

## Unionism and Revolution in the Arab World

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag widmet sich der Gewerkschaftsbewegung in der arabischen Welt und ihrer Rolle in den Revolutionen von 2011. Zunächst soll, ohne zu sehr ins Detail zu gehen, ein Überblick präsentiert und die Beispiele Tunesien und Ägypten untersucht werden, wo die Gewerkschaften eine wichtige Rolle im revolutionären Prozess spielten. Dieser Beitrag basiert auf einer Literaturrecherche und qualitativen Interviews mit Gewerkschaftsführern und Intellektuellen aus Ägypten, Syrien und Libyen.

In diesem Artikel soll auch demonstriert werden, wie wichtig unabhängige Gewerkschaften für die Revolutionen in Tunesien und Ägypten waren und wie wichtig sie für die zukünftige Entwicklung dieser Staaten sind. Die These lautet, dass Gewerkschaften entscheidend für die Ausbildung einer demokratischen Gesellschaft sind, weil sie ein essenzielles Werkzeug für die Organisation der Interessen der Arbeiter sind. Bezogen auf die arabische Welt gilt, dass dort, wo Gewerkschaften existierten, diese eine wichtige Rolle in den Übergangsprozessen der Staaten gespielt haben.

### Abstract

*In this paper, I will present an outline of trade unionism in the Arab world and its role in the revolutions of 2011. Without going into too much detail, I will present an overview and explore the examples of Tunisia and Egypt, where unions played an important role in the revolutionary process, while also relying on a literature survey and qualitative interviews with trade union leaders and intellectuals from Egypt, Syria, and Libya.*

*In this paper, I will also demonstrate the importance of autonomous trade unions for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt as well as for the future development of these states. I conclude that trade unions are crucial for the development of a democratic society because they are an essential tool with which to organize the interests of workers. For the case of the Arab world, I demonstrate that, where these trade unions existed, they have been able to play an important role in the transition of the states.*

## Trade unions and the Arab Spring

In this paper, I will present an outline of trade unionism in the Arab world and its role in the revolutions of 2011. As such, I am unable to go into detail, but in addition to an overview, I will explore the examples of Tunisia and Egypt, where unions played an important role in the revolutionary process. My argument is based on a survey of the literature and qualitative interviews with trade union leaders and intellectuals from Egypt, Syria and Libya.

Historically, trade unions played a significant role already in the anti-colonial resistance in the industrialized and more urban parts of the Arab world. For this reason, modern trade unions should also be seen in the context of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. Furthermore, up until the nineteenth century manufacturing in the Arab world was based on small, labor-intensive artisanal enterprises. These artisans were organized in guilds (see Beinín 2001, pp. 16-19).

Modern trade unions were not established until after World War I. Many were closely connected to, or were part of, the anti-colonial movements in the Arab world. After the success of these movements, many of the trade unions were integrated into the new political systems and thus became part of the corruption within the different authoritarian regimes. In the conservative monarchies in the Gulf region, most trade unions were established much later and are still under significant legal restrictions today. In this paper, I will provide an overview of these trade unions while also focusing on the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, where trade unions have played a crucial role in the developments of the so called “Arab Spring.”

### The UGTT and the revolution in Tunisia

It is perhaps no accident that the 2011 revolutions in the Arab world started in Tunisia, a country with a highly educated population and relatively autonomous and well-organized trade unions. Established as early as 1946, ten years before independence was achieved, the Tunisian General Labor Union (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* or UGTT) managed to be a partner, and not a subordinate organization, of the anti-colonial movement led by Habib Bourghiba, who became the first president after independence in 1957. The presence of a strong leadership, which had gained its historic merits in the struggle for independence, was one reason why the UGTT was able to keep its relative autonomy. Militants like Habib Achour, who was the secretary-general of the UGTT for several terms, had

a conflictive relationship with the government and defended UGTT's autonomy. Salah Hamzaoui (1999, p. 378) mentions that the regime also used the UGTT as a channel for acquiring information about the population's attitude toward the regime and about possible sources of discontent in society. In order to keep this channel open, the regime had to accept a certain degree of autonomy of the trade unions. While many of the union committees kept some independence, the leadership of the UGTT was at least partly corrupt and close to the regime (Camau/Geisser 2003, p. 220f).

It would go beyond the focus of this article to narrate the history of the UGTT during the period of Bourghiba and Ben Ali, but it must be stated that the new labor movement in Tunisia should be seen in the context of a shift from an authoritarian welfare state to a neo-liberal economy in the 1990s. In January 1995, Tunisia became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and in October it became a founding member of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), also referred to as the Barcelona Process. The European Union – with the former colonial power of France, and the United States as a Western ally – played an important economic role for the country and pushed it forward into an economic – but not a political – liberalization. These economic changes led to a crisis of the authoritarian bargain that kept Ben Ali's regime in power. Authoritarian regimes are never able to rely on pure force alone. Rather their maintaining power can be described as a

repeated game between a representative citizen and an autocrat who faces the threat of insurrection, and where economic benefits and political rights are simultaneously determined according to the opportunity costs the regime faces in providing these "goods." (Desai/Olofsgård/Yousef 2007, p. 4)

While under Habib Bourghiba the regime was still able to offer jobs and economic benefits to the middle class, it was able to offer this to a lesser extent in the late period under Ben Ali. Moreover, the economic liberalization excluded a growing number of educated younger people from secure jobs and careers. In a conservative and religious society like this one, exclusion from the regular job market also meant a de facto exclusion from the possibility to marry and therefore any form of legitimized sexual relations. Thus, economic pressure on the younger generation also caused a much stronger social pressure than unemployment in Europe or Latin America.

The balance between the UGTT leadership's cooperation with and integration into the regime and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the local trade unions committees changed in 2000 when Ismail Sabhani was forced to resign as a leader

of the UGTT and Abdesslem Jerad took over. Under Jerad's leadership militant unionists could more easily organize within the UGTT. At the same time, the UGTT became increasingly marginalized and lost its influence on the regime. Failed attempts to organize an alternative and more militant trade union federation in 2006 led to the return of many grassroots activists to the UGTT. While its leadership continued to cooperate with the regime, the influence of these grassroots activists began to grow within the official unions.

