

Revolution in Egypt

Interview with Jano Charbel, a labor journalist and anarcho-syndicalist from Cairo

How would you describe the class composition of the uprising? And to what degree were economic grievances a driving force, even though political and not so much economic demands were predominant?

The uprising started, as is well known, on January 25th. That's Egypt's Police Day. Of course, the population had a great disliking towards the police force. On the 25th, it was mostly youth that were taking to the streets, even though there were also older people, but they were not the majority. The protests, called for on Facebook, happened in a number of cities throughout the country. I was in Alexandria at the time, there were about 20,000 people protesting there, and in Cairo the numbers were much bigger, but since I wasn't there I can't really tell you about the composition of the protesters on the first day. When I arrived in Cairo at one o'clock in the night, they had already dispersed the people in Tahrir Square, but there were still over 10,000 people protesting and marching in the streets; so I thought, it's a very big thing, I hadn't seen such numbers since the war on Iraq.

The chants were mostly directed against the regime, and a number of them we had imported from Tunisia, like »The people demand the removal of the regime«. Egyptian opposition activists have raised numerous anti-Mubarak and anti-regime slogans since December 2004, but this specific slogan had not been chanted in Egypt except after success of the Tunisian uprising. This Tunisian anti-regime slogan is now heard on the streets of Libya, Yemen, Syria and in the uprisings of other Arab countries.

Another slogan was »Here is Mohammed with Younis« - meaning: Christians and Muslims are united – »tomorrow Egypt will be like Tunis«. So I believe that the driving force and inspiration came from the Tunisian Revolution. Egyptians realized: We can actually do the same thing, we can get rid of this dictator who has been ruling the country for 30 years, and along with the dictator the whole regime, this whole corrupt, oppressive system can be removed; just like it was removed in Tunisia. I don't doubt the revolutionary potential of Egyptian youth or the Egyptian masses, but I believe that without the example of Tunisia the revolution in Egypt would have been less likely.

The Egyptian people grew more confident and militant after seeing that other Arabs (Tunisians) succeeded in overthrowing a regime that is - very similarly - oppressive, corrupt, dictatorial, pro-Imperialist and favored by Western states - just like the Mubarak regime at home. Still, everybody was surprised by the number of people that showed up on the streets of cities across the country - including Alexandria, Cairo, Suez, Mahalla and Mansoura etc.

So already in the beginning there were also protests in Mahalla, i. e. workers' protests?

I wasn't in Mahalla during the 18-day uprising, but yes, Mahalla is an industrial city; it is reported that protests there included workers, students, professionals, farmers and the unemployed amongst others. Mahalla is also important because there was a historic uprising in this city on April 6th and 7th 2008, primarily led by working class people, unemployed youth, the urban poor, and other marginalized sectors of society.

Prior to the popular uprising in this city, an unprecedented wave of strikes swept across the country - starting with the Mahalla textile strike of December 2006. The success of this strike encouraged the Egyptian working classes to demand their rights - their political rights and also their socio-economic rights. The build-up also started from December 12th 2004 when around 300 people held the first anti-Mubarak protest in public. That was previously unheard of. Nobody dared to chant »Down, down with Hosni Mubarak« on the streets before that date; if you dared to do so you would've very likely disappeared and nobody would know anything about you or your whereabouts.

So there are a number of landmark events and catalysts that must be mentioned. It must also be mentioned that January 25th is (or rather, was) Egyptian Police Day, an official national holiday. The Egyptian police were long despised for their oppressiveness, intrusiveness, arrogance, brutality, their widespread and systematic use of torture, along with their corruption. The police were, and still are, the most hated face of the Egyptian state.

That hatred is something that would unify different parts of society – students, professionals, workers...?

Yes, but in the beginning it was primarily youth on the streets. Naturally there were workers involved, blue collar as well as white collar workers. Yet the workers' strikes and protests started happening at a later stage of the 18-day uprising. Thousands of workers initially supported the January 25th uprising from their factories, they sent letters and messages of solidarity; later they started protesting and camping at Tahrir Square. But it was only around three or four days prior to Mubarak's downfall that they actually went on strike en masse.

So would you say that the upsurge in strike activity was decisive for the eventual removal of Mubarak?

I think that if it wasn't for the labor strikes, Mubarak could have gambled on the street protests fizzling out and losing momentum. The regime had unleashed its propaganda in full-force – via state-owned TV, radio, and the newspapers - to weaken and distort the image of the uprising. And they were using the media very effectively in instilling fear amongst the people. It was a well-organized campaign of psychological-terrorism targeting the masses.

Propaganda was spewed-out to the effect that we are living in chaos, that we must return to our stability and normality, and that Mubarak is Egypt's savior. There are foreign powers behind these protests - Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, Israel, the USA, the UK, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, etc.

