

Cairo Transport Workers in the Egyptian Revolution

Transport

Cairo is a bustling city of millions with a massive transport system. Tens of thousands of people work in its various buses, its metro, its trams, its railway, its haulage and taxis. As has happened to workers the world over, the always humble conditions of the workforce have been squeezed by the international drive by capitalism to neo-liberalism. Under Mubarak, this was exacerbated as his brutal, undemocratic government used repression to prevent the workers from doing anything about it.

Transport workers were forced to join a state-run "Transport Union" that notionally represented them, but in fact just delivered management policy.

Rank and file bus workers in Cairo first began to act independently of the old union in 2009 and, despite the state ruling the strike illegal, they got solid action at the majority of Cairo's eleven bus garages and disrupted an estimated 20 million journeys. Their key demands over pay and conditions massively built the confidence of the bus-workers.

Workers in the Revolution

When the 25 January Revolution broke out, the widely-respected Independent Tax Collectors Union called on other workers to join their struggle for full independence from independent union federation and going on all-out general strike to demand the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The bus-workers enthusiastically answered the call.

With his regime collapsing around him, Mubarak attempted to harden up pro-regime demonstrations by enforcing a "buses shut-down" of work and industry. Pro-Mubarak demonstrations, in the event, were a washout. As the Government then tried to bring business back to work, the new Public Transport Authority Workers Union (PTAWU) launched its all-out strike and joined in with the protesters on the streets. Transport ground to a halt once again in Cairo and many workers, who couldn't go to their jobs even if they wanted to, used the opportunity to go and join demonstrations. Three days later, to rapturous applause, Mubarak's ousting was announced.

Demands

In the week after Mubarak fell, the bus drivers decided to take strike action again. Like their comrades in the other new unions, they were now confident to move on to more numerous and ambitious demands. They fought for Key demands of the movement:

- An end to Egypt's colonial-era wage structure, with a new minimum wage of ££2,000 and, more radically, maximum wages for management.
- Permanent contracts and reinstatement of victimised workers.
- Renationalisation of sections that had been privatised since the late 1970s.
- The removal of "Little Mubarak" managers: from the garage level all the way up to the Government ministries.

Activists in the PTAWU say that their present structure is temporary, waiting for a proper founding conference. They have been trying to learn from successful models of union organisation used by other

successful workers. It has an autonomous committee at each garage (garages can take individual strike action), and represents all grades in the industry (drivers ticket collectors, engineers and other staff, like mechanics) who have come together because it is the best way to win. Overall leadership will come from a general committee of recallable delegates from the garage committees and PTAWU are adamant they are building and running their union from the bottom up and do not want external direction or funding.

Minister of Labour imprisoned

Now that the revolution has moved from its early, "classless" phase into a more polarised struggle over social questions, the new ruling military junta having to play a cunning game to try and push back the revolution, without losing their authority. One result has been contradictory moves over labour law. They imprisoned the former Minister of Labour for his role in organising gang violence against the Tahrir square protests and allowed the independent unions to legally register themselves with the Government, which are big gains.

At the same time they have passed new laws allowing themselves additional power to ban strikes and demonstrations. As a test case for this, Ali Fattouh, founding president of PTAWU, has been charged with the new crime of "incitement to strike". This a clear attack on the union, but also recognition of how powerful it potentially is. The union has responded entirely correctly, it called another solid strike in defence of its leader. As one bus driver I spoke to put it: "We don't take the strike laws at face value in Egypt." Strikes have been effectively illegal since 1957.

