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**Social Movements,  
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in the Middle East  
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Edited by Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel

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and control in the security apparatus, the trade union federation's decision to join the movement, and the dissemination of pictures of police brutality.

"Nothing will ever be the same again," joyously chanted most of the participants in the popular uprising after Ben Ali's flight on January 14, 2011. This phrase sums up their perception that the extraordinary process they were experiencing was irreversible. Despite this apparent consensus, the diversity of life situations, social relations, and mental universes soon reasserted itself once the exhilaration of the "revolutionary moment" of January–February faded. The return to "normal" led some people to withdraw from protest and others to take their radicalism to a higher level. No longer caught up in the fast-paced revolutionary moment, each person seemed to recover his or her own pace in a rapidly shifting political situation whose full scope can only be assessed once the longer story of Tunisia's revolutionary process has become known. While Yusra has moved Ben Ali's portrait from her living room to her bedroom and swears in disgust that she will never go to another demonstration again, the young rebels of Hammam-Lif have withdrawn in their own way. They no longer occupy public space and did not take part in the October 2011 election campaign or even vote. As for Ziyad, a veteran of increasingly intense struggles in the mining basin, he claims that he will be "the next one to set himself on fire if we don't get jobs soon."

## 10 A WORKERS' SOCIAL MOVEMENT ON THE MARGIN OF THE GLOBAL NEOLIBERAL ORDER, EGYPT 2004–2012

Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc

THE PROMINENCE OF NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS since the 1960s led many social theorists to imagine a postmodern political order and the demise of identities and social mobilizations based on class and nation (Inglehart 1977; Piore and Sabel 1984; Arrighi 1996; Melucci 1996). While excellent scholarship is still being done on the history and sociology of labor, workers receive far less attention than they did during the heyday of social history. A featured article in *International Labor and Working-Class History* argued that labor history had lost its "élan, directionality, and intellectual purpose" (Katznelson 1994). A more recent article (Friedman 2009) in the same journal, although speaking only of the "industrialized democracies," asked even more provocatively, "Is Labor Dead?" But more than a decade of labor mobilizations in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Bahrain, and Algeria demonstrate that Arab workers, at least, have not received the message that class is unfashionable and suggest that predictions of the demise of labor and class may be neoliberal wishful thinking. In Egypt from 1998 to the end of 2010 well over two million workers participated in 3,400–4,000 factory occupations, strikes, demonstrations, or other collective actions (see Tables 10.1 and 10.2 below).

The upsurge of overt workplace-based labor protests during the past decade profoundly transformed Egyptian political culture. These actions involved public and private sector factory workers, bakers, civil servants, teachers, tax collectors, medical doctors, transport workers, and garbage collectors; other public protests in this period included demonstrations against water shortages and poor housing and sit-ins staged in front of government offices. Workers most commonly presented bread-and-butter demands, sometimes literally, as in the protests over shortages of subsidized bread in the spring of 2008. They did not initiate the demonstrations that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. But their collective actions over the course of more than a decade formed an important component of the matrix of forces propelling that mobilization.

### SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY AND THE EGYPTIAN WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Egyptian workers' collective actions resemble Tilly and Tarrow's (2007, 8) definition of a social movement: "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities." But the Egyptian workers' case suggests the need to modify classical Social Movement Theory (SMT) to account for the particular combination of an authoritarian state and what Broadbent calls "other-directed" insurgents—people who do not conceive of themselves as or aspire to be fully autonomous individuals detached from the dense networks of families and friends that give meaning to their lives (2003, 222). Such cases have been undertheorized because of the historic derivation of SMT largely from evidence in the global North and pluralistic, democratic states. The Egyptian workers' movement highlights: (1) the importance of perceived threats, as opposed to opportunities, in motivating collective action; (2) possibilities for collective action and movement-building in a resource-poor, authoritarian environment; (3) local networks' capacity simultaneously to enable local mobilization while disabling mobilization on a national scale; (4) the differential effects of political change ("opportunities" in the terminology of classical SMT) on the urban intelligentsia compared to workers; (5) the continuing relevance of class; and (6) the agency of insurgent workers in expanding their repertoire of contention.

The first two points above adopt propositions advanced by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly in their revision of SMT (2001, 41–50). But the concept of threat used here is broader than Tarrow's (2011, 295) usage, which restricts the term "to the state's and other actors' capacity or will to control dissent." Goldstone and Tilly's (2001, 183) definition of a threat as "the costs a social group will incur from protest, or *that it expects to suffer if it does not take action*" (emphasis added) is more applicable to the Egyptian workers' movement.

The Egyptian workers' movement of the 2000s was primarily a class-based response to neoliberal economic restructuring. It is similar to protests against International Monetary Fund–imposed policies in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, and Jordan from the 1970s to the 1990s (Seddon 1989; Beinun 1993). But it was more clearly based among urban workers, more protracted, and more successful. The ensemble of six points noted above explains the character of a sustained social movement that achieved substantial economic gains through a protracted series of local actions of varying and unpredictable intensity and long-lasting campaigns in several localities—but that lacked a recognized na-

tional or regional organization, program, or leadership until after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak.

Consequently, there was not a unified "labor movement." Nonetheless, we use the term "movement" to refer to a nationwide phenomenon of collective action that relied on a common repertoire of protest to voice common grievances. Although centered on workplace issues, these grievances were a response to the ongoing restructuring of the political economy affecting workers throughout Egypt. This resulted in the "destabilization of the stable" and the "growth out of precariousness . . . reach[ing] into previously stable zones of employment" (Castel 2003, 387). This destabilization, affecting workers, as well as professionals and the impoverished lower middle classes (Kandil 2012), has redefined the meaning of "working class," which has been reconfigured by the differing status of permanent and temporary workers, especially in recently privatized firms. Labor protests have reflected this reconfiguration. Engineers and blue-collar workers have struck together to demand payment of an overdue bonus, for example, while temporary workers who are not entitled to such benefits have not participated. We understand "working class" as a structural category historically formed and reformed by industrial modernity, colonialism, nationalism, postcolonial anti-imperialism, and most recently global neoliberalism. It simultaneously comprises the microhistories and local cultures of social networks in urban and suburban industrial areas.

