

## Faces from the front line – Egyptian PSI affiliates

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Leading activists in new free Egyptian trade unions which have affiliated to PSI. Cairo, September 2012. Left to right: Emad Mohamed Elaraby, Amr Aly Mohamed (Petrotrade Union); Khaled Mahmoud Nawar (Egyptian civilian pilots syndicate (EGYCPS)); Fatma Foad Aly (Selas Union); Waled Mohamed Saed (Petrotrade Union); Sahar Dosokee Ebrahiem (Health Technicians Union); Tarek Mostafa Koeb (RETA)

The headquarters of the Egyptian Federation of Independent trade Unions (EFITU) is on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of a residential apartment block in a Cairo sidestreet, just 20 minutes walk from Tahrir Square, the centre of the Egyptian uprising. The office is just an ordinary flat, with three rooms, kitchen and bathroom. Only a poster stuck on the front door shows that it is in fact the headquarters of a new trade union movement in a country of 80 million people.

On the evening of Sunday 9 September 2012, there were meetings in every room. One of those meetings involved 5 unions affiliated to PSI, discussing their strategies, and how PSI could support them. In the room next door, EFITU leaders were planning a media conference around their demands for a new labour law to recognise the rights of workers to join free trade unions.

EFITU was formed in March 2011, born as part of the uprising. It provided a way of linking the unofficial unions, and a voice for workers in the uprising itself. These unions have grown out of years of unofficial union organisation and strikes under the old dictatorship – a wave of strikes and disputes that is still continuing today. The strikers have been over pay and conditions and employers refusing to honour agreements, but also demands for better public healthcare, general strikes in support of the democratic demands of the uprising - and strikes against privatisation and the corruption involved in it. This too was a core factor in the uprisings themselves, one result of which was the conviction of Mubarak's sons for corrupt profiteering from privatisations.




The PSI affiliates have been at the forefront of this movement. RETA was formed by local government property tax collectors to defend pay and conditions, and asked the government to recognise it in 2009 – the first union to defy the law against organisations outside the official government-sponsored unions. The Health Technicians union was also formed in 2010, and, together with RETA and the teachers' union, were the original founders of EFITU. The workers of Petrotrade, the major energy company in Egypt, have organised a series of strikes over the last few years. SELAS, the general tax workers union, has also taken action, and experienced a backlash from the Ministry of Finance, which has suspended 51 union members without pay. The new water workers union is also expected to affiliate to PSI, but its first priority is to complete organising the water workers in every city and region of Egypt, to ensure that there is a single nationwide union.





At the meeting in Cairo, before discussing the issues in Egypt, the affiliates first wanted to learn how unions in other countries had rebuilt their organisations after the end of dictatorships, and their relations with social movements and political parties. We discussed how the Brazilians confederation, CUT, and the South African confederation COSATU, had built new trade union movements based on organisation that was originally illegal under the undemocratic regimes; how South Koreans had defied labour laws to create a new movement; how Indonesian unions had rebuilt themselves after the overthrow of the Suharto dictatorship; and how in former communist states of eastern Europe some trade unionists had created new unions, while others had reformed the old official unions. We could have also discussed the experiences in Spain and Portugal, where trade unionism was rebuilt after the end of the dictatorships in the 1970s. PSI and its affiliates have a wealth of experience to offer on this strategic issue.

Turning to Egypt, the unions have very clear priorities.

- The first and greatest is the need for a new labour law to replace the old law of the dictatorship, which prevents workers from joining or paying dues to, any unions except the official government bodies – which have already been condemned for corruption. Without that change, the new unions cannot even collect contributions from their members, so they have no money and no resources. The military and the new Egyptian government, however, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, is resisting such a change, and has dropped the draft legislation drawn up earlier in 2012 which would have delivered these rights .
- The second is that the minimum wage should actually be paid, everywhere. In 2011 the interim government agreed to a minimum wage of 700 Egyptian pounds per month, but takes no steps to enforce it.
- The third is the need to change the anti-union culture of managers and employers, developed over years of dictatorship and reinforced by neoliberal ideologies.
- Finally, they want more training and resources from the international trade union movement.

