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The Egyptian Labour Movement between the World Wars

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Introduction

The rise of the Egyptian labour movement resulted from the economic changes following the breakdown of the monopoly system and association of the Egyptian economy with the world capitalist market during the second half of the nineteenth century. With the absence of an indigenous enterprising group, the vacuum resulted by the abolition of monopoly system opened the way for foreign investments. Egypt had seen a tremendous influx of foreign capital into the country to be invested in State Debt, agrarian land companies, mortgage credits, commerce, and public utility services such as water supply, gas, and (later) electricity, and transportation.¹ This development realized the integration of the Egyptian economy in the world capitalistic economy as an agrarian unit producing cotton, within a system of capitalist division of labour. By the development of landownership through the nineteenth century, the property deeds were concentrated in the hands of a limited number of landlords, while the peasant land became a target for dissolution and expropriation to turn the landless peasants into tenants and wage earners.² Thus creating the preconditions for the formation of a labour class.

The Formation of the Egyptian Working Class

Wage labour as the only mean of earning livelihood became widespread by the end of the nineteenth century. The setting up of enterprises in industry specialized in processing export products and the production of a limited number of goods, besides railways and other services sponsored by the State, increased the demand for labour power.

Workers in these enterprises came out of three categories:

¹ Crouchley, *The Investment of Foreign Capital in Egyptian Companies and Public Debt*, pp. 35-42

² See, Raouf Abbas, *al-Nizarn al-Ijtima'i fi Misr fi Zil al-rnilkiyyat al-Zira'lya al-Kabira*.

- (1) those coming from rural origin, mainly landless peasants seeking employment in urban areas;
- (2) some craftsmen who suffered from the competition of European commodities and whose guilds were weakened due to the economic policy of monopoly under Mohamed Ali, then collapsed during the last decade of the nineteenth century when the British occupation authorities issued the decree of patent license within the framework of laissez-faire policy resulting in destruction of the traditional authority and functions of the guilds;
- (3) unemployed skilled European workers of the Mediterranean countries who migrated to Egypt seeking work on better terms and to take the advantage of the Capitulations.³

These three categories comprised the Egyptian working class in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the first manifestation of the movement was initiated in a series of strikes and the foundation of trade unions. Therefore, the formation of the Egyptian working class followed the economic changes of the second half of the nineteenth century with the subsequent development of landownership and the transformation of agrarian land into commodity and the separation of the direct producers (peasants) from their mean of production (land).

Although there had been an industrial sector under Mohamed Ali with a labour power estimated at 8% of the total population, the industrial experience of that era did not provide chance for the creation of a working class. The workers were recruited by the State by corvée system, uprooted from their villages and forced to join the factories under military administration. Their work was a kind of labour tax burden, they were always looking forward to get rid of by escaping back to their villages. It was among the reasons of failure of industry under Mohamed Ali. Once the industrial projects were closed down by the end of 1840's, the workers resumed their functions as peasants. When Khedive Ismail tried to launch industry and established some factories, he depended on European labourers besides unskilled seasonal workers recruited from agriculture. Such circumstances did not provide the prerequisites for the emergence of working class, which was realized by the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the development of a dependent economy and the dissolution of peasant property.⁴

Labour conditions were extremely bad, with no fixed working hours and low wages. Daily working hours averaged between 13-17 hours, the main demand of the working class at that time was to secure a maximum ten-hour working day. The

³ Raouf Abbas, *al-Harakat-ul-Ummaliya fi Misr 1899-1952*, pp. 45-6.