Factories and workers' neighborhoods, such as the housing projects for public sector workers established during the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–70), are the locus of identity and sociability. Some families have been employed in the same workplace for several generations. Jobs are often obtained through family or neighborhood connections. Families in the same apartment block or neighborhood organize mutual financial assistance. Workmates frequent the same cafes and markets. Their children go to the same schools and commonly marry each other (Duboc 2011). These networks of social relations, in which the family is the central unit, sustain the workers' movement and make it difficult for the government to extinguish it without using massive force. However, by their nature these highly localized working-class networks cannot easily be projected onto a national scale. In contrast to SMT approaches stressing the role of networks in connecting individuals to opportunities for mobilization, Egyptian workers' local networks outside the factory have had only a limited capacity for mobilization. Their primary role is to support the social fabric of the community.

Workers' protests of the 2000s and beyond commonly demanded that state authorities intervene to defend their standard of living or their rights in the face of perceived injustices committed by private entrepreneurs or public sector managers. The discourse framing these demands invokes the Arab Socialism of the 1950s and 1960s or is reminiscent of the moral economy that valorizes a nationalist populist pact (Heydemann 2007, 35). However, the concept of moral economy only partially explains the dynamics of labor protests. It focuses on the anger of those whose rights are violated and the defensive nature of mobilizations to maintain the status quo. Thus, it overlooks initiatives to challenge state-controlled unions and denounce corruption and bad management.

The empirical evidence in this chapter derives from field research conducted in Egypt between 2004 and 2012, including two years among textile workers in Mahalla al-Kubra and Shibin al-Kawm in the Nile Delta in 2008–10, in addition to unpublished and published material and interviews with nongovernmental organizations, labor journalists, and political activists. Joel Beinin's previous research on Egyptian labor (cited in the Bibliography) provides a long-term historical context.

The official trade union structure—the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF)—was an arm of the regime. After Mubarak's overthrow it remained a bastion of ancien régime loyalists. In 2012 the Muslim Brothers enticed them into collaboration to establish a condominium, whose stability is uncertain, over the organization. ETUF's legal monopoly on trade union organization was guaranteed by the Trade Union Law no. 35 of 1976.<sup>1</sup> Its 1,751 local union committees have usually been an impediment to achieving workers' demands. The Unified Labor Law no. 12 of 2003 legalized strikes. However, only one of the strikes referred to here was legal (and only partially) because the law permits strikes only when they have been approved by the relevant national general union and the ETUF executive committee.

The upsurge in workers' protest did not rely on "movement entrepreneurs" or "professional movement organizations" or previously existing "bases," which some social movement theorists have regarded as necessary to form a movement (McCarthy and Zald 1987, 337–92, 15–48; Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 13–14). Until 2011, none of Egypt's opposition parties, including those friendly to workers—the leftist National Progressive Unionist (Tagammu') and the Nasserist Dignity (Karama) parties—had much presence outside their Cairo headquarters. Although Hamdin Sabbahi, the Karama presidential candidate, made an unexpected breakthrough in the June 2012 elections, his party has

had very limited influence in workplaces. Contrary to the Mubarak regime's accusations, labor protests were not organized by the Muslim Brothers or communists. Adherents of all parties participated, but not as leaders or initiators. For workers, the legitimacy of their protests stemmed from their independence from discredited political parties and organizations. This did not change despite the burgeoning of political parties since the fall of Mubarak (Chabel 2012). The middle-class, urban, oppositional intelligentsia had a limited relationship to the movement before 2011—mostly through several labor journalists. The movement had meager financial resources, no national or organizational infrastructure, and no national-level leadership or coordination. E-mail and Internet contacts were uncommon, though a few workers blog in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> Irregular face-to-face meetings and mobile telephones were the main means of communication.

The workers' movement was supported by several labor-oriented NGOs and the tiny, Trotskyist Center for Socialist Studies (which split in 2010). Until the establishment of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights in 2010 the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) and the Coordinating Committee for Trade Union and Workers Rights and Liberties (CCTUWRL) were the only NGOs with full-time staff in regular contact with workers, but these organizations together employed only a handful of people.<sup>3</sup> We know of no collective actions initiated by these institutions.

#### POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS, URBAN INTELLIGENTSIA

There are two contexts for the emergence of this movement. The first is the political mobilization of the middle-class, urban intelligentsia, which can reasonably be explained by the Political Process Model (PPM) of SMT. In Tarrow's (1998, 19) formulation:

People engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change and then, by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, create new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention.

In the fall of 2000 twenty NGOs and Nasserist and leftist intellectuals organized the Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifāda. In early 2001 the committee held the first legal street demonstrations not sponsored by the regime in half a century (Howeidy 2005). Subsequently Palestinian solidarity demonstrations and protests against George W. Bush's Middle

Eastern wars became regular phenomena. Popular anger over these issues compelled the regime to relax—to varying and unpredictable degrees—its control over public space and the media.

Seizing the opportunity of this limited political liberalization, the Egyptian Movement for Change was established. Its slogan and popular name—Kifaya (Enough!)—epitomized the mounting dissatisfaction with the regime. Kifaya's first public demonstration, in December 2004, featured slogans and chants opposing Hosni Mubarak's prospective run for a fifth presidential term in September 2005 and the grooming of his son, Gamal, to succeed him, and demanding reduced powers for the presidency.

Although Kifaya expressed widespread popular sentiment, in private conversations members acknowledged their weak ties with workers. Nonetheless many government spokespersons, secular opponents of the Mubarak regime, and scholars believe that Kifaya either inspired the workers' movement or created the atmosphere that allowed it to flourish.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the mobilization of the intelligentsia as a stimulus for the workers' movement appears attractive because it not only confirms the PPM approach but also enhances the relevance of urban, middle-class political activists, who are more accessible to Westerners. But this is based on a misreading of the history of the workers' movement—reiterated in most journalistic accounts—that wrongly dates its takeoff with the December 2006 strike at Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra.

