

Special
Trade Unions and the
30 June Rebel Campaign

STILL FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

How workers in Egypt and Tunisia are resisting
neo-liberalism, austerity and privatisation

MENA Solidarity

Introduction

In 2011, when revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt toppled dictators, British government ministers rushed to congratulate the Tunisian and Egyptian people on their democratic achievements.

Two years later, they are forcing an agenda of 'economic reforms' on the Arab world offering more of the failed neo-liberal policies of privatisation and austerity which are wrecking the lives of millions in Europe.

Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with the backing of Western governments, are demanding that Tunisia and Egypt deepen the same policies which helped to trigger the Arab revolutions in the first place.

They found willing partners in the Islamist governments which were elected in Tunisia and Egypt after the fall of dictators Ben Ali and Mubarak.

Yet the huge street protests and strikes which pushed the Egyptian military to remove the president of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, from power in July 2013, have shown the difficulty in implementing this agenda.

The backdrop to the demonstrations called by the 'Rebel' campaign, which gathered more than 20 million signatures on a statement calling for Morsi to resign, was a huge wave of strikes and protests over rising prices, power and water cuts, job cuts and factory closures.

This briefing gives an introduction to the social struggles which lie at the heart of the Arab Revolutions.

Turn to the inside back page for suggestions of ways you can join our campaign in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Arab world in the fight for bread, freedom and social justice.

MENA Background briefing: **Still fighting for bread, freedom and social justice.** *How workers in the Middle East are resisting neo-liberalism, austerity and privatisation.* By **Jonathan Maunder & Anne Alexander.**

● Website: menasolidaritynetwork.com ● Email: menasolidarity@gmail.com
● Facebook: www.facebook.com/MenaSolidarityNetwork ● Twitter: [@menasolidarity](https://twitter.com/menasolidarity)

Pictures: **Gigi Ibrahim** (www.flickr.com/photos/gigiibrahim)

Design by **Simon Assaf** (assafsimon@hotmail.com)

Neo-liberal policies stoked the fires of revolt

Despite the popular uprisings, workers across the Arab world are still fighting for the basic demands of the revolutions

In both Tunisia and Egypt, the neo-liberal policies of the pre-revolutionary period fuelled the social protests which stoked the fires of revolution.

Privatisation in Egypt threw hundreds of thousands out of work or into impoverished 'early retirement' after economic reforms adopted by the Mubarak regime in 1993.

Investment and development in Tunisia favoured the coastal regions but barely touched the central areas of the country, where unemployment was extremely high.

Cuts in public health and education services meant that people had to find extra cash to pay for a doctor for their kids, or after-school lessons to help them pass exams. There was galloping food-price inflation, even before the revolution, which sparked bread riots in Egypt in 2008.

The lightning rod for the Tunisian revolution was the death of Mohamed Bouazizi — a young man driven to suicide by economic hardship and state harassment.

The uprising which followed was for both democracy and social justice, and workers, through the national UGTT union, played a central role in bringing down the dictatorship of Ben Ali.

The Egyptian revolution was

triggered by the Tunisian example, but for years beforehand workers, for example in the giant textile factory of Mahalla al-Kubra, had been striking and protesting for better wages and conditions and for independent trade unions.

Since Mubarak was overthrown strikes by workers against privatisation and for social justice have spread like wildfire.

Egypt

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Western governments have pushing their agenda of savage attacks on the living standards of the poor in talks with the Egyptian government for more than a year now. With the economic situation worsening day by day,

Egyptian's leaders — whichever party or political current they represent — remain under enormous pressure to impose more of the policies which sparked the revolution of 2011.

Already, 40 percent of people in Egypt live on less than \$2US a day and prices of essential goods have already risen by 25 percent on average in the last year. Yet the IMF insisted on deep cuts to subsidies for fuel and bread — which millions of

ordinary people depend on — during negotiations with the government appointed by Islamist president Mohammed Morsi in 2012.

It is highly unlikely that they will change their policies when dealing with his successors.

These subsidies fund the public bakeries which produce the *baladi* bread — the staple food in Egypt, particularly for the poor.

A recent study showed that without the bread subsidies, the 2008 economic crisis would have pushed another 20-30 percent of Egyptians below the poverty line.

The fuel subsidy allows Egyptians to buy cooking gas at discounted rates. For millions of people this is what

allows them to cook hot food.

The IMF not only demanded cuts in subsidies but also the raising of regressive indirect taxes on cigarettes and other everyday goods.

The IMF also made the devaluation of the Egyptian pound against the US dollar a requirement of the loan, which would push up the cost of food and inflation further.

