

# The Role of Egyptian Workers in the 2011 Uprising: A View from Below

Iside Gjergji  
University of Coimbra

**Abstract.** An oft-used representation of the Egyptian mass uprising in Western journalistic and academic debates is: through the use of social networks, young people have been able to quickly mobilize millions of protesters. Egyptian uprising is often interpreted as social and political phenomena, mostly instigated by middle-classes, highly educated and unemployed young people. In this perspective, workers' movement and its decadal struggles receive less attention and is considered *a priori* irrelevant. This paper aims to contribute some essential steps in considering the recent Egyptian uprising as a complex historical process, in which labour movement's role was pivotal. At methodological level, the paper seeks to combine literature, quantitative and qualitative research methods.

**Key-words:** Egypt; uprising; workers; Arab spring.

## O Papel dos Trabalhadores Egípcios na Revolta de 2011: Uma Visão de Baixo

**Resumo.** Uma ideia muito comum sobre o levante em massa egípcio nos debates jornalísticos e acadêmicos ocidentais é a seguinte: através do uso das redes sociais, os jovens têm sido capazes de mobilizar rapidamente milhares de manifestantes. A revolta egípcia é muitas vezes interpretada como um fenômeno social e político, principalmente instigada pela classe média, formada por jovens altamente qualificados e desempregados. Nesta perspectiva, o movimento dos trabalhadores recebe menos atenção e tem sido considerado irrelevante *a priori*. Este trabalho visa contribuir analisando alguns movimentos essenciais da recente revolta egípcia como um processo histórico complexo, no qual o papel do movimento sindical foi fundamental. Metodologicamente, o trabalho procura combinar a literatura com métodos de pesquisa quantitativos e qualitativos.

**Palavras-chave:** Egito; revolta; trabalhadores; primavera árabe.

## 1 Introduction: Bringing Workers to Centre Stage

On July 3rd, 2012, the *Egypt Independent* published an interesting article entitled: “Workers federation defends fired Egyptian workers in Italy”. The article reported the decision of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) to defend almost seventy Egyptian workers in Italy who were fired without prior notification and brutally treated by the Italian police as they demonstrated (Egypt Independent, 2012). It was clear therefore that something important and “unexpected” was occurring in the Egyptian labour movement. Paradoxically, there had been very little written on this movement and its achievements, especially regarding its impact in the 2011 uprising.

An oft-used representation of the Egyptian mass uprising in Western journalistic and academic debates is: through the use of social networks, young twitter and facebook-users have been able to quickly mobilize and organize millions of protesters. Thus, Egyptian uprising has often been interpreted as social and political phenomena, mostly instigated by middle-classes, highly educated and unemployed young people (Acedo, 2011; Bottazzi and Hamai, 2011). In this dominant perspective – which considers labour history finished and still poses questions like: “Is Labor Dead?” (Friedman, 2009) – workers' movements and their decadal struggles receive less attention and are considered *a priori* irrelevant. Yet the Egyptian Union Federation is now defending workers' rights in the West. It probably happens because, as Joel Beinin eloquently puts it: “Egyptian workers have not received the message that class struggle is unfashionable” (Beinin, 2011, p. 181).

What this article aims to do is to contribute some essential steps in considering the recent

Egyptian uprising as a complex historical process, in which workers' movement has played a very important role. By capturing a slice of the entangled discourses, politics and practices and by traversing social and political studies, this paper proposes an analysis of the contentious politics of the working classes in Egypt. A sustained lack of engagement with the Egyptian workers' lived experiences and struggles has not only reproduced disempowering paradigms in analyzing the 2011 uprising, but has also reproduced the conventional Western wisdom on the Arab countries – Egypt included – which considers them: “defined by ‘Islam’, that [...] has a strong anti-Western and anti-modern component (or simply, ‘they hate us’), and that it is uniquely susceptible to irrational political radicalism, authoritarianism, and terrorism” (Beinin and Vairel, 2012, p. 1).

Indeed, what we are (still) witnessing unfold in North Africa and Middle East requires a brief reflection on the way several Western scholars and observers are depicting the ‘Arab spring’. Orientalist *clichés* shape this new intellectual campaign, in the attempt to distort the factual evidence of events. Even the concept of season (Arab Spring?) “belongs to a long history of Orientalizing the region” (Shihade, et al., 2012, p. 1). In Thomas Friedman’s words, published in the *New York Times* on May 14th, 2011, we can see a clear example of this: “[t]his uprising, at root, is not political. It’s existential. It is much more Albert Camus than Che Guevara” (2011, p. 3).

By the same token Bernard Lewis, the renowned Islamic scholar, who claimed:

The Arab masses certainly want change. And they want improvement. But when you say do they want democracy, that’s a more difficult question to answer. What does ‘democracy’ mean? It’s a word that’s used with very different meanings, even in different parts of the Western world. And it’s a political concept that has no history, no record whatever in the Arab, Islamic world (Horowitz, 2011, p. 2).

Hence, the Arab world is often represented – even in the midst of a huge revolutionary age – as a static, monolithic and a-historical world, in which Arab people are seen as constitutionally backward and incompetent. As Shihade, Flesher Fominaya and Cox underline:

In the many reports, talks, conferences, and or papers about the Arab revolution, old Orientalist and neo-Orientalist narratives continue to present the Arab world as either dangerous, chaotic and violent or stagnant, passive, and always in need of help from the outside (from the West) (2012, p. 2).

Energies, hopes and fights of Arab people for a better life for over a hundred years seem to interest very few people. Their everyday lives and struggles remain buried under tons of books and articles celebrating the supposed Western supremacy. Nevertheless, the riots’ echo and the emerging of new political and social scenario after the recent Arab revolts have severely hit all these false and Orientalist representations of Arab people. As Dabashi underlines:

The Arab uprisings have propelled us back into the force field of history. These revolutionary uprisings prove every theory of modernization, Westernization, Eurocentricity, the West as the measure of the Rest, the End of History, the Clash of Civilizations, ad absurdum, wrong (2012, p. 15).

The Orientalist terms and representations of the Arab uprisings “do not account for the radical transformation in politics and values that the Arab World is undertaking” (Hanafi, 2012, p. 198-199). The best way to shed some light on this new social and political scenario, that has shaken the contours of the world that have hitherto operated, is to bring to centre stage the real existence of millions of individuals living and working in the so-called “Arab world” and, especially, to analyse the

mobilization of millions of workers, young people without perspectives and women without rights. As several scholars and observers claim, the Arab 2011 uprisings were not born in a vacuum. Hanafi is right when he says that: “one should read them as continuities in a long history of protest in the region rather than a total rupture” (2012, p. 199).