### ACCELERATED NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Historical precision about the movement's beginnings supports an alternative view: the workers' movement is a response to the threat posed by the neoliberal restructuring of the Egyptian economy and society heralded by President Anwar al-Sadat's 1974 "Open Door" economic policy and belatedly implemented by the 1991 Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP) agreements with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In the 1980s and 1990s protest actions typically involved public sector workers seeking to defend gains achieved in the era of Arab Socialism (Beinin 1993; El Shafiei 1995; Posusney 1997; Pratt 1998). Workers' protests increased gradually after the 1991 ERSAP agreements, nearly a decade before the mobilizations of the urban middle class around foreign policy issues. Strikes and other labor actions spiked sharply in mid-2004, months before the first Kifaya demonstration, and persisted after Kifaya lost steam in late 2006.

Law 203 of 1991 implementing the ERSAP specified 314 public sector enterprises eligible for privatization. By mid-2002, 190 enterprises were fully or partially sold off (CARANA Corporation 2002). An economic slowdown slackened the pace of privatization for the next two years. Law 203 forbids mass layoffs after privatization of a firm. Therefore managers of public sector firms slated for privatization typically made them more attractive to buyers by reducing the workforce before the sale. According to a survey of sixteen firms privatized since 1995, only two increased their workforce despite all the firms having received significant new capital investment (Knight 2007).

In July 2004 Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif formed a new government, entrusting the economic portfolios in the cabinet to Western-educated PhD's or businessmen close to Gamal Mubarak. The "government of businessmen" initiated a second wave of privatizations, selling a record seventeen public enterprises in its first fiscal year in office (American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt 2005). Receipts from privatization in fiscal year 2006–7 totaled US\$5.34 billion, more than the \$3.12 billion in the decade before the Nazif government took office (Oxford Business Group 2008, 52). In 2007 the World Bank ranked Egypt one of the top ten economic "reformers" in the world and number one in the Middle East (World Bank 2007, 1).

Egypt's gross domestic product grew impressively as the Nazif government vigorously implemented the neoliberal program. Concurrently the gap between "emerging Egypt" and the great majority of Egyptians who have not "emerged" widened (Mitchell 2002, 272–303; Denis 2006). According to the World Bank (2007a), nearly 44 percent of Egyptians are "extremely poor," unable to meet minimum food needs; "poor," unable to meet basic food needs; or "near-poor," able to meet some basic food needs.

From 2005 to 2008 food prices rose at least 33 percent for meat and as much as 146 percent for chicken (*al-Misri al-Yawm*, February 28, 2008). In August 2008 the government estimated that the annual rate of inflation for foodstuffs exceeded 35 percent, while the rate of general inflation surpassed 25 percent (Radwan 2008). In the spring of 2008 shortages of subsidized bread generated a major social crisis (*al-Misri al-Yawm*, May 13, 17, 23, 2008).

Workers' wages were simply inadequate to cope with these conditions. Real wages were lower in 2006 than in 1988, while earnings inequality increased (Said 2009, 54–55). The monthly minimum basic wage in July 2007 was £1105.00 or about US\$19.00 (Barakat 2007, 178–80).<sup>5</sup> Actual wages are difficult to calculate because of the many supplements to basic wages. Moreover

60 percent of employment is in the "informal sector" (Assaad 2009, xvi). In 2006–8 textile workers' monthly take-home pay ranged from £E200 to £E800 (about US\$35–\$145).

During the era of Arab Socialism many public sector workers came to feel a sense of ownership in their enterprises. Consequently the most common forms of worker protest were factory occupations (*i'tisam/al*) while production continued, or refusal to accept paychecks rather than strikes (*idnah/al*). In the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s strikes were rare, lasted a few days at most, and were normally dispersed by overwhelming force.

Strikes became more frequent after the mid-1990s and spiked sharply in 2004; they were also longer, with several lasting months (Pratt 1998, 53–55; al-Basyuni and Sa'id 2007, 13, 15, 19). In 1984–89 and the mid-1990s there were 25 to 80 collective actions a year (El Shafei 1995; Pratt 1998). From 1998 to 2003 there was an average of 118 workers' collective actions a year (see Tables 10.1 and 10.2). In 2004 there were 265 collective actions—more than double the 1998–2003 average; more than 70 percent (190) of the collective actions in 2004 occurred after the Nazif government took office in July. In 2005 there were 202 collective actions, fewer than in 2004 but still nearly double the 1998–2003 average. Workers' protests escalated slightly in 2006, reaching 222 collective actions, and in 2007 totaled an astounding 614 actions. The center of gravity of the workers' movement, as had been the case since the late 1930s, was the textile industry. But by 2007 the movement encompassed virtually every industrial sector, public services, and civil servants. In 2008 there were 609 collective actions, despite a serious setback when the regime attacked crowds demonstrating against higher prices in Mahalla al-Kubra on April 6–7, 2008 (as discussed in Tables 10.1 and 10.2).

In the 2000s the government rarely used violence to disperse workers' protests. There is no definitive evidence to explain this. During 2004–5 workers' protests became regular events reported in the private media. Consequently the regime may have feared that repression would create unfavorable publicity that might deter foreign investment. Perhaps Talcott Parsons's aphorism explains the state's response: "State coercion is like the reserves of a bank. It is not intended to be drawn on by everyone at once, and if too many people make demands, it will soon run out" (quoted in Kurzman 2004, 117). Paradoxically, then, neoliberal economic restructuring provided the threat that motivated workers' collective action and expanded the opportunities for its success.