Steffen Erdle, who wrote one of the most brilliant analyses of the late Ben Ali regime, describes the political consequences of the cross-sectional character of the UGTT as follows:

The heterogeneity of the UGTT's membership, its long history and still strong legitimacy as a national organization, and the often multiple political and organizational affiliations of its activists create a political power field which the state cannot entirely control. (Erdle 2010, p. 216)

This character gave the trade unions the autonomy to strike against the regime when the protest movement in December and January grew. The involvement of the members of the UGTT, who forced the leadership to participate in the revolution from January 10 onwards, was a crucial factor for the success of the revolution that forced President Ben Ali to leave the country on January 14. The UGTT also played an extremely important role in the following days. Ministers from the UGTT, who had been appointed to the transitional government, withdrew from their positions within days.<sup>11</sup> The UGTT and especially the grassroots committees of the trade unions continued their protest. This forced the regime to make a real change and prevented a development like the one in Egypt, where the regime managed to stay in power and only the president and the head of state changed.

The trade unions continue to be one of the driving forces of change in Tunisia today. In February 2011 the International Trade Union Confederation noted that the UGTT had 517,000 members.<sup>12</sup> Trade unions have been involved in a number of demonstrations and strikes since the revolution.

## **New unionism in Egypt**

In the cities of Cairo and Alexandria and the Suez Canal, local trade unions were established already after World War I. Beinun and Lockman mention thirty-eight

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11 <http://www.ennaharonline.com/en/international/5582.html>

12 [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No\\_13\\_-\\_List\\_Affiliates\\_08GC-2.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_13_-_List_Affiliates_08GC-2.pdf)

unions in Cairo and thirty-three in Alexandria in 1921. However, they also mention that many of these “existed only on paper or functioned only when economic conditions allowed” (Beinin/Lockman 1989, p. 123).

The early labor movement in Egypt was closely connected to the anti-colonial struggle against British rule. Despite its formal independence in 1922, British influence remained intact during Egyptian independence until the revolution of the Free Officers in 1952. However, this revolution did not result in a democratic republic. Instead, the outcome of the subsequent power struggle between Ali Muhammad Nagib and Gamal Abd al-Nasser was an authoritarian military regime that proclaimed an Arab nationalist version of “Arab Socialism.” In the new regime Gamal Abd al-Nasser established a state-controlled trade union federation in 1957, which was called the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). The ETUF functioned as the sole legal representative of the Egyptian workers, but not as an authentic trade union. Joel Beinin, the most prominent historian of the Egyptian labor movement characterizes the ETUF as follows:

Since the establishment of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) in 1957, trade unions have functioned as an arm of the state rather than as democratic representatives of workers, mobilizing workers to demonstrate “popular support” for the divergent policies of successive regimes at the ballot box or in the street. Trade-union elections have always been rigged, with oppositional elements from communists to Muslim Brothers banned from running as candidates for trade-union committees. There have never been direct elections for the executive committees of the twenty-three national general unions or the ETUF executive committee, thus guaranteeing that they remain safely in the hands of the regime loyalists. (Beinin 2009b, p. 68f)

Thus, although the ETUF leadership was part of the regime, this does not mean that all of the ETUF’s members were conformable with it. On the contrary, oppositional activists from the left or the Muslim Brotherhood became active in several the ETUF’s committees and tried to turn local committees into real trade union organizations. During the Nasser period, left-wing critics not only assailed the repression of communists, but also the deficiencies of Nasser’s “Socialism.” Labor activists like the Marxist lawyer Nabil al-Hilali, who wrote in the left-wing journal *al-Katib*, already advocated in the late 1960s for the establishment of a “vanguard party to fill the political void between the regime and the public. Such an organization, he said, was essential to protect the revolution and its progress towards socialism” (Ginat 1997, p. 174). This position is exemplary for many

labor activists under Gamal Abd al-Nasser's rule. While defending the Nasser revolution against its enemies, they criticized the lack of progress towards socialism and the lack of independent working class organizations, including trade unions. However, many of these early labor activists were orthodox Marxists and thus more interested in a vanguard party than trade unions.

After the so-called *infitah*<sup>13</sup> period under President Sadat, which led to economic liberalization and the end of Nasser's Arab socialism, the remaining left-wing nationalists were ousted from the regime. It would go beyond the scope of this article to describe the development of Egypt's political economy in the last fifty years, but it must be stated that the shift from Nasser's authoritarian nationalist socialism to Sadat's and Mubarak's neo-liberal reforms also undermined the authoritarian bargain between the regime and the Egyptian population in the long run (see Schmidinger 2011).

Already in the late 1980s, workers started to reorganize to counteract the consequences of the regime's neo-liberal policy. Veteran union activists like Taha Saad Uthman and Mohammed Mutawalli al-Sharawi began to publish the newspaper *Sawt al-Amil* (Workers' Voice) (see Beinin 1994, p. 265), while textile workers in al-Mahalla al-Kubra and Shubra al-Khayma organized in regional workers organizations (Beinin 2009b, p. 72).

The conditions of the working class in Egypt continued to deteriorate in the 1990s, but the new millennium brought with it a new labor activism that challenged the regime. In 1990, left-wing trade unionists like Kamal Abbas and Yusuf Darwish founded the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Service (CTUWS), a NGO that supported workers in their struggles and their attempts to organize but was not itself a trade union. With roots in the left, its leadership soon tried to concentrate on independent NGO activities to promote the rights of workers to organize. These activities started in Hewlan, an industrial town in the south of Cairo, but have since expanded to four other main centers in different parts of Egypt. As Kamal Abbas has pointed out, its main goals are to help workers establish democratic organizations and to enable them to fight for their social and economic rights to strike, to organize and to improve their working conditions (Abbas 2011).

The organizing of workers and workers' struggles is an important background development leading up to the events in January and February of 2011. In 2004, there had already been 265 different strikes, sit-ins, protests and demonstrations in

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13 Arabic for "opening"; a period of liberalization since 1974.

Egypt. According to the Land Center for Human Rights, there were 202 collective actions in 2005, 222 in 2006 and 614 in 2007 (Beinin 2009a, p. 37).