Workers are already fighting these attacks, which are a betrayal of the revolution's demand for 'Bread, Freedom and Social Justice'. Cairo bakers launched a series of strikes and protests against the subsidy cuts in March 2013.

The head of the IMF team pushing for the savage cuts is Masood Ahmed, who was director of policy at the UK's Department for International Development from 2003-2006.

That such a fervent neo-liberal headed up the UK government's global 'poverty reduction' department shows how keen the UK government is to impose neo-liberalism not just at home but also abroad.

Fighting back gets results — but living standards still slide

The IMF team negotiating the loan was horrified to find that Egypt's public sector wage bill has risen by around 80 percent since the revolution, and that 400,000 workers on temporary contracts have won permanent jobs, with another 400,000 permanent posts in the pipeline.

These gains are the result of a massive surge in workers' resistance: hundreds of strikes across the public sector in the past two years have demanded better pay and job security.

Stop privatisation: workers speak out

"We reject the government's intentions to move towards water privatisation. Water is a necessity of life, like the air we breathe. The former regime planned to fully privatise the water company, after creating a 'Holding Company' to ease the transition.

"But God blessed us with the Revolution of 25 January 2011, which allowed us to restore the people's property. ... However, raising and deregulating the price of water will be a heavy burden for people in the current economic circumstances, which are forcing the government to move towards privatisation."

Mohamed Hardan *Independent Union of Drinking Water Company Workers*



Egyptians queue for subsidized bread, April 2008.

Picture: James Buck

High price of bread

'There is a lot of corruption, and the whole system of bread production is failing. Of course, it is us the bakery workers and bread sellers who face the anger of our customers when the system goes wrong. They shout at us and a colleague was attacked with hammer.'

'I have a degree in Commerce, but as a divorced woman I've had no choice but to take this job, even though it doesn't pay enough to feed my two kids.'

'Our working conditions are really unsafe, particularly for women. We work in wooden kiosks in the street to distribute the bread from the public bakeries.'

'I end up taking money from my own pocket to repair the kiosk where I work.'

'We are trying to build an independent union and have around 60 members now. Our wages are very low, we get around 265 LE (£25) a month.'

'The old unions have done nothing for us, they worked hand-in-hand with the old regime and don't really represent workers' interests.'

'That's why we've set up our own union and joined the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions.'

Abeer Ashour, *President of the Union of Bread Sellers and Producers in Suez.*



30 June rebel puts Morsi on a dollar note

Rising tide of strikes and protests

According to a report by the International Development Centre (IDC) in Cairo, Egypt saw a record number of 9427 protests during Mohamed Morsi's first year in office. On average there were more than 1100 protests per month during the 2013, compared to 176 per month during 2010.

Just over 4,000 of these were strikes and protests by workers, and 67 percent of the total were driven by social and economic grievances. Egyptians adopted over 60 different methods of protest, among them are: strikes (1,013), sit-ins (811), marches (503), human chains (80), horn-blowing campaigns (21), non-payment campaigns and road-blocks.

Protests against Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government rose to a crescendo in June 2013, with the 'Rebel' signature campaign. Revolutionary activists collected some 20 million signatures on a statement withdrawing confidence from Morsi and calling for early elections.

Tunisia

The government led by the Islamist Ennahda Party in Tunisia is also set to implement neo-liberal measures after accepting an IMF loan.

The £1.19bn IMF loan will require tax rises and subsidy cuts. There will be a 1 percent levy in addition to taxes on the incomes of workers in the public sector. The cost of essentials such as fuel and milk has rocketed in the last year.

The European Union is adding to the pressure, demanding that the government liberalise Tunisian banks along the lines which have created the catastrophic economic crisis in the Eurozone.

Most of the Ben-Ali era laws restricting protests and strikes remain in place, and the government is increasingly willing to use them. Despite this, Tunisian workers are still fighting back.

There have been a number of regional general strikes and other strikes hitting specific sectors and industries. In January 2013 a general strike shook the northwestern governorate of El Kef, shutting down most business and industry. Groups of protesters attacked the main police station in the governorate. In January oil workers walked out on strike for three days in the Tataouine governorate.

Around the region

The feeling of workers' militancy inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt continues to spread across the Arab world. In Morocco

the '20th February' movement has been holding a number of big street protests demanding jobs, social justice and democracy.

In Lebanon thousands of teachers and civil servants were on indefinite strike in April.

Meanwhile there have been strikes and protests across the Gulf, ranging from the on-going struggle for democracy in Bahrain to the revolutionary upheavals in Yemen.

