

Trapped outside politics: Egyptian independent unions' democratising dilemma

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■ Executive summary

Currently the independent trade union movement is one of the most active forces in Egyptian civil society. Since the 2011 revolution, on average three strikes per day have been organised. The demands are workplace specific, such as for higher wages, rather than for overall structural changes, however. Can these independent trade unions play a positive role for democratisation in Egypt? The report argues that the independent trade unions make important contributions to democratisation at the local level through increasing workers' sense of agency, democratising industrial relations from below and creating a space where people from different ideological affiliations can work together. However, the weakness of the national federations of independent unions, the lack of a legal framework fully recognising freedom of association and the unwillingness of workers to bring their concerns to the national level impair the unions' impact as pro-democracy actors. The dilemma facing independent trade unions is that they have to move from the local to the national level if they are to become more significant democratising actors. Doing so, however, risks alienating their base, destroying their depolarising potential, increasing the risks of co-optation and hence threatening their very existence.

Introduction¹

"The country will not rise without the rise of the workers and the workers will not rise without the rise of the country."²

The independent trade union movement is currently one of the most active forces of Egyptian civil society. A wave of strikes has been organised since 2006, and after 2011 the numbers have exploded, with over three strikes per day on average. Strikes have been organised during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011 and Muhammad Mursi in 2012-13, and after the military take-over in July 2013 (Amin al-Din, 2013; ECESR, 2014). Even though experiences from democratisation processes in Europe and Latin America point to the central role of labour movements in bringing about inclusive democracy (e.g. Bellin, 2000; Collier, 1999; Robertson, 2004), the impact of trade unions and strikes on the Egyptian transition remains understudied. This report seeks to address this gap. Can the independent labour movement contribute to democratisation in Egypt and, if so, in what way? What are the challenges facing the Egyptian independent unions in playing such a

role? The analysis is based on interviews with trade union activists conducted by the author in 2012, 2013 and 2014, as well as on archival material, newspaper reports and secondary sources. The report will begin with a brief outline of the rise of independent unionism, before the analytical framework is presented. The bulk of the report will be an analysis of the various opportunities and challenges facing the Egyptian independent trade union movement today.

The rise of independent trade unionism in Egypt

Between the 1950s and the early 2000s strikes were rare in Egypt. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was created in 1957 and had a monopoly on organising workers. Membership of the ETUF was compulsory and strikes were banned. Trade union elections were subject to widespread fraud, and only candidates loyal to Mubarak's National Democratic Party were on the ballot (Beinin, 2010; Bishara, 2012a). The Egyptian state used the ETUF as an instrument to minimise dissent among workers, making it impossible for them to promote their interests. As Kassem (2004: 150)

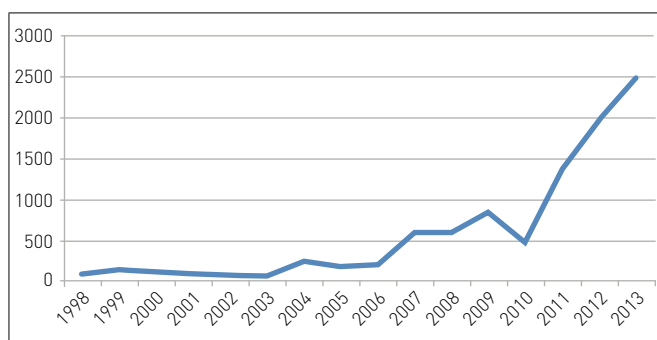
¹ Parts of this report draws on findings from Kindt (2013; 2014).

² Author interview with independent trade unionist, Cairo, October 2012.

wrote in 2004, “The autonomy of trade unions has been marginalized to such a degree that it is difficult to distinguish them from the state”.

This undemocratic industrial relations system remained relatively unchallenged for over 40 years (Bianchi, 1986; Kassem, 2004; Posusney, 1993), but met significant opposition from the mid-2000s onward. In mid-2006 a strike wave erupted, spreading across both public and private sector companies (Beinin, 2010; Beinin & El-Hamalawy, 2007a; El-Mahdi, 2011). The development of this strike wave is shown by Figure 1. After the revolution the numbers exploded, with 1,377 strikes and workers’ protests registered in 2011, 1,969 in 2012 and over 2,400 in 2013 (Amin al-Din, 2013; ECESR, 2014).