Thus, Egyptian workers’ struggles and strikes should be considered part of all phases, stages and factors of the 2011 uprising. Without taking into account this it would be impossible to identify and recognise the real social actors that are still filling the Arab streets. As Rosa Luxemburg lucidly put it, long time ago, in an attempt to counter the way 1905 mass strikes in Russia were (wrongly) perceived and described by German activists:

Instead of the rigid and hollow scheme of an arid political action carried out by the decision of the highest committees and furnished with a plan and panorama, we see a bit of pulsating life of flash and blood, which cannot be cut out of the large frame of the revolution but is connected with all parts of the revolution by a thousand veins (Luxemburg, 1986, p. 46).

Hence, considering that history and revolutions have nothing in common with pedantic schematisms, we should focus on this “pulsating life of flash and blood” and follow the directions of these “thousand veins”. To do so, this paper will first illustrate a brief history of one of the actors involved in the Egyptian revolution, namely the workers’ movement. The aim is to explore the evolving process of this specific revolutionary subjectivity as well as its forms of participation in the recent uprising. Further, the paper highlights the emerging contradictions in the Western dominant representation of the Egyptian uprising as a Facebook-revolution, in order to better understand the Egyptian revolutionary process and its social (and cyber) actors. The concluding remarks, far from summarizing what is written in the other sections, point towards wider theoretical terrains with the aim to stimulate further debates.

The intersection of different disciplines and methodological approaches functions here as a theoretical framework to examine the historical, social and political context in which the Egyptian labour movement has developed. This paper also draws upon 15 in-depth interviews I conducted during 2012 with activists and workers in Egypt. Furthermore, the paper is informed by many informal meetings I had with workers and union members of different Egyptian industrial sectors.

Finally, it is important to specify the reasons that bring me to use as analytical tools those provided by social science, as hitherto developed for other social movements in other parts of the planet. Much has been discussed and written about the Middle East and North African political and social mobilizations’ specific nature, in order to establish if these movements can be considered as other social movements and, consequently, analysed with the Social Movement Theory’s tools. The fact that the Middle East and North African political contestations do not often resemble other paradigmatic movements in other regions – such as the French revolution and their aftermaths (Tilly, 1986), the civil rights movements in North America (McAdam, 1982, 1986), the feminist movements (Rupp and Taylor, 1987), and so on – does not prove that tools so far provided by the Social Movement Theory cannot be used to analyse and understand them. On the contrary, as Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel clearly point out:

Middle East and North Africa can be understood using the tools that social science has developed for the rest of the World. And we argue that the Middle East and North Africa is a complex and fascinating laboratory, not only to confirm the applicability of SMT but also to enrich our theoretical knowledge of social movements and other forms of political contestation (2011, p. 2).

Thus, what this paper tries to explore could not only render legible the 2011 uprising, but it could also contribute to further develop theoretical knowledge on social movements.

## **2 Workers' Struggles after the Revolution: From the Economic to the Political Demands**

While writing this article I spent a summer in Egypt carrying out research. The country was crossed by strikes, protests and industrial actions. Perhaps a little anecdote can provide a clearer picture of the situation: on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, I took a taxi to reach the Cairo railway station. During the taxi ride I noticed at least three sit-ins and the nervous taxi driver had to drop me far away, as the road leading to the station was closed by some workers on strike. Once at the station, I had to wait almost three hours before I knew there was no train to Alexandria because of the railway workers' wildcat strike. I tried to take a bus later, but transport workers were already on strike from at least three days. The only way to reach Alexandria was to take a private "microbus" or a taxi, but I was also told that some of the licensed taxi drivers were on strike to protest against high taxes.

This situation was far from being an exception. Not a single day of June or July 2012 (until Ramadan began on July 20<sup>th</sup>) in Egypt was without labour protest: groups of workers coming to Cairo to protest or meet Mohamed Morsi, the newly appointed president, some leaving after promises were made, others continuing to sit-in. The labour unrest expanded also in other Egyptian cities, such as Alexandria, Suez, Port Said, etc. The Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights provides a number of protests and industrial actions in the first half of May 2012: 137 labour protests and industrial actions. The figure went down in the second half of May to 69 and continued sliding in the first half of June to 38, only to start increasing again in the second half of June to 119. However, the biggest industrial actions took place in July. As always in the last decades, things became serious when the Delta and Suez Canal workers went on strike. First came a wave of factory occupations in the industrial towns of the Suez Canal. Then on July 15<sup>th</sup>, twenty-three thousand textile workers at the state-owned Mahalla Misr Spinning and Weaving company (known as Ghazl al-Mahalla) – Egypt's biggest textile firm's industrial complex – began a strike halting production and calling for "a greater share of 2011 profits and increases in end of service remunerations" (Ahram Online, 2012a). In addition, they asked an adequate minimum wage of 1.500 EGP (about 245,7 \$) and the development of the company's hospital.

After Mahalla, a wave of strikes rapidly spread in the Egyptian textile sector in less than an hour, including factories in many other governorates such as Tanta, Sharqyah and Alexandria, as well as in other sectors like electricity services, doctors, Metro workers, construction, cement factories, fishermen and real estate tax employees. Workers at El-Nasr for Spinning and Weaving, Tanta for Spinning, Kafr el Dawar and Samannood Wool Weavers joined the collective action in Mahalla after a few days (Ishani, 2012). All workers everywhere raised the same demands of a minimum wage, permanent contracts, health insurance and the purge of the factories' corrupt managers.

The first state response to these mass actions was repression: workers from the Ceramics Cleopatra factory faced teargas and rubber bullets as they demonstrated in Suez on July 17<sup>th</sup>. Thus were back in action elsewhere: at least one worker was killed and several others were injured in these attacks.

Nonetheless, the Mahalla strike was partially successful. After almost a week, Mahalla workers forced concessions from the government, which had to meet workers' representatives and sign an agreement. This agreement included all the public sector textile factories, which now employ about 100,000 workers in Egypt (Alexander, 2012a).

Workers' demands were not only focused on economic interests. The Mahalla workers' statement, entitled "A message to the President", provides important information on the strike's

political aspects:

The workers have suffered from the marginalization, poverty and humiliation over many decades. So, workers must be now the first concern of the President, because all that matters to workers is to achieve the revolution's goals: freedom and social justice. We want to remind the President that it was the workers who toppled the oppressive regime (Atef, 2012, p. 2).

The interaction between the struggle for social justice (concretely expressed in demanding higher wages, improved working conditions and job security) and the battle for *tahrir* ('freedom') as well as for *tathir*, i.e. the "purge" of corrupt managers from public sector factories or institutions, has always characterized labour actions in Egypt in the last decades (Alexander, 2012b). This time, the overtly political demands of the Mahalla workers (i.e. the "message to the president") and the huge wave of strikes all over the country deeply influenced the political debate's course in Egypt, since attention, until that moment, was exclusively focused on issues such as the new constitution, the elections, the parliament and the SCAF rules. Strikes and the "message to the president" helped shift it from issues affecting only the institutional and political asset to those affecting social and economic problems related to the broad base of the poor and the marginalized. It especially helped move the focus from the religious/secular polarization that had dominated the electoral and political debate.