If it wasn't for the labor strikes, Mubarak could have held on to power, not indefinitely, but at least for six months - until the end of his term in office. And then he could have put his son Gamal on the throne, he could have maintained the regime. In this case we would have

witnessed massive street protests that were vocal, but which did not accomplish much. So I believe the most pivotal element in the uprising were the labor strikes.

What scale did they reach? Were they as big as 2008, or even bigger?

Now it's arguably bigger than 2008. The strike wave starting in December 2006 began to settle down by the end of 2010, labor strikes were still being reported nationwide but the number of strikes and workers' protests had decreased somewhat. Their resurgence during the uprising - on February 8th 2011 - also involved key sectors of the national economy. Public transport workers went on strike, while thousands of other workers protested and threatened to strike all along the Suez Canal - and this is one of Egypt's primary sources of income and revenue. These labor strikes put more pressure on the regime than anything else - you can handle street protests, but when you have massive street protests and workers' strikes combined, you're in deep shit.

Workers' Struggles prior to the Revolution

How would you describe the more recent development of the situation of workers? Many analyses state major setbacks for workers over the last decades; on the other hand, Paul Amar writes: »The passion of workers that began this uprising does not stem from their marginalization and poverty; rather, it stems from their centrality to new development processes and dynamics«.¹

I would say that what triggered the strike wave from 2006 until now was the trade union elections of October and November 2006 - nationwide elections held every five years. And those in 2006 were arguably the worst Egypt has ever witnessed. The most undemocratic and fraudulent elections ever - over 20,000 workers were prevented from running or nominating themselves.

But the official union was state-controlled from the beginning, so what difference did that make?

Yes, but the elections of 2006 drove home the fact that this union federation is totally unrepresentative of workers' interests, that all of its constituent unions - from the local committees, to the general unions, to the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) council - are representatives of the ruling party, of capital's interests. They're all Mubarak's men, the regime's sweethearts.

After the results of these foul trade union elections workers in the state-owned Mahalla Textile Company - at that time it had around 27,000 workers - went on strike in December 2006. They managed to win many of their demands; and they had also called for a vote of no-confidence against the local union committee because it did not represent them and they started collecting signatures for the impeachment of their union committee.

In negotiations with the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation, and its General Union for Textile Workers, they managed to reach an agreement for a temporary trade union

¹ Paul Amar, Why Egypt's Progressives Win, 8. Februar 2011, www.jadaliyya.com

committee to manage the workers' affairs. The General Union did not deem the official trade union committee to be illegitimate, but it allowed the workers to choose their representatives in a new care-taker committee.

Similar demands spread to other textile workers, including the state-owned Kafr el-Dawwar textile factory and the Shebin el-Kom textile factory – both very large textile companies in the Nile delta. Shebin el-Kom was privatized, so they had a number of different demands, but workers at all three of these companies demanded the removal of the local union committees because they were undemocratically appointed and not representative.

In Kafr el-Dawwar and in Shebin el-Kom they managed to win some concessions as well. So this strike wave spread and grew exponentially as workers saw that the only way to get their rights is by striking. Other sectors followed suit and started striking - including manual laborers, employees, and professionals - including lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses, etc.

In legal terms, those would be wildcat strikes? They were obviously not called by the state union...

They were not authorized by the state union, so yes, they were considered wildcat strikes. This strike wave affected all sectors of the economy and society- public sector works, private sector and privatized works; blue collar and white collar workers, temporary workers, informal sector workers – everybody began striking for their rights, Workers realized that the authorities won't heed our demands if we only protest outside working hours, or if we merely sign and send petitions. The power of the strike pressures authorities into heeding workers' demands.

So what I realized while covering a number of different strikes, is that everybody was saying: »Why Mahalla and not us?« How come that they get their rights and we don't? We must also strike. So this led to a massive wave of strikes from December 2006 to the present day, which has been unprecedented since 1947. But during the 1950s to the 1990s, and even up to the 2009 the blue collar unions were totally controlled by representatives of the ruling regime. Workers who spoke up against this system were either removed from their union committees, or prevented from renomination; and sometimes even thrown into prison.

So in December 2006 a new era of workers' and professionals' strikes/protests began; and this was very important in the lead-up to the revolution. Egypt's workers actively began raising their grievances regarding corruption, the privatization of companies, the mismanagement of these companies by corrupt officials.

Thousands of workers complain that there was a deliberate and systematic campaign by the ruling regime to make public-sector companies unprofitable in order to privatize them; and in order to generate illicit money through these privatizations. According to financial estimates, the Mubarak Family's fortune may range from one billion to 70 billion \$. Most of this illicit money was accumulated during the 1990s, when the privatization policies began.

The Mubarak regime adopted IMF policies as the official policy. The state adopted neo-liberal capitalism, opening up the markets via privatization plans. This is where the corrupt officials started to make millions if not billions. And naturally, in the absence of a democratic

system there is no accountability and no transparency - thus corruption goes unquestioned, it becomes the norm.