Figure 1: Number of strikes by Egyptian workers, 1998-2013



Source: Annual reports of the Land Centre for Human Rights, <<http://www.lchr-eg.org/>>. Numbers for 2011-13 are from Amin al-Din (2013) and ECESR (2014).

With only a few exceptions the strikes before the revolution were organised by workers without the backing of the ETUF or any other union organisation. After 2011, however, new unions that were independent of the ETUF framework were established. As I will return to later, these independent unions are not fully recognised in the Egyptian legal framework. Despite this, over one thousand independent unions and three new independent union federations were created between 2011 and 2014 (Beinin, 2012; Bishara, 2014).

The majority of striking workers focus on workplace-related issues rather than structural changes to the Egyptian economic, legal or political framework. Their demands are connected to so-called bread-and-butter issues, i.e. higher wages and better job security, in addition to protests against mismanagement and corruption. Only a tiny minority of strikes address issues beyond the local workplace (Amin al-Din, 2013; Beinin, 2013a). Federations of independent unions raise more structural demands such as legislation to guarantee freedom of association, but these issues are not on the agenda of local unions, which are the drivers of Egyptian worker mobilisation (Amin al-Din, 2013).

In other words, the Egyptian independent trade union movement is militant, organising a high number of strikes and protests. At the same time, the demands it raises relate to the local workplaces rather than larger structural reforms. Can a labour movement that raises demands related to local workplaces rather than structural reforms contribute to democratisation? Existing work on the Egyptian trade unions presents an ambiguous picture. El-Mahdi (2011: 389) claims that “Labour is now poised to become the most important social actors ... opening new paths for democratization”. Beinin (2012) argues similarly that independent trade unions are “the strongest nationally organized force confronting the autocratic tendencies of the old order”. At the same time, others, like Bishara (2014), are sceptical of the unions’ potential to play a constructive role. She argues that “the fragmentation of the independent union scene undermines their capacity to exert political pressure, at least in the short run” (Bishara, 2014: 4). None of these authors has, however, engaged in a systematic analysis of how or in what way trade union action influences democratisation. This is the focus of the present report.

Analytical framework

When defining democracy I follow the sociologist Stein Ringen (2009: 25), who argues that democracy is “a political system where citizens hold the ultimate control over collective decisions in a securely institutionalized manner”. Elections are obviously a part of this understanding of democracy, because they provide an institutionalised way for citizens to influence collective decisions. However, elections alone are not enough to build a democracy. A true democracy needs active citizens who participate in democratic institutions that are able to implement citizens’ demands.

Ringen’s (2009) understanding of democracy opens the way for a context-sensitive analysis of trade unions’ role in democratisation processes. Rather than reading the political role of the trade unions by examining the number of strikes and type of demands presented, as traditional democratisation theory tends to do (e.g. Higley & Burton, 2006; O’Donnell et al., 1986; Przeworski, 1991), the role of trade unions has to be analysed according to how these strikes and demands influence the local context at different levels. How members of a trade union are affected by their participation, how the trade unions influence the institutional environment they operate in (the industrial relations system) and how they influence political institutions are all relevant factors for an analysis of democratisation in Ringen’s terms. In other words, trade unions should be analysed at the individual, institutional and political levels.³ This report will structure its analysis in terms of these three levels, focusing on the institutional and political levels, before bringing all the challenges and opportunities for democratisation together in a concluding discussion.

³ For a more detailed outline of the theoretical foundation of this framework, see Kindt (2013: 19-37).

The following analysis is based on two main sources of data. Firstly, it draws on 30 in-depth interviews with trade union activists from a variety of Egyptian local independent unions and the various union federations. Around 15 of these informants are from the transportation workers' union and the doctors' syndicate used in previous research (Kindt, 2014). The other half of the interviews were held with representatives and members of independent unions, representatives of three of the independent union federations, and NGOs working with the unions. I do not disclose which organisations I met with due to issues of anonymity. The interviews were conducted in October-December 2012, June 2013 and March 2014. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic by the author. All quotes are my own translations from Arabic to English. Secondly, I draw on newspaper sources and archival material describing strike incidents and political developments relevant to the trade union movement.