The statement's assertive tone and workers' awareness about their crucial role in the 2011 uprisings ("We would like to remind the President that it was the workers who toppled the oppressive regime") also reveals the political challenge workers are seeking to launch to the government and to all the Egyptian political parties and movements. Many trade unions and other bodies issued statements in solidarity with Mahalla and Egyptian workers: the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, the Egyptian Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Socialists, the Free Trade Union of the Egyptian Workers, etc. Nevertheless, not all left-wing parties publicly supported this new wave of strikes.

The interaction between economic and political demands in the Egyptian workers' struggles became even more evident in October 2012, when a report accusing president Morsi was released by the Centre for Trade Unions and Workers (CTUW), the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC) and the Centre for Trade Unions and Workers' Services (CTUWS): "the government did not respond to the workers' strikes in a way that befits a government that came after a revolution. Instead, it resorted to the same tactics as the old regime" (Ahram Online, 2012b).

In this damning report, president Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Morsi is a long-term member) were also accused of "disturbing changes to the Syndicate Law 35 of 1976 that regulates trade union activity" and of failing to give workers freedom and independence, even though "there are now 1,200 independent syndicates in the country" (Ahram Online, 2012b).

Many of these new independent unions are now part of the two new union federations, namely the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC). Although Egyptian workers do not seem to want to further accept political demobilisation – challenging president Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood and all the Egyptian political parties, and making them unlikely to continue ignoring the "social justice" issue –, the new federations are rather "weak in resources and organizational capacity" (Beinin, 2013). As Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio underline, there is no coordination and unity in their actions:

With regard to the independent labour movement, there is the problem of achieving a degree of coordination for unitary action. EFITU, the new independent federation, has grown very rapidly since its establishment on January 31st, 2011, and now comprises over two hundred unions of varying size. Achieving a degree of "internal democracy" for EFITU will be crucial in retaining the level of legitimacy and mobilisation which workers have achieved in the run-up

to the January Uprising and since then. There have also been the first signs of fissures within EFITU: its two principal founding organisations, Kamal Abu Eita's RETA and Kamal Abbas' CTUWS fell out last autumn, and CTUWS has withdrawn from EFITU. The differences were on the surface related to "foreign funding", but also to basic strategic objectives for the labour movement, with RETA favouring focusing unionisation drives on the still large public sector, while CTUWS aims to extend unionisation into the private sector and into Special Economic Zones, where workers have even fewer rights (2012, p. 109).

As Beinín argues, this happens in part "because Egypt had no experience with democratic trade unionism between the early 1950s and 2011" (Beinín, 2013). Nonetheless, workers' struggles now overtly embody both political and economic elements.

### **3 A Brief History of the Egyptian Workers' Struggles over the Decades**

According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), Egypt's population reached 82.3 million on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Cairo, the capital, is one of the most densely populated and polluted cities on the globe with a population around 8.8 million inhabitants. Most Egyptians now live in cities, almost 57% of its population. Manufacturing is the second largest sector of the economy after agriculture. In 2010, in agriculture there were about 28.2% workers of the total labour force that contributed in the gross domestic product by 13.2% with constant prices in year 2009/2010 (CAPMAS, 2011). The market labour force (including all the individuals from the age of 15, the minimum age of employment according to the Egyptian labour law, to 65 years old, the retirement age) is over 26.1 million. The number of the employed at the end of 2010, according to CAPMAS, was about 23.8 million (19.1 million males and 4.6 million females). Official statistics report about 2.3 million unemployed in Egypt and the unemployment rate is about 9% (CAPMAS, 2011), but according to the Egyptian Solidarity Centre Report: "60 % of all workers are employed in the informal economy" (2010, p. 5).

Many observers believe that the real unemployment rate is higher than the official figures in 2012, given the slowdown in economic growth associated with the global economic crisis that began in 2008. The growing of the unemployment rate is one of the causes of the recent waves of strikes and protests.

However, the last waves of strikes in Egypt should not be considered an exceptional event. Struggles and strikes to demand higher wages and better working conditions in Egypt are an 'old tradition'. As it is acknowledged, the world's first documented strike took place in Egypt thousands of years ago: it was "a three-day sit-in over pay grievances by pyramid builders" (Trumka, 2010, p. 3).

The modern labour movement in Egypt has its origin in Cairo with the 1899 Greek cigarette rollers strike against bad working conditions and the de-skilling of their jobs. It was on that occasion that the first Egyptian trade union was formed. Within a few decades, many other unions - mostly railway and tramway workers' unions - were set up in Cairo and Alexandria. Their main characteristic was, since the beginning, the strong anti-colonialist feeling, as supervisors in workplaces were almost always foreigners. Hence, fighting for higher wages or better working conditions basically meant fighting against the colonizers (Egyptian Solidarity Centre, 2010, p. 8).

Thanks to workers' struggles the first labour law in Egypt was issued in 1909. It formally prohibited the employment of children under the age of nine in cotton ginning, tobacco, and textile factories. Another protecting labour law was issued in 1933 (Law 48/1933), establishing protection for women and children. However, these advanced legislative measures were never implemented because they were widely ignored by employers. In order to change this situation, in 1937, was formed the Commission to Organize the Workers' Movement (COWM), and then, in March 1938, representatives

of Cairo area trade unions established the General Federation of Labour Unions in the Kingdom of Egypt (GFLUKE). The GFLUKE represents the first Egyptian independent trade union federation and it is clearly a key index of the vitality and maturation of the Egyptian labour movement since the early 20th century.

During the Second World War, Egyptian trade unions were finally legalized. However, the government law of 1942, which legalised trade unions for the first time, established as well extensive state power to control them and national industrial unions and federation unions were prohibited; only segmented unions, i.e. unions related only to one workplace, were allowed. Nonetheless, trade union movement did expand dramatically: “by May 1944, there were 350 registered unions with approximately 120,000 members” (Egyptian Solidarity Centre, 2010, p. 13). During the Second World War, the industrial working class grew significantly (about 623,000 factory workers), and so did the anti-colonial character of the Egyptian labour movement between October 1945 and January 1952.

When Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers overthrew the monarchy on July 23rd, 1952, and established a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), many workers enthusiastically supported the military regime. The Free Officers promised not only full Egyptian independence but social justice as well. In fact, with Nasser as president, a top-down wave of social, political and economic reforms began to transform the country in line with the popular anti-colonial movement. These reforms mainly included: labour legislation; agrarian reform (largely unfinished); electrification of the country; wide access to education; the establishment of a modern health care system. In 1954, all banks, all enterprises with more than 200 employees and large landholdings were nationalized (sometimes with compensation). Workers of nationalised enterprises became state employees and their standard of living improved markedly. Real wages increased by one-third from 1960 to 1964, while the number of weekly hours of work declined by 10 %. The government guaranteed all university graduates and all high school graduates a job (Egyptian Solidarity Centre, 2010, p. 17). For all these radical and top-down reforms workers had to pay a hefty price: first of all the cancellation of their participation in the political life and, accordingly, the harsh repression of their struggles or strikes: “there have been no legal strikes in Egypt since Nasser consolidated power in March 1954” (Beinin, 2009, p. 69).

