

# LABOR PROTEST POLITICS AND WORKER RIGHTS IN EGYPT

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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**SPEAKER:**

**Dr. Joel Beinin**

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Stanford University

**DISCUSSANTS:**

**Kamal Abbas**

General Coordinator

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**Heba El-Shazli**

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**Sarah Leah Whitson**

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Transcript by Federal News Service

Washington, D.C.

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MICHELE DUNNE: Welcome to the Carnegie Endowment. I'd like to start by thanking the Solidarity Center, which is co-hosting this event. And the occasion for this discussion is the launch of a new Solidarity Center report, "The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt." I hope you picked one up on the publications table. If you didn't, please do when you leave.

Having just read it myself, I have to say it is really a fantastic report. It's very comprehensive, it's very informative, it really puts the issue of labor rights in the context of Egyptian history and current Egyptian politics. And I personally really learned a lot from reading it. I think you can learn a lot about Egypt in general by reading this report, which also contains a lot of wonderful images.

And speaking of images, I just wanted to note – I don't know how many of you were looking at these, flipping images before the event started here, but I want to thank photographer Sarah Carr for permission to use these photos.

These were taken just within the last week and they are of an ongoing demonstration in Cairo by several hundred workers of the privatized Tanta Flax and Oils Company. They're protesting the dismissal of their local union leader and a lockout by the management. And this is an issue that is most likely going to be discussed in the Egyptian parliament next week. So our topic today is very much a live issue in Egypt, and something that's very relevant right now.

I think that examining labor issues and the phenomenon of labor protests allows us to kind of open a window on the situation in Egypt, a very valuable window, to look at what's going on in Egypt today. And it's a little bit different from the elite politics that we often discuss. In fact, I think it's fair to say that you can't really understand what's going on today in Egypt economically, socially and politically without looking into the labor issue and labor protests. So I hope that our speakers today are going to shed light on what is going on with labor in Egypt today, including the ambiguous position of the government-dominated trade union federation, and also put these issues in a broader context for us.

Some of the questions that occur to me, now – we've seen this very large increase in labor protest activity since 2004 and even more so since 2007. To what extents are these protests attributable to economic reforms and privatization and the dislocations that are caused by them versus a changed climate, a changed political and social climate, in which protest in general has become more acceptable and has become more widespread?

Another question that occurs to me is while, labor protestors are primarily concerned with specific bread-and-butter grievances, this report identifies some key laws – the emergency law – the state of emergency in Egypt – the NGO law, the unified labor law – that are directly relevant to the case of laborers. Some opposition currents, be it Kefaya, the April 6 movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, leftists, et cetera, have tried to connect with labor protestors, so far with limited results. So why is that? And what is the prospect for labor and political protestors in Egypt to make common cause?

And also, since we're in Washington, I think we need to ask the question: What role can or should the United States be playing in supporting the rights of Egyptian workers? And is that only possible in terms of negotiations over a free trade agreement, which are, as we know, are not happening at this point, or are there other ways in which the United States can support the rights of workers?

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We have, I think, an absolutely ideal panel; the best possible panel to discuss these issues today. First of all, we have Dr. Joel Beinin, professor of Middle East history at Stanford University, who is the author of this fine report and, really, the foremost expert on labor issues in Egypt.

We also have with us Mr. Kamal Abbas, executive director of the Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services in Egypt. He is a veteran labor activist, someone who really has been at the center of the labor struggles in the last couple of years and someone who's suffered a great deal of harassment – he and his organization – from the Egyptian government as a result.

And we also have with us Sarah Leah Whitson, director of the Middle East and North African division at Human Rights Watch. I also want to introduce my co-host for this event, Heba El-Shazli, regional program director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Solidarity Center. Heba is going to be providing translation for Mr. Abbas's comments and I hope she'll also contribute to the conversation.

So we're going to begin with a presentation by Dr. Beinin and proceed to comments by Mr. Abbas and Ms. Whitson and then we'll open the floor for your questions.

JOEL BEININ: Good afternoon, thank you for coming. And thank you to the Carnegie Endowment for hosting this event. There are a lot of other people who I could thank as well but I'll limit the thanks to people in the room. First of all, Kamal Abbas, who is one of the people who has taught me a great deal about labor in Egypt; Heba El-Shazli and the staff of the Solidarity Center, of which Erin Radford is present today, who asked me to do the research and writing, and provided terrific research and logistical assistance; and also Francesca Ricciardone, who is now working for the International Trade Union Confederation and was my student at the American University in Cairo and did her MA thesis on gender and the current labor movement.

So this report is the tenth in the series, "Justice for All," which the Solidarity Center has been issuing about various countries around the world. And the report takes the form of a commentary on the 1998 statement of the International Labor Organization on the basic rights of workers at work. And these rights are freedom of association, the right to organize and bargain collectively, no discrimination, no use of child labor and no use of forced labor.

And it probably won't be surprising to those of you who know something about Egypt that the Egyptian government long ago has signed all of the relevant ILO conventions and has agreed to uphold all of these rights. But it's also no surprise that when we looked into it deeply, we found that there are massive violations across the board, indeed, systematic violations in many cases.