The largest strikes occurred among the textile workers of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company<sup>14</sup> in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. In October 2006, the strikes started due to the regime's involvement in a trade union election fraud and because of the lack of an increase of wages (Hussein 2011). Interestingly, many women played an important role in this strike and fought more militantly than their male counterparts (see Beinin 2009b, p. 80; Abbas 2011; Hussein 2011). The strike and occupation of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company of 2006 was of extreme importance because it was one of the first successful strikes in many years and it thus demonstrated the significance of collective action to other workers.

On the fourth day of the occupation panicking government officials offered a 45-day bonus and gave assurances that the company would not be privatized. The government also promised that, if the company earned more than E£ 60 million in profits during the year, 10 percent of profits would be distributed to the workers. The strike was suspended, with the government-controlled trade-union federation humiliated by the success of the unauthorized action. This victory reverberated throughout the textile sector, and in subsequent months thousands of workers in at least ten mills in Alexandria and the Delta participated in protests ranging from strikes and slowdowns to collective action if they did not get what the Mahalla strikers won. In almost all cases the government conceded. (Beinin 2009b, p. 80)

These successful strikes inspired others to take action. All of these struggles were organized by grassroots activists and not by the official trade unions of the ETUF. However, this grassroots labor activism came at a high price for many activists. Hamdy Hussein, a communist unionist of the textile workers in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, who was elected into the ETUF-committee of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, was arrested thirteen times and spent more than four years altogether in prison. Like most political prisoners, he was also tortured in prison (Hussein 2011).

This number of workers' protests would have been unthinkable in the 1990s. Joel Beinin summarizes the expanding struggles in the following:

In mid-2007, collective actions spread from their centre of gravity in the textile and clothing industry to encompass building material workers, urban transport workers, the Cairo underground Metro workers, railway workers, food processing workers, bakers, sanitation workers, oil work-

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14 This is the largest single company in Egypt, with around 27,000 workers.

ers in Suez, and others. White collar workers and civil servants, university professors, doctors, and other professionals joined the movement. Most notable in this sector was a strike of 55,000 real estate tax collectors throughout Egypt in December. (Beinin 2009a, p. 37f)

Workers and trade union activists worked both outside and inside the official ETUF. However, when opposition activists were elected into committees of the ETUF, they were ignored by the leadership appointed by the regime. Left-wing grassroots trade unionist Hamdy Hussein said in an interview that he and his colleagues were not even given an appointment with the ETUF leadership when they wanted to discuss the problems of their colleagues (Hussein 2011).

However, grassroots activists like Hamdy Hussein, who worked within the ETUF but also challenged its leadership, played an important role in the development of a new labor movement that included the establishment of new trade unions independent of the ETUF. Due to a lack of support for workers' struggles from the ETUF, new trade unions were established with the help of the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Service (CTUWS).

Because the promises of the regime were not fulfilled in 2006, the strikes at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company continued throughout 2007 and 2008. In early April 2008, they grew into a general uprising in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. A general strike was proclaimed for the 6th of April. The authorities reacted with panic, and hundreds of security guards took control of the Mahalla textile factories before work began, seizing workers and forcing them to work. The police reacted with extreme violence against the protests. They used tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition against protesters. Two people, including a 15-year-old boy, were killed. Leaders of opposition parties were detained, and many of them were tortured and raped in custody. The extreme violence of the state against the workers on April 6, 2008, led to the naming of the Facebook group and youth movement called "The 6th of April," which was one of the youth movements that played a central role in the revolution of 2011 (Sharaf 2011).

Many new trade unions had already formed during the last years of the Mubarak regime, but most of them had not yet been legalized. For example, the independent teachers' union was already established on July 14, 2010, but it was not legalized until after the revolution on April 17, 2011 (al-Beyali 2011). On January 30, many of these new trade unions established a new Egyptian Independent Trade Unions Federation (EITUF) in Midan Tahrir. As it was strongly opposed by the governmental ETUF – its secretary-general Ibrahim el Azhary called the EITUF



“the counter-revolution among the workers” and “a Zionist conspiracy”<sup>15</sup> – the new EITUF mainly organized around the independent unions of the public sector in the orbit of the Egyptian Tax Collectors’ Union with its legendary leader Kamal Abou Eta.

In their founding declaration, the EITUF’s demands included:

1. The right to work of Egyptian citizens – and binding the government to “un-employment compensation.”
2. Defining a minimum wage of no less than E£ 1200, with an annual raise proportionate to inflation; guaranteeing workers’ rights to bonuses and benefits according to work value, especially work compensation for those facing work hazards. Moreover, the demand that the maximum wage should never exceed minimum wage by more than ten times.
3. The right of all Egyptian citizens to fair social security, including the right to health care, housing, an education system “ensuring free education and syllabus development to cope with science and technology evolution” and the right of retirees to decent pensions and benefits.
4. Workers’ and employees’ right to organize, to create their own bylaws, and to remove all legal restrictions regarding this right.
5. Freeing all detainees imprisoned after January 25.<sup>16</sup>

Both unionists and left-wing party leaders and civil society activists agree that the trade unions played a central role in the overthrow of the Mubarak regime (interviews with Hussein, Sharaf, Temraz, al-Beyali, Hifny, Abbas and Adli 2011). Many of the trade union leaders believe that the threat that the public sector would start a general strike and paralyze the whole country was the main reason why the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) expelled Mubarak from power on February 11 and took over the country (interviews with Hussein, al-Beyali and Hifny 2011).