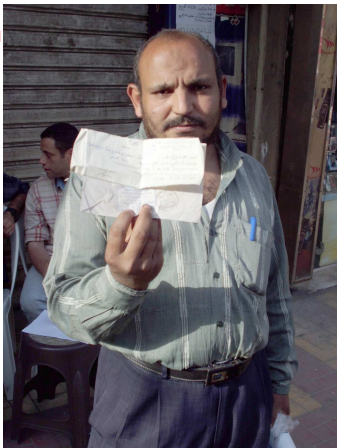
The old union, whose leadership has been specifically banned from joining PTAWU, is another factor trying to reverse the revolution. They have responded to Mubarak's fall by trying to reposition themselves as a moderate alternative and have tried to secure some of the new union's goals by getting "sweetheart" deals with management. This has not fooled much of the workforce: the old union spent late January and early February organising things for pro-regime gangs.

Strike!

On the day before we left Egypt, we saw first-hand the effects of the union's fourth full strike, in defence of their



The Front Page: RMT delegation makes news in the national paper - 'Egypt Today'



Ali Fattouh, President, Public Transport Authority Workers Union, holding his call-up papers for trial. He's been charged with inciting strike action. Send messages of solidarity for Ali Fattouh to: menauldarity@gmail.com

victimised president, which brought the city's urgent traffic to standstill. The bus drivers have become a key part of the leadership of Egypt's new unionism and the revolutionary movement as a whole.

At the time of writing, Ali Fattouh will be going to trial on 4 June. As an act of solidarity, the Middle East & North Africa Solidarity Campaign (MENA), is organising a petition to go to the Egyptian embassy, calling on the new Government to end its criminalisation of the new unions. But solidarity with Egyptian workers is not just about us helping them, it's also about us learning from their heroic struggle, so that we will be prepared when we have to have to defend ourselves against repression and austerity.

Kieran Crowe, Fleet Branch

The London Transport Regional RMT delegation was composed of:

Unjum Mirza, Political Officer LTRC.

Paul Jackson, Branch Secretary, LU Engineering

Kieran Crowe, Fleet Branch

We would be more than happy to offer a personal report to your branch or any special meetings.

To make arrangements please contact Unjum on:

07958 124 225 or email: unjummirza@yahoo.co.uk

London Transport Regional Council Political Report

The Egyptian Revolution



Revolutionary street art: The crescent and cross united in struggle

May Day in Tahrir Square

Our political report is a first hand account of the ongoing Egyptian Revolution by the RMT delegation to Cairo to celebrate the first May Day after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The delegation was tasked to make contact with trade unionists across industries, to learn about their struggles and their progress in forming and building new independent Trade Unions.

In 40,000 words Paul Jackson's brilliant report captures the breadth, politics and life of the revolution from the standpoint of the workers and the (extraordinary) women and men that made the revolution and who seek to deepen it.

On the back page Kieran Crowe reports on workers' struggle before, during, and since the revolution of 25 January. His focus is on the bus workers and our need to extend solidarity to Ali Fattouh, a leading bus trade unionist, who is due to be tried on the charge of inciting strike action.

Revolution

The stage for revolution in Egypt was set with a rise in workers' struggle and strikes from 2004. The Tunisian revolution at the turn of 2011 was the spark that lit the dramatic events that unfolded from 25 January and the fall of Mubarak on 12 February. Both revolutions have generated a massive, inspiring, revolutionary movement across the entire region.

This is a movement of the masses – ordinary women and men like us. Not self-declared leaders within the region and certainly not from the West. The only thing the Western leaders have offered (and delivered) has been bloodshed and misery. Think of Afghanistan and Iraq. Then wonder, how on earth could these

liars, murderers and warmongers even pretend to help 'liberate' Libya. They have their own agenda (oil, as well as politically re-shaping the region since the revolutions in their own interests - witness Obama's Statement 20 May) and that agenda is not ours.

The media's often obsessive preoccupation with the Muslim Brotherhood is merely an extension of the racist view of Arabs generally and, more specifically, the Islamophobia generated by the 'war on terror'. In reality, the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the largest organisation in Egypt, is actually quite a conservative force that has certainly not helped.

