



CENTER FOR TRADE UNION & WORKERS SERVICES

(CTUWS)

Honored the French Republic's Human Rights Prize

Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS)

A March of Struggle

Throughout the current year which is about to come to an end, life was very difficult for the CTUWS. There was a continuous series of unprecedented governmental assaults and tyranny which reduced its effectiveness. The CTUWS' premises were closed. Its activities were hampered. And finally, the court of first instances issued its ruling of one year imprisonment for CTUWS' General Coordinator Mr. Kamal Abbas who was accused of committing two crimes of public abuse and defame through publication. The CTUWS confronted this relentless and fierce attack with the strong determination to perform its role regardless of these difficulties and to uphold its obligation to defend the genuine democratic rights of the Egyptian workers particularly the right to organize their autonomous trade unions and to remove all the legal and administrative barriers which prevents them from exercising this right.

The CTUWS was born inside the Egyptian trade union movement to express its democratic current which started to take shape and form during the 1980's through calling for the right of free representation of the Egyptian workers and to take initiatives to develop machineries for the movement outside the official trade union organization which was apparently separated from the movement. Such a separation created considerable vacuum and increasing workers demands which could not be fulfilled or released. The Center for Trade Union and Workers Services "CTUWS" was established seventeen years ago after the well known strike of the Iron and Steel Workers which represented the point of change in the labour movement not only because it was the biggest strike or because it was confronted by the most serious forms of violence, but also because it shocked the conscience of the Egyptian society and attracted it towards large scale solidarity with the workers. Throughout the years, the CTUWS managed to fulfill much of the requirements of the labour movement. It developed its experiences and capacities. Its activities extended from Cairo to the governorates of the Delta in the north and the governorates of Upper Egypt in the south. Its diversified services included training, legal support and lobbying campaigns; and it gained considerable creditability at the national and the international levels.

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It was surprising and paradoxical at the same time to close the premises and to jeopardize the legality of the presence of such an organization which continued to function throughout these years. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (the official federation) and the Ministry of Manpower launched war against this organization, held it responsible for the successive workers strikes and accused it of raising unrest and acting against national interest. As a result of the war launched against the CTUWS, the security forces surrounded its premises, cut off electricity supply, closed its doors and sealed them with red wax.

Several factors coinciding with the beginning of 2007 made this year the hottest year in the life of the Egyptian trade union movement and the CTUWS altogether. It marked a serious turning point in the life of both of them. This is elaborated as follows:

- Trade union elections were made during the last few months of 2006 to start a new trade union term for the “formal” trade union federation. In spite of the violations that took place concerning candidature and election procedures which are not uncommon in such elections, this time witnessed new situations which gave the elections different dimensions:
 - The formal trade union organization reached such a crisis that it became unable to bear the strong shocks brought up by elections. Questions were raised repeatedly about the credibility of this organization and its ability to perform its role which is so designed to contain the movement and keep it under control. The structural philosophy of this organization became weaker. It was based on the arbitrary membership of the government and public sector workers which formed a semi monopoly of the different economic activities of the country. Its activities were limited organizing trips and condoling the relatives of the workers who pass away. Labour relations were determined in detail by the laws which governed those two sectors. But after the decrease of the public sector, the historical foundation of the organization started to collapse. It is not possible any longer to rely on the philosophy of forced membership and the check-off system which cuts off the membership subscription dues from the workers wages. The new private sector will not allow this to happen especially in the absence of the democratic trade union culture.
 - The crisis of the trade union organization is not limited to its shrinking membership or the lack of new blood in its leading circles to the extent that the majority of the leaderships are retired workers. The crisis is more than that. The organization has become unable to deal with the new labour situation in the shade of privatization, restructuring and deregulation in addition to the urgent need to activate the mechanisms of pressure and negotiations. They are the mechanisms which can never

be operated by an organization whose leaders were trained to consider a strike as an impermissible taboo which stands in contradiction with “our culture” and to regard trade union pluralism as “an evil act and a foreign attempt to destroy our trade union movement”.

- This contradiction between the actual conditions of the Egyptian workers - which force the majority to express their demands and interests by various shapes of protest – and the “formal trade union organization which monopolizes their representation and turns its back to their rights and to their movements. Such a contradiction made the trade union elections more scorching than ever. The elections, on one hand, were a suitable environment for some of the workers to express their dissatisfaction and complaints from their organization and from their economic situation. On the other hand, elections make a larger number of activists stand for the elections either to activate the grassroots or just to challenge the existing elite leaders and agitate their unpleasant provoking attitude. Thus, there were elections in some government agencies whose trade union leaders were formerly appointed or elected by acclamation without any actual voting. Sometimes the workers of these agencies knew little or nothing about the elections or were unwilling to take part because they considered the matter as a governmental affair which does not concern them.
- The increasing number of candidates or workers willing to stand as candidates makes it difficult to control the results of the elections. It becomes necessary to commit more violations and to exercise more security and administrative interventions.
- The general atmosphere in our country during the last two years - where there were louder calls for democracy augmented by the media and the autonomous newspapers and T.V. channels – made the trade union elections for the first time raise unprecedented societal attention. The committed violations provided hot stories which the media were competing to cover. As a result, the “formal” T.U. organization and the government bodies which collaborated with it were embarrassed. In the past, such violations were committed very quietly without attracting any attention.
- Embarrassed by the international trade union circles, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation and the collaborating governmental bodies particularly the Ministry of Manpower announced that the new elections will witness unprecedented fairness and transparency. What happened was the contrary. The number of violations exceeded those in the previous elections. The claims that the violations were committed vis-à-vis Islamic extremists were proven invalid and incredible. The violations were committed against candidates who did not belong to any political current. The objective of the violations was to keep the “formal” trade union organization under the control of its autocratic

leaders who share the seats of its boards of directors without competition or challenges.

