

MENA Solidarity Network

Solidarity with workers in the Middle East and North Africa menasolidaritynetwork.com Summer 2011



Report prepared by members of the RMT, UCU, CWU, PCS and NUT unions

Building independent trade unions in Egypt

Egyptian workers have a long history of organisation and struggle. In fact, as Kamal Abu Aita from the property tax collectors' union pointed out to a delegation of British trade unionists, it is where the first recorded strike in human history took place, around three thousand years ago.

For the first half of the twentieth century, Egyptian workers struggled to build unions in the shadow of British colonialism. The workers' movement played a crucial role in battles for social justice and the mass movement against the British military occupation of Egypt in the 1940s.

The overthrow of the monarchy by army officers in 1952 led to the creation of state-run industries and a welfare system, but also saw trade unions essentially taken over by the state. While workers' strikes and protests continued throughout the next five decades, these were all organised outside the officially-sanctioned trade union federation, and were generally brutally repressed.

Things changed dramatically in 2006 when a strike by textile workers in Mahalla al-Kubra sparked a wave of strikes and protests across Egypt. Over the next five years around two million workers would take strike action demanding better pay and conditions and protesting at their lack of freedom to organise. The first independent union since 1957 was founded by property tax collectors out of a national strike in 2007.

Three other independent unions followed: set up this time by health technicians, teachers and pensioners, while networks of strike organisers and activists emerged among transport workers, postal workers and many other groups of workers.

The strike wave explains why from the beginning, the Egyptian revolution has had demands for social justice at its heart. Workers played a crucial role in the uprising against Mubarak, too. Huge strikes in the last week before Mubarak fell showed the regime that it could no longer contain the protests.

New phase

As our delegation found, the end of the uprising opened a new phase in the revolution, with dozens of independent unions springing into being, and workers raising a host of social demands. These new unions are facing immense challenges as they attempt to turn the revolution's promise of social justice into reality for the millions of Egyptian workers who went into the streets against Mubarak's police and thugs.

State repression has continued in both new and old forms.



British trade union delegation celebrates MayDay in Tahrir Square, Cairo

Although independent unions now have the right to organise legally, 'disruptive' strikes have been banned by the ruling military council. Leading trade unionists, such as Ali Fattouh from the Public Transport Authority Union faced prosecution for "incitement to strike". *(The charges have now been dropped)*

The new unions are being built from the bottom up, with only the resources which activists can scrape together from their own workplaces. They are generally highly democratic: 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.

After decades living with a government-run bureaucracy in place of a genuine trade union federation, activists in the independent unions are determined to keep power at the grassroots level. In some workplaces, union organising is even forcing democracy on the bosses: staff at the Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital sacked their corrupt director and the new independent union organised an election for his replacement.

It is stories like this which should remind us that solidarity is a two-way process, and that the struggles of workers in Egypt can teach us so much about what democracy and social justice really mean.

Anne Alexander, UCU

A historic moment for Egyptians

by **Unjum Mirza**
Political Officer (LTRC) and acting secretary MENA Solidarity Network

THE stage for revolution in Egypt was set with a rise in workers’ struggle that began in 2004. The Tunisian revolution at the turn of 2011 was the spark that lit the dramatic events that unfolded from 25 January until the fall of Egypt’s dictator Hosni Mubarak on 11 February. Both revolutions have generated a massive, inspiring movement across the Middle East and North Africa.

This is a movement of the masses — ordinary women and men like us, not self-declared leaders and certainly not from the West. The only thing the Western leaders have offered (and delivered) has been bloodshed and misery. Think of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Then wonder, how on earth could these liars, murderers and warmongers even pretend to help “liberate” Libya.

They have their own agenda (oil, and politically re-shaping the region in their own interests) and that agenda is not ours. The media’s often obsessive preoccupation with the Muslim Brotherhood is merely an extension of the racist view of Arabs generally and, more specifically, of the Islamophobia generated by the ‘war on terror’.

In reality, the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the largest organised opposition in Egypt, is a conservative force that has contradictory pulls. The top of the organisation is dominated by businessmen and middle class professionals who want a halt to the process of the revolution and certainly do not support strike action.

At the base are the poorer and working class people were engaged in the revolution directly in Tahrir Square, bringing with them organisational strength (particularly when Mubarak sent in his thugs in an attempt to break the revolution) and are presently, as we witnessed first hand, participating in the formation of the independent unions and organising strikes.

Where Next?

While we cannot lose sight of the other struggles across the region — Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and other countries, as well as the continuing struggle for Palestinian freedom — Egypt is at the axis of the Arab world.

It has the biggest population, the largest industrial economy, and a deep tradition of industrial, political struggle and resistance to colonialism and imperialism. Egypt holds the keys to unlocking the doors to freedom for the entire region. This is what makes Egypt so important for us all.

One hundred days since the fall of Mubarak there is much to celebrate. However, there is still much to do. Each revolution has its “spring-time” when everybody is united and together against the common enemy. The vast majority of Egyptians were united in the struggle focused that focussed on Tahrir Square in central Cairo, the capital of Egypt.

However, now that Mubarak has gone, the fundamental problems of equality, social justice and freedom remain. Furthermore, the army — which is not just an integral institution of the Egyptian state but is also a key stakeholder in the economy and an employer — remains intact. The question arises: How do we go forward with the revolution?

The differentiation taking place in Egypt is now between those who argue, “Go back to your homes and daily life and wait for the upcoming elections and let the transition to democracy take its course” and those who say, “The fall of Mubarak was just the first phase of the revolution. We must now organise to connect our struggles, move the revolution forward and win our demands

to rid the workplaces of the ‘little Mubarak’s, for better wages, conditions, and the plight of the poor”.

This second approach is the one taken by the new independent trade unions that requires the fullest support and solidarity among British trade unionists. These new independent unions recognise that standing still is not an option and must press ahead in their struggle if they are to preserve the gains made thus far — let alone win further economic and social demands. Among trade unionists, here again, there is a debate: “How best to organise to go forward?”