Sudan has also seen waves of protest over the past year. The regime of Omar al-Bashir has imposed sweeping cuts and privatisation schemes in a desperate attempt to deal with the financial crisis triggered by the separation of South Sudan in 2011 and the loss of most of the Khartoum government's oil revenues.

In June 2012 demonstrations by students against austerity measures sparked a wider protest movement which raised slogans echoing those of the revolutions in the Arab world: "Revolution is the choice of the people" and "the people want the downfall of the regime." ■

'Our revolution is about social justice'

'The Tunisian Revolution was a social uprising, and the process which started in November 2011 is continuing because the demands have not much been realized.

'The IMF is dictating economic policy and people are unhappy because there is no social justice, jobs or freedom. Some people think trade unions should keep out of politics but

we believe that trade unions must be involved in politics so we don't have another dictatorship and so that we can oppose the capitalists.

'Unity is needed to win the struggle against dictatorship and implement policies in favour of ordinary people.'

Mohamed Sghaier — UGTT, Kasserine region, Tunisia — was speaking at a meeting organised by MENA Solidarity Network at the World Social Forum in Tunisia on 27 March 2013.
Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com

*The Muslim Brotherhood government lost its legitimacy among workers and the poor, says union leader **Mohamed Ahmed Salem***

Discontent of 30 June rebels

Trade union activists took part in collecting signatures for the Rebel Campaign.

Before 30 June we also participated in public meetings for the campaign in the industrial heartlands of Tanta, Mahalla al-Kubra, Port Sa'id and Minya in Upper Egypt.

In Tanta we started our protests two days early, when a new governor from the Muslim Brotherhood was appointed. We went down into the streets to oppose his appointment and stayed there until 30 June.

Numbers started to build up on 25 June, until by 29 June there were about 10,000 in the streets besieging the provincial government buildings.

Like most Egyptians, we took part in the campaign in protest at the way that Morsi used the institution of the presidency in the interests of the Brotherhood alone, and not the interests of the people, and the workers in particular.

Just like under the old regime, his policies benefited businessmen and investors, not workers. We'd never seen so many workers lose their jobs, nor so many trade unionists victimised. Some trade unionists in Alexandria, Fayyoun and Assiyut were even sentenced to jail.

In Gharbiyya Province we suffered from the independent unions not gaining recognition from management.

A number of colleagues in the Rice

Mills Company and the Drinking Water Company were taken to court for their trade union activities.

But the major reason why there was a crisis between the Brotherhood and the workers was the party's failure to issue the law on trade union freedoms.

Last year the Military Council believed that delivering the country to the Brotherhood would avoid bloodshed. The army wanted to get away from political battles and return to its core role.

We are now facing a number of challenges. Firstly we want to see a new trade union law. Secondly the previous government failed to take back privatised companies where the courts decreed their return to public ownership.

Thirdly we have to get companies which have closed down during the economic crisis working again.

Finally we need to stop government interference in trade union work. This is something which the Egyptian working class has suffered from for a long time.

We will be organising to represent workers in the new parliament and to carry their demands and suffering. If workers' demands are still ignored we'll re-organise.

Mohamed Ahmed Salem is President of the Regional Federation of Independent Unions in Gharbiyya province, which is part of the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress.



Protest against the IMF

No support for workers from Military or Morsi

One of the first acts of the Military Council which ruled Egypt after February 2011 was to pass a law criminalising strikes and protests.

Rather than repealing this legislation, the Muslim Brotherhood government which followed launched a wave of repression against workers as strikes and sit-ins spread in response to the growing economic and social crisis.

The army continued to intervene in an attempt to repress crucial struggles. In April 2013 striking rail workers were faced with forced conscription into the army.

The generals backed off when the Cairo Metro workers threatened to join the strike. Some other groups of workers have taken on the military successfully.

Airport workers at Cairo airport took strike action which forced the military to sack the general running the airport and appoint a civilian director instead.



Cancel Egypt's debt!

Egypt's economy bears the burden of an external debt that amounts to £23.5bn, according to the figures of the Central Bank of Egypt.

This debt costs Egyptian citizens an annual amount of £1.7bn in debt service. Egypt pays £12 million a year in debt repayments to the UK government. The Department for Business, Skills and Innovation has repeatedly refused to cancel the debt payments since Mubarak was overthrown.

Egypt's external debt is a direct result of Mubarak regime's neo-liberal economic policies, which resorted to external borrowing as a quick fix.