Activists from trade unions and left-wing parties all stress the importance of the growing independent trade unions movement in Egypt. While these trade unions fought against Mubarak’s regime until February 11, they now focus on the salaries of members, their working conditions and their struggles against factories closing or losing their jobs due to the economic crisis. Although many trade union leaders are very skeptical towards the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

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15 <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/independent-new-trade-unions-in-egypt-clash-with-mubarak-old-guard>

16 [http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?page=print\\_article&id\\_article=2065](http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?page=print_article&id_article=2065)

(SCAF), most of them are optimistic about organizing. Textile workers unionist Hamdy Hussein states:

The independent trade union is growing stronger day by day. Every day new trade union committees are established. We believe that this will result in – maybe not only one – but several strong trade union federations. After new elections for the official trade unions these independent unions could organize together with the official unions in one strong unified trade unions federation. That’s why we are working within the official trade unions and we are establishing independent trade unions. (Hussein 2011)

The independent teachers’ union organized as many as 65,000 members by September 2011 (al-Beyali 2011) and had an impressive ability to organize tens of thousands of teachers to participate in street protests in Cairo. On September 10, 2011, tens of thousands of teachers from Cairo and the surrounding cities and villages demanded higher salaries, reforms in the education system and the resignation of the minister of education Ahmed Gamal El-din Moussa. Through participatory observation, not only the anger of the teachers was noted, but also a very well organized and disciplined demonstration. Participants complained about their extremely low wages and spoke about having to work second and third jobs to survive.<sup>17</sup> While the teachers’ union met with predominantly positive reactions from passers-by, this is not the case with every protest in the public sector. A strike by post office clerks during the same period received very different reactions. People who did not receive their pension checks due to the strike openly attacked striking post office clerks and even verbally harassed them.<sup>18</sup> While many Egyptians sympathize with the demands of the trade unions, others see them as partially responsible for the economic decline and unrest in the country.

Additionally, the new trade union movement is far from being unified. By September 2011, 130 new independent unions had been established in Egypt, of which only twenty-four are now members of the EITUF. According to the CTUWS, the EITUF is dominated by trade unions from the public sector. Other unions of blue-collar workers criticize the EITUF’s founding as overhasty and as lacking democratic legitimization.

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17 I talked with thirteen different teachers at the demonstration. Nine of them were from Cairo, four from small towns in the Delta and the Fayyum region. All of them complained about extremely low salaries. None of them were able to live off a teacher’s salary alone. All of them had a second job, eight of them even a third job. Consequently, they are unable to concentrate on their jobs as a teacher. The efforts that teachers invest in their students are therefore extremely low and corruption is a common problem in Egyptian schools.

18 People even accused them of shirk (idolatry or polytheism).

Already in September 2011 Kamal Abbas from the CTUWS declared that many of these unions wanted to establish a new federation that should include all independent trade unions and is led by a democratically elected leadership (Abbas 2011). However, that did not lead to a unified labor union, but to a split between the EFITU and a competing Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC).

These developments continued the last months between the original production and the publication of this paper. In January 2013 the specialist for the Egyptian labor movement Joel Beinin<sup>19</sup> summarizes:

“Since the uprising against the Mubarak regime, some 1,000 new unions independent of the state-sponsored Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (ETUF) have sprung up. Many of them are affiliated with either the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) or the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress, established after the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) and unions in its orbit broke off from EFITU in the summer of 2011. The split has undermined the fledgling independent trade union movement.” (Beinin, 2013)

Another interesting question concerns the future of the former governmental Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). On August 16, the Egyptian prime minister Essam Sharaf ordered the executive board of the ETUF to dissolve in order to comply with a court ruling that stipulated that the board was illegitimate because it had been selected by fraudulent elections.<sup>20</sup> Independent trade unionists now see a chance to take over the ETUF and unify it with the EITUF (interviews with Hifny, al-Beyali and Hussein 2011).

Trotskyist groups have also tried to organize a political party – the so-called Workers Democratic Party – together with several unionists. Party spokesperson Kamal Khalil says, “Most leftist attempts to form a party include intellectuals as major players and a number of workers as members... This party aims at having workers as the main players and leaders of the party joined by a number of intellectuals.”<sup>21</sup> Hany Temraz, one of the founders of the party, insists that the difference between the new party and other left-wing parties is its roots in the trade unions movement (Temraz 2011). However, it is difficult to say how many trade unionists really support the new party and other union activists. CTUWS co-founder Kamal Abbas insists on the separation of trade unions and political

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19 Beinin, Joel (2013): Workers, Trade Unions and Egypt's Political Future Middle East Report: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011813>

20 [http://www.unionbook.org/profiles/blogs/egypt-old-state-controlled-corrupt-unions-dissolved?xg\\_source=activity](http://www.unionbook.org/profiles/blogs/egypt-old-state-controlled-corrupt-unions-dissolved?xg_source=activity)

21 <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/6863/Egypt/Politics-/January-Revolution-generates-a-new-Egyptian-politi.aspx>

parties: “In the new trade unions all workers are working together. It does not matter if they are Muslim Brothers, communists or something else. All of them have the same interests as workers” (Abbas 2011).

It is hard to say how strong workers’ parties will be in Egyptian politics in the future. However, it is safe to say that, for now, the trade unions are a much stronger force than the political parties that failed in the first free elections in late 2011 and early 2012. The party coalition The Revolution Continues, which unites most left-wing parties, only won 2.34 percent (ten seats) in the new parliament. Also the repression of trade unionists seems to be growing. On February 11, 2012, one of the most prominent unionists from al-Mahalla al-Kubra, Kamal al-Fayoumy, was arrested for “inciting disorder and planning acts of vandalism by calling on workers to join the February<sup>11</sup> general strike.”<sup>22</sup>

However, this also demonstrates that the military still feared that the new trade unions could play an important role in future struggles, and that they could therefore shape the new political system of Egypt.

It might be early for a final judgment on the labor policy of the new government under Muhammed Mursi, but the Muslim Brotherhood, dominated by small businessmen is definitely not known to be labor friendly. Kamal Abou Eta, the legendary leader of the Egyptian Tax Collectors’ Union and the EITUF, criticized in October 2012 that the attitude of the new government “to workers, trade unions and economic and social rights is even more hostile than that of the National Democratic Party.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand the Egyptian working class is now much better organized for future conflicts than it was before the revolution. On 15th of October 2012 the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), another newly established trade unions federation, the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC) and some other groups established a joint National Front for the Defense of Labor Rights and Union Liberties.<sup>24</sup> Egypt has much more organized labor now than ever before. Many of the unions are increase their membership and new unions, including unions of vulnerable groups like female housemaids<sup>25</sup>, are founded. It will not be an easy game for the new Egyptian government to ignore these changes in the Egyptian working class.