⁴ Al-Giratly, Ali, *Tarikh al-Sina'a fi Misr fi al-Nisf al-Awwal min al-Qarn al-Tasi' Ashr*, pp. 156-7.

maximum daily wage was three piasters for unskilled and eight piasters for skilled workers, but wages paid to European workers were far better than what were paid to Egyptians, even with similar qualifications.⁵

During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the Egyptian workers organized strikes, demanding improvement in their economic conditions. There is no accurate detailed information about the beginning of these strikes, but much information has unexpectedly been found about the strike that was organized in December 1899 and lasted for three months by workers engaged in rolling cigarettes being affected by the mechanization of their industry. The strike was well organized and these workers established the first trade union in Egypt.⁶ There can be no doubt that this strike was preceded by other strikes in which the Egyptian working class got training.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, there were many strikes organized by Europeans in which the Egyptian working class participated. These provided a good opportunity for the Egyptian working class to gain experience of collective struggle against capital. Although their success was limited, it was sufficient to encourage them to establish trade unions, then known as "workers societies". But these societies were not permitted to survive for long, being attacked by the authorities.

The Rise of Trade-Unions

The 1907 economic crisis marked a turning point in the history of the Egyptian working class. It brought about a sharp decline in people's living condition, wages were reduced and workers dismissed. Being victims of the domination of world capitalism over the Egyptian economy, the Egyptian workers became aware that they cannot keep alliance with their foreign comrades who were privileged by higher wages and better working conditions. They were convinced that the European workers have nothing to share with them. On the contrary they had been used to realize the main ends of the European workers. For them, it was difficult to distinguish between foreign capital and foreign workers, being oppressed and exploited by the former and socially disregarded by the latter. Therefore, the Egyptian workers split from their foreign comrades and decided to have independent movement. Hence, they discovered that their enemy (foreign capital) was their country's enemy (foreign domination), they integrated their class struggle with the national struggle against imperialism.

⁵ Raouf Abbas, op. cit., pp. 50-52.

⁶ Colombe, M., L'Evolution de L'Egypte 1924-1950, p. 187.

This resulted in the Egyptian working class re-establishing trade unions and continuing the struggle for their economic demands. The bourgeois leadership of the nationalist movement supported the workers struggle against capital, most of which represented foreign capital.⁷

The support given by the Nationalist party to the labour movement was aimed at recruiting the working class, peasants, and intellectuals to the nationalist struggle against British occupation. To confirm this aim, in 1910 the party established *Niqabat 'Ummal al-Sanay'i al-Yadawiya* (Trade Union of Craftsmen), with branches in Alexandria, Mansura, and Tanta and a club in al-Sabtiya workers district in Cairo. A series of lectures was organized by the club to awaken workers' consciousness. Membership of the trade union increased from 979 in 1910 to 3,139 in 1912.⁸

The occupation authorities eliminated the nationalist movement by suppressing the nationalist party. Mohamed Farid, the leader of the party was obliged to flee abroad, and the suppression of the Nationalist party was accompanied by severe attacks on the trade unions. At the beginning of the First World War, the occupation authorities enforced martial law, suppressed political activities and disbanded the trade unions.

The second turning point in the development of the Egyptian working class proceeded from the war. Two factors were behind this development:

- (1) the number of workers increased from 457,269 in 1907 to 639,929 in 1917 as a result of increasing industrial production during the war;
- (2) collapse of trade unionism because of martial law, with workers unable to struggle for their demands. Although the cost of living doubled during the wartime, wages were fixed.⁹

These were the major reasons that led the working class to actively participate in the 1919 revolution under the leadership of al-Wafd, the nationalist bourgeois party. The revolution provided the opportunity for re-establishing trade unions.

Labour Conditions in Post-war Years

In the post-war years, labour conditions were very unsettled, most industrial enterprises established by the military authorities during wartime being suspended, with thousands of workers unemployed. Then, by 1918, foreign competition began to weigh heavily on all sectors: stocks accumulated, working hours reduced, and

⁷ Raouf Abbas, op. cit., pp. 59-64.

⁸ Milika al-Iryan, Markaz Misr al-Iqtisadi, p. 88.

⁹ Issawi, Charles, Egypt at Mid-Century, An Economic Survey, p. 50.

some factories had to close down. The labour supply far exceeded the demands of the labour market, and wages were reduced, while the cost of living was increasing as shown in Table 1.¹⁰

Table 1
Cost of Living in Egypt: 1919-23

Year	Index (1913-14=100)
1919	202
1920	237
1921	196
1922	176
1923	162

The workers were therefore unable to support themselves. For them, it was essential to struggle for their economic demands by re-organization of trade unions, a number of new trade unions were founded, and old trade unions were resurrected and continued their activities.

