Labor as a Pro-democracy Actor in Egypt and Brazil

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In Egypt, the biggest country of the region a cycle of protest have ensued with a new phase of neoliberal changes in ٢٠٠٤, witnessing the rise of a pro-democracy movement followed by the largest workers movement known to the region in fifty years. By comparing the case of Egypt to that of Brazil, where a strong relationship between the labor movement and democratization movement was witnessed in the ١٩٧٠s and ٨٠s the paper seeks to address two questions: what is the relationship (if any) between the pro-democracy movement and the rising labor movement that followed in Egypt? And what are the points of divergence and convergence between the experience of Latin America specifically Brazil, and that of Egypt, in terms of neoliberal changes and collective mobilization. In doing so the paper analyzes the role and potential of labor as an agent of democratization and its relationship to another social movement with different class composition and demands (the pro-democracy movement). The paper also offers preliminary conclusions regarding the changing pattern and thus impact of labor mobilization at different historical junctures.

Introduction

For the past two decades neoliberalism as a political and economic model became the main panacea of globalization, reshaping a lot of relations on the international level as well as within the boundaries of nation-states. While a lot of the literature discussed the disintegrating effects of neoliberalism on collective action, this paper investigates and documents an opposite pattern. Contrary to the case of many Latin American countries, where the advent of neoliberalism coupled with ensuing democratization processes have demobilized a lot of collective actors prompting the now famous question: "where have all the movements gone?" In the case of many Middle Eastern countries, the opposite dynamic seem to be unraveling. That is, political and economic impacts of neoliberalism seem to be prodding long-dormant actors to a cycle of collective contention.

In Egypt, the biggest country of the region a cycle of protest have ensued with a new phase of neoliberal changes in ٢٠٠٤, witnessing the rise of a pro-democracy movement followed by the largest workers movement known to the region in fifty years. Studying, labor as an actor is a move back to a long –but recently forgotten- tradition in social sciences that put social forces—and more specifically *social classes*—center stage when explaining socio-political outcomes including democratization and authoritarianism.[١] The article is a move beyond the predominant stream of overly state-centric literature with its elite-bias, which focuses on the role and strategic choice of elites and political leadership, the importance of formal political institutions for understanding political transitions.

Despite a lot of differences between Egypt and Brazil, the main importance of Brazil as a comparative case to the Egyptian contentious movements lays in two elements. The first is that Brazil is one of the few cases in which a democratic transition happened because of internal factors and dynamics which the labor movement spearheaded. As such, it refutes the presumption upheld by some commentators that the Egyptian labor movement is bound by economistic and sectorial limitations. As many scholars have asserted "union militancy of the early ١٩٧٠s resulted in a movement of more autonomous labor unions, unions whose shop-floor action worked toward a transformation of the industrial relations system that in turn was translated into political opposition to the military regime".[٢] The second is that the success and decline of this movement can provide invaluable lessons for the rising labor movement in Egypt with its own turn to new unionism. Especially that the Brazilian trajectory of success and later decline is not inevitable. Rather, it is subject to its own historical context and the moment of capitalist development and class-struggle in question.

The Development of a Labor Movement

An understanding of any movement cannot be complete without a historical outlook at how cultural, political and economic processes combine dialectically over time to make labor mobilization possible at a particular moment. In this respect, the Gramscian dual dynamic of hegemony and domination seem particularly suitable with its emphasis on both the material foundation and super-structural elements of consciousness and culture. Such a framework goes beyond the binaries characterizing labor and social movements studies (especially in the South) be it economic versus cultural determinism on the one hand, or structure versus agency on the other. Using this framework and fieldwork findings, I argue that the labor movement, is an outcome of the neoliberal rupture of the post-١٩٥٢ labor-state pact both in its hegemonic (ideational) part and in its domination (material) elements. Yet, once ignited through El-Mahalla strike, this movement had a momentum beyond the original structural factors causing it. The

difference in structural variables, specifically the timing of the labor movement and possibility of alliances can mark the difference between labor as an agent of democratization in Egypt and Brazil.

The recent and extended wave of labor action in Egypt has no doubt generated a debate within circles of activists, scholars, and policy-makers. During the past few years, specifically since December ٢٠٠٦, Egypt has witnessed "the largest social movement in over half a century"; the labor movement with more than ١,٧ million participants.[٣] For decades the idea and mental image of Egyptian labor as an active actor within the public sphere and civil society seemed to be a myth or at least a legacy not supported by any visible action. Not only was this idea applicable to the working-class in Egypt, but rather there seemed to be a number of studies and real life events confirming the marginal if not complacent role that labor is playing in accepting neoliberalism worldwide. According to Antunes &Hallewell, the changing forms of production regimes under neoliberalism have changed the way and content of labor organization.

> "It is plain that the crisis also intensely affects the universe of consciousness-the very nature of labor and its forms of representation. The trade unions are confused and are playing an increasingly defensive game. They are giving up the class-based unionism of the ١٩٦٠ and ١٩٧٠s for an acceptance of the non-confrontational trade unionism of participation, negotiation, and partnership that in general acquiesces in the rules of capital…"[٤]

To the contrary, the recent wave marked a rise of a labor movement which acted independently against the state and workplace authorities, including hundreds of thousands of workers, and have not subsided ever since. A look at Figure (١), shows how the number of contentious action have soared since El-Mahalla strike amounting to more than the aggregate number of such actions in the preceding eight years.