On the one hand you have some who are more conciliatory and want to have closer organisational links with unions internationally to draw on our “expertise”. We must ask, “Do we really want to project an image of our type of union organisation as a model, warts and all (and lets be honest – there are a lot of warts!) on the new independent unions in Egypt?”

Rather than tell them how it is done, can we learn from them and begin to address our own shortcomings, enhancing our struggles and structures, our self-activity and independence.

Debate

Many Egyptian trade-unionists want solidarity, but on terms of the self-activity of their members and complete independence. They do not want bureaucratisation and dependency on the international union federations.

This is a regional struggle with global implications. Imagine linking the revolutionary struggles for freedom and social justice in the Middle East and North Africa with the struggles against austerity in Greece, Italy and Spain where general strikes and massive protests have rocked the ruling elites.

These struggles, at root, are our struggles — they are all sourced in the crisis of an exploitative world system. Our task is to offer solidarity to those fighting back and deepen that struggle, while organising our own fight at home.

Our task is to offer a vision of the world if we, as workers, peasants, the poor and oppressed rose up and ran our lives for ourselves. Imagine that — the mass majority running society in the interests of the mass majority.

There is no such thing as “we” in any country. Across the world there is only “us” and “them”. We produce the wealth in society and “they” profit from the fruits of our labour.

As the great poet and socialist Bertolt Brecht wrote: “Those who eat their full, speak to the hungry about the wonderful times to come. Those who lead the country into the abyss, call ruling too difficult for ordinary men.”

This section of the report was provided by a first hand account of the ongoing Egyptian Revolution by the RMT delegation to Cairo. We travelled to Egypt to join the celebrations of the first MayDay after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The delegation was tasked to make contact with trade unionists across industries, to learn about their struggles and their progress in forming and building new Independent Trade Unions. ■

*The London Transport Regional RMT delegation to Egypt: **Unjum Mirza**, Political Officer LTRC; **Paul Jackson**, Branch Secretary, LU Engineering; **Kieran Crowe**, Fleet Branch. We would be happy to offer a personal report to your branch or any special meetings. To make arrangements please contact Unjum on: 07958 124 225 or email: unjummirza@yahoo.co.uk*

Transport workers launch new rank-and-file union

by **Kieran Crowe**
RMT Fleet Branch

CAIRO is a bustling city of millions with a massive transport system. Tens of thousands of people work on its buses, the metro, trams, railway, haulage and taxis. As has happened the world over, the humble conditions of the workforce have been squeezed by the international drive by capitalism to neo-liberalism.

Former dictator Hosni Mubarak used repression to prevent the workers from doing anything about it. Egyptian Transport workers had to join a state-run Transport Union that just delivered management policy.

Rank-and-file bus workers in the capital Cairo first began to act independently of the state union in 2009 and, despite the state ruling these strikes illegal, the workers got solid action at the majority of city’s eleven bus garages and disrupted an estimated 20 million journeys.

Their key demands over pay and conditions built the confidence of the busworkers. When the 25 January Revolution broke out, the widely-respected Independent Tax Collectors Union called on other workers to join with them in forming a fully independent union federation, and going on all-out general strike to demand the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The bus workers enthusiastically answered the call.

With his regime collapsing around him, Mubarak attempted to harden up pro-regime demonstrations by enforcing a “bosses shutdown” of work and industry. Pro-Mubarak demonstrations, in the event, were a washout. As the government then tried to bring businesses back to work, the new Public Transport Authority Workers Union (PTAWU) launched its all-out strike and joined in with the protesters on the streets.

Transport ground to a halt once again in Cairo and many workers, who couldn’t go to their jobs even if they wanted to, used the opportunity to go and join demonstrations. Three days later, to rapturous applause, Mubarak’s ousting was announced.

In the week after Mubarak fell, the bus drivers decided to take strike action again. Like their comrades in the other new unions, they were now confident to move on to making more ambitious demands.

Key demands of transport workers

- An end to Egypt’s colonial-era wage structure, with a new minimum wage of £200 a month and, more radically, a maximum wages for management;
 - Permanent contracts and reinstatement of victimised workers;
 - Renationalisation of sections that had been privatised since the late 1970s;
 - The removal of “Little Mubarak” managers: from the garage level, all the way up to the government ministries.
- Activists say their present structure is temporary and are waiting for a founding conference. They have been trying to learn from successful models of union organisation used by other workers.
- It has an autonomous committee at each garage (garages can take individual strike action), and represents all grades in the industry (drivers ticket collectors, engineers and other staff, like medics) who have come together because it is the best way to win.

Overall leadership will come from a general committee of recallable delegates from the garage committees and PTAWU are adamant they are building and running their union from the bottom up and does not want external direction or funding.

Now that the revolution has moved into a more polarised



Murals in Cairo celebrate Muslim-Christian unity in the 25 January Revolution

struggle over social questions, the ruling military junta are having to play a cunning game to try and push back the revolution.

One result has been contradictory moves over labour law. They imprisoned the former Minister of Labour for her role in organising gang violence against the Tahrir Square protests, and allowed the independent unions to legally register themselves with the government, which are big gains. At the same time they have passed new laws to ban strikes and demonstrations.

As a test case for this, Ali Fattouh, founding president of PTAWU, was charged with the new crime of “incitement to strike”. This was a clear attack on the union, but also recognition of how powerful it potentially is. The union called a strike in defence of its leader, forcing the state to drop all the charges.

As one bus driver I spoke to put it: “We don’t take the strike laws at face value in Egypt.” Strikes have been effectively illegal since 1957. The old union, whose leadership has been banned from joining PTAWU, is another factor trying to reverse the revolution. They have responded to Mubarak’s fall by trying to reposition themselves as a “moderate alternative” and have tried to secure “sweetheart deals” with management.

On the day before we left Egypt, we saw first-hand the effects of the union’s fourth full strike, in defence of Ali Fattouh, the head of the transport union. The strike brought the city’s traffic to a halt. The drivers have become a key part of the leadership of Egypt’s new unionism and the revolutionary movement.

