



Interview with Heba Khalil*

The interview was conducted by Ihab Shabana

April 30, 2016

CEMMIS: The history of the Egyptian working class enumerates many struggles that date from the beginning of 20th century, even in times of war and great repression. Do you think that a mobilizing class consciousness exists in Egypt, maybe in the Marxist sense of the term or with a broader sense, or do you think for instance that the national myth of saving Egypt in times of crisis and accusations of treason affects the workers' movement?

HEBA KHALIL: Well, it's a bit of a complex question. The easy answer would be that no, the workers in Egypt have not developed a class consciousness, not over the decades that have passed, you know, not since the beginning of the 20th century and definitely not nowadays. And you know, I think that the big thing that shows that class you know... class consciousness means really organizing and acting as a class, the class interests becoming the priority but also becoming the identity for the workers. To me, what happened in Egypt since 2011, going through the period of the Muslim Brotherhood, and worries of the islamisation, that were...you know, the workers used to talk a lot about the akhwanit or the brotherhoodization of the workers' movement, and then going to supporting the military regime which continues up until today. Even the political fractions which started up supporting the military regime in 2013 and supporting the military core, the change of government, many of them after a year have realized how oppressive and repressive and power hungry the military regime is, that is not simply saving the country from the Muslim Brotherhood, the brotherhoodization, as they called it. But, even the independent trade unions continue to largely support the military regime, the EFITU, which is the earliest of them, it was established by Kamal Abu Eita, officially organized a press conference to support Sisi for the presidential elections. They took an official political stance to support al Sisi. By that time it had already been a year since the military regime came to power so that was in mid 2014, so they could see the repression already started. So workers' consciousness would have organized against Sisi's regime, it would organize under a regime that had already started its oppression on worker's strikes, that had already passed the anti-protests law but still, they didn't do it

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and they decided to support the military regime till the end. As you said, not in a worker's consciousness type of way, but in a let's say Egypt type of way. And of course, Kamal Abu Eita is a case in a point, becoming minister of labor and migration but he allowed a workers' strike to be violently dispersed right where his office was. He was sitting upstairs and he didn't even go downstairs to negotiate with his workers, the ones he is supposed to be part of. Kamal Abu Eita let the chance in 2008 and in 2011 during the 18 days and after, he was leading the workers supposedly and he was one of the peoples who created the slogans, the motos for the workers' movement and, unlike the people who had foreseen, he is responsible for the creation of the first independent labor union. Still he sat in his office as a minister, which is completely contrary to what you would imagine. You would imagine someone like him being the bastion for the workers' consciousness, for the class consciousness. He was sitting there and he didn't even go downstairs to check on the workers while they were being attacked by the police and dispersed. And they were protesting by the building where his office was, in front of his building. So, I don't think there's a workers' consciousness in the way you imagine it should have been established with decades of the worker's movement in Egypt having to fight for different struggles. I think a big part of this is that the struggles of the workers' movement so far has either been very narrow, need based and focused on a specific demand, and by narrow I don't mean narrow minded but I mean narrow in its call for support. So, you either have this success by a specific union at a specific factory or within a specific sector who know what they want exactly, whether they demanding wages or they demanding bonuses or better health and safety procedures, and that is a successful struggle by itself, or the very popular railway strikes that was a very successful struggle but it was very need based. Or you have this mashing up of labor and politics, political parties like in 2008, where you don't have organizations based on workers' consciousness and based on a class consciousness. You have an organization that is like an umbrella, it has space for the Kefaya movement, it has space for the 6th of April movement, it has space for the workers, it has space for the regime's opposition who are not organized in political parties. I am not saying that this is a bad thing to have this kind of large, cross-sector cooperation or networking. But the fact is that the success was based on this networking; it wasn't based on strong workers' movement per se.

CEMMIS: What main transformations you see on the demands of the Egyptian Labor Movement? For instance, the minimum wage demand, or the freedom of association, or ending the trials for syndicalism, the military trials or collective bargaining rights. Have these things been unaffected by time or have they changed after 2011? And actually, have any networks been forged throughout the recent Egyptian history between the labor movement and the political parties or political organizations?