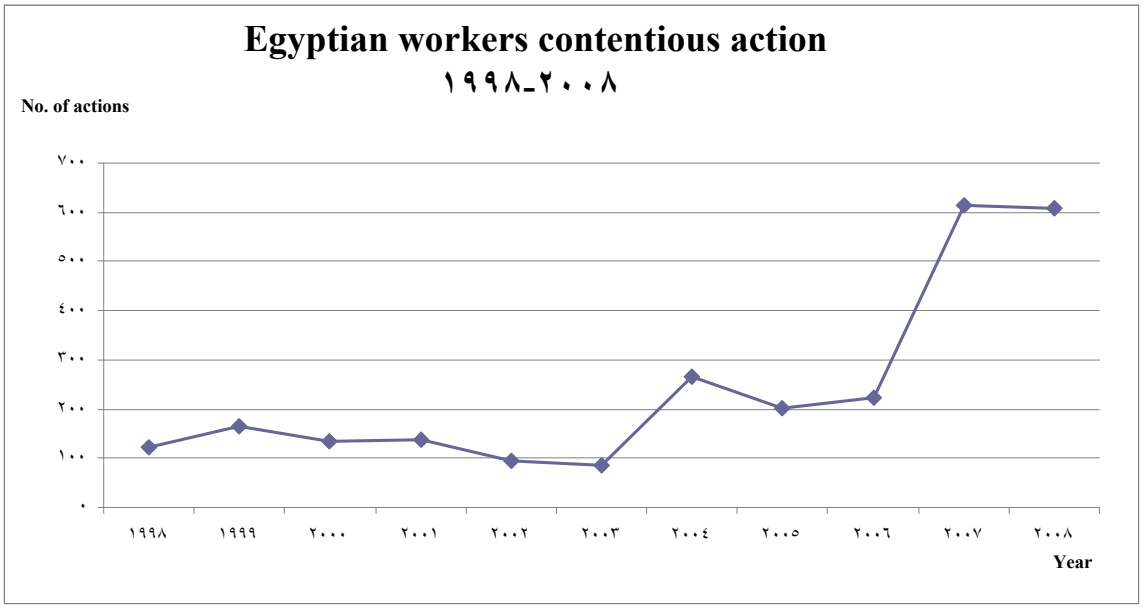

Figure (١)[٥]

The figures demonstrate that the current workers' movement is not a one-off event. Moreover, the current movement while quantitatively significant with estimates of more than ١,٧ million participating in the actions (٢٠٠٦-٢٠٠٩), it also marks a qualitative leap with the Real Estate Tax

Collectors forming an independent union in April ٢٠٠٩ –the first autonomous non-state union since the ١٩٤٠s- after a year and half struggle since their successful strike in December ٢٠٠٧. Thus, it seems that within this rising movement two episodes are monumental, El-Mahallah El-Kubra strikes' wave and the Real Estate Tax Collectors' struggle.

In Brazil one of the first Latin American countries to make the shift from a military dictatorship to being an electoral democracy a similar trajectory unwrapped during the ١٩٧٠s and ١٩٨٠s. It is also a country where labor actions and independent unionism in the١٩٧٠s-١٩٩٠s –which has been dubbed *new unionism*- even resulted in a workers party (PT) from which the Brazilian President, Silva de Lula (an auto-worker) comes. Similar, to Egypt this movement erupted and thrived under a dictatorship that was even more brutal than the Egyptian authoritarian regime. Also, this movement continued under an economic crisis even worse than the current crisis that Egypt has been enduring for a while and which was worsened in the last year.

That is not to underestimate the differences between the two contexts. First, that Egypt and Brazil differ considerably in terms of political, demographic and economic structures. The size of industrial workers in Brazil which is more than quadruple that of Egypt, a complex ethnic make-up in terms of population and geographical variation, a short modern history of instable military-dictatorships (١٩٦٤- ١٩٨٥) followed by a shift to democracy in the mid-١٩٨٠s, and finally some of the most successful social movements namely Landless Peasants (MST). Second, by no means is Brazil the perfect democracy or equitable system to which a strong labor movement have resulted. Rather huge inequalities continue to malaise the Brazilian context, with extreme levels of maldistribution (e.g.١٪ of Brazilians own ٤٦٪ of land), police violence, abuse of women just to mention a few examples. Finally, the new unionist movement has not been on a continuous path of success meaning autonomous, representative, incorruptible, democratic and class-consciousness. Rather, following a peak of success the movement has been characterized by more and more negative elements of cooptation since the mid-١٩٩٠s.

In Egypt, contentious action by labor was always present ever since the beginning of the ٢٠th century, despite being sporadic and episodic. Yet two phases in Egyptian modern history mark a labor movement by excellence; the period of ١٩٤٦-١٩٥١ and the current phase which started in December ٢٠٠٦ with the biggest series of industrial action led by El-Mahalla El-Kubra weaving and textile workers.[٦] In fact, ever since the ١٩٥٢ coup and the seminal events of ١٩٥٤[٧], which ushered in a populist-corporatist pact between the workers and the state, one cannot speak about a labor *movement*. This pact which annihilated the preceding labor movement of the ١٩٤٠s organized labor "into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly".[٨] As a quintessential case of populist-corporatism, this pact was marked by a clear threat of brutal repression (as exemplified in ١٩٥٤ executions) while at the same time brought about immediate material improvements in workers' living standards and alleviated their status in society (e.g. the socialist decrees of July ١٩٦١).[٩] The new regime succeeded in purging militants from leadership of the unions and in co-opting the remaining moderates through the state-unions which were monopolized by the state through the establishment of the General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU) in ١٩٥٧. Ever since then, "trade unions have functioned as an arm of the state rather than as democratic representatives of workers, mobilizing workers to demonstrate 'popular support' for the divergent policies of successive regimes at the ballot box or in the street".[١٠]

And while there have been important industrial action during this past five decade period, such as the Iron and Steel factory workers contentious action in ١٩٦٨, ١٩٧٧, and ١٩٨٩; Kafr el Dawar Weaving and Spinning ١٩٩٥; and the railway workers strike in ١٩٨٦, these actions were not contagious and did not expand to include other workers. They did not result in new organizational forms of labor nor were they sustainable. Thus, unlike the recent episode which was sparked by El-Mahalla El-Kubra strike in December ٢٠٠٦, they did not constitute a *movement*. That is, "an organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities".[١١]