So for example, there is an Egyptian trade union federation. It was established in 1957 but it's in no sense an independent trade union institution. It functions essentially as an arm of the government. In workplaces where it does represent workers, joining the union is mandatory and dues check-off is mandatory. A new local union which is formed, if it is recognized, has to be affiliated to the sector national union and through it to the Egyptian trade union federation. And this problem essentially means that workers have no representation despite the fact that they are now facing some of the worst economic conditions in the modern history of Egypt.

Since 2004 – and this can be dated fairly precisely with the entry into office of the current government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif – since 2004, there have been some 3,000 collective actions – strikes, demonstrations and so on – involving some 2 million Egyptian workers.

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This is the largest social movement in the Arab world since World War II, the largest labor movement that Egypt has seen since there was a modern labor movement in Egypt in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. All indications are that this movement is continuing as we speak – not only this current sit-in demonstration of the Tanta Flax and Oil workers which is going on now but also the latest report that I received just the other day counts 59 labor protests in the last two weeks of January alone, including 14 strikes. So the movement appears to be on pace to continue with the intensity that we have seen since 2004. More broadly, you can see – and these figures are contained in an appendix to chapter 1 that since the late 1990s – there's been an increase in labor protests.

So to partially answer Michele's question, workers were in motion before there was Kefaya; before there was the second Palestinian intifada, which moved a lot of people into the streets; before the protests against the American invasion of Iraq, which also moved a lot of people into the streets. And the reasons for the workers' protest is more or less that it is a direct response to the 1991 economic reform and structural adjustment program that Egypt signed with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

And in the sphere of labor relations, the accompaniment to the 1991 ERSAP agreement is the 2003 unified labor law. On paper, the unified labor law appears to give workers certain rights, such as the right to strike. But in fact, workers can only strike if two-thirds of the executive committee of their national union approves the strike. So if you are – for example, the Kitan Tanta workers would be under the aegis of the national union of textile workers. And it would be the executive board of that national union which would have to approve this strike, which it has not.

In fact, the Egyptian trade union federation has partially supported only one strike since this strike wave broke out. And that is that it gave the Kitan Tanta workers – these very workers – permission to strike for five days beginning on May 31<sup>st</sup>. They remained on strike until mid-November because their demands were not achieved.

And here they are back on the streets because the agreements that were reached in mid-November have not been implemented. And this is a firm which was a public sector firm, was privatized, sold to a new Saudi owner who totally refuses to abide by his contractual commitments vis-à-vis the workers. And this is a snapshot of the most typical kind of issue that has sparked labor protests.

There has been a very dramatic increase in the pace of privatization of the public sector since the government of Prime Minister Nazif came into office. He announced that this would be his objective and, in fact, during the first year of the new government in office, 17 public sector firms were privatized. That's a record for a year. and in 2007, the total receipts of the government from the privatization process – from the sale of public assets – was 10 times what it had been in the previous decade. So the government of Prime Minister Nazif is true to its word. It has accelerated the privatization process. The neoliberal restructuring of Egypt is well underway.

And for workers, the problem is there is no structure to deal with this. The existing trade union framework does not represent them. By law, it has a monopoly on representing workers, therefore the vast majority of all of what's happened to protest the privatization process and its ill social effects has been a ground-up process. And that, I think, is ultimately the most important thing about this whole movement.

As Michele mentioned, there's been a lot of discussion about democratization in Egypt and whether there would or wouldn't be or is or isn't democratization in Egypt focusing on either the level of elite politics or on the level of the educated intelligentsia of the cities. In my opinion, this is where democratization is happening.

This is the most democratic thing that is happening in Egypt because here you have people who are getting together, choosing in one form or another their leaders, deciding what it is that they want, deciding on the tactics

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that they will pursue to go about achieving their aims, and for the first time to a very considerable extent, actually winning a good part of their demands.

So one of the explanations for the continuity of this movement is that unlike, for example, what happened to Kamal Abbas when he led steelworkers in Helwan on strike in 1989 and the security forces moved in with massive force, killed people, beat people, arrested people, tortured people, that's not happening.

And what happened in Helwan in 1989 is not atypical. The government did similar things in Kafr el-Dawwar in 1984 and again in 1994. This is not happening now. These workers are going on strike. Sometimes the security forces do intervene but never this kind of violent level of intervention which was typical in the past.

And that's meant that workers have had the opportunity to actually achieve some of their demands. And then other workers seeing that happen have received the message. If you want something, the only way you're going to go to get it is to go out and struggle for it. And that's actually a pretty good lesson for people around the world because it's always been that way.

MS. DUNNE: Thank you. Mr. Abbas, your comments, please?

(Note: Mr. Abbas' remarks are delivered via translator.)

KAMAL ABBAS: Good afternoon. I'm going to really be very brief and summarize because I'm here primarily to respond to questions. And that, I feel, is very important.

First, I'd like to thank very much the Carnegie Endowment for hosting us and also thank the Solidarity Center for this wonderful report, and of course, Dr. Joel Beinin for his always-professional and exact work.

This is really a very personal moment for me. This embodies the stories of many workers in Egypt, and it's a story of happiness, of joy. It is also a story of respect for those who are on strike. The story what Joel was telling you about – the incidents at the steel mill in Helwan in 1989 where I was fired – I was imprisoned and one of my very good friends was killed by security forces who used all kinds of bullets as well as tear gas.

