

Middle East Solidarity

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The art of resistance from the river to the sea

'Tears that taste of the sea'

Artist Rachid Koraïchi interviewed about how art can build resistance to racism and injustice

Revolutionary art in Egypt, ten years on

Fareid Atta explores the contradictory legacy of the art and music of the revolution

History textbooks targeted

Miriam Scharf speaks to researcher who revealed Zionist campaign which forced publisher to rewrite school books

Organising against sexist new laws

Egyptian women are challenging proposed legal changes which will deny them basic rights

Solidarity rising for Palestine

Italian dockers block Israeli ships, while protests surge across the world in protest at the occupation



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About us

Events in the Middle East often dominate the news, but it is war, sectarian violence and western military intervention which grab the headlines.

Middle East Solidarity shows a different side to the region.

We report on resistance to repression and imperialism from Morocco to Yemen, covering the strikes and protests which are missed by the mainstream media.

We carry the voices and stories of the women and men who are still fighting for bread, freedom and social justice to new audiences.

Our practical guides to campaigning and resources for activists aim to build a stronger solidarity movement.

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Find out more here:
www.menasolidaritynetwork.com
www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org
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Image on front cover and p3: Rachid Koraïchi, *The Garden of Africa - Le Jardin d'Afrique* (detail on cover), 2020. Etching, 108.5 x 76 cm. Edition of 70 (#25/70). Courtesy the Artist and October Gallery. From the exhibition *Tears that taste of the sea*.

‘Tears that taste of the sea’

**Rachid
Koraichi**



The Garden of Africa | Photo: Rachid Koraïchi

As his personal exhibition, *'Tears that taste of the sea'* opens at the October Gallery in London, Algerian artist **Rachid Koraïchi** tells **Almaas Yahye** and **Julie Henri** about his project in Zarsis, Tunisia, a memorial garden commemorating the lives of people who drowned trying to cross the sea to Europe and how his work reflects the struggle against injustice.

Can you tell us more about your project ***Le Jardin d'Afrique*** (The Garden of Africa) in Tunisia?

I was absolutely appalled when I saw a landfill in Zarsis for the first time. It was literally made of a pile of rubbish from the town, littered with bits of legs, knees, feet and heads sticking out of the ground as if hounds had been digging them out at night time.

When I asked about it, I was told that the town was too poor to afford burying those people. When they have at least 10 five-star hotels. Tell me how those people who earn millions do not provide you with a truck, ambulances, or anything to bury those people.

There's plenty of land! There is a whole desert! You don't need to give them tombs that I made for my memorial, but at least build a dedicated area, even if it is a communal grave. Just give them the minimal dignity they deserve and bury them properly underground. But why throw all those bodies in a dump? This is the worst of the worst.

And so, my response to this was if you don't want those bodies in your graveyards (Black, Christian, Buddhist, etc), I will bury them in my Muslim memorial, as those Muslims would have been very happy to welcome those people in their resting place, blessing them and praying for them.

And this is how I created my place – which I would not call a “graveyard” but “Garden of Africa”. The vast majority of people there are from Sub-Saharan Africa. And it is true that North Africa

turns its back on Sub-Saharan Africa. People in North Africa look north towards Europe, but never behind, when behind them lies humanity's history.

When I first started creating the Garden of Africa, I had no specific strategy – I was fully driven by emotion. I decided to bury every person in the absolute respect of their religions. Typically, Muslim cemeteries would have very few plants – only mud or sand.

But I wanted to create a heavenly garden. Out of respect to Christians buried in the garden, I bought 12 vine trees that represent the 12 apostles. I also planted five olive trees that represent the 5 pillars of Islam.

I am also setting up a small association. The president of the Red Crescent really helped me with this project. And I would like to hand over the keys of the Garden of Africa to him to look after it. The reason why I also created a DNA centre is because I don't only want this place to be a place where we bury people. I want this place to bring the living together with their loved ones.

Why was it important to you to create this memorial?

The question at the heart of this project is why are we in this dramatic situation? My father was a resistance fighter during the Algerian war of independence. But when resistance ended with the ceasefire agreement in March 1961, he left the mountains where he spent some time in prison and got tortured; he came back home to look

after our family.

He did not seek to get any benefit from supporting the resistance. However, many people in our country managed to capitalise on the resistance movement, and unfortunately many politicians who were at the Moroccan and Tunisian borders, but not in the mountains in the middle of the country, got into power, or rather took power and turned it into their capital and their business.

Which is why this wonderful country, rich in resources such as gas, oil, gold, uranium, copper, zinc, iron, sulphate, etc – which has a 1,400km-long coast, plains, mountains, a magnificent desert – is in a catastrophic economic situation. It is all because of the mafia, dealers, thieves and corruption in the system.

That's why we should stop saying that Africa is poor and its people live in misery – Africa is not poor. Africa is being looted by the same people who colonised it in collaboration with the people leading those African countries.

While they leave their people to starve, they get richer. People would rather die at sea – or even in the desert – instead of living in a rotten system where they have no future.

I am an artist, why have I turned into a grave digger?

Today there is no recognition of what European leaders have done. A few weeks ago, a boat with 130 refugees went round all the European maritime ports – Italy, Spain, France, Malta, etc – for three whole days and all 130 people died.

For me, all humans are my brothers in humanity. I myself lost my brother when I was young – in college. My brother was a year and a half older than me – and he died in the Mediterranean Sea right after Algeria gained its independence. We never found his body. And in a way, for me, I am also creating a large tomb for my brother who disappeared in the same sea. Making this memorial was important to me.

Tell us about the vision for the exhibition in London.

My title, 'Tears that taste of the sea' refers to the sea in which people drowned. I produced those large jars with their four handles – for which I got my inspiration from lachrymatories. Typically, lachrymatories are small jars made of glass (smaller than your little finger) that women would put by the corner of their eyes to collect the tears

from the loss of a child, husband, father, mother, as well as to collect tears of joy.

And when they died, they would be buried with their lachrymatories. But as there are so many people who died at sea, that's why I produced large blue lachrymatories, whose colour symbolises the sea. Blue is also the colour of impossible – the sea is not really blue, it's the sky that gives it this blue-ish colour. If you were to take some water in your hands, it would not be



Blue Lachrymatory Vase



Steel figure from the series Les Vigilants (iii)
Photos: Rachid Koraichi

blue. Similarly, if you were to reach your hand for the sky, you would not get a blue bit of it.

And now why four handles? That's in reference to African women with their boubous and their hands on their hips whilst walking – almost dancing like queens on the streets. And the other two handles are for their husband's hands forming a couple that represents humanity.

Take the metal sculptures – the most important part of those sculptures is their shadows. Why? Because my family comes from the Arabian desert, and after moving around, today my family has now settled down in the Sahara in the

Algerian desert. The desert can reach up to 75 degrees in the shade; people live underground. As such, shade is crucial in the desert to protect life. For example, the palm tree protects fruit trees below it with its shadow.

Without shade, we couldn't live – we'd die. And finally, the most powerful symbol of shade is faithfulness. A baby after it starts crawling already has its shadow – it's its very own, like a fingerprint. Throughout our whole life, our shadow escorts us right until the very day we die, when our shadow comes into our coffin with us – that is the most absolute sign of faithfulness.

Can art itself be a form of resistance to oppression?

There will be three exhibitions in London: one at the October Gallery – which is my personal exhibition – one at the British Museum and one at the V&A.

For the British Museum exhibition I donated a large number of artworks that I produced with my friend and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. And at the time, we were also producing those works in the middle of wars in the 1980s. Today we are still in the same situation.

If you take the *Poem of Beirut*, for which I developed a book, I would talk to Mahmoud over the phone while he was in a prison in Beirut. He would be telling me about how he was going through this, how he felt, talking about his emotions. And so I worked on emotions that sparked the creation of the *Poem of Beirut*. What I was interested in was not so much the poem in itself but what sparked its creation – emotions.

My work always emerges from questions – why are the same people always forgotten? Why are the haves and the have nots always the same people? And this is still true today if you take the Covid-19 vaccine – why is it the same people who do not have access to it? Especially when the continent has such a great youth population and so many resources.

All these injustices drive my reflections.

Images courtesy of Rachid Koraichi and October Gallery. 'Tears that taste of the sea' is at the October Gallery <https://octobergallery.co.uk/> until 12 June. Thanks to Shelagh Smith for additional help with translating and editing.

PALESTINE

General strike signals unity in resistance

Anne Alexander

The resurgence of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation through a historic general strike across the whole of historic Palestine shows that that the long-term drift towards 'normalisation' of diplomatic and military relations between the Arab states and Israel will be contested on the streets. It is a factor that US President Joe Biden will have to take into account, despite his long-term support for the Israeli occupation.

The strike followed an escalation of racist violence and harassment aimed at accelerating the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian families from the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah and attacks by Israeli security forces on worshippers at the Al-Aqsa mosque. The fact that the strike united Palestinians both inside and outside Israel's borders in solidarity and protest for the first



Biden meets Netanyahu in 2016 | Photo: US Embassy Tel Aviv

time in decades is a vitally important development.

Meanwhile, Israel fighters pounded Gaza with another deadly barrage of missiles, killing hundreds of Palestinians including nearly 70 children and destroying media facilities, schools, hospitals and medical centres. The Islamist movement Hamas, which has held power in the Gaza Strip since elections in 2006, fired hundreds of rockets into Israel, some of which reached as far as Tel Aviv, killing 12 Israelis including 2 children.