In Brazil a similar ruling pact of state corporatism prevailed, until it was broken by the rise of 'bureaucratic authoritarianism" in the ١٩٦٠s. The rise of this new social and ruling pact based on an alliance between the military, compradors, and to a lesser extent the middle class, meant an end of labor as a necessary state-ally politically and economically. The production and economic logic was not geared towards internal consumption and hence the large working class lost a lot of its bargaining power and importance. However, starting the late ١٩٧٠s Brazil started to witness a new trend very similar to what Egypt has been experiencing since December ٢٠٠٦ with El-Mahalla strike. There were an enormous number of strikes, involving a wide range of occupations –industrial workers (especially those in heavy industry –automotives, steel, and metal works), rural laborers, civil servants, and various middle-level wage earners. In ١٩٨٧, for example, there were ٢،٢٥٩ strikes, and in ١٩٨٨ more than ٦٣ million days of work were lost.[١٢] The movement was characterized by the existence of general strikes within particular trades (e.g. bank workers in ١٩٩٥), strikes in which workplaces were occupied (e.g. General Motors factory in ١٩٨٥, National Steelworks in ١٩٨٩), and even nationwide mass strikes like that of March ١٩٨٩ which included ٣٥ million workers (the largest in Brazilian history).

The two surface symbolic episodes that mark the political appearance of this new trade union movement date back to ١٩٧٧ and ١٩٧٨. In August ١٩٧٧ the military government admitted the manipulation of the official figures used for the calculation of wage increases of Brazilian industrial workers for years ١٩٧٣ and ١٩٧٤. This manipulation of statistics caused a ٣٤,١٪ loss in the real wages during that period.[١٣] Accordingly, the Metalworkers Union of Sao Bernardo – led by Lula da Silva- organized a vast campaign to force the government to pay back to workers the difference lost. It was the "Campagin of the ٣٤,١ percent" that began to shake workers out of their fear and inaction. The second episode was the National Confederation of Workers in Industry in late ١٩٧٨. Although this conference was organized by members of the 'pelego' sector of the unions (those co-opted by the state), a group of more combative union leaders set up an alternative platform and gathered, for the first time, to coordinate the work of a network of leadership who openly voiced their opposition to the official controls over trade unions and the labor code.

These two episodes were then capitalized on by advanced sections of the working class with the support of the remains of the leftist parties (which had gone underground with the military regimes) and the strong liberation theology advocates of the Catholic church, started to form factory-based committees. Just like the Higher Strike Committee in the case of the Egyptian Tax collectors movement, these committees were democratically elected by the workers to facilitate the management, planning and negotiation of strikes and latter on as an alternative of the state's corporatist union structure. With the spread of the strikes and industrial action various factory committees started to meet and coordinate on the regional level. And while this was not a mechanical nor a linear process, but one that witnessed ups and downs, there was an upward pattern as will be explained in the coming section. There was an impressive growth of trade-union membership among middle-level wage earners in the services sector (bank

workers, teachers, physicians, civil servants) during this period, and these workers started to be organized into unions of significant size. Already by the end of the ١٩٨٠s the number of unions in Brazil had reached ٩،٨٣٣ and by the mid-١٩٩٠s this had become ١٥،٩٧٢ including urban and rural unions, management, and workers. There was an impressive growth in the number of workers' unions, not only of those linked to the industrial working class but among different sectors, including the self-employed and civil servants.

Based on this mushrooming, trade-union confederations emerged. The largest and most successful of them being the Central Union of Workers (CUT), founded in ١٩٨٣ and inspired by the desire for a class-based unionism autonomous and independent of the state and heir of a decade of workers' struggle. Simultaneously, a new party, the Workers Party Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), has even emerged as early as ١٩٧٩ from the strongest sector of that country's labor movement. This has resulted in the confluence of the new unionism, born within the union structure of that period, and the movement of opposition unions, which act outside the official government-sponsored union structure and oppose both the government control and the verticality of official unionism, with the rise of other social movements against the dictatorship and the PT.

The Rise of the Egyptian Labor Movement: Different Challenges

Initially confirming some of the moral economy arguments the workers at Misr Spinning in Mahalla al-Kubra went on strike when they did not receive the two-months' bonus decreed by the Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. After a week of complaining and organizing small protests, on December ٧, ٢٠٠٦, ٢٤،٠٠٠ workers began a strike when thousands of female workers in the plant left their work stations and started moving to the male workers location chanting "Where are the Men? The Women Are Here!".[١٤] Joining ranks the women and men started marching towards the center of the plant; 'Tala't Harb Square'. For the following three days more than ١٠, ٠٠٠ women and men occupied the factory, stopped work, and organized a strike committee. "On the fourth day of the occupation panicking government officials offered a ٤٥–day bonus" more than double of what workers used to get.[١٥] Moving away from moral economy demands, by March ٢٠٠٧, ٥،٠٠٠ workers of the Misr Company had resigned from the state-controlled textile workers' union in protest at its failure to support their strike. In September ٢٠٠٧ they went on strike for a second time, to enforce the agreement reached at the settlement of the ٢٠٠٦ strike, but also demanded removal of corrupt managers and trade union officials, and called on the government to convene the National Wages Council to discuss raising the level of the national minimum wage.[١٦] This time the strike last for six days. It ended with a victory for the workers: they won an additional ٧٠ days' bonus pay –which increased after the strike to a total of at least ١٣٠ days' pay- and the resignation of the entire board of directors at the company's annual general meeting in November ٢٠٠٧.[١٧]

In this respect, the recent strikes' wave marked a shift in the labor movement as a whole that contradicts earlier patterns as recent as the ١٩٨٠s. "The strike 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".[١٨] Moreover, some of these strikes such as in Kafr al-Dawwar, overtly expressed solidarity with El-Mahalla workers. "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".[١٩] Similarly, confirming a rising class consciousness and a rupture in the ideational consent, contentious action did not stop within the boundaries of the state sector but spilled-over to include employers at large. Table (١) shows the number of

contentious actions during (٢٠٠٦-٢٠٠٨) divided by sector, in which the percentage of actions in private enterprise increased steadily.