Today, the situation has changed quite dramatically actually. Today, workers are going on strike and as a result, the government is actually negotiating. And the fighting and the battles conducted by workers are definitely built on many years of those who have been martyred, who have died. And now we are reaping some of the rewards.

At a press interview this morning, we were asked about what are the political gains that workers have been able to achieve – what have they been able to get? My answer is as follows: First, the participation of more than 2 million workers in various strikes, and being able to have the right to strike is a first achievement. Through these many strikes, there have been increases in wages and the government has been forced to negotiate and actually give some of these demands to the workers.

Also, in terms of the development of the organization of workers, today we actually have seen a very successful example with the creation of an independent union of the real estate tax collectors. This is truly impressive. It's surprising. You have to question it.

Basically, over a period of 1 year in 28 provinces – or, we call them governorates – more than 40,000 employees basically had local election – very democratic, very transparent – to elect their local representative

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committees. And on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, 2008, 3,000 representatives met at the headquarters of the journalist union to elect their national leadership of this new union in front of everyone from the press and their representatives and leaders. It was a very personal and a very emotional moment for me because this is a moment that I've been waiting for, for 30 years. This is something I didn't think I would be able to see in my lifetime – the actual creation of an independent, democratic union.

And to end my comments, I'm actually very happy that we're here to talk about strikes and this very important report. And I think that the whole world now has been quite interested in what's happening to the Egyptian worker and to the worker movement in Egypt.

I can remember that in 1989 when we were on strike we had a journalist come from the Egyptian newspaper Al-Wafd. We considered him a hero. We lifted him up on our shoulders and we were shouting, you know, welcome – welcomed him. Today the whole world is dealing with us with respect and appreciation with the battles and the fights that the workers in Egypt are conducting today.

I want to thank Joel again. About 10 years ago, you and Zachary Lockman wrote one of the best books and the workers and worker movement in Egypt. And today you also presented a very respectable, professional report. And I also thank International Solidarity and I am telling them I'm really very jealous. And I would really have wanted this to do have been launched from Egypt. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. DUNNE: Thank you very much. And thank you, Mr. Abbas. I think you really did a great job of putting your comments in kind of the context and showing how the changing level of attention to these issues in Egypt and here. Ms. Whitson?

SARAH LEAH WHITSON: I wanted to put the workers' rights movement in Egypt in the broader context of the political and human rights realities in the country today, which I think makes all the more remarkable the facts that we just heard from Joel of 2 million workers participating in some kind of a labor strike or labor demand. In the past few years, 40,000 demanding and insisting and participating in elections to select independent trade union leaders in the country.

In the context of life in Egypt and the laws under which people operate, it is in fact an astounding achievement and I think really reflects just how difficult the conditions are for workers in Egypt that leads them to take the risks that they take, not only for themselves but for their families, for the security of their children, their education, the many ways in which there can be retaliatory conduct against workers. Not just batons on their heads or even bullets in their bodies, but wide-scale repercussions that go far beyond and affect many more.

The reality is that Egypt is now and has been for many decades under a form of martial law. The emergency laws that were passed decades ago during a time of war in Egypt continue to be the primary tool that the government relies on to arrest whomever it wants, detain them for as long as it wants without charge, without transparency, sometimes not always trying them under state security courts without a right to appeal, with judges that do not have independence and do not act independently.

And it is in this context that there are legalized restrictions on speech. The very terms of the Egyptian penal code prohibit what Egyptians can say under very loosely defined provisions – for example – of harming national security – whatever that means – insulting the nation, harming the values of the nation and other very loosely defined, vague, ambiguous provisions that basically gives the government the discretion to decide when it's going to prosecute people for what they've said – whether publicly or in writing or on blogs – or not.

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There are similarly legalized restrictions on NGOs, on nongovernmental associations and their ability to operate as truly nongovernmental organizations. The government decides what organization can become legally registered, who can be on its board, whether or not their funding can be approved or not approved and, of course, the record is rife particularly with trade and labor organizations that have been attacked by the government, forcibly shut down because ultimate – and able to do so with the veneer of law, given laws that restrict their existence.

There are also laws that exist to restrict political parties and the ability of political parties to come into being, so that, in fact, there is no real competition in Egyptian elections. There is no legalized opposition that actually has the standing or the capacity to compete freely against the government's party. Similarly, there are legalized restrictions on demonstrations that limit the ability of Egyptians to make their demands known that are in fact what is used against labor unions that demonstrate to demand their rights.

The overarching impetus of these laws which are, as usual, done in the name of security is, in fact, to serve the government's interest of keeping itself in power. That is the reason why these laws are used and implemented. And that is why there is no real political opposition in Egypt that's able to contest and win contested elections.

It's also interesting, I think, why the government sees a threat in every corner and treats as a security threat even labor union strikes at a small factory where the demands are actually quite simple. You know, better wages, better work conditions, better hours – or, in fact, has to do with the demands to have labor unions operate as independent labor unions free from government interference. For the Egyptian government, all of these are threats to its monopoly control of power. And I think that's what it comes down to in terms of the government's consistent resistance to the demands of the labor unions.

You couple this with the police brutality and torture which, I think, are the hallmarks these days of the Egyptian security forces. And I think the conclusion that we see, particularly as experienced by labor union activists and ordinary workers is that the main threat to the security of the Egyptian people, the main threat to Egyptian workers are the Egyptian security forces.

