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Labor’s Role in the Arab Uprisings and Beyond

IAN M. HARTSHORN

The Arab uprisings, starting in Tunisia in late 2010 and then spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, were far from the “proletarian revolution” feared or dreamed of in the twentieth century. A heterogeneous coalition of actors, temporarily bridging political, religious, and class divides, came together to push for change throughout the region, and the decisive action was often taken by military elites. The working class and institutions representing the interests of workers sought redress for their grievances in the revolutionary process. But few of their demands have been met. New political powers have emerged, but few of them are operating with the goal of improving workers’ lives.

Labor Shifts

Third in a series

During my fieldwork in Cairo in 2012, a worker told me that newly emboldened laborers wanted to tear down “all the Mubaraks in the company and factory.” In his view, Egypt’s patriarchal and dictatorial national politics had direct repercussions on the factory floor. Five years later, this symmetry sadly persists, with chaos or authoritarianism gripping labor relations as well as many governments in the region. Yet workers in the Middle East do not exist in isolation. Powerful global forces can either support reforms that lead to decent jobs and democratic institutions, or enable further unrest and authoritarianism.

BAD BARGAIN

Labor policy in the region is partly a function of labor-market conditions. States that are relatively abundant in labor tend to allow a limited number of national labor organizations. They have sought to control these organizations, and through them, workers, through a form of corporatism. Among

these countries are several that have experienced revolutionary ferment since 2011: Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. Other states that are relatively poor in labor tend to bring in foreign workers and exclude them from decision making, repressing attempts at unionization. The more repressive systems include those in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Another group of countries that allow trade unions but have had relatively less unrest includes Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Kuwait.

In Middle Eastern countries where trade unions operate legally, their existence has historically been tied to postindependence state building. Republics like Egypt and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s adopted socialist rhetoric and policies that included an expanded role for trade unions—but under the watchful eye of increasingly repressive regimes. An implicit, and sometimes explicit, bargain offered workers better wages, public employment, and tight labor markets in return for the unions’ promise to leave politics to the regime. Since the government was often the employer of last resort, the ranks of the public sector swelled. By the time fiscal crises hit in the 1980s, many of these regimes pivoted to more open economies and internationally mandated structural adjustments. The adjustments led to a weakening of labor’s power and an increasingly precarious working class.

Over 350 million people live in the Middle East and North Africa, a majority of whom would fall into the category of “working class and working poor” by any definition. Many are outside the employment system altogether. Overall unemployment stands at 12 percent; youth unemployment is in excess of 30 percent, according to a 2015 International Labor Organization (ILO) report; and 67 percent of those who have work are employed in the informal economy, the World Bank reported in 2012. The region also hosts 32 million international migrants, further complicating the task of

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providing services to workers and protecting their rights.

Many workers, both those organized into trade unions and those who were not, saw the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to improve their conditions. Whether their demands centered on increased workplace safety, improved wages, trade-union democracy, or independence from authoritarian regimes, the revolutionary slogan of “bread, freedom, and social justice” was their rallying cry.

The workers and the unions that claimed to be their representatives found a constellation of domestic and international forces arrayed against them. Just as postcolonial states in the 1950s and 1960s were bequeathed bloated bureaucracies and overdeveloped security structures, states after the Arab uprisings have inherited almost thirty years of so-called structural adjustments and neoliberal reforms. Often promoted by foreign donors and international financial institutions, the reforms have had mixed results, to say the least.

Both the changing nature of elite advice, and the way local authoritarian institutions interpret it, have left the very terms “adjustment” and “liberalization” close to meaningless. The liberalizations were often as distorted as the supposed macroeconomic imbalances they sought to correct, dependent as they were on factors including the state’s priorities, the different sets of cronies requiring appeasement, the foreign aid extracted from international patrons, and the price of natural resources.