The meeting in Cairo took place in the evening, like all meetings of the new unions, because no employers give any time off work for activities in the EFITU unions, and there are no full-time officials. They have the massive support of their membership, but building trade unionism remains a constant battle, without resources and against a hostile legal framework. They have given inspiration to their fellow trade unionists everywhere, and in turn they are looking for advice and support from around the world.

<p>Sahar Dosokee Ebrahiem Healthcare union – and PSI coordinator</p>		<p>“The top managers are all anti-union. They were all appointed under the old regime, and they still have the same mindset of opposition to free trade unions. They need to be changed.”</p> <p>“Parliament has approved a minimum wage for everyone of 700 Egyptian pounds – but they have taken no action to make employers pay it.”</p> <p>“Despite months of talking, the government has still not published a new labour law that would legalise free trade unions.”</p> <p>“We need PSI to organise more training workshops , on how to be a trade union activist, and about the role of PSI”.</p>
<p>Tarek Mostafa Koeb RETA union – and PSI coordinator</p>		<p>“A new law on trade union rights must be passed as soon as possible”</p> <p>“There is no culture of trade unionism amongst Egyptian workers – we have to create it.”</p> <p>“Governments past and present have worked to oppose trade union rights”</p> <p>“All the independent unions are desperately short of resources.”</p>
<p>Emad Mohamed Elaraby Petrotrade union</p>		<p>“EFITU, the unions and the other social movements in Egypt all share a key need: the need for a new law providing freedom for trade unionists. So we are asking trade unionists around the world to help us put pressure on our government, whether by political pressure from your own countries, or through international social movements, or through direct support from international confederations of trade unions. I am speaking as a board member of EFITU as well as an activist in the Petrotrade union.”</p>

<p>Amr Aly Mohamed Petrotrade union</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2400 workers were forced to leave jobs, dismissed, they were physically. 340 went to court, won case (others could not afford), but company will still not take them back. This was 'application no 6' – instead of renewing say you are not needed, when argue, force you to say you resign, then re-apply (had to sign resignationat same time as employed!). Now penniless, can't feed or school their kids.</li> <li>- Can't find funds for decent HQ,</li> <li>- also not enough training for active trade unionists. Trasing only for board members of union or efitu, but all rank and file workers entiltled to equal training.</li> </ul>
<p>Waled Mohamed Saed Petrotrade union</p>		<p>“We are facing many problems as union activists. Our hands are tied by the old laws, and the ministry refuses to pass the new law, and so we still cannot correct the problems of the old regime. The Petrotrade union cannot even find money for its most basic activities, yet we organise thousands of workers in one of the biggest companies in Egypt.</p> <p>“Forming EFITU has been a good move. We now need resources from unions in other countries to provide proper training for trade unionists.”</p>
<p>Fatma Foad Aly SELAS union</p>		<p>“The union [which organises tax workers] has a great problem with the Ministry of Finance. The ministry has suspended 51 of our members , without pay, because they are union activists.</p> <p>“The union is also suffering because it has no funds even for a HQ office.”</p> <p>“EFITU needs to be strengthened further in order to get the new law on trade union freedom passed”.</p>
<p>Khaled Mahmoud Nawar Egyptian civilian pilots syndicate (EGYCPS)</p>		<p>(acting as interpreter)</p>

See also:

- A good account of the rise of EFITU and the issues facing trade unionists in Egypt is: “The Rise of Egypt’s Workers” by Joel Beinin (Carnegie Paper, June 2012 <https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/28/rise-of-egypt-s-workers/cyom#> )

- *MENA solidarity campaign 07 Sept 2012: Egypt: New campaign for trade union freedoms launched* <http://menasolidaritynetwork.com/2012/09/07/egypt-new-campaign-for-trade-union-freedoms-launched/>
- *IPS 20 July 2012 Egypt's New Unions Face Uncertain Future* <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/07/egypts-new-unions-face-uncertain-future/>

*David Hall is Director of PSIRU, [www.psiru.org](http://www.psiru.org), the research unit at the University of Greenwich in London, UK, which was created by, and is core funded by PSI. He was in Egypt to speak at a conference organised by the social movements to expose the problems with public-private partnership (PPPs).*