I think we're here in Washington today having this presentation today in part in recognition of the important role that the United States government plays and the influence it has or should have with respect to the conduct and policies of the Egyptian government. I don't think it's news to any that U.S. assistance to Egypt, I think, at this point exceeds \$1.6 billion – the vast, vast, vast majority of that – approximately \$1.3 billion – in military assistance. And given that the Egyptian government is not currently fighting any wars with its neighbors fortunately, certainly that military assistance should no doubt be used in the arsenal of what the government has inside its own security forces.

There is an important measure that the United States government should and can be using and that is to condition its aid on important human rights reforms, on respecting the basic rights of Egyptians to speak their minds freely, to assemble freely, to organize freely, to be tried before independent civilian courts, to be free from torture and abuse at the hands of their own police.

But in fact, aid conditionality has not been used in a way that's meaningful to the lives of the Egyptian people. Instead, what little conditionality has been imposed on the Egyptian government has pertained overwhelmingly and almost exclusively to Egypt's conduct vis-à-vis the border at Gaza and the extent to which it has implemented sufficient security measures to protect Israel.

I think, overall, what we need to – the unavoidable, inescapable reality is that we have to recognize the role of the U.S. government in its relationship with Egypt – particularly the financial relationship with Egypt – in a marker

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of condoning the government's conduct, condoning the laws it has in place in the country – and in, as well, enabling the government to maintain its absolute control of power in the country. I hope we can certainly discuss some of this more during the Q&A, but I want to stick to the time limit. (Applause.)

MS. DUNNE: Yes, thank you to all the speakers for being so concise. Because you were so concise, I'm going to take for myself the privilege of asking you a couple of questions before I open it up to the audience. And let me ask two questions and any of you who want to respond to this, I welcome it.

The first question is about the relation of all this to economic reform. I mean, the United States has encouraged Egypt to carry out these macroeconomic reforms and Egypt has done so. And we have applauded them for doing it. And it's very clear that the labor protests are related at least in part to the dislocations caused by privatization. So I think, you know, it's too big a subject to talk about whether those reforms were the right thing to do or not, but let me ask this question.

The dislocations that laborers have suffered as a result of the privatizations – were they avoidable? I mean, are these kind of dislocations unavoidable when you carry out macroeconomic reforms like this? Or were there things that the Egyptian government could have done, where perhaps if workers had been able to organize more freely to advocate their own rights? Were there things that could have been done that could have avoided this situation? In other words, could Egypt have carried out these reforms and yet avoided causing this much pain to the workers resulting in these protests? That's question number one.

Question number two is both Joel and Kamal acknowledged that the Egyptian government is dealing with labor protestors in a gentler way than it has in the past. I mean, we contrasted their treatment of a strike 20 years ago with what we're seeing today. And also, elsewhere I've heard it said – I don't know if you agree with this – that the Egyptian government has been much more accommodating to labor protestors than it has been to political protestors, willing to discuss their grievances and treating them perhaps in a slightly less coercive way. So I wonder what your comments are on those two issues.

MR. BEININ: I think the most fundamental issue regarding the trajectory of the economic reform and structural adjustment program is that workers have had absolutely no voice and no legitimate representation to make their needs and demands known. So the government has gone ahead and implemented this project. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which nominally represents the interests of workers, hasn't done so because it's in the hands of the ruling party and its leadership is vetted by the regime.

And so the ordinary people who have been affected by this process of economic restructuring have had no input into how the process would go. So that's the most fundamental thing and beyond that, we could talk about whether it was done in the best way and whether there were alternatives and so on and so forth. But however it might have been, workers were left out of it.

Not only that, Egypt is in effect advertising itself as a place where foreign direct investment can come and find a docile labor force that the Egyptian security force will keep under control and a low-wage labor force. So despite the fact that wages have increased in part as a result of the protests in recent years, according to the Egyptian ministry of investment, wages in Egypt are 47 percent of the wages in Turkey and somewhere around a third of the wages in Tunisia and Morocco, which are Egypt's most important regional competitors.

So the government is literally advertising to foreign investors that they should come and take advantage of the super exploitation of Egyptian workers. And the government has allowed workers to win certain demands. In my opinion, this is something which I don't think we have lots of evidence for because repressing workers in the way

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that has been done in the past would upset potential investors. You wouldn't want to be investing lots of money in a situation where the government has to pull out the stops and exercise violence against workers who are protesting.

MR. ABBAS: In addition to what Joel just said in terms of the first question, basically the economic restructuring program in Egypt began in earnest starting in 1991. And after 3 years, our center for trade union and worker services released a very important report. This report indicated three steps, three things that the government definitely had to do in order to go through with this economic restructuring program:

Number one, so if we're going towards a liberal open market economy, so there absolutely has to be freedom of trade unions, you know, freedom of association. You don't give all the rights to the owners, to the employers and you forbid and you take away from the workers their right to also freely associate. And also the lack of or the nonexistence ability to be able to negotiate.

Second point, to begin a change in the system of social security: This was actually quite a functional and effective system that was set up in the 1960s, but after these economic changes, it would then have to move or change from sort of social security to social insurance more. So that would include, for example, unemployment insurance and things like that. And that would have rights that based on the rights of citizenship.