The wide participation

of Palestinians living inside the borders of Israel in the strike marks an important shift in the scale and tempo of organisation there. The strike was officially called by the Higher Follow-Up Committee, which brings together Palestinian political figures inside Israel. However it was driven by grassroots organising to resist the rising tide of racist violence from far-right Israeli groups, whose attacks on Palestinians recently took on a new intensity in cities such as Lydd and Haifa.

Palestinians living in

Lydd were attacked by lynch mobs of racists, many of whom have recently moved to the area from the West Bank settlements. These racist movements, regularly proclaim their intention to force Palestinians out of Israel and the occupied territories. They are no mere far-right fringe, but rather allies of politicians such as Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid who look set to consolidate control over the Israeli government following a deal to oust Netanyahu from power in early June.

MIDDLE EAST

Shifts in the balance of power?

Ameen Nemer

During Joe Biden's first 100 days in office as US President, we can clearly see the drift in some US policies

which directly affect Saudi Arabia and Iran. Among these are efforts to bring the United States and Iran back into the nuclear deal, JCPOA.

This agreement was signed during Obama's administration when Biden was vice president but Trump withdrew, describing it as a "terrible" deal.

Moreover, Trump's policy was to apply "maximum pressure" by introducing more sanctions on Iran. In

2017, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) said in an interview that he wanted to take the battle inside Iranian territory, adding that there was no chance for dialogue with Iran because of the Islamic Republic's "radical ideology." However, in April this year, his tone had totally changed, as he described Iran as a neighbour country in an interview, adding that he is seeking to build good

relations by working with his regional and international partners.

Before this interview, there was a rumour that there was a meeting in Iraq between Iran and Saudi Arabia's security officials. It seems this interview is an outcome and a message of the new Saudi foreign policy which is undoubtedly a reflection of the new US Middle East policy.

PALESTINE

‘Your protests are giving us hope’

Anne Alexander

Two massive demonstrations brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets of London in solidarity with Palestine on 15 and 22 May.

Up and down the country thousands more joined protests and rallies demanding an end to Israeli military attacks, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. Meanwhile on 18 May, a general strike showed the power of Palestinian resistance, as workers walked out, shops shut down and protests and rallies defied the Israeli military and police.

Middle East Solidarity spoke to Palestinian documentary film-maker Rawan Damen about the significance of the strike and how a bigger and more effective solidarity movement outside Palestine can make a difference to the Palestinian struggle for justice.

“The big demonstration in London on Saturday has given us Palestinians everywhere a lot of hope,” Rawan told us. “We can see solidarity action that is happening in the streets, in academia, and among political circles.”

This rising solidarity movement is connected with a “new energy” in organised popular resistance to the Israeli occupation, Rawan explained. “There is a grassroots movement organising civil disobedience and demonstrations, there is a new spirit, a new energy, and a new grassroots movement that we need to



Glasgow rallies for Palestine | Photo: Henry Maitles

build on.” One sign of this is the success of the general strike on 18 May. As Rawan noted, the tactic of a general strike has a long history in the Palestinian resistance movement.

“In 1936 there was a big general strike in Palestine against the British colonisation and the Zionist movement between 1936 and 1939. Around 5,000 Palestinians were killed and 15,000 injured. Many people were expelled by the British to other Arab countries including Syria and Iraq.”

The memory of the general strike in 1976 by Palestinians living within Israel is still strong as well, commemorated each year on Land Day. However, the strike last week was a dramatic demonstration of Palestinian unity, said Rawan.

“Palestinians across all historic Palestine, including the Occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem, inside Israel and the Gaza Strip decided to do something together. It is very significant that the strike happened in this unifying way.”

Israeli forces have targeted not only Palestinian activists, but also journalists reporting from Palestine, killing many

and destroying media offices, such as the building housing international news agencies destroyed by Israeli missiles in the latest attack on Gaza. This is a deliberate policy, Rawan told us.

“They don’t want the Palestinian narrative to be there, because the Palestinian narrative is the just narrative. It is the narrative that says what is happening on the ground is ethnic cleansing which is happening in all of historic Palestine, and there is continuing resistance to ethnic cleansing.

Journalists are among the people who expose the war crimes of Israel and this is something that Israel doesn’t want. So not only Palestinian journalists are targeted but any journalists, even British journalists, foreign journalists.”

That’s why one of the most important forms that solidarity action can take is to tell the story about what is happening in Palestine, argued Rawan. A second step is to acknowledge that Britain has a historic responsibility for the Israeli Occupation. “The British Mandate facilitated Zionist immigration, protected the Zionist movement,

empowered them with military forces which made it possible to create Israel but also to banish Palestinians and thus not allowing a Palestinian state to emerge in 1948.” So key goals of the solidarity movement in Britain are to “stop arming Israel unless it adheres to human rights and international law and to stop getting exports from Israel’s settlements which are illegal in international law.”

The ceasefire doesn’t mean that the problems for the Palestinians have gone away, warned Rawan. Although the pause in bombing has temporarily eased the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, they once again face rebuilding shattered infrastructure and devastated health and education systems.

“The occupation is still there, the discrimination and the racism, the apartheid system is still there. We need to continue because justice should prevail if we work hard together. It might not be very soon but the solidarity shown during the last few weeks gives us hope that it might be sooner than we thought.”

[Go to pages 26- 27 for more on solidarity action](#)



Speaking in colour

What is the legacy of Egypt's revolutionary art?

Ten years after the uprising unleashed an explosion of creativity, **Fareid Atta** explores the multiple legacies of revolutionary art in Egypt: the spaces in which it continues to signify resistance and forms of co-optation by the current regime.

On Friday 28 January 2011, a flash mob, equipped with lightning green aerosol cans and donning make-shift gas masks, stormed the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP). The graffiti artists showered the walls of the building with messages of defiance.

Ten years on, and perhaps the two most enduring slogans on the iconic building wedged between the Egyptian museum and Nasser's Nile Ritz Carlton, are the sardonic "Opening soon" and the celebratory "Free zone. Tahrir Square." It wouldn't be long before the NDP went up in flames. Looking back at the revolutionary moment a decade on, what is the legacy of Egyptian revolutionary art?

It was just around the corner from the NDP headquarters, on Mohamed

Mahmoud Street, where the voices of a generation would break out in breathtaking technicolour. Alaa Awad, one of the main protagonists of this explosive art form, spoke to me of the excitement and creativity that was born in that moment:

"It was amazing to be with the people. I painted in a traffic jam. But I was painting with freedom. It was a hilarious mess."

Sarah Awad, Assistant Professor of Communications and Psychology at the University of Aalborg in Denmark, remarked at the time: "2011 street art had strong resonance with varied audiences: from pedestrians in Egyptian streets, to international viewers following the happenings in Egypt."

The movement started during the 18-day demonstrations against Mubarak,

and continued later in the year after the Port Said massacre.

Women's participation in art skyrocketed: groups such as "Women on Walls" and "Graffiti Harimi" were active all over Egypt, particularly in Alexandria. Perhaps the pseudonymity of the art form gave women and young people the safety to express themselves for the first time.

Mia Grondahl, a writer who has been living in Egypt since 2001, observed: "There was very little street art in Egypt before the Revolution."

Through her paintings in 2011, visual artist Fajr Soliman expressed her special concern for women and social issues in the Arab world. The animals she depicted in her murals anthropomorphised Egyptians to represent issues such as police brutality and youth unemployment.

El Zeft, another visual artist, produced the iconic stencil: "Nefertiti in a Gas Mask," and became a symbolic lynchpin of social movements focussing on female empowerment in the Middle East and Europe.

Other art forms played an equally important role in the burgeoning youth movement. A new genre of music called "electro chaabi," dazzled the Egyptian underground with its infectious beats.

Chaabi, of course, is not a new phenomenon. The word in Arabic simply means traditional or folk, and as a genre, had been popular in Egypt for decades. The new iteration, though, is a postmodern, hybrid and cosmopolitan affair. The music first emerged in working class neighbourhoods in Cairo such as Madinat al-Salam.

Its hybrid style combined the sounds of traditional Sufi folk songs with contemporary reggaeton and Jamaican roots. The lyrics of "electro chaabi" were playful and personal and were most often played at weddings in these neighbourhoods.

A political edge, however, lurks under the seemingly innocuous lyrics. In one song, the revolutionary slogan "the people demand the fall of the regime" was transformed into "the people demand the groom to be happy." DJ Haha, another rapper, interspersed his verses with politics: "yasqut yasqut hokm il askar" the English rendered as "down down with military rule."

Electro chaabi remains hugely popular over a decade on from the revolution. In more ways than one it was able to capture the listless mood of Egypt's youth, in contrast to the



'Something the mind can't believe' | Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy

country's graffiti scene, a movement which has slowly faded from the public stage.

Electro chaabi's success could be because the musicians have their own 'economy' of sorts, with audiences queuing up to hear the artists perform at weddings and on national holidays. A lucky few have even secured lucrative deals with music labels.

Claudia Ali, cofounder of the Nun Art Gallery in Luxor, goes some way to understanding the phenomenon. She told me, "the good side [post 2011]: art became public. The bad side: artists weren't paid for their works. Usually, they even paid for the colours out of their own pockets." The interview, however, was more curious for its omissions than its answers. When asked about the revolutionary art

movement, she sheepishly declined to answer, despite many revolutionary artists displaying their work in her gallery.

One of these artists, Alaa Awad, based in Luxor, works as a lecturer and a practising artist. His neo-pharaonic murals first gained notoriety in the Mohamed Mahmoud street theatre of 2011.

In one of his murals, "Marching Women," he transforms a group of female mourners into armed protestors, their sticks intended as a symbol of self-defence, and the papyrus a symbol of knowledge.

Awad has been able to sustain a career as an artist in Egypt over the past decade where many have been forced to flee the country. He has exhibited his wares in the likes of Germany, China,

the US and Denmark. Murals are now, however, a thing of the past for him.