In the postwar years, the institution's trade union was the common example of trade unionism, the workers of each factory or unit within the same enterprise established their own trade union. Female workers did not join membership by force of traditions, and skilled workers rarely joined membership because they were better paid and their services were needed, they did not suffer from unemployment.

The statutes of the trade unions were modeled on the lines of the statute of the Trade Union of Craftsmen, besides the articles on foundation, administration and dissolution, they defined their main aims as to defend legitimate interests of the workers against employers and authorities, to improve the social conditions of members, and to refrain from politics and religious matters.¹¹

Immediately after re-establishment of trade unions, strikes were organized on the issue of labour legislation and the availability of jobs for unemployed workers. The workers demanded reduction in work hours, increase in wages, and paid holidays and weekend.

In response to these strikes, the government formed in August 1919, the Committee of Conciliation and Arbitration in Cairo, with membership of five high ranking officials, to settle down disputes through conciliation. Similar Committees were formed in the provinces with the *mudir* (governor) in chair, and District Attorney, judge, employers representative and workers representative as members. But these committees could not solve labour problems because their resolutions were not supported by legal obligations, and the employers did not take them seriously.¹²

¹⁰ National Bank of Egypt, National Bank of Egypt 1898-1948, p. 51.

¹¹ Hussein Khallaf, *Niqabat-ul-Ummal fi Misr* pp. 38-9.

¹² Ibrahim al-Ghatrifi, *Tatawur Tashri'i al-Amal fi Misr*, pp. 405-6.

Therefore, the early 1920's had witnessed a series of labour strikes all over the country, providing the social background which prepared the active political movements of socialists among the working class who were gradually awakening to their class consciousness.

Labour Movement and Socialism

The first revolutionary socialist cells in Egypt came into being as early as 1918 in big cities such as Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said, where there were many foreign residents living. The Egyptian socialist party was founded two years later in Alexandria by Joseph Rosenthal, a jeweler of Italian origin. From the beginning of the century, he had taken part in organizing trade unions into a confederation to be "a center for economic struggle and ideological training".¹³ In January 1921, the confederation was founded with some three thousand members. At the same time, a group of Egyptian intellectuals in Cairo were talking of finding a "society" for the study of socialism. When they heard about the Socialist Party of Alexandria, they communicated with Rosenthal and finally joined the party, the headquarters of which were transferred to Cairo, with a branch in Alexandria.¹⁴

Joseph Rosenthal did not initiate the manifesto of the party, so as to avoid the appearance of it being the work of foreigners. It was initiated by Salama Musa, Ali el-Inani, Mohamed Abdulla Inan, and Mahmud Hosni al-'Ulrahi. The manifesto sets out the political aims of the party as the liberation of Egypt and the evacuation of British troops; struggle against imperialism, militarism, and dictatorship; support of the peoples' struggle for independence; and the cancellation of secret treaties. Economic aims were: the establishment of a socialist state in which natural resources and productive power will be devoted to the well-being of the masses; distribution of production should be made according to the productive capacity and qualifications of each individual; termination of capitalist competition. Social aims were: free education for all males and females; the teaching of democracy; improvement of labour conditions by increasing wages and provision of social insurance; and emancipation of Oriental womanhood. The stated aim was for the party to carry out this program by political struggle, depending on trade unions and the socialist members of Parliament and the provincial councils, to which elections must be free and voting rights assured for all Egyptians including women.¹⁵

Although the party was quite moderate and avoided revolutionary action and class struggle, a severe reactionary campaign began, charging that socialism is against Islam and social security. Mohamed Hussein Heikal, the well-known liberal

¹³ See, the confessions of Joseph Rosenthal to the Parquet in, al-Ahram, Mar. 7, 1924.

¹⁴ Al-Ahram, Aug. 20-24, 1921.