The third point, the idea of transition and retraining. Thousands of workers would lose their jobs because of the restructuring. So then I have to create a system to be able to retrain them for new and different vocations and different jobs.

The second question? Give it to Joel first.

MR. BEININ: So Michele asked, we've acknowledged that the government is more accommodating towards labor protests than it has been in the past and what's the reason for it. At the end of my last comment, I gave what I think is the reason, but I really can't prove it – which is that it's an effort to maintain as much social peace as is possible because Egypt has put all its eggs in the basket of foreign direct investment. And in fact, for the 3 years following the installation of Prime Minister Nazif's government, the rate of annual GDP growth in Egypt was about 7 percent. Very impressive, very dramatic.

The problem is the question of distribution: The distribution was and remains very unequal. But the strategy was that this would continue and this would catapult Egypt into a higher level of economic development and okay, we'll buy off the workers with the income that we have from high petroleum prices and higher tolls through the Suez Canal partly as a result of increased consumption of petroleum. That model has been subjected to something of a crisis as a result of the international financial crisis. Egypt's GDP growth has gone down significantly, unemployment has gone up. So it's unclear whether this will continue at all.

MR. ABBAS: In addition to what Joel's just said, let's please review and analyze the changes within Egyptian society because these are very real changes. The presence of an independent media, independent also television channels and stations, the presence of civil society organizations, the presence of political youth – young political movements. The moment that there's a strike or there's an action at a factory, within seconds we are able to see it live via one of the satellite stations.

We have to make note of these changes because many have given their lives for the situation that we have today. So today the culture of protest is actually now part of the daily culture in Egypt. And I think that the use of excessive force by the government today in the current economic situation would actually lead to an explosion.

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MS. DUNNE: Okay, thank you very much. We have a great audience here today. We have people interested in labor issues, in human rights issues, in Egypt in general and so forth. So I'm going to open the floor for questions. Please put up your hand. I'm going to ask you to do a couple of things: wait until a microphone comes to you, identify yourself briefly, keep your question as concise as possible and please let me know if you want to address it to a specific one of the speakers.

Q: Thank you. My name's Jim Shea. I'm with the Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs. We've been following events – labor events in Egypt fairly closely for a while now. Fake labor organizations such as the ETUF eventually lose their legitimacy in the eyes of their membership and that's clearly what has happened in Egypt today. Is there any acknowledgment or recognition or thinking at the ETUF or the government that this system is going to have to be remade? Or are they just going to go continue on crisis management mode for the foreseeable future?

MR. ABBAS: This is a most wonderful and wise recommendation, sir, that if you could please get it to the ears of the Egyptian government, that they definitely need to hear this because as you said, the ETUF is exactly as you described it. Actually, ETUF's dealing with the protests and the strike is worse than the dealings of the Egyptian government with those strikes.

Let me give one example. The employees in the real estate tax collectors, when they created their independent union, the government actually – the ministry – actually accepted the papers, as you know, with, yes, some pressure from the international labor organization, but they actually accepted the papers. You'd think that the ETUF would then cooperate and work with this situation. But actually, you know, they actually behaved in pretty much the predictable way that we're used to.

So the head of the general union within the ETUF that comprises those same types of workers actually went to the prosecutor general – or the general attorney, the equivalent – and filed a complaint against the new president of the RETA, the real estate tax collectors union. And he asked the prosecutor general to actually take the new president and the organization to court because they created a new and independent organization outside of the ETUF structure.

MS. DUNNE: Okay. There's a gentleman immediately behind the questioner – yeah.

Q: I'm Stanley Kober with the Cato Institute. In concluding his response to Michele's question, Mr. Abbas used the word, "explosion". Does this labor unrest foreshadow a revolution?

HEBA EL-SHAZLI: I bet I translated that right, I hope. (Laughter.) I did. (Laughter.)

MR. ABBAS: I actually hope that there is not a revolution because it's for all of our interests as Egyptians that the change happens and takes place in Egypt in a peaceful manner. Because I believe that any explosion, any revolution is not to the basic interest of the Egyptian people, the Egyptian government – the political structures, the people and the government.

MS. DUNNE: There's a gentleman in the back door who's been waiting.

Q: Tim Beatty from the Teamsters. Brother Kamal, following up on Jim Shea's question – we do get approached by unions in Egypt, for us particularly in the transport sector and some of them I think sort of more government-linked. So is your recommendation, sort of, isolate, no contact or should we work with them? What

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would be your counsel to us as Egyptian official trade union structures approach us about giving them advice on privatization or whatever else it might be?

MR. ABBAS: What kind of help do they ask for?

Q: Advice on privatization.

MR. ABBAS: Let me speak with you frankly. I see that the Egyptian Trade Union Federation does not represent the Egyptian workers. The way it's structured, the way the bylaws are set. It is an institution that is outside of history. It just – it's got to – yeah, it's out there. (Laughter.)

I am asked this question actually quite often: And so what do we do with the Egyptian Trade Union Federation? How do we deal with them? My very specific answer: Help Egyptian workers. Help Egyptian workers. And therefore any assistance to the Egyptian Trade Union Federation is actually against the Egyptian worker.

Q: Thank you. I wanted to ask if the workers' activism and activity during the last several years has also succeeded in establishing connections with other protest movements or groups. Specifically, the ones led by civil society.