A decade on, he continues to be inspired by the flat plains and stylised forms seen in Ancient Egyptian art: the colours are vivid and bejewelled, but their subject matter is now the domestic and bucolic. Awad's work charmingly celebrates life in Upper Egypt, but makes no reference to, or comment on, the struggles of living in a military dictatorship.

Arguably his current success in Egypt has been largely down to the commodification of his revolutionary murals. And, of course, his steady support for the current regime. He told me: "We don't have problems at all in Egypt. We love each other and support each other."

He continued: "The new regime is great. The army leads Egypt in the right way. When the revolution happened, the army saved Egypt."

In contrast to Awad's highly stylised paintings, artists such as Abu Bakr produced more meaningful work by playing with motifs and irony. His work covers everything from the mourning of mothers to the bold, striking renditions of the regime's atrocities.

Bakr's angel wings became synonymous with his art, especially in the "martyrs' mural" where he and others painstakingly sketched out all 75 of the young Ahly football fans from the Port Said massacre.

The fans were known as the "ultras Ahlawy," who for three consecutive nights battled the security forces on Mohamed Mahmoud street. Bakr and his friends would tirelessly paint their portraits in between their own demonstrations on the front line.

Of course, the role of revolutions in inspiring works of art and music is not a new phenomenon.

Delacroix's "Liberty leading the people," is perhaps the most famous example of such revolutionary inspiration. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet propaganda created a national mythology elevating the workers as gods. Revolutionary art in Egypt, however, was more of an individualised phenomenon, and as such has been met with hostility and censorship.

In 2015, the famous graffiti wall, owned by the American University in Cairo (AUC), was demolished and replaced with a garden "to increase the green areas," in the city, and is part



"The martyr Muhammad Sirri" | Photo: Anne Alexander

of an ongoing project to "beautify" downtown. In 2015, the entire "Mugamma" (the central government building in Cairo) was painted white as if to signify the symbolic end of revolutionary "counter-space," and with it, the colourful graffiti movement.

The director of graphic design at AUC commented at the time: "[that] the wall is no less than a documentation of the revolution. Many of us are just moving on and doing things elsewhere. Graffiti is always an ongoing story, I don't see it as the end of anything. I think what is happening is a purely practical measure."

You could be forgiven for thinking the erection of the obelisk of Ramses II represents an attempt by the regime to ignore, and indeed repress, the country's contemporary cultural discourse. The regime's recent preference for Pharaonic art could itself be construed as a form of propaganda.

The Pharaonic monument represents a powerful image of kinship and the glory of Egyptian civilisation. This

image resuscitates a zeitgeist of Egypt's pharaonic past in the heart of Cairo, and so signals the accompanying hierarchical, tyrannical, and strictly conservative values which it embodies.

What the regime seems to be implying here is that the Egyptian people pay the current regime the same societal deference as their forbears.

The nonchalant attitude to Egypt's internationally envied revolutionary graffiti begs the question, what does constitute "real" Egyptian art?

Certainly not its revolutionary music. Mahragan music has been met with the same censorship. As it increased in popularity, successive campaigns were launched against it. Government agencies cite it as vulgar, obscene, and deviant from "Egyptian values."

In early 2020, "Bint El Giran" (the neighbours' girl) by Hassan Shakosh and Omar Kamal, became a global sensation as it hit number two on the global chart of Soundcloud. When Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk posted the



Mural celebrating Gika, a young activist killed by the security forces in 2012 | Photo: Anne Alexander

list on his Twitter account, the regime took note.

The alleged profanity of the song led to the music syndicate officially banning mahragan music in February 2020. The syndicate declared that any live music establishment that hosts a mahragan singer could be sued. Other institutions in Egypt have taken similar steps.

For instance, the Central Authority for the Control of Artistic works, the Ministry of Interior and the “Syndicate of Actors” banned the successful chaabi musician, Bika. The charges filed against him, amongst many, were of “corrupting the public taste.” When the musician reportedly attempted to join the syndicate, he was refused.

So, what is the legacy of revolutionary art? The revolutionary art which came at such a price to its perpetrators?

Graffiti art in Egypt has appeared sporadically since the revolutionary spark in 2011. In 2018, a team called the “Mobdeoun Association,” composed of 11 artists, spray-painted the walls and ceiling of the Cairo Opera metro station with contemporary Egyptian style. Their work gained public plaudits and uncharacteristically did not attract unwanted ire from the Egyptian authorities.

It later transpired, however, that this rare display in public space was only possible after the team

acquired permission from the relevant authorities. As Youssra El-Sharkawy argued:

“The new wave of Egyptian graffiti art is often commercially aligned, culturally rooted and at times addresses social concerns, but is stripped of the political messaging central to its earlier avatar in the country.”

Alaa Ahmed Ali, 22, is an artist and physical therapy student at Cairo University. She uses her skills for commercial purposes. She set up a Facebook page called Ala al-Hera (on the wall) where she promotes her wares – murals, cartoons, portraits – to potential customers. She sells her artwork for between 300 EGP and 800 EGP per sq. meter. Alaa is not unique, many of the former “revolutionary artists” have had to commercialise their work or produce pro-regime art.

Hossein Amirsadeghi, takes a somewhat bleak view. The author of *Art and Patronage*, argued: “the only hope for artists in the region is where it serves the regime, for propaganda and projection of a creative stance which is strictly controlled.”

There are some, such as Othman Lazraq, the director of Fundación Alianzas, who would contend that the art’s success was limited, but at least it was able to “increase the global interest for artists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which are now

quite popular and becoming more mainstream.” This is certainly true for artists such as Alaa Awad.

Sascha Crasnow, a lecturer in Islamic arts, strikes a more upbeat tone, and suggests that despite the regime’s desire to erase the memory of “revolutionary art”, it will still be able to live on in social media and the virtual sphere. She commented: “as [murals and stencils and graffiti] move through virtual spaces, their meaning and impact may or may not change as they are removed from their original context and placed into new ones.”

Perhaps the individual who strikes the most affirmative tone is the satirical artist Ganzeer, who has lived in Los Angeles since 2014. He thinks of the Egyptian Revolution as a “zero sum game” but points to other art movements in history where sizable changes to society have needed to go through “unpredictable phases.”

It is currently unclear as to what the unpredictable changes are that Egyptian society will need to go through and how in order to become more free and unfettered from government censorship. One thing is assured: if you are a deft hand at ancient Egyptian art, then you will have a job for life.

Fareid Atta is a journalist and researcher. He is working on a documentary about migrant artists he met during a year working on Samos.



Showing some steel: workers battle for Helwan

Francesco De Lellis, Gianni Del Panta, and Mattia Giampaolo report on a heroic fight to save jobs at Helwan Iron and Steel Company in Egypt.

On May 29, for the first time in the history of the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in Helwan all the four furnaces of the factory were turned off. In reaction, about 500 workers staged a sit-in in front of the company's main gate, finding the prompt reply by the security forces, who detained 10 workers for two hours. At the time of writing, negotiations between the state and the company's trade union committee about several workers' issues such as monthly payments, health insurance benefits, and pensions remain ongoing.

What appears less uncertain, however, is the destiny of the plant. Considering the high costs to reactivate furnaces and due to risk that the sudden stop might have damaged them, it is extremely likely that this is the very last act of the factory. For about half a

year, workers have struggled to defend their right to have a salary. It now appears that their efforts might have been unsuccessful.

Yet, workers who struggle together are never totally defeated. They will learn from their fight, and so will the wider labour movement. This article explores how a great labour dispute in Helwan has taken place in a very autocratic and repressive context, also contextualizing it in a more broad picture of resurgence of workers' mobilisations.

The Helwan workers had spent the anniversary of Egypt's January 25 Revolution staging a massive demonstration in their factory. However, their thousands-strong march was neither a celebration of the popular revolt that ousted president Hosni Mubarak in 2011 nor a reaffirmation

of the role of the working class in the revolutionary process.

In fact, workers at the Iron and Steel were defending the source of livelihoods for them and their families, protesting against the liquidation of the entire factory decreed by an extraordinary general assembly meeting on 11 January. Dreading the definitive closure of the 67 years old factory, the roughly 7,300 workers of the plant started agitating and ultimately proclaimed a permanent sit-in on site on January 17.

The decision to liquidate the most important iron and steel plant in the country came after at least a decade of accumulated losses and spiralling debt. Production has fallen to 10 percent of the factory's former annual capacity. The workers, though, are refusing to pay the price of years of mismanagement and lack of investment, leading to the

decay and obsolescence of the plant's machinery.

"They destroyed it, now they sell it," was one of the chants aired in the daily marches during the week after workers declared their protest.

"We will not leave, Hisham will leave" was another slogan of the sit-in, referring to the much hated Minister of Public Enterprise Sector, Hisham Tawfiq, who is behind the decision to liquidate the Iron and Steel Company in Helwan and other key public industries, claiming that their losses have burdened the national budget for too long.

"We will not leave it to the thieves," workers chanted in their demonstrations, pointing their fingers at those who, according to them, have deliberately caused the collapse of the industry. The government's official line is that market saturation has forced the shutdown on the Helwan Iron and Steel Company.

Yet, contributing to the market glut is also the Suez Steel factory, which has been controlled by the army since 2016. Plants owned by the army often benefit from subsidised energy and transportation costs, meaning they can undercut their competitors, according

to experts quoted by independent news website, Mada Masr.

The protest remained totally peaceful, although massive numbers of security forces were deployed immediately after the launch of the sit-in, to prevent people from the local neighbourhood joining the protesters.