¹⁵ Ibid, Sept. 17, 1921.

intellectual, claimed that socialism was not suitable for agrarian countries, particularly Egypt.¹⁶ Salama Musa, one of the party leaders, defended the party. In one of his articles, he claimed that there was no conflict between landlords and tenants, and the party should be a friend of both.¹⁷ In another article, he stated that the party was anti-communist, following Fabian principles, and its slogan was "development without revolution or coup d'etat".¹⁸

Ideological disputes had been carried on between the leadership of the party in Cairo and the radical members of Alexandria branch. In July 30, 1922, the latter invited radical members of other branches to confer in Alexandria, and this conference decided that the Alexandria branch should become headquarters, communism was to be the doctrine of the party, and its title changed to the Egyptian Socialist party, Egyptian Branch of the Comintern.

The leaders of the new organization were Joseph Rosenthal, Autun Marun, and Mahmud Hosni al-'Urabi. The latter was appointed delegate to the fourth conference of the Comintern held in Moscow, and applied for Comintern membership for the party. Returning, he reported that the Comintern could not admit the Egyptian Socialist party to membership unless it changed its name to the Egyptian Communist party, prepared a program for the peasants and expelled Joseph Rosenthal and other European members.¹⁹

In January 1923, a conference was held to discuss changing the name and adopting a new manifesto. This manifesto stated that the party struggle is for the emancipation of Egypt and the Sudan; the strengthening of relations between the people of the two countries; to struggle together against native and foreign enemies; the formation of a united front with the nationalist bourgeoisie to struggle against imperialism; nationalization of the Suez Canal; abolition of State Debt and capitulations; organizing trade unions and seeking their legal recognition; introduction of an eight-hour working day; equal payment for Egyptian and European workers; and formation of producer and consumer co-operatives.

Part of the manifesto was devoted to the peasants, and called for the abolition of large-scale landownership, confiscation of holdings of over one hundred feddans, the surplus to be distributed among the landless peasantry or to become "peoples farms" managed by peasant Soviets, cancellation of debts of peasants owning less

¹⁶ Ibid, Aug. 18, 1921.

¹⁷ Ibid, Aug. 31, 1921.

¹⁸ Ibid, Jan. 9, 1923.

¹⁹ See footnote 13.

than thirty feddans and elimination of land tax for peasants owning less than ten feddans.²⁰

Immediately after the announcement of the new manifesto, the Communist party reorganized the Confederation of Trade Unions which was established by Joseph Rosenthal in 1921. In February 1923, "direct action", a slogan issued by the party, was put into effect and labour strikes were held in Alexandria. An attempt was made to organize a general strike, but the occupation authorities arrested Mahmud Hosni al-'Urabi, Antun Marum, and two leaders of the confederation: Hassan Hosni and Amin Yehia. They were tried by court martial.²¹

The Communist party did not agree with the Constitution drawn up in 1923. This perhaps implies the attitude of the party toward the Wafd and the nationalist bourgeoisie, but supporting the "direct action", organizing the proletariat struggle to win economic demands. Before launching strikes, the Communist party asked Saad Zaghlul, the Wafd leader and premier, to legally recognize the trade unions, to establish a governmental office to make jobs available for unemployed workers, to approve formation of landless peasant unions in order to improve the standard of living, and to recognize the Soviet Union.²² The strikes started in November 1923, and continued through March 1924. In Alexandria the workers occupied factories and dismissed the entrepreneurs. Strikes occurred simultaneously in Cairo and Suez Canal zone.

In March 1924, the government interfered to restore order and eliminate the strike movement. Gamal ed-Din Pasha, Undersecretary of State for Interior was sent to Alexandria to examine the situation there. Returning to Cairo, he told the cabinet that the best solution would be to disband both the Communist party and the Confederation of Trade Unions.²³ Police attacked the headquarters of both institutions and the houses of members, arrested them, and confiscated documents.²⁴ A new provision was added to the penal code: "Sentence to five years' imprisonment those who urge people to oppose the regime by spreading revolutionary ideas against Human Society". The investigation found that there were branches of the Communist party in Cairo, Tanta, Zagazig, el-Mahalla el-Kubra, and Abu Qurqas.²⁵

²⁰ Translation of the Arabic text included in summation of the trial of the party, published in al-Ahram, Dec. 19, 1924; Agwani quoted the English text from Labour Monthly (London), vol 12, Mar. 1922, pp.276-79, which differs slightly, (see, Agwani, M. S., Communism in the Arab East, pp.4-5).