And a follow-up to this is I agree with Joel that, of course, the workers' movement is a social movement, but is one of the goals of that movement is to connect with other social movements in Egyptian society as well, including those that are a part of the middle class? Thank you.

MR. BEININ: So in answer to Miravat's (sp) question, I think we first of all have to seriously ask, what does the term civil society mean in a country like Egypt? If a nongovernmental organization requires permission from the government to exist at all, to what extent is it actually a nongovernmental organization and to what extent does it actually represent what it purports to represent?

The restrictions are very, very tight. So there are many, many excellent people, including close personal friends of mine, who are trying to work within these restrictions. But almost by definition, they have limited access to the Egyptian people because the law is set up to make that be the case.

The distinction of the workers movement, as opposed to all of the other political or civic protest movements that have arisen in Egypt roughly in the last decade is that the workers movement is a mass movement. When workers protest, they can get thousands, and sometimes tens of thousands, of people on the street. When middle-class NGOs, political forces in the broadest alliance that they can possibly achieve, call for some kind of protest, maybe they'll get several hundred people on the street.

Workers are happy when they see that some of the political forces have issued statements of support for them, and many political forces have, indeed. But the workers are doing what they are doing on their own. They're not being incited by anybody. And they are very careful not to appear to be linked to any existing political force because they, like most of the rest of the people of Egypt, don't have any confidence in the existing political forces. The legal political parties actually don't represent anybody.

Some of the non-governmental organizations have tried to make links with workers. It's been only to a very limited extent. In my experience – and maybe Kamal will say differently – the strongest links between middle class elements and workers are forged by a small group of very brave labor correspondents who write in several different

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Egyptian newspapers or on blogs. They're Al-Dustour and Almasry Alyoum and others. And some of those people do belong to political organizations, and consequently, a certain link can be established.

But every time I have visited workers, they have insisted, we don't belong to any one political organization. This is not something which is being initiated from outside; this is something that we are doing on our own.

MR. ABBAS: Just two very quick points. Please, let's not just say that the protests that are happening in Egypt today are just by workers. Actually, one of the most successful strikes that I've seen in quite some time is the one led by the pharmacists.

MS. EL-SHAZLI: And actually, I agree. I was there. (Chuckles.) And you could not find a pharmacy anywhere that was open.

MR. ABBAS: One other point is the misuse by the political powers of the workers and the workers movements. Because workers go on strike and have job actions for very specific and concrete demands. And what should happen is that these political forces should work with them to gain and get those specific, concrete demands. But what happens by these political forces – they put their own agendas, their own platforms and they try to impose them on the workers. And that is very dangerous.

MS. DUNNE: Okay. This gentleman here, with his hand up.

Q: Thank you. (Inaudible) – CSIS. I have a question for Dr. Bein. And I wonder if it would be fair to really call the labor protests in Egypt a movement, because it occurs to me, at least, that they have been, for the most part, spontaneous, sporadic reactions to events that have taken place. And they lack cohesion in terms of action and organizing amongst each other. So for example, the workers in Tanta wouldn't have much to do with the workers in Helwan, at least as far as I know. So is it really fair to label it a movement, or are these just outbursts of anger?

MR. BEININ: Kamal and I were having this very discussion this morning, and I do call it a movement because something that continues for the better part of a decade isn't simply a series of accidental outbursts. It's true that workers in one place may not know or have effective links to workers in another place, but it's also true that in the textile factories of the delta, for example, people do know each other, people do call each other up on their mobiles after a successful action.

After the big strike of December, 2006, in Mahalla al-Kubra, which is on the cover of the report, there were strikes in 10 other textile factories in the delta. Some of those people who led those strikes didn't know each other before the strikes; afterwards, they certainly did. And there are occasions when people are brought together, for example international women's day 2008. The New Women Foundation hosted a gathering in Cairo to honor women who had played a prominent role in the labor movement.

So people came from all over the country, some of whom who had not known each other before. Those women got up, spoke in front of a mixed crowd, including foreigners like myself – something which Egyptian workers from peasant backgrounds are not accustomed to doing. And then afterwards, they sat down with a mixed group of workers – men and women – to plan strategy for the coming period. So this might be a somewhat exceptional example, but things like this are happening.

I'm not going to predict where they're going. I agree with Kamal; they are not leading to a revolution. But clearly, this is a self-sustaining movement, which is deeply rooted in the social life of workers. When people go on

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strike or engage in any other kind of collective action, they are relying on the fact that they are living in the same neighborhoods, their children go to the same schools, their children marry each other, the wives are lending each other money in monthly savings schemes.

The grocer supports the strike because he can't get paid unless the workers get paid enough wages to pay their grocery bills. So there's a broad social network that supports these labor actions, and by their nature, they are local. So there'll be one network in Kafr el-Dawwar and one network in Mahalla al-Kubra and so on. But there are also examples of some coordination beyond the local level.

MR. ABBAS: I wish there was more time because on this particular point, I'm in disagreement with Joel. (Chuckles.) Very simply, with all due respect to everything that's happening in Egypt today, yes, it is a worker movement, but it has not moved up or been promoted to a social movement, because it's turning, it's moving around a fundamental demand by workers. And that hasn't happened yet. Excuse me.

