



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Justice for All: the Struggle for Workers Rights in Egypt"

The Solidarity Center
1025 5th Street NW

February 18, 2010, 5:30 – 7:00 PM

The Solidarity Center hosted an event to mark the release of its new report, "Justice for All: the Struggle for Workers Rights in Egypt." **Erin Radford**, Program Officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the Solidarity Center, moderated the discussion that featured **Kamal Abbas**, General Coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS). Abbas spoke on the urgent need to form independent organizations that advance and support the needs of workers in a democratic manner, provide direct support and services to the workers, and fill the void created by the "official" trade union organization which failed to achieve its fundamental obligations. His organization, CTUWS, is an independent non-governmental organization concerned with defending the democratic and economic rights of workers, and is the largest independent institution of its kind in Egypt.

Kamal Abbas kicked off the discussion by noting that Egypt was put on a blacklist of countries to be reviewed about labor and workers rights, which makes the timing of the Solidarity Center's report particularly important. Since 1957, the environment for those seeking to organize has been fraught with structural and cultural barriers, but the Egyptian labor movement is starting to reemerge with unions that are internally democratic and at the service of their members.

He then expounded upon a particular example of successful labor organizing: a real estate tax collectors union that went on strike to demand higher wages, eventually forcing the employers to capitulate. Additionally, over a period of one year, **more than 40,000 female and male employees in about 28 different provinces engaged in democratic processes to elect their local labor leadership** – and on December 20, 2008, 3000 representatives of the real estate tax collectors met to directly elect their national leadership. **Women employees played a very effective and important role throughout not only the creation of this independent union, but the strike and leadership election as well.** This union was also the first of its kind to have an executive board composed of more than 30 percent women, thanks in part to their invaluable role in the tax collector strike. Abbas explained that this movement can serve as a model for others, and can inspire them to cross the "barrier of fear that was created over many years" in order to exercise their right to strike.

In response to a question about the progression, if any, of labor movement policy under Presidents **Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak**, Abbas described the structural characteristics of the Egyptian economy, and how they impacted the formation of labor unions. "During Nasser's reign," he said, "the government was the sole investor, so the government owned the major industrial means of production. And the unions were nationalized. They had limited roles in terms of providing services for their members, and that was about it – similar to what you say in the USSR and Eastern Europe." However, workers enjoyed many rights during that period and even had access to decent education and healthcare services. "During Sadat's term," he continued, "you started to see the transformation to a

more market economy. And beginning in the 1990s, you see more explicit implementation of recommendations of the World Bank and IMF." However, **even though about 70 percent of the public sector was privatized, most unions remained exactly the same, with the same undemocratic structure, the same behavior, and the same leadership.**

One audience member asked about whether recent sit-ins are an indication that labor organizations are becoming more confrontational with their tactics, and Abbas responded that these **sit-ins are an increasingly common tactic used by groups**. He then addressed a question about the internally democratic nature of labor groups by expressing his astonishment that **laborers have strongly maintained democracy within their representative bodies**. Egypt has lived under authoritarianism since 1952, which means a pervasive fear that often prevents the development of democratic cultures. He referenced the negative experience from 1976 when Egypt allowed a degree of competitiveness within political parties, which he attributed to the lack of a democratic culture. But labor unions have thus far been able to overcome this history.

Shifting gears, one guest asked whether Abbas noticed a change, either positive or negative, in U.S. policy since **President Obama's** inauguration last year. Abbas responded that **even though the Bush administration had a strong democratic discourse, it didn't penetrate Egyptian society since the Iraq invasion was such a destructive force**. The Egyptian regime exploited the poor perception of U.S. intentions to ruin **Ayman Nour's** career, for example, because he had attended a dinner with then Secretary of State **Colin Powell**. "The feeling now in the opposition is that Obama's discourse is a conciliatory discourse. **Secretary Clinton** spoke about supporting human rights and not about democracy, and the State Department talks about training and education on human rights issues. **But even though there was a huge welcome for Obama's Cairo speech, the opposition felt that by choosing Cairo to give that speech, Obama was implicitly giving moral support for the regime.** And I agree with that analysis."

Abbas continued analyzing U.S. policy by answering a question about how the U.S. administration should prioritize labor rights relative to important diplomatic issues on the table such as democracy promotion and other human rights. **"I personally would like workers rights to be number 1 in all things – but also in a practical, objective way, it should be higher on the list.** We're talking about a country that has a workforce of 24 million, and those people live in the community, are a part of society, produce goods, and are not lazy. **The number 1 democratic request is the right to organize, the freedom to associate, and this is pretty important on the list of fundamental rights that we all should have."**

The biggest enemy in trying to demand your rights is fear, according to Abbas. "When people are freed from fear, they are liberated to be able to demand and advocate for their rights." New technologies such as the internet, cell phones, and satellite television have helped in this regard, enabling Egyptians to see what is going on around the world.

He concluded with a discussion of gender discrimination and sexual harassment, describing the deterioration of protections for women in the workplace, but also noting that some women are finally starting to speak up. **"Last month, we had a workshop for fifteen women in the private sector, and when they were asked about sexual harassment, they answered that it does happen – but to their friends, not to them."** He thinks it's a positive sign that they're even talking about the issue at all.