Sector/Year	٢٠٠٦	٢٠٠٧	٢٠٠٨
Public Sector	١٥٦	٤٠٠	٣٧٤
Private Sector	٦٦	٢١٤	٢٣٥
Total	٢٢٢	٦١٤	٦٠٩
Private sector action as % of total actions	٢٩,٧٪	٣٤,٨٪	٣٨,٥٪

Table ١: Contentious Action by Sector

Such developments –even according to advocates of the moral economy- confirm a rising class-consciousness, and more importantly, marks a rise in a labor movement and not just sporadic expression of grievances.

On ١٧ February ٢٠٠٨, as the National Wages Council prepared to meet, thousands protested in the streets of Mahalla carrying bread loaves, demanding a national minimum wage of ١،٢٠٠ Egyptian pounds and chanting anti-Mubarak slogans.[٢٠] The movement was adopting systemic and more overtly political demands. One of El-Mahalla eight leaders arrested for two days during the September strike, later told journalists:

> We want a change in the structure and hierarchy of the union system in this country… I want the whole government to resign…. I want the Mubarak regime to come to an end. Politics and workers' rights are inseparable[٢١]

This politicization of demands was further reflected in the Tax Collectors' struggle which unfolded in December ٢٠٠٧. After ten days of camping outside the Finance Ministry in Downtown Cairo, the Minister responded to their demands by raising their salaries by ٣٢٥ percent.[٢٢] Yet, the struggle continued, having formed an elected strike committee the employees started collected signatures not to sack their union officials but to form an independent parallel union. According to Kamal Abu Eita, the elected Chair of the strike committee and the 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.[٢٣]

The formation of Egypt's first independent trade union since ١٩٥٧—the Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Employees (URETAE)—came a year and a half after the national strike. The denouncement and breakaway from the state controlled, General Federation of Trade Unions presents a direct contestation to the authoritarian nature of the regime. Against moral economy arguments, the workers demands were not "resortive" in nature, nor did follow the "stability-disruption-protest" pattern seeking to reinstate "patron-client relationships".[٢٤] Rather, they

sketched a pattern of escalation (protests did not stop even when workers achieved their initial economic demands) seeking anti-corporatist relationships (resignation from the state union, sacking officials, and establishing independent union) and changing the nature of their demands to being more systemic (anti-Mubarak slogans and a national minimum wage).

Where did all this contention, that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from earlier labor action, come from? I argue that the changes brought about by the neoliberal model –which was initiated by an agreement with the IMF in ١٩٩١- both in its political and economic dimensions (restructuring the relations of production as well as the state apparatus) have challenged labor-state relations pushing labor into contestation and conditioning the state's response to it in a way that allowed its continuation. The same factor which caused a dissipation of the labor movement in Brazil helped its rise in Egypt, the changing positionality of labor within the Egyptian socio-economic and political matrices which are changing themselves. What Bellin described in ٢٠٠٠ regarding the economic neoliberal pressures on workers is even truer by the end of the decade. The advent of neoliberalism in Egypt, which has taken a new height with Nazif's cabinet in ٢٠٠٤, was/is definitely breaching the economic element of a long-standing social-pact holding workers to the state in a non-confrontational relationship. The new government composed of openly neoliberal technocrats and businessmen "promoted a second wave of privatization and enacted other measures to encourage foreign direct investment" raising justified fears about lay-offs and a further move away from the ١٩٥٢ labor-state alliance.[٢٥] By the end of ٢٠٠٦ when this movement erupted, Egyptian workers had been experiencing neoliberal effects for more than fifteen years, since ١٩٩١. Hence, the regime's propaganda about neoliberal economic changes not affecting workers have been put to the test and proved unviable. Hence, the perceived threats of neoliberal changes magnified by the new cabinet, along with the experienced atrocities over the past decade provided the impetus for at least El-Mahalla insurgency. However, the success of this early strike movement provided further impetus for the rest of the workers movement, as I will explain later.

Equally important, the advent of neoliberalism has conditioned the state's response to the rising labor contention in multiple ways that allowed its spread beyond El-Mahalla to constitute a wide movement. The sheer size of El-Mahalla contention was reason enough to expect the state to deploy its repression faculties full-gear, which it did not do until April ٦ ٢٠٠٨. This cannot be attributed to the fact "that the regime feels less threatened because workers' demands are not directly political—during the ١٩٨٠s and ١٩٩٠s workers' protests raising much more modest demands were crushed by overwhelming force".[٢٦] However, because of the economic neoliberal changes at this point (٢٠٠٦-٢٠٠٩) the state was no longer the biggest employer and main economic actor it used to be during earlier decades and up to the ١٩٩٠s. Being driven by private economic actors and dependent on foreign investments for its economic survival, the state could not afford the cost of bad-publicity and the fear that repression would create for potential investors. As one activist put it, "they did not want to scare away the investors by invading plants with armored cars and armed soldiers like they used to do…who would want to invest in such an atmosphere".[٢٧] In addition, politically the state apparatus having been neoliberalized was no longer solely dominated by hardcore bureaucrats and military-men "hardliners" with their die-hard repression approach. Rather, the advent of neoliberalism meant the rise of technocrats and business people led by the President's son Gamal Mubarak and institutionalized both in the cabinet and the Policies Committee of the ruling party (National Democratic Party). This camp of "soft-liners" which included the Minister of Investment, *Mahmood Mohideen* are of a different training and outlook which does not make repression their first resort as it was for their

predecessors. Hence, one of the two arms of populist-corporatism, which is coercion and a show of force, was not demonstrated, further shaking this pact and giving more confidence to the by-standing workers.