Table 10.1. Number of Protesters, 2004–2011

	Strikes	Gatherings	Sit-ins	Demonstrations	Total
<b>2004</b>					
Governmental sector	585	11,541	5,577	16,597	34,300
Public business sector	3,551	7,237	12,514	7,238	30,540
Private sector	637	16,465	303,016	1,388	321,506
Subtotal	4,773	35,243	321,107	25,223	386,346
<b>2005</b>					
Governmental sector	6,082	4,001	4,741	13,150	27,974
Public business sector	2,032	66,498	13,855	1,040	83,425
Private sector	11,450	15,692	1,834	800	29,776
Subtotal	19,564	86,191	20,430	14,990	141,175
<b>2006</b>					
Governmental sector	67,188	7,341	13,317	7,390	95,236
Public business sector	12,466	24,599	45,569	62	82,696
Private sector	5,355	2,289	12,108	404	20,156
Subtotal	85,009	34,229	70,994	7,856	198,088
<b>2007</b>					
Governmental sector	17,269	41,658	35,688	3,889	98,504
Public business sector	112,583	56,519	47,429	1,120	217,651
Private sector	93,178	18,545	34,340	12,620	158,683
Subtotal	223,030	116,722	117,457	17,629	474,838
<b>2008</b>					
Governmental sector	15,554	217,602	12,829	8,642	254,627
Public business sector	17,896	65,830	29,297	15,020	128,043
Private sector	29,341	80,825	44,348	4,239	158,753
Subtotal	62,791	364,257	86,474	27,901	541,423
<b>2009</b>					
Governmental sector	29,015	58,658	7,459	3,560	98,692
Public business sector	26,215	96,925	24,703	1,580	149,423
Private sector	20,708	27,506	16,881	5,757	70,852
Subtotal	75,938	183,089	49,043	10,897	318,967
<b>2010</b>					
Governmental sector	11,938	5,154	5,801	16,747	39,640
Public business sector	2,680	25,390	4,213	4,210	36,493
Private sector	11,362	6,230	19,872	32,074	69,538
Subtotal	25,980	36,774	29,886	53,031	145,671
Total 2004–2010	497,085	856,505	695,391	157,527	2,206,508
<b>2011</b>					ca. 950,000
All sectors					

SOURCE: Markaz al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan (Land Centre for Human Rights), *Silsilat al-Huquq al-Insaniyya wa'l-iftina'yya*, no. 34 (July 2004); no. 35 (February 2005); no. 39 (August 2005); no. 42 (January 2006); no. 49 (July 2006); no. 54 (February 2007); no. 56 (July 2007); no. 58 (February 2008); no. 65 (March 2009); no. 78 (February 2010); no. 84 (August 2010); no. 88 (January 2011). Available at <http://www.lchr-eg.org/>. As the Land Centre for Human Rights stopped publishing this data in 2011, our conservative estimate for that year is based on monthly reports of *Mu'assasat Awlad al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan* (Sons of the Land Human Rights Association) posted on various websites. Data for 2004–8 reprinted from *The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt* by permission of the Solidarity Center.

Table 10.2. Protests, 1998–2011

	Strikes	Other Forms of Protest <sup>a</sup>	Strikes	Demonstrations	Total
1998					
Sector not mentioned	40	42	18	14	114
1999					
Governmental sector	13	21	4	2	40
Public business sector	10	10	7	1	28
Private sector	15	4	4	1	24
Sector not mentioned	16	25	17	14	72
Subtotal	54	60	32	18	164
2000		Gatherings <sup>a</sup>			
Governmental sector	3	NA	3	8	14
Public business sector	6	NA	10	10	26
Private sector	9	NA	6	11	26
Sector not mentioned	22	NA	29	18	69
Subtotal	40	NA	48	47	135
2001					
Governmental sector	6	NA	3	12	21
Public business sector	8	NA	13	21	42
Private sector	5	NA	16	31	52
Subtotal	19	NA	32	64	115
2002					
Governmental sector	8	NA	3	14	25
Public business sector	3	NA	11	8	22
Private sector	13	NA	12	24	49
Subtotal	24	NA	26	46	96
2003					
Governmental sector	6	13	5	2	26
Public business sector	3	6	3	3	15
Private sector	16	14	14	1	45
Subtotal	25	33	22	6	86
2004					
Governmental sector	24	37	45	20	126
Public business sector	10	26	22	14	72
Private sector	9	24	23	12	68
Subtotal	43	87	90	46	266
2005					
Governmental sector	21	31	21	7	80
Public business sector	13	25	29	5	72
Private sector	12	25	9	4	50
Subtotal	46	81	59	16	202
2006					
Governmental sector	17	26	24	13	80
Public business sector	13	27	33	6	79
Private sector	17	16	24	6	63
Subtotal	47	69	81	25	222

(continued)

Table 10.2. (continued)

	Strikes	Gatherings	Strikes	Demonstrations	Total
2007					
Governmental sector	36	121	80	18	255
Public business sector	31	63	47	4	145
Private sector	43	80	70	21	214
Subtotal	110	264	197	43	614
2008					
Governmental sector	37	133	67	30	267
Public business sector	17	43	38	9	107
Private sector	68	77	69	21	235
Subtotal	122	253	174	60	609
2009					
Governmental Sector	31	87	51	20	189
Public Business Sector	12	28	21	6	67
Private Sector	41	65	54	16	176
Subtotal	84	180	126	42	432
2010					
Governmental sector	36	29	38	62	165
Public business sector	7	9	11	7	34
Private sector	33	23	61	55	172
Subtotal	76	61	110	124	371
Total 1998–2010	570	889	779	385	2,623
2011					
All Sectors	280	333	466	298	1,377

<sup>a</sup> In 1998 and 1999 the ICHR used the term "Other Forms of Protest" for this rubric. In 2000 they began to call it "Gatherings."

NOTE: The Land Centre for Human Rights considers a series of actions over a dispute in a workplace (for example, a petition, a demonstration, then a strike) as one action. Counting such actions separately would result in a total of at least 3,950 collective actions for 1998–2010.

SOURCE: Markaz al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan (Land Centre for Human Rights), *Shi'at al-Huquq al-Insaniyya wa'l-Jihna* 1994, no. 5 (December 1998); no. 14 (April 2000); no. 18 (May 2001); no. 22 (March 2002); no. 42 (January 2003); no. 31 (January 2004); no. 34 (July 2004); no. 35 (February 2005); no. 39 (August 2005); no. 42 (January 2006); no. 49 (July 2006); no. 54 (February 2007); no. 56 (July 2007); no. 58 (February 2008); no. 65 (March 2009); no. 78 (February 2010); no. 84 (August 2010); no. 88 (January 2011). Available at <http://www.lchr.org/>. As the Land Centre for Human Rights stopped publishing this data in 2011, our conservative estimate for that year is based on monthly reports of Mr. Assad Awlad al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan (Sons of the Land Human Rights Association) posted on various websites. Data for 1998–2008 reprinted from *The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt* by permission of the Solidarity Center.