● *Ali Fattouh’s trial took place on 4 June. As an act of solidarity, the **Middle East & North Africa Solidarity Campaign (MENA)** organised a petition to the Egyptian embassy, calling on the new government to end its criminalisation of the unions. Over 400 leading trade unionists signed, including the general secretaries of the RMT, PCS and NUJ, as well as MPs Katy Clark and John McDonnell. **Ali was found not guilty.***

We received the following statement from his lawyer, Haitham Muhammadiyah: “On behalf of the Public Transport Authority Workers Union I’d like to express our thanks to the RMT and other UK trade unions who sent Ali Fattouh messages of support. This solidarity is very important to us, as although Ali was found not guilty by the court, we know that this case was a clear attack on the leadership of the independent unions.

“It is part of a wider campaign through the legislation against strikes and protests and the arrests and harassment of trade unionists which we are witnessing now. The same day Ali was found ‘not guilty’ five colleagues from the Health Technicians Union were arrested and are facing a trial in a military court. We still need your solidarity.”

MayDay in Tahrir Square – beware camels!

by **Paul Jackson**

Branch Secretary, LU Engineering RMT

I WAS invited as a delegate of the LT Regional Council to go and meet trade unionists in Cairo, Egypt. Initially I was as enthusiastic as a poodle on a hot plate. But I relented. We flew out on the Thursday and arrived at what looked like a total dump. Luckily, once up the decrepit stair case, the hotel itself was actually OK.

The Friday was time to roll-up our sleeves and get down to the hard work. This was the bit I was not looking forward too. The next three days would have become something of a blur except for the brilliant help of our interpreter, Anne Alexander who organised and translated incessantly for the whole time (she not only did English to Arabic, but cockney to English). We met many organisations and trade unionists.

The first trade unionist we met was Kamal Abu Aita, president of the Property Tax Inspectors Union (RETAU). This was an incredible man who told the story of how he had organised independent strike action in 2007 under the Mubarak regime.

In Egypt, tax is collected door to door. They are actively told not to collect from the rich so the burden falls on the poor — much like here. Their pay goes below being poor to being abysmal. These people went on strike and held a “sit in” by their government offices. This lasted many days, with popular support being given to them by local people.

The state trade union tried to get them back to work, however, they refused and eventually the government gave in to their demands. The new aspect of this strike was not only the independence but also how this was democratically decided and run by the rank and file as opposed to the “state unions”. This took place before the revolution and was key to showing other workers how to organise.

Transport workers

We met a few transport workers, mainly due to our rail background. We initially met them down a Cairo back street, late into the night. The danger of this meeting was that it becomes a busman’s holiday and we all ended up getting into the “anorak” mode.

The rail workers were in the process of forming their own union. They were suffering the same injustices that were faced, except, we get sacked and they get shot — a small but important

difference. A lot of their fights surrounded safety and blame.

Their technology was ancient (non-signalled areas) and when things went wrong, their members would end in court. They organised their structure around strike committees which then elected a delegate to an “executive” strike committee.

Which is an interesting way of looking at organising, a strike committee to organise strikes with the power to make democratic decisions!

We also met union leader Ali Fattouh and his solicitor, Haitham. Ali was being tried as a test case for the new anti-trade union laws that had been brought in “after” the revolution.

The charge against him was one of inciting strike action in the bus industry. As strikes are illegal, his case is important in the context of further struggle for freedom and justice. The state are throwing their weight to crush the new organisations being created. Ali faced seven years in prison if found guilty.

His main tactic seemed to be a mass demonstration at the court. His solicitor felt that if they had enough people, they would force an adjournment. This in many ways is taking the idea of justice out of the legislature and making it the property of the people. *Incidentally, many activists are being accused of being “Israeli agents” or “pawns of the west”. Support is fine, but it has to be given in a way as not to undermine those your aim to help.*

MayDay in Tahrir

This was the main reason we were there. There were some differences in estimated figures (10,000 to two million) and whether it would pass off peacefully (riot police on strike ensured it was peaceful). This was more of a rally where people came and went.

There was a great oratory section from the solicitors (can’t imagine Thompson’s doing rhythmic chanting). We had the RMT flags out and that caused many people to start talking and finding out whilst we were there. Police informers aside, it was very interesting to talk to people and hear their views.

Mothers of the Martyrs

Probably the most poignant moment of the visit. There were many mothers carrying bill boards of children who were killed during the revolution. One mother explained her son was shot twice in the back while in a prison cell. Words fail me, as

A message of thanks for our Egyptian colleagues

BETWEEN 28 April and 3 May 2011 a delegation of trade unionists from Britain visited Egypt to meet activists building independent unions.

The delegation was facilitated by Solidarity with Middle East and North Africa (Mena) Workers Network, and included a delegation from RMT London Region, and members of PCS, CWU, NUT and UCU unions.

This report records some of the discussions we had during that short visit, and highlights the challenges that trade unionists are facing in Egypt as they attempt to rebuild independent workers’ organisations.

The delegation members would like to thank all our Egyptian colleagues who gave up their precious time to meet us, in particular **Kamal Abu Aita**, **Noha Mohamed Murshid** and colleagues from the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU), **Ahmed el-Sayyed** and **Alaa al-Batawy** and colleagues from the Egyptian Health Technologists Syndicate; **Ali Fattouh** and **Mohamed Abd-al-Sattar** from the Independent Public Transport Authority Union; **Ramadan Mohamed** and colleagues from Al-Wasta Independent Rail Workers’ Union; **Abdul Hafiz al-Tayyil** and colleagues from the Independent School Teachers’ Union;

Hala Kamal from 9th March Movement for the Independence of the Universities; **Mohamed Shafiq** from the Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital Workers’ Union; and **Haitham Muhammadain**, **Hisham Fouad** and **Kamal Khalil** from the Democratic Workers’ Party. Many thanks to **Simon Assaf** (assafsimon@hotmail.com) for help in preparing this document.