Despite Nasser’s economic policy, the index of real wages didn’t remain the same over the years; it declined many times between 1964 and 1976 and workers’ collective actions erupted everywhere in the country (Beinin, 1993). The most significant action took place at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra, the central Delta city: “A three day sit-in strike in March 1975 resulted in a wage increase from EGP 9 to EGP 15 a day for all public-sector production workers in Egypt” (Beinin, 2009, p. 70).

The end of Nasser’s policy started in 1970 with the coming to power of Saddat. Ever since, a radical shift occurred in Egypt, both on a political and economic level. Saddat launched the *infitah* programme (‘open door’ programme), reinstating the private sector and attracting foreign capital, while reducing the state’s role. The ‘open door’ policy brought rapid and radical change “prompting a property boom and forming a new parasitic bourgeoisie” (Hinnebusch, 1985, p. 69-70). Conditions of the mass of people worsened within a few years and ‘bread riots’ erupted everywhere in the country in 1977. Workers considered these economic reforms as a direct attack on their living conditions: “[m]illions of people protested, and in Cairo, symbols of the new wealth – luxury hotels, boutiques, nightclubs and casinos – were ransacked and burned” (Marfleet, 2009, p. 21).

Industrial workers played a significant role in these popular protests and their actions were “an immediate response both to IMF-inspired reforms and to longer-term grievances” (Beinin, 2009, p. 70). These popular unrests had a national character, however they were not well-organized. Nevertheless, the 1977 riots proved to be pivotal for the Egyptian popular classes, especially for the working classes, because they forced the government to back off and many subsidies were restored (Posusney, 1993, p.

222).

On Sadat's death, in 1981, Hosni Mubarak became the Egypt's president. He pursued the same Sadat's strategy of 'openness', naming it "productive *infitah*"; free market and export-oriented economy were further strengthened under his leadership. In line with the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme, signed with the International Monetary Fund in 1991, the Egyptian government privatized almost all that remained of the public sector, while liberalizing prices and rents:

Mubarak pursued a more aggressive liberalization of the economy. In 1991, Egypt embarked on a massive structural adjustment program. The government's neglect of the agricultural sector during the 1980s and 1990s impoverished and marginalized small peasants. At the same time, neoliberal policies created tension within the dominant class (Munif, 2013, p. 206).

The deepening of neoliberal policies, between the 1980s and 1990s, completely wiped out the Nasserist state; all that survived was the authoritarian apparatus of coercion. Nevertheless, this didn't stop Egyptian workers to get back to the streets again. From 1984 to 1989 and the mid-1990s there were 25 to 80 collective actions a year (El Shafei, 1995): "tens of thousands of textile workers in Kafr al-Dawar erupted in a three-day urban insurrection, cutting telephone lines, setting fires, blocking transportation and destroying trains and cars before a massive crackdown by security forces restored order" (Solidarity Centre, 2010, p. 13).

After the 2004 a new and wider wave of public enterprises' privatizations began and the World Bank ranked Egypt one of the top ten economic 'reformers' in the world (World Bank, 2007, p. 1). Yet Egypt became in the same period one of the countries where food prices rose sky high, while wages remained stagnant. This situation brought Egyptian workers demonstrate against their bad living and working conditions: "from 1998 to 2009, over two million workers participated in more than 3,300 factory occupations, strikes, demonstrations, or other collective actions" (Beinin, 2011, p. 181). Mubarak's government tried to avoid the massive workers' protests by adopting a two-fold approach: little redistribution and hard repression. However, Mubarak's way of governing was mostly through the heavy 'right hand', to borrow Bourdieu's metaphor of the state (1999), using the security and repressive apparatus against workers, protesters and opposition forces.

Despite Mubarak's repression, a sharp rise in workers' collective action occurred from 2006. The biggest one was that of Mahalla workers who went on strike on December 2006. This strike was sparked by the women working at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company; they walked out first challenging their male colleagues and chanting: "Here are the women! Where are the men?". This was a victorious strike, and after that a wave of strikes engulfed the whole country and almost all sectors of the Egyptian economy (professors' strike, journalists' strike, tax collectors' strike).

On April 6th, 2008, the day of "April 6 Youth Movement" foundation, there was a huge effort to stage a general nationwide strike, in support of Mahalla workers' strikes against surging food prices. This general strike never took place, but there were mass actions organized by both workers and residents of Mahalla. Their three-day struggle rapidly led to the formation of the first independent trade unions of the tax collectors, the teacher's union, and other trade independent unions in 2009.

This Mahalla event represents a turning point not only for the labour movement but also for all the opposition political movements in Egypt. It is considered by many "to have paved the way for the Revolution in 2011" (Munif, 2013, p. 207). Indeed, 2009 and 2010 were marked by mass national strikes, nation-wide sit-ins, and visible labour protests, in Tahrir Square or other locations that spawned the 2011 uprising. Many of these important labour strikes and sit-ins were sparked by women, even if they represent in Egypt "less than a third of women of working age in the labour force" (Nasr, 2010, p. 9). Some of them became strike leaders and helped creating the new independent unions, that

are now leading and organizing the labour protests.

#### **4 “Street-Revolution” or “Facebook-Revolution”?**

“Before we start talking about the Egyptian revolution we need to define the concept of revolution. When does a revolution start? Do revolutions come out of the blue or are they the outcome of years of struggle?”, debuted Fatma Ramadan, leader of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), when I asked her to talk about the Egyptian revolutionary subjects.

The provocative questions of the Egyptian union leader are a good starting point for a debate on the workers’ role and their form of participation in the recent Egyptian uprising. In order to do this, we first need to answer the following question: was the Egyptian revolution a ‘Facebook-revolution’, as it is often said, or was it a collective struggle brewing over the last years?

If we consider the factual evidence, the emphasis put on social media’s role in the Egyptian uprisings doesn’t seem to have a sound scientific basis. As Ursula Lindsey highlights:

Already on January 25, cell-phone coverage was unavailable to the protesters who had streamed into Tahrir Square. The next day, telecom operators received instructions from the authorities to lower data-rate limits – a way to reduce the speed of the Internet. By the night of January 27, the Internet was down. Text messaging was disabled. The following morning, all cell-phone coverage in Egypt was gone. Officials of Vodafone, one of the major telecom operators in the country, have said they were obligated to obey government shutdown orders by Egyptian law, which gives the authorities broad emergency powers (2012, p. 53).