Thus, politically and economically the foundational (material) elements of the corporatist ruling pact that governed labor-state relations were shifting, despite the continuity of its institutional manifestation–the monolith GFETU- and other political elements –an entrenched security apparatus in an authoritarian regime. Concomitantly, the sources and venues of ideational hegemony were also being challenged. The rise of earlier cycles of protest by other groups in society, the present of new media-outlets that are not state-owned and controlled, and the changing nationalist discourse adopted by the regime, contributed to a changing hegemony.

That is, the rise of a cycle of mobilization in Egypt, including the pro-Intifada movement in ٢٠٠٠, the anti-war protests of ٢٠٠٣, and later the pro-democracy movement *Kefaya* (Enough) in ٢٠٠٤-٢٠٠٦ have created an environment where contention seemed possible. Not in the sense that it raised the workers political consciousness but rather, that the early cycles of contention have affected the labor movement indirectly by introducing new tactics to the Egyptian political sphere. For example street sit-ins which resurfaced in the anti-war demonstration in ٢٠٠٣ and later on some demonstrations of Kefaya, was adopted by both El-Mahalla workers and the Tax collectors' in their respective strikes. Similarly, the labor movement benefited from the media attention that Kefaya sough for contention action during its hype years (٢٠٠٤-٢٠٠٦). As I will show later the labor movement, also capitalized on an 'activists community' that was formed during the height of the democracy movement.

This is associated with the second important change which it the rise of independent media outlets that disseminated information about these protests and mobilization endeavors. The first independent newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm came out in ٢٠٠٤ 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 T.V. channels also came out and were reporting on protests and movements that the state-owned media channels remained blind to. For many workers these newspapers "scaffolds" in the Leninist sense, used to build the labor movement. Workers follow the news of different labor actions, expected moves, achievements and challenges through these newspapers. As one of El-Mahalla workers told me, "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".[٢٨] Consequently, with the rise of independent and alternative media the cost of using coercion –which is integral to the populist state-corporatism-against the movement was made higher for the state. The day a strike is forcefully broke and workers repressed local and international media cover it the next day in droves, which was not possible ten years ago.

Finally, one of the most important elements of the post-١٩٥٢ hegemony and its alliance with labor was its post-colonial "modernizing" nature and rhetoric.[٢٩] Labor was not only co-opted through material gains as I explained earlier, but also through being willfully subsumed within the nationalist movement and later the post-independence nationalist regime. The workers' organizations and demands "became linked to the struggle against colonialism, thereby blurring the lines between class demands and national political demands".[٣٠] Consequently, sacrifices could be asked and class-tensions glossed over by the ruling elite under the rhetoric of nationalism. But, with the state forgoing this rhetoric and policy direction slowly since the Sadat years but more forcefully during the past decade this part of the hegemony was no longer valid. The regime's stands towards the Palestinian issue, the American invasion of Iraq, and Israeli-

Lebanese war in ٢٠٠٦ in addition to parading of close relationships with American administrations deprived it from its historic nationalist zeal. Hence, class tensions which were arising under neoliberal changes could not be glossed over by nationalist demands.

Sustainability of the Movement: Organizational forms and ideational frames

Unlike earlier movements (the pro-Intifada, antiwar, or democracy movements) the labor movement proved the most sustainable. In this respect the rise and continuity of the movement can only be seen if events are seen as a continuum and in totality. In other words the new independent tax-collectors union cannot be seen in isolation of El-Mahalla strike wave –despite its subsidence- and a current postal workers strike movement cannot be seen devoid of the tax-collectors' achievement. Certain features were developed throughout these struggles and were key to its continuity, including internal democratization and successful mobilization of resources.

These developments showed the intra-movement "spill-over effects" within organizational forms as much as it shows how these organizational forms can be adopted and developed further within other sites of the movement. Such effect, does not stop within the boundaries of a particular movement –in this case labor- but is equally applicable within the broader context of social movements and the public sphere at large. Of course, this does not happen mechanically, or else we would have seen the rise of the first independent union in El-Mahalla or the textile sector. But rather it's a dynamic process in which the newly innovated organizational forms transverse different contention sites to manifesting themselves and developing differently in conjunction with their context. However, the importance of the forms of organization adopted by the labor movement stems not only from their decisive capacity for the movement's success, but also from their potential to reshape social norms and practices at large. As one observer noted, the answer to the question 'how do we organize?' reverberates "inward to the shaping of collective identity and outward to link movements to institutions or opportunity structures".[٣١] Similarly, these new forms of organization "serve as catalysts for the rearrangement and possible transformation of the array of organizational models that characterizes a society" (Clemens ١٩٩٦: ٢٠٩).[٣٢] For example, El-Mahalla strike marked the first and largest shift from work-in tactic to work-stoppage. That is, ever since the Nasserite era public sector workers protested by staying at the workplace after hours and in many cases increased production (Pousussney ١٩٩٧; Bassiouny & Said ٢٠٠٨). Such tactic was in line with the populist-nationalist pact discussed above, in which the workers identified themselves both as partners in the nationalist quest towards "modernity" and "anti-colonialism" and as "clients" to which the state as "patron" had obligations. Accordingly, the shift away from this tactic to the more confrontational work-stoppage gave impetus to the challenge of this pact as much as it is a change in class-consciousness and ideational hegemony.