The most significant change that coincides with the upsurge in workers' collective action is the installation of the Nazif government. Intensification of neoliberal economic restructuring led to deeper economic despair and class anger. The perceived (and often quite real) threat of loss of jobs or social benefits after firms were privatized; low wages; delays or nonpayment of bonuses, incentive pay, and other allowances critical to bringing income to a level that can sustain survival animated most workers' demands since mid-2004.

The coincidence of intensified neoliberal restructuring and an upsurge in workers' collective action is not necessarily proof of causality. But it is consistent with how protest leaders framed their actions and provides a better explanation than inadequately historicized explanations privileging the activities of the intelligentsia and middle classes. We argue, therefore, that the political economy context is both the deeper structural and the proximate explanation for the eruption of the movement. Accelerated privatization of the public sector and elimination of secure jobs with social benefits exacerbated the long-term erosion of workers' economic gains during the Nasser era and the decline of public sector employment.

#### PRIVATIZATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The strikes at ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, north of Cairo, exemplified the new spirit of contentious collective action that arose in response to accelerated privatization of the public sector. An Egyptian investor, Hashim al-Daghri, had leased the firm for three years in 2003 for £E2.5 million a year. A year later al-Daghri bought the enterprise for only £E4 million. ESCO workers believed that they and the public, not the state managers, were the owners of the firm. In October 2004 a workforce of about four hundred—sharply reduced in preparation for selling the firm—struck briefly to demand that their workplace not be privatized. If privatization was implemented, the ESCO workers wanted their jobs to be guaranteed; if that was not possible, they sought adequate early retirement packages. Receiving no satisfaction, they began a second strike on February 13, 2005 (Beinin 2005).

Gamal Sha'ban, a skilled worker with twenty-three years of seniority asked, "With what right was the sale conducted?" The workers owned 10 percent of the firm, but they were not consulted about the sale. "[Muhsin Abd al-Wahhab] al-Gilani [CEO of the Cotton and Textiles Holding Company] agreed to the sale. Was the company his property or the property of the people?" Many ESCO workers believed that they were entitled to retain their jobs rather than be re-

placed by new workers who would likely receive lower wages and fewer benefits (Beinin 2005). The ESCO strike was among the first of many at recently privatized public firms. Workers in such enterprises frequently complained that the new owners did not abide by their contractual commitments. The ESCO workers failed to reverse the privatization. But they achieved substantial economic gains and compelled the state to adjudicate the dispute, even though it had already sold the enterprise (Rady 2005). Workers elsewhere received the message that strikes might achieve concrete results.

One of the most intense postprivatization actions was the March 2009 strike of 4,200 workers (reduced from 11,000) at the Indorama Shihin Spinning Company, which had been privatized in late 2006 (Carr 2009, 2009a). The strike galvanized a broad spectrum of opinion against the new Indonesian owners. This compelled ETUF to authorize what labor activists believed was only the second strike in its history, in May–June 2009 at Tanta Flax and Oil Company, another newly privatized firm (with a Saudi proprietor), which had already experienced several strikes and protests. Although ETUF authorized a five-day strike, it lasted more than five months. There were also strikes at the newly privatized Omar Effendi Department Stores (also under Saudi ownership) in April and May 2009 (Carr 2009b). These strikes indicated that even if privatized firms initially offered decent wages and benefits, they could eventually be eroded by the requirements of international competition or private investors' appetite for profit.

From the 1970s through the 1990s almost all workers' collective action was among public sector workers who used their factory and neighborhood networks to organize in order to preserve their gains from the Nasser era. Workers in the new satellite cities surrounding Cairo—10th of Ramadan, Sadat, and 6th of October—did not at first have such networks; they rarely belonged to trade unions and were targeted for retaliation or dismissal if they made "trouble." However, about 40 percent of those participating in collective actions since 2004 were employed in the private sector.

One of the first protracted collective actions in the private sector was at the Egyptian-Spanish Ora-Misir Company, established in 1983 in 10th of Ramadan City. Ora-Misir manufactured building materials using asbestos for more than twenty years, despite the ban on the substance in the United States and Europe. From 1997 to 2004 eighteen employees died, forty-six contracted lung cancer, and many of the one hundred and twenty remaining on the job suffered from asbestosis. Under considerable local and international pressure (solicited by the CTUWS), in September 2004 the government ordered Ora-Misir to close and to



pay a fine and compensation to its workers. The proprietor responded by dismissing all the workers without paying compensation. In November workers set up an encampment outside the factory and remained there for more than nine months. In July 2005 some of them occupied the ETUF headquarters and successfully pressured the federation to support their demands (Rady 2005a).

### STRIKES AT MISR SPINNING AND WEAVING

The largest industrial strike during 2004–10 erupted in December 2006 at the huge Misr Spinning and Weaving Company (known as Ghazl al-Mahalla) in Mahalla al-Kubra. The firm is a powerful political symbol. It was established in 1927 by Tal'at Harb, widely considered a hero of Egyptian economic nationalism, and in 1960 it became one of the first industrial firms nationalized by the Nasser regime. Nearly a quarter of all public sector textile and clothing workers (about twenty-two thousand) are employed there. Significant as it was, this strike did not launch the workers' movement, though it increased its momentum.

On March 3, 2006, Prime Minister Nazif decreed an increase in the annual bonus given to all public sector workers, from £Et100 to two months' salary. "December [when annual bonuses are paid] came, and everyone was anxious. We discovered we'd been ripped off. They only offered us the same old £Et100. Actually, £Et89 to be more precise, since there are deductions [for taxes]," said Muhammad al-'Attar, a leader of the strike and a foreman in the garment division.<sup>6</sup>

On December 7 production ceased when around three thousand female garment workers left their stations. They marched over to the spinning and weaving sections, where their male colleagues had not yet stopped their machines, and stormed in chanting, "Where are the men? Here are the women!" The men then joined the strike.