Hence, as the January 28th “day of rage” neared, the only way to communicate was organizing face-to-face meetings: there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no Youtube, and no cell-phones. Among those who share this opinion is Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and formerly director of policy planning in the US State Department, who underlines that:

Social media are a significant factor, but their role has been exaggerated. It is hardly the first disruptive technology to come along: the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and cassettes all posed challenges to the existing order of their day. And like these earlier technologies, social media are not decisive: they can be repressed by governments as well as employed by governments to motivate their supporters (2011, p. 115).

By the same token Beinun and Varel, who claim how in both Tunisian and Egyptian cases:

The instant analysis of much of the mass media has focused on Web 2.0 social media - blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc. – as the mechanisms facilitating the mobilization of insurgent movements. [...] Some have mentioned the relatively free flow of information across the Arab world as a result of satellite TV networks, especially al-Jazeera and al-‘Arabiyya. This too is undoubtedly part of the explanation. But al-Jazeera began broadcasting in 1996. It was a virtual leader for the Tunisian uprising. But it was slow to cover the January 25 events in Egypt, which many suspected was due to pressure from the network’s patron, the Emir of Qatar. Subsequently, al-Jazeera more than made up for lost time, even though its reporters were arrested and their cameras confiscated on January 30. Mobile phones, which have been used for political mobilization far more than Facebook and Twitter, have been available in Egypt since 1998 (2011, p. 248).

A clear evidence of this was the demonstration of August 24th, 2012, organized by “Facebook militants”: it was completely insignificant (Akl, 2012). This proves, obviously, only that social media

are not enough to bring about revolution and that, of course, revolutions do not materialize on demand. Nevertheless, social media's role in Egyptian society's communication should not be underestimated. As reported by *Ahram Online*, on July 18th, 2012:

Egypt has a total of 11.3 million Facebook users, with 1.6 million new accounts created between January and June 2012, according to statistics from the Arab Social Media Report (ASMR). This makes Egypt, the Arab world's largest nation by population, also the region's biggest user of the popular social networking site. The Arab world had a total of 45.2 million Facebook users at the end of June 2012, the report says, up from 37.4 million in January. In June 2011, the figure stood at 29.8 million, suggesting an annual rise of 50 per cent. The report also shows the number of Arab world Facebook users has roughly tripled in the last two years, from 16 million in mid-2010 to 45 million this summer. Younger Arabs - those aged between 15 and 29 years - make up about 70 per cent of total Facebook users, a proportion that has held relatively steady<sup>1</sup> (2012c).

Sociological debates on the potential of the new media in shaping society are not new. They began with Manuel Castells's work, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) and more recently *Communication Power* (2009). Many scholars recognize the potential of social media as a vehicle for spreading democracy (Poster, 1995). However, other scholars identify strong limits to the role of the new media in politics and democracy (Howard, 2011). The ongoing discussions on this subject are often divided between:

Those who emphasize the controlling role of the new media, as a new tool of repression in the arsenal of the dictators, and those who see it as a tool for democratic openness. Even in democratic societies, as some writers point out, the new technology poses a grave threat to the freedom and privacy of citizens. Other writers often get somewhat carried away with the potential role of the new media in shaping politics, opening up a new public sphere, especially in societies where a real public sphere is absent. There are, however, some writers who have presented a more balanced view of the pitfalls and potential, of the controlling as well as emancipatory role of the new media (Khondker, 2011, p. 676).

However, as many authors claim, the role of new social media in the Egyptian mass uprising cannot be questioned. This role was more about creating new spaces in alternative, rapid and not controlled communication, rather than organizing revolution, street fights or forging political consciousness. Abdulla Rasha clearly highlights this aspect when he claims that:

The Internet was the tool that showed every dissident voice in Egypt that he or she is not alone, and is indeed joined by at least hundreds of thousands who seek change. Facebook did not go to Tahrir Square. The people did. Twitter did not go Al-Qaied Ibrahim Square. The people did. More than one-third of Egypt's population of eighty million remains illiterate, and just 25 percent of Egyptians use the Internet (2011, p. 41).

The role of conventional media and their reciprocal interaction with social media should not be underestimated. By analysing the role of *Al Jazeera* (in Arabic) and many other channels in presenting the news of the Arab uprisings, Manuel Castells underlines:

---

<sup>1</sup> This situation should also be considered as a result of the Egyptian government's industrial strategy; since 1980s the Egyptian government imposed rapid growth "in medium and high-tech industry with the aim of making Egypt a 'pioneer exporter' in the Middle East and North Africa of consumer electronics, automotive components and biotechnology" (El-Sayed El-Naggar, 2009, p. 47).

Al Jazeera has collected the information disseminated on the Internet by the people using them as sources and organized groups on Facebook, then retransmitting free news on mobile phones. Thus was born a new system of mass communication built like a mix between an interactive television, Internet, radio and mobile communication systems. The communication of the future is already used by the revolutions of the present. [...] Obviously communication technologies did not give birth to the insurgency. The rebellion was born from the poverty and social exclusion that afflict much of the population in this fake democracy (2011).

Taking all this into account it should be deduced that social media's role in the Egyptian uprisings was undoubtedly relevant, but not crucial. The revolutionary subjectivities should not be sought among Facebook's "like" or tweets, but in the many popular struggles and street protests over the decades. In addition, it shouldn't be forgotten that many of those who participated in the 2011 uprisings were from the subaltern classes (El-Mahdi, 2011), with obvious limited access to Internet and social media.

### **5 Workers' Role and Participation in the 2011 Uprising**

Many scholars and Egyptian activists claim that the first signs of widespread political opposition should be sought in September 2000, when tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada. It's important to remind here that this happened while public gathering and street protests were legally banned. Thus, demonstrations in solidarity with Palestinians represented at that time a courageous collective act, which very soon gained an anti-regime character. However, the anger against the regime exploded on a larger scale with the outbreak of the war on Iraq, on March, 20th-21st, 2003. On this occasion, "Egyptians occupied Tahrir Square in a protest that began over the US invasion of Iraq and soon turned into one against President Hosni Mubarak and his regime" (Schemm, 2012, p. 85).

In the winter of 2004 the 'Kefaya movement' was launched, unifying several political parties and movements in demand for rotation of power. At first, Kefaya (*kefaya* is the Arabic word for enough) successfully mobilized wide segments of Egyptian society criticizing Mubarak and opposing Mubarak's son hereditary succession, but at last it proved unable to overcome many impediments to its reform efforts and political participation (Al-Sayyid, 2009; Al-Din Arafat, 2009). Despite its failure, the Kefaya movement inspired important (even if partial) social and legal reforms. It also helped creating an online community, integrating for the first time social media and opposition movements (Levinson, 2005).

Another important movement was born in April 2008: the "April 6 Youth Movement". It was formed more or less spontaneously around the effort to stage a general nationwide strike against surging food prices, supporting workers' strikes in the city of Mahalla:

Since the Second Intifada in 2000, different groups formed coalitions to support the struggle of Palestinians and oppose the war in Iraq. Two important groups emerged from these struggles: (1) Kifaya, a coalition of liberal, leftist, and Islamic groups that organized protests and symbolic actions to challenge Mubarak's authoritarian rule; and (2) the April 6 Youth Movement, mostly middle class youth who started backing workers' struggles in April 2008. These social movements helped challenge the political hegemony of the elite (Munif, 2013, p. 208).