A conservative German paper had an interesting report about Mahalla.² They interviewed a private factory owner who is supporting the Mahalla strike because he says the workers in that state-owned factory get a lower wage than what he has to pay his own workers. In other words, do wages necessarily go down when businesses are privatized, or is it more about lay-offs?

Generally – but not in all cases – the private sector pays better wages. Yet better wages does not translate into more workers' rights. On the contrary, most unions are in found in public sector enterprises and most of the temporary workers are in the private/informal sectors. So you can be paid more in the private sector, but you typically don't have a union, you might not have a pension plan and you have less job-security as you can be laid off at any time. Basically, workers who attempt to organize, unionize or strike are very likely to be sacked. There are generally fewer rights for worker's rights in the private sector - including the rights to organize and to collective bargaining.

Temporary/piecework contracts are common also in the public sector, but much more so in the private sector. Workers have to sign undated resignation letters, and the employer can fill in a resignation date at any time. Workers are left defenseless with no unions to defend their rights. Workers are deprived of periodic/annual bonuses, they don't have the right to health-care, to transportation, housing, to pension plans. They are typically deprived of the most basic labor rights.

Would you say that the part of the proletariat that is out of work or in the informal sector has grown? Paul Amar mentions a recent investment boom in Egypt. Is employment in manufacturing going down as a whole through privatizations or is there a kind of boom which absorbs more labor power?

In most cases I've seen, the private sector comes in to buy already-existing public sectors works. They usually don't establish new companies. They usually buy-up the companies that have been »failed«, whether intentionally failed or due to inefficiency or corruption on ministry levels. Private capital is not really doing much except to buy already operating companies.

This was the case with the Shebin el-Kom (now Indorama-Shebin) textile company, and in countless other companies that have been rendered unprofitable. Thus the Mubarak regime decided to sell them off to investors. I don't agree that the private sector created new employment opportunities. On the contrary; when they buy these public sector companies they tend to lay off thousands of workers.

So unemployment is now a bigger problem than, let's say, 20 years ago?

² Rainer Hermann, Ägypten: Vorgeschichte und Nachwirkungen, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, February 20th 2011, <http://www.faz.net/artikel/C32315/aegypten-vorgeschichte-und-nachwirkungen-30327968.html>

We don't have good statistics on unemployment. The Mubarak regime was saying that it was seven percent, but everyone could see with their own eyes that this was totally untrue. Especially in the villages and rural Egypt where you find poor families that have very limited sources of income. Impoverished rural families moved into urban slums en masse, where they often have to resort to begging, and are seasonally employed at best. They line the sidewalks in big cities, looking for contractors to hire them for construction works. And then there is the informal sector which constitutes over a third of the national economy, and which is characterized by piecework, seasonal labor, and intermittent employment.

The so-called surplus proletariat – the fact that a growing part of those who have to sell their labor power can't do so in regular forms, is thrown back into the informal economy and ends up in slums – to us seems to be a major issue today in a global perspective. That is why I'm asking you what the general tendency in Egypt is in your view, whether there is massive investment that absorbs new labor power or whether there is such a growing surplus proletariat.

Egypt is primarily an agricultural country – although it is trying to move away from that; the number of farmers and peasants in rural Egypt outnumbers the workers and employees. Land was being relegated to big businessmen who are closely aligned with the NDP; there were massive land-reclamation projects that go to millionaires and billionaires, like this project in the late 1990s called Toshka in the New Valley Government, in South-Western Egypt.

The government said we're going to turn this into a green paradise and investors will flock from around the world. They sold this land primarily to people from NDP at a fraction of the cost of the land what it is worth, and they sold it to the likes of the Saudi Prince Walid Ibn Talal, one of the richest people on earth.

And the whole project ended up as a big failure; this land is unsuitable for agriculture; it is primarily rocky, infertile land. So the only people who profited were those who got the best land there. The Saudi Prince was one of the persons who benefited most.

First the Egyptian media said that Toshka will create thousands of new jobs; huge opportunities for the youth and the unemployed. Toshka would make unemployment a thing of the past. The project would revolutionize agriculture, build factories, and there would be farms everywhere. After a couple of years, when things started going down the drain, they just stopped talking about this failed project.

There are contradictory reports on the dynamics of the Egyptian economy, some suggesting it is strongly growing, others saying that statistical growth is mostly due to distorted figures. What's your view on this and how would you describe the general climate, is it comparable to China where many people feel they will be carried along with general growth and progress?

I can't answer this in detail because I'm not an economist. Yes, the economy is growing, foreign direct investment has increased, the stock market has grown and benefited, and all the business classes are very happy. But that does not translate into prosperity for the workers. At

the end of the day it's the government which provides its skewed statistics for the GDP and GNP.