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22 <http://menasolidaritynetwork.com/2012/02/12/egypt-textile-worker-activist-kamal-fayoumy-arrested/>

23 <http://www.albawaba.com/business/egypt-muslim-brotherhood-trade-union-448529>

24 <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/independent-unions-declare-new-alliance>

25 <http://213.158.162.45/~egyptian/index.php?action=news&id=27938&title=Maids%20in%20need%20of%20protection>

## Monarchs and workers: Unionism in the Gulf region

Trade unions also played a crucial role in the protest movement in Bahrain. Bahrain was the first conservative monarchal country in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) to legalize trade unions with the Workers Trade Union Law, issued on September 24, 2002. The law recognizes the right of workers to organize collectively and contains regulations for strikes, although it also restricts activities for certain essential services. The new law has resulted in the establishment of the General Federation of Workers Trade Unions in Bahrain (GFWTUB) and should definitely be seen as a sign of progress for unionism in the Gulf region. However, the ICFTU has criticized that the law did not bring “full freedom of association, as all trade unions have to belong to the GFBTU. Workers in the private and public sector may join trade unions, including non-citizens, who make up a sizeable proportion of Bahrain’s workforce.”<sup>26</sup>

This has resulted in the severe repression of unionists during the violent crackdown of protests in Bahrain with the support of Saudi Arabia and Western allies of conservative Gulf monarchies, especially the United States. On September 26, Bahrain jailed the head of the teachers’ union Mehdi Issa Mohammed Abu Deeb for ten years and his deputy Jalila Mohammed Reza al-Salman for three years for “inciting hatred of the Gulf kingdom’s monarchy and calling for its overthrow during protests earlier this year.”<sup>27</sup>

In October 2012 the sentences were reduced to five years for Mehdi Abu Deeb and six months for Jalila al-Salman to six-months. Protests of international trade unions and human rights organizations like amnesty international could not prevent the authorities from punishing them.<sup>28</sup>

Besides Bahrain the only other countries in the GCC that permit certain legal trade unions are Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.

The oldest trade union in the GCC is the Kuwait Trade Union Federation (KTUF). However, the KTUF only organizes workers in the public sector. Domestic and maritime workers are not permitted to organize. Migrant workers, who make up about 80 percent of the workforce, are only permitted to become KTUF members if they have resided in Kuwait for at least five years. According to the ITUC they “must obtain a certificate of moral standing and good conduct

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26 <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222248&Language=EN>

27 <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2011/Sep-26/149717-bahrain-jails-teachers-union-leaders-for-incitement.ashx#ixzz1Z8d2SSwJ>

28 <http://www.vob.org/en/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=1956>

before they are allowed to join trade unions as non-voting members. They are not permitted to run for any trade union posts.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the situation of foreign workers is still disastrous, the solidarity of international unions led to a memorandum of understanding between the Nepalese trade union GEFONT and the unions in Kuwait (KTUF) and Bahrain (GFBTU) in January 2012.<sup>30</sup> This cooperation could lead to further combined struggles in the future.

In Oman some illegal unionist activities occurred in the time before 2006, but the General Foundation of Oman Trade Union (GFOTU) was not established and legalized until after a decree by Sultan Qaboos to legalize unions in 2006. The GFOTU still has many limitations, especially regarding organizing foreign workers, but it managed to become a strong federation with seventy different individual unions by the time it held its Founding Congress on February 15, 2010.<sup>31</sup>

The Labor Code of Qatar allows only a single union, the General Union of Workers of Qatar. Government employees and non-Qatari nationals, who make up the majority of the workforce, are not allowed to unionize. Although Hamad bin Chalifa al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar, runs the pan-Arab satellite TV program al-Jazeera, which played a crucial role in media freedom and reporting about the “Arab Spring” in other countries, journalists have not been given the right to form their own trade union in Qatar.<sup>32</sup> Due to the large number of foreign workers without any rights to unionize, Qatar trade unions are without any influence in Qatar. In February 2012 Ambet Yuson, the secretary-general of Building and Wood Workers International, told Reuters:

Ninety-four percent of workers are migrants in Qatar. It’s basically modern slavery. They are migrant workers from India, Nepal and Bangladesh; they go there and their passports are withheld, sometimes they don’t get paid their salaries or they are six months late and they have no other options.<sup>33</sup>

In 2006 Khalid Al Khazraji, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Labor of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced that “residents will be able to establish trade unions after an article is added to the Labour Law authorising the Labour Minister to issue regulations for these unions.”<sup>34</sup> However, this promise was never

29 <http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/getcountry.php?IDCountry=KWT&IDLang=EN>

30 <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/kuwait-bahrain-agree-deal-protect-nepal-workers-441593.html>

31 <http://www.ituc-csi.org/oman-a-new-trade-union-centre-is.html>

32 <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c4fec5dc.html>

33 <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/297616/20120213/qatar-migrant-workers-wealth-abuse-labor-rights.htm>

34 [http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/Trade\\_unions\\_set\\_to\\_be\\_legalised/19972.htm](http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/Trade_unions_set_to_be_legalised/19972.htm)

kept. To date, merely an NGO called mafiwasta,<sup>35</sup> which means “without patronage,” has tried to support workers in the UAE. The situation for workers in the UAE is especially difficult because most of them are non-citizens of the UAE. Less than 20 percent of the inhabitants of this federation of absolutist monarchies are nationals who are in the upper class of their country. Literally all blue-collar workers are Indian, Pakistani, Palestinian or other Arab nationals and can be easily deported for any political activity.