²¹ Al-Ahram, Mar. 19-24, 1923.

²² Ibid, Dec. 19, 1924.

²³ Ibid, Mar. 6-27, 1924.

²⁴ Ibid, Mar. 4, 1924.

²⁵ Ibid, July 7, 1924.

To obviate the danger, the leaders of the Confederation announced that there was no connection between the confederation and the Communist party, and that the confederation had no interest in politics. It was interested mainly in improving the economic conditions of workers, to make them equal to the condition of European workers.²⁶

On May 28, 1924, eleven people were brought before the court, among them six leaders of the Communist party and the Confederation of Trade Unions, including two Russians.²⁷ They were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment ranging from six months to five years.

The weakness of the Communist party derives from its misinterpretation of the historical circumstances. It was a national liberation movement led by the nationalist bourgeoisie. Instead of forming a national front with revolutionary petty bourgeois elements against imperialism, the party engaged in class struggle, thus providing a good excuse for the national bourgeoisie to eliminate the party and the Confederation of Trade Unions. The Wafd then set about gaining control of the labour movement.

Labour Movement under the Leadership of National Bourgeoisie

In April 1924, a new Confederation of Trade Unions was founded by Abdul-Rahman Fahmi, ex-police commander and secretary of the Wafd Central Committee. But the Wafdist government made no attempt to solve the labour problems, and in November 1924, the Confederation was disbanded immediately upon resignation of the Wafdist government.

The pro-British governments of the late twenties were all hostile to the labour movement. The police authorities attacked trade unions and rounded up active members of the trade unions. Some Communist cadres succeeded in organizing cells, but within limited circles, the members being petty bourgeois intellectuals. They toyed with the idea of creating a revolutionary workers' army that would put the Wafd into power after curing it of the fatal disease of compromise.

A manifesto published in the early thirties proclaimed: the direct and immediate purpose of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolution in Egypt is to throw off the imperialist yoke and get rid of the reactionary monarchy, to will complete independence for Egypt, to carry through an agrarian peasant revolution, to

²⁶ Ibid, Mar. 10, 1924.

²⁷ The six leaders were: Mahmud Hosni al-'Urab), Antun Marun, Safwan Abul-Fat'h, and el-Shahaat Ibrahim; the Russians were: Ibram Catz and Hillel Zanberg.

introduce an eight-hour working day, the radical improvement of the conditions of the workers, and the establishment of a revolutionary and democratic dictatorship of the working class and peasantry in the form of the Soviet government of workers and peasants.²⁸

But this was no more than the expression of hope, for Communist cells had no effective communication with the trade unions. On the contrary, the national bourgeoisie dominated the trade unions by founding and holding leadership of confederations. Instead of unifying trade unions in one confederation, some intellectuals, mostly lawyers, founded a confederation first and then organized trade unions to create a workers' base to support their political party. This was a unique phenomenon in the development of the labour movement in Egypt.

The economic crisis of the Great Depression added to the sufferings of the Egyptian working class. The economic policy initiated by the government to tackle the crisis resulted in rising in the cost of living and price index, while wages were reduced, and thousands of workers lost their jobs.²⁹ Naturally, workers had to struggle for their economic demands. Trade unions in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez Canal zone, organized strikes on the issue of wages, limitation of working hours, and the availability of jobs for unemployed workers. Hoping- that the Wafd government should take an action in order to solve labour problems, the strikes were spread out all over the country in various sectors of the economy, specially industry and transportation.³⁰ But the Wafd government was not ready to add new burdens to capital. Instead of meeting the demands of the workers, the Wafd party tried again to control the labour movement, thus opened the way for the national bourgeoisie domination over the trade unions.