The workers of El-Mahalla have also set a new record in terms of the duration of workers' action. This change in duration, dictated an enrichment in the "tactical and organizational repertoires" available to the workers movement as a whole and not just in El-Mahalla. Before El-Mahalla "workers' protests were generally short in duration. Sometimes the only news of a new protest would be the report of its suppression. The majority of workers' protests lasted less than ٢٤ hours".[٣٣] In contrast, El-Mahalla strikes lasted three and six days respectively. This change did not only mean an increased pressure on the state, but more importantly it required a higher-level of organization that set an example to other workers and dissent groups. As Bassiouny & Said confrim, "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".[٣٤] 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 food and shelter supplies, and even night-watch teams to protect the sleeping workers and the machines. This level of sophisticated organization was later emulated by workers of Karf El-Dawwar in February ٢٠٠٧, Abul-Makaram textile company in Sadat City which lasted almost three weeks, and the Tax Collectors strike in December ٢٠٠٧. Not only did this new mechanism add a much needed tools into the "mobilizing structures" of the workers movement at large, but it also increased the 'ownership' of workers and hence their readiness to continue. One of the leaders of the Tax collectors said, "I was responsible for the subsistence committee, collecting money, sending the men to do the grocery shopping then cooking… managing the distribution of tents and covers. I felt that I was at home and that these people are my family who I have a responsibility to".[٣٥] But strike committees, did not only sustain the movement through the sense of ownership it created, but more importantly through building internal democracy. "Workers' representatives reported back to mass meetings of thousands of strikers on the progress of negotiations".[٣٦] Decisions, statements and tactics were based on collective discussions and hence was more difficult for the authorities to break the strike from within. Later on in the case of the Tax collectors not only was the higher strike committee elected and operated according to principles of deliberative democracy, but it was also regular elections since the end of the strike in December ٢٠٠٧, with some members casted out and other new leaders joining. Thus, there was a constant reassurance that the leadership will be representing the collective interests of the employees and the earlier had to continuously be accessible to the base, accountable and transparent.

By devising organizational measures that stress internal democracy, workers were sending a clear message that horizontal collective governance with participation, representation, and accountability, is doable and successful. Such an idea that is usually very questionable in a context of uninterrupted authoritarianism, but proven right through implementation rather than propaganda. Similarly, the move from narrow economic plant-specific demands in El-Mahalla the first strike or in the Tax collectors sit-in, to broader more politicized demands –independent organization- later on and the change of slogans and chants that accompanied it was very successful. Workers' leaders, because they are organic to the labor movement started from the point of consciousness on which the majority of workers stand, that is; not anti-regime per se but more confrontational when it comes to economic demands.

Civil and Political Societies: The Absent Links

However, the democratization potential carried by this movement is counterbalanced by the malaise of Egyptian political society (political parties and opposition forces) and civil society (NGOs and social movements). The absence of strong allies is a challenge that the labor movement have been struggling with to realize its potential as an agent of macro-political change. Social movements (including labor) need to build alliances with, exchange experiences, and benefit organizationally from other organizations within both civil society and the 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".[٣٧] In Brazil for example, the labor movement in the ١٩٧٠s and ١٩٨٠s benefited from coalitions with leftist parties and landless peasants social movement (MST). Such reservoirs are not available to the Egyptian labor movement, which explains why the numerous labor actions over the past years

(٢٠٠٦-present) have not culminated in more structural systemic changes at least regarding labor conditions.

In Egypt, political contenders were taken by surprise when the first Mahalla strike erupted in December ٢٠٠٦ and from then on their engagement with the movement remained insignificant or harmful. The biggest of the opposition forces, the Muslim Brother, continued to be reserved when it came to the support of the movement, reflecting the class heterogeneity of its membership, and the lack of a programmatic socio-economic position (Naguib ٢٠٠٩).[٣٨] Moreover, as a conservative political force, despite being the only mass-based, they tend to view contentious action with suspicion. This was very clear in the statements issued by their leadership on the eve of the aborted Mahalla strike on April ٦th ٢٠٠٨. The Brotherhood warned against the potential "chaos" that a mass-strike can generate.[٣٩]

Similarly, the El-Mahalla strike could not benefit from any strong leftist parties –the traditional allies of labor- despite attempts of some of these forces to be present, again unlike the Brazilian case where a tradition of these classical allies was present despite the military dictorships. Unlike the earlier waves of labor dissent in Egypt during the ١٩٤٠s and even the ١٩٨٠s, the recent labor movement came at a time when there are no strong leftist parties in Egypt. Rather the Egyptian political society only harbors a few underground leftist organizations (Revolutionary Socialist, Egyptian Communist Party, The People's Party, and Egyptian Socialists) all of which do not exceed tens of activists mostly from the intellegensia with no labor-roots. As such, these grouping remain too small and organizationally weak to provide the necessary alliance and political clout that the labor movement- could capitalize on for any leaps in the movement. Moreover, as underground organizations, these groups suffer from the lack of necessary 'freedom of movement' to organize and agitate publically within and in support of the labor movement. At the same time, the biggest and only legal leftist party National Progressive Unionist Party (al-Tagammu ') have "lost much of its popular base because it decided to support the Mubarak regime against the Islamist insurgency" in the ١٩٩٠s, rendering it an unviable ally.[٤٠] In this regard the Egyptian labor movement is bearing the brunt of years of continuous corporatist authoritarianism which did not only manage to co-opt labor, but equally succeeded in weakening and co-opting opposition forces.

This situation in which workers have suffered from absence of strong allies within the political society is no different when it comes to civil society. El-Mahalla's first strike and the labor movement occurred after these social movements have subsided. Moreover, even at the height of these movements (٢٠٠٤-٢٠٠٦), it is questionable that they had the necessary constituencies nor organizational skills to strengthen the labor. Moreover, specifically in the case of El-Mahalla the oppositional middle-class movements have sometimes proved more harmful than beneficial. According to one of the strike movement leaders these opposition movements by trying to mobilize broader support for El-Mahalla aborted strike on ٦th April ٢٠٠٨, have proved detrimental:

> We had planned an announced our third strike scheduled on April ٦th to further push for broader demands, including a national minimum wage and freedom of labor organizations, along with our specific demands about housing, health care and transportation. Having been successful with our earlier strikes as a tactic to achieve our rights there was consensus within the workers on doing it again. However, political groups in Cairo spoilt it for us. Right after we announced the date of our strike they started a call for a nationwide strike …on the internet and in newspapers there were debates between Kefaya and the Muslim Brotherhood and people we do not even know