The minimum wage has been the same in Egypt since the 1980s, only 35 pounds (\$ 6) per month. That was unchanged until just last year when workers' NGOs filed judicial suits against this unrealistically low minimum wage. For not even a single person can subsist on such a wage. Legal action was taken and appeals were lodged before the administrative court for a monthly minimum wage of 1,200 Pounds (\$ 200). The court agreed it should be raised, and then the National Council on Wages – a body controlled by the government – decided to set the minimum wage at 400 Pounds (\$ 70), which is still unrealistically low. Even the state-controlled ETUF suggested 500 Pounds. So the NGOs filed further law-suits but nothing happened. On top of that, the Council said this minimum wage should not be applicable to the public sector - only to private companies.

On what grounds? Because of higher benefits in the state sector?

The authorities argued that it would be too much of a burden on the national economy, they wouldn't have enough money in the state's coffers, and so on. Of course, now that one knows that these ministers had accumulated/stolen billions of dollars, and the Mubarak Family's fortunes may reach up to \$ 70 billion, this argument has been proven to be baseless. This argument was made while thousands of workers in the public sector were making as little as 60 to 90 Pounds (\$ 10 to 15) a month; including state-employed agricultural workers and technicians, and workers in land reclamation projects, for example.

So that only works out if you still have some access to land?

Yes, or if you are employed in another job, or jobs. Tens of thousands across the county protested because they were earning the equivalent of \$ 150 per month, or less. Ever since December 2006, thousands of workers' have demanded a monthly minimum wage of 1,200 Pounds (around \$ 200,) and that this minimum wage should be applicable to all sectors.

When the uprising began this socio-economic demand was somewhat side-lined, unfortunately. It remained a popular demand, but was pushed into the backseat by the uprising's pressing political demands. It was mostly articulated by the workers' themselves and by youth involved in the labor scene.

But of course the main demand was the removal of Mubarak, the dismissal of his ministers, their trials, the dissolution of the State Security apparatus, the combating of corruption, etc. The uprising's demands were primarily political, not social and economic demands. And since the revolution the state-owned media has been trumpeting propaganda along the lines of: This is not a time for strikes, the revolution has succeeded and is now over, go back to work because you're harming the national economy. They even went so far as to claim that workers' strikes are part of the counter-revolution.

Sounds Orwellian.

Yes, if it wasn't for the workers' strikes, Mubarak might still be in power; and even before the revolution, workers were the most vocal and organized sectors in civil society. They were the

most influential and powerful forces amongst Egypt's social movements. Now the state-owned media, the interim government, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces claim that workers' strikes are part of the counter-revolution.

The »Commune of Tahrir Square«

To come back to the revolution, how was it organized? We always here that parties and groups didn't play a role and it was »the people« who did it. Some even talk of the »Commune of Tahrir Square«.

To understand the Tahrir Square Commune, you have to go back and look at workers' strikes and see how they manage themselves when they have no sources of income – these strikes can go on for weeks, sometimes for months. When they go on strike, they also bring their families to occupy the factories. These families pool their resources, and thus are able to prepare and provide sufficient amounts of food for the workers. The same things happened in Tahrir. It was organized in the same communal manner.

So their families sleep in the factories?

Sometimes they sleep in their own houses, sometimes workers would bring them to the protest sites. And the same thing happened at Tahrir Square, they brought in their families, their families would bring in food and people would distribute it amongst themselves.

At Tahrir, food and beverages were distributed to everybody free of charge. People were voluntarily cleaning up the streets around the square, there was free health care in a number of tented field-hospitals. I remember an American journalist in the square who had been injured by thugs saying: The revolution here has given me something I can't get in the United States, that is free health care. His injuries were treated and no one asked for a penny... Of course, those who were seriously injured, with bullet wounds, were taken to proper hospitals. They couldn't be treated at these rudimentary field hospitals.

So it was a self-managing commune, if you want to call it a commune; some people said it was a kind of Woodstock. A festive, self-sustaining body of people who have common demands; and this is very similar situation to workers on strike.

Thousands of workers from around Greater Cairo would finish their work-shifts, and then join the protests. Also workers from distant governorates came to Tahrir Square. They would stay for a day or two, sometimes more, and then went back to work. Sometimes they also brought their families. Then on February 8th and 9th the workers' unleashed their massive wave of strikes.

This reminds me a bit of the revolt in Greece where it was said that »things just happened by themselves«. So there was no organization of, for example, food distribution, there were no assemblies or similar forms?

Neighborhood-based entities called 'popular committees' emerged out of necessity. They were established as neighborhood watches and patrols because since January 28th the police were defeated, and they withdrew from the streets. But not only that, the police also released

thousands from their prisons. I support the release of prisoners, but some prisoners had very violent criminal records, and hundreds - if not thousands of these elements - were actually armed by the police who told them: »Go and attack the people, wreak havoc. Kill whoever you want to kill, destroy whatever you want to destroy.«

Were they actually paid by the state?

From interviews I have conducted with armed thugs who were apprehended at Tahrir Square, I know that they were many who were promised money by officers in the Ministry of the Interior, up to 5,000 Pounds (over \$ 830). Of course, they probably received nothing, but they were promised this sum which by Egyptian standards is a small fortune.