Unjum Mirza, **Paul Jackson** and **Kieran Crowe** (RMT London Region), **Nick Grant** (NUT); **Anna Owens** and **Andy Lawson** (PCS); **Simon Midgley** (CWU); **Dalia Mostafa** and **Anne Alexander** (UCU)



British trade unionist celebrate MayDay in Tahrir Square, the birthplace of the revolution

none suffice. They wanted the world to know their children were murdered, so I honour their memory.

Voting out the boss

One hospital in Cairo voted out the boss. They then took control of running it. Great, worker control, direct action... Unfortunately, the payrolls was centrally done, so they elected a new “boss” so they could get their pay slips signed off! I like the idea of union members electing their own boss, I suppose its like the Council of Executives Elections really.

Traffic and camels!

Cairo traffic is the work of the counter-revolution: shut eyes and walk! The camels are far as I am concerned are the work of the devil, and a tool of the counterrevolution. I was dismounted from one and gravity did what gravity does. Best to avoid.

Police

The streets are totally safe the community polices itself. A much better model than the fascists in our police forces.

Conclusion

Our trade unions need to reach out and help the unions in Egypt in ways they want — not how we think they should be helped. Foreign interference must be avoided at all costs. The situation regards to unions is very fluid with more forming every day.

However, the state ones are discredited and are part of the problem. Many of these serve the state and not its members, they are there to calm rather than fight. We need to reach out and carry on learning from our Egyptian sisters and brothers, but for now it must be at a distance. ■

‘This is why we need a rail union’

Railworkers from Bani Sueif, south of Cairo, speak out at the founding conference of their independent union on 4 May 2011.

Ramadan Mohamed-Ali Abdel Maguid

Train driver, Wasta

“Independent unions are formed by revolutionaries because they are about freedom, preventing corruption, and protecting rights. No satellite TV stations or newspapers can help, you have to get your own rights by working with your colleagues.”

Mohammed Saber-Ahmed Abdel Tawab

Engineering department, Bani Sueif

“We are 70,000 railway workers, and the old union takes 2 pounds (20p) from each of us monthly. Where does that money go? Nobody defends us. “Who will do that? The head of the

old union won’t do that because he stands with the president of the Railway Authority.”

Mohammed Kamel Gomaa

Conductor, Wasta

“Our independent union will represent all groups and types of workers. So when they all stand together, this union will demand everyone’s rights and not a specific person’s or group’s.”

Mohammed Salama Owais

Tower Controller for Traffic, Wasta

“In Tahrir Square, some people spoke about independent unions. I met Mohammed Abu Youssef, who is a member of the Public Transport Authority Workers’ Union. He and other people told me about independent unions.”

Interviews by Philip Rizk. Translated by MennatAllah Gaafar.

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- For details of campaigns go to menasolidaritynetwork.com
- We are happy to forward messages of support to colleagues in the Egyptian independent union federation. Please email the message to menasolidarity@gmail.com
- Invite a speaker from MENA Solidarity Network to your union branch. Contact Andy on 07703 058770, email menasolidarity@gmail.com
- Get your trades union branch to affiliate to MENA Solidarity Network. You can also order copies of this report from us. For details go to: menasolidaritynetwork.com



Trade unionists make speeches (clockwise) and chant slogans in Tahrir Square. Workers spell-out their demands. Graffiti for the revolution.



Families of the those killed in the revolution demand justice for their loved ones in Tahrir Square



A sign in central Cairo says it all



Egyptian trade unionists in discussion



Andy Lawson and Anna Owens interview Noha Mohamed Murshid from RETAU



Military production workers

Egyptian and British trade unionists took part in discussions and conversations... well into the night



Activists from the Doctors' Union



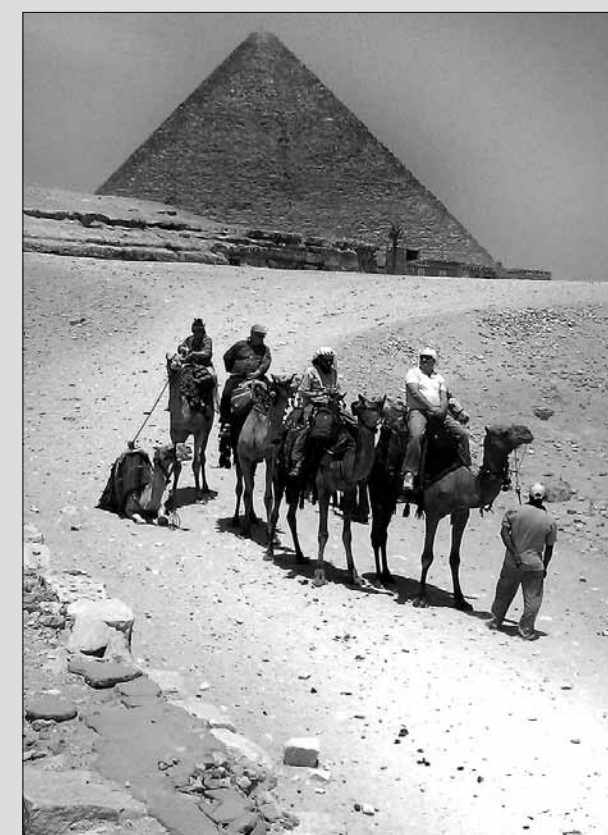
Transport union leader Ali Fattouh



RMT members discuss the finer points of signalling systems with colleagues from the Egyptian rail union



Five go to the Pyramids. The delegation visits Giza, outside Cairo. But even here they could not escape the attentions of counter-revolutionary camels. (Many thanks to Charlie Kimber and the delegates for use of their pictures)



How tax collectors built a new union

by **Anna Owens**
PCS civil service workers union

IT WAS a humbling experience to meet Egyptian revolutionaries and look into the faces of those who will have been beaten, imprisoned and victimised, but who never gave up fighting against the regime of Husni Mubarak.