In this decadal rising opposition movement, workers' role was pivotal. However, it is important here to be clear about this role. There currently exist more than 1,200 independent unions, but before 2011 there were only few of them and the few existing unions were (and still are) too small and unorganized, i.e. unable to shape or lead the opposition movement. As Joel Beinin underlines:

The independent labour movement was unprepared to take the lead when unrest swept through the Arab world in January 2011. It had no nationally recognized leadership, few organizational or financial resources, limited international support, no political program, and only a minimal economic program (2012, p. 1).

That doesn't mean that workers didn't take part during the 18 days of the Egyptian uprisings. On the contrary, as Fatma Ramadan commented:

While workers of almost all steel mills were in Tahrir Square, or protesting in Giza, other workers of the sugar company were in al-Fayyum, or in the streets of Ismailia and Kafr Sheikh. How could one think there were no workers protesting in a working-class town like Mahalla al-Kubra, where more than 500,000 people took to the streets every day during the revolution? If not workers, who were those two million people protesting and fighting every day in Alexandria?

Other workers described the same situation. One of them, A. A., who works for the Suez Canal Authority, said:

We were all in the streets during the glorious 18 days of the revolution. No one of us stayed home or went to work. We were all together, even though not so well organized at the very beginning. We didn't take to the streets as members of a union, but as individuals. [...] Of course, we brought some flags, but they were Egyptian flags, not union flags.

It was estimated that between January 25th, when the demonstrations started, and February 11th, when Hosni Mubarak was toppled, at least 15 million people out of a population of about 80 million – that is more than 20 percent of the population – took part in the mass mobilizations (Amin, 2011, p. 13).

As confirmed by all the activists interviewed, the Egyptian uprising had an undoubtedly nationwide and popular character; Tahrir Square in Cairo became the symbol of the revolution, which attracted most of the media coverage in the West, but it was not Tahrir square the place of the revolution *par excellence*: every city, province and corner of the country was involved. The demonstrators in other cities, such as Suez, Port Said and Alexandria, according to the respondents, were even more militant. In Alexandria, for example, the protesters didn't only hold a unique square, as happened in Cairo; they came out every single day in the tens and hundreds of thousands from every neighborhood and street, confronting everyday the police and tear gas, until they defeated the Mubarak police, pushing it out of the city. One of the labour activists of Alexandria said:

It was beautiful! We had to fight hard to liberate our city, some of us died, others disappeared inside the police buildings, but in the end we made it. Alexandria's inhabitants were so friendly and different without Mubarak's dogs [police officers]. Everyone was finally free. [...] Obviously, at some point we had to organize our popular patrols in the neighbourhoods, to secure people from thugs' threatens. This was my first self-organizing experience and it completely changed my life. Now I know that we can be happy...

Every single person I could interview in Alexandria used to define the 18 days of the revolution as “the 18 days of happiness” or “the 18 days without fear”. Surprisingly, no one from Cairo, Port Said or Suez used the same expression to describe the revolutionary experiences. This means that participation and fighting strategies were different in different locations. However, it is hard to deny the participation of workers in the Egyptian uprising, especially if it is considered that almost 15 million people took to the streets claiming “freedom, dignity and social justice”.

Indeed, workers not only took part as individuals or small groups in the 2011 uprisings, but their

strikes during Mubarak's final week in early February 2011 proved to be crucial for the successful outcome of the revolution. As many interviewers claimed, those strikes gave the final blow to the Mubarak's government, as they helped shift the balance between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces in the field.

Furthermore, during the popular uprisings' days, workers were able to gather their forces and create the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). Thus, the first concrete revolutionary act, that "violated ETUF's legal monopoly on trade union organization" (Beinin, 2012, p. 7), was the federation of independent unions, i.e. a workers' organization. Its existence was significantly announced on January 30th, 2011, at a press conference in Cairo's Tahrir Square, surrounded by thousands of demonstrators chanting against Mubarak and claiming: "Freedom, dignity, social justice".

## **6 Conclusions: What Future for the Workers' Struggles?**

The Egyptian uprising doesn't seem to appear out of nowhere. Instead, it seems to be the result of an articulated process that has been brewing over the past years. It seems to be more like a chain reaction to the bread riots, to the struggle for civil rights, to the protests in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada, to the demonstrations against the war in Iraq, and – of course – to the many workers' strikes, than a shot in the dark. As the Egyptian journalist Hossam El-Hamalawy points out: "The uprising that started on 25 January 2011 was the result of a long process in which the wall of fear fell, bit by bit" (2011).

This doesn't mean that the Egyptian uprising should not be considered as a break in the historic continuum. On the contrary, it is a break and, probably, a very big one (and maybe, right now, it is only at its very beginning), but it should not be conflated with the conditions of its possibility:

If the revolutionary Event is cut off from its conditions of possibility, from its material base, its 'event site' ('site e-ve-nementiel', to use Alain Badiou's terminology) with all its elements and their mobilization, then it appears as a metaphysical miracle that fell from the sky (Savas, 2011, p. 422).

Egyptian workers' movement was one of the most important revolutionary subjectivity – fighting in the working places and in the streets – that made possible the revolutionary Event, even if workers did not make the headlines in the mass demonstrations of January and February 2011. Workers' decadal strikes and struggles were crucial because delegitimizing, day by day, the dictatorial regime, they promoted among subaltern classes, youth and feminist movements a culture of protest. As Khaled Ali, the prominent labour activist, lawyer and former candidate for president, said in an interview on Democracy Now!:

The workers have successfully launched and sustained the largest wave of labour mobilizations this county has seen, from 2004 until 2011. The workers are the ones who brought down the structures of this regime in the past years. They are the ones that have been fighting for independent organizing on the ground, and they're the ones who created Egypt's first de facto independent trade union. And they insisted on the right to have pluralistic trade unions, not just unions that are stacked with government supporters. They're the ones who brought their grievances to the streets (Democracy Now!, 2011).

Strikes and other collective actions didn't stop after the Mubarak resignation. On the contrary, they

escalated and new sectors began participating in the strikes, including the police force, bank workers, public transport workers, medical ambulance workers and Mahalla textile workers. While writing this article, thousands of Egyptian workers are still on strike, demanding better working conditions, an increase in the minimum wage and, above all, the revolution's promises fulfilled.