MR. BEININ: Because it hasn't yet moved –

MR. ABBAS: Because it hasn't moved around, excuse me. There is a call for a larger gathering and movement around the change and increasing the minimum wage, but it was not very successful. Because that could have been something that would have brought a lot more people. I'm actually seeing things are moving quite naturally and normally.

It's going normally in the sense that when you're looking at a government that is using the tools of the emergency law and all these very restrictive – restricting all civil and political rights – and the weakness of the general political atmosphere, so it's natural that these movements of workers are in different areas and are not necessarily connected, and definitely, then, limited and focused on these economic demands pertaining to the people that are protesting and demanding them in the locale.

It's not enough, because of time – my response is not enough – but maybe afterwards, we can talk more about that. But it's definitely one of those, sort of, thoughtful and intellectual discussions that are taking place right now in Egypt.

MR. BEININ: Let me just say, Kamal and I don't disagree on the facts; we do disagree, I think, on what they add up to.

MS. DUNNE: Okay, thank you. There's a question in the back of the room. Ricky Goldstein?

Q: Hi, Ricky Goldstein, Human Rights Watch. Egypt is having elections soon. To what extent has the labor movement prepared either a list of demands to put before candidates or some kind of scorecard for candidates on the issues that matter to them – on minimum wage, reinvestment, privatization and so forth? I mean, we all know what Egyptian elections are like. We all know what the parliament is like. But why not use this occasion to advertise your political clout and your program?

MR. ABBAS: You have a very good point here. It's a season – electoral season. I recall from the elections in 2005, there was actually competition with President Mubarak. And there was the problem or the situation of the asbestos workers who'd been on strike for more than a year. The workers were on strike in their factory in the Tenth of Ramadan City when the electoral season began.

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So the workers then moved their strike from the headquarters of the factory to right in front of the headquarters of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in downtown Cairo. And the president was going to visit el-Mahalla, the largest city in the delta – largest complex of garment and textile industry. Aisha Abdel Hadi, who is now the minister of manpower, she called the president about this problem. So he called the minister of investment, solved the problem. A problem that lasted for a year-and-a-half was resolved in 24 hours. You are absolutely right. This is an opportunity. It is a season to be used.

MS. DUNNE: Okay. We have about 10 more minutes, so I think at this point, we'll collect several questions – all the remaining questions – and then I'll let each of the speakers comment.

Q: I'm Sayeed Hanafi (ph). I'm an Egyptian lawyer. And actually, I just wanted to follow up on this question, because I think the idea is that the Egyptian constitution allows for a 50 percent representation in the parliament for laborers. And obviously, this is theoretical, but, like, why doesn't the labor movement do something about it in their individual, like, clusters? Why aren't they organized in a way to promote certain candidates from the labor movement itself?

MS. DUNNE: Okay, there's another question here, in the – Dina?

Q: Hi, Dina Bishara from GW. This question is for Mr. Abbas. Can you please shed some light on the interaction between the government and the independent union by the tax collectors? The government has implicitly legitimated the existence of this union by dealing with its members and negotiating with it, and was willing to, perhaps, acknowledge it by giving it license.

Why were they willing to do that and what does that mean? And what is the relationship between the government and the official union on this issue? Why is there disagreement? Can you just explain a little bit more what's going on there?

MS. DUNNE: Okay. In the center of the room back there, yeah.

Q: I'm David Dorn with the American Federation of Teachers. I'd like to ask Brother Kamal if he could comment on the situation of the independent teachers union – the small, independent teachers union that sprung up and its potential for its future. And then, maybe a far-out question, but what's the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, or their reaction to this?

MS. DUNNE: Question here in the front of the room.

Q: Actually, this is a follow-up question from a couple questions ago. I was just curious what the relevance of the establishment of RETA has for future independent trade unions. Does this foreshadow new unions?

MS. DUNNE: Okay, let's respond to those questions. Who would like to begin?

MR. ABBAS: I'm going to respond in order of the questions that were received. The law says, in Egypt, yes, 50 percent workers, 50 percent peasants. And yes, in the People's Assembly, there are 50 percent workers, 50 percent peasants. But this is on paper. That's on paper.

What is the relationship of these “workers” and “peasants” to workers and peasants? The majority – actually, the relationship – the majority of it is actually completely in contradiction with the interests and desires of workers and peasants. It's the same type of relationship between the Egyptian Trade Union Federation and their

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relationship with workers; yeah, it's a trade union federation, but does it really represent workers? This is a real problem in the political structure or composition in Egypt, that you find structures with names, with very lovely goals written on paper, but in terms of implementation and actuality, it's another story completely.

The second question about the relationship between the government and the real estate tax collectors union and the government and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, I'm actually a little bit at a loss, because many times, one feels that you are in front of not just one government, but, sort of, many governments. And also, the contradictions that I see, that sometimes you're in front of many different people at the same time. Let me try to clarify the situation.

In December, 2006, when the strikes began in Egypt, there was a huge campaign against the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services that we were the ones inciting these protests and these strikes. And with the great force of the security forces, they succeeded in closing – shutting down the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services. I'm sorry, for a year-and-a-half. And then we came back.

HEBA EL-SHAZLI: And if I may, they went to court and they won, and they came back, meaning they reopened CTUWS.