In April 1930, the Wafd succeeded in founding a confederation when Aziz Mirham, the well-known Wafdist, organized the General Confederation of Trade Unions headed by Ahmed Mohamed Agha and Hosni al-Shintinawi, both Wafdist lawyers. At the same time, Dawud Ratib Bey, a wealthy landlord and member of the Liberal Constitutionalist party, founded a confederation which he called by the same name. It was expected that it would win the support of the working class for the party, which really represented the interests of landlords and the upper middle class.³¹ In December 1930, the Wafdists members of the council of this confederation expelled Dawud Ratib Bey and appointed Prince Abbas Halim, member of the royal family and friend of the Wafdists, the president of the

²⁸ Agwani, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁹ Gamal ed-Din Sa'id, *al-T'atwwur al-Iqtisadi fi Misr munzu-l-kasad al-'Alami al-Kabir*, pp. 31.

³⁰ *Al-'Amil al-Misri*, May 26, 1930.

³¹ Raouf Abbas, op. cit., pp. 88-9.

confederation.³² One month later, the Wafdist confederation headed by Ahmed Mohamed Agha merged with the confederation of Prince Abbas Halim and the Wafdist intellectuals acted as consultants.³³

The government of Sidqi Pasha was very hostile to such a confederation, which was under the influence of the Wafd. On March 15, 1931, the authorities disbanded the confederation and rounded up the leaders of the trade unions. But in July, the confederation sent Ibrahim Zein ed-Din, the general secretary, as a delegate to the conference of the International Federation of the Trade Unions (IFTU) in Madrid. He complained of the hostility of the Egyptian government and the suppression of trade unionism in Egypt. The conference protested to the Egyptian government, requested the mediation of the British labour government and sent Walter Scavenlis, the general secretary, to Egypt to examine the situation of the trade unions. In an attempt to lessen the danger of a strong labour movement, the government invited H. B. Butler, associate manager of the International Labour Bureau to study the labour situation in Egypt and propose draft labour legislation. The government also established a labour office affiliated with the Ministry of Interior.³⁴

In response to the recommendations of Butler, the government founded a Consultative Council with members representing government business, and the Union of Industries, to propose draft labour legislation, and provide consultation to the government in labour affairs in order to improve labour conditions.

As a result, some legislations were issued to regulate children and women employment (1933), maximum day working hours in certain dangerous industries (1935), but these legislations ignored the main problems of labour caused by the economic crisis.

For this reason, the labour legislation of the 1930's did not put an end to the day to day movement of the workers. The period witnessed a series of strikes organized by the workers of Suez Canal Company, public utility workers, and transportation workers, on the issue of wages and unemployment. The strike caused many difficulties to both government and business, despite the absence of the central labour leadership after the suppression of the General Confederation of Trade Unions by the police authorities.

Taking in consideration the fierce struggle of the workers in the 1930's, we needed to investigate the situation of their leadership as represented by the trade unions

³² Ibid, p. 91.

³³ Zaki Badaoui, *Les Problèmes du Travail et Les Organisations Ouvriers en Egypte*, p. 27.

³⁴ Raouf Abbas, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-106.

and the confederation of trade unions, in order to know how efficient it was, and to have an idea about its main characteristics.

The documents of the Public Security Department provide us with reports on the labour activities in 1926-31.³⁵ These reports contain detailed information on the trade unions of the late 1920's and the early thirties, but they neglected the most active trade unions of some institutions, like oil processing companies in Alexandria, cement works in Ma'sara, and sugar refineries in Hawamdiya. The absence of these trade unions in the reports could be interpreted by the fact that they were disbanded by the police authorities immediately after the strikes of the early twenties.

The documents show that there were fourteen trade unions in Cairo in 1926, eighteen in 1927, and thirty three in 1931. While in 1926-27, trade unions membership were decreased by 1%, their budgets were decreased by 33%, due to the suppression by the reactionary governments of Ziwar Pasha and Mohamed Mahmud Pasha, and the economic crisis which prevented the trade unionists from paying the membership' fees. In 1931, the trade unions were increased in number by 75%, in membership by 17%, and in budget by 100%.

