

Workers' movement

Source of Egyptian uprising

Everyone knows that the protests in Tahrir Square ultimately brought down the Egyptian government and that the youth movement played a big part in this. But as **Shamil Jeppie** writes few people know that the workers' movement from 2006 played a large part in giving Egyptians the confidence to overthrow a corrupt government.

On 11 February 2011 Hosni Mubarak gave in to demands of the Egyptian people that he leave his position. Egyptians – men and women, young and old, and from all religious affiliations and class backgrounds – had been occupying the main square in Cairo, Tahrir (Liberation) Square, since January 25 to express their opposition to the state.

Mubarak was in office since 1981. He ran a corrupt government that pretended to be democratic. Elections were rigged and opposition activists and politicians were imprisoned or 'disappeared'. His government applied an Emergency Law, which meant the military and state security services could resort to extra-judicial measures to ensure 'law and order'.

The Egyptian state also received high levels of US aid because the US saw it as a strategic regional partner, a friend of Israel, and it suppressed radical Islamic activism.

Mubarak's government tried to make Egypt hospitable to foreign investment by suppressing an independent labour movement. The government tried, especially in the 1990s, to speed up

privatisation of the economy. This was accompanied by large-scale corruption as state assets were handed out cheaply to family and friends of leading party members.

Egyptians knew about these deals and they are currently being investigated, with Mubarak's sons and many of his former ministers taken into custody.

Whether these investigations will make any difference to the masses remains to be seen. Will the labour force, estimated at 25 million in 2010, benefit from the fall of the Mubarak government?

WORKERS TAKE ACTION

The state was unconcerned about workers' rights and tried through legal and extra-legal means to suppress their mobilisation. Wages were often so low that even workers in full employment could not feed their families. Holding two jobs was also not enough to make ends meet.

Egypt has no minimum wage and workers were at the mercy of management in the private and public sectors. Indeed, Egypt was suspended from the ILO (International Labour Organization) because of very poor work conditions. The government recognised only an

official union run by members of the ruling party which acted against workers.

Workers were among tens of thousands who occupied Tahrir Square and within days of Mubarak's departure workers in the Helwan Governate, Mahalla al-kubra, Nasr City, Tanta, 10th of Ramadan City, Ismailiyyah and elsewhere went on strike. At the Suez Canal workers also threatened to go on hunger strike.

The demands were basic and similar: higher wages, a living wage. There were specific demands too: permanent contracts, unpaid bonuses and unfulfilled promotions. There were also protests at the headquarters of the official Egyptian Trades Union Federation, which had never acted in the interest of workers.

Strikes were spontaneous and short but they spread throughout the country for weeks. The state could not react to worker actions partly because the security apparatus was in disarray by this time and the extent of labour action surprised the state and bosses.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces that took charge after Mubarak's departure issued

a decree within weeks banning all strikes saying they could destabilise the country. The fear of 'counter-revolutionary' forces in the disbanded state security services and the former ruling party were engaging in action to delegitimise the protestors.

On the other hand, the new cabinet said that new legislation on minimum wages and recognition of independent unions would be introduced within six months. The struggle of labour is indeed in a new phase.

BACKGROUND TO UNREST AND STRIKES

In these strikes in a new era in Egypt, workers have made the important point that collective action will become even more important in Egypt.

Egypt has a long history of labour mobilisation especially in the post-Second World War period. However, in recent years there was an insurgent character to worker action. This began in the mid-1980s which also witnessed support groups emerging to publicise worker struggles and take them outside the factories.

Some of these solidarity activists were workers themselves, some from an older generation of socialist activists. In recent years youth aware of the power of the internet and mobile phones also joined worker support groups. At most 15% of Egyptians have access to the internet and these young people were among them.

The Egyptian Trade Union Federation and its affiliates never brought workers out on strike. Collective action has for decades been staged by workers themselves without official union backing. Union officials blatantly took the side of management and the state treated strikes as a security matter. Yet there were numerous reasons for workers to strike as living standards declined and wages stagnated.

The growing militancy of workers in the past five years is clear from these figures. In 2005 there were around 200 strikes in Egypt; in 2006 about 220 strikes; in 2007 strike action rose to just over 600 and over 600 strikes and sit-ins occurred in 2008.

The industrial strike of December 2006 was the largest in more than 60 years. At a state-owned textile factory in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla al-kubra, 100kms north of Cairo, 24 000 workers went on strike. They demanded the bonuses that the prime minister had promised.

It was an important turning-point in breaking down working class fear of the authorities. News about this strike spread widely and had a significant impact on workers in other sections of Egyptian society opposed to the regime. In September 2007 there were further strikes pressing the same demands for increases, bonuses and against corruption. Some 55 000 real estate tax collectors downed tools at the end of 2007 and strikes erupted in various sectors in state and private enterprises.

Each strike had its demands but the government's commitment to implement World Bank and IMF economic restructuring policies in the past two decades provides the larger context for these worker actions. The worker protestors were always intimidated and none of the strikes was sustained, but they made a major difference to workers giving them confidence to act collectively.

