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The Labor Movement of “Mahala- EL Kobra” in Egypt: A catalyst for Political Change?

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Introduction:

During the last years, and in the context of an increasing number of social protestation movement, Egypt has witnessed one of the largest social movements in 5 decades: The “Mahala EL Kobra” labor’s movement. Something worth noting, “Mahala EL Kobra” city is one of the most important industrial cities in Egypt. It is known by its big Company constituted from 24 000 workers, and famous because of its very long history of militancy: It’s “The Egypt Company for Spinning and Weaving” (*Sherket Masr lel Ghazl wel Nasig*), also called “The Mahala Company” (*Sherket El Mahala*). After around 18 years of passivity, the labor movement has ignited there, just after the big strike of December 2006. Indeed, the three-days of Mahalla workers’ strike of December 2006 can be seen as a major turning point in the history of the recent protestation movement in Egypt, as it produced a “spillover effect”, crossing different sectors of the economy and industries. Thus, we can see that the number of protestation acts increased from 266 in 2006 to 614 in 2007, despite the fact that we witnessed only 202 protestation acts in 2005, according to the Land center for Human Rightⁱ. Thus, in the nine-month period From the 7th of December 2006 (1st “Mahala” Strike) to the 23rd of September 2007 (2nd “Mahala” Strike) more than 198,414 workers took strike actions.ⁱⁱ In 2007, “EL Mahala Company”, witnessed one of its more organized and successful strikes as it pushed the government to achieve partially the workers claims. A strike that continued for six days, before the intervention of the chairman of the pro- government General

Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU). However, the alignment of the wage with the inflation, one of the more important workers' claims was not tackled in the negotiation that followed the strikeⁱⁱⁱ, as there was no real pressure to achieve it, the pressure was more on the direct economical benefits. Indeed, this result is not irrelevant because it sheds light on the different leaders positions and visions within the company, an issue that will be important for our analyses. Hence, for one camp the alignment of the wages with the inflation was an essential claim, on the contrary, for the other one, direct economical benefits are more important to gain for the workers. In this context of the "Mahala" labor movement potency and impact, the following question arises: **Can this movement be a real catalyst for a political change?** In order to give an answer to that question, our presentation will be divided in 2 sections: 1- In the 1st one, we will try to do a short analytical presentation of the famous 6th of April 2008 strike, and the results and dynamics it generated. 2- In the second section, and further to our emphasize to those dynamics, we will try to analyze the obstacles that prevent this labor movement from being transformed into a political reality.

1) **The Famous 6th of April 2008 Strike:**

In this context of a partial realization of the workers' demands, the labor leaders have decided to declare a strike on April 6th. Since January, the leaders had already agreed on the fact that April 6th was the day of the strike inside Mahala Company. However, the novelty of this strike comes from two facts: 1- Its transmission from "Mahala" to the national level. 2- The popular uprising it generates, the most important in Egypt since 1975.

1-1) How was it transposed to the national level?

This transposition happened through 2 essential events: 1- The 17th of February manifestation inside the Company that was organized in the aim of claiming a minimum wage increase to 1200 Egyptian Pounds for all workers, the day before the decision of the National Council for wages concerning the minimum wage in Egypt^{iv}. Indeed, this manifestation gave a national look to the wage issue and consequently to the cause of "Mahala" workers. The Cairo left-wing circles certainly welcomed it, considering it a special moment for the labor movement^v. 2- The transposition of the strike event to the popular internet website « Facebook », on the

22nd of March, through a group of young people, who decided to transfer the labor leaders call, by creating a group on Facebook in which they ask for a general strike in all of Egypt as a way of expressing solidarity with the workers in particular and to express the peoples anger because of rising prices in Egypt^{vi}. The number of the virtual participants in that group has reached 70 000 persons. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood and the traditional political parties, the movement "Kefaya" and the party "*El A'amal*", the party "Karama", the party "Wasat" has adopted this claim,^{vii} conferring it a political potency and consequently a large weight in the media. In this context, it is necessary to point out that the propaganda done by "Facebook" youth, movement "Kefaya" and the other political parties was not in the interests of the workers. This propaganda has not only attracted the state- security apparatus who have transformed the Company in particular and the city in general into military barracks, but also urged the GFETU chairman, to force the labor leaders to sign a document in which they confirm dissolving the 6th of April strike^{viii}. That is to say, if the labor movement with its economical claims fostered a kind of national mobilization, the latter only stifled the labor movement demands, because it based on these demands to achieve a political agenda. Indeed, the five leaders that accepted to sign the document have thus justified their position, by the agreement of the GFETU chairman to achieve some of their demands^{ix}.