At the top of the organisation it is dominated by businessmen and middle class professionals who want a halt to the process of the revolution and certainly do not support strike action. At the base of the organisation, the poorer and working class elements were often engaged in the revolution directly in Tahrir Square, bringing with them organisational strength (particularly when Mubarak sent in his thugs in an attempt to break the revolution) and presently, as we witnessed first hand, are also participating in the formation of the independent unions and organising for strikes.

Egypt: Where Next?

While we cannot lose sight of the other struggles across the region, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen etc, and lets not forget the continuing struggle for Palestinian freedom, Egypt is at the axis of the Arab world. Egypt has the greatest population and industrial economy and a deep tradition of industrial, political and anti-colonial/imperial resistance - it holds the keys to

unlocking the doors to freedom for the entire region. This is what makes Egypt so important for us all.

One hundred days since the fall of Mubarak there is much to celebrate. However, there is still much to do. Each revolution has its 'spring-time when everybody is united and together against the common enemy'. The vast majority were united in the struggle focused in Tahrir Square. However, now Mubarak's gone the fundamental problems of bread and inequality, social justice and freedom remain. Further, the army, which is not just an integral institution of the Egyptian state but is also a key stakeholder in the economy and thus an employer, remains intact. The question arises – how do we go forward with the revolution?

This is where Egypt is now. A differentiation is taking place between those who argue "go back to your homes and daily life and wait for the elections and let the transition to democracy take its course" and those who say 'the fall of Mubarak was just the first phase of the revolution. We must now organise to connect our struggles, move the revolution forward and win our demands to rid the workplaces of the 'little Mubarak', for better wages, conditions, and the plight of the poor'.

This latter approach is the one taken by the Independent unions which requires our fullest support and solidarity. They recognise that standing still is not an option. They must press ahead in their struggle if they are to preserve the gains made thus far let alone win further economic and social demands.

Among trade unionists, here again, there is a debate. How best to organise to go forward? On the one hand you have some who are more conciliatory and want to have closer organisational links with unions internationally to draw on their expertise.

Image of our type of union organisation as a model, wars and all (and lets be honest – there's a lot of wars!) on the new independent unions in Egypt? Rather than tell them 'now it's done', we can actually learn from them and begin to address our own shortcomings, enhancing our struggles and structures?

Self-activity and Independence

This is where the other wing of the debate comes in. Many Egyptian trade-unionists want solidarity but on terms of self-activity of their own people and complete independence – not bureaucratization and dependency on international unions. As Paul Jackson explains in his report: *"The trade unions (i.e. our unions) need to reach out and help the unions in Egypt in ways they want, not how we think they should be helped"*.

This is a regional struggle with global implications. Imagine linking the revolutionary struggles for freedom and social justice in the Middle East and North Africa with the struggles against austerity in Greece, Italy and Spain where general strikes and massive protests have rocked the ruling elites.

These struggles, at root, are our struggles - they're all sourced in the crisis of an exploitative world system. Our task is to offer solidarity to those fighting back and deepen that struggle, organising our own fight at 'home'. Our task is to offer a vision of the world we'd, as workers, peasants, the poor and oppressed rise up and ran our lives for ourselves. Imagine that - the mass majority running society in the interests of the mass majority. There's no such thing as 'us' in any country – across the world we're all 'us' and 'them' - 'Us' who produce the wealth in society and them who profit from the fruits of our labour. As the great poet and socialist Bertolt Brecht wrote:

"Those who eat their fill, speak to the hungry about the wonderful times to come. Those who lead the country into the abyss, call ruling too difficult for ordinary men."

Unjum Mirza, Political Officer, LTRC

Report from the Egyptian Revolution...

MAY DAY 2011 - TAHRIR SQUARE



Independent trade unionists debate the way forward on May Day, Tahrir Square

Paul Jackson, Branch Secretary, LU Engineering RMT

Should I stay or should I go?

I was invited as a delegate of the LT Regional Council to go an meet trade unionists in Cairo. Initially I was as enthusiastic as a poodle on a hot plate. My wife instructed me not to attend as she had visions of me being murdered. All in all, I had to weigh up the pro's and cons. Rather than be thought of as under the thumb, I decided I would go.

