Review of African Political Economy
Vol. 38, No. 129, September 2011, 387–402

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Labour protests in Egypt: causes and meanings[1]

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Egypt has experienced a wave of unprecedented labour protests since December 2006. Refuting moral economy and rational choice arguments as a basis for understanding labour unrest in Egypt, this paper argues that this wave of protests is an outcome of the rupture of the hegemonic ruling pact governing Egypt since 1952. As such, this movement, which includes both industrial workers as well as white-collar state employees, should be interpreted beyond its immediate material demands. Rather, the paper argues, the changing constituency, tactics, and internal organisation of the movement all point to the potential role that it can play in further eroding the corporatist–authoritarian structure governing state-society relations in Egypt. The paper concludes that this movement might be carrying the potential for wider democratisation.

Keywords: labour; Egypt; corporatism; protests; movement; authoritarianism

Introduction

During the past few years Egypt has witnessed, in its labour movement, 'the largest social movement in over half a century' (Beinin 2009, p. 77). For decades the idea of Egyptian labour as an active agent within the public sphere and civil society seemed little more than a myth or, at the very least, a legacy not supported by any visible action. And while there has been important labour action during the past five decades, this was both limited and sporadic, and did not expand to include workers outside the locale of contention (i.e. the specific plant or workplace). Subsequently, it did not result in new organisational forms of labour and certainly did not include white-collar state employees. In contrast, the recent wave of labour contention which was ignited in December 2006 in the biggest weaving and spinning factory in Egypt, in El-Mahalla town, marked the start of something that is quantitatively and qualitatively different.

The workers at Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra, where nearly a quarter of all public sector textile and clothing workers are employed, went on strike when they did not receive a bonus payment which had been decreed by Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. Their action marked 'the largest and most politically significant industrial strike since a dispute in the same workplace in 1947' (Beinin 2009, p. 79). After a week of complaining and organising small protests, 24,000 workers began a strike on 7 December 2006, when thousands of female workers in the plant left their work stations and walked over to where their male counterparts were working, chanting 'Where are the men? The women are here!'[2] Joining ranks, women and men marched towards the centre of the

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ISSN 0305-6244 print/ISSN 1740-1720 online
© 2011 ROAPE Publications Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2011.598342
http://www.informaworld.com

plant, Tala't Harb Square. Over the following three days more than 10,000 striking workers occupied the factory round the clock, forming a strike committee to organise logistics of the strike, speak to the media and negotiate with the workplace authorities. 'On the fourth day of the occupation panicking government officials offered a 45-day bonus', more than double what workers had traditionally received (Beinin 2009, p. 80). Drawing inspiration from the action of the Mahalla workers, other industrial workers in both the state and private sectors, as well as white-collar employees (postal workers, educational administrators, tax collectors, transportation workers, the government information centre employees, and even physicians and pharmacists), would stage a series of protests, consolidating a movement that has not subsided since.

The current movement, while quantitatively significant (more than 1.7 million workers are estimated to have participated in actions between 2006 and 2009), also marks a qualitative leap from earlier labour action in Egypt. The overwhelming majority of these strikes and actions were organised by worker-leaders outside official union committees, which in a number of cases were rendered redundant as, in many of these locales of contention, workers and employees elected their own strike-committees with responsibility for managing ongoing action, representing workers in negotiations with the authorities and organising future action. They developed a whole new repertoire of contention tools, ranging from street protests and strikes to extended sit-ins at official buildings (Parliament and the Cabinet headquarters) and factory occupations. Such independent organisation reached its apogee with the real estate tax collectors forming an independent union in April 2009 – the first autonomous non-state union since the 1940s – following their successful but extended struggle, which started in December 2007.

However, alongside these successes were important cases where, despite persistent struggle, workers were either defeated (e.g. Mansura-Espana Garments factory, Information and Decision-Making Support Centre employees) or won only partial victories (e.g. ESCO Qalyub Spinning and Ora-Misr Asbestos factories). There are also many cases in which, rather than demonstrating confrontational class consciousness, signs and slogans at strikes and protests called on President Hosni Mubarak or some other government official to come and investigate workers' grievances. In addition, there were lengthy strikes (such as Indorama Shibin, Kitan Tanta factories) that were simply ignored by the state and in which the workers moved from points of high politicisation and confrontation with the state – staging extended sit-ins in front of Parliament and hanging effigies of the prime minister and other National Democratic Party (NDP) figures – to moving back to minimal demands and pleading with state officials for a resolution. However, despite the different outcomes and demands, in all cases there were new organisational features (specifically internal democratisation and the adoption of novel confrontational tactics) that are significant in understanding the continuity of the protests and their political meaning.

Thus, the rise of this movement lends itself to a lot of questions, both theoretical and practical. This paper focuses on two of these. First, where did this movement come from, i.e. what are the causes of the rise of this movement at this particular historical moment? And, second, what does the movement tell us about the changing macro-political landscape in Egypt, i.e. what does it actually mean? Unfortunately, the existing literature and available theoretical frameworks are inadequate for dealing with these recent developments in labour movement organisation. Indeed, while some recent literature provides excellent descriptions of the developments in labour protests, it does not delve sufficiently deeply into key episodes, or explore their meaning for the restructuring of state–society relations as such, being mostly policy and media reports (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007a, Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007b, Beinin 2010, Clement 2009, pp. 100–116).