It is obvious that this development was a result of the growth of the trade unions when the workers of the railways joined the General Trade Union of Workers, which obtained a governmental financial subsidy in order to keep this important sector of the working class away from the General Confederation of Trade Unions which was controlled by the Wafd. Hence, membership of the General Trade Union of Workers was increased by 300% compared with membership in 1927. It was mainly concerned with social services offered to the members to lessen the effects of the economic crisis on the railway workers. The General Confederation of Trade Unions organized the craftsmen in trade unions in order to increase the number of trade unions affiliated, and to increase membership.

No information regarding trade unions in Alexandria and other cities is available before 1927. There were twenty one trade unions in Alexandria, nine in Suez Canal zone, eleven in the Delta, and two in Fayum for government workers.

The fact that only 2.3% of Cairo workers, and 4.1% of Alexandria workers, were affiliated to trade unions, shows that the majority of the working class refrained from joining trade unions due to the lack of class consciousness. They hesitated in joining trade unions to avoid being chased by the police authorities.

³⁵ Raouf Abbas, *al-Harakat-ul-Ummaliya al-Misriya fi Dhaw' ul-Watha'iq al-Biritaniya 1924-1937*, pp. 30-38.

These circumstances made the reasons behind the weakness of trade unionism in Egypt, and the failure of the strikes to achieve their ends. The workers of a certain enterprise 'were divided among a number of trade unions, instead of having a unified one, such as the case of the railway workers who were distributed among four trade unions, Cairo tramway workers who were distributed among two trade unions. Being divided, the workers could not conduct successful collective bargaining with the employers, and the authorities could easily suppress their movements.

The trade unions suffered not only from the hostility of the authorities, but also from the disputes of the bourgeois leadership. Prince Abbas Halim tried to get rid of the Wafdist influence from the General Confederation of Trade Unions. But, in February 1935, the Wafd founded another confederation which they called the Supreme Council of Workers. Most of the trade unions which had been affiliated with the confederation headed by Abbas Halim joined the new wafdist confederation, but instead of struggling for the improvement of labour conditions, they were fighting each other. These were good chickens for the police, and many trade unions were disbanded and the leaders arrested.³⁶

In spite of the conflicts of the bourgeois leadership, the Egyptian working class participated in the demonstrations of November 1935, calling for the restoration of the 1923 constitution. Together with the students, they forced the political parties to form a national front against the monarchy and against British imperialism.³⁷ It was because of this movement that the Constitution was restored.

In 1936, labour strikes spread all over the country. This was the time of the honeymoon of Egyptian and European capitalism. Some joint-stock companies were established, especially in the field of textiles and weaving. Labour conditions were far from good. In 1935, it was decreed that workers should have retirement pensions if they had been employed for a certain number of years, but to avoid paying the retirement pension, entrepreneurs would dismiss workers after employing them just a few months, then hire them again.³⁸ Although the cost of living was increasing, wages were reduced and workers could not support themselves.

In absence of any efficient confederation that could organize strikes to win their economic demands, most strikes were violent and workers destroyed both machines and factories. The police shot sugar workers at Hawamdiya and

³⁶ Raouf Abbas, *al-Harakat-ul-'Ummaliya fi Misr 1899-1952*, pp. 95-102.

³⁷ Abdel Rahman el-Rafi', *Fi A'qab ul-Thawrat-ul-Misriya*. Vol 12, pp. 202-12.

³⁸ Sayed Qandil, *Niqabiyati, al-Risalat-u al-'Ummaliya al-Ula*. P. 31.

transportation workers in Alexandria. The worsening labour conditions and the hostility of the authorities and entrepreneurs persuaded the trade unionists to found a confederation free from the influence of political parties. In September 1937, some radical trade unionists founded an Institution for Organizing the Labour Movement, as a way to establish a confederation and organize a labour party. Mohamed Yousef el-Maddarik, the well-known communist trade unionist, was the leader of the institution.