Individual level

On the individual level, trade unions can contribute positively to democratisation in two ways; firstly, by making workers feel an increasing sense of agency, and making them feel able to control and affect their own work situations. Democracy, in Ringen's (2009) terms, is about citizens gaining control of decisions that influence their own lives. Unions that enable their members to influence their workplace situations make constructive contributions to democratisation. My data suggests that the independent Egyptian unions contribute positively in this regard. My informants described how they were unable to complain about their workplace situations before the independent unionists came on the scene. They saw that there were problems, but did not know how to articulate them or whom to complain to. After the independent unions entered the workplace, however, they could complain to them and would actually be heard. A public transportation worker gave a representative image of how my informants viewed the new independent unionists:

I felt that they [the independent unionists] managed to convey the problems that we all felt, but were unable to convey ourselves. ... Instead of a unionist who was not present for six years, like the old union, he was a unionist who was with us 24 hours a day.⁴

The general sense of increased agency is also evident in the number of strikes and the increasing number of workers who participate in collective action at many workplaces. The workers felt it was worthwhile to join the strikes and that doing so made a difference: "I had nothing to live off before the independent union came. Now, I am at least close to feeding my family", said one young unionist.

Secondly, according to theories on social capital and participatory democracy, trade unions can contribute to the growth of a *democratic consciousness*, increasing workers' trust and participation in democracy at the national level. Local organisations may therefore function as so-called "schools of democracy" (Paxton, 2002; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1994; Terriquez, 2011). By participating in organisations at the local level, people can also learn about democracy at the national level (Pateman, 1970). There are, however, few indications in my data that the independent trade unions contribute positively in this regard. Firstly, workers did not see themselves as a part of a political project. When asked why they participated in strikes, all answered that it was in order to "feed their families" or "earn a decent wage".⁵ A leading figure in one local union even stated that "you will never get a worker to strike for any reason except wages".⁶ Although some of my informants claimed that they had a "revolutionary right" to strike, none of them saw their participation as a part of a broader struggle for democracy or political change. In other words, I did not find any direct linkage between participation in independent unions and an increasing political awareness or democratic consciousness. Although this arguably goes against the expectations of some parts of social capital theory, it is in line with a number of newer studies claiming that people only become more politically aware through participation if the organisations of which they are members take direct political action and talk about politics to their members (Brown & Brown, 2003; Terriquez, 2011). Members of Egyptian independent unions do not see any link between their participation and national politics because they do not think of their participation as being related to political issues or democratisation. They see the main goal of the union as improving wages and working/living conditions. This impedes the link between participation in the union and commitment to and participation in democracy at the national level. However, it is important to bear in mind that independent unions are new in Egypt and that political consciousness is not static. The political awareness of their members might develop or change in the coming years. In addition, there might be good reasons for the independent unions to keep a distance between their work and national politics, and not frame their struggle in overtly ideological terms, a point I will return to in the following section.

Summing up the situation at the individual level, Egyptian independent unions contribute to democratisation by giving workers an increased sense of agency. However, they face a challenge in that participation in independent unions does not seem to be a stepping stone to participation in democratic institutions at the regional or national level.

⁴ Author interview with independent unionist, Cairo, December 2012.

⁵ Author interviews with independent unionists, Cairo, October-December 2012.

⁶ Author interviews with independent unionists, Cairo, November 2012.

Institutional level

On the institutional level, there are also two ways in which trade unions can contribute positively to democratisation. Firstly, they may help to democratise the industrial relations system. A democratic industrial relations system is one that “gives ordinary workers a voice in determining the conditions that shape their work lives” (Stepan-Norris, 1997: 475). Secondly, unions are democratising if they are able to implement the demands they raise. It does not help if workers are able to voice their grievances in trade unions if the unions are unable to present workers’ demands and improve their situation in accordance with these demands.

