

# THE NEW EGYPTIAN LABOR MOVEMENT

Giving youth a voice in the workplace

**Kristian Takvam Kindt**, Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies

## **Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies**

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# EGYPT

139/148

JustJobs Index Ranking



49%

Labor Force  
Participation



34%

Youth Labor Force  
Participation



11.9%

Unemployment



35.7%

Youth  
Unemployment

**Source:** These data are ILO modeled estimates provided by the World Bank. Individual authors may use national estimates.

## Challenge

*Following the 2011 revolution and the recent years of political turmoil, young people in Egypt lack good job opportunities and the voice to advocate for higher wages and better working conditions.*

## Strategy

*The rise of independent trade unions is fostering a more stable environment for job creation and offering Egyptian youth a channel for voicing their demands.*

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The desperate need for more and better jobs for Egypt's youth is one of the key challenges confronting the country. Youth discontent was the spark that helped ignite the 2011 revolution, and if high youth unemployment and poor working conditions continue to persist, so will Egypt's social unrest and its economic woes. As Dewan

et al claim in a report by the JustJobs Network, "Stability depends on whether Egypt's economy can generate enough "just jobs"—complete with appropriate remuneration, good working conditions, and opportunities for average citizens to make a better life for themselves and their families—to give the nation's new democracy the underpinning it needs to thrive."<sup>1</sup>

***"If high youth unemployment and poor working conditions continue to persist, so will Egypt's social unrest and its economic woes."***

This chapter examines whether trade unions can be a constructive actor to help generate more positive job outcomes for Egyptian youth.

Can they be part of the solution, and if so, how?

An examination of strike statistics and qualitative fieldwork in Egypt suggest that trade unions exert an important positive

influence on employment outcomes in the Egyptian labor market.

They have the ability to improve work standards, build a more democratic and transparent industrial relations system, and provide an arena for youth to voice their grievances in a controlled environment rather than through

violent and unruly means. Although there are several challenges facing youth organizing in trade unions, supporting and strengthening

independent trade unions in Egypt will help improve the employment outcomes for youth in Egypt.

## Youth and trade unions in Egypt

Youth unemployment is high and rising in Egypt. Over 850,000 new young people enter the workforce each year, more than the Egyptian labor market is able to absorb. There is a poor match between skills and job opportunities, and the youth bulge is turning into a lost generation.<sup>2</sup> The situation for a large segment of the Egyptian population can be described with Singerman's term, "waithood,"<sup>3</sup> defined as a liminal phase between childhood and adulthood where quality jobs and opportunities are lacking. Youth find themselves in a situation where they are unable to "access the basic resources to become independent adults."<sup>4</sup>

An analysis of "waithood" and youth unemployment in Egypt has prompted scholars to propose various solutions: increasing private sector employment,<sup>5</sup> reforming the public sector,

improving the education system,<sup>6</sup> and changing the job preferences of Egyptians from the public to the private sector.<sup>7</sup> Very few<sup>i</sup> of the proposed strategies mention trade unions as a possible ally to improve job outcomes – both the quality and quantity of jobs – for youth. Those who do mention trade unions as an actor do not engage in an analysis of exactly how trade unions can help improve job outcomes and their current role in doing so.

***"Fostering democratic reform, promoting stability, and preventing conflict in Egypt will require jobs but the jobs must be "just jobs." Reinforcing the region's trade union movement is vital to this goal."***

There are several possible reasons why trade unions are neglected in policy initiatives aimed at improving

job outcomes for youth. First, there was no real labor movement in Egypt until recently. The state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was the only recognized trade union federation and did not function as an arena for representation of workers, but was

<sup>i</sup> A notable exception is (Dewan, Hairston, and Bernhardt 2012)

rather a government instrument to keep worker discontent in check.<sup>8</sup> Since 2006, however, Egypt has seen a huge wave of strikes, with over 4,000 since the revolution in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Over a thousand new unions, independent of the ETUF framework, have been created, and two new federations representing the independent trade unions have emerged.<sup>10</sup>