In Saudi Arabia there are also no legal trade unions. The new Labor Code that came into power in April 2006 was drafted without any input from workers’ representatives. The Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights of the ITUC stated in 2008 about the law:

It still does not grant workers the right to organise, bargain collectively or strike. While it improves women’s opportunity to work by opening more sectors where they will be allowed to work, there is no sign of the promised protection for female domestic workers.<sup>36</sup>

As in the UAE, many of the workers are immigrants without any access to Saudi citizenship. In reality many of these workers do not have any rights in Saudi Arabia. Many are victims of violence by their employers, but also by officials of the state. Foreign workers regularly become victims of the extremely brutal Saudi penal code, based on the Wahhabi interpretation of Sharia law. The most recent case in September 2011 was Abdul Hamid bin Hussein Mostafa al-Fakki, a foreign worker from Sudan, who was beheaded in Medina for the crime of “witchcraft and sorcery.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Unionism in Arab republics: Between watchdogs of the regimes and class struggle**

Along with the monarchies in the Gulf region, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Algeria also have a long history as republics as well as an urban tradition and some industrialization already in the early twentieth century. Some of them also have a history of armed anti-colonial struggle. Syria and Iraq were ruled for decades by the Arab nationalist Baath Party, and Qaddafi’s Libya had an ideological orientation towards Arab nationalism (Nasserism). Additionally, the Algerian FLN

35 <http://www.mafiwasta.com/>

36 <http://survey08.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?IDContinent=5&IDCountry=SAU&Lang=EN>

37 <http://www.sudantribune.com/Sudanese-man-executed-in-Saudi,40213>

had leanings towards Arab nationalism. Only in Lebanon were various forms of authoritarian nationalism unable to take power due to the country's complicated sectarian power structure that did not allow a single group to control the entire state. However, the loosely organized General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) is also suffering under sectarian divisions and has never recovered from its decline during the civil war. A special case is Sudan, which has a long history of an independent labor movement that is now repressed by the current regime (see Fawzi 1957; Warburg 1978; Niblock 1987; Schmidinger 2004 and 2009). Siddig Elzailaee's paper in this volume will cover this more in detail.

The Algerian Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA) was established as part of the anti-colonial national liberation movement of Algeria (see Plum 1962). After the Algeria's independence in 1962 the UGTA became effectively subordinated to the ruling Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), but it regained limited autonomy after the end of the single-party regime in the 1990s. The International Trade Union Confederation counted 1,533,000 members in the UGTA in February 2011, which means that the UGTA is one of the largest trade union federations in the Arab world.<sup>38</sup> However, under the conditions of the authoritarian Algerian regime, the UGTA is far from having the freedom and autonomy that trade unions enjoy in Europe. Nevertheless, under the conditions of a revolutionary mass movement, they could play an important role similar to the UGTT in Tunisia.

Despite the fact that Syria and especially Iraq have vibrant labor movements dating back to the 1930s, including strong communist parties and trade unions (see Ismael/Ismael 1998; Battatu 1978), their legal trade unions were completely taken over, or new yellow unions were created by the totalitarian Baath regimes in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Syria all of these state-sponsored "trade unions" must be affiliated with the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which was founded in March 1938 but has since been transformed into a watchdog of the Baath regime. Alan George describes the GFTU as such:

Since 1975 the GFTU has been headed by 'Izzeddin Nasser. From 1980 until the Ninth Regional Congress in June 2000, he also headed the party's (or, to be precise the Regional Command's) Workers' Bureau. Presently, the GFTU links 194 trade unions with a total membership (in 2000) of 820,050. (George 2003, p. 76)

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38 [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No\\_13\\_-\\_List\\_Affiliates\\_08GC-2.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_13_-_List_Affiliates_08GC-2.pdf)



However, the close structural and personal links between these trade unions and the ruling Baath Party demonstrate that they are rather the regime's watchdogs than real trade unions. The Syrian Marxist philosopher Sadiq al-Azm therefore does not see the Syrian trade unions as having any role in the current protests in Syria. In an interview from October 2011 he stated: "There are no independent trade unions in Syria. The regime successfully prevented any attempts to organize workers. The Syrian regime was much more rigid in this context, than the Egyptian or Tunisian regime" (al-Azm 2011).

Syria is also the seat of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU), a pan-Arab umbrella organization of Arab trade unions. In the context of the protest movements in Yemen, Bahrain and Libya, in the spring of 2011 the General Secretariat of the ICATU said that it

believes that continuing to pursue a crackdown policy on demonstrators with the use of force in this bloody form is a style which does not match with the values of democracy and the public right to demonstrate, to sit-in and to express. And this is a legitimate right guaranteed by all of the laws and constitutions, and in light of this, it calls for the need to release all detainees in the aftermath of those demonstrations.<sup>39</sup>

The ICATU changed their tune when the protests reached Syria. In early November 2011, after the Syrian Baath regime had already massacred at least 3,500 opposition activists since the beginning of the protests, the Secretary General of the ICATU sent a telegram on the religious holiday Eid Al-Adha to President Assad in which he assured Assad that the ICATU "once again had pride in your positions of nationalism, the support of Arab workers from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, along with Syria" and declared its resistance to "powers who sold themselves to the devil and used the weapons of terrorism to disrupt security and stability enjoyed by the Syrian people." The Secretary General of the ICATU continued to express his confidence "that the target of this conspiracy with its cowardly attitudes will be received by the resistance of the youth and wisdom"<sup>40</sup> of the president. In this way the pan-Arab regional umbrella organization of trade unions demonstrated once more its collaboration with one of the most authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and its lack of any independence from the ruling Baath Party. This lack of any form of at least semi-independent workers' organizations is one of the main reasons why strikes and other forms of workers' struggles could

39 [http://www.icatu56.org/index\\_en.php?showit=8](http://www.icatu56.org/index_en.php?showit=8)

40 <http://www.icatu56.org/show3.php?page=showsecretariat.php&main=196>, translated by the author.

not be used to overthrow the regime and why the conflict developed into a civil war in early 2012 with the danger of a long-term confessional conflict.

The Iraqi Baath regime also transformed the trade unions into its watchdogs. Independent unionists went into exile or underground. However, since the fall of the regime in 2003 unionists have started to reestablish independent trade unions again. Activists from the exiled Workers' Democratic Trade Union Movement (WDTUM) returned to Iraq and helped to establish a new independent trade union federation, and already in May 16, 2003, workers formed the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in Bagdad (see Johnson/Muhsin 2006, p. 28).

The IFTU united oil and gas workers, the Railway and Aviation Union, the Vegetable Oil and Food Staff Union, the Leather Products and Textile Workers Unions and several other important unions. By 2004 it had already organized more than 200,000 workers, and it also started to play a central role in strikes by different workers all over Iraq (see Johnson/Muhsin 2006, p. 31).