Democratising against the law

In terms of industrial relations, the independent unions are fighting an uphill battle. Freedom of association is not fully recognised in the Egyptian legal framework. A draft law fully recognising freedom of association for unions in accordance with International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 87, which Egypt has ratified, was presented in March 2011. However, successive governments have shown little interest in implementing it (Beinin, 2012). When the interim government took power after the ousting of President Mursi in July 2013, Kamal Abu ‘Ayta, a leading independent union activists, was made minister of manpower. Hopes were high among the independent unionists that he would issue the trade union freedom law; however, he made no progress towards recognising the independent unions (Bishara, 2014). After Abu ‘Ayta resigned with the rest of the government in February 2014, Nahid al-Ashri took over his position. She is a veteran in the ministry from the Mubarak era, is known for being a hard-liner on workers’ issues, and was called “the worst possible choice” by several union activists (Beinin, 2013b; Charbel, 2014). She is unlikely to push for the implementation of trade union freedom.

The new independent unions have been unable or unwilling to address the issue of legal recognition. The few attempts to coordinate a campaign to support the trade union freedom law have not succeeded.⁷ Despite this, the unions are fighting for a more democratic industrial relations system by other means. Instead of waiting for freedom of association to be granted by law, the trade unions are enforcing freedom of association from below. Independent of the ETUF framework, they have enforced a de facto pluralisation of the Egyptian union scene. Most of these unions have also become recognised as the real representatives of the workers, in practice if not legally. All my informants, who represented different independent unions, described how their employers attempted to reach a deal with the old ETUF-controlled unions during strikes, but were forced to bring the new independent unions to the negotiation table, even though these unions were not fully recognised legally. As one independent transportation

unionist put it: “We don’t have time to wait for changes in legislation. We fight to implement our rights from below.”⁸ The local unions are tackling the challenge of legal recognition through local-level struggles rather than broad campaigns for legislative changes. By continuing with their activities, these independent unions remain at the forefront of the fight for freedom of association, a cornerstone of any understanding of democracy.

Despite these achievements, the lack of legal recognition constitutes a potentially fatal challenge for the independent unions. As long as they are not legally recognised, these unions run a continuing risk of being repressed. Evidence from other contexts reveals how the lack of legal recognition usually leads to the co-optation of the union movement or to increasing support for more radical means of protests, like violent strikes (Robertson, 2004; Robertson & Teitelbaum, 2011; Teitelbaum, 2007). So even though the trade unions are playing an essential role in enforcing democratic industrial relations, the state has to catch up with the unions and grant them freedom if they are to play a democratising role in the Egyptian transition in the long run.

Forced to be local

Union power is the second indicator at the institutional level. Here the picture is ambiguous. Independent trade unions are strong at the local level. This is evident in their ability to mobilise strikes and gain concessions from employers. The textile workers, postal workers and transportation workers are just some examples of groups that have increased their wages through strikes (ECESR, 2014). Through being recognised as legitimate representatives of the workers, these unions are also in a much better structural position to implement their demands and have a seat at the negotiation table, which in itself is a sign of strength (Diani, 1997).

Even though the independent unions are winning concessions, the local nature of their demands is arguably one of their greatest challenges. The demands raised by striking workers in 2006 and 2014 are strikingly similar (Beinin & El-Hamalawy, 2007b; ECESR, 2014). Local unions are still the drivers of mobilisation (Beinin, 2013b). There are only few and sporadic efforts to coordinate a push for more structural changes, such as changes in legislation, better mechanisms for social dialogue or an overall reform of the wage structure. Independent federations remain weak, without any coordinating capacity.

After the revolution in 2011 no less than three new federations of independent unions have been created. Firstly, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) was established in 2011. Then, in the same year, the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC) was founded

⁷ Author interview with Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, March 2014.

