CENTER FOR TRADE UNION & WORKERS SERVICES
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The Labour Movement: Facts and Challenges

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AFA PAPERS

About the Author:

- General Coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services "CTUWS".
- Worked at the Egyptian Arab and Steel Company from 1977 to 1989 when he was dismissed after participating in leading the strike of the iron and steel workers of Helwan in August 1989.
- Established in March 1990, with a number of labour leaders, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services which played a significant role through the past twenty years in defence of and advocacy for the workers' democratic rights including their right to establish independent trade unions freely.
- Participated in many international labour conferences and issued a number of studies on labour movement affairs.

Summary of the Paper:

On January 25, 2011 the Egyptian people revolted against tyranny and poverty raising the slogan "bread – freedom – social Justice). The author is of the opinion that the Revolution since the beginning had a clear objective: it was a revolution against poverty and tyranny and for freedom and social justice. It was natural that the workers have participated in the revolution since its occurrence in January 25. The paper focused on several important points including:

- The stages of the workers' participation in the revolution of January 25, 2011.
- The role of the labour movement in the transitional stage and the challenges which confront it.
- The pivotal options which the labour movement should define in this stage.

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This paper includes the output of its author and the pertinent discussions in a workshop organized by AFA.
The paper is issued in cooperation with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

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The Workers and the Revolution:

The Egyptian people revolted against tyranny and poverty in January 25, 2011. They raised the slogan "bread – freedom – social Justice). Thus, it was clear from the very beginning that the revolution had a clear objective: it was a revolution against poverty and tyranny and for freedom and social justice. It was natural that the workers have participated in the revolution since its occurrence in January 25. Their participation in the revolution was through several stages which may be summed in the following:

The stages of the workers' participation in the revolution of January 25, 2011:

The First Stage: There is no doubt that the fermentation period which the Egyptian revolution underwent since 2005 was one of the main factors of the outbreak of the revolution. The workers played a significant role during this period. When the spinning workers of Mehalla announced their strike in December 7, 2006, it was the announcement of the beginning of a strong wave of strike movements. More than 2 million workers participated in strikes during the past two years. They organized more than 3 thousand strikes in different industrial and service sectors.

The strikes extended outside factories and found their place in the street close to the building of the Cabinet of Ministers and on the pavement in front of the People's Assembly (the Parliament). Through these strikes, the workers succeeded not only to achieve 90% of their demand according to an announcement for the former Prime Minister Dr. Ahmed Nazif, but also to extend their demands beyond the economic dimension. The real estate tax employees, the pension holders and the health service technicians succeeded to impose their will and establish independent trade unions. The Egyptian workers struggled for many decades in order to achieve this demand, i.e. the right to establish independent trade unions. It goes without saying that these strikes encouraged many sectors of the poor to overcome the barrier of fear and to go to the streets calling for their rights. In this manner, the workers made the protest movement acquire its social dimension.

The Second Stage: The workers, together with many sectors of the Egyptian population participated in the revolution since its beginning. The industrial cities were involved in the revolutionary action. Cities like Mehalla, Helwan, 10th of Ramadan and Sadat City were strongly represented in the Friday of Anger and the Friday if Challenge.

The Third Stage: On January 30, and according to the initiative of CTUWS, representatives of the independent trade unions (the Real Estate Tax Union, the Pension Holders Federation and the Health Technicians Union) met at the premises of the Health Technicians Union with labour leaders from Mehalla, Helwan, 10th of Ramadan and Sadat City. At this meeting, the participants decided to launch the founding body of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions which issued its first declaration calling the workers to join the efforts to form their independent federation and to form committees in factories and establishments in order to organize the workers' active participation in the revolution and to protect their factories and establishments. The declaration included, as well, the most important demands of the workers.

The Fourth Stage: On February 8, 2011, the day which the International Trade Union Confederation decided to make it the day of solidarity with the Egyptian revolution, the Egyptian

Federation of Independent Trade Unions issued a declaration entitled "**The Egyptian Workers Day**" and invited Egyptian workers to express themselves by using the weapon of strike. More than 100 000 copies of the declaration were distributed in the important labour sites.

The Fifth Stage: Egypt witnessed on February 9 and 10 a number of workers' strikes in several economic and service centers not only in Cairo but also in most of the cities in Egypt particularly that the leaders of the Independent Federation declared through the media that if the President of the Republic does not step out, the workers will escalate their workers until they reach public strike.

The workers at the tasks of the transitional stage:

Many activists, political thinkers and trade unionists emphasize that the transitional period which Egypt is currently undergoing is the most important and the most serious stage of the revolution. This means that all of us should work together according to a clear and well-defined vision to achieve the tasks of this stage with the least losses and the best results which we can build upon. Thus, the Egyptian labour movement should have a clear vision for the tasks to be achieved during this stage including:

1. Participation with the active powers of the revolution in building an establishment for social dialogue which establishes for national dialogue for all the political and trade union powers.
2. Building the organizational capacities for the two parts of effective negotiations (the workers and the employers). Without genuine representatives for the two parties of labour, we cannot conduct real negotiations capable of reaching framework agreements which decide the foundations for labour relations or reach sectoral labour agreements.
3. Building relationships of coordination between the political powers and the labour movement in order to bridge the gap between them which led in many cases to many problems the latest of which was the hostile stand taken by some political powers against the last workers protests.

Challenges:

The revolution succeeded in February 11 to force the former president to step down. Since then, the leaders of the Independent Federation started to build the federation amidst the current and storms of the anti-revolution:

1. In spite of the downfall of the regime, the despotic legislative structure is still functioning. The president was toppled, but the laws which restrict the right to organization are still remaining. On the top of such laws is the law on the trade unions No. 35 for the year 1976 and its amendments for the year 1995 which regulates the authority's domination on trade union organizations.
2. Although the workers strongly refuse the trade union federation which is attached to the authority, it is existing with all its structures. This gives its leaders the ability to maneuver against the movement of building the Independent Federation.
3. Throughout the past decades, trade union thought has lost its core concept of the genuine organization which acts "to improve work conditions" because the leaders of that organization adopted bad practices against the workers' rights through these decades.

4. The deprivation of the private sector workers (who are bigger in size now) from the right to form trade union committees (plant unions) led to the absence of trade union ideas and concepts in this sector in which the youth are the majority.
5. The labour movement lacks a sufficient number of labour cadres capable of performing the functions of building the Independent Federation in a democratic manner.
6. The current organizational conditions which prevail in Egypt now made a number of the leaders of the Independent Federation lack concentration on the process of building the Independent Federation.