We left on the Thursday and arrived at what looked suspiciously like a total dump late that night. Luckily, once up the decrepit stair case, the hotel itself was actually ok.

Down to work

The Friday was time to role up our sleeves and get down to the hard work. This was the bit I was not looking forward too. To be honest, the next three hours would have become something of a blue blur except for the brilliant help of our interpreter, Anne (she not only did English to Egyptian, but cockney to English), who organised and translated information for the whole time, as we met many organisations and trade unionists.

The first trade unionist we met was Kamal Abu Aita, President of the Property Tax Collectors Union (RETAU). This was an incredible man who told the story of how he had organised independent strike action in 2007 under the Mubarak regime. In Egypt, tax is basically collected door to door. They are actively told not to collect from the rich so the tax burden falls on the poor. All in all, much like here. Their pay goes below being poor to being abysmal.

This is a common theme across all sectors. Basically, these people went to school and held a 'sit in' by their government offices. This lasted many days, with popular support being given to them by local people (food and water etc).

The 'State' Trade Union tried to get them back to work, however, they refused and eventually the government gave in to their demands. The new aspect of this strike was not only the independence but also how this was democratically decided and run by the rank and file as opposed to the 'state unions'.

This took place before the revolution and was key to showing other workers how to organise.

Medical Technicians: We met with these people as they were just forming their union. Basically, they had put flyers to get people to attend a mass meeting (some 4000 turned up) and the agreed to set up an Independent Union. When we met them it was inspiring to watch them deciding how much to charge members (union subs), what to spend their money on, how to organise their union. It was strange that they had no idea of the need for a bureaucracy within a union and had instinctively organised themselves.

Doctors: These people are paid less than £30 a month and had again formed their own union. We met them as they were deciding on strike action, whether to do all out or one day, then all out (emergency and ICU would not be affected). Their demands were for a maximum wage for their bosses and the rest of their money to be redistributed to the other workers. They

were also very patient focused and many of their demands such as better training, was aimed at improving care.

I must admit, I missed much of the discussions as I was side tracked by a female doctor. She used the well known chat up line of "what religion are you?" I toyed with the idea of saying Jewish but felt maybe better stick with none. It was fascinating just how interested she was (and many others) in as *people*. What did we think of this, what did we think of that? Why do we have a queen? (I didn't know), what the queen does? (I didn't know)? What the queen's purpose was? (in the end I just said, you had to have someone's head on a stamp)? We broached the subject of Libya and unsurprisingly, she was very against the western intervention. She fervently believed that the Libyan revolution should not have become an armed insurrection and the Libyans should decide their own destiny. The West were seen as a colonial occupation and not as saving innocent people.

Incidentally, we introduced the idea of picketing to these people and explained what it meant as there was not an equivalent task in Egypt. Egypt brought civilisation to the world and we returned the favour by showing them picketing. This no doubt will be used to blame Bob Crow for the fact the pyramids look like they've not been finished yet.

Transport Workers: We met a few of these, mainly due to our Rail background. We initially met them down a dark "come mug me" back streets of Cairo, late into the night. The danger of this meeting was that it becomes a busman's holiday and we all ended up getting into the "anorak" mode. The Rail Workers were in the process of forming their own independent union. They had sent out the flyers and their inaugural meeting was to be on the Wednesday (unfortunately after we were due to leave). They were suffering the same injustices that was faced, except, we get sacked and they get shot, a small but important difference.

A lot of their fights surrounded safety and blame. Their technology was ancient (non-sigalled area) and when things went wrong, their members would end in court. They organised their structure around strike committees which then elected a delegate to an 'executive' strike committee. Which again is an interesting way of looking at organising, a strike committee to organise strikes with the power to make democratic decisions!