For relatively labor-poor states in the Gulf, these policies often meant failed attempts to indigenize the workforce after generations of relying on foreign labor. Relatively labor-abundant states in North Africa attempted to restrict public-sector employment and roll back the last vestiges of socialized economies. In either case, putting labor to new purposes became a vital task in the years prior to the uprisings. Dealing with empowered workers frustrated and alienated by these changes has been a daunting task for ruling regimes, whether protests fundamentally changed them or not. In almost all cases, the barrier of fear was broken and citizens increased their demands on regimes, including economic demands.

REPRESSION AND REVOLUTION

External threats also challenge the region. In boom years, the Gulf absorbed excess labor from

other parts of the Middle East, decreasing unemployment in labor-abundant states and increasing the flow of remittances to them. But oil prices have dropped precipitously since 2011, leaving oil-exporting states scrambling to fill holes in their budgets, with little capacity left to fund neighbors directly or indirectly. Instability brought on by the revolutions has produced 16 million or more refugees or internally displaced people.

While the world economy has grown overall since 2011, many countries in the region remain mired in recession. States have reacted to the new political opening and economic challenges in several ways. Those that have the money to buy goodwill and quiescence have done so. Gulf states not only gave raises and bonuses to their own workers, but funded their favored governments throughout the region. Money also flowed in from the United States and Europe, both for standard defense expenditures and for new democracy promotion and consolidation efforts. Some states, like Tunisia, have rapidly expanded public spending.

Others have turned again to the international financial institutions, which continue to press for market liberalization and private sector-led growth, especially in employment.

With their economies stalled and workers’ expectations at an all-time high, countries throughout the region have faced an untenable set of competing demands: for higher wages in a time of tighter budgets, better industrial relations with fractured unions, and more foreign direct investment amid instability. Despite these new challenges, they are left with the same three options that have historically conditioned labor relations in the region: crush, co-opt, or cooperate. These options are neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive. Sometimes attempts at co-optation fail, leading to genuine cooperation. Occasionally the arrow goes in the other direction, as unions are slowly taken over by political forces. Unfortunately, given the persistence of authoritarian politics throughout the region, repression is all too common, sometimes with deadly results.

Some trade unions, even in the most repressive states, attempted to organize themselves and press for greater autonomy in the revolutionary moment. The Bahraini trade union, granted legal status in an earlier round of unrest in the early 2000s, spoke out forcefully. Along with other elements of civil society, the union was severely re-

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pressed in a Saudi-backed crackdown in Bahrain later in 2011. Elsewhere, Dubai has threatened striking workers with deportation and police violence. Palestinian workers have sued to gain access to the same labor courts as Israeli workers in settlements in the West Bank.

Even this repression pales in comparison with the experience of workers in active conflict zones. Workers and trade unions have been caught between competing factions and subjected to violence in Syria and Iraq. In states struggling for their survival and territorial integrity, workers' issues are given limited if any attention.

Despite lofty rhetoric about "justice" and "dignity," the changes wrought by the Arab uprisings were mostly political, when not entirely cosmetic. Transnational capital flows from the Gulf, the United States, and the European Union still have an impact on North African economies. Local labor markets continue to be characterized by reduced protections, limited representation, weak contracts, and job insecurity.

The political context for labor, however, has changed in those countries that have undergone shifts in ruling coalitions, perhaps most dramatically in Egypt and Tunisia. While crushing labor remains a dominant ruling model in the region, these two countries have experienced both cooperation and co-optation in the past five years. They might offer a vision of what a different Middle East could look like for workers and unions.

NORTH AFRICAN VANGUARD

Nowhere in the Middle East have the recent political changes been as thoroughgoing as on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Here, where the uprisings started following the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a young precarious worker in Tunisia's interior, more regimes have fallen than anywhere else. First, following a largely bloodless mass mobilization reminiscent of people-power movements in Eastern Europe and East Asia, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was forced from office and into exile. Next, a deadlier and less decisive protest movement in Egypt precipitated the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in a military intervention.