So these popular committees started organizing for the defense and protection of their neighborhoods, homes, shops, and other properties. The state had pretty much collapsed and temporarily ceased to provide services; so these committees also took the initiative of cleaning up streets, repainting side-walks, disposing of garbage, conducting traffic, and so on. The people were not paid to do these things, it was in their nature to do so. The people realized that is our revolution, and if the state doesn't help us then we will help ourselves.

Such spontaneous grass-roots organization was also noticeable in Tahrir Square, but not only there – there were many Tahrir Squares across the country, in Alexandria, Mahalla, Suez, Mansoura, El Arish, Assiut, El-Minya, etc. People were self-managing their societies. People were willing to overthrow the state, and also to overgrow the state, by providing food and health care, cleaning up, organizing traffic and so on. Egyptians had previously seen little to no good coming from the government; only corruption and oppression – over 680 were killed during the uprising.

New Patriotism

Before the revolution, people were ashamed to identify themselves as Egyptians, that is why they chose to identify firstly as being Muslims or Christians. Young people were standing in long lines outside the embassies of Western states, desperately trying to leave the country.

It almost seems that there is a resurgence of patriotism through the revolution, we see Egyptian flags everywhere...

Yes, there is a resurgence of Egyptian nationalism and that is something I admire and at the same time I think it's being overdone...

Why do you admire it?

There is, for example, a moving slogan that emerged with Mubarak's downfall: »Hold your head high, you're Egyptian«. Before, it was all about: Keep your head down because you're Egyptian, don't step out of line, otherwise you may end up in prison. Now people are saying: This is my country, I'm not afraid to speak up, I can rebuild my society, it's no longer the country of Mubarak and his corrupt businessmen ministers. In this sense, this patriotism is admirable, but of course the media have blown it out of context, adding xenophobic elements to it.

Some of the chants now are actually reactionary, »Egypt is above all«, like: *Egypt über alles*. It actually borders on fascism, it's too nationalistic. Or to say: »We're all Egyptians« - yes, we are, but there are wealthy and powerful Egyptians who are more than willing to exploit you, who are willing to send you to prison, and torture you to death if need be, to defend their own interests.

But exactly for that reason there is no innocent patriotism which is then exaggerated. I see what you mean, that it was an expression of raising one's head and not putting up with everything...

... to reclaim your country...

...yes, but to »reclaim your country« is not the perspective, it's about abolishing states on a global scale, abolishing borders...

Absolutely. And that is what we as anarchists or radical leftists would like to see. But you can't go from A to Z in one jump, in some cases you have to take it gradually. And now this patriotism is going too far, there is the idea of »Egypt first« - so don't go on strike, don't think about your class interests. That's nationalist propaganda.

So would you make a distinction between nationalism and not-so-bad patriotism?

They're both pretty much the same, they're bad, but there's different degrees of bad nationalism. You can have a nationalism that says: Reclaim your country, raise your head high. And then you can have a nationalism that says: There's foreign elements involved in the revolution and the foreign media is spreading lies.

Then there's xenophobia. And then there's nationalism for the sake of nationalism – let's protect a symbolic Egypt at the expense of our own class interests. This is what I find most detrimental at the moment: Egypt first, and let's forget about our class interests. I would like to see an end to this flag-waving and painting our faces red, white and black.

Let's see what our real interests are – at least 40 per cent of Egyptians live below the poverty line and the majority of the rest are struggling to get by. Even professionals, they make maybe 1,000 Pounds (just over \$US 165) per month, that's nowhere near enough to support a family. So it's not like Egypt has made the revolution and everyone has the same interests. There are workers' interests and there are capitalists' interests.

Gender, Class and Feminism

What has been the role of women in the uprising and what impact does the uprising have on gender relations?

Since January 25th women have played a very important role in the revolution. They were visibly present in the protests, in some places they were maybe even the majority. I only witnessed events in Cairo and Alexandria, and there women were a sizable minority, maybe 30 to 40 per cent, perhaps more. You could see women wearing their hair open, others wearing the hijab. They were involved in all sorts of activities – protesting on the front-lines, street clean-ups, delivering fiery speeches in Tahrir Square, providing food and medical care.

On the neighborhood level, the popular committees on the streets were primarily men carrying arms, like swords, knives, clubs, and sometimes guns. Women would prepare food, and sometimes Molotov cocktails, for those on the street. Some women and girls could also be seen standing guard on the streets with the popular committees.

That's mostly in conformity with traditional gender roles.

Yes, but starting on January 28th, people occupied the square and had encamped themselves there, women naturally joined in the occupation. This in itself questioned the confines into which society had placed women, according to which they were taught to stay at home - either in the kitchen or the bedroom, or taking care of the children. Women defied these confines, they took to the front-lines of protests and street battles with the police. Some even confronted armed thugs by rock-throwing, and that's not something you'd normally see on the streets of pre-revolutionary Egypt. So this was a very radicalizing and liberating experience for both women and girls.