MR. ABBAS: And in the reception – the celebration party that they had at the occasion of the reopening, the first, let's say, attendees to this reception, the celebratory affair, were those ministers who actually were inciting and pushing for and succeeded in closing down the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services. (Laughter.)

A very interesting question, for me, is the role of the Muslim Brothers (sic). I'd like to answer it, but unfortunately, we have a time problem. I'd like to be able, afterwards, so I could be able to speak more freely, with time, because in this situation, there are a number of lies that are taking place. There are lies by the government and there are lies being said by the Muslim Brothers themselves. Because they're always drawing a connection between the Muslim Brotherhood and the workers movement, and very far away from what is happening today in Egypt.

The Egyptian labor movement is more than 100 years old and the Muslim Brotherhood is about 70 years old. We've never heard, in this whole time period, of a strike or a protest that was – where the Muslim Brotherhood participated in or led. We've never heard or seen of a worker leadership that came out of the Muslim Brotherhood. I believe the Muslim Brotherhood are lying so they could then gain an honor that they do not deserve. And the government also lies so that way, they can infiltrate and produce fear.

MS. EL-SHAZLI: I'd like to say something, if I may. I will never forget that in December, 2006, at Mahalla el-Kubra, when such an accusation was made – that 26,000 workers were on strike and that the Muslim Brotherhood was behind it. And on the next day, actually on the front page, there was a wonderful photograph. Many of these workers were holding up their membership cards that said, "National Democratic Party." So they said, we're members of you; we're not members of the Muslim Brotherhood. So again, it was a beautiful visual. So I think that lends to what Kamal just said.

MS. DUNNE: I want to give Ms. Whitson and Dr. Beinlin just a moment to make a few closing comments.

MS. WHITSON: Yeah, I guess just to shift the topic a little bit, I'd again hope that, in terms of what the U.S. administration should be thinking about and doing with respect to Egypt, particularly in the upcoming elections and what is no doubt going to be all kinds of shenanigans to ensure, for example, that Muslim Brotherhood candidates are unable to run in the election and win election seats, is that the administration use language as tough as the

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language that's been directed at Iran, for example, for its post-election violence, for its arrest of opposition candidates, for its continued detention of opposition candidates.

Because there is a disconnect when the focus is only one-sided and one-directional, particularly given how much influence the U.S. should be having in exercising an influence with its close friend in the Egyptian government.

MR. BEININ: Let me just answer the question that the gentleman asked and was not addressed by Kamal. It's not actually the teachers who are thinking about forming an independent union; some are, some aren't, but they actually haven't gotten very far. It's the educational administrative workers who have actually formed an association, which they hope to turn into an independent union. And also, postal workers are in the process of doing that.

And if you take these three groups of, basically, white-collar workers – the real estate tax collectors, the educational administrative workers and the postal workers – together, it gives you a sense of what can and can't happen in Egypt. So the workers of Mahalla el-Kubra – the 25,000 or so textile workers of Mahalla el-Kubra who actually tried to form an independent union and sent registered letters of resignation to the trade union federation saying that they don't want their dues to be deducted and so on – they got nowhere. Their dues are still being deducted.

And that's because this is a strategic industrial enterprise and the government will sometimes let them go on strike and grant some of their demands, but to establish an independent trade union in such a place would be a national symbol of enormous importance and a huge defeat for the regime. And they aren't going to let it happen if they can prevent it, which, so far, they can.

On the other hand, these white-collar workers are government employees. They have their hands on the throat of the government. So one of the things that the real estate tax collectors was able to do was, they stopped collecting taxes. So the government receipts went down and so they had an actual means of pressure. So under the current situation in Egypt, it seems – I want to be very tentative – likely that white-collar, government employees are more likely to be able to form independent unions than blue-collar workers. Maybe that will change.

I just want to close by speaking to what many people have suggested, not only here, but the journalists we spoke to this morning and the dozens of journalists I spoke to while I was living in Egypt and doing the research for this report, about the disconnect between labor and politics. Because Egypt has not had any representative or competitive system of politics since the collapse of the monarchy in 1952, everything has to be invented from the start.

And that takes a very long time, especially when you're talking about people who work very, very hard, get very little money and are almost totally preoccupied with the day-to-day struggle for existence. If there will be democracy in Egypt, they are going to be its builders, I believe. But it could also take a very long time, for that reason.

MS. DUNNE: Thank you, Joel. Please.

MR. ABBAS: Let me just say, to conclude, that there's going to be a very important event in 2011 – that there will be elections of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation – their structures. And also, the Egyptian government is going to have some responsibilities and things to answer to in front of the International Labor Organization. And I

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think that the few years to come will clearly identify and clarify how and where the labor movement is going to be going in Egypt.

I'd like to end with this message, and I have to – I'm duty bound to deliver this message. There are 400 workers from the Tanta Kitan – which is flax – and linen company. They are now standing in the street in front of the prime minister's office. They've been there for nine nights. They're asking for their very simple and basic demands, but nobody's listening to them. Please, let's try to have the government listen to them. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. DUNNE: Thank you. I want to thank the Solidarity Center for co-hosting this event, thank our speakers, Dr. Joel Beinin, Mr. Kamal Abbas, Ms. Sarah Leah Whitson and thank Heba El-Shazli for co-hosting, and also for her incredibly skillful translation. Thanks very much.

(END)