Finally, a protracted conflict led to the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya after a NATO intervention, but left chaos in its wake. Qaddafi's rule focused on destroying any Libyan institution that could threaten him, leaving a fractured military, limited opposition, and almost no civil society ca-

pable of consolidating power. Tunisia and Egypt, however, had to grapple not only with their newly empowered citizens but also with an array of legacy institutions.

Both countries' authoritarian regimes, entrenched from the 1950s until the recent revolutions, controlled and manipulated national-level trade unions to keep them quiet. The early bargains with labor went hand in hand with state planning and increased wages, giving the impression that workers were acquiescing. But as the regimes ossified, carrots were replaced by sticks, the more militant labor leaders were purged, and legitimate demands were repressed.

Structural adjustment policies were aimed at cutting debt and reducing public employment, a stronghold for national labor unions in both countries. Unions slowed but could not halt the market-based changes to the economy. Their influence declined in the 1990s, along with their membership rolls. Faced with growing internal threats, real or imagined, Egypt and Tunisia increased the presence and power of security services that were ready to crack down on any unrest, including industrial actions. A constant drive for more foreign direct investment yielded new "flexibilized" labor laws allowing for easier hiring and firing of workers. Meanwhile, in the growing informal sector, organized labor had no influence at all.

While long-simmering discontent over a host of issues provided the necessary preconditions for revolution in Egypt and Tunisia, workers were pushed past the tipping point in those countries earlier than most. An unprecedented wave of strikes broke out in Egypt in the mid-2000s, including thousands of industrial actions across the country. Tunisia similarly experienced unrest in its interior regions in 2008 and 2009, leading to arrests of worker-activists and their families.

Throughout this period, working-class activists experimented with new forms of organizing in response to the restrictions and pressure of co-optation on the national trade unions. Crusading law firms arose in Egypt, taking up the cases of the laid-off and exploited. Nontraditional unions were formed in Tunisia, including one for unemployed university graduates. All contributed to the sense of socioeconomic crisis, while offering new protest tactics to the broader society. When protests broke out in Tunisia following Bouazizi's death, the local office of the national trade union joined the protests.

The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), historically more decentralized and militant than its Egyptian counterpart, supported the revolution. Despite initially accepting a reconfigured version of the former regime, the union eventually rejected the “remnants” of Ben Ali’s dictatorship and embraced a call for free and fair elections. Spurred on by militant local members, the UGTT endorsed a transition plan and consulted on appointments of regional governors. By the time the first election was held in October 2011, the union was on the path of internal reform and a continued national role.

Egyptian workers entered the revolutionary process primarily as individuals. Despite representing more than four million workers, many of whom supported change, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) sided with the Mubarak regime. The union’s president, Hussein Megawar, was later indicted on charges that he organized the notorious February 2011 Camel Battle, in which horse- and camel-riding thugs attacked protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. But individual unionists were active in revolutionary groups, and many hoped that the opening in the political space could help reform industrial relations as well. A coalition of independent unions born of the mid-decade strike wave announced the formation of their new federation at a rally in Tahrir Square on January 30, 2011.

Independent unions in Tunisia also took advantage of the flourishing of civil society and attempted to organize alternatives to the dominant union. In both countries, independent unions reached out to those marginalized by the economic reforms of the 1990s and 2000s: the unemployed, public-sector employees, informal workers, and laborers in foreign-owned businesses. In each instance, the traditional structure for gathering and transmitting workers’ concerns to authorities had collapsed. The promise of the revolutions included the possibility of having someone new in power who would be receptive to workers’ demands.

Workers in both Egypt and Tunisia sought support in the form of training and financing from abroad. Some received training from unions in the United States and Europe. Others, to justify their organizing campaigns, invoked ILO conventions that their government had signed. Far from withdrawing from a globalized economy, these workers hoped to enjoy the benefits of international democratic and human rights norms.