Sayyid Habib, another of the strike leaders, said that "as night fell," the men found it "very difficult to convince the women to go home. They wanted to stay and sleep over. It took us hours to convince them to go home to their families, and return the following day." Al-'Attar proudly added, "The women were more militant than the men."

On the fourth day of the mill occupation, government officials offered a forty-five-day bonus, assurances that the company would not be privatized, and a promise that if the company earned more than £Et60 million in profit in the current fiscal year, 10 percent of the profit would be distributed to the workers. This victory reverberated throughout the textile sector. In the subsequent

three months as many as thirty thousand workers in at least ten textile mills in the Delta and Alexandria participated in strikes, slowdowns, and threats of collective action, demanding to receive what the Ghazl al-Mahalla strikers had won. In virtually all cases the government succumbed.

The regime was caught off guard. But the sale of public assets and the high price of oil meant there was sufficient cash on hand to buy off discontent. The state apparently chose this option rather than clashes with workers that might have derailed the privatization program. However, intensifying neoliberal policies provoked more protests. As striking proved effective in achieving economic gains and entailed lower risks than before, every successful action encouraged others.

### "WORK IS POLITICS. . . . THIS IS AS DEMOCRATIC AS IT GETS"

Soon after the Ghazl al-Mahalla strike, the elected strike committee launched a campaign to impeach the official local union committee because it had not supported the workers' demands. By February 2007 nearly thirteen thousand workers had signed a petition to the General Union of Textile Workers, demanding elections for a new union committee. Otherwise they threatened to resign from ETUF.

The ETUF bureaucrats, already humiliated by the successful strike, adamantly opposed the impeachment demand. Granting it might have triggered a flurry of similar protests because the fall 2006 national trade union elections had been widely condemned as fraudulent. Several members of the Ghazl al-Mahalla strike committee had sought to run for union office, but the security forces removed them from the ballot. The CTUWS called the elections "unequivocally the worst in the history of the Egyptian trade unions" (Center for Trade Union and Workers Services 2007, 19).

Rebuffed by their national "leaders," some three thousand Ghazl al-Mahalla workers officially resigned from the General Union of Textile Workers. However, ETUF did not recognize these resignations and continued to deduct dues from their paychecks. On April 15, 2007, the strike committee organized a delegation of one hundred workers to travel to ETUF headquarters in Cairo and demand that the resignations be recognized. Police confiscated the license of the driver of the bus they had hired and then physically blocked workers from boarding a Cairo-bound train—a relatively mild form of repression.<sup>8</sup>

As of September 2007 promises made at the conclusion of the December 2006 strike remained unfulfilled. The Ghazl al-Mahalla workers struck for the

second time in a year—and won. The second strike was even more militant than the first and belied the wishful claims of the government and its media that the strike wave had run its course.

The private Egyptian press published reports that Ghazl al-Mahalla earned between £E170 and £E217 million in fiscal year 2006–7. Consequently the workers claimed that they were due bonuses equal to 150 days' pay rather than the twenty days' they had received. After a six-day strike they won an additional seventy days' bonus pay, payable immediately. A meeting of the company's administrative general assembly after the strike was to increase this to a total of at least 130 days' pay. Much-hated CEO Mahmud al-Gibali was eventually dismissed.

The biggest victory was in the political arena: after declaring their refusal to do so, regime representatives, including ETUF president Husayn Mugawir and the minister of investment, were forced to come to Mahalla al-Kubra to negotiate with the strike committee. Thus while the workers did not formally win their demand to impeach the trade union committee, they rendered it irrelevant.

In contrast to most other workers' collective actions in the 2000s, in September 2007 some of the Ghazl al-Mahalla strike leaders explicitly framed their struggle as a political contest with national implications. Sayyid Habib told Voice of America Radio, "We are challenging the regime" (September 28, 2007). Chants and banners raised during the strike opposed the economic policies of the Nazif government. Kareem Elbehiry, a worker who writes the Egyptworkers blog (in Arabic), uploaded video clips featuring workers chanting, "We will not be ruled by the World Bank! We will not be ruled by colonialism!" Muhammad al-'Attar and seven other leaders were arrested for two days during the strike. On his release he told journalists, "We want a change in the structure and hierarchy of the union system in this country. . . . The way unions in this country are organized is completely wrong, from top to bottom. It is organized to make it look like our representatives have been elected, when really they are appointed by the government." Later that day al-'Attar told a pre-*ifhar* (Ramadan breakfast) workers' rally: "I want the whole government to resign. . . . I want the Mubarak regime to come to an end. Politics and workers' rights are inseparable. Work is politics by itself. What we are witnessing here right now, this is as democratic as it gets" (Stack and Mazen 2007).

Ghazl al-Mahalla workers suffered a major setback following an unsuccessful campaign to increase the national minimum wage. In January 2008 workers' leaders called for a national strike on April 6 in support of a demand to raise the monthly basic minimum wage to £E1,200. On April 2 security forces occupied

Mahalla al-Kubra and the factory and exerted intense pressure on strike committee members to cancel the strike. Concurrently, the company granted several outstanding demands and agreed to implement previously promised free transportation to and from work. Succumbing to this combination of repression and co-optation, a majority of the strike committee agreed to call off the strike, but two leaders refused to back down. Few other enterprises struck on that day.

While there was no strike in Ghazl al-Mahalla, after the 3:30 p.m. shift change, a crowd of mostly young boys and women gathered in the main square and began chanting slogans denouncing the high price of unsubsidized bread.<sup>10</sup> Plainclothes thugs of the regime who were on hand in anticipation of "trouble" unleashed volleys of rocks to disperse the crowd while uniformed Central Security Forces fired canisters of tear gas. As the violence escalated, the crowd burned the banners of the ruling party's candidates for the municipal elections scheduled for April 8. On April 7 an even larger crowd than the day before gleefully defaced a large poster of Hosni Mubarak. Over the two days, security forces arrested 331 people, beat up hundreds, critically wounded nine, and shot dead fifteen-year-old Ahmad 'Ali Mubarak with a bullet to his head as he was standing on the balcony of his flat.