⁸ Author interview with independent unionist, June 2013.

in opposition to the EFITU. In 2013 internal differences in the EDLC led to a new split. As Bishara (2012b) argues, these splits make it almost impossible to know who speaks on behalf of Egyptian workers, with the result that workers are unable to talk to the government with one strong voice. Indeed, my informants argue that the federations are unable to coordinate their efforts in any meaningful way. Representatives of the independent federations even argue that any cooperation between these federations at this point in time is not feasible, because of both personal and political conflicts between their leaders.⁹

In addition, the federations are financially weak, partly because they lack legal recognition, the existence of the ETUF and internal splits (El-Shazli, 2013). It is difficult for the independent trade union federations to attract support from international organisations as long as there are several conflicting organisations at the same level.¹⁰ It is also difficult for the independent federations to collect union dues, when the old state-controlled ETUF still exists and membership of it remains compulsory. This contributes to the weakness of the independent federations while simultaneously keeping the ETUF in a strong position (ECESR, 2013; El-Shazli, 2013). With no money from union dues and limited international support, the capacity of the independent federations is almost non-existent. The EFITU claims to have three full-time employees, while the EDLC has none. Many local independent unions are affiliated with the independent federations, but my informants acknowledge that no real cooperation is possible as long as these federations lack resources.

The local nature of the independent unions, weak independent federations and the lack of legal recognition impede the ability of independent unions to play a constructive democratising role in the long run. They are unable to push for legislative change, obtain acceptance of a national minimum wage or set up mechanisms for social dialogue. Without legal protection they risk being violently repressed or co-opted and remain unable to secure broad inclusive democratic rights at the national level. Even though the national-level federations are failing, some interesting attempts are under way to coordinate independent unions outside Cairo. In Alexandria and Ismailiyya regional union federations have been set up,¹¹ and the ILO has started an initiative to establish mechanisms for social dialogue in one of Egypt's industrial zones (ILO, 2014). If such initiatives increase, they might provide a platform to build stronger national institutions, but currently the union movement remains localised. To sum up the situation at the institutional level, independent unions find themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they have achieved important successes and are fighting for a more democratically organised and truly

representative trade union movement. However, these achievements might be undermined if legal recognition is not achieved and if the independent federations remain weak while the state-controlled federation re-emerges as a powerful institution.

Political level

The last level where trade unions can play a constructive role for democratisation is at the political level. Historically, the political influence of labour parties has been constitutive in many countries in securing inclusive rights. In both Europe and Latin America, labour parties have been a central arena for this kind of influence (Collier, 1999). Political influence might also be gained through other means, such as alliances with political parties or in other ways (Robertson, 2004).

In Egypt, the independent trade unions define themselves as “non-political” or “apolitical”. Representatives from both local unions and independent federations emphasise that being “outside politics” is a goal in itself. A leading figure in the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress argued that “The workers’ struggle has nothing to do with politics; the two are completely disconnected”.¹² In the view of my informants, workers’ rights are not divisive issues in the way that political issues are. To grant workers what they need is not an ideological position, but just something everybody agrees on. A leading figure in the independent transportation workers’ union elaborated:

Workers’ issues are not sectarian issues, like politics and religion. When I fight for workers’ rights, do I fight for only Muslim workers’ rights, or for the right of Muslim *and* Christian workers? No. The salary does not know religion and has no political affiliation.¹³

Independent unionists’ perception of themselves as “non-political” might seem at odds with conventional understanding of trade union activity as essentially a political enterprise, even if unions only fight for better wages and working conditions. It is therefore important to emphasise that “non-political” in this context refers to what the workers themselves define as political and non-political. It is clear from the statements above that politics for them is something confined to the parliamentary sphere and to politicians, while grassroots work is defined as something else. Whether one agrees with such a conception of the political is not really relevant in this context. The important point is that this “non-political” outlook has had several consequences for how unions relate to political parties and political institutions, which is highly relevant to understanding their role in democratisation at the political level.

⁹ Author interview with independent union federations, March 2014.

¹⁰ Author interview with independent union federations, March 2014.

¹¹ Author interviews with independent unionists, Ismailiyya, March 2014.

¹² Author interview with independent unionist, Cairo, September 2012.

¹³ Author interview with independent unionist, Cairo, September 2012.