In addition, available theoretical paradigms used for the study of labour in Egypt do not provide sufficient grounds for understanding labour mobilisation at the current historical juncture. Hence, this article uses a Gramscian framework that looks at elements of domination and hegemony, to answer these research questions.

The article argues that the recent wave of labour protests cannot be understood merely in terms of economic demands by individuals trying to maximise utility (rational choice) or restore gains (moral economy); but, rather, that these economic demands both arise from, and contribute to, changes in the nature of the ruling pact which has emerged in the years since 1952. The labour movement is an outcome and a signifier of the neoliberal rupture of the post-1952 labour–state pact, both in its hegemonic (ideational) form and its domination (material) elements. Based on this dialectical relationship labour, which was a solidifying pillar for populist authoritarianism with its corporatist mechanisms for five decades, is now poised to become the most important social actor behind corporatism's demise and hence might be opening new paths for democratisation. As such, the article is an attempt to move beyond a dominant overly state-centric literature, with its elite-bias, which focuses on the role and strategic choice of elites and political leadership in understanding political transitions (see, for example, Brownlee 2007, Lust-Okar 2005, Rutherford 2008). In addition, it provides insights into the dismantling of populist state-corporatism – which provided an infrastructure for sustaining authoritarianism in the region for more than half a century since independence – from below (Bianchi 1986, Bianchi 1989, Ayubi 1995).

Classically, there have been multiple definitions of and differentiations in the literature between: white-collar/middle-class versus blue-collars/working class; proletariat versus lumpenproletariat, popular sectors etc. However, developments in capitalism during the past 20 years, and changes in the socio-economic matrix under neoliberalism, have made these dividing lines more complex and, in many contexts, rendered them redundant and misleading. Some industrial workers, for instance, are better paid, have better working conditions, and are more skilled than some white-collar workers. And both share common objective conditions, and similar subjectivity and relational positions within the neoliberal matrix, in opposition to the new ruling elite of 'technocrats' and business-owners. This has prompted what has been labelled the 'proletarianisation of the white-collars' (Hall 1997, Marshall 1997, Wright 1997). Hence, this paper understands *labour* to denote waged labour that has been excluded politically and economically from the new development matrix under neoliberalism, and which includes the majority of white-collar and blue-collar workers, and the lumpenproletariat. However, the examples and analysis used throughout the paper focus on two specific groups within the broader category of labour: state employees and industrial workers, both of which have traditionally been state allies and hence the underlying pillar of populist state corporatism.

Brief historical background

Although sporadic and episodic, contentious action by labour has been reported in Egypt since the beginning of the twentieth century. The first documented strike was in 1899 by the rolled-cigarette workers, which lasted three months and resulted in the first trade union in Egypt (Abbas 1973, p. 62). A number of labour unions known as 'workers' societies' were then formed as early as 1908 and, by the end of World War I, with the rise of Marxist parties in Egypt, these unions were amalgamated into the 'Workers Confederation' (Abbas 1973). Despite the changeable fortunes of these labour organisations and state attempts to clamp down on both the unions and their Socialist-Communist backers, Egypt could, by the second half of the 1940s, claim a strong independent labour movement

which became an integral part of the national liberation movement.[3] Between 1946 and 1951, labour strikes and job-actions against British occupation, as well as business-owners, prompted different political parties to seek the allegiance of this movement, and the state to try to crush it. However, the existence and independence of this movement ended shortly after the 1952 *coup d'état*, which not only violently crushed labour riots in the Nile delta town of Kafr El-Dawwar a couple of months after the coup, but also executed two workers leaders – Mustafa Khamis and Mohamed Al-Baqri – in order to send a strong message to the movement as a whole.

Shortly afterwards, the seminal events of 1954 – in which Gamal (Jamal) Abdel Nasser overthrew the more liberal-leaning president, Mohamed Naguib, banned pluralist independent political organisation and created the monolithic Liberation Rally – ushered in a populist–corporatist pact between labour and the state. More broadly, this denoted an etatist model, in which 'the state controls the bulk of the economic, political, and social domains, leaving little space for society to develop itself and for interest groups to surface, compete, and act autonomously' (Bayat 2002, p. 1). As quintessential state corporatism, this model, which annihilated the labour movement of the 1940s, organised labour (along with other groups of society) 'into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly' (Schmitter 1974, p. 86). The new regime established the General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU) in 1957, monopolising the workers' unions, purging militants from the leadership, and co-opting remaining moderates. Ever since then, 'trade unions have functioned as an arm of the state rather than as democratic representatives of workers, mobilising workers to demonstrate "popular support" for the divergent policies of successive regimes at the ballot box or in the street' (Beinin 2009, p. 68). As a result of this reorganisation of state–labour relations, earlier labour mobilisation subsided throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s, only to be resumed at particular moments during 1970s and 1980s, notably during the Iron and Steel factory workers actions in 1968, 1977 and 1989; events at Kafr El Dawwar Weaving and Spinning in 1995, and the railway workers strike in 1986.