We also met Ali Fattouh and his solicitor, Haitham. Ali was being tried as a test case for the new anti-trade union laws that had been brought in "after" the revolution. Which is strange, as a revolution is meant to free the people from the tyranny of the past and not just replace it. The charge against him was one of inciting strike action in the bus industry. Strikes are illegal. His case is massive, important in the context of further struggle for freedom and justice. The state are throwing their weight to crush the new organisations being created. Ali himself faces 7 years in prison if found guilty. The main tactic for his case seemed to be a mass demonstration at the court. His lawyers felt that if they had enough people, they would force the court to adjourn. This in many ways is taking the idea of justice out of the legislature and making it the property of the people. Anyway, we sent him best wishes and his case is now adjourned to a higher

court. Incidentally, many activists are being accused of being Israeli agents or pawns of the west. Support is fine, but it has to be given in a way as not to undermine those who aim to help.

Rail Police: Weren't around too much as they had formed a union and went on strike whilst there!

Workers Party: Weren't around too much as they had few (few) there are a few workers parties forming. They were trying to keep politics very separate from trade union action. I think this is stupid. I liked the Workers party as they said they wanted 70% of members to be workers and a max of 30 percent intellectuals. 70% do, 30% watch! This differs from many of our working class parties where they all watch and none of them work.

May Day in Tahrir Square: This was the main reason we were there. There were some differences in estimated figures from 10,000 to 2 million! However it would not pick peacefully (riot police on strike ensured it was very peaceful). This was not a march but more of a rally where people came and went. There was a great oratory section from the solicitors (can't imagine Tahrir square doing rhythmic chanting). I haven't a clue but they were saying, but it certainly got the crowd going. We had the RMT flag and that caused many people to start talking and finding out whilst we were there. Police informers aside, it was very interesting to talk to people and hear their views.

Mothers of the Martyrs: probably the most poignant moment of the visit. There were many mothers carrying bill boards of their dead children, killed in the revolution. One mother explained her son was arrested and shot twice in the back of a prison cell. Words really fail me, as none suffice. However, they wanted their story told and their pictures taken. They wanted the world to know their children were murdered, so I honour their memory.

Voting out the boss: one hospital organised and voted out the boss. They then took control of running it. Great, worker control action. I was disconcerted that the hospital was centrally done, so they elected a new "boss" so they could get their pay slips signed off!! Like the idea of unions electing their own boss. I suppose its like the Council of Executives Elections really.

Traffic: This is the work of the counter-revolution: Shut eyes and walk.

Camels: Are the work of the devil and a tool of the counter-revolution. I was disconcerted from one and gravity did what gravity does. Best to avoid.

Police: Since they get a kicking in the revolution, you don't see them! The streets are totally safe the community polices itself. A much better model than the fascists in our police forces.

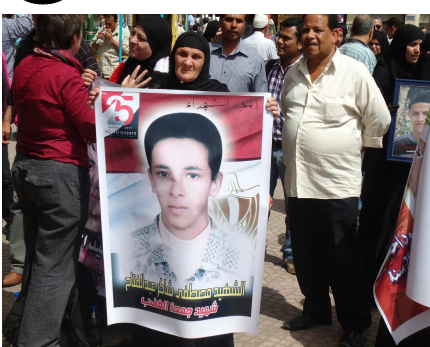
Conclusion:

As a founder member of the sarco-cynicists I was not expecting much (except perhaps murder and beheading). But this was a very mild and eye opening visit. The trade unions need to reach out and help the unions in Egypt in ways they want, not how we think they should be helped. Foreign interference must be avoided at all costs. The situation regards to unions is very fluid with more forming every day. However the state ones are discredited and are part of the problem. Many of these serve the state and not it's members, they are there to calm rather than fight. We need to reach out and carry on learning, but for now it must be at a distance.

NOT TO BE MISSED! Solidarity with the Egyptian Independent Unions

Meeting with very special guest speaker: Kamal Abu Aita

Wednesday 29 June (venue/time TBA)
Plus Paul Jackson, Anne Alexander and others



Mothers of the Martyrs