We met delegations of health workers, transport workers and military workers. But the one that impressed me the most was Kamal Abu Aita — and it wasn't because he's from my profession, tax collecting. It was because here was a man who was 58 years old, had been in prison 18 times and still spoke with the fiery spirit of someone who had just come alive.

Kamal is the president of the tax collectors union. When we were introduced to him, Kamal said: “Welcome to the Egyptian revolution. We used to be part of the empire where the sun never set. Egypt had the first documented strike in human history when over 3,000 years ago the workers who built the pyramids went on strike for better wages. The struggle has never stopped since. We have fought colonialism, imperialism and have continued the struggle for workers rights.”

Kamal is a life long political activist. He became involved in politics as a student in the 1970s and over the years has campaigned for peasants' rights and prisoners of conscience.

Kamal tried to get a job as a teacher but was turned down for security reasons. In 1979 a friend told him that there were jobs in the tax department. In those days tax officials were hated because they only taxed the poor and the peasantry. His job was dangerous as property tax collectors collected the money in cash and therefore were prone to getting robbed.

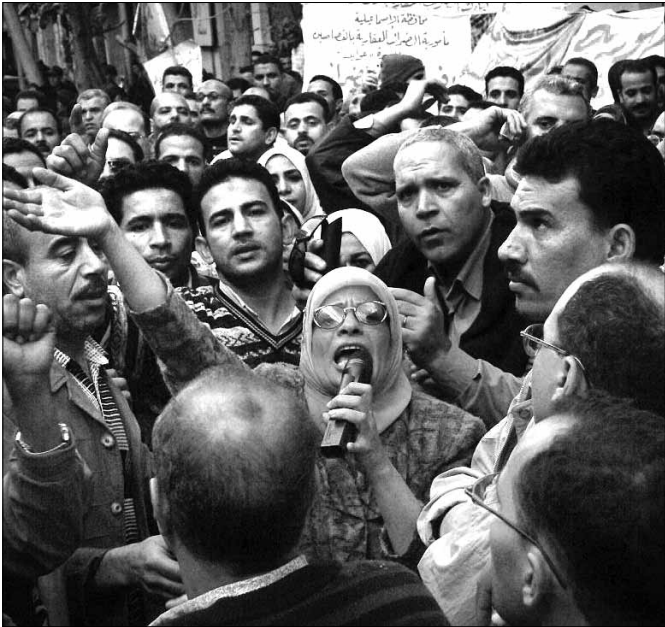
In 1974 the regime disbanded the independent property tax collectors union because they attempted to collect the property tax off the mother of the then Minister of Finance. A new law was introduced which made property tax collectors employees of the council, rather than of central government. As a result, the wages and the terms and conditions of these 55,000 employees began to crumble.

Ballot rigging

In 1982 Kamal was instrumental in setting up a new union for the tax collectors and became its president for the next 25 years. In 2006 he was deposed following ballot rigging. This however, allowed him to do to more grassroots campaigning, and in 2007 an event took place which would lead to one of the most momentous events to come out of the Egyptian revolution.

One of the duties of tax collectors was to collect the tax from sanitation fees, this earned them commission. Mubarak took away this role, and although the money they made from this work was tiny, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. These workers were now earning a quarter of what their fellow tax workers were earning — salaries of 300 Egyptian pounds a month, equivalent to about £30.

Kamal and his comrades contacted tax collectors across the country and suggested they hold a sit-in outside the cabinet offices in central Cairo. Some of these tax collectors were influenced by growing militancy among textile workers that was triggered by a sit-in of 500 women workers over the withdrawal



Tax collectors discuss strike tactics during their sit-in in Cairo
(picture: baheyya.blogspot.com)

of bonuses. This militancy spread to encompass some 20,000 textile workers.

The first sit-in of the tax collectors was held on the 2 May 2010 and gradually more sit-ins were organised. By October and November 2010 — the busiest time of year for tax collectors — 15 out of the 27 provinces staged sit-ins and the state lost over 80 percent of its property tax revenues that year.

The government would not budge so they decided to take their action straight to the ministry of finance. On the 3 December around 5,000 of them descended on the ministry of finance and began their protest. Security tried to move them with water cannon but instead the men and women sat on the pavement and the 11 day sit in began.

This was the first time that tax inspectors had taken strike action, the first time that a strike had taken place in the street and the first time that men and women had come together like this.

Their sit-in lasted 11 days, they were surrounded by the police, slept in tents and survived because of the of food and drink they received from the local community.

On day seven the minister of security came to them and shouted through a megaphone that people were sick of them and that they should go home. When the local community heard this they brought even more food shouting, “We love you, we respect you”.

The Minister of Finance then met with delegates and said he would negotiate with them if they called off their strike. Some of the delegates wanted to do this, but Kamal said no. He argued that they have to bring all decisions back to the strikers otherwise they could divide the union, and then some of them could be victimised.

Struggle for recognition

Kamal and his team went back to the strikers and said it was like Sparta, he told them to line up either side to show if they agreed with the proposal or not. In the event only one man agreed to accept, and when they asked him later on why he did, he said he didn't understand what was going on!

Then on day 11 the minister of finance and the state security asked to meet with Kamal and the rest of the negotiators. Kamal said he wasn't scared because there was an army of strikers behind him, so instead of arresting him, in front of the media,

they offered a huge pay rise. These tax collectors are now on the same pay as their fellow tax collectors who work for directly for central government.

At the end of 2007 the media carried out a survey and Kamal was voted the most popular person of that year, and the tax collectors strike was voted the most popular event. Kamal said that the model used for the strike became the model for the revolution, as people descended onto Tahrir Square and wouldn't leave until Mubarak had gone.

It was also during the revolutionary sit down in Tahrir Square that on day 5, the tax collectors announced in the Square that they were setting up the first independent trade union.

Now that is the story of the tax collectors and all sorts of workers are now following their lead and setting up their own independent trade unions. However as Kamal said, the tax collectors model is unique as they took strike action and then they set up their trade union, whereas other workers have set up the trade union first and then talk about taking strike action.