FRAUGHT TRANSITIONS

Egypt’s post-Mubarak military interregnum showed some early signs of opening more space in the trade-union sector. A reformist friend of independent unions, Ahmed Hassan al-Borai, was appointed minister of manpower. He attempted to reorganize the regime-affiliated ETUF while also giving the new independent federations legal cover to organize. At the same time, however, the military authorities called for an end to work stoppages and labor protests, even threatening workers in several instances. As 2011 and 2012 wore on and the strike wave continued, the military leaders seemed increasingly disinclined to allow reforms. Al-Borai stepped down without passing a proposed trade-union law that would allow independent organizing and reform of the ETUF. Bread-and-butter concerns of workers slipped from national attention, as a simmering dispute between secular and Islamist forces threatened the political transition.

Egypt’s first postrevolutionary president, Mohamed Morsi, elected in 2012, came from the long-repressed Muslim Brotherhood movement. While the group tried to appeal to workers rhetorically, its actions focused on co-optation instead of cooperation. The Brotherhood sought influence in the old national trade-union confederation from the Mubarak era and stymied efforts to build a robust democratic alternative. That prop of the Mubarak regime survived the transition partly thanks to the unlikely support of the rising Islamist movement.

Despite its revolutionary rhetoric and commitment to “Islamicized” economic policy, the Brotherhood’s thinking had turned in a pro-business direction in the generation before the revolution. Many of its leading members were business owners, and their disposition toward workers’ demands was not terribly different from that of their predecessors in power. In any case, their differences with the country’s secular forces, notably the military, occupied much of the following year. Security deteriorated during Morsi’s presidency until conflict seemed unavoidable.

Tunisia’s post-Ben Ali era did not see the rise of a military regime. Political parties, many of which had ties with the UGTT, planned for a swift transition to democracy via open elections and the drafting of a new constitution. However, as in Egypt, electoral politics benefited the country’s Islamist forces, in this case the Ennahda party. Ennahda won a plurality of votes in 2011 and

formed an alliance with two center-left parties. The Troika government, as it was called, found itself stymied by industrial actions, much like its counterpart in Egypt.

The UGTT expanded its base with new members, secured more permanent contracts, and tested its strength by holding a general strike. Several competitors organized workers outside the UGTT. Empowered regional UGTT offices and quasi-independent workers' committees made it hard to tell which strikes were recognized by the union's central office and which were undertaken by local initiative.

Meanwhile, security in the country eroded, in part due to the difficulties of reforming Ben Ali's police state. The collapse of the Libyan regime created a larger North African base for insurgents. A series of high-profile assassinations of leftist politicians in 2013 stoked fears of secular-Islamist violence and threatened to derail Tunisia's democratic transition.

DIVERGENT OUTCOMES

The postrevolutionary hopes for democracy in both Egypt and Tunisia appeared destined for failure in 2013. Both countries had experienced political violence, an unprecedented strike wave, and gridlock in their respective constitutional assemblies.

In Egypt, mass protests against Morsi's rule triggered the intervention of the military, which removed him from power in 2014 and replaced him with General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The military once again appointed a minister of manpower from the ranks of the militant independent trade unions. But workers remained unable to make progress on their goal of reforming existing institutions or crafting new ones. A proposal for a new trade union law stalled again.

The military's security crackdown extended from the regime's Islamist opponents to liberal and leftist activists, including some with ties to the trade union movement. The right to protest was severely curtailed and the climate of fear had a chilling effect on trade union organizing. In its labor policies, the Sisi regime has focused entirely on "productivity" and ending industrial actions, even to the point of replacing striking workers with military conscripts. Labor has been decisively weakened.