However, it did not organize workers in the Kurdish autonomous region, where Kurdish trade unions had already organized after the establishment of the autonomous region in 1991, often in close affiliation to one of the major Kurdish political parties – most of these Kurdish trade unions are organized in the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU). Furthermore, the old trade union of the Baath regime, the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), continued to exist, and the workers that were linked to the council communist Workers' Communist Party of Iraq established another trade union federation, the so-called Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI).<sup>41</sup> The FWCUI became much stronger than the Workers' Communist Party and became increasingly popular through its support of strikes in the south of Iraq, especially in Basra.

In September 2005 the IFTU, the old official GFTU and the GFITU, which had split off from the GFTU, signed a contract to merge in the new General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW).<sup>42</sup> The GFIW thus became the largest and most efficient trade union federation in Iraq. In 2007 the GFIW and the FWCUI supported the major strike of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Workers (IFOU) in Basra to oppose the national oil law backed by the U.S.

As an organization accepted by the above parties, but which was still rooted in the history of the Iraqi labor movement, the GFIW has become increasingly dangerous for the ruling parties, predominantly the Shiite fractions of political Islam. This has led to a permanent conflict with Iraq's government and the increasingly

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41 <http://fwcui.org/>

42 [http://www.iraqitradeunions.org/wordpress/?page\\_id=674](http://www.iraqitradeunions.org/wordpress/?page_id=674)

repressive political climate against trade unions in Iraq. In July 2010, a ministerial order was issued by the Ministry of Electricity that prohibited union activities in this sector, and international protests ensued.<sup>43</sup> In April 2011, the new minister of labor and social affairs, Nasser al-Rabie, a member of the radical Shiite party of Muqtada al-Sadr, announced his rejection of the GFIW.<sup>44</sup> Its offices were raided and GFIW's international representative Abdullah Muhsin said that they "terrified everyone by pointing their armed weapons in people's faces until we were forced to leave. We protested, saying that we are not appointed by the government, but it did little good."<sup>45</sup>

There are certainly signs that the Iraqi government will try to reestablish a yellow union that is close to the ruling parties. But there is also resistance from real trade unions supported by large parts of the Iraqi working class. The civil war in Iraq has left the country highly tribalized, and it has handicapped the organizational processes of workers along their class interests.

The republics with the least developed trade unions are Yemen, Mauretania and Libya. All three countries have been dominated by tribal power structures and not by a capitalist class society until now. Yemen has the Yemeni Confederation of Labor Unions (YCLU), which was formed by a merger between the Aden Trades Union Congress and the General Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions in 1990. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, the YCLU has 350,000 members.<sup>46</sup> Mauretania has a fragmented trade union movement that includes the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs de Mauritanie (CGTM)<sup>47</sup> with 25,000 members, the Confédération Libre des Travailleurs de Mauritanie (CLTM) with 56,000, the Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs de Mauritanie (CNTM) with 18,500 and the Union des Travailleurs de Mauritanie (UTM) with 28,789 members.<sup>48</sup> Although these trade unions are at least relatively autonomous from the state, they only play a limited role due to the lack of a large working class in these largely tribal societies.

This is not the case for the National Trade Unions' Federation (NTUF) in Libya. This "trade union" was created solely by the Qaddafi regime in 1972 and never functioned as a real trade union. Rather, it was the regime's watchdog, controlling workers and integrating them into the totalitarian system of Qaddafi's

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43 <http://www.ituc-csi.org/iraq-trade-unions-banned-in-the.html>

44 <http://www.tribunemagazine.co.uk/2011/07/essential-trade-union-rights-and-freedoms-are-at-risk/>

45 <http://www.tribunemagazine.co.uk/2011/07/essential-trade-union-rights-and-freedoms-are-at-risk/>

46 [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No\\_13\\_-\\_List\\_Affiliates\\_08GC-2.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_13_-_List_Affiliates_08GC-2.pdf)

47 <http://www.cgtm.org>

48 [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No\\_13\\_-\\_List\\_Affiliates\\_08GC-2.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_13_-_List_Affiliates_08GC-2.pdf)

Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The NTUF collapsed together with the Qaddafi regime in the civil war of 2011 and did not play a role in the uprising against the regime. On the contrary, the NTUF and the Syrian General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) appealed to other trade unions to help stop NATO's military intervention against Libya – a step heavily opposed by independent trade unions in other Arab countries like Egypt.<sup>49</sup>

Only in 2012 the first local trade unions started to organize. Until today they play a marginal role. In September 2011 Abdelsalam Kablan, the deputy minister of finance of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC), said that the NTC has not had anything close to an organized labor force yet (Kablan 2011). During my field research in September 2011 in Benghazi, no one was aware of any attempts to organize trade unions. The reasons for the lack of any new trade unions in Libya could be the following:

1. The bargaining power of labor in rentier states is very limited.
2. The Libyan working class has been predominantly composed of foreign labor. Many of them left Libya during the civil war and only some of them have returned. The legal status of these foreign returnees is uncertain and much of industry is still not producing.
3. The civil war in Libya was still going on at the time and, due to the conditions of the civil war, many male Libyans were fighting in one of the armed militias, meaning they identified themselves as fighters and not as workers.
4. Tribalism was reinforced by the civil war. This created other loyalties and solidarities, and not class solidarity among workers.

The future establishment of real trade unions in Libya will certainly depend on the general political development of the state. Only if Libya is able to create some stability and a civil state with certain political liberties will trade unions be able to establish themselves. On the other hand, the nonexistence of autonomous trade unions was one of the main reasons why the Libyan revolution could not succeed without a civil war. There was no organized labor force that could coerce the government to step down through a general strike or through other forms of struggle. The tribalism of the political conflict that led to civil war has also reinforced tribal loyalties. This could be a major challenge for future attempts to organize Libyans along class lines instead of tribal lines.

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<sup>49</sup> Communist trade unionist Hamdy Hussein stated that both the trade union and the Communist Party openly opposed the NTUF's calls. In September 2011 it was announced that the independent trade unions in Egypt would like to work together with future independent trade unions in Libya, but not with the NTUF of the old regime (Hussein 2011).