Supported by the royal court, Prince Abbas Halim announced his intention to continue leading the labour movement. In March 1938, his agents in the institution for Organizing the Labour Movement elected him the president of the General Confederation of the Egyptian Kingdom Trade Unions, established by thirty two trade unions. After a month, the radical members of the confederation displaced Abbas Halim and elected Mohamed el-Dimirdash, a weaver of Alexandria and member of the Parliament.³⁹

Under the radical leadership, the confederation organized a demonstration on May 8, 1938, calling for the reorganization of the trade unions, and demanding compensation for labour accidents, reduction of working hours, fixed minimum wages, and solution of unemployment problem.⁴⁰ Although the government promised to improve labour conditions, a year passed but no positive action was taken.

On June 13, 1939, the confederation initiated a hunger strike to force the government to submit to the Parliament a bill for an act granting recognition to the trade unions. The government had no choice but to submit the bill for enactment by the Parliament, but with most members belonging to the upper middle class, entrepreneurs and landlords, it was impossible to get the bill through. A manifesto was issued by the confederation declaring that the working class could not rely on political parties and politicians, and the struggle must continue for the improvement of working conditions. But then came the outbreak of the Second World War and the proclamation of martial laws, which provided the government with the chance they sought to disband the confederation and round up its leaders.⁴¹

The Egyptian working class had to wait for three years to obtain the recognition of trade unions. When the Wafd formed the government in February 1942, many actions had been taken in order to obtain the support of the masses to the party.

³⁹ Raouf Abbas, op. cit., pp. 106-8.

⁴⁰ Al-Balagh, May 8, 1938.

⁴¹ Zaki Badaoui, op.cit., p. 42.

Among these actions was the recognition of the trade unions, thus, the Trade Unions Recognition Act was passed, and trade unions were registered. But the Act did not admit the establishment of a confederation, and the Egyptian workers had to struggle for obtaining this right up to 1952.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to find out the reasons behind the weakness of the Egyptian labour movement, and lack of solidarity among the Egyptian workers, which could be typical to the Third World countries in the epoch of national liberation.

The Egyptian workers understood the link between foreign capital, which oppressed and exploited them, and imperialism, which dominated their country. Therefore, they did not hesitate in joining nationalist struggle against imperialism, being compound with class struggle against foreign capitalism. They considered the national bourgeoisie their natural ally, but the latter did not share them the same view. They were seeking the political support of the working class in order to solve their contradictions with the dominant foreign capital, and to secure political and economic independence, thus they over-looked the economic demands of the working class, their potential ally.

After gaining political independence, the national bourgeoisie discovered that economic independence was no more than a slogan. Industrialization was not possible without the support of foreign capital. Bank Misr, which was founded out of the 1919 revolution as bearer of the torch of economic independence and Egyptianization of the economy, was forced to seek modern technology, and to take foreign partners. In 1934, 77% of the assets of manufacturing and commercial corporations, and 85% of the assets of all firms were in companies with foreign participation. This means that the interests of the national bourgeoisie were accommodated with the interests of the foreign capital. That is why the national bourgeois political leadership was always frightened of losing hegemony over the working class movement, which was the reason behind dividing and weakening the labour movement in the name of national struggle.

The weakness of class consciousness among the Egyptian workers, helped the national bourgeoisie to control the labour movement. In spite of the growth of the Egyptian working class through the inter-war period, it was not strong enough to form a powerful labour front against capital. The steady influx of peasants into the ranks of waged labour weakened the solidarity and struggling capability of the workers. Besides the fact that a considerable number of workers in the main

⁴² Raouf Abbas, op. cit., p. 109.

industrial centers, such as Mahalla el-Kubra, Kafr el-Zayat, and Kafr el-Dawwar, were living in the rural suburbs, handling agricultural seasonal jobs beside engagement in industry, which affected the solidarity of the workers.

If we add the lack of ideological training due to the suppression of trade unionism and the socialist political activities, and detention of the active members of the trade unions, we may find the reason behind the relative weakness of the rank and file of the Egyptian labour movement.