None of the unions I interviewed expressed any interest in political alliances. They did not make any statements supporting a specific political party or individual candidate in the various elections. In addition, the unions claimed to practise an unwritten rule that “no one was allowed to talk about politics in union meetings”. What they meant was that only issues related to their concrete demands for better wages and working conditions were discussed. Events unfolding on the national political scene were seen as irrelevant and differences in this regard were not to be discussed.¹⁴

The “non-political” attitude of the independent unions had both negative and positive implications for their democratising role. On the negative side, it is unlikely that a workers’ party or strong political alliances will emerge in the short run in Egypt. No serious initiative has been taken to form such a party, and as I have explained, none of the trade unions studied is interested in fighting for issues not directly related to their immediate work situation. This, combined with their wish not to be politicised and not to make formal political alliances, makes it unlikely that they will pursue such a strategy in the near future. This could be deemed a negative implication, because political alliances have been important for trade unions in other contexts as a way of securing workers’ rights.

On the positive side, the independent unions are in a position where they give advice on workers’ issues to parties from very different ideological backgrounds. In some cases unionists have even helped to write policy for political parties. One member of the doctors’ strike committee was writing the health policy for two large opposition parties. A leading figure among the independent transportation workers was writing the labour policy for both a smaller socialist party and Salafi parties, to mention some examples.¹⁵ The strategy of writing policy for different parties could be described as Leninism turned on its head. Whereas Lenin (1988 [1902]) argued that workers were too stupid to understand politics and that a strong party was needed to teach them, the Egyptian workers say that it is the politicians who need to be taught how to write policy by the workers. This is a positive step because it leads to political programmes that are rooted in peoples’ actual needs and experiences, instead of merely being based on an ideological platform.

Their “non-political” strategy also enables the unions to include members of different political factions in the same union. There were socialists, Salafis, moderate Islamists, liberals and people who did not care about politics in all the unions under study. Workers talked about how they left their political affiliation at the entrance to the workplace and only cared about the well-being of their fellow workers once inside, regardless of their affiliation. The justification for going on strike could vary according to individuals’

political affiliations. The socialists tended to talk about the injustice in the system and the rich people who got more than they deserved, whereas the Islamists often mentioned various *hadiths* about how the Prophet Muhammad wanted to stop any injustices, including those affecting workers. But the socialists did not see any problem in working with Salafis, or the other way around. “We are both workers in the same place and want the same rights, that’s what matters”, one transportation worker stated. By not talking about party politics they managed to put ideological rivalries aside and concentrate their efforts on real-life issues instead. After the ousting of President Mursi, polarisation is threatening to destroy the possibility of inclusive democracy in Egypt. The independent trade unions remain one of the few spaces where cooperation happens across political divides. Seen this way, they have an important potential to limit the polarisation that is destroying Egyptian politics. The federation of trade unions in Tunisia (UGTT) has shown how this can be done, by mediating between the opposition and the Islamists in 2013 (Bishara, 2014). Even in 2014, my informants insisted on their independence from politics and refused to mix political affiliation with union membership.

To sum up, the independent unions under study lack explicit goals to influence political institutions. When examining their actions, however, it is clear that they have many positive consequences for democratisation. By creating a political space that members of different political currents can join and be active in, unions constitute an example of how cooperation is possible, despite the polarisation of Egyptian politics. In addition, the unions’ relationship to politics is a bottom-up approach that provides useful input to political parties in Egypt. If both of these assets are developed further, the Egyptian trade unions could be an important actor in depolarising the political scene.

The democratising dilemma of Egypt’s independent trade unions

The one trait that characterises the independent unions in Egypt is that they are localised. Local unions are drivers of mobilisation: they only raise workplace-specific demands, they are not interested in creating bonds with political parties and do not understand their work as being political in any sense. According to traditional democratisation theorists, such a narrow focus, combined with a high number of strikes, disrupts the transition process rather than aiding it (Della Porta, 2013; Higley & Burton, 1989; 2006; Przeworski, 1991). As this report has shown, it is possible to argue that the localised focus of the Egyptian independent unions limits their ability to be a constructive actor that can push for increased democratisation at the national level. On the individual level there are no signs that workers gain increased democratic consciousness through union participation. On the institutional level the

¹⁴ Author interviews with independent unionists, Cairo, November 2012, March 2014.