Despite facing some of the same pressures as Egypt, Tunisia managed to right itself. The UGTT launched a "national dialogue" in an attempt to prevent an Egypt-like outcome. Political parties met under the union's auspices, and eventually Ennahda was forced to come to the negotiating table as well. The union recruited the national business association and lawyer's guild to form a "quartet" to guide the "transition within a transition." They succeeded in getting political parties to advance the work of the constitutional assembly, appoint a technocratic government, and set a date for new elections. Their work received international acclaim and they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

The new government has faced its own challenges, including clashes with the UGTT, but it has domestic and international legitimacy. A series of "unity" cabinets have attempted to push through much-needed reform legislation. President Beji Caid Essebsi has made clear his desire to bring all sectors of society into the government directly, including business and labor leaders. But the latest prime minister, Youseff Chahed, has so far been unable to produce such a grand bargain since his appointment by Essebsi in April 2016.

The UGTT has worked to

protect its independence despite strong regime pressure to formally join the government in pressing for a more liberalized economy and austerity measures. Whether it can continue to resist remains to be seen.

While the differences between Tunisia and Egypt were extensive, neither outcome was guaranteed. Egypt's military regimes have been eager to co-opt any labor leader, whether from the old trade union confederation or one of its competitors, who promises to end strikes. Tunisia's unions were riven by internal disputes during the transition and could have easily been co-opted by new parties. Both countries also face an uncertain future, in which domestic and international politics will both play a major role.

TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The Middle East and North Africa are sometimes seen as isolated and exceptional in world politics. The Arab uprisings suggest that they are anything but. Workers in Tunisia and Egypt regularly brought up workers' parties and workers'

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movements from around the world in conversations I have had with them over the past five years. Models and examples of worker engagement, from Brazil to Poland to the United States, were discussed and debated in the streets and union halls of the Arab world. Considering how labor in this region interacts with global forces may give us the best lens to judge the next steps in their political transitions.

Workers throughout the region drew inspiration from the workers and unionists who took an active part in the Arab revolutionary movements. Messages of solidarity came even from outside the region, including from trade unionists and public-sector employees in the United States and Europe. New types of contention and worker mobilization may yet affect those countries that did not experience major political transitions in the past several years. The contagion effect of the Arab uprisings was well documented, and is still a force, even if the tide of mass movements is receding. Workers in the region are finding new ways to engage with their colleagues around the world, reshaping norms and institutions.

Dealing with working-class issues and labor strife is hardly a new problem in world politics. The ILO, based on the idea of tripartite negotiation among workers, business, and the state, dates back to 1919. But labor has been slow to embrace its role as a transnational actor in the same way capital did in the late twentieth century. This has begun to change in the Middle East and North Africa. Trade unionists in Egypt and Tunisia shared information both explicitly and tacitly throughout their transitions. The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, a successor to organizations that worked with Polish trade unionists before the fall of communism, is active where possible in the region. The UGTT received expert advice on me-

diation and negotiation from Scandinavian trade unionists.

Since the late 1990s, the ILO has focused on several of its long-standing conventions seen as decisive in protecting rights at work. These "core labor standards" have been invoked explicitly in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Bahrain. Just as dissidents in the former Soviet Union once wielded the Helsinki Accords, workers under authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have laid claim to the right to organize under the core labor standards.

The process is slow and uneven. Some elements of transnational labor institutions have reverted to cooperating with co-opted unions to avoid provoking repression. Despite this, a labor genie is out of the bottle throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Whether through a rights-based discourse emerging from international agreements or by filling the domestic niche of interlocutor between competing social forces, working-class and labor organizations have new models that transcend their traditional subordinate roles in state building and regime maintenance.

Long hobbled by co-opted unions or violent repression, labor in the region is still challenged economically and politically, even if the old model of state-led growth and worker quiescence is unlikely to be revived. The model of free-market growth threatens a further erosion of labor power. But the Arab uprisings raised the hopes of workers throughout the region. Workers have broken the barrier of fear to express their demands, and are invoking a powerful rights discourse to pressure their governments. Whether they follow the path of Tunisia, strongly influencing political transitions, or Egypt, accepting co-optation and repression, will depend on their ability to mobilize resources both locally and internationally. ■