On April 8 a delegation of high-level government officials led by Prime Minister Nazif rushed to Mahalla al-Kubra to restore calm. Nazif announced a bonus of one month's pay for Ghazl al-Mahalla workers and fifteen days for all other public sector textile workers. Many of the latter promptly threatened to strike if they did not receive a thirty-day bonus. The minister of investment promised better transportation facilities, special bakeries to dispense subsidized bread, revival of the cooperative store to provide subsidized rice, oil, sugar, and flour, and new medical equipment and specialized staff for the city's general hospital (Beinin 2008).

Following the clashes of April 6–7, forty-nine protesters were tried by an Emergency State Security Court. Twenty-two were convicted and sentenced to three-to-five-year jail terms. Three workers from Ghazl al-Mahalla were arrested, tortured, and detained for two months; several of their colleagues were given disciplinary transfers, although most were ultimately reversed. This level of repression was exceptional during 2004–11. It was perhaps due to the government's sensitivity about the symbolic status of Ghazl al-Mahalla and fear that workers might successfully organize a national protest. Although the abortive strike sought to support a "nonpolitical" economic demand, the specter of a nationally coordinated workers' action was intolerable.

## TOWARD INDEPENDENT UNIONS?

The largest collective actions of the 2000s involved fifty-five thousand real estate tax collectors employed by local authorities. Demanding wage parity with tax collectors employed directly by the Ministry of Finance, they organized escalating protests during the fall of 2007, including demonstrations and refusal to collect taxes. In December about ten thousand municipal real estate tax collectors and their family members sat-in for eleven days in front of the Ministry of Finance in downtown Cairo. The strike ended when the minister of finance agreed to a bonus equal to two months' pay and raised the wages of the municipal tax collectors by 325 percent, giving them parity with those employed by the General Tax Authority (Carr 2008).

The strike committee then began to turn itself into an independent union. On December 20, 2008, after gathering endorsements of twenty-seven thousand tax collectors, the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers was established at the headquarters of Cairo's Press Syndicate. Tax collectors and supporters filled the building beyond capacity, foiling the security authorities' efforts to thwart the meeting by shutting off the air conditioning. The government recognized the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers in April 2009.<sup>11</sup>

This case is exceptional for several reasons. The tax collectors are not properly "workers" but civil servants strategically located in the state apparatus. They did forge a national network linked to NGOs and opposition political parties—especially the CTUWS and the Karama Party—and they had sufficient resources to publish a monthly newspaper.<sup>12</sup> Their principal leader, Kamal Abu Eita, has a history of activism and is a leading member of Karama. While these experiences enhanced his capacities to lead his own union, Abu Eita did not become a national leader of the broader movement before January 2011. Nonetheless, this mobilization inspired several other groups of civil servants; health professionals, teachers and retirees formed independent unions in 2010.

The tax collectors' success in forming an independent union was exceptional. After the strike of December 2006, the Ghazl al-Mahalla strike committee made several attempts to form an independent union and organize coordination of textile workers in the Delta and in Alexandria. But they were unable to sustain these efforts. Personality clashes and differences over whether to strike on April 6, 2008, split the leadership. By March 2009 one group had decided not to pursue establishing an independent union,<sup>13</sup> another faction was demoralized; a third continued to pursue a more confrontational strategy.

These developments at Ghazl al-Mahalla, where the workers' movement was best organized and nationally visible, indicate that it is not necessary to agree on values and strategies in order to constitute a movement, as Tarrow (1998, 106–22) argues. The movement developed through tactical agreements on actions to achieve specific demands and a largely implicit conception of workers' "rights," having no common political stance or explicit long-term strategy.

## WORKERS AND THE POPULAR UPRISING OF 2011

The mass protests calling for the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak that began on January 25, 2011, did not originate from factories, nor were they led by labor activists. But workers were quick to participate and seized the opportunity to assert social and economic demands along with calls for the overthrow of Mubarak. On January 30, 2011, REITA, the independent health professionals and teachers unions, the retirees' association, and groups of other workers formed the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). This was a revolutionary act, ending in practice (though not in law) ETUF's monopoly on union representation since 1957. It also signaled labor activists' intention that regime change should include new trade union legislation ensuring pluralism and freedom of organization. The main demands put forward by the founding statement of EFITU included implementation of a minimum wage and guarantees of freedom of organization; it called on workers to organize sit-ins and strikes to achieve "the demands of the Egyptian people" (Kamal Abu 'Aya et al. 2011).

During the first days of the uprising workers joined the protests as individuals. In contrast to collective actions that had been confined to workplaces until then, the mass demonstrations of January and February 2011 took place in the streets and public squares of Egyptian cities. Earlier sit-ins staged by workers, civil servants, and a wide range of citizens in front of the parliament and the prime minister's office in 2010 had appropriated public space to voice grievances, but the security forces had restricted their scope.

The violent outcome of the failed national strike of April 6, 2008, likely led workers to engage in the anti-Mubarak protests cautiously, as individuals rather than at the factory level, to prevent a possible repressive backlash. Moreover, in the absence of a national organized movement, workers were not in a position to take the lead. As Khalid 'Ali, the director of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights and 2012 presidential candidate, explained, "The workers did not start the January 25 movement because they have no organizing structure. . . . [But] one of the important steps of this revolution was taken

when they began to protest, giving the revolution an economic and social slant besides the political demands" (Kempf 2011).