> …about joining the strike by staying at home or going out on demonstrations. The regime felt more threatened than it already was. So from ٤th to ٦th of April security forces occupied the whole city…they changed the gates of the plant…arrested some of the workers and paid home visits to others. The pressure was so much that we could not go ahead with the strike. They [political groups] made it impossible for us without even consulting us on their childish calls. [٤١]

Other workers reiterated the same position, accusing the political groups of "parachuting" on their strike movement, leading to a set-back. The interpretation of the workers is obviously true, if we bear in mind that April ٦th was the only industrial action that workers announced but were not able to follow through. Using El-Mahalla as a Torojan horse to succeed in mass-mobilization –that they have been failing to ensue since ٢٠٠٤- the political protest movements climaxed the situation to an anti-regime height that provoked full-capacity repression. Having no organizational links with the strike movement, these forces were imposing their own agenda at moment when the political opportunity structure and the organizational capacities of both the earlier and the later movements' were not ready for.

With no other potentials allies within civil society in which trade unions are nationalized and state-run and non-governmental organization (NGOs) are restricted by donor and government restrictions the labor movement is left in a void.[٤٢] In response to this challenge, the only alternative that the labor movement seems to have, if it is to continue and have a broader political impact, is for its different actors to form their own organizational front and coalition. That is, horizontal organization structures that allow for systematic pooling and mobilization of resources, co-ordination of action in multiple sites, and regular exchange of views on tactics and strategy.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the workers movement gave boast to a class-consciousness that was already changing due to ruptures in the material and ideational relationship connecting workers to the state (both as an employer and a political ally). As one commentator noted, "[a]lthough workers' demands are largely "economistic" and localised, the strike movement has potentially profound political consequences, as it challenges both the repressive local state and the remorseless global logic of neoliberal economic restructuring".[٤٣] While at the same time workers set an organizational example, adopting and adapting tools and framing issues in a way that can be beneficial to other social movements. In this regard, the experience of the workers movement asserts that social movements are conditioned by the historical context they arise in, as much as by contemporary conditions and decisions that actors themselves make.

Having witnessed the widest popular uprising in Egypt -since ١٩٧٧ bread riots- in El-Mahalla, and the rise of the first independent union for Real Estate Tax-collectors, observers should be turning their eyes to the labor movement as a potential actor of democratization. However, the workers movement cannot be expected to play a direct role in regime-change through the upcoming cycle of parliamentary and presidential elections (٢٠١٠-٢١١), because of the absence of organic links between the middle-class democracy movement and the workers movement. The absence of such links between this movement and strong political allies makes this elevation task more complicated on the short-term. Yet, the workers movement democratization effect should be seen in light of their challenge to the existing state-society relations of corporatism.

By challenging the long held populist-corporatist ruling pact, which labor is the biggest and oldest ally of; the workers further shook the ruptured pact binding successive Egyptians

regimes to society since ١٩٥٢. By challenging the hegemony of the state-dominated union, pushing for demands beyond moral economy and of significant importance to independent organization, workers are setting stage for nurturing a different and more vibrant civil society based on collective organization rather than being dominated by professional organizations (NGOs) and state-run unions. Moreover, it is pointing the attention of nascent actors within the political society to the importance and possibility of mass-organization as opposed to 'closed door' tactics adopted by established opposition parties. In addition, having more than ٢ million Egyptians –workers and their families-involved in this movement this is the largest episode of mass-mobilization which cannot leave society as whole untouched.[٤٤] Finally, the sustainability of the workers movement despite the threat of state repression (workers transfers, pay cuts, arrests, and full-fledged coercion in Mahalla uprising) is definitely reshaping the political opportunity structure both by setting an example to other potential actors and by wearing on the state's corporatism capacities (both in terms of co-option and repression).

On a different front, the story of rise, success, and relative decline of the Brazilian labor movement and its new unionism, seems to offer a number of valuable conclusions for the Egyptian movement that could be summarized in the following First, unlike the conventional wisdom that assumes that political democracy and elected regimes are a prerequisite to a thriving social movement including the labor movement. The Brazilian case as much as all Latin American democratic transitions attests to the opposite. That is, the Brazilian labor movement preceded and among other things caused a transition to electoral democracy within the political system. Similarly, a transition to electoral democracy does not represent the ultimate safe haven for social movements or the final destination. Secondly, both objective conditions as well as the choices of actors play a decisive role in the outcome of any movement and not one of them. What is key here is how actors interpret, respond, and ultimately reshape objective circumstances (such as an economic crisis, changes in production regimes, shift in political ideology…etc.) both to create success or decline. Third, the position of rural workers, self-employed workers, worker cooperatives, the unemployed, and the informal sector in the Brazilian movement reflected the fact that workers could no longer be equated with the urban industrial proletariat. And the recognition that different strategies and forms of mobilization and organization were needed for groups with different interests and demands if labor is to have the continued pressure needed for being an agent of democratization. Finally, it is decisively important that left-wing unionism break with the growing tendency towards bureaucratization that has become a strong mark of the union movement globally, which distances it from its bases in society increasing even more the gulf between trade-unions and social movements. This is a symptom that even new independent unionism was (is) not immune to.

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[١] Eva Bellin, Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries *World Politics* ٥٢ (January ٢٠٠٠), ١٧٥–٢٠٥.

[٢] Marieke Riethof. The Brazilian Labor Movement: From Opposition to Participation. London: ٢٠٠٤.

[٣] Joel Beinin, "Workers' struggles under 'socialism' and neoliberalism," in Rabab El-Mahdi & Philip Marfleet, eds. *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (London: Zed Press, ٢٠٠٩), p.٧٧.