But this did not only happen at Tahrir Square. In a number of factory strikes, protests and occupations were actually led by women. There was the historic case of the Mansoura Espagna Company, a textile factory which employs mostly women (nearly all of whom wear the hijab or niqab). During their factory occupation in 2007 men and women slept-in under one roof, in the same place. Of course their quarters were separated by curtains, but nonetheless, for more conservative people that's totally unacceptable, sleeping outside the home. Some women workers even got divorced for this, and a number of fiancées were abandoned by their would-be-husbands. Nevertheless, women workers broke this taboo.

Were there conflicts around this during the uprising, did the more conservative elements tell women to go home?

I never heard anyone saying this, not even from the most reactionary elements of society. Yet some men would preach conservative, reactionary, and intrusive messages – why are you not wearing a hijab? What religion are you? Do you pray? That kind of shit.

Sexual harassment was virtually non-existent in Tahrir Square. It is unfortunately resurfacing, but women are now more likely to fight back. The revolution has made them more aware of their rights and also of their capacity as revolutionary agents. Not just as a mother or wife or teacher or concubine. Women and girls were empowered as they took to the streets; they were as active, brave and militant as men, if not more. We've seen countless women who were far more militant and braver than men.

How do the attacks on the women's demo on 8th of March fit into this picture?

The protest march on International Women's Day was for equal rights and opportunities, and prior to the revolution it was extremely rare to see an all-women's protest – for a century Egypt has witnessed protests with both women and men, but this was, almost exclusively, a women's protest and as such it may have been a provocation for more conservative and reactionary elements. Also, very many women were not covering their hair. This was after Mubarak was dethroned and a new state-propaganda had set in: that street protests and strikes

harm the country. So people were saying: We should be demanding Egypt's rights, not women's rights, that is a secondary issue.

I have heard horrific details about the harassment of these women. Women said, we're used to harassment, but what happened to us in this protest went far beyond harassment. You had several men groping them, not just one; women were being beaten; female journalists, especially foreign ones, were being assaulted. Lara Logan of CBS was nearly gang-raped. So on this day it was women demanding their rights and reactionary Egypt saying: No, this is still a male-dominated society. The revolution is over, we won, so go back home.

But women are radicalized after the revolution, and since they were present in Tahrir Square - just like the men were - then in the New Egypt they must be entitled to the same rights and freedoms. For example, before the revolution the Muslim Brotherhood and other ultra-conservative groupings were arguing that women - like non-Muslims - must not be allowed to serve as presidents of Egypt. Other conservative reactionary groups - amongst both Muslims and Christians - argued that women must not serve as judges, since they're »unstable«, or too emotional, etc... Since the revolution the Muslim Brotherhood has actually just taken a step forward and announced that could accept a Coptic Christian or woman as president.

So how are gender, class and feminism related? It seems that the question whether women can become president or judge is of little concern for the female workers you were talking about before. Are there different agendas or do common interests – opposition to female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual harassment, a secular constitution free from Islamic law – predominate?

First of all, women's rights NGOs are primarily middle class organizations, often run by lawyers who are aware of their rights and of the discrepancies between domestic law and international law. They promote equal opportunities and equal pay for women. Because in Egypt, women often earn less - or (in certain agricultural communities) nothing at all - even if they do they work the same work.

I agree that women can have different interests according to their class belonging, but aren't there also common interests, for example access to university, struggle against sexual assaults in the streets, against FGM...

Around 60 per cent of Egyptian women are illiterate, especially in the rural areas. And if you are illiterate, you may not be aware of women's rights violations, such as Female Genital Mutilation; or your rights as a citizen or as a girl/woman. So I think working class women are at a disadvantage, especially in the countryside, because they often aren't aware of their rights.

Another common problem for all women are the more radical Islamist groups. There's talk about threats to women - like a few which happened during the 1990s - including acid attacks on women who expose their legs or wear short-sleeved shirts. Although even the reactionary Salafist groups said they did not issue such statements. But in any case, a male-centric and reactionary Islamist discourse is resurfacing according to which a woman's place is the home. Against such tendencies, women's groupings are demanding a secular state. Of course, I would prefer to see a secular society without a state.

Islamism

Do you think the Muslim Brothers present a threat? It was generally said that they did not play a leading role in the uprising, that they kept a low profile, and it also seems to be clear that there is a gap between younger Muslim Brothers and the old Sharia types.

First, it's important to say that there is not just one form of Islamic movement. You have the Muslim Brothers, who are the most important society. Then you have more labor oriented ones, like the Islamist Labour Party, more oriented towards a conservative social welfare system. Then you have a group called Al-Wasat, which means middle/center, and which is a more moderate Islamist party; and they are for politics similar to those of the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey. And then you have the radical Salafis, Gamat al-Islamiya and Jihad. These latter three groups are ultra-reactionary, and have a history of organized violence and terror.