¹⁵ Author interviews with independent unionists, Cairo, November 2012, March 2014.

narrow focus of the local unions and the weakness of independent union federations prevent the labour movement from pushing for crucial structural changes such as complete legal recognition. At the political level it is unlikely that any labour party will emerge from the current Egyptian trade union movement, because it considers its struggle to be non-political.

On the other hand, this narrow focus also has some important positive implications for democratisation. On the individual level workers feel an increased sense of agency and an ability to actually influence their own workplace situations. On the institutional level the creation of over one thousand local independent unions is in itself an important step towards freedom of association, a cornerstone of any democratic state. On the political level unions are able to include members from different ideological affiliations and develop bottom-up policies for various opposition parties.

The central question is, what potential is there for the independent unions to evolve from a localised movement to a stronger actor on the national political scene? The development of more structural demands on behalf of the labour movement would seemingly enable them to push for important structural changes such as recognising trade union freedom, implementing the minimum wage, and providing input to economic policy from a labour perspective, which would be important contributions to democracy. However, it seems unlikely that the independent union movement will develop in this direction in the short term, for several reasons. Firstly, as long as the independent national federations remain weak, it is difficult to imagine how workers' demands are going to develop to include larger structural issues. Experience from other countries, such as Norway, show that it is only when national-level federations are stronger than local unions that they are able to demand discipline from workers and push for structural changes (Olstad, 1991). Secondly, Egyptian workers seem to be unwilling to fight for structural reforms. As discussed above, the reason workers participate in strikes is related to workplace-specific issues. This means that unions have to mobilise on these demands in order to obtain workers' support. A strategy meeting of a local union I attended exemplifies this dynamic. The strike committee discussed which demands they should negotiate for with the employer. The initial suggestion was to negotiate an overall change in the law that regulated their wages. They quickly rejected this idea and settled for demanding certain small concessions in the negotiations instead. As one of them argued,

We have to give something to the striking workers now. If we say that the negotiations ended in deadlock, they will not join us for another strike next time. We have to take the 200 pounds or whatever we get to keep them happy, and fight for the larger issues later.

Even though they wanted structural changes, they were unable to negotiate on them, because they needed to

please their membership base. The inability to convince workers to fight for larger changes truly impedes the development of demands from the localised to the structural.

In addition to being unlikely, it is not a given that the development of a more explicitly political and structurally oriented labour movement would imply a positive contribution to democratisation. Firstly, if the unions begin to mobilise on more structural demands, they would likely lose the support of their membership base, because workers are currently preoccupied with local issues. Secondly, a union movement closely linked with a political party would threaten to ruin the depolarising potential of the movement by creating splits along ideological lines. It is only by defining themselves as non-political that unions manage to recruit and sustain a broad membership base. A third challenge is that the Egyptian political scene is seen as corrupt, far removed from people's daily lives and an arena for sectarian interests more than one where progressive social change can be achieved. If the independent trade unions engage with political institutions, they risk being co-opted into a corrupt political system. This is a challenge that workers are aware of and one of the reasons they themselves mention for defining themselves as being removed from formal politics.

In other words, the development of a more structurally focused outlook would threaten the mobilising power of the independent unions. The only way forward for the Egyptian independent trade unions is therefore to adopt a bottom-up strategy. By building on regional collectives of localised unions, they might in the long run achieve increased awareness of the importance of structural change and develop an increasing capacity to implement it.

Conclusion

Three years after the revolution, the independent unions are the most active force in Egyptian civil society. Despite fighting for only workplace-specific demands and facing the huge challenges of a repressive legal environment and weak organisational capacity, they make important local contributions to democratisation. They increase workers' sense of agency, democratise industrial relations from below and manage to include members from different ideological affiliations. They are, however, currently unable to establish themselves as an actor on the national political scene, which arguably is needed if they are to impact national politics. At the same time, to do so in the current context could severely weaken and potentially destroy the Egyptian independent trade union movement. It would alienate their base, destroy their depolarising potential and increase the risk of co-optation. In this sense, the Egyptian trade unions face a choice between continued activity at the local level, with all its limitations, or running the risk of being repressed or co-opted at the national level by striving for increased influence. This is a dilemma with no apparent solution. The independent trade unions are caught between the local and the national and are therefore trapped outside formal politics.

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