However, it is important to note that this pact and the resulting circumvention of independent labour mobilisation were based not only on repression (as exemplified in the 1952 executions of labour leaders and later imprisonment of dissidents in the 1950s and 1960s), but also on co-optation incentives, including immediate material improvements in workers' livelihoods (e.g. the socialist decrees of July 1961; free education for all; state-provided health care etc.), and an ideational consent in which both the regime and labour constituted a fighting bloc against imperial forces and their local allies – the bourgeoisie. This was due largely to the immense strength of the labour movement during the 1940s, which forced different political forces (including royalty, communists, nationalists, and Islamists) to compete for its allegiance, as well as the imperative of the new post-colonial state to *modernise* (read: industrialise) the economy (Beinin and Lockman 1987, pp. 449–461). Thus, while the regime moved labour organisation from pluralism to corporatism, it did so through political inclusion and selectively co-opting, rather than excluding, the working class from socio-economic development processes in order to secure its acquiescence.[4] Similarly, the new regime guaranteed state employment to all university graduates; even at minimal wages, such guaranteed employment, garnering the allegiance of the rising middle class, has been correctly seen by many scholars as integral to the sustainability of the regime and a corner-stone in public consent for authoritarianism (Goldberg 1992, El Mikawy 1999, Pratt 2007). Thus, the working class, broadly defined (including

blue-collar workers and the majority of state white-collar workers), has been playing a role in shaping the ruling pact of state–society relations, even as it was itself conditioned by it. As the largest organised sector in society, its corporatisation set the ground for the pact governing state–society relations at large.

Changing labour dynamics

As recently as the beginning of the new millennium, it was suggested that 'the economic restructuring of the 1980s has further undermined organised labour, as the public sector, the core of trade unionism, is shrinking because of closures, downsizing, and early retirements. Numerous reports point to the declining capacity of the region's labour movements to mobilise' (Bayat 2002, p. 7). However, Figure 1 shows that the number of contentious actions have soared since the El-Mahalla strike in 2006, amounting to more than the aggregate number of such actions in the preceding eight years – which, by the end of the 1990s, was already double the number of protests seen in any year throughout the 1980s (Paczynski 2009, p. 181). Contrary to predictions of the constraining effects of neoliberalism on labour militancy in the literature, therefore, it seems that there has been more contentious labour action – despite, or maybe because of, economic restructuring. The literature also falls short in its understanding of the changing nature of such contentious action.

According to existing paradigms in the literature, worker mobilisation in Egypt can be explained in one of two ways: First, via the moral economy approach, used by Marsha Posusney, among others; and, second, linking rational choice approach to structural variables, the route favoured by writers like Ellis Goldberg and Eva Rana Bellin. Starting with moral economy arguments, Posusney (1993) argues that:

> Collective action is a response to violations of norms and standards to which the subaltern class has become accustomed and which it expects the dominant elites to maintain. Rather than

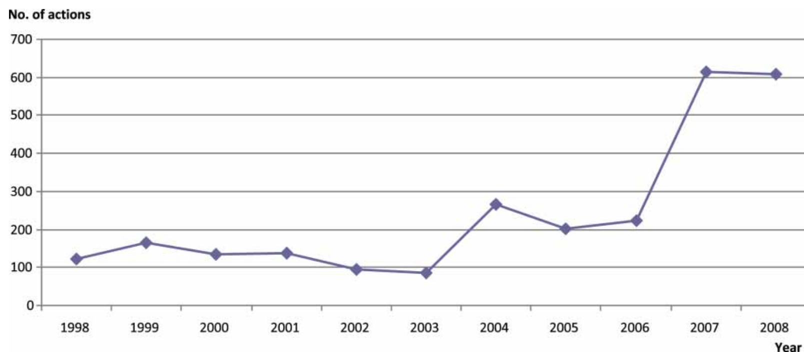

Figure 1. Contentious action by Egyptian workers, 1998–2008.
Note: The graph was compiled from the Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR), (http://www.lchr-eg.org) Economic and Social Rights Series nos. 5, 7, 13, 16, 18, 22, 28, 30, 33, 36, 39, 42, 49, 54, 56 and 58 (El-Mahdi 2010, p. 147). Some of the figures show discrepancies with the figures reported by the Trade Union and Workers Watch (received by email from the Hisham Mubarak Law Center). For example, the Watch reports 756 actions in 2007 versus 614 in the LCHR report. The discrepancy, which can be found in other figures and years, including the number of participants, can be attributed to the different definitions of 'contentious action' adopted by the two main labour monitors. While LCHR defines contentious action as 'strikes, demonstrations, picketing, and gathering', the Watch extends this to include 'complaints and legal action'.

> reflecting some emerging new consciousness, then, protests under a moral economy aim at resurrecting the status quo ante. The goal is not to negotiate and redefine the terms of exploitation but to reinstate them after they have been abandoned (p.85).

Hence, dissent by Egyptian workers is to be understood as 'restorative', aimed at reinstating a patron–client relationship with the state and the socio-economic privileges this entailed – and this at the expense of political rights. Similarly, in analysing workers protests in the 1990s, Pratt (2001, p. 112) affirms that 'workers' actions . . . do not represent a break from postcolonial state-labour relation. Instead, these actions attempt to maintain the pattern of relations existing before 1991.' That is, a pattern of patron–client relations, in which workers sacrifice autonomous organisation or mobilisation in return for guaranteed economic gains. Thus most recent action by industrial labour and state employees, in focusing on economic demands (wages and economic benefits), would appear at first glance to confirm this moral economy reading (the El-Mahalla workers, for example, first went on strike to regain instated economic rights which they had been denied). However, a closer look at the tactics adopted in recent protests shows that they differ from those adopted during earlier decades, in addition to being accompanied by the rise of new demands, such as the sacking of company management, replacement of union committees, or even the establishment of independent unions. This renders the moral economy argument inadequate, while lending a very different meaning to these recent protests and, consequently, their prospects.