Tactics

We met some doctors who were debating what sort of action they should take now that their union had been set up. Should they go all out or test the water with a one day strike first, they then turned round and asked our delegation what they should do and our delegation, in classic fashion, said, “It depends on the concentration of forces, the confidence of the members.”

We met another group of health workers and they were asking how trade union subs are deducted in Britain, do reps get facility time, how do we negotiate with management.

These were some of the basic questions that we had to deal with as these workers had only ever known the official corrupt Egyptian trade union, and were now trying to create new democratic unions free of corruption.

In mid February 40 strike leaders from a range of industries met to coordinate demands and to launch an independent trade union movement under the slogan “Revolution, freedom and social justice”.

They presented a workers programme with some of the demands calling for:

- Rise the minimum wage, and the maximum wage no more than 15 times the minimum.
- The freedom to organise independent trade unions and to demonstrate.
- Permanent contracts for all workers.
- Renationalisation of all privatised industries.
- Dismissal of corrupt managers, a curb on the use of consultants, and control over prices.
- Health care as a necessary condition for increasing production.
- Dissolution of the official Egyptian trade union.

If even half of these demands are met, the new Egyptian trade unions will represent the most advanced trade union movement in the world.

An historic opportunity is developing in Egypt around workers' demands, and some are now trying to set up a new workers' party which has the ability to win a new generation of Egyptian workers.

We met one of the leaders of the Democratic Workers Party. He said that one of the problems with setting the new party up is that people are wary of parties because of their previous experience. One of his roles was to convince them that it was not the idea of the party that is the problem, it is the corruption of the party system under the Mubarak regime that has made people cynical. ■



by **Kamal Abu Aita**
President of RETAU tax collectors' union
BEFORE the revolution our members were low paid because of corruption in the system — the property tax was controlled by local councils, not the Ministry of Finance. Consciousness was low amongst most property tax workers. Property tax collectors organised a committee inside the official union and fought for their rights for 25 years.

The years of petitions, protesting and organising didn't win negotiating rights, only the right to negotiate with the state backed trade union officials who were working against us. We faced state security repression. As a last resort, in 2007 we organised strike committees in 27 provinces across Egypt and set a date for a strike. On 3 December 2007 colleagues from all over Egypt gathered, all with different cultures and dialects. They took over the street outside the ministerial cabinet in Central Cairo. Men and women slept alongside each other during the sit-in.

This caused a huge crisis for officials, who moved their cabinet meetings 40km away so they couldn't hear the chanting from the strikers. But they couldn't avoid their voices. We were on the street for 11 days. This required a huge operation. Women activists organised to feed the strikers.

On day seven a state security official asked representatives of the strikers to negotiate with the Minister of Finance. But their concessions were not enough, they offered talks but only if we called off the strikes. We refused and said we would take the offer back to the strikers for a vote.

We put off this vote until all strike committees nationally had been consulted. We voted to continue the strike and called out more people. Bigger delegations arrived from the provinces.

The families of strikers also began to join the sit-in. State security mobilised to stop the delegations from arriving. This was happening during the Eid (Muslim holiday). So at the same time, people also collected presents for the children.

We met on the 11th day of the strike we began to organise food and other necessities. Our sit-in was surrounded by police. We knew this would be a long struggle. Then state security again asked for negotiations — this time we were not afraid because of our mobilisation. We demanded the minister meet us in a cafe next to the sit-in.

We negotiated until dawn and won all of our demands. The government paid for everyone's costs to return to their homes. We won a 347 percent pay rise — since then, this has risen to a further 600 percent. We discussed the future of the strike committees and agreed to turn them into an industrial union — one born out of a strike. We changed from being some of the most hated people in Egypt to some of the best loved. We are now seen as a model for organising, with the ruling class divided on how to respond to us.

Revolution

This strike took place under the shadow of dictatorship and with the absence of organisation. The same was true in the struggle for independent unions among teachers and health technicians. The strikers showed people they could change things. When the masses moved, it was with organised forces behind a democratic people. Our victories were a pre-cursor to the revolution.

We suffered during the 25 January revolution. We had martyrs, including the son of a colleague. Meanwhile the official unions conspired to defend the dictator Husni Mubarak. They organised thugs to break up protests on 25 January (the first day of the revolution). On the fifth day of the revolution we announced the formation of the Independent Union Federation and called for a general strike in defence of the revolution — a crucial step.

The independent unions are now legal, but the state is trying to put its mark on rights that we won. Since the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood (the largest opposition movement under Mubarak) has taken a different role. They play a very small role in the unions — there is little sympathy for their programme. Some strikes have taken place in factories owned by Brotherhood members.

Prior to the revolution, they were the most potent and attractive oppositional force. They used to win a majority of seats in student union elections, now they have only 8 to 12 percent, this is despite their student organisation being their strongest section. The Brotherhood is now brought out to defend the new regime. We need to build from below to win in the upcoming elections. ■

All to play for in Egyptian education

by **Nick Grant**

Secretary Ealing NUT

THE Egyptian classroom can be a daunting place for teachers as well as learners. Some 63 percent of Egyptian schools have class sizes of at least 45 pupils. In rural schools this can be as high as 60 pupils, while in the poor urban neighbourhoods it can reach 90 pupils per classroom.

One teacher working in Giza, a suburb of Cairo, admitted that he could never learn all the names of his students because there can be 120 pupils crammed into a classroom. When asked if he ever resorted to physical punishment, he awkwardly replied that, “There are a lot of reasons for violence in Egypt.” The teacher told me his job was similar to that of a prison guard.

Gamal Abdul Nasser, the leader of Egypt’s first revolution in 1952, created an education system that aimed to provide primary schooling for children from the ages of 6 to 11; preparatory schools from 12-16; and high schools for 16-19 year olds. A typical school day started at 8am and ended at 1pm. Only about 7 percent of children slipped through the net, often ending up living the feral life of a street urchin.