On February 7 and 8 workplaces went on strike demanding both the resolution of local grievances and the ouster of Mubarak. During February 2011, 489 labor protests took place across Egypt, involving about two hundred thousand workers, including many in strategic sectors like the subsidiary companies of the Suez Canal Authority, Ghazl al-Mahalla, the Cairo and Alexandria Public Transport Authorities, the state-owned telecommunications company, Telecom Egypt, as well as medical doctors.<sup>14</sup> The exact weight of these strikes in the overthrow of Mubarak is uncertain. According to the Sons of the Land Center for Human Rights, the economic paralysis created by the strikes "was one of the most important factors leading to the rapidity of Mubarak's decision to leave" (Mu'assasat Awlad al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan 2011). Between January 28 and February 5, production in key industrial zones dropped by 60 percent because of the unrest in the country and the closure of workplaces.<sup>15</sup>

Strikes were not the only factor that paralyzed the economy. Government measures such as closing ATMs and imposing the curfew, which disrupted transport and the supply chain for consumer goods, also contributed. According to the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, few trucking companies were operating.<sup>16</sup> Activity at ports also declined sharply; some had to shut down from January 31. The port of Alexandria, which handles about 60 percent of Egypt's foreign trade, including vital wheat imports, was not officially closed but operated at limited capacity, putting food supplies at risk if the delay of cargo shipments lasted longer.<sup>17</sup>

The constraints discussed in this chapter prevented the organization of general strikes comparable to those that shut down Iran's oil industry in 1979 (Kurzman 2012). In February 2011 workers' mobilizations followed the same patterns that prevailed between 2004 and 2010: protests were centered on local workplaces and did not become a nationally organized movement. However, workers' collective actions certainly strengthened the opposition movement, and their participation in the overthrow of Mubarak enhanced workers' organizational and political capacity.

On February 11, 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) led by Defense Minister and Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi removed Mubarak from office and assumed power. But labor protests did not stop. Workers continued to ask for better pay and working conditions. On February 14, EFTU staged a demonstration in front of ETUF headquarters in Cairo

to demand its dissolution and the prosecution of ETUF management board. The protesters were attacked by ETUF security (Charbel 2011). At Ghazl al-Mahalla striking workers also demanded the resignation of Fu'ad 'Abd al-'Alim, CEO of the public sector spinning and Weaving Holding Company, whose management style had been criticized by workers for years.

Workers' collective actions continued despite the SCAF's measures to criminalize labor actions. Military Decree 34 on March 24 established a fine of up to £E50,000 (about \$8,333) for anyone participating in or encouraging others to join a sit-in or any other activity that "prevents, delays or disrupts the work of public institutions or public authorities." The penalty increases to £E500,000 (about \$83,333) and at least a year's imprisonment in the event of violence or property damage that may lead to "destruction of means of production" or harm "national unity and public security and order." Military Decree 34 was enforced only once. On June 29, 2011, a military court sentenced five workers at Petrojet, an oil- and gas-services company operated by the Ministry of Petroleum, to a one-year suspended prison term for sitting on the pavement in front of the ministry. The severity of the sentence and its suspension reflected the uncertain balance of political legitimacy between the military and the workers' movement (Beinin 2012). During 2011 about 900,000 Egyptians participated in nearly 1,400 labor actions.<sup>18</sup>

There was a clear contradiction between the SCAF's antilabor policies and those of interim Minister of Manpower and Migration Ahmad Hasan al-Bura'i. In March, al-Bura'i recognized workers' right to establish unions and federations independent of ETUF. On August 4 he dissolved ETUF's board of directors and appointed an interim steering committee to manage ETUF that included eighteen independent trade unionists, leftists, and Muslim Brothers and seven ETUF stalwarts of the old regime (Basyuni 2011). This progressive momentum was reversed in November 2011, when most of the old ETUF leadership was reinstated. Several months later, Ahmad 'Abd al-Zahir, head of the General Union of Cooperatives and an associate of former ETUF president Husayn Mughawir became the head of ETUF. Law 35 of 1976 prohibiting trade union pluralism remained in force, while the SCAF blocked draft trade union legislation approved by both the Ministry of Manpower and Migration and the cabinet in August 2011 and conforming to the standards of the International Labor Organization.

The most significant gain for workers from the overthrow of Mubarak was an increase in the monthly minimum basic wage to £E700 (about \$116) for

public sector employees effective July 1, 2011. In October 2011 the first-ever private sector minimum wage was established at £E/7.00 (Beinin 2012). Yet its enforcement is uncertain.

## CONCLUSION

The trajectory of the Egyptian workers' movement differs from those Tarrow (2011, 294) suggests as responses to different combinations of opportunity and threat. The intensification of collective action dating to mid-2004 was launched by relatively weak actors in mid-sized enterprises like Ora-Misir and ESCO, who were motivated largely by enhanced threats: deteriorating health and fears of the loss of job security and social benefits in these cases. Workers achieved significant gains by obliging ETUF and the government to exert pressure on their private sector employers. The disinclination of the government to violently repress collective action was apparent only after the Ora-Misir and ESCO workers were committed to their sit-ins; it was not perceived as an opportunity beforehand.

The strongest actors—the Ghazl al-Mahalla workers—did not join the movement until late 2006, when the pattern of greater government tolerance for workers' protest was established. Their strikes won substantial economic demands, which the government applied to the entire public sector textile industry after less intense collective actions at other workplaces. Despite their superior level of organization (until the leadership became divided in April 2008), the strategic character of their enterprise, and their historic leading role in winning economic gains, the Ghazl al-Mahalla strike committee could not establish social movement institutions or an independent union. Instead, the previously unheralded real estate tax collectors achieved the greatest economic gains of the entire movement before Mubarak's ouster and succeeded in establishing the first independent trade union in Egypt in more than half a century. Thus, contrary to McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald's assertion (1996, 13), it was not necessary and in most cases not possible to "create an enduring organizational structure to sustain collective action."

Workers' collective actions became a substantial element of a burgeoning culture of protest in the 2000s, and workers continued to assert their demands in the post-Mubarak transitional period. Of course, factors other than labor must be taken into account in understanding how mass protests were able to overthrow Mubarak: the role of the army, the highly centralized nature of state power, and global geopolitics. But several years before Mubarak's demise, a class-based social movement had successfully asserted its public presence in an

authoritarian state that imposed severe limits on associational life. This phenomenon confounded the conventional wisdom of journalists, scholars, and politicians who regarded "economic reform," "democratization" (understood as electoral procedures), and the "peace process" as the most important stories in Egypt during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It deserves to be understood in its own right.