In this respect, the recent wave of strikes marked a shift in the labour movement as a whole which contradicts earlier patterns of labour contention, even those observable as recently as the 1980s. Thus, moving away from moral economy demands, some 5000 El-Mahalla (Misr Company) workers had resigned from the state-controlled Textile Workers' Union by March 2007, in protest at its failure to support their strike, despite having had the economic demands they initially went out on strike for, 'reinstated'. In September 2007 they went on strike for a second time, to enforce the agreement reached at the settlement of the 2006 strike, while also demanding the removal of corrupt managers and trade union officials, and calling on the government to convene the National Wages Council to discuss raising the level of the national minimum wage (Interview, Haitham, 10 June 2009).[5] Thus, the workers were moving away from solely trying to reinstate economic gains and privileges, to more directly *political* demands having to do with minimum wage and autonomous organisation.

This politicisation of demands was further reflected in the real estate tax collectors' struggle, which unfolded in December 2007. After 10 days of camping outside the Finance Ministry in downtown Cairo, the minister responded to their demands by raising their salaries by 325% (*Daily News Egypt* 2009). Yet, the struggle continued. Having formed an elected strike committee, the employees started collecting signatures, not just to sack their union officials but also to form an independent parallel union. According to Kamal Abu Eita, the elected chair of the strike committee and president of the first independent union:

> We started holding meetings in all Egyptian governorates, to discuss the idea of an independent union. In each governorate an elected local committee shadowed the official union and started to collect signatures for the independent union. Even though people had gotten their financial demands that we initially went on strike for, we wanted more. We wanted our freedom. (Interview, 14 July 2009)

Deconstructing moral economy arguments even further, it is worth noting that striking real estate tax collectors, whose initial demands for equal pay with income-tax collectors

were met, still made more radical and politicised demands, eventually announcing the formation of an independent union in April 2009 with a membership of 37,000 out of a total population of 52,000 employees (Interview, Kamal Abu Eita, 14 July 2009). The Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Employees (URETAE), Egypt's first independent trade union since 1957, was formed a year and a half after the tax collectors' strike. Thus, rather than conforming to the 'stability–disruption–protest' pattern seeking to reinstate 'patron–client relationships' (Posusney 1993, p. 85), the tax collectors' struggle sketched out a different pattern – one of escalation (continuing protests even after workers had achieved their initial economic demands) seeking anti-corporatist relationships (resignation from the state union, sacking of officials and establishing an independent union).

Furthermore, Posusney (1993) refutes a Marxist explanation of growing class-consciousness as a reason for Egyptian labour action in the 1980s, in favour of moral economy explanations, contending that, 'if class consciousness is growing, we should expect workers increasingly to challenge the private sector, to show solidarity across plants, and to struggle for systemic change ... this was not what occurred' (p. 99). However, this was exactly what happened following the El-Mahalla strike in 2006, which 'triggered a wave of workers' protests across Egypt, crossing different sectors of the economy and industries – from Mahalla to Kafr al-Dawwar to Shibin al-Kum; from spinning and weaving to cement, to the railways, the metro and public transport workers' (Bassiouny and Said 2008, p. 3). Moreover, some of these strikes, such as that in Kafr al-Dawwar, overtly expressed solidarity with El-Mahalla workers. As one of the workers in Karf al-Dawwar put it, 'Of course we expressed solidarity with El-Mahalla through a one-hour work stoppage ... their strike was very inspiring and reminded us of ways to get our rights' (Interview, Mourad, 18 June 2008).

Table 1 provides further evidence of rising class-consciousness, indicating how, rather than being restricted to the state sector, contentious action spilled over to include employers at large. It shows the number of contentious actions during 2006–2008, confirming that the percentage of actions in the private sector increased steadily (El-Mahdi 2010, p. 153). Such developments – even according to advocates of the moral economy – confirm a rising class-consciousness and, more importantly, mark the emergence of a labour movement that is not preoccupied solely with reinstating patron–client relationships.

Turning to rational choice, the second approach to understanding labour mobilisation, workers' action (or any action for that matter) is understood as the outcome of aggregated individual preferences shaped by the desire to maximise utility. In the case of workers this means that they protest only when expected benefits (pay and job privileges) exceed expected costs (forgone wages, job loss or repression). While both Goldberg and Bellin use sophisticated versions of this approach, the earlier factoring in the specificity of labour conditions in the South, while the latter uses structural variables (state dependence and workers' comparative privilege) as determinants to understand Egyptian workers dissent, they still utilise the same general logic of rational choice. Goldberg (1992), for

Table 1. Number of contentious actions by ownership sector.

Sector/Year	2006	2007	2008
Public sector	156	400	374
Private sector	66	214	235
Total	222	614	609
Private sector action as % of total actions	29.7	34.8	38.5

Source: El-Mahdi (2010, p. 153).

example, argues that the Egyptian economic regime after 1952 eliminated the risk of job losses, and that this was as an impediment to contentious activity, with the result that individual workers and state employees, who were the main beneficiaries of this system, had no motivation as rational individuals to protest. Similarly, Bellin (2000) argues that workers' contentious action is conditioned by their dependence on the state for viability and clout, as well as 'aristocratic privilege', the degree to which these workers are relatively privileged vis-à-vis the general population.