Second, some argue that trade unions are obstacles to development in the sense that their demands create an environment where businesses are not able to operate predictably. By this logic, trade unions disrupt possibilities for foreign direct investment, and thereby employment creation.<sup>11</sup> Other studies rebut this conclusion; as Dewan et al argue: “Fostering democratic reform, promoting stability, and preventing conflict in Egypt will require jobs but the jobs must be “just jobs.” Reinforcing the region’s trade union movement is vital to this goal.”<sup>12</sup>

## Decent work standards

One of the most important contributions of Egypt’s independent trade unions is their fight for decent work standards and better quality jobs. The poor quality of work in Egypt is as pressing a problem as the dearth of employment opportunities. As Dewan et al claim,<sup>15</sup> national

The rise of new independent unionism in Egypt lends itself to examining the role of trade unions in stemming youth unemployment and improving working conditions for young people. This chapter outlines three ways in which trade unions in Egypt contribute positively to job outcomes for youth. The final section discusses the challenges the trade union movement faces in order to utilize its potential as an ally in the struggle to help Egyptian youth find better jobs.

The following analysis is based on qualitative fieldwork among young trade union activists in Egypt in 2012, 2013, and 2014.<sup>13</sup> The fieldwork consisted of interviews with leaders in the two independent trade union federations, local union organizers, and members of trade unions. This chapter also draws on articles and data from a strike statistics database containing information on number of strikes, type of strike, and demands raised.<sup>14</sup>

labor statistics “don’t capture the many people that show up in labor statistics as being employed when in reality they are underemployed, sharing low-productivity work, or are in other forms of irregular employment. Such individuals are not gainfully employed.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Rousdy argues

that “although younger cohorts are getting jobs faster than their older counterparts, the quality of these jobs is deteriorating significantly.”<sup>17</sup> In 2012, it was estimated that 51 percent of the labor force was employed in the informal sector in Egypt without labor rights, or supervision of the quality of their jobs.<sup>18</sup> Fighting for more decent work standards therefore becomes an important step in order to ensure that youth have gainful employment.

One way to investigate the trade unions’ performance on this issue is to look at the type of demands that are raised. **Table 1** shows reasons

for strikes in Egypt in 2012. The vast majority of these demands are local, workplace-specific demands such as higher wages, more bonuses and job security. Some analysts argue that the trade unions should develop more politically oriented demands in order to be constructive players on the national political scene.<sup>19</sup> But organizing young workers around local demands such as wages and job security is an essential step in improving quality of work.

No official statistics exist on how many of their demands have been satisfied, but evidence from the field shows that these strikes led to

Table 01

### Demands Raised by Striking Workers in Egypt (2012)

Demands raised by striking workers in Egypt (2012)	Number of protests / strikes	Proportion of Total (%)
Wage or bonus increase	708	36.0
Improvement in work security	380	19.3
Protest against employees being fired	108	5.5
Poor treatment from management	71	3.6
Corruption in the management	111	5.6
Protest against closing factories	29	1.5
Delayed payment or promotion	114	5.7
Other	448	22.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>1969</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Amin al-Din, Nadeem. 2013. *al-’ihtigāgāt ‘al-’umāliyya fi masr 2012 (Workers Protests in Egypt 2012)*, edited by Nadeem Amin al-Din. Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights

several concessions by employers in a number of workplaces. Many of those interviewed noted that trade union involvement has actually helped increase their wages and made working conditions safer. For example, as Ali, a young transportation worker who participated in all strikes that took place after the revolution, said: “Before we did not earn anything, but now we can soon live off our wage.” Similarly, Hassan, a young doctor participating in the doctors’ strike, stated: “Our hospitals are garbage. But this strike actually enables us to get more medicine, to say when we lack equipment. The unionists are really helping to improve the situation.”