Ordinary Egyptians did not have a say over the need for external borrowing nor the priorities over which the loans will be spent, and now they continue to suffer from Mubarak's debt burden even after his fall.

Government corruption was endemic throughout Mubarak's reign and will have infiltrated debt management.

For more information visit:
www.dropegyptstdebt.org
www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk

'Army feared popular radicalisation'

The majority of workers supported the Army's intervention on 30 June, and think that it is a victory for the people and an expression of the people's will.

Workers did participate in the Rebel Campaign, and went down into the streets on 30 June and afterwards, but they participated as individuals.

There was some organised participation by workers, in the form of statements which national and regional union federations such as the Suez Workers' Federation and the Port Said Workers' Federation put out.

After the end of 30 June, we saw the beginnings of workers' participation in an organised way, which could have reached the level of civil disobedience.

For example, some council workers did succeed in totally shutting down local government institutions in the provinces in co-operation with the protesters in the streets.

This happened in Daqahiliyya and Beheira provinces. I think that the army rushed out a statement on the first day, fearing the radicalisation of this movement, just like when it removed Mubarak.

Workers took part because over

the past two and half years their demands have been completely ignored. These were demands they raised long before the revolution, and dreamed of achieving after the downfall of Mubarak, but that did not happen.

Instead the persecution of trade unionists increased, the law on trade union freedoms was not

issued, while other laws criminalising protests and strikes were passed.

Workers were arrested, their strikes broken up by force, they were sacked and faced other forms of victimisation.

Morsi's regime and the Military Council practised the same policies against workers and their leaders.

I think that the popular movement lacks organisation and a political voice. This situation has allowed the Right, represented by the army, police, the remnants of the old regime, and even the liberals, to ride on the back of the mass movement.

I believe that the trade unions must work hard to strengthen their networks while raising the voice of workers and their demands.

Fatma Ramadan is a civil service trade union leader and member of the executive of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions. She speaks in a personal capacity.



What you can do

Pass this resolution in your union branch/Trades Council:

This branch extends its solidarity to all workers who continue to struggle within the Arab revolutions for a living wage, freedom of union organisation, against neo-liberal reforms and for public ownership.

- This branch notes that the UK government is supporting attempts by the IMF and EU to further entrench neo-liberal policies which will harm working class people in Tunisia and Egypt by cutting subsidies for essential goods and deepening privatisation.
- This branch also notes that Egypt continues to pay £12 million a year to the UK Department of Business for debts built up during the corrupt and undemocratic Mubarak regime.
- This branch calls for an end to loans from international organisations such as the IMF and EU which are conditional upon attacking working class living standards and rights.
- This branch therefore resolves:
 - a. To write to the Business Secretary Vince Cable demanding the cancellation of all Egyptian debt to the UK.
 - b. The UK trade union movement to organise on-going and meaningful solidarity with trade unionists in the MENA region fighting neo-liberal policies supported by the UK government.
 - c. To send a message of solidarity to the Tunisian UGTT and Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions.
 - d. To affiliate to MENA Solidarity Network at a cost of £25 and to circulate information about the network's campaigns to our members.

About MENA Solidarity Network

MENA Solidarity Network's campaigns take inspiration from workers' struggles in the Arab world back into the trade unions here in order to strengthen our own strikes and protests.

We are supported by three national trade unions, NUT, PCS and UCU, plus a number of trades councils and union branches. Our steering committee includes MPs John McDonnell and Katy Clark, and activists from the NUT, NUJ, RMT, UCU, UNITE and BMA.

During the past year we've mobilised solidarity for striking Egyptian dock workers and civil servants, organised campaigns for jailed Bahraini healthworkers, linked steel workers occupying their factories in Greece and Egypt, and joined protests against repression of opposition activists in Sudan.

Solidarity isn't a one-way street, either. We brought messages of support from Egyptian activists to public sector picket lines last year, highlighting the simple slogan: 'we are all united for bread, freedom and social justice'.

'Still fighting for social justice'

The Arab Revolutions' of slogan 'bread, freedom and social justice' echoed around the world following the fall of the dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet, more than two years later, the battle against the policies of privatisation, austerity and unemployment which helped to spark the revolutions of 2011 are still raging. This background briefing shows how governments in the West and the Arab world are still working hand-in-glove to make the poor pay for the economic crisis.

Solidarity with MENA Workers Network



- menasolidaritynetwork.com ● Email: menasolidarity@gmail.com
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/MenaSolidarityNetwork
- Twitter: [@menasolidarity](https://twitter.com/menasolidarity)