According to this logic, El-Mahalla dissent should have occurred under circumstances where the expected material gains of the strike outweighed the cost (because of a tight labour market, decline of state dependence and privilege, or reduction of repression), which was not the case.[6] Even though some of these factors were present (e.g. declining state dependence) others were not (e.g. tight labour market, declining threat of repression), thus casting doubt on the explanatory value of utility-maximisation arguments. Moreover, some of the conditions favourable for strike action, according to rational choice arguments (e.g. loss of job security, declining state dependence), had existed for at least a decade prior to recent labour protests, dating to the advent of neoliberalism. Why, then, did the unprecedented rise in the scale of worker protests start only in 2006 and not earlier? Does this not raise questions about the uncritical belief in the assumption that protests are no more than calculated individual decisions aimed at utility maximisation when predicted gains outweigh losses?

In contrast to these approaches, it seems that a Gramscian understanding of the dual dynamic of hegemony and domination is much better able to explain recent worker protests in Egypt. Domination refers to the material armour of state coercion and the economic system of production–distribution, while hegemony delineates the super-structural elements of institutions shaping consciousness and socio-cultural norms in a way that cloaks domination–exploitation with consent.[7] Specifically, I argue that neoliberal changes are redefining labour–state relations in four ways, and making labour mobilisation viable. In terms of domination, two changes are most significant: 1) the inability of the state to sustain earlier socio-economic provisions, both worker-specific (e.g. secure employment, subsistence wages) and universal (e.g. free education, health care), for which urban labour were the primary beneficiaries; 2) a restraint on the possibility of using coercion against protesting workers (because of the changes within the ruling elite, as well as the imperative for attracting private capital as the modus operandi of neoliberalism). These changes associated with domination are combined with changes in aspects of the ruling hegemony specifically; 3) the end of the earlier nationalism characterising the state and the regime (with specific turning points revealing this change such as the regime's position on the American invasion of Iraq and the Palestinian problem – which are perceived by many as anti-nationalist); and 4) the rise of the new media with an increasing role in circulating information more freely, even if not engendering class-consciousness.

Finally, reading recent worker mobilisation as a sign of rupture in the post-1952 ruling pact, I argue that the meaning of these protests lies well beyond their limited economic demands. Despite the fact that many of these actions have not managed to achieve their demands, while many others have appealed to regime icons (specifically President Hosni Mubarak and his son Gamal) for 'help', this recent wave of protests is breaching the existing populist pact and, in doing so, setting the stage for an alternative one.

Changing political and economic matrices

Where did all this contention, so qualitatively and quantitatively different from earlier labour action, come from? The answer lies in the neoliberal model, initiated by an

agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1991, and its restructuring of both the relations of production and the state apparatus. The model has changed labour–state relations, pushing labour into contestation and conditioning the state's response to the latter in a way which allowed its continuation. The regime has, since 1991, endorsed economic restructuring which saw the axing of labour's 'most treasured advantage (job security)', as well as a lot of the socio-economic privileges of public sector and state workers (including subsidised holiday trips, food products, transportation) (Bellin 2000, p. 204). During the 1990s, then, there was a doubling of workers protests compared to the 1980s, as industrial labour challenged neoliberal changes (Abdel-Kader 1998, El Shafei 1995). By the end of 2006, when the recent wave of protests erupted, Egyptian workers had already experienced more than 15 years of neoliberalism, during which there had also been a gradual increase in labour mobilisation. In particular, the appointment of the Nazif cabinet in July 2004 and its subsequent headlong pursuit of neoliberalism had, by 2006, created the conditions for the emergence of a larger and more entrenched movement.

The government, which was composed of openly neoliberal technocrats and businessmen, 'promoted a second wave of privatisation and enacted other measures to encourage foreign direct investment', raising well-founded fears about lay-offs and hastening a shift away from the 1952 labour–state alliance (Beinin 2009, p. 77). Unlike earlier governments, Nazif's signalled a shift towards greater intensification of neoliberalism; not only was its composition telling, representing a shift away from state-bureaucrats and academics to technocrats and businessmen, but it also undertook a programme of divestiture of state assets during its first two years in office which was greater in scope than the cumulative total of all privatisation undertaken since the beginning of such programmes in the 1990s. The new cabinet stressed that their mission was to speed up privatisation and attract foreign investment in order to accelerate growth, changing laws and regulations to this supreme purpose. Prices, especially of food and transportation, experienced sharp and unprecedented increases, leading to heightened inflation despite a proclaimed increase in GNP (*Egyptnews.com* 2008). Moreover, successive statements made by Nazif about the need to reassess food and fuel subsidies, and for Egyptians to 'grow up' and stop depending on the state, confirmed popular suspicion about the regime's move away from the earlier model of state-guaranteed socio-economic rights.[8]

By 2006, then, the regime's propaganda about neoliberal economic changes not affecting workers had been put to the test and found wanting. As one labour activist put it, when asked why worker mobilisation only took place in 2006, despite neoliberal changes enacted as early as 1991:

> Because by that time workers have seen first hand that the counter atrocity measures of neoliberal changes such as early retirement schemes, retraining, and loans for starting their own small business is a scam. They have seen how other workers who supposedly benefited from these schemes ended up with no source of income or a real safety-net because of inflation and rising prices which swallowed whatever severance payment they took. They could not find new jobs and prices were increasing systematically. (Interview, Fouad, 12 June 2009)

In other words, neoliberal changes adopted by the Nazif government eroded the material gains of state corporatism while not providing an alternative and, in the process, provided the impetus for the initial insurgency.