But the education reforms Nasser introduced were hampered by scant resources, while learning was by rote according to an archaic national curriculum. Education was, along with all Egyptian society, crippled by corruption, low pay and under investment. Despite the celebration of the “Facebook revolution”, computers in schools are rare, and the drop-out rates for post-11 is high, especially for girls.

A state sector graduate teacher in their first year earns around £30 a month. While in the private sector — around 20 percent of schools — teachers are expected to earn their income by offering out-of-hours tuition.

Apology

The Mubarak-era Syndicate for Education Professionals (SEP) — which is funded through compulsory subscriptions from almost one million teachers — recently apologised for the crisis in education. Now it is facing new challenge from the recently formed Independent School Teachers Trade Union (ISTTU) — which has mushroomed to 40,000 members during the revolution — and the smaller General Union of Egyptian Teachers (GUET).

One of the ISTTU officers told me that, “We recently received recognition from Education International (EI) and clearance from the Egyptian Ministry of Labour to open a bank account and set up an official office.” (EI is the global federation of teacher unions.)

Local groups are composed of three or four members in schools. These form the basic autonomous organisational unit for union.

The GUET says that its constitution is more transparent, and more independent from both Mubarak-era stooges and “foreign interests.” The union campaigns for a £120 per month minimum wage, an end to private tuition as a means of subsistence, greater professional development, and maximum class sizes of 30.

Both unions empower the predominantly young, and female, voices for change that emerged during the 25 January revolution.



Many poor Egyptians live in the shadow of wealth

And both want to cleanse management and administration in all provinces from corruption associated with the official SEP syndicate.

This new wave of union activism has spread to the universities. The “March 9 Movement” campaign for academic freedom staged a number of campus protests calling for the dismissal of the rectors in all of Egypt’s universities. This political demand has taken precedence over a pay claim — which has been shelved until Mubarak’s placemen are gone. Staff want to provide a relevant university curriculum, and want to do so with financial and professional dignity.

The message we received from the young Egyptian education unions is that UK trade unions should be doing all they can to show practical solidarity. Union activists are adamant that they do not want financial aid, what they want is to share in our rich experience in organisation, representation, policy and training.

● *UK delegates met a broad spectrum of the new political and labour movement organisations that is emerging to harness the momentum of protest unleashed by the 25 January Revolution. During our trip we joined a Mayday crowd in Tahrir Square of around 20,000 supporters of the new independent trade union movement. Workers in transport, health, civil service, education, textiles and docks are planning action to oust Mubarak cronies, end corruption, improve pay and democratise services.*

From Tahrir to the campus

by **Dalia Mostafa**

University of Manchester and UCU

‘MY union, the UCU, invited a lecturer and activist from the English Literature Department in the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, Hala Kamal, to speak at our annual congress at the end of May, and so I went to meet her in Cairo.

Hala is an activist with the 9th March Movement for the Independence of the Universities, a campaigning group of academics which existed for several years before the revolution to defend freedom of speech on campus, the rights of faculty members to better pay, for a better education for students, and for higher quality academic research..

Hala invited me to attend one of the meetings which academics in the Faculty of Arts had organised to plan their campaign for elections to the Deanship of the Faculty. She wanted this to be an opportunity to share experiences, so that I could see firsthand what some of the issues



Students played an important role in the revolution, now the struggle has moved to the campus.

colleagues in Cairo University are facing.

Egyptian universities have all seen tremendous changes since the revolution. The university presidents, Deans of Faculties and Vice-Deans were appointed or vetted by the old ruling party and state security apparatus.

So when the revolution happened, academics immediately began asking “how can we change things in the university?”

In many universities, protests by students and staff forced the old Deans to step down.

In the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, the Dean was due to retire in July, so the academics began a big campaign for an election to find his successor. In the meeting I attended, activists were discussing next steps in the campaign.

The old dean tried every means he could to stop them. He had agreed to the idea of conducting a survey of academic staff asking if they wanted to hold an election, expecting that few would bother to vote for the idea, but the result was an overwhelming ‘yes’.

In June the election finally took place, and Professor Randa Abou-Bakr, an activist with the 9th March Movement was elected. She is the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts ever, and the first elected dean in two decades. The university administration has tried to block her appointment, but lecturers are confident they will win.

Other issues which will be crucial for academics in the near future include pay and conditions at work. Currently university lecturers’ pay is very low.

Another important struggle will be around supporting students. Lecturers are expecting a big wave of student activism in the autumn around issues such as reducing tuition fees, the price of books, better services on campus, and the right to protest. ■

A question of communication

by **Simon Midgley**

CWU Bradford & District

WE met colleagues from the Egyptian Health Technologists Syndicate, a union of 25,000 members, representing health service professionals such as radiographers and anaesthetists.

Their union was demanding that the government should fund the professional training and education that was required for them to do their jobs. Reps were drawing up a detailed plan of how the state should provide this funding, which would be presented to the Minister of Health. If the minister did not agree to their demands national strike action might be the next step.

We joined union reps from 20 provinces across Egypt for a two-hour discussion. They wanted answers to fundamental questions which we rarely ask ourselves. How do people get to join your unions? How do you make sure that you get collect the money from your members? When you are doing union work, do you have to do your normal job as well?

They were interested in union democracy: ‘Who decides how trade union leaders are chosen?’ and ‘How much are they paid?’ This led us to point out that, in our view, the leaders of our trade unions were often paid too much and were as a consequence cushioned from the daily

reality of life for ordinary members.

We had a lengthy discussion on whether it is possible or desirable for politics and trade union issues to be kept in separate spheres.

External interference and control of trade unions in Egypt had left a bad taste in the mouth of many activists.

We highlighted some of the issues we felt were problems within the British union movement, such as the close links between the Labour Party and some union leaders which often weakened the union response to attacks on workers, particularly under Labour governments.

The union leaders are elected by the members, but these leaders occupy a position between the workers and the employers, negotiating compromise deals between the two.

