

**ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVE: THE ROLE OF
INDEPENDENT LABOR ORGANIZATIONS IN
THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION**

AHMED KAMEL

*Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics
Free University of Berlin*

The role of independent trade unions in the Egyptian revolution began some years ago, before the massive demonstrations in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011. The Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services and the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU) can be described as the main actors of the independent trade union movement before the revolution. In 2006, workers at the Mahala El Kobra spinning and weaving company organized a massive strike over cuts in their annual bonuses and the government's plans to privatize the company, which is the largest manufacturer in the country and employs around 27,000 workers. The rare victory of the Mahala workers and labor activists inspired thousands of workers in other workplaces to launch their own militant trade union actions with a large series of wildcat strikes, in which the independent labor movement was highly active in mobilizing the labor force.

Between 2006 and 2008, it was reported that dozens of strikes took place outside the formal trade union structure. In 2008, for example, tax collectors were able to establish the first ever independent trade union in Egypt (RETAU), which emerged from their strike demanding better wages and working conditions. On April 6–7, 2008, the city of Mahala El Kobra witnessed mass protests over bread prices and strikes by textile workers calling for better wages and working conditions, independent labor representation, and the resignation of the formal trade union committee at the Mahala El Kobra spinning and weaving company. The protests involved both workers and members of the general public.

The Mubarak government realized the threat posed by the action, and therefore it responded very brutally, killing and arresting a number of workers and demonstrators. However, the joint action by labor and the public served as a platform for the formulation of some initial public demands, for a minimum wage for all and the ending of high prices. Furthermore, such action saw the birth of the 6 April Political Movement, which was named after the 2008 protests in Mahala and played a prominent role in the mobilization for the Egyptian revolution.

The waves of labor protests and strikes between 2006 and 2011 have been described as the biggest in Egypt during the last 60 years. Indeed, it can be argued that workers in Egypt started their revolution in 2006, and contributed significantly to formulating the general demands of the revolution in the first place. They were also able, through these series of actions, to establish their own independent unions and organizations, in spite of the law's ban on independent unions and the threat of punishments for founding them. These independent organizations challenged the Mubarak regime and forced it to come to the table and negotiate. The workers' actions also served as an example to Egyptians as to why to revolt, what the outcomes would be, and what sacrifices would be involved. During the broader Egyptian revolution, labor activists and the independent unions were among the first forces to start demonstrating and to occupy Tahrir Square. They then successfully mobilized other Egyptians to join the revolt. On January 30, 2011, the independent trade unions came together to declare the foundation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) from Tahrir Square and immediately called for a general strike. Hundreds of thousands responded to the call. The workers' unity and their positive response to EFITU's call were among the important tools used to put pressure on Mubarak to step down, which he did on February 11, 2011. The revolution consolidated the space for independent unions, but they, like the rest of the Egyptian people, continue to face great challenges in the struggle for democracy and a decent standard of living.

Direct reprint requests to:

Ahmed Kamel
Paul-Junius st 44
10369 Berlin
Germany
e-mail: ahmedkamel79@yahoo.com