A journalist for the private channel Cairo 24 was also reportedly arrested while attempting to reach the site of a demonstration to cover the events. Media coverage of the protests from the inside has been very difficult, and information dissemination has been mainly done by workers themselves and solidarity activists on social media platforms.

The approximately 7,300 workers also decided not to interrupt production, as a way to show their responsibility towards the factory and avoid the extremely difficult and costly procedure of re-starting furnaces.

However, they also wanted to affirm that the plant is continuing to work, against claims by the ministry itself saying that the plant was effectively already idle before the decision to liquidate it.

The announcement of the liquidation and the launch of the workers' sit-in

stirred a wide debate, both at a societal level and in parliament, where Minister Hisham Tawfiq was targeted by heated speeches and critiques from a number of MPs opposing the closure of the Iron and Steel Company and more generally the gradual liquidation of a number of important public industries.

The Centre for Trade Unions and Workers Services, together with a number of workers from the factory, also submitted an appeal to an administrative court to contest the decision.

According to a recent declaration by the Ministry of Public Enterprise Sector, each worker of the factory would receive a pay-out of at least 220,000 EGP (around £10,000), but the workers have pointed out that at least three quarters of the workforce will not be eligible for retirement benefits, and will thus risk immediate unemployment.

The liquidation of the factory will have repercussions not only on an economic level, but also for a community that has shaped its identity around the plant, supplying it with a workforce generation after generation: "Egypt is our country. Steel is our life" was also reportedly one of the chants heard in the early demonstrations.

A symbol, not just a factory

The Iron and Steel factory is much more than a manufacturing site. It represents one of the symbols of Egypt's attempt to build a solid industrial base that could grant the country actual, and not just formal, independence from Western powers.

For many Egyptians, the factory has therefore come to embody ideals such as modernisation and development, emerging as one of the symbols of state intervention in the economy. President Gamal Abdel Nasser's words in his inauguration speech at the plant summarised well all these aspects. According to him, the Iron and Steel factory was nothing less than "Egypt's-dream come-true."

The building project started officially in 1954 and completed about 4 years later. A few figures make clear the gigantic character of the factory. It was built on about 4,000 acres of land and at its peak in 1982 employed 25,527 workers, who were gradually reduced to the still impressive figure

of about 13,000 on the eve of the 2011 revolution.

Next to the factory, there is a company town, composed of around 3,000 households of the factory's workers, hospitals, schools, sporting clubs, and an industrial technical college. Just as the factory encompassed all stages of steel processing, workers lived out their whole lives in the factory town.

In sharp contrast to the textile sector, where labour militancy had already emerged in the first half of the century, the iron and steel branches of industry could not rely on any kind of tradition of workers' activism. In many cases, moreover, workers were former peasants who came directly from the countryside, having no experience at all of labour mobilisations and enjoyed relative, but still real, social mobility.

These factors might help explain why there were no significant labour disputes at the Iron and Steel factory throughout the 1960s. Things started

changing, however, by the end of the decade.

Two main elements seem relevant in this regard. On the one hand, the workforce increased at an impressive pace, jumping from about 4,500 workers in 1958 to more than 21,000 in 1971. On the other hand, the Socialist Institute, which operated in Helwan, organized several political meetings with workers, some of which attracted as much as 4,000 people. In such a context, the adoption of austerity measures in the wake of the failure of Nasser's economic project and Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war against Israel, which shattered the myth of so-called Arab socialism, led to an upsurge of labour militancy.

In reaction to cuts to salaries and longer working days, blue-collar workers in Helwan staged an impressive 10,000-strong sit-in. Whilst some workers' demands were satisfied, the security forces violently broke up the sit-in, arresting hundreds of workers.



Mass meeting by Helwan workers | Photo: RevSoc.me

In the following years, the Iron and Steel factory remained vital and radical. Workers took part in the 1977 bread revolt, which broke out in response to cuts on basic foodstuffs and almost brought down Sadat's regime, and protested against Israeli president Navon's visit in Egypt in 1980.

The latter mobilisation is remarkable since it represented the first protest in Helwan that did not emerge from economic demands, opening up a decade in which various leftist organisations operated semi-clandestinely in the plant.

It was in such a context that workers, protesting against a factory committee seen as too close to the state, occupied the factory twice in July and August 1989.

The request for elections to a new factory committee faced the brutal response from the security apparatuses, which opened fire on the workers, killing one, wounding dozens, and arresting hundreds of them.

The 1989 events became a symbol of workers' activism and police brutality for the Egyptian left, which won a record high number of seats in the following factory committee elections. In a gradual way, however, the militant character of Helwan apparently faded away and the Iron and Steel Factory remained silent in the years that preceded the revolution – when the longest and strongest wave of workers' strike since independence developed in Egypt – as well as in the course of the revolution itself.

From a stronghold of leftist tendencies and labour activism, Helwan apparently turned into a bastion of moderation and conservatism. Does the scale of mobilisation over the last few weeks show that some of those traditions are reviving?

The wind-up of the Iron and Steel Company is not the only recent attempt by the Egyptian regime to get rid of state industries: a process that actually has been going on since the 1990s, when international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank insisted on the implementation of a vast set of neoliberal reforms.

In February 2020, for instance, the government ordered the sell-off of the historical Navigation Company, whilst the National Cement Company suffered the same fate in 2019. However, workers in Helwan as well as elsewhere are mobilising to avoid the liquidation of national industries.

According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, despite a very high level of repression, workers are still continuing to fight back over a range of issues, with up to 173 demonstrations taking place in 2020.

One of the most important protests was the two month-long sit-in that workers at the state-owned Delta Company for Fertilizer and Chemical Industries in Daqhaliyya (Northern Egypt) staged to protest against the closure and relocation of the factory in Suez – about 200 kilometres away.

The factory was established in 1965 and currently employs about 2,500 workers.

The decision to liquidate the factory, according to one of the trade union leaders, was due to the lack of innovation of the means of production and the rise in gas prices since 2014 which has caused significant losses.

The government justified its decision under the pretext of high levels of pollution in the area, ensuring that workers will be relocated in the El Nasr Company for Fertilizers and Chemical

Industries in Suez.

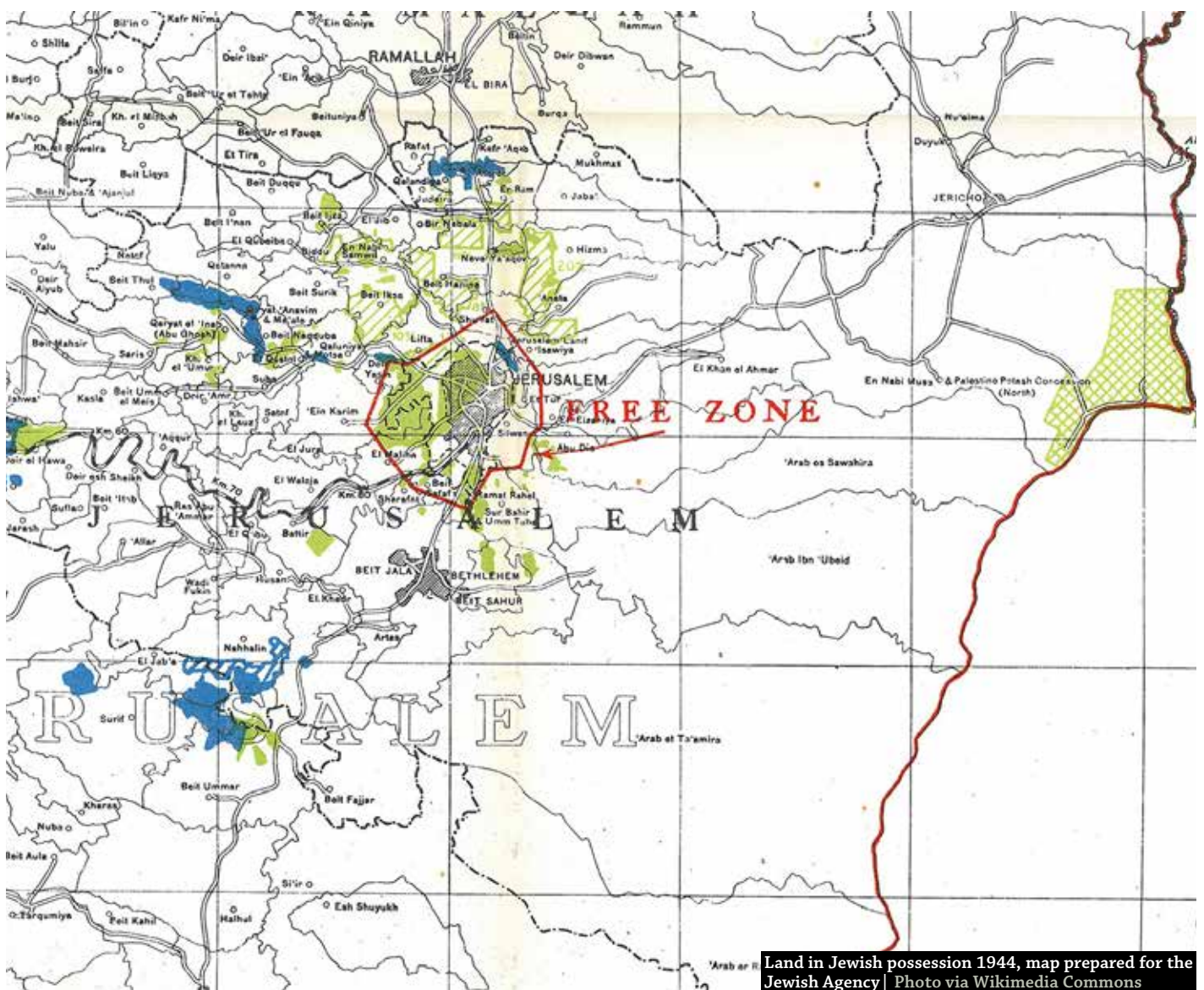
The factory will be demolished and replaced by housing compounds in order to deal with the housing emergency which, among other things, triggered protests in September. As workers' protests went on, security forces arrested 9 workers, among them 4 members of the factory committee, in January 2021.