[٤] "The World of Work, the Restructuring of Production, and Challenges to Trade Unionism and Social Struggles in Brazil" in *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. ٢٧, No. ٦, (٢٠٠٠) p.١٠.

[٥] The graph was compiled from the Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR), http://www.lchr-eg.org Economic and Social Rights Series no. ٥،٧, ١٣, ١٦, ١٨, ٢٢, ٢٨, ٣٠, ٣٣, ٣٦, ٣٩, ٤٢, ٤٩, ٥٤, ٥٦, ٥٨, & ٥٤. Some of the figures show discrepancies with the figures reported by the Trade Union and Workers Watch (received by email from Hisham Mubarak Law Center). For example, the Watch reports ٧٥٦ actions in ٢٠٠٧ versus ٦١٤ in 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" the two main labor monitors adopt. While LCHR defines contentious action as "strikes, demonstrations, picketing, and gathering" the Watch extends this to include "complaints and legal action".

[٦] For an excellent account of the rise and development of the labor movement before ١٩٥٢, see Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working-Class ١٨٨٢-١٩٥٤* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, ١٩٨٧).

[٧] That year witnessed the execution of two labor leaders *Khamis* and *El-Baqry*.

[٨] Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" Review of Politics, ٣٦, no. ١ (January ١٩٧٤): ٨٥-١٣١.

[٩] Marsha Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt.(* New York: Columbia University Press, ١٩٩٧); Ellis Goldberg, "The Foundations of State-Labor Relations in Contemporary Egypt," *Comparative Politics* ٢٤ (January ١٩٩٢), Marbo, R. & S. Radwan *The Industrialization of Egypt*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, ١٩٧٦).

[١٠] Beinin, p.٦٨.

[١١] Charles Tilly, "Social movements and national politics," in C. Bright & S. Harding, eds., *State-making and social movements: Essays in history and theory,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, ١٩٨٤), p.٣٠٤.

[١٢] Thomas R. Rochon and Michael J. Mitchell. Social Bases of the Transition to Democracy in Brazil. Comparative Politics, Vol. ٢١, No. ٣, ١٩٨٩.

[١٣] Maria Helena Moreira Alves. Grassroots Organizations, Trade Unions, and the Church: A Challenge to the Controlled Abertura in Brazil. Latin American Perspectives, Vol. ١١, No. ١, ١٩٨٤.

[١٤] Interview, Asmaa, one of the female workers in Misr Spinning, Cairo ٨ March ٢٠٠٧. N.B. All names of El-Mahalla workers' interviewees have been changed on their request for security reasons.

[١٥] Beinin p.٨٠.

[١٦] Interview, Haitham, worker in Misr Spinning who had pay-cut and was transferred to Cairo and because of his participation in the strikes. Cairo, ١٠ July ٢٠٠٩.

[١٧] Moustafa Bassiouny & Omar Said, "Egypt's Strike Wave" *International Socialism* ٣١ (March ٢٠٠٨), p.٨.

[١٨] Bassiouny and Said, p.٣

[١٩] Mourad, one of the workers leaders in Kafr El-Dawwar, personal interview, Cairo ١٨ June ٢٠٠٨

[٢٠] http://egyworkers.blogspot.com/٢٠٠٨/٠٢/blog-post_١٧.html

[٢١] Stack , L., and M. Mazen (٢٠٠٧) 'Striking Mahalla Workers Demand Government Fulfill Broken Promises', *Daily News Egypt*, ٢٧ September.

[٢٢] Daily News Egypt, ٤/٢٢/٢٠٠٩, Real Estate Tax Authority Form Egypt's ١st Independent Union: http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=٢١٢٥٩

[٢٣] Interview, ١٤ July ٢٠٠٩.

[٢٤] Posusney, "Irrational Workers" p.٨٥.

[٢٥] Beinin, p.٧٧.

[٢٦] Anne Alexander, "Inside Egypt's Mass Strikes" International Socialism ٣١ (March ٢٠٠٨), p.٢.
[٢٧] Hisham, interview May ١٠, ٢٠٠٩.
[٢٨] Interview, July ١١, ٢٠٠٩.
[٢٩] See Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World,* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, ٢٠٠٧), Ch.٢; Lockman & Beinin ٤٤٩-٤٦١
[٣٠] Pratt, p.٣٥.
[٣١] Elizabeth Clemens, Organizational Form as Frame: Collective Identity and Political Strategy in the American Labor Movement ١٨٨٠-١٩٢٠. In Douglas McAdam, J. McCarthy, & M. Zald (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on social movements* (pp. ٢٠٥-٢٢٦). *(*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ١٩٩٦), p.٢٠٩.
[٣٢] Ibid, p.٢٠٩.
[٣٣] Ibid. p.١٩.
[٣٤] Ibid.p.١٩.
[٣٥] Mervat, member of the strike committee for the Real Estate Tax Agency, interview, March ٨, ٢٠٠٩.
[٣٦] Alexander, p.٦.
[٣٧] David Meyer & Nancy Whittier, "Social Movement Spillover," *Social Problems* ٤١ (٢), ١٩٩٤ p.٢٧٧.
[٣٨] For an excellent analysis on the MB changing class constituency and their position on economic policies see; Sameh Naguib, Islamism(s): Old and New. In Rabab El-Mahdi & Philip Marfleet (Eds.) *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (pp.١٠٣-١١٩), (London: Zed Press, ٢٠٠٩).
[٣٩] Al-Masry Al-Youm ١،٤،٥ April ٢٠٠٨.
[٤٠] Beinin, p. ٧٣
[٤١] Mohamed, personal interview, ١٠ May ٢٠٠٨.
[٤٢] See for example Maha Abdel Rahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt,* (London: I.B. Tauris, ٢٠٠٤).
[٤٣] Alexander, p.٢.
[٤٤] Although there is no precise count for workers involved, Joel Benin through his research for "The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt", has compiled statistics which puts the number of workers involved at ١,٧ million.