Prior to the revolution the Muslim Brotherhood said that they did not support revolution as a mean of changing the system, that was stated in their program. But with the advance of the uprising since January 25th, because they are very capable of mobilizing their supporters, and because they are against the Mubarak regime, they showed up en masse. They, along with other Islamists, were by no means a majority in the protests. At best they were a minority of around 30 per cent. In Tahrir Square.,

Amongst others, the Muslim Brothers were very active in protecting the Square. It must be said that they were on the front lines on several occasions during the uprising - especially during the »Battle of the Camels« in Tahrir on February 2. A number of them died from their injuries, they were extremely brave.

Since Mubarak's abdication the Brotherhood's policies seem to be geared primarily towards the formation of a political party, or parties. They were banned from doing so under Mubarak. And so now they are working on establishing a party, even two parties, some say.

There are schisms within the Muslim Brotherhood. Not just between the young and the old, but also between the conservatives and the ultra-conservatives, the more radical, the more socially-oriented, the more business-oriented. A number of them are multimillionaire businessmen and due to the fact that they have tons of money they can support charities, relief works, clinics, housing projects... There was a large and destructive earthquake in 1992; the Brotherhood was able to provide shelter and housing for the people who had lost their homes - while the government was not providing anything. Apart from this kind of welfare, their appeal with the slogan of »Islam is the solution« to all problems, it's quite powerful in a conservative Muslim society like Egypt.

Regarding the social basis of the Muslim Brothers, would it be oversimplified to say they are an alignment of rich businessmen, upwardly mobile professionals and the totally impoverished, whereas they have little appeal to the working class in a more strict sense?

Their appeal to workers is limited. If I'm a conservative worker, I may agree that »Islam is the solution«. But what then? Has that given me higher wages, protected my right to strike, has that given me a union that represents me and my comrades? It has not, it's just hot air.

The same can be said for most Islamist tendencies, because they believe in social harmony and not in class conflict. They consider classes as natural, it's simply the way societies are. We can merely decrease the gap between classes through Islamic charity. They would never advocate any kind of revolutionary change.

So in the Labor Unions, the Muslim Brothers aren't strong, but they're strong in the professional syndicates. The Mubarak government even issued a special law concerning elections within professional syndicates to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood's hold over elections in these professional associations.

So do you think it's in the cards that they come out as the ruling party or form a bloc with the military?

I don't think it's likely, but it is possible. We've seen that in 1979 in Iran, which was not an Islamist revolution but was successfully hijacked by the Islamists. Still, the majority in Egypt does not support the Muslim Brotherhood. They are just a very well organized society, and they have millions if not billions of Pounds which they can invest in charity and religious propaganda.

Workers, Unions and Revolution

Do you expect strikes to increase now that old repressive regime is gone?

I do expect a broadening of working class struggles in the near and hopefully also the more distant future, but at the same time we have to look at this Supreme Military Council which is protecting the counterrevolution. It has recently issued a decree that threatens striking workers with both imprisonment and fines up to half a million pounds (over \$ 83,000 !) The military has vested interest in protecting the old regime.

Tantawi, the chief of the military junta, was appointed in 1991, he's been Minister of Defense for 20 years under Mubarak. This may explain why civilians (including activists, protesters and striking workers) are arrested and sentenced by military tribunals, with no right to appeal, and are typically tortured during the process. While ministers and members of the old regime who have accumulated billions of Pounds stand trial before civil courts, if at all. This while Tantawi and his military council have left Mubarak on holiday, and in a luxurious hospital, in Sharm el-Sheikh. There is intense propaganda against strikes now. But from what I see, the workers are telling the government and military rulers to go fuck themselves. A popular slogan is: »Don't put workers on trial, put Mubarak on trial«.

The issue is of course not only Mubarak. There are still thousands of little Mubaraks in power. Students, for example, are protesting against the old state-appointed deans remaining in office. The headquarters of the NDP were burnt down, and the corrupt party was dissolved, but a many party officials are still at large. Same with the State Security apparatus. It was dissolved but the same old people – who were in charge of killing, espionage, torturing – now

form the National Security apparatus; they simply replaced the word »state« with »national«, that's all.

What are the main demands in workers' protests and strikes currently?

The main demands are full-time contracts, a minimum wage of 1,200 Pounds, the right to establish independent unions. There are over 22 independent unions now, the first four of which have federated to form the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions which challenges the yellow official union.

Already in the past there were cases of workers taking over their factories after the owners – corrupt businessmen – had fled the country and court verdicts. In 2001 the multimillionaire businessman Ramy Lakkah fled Egypt and left his factories abandoned. The workforce of one of his companies – producing light bulbs, and located in an industrial satellite city on the outskirts of Cairo – self-managed the factory from 2001 to 2006. They were able to meet their wages and even to increase production.