Another important dispute took place at one of the historic strongholds of the Egyptian labour movement: Misr Spinning and Weaving in Kafr el-Dawwar. On 27 December, according to the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), workers went on strike after the decision of the government to demolish the factory and to replace it with popular houses, as in Daqhaliyya.

Other important textile factories, moreover, are suffering the same fate. In February 2021, the Alexandria Spinning Company's (Spinalex) branch in Nozha, announced the closure of the factory and its relocation to Sadat City. Many workers were pressured into resigning and many others were relocated with the promise of receiving accommodation in the new city.

The development of this new wave of labour protests in Egypt is particularly significant. It shows that workers are still capable of acting collectively to defend their jobs, salaries, and social dignity, despite the difficulties and setbacks of the last few years.

Francesco De Lellis, Gianni Del Panta, and Mattia Giampaolo are Italian researchers. A previous version of this updated article appeared on www.menasolidaritynetwork.com



Rewriting History

How pro-Israeli groups altered GCSE textbooks

Major education publisher Pearson altered two GCSE History textbooks after a campaign by Zionist organisations, an academic study has shown. **Miriam Scharf** investigates.

Under pressure from pro-Israeli organisations, a major educational publisher carried out an extensive revision of two GCSE History textbooks which inserted “major distortions” on questions such as the illegality of settlements under international law, according to a leading academic. Professor John Chalcraft co-authored a detailed report comparing the content of the two texts before and after the intervention by UK Lawyers for Israel, the Zionist Federation and the Board of

Deputies of British Jews.

He told Middle East Solidarity that he was shocked by “what has happened to the content of these textbooks – instead of offering credible educational material on Israel/Palestine, they offer distortions and bias.”

Educational publisher Pearson withdrew and “revised” the content of textbooks for GCSE History: “Conflict in the Middle East” and “The Middle East: Conflict, Crisis and Change” following a campaign by pro-Israeli groups between

October 2018 and January 2020. When Professor Chalcraft and Professor James Dickins examined the reissued texts they found substantial alterations which the publisher failed to acknowledge had even taken place.

"Facts and interpretations have been cherry-picked to exonerate Israel and blame Palestinians", Professor Chalcraft told us. "Double-standards are at work in the coverage of sensitive issues around violence and suffering – and in terms of the presentation of what is consensual and what is controversial.

And major distortions were introduced on basic issues – such as international law. The revision was led by lawyer-advocates for one side only, and is invasive, involving as many as 294 changes in only 80 pages of text."

A line-by-line comparison of the texts revealed hundreds of changes, averaging three a page. These were overwhelmingly designed to establish a narrative more favourable to Israel and less favourable to the Palestinians. Pearson then re-issued the textbook, without acknowledging it was a new edition, and with no mention of any changes.

In the original version of the domestic GCSE textbook there are 10 references to Jewish terrorism and 32 to Palestinian terrorism (in each case including use of 'terror', 'terrorist' or 'terrorism'). After revision there are four references to terrorism by Jewish groups, and 61 references to terrorism by Palestinian ones.

Alterations had been made to the text, timelines, maps and photographs, as well as to sample student essays and questions. The massacre at Deir Yassin, where Israeli forces killed at least 107 Palestinian civilians, is described in the original version of the international GCSE textbook as "one of the worst atrocities of the [1948] war". In the revised edition the word "atrocities" has been replaced by "acts".

The original version says that "international law states that a country cannot annex or indefinitely occupy territory gained by force". The revised version replaces this with: "Some argue that international law states that a country cannot annex or indefinitely occupy territory gained by force."

The well-documented fact that during the first intifada of 1987-93 "the arms and fingers of [Palestinian] child stone throwers were broken [by Israeli soldiers]" was stated in the original edition, but removed in the revised

version.

UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI), a hardline pro-Israeli pressure group, said in January 2020 that Pearson had carried out a "full and independent review" of the textbooks and would be "updating" the contents. According to Professor Chalcraft, the publisher did approach educational charity Parallel Histories to undertake a review, but went ahead to make major changes even though the charity "found no overall bias in the original versions".

Parallel Histories "did not see, and were not involved in, the revision process which created the bias," he noted. "The revision process essentially appears to have involved Pearson, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and UKLFI."

History teachers told Middle East Solidarity they were deeply concerned by the revelations of systematic and unacknowledged tampering with the Pearson textbooks.

Anna Gluckstein, who has been teaching History for many years in a North London school, said, "All history is subject to interpretation and when facts are analysed as objectively as possible, this can help explain the modern world. You cannot adequately understand why the Palestinian demand for a return to their homeland runs through Middle Eastern and world politics without fully describing the role of the Zionist militias in the Nakba or that of the Israeli state since then."

"Questioning the widely held view in the international community on the illegality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank fuels a false narrative."

"Our job as history teachers is to enable our students to analyse and test different historical interpretations based on facts. These revisions show how important it is that school textbooks should be free from interference by special interest groups. If there is such interference it should be acknowledged. Checking sources is basic to all good history teaching".

Rob Behan, an experienced History and Politics teacher at an East London Sixth Form College, added: "it is extremely concerning to learn that

Pearson have edited its textbook on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a manner that presents a more one-sided view of the conflict. I teach aspects of this conflict on my courses and recognise the sensitivity, objectivity and impartiality with which it must be treated given the passionate responses it can evoke."

"The need to listen to a range of views and voices is a key skill in building critical understanding of history and politics for young people. To reduce or downplay Israeli violence, while at the same time intensifying Palestinian violence, as I understand this textbook does, reduces the academic integrity of such a work designed to improve understanding of a complex conflict.

"Questioning the widely held view in the international community on the illegality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, as I understand the revised textbook does, further fuels a false narrative."

Pearson has paused distribution of the two textbooks for the moment, however Professor Chalcraft argues the publisher needs to take further action by withdrawing all copies of the revised texts.

Pearson must "inform teachers, parents, and students that the current versions of these texts are not fit for purpose, and compensate those schools that have bought them and undertake a review of their internal processes to ensure that no repetition of this biased editorial process can occur" he explained.

The intervention of the Board of Deputies and UKLFI can be seen in a larger context. Over the last two years there has been enormous pressure, including from the Department for Education, for educational institutions to adopt the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

Examples included as part of this definition label specific criticisms of Israel as antisemitic. The IHRA definition has been used across councils and universities to close down debate on Palestine and events giving solidarity to Palestinians. This interference with school textbooks dealing with the conflict is part of a more general offensive to delegitimise and silence any voice giving the Palestinian narrative.

Go to www.bricup.org.uk to read the full report



Vaccine Apartheid

The untold story of Israel's Covid-19 immunisation campaign

Israel's Covid-19 vaccination programme “success” hides a policy of systematic discrimination against Palestinians, **Hugo Leal** reports.

While Israel's most recent military atrocities have been met with international repudiation, its Covid-19 vaccine rollout is still being hailed as a resounding success. But there is a lesser-known story about Israel's vaccination drive, one that is not making headlines across the world. The vaccination campaign against Covid-19 carried out by the Israeli authorities constitutes a practice of vaccine apartheid, a crime that adds to a long record of human rights abuses by the state of Israel.

Both indiscriminate killings in Gaza and the life-threatening vaccine segregation policy are less isolated incidents of a far-right government struggling to survive than the consequence of a decades-long process of targeted persecution and general disregard for the health of Palestinians.

Beyond the seemingly impulsive instances of quotidian repression there is a historic path of systematic

oppression. As Human Rights Watch recently concluded, a threshold has been crossed and Israel stands accused of the crimes of Apartheid and Persecution.

The organisation does not use Apartheid as an apt analogy but in the proper criminal sense, as defined by the 1973 “Apartheid Convention” and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. In this context, vaccine apartheid is an expression of a broader and persistent history of the crimes of Apartheid and Persecution perpetrated by Israel.

It is a Jewish-first policy that treats Palestinians not just as second-rate citizens but also as second-rate humans.

Israel asserts its rights over the Occupied Territories without ever conceding that it also has duties to the non-Jewish populations living under occupation.

Having a government based on a Jewish-first or even a Jewish-only platform organising one of the most expedite immunisation campaigns in the world for Israeli Jews while refusing, blocking and/or delaying vaccines to Palestinian in the OPT and Israel is an

“inhuman act [...] committed in the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination of one racial group over any other racial group or groups [...] with the intention of maintaining that regime”, the very definition of the crime of Apartheid as laid out by the ICC.

Israel is forever willing to assert its rights over the occupied territories without ever conceding that it also has duties to the non-Jewish populations living under occupation. The expansion of a settler-colonial state through annexation has been enforced by successive Israeli governments dissociated from any responsibility over the people who have been deprived of their property and their rights.

A couple of months into the inoculation campaign, when it became clear that Israel had adopted a Jewish-first policy, NGOs, epidemiologists and medical professionals working on the ground alerted to the iniquity of the country's vaccine rollout.

Confronted with vaccine shortages in their own countries, many governments as well as the public and published opinions looked at the Israeli vaccine abundance with wonderment and turned a blind eye to the question of fair redistribution. Showered

with international praise about the vaccination pace, the Israeli government easily shrugged off accusations of discrimination against Palestinians, including those working and living in Israel.