Equally important, the advent of neoliberalism conditioned the state's response to rising labour militancy in multiple ways that encouraged its spread beyond El-Mahalla. The sheer

size of the El-Mahalla protest was reason enough to expect the state to deploy its repressive machinery to its fullest extent, something which did not happen until 6 April 2008. Nor was this attributable to the fact 'that the regime feels less threatened because workers' demands are not directly political – during the 1980s and 1990s workers' protests raising much more modest demands were crushed by overwhelming force' (Alexander 2008, p. 52). Rather, the explanation lay in the fact that, as a result of neoliberal changes between 2006 and 2009, the state was no longer the economic actor it used to be in the decades up to the 1990s. Driven by private economic actors, and dependent on foreign investment for its economic survival, the state could not risk alienating potential investors with the bad publicity which would have accompanied any attempt at state repression of protesting workers. As one activist put it, 'they did not want to scare away the investors by invading plants with armoured cars and armed soldiers like they used to do . . . who would want to invest in such an atmosphere?' (Interview, Hisham, 10 May 2009).

In addition, politically, the neoliberalising state apparatus was no longer dominated by hardcore bureaucrats and military 'hardliners' with their die-hard repressive approach. Rather, the advent of neoliberalism meant the rise of technocrats and business people to positions of prominence, both in the cabinet and the Policies Committee of the ruling National Democratic Party, led by the President's son Gamal Mubarak. The technocratic and bureaucratic background of these 'soft-liners', including the Minister of Investment at the time, Mahmood Mohideen, meant that, unlike their predecessors, repression was not their default response to perceived challenges to state policy. Hence, the second of the two arms of populist corporatism, coercion and a show of force, was not demonstrated, further undermining this pact and giving greater confidence to the workers. Thus, politically and economically, the foundational (material) elements of the corporatist ruling pact that governed labour–state relations were shifting, despite the continuity of its institutional manifestation – the monolith GFETU – and other political elements (e.g. an entrenched security apparatus in an authoritarian regime).

Concomitantly, the sources and venues of ideational hegemony of the existing etatist model and populist–corporatist pact were also being challenged. The rise of new private media outlets, and the changing nationalist discourse adopted by the regime, contributed to a wiggling hegemony of the regime in its ideational and normative aspects. That is, the idea that the state and the regime are patrons or at least allies of workers' interests has been contested and exposed. The first independent newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, appeared in 2004, to be followed by *Sout Al-Ommah*, *Al-Fagr*, *Al-Doustor* and many others in the course of the following couple of years. In addition, blogs and satellite television channels also emerged and reported on protests and movements that the state-owned media channels remained silent on. For many workers, these newspapers served as 'scaffolds' in the Leninist sense, and were used to build the labour movement. Workers follow the news of different labour actions, expected moves, achievements and challenges via these newspapers. As one worker from El-Mahallah said, 'we read these newspapers to know what the state is cooking for us, but also to send messages to the state and test the waters . . . more importantly our action would have gone unnoticed if it wasn't for these independent media people' (Interview, Mohamed, Misr Spinning Company, 15 June 2009). This view was repeated in all interviews, and during visits to striking workers over the last two years. Consequently, with the rise of independent and alternative media, the cost of using coercion, so integral to populist state corporatism, increased significantly for the state, given the risk of unwelcome publicity attendant on widespread press coverage of state attempts to suppress labour protests or strikes. Thus coverage, including footage, of the brutal clamp-down in El-Mahalla on 6 April 2008 made it into

major local newspapers, the Internet and the international media, a very different situation from that which occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, when blogs – citizen journalism – and independent newspapers did not exist. The contagious confidence which widespread favourable or sympathetic news coverage generates in dissident workers cannot be overestimated.

Finally, one of the most important elements of the post-1952 hegemony, and the state alliance with labour, was its post-colonial 'modernising' tendency and rhetoric (see Pratt 2007, Beinin and Lockman 1987). Labour was not only co-opted through material gains and the threat of repression, but also through being wilfully subsumed within the nationalist movement and, later, the post-independence nationalist regime. Workers' organisations and demands 'became linked to the struggle against colonialism, thereby blurring the lines between class demands and national political demands' (Pratt 2007, p. 35). Consequently, sacrifices could be demanded of people, and class tensions glossed over, by the ruling elite under the rhetoric of nationalism. But, with the state slowly abandoning both this rhetoric and its associated policy direction from about the mid 1970s (following the Middle East war of 1973, the negotiation of peace agreement with, and adoption of an open door economic policy toward Israel), and more forcefully during the past decade, the hegemony was weakened. In the event, the regime was deprived of its historic nationalist zeal by a combination of its stance on the Palestinian issue, the American invasion of Iraq, and the Israeli–Lebanese war in 2006 (all instances in which anti-regime street demonstrations abound), and its flaunting of its close ties with successive American administrations. Moreover, in 2004 and 2006, the regime signed two trade treaties (Qualifying Industrial Zones [QIZ] and export of Egyptian natural gas) with Israel, Egypt's historic 'enemy'. Hence, class tensions which were arising under neoliberalism could not be glossed over by an appeal to nationalism. As the hegemonic consent built on an anti-imperialist rhetoric was breached by the regime, workers were further liberated from their part of the pact.