## Trade unions as part of contemporary national liberation movements

Palestinian trade unions are special cases in the Arab world because, due to the general political situation in Palestine, many of them are still closely linked to a national liberation movement and, as yet, are not trade unions in an independent state. Palestinian trade unions existed already in the 1920s, but most of them did not survive the Israeli war of independence and what the Palestinians call the “Nakba,” or the catastrophe of 1948. Founded in 1965, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) was primarily the trade union of the Fatah, the strongest party in the PLO. Due to this close alliance, the PGFTU was rather a front organization for the Fatah and later the Palestinian National Authority, and not so much a real trade union. This is even more the case for the Palestinian Trade Union Federation (PTUF), which has close ties to the pan-Arab, Damascus-based International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) (Heil 2006, p. 12).

As to Hamas-affiliated Islamic trade unions, they have been organized since 1992 in the Islamic Workers’ Association (Heil 2006, p. 13).

In 1993 the Democracy and Workers’ Rights Center (DWRC) was founded as an NGO by “a group of lawyers, academics, trade unionists and prominent figures in the Palestinian society to defend Palestinian workers’ rights and promote principles of democracy and social justice in the Palestinian territories.”<sup>50</sup> In 2007 the DWRC supported the foundation of the Federation of Independent & Democratic Trade Unions & Workers’ Committees in Palestine as an alternative to the PGFTU and other party-affiliated trade union federations.<sup>51</sup> However, all of these unions are heavily involved in the Palestinian national struggle and only partly focus on the struggle of workers’ rights.

A similar special case is the Sahrawi Trade Union, also known as UGT SARIO (Union General de Trabajadores de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro). Like the Palestinian trade unions, the UGT SARIO is not a trade union in an independent state, but is rather closely linked to the national liberation movement of the West Sahara, the Frente Polisario. Like the Palestinian trade unions, the UGT SARIO is part of the national liberation struggle, rather than focused on trade union activities. This is also apparent in its statements, such as one from May 1, 2011, when it declared its appreciation of the efforts of Saharawi workers and their “sacrifices to impose our right to freedom, independence and living in dignity in our land, Western

50 <http://www.dwrc.org/etemplate.aspx?id=52>

51 <http://www.advocacynet.org/resource/962>

Sahara” and asked the Saharawi workers to “mobilize and release all challenges to complete liberation and build the national project.”<sup>52</sup>

In both the Palestinian and the Sahrawi case, trade unions often see specific workers’ demands as secondary to their national struggle. In many ways their present situation parallels the historic relation of trade unions to the anti-colonial liberation movements of the early decades of the twentieth century. Only after the possible success of these national liberation movements and the establishment of a Palestinian or a Sahrawi state will we see whether these trade unions were able to learn from the failures of earlier examples.

Unfortunately, workers’ solidarity does not outweigh political conflicts. Palestinian trade unions have only limited partnerships with Israeli trade unions and there is no known cooperation between Moroccan and Sahrawi trade unions.

Despite many other disagreements with the government of King Muhammad VI and Prime Minister Abbas al-Fassi from the conservative Istiqlal Party, Morocco’s various trade union federations – the Confédération Démocratique du Travail (CDT), the Union Générale des Travailleurs du Maroc (UGTM), the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT), the Union nationale du travail au Maroc (UNTM) and the Fédération Démocratique du Travail (FDT)<sup>53</sup> – generally share the national consensus in Morocco that the Western Sahara is an integral part of the country. Therefore they do not recognize the institutions of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), including its trade union UGT SARIO.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the national question also seems to overrule the class question. However, in 2008 various trade unions helped when an agreement was signed between the Israeli Histadrut<sup>54</sup> and the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) regarding future relations for negotiations, dialogue and joint initiatives for advancing “fraternity and co-existence.”<sup>55</sup> Much of the efforts to establish contacts between Israeli and Palestinian trade unions have been made by other trade unions in various countries that are connected in the organization Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine (TULIP).<sup>56</sup> However, their effects on the grassroots level seem limited.

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52 <http://www.spsrasd.info/en/content/ugtsario-condemns-moroccan-repression-against-saharawi-workers-occupied-territories>

53 On trade unionism in Morocco, see the article by Stefanie Slaoui-Zirpins in this book.

54 Histadrut is the dominant trade union federation of Israel. For other unions, see the article by Ami Vatury in this book.

55 [http://www.tufi.org.uk/histadrut\\_pgftu/histadrut\\_pgftu\\_agreement.html](http://www.tufi.org.uk/histadrut_pgftu/histadrut_pgftu_agreement.html)

56 <http://www.tuliponline.org>

## Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted the importance of autonomous trade unions for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and for the future development of these states. Trade unions are crucial for the development of a democratic society, as they are an essential tool for organizing the interests of workers. Where these trade unions already existed, they have been able to play an important role in the states' transition, and where they continued their struggles, they have also been able to assure that the old regimes would not continue under other guises. In the case of Egypt, this struggle is not yet over, and the trade unions are currently facing further challenges from the regime. In Bahrain, the trade unions are also encountering a major crackdown by the regime. On the other hand, the new independent trade unions in Egypt and the trade unions in Bahrain are continuing their struggle, and especially in Egypt the trade union movement continues to grow. Unlike the old trade unions, the new unions are maintaining some distance to political parties and are focusing on workers' issues. This enables them to maintain more autonomy from political parties and regimes.

Should these experiences also have an impact on the trade unions in other Arab countries and on the trade unions connected with national liberation movements, this could be a major push for the establishment of a new, less ideological, and perhaps more efficient labor movement in the Arab world. This will be much more difficult in countries where the workforce consists of foreign workers with very limited rights and in countries with a highly tribalized society, where other loyalties are more important than class interests.

However, as the economic crisis in some of these societies continues, social questions could become more important. Growing global struggles for the distribution of wealth and resources will also intensify the conflicts within the societies of the Middle East. Either these struggles will be solved with a class struggle of the working class and the poor, or they will lead to armed conflicts along clientelistic or tribalistic power structures. That is why trade unions not only play a crucial role for the workers in the Arab world, but also for the development of peaceful and democratic societies.

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