, to get rid of Mubarak (Beinin 2012). The Muslim Brotherhood would stun in the first set of elections, securing not only the presidency but also significant numbers within the new parliament, launching their new political party, The Freedom and Justice Party (Cleveland and Bunton 2018). They were one of the only established entities that offered an image of political authority and experience. After the election, they edged out the standing military power (Brown 2013). The Muslim Brotherhood made loose appeals to workers' demands, but these seemed more based on co-optation rather than cooperation. They fell on the old notions of a nationally controlled trade union and stifled efforts to build new, more autonomous unions that the working masses had been pushing for (Hartshorn 2016). Ultimately, they would refuse to recognize the independent trade unions or their new

coalition (Meijer 2016). The post-Mubarak parliament underrepresented workers' interests in its composition, so in turn, they didn't reap the benefits of the government "remodel" (Beinin 2012).

Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate, attempted to assert absolute presidential authority over the emerging constitution and its assembly, determined to quell any efforts to lessen his rule; this greatly angered the Egyptian people, who were not seeing the kind of government they had fought for just months earlier (Brown 2013). In 2013, mass protests would once again crowd the streets of Egypt, with the same tune of toppling the regime, yet this time around, the name on people's mouths was Morsi. And again, history seemed to repeat itself as the military intervened and Morsi was arrested (Hartshorn 2016). Some literature suggests that the ousting of Morsi was the mark of failure on Egypt's attempt to uphold a democratic transition, dashing both internal and international hopes that this marked a step away from the authoritarian grip that has held the country for decades (Brown 2013).

In a reprise of 2011, the Freedom and Justice Party was edged out by the military in a half-revolution, half-coup (Beinin 2012). General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi led the charge, and the period following was one of heightened violence. Pro-Morsi protesters were killed, Muslim Brotherhood members imprisoned, and there were increased disappearances, and the silencing of any voices of dissent cast a dark shadow over the revolutionaries' hopes that seemed to be so bright just years earlier. Al-Sisi would run for president and win in 2014, although with very low turnout at the polls, some argue that it was the perceived stability of his leadership that appealed to voters after the past 3 years of uncertainty (Cleveland and Bunton 2018). This new regime further suppressed the right to protest and fostered a climate of fear that made the workers' movement unable to make meaningful progress in their reform goals. Fear of retaliation from employers or from the new regime held back many from joining independent unions (Abdelrahman 2014). Al-Sisi remains as

the Head of State in Egypt to this day, and his ability to stay in power is likely a mixture of his heavy-handed suppression of dissent and the stability he offers to the country as a leader.

Revolutionaries have been marginalized in the ensuing political turmoil following the initial regime overthrow, cast to the side by already established players (Abdelrahman 2014). The actors who played a major role in the post-Mubarak transition were themselves authoritarian. The SCAF did not work for the people and exercised intense power over decision-making during that most critical time. The unbalanced political scene allowed for the Muslim Brotherhood to win big in initial elections, which dredged up distrust among other parties, and in the Brotherhood's eventual downfall, democracy yet again did not prevail. Authoritarian institutions and politics did not fall with Mubarak (Brown 2013), and they do not lend will to democratic policies. So, although the political actors may have had democratic aspirations, the climate of the government in Egypt did not foster them. The actual transition plan, post-Mubarak, didn't seem to be a fleshed-out thing; the political control fell into the hands of the military simply because they claimed it when the time was right. But even with the tumultuous path the workers' movement has taken through each of these regime changes, they have proven themselves throughout multiple crucial points in Egyptian history as a strong, nationally spanning force that is successful in destabilizing a regime (Beinin 2012).

Conclusion: The Current Status of Workers' Rights

Upon exploring the turbulent journey of the labor movement, it proves relevant to this essay to examine how its mission stands today. The U.S. State Department releases a country report on the status of human rights practices within a certain nation, and in 2024, they released their findings on Egypt. Egypt's current constitution, which was ratified in 2014 via public referendum during the Al-Sisi era, does provide for freedom of association and embedded within that is the

right to peaceful strikes. However, penalties are rarely applied against violators of these rights, and in the private sector, especially, there is a consistent trend of striking workers facing criminal charges (United States Department of State 2025). The formation of independent trade unions is still an uphill battle. Workers have the right to form and join them, but under significant restrictions, with approval dependent on the ETUF. Independent unions face many obstacles to registering with the government, facing lengthy delays from the office of the Ministry of Labor or just receiving a flat-out denial of their proposed union by the ETUF. Violations of workers' rights include delays in payments and arbitrary dismissal due to the absence of employment contracts. There is a set minimum wage for government and public sector employees, one that is set above the poverty line, and although the minimum wage has increased, it has done so at uneven rates and excludes agricultural, fishery, and domestic workers (United States Department of State 2025).

The issues presented above are further compounded by the fact that there is simply not a sufficient number of labor inspectors to enforce compliance with any kind of labor standards. On the ground, the fight for labor rights is persisting, and they speak to worries about little government oversight and enforcement. They assert that employers often ignore labor requirements, especially within the service and informal sectors, which account for roughly 67% of Egypt's labor force (International Labor Organization 2025). However, in an exciting turn of events, August of 2025 saw the introduction of the most ambitious piece of labor reform in decades: Law No. 14 of 2025, which went into effect in September 2025. This new law seeks to modernize workplace protections to better reflect contemporary standards. Some of the articles include: an expansion on the definition of work to include previously underrepresented parties; new protections against arbitrary dismissal; extended maternity leave; and new protections surrounding sexual harassment and workplace violence. Also, under Article 143, a specialized labor judiciary was to be formed. The

new labor courts were created and began operating in October of 2025 (Thabet 2025). They will be tasked with handling employment disputes, which, up until now, had been something the government kept its hands out of, leaving it between employer and employee, often without resolution and often ending in a strike (United States Department of State 2025). Accounts share that the motivations behind this new law lie in the attraction of foreign investment, ones who want to see that Egypt is living up to international labor benchmarks (Thabet 2025).

The new labor law addresses several crucial problems but also fails to address some of the movement's major concerns. As it is still in the early stages of implementation, it will be important to follow how the repercussions from Law No. 14 of 2025 will impact Egypt’s workers and their movement as a whole. The workers’ movement, as it has evolved from the end of the 20th century to now, tells a story of hardship. But even in the face of obstacles, their efforts have not completely died out, attesting to their crucial role throughout Egyptian history as a force for social change, especially in the context of the 2011 Uprisings.

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