Questions

As left-wing union activists, we advocate a ‘rank and file’ approach to organising in order to mobilise the membership, and make sure the leaders are accountable to the membership.

Our Egyptian colleagues had seen news reports of the TUC demonstration on 26 March. ‘How did you build this demonstration?’ they asked. I explained the whole lengthy process. There were a few frowning faces around the table, and one of the lead negotiators asked: ‘How long did that take?’ I hesitated a little, and then replied: ‘About six months.’

There was a pause, and then, with the universal gesture of putting a telephone to his ear, the rep replied: ‘It would take us three days by phone.’

Full report go to menasolidaritynetwork.com

MENA Solidarity Network

Solidarity with workers in the Middle East and North Africa



Solidarity with MENA Workers Network

We are a network of activists from different unions in the UK engaged in building solidarity links with workers in the Middle East and North Africa in support of their struggle for social justice and workers’ rights.

Founding statement

We celebrate the heroic struggles of workers in Middle East and North Africa (Mena) who have played a vital role in bringing down tyrants across the region. We support their continuing battles for genuine democracy and social justice.

We agree to help their campaigns for the right to strike and other basic social and democratic rights, for unions free from state control, and for well-paid and secure jobs.

Supporting organisations include: RMT London Region, Cambridgeshire Trades Council, Manchester TUC and the UCU.

Get involved

To get involved, or find out more about solidarity work, please email: menasolidarity@gmail.com or visit menasolidaritynetwork.com

A democratic party for workers

by **Kamal Khalil**

Democratic Workers Party, Egypt

THERE has been a huge strike wave since December 2006 — it started in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra with the textile workers, then it spread to the tax collectors, rail workers and postal workers. Workers wanted a party to represent them and take up their demands. This could not happen before the revolution as the Political Parties Commission did not allow parties to be formed.

Workers played a leading role in the last days of the revolution. On 9 and 10 February there was a strike wave across Egypt. This helped the sit-ins taking place on the streets in the cities.

After 11 February when Mubarak stepped down we talked to workers about founding a party — we've recruited members and developed a programme. We approach workers and ask what they feel should be included in our programme. We have members in the public transport authority, the railway, textile workers and postal workers in Alexandria, Egypt's second city.

All those who work for a wage can join, as can peasants. It was initially proposed as the Workers and Peasants Party but had no peasants as members — it does now following peasant conferences. 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.

After we started to recruit members, the law required 1,000 members to form a party, and there was no ban on class-based parties. Two weeks later this was increased to 5,000 members (with a requirement for new parties to list their members in an advert in a daily paper at a cost of £50,000), and a ban placed on class-based parties. So we are in a struggle against the state over this, as parties are an expression of class interests. Our name is a challenge to the regime.

Barriers

We presented the papers of 1,000 members. Reaching 5,000 will take longer. We want to build a base from below — workers who join need to be committed to our programme. We are building out of mass struggles. We need to start from where workers are at — we can't impose ideas on them.

There is no ideological authority in the name of the party. But the programme talks about workers' power. In the interests of people, not of profit, opposed to neoliberal policies — a socialist programme.

We organise solidarity demonstrations between different workplaces. We campaign for the renationalisation of the Shabeena Company textile factories, where the workers have been on strike for the last two weeks. Delegations were taken to the factory, and a conference was held inside.

Then we held a big demonstration in the town 4km away, marched to the governorate building and took a delegation to negotiate. When the Mahalla workers joined the demonstration, the governor asked what they were doing there.

The Mahalla workers said what affects them, affects us — this is an example of workers' solidarity. The governor agreed to the demands, including the reinstatement of sacked workers — this was witnessed by the Mahalla workers. We

held a demonstration in the street afterwards. The workers from the factory joined the party. We have discussed our programme with them. This is a model.

There are three leftist parties in Egypt. Two of them are from the old left — they are mostly made up of old people with a long history. Most in the Democratic Workers Party are workers, with a few old activists. Many of our members came from the 2006 strike wave. The constitution of the new party requires at least 70 percent of the leadership to be workers. We want intellectuals, students, doctors, to join but they must support our programme. We are organising in the provinces and governorates and in the working class neighbourhoods in Cairo. We are in contact with many workers' groups. We're meeting them and asking them to add to our programme — trying to link up the groups.

We are building the base of the party. One of the problems we face is the current ban on strikes and demonstrations. This law must be ignored. Another problem is that we don't have the £50,000 to pay for an advert in the national press, and if we did we'd spend it on our own newspaper — so we and others are fighting this law.

Elections

We do not know what voting system will be used for the election. We do not have "one person one vote". It looks like being a combination of electoral systems. Under first past-the-post, we will stand in some areas to explain our programme. If there is a list system, we will join a coalition with left/democratic parties.

We will build from the coming struggles. The revolution has led to rise in social struggles, and the state has taken steps. It only talks of reforming the wage system, and improving peasants' conditions, but this is not happening on the ground.

Our programme includes progressive taxation. Some other parties, including the social democrats, have elements of this. Most new parties are still forming and their programmes are unclear. The old parties are clearer, but played no role in the revolution. Large numbers of young people have only ever seen the old parties so are opposed to the idea of forming parties. We are trying to show the problem is not parties, it is being in alliance with the state.

Some 3,000 people have joined us to date. The new industrial unions have helped following the introduction of the Trade Union Freedom Law. It will take a long time to get the unions to affiliate. The most militant workers, include those in the Public Transport Authority have joined. We do not want the party to control the unions, we want to act and influence within them.

Neoliberal policies have destroyed cotton growing in Egypt. Before the introduction of neoliberal policies half the national workforce were involved in growing and the manufacture of cotton. The industry has all but collapsed. Here the bosses stand alongside the workers, as they have a shared interest in saving the industry.

There have been big strikes in five subsidiary companies in the Suez Canal, as their conditions are worse than those in the main Suez Canal Authority. Workers and peasants have different class interests but both are oppressed.

We are united at present by opposing neoliberal policies in action. We may require separate organisations in future. ■