The 'April 6' youth movement, which played such an important role in the recent insurgency, was named after the day in 2008 when a strike was called to demand a national minimum wage.

This growing militancy of workers was not much covered by the highly censored media. Many outbursts were under-reported such as the sustained uprisings

in small Nile Delta towns which showed the anger of ordinary poorly-organised Egyptians.

There had been ongoing battles between police thugs and small-town dwellers over clean water and other neglected services. Hundreds of thousands of people had participated over the past three years in these protests. High inflation, stagnant wages for about 20 years, and an almost complete breakdown in services across the country provided ripe conditions for unrest.

CONCLUSION

What Egyptians call the '25 January revolution' should be seen as part of a longer struggle in which a significant role was played by worker strikes, protests and sit-ins from 2006 and growing militancy since then.

There has been an emphasis on the role of youth and the new media in overthrowing Mubarak's government but Western media gave no coverage to the role of worker and local struggles throughout Egypt in the period leading up to the occupation of Tahrir Square.

Egypt is often described as the most important Arab country because it has the largest Arabic-speaking population. Its media and popular culture have always spread quickly throughout the Arabic world, and politically it has tended to give leadership in the region. It must be added that it has the largest working class in the region with a capacity for militancy.

The formation of an independent democratic labour movement acting in the interests of the working class is a major achievement of the insurgency that began in January this year.

Shamil Jeppie is a senior researcher and associate professor in the Institute for the Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town.

Cracks appear in Mubarak-Era labour body

The state-controlled trade union federation that for over half a century was employed by Egyptian rulers to suppress workers' protests and mobilise voters for sham elections appears to be crumbling with the recent ousting of President Hosni Mubarak.

'There is a movement against state control of unions,' says Mohamed Trabelsi, a specialist on union activities at the International Labour Organisation (ILO). 'You now have many strikes and labour protests in Egypt, and workers in many sectors have started to organise and form free and independent unions.'

Until recently, all union activities and finance in Egypt fell under the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). Membership in the state-controlled body was mandatory for most public sector employees, and union dues were automatically deducted from their salaries.

Mubarak carefully orchestrated the federation's elections during his 30-year rule to ensure that union heads were loyal to the regime. ETUF in turn mobilised its four million members for pro-government rallies and bussed workers to polling stations during general elections to vote for the ruling party.

It also suppressed strikes to ensure the state had a steady supply of cheap labour.

'Strikes were only allowed with ETUF permission, which was granted only once,' explains Tamer Fathy, a spokesman for the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services.

Cracks had appeared in ETUF's authority while Mubarak was in power. Now that he is gone, and his ruling party in tatters, workers are pressing to have the federation dissolved and its union heads held accountable.

Prosecutors are also investigating

corruption allegations against ETUF president Hussein Megawer. He is also under separate investigation for his alleged role in organising thugs to attack pro-democracy protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square on 2 February.

The official trade union federation's power has been on the wane since late 2006, when textile workers in the northern industrial town of Mahalla El-Kubra held a factory sit-in to protest unpaid bonuses. Since then, more than 3 000 labour protests have been organised across Egypt, involving over two million workers in nearly every sector.

In most instances, striking workers have demanded higher wages and better working conditions as well as the removal of corrupt company managers.

Many workers also accuse ETUF union heads most of whom were high ranking members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party of siding with the government and factory owners against them during labour protests, and have called for their impeachment. Their dissatisfaction with the state-backed federation prompted demands for independent unions that are accountable to their members.

Property tax collectors were the first to break from ETUF's sphere of influence, establishing the Real Estate Tax Authority Union in 2009, Egypt's first autonomous trade union since 1957. Their historic act encouraged workers in other sectors to follow suit.

Labour leaders recently announced the formation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), a feisty rival to ETUF that groups the independent unions of property tax collectors, teachers, health technicians and pensioners. The upstart labour body claims to represent over 200 000 workers and has received thousands

of membership requests in various sectors.

'This is the time for organising strong, independent unions that are far from government influence and are fully democratic,' says Fathy. 'Workers want strong representation to be able to sit with their employers and negotiate for better wages and benefits.'

Egypt's new labour minister, Ahmed El-Borai, is a legal expert on organised labour and a staunch supporter of independent unions. His appointment, which came after protesters adamantly rejected the previous government's nomination of ETUF treasurer Ismail Fahmy, has cast doubts on ETUF's future.

At a labour conference in March, El-Borai declared the inalienable right of workers to form independent labour unions and federations in accordance with international labour conventions that Egypt has ratified but long ignored.

The minister also cancelled all state subsidies to ETUF, estimated at nearly US \$15-million US dollars a year. He said workers should be free to choose their representation, and declared an end to the practice of deducting mandatory ETUF membership fees from employees' salaries.

ETUF officials expect their embattled federation will weather the post-Mubarak storm, but sweeping changes in policy and leadership appear inevitable.

Given the pressure to reform, it appears unlikely that ETUF's leadership will remain in place until board elections, scheduled for November. Labour activists say no progress can be made until the regime loyalists are removed and a freely elected board is installed in their place. ■

Cam McGrath Cairo, 5 April 2011 (IPS)