1-2) The popular Uprising and its reasons:

Unlike other Egyptian cities, in "Mahala", the city that declared the strike and then aborted it under pressure, thousands of people came out in huge demonstrations on the 6th and the 7th of April. Even, "Mahala" citizens did not hesitate to throw stones at the security guards. In this context, we can analyze the reasons for the huge events of the 6th and 7th of April as follows: 1) The medias effect and its impact. Hence, when the 6th of April came, the inhabitants of "Mahala" were all mobilized and waiting for an event. 2) The inhabitants of "Mahala" had already taken the habit of demonstrating thanks to the manifestation more or less regularly organized by the Committee of political parties in "Mahala" which a committee that is constituted by most political parties since 2006^x. 3) These people, greatly frustrated by the rising prices and seeing that the workers have dissolved their strikes, were thus very determined to demonstrate and were just waiting for the first signal.^{xi} Indeed, the huge reaction in "Mahala" cannot be understood without knowing the relationship, the people maintain with the "Mahala" Company workers: At "Mahala", in most families,

we often find one or two members working in this company. Hence, over time, a natural social bond was therefore established between the workers of the Company on one hand and the inhabitants of the city on the other hand. Indeed, since 1975, the Company was established in the collective memory of “Mahala” citizens as being the place that militate for the violated rights^{xii}. Thus, if the “Mahala” Company, the great defender of the workers’ rights in particular and of the people of “Mahala” in general aborted its strike, this would result in doubling the frustration. 4) The large presence of security forces did not hesitate to provoke the people who, after consecutive provocations gathered and demonstrated.^{xiii}

2- Why Did the “Mahala” Labor Movement not Transform into a Political Reality?

After presenting the “Mahala” labor movements recent strikes and the dynamics it generated, we will try in this part, to briefly analyze the 3 obstacles that hinder the ability of the labor movement in “Mahala” in particular and other protestation movements in Egypt in general to be transformed into a political reality:

1) The Egyptian Regime Policy:

If the Egyptian regime could tolerate these kind of economic demands, it could not tolerate that those claims generate into political demands. This is what the labor movement in « Mahala » and other protestation movements understand very well. The pressure put on the labor leaders to sign the document in one hand, and the extensive and severe security presence on the day of April 6th as well as the wave of arrests that followed in the other hand, states that fact. Hence, the regime has managed to force this protestation movements to be apolitical, by obliging them not to get in touch with politicians, whereas normally the later should be the link between these movements and the political system.

2) Lack of coalition between the labor movement and the political forces:

As mentioned in the first point, the regime does not tolerate this kind of alliance, however saying that, would not present a complete analysis. An alliance between the political forces and the labor movement is also absent because of the very absence of the political opposition as well. However, several studies on social movements have confirmed, that social movements need to build networks and coalitions with strong civil or political allies, if they want to push for change^{xiv}. This was obvious in other political experiences such as the Brazilian labor movement in

1970 and 1980, which succeeded to form a coalition with leftist parties and landless peasants' social movements. Successful alliances as catalyst for change, were certainly obvious also in the Polish case where those coalitions generated in the formation of Solidarity, the motor of change in Poland. In Egypt, the absence of such an alliance explains why the consecutive strikes of "Mahala" workers since 2006 have failed to establish a structural change, even regarding the workers conditions themselves. Indeed, "Mahala" strikes since 2006 have received no help from the leftist parties, the traditional allies of the labor movements. Something worth noting is that the chairman of the "Tagamoa" party, the largest leftist party in Egypt, was the first to declare he was against the establishment of a general strike^{xv}, while the latter would be mainly established in solidarity with the Mahala workers. In this context, one can easily say that the general strike on April 6th merely shows that the political opposition is only present virtually. A group of opposition was already reluctant to support the labor movement, the other just tried to use it as "Trojan Horse" to achieve his own political agenda. The political forces tried to declare a general strike in solidarity with the workers, while solidarity does not exist in reality, since the labor leaders are trying very hard to distance their involvement in politics.

3) Contradictory logics of militancy between the labor movement leaders':

The labor leaders are actually divided in two camps:

1) The first, is the one who has a leftist orientation. It is essentially linked to the "League of textile" « *Rabetat EL Ghazl we AL Nasig* » or "EL Rabta", an underground organization established in 2007, the idea of the latter -which was never achieved otherwise- is to build a league that would include within it, all the workmen in the textile sector in Egypt, starting with those of « EL Mahala ». This camp is more radical in its position vis-à-vis the government. Certainly, it is the one who had mainly organised the 17th of February 2008 manifestation -already mentioned above- for claiming the minimum wage. While the labor leaders of this camp give first priority to satisfy workers' economic demands, their ideological orientations give their militant actions a political aspect. Hence, their speech seems distant to workers who would rather see their economic demands achieved, to see an ideology enforced. One criticism of this camp is that though it has progressive vision, it is not always aware if it really possesses the means to achieve it. Thus, if the claim of a minimum wage was indeed a legitimate and intelligent claim, as it would end the financial problems suffered by workers, on the contrary, the labor movement in "Mahala" in its present

state was unable to push for the realization of such a request, especially because a national wide claim requires a national wide mobilization through the building of alliances. Certainly, this is absent, as the 6th of April strike has shown us.