Egypt, as it is acknowledged, is a pivotal country in the Mediterranean and Middle East area. As El-Mahdi and Marfleet underline: "its economic, political and social influence parallels that of Brasil in South America or of India in South Asia" (2009, p. 151). Egypt has the largest population in the region, the biggest productive economy and a very important political and military influence (Hashim, 2011) in the so called "Arab world". Therefore, what happens in Egypt has a deep impact in the Middle East and, in general, in the Global South, "especially since a new world crisis has given urgency to debates about the impacts of neoliberalism and the effectiveness of resistance and of alternatives to the global market model" (El-Mahdi, Marfleet, 2009, p. 151).

Egyptian workers with their past and current economic and political struggles are showing the world that Egyptian uprising was not only against corrupt individuals who prevent capitalism from functioning properly, and therefore demanding for "normal" or "democratic" free market (Maher, 2011, p. 41). Obviously, the masses of protesters who took to the streets in the 2011 uprising wanted freedom and democratic reforms, but workers and the poor also asked for social justice and the redistribution of the country's wealth after 30 years of privatization, impoverishment and neoliberal policies. As Samir Amin claims:

The youth and the radical left sought in common three objectives: restoration of democracy (ending the police/military regime), the undertaking of a new economic and social policy favorable to the popular masses (breaking with the submission to demands of globalized liberalism), and an independent foreign policy (breaking with the submission to the requirements of a U.S. hegemony and the extension of U.S. military control over the whole planet) (Amin, 2011, p. 13).

In this perspective, the Egyptian workers participation in the 2011 uprising should be also considered a class-based response to neoliberal economic restructuring. Ignoring these aspects would fail to understand the roots of the Egyptian mass uprising and what really triggered them. Especially, it would fail to understand that "the 'springtime' of the Arab peoples is akin to that which the peoples of Latin America have experienced for two decades" (Amin, 2011, p. 28).

Moreover, the social amorphousness of the Egyptian uprising should not be misinterpreted, as it is not the result of:

An amalgam of disparate elements, modern and traditional, in any kind of equilibrium. It expresses a combined and uneven development of an ensemble of 'contemporary' and 'non contemporary' contradictions (to use the very actual dialectic notion of Ernst Bloch), where the modern, not the traditional, the contemporary capital/labour contradiction, globally and locally, not the non-contemporary contradictions of anachronistic elements, is the determining, in the last instance, pole within the fabric of the complex ensemble of social relations (Savas, 2011, p. 423).

The "springtime" of the Egyptian (and Arab) people seems thus to represent a "new awakening" in the South. But will the Egyptian movements, and especially the workers' movement, succeed in their objectives, resisting the current globalized and financialized economic system and, at the same time, becoming a model of resistance to the global market?

Maybe no one can predict it right now, but Tahrir and Egypt are still vibrating and it seems there will be much to see and expect in the near future.

## References

- ACEDO, Clementina. Achievements and challenges of higher education in Arab countries. *Prospects* [Online], n. 41, 2011. Available at: <http://rd.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-011-9194-6/fulltext.html>. Accessed on: 05/01/2012.
- AHRAM ONLINE (a). Thousands of Mahalla textile workers strike to remove CEO. *Ahram Online*, 15/07/2012. Available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/47761/Business/Economy/Thousands-of-Mahalla-textile-workers-strike-to-rem.aspx>. Accessed on: 15/07/2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (b). Egyptian labour movement accuses Morsi of betrayal. *Ahram Online*, 08/10/2012. Available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/140/55075/Egypt/Firstdays/Egyptian-labour-movement-accuses-Morsi-of-betrayal.aspx>. Accessed on: 08/10/2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (c). Egypt has quarter of Arab world's Facebook users: Report. *Ahram Online*, 18/07/2012. Available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/48064/Business/Economy/Egypt-has-quarter-of-Arab-worlds-Facebook-users-Re.aspx>. Accessed on: 18/07/2012.
- AKL, Ziad. The social media illusion. *Daily News Egypt* [Online], 01/09/2012. Available at: <http://dailynewsegyp.com/2012/09/01/the-social-media-illusion>. Accessed on: 01/09/2012.
- AL-DIN ARAFAT, Alaa. *The Mubarak leadership and future of democracy in Egypt*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- ALEXANDER, Anne (a). Egypt's strikers defy crackdown and win concessions from regime. *Socialist Worker* [Online], 24/07/2012. Available at: <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29194>. Accessed on: 24/07/2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (b). The Egyptian workers' movement and the 25 January revolution, *Intercol.net* [Online] Available at: [http://www.intercoll.net/bdf/en/corpus\\_document/fiche-document-61.html](http://www.intercoll.net/bdf/en/corpus_document/fiche-document-61.html). Accessed on: 09/01/2012.
- AL-SAYYID, Mustapha Kamel. Kefaya at a turning point. In: HOPKINS, Niholas (Org.). *Political and social protest in Egypt*. Cairo Papers in Social Science, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009.
- AMIN, Samir. An Arab springtime? *Monthly Review*, v. 63, n. 5, 2011, p. 8-28.
- ATEF, Mohamed. The Egyptian revolution: Mahalla is leading again. *Counterfire* [Online], 15/07/2012. Available at: <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/15901-the-egyptian-revolution-mahalla-is-leading-again>. Accessed on: 16/07/2012.
- BEININ, Joel. All Unionized and nowhere to go. *The Carnegie Papers* [Online], 2013. Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/08/all-unionized-and-nowhere-to-go/f04j>. Accessed on: 04/02/2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The rise of Egypt's workers. *The Carnegie Papers* [Online], 2012. Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/28/rise-of-egypt-s-workers/coh8>. Accessed on: 10/09/2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A workers' social movement on the margin of the global neoliberal order, Egypt 2004-2009. In: BEININ, Joel; VAIREL, Frédéric. *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Workers' struggles under "socialism" and neoliberalism. In: EL-MAHDI, Rabab;
- MARFLEET, Philip (Orgs). *Egypt. Moment of change*. Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Will the real Egyptian working class please stand up? In: LOCKMAN, Zachary (Org.). *Workers and working class in the Middle East: struggles, histories, historiographies*. Albany NY: State University of New York, 1993.
- BEININ, Joel; VAIREL, Frédéric. *The Middle East and North Africa: beyond classical social*