Adding gall to injury, Israel, which has been violating the Oslo Accords for more than 25 years, evaded responsibility for the fate of Palestinians shamelessly invoking a transitory disposition of the Interim Agreement (Oslo II Accord) that transfers the responsibility over the regular vaccine schedule to the Palestinian side.

By doing so, the Israeli government and health authorities intentionally ignored the relevant dispositions of the Agreement specifically drawn for epidemics stating that both parties “shall exchange information regarding epidemics and contagious diseases, shall cooperate in combating them and shall develop methods for exchange of medical files and documents”.

As some legal scholars have pointed out, denying, blocking or postponing vaccinations to populations under occupation amidst a lethal pandemic is also a flagrant violation of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention.

Vaccine apartheid is a form of segregation that transcends the more common, yet also egregious, practice of vaccine nationalism.

To be precise, the Israeli vaccination programme is a reckless, lethal and criminal concoction of both vaccine nationalism and vaccine apartheid. Much like in the UK, Israel's vaccine nationalism was a desperate attempt by a flailing and failing government to buy its way out of a pandemic it had been mishandling.

Vaccine acquisition illustrates this point. The country paid up to four times more per dose than the value initially agreed by the EU for the same vaccines. This put Israel at the forefront of a bidding war that is still depriving poor countries from access to vaccines and driving up incidence numbers across the world.

In order to jump the queue and secure the vaccines Israel added a data bonus to the monetary premium; Israeli citizens of all races and creeds learned the supply contract had a data sharing clause with the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, an appropriation of individual clinical data for private purposes and corporate profits.

But more than the iniquitous

acquisition process, the biggest problem with Israel's vaccination programme is the lack of an equitable redistribution of the acquired doses. The fact that the Jewish-first vaccine apartheid policy is affecting disproportionately the Palestinians can be discerned at three levels.

Firstly, as mentioned above and in contravention of applicable international law, Israel made clear from the onset that the OPT was going to be excluded from the planned inoculation campaign. Besides denying access to the doses in its stock, Israel extended the Gaza blockade to the vital Covid-19 vaccine coming from abroad.

In February, for example, the country prevented a shipment of the Russian-developed Sputnik V destined for frontline workers from entering Gaza. Palestinians in the OPT are thus left at the mercy of “vaccine diplomacy” and the underfunded and understocked COVAX vaccine-sharing initiative.

Denying, blocking or postponing vaccinations to populations under occupation amidst a pandemic is also a flagrant violation of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention.

Secondly, the Israeli authorities also postponed the inoculation of Palestinians with work and residence permits in Israel for months on end. An estimated 133,000 Palestinians spend most of their daily lives in Israel or West Bank settlements in close contact with other individuals. It took almost three months until the first Palestinian workers received the initial dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Thirdly, vaccine apartheid is a grave threat to public health for Israeli citizens. By neglecting the Palestinians as well as the Bedouins in the Negev and Galilee living in the country as citizens, Israel is compromising any possibility of achieving herd immunity through mass immunisation.

As a consequence, at the beginning of March and according to the available statistics out of the 30 cities with the highest infection rate in Israel 25 were classified as Arab. While there were also problems in reaching the Orthodox Jewish communities, the non-Jewish population is the one being

systematically segregated.

The Israeli health authorities, who have been unwilling to work alongside the local organisations of Palestinians, were quick to elude any responsibility. According to Israeli officials, online misinformation and widespread beliefs in conspiracy theories among “Arab Israelis” are the root-cause of the sluggish uptake.

Vaccine hesitancy and rejection has a complex set of justifications that can range from personal and religious beliefs to the weaponisation of conspiracy theories for economic and political purposes. When it comes to racialised groups and marginalised communities though, vaccine hesitancy and rejection is intertwined with a macabre history of appropriation of individual bodies of those same vulnerable populations by the health and scientific authorities integrated in the oppressive apparatus.

In the US, for example, it is not difficult to link the hesitancy of black and brown communities to practices that go from neglect and exclusion of healthcare provision to outright abusive and criminal (un)scientific practices, such as the infamous utilisation of black and brown bodies in poor communities as experimentation subjects.

A viral narrative has more chances of survival and growth when it repurposes and instrumentalises a credible threat. Trust-building does not happen overnight, particularly after decades of trust wrecking policies and abuses.

High-income countries are jeopardising humanity's global immunisation effort by protecting their citizens first while letting the virus reproduce and mutate in the rest of the world.

In the same way, Israelis are endangering Palestinian lives and jeopardising its own inoculation campaign by ignoring that, regardless of the vaccine apartheid policies, local populations live and work together, no matter their creed, ideological and national affiliations.

The warning for rich countries and Israel is the same: if vaccine nationalism and vaccine apartheid persist, sooner or later the virus will jump the immunological barrier and no walls will prevent it from sowing more death and misery at home and abroad.

Hugo Leal is a Research Associate at the University of Cambridge

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MENA Solidarity Research Report No.1



TRADE UNIONS AND THE ALGERIAN UPRISING

A Research Report by MENA Solidarity Network



By Hamza Hamouchene, Samir Larabi and Shelagh Smith

Contents include: A year of the Hirak - History of the Algerian workers' movement - The struggle in Kabylia - Teachers drive union change - Trade unions and the Hirak - Britain's role in Algeria - Political prisoners and repression - A guide to solidarity action

AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD AT WWW.MENASOLIDARITYNETWORK.COM

‘We’re not machines for birthing children’

Egyptian women speak out against sexist new laws

Changes to laws which control women’s rights in marriage, custody of children after divorce have sparked online campaigns as women challenge a sexist system, **H Hasan** reports.

A draft of a new Personal Status Law issued by the Egyptian Cabinet has sparked widespread controversy over social media regarding gender equality and the position of women in Egypt.

The draft law, yet to be reviewed by the Egyptian Parliament, would prevent women from signing their own contract of marriage, requiring instead the signature of a male guardian. Moreover, it gives the right to any male member of the family to annul the marriage contract within a year if he deems it “unequal”.

Among the most controversial articles of the draft law are those relating to custody of children after divorce. According to the draft, a mother who has guardianship over her children would be prevented from making decisions on their behalf regarding educational, legal and medical matters. She would not be able to travel with them without the consent of the father nor register a birth, obtain a passport, nor open a bank account in their name.

According to the Egyptian Council for Women’s Rights, the draft law does not recognise the legal status and capacity of women. Thus, “the legal personality of women is... abolished and [they are] viewed as incapacitated persons. Moreover, any right for mothers to have a say in the lives of their young children is eliminated” which means that her role is reduced to merely “a machine for birthing children.”

Taking to social media under the hashtag “alwilaya haqqi” (Guardianship

is my right) many Egyptian women have criticised not only the new draft law but also existing laws regarding women’s legal status.

Existing laws restrict the capacity of women in simple matters like renting a hotel room by themselves. Critics offered their own personal stories of situations where their lives have been restricted by these unfair and derogatory laws.

One woman who took part in the campaign spoke about the difficulty she faced when she tried to finalise her formal documents to join her father who works abroad. She could not prove that she was not married until her uncle gave his consent.

According to the draft law, a mother who has guardianship over her children would be prevented from making decisions on their behalf regarding educational, legal and medical matters.

A number of women explained that they have been prevented from moving their children from one school to another or applying for a place in a new school. Many of the cases do not even concern divorce and dispute but simply difficulties faced when the father is working abroad.

While criticism is most substantially being voiced from feminist perspectives, there is also significant disagreement with the draft and the existing laws from religious and Islamist communities.

One member of the campaign, blogging under initials S.H., urged people with religious affiliations to oppose the laws. She took the perspective that the majority of the 100,000+ political prisoners in Egypt are from Islamist groups, and in most cases, the wives or the mothers of these prisoners are the

ones who support the family financially and emotionally, prepare for the prison visits, and finalise any paperwork in the public offices and schools. Therefore, these laws also have a religious bearing.

Historically speaking the most recent reforms made to Personal Status laws were introduced in the President Mubarak era in 2000. It is believed that these changes came as a favour to influential figures in Mubarak’s regime. However, they eventually granted ordinary women more freedoms. Among the changes introduced was the al-Khul’ law which gives women the legal right to initiate a divorce.

According to this law, women can be granted a divorce in exchange for her dowry. Also introduced was a new marriage contract which includes a blank page to write down any stipulations from both parties. Although these changes were based solidly on one or more of the four Islamic law schools, they caused heated controversy and stirred public discussion.

One way to consider the newly proposed draft of the Personal Status Law is through the increasing militarisation of public life in Egypt. This broader context is one in which civilians are viewed as vulnerable, incapacitated people who need constant protection and surveillance from a powerful masculine figure, similar to the derogatory views of women.

This view is underscored by Egyptian military sponsored propaganda. The recent film al-Mamar (The Passage), for instance, characterises civilians in sharp contrast to the heroic image of their military counterparts.

The campaign “alwilaya haqqi” is fighting to pressure the Egyptian parliament into make essential changes. It gives us hope that there is still room for expressing opposing views in an increasingly repressive Egypt.



'Our demands are legitimate' say striking firefighters in Algiers | Photo: Cosyfop via Facebook

'We strike for dignity'

Algerian workers in revolt

A powerful wave of workers' struggles has rocked Algeria in recent weeks. **Shelagh Smith** investigates how the battles in the workplaces have evolved alongside the Hirak protest movement.

More than two years since the Hirak protest movement erupted in Algeria against a fifth mandate for President Bouteflika and the regime which has ruled Algeria since independence in 1962, the struggle continues. The coronavirus epidemic of 2020 did what the repressive police and military apparatus couldn't - it forced the twice-weekly protests from the streets.

