

The Trade Union Movement in Egypt

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Even to day Egypt is still mainly an agrarian country, but among all the countries of the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean it takes the lead as regards capitalist development. In some places conditions are still patriarchal, and in one and the same village there may be seen both the iron plough and the up-to-date tractor. Home industry in its most primitive form is being substituted by workshops and factories of exemplary equipment. The economic revolution has however not been carried through quite painlessly. It has created new conditions of existence for the peasants and tenant farmers driven from the villages, and hammered into the minds of these classes an increasing comprehension of their class interests and duties. The following figures give an idea of the social differentiation of the Egyptian population, and of the process of capitalist development in 1918:

1. Agriculture: a) day laborers 2,150,000; b) large holders 28,000; c) small holders 1,300,000.
2. Fishery and hunting: a) day laborers 8,000; b) large leaseholders 100; c) independent 25,000.
3. Textile industry: a) workers 25,000; b) owners of undertakings 525; c) independent craftsmen 32,000.
4. Metal industry: a) workers 16,000; b) owners of undertakings 390; c) independent master workers 10,000.
5. Clothing industry: a) workers 42,000; b) owners of undertakings 1,750; c) independent master workers 70,000.
6. Furniture industry: a) workers 18,000; b) owners of undertakings 330; c) independent master workers 14,000.
7. Building trade: a) workers 44,000; b) owners of undertakings 435; c) independent 14,000.

Besides these important branches of industry, in which the greatest masses of the proletariat and of the artisan class are concentrated, mention must also be made of the transport industry, which is fairly highly developed in Egypt, and occupies about 150,000 workers and employes. About 30,000 workers and 25,000 home workers are further employed in various other branches of industry. If we take into consideration that the total population of Egypt does not exceed 13½ millions, we have thus a proletariat which is no weaker proportionately, than in any country of the Balkans. The process of proletarianizing the masses of Egypt may best be recognized from the following table:

Branch of Industry	No. of workers occupied in	
	1907—1910	1917—1920
Transport	100,000	150,000
Clothing industry	76,500	144,500
Furnishing industry	5,500	47,500
Agriculture	2,500,000	4,100,000

In other branches of industry, as for instance in the metal industry, and in the building trade, there is, on the other hand, a reduction in the number of workers employed; in the metal industry from 35,000 in 1907 to 23,000 in 1918, in the building trade from 75,000 to 45,000 in the same period; this is however mainly attributable to the perfecting of mechanical production and by the lessening of public works.

Until the war the native workers had practically no trade unions; only the European immigrants, especially the Italian, had their organizations, which were quite isolated. The privileged position and prejudices of the European workers caused them to hold aloof from the native workers, and to refuse them admission into their unions. Where the natives possessed organizations at all, these were purely of a guild character. Before the war the strikes of the natives were spontaneous, and were not followed by any organization of forces. The war effected a radical change in this state of affairs. Besides requiring Labor Corps composed of native workers, the English military authorities also required a great number of technically qualified workers, and for this purpose set up some special schools giving short terms of instruction, in which about 30,000 natives received technical vocational training. This created the central point which had been lacking to the native proletariat.

Immediately after the war, when waves of national revolutionary movement swept the country, carrying with them even the dense masses of impoverished peasants, the role being played by the native proletariat became evident. The nationalists at once grasped the importance of so powerful a factor, and endeavored to utilize it for their own aims. It was of course not difficult to organize the fairly concentrated masses of workers,

already filled with hate against the English military dictatorship, in trade unions, and to induce them to enter upon strikes which frequently received support. Unions sprang into existence one after the other, and very soon these underwent their baptism of fire. The general strike of the railwaymen at the beginning of 1919, the strike of the civil servants, and a number of other conflicts, convinced the English government that it was not merely confronted by a few privileged rebels but by the masses of the working people. But the nationalists were also disappointed in their expectations. That which they had hoped to find a lifeless tool proved to be a living and independent element. The workers speedily ceased to act on the orders of the nationalists, and proceeded to independent action, to struggle for their own economic interests.

It will suffice if we mention that between August 18. and November 31, 1919 twenty four strikes took place, of which the railwaymen's strike in Cairo lasted 56 days, and three others each lasted 40 days. The demands of the strikers were exclusively of an economic nature. Between 1919 and 1921 there were 81 strikes in Egypt, of which 67 were general strikes (comprising the whole of the undertakings of the branch of industry concerned) and 14 partial strikes. 2,000 to 2,500 workers participated in each of these strikes. In most cases the strikes were carried through determinedly, and no native worker acted as blackleg. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the European workers, who more than once betrayed the strikers in the fullest sense of the term. The native proletariat, which is organized on a national basis (the majority of the large factories belong to Europeans), has invariably proved more revolutionary than their European comrades.

Despite this, the strike wave has by no means sufficed to create a powerfully centralized and actual class organization of the Egyptian proletariat. The Egyptian intelligentsia regarded the trade union movement solely from the standpoint of a means for attaining its own political aims, it failed to appreciate the importance of the movement, and in many cases sabotaged it.

During the last two years, in which the various factions within the nationalist movement became evident, the nationalists ceased to take any interest in the trade unions, and these fell into the hands of various political career hunters. Communists and revolutionary trade unionists endeavored to lead the trade unions into regular channels. In 1919 an Italian comrade undertook the establishment of a labor exchange in Cairo, and was at first supported by all the European unions. But the English government speedily put an end to this attempt by expelling this comrade from the country. A second attempt was made at the beginning of 1921 by the young Communist Party of Egypt. After two conferences, participated in by the representatives of the largest unions, the "Labor Confederation of Egypt" was organized, but its initiators were lacking in experience and organizatory forces, and the union existed more on paper than in reality. The Egyptian party is now beginning work in this direction on a narrower basis, but consequently with better prospects of success.

The above will be better understood if a few words are given on the influence of the RILU. in Egypt. It is hardly necessary to mention that the native worker has little idea of what the Amsterdam International and the RILU. respectively represent. But the Egyptian worker stands for revolutionary struggle against his political and economic oppressors, and therefore he stands "for Moscow". Opportunist tendencies are strangers to the young Egyptian proletariat, and therefore it belongs ideologically to us.