Then we have another case from 2008 to 2010, also in the Tenth of Ramadan industrial city, where the owner, Adel Agha, was sentenced to a lengthy prison term, along with a hefty fine; so he also fled the country. His business was capital-intensive and workers were not able to operate it as a whole. But a subsidiary company known as the Economic Company for Industrial Development - with three factories - within his company (named Ahmonseto) were able to self-manage production. There are other examples of self-management which have existed as short-lived experiments.

So these are radical examples of workers taking the initiative and run production themselves, and I expect that if the revolution becomes radicalized and businessmen flee the country, workers will be able to take over and manage the means of production as we have seen it happen in these aforementioned cases.

What's also important is that the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions explicitly makes no distinction between white collar and blue collar; a worker is someone who owns no means of production and is forced to sell his labor power for a wage or a salary.

So there is now a new era for workers in Egypt. They are mobilizing both blue collar and white collar unions - in the public, private and informal sectors of the economy. And if these independent unions turn out to be as corrupt as the old one, workers are now experienced enough to know that they can form/elect more democratic, transparent and radical unions. They feel empowered, they feel the future is theirs. They can move from being wage-slaves to producers who can take control of their destinies themselves.

But in that case they wouldn't need unions any longer, would they? It seems natural that workers in Egypt now form independent unions and it's probably a step forward for them. But to overcome their existence as wage-slaves, to overcome the capital relation, they would have to abolish themselves as a class, as sellers of labor power, and unions are tied to precisely that sale of labor power. The idea of a free society run by unions seems illogical to me since in a free society the wage system would be abolished so there would be no room for unions.

I would disagree, because as we have seen in the Revolution and Civil War in Spain, unions there, especially the CNT-FAI, played an immensely important role. It was not bread-and-butter unionism any longer, it was about reclaiming the factories, not as wage-slaves, but as producers who can determine production themselves.

Perhaps many years after the success of international socialist revolution, there will be no need for unions any longer - in a higher stage of communism where there is no more state and no more capital. All people would know that social-solidarity and mutual-aid are natural, or instinctual. But to reach that stage, I believe revolutionary unions will play an indispensable role.

The issue of unions is rather complicated. In countries like Germany, you have »independent« unions which are still part and parcel of the system, they actually have an important role to play to guarantee the smooth functioning of production, and the more disruptive strikes in postwar history were for example wildcat strikes in the 1970s, mostly by immigrant workers. At the same time, the situation in those sectors where the unions are weak is not necessarily better. But when it comes to revolution – the self-abolition of the proletariat which also implies a rupture with the existing division of labor – unions have no role to play, they are a legal entity to regulate class relations and as such tied to the wage system and to law. There are also texts on Spain which argue that there were in fact conflicts between workers and the anarcho-syndicalists since the workers didn't want to continue work.

I agree with the Marxist analysis that unions play a role in perpetuating capitalism by bargaining for the scraps that fall off the table of the capitalists; by making capitalist-exploitation more tolerable for workers. In most cases bread and butter unions don't question the system.

But if we look at Wisconsin for example, the state is still afraid of these bread and butter unions. It perceives that they still have too much power, so the state tries to eliminate their right to collective bargaining.

And to move to a completely socialist or communist society, I believe that there are a number of steps to take, be it a soviet, workers' council or a revolutionary union. I understand your point on the division of labor, but from a worker's perspective, you're not longer a wage-slave; you are a co-owner, a co-distributor, a co-decision-maker, when you collectively self-manage the factory. But this is not just about self-managing your factory, it's about collectively self-managing your free society at large.

...but that leaves this whole framework intact, you're still a worker in this factory which you own, whereas the point is to break with the concept of property completely. How that is to be done, I don't know, but I think we've had enough historical experience with self-management as a dead-end that does not break with the logic of commodity production, with exchange value and money. Zanon in Argentina for example is a very interesting experience, but at the end of the day they have to sell their products on the market and that also determines the conditions within the factory.

Small improvements, but the system stays intact? Yes. We agree that we want wage slavery, private property and the existing division of labor abolished once and for all. But this is going to take a lot of work, it requires a massive reconstruction of society. And that's why I believe that unions have such an important role to play.

In the case of Egypt, we had only state-controlled unions since 1957. The country has moved a step forward in establishing independent unions and federations. Even if they (temporarily) leave wage slavery, capitalism and the state intact. Because independent unionism increases workers' awareness of their place in society - that they're not just to be exploited and to disposed of any time.

We have to start somewhere in Egypt. I believe that with this independent union movement, we will have more radical unions which begin to question the factory hierarchy, and the whole structure of society. I believe – I hope – this will lead to social upheaval which in turn will lead to social revolution - and eventually to taking over the means of production. And of course this would involve the elimination of certain industries such as military production. A complete reorganization of production according to the real needs and aspirations of a free, classless, stateless and egalitarian society. ■

The interview was conducted by two friends of the classless society in Cairo in spring 2011.