After pressure from unions, the government has also decided to raise the minimum wage<sup>20</sup> – an

achievement that would not have been realized without a unified stance from unions. While enforcement of the minimum wage remains a challenge, the new law is an important step and an example of how union pressure can be effective. A number of fresh strikes are now demanding the implementation and enforcement of the new minimum wage law.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to improving the quality of jobs and wages for workers, a focus on raising wages may also be beneficial for job creation in Egypt. Through higher wages, workers begin consuming more, fueling aggregate demand that in turn reinforces economic dynamism and growth.<sup>22</sup>

## Democratic industrial relations system

Trade unions can also play a role in creating better job outcomes for youth through building a more democratic industrial relations system. A democratic and transparent industrial relations system is universally acknowledged as an important step for creating just jobs.<sup>23</sup> As the ILO clearly states, without social dialogue and real representation, it is impossible to design policies adapted to the needs of young people. As Dewan et al argue, “workers must have the right to

freedom of association and collective bargaining so that they can be a force in propelling Egypt’s economy forward and in claiming their fair share of its prosperity.”<sup>24</sup>

In the Egyptian legal framework, freedom of association for unions is not fully recognized. A draft for a trade unions freedom law has existed since March 2011, but successive governments have shown little interest in passing and

implementing it.<sup>25</sup> Instead of waiting for the freedom of association to be granted by law, the trade unions are enforcing freedom of association bottom-up. Two concrete examples illustrate this.

The public transportation workers – a group that was followed closely in the fieldwork – were one of several hundred groups of workers who created an independent union in 2011. As opposed to the old ETUF - affiliated union, the independent union conducted fair elections.<sup>26</sup> Even though the independent union was not legally recognized, it fought its way to become the de facto representative of public transportation workers. During a strike in September 2011, the employer tried to negotiate a deal with the state-controlled union and called off the strike.<sup>27</sup> The Independent Transportation Workers refused to accept this deal, since they were not present in the negotiations. They resumed their strike.<sup>28</sup> After one more week the employer agreed to negotiate with the Independent Transportation Workers, and reached a deal.<sup>29</sup> As one of the leading activists in the union said, “We don’t have time to wait for changes in legislation. We fight to implement our rights from below.” On subsequent occasions, the employers consulted with the Independent Transportation Workers. This anecdote reflects how social movements, rather than legislation,

have brought about changes in Egypt’s industrial relations system.

The organizing efforts of Egyptian doctors provide another example of how Egyptian trade unions have helped democratize industrial relations. The doctors did not form an independent syndicate but chose to work from inside instead, forming a group called “the independent current” within the ETUF affiliate. In many instances, these independent doctors forced the syndicate to behave by democratic rules. First, they managed to push through the first elections in the doctors’ syndicate in over twenty years.<sup>30</sup> Second, they managed to mobilize doctors to participate in general assemblies in the doctors’ syndicate. These general assemblies constitute the highest authority in the syndicate, and decisions such as whether to go on strike now come up for debate and voting in these forums. The participation rates in the assemblies were at an all time high in 2011 and 2012, which in itself is important for the legitimacy of the democratic process within the syndicate.<sup>31</sup> And third, the independent current functioned as guarantors of democratic conduct during the general assemblies.

Some of the interviews with the doctors’ union described how the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated

***“We don’t have time to wait for changes in legislation. We fight to implement our rights from below.”***

*- Leader in the Independent Transportation Workers union*



syndicate leadership attempted to trick the Independent Doctors by breaking democratic rules during general assemblies. On several occasions the leadership tried to invalidate their votes or hinder them from entering the general assembly. Essam El-Erian, who led some of the assemblies, also refused to sign decisions for strikes even after they were approved by a vote. The Independent Doctors fought this on every occasion and made sure that the syndicate abided by the rules. They also showed commitment to democratic rules through accepting losses. When the Independent Doctors did not win a majority for a demand or strike action in the general

assembly, they accepted it. When the Muslim Brotherhood won the majority of votes in the syndicate elections, they accepted it.

These two examples demonstrate how independent unions in Egypt are essential actors in ensuring a democratic industrial relations system. A transparent industrial relations system, if allowed to develop, would create a more favorable investment climate while at the same time ensuring that the interests of workers, especially the nation's frustrated youth, are represented and that their concerns can be voiced more effectively than in the past.