- movement theory. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Afterword: popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Acts of resistance: against the tyranny of the market*. New York, NY: New Press, 1999.
- BOTTAZZI, Laura; HAMAUI, Rony. I veri perché della rivoluzione egiziana, *Lavoce.info* [Online], 2011. Available at: [www.lavoce.info](http://www.lavoce.info). Accessed: on 08/02/2011.
- CAPMAS. *The statistical year book*. Cairo: Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), 2011.
- CASTELLS, Manuel. *Interview*. Available at: <http://globalsociology.com/2011/02/07/the-sociology-elders-on-the-social-movements-in-tunisia-and-egypt>. Accessed on: 28/06/2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Communication power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The rise of the network society*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.
- DABASHI, Hamid. *The Arab spring: the end of postcolonialism*. London-New York: Zed Books, 2012.
- DEMOCRACY NOW!. *Egyptian uprising fueled by striking workers across nation*, Interview with Khaled Ali, 18/02/2011. Available at: [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/18/egyptian\\_uprising\\_fueled\\_by\\_striking\\_workers](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/18/egyptian_uprising_fueled_by_striking_workers). Accessed on: 29/10/2012.
- EGYPTIAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE. *The struggle for worker rights in Egypt: a report by the solidarity centre*, 2010. Available at: [http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs\\_egypt\\_wr.pdf](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs_egypt_wr.pdf). Accessed on: 04/04/2012;
- EL-MAHDI, Rabab. Orientalising the Egyptian uprising. *Jadaliyya*, 11/04/2011. Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>. Accessed on: 11/04/2011.
- EL-MAHDI, Rabab; MARFLEET, Philip. Conclusion: What's next? In: EL-MAHDI, Rabab; MARFLEET, Philip. *Egypt: moment of change*. Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2009.
- EL-HAMALAWY, Hossam. Egypt's revolution has been 10 years in the making. *The Guardian*, 02/02/2011. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/02/egypt-revolution-mubarak-wall-of-fear>. Accessed on: 02/02/2011
- EL-SAYED EL-NAGGAR, Ahmad. economic policy: from state control to decay and corruption. In: EL-MAHDI, Rabab; MARFLEET, Philip. *Egypt: moment of change*. Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2009.
- EL SHAFEI, Omar. Workers, trade unions, and the state in Egypt: 1984-1989. *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, n. 18, n. 2, 1995, p. 1-43.
- FRIEDMAN, Gerald. Is labor dead? *International Labor and Working Class History*, n. 75, 2009, p. 126-144.
- FRIEDMAN, Thomas. I am a man. *The New York Times*, 14/05/2011. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/15friedman.html>. Accessed on: 14/05/2011;
- HAASS, Richard. Reflection on the revolution in Egypt. In: Council on Foreign Relations (Org.). *The new Arab revolt*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011. p. 115-119.
- HANAFI, Sari. The Arab revolutions: the emergence of a new political subjectivity. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, v. 5, n. 2, 2012, p. 198-213.
- HASHIM, Ahmed. The Egyptian military, part two: from Mubarak Onward. *Middle East Policy*, v. XVIII, n. 4, 2011, p. 106-128.

- HINNEBUSCH, Raymond. *Egyptian politics under Sadat*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- HOROVITZ, David. A mass expression of outrage against injustice. *The Jerusalem Post*, 25/02/2011. Available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=209770>. Accessed on: 25/02/2011.
- HOWARD, Philip. *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: information technology and political islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- ISHANI, Maryam. Mahalla strike gains strength. *The Daily News Egypt* [Online], 18/07/2012. Available at: <http://thedailynewsegypt.com/2012/07/18/mahalla-strike-gains-strength-2>. Accessed on: 18/07/2012.
- KHONDKER, Habibul Haque. Role of the new media in the Arab spring. *Globalizations*, v. 8, n. 5, 2011, p. 675-679.
- LEVINSON, Charles. Egypt's growing blogger community pushes limit of dissent. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2005. Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0824/p07s01-wome.html>. Accessed on: 24/09/2012;
- LINDSEY, Ursula. Revolution and counterrevolution in the Egyptian media. In: SOWERS, Jeannie; TOENSING, Chris. *The journey to tahrir: revolution, protest, and social change in Egypt*. London/New York: Verso, 2012.
- LUXEMBURG, Rosa. *The mass strike*. London: Bookmarks, 1986.
- MAHER, Stephen. The political economy of the Egyptian uprising. *Monthly Review*, v. 63, n. 6, 2011, p. 32-45.
- McADAM, Doug. Recruitment to high-risk activism: the case of freedom summer. *American Journal of Sociology*, n. 94, 1986, pp. 64-90.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Political process and the development of black insurgency 1930-1970*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- MUNIF, Yasser. The Arab revolts: the old is dying and the new cannot be born. *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, v. 25, n. 2, 2013, p. 202-217.
- NASR, Sahar. *Egyptian women workers and entrepreneurs: maximizing opportunities in the economic sphere*. Herndon, VA: World Bank Publications, 2010.
- SHIHADÉ, Magide; FLESHER FOMINAYA, Cristina; COX, Laurence. The season of revolution: the Arab spring and European mobilization. *Interface* [Online], v. 4, n. 1, May, 2012. Available at: <http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Issue-4-1-Full-PDF.pdf>. Accessed on: 15/09/2012.
- POSTER, Mark. *Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere*, 1995. Available at: <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/mposter/writings/democ.html>. Accessed on: 23/10/2011.
- POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. Collective action and workers' consciousness in contemporary Egypt. In: LOCKMAN, Zachary (Org.). *Workers and working classes in the Middle East: struggles, histories, historiographies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- RASHA, Abdulla. The revolution will be tweeted: the story of digital activism in Egypt. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, n. 3, 2011, p. 41-50.
- RUPP, Leila; TAYLOR, Verta. *Survivals in the doldrums: the American women's right movement, 1945 to the 1960s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- SAVAS, Michael-Matsas. The Arab spring: the revolution at the doors of Europe. *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, v. 39, n. 3, 2011, p. 421-432.
- SCHEMM, Paul. Activist dissent and anti-war protest in Egypt. In: SOWERS, Jeannie; TOENSING, Chris. *The journey to Tahrir: revolution, protest, and social change in Egypt*. London/New York: Verso, 2012.

TAHA, Mohammad Rana. Minister of manpower gives focus to Cleopatra ceramics controversy. *The Daily News Egypt* [Online], 05/08/2012. Available at: <http://thedailynewsegypt.com/2012/08/05/minister-of-manpower-gives-focus-to-cleopatra-ceramics-controversy>. Accessed on: 05/08/2012.

TETI, Andrea; GERVASIO, Gennaro. After Mubarak, before transition: the challenges for Egypt's democratic opposition. *Interface* [Online], v. 4, n. 1, May, 2012. Available at: <http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Issue-4-1-Full-PDF.pdf>. Accessed on: 15/09/2012.

TILLY, Charles. *The contentious french: four centuries of popular struggle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

TRUMKA, Richard. Foreword. In: Egyptian Solidarity Centre (Org.) *Struggle for worker rights in Egypt*. Available at: [http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs\\_egypt\\_wr.pdf](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs_egypt_wr.pdf). Accessed on: 06/06/2011.

WORLD BANK. *Doing business in Egypt 2008*. Washington DC: World Bank, 2007. Available at: [http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/subnational/DB08\\_Subnational\\_Report\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/subnational/DB08_Subnational_Report_Egypt.pdf). Accessed on: 20/12/2011.

*Artigo recebido em: Outubro/2012.*

*Artigo aprovado em: Junho/2013.*

**Iside Gjergji** (iside.gjergji@gmail.com) é doutora em Sociology of Migration and Cultures na Universidade Salento, Itália. Atualmente é Senior Researcher no Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.