Meanings: changing organisational forms and ideational frames

Unlike earlier protest movements in Egypt (the pro-*Intifada*, antiwar, or democracy movements), the labour movement proved the most sustainable. As Gramsci acknowledged early on, objective conditions alone – including state crisis – do not precipitate successful mobilisation, which is also influenced by 'the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes', i.e. class-consciousness (Gramsci 1971, p. 181). Thus, while structural and superstructure factors discussed above can explain the rise of the labour movement, only a closer look at its organisational forms and tactics can fully explain its sustainability and meaning. In this respect, the rise and continuity of the movement becomes clear, only if events are seen as a continuum and in totality. In other words, the new independent tax-collectors' union cannot be seen in isolation from the El-Mahalla strike any more than a current postal workers' strike movement can be seen as unrelated to the achievement of striking tax collectors. A close look at the unfolding organisational patterns within this wave of protests reveals changes within the state–corporatist pact which indicate a dismantling of the basis of authoritarian dynamics from below. Thus, the changing dynamics of labour contention promise to provide a new push for democratisation from below by creating pressure on the state and rendering long-held patron–client relationships unviable.

In this respect El-Mahalla workers seem very important. The three-day Mahalla workers' strike of December 2006 can be seen as a major turning point in the history of the Egyptian workers' movement. As Bassiouny and Said put it, 'It is possible to talk of

the periods “before the Mahalla strike” and “after the Mahalla strike” . . . the workers’ movement after December 2006 bore the imprint of the Mahalla strike in several key ways’ (2008, p. 7). That is, ever since the Nasserite era, public sector workers protested by staying at the workplace after hours and, in many cases, increased production (Posusney 1997, Pratt 2001, Bassiouny and Said 2008). Such a tactic was in line with the populist–nationalist pact discussed above, in which the workers identified themselves both as partners in the nationalist quest for ‘modernity’ and ‘anti-colonialism’, and as ‘clients’ to whom the state, as ‘patron’, had obligations but also rights. The El-Mahalla strike marked the first and largest shift from work-in tactic to work-stoppage. The introduction of work-stoppage was later adopted by strikers in both the industrial sector (e.g. Mansura-Espangia, Markarm Textile) and service sector (e.g. public bus drivers in August 2009), as well as by state employees (e.g. postal workers, tax collectors, nurses). The adoption of this tactic as an alternative to work-in clearly marks a shift away from the earlier relations of labour–state partnership assumed since 1952, even if workers do not consciously signal this shift.

In addition, workers’ actions were lasting for record durations. Before El-Mahalla, ‘workers’ protests were generally of short duration. Sometimes, the only news of a new protest would be the report of its suppression. The majority of workers’ protests lasted less than 24 hours (Bassiouny and Said 2008, p. 19). In contrast, the El-Mahalla strikes lasted three and six days, respectively. This change in duration dictated changes in the tactical and organisational repertoires used by workers. ‘A strike lasting several days opens up wide horizons for the workers’ movement to develop . . . it forces workers to develop mechanisms to stay overnight, provide daily meals and protect the workplace’ as much as it requires a leadership that can keep workers motivated and united for a longer time (Bassiouny and Said 2008, p. 19). It did not only mean an increased pressure on the state but, more importantly, required a higher level of organisation that set an example to other workers and dissent groups. Hence, El-Mahalla workers had to resort to the long-forgotten tradition of ‘strike-committees’; electing their own representative to negotiate with the authorities and designating individuals to speak to the press, arrange for supplies of food and shelter, and even night-watch teams to protect sleeping workers and machinery. This level of sophisticated organisation was later emulated by workers of Karf El-Dawwar in February 2007; Abul-Makaram textile company in Sadat City which lasted almost three weeks; the 10-day tax collectors’ strike in December 2007; and, most recently, the least successful but longest-lasting strike, Ketan Tanta, which went on for more than six months in 2009.

In contrast to the hierarchy and bureaucratic structures of the state-controlled trade unions, the recent labour protests have created new mechanisms from below that are slowly challenging the institutional basis of state corporatism. Soon after El-Mahalla’s first strike, the *de facto* worker leaders who emerged from the strike launched a campaign to impeach local union officials who had opposed the strike and who, according to workers, enjoyed close ties with the state security apparatus and were puppets of the GFETU. Eventually, over 13,000 workers signed a petition addressed to the General Union of Textile Workers demanding impeachment of the local union committee and the conduct of new elections (Interview, Haitham, Worker in Misr Spinning Company, 10 June 2009). Regime representatives, including GFETU chief Husayn Megawir, first refused to meet the workers, and were then forced to go to Mahalla to negotiate with the elected strike committee, by-passing the official trade-union committee. Thus, ‘while the Misr workers did not formally win their demand to impeach the trade union committee, they rendered it irrelevant’ (Beinin 2009, p. 84). Sidelining the official union workers’ committee, the chosen

strike committee had to operate democratically. 'Workers' representatives reported back to mass meetings of thousands of strikers on the progress of negotiations' (Alexander 2008, p. 56). Decisions, statements and tactics were based on collective discussions, making it more difficult for the authorities to break the strike from within. Later on, in the case of the tax collectors' strike, not only was the strike committee elected and operated according to principles of deliberative democracy, but there have been regular elections since the end of the strike in December 2007. This novel form of organisation contradicts the internal logic of state corporatism, set a precedent and sowed the seeds for independent organisation away from state-manipulated elections which had been so closely associated with organised labour since 1957.