## A channel for voicing discontent

Youth discontent, especially over socioeconomic conditions, sparked the 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution in 2011. Youth grievances must be addressed in order to provide greater social and political stability in the nation. In 2011, the only channel youth found to voice their concerns was street protest. These street protests led to important changes, but the political scene is arguably as undemocratic now as during the Mubarak era, leaving little hope that youth will be able to voice their concerns effectively through party politics in the coming years. In the absence of meaningful political participation, trade unions are becoming an arena for putting forward grievances. In this way, they have the potential to foster more social stability.

Interviews with young members from a number of different unions point out that independent unions actually give workers a sense of agency, a feeling that they are able to change their economic situation for the better. Respondents stated that the independent union has made it easier to voice their grievances, and all expressed that their work situation had gotten better in recent years. They appreciated the concessions the administration gave, the increase in bonuses, and better working conditions. They felt that they had someone to turn to, someone to complain to and that the independent union was actually helping them change their workplace for the better. This finding is confirmed by the fact that the membership numbers in the independent

union are rising, and that the strikes initiated by the unions have gained increasing support over the last two years.

Trade unions can offer something that street protests cannot: direct influence over one's work situation. The fact that trade unions are developing into platforms to voice dissent might have a stabilizing effect. As Teitelbaum argues with evidence from the Sri Lankan context: "Repression of unions may backfire, creating bursts of highly visible and destabilizing protests that undermine the developmental objectives of neoliberal reform."<sup>32</sup> In other words, increasing youth participation in unions is a way towards stability, not increased tension, which can create a more attractive environment for investment and job creation.<sup>33</sup>

### ***The remaining challenges***

Although trade unions in Egypt contribute positively in these respects, it is important to mention the major challenges that still hinder them from being more constructive.

The four most important challenges are:

1. *Internal cleavages within the trade union movement:* Five different federations have been created for independent unions since the 2011

revolution, and there are personal and political conflicts within several of the local unions. It is difficult, therefore, for national and international actors to understand with whom they should engage.<sup>34</sup>

2. *Lack of legal recognition for the unions:* Even though the unions have seen some success mobilizing and bargaining on their own, the lack of full legal recognition makes it difficult for the unions to collect union dues, and allows for the possibility that unions could be shut down because they are not operating within the limits of the law.<sup>35</sup>

3. *Lack of awareness among some youth of the importance of trade union work:* All the interviews conducted suggest that there is a lack of awareness among youth of the importance of trade union work. This makes the recruitment of youth into trade unions difficult.

4. *The informalization of the labor market:* Egypt's large and growing informal sector, to a large extent, is outside the reach of trade unions. And the informal sector tends to be where many young people find employment.<sup>36</sup> As of yet, the independent trade unions have not devised a successful strategy for including the informal sector in their work.

***“Trade unions can offer something that street protests cannot: direct influence over one’s work situation.”***

## Conclusion

A lack of high-quality job opportunities for youth remains one of Egypt's biggest challenges. Addressing this crisis is not only important for young people, but an absolute necessity if Egypt is to stabilize and recover economically and politically.

Extensive fieldwork carried out over three years points to three ways in which independent Egyptian trade unions have made a positive contribution in addressing this challenge. The trade unions have fought and have in many instances succeeded in implementing decent

work standards; they have been key players in enforcing a more democratic industrial relations system; and they have provided a platform for youth to voice their grievances in an organized manner, rather than through violent protest. The effect of these contributions is higher quality jobs and a more stable and predictable work environment, which can create a better climate for investment and promote the creation of more jobs. Trade unions are not a panacea, but they serve as an important channel through which Egyptian youth can play an active role in improving their employment outcomes.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>6</sup> Dewan et al, *ibid.*; Assaad, Ragui, Rania Rousdhy, and Ali Rashed. 2009. *Measuring and Operationalizing Job Quality in Egypt*. (New York City: Population Council). Accessed on September 10, 2014. <http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/wp/mena/01.pdf>

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<sup>14</sup> The database can be found at <http://esep.info/protests-listing>

<sup>15</sup> Dewan et al, *ibid.*

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