- The crisis of the “formal” trade union organization is demonstrated in different shapes and forms. The internal disputes are increasing. Reconciliation efforts succeeded sometimes to close the files very quickly for fear of putting all of them in trouble. And sometimes there were scapegoats who were mercilessly stabbed.
- By the end of the elections and the announcement on 28/11/2006 of the results which were not very much different from the results of the previous elections, the crisis which was disclosed was deeper and more serious. The workers anger resulting from the violations and the accompanying direct oppression and repression caused more congestion.
- The elections were followed by a series of workers protests. The biggest of these protests were the workers strikes of the Mehalla el Kobra Spinning and Weaving Company, the strikes of two cement companies in Helwan and Turah, and the successive strikes that included most of the textiles and clothing factories during January and February 2007.
- During the months that followed and throughout 2007 the workers movements were like waves which moved quickly sometimes and slowly sometimes, but they were always moving. The demands of the majority of the protesting workers were based upon wages (the different forms of the non-fixed wages, incentives and the workers’ share in profits). Other workers demanded job security and changing their temporary contracts to permanent ones.
- There is nothing surprising in the workers’ call for higher wages. The deteriorating economic conditions of most of the Egyptian people is not a secret. According to governmental statistics, inflation scored unprecedented rates during the past few months. The real value of the money dropped to very low levels.
- Although the Egyptian Labour Law No. 12 of the year 2003 stipulated the establishment of a Higher Council for Wages to determine the minimum wages and the periodical increment. This Council did not perform its function to-date in spite of the urgent need to change the wages structure. Instead, the government changed the wages of some categories when the conditions seemed to be catastrophic. The government treated these situations with sedatives in order to reduce tension. This explains why more sectors and more categories are calling partially to improve their situation. In this context, we can understand the stronger move of the textile workers who get the lowest wages if compared with other sectors.

- The absence of a genuine trade union organization makes it difficult – if not impossible – to settle the situation through negotiations without resorting to strikes. There is no organization to organize the demands and to negotiate thereon. That is why the Egyptian workers go in strike to start with. Even if they call for negotiations, they do not find the appropriate response. But when they go in strike, the other party (be it the management, the owner or the government) is forced to negotiate with whoever is entitled by the workers themselves.
- The congestion at the workers’ arena during the trade union elections – which embodied the actual absence of a genuine organization – was clearly reflected on the workers movements which demanded solution of their trade union committees (the plant committees). The Mehalla el Kobra workers gathered fifteen thousand (15000) signatures to raise the motion of “no confidence” in their trade union committee. But the formal trade union organization refused and is still refusing this demand. However, it submitted to their demand and recognized an autonomous team to negotiate for them
- All the above mentioned factors accompanied by a totalitarian thinking which does not admit the diversity and the resources of the popular initiatives or the workers and the peoples ability to exercise their influence, express their demands and attempt to realize their interests. Such a mentality is seeking a motivator behind every action and a conspirator in every location. This mentality thought that it found what it was looking for at the CTUWS.
- The CTUWS did not present itself as a substitute for the “formal” trade union federation. It was simply obliged to defend the rights of the Egyptian workers to form their independent trade unions. It supported the workers’ initiative to achieve this goal. And supported their right to be trained and to organize programs to raise their awareness of their trade union and labour rights. But the prevalent situation as explained earlier made the workers resort to the CTUWS in the absence of the “formal” trade union organization. They asked the CTUWS to provide them with training and legal support. They consulted the CTUWS’ activists concerning their rights, the legality of their rights and the worthiness of their realization.

Even though the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) is neither a union nor a trade union organization, it fills the vacuum created by the absence of independent trade unions for the Egyptian workers. For this reason, the “formal” trade union federation considered the CTUWS a dangerous organization. But the danger is inherent inside the federation itself and in its crisis.

The Center for Trade Union and Workers Services did not incite workers to go in strikes. It defended their legal right to practice all sorts of lobbying and negotiations

in order to realize their rights. But those who were unable to understand the real motivations of strikes held the CTUWS responsible for inciting strikes. Meanwhile, government officials admitted the merit of the workers' demands.

For all these reasons, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation launched war against the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services. The Egyptian government closed CTUWS' premises. Moreover, a sentence of one-year imprisonment was issued for Mr. Kamal Abbas the general coordinator of CTUWS.

And for all the above, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services is still continuous.

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