2) The second camp is constituted of those five leaders linked to the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services” (CTUWS) “*Dar El Khadamat*”, an NGO whose main goal is to help workers in all matters related to the acquisition of their rights, and which actually played a key role in that issue. These five leaders are those who signed the document the GFETU chairman ordered them to sign and accepted to dissolve the strike. Despite the fact that, they have less political experience and no political ideology, these leaders have a real social base and a real presence within the company, a fact that we cannot understand unless we know what kind of leadership those leaders exercise inside the Company. Indeed, we can call it the “leadership of services” style. In other words, their role as leaders is not generated from their capacity to draw long term solutions to the labor problems, as the 1st camp tries to do, but from their capacity to serve the workers by fulfilling their direct material needs. Thus, these 5 leaders have the privilege, not to say disadvantage, of speaking both, the government as well as the workers language: The workers want only to get concrete rapid material gains and the government would only accept the achievement of some economic claims that do not require structural long term revisions. Having the same government language means that the labor leaders are not in a real opposing position and thus not in a perspective of political not even systemic change.

In this context, it is worth noting that, the result of the signature provided by the five leaders linked to CTUWS and the dissolution of the strike in this way, has been the strengthening of the already existing divisions between the leaders. As for « *EL Rabta* » leaders, the dissolution of the strike-if ever-it stands should take the following form: 1) It would be in exchange for achieving a reasonable number of workers claims, certainly at the head of which the minimum wage, otherwise it would be a concession without concrete exchange. 2) It should be done independently otherwise, a submission vis-à-vis the official union will result.^{xvi}

Conclusion :

In order to conclude, we can say that the « Mahala » labor’s movement protestations are the result of an increasing socio-economic frustration combined with the presence of a pro-governemental Trad Union, completely illegitimate in the

workers eyes, a dynamic that can push for the creation of free Trad Union, especially because, most of « Mahala » leaders has a real social base inside the Company. But is the labor movement in « Mahala » in its actual state capable to push for such an important change? The « Mahala » leaders, as well as other protestation movements, are always torn between two paths : Should they be realistic and only claim for rapid material gains, while sacrificing long terms goals? Or, should they militate for long term goals scarifying the acquisition of short term gains, and hence trying to give a final solution to their problems? However, achieving such goals can only be realized through a real coalition with other actors from the political or the civil sphere, and here is the absent link and the real problem.



Notes

ⁱ EL Bahga toshrek ma intesarat el Omal we al mokawema we al ghadab khlelal aa'm 2008 (Happiness because of the workers victory : Resistance and Anger during 2008), Economic and Social Rights Serie, Land Center for Human Rights, n65, Mars 2008, available on: <http://www.lchr-eg.org/>

ⁱⁱ Mustafa Bassiouny and Omar Said, A new workers movements : The Strike wave of 2007, *International Socialism*, n118, 31mars 2008, available on : <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=429&issue=118>

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Mustapha Foda, a labor leader in the" Egypt Company" in Mahala, Mahala EL Kobra- Egypt, 15 August 2009

^{iv} *EL Badil newspaper*, 17 February 2008

^v Marie Duboc, "*Le 6 avril : un jour de colère sans grèves*", in Iman Farag (dir.), *Chroniques 2008*, Cedej, Le Caire

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} ELhamy EL Marghany, Roe'ya lema hadas fe 6 Abril (A vision for what happened in the 6th of April), Hisham Mubarak Law Center, 25 September 2008, available on : <http://www.hmlc-egy.org/node/850>

^{viii} Interview with Karim EL Behiri, Blogger, Blog of "Egypt Workers" (*Modawanet Omal Masr*) and a labor leader in the" Egypt Company" in Mahala, Cairo- Egypt, 13 January 2009

^{ix} Interview with Faysal Lakoshi, a labor leader in the" Egypt Company" in Mahala, Mahala EL Kobra- Egypt, 11 August 2009

^x Interview with Gaber Serkis, member of the Political Party Committee at Mahala, Mahala EL Kobra-Egypt, 24 January 2008

^{xi} Interview with Abdel Moneim Emam, member of the Political Party Committee at Mahala, Cairo-Egypt, 28 December 2008

^{xii} Interview with Fathi Abdel Hamid, ancient labor leader at the" Egypt Company" in Mahala, Mahala EL Kobra- Egypt, 31 January 2009

^{xiii} Interview with Abdel Moneim Emam, member of the Political Party Committee at Mahala, op.cit

^{xiv} For more information : McAdam, D., McCarthy, J., & Zald, M. Eds . *Comparative Perspectives*

on Social Movements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996

^{xv} ELhamy EL Marghany, Roe'ya lema hadas fe 6 Abril (A vision for what happened in the 6th of April), op.cit

^{xvi} Interview with Karim EL Behiri, Blogger, Blog of "Egypt Workers" (*Modawanet Omal Masr*) and a labor leader in the" Egypt Company" in Mahala, op.cit