President Tebboune was elected in December 2019 despite an abstention rate of over 60 percent. His referendum on Constitutional reform organised in the midst of the health crisis had an abstention rate of 77 percent. Now the regime is trying to gain legitimacy through talks with leaders of pro-regime, liberal and Islamic parties in advance of legislative elections on 12 June, which it is claimed will usher in a government of national unity. "Neither the presidential elections nor the referendum failed to solve the problem of democracy or legitimacy. These elections will only worsen the crisis" said

the veteran lawyer and human rights activist Mustapha Bouchachi.

Indeed, repression has increased against the popular movement the Hirak, which returned to the streets on 22 February, its second anniversary, although the numbers are reduced from pre-Covid times. The regime released around 40 prisoners of conscience on 22 February, with the aim of preparing the ground for its roadmap. But as protests resumed, dozens of activists were detained.

There have been many arrests, long prison sentences, brutality and sexual harassment of demonstrators, the most recent being of a 15-year-old boy Said Chetouane. At the end of April there were 72 political detainees, according to the CNLD (National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees).

The end of the march in Algiers on 30 April was met with brutal repression, just like that suffered by the demonstrators in Oran, Tiaret and Annaba in recent weeks.

Most of those arrested on the



'We are standing firm,' school teachers have joined the strikes | Photo: Cosyfop via Facebook

marches are released soon afterwards, but many are kept in preventive detention. 23 demonstrators arrested on 3 April have been on hunger strike since then and refuse to give up.

A collective of several human rights organisations has launched an open letter to national and international opinion on their case "before it is too late." They affirm that "their detention is an attack on the fundamental principle enshrined in the Constitution and the human rights texts ratified by Algeria, namely, freedom of expression and peaceful demonstration."

At the same time there has been a springtime of industrial disputes and strikes since April, against a background of social and economic crisis. The main issues are wage increases, payment of wage arrears, the protection of jobs, respect for union rights and retirement after 32 years of service.

A beacon of this revival of workers struggle is the 10-month-long strike at Numilog in Bejaïa, part of the Cevital group owned by oligarch Issad Rebrab. 196 workers remain sacked, despite 13 court decisions in favour of their reinstatement and respect for the right to organise. The strikers face police repression and lack of support from the leadership of the UGTA union. Dozens of families have been without pay for several months in the midst of the economic crisis. Despite this they continue to organise sit-ins and marches.

On 7 April there was a nationwide strike by health workers who provided only a minimum service. The turnout varied but reached over 90 percent in some hospitals. Unions are demanding decent salaries, and pointed out that

220 health workers had died during the crisis, of whom 176 were doctors. The president of the SNPSP (National Union of Public Health Practitioners) said: "We want real and radical solutions. Enough of the ad hoc solutions. We need living wages worthy of the White Army".

The president of the SNECHU (National Union of Teachers, Researchers and Hospital Academics) added: "We have been campaigning for dignity for years. We had pledges from a dozen ministers without any real change. Today we are saying 'no' for the umpteenth time. We are prepared to go far beyond a single day of protest. Do not expect us to be silent until we see our demands met."

"We are prepared to go far beyond a single day of protest. Do not expect us to be silent until we see our demands met."

In addition to better salaries, the unions are demanding the creation of a public service for the health sector, the fulfillment of President Tebboune's promises of Covid bonuses which have still not been paid, and recognition of Covid as an occupational disease. The president of SAP (National Paramedics Union) said that health workers faced the situation as soldiers and some left their lives in the arena of the fight against the virus, yet their children are left with no insurance.

A strike by teachers in Oran in mid-April has spread across the country to become a movement. In some areas, such as Setif, this is independent of

the trade unions, who some teachers feel are not defending their interests. The strike is open ended, and classes closed, with some administrators joining in. At the end of April, hundreds of education workers besieged the Education Directorate to express their determination to continue the "fight for dignity." They threatened to boycott future examinations if their demands are not met. "Too many broken promises, too much contempt from the authorities!" said a teacher to explain the persistence of the movement.

For the demonstrators, the whole education system must change to restore respect, and give pupils access to a quality education. Their demands include an increase in the basic salary, with wages to be paid on time. But they are also calling for the revision of school curricula and the content of school books. Many teachers, especially contract workers, feel treated with contempt, hence the call for dignity, and for the creation of permanent posts.

At the end of April three education unions called a national one day strike: SATEF, UNPEF and CELA. "More strikes are to be expected. We are not done yet," threatened the general secretary of the Algerian high school council (CLA). "The sector has been in turmoil for two weeks, characterised by strikes and rallies of different unions without anyone worrying. The cup is full and the education workers can no longer take it. They are on the verge of explosion and everyone has been warned."

In April the SAFI (Autonomous union of tax officials) held two strikes, due to their miserable wages and deplorable working conditions.

For the second time, commercial control and anti-fraud officers in the SNTC (National Union of Workers in the Ministry of Commerce), affiliated with the UGTA central, held a four-day nationwide strike in April, causing a blockage of goods at ports and airports.

On 25 April hundreds of firefighters struck and staged sit-ins at their various headquarters. The protest had started in El-Herrach on 18 April and then spread to all cities a week later. More than 800 firefighters and civil protection agents responded to the strike call launched by their colleagues "independently and not through a union," according to strikers on social media. They are demanding an increase in their very low basic salary, financial compensation for the 80 hours worked per week, and a Covid bonus, as is the case in the medical profession.

Then on 2 May one thousand firefighters demonstrated in Algiers in a "march for dignity." They were met with a wall of riot police, tear gas and rubber bullets. They managed to reach their headquarters, where they refused any negotiation until one of their colleagues was released. They also demanded the reinstatement of 36 sacked colleagues, and backdated Covid bonuses. The Minister of the Interior accused them of destabilising the country.

Nine union sections affiliated to the regional office of SNAPAP, the National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Staff, called for a day of protest on 6 May against the insecurity and mismanagement suffered by workers, teachers and students at Mouloud Mammeri University in Tizi Ouzou. Technical staff in the ATS union struck for almost a month, the rectorate was closed for two months by students, most departments of the university have been paralysed, and yet the university claims all is well. Several months after the start of the strike movement, SNAPAP is now calling for the rector of the university to go.

Postal workers began their protest movement on April 12. Despite threats from the management of Algeria Post to fire all those who continued the strike, the postal workers remain determined to "wrest back their rights" and "eliminate injustices." Even though the strike started on the basis of calls launched on social networks, not a trade union, there has been a growing and significant mobilisation.

Other strikes have taken place by port workers in Algiers, workers in BASP and SONATRACH (Petroleum Sector) as



Protests continue despite repression | Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

well as workers in construction, textiles, industrial vehicles, construction and universities.

A thousand firefighters demonstrated in Algiers in a "march for dignity." They were met with a wall of riot police, tear gas and rubber bullets.

Added to this are the struggles over unemployment, especially in the south of the country, and over housing and other issues. The absence of a unified struggle of the labour movement, social movements and the Hirak has enabled the regime to use repression against activists and journalists, often under the pretext of attacking "national unity" and "security of the state."

A call was made in March in Bejaia to establish a national committee in defense of the public sector, public enterprises, jobs, the gains of workers, and the social gains of independence, by the CST (Workers' Solidarity Committee), which involves worker activists from a number of trade unions. The CST points out that the government's offensives have augmented since the damage inflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic: thousands of businesses have closed, hundreds of

thousands of workers made redundant or left without wages for several months. The list is long:

ENIEM (electrical goods manufacturer), a public company in Tizi-Ouzou; ENAD in Bouira (manufacturer of detergents and cleaning products) where workers threatened mass suicide in February; NUMILOG, a subsidiary of CEVITAL (transport of goods); EPB port company in Bejaia; SOMACOB brickworks in Seddouk; steelworks El-Hadjar in Annaba; Africaver glass company in Jijel; a Renault factory in Oran; and the Brandt home appliance factory in Sétif, whose workers are fighting to maintain their business and their jobs.

The CST also says the government intends to privatise the public banks, to "reform" and to privatise the public industrial sector. It has announced the end of state subsidies for basic necessities and for health, education, universities, water, transport, housing, fuel, etc., which are the basis of the social nature of the Algerian state. This will further worsen the already precarious situation of workers and their families.

[Go to page 24 for more details of how to take action in solidarity with Algerian activists.](#)



Huge solidarity campaign in Italy wins citizenship for Patrick Zaki

Irang Bak

In Italy the solidarity campaign with Patrick Zaki, a graduate student at University of Bologna, human rights activist and a socialist arrested in Egypt last year, has drawn huge support from the public.

The Italian senate decided to grant Zaki honorary citizenship: 204 members voted in favour out of 241 members present with no objection to the decision.

This came after more than 200,000 Italians signed a petition demanding Zaki's freedom and granting him Italian citizenship in support. More than 50 Italian cities also decided to grant citizenship to Zaki.

University campuses across Italy have seen a wave of activism by students, including actions highlighting how Patrick is missing from lectures by placing cardboard cutouts of his silhouette in lecture halls and libraries.



Universities across Italy have called for Patrick's release | Photo: Patrick Libero via Facebook

Trade unionist Khalil Rizk released as campaign for detainees continues

Irang Bak

Activists in Egypt told Egypt Solidarity Initiative that trade unionist Khalil Rizk, whose case we highlighted earlier this year, has now been released from prison.

In February, Egypt Solidarity Initiative launched a campaign demanding the release of detained Egyptian activists and medical treatment for Hisham Fouad, a socialist activist and a journalist, whose health

has been deteriorating due to the inhumane conditions in Egyptian prisons.