Similarly, the emergence of more politicised demands as part of recent labour protests, including attempts at independent organisation during protests by real estate tax collectors (which actually succeeded), struggles by postal workers and administrators of the Ministry of Education, as well as demands for the renationalisation of privatised entities during protests at the Ketan Tanta plant and Karf El-Dawar textile plant, breached long-held state–labour corporatist 'norms'. The movement was adopting systemic and more overtly political demands. And, despite not being a linear or irreversible process, the rise of more politicised demands endorsed by hundreds of thousands of state employees and industrial workers, including national minimum wage and independent unions (even when not anti-regime per se), is definitely a break from earlier patterns of partnership with the state and the ruling regime.

These developments are as useful in demonstrating 'spill-over effects' within organisational forms, as in highlighting how organisational forms can be adopted and developed further within new sites of contention. However, this does not happen mechanically. Rather, it is a dynamic process in which the new organisational forms traverse sites of contention and manifest themselves variously in these different locations. Ultimately, the significance of both these new forms of organisation and the increased demands from the labour movement lies in their potential to reshape the social norms and practices binding labour to the state and the latter to society at large. The meaning of these new forms of labour protests cannot therefore be over emphasised, given the pivotal role that state–labour corporatism in Egypt has played in stabilising post-1952 populist authoritarian rule.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the workers' movement emerged from ruptures in the hegemonic relationship connecting workers to the state (both as an employer and a political ally). However, such a process is neither guaranteed nor inevitable. The absence of strong political allies is a challenge that the labour movement has been struggling with in its bid to realise its potential as an agent of macro-political change. Social movements (including labour) need to build alliances and exchange experiences with, and benefit organisationally and politically from, other entities within civil society and the wider political sphere. These 'movements are not distinct and self-contained; rather, they grow from and give birth to other movements, work in coalition with other movements, and influence each other indirectly through their effects on the larger cultural and political environment' (Meyer and Whittier 1994, p. 277). In Brazil, for example, the labour movement in the 1970s and 1980s benefited from coalitions with leftist parties and a landless peasant social movement (MST), while in the US the feminist movement capitalised on the earlier civil rights movement. Such reservoirs are not available to the Egyptian labour movement, which explains why the numerous labour actions in the period since 2006 have not culminated

in more structural systemic changes, at least regarding labour conditions. In this regard, the Egyptian labour movement bore the brunt of years of continuous corporatist authoritarianism, which did not only co-opt labour, but succeeded equally in weakening and co-opting oppositional forces from different walks.

The combination of El-Mahalla events in 2008 – the widest popular uprising in Egypt since the 1977 bread riots – and the rise of the first independent union for real estate tax collectors, does raise questions about the potential of the labour movement as a catalyst for wider socio-political change. Certainly, a movement which involved more than 1.7 million Egyptians in an impressive episode of mass mobilisation had to have left a mark on society as a whole.[9] Nonetheless, because of an absence of links between the middle-class democracy movement and the workers' movement, the latter cannot be expected to play a direct role in regime change during the cycle of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010–2011. Indeed, the demonstration effect of the workers' movement ought to be seen as much in the movement's challenge to existing state–society relations of corporatism as in its suggestion of how alternative forms of organisation based on internal democracy can be developed.

Through their protests, strikes and other actions, workers and state employees are hastening the rupture of the populist–corporatist ruling pact which has bound successive Egyptian regimes to society since 1952. By challenging the hegemony of the state-dominated union, and pushing for demands beyond moral economy, labour is nurturing a different and more vibrant civil society based on collective organisation in place of one dominated by professional organisations (non-governmental organisations) and state-run unions. Moreover, such challenges point to the importance and possibilities of mass organisation, particularly when compared to the 'closed door' tactics adopted by established opposition parties and political movements. Finally, the threat of state repression notwithstanding (worker transfers, pay cuts, arrests, and fully fledged coercion in El-Mahalla uprising), the sustainability of the workers' movement is definitely reshaping the political economy, both by setting an example to potential actors and by wearing down the regime's capacity for diverting dissent, both in terms of co-optation and potential repression.

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Notes

1. This paper was written and submitted for publication in June 2010, before the Egyptian Uprising of 25 January 2011 which toppled the Mubarak regime.
2. Repeated in all interviews with El-Mahalla workers. All names of workers interviewed have been changed at their request.
3. For an excellent account of the rise and development of the labour movement before 1952, see Beinin and Lockman (1987).
4. For more details, see Posusney (1997), Goldberg (1992), and Marbo and Radwan (1976).
5. This worker's pay was cut and the worker was transferred to Cairo because of having participated in the strikes.
6. For example, El-Mahalla workers who started the protest movement are among the few maintaining their 'aristocratic privileges' in terms of wages and work conditions. See American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt (2004, p. 33), Beinin (2009, p. 75), and Workers and Trade Unions Watch (2007, p. 234).

7. This distinction between domination and hegemony is characteristic of earlier parts of *The prison notebooks*, although it is later conflated to make hegemony inclusive of both coercion and consent (see Gramsci 1971). For an excellent synthesis, see Anderson (1976).
8. See for example *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 24 September 2008, 2 December 2007, p. 1; *Al-Wafd*, 4 February 2006.
9. Although there is no precise count of workers involved, Benin (2010), has compiled statistics which put the number of workers involved at 1.7 million.

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