Trade unions in the UK responded to the campaign with solidarity. Members of Unison in the London Fire Authority issued a statement condemning the Egyptian authorities and demanding immediate medical treatment for Hisham Fouad. This statement was also sent to the Egyptian embassy in London.

Members of the German parliament also issued a statement calling for the release of political prisoners in Egypt, highlighting the case of socialist activists Hisham Fouad, Ayman Abdel-Moati, Haitham Mohamedain, Mahienour el-Masri, Khalil Rizk and Patrick Zaki.

Signatories included Michel Brandt, Member of Parliament for Die LINKE parliamentary group, Member of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid and Christine

Buchholz, Member of Parliament for Die LINKE parliamentary group, Member of the Defense Committee.

Currently more than 60,000 political prisoners are held in jail in Egypt on trumped-up charges such as "being a member of a terrorist organisation" and "spreading lies."

What you can do:

- **Pass a resolution in your union branch calling for the release of the detainees**
- **Write to your MP condemning British government support for the Egyptian regime**
- **Send a letter of protest to the Egyptian embassy**
- **Share news of the campaign on social media**

Go to www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org for more information

Algerian activists appeal for solidarity as repression intensifies

Shelagh Smith

The Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) reported on 25 May a serious escalation in the repression and violence facing the opposition to the Algerian regime.

A few days before the parliamentary elections on 12 June which are supposed to bring about a 'New Algeria', the regime is resorting to all-out repression against the peaceful Hirak protests, the democratic opposition, civil society, independent journalists and all dissenting voices.

In a statement on Facebook on 25 May, Said Salhi, Vice President of LADDH stated: "2,000 arrests in two weeks, 175 prisoners of conscience in 3 months since President Tebboune's pardon last February, hundreds of Hirakists on bail, one journalist in prison and others under judicial control, political parties threatened with dissolution, associations too."

On 14 May the 117th Friday of popular protest against the regime was marked by fierce repression and dozens of arrests. In Algiers, journalists and photographers from the online press, news agency correspondents, such as AFP and Reuters were also arrested by the security services. Arrested again was the journalist Khaled Drareni who spent 10 months in prison last year. Female journalist KENZA Khattou was violently arrested in Algiers.

Several opposition political parties and organisations have been threatened by the Ministry of the Interior with dissolution: the PST (Socialist Workers Party), the UCP (Union for Change and Progress), the RAJ (Youth Action Assembly), the PT (Workers Party), the MDS (Democratic and Social Movement), the RCD (Rally for Culture and Democracy) and the association in the heart of the popular quarter in Algiers, SOS Bab El Oued.

On 22 May, the general secretary of the PST Mahmoud Rechidi announced that "the authorities have



Journalist KENZA Khattou was violently arrested | Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

initiated summary proceedings for the provisional suspension of the PST, all its political activities and the closure of its premises". He appealed for unconditional support for the comrades of the PST.

Many political leaders and activists have been harassed and arrested, such as Wahid Ben Halla (Leader of the MDS), Mohcen Belabbes (President of the RCD) and Ali Laskri (Leader of the FFS).

At least 3,000 individuals, including human rights defenders and peaceful protesters, have been arbitrarily arrested since 18 February 2021.

On 29 April in Oran, three members of The Algerian League for The Defence of Human Rights (LADDH), along with 12 other Hirak activists, were charged with belonging to a terrorist or subversive organisation, which could lead to twenty years' imprisonment.

Kaddour Chouicha is a university lecturer, and vice president of LADDH. Said Boudour is a journalist, and works to defend the rights of migrants and political prisoners. Jamila Loukil is a women's rights defender and journalist covering the peaceful Hirak demonstrations in Oran.

These new terrorism charges constitute a dangerous escalation in

attacks against journalists and human rights defenders, and the Hirak peaceful protest movement itself.

On 18 May the High Security Council chaired by President Tebboune placed two organisations based abroad on the list of "terrorist organisations": MAK and Rachad. MAK (Movement for the self-determination of Kabylia) arose out of the "Black Spring" of 2001, when protests in Kabylia were violently repressed, leaving 126 Kabyles dead and thousands severely injured. On the conservative wing of the Hirak protest is the Rachad movement, founded in 2007 by, amongst others, former activists from the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front).

Although both organisations have their critics, the regime is aiming to criminalise political organisations which do not follow its imposition of the 12 June elections.

What you can do:

- **Send a message of solidarity to the organisations threatened with dissolution via MENA solidarity on Facebook**
- **Pass a resolution in your union branch**



Protests across Britain for Palestine on 15 May: Clockwise from top left - London, Leeds and Brighton | Photos: Margot Hill, Jo Gilmore and Christian Hogsberg

Surge in protests boosts activism for Palestine

Anne Alexander

Hundreds of thousands took to the streets for Palestine on 15 and 22 May in London, with thousands joining protests elsewhere around Britain.

Many universities have seen a resurgence of Palestine solidarity activism, despite the pressure from pro-Israeli groups and the government on Higher Education institutions to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism. Over 1600 students, alumni and staff and 34 student societies at the University of Cambridge backed an open letter to the Vice Chancellor

initiated by the Palestine Solidarity society calling on the university to break its links with BAE Systems and Caterpillar because of their role in enabling Israeli military attacks and the destruction of Palestinian homes.

"Palestinians' daily lives are defined by apartheid structures of oppression," noted the letter. "The continuation of this violent system is only possible because of the impunity granted to Israel and the abhorrent complicity of countries and institutions around the world— including the University of Cambridge."

Students and staff in Cambridge were not alone: thousands of academics and students across the world added their names to statements in solidarity with Palestine in recent weeks, according to the BDS movement website. Many explicitly endorsed the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. Among those taking action were:

- 120 Gender Studies departments in the USA
- 40 university departments in the Netherlands
- 24 departments, academic programmes, unions and student unions in Belgium
- 2800 healthcare workers, scholars, researchers, and students in Canada

The UCU union which represents 120,000 academic and academic-related staff debated motions in solidarity with Palestine at its annual congress, and opposed to the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

The battle to defend the right to speak for Palestine in workplaces, universities, schools and colleges remains intense however, as government ministers announced plans to prevent "publicly funded bodies" from supporting BDS.



Italian dockers block Israeli ship in solidarity with Palestine

Gianni Del Panta

Over the last years, the Italian ports have seen the development of a long series of protests and strikes against the passage and loading of ships carrying military equipment.

In Genoa the CALP (Collettivo Autonomo Lavoratori Portuali – Dockworkers' Autonomous Collective) has repeatedly struggled against Saudi ships filled with weapons and military vehicles that were subsequently used in the Yemen war. A few weeks ago, however, a very similar protest against a ship heading towards the port of Ashdod in Israel, the Asiatic Island, developed in Livorno. *Middle East Solidarity* spoke to one of the dockers involved.

What happened when you heard the ship was heading for Livorno?

The association Weapon Watch, which monitors the traffic of weapons in the European and Mediterranean ports, informed some members of the CALP that the Asiatic Island was arriving in Livorno. The ship had already stopped in Genoa, where it

loaded military equipment such as munitions and explosives during the night and in secret. The CALP immediately contacted us to spread the news. We discovered that the Asiatic Island's last stop would be the port of Ashdod in Israel. This made clear that the war material would have been used in the war of aggression that the Israeli state was conducting against Palestinians.

And you refused to be part of such atrocities. Is that right?

Exactly. We immediately started to search for the terminal in which the ship would dock. Once we discovered that it was the terminal Darsena Toscana (Tuscany harbour), we reached some of the colleagues who work there and are more politicised. In case the Asiatic Island had loaded military equipment, many workers declared that they would have gone on strike. There were a lot of rumours about this, and we received several reports about the presence of dozens of military vehicles in a terminal very close to that in which the ship was docked. Eventually, even thanks to our mobilisation, the ship did not load any military equipment and rapidly left the port of Livorno.

Did the previous protests and strikes in the port of Genoa play any role in inspiring your mobilisation?

Dockers in Genoa and above all the CALP were the very first to seriously question the passage and loading of

ships with military equipment in the Italian ports. In so doing, they were a point of reference and a source of inspiration for us. Even more, they have shed light on something that is very relevant for all dockers. There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, there is a clear and easy to depict moral issue: we do not want to be part of states that attack civilians or fight wars. On the other, loading military equipment and working on or next to ships that carry explosives is particularly risky for us. This problem is very relevant for a port such as Livorno, which has traditionally seen the passage of military equipment, often heading to the nearby American military base of Camp Darby.

On 8 May, a meeting among workers of various Italian ports was held in Genoa. Who attended the meeting and what are the main reasons for this kind of initiative?

In addition to the comrades from Genoa who hosted the meeting, there were also dockers from Livorno, Trieste and Civitavecchia. We really hope to include workers from important ports of the South such as Napoli and Taranto in the near future. Our goal is to achieve a permanent form of collaboration among the most radical Italian ports. Initiatives like the meeting in Genoa help bring together workers coming from different port cities. It shows us, moreover, that we are not alone in our struggles.



Disabled activists join a protest in Tunisia in 2011 | Photo: Nasser Nouri

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MENA Solidarity is a network of activists from different unions in the UK engaged in building solidarity for struggle to win social justice and workers' rights in the Middle East. We are supported by the UCU, PCS and NEU unions and a number of other trade union regions and branches.

BAHRAIN WATCH

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bahrainwatch.org

Bahrain Watch is an independent research and advocacy organisation formed in February 2012 that seeks to promote effective, transparent and accountable governance in Bahrain.

Egypt
مصر
SOLIDARITY

Egypt Solidarity

egyptsolidarityinitiative.org

Egypt Solidarity launched on 11 February 2014, the third anniversary of the fall of Mubarak, in order to campaign in defence of democratic rights in Egypt.