H.K.: I don't think there has been a paradigm shift in the demands of the workers. I do see a shift but I don't think is a conceptual shift that we can read as a shift in the labor movement itself or a maturing of the labor movement. To me the shift comes from changing the nature of the struggling. Well, first of all you already have independent labor unions so once you have these independent unions you've already created a new space of the workers, where they don't have to be oppressed by literally state led unions. Within these new spaces you create new demands... One needs to save these new spaces and make sure they continue to exist. That was the big struggle that EFITU and the others, the Democratic Labor Congress, had in 2012 with the Morsi government, when they were trying to infiltrate the independent trade unions because that was a new

demand. We have the space, we want to save it for ourselves, don't take it over. But also to make sure that the new spaces that have been created for independent labor unions, that these have the same rights and equal entitlements as the official unions. So I think that so far there has been a shift and opening of space for the labor movement. I see a development in the demands and the language of the labor movement if we can speak of a labor movement in Egypt, and I am not sure we can do that. But let's just use the simple term "the labor movement". Insofar as we are talking about the changing realities around them yes, there is a change in the kind of demands and there is a change in what they are calling for. The labor movement in Egypt has historically been a mix of joining for political purposes and joining for their own need based purposes or the basic wage, better working conditions and so on but also talking about the workers' *karama* (dignity) and about freedom. These kinds of demands I don't think they are new to the scene of the labor movement, I think we know about them more now. Maybe it's also the age of social media and the age of the flying news, basically report news just by putting them on twitter. Now we know more about the kinds of demands that the liberal movement do than we did 20 years ago. But I think, if you look at specific struggles throughout the years like the bread riots in Egypt or the 1967 Naksa, if you look at specific moments that are well documented you will see that the labor movement is using all kind of language and that the workers are not just speaking about wages, about their direct interests as workers but also speaking as citizens and speaking not necessarily the class language of this working class or commodified labor; like they are not using of course this kind of more Marxist language but they are speaking about *al tabaqat al muhamasha*, the marginalized classes, the isolated people, the disadvantaged people and stuff like that. But I see this as something that existed and is more continuous.

Now, the relationship between the labor movement and the political groups and political parties and youth movements and so on is very interesting and I don't know if it's something we should consider also as a paradigm shift or rather as something that we could have seen in previous times. So the kind of relationship that the 6th of April movement had to the Mahala workers in 2008, whether that's something we could regard as a paradigm swift, as something new that it's a convergence of two movements around similar demands or whether this is something we could also trace throughout history as one of the networks that could be forged between similarly minded groups and similarly interested groups. I don't have any historical key studies in mind, so you're the historian, you look for some studies but I know that in the 1980's and the railway strikes case many of the political parties were forging these networks with workers. They were not just helping them through procedures but also helping them through media appearance and explaining their point of view, and writing at newspapers about them and things like that. I don't know if you are familiar with that case study, it's a very important case study even legally in Egypt it was a precedent where the court ruled in favor of the workers and said that the railway workers' strike and that they were being tried for having stopped the railways which is *taghtil al intag* (delay of the production) and that production is brought to a standstill and they are killing the economy and so on and so forth. The court found that they were not guilty and in the court's decision they said that in defending their humanity and in defending their basic entitlements as citizens and as workers and as human beings they are entitled to stop working and they are entitled to strike, and they have the right to strike. And that had been used as a precedent since then, because it's almost like law in its own right, once you have a court say something like that and in that incident you had political parties and you had similar networks being forged and you had the changing framing and branding of the labor movement, according to, or depending on who they were talking to... You can use the language of politics sometimes, you can use the language of "yes

we are workers and we want the better wages and better working conditions". But I guess what I am trying to say is I don't see the paradigm shift aside from the fact that there is this new space called the independent labor unions, which unfortunately is not just under attack from outside, it definitely is, but is also under a lot of pressure from its inside. The independent union structure has not been in any way successful the way it should have been in creating this space where workers can freely advance their cause or you know as they called it their class consciousness.

CEMMIS: What do you think is the main reason for the division in the partial failure of the Egyptian labor movement? Does it have similar characteristics with other Arab labor movements? I mention this because sometimes the labor movements of the Southern European countries like that of Greece for instance are also characterized as divided and not very effective.

H.K.: I think the failure so far of the Egyptian labor movement is a mix of contexts, that is what the state was strong enough to do and internal failures. And I do think that part of the internal failures and I think that it is very easy to talk about the failure of the independent labor movement because the government was repressive. And yes they were repressive that's not wrong. But is also too simple of an answer and is also easy to talk about the regime changes and you know this highly polarized period in Egypt where we did not just have the independent labor movements but we had many youth movements who were born out of 2011 who completely died out, and were ripped of not necessarily by regime repression but also by the kind of polarization that existed in Egypt at some point. When you have to decide that in 2012 people decided that yes we are anti-Mubarak, we are revolutionaries, and we want bread, freedom and social justice. And then the military comes to power for an interim period and that's when you have to think, you know, about how you will re position yourself or put yourself *vis a vis* the military. Do you respect the military as a military or as a political leader? And we all have to grab with this question. And then the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power. And then you get the fights, "*do we hate the Muslim Brotherhood because they are the Muslim Brotherhood and because they are Islamists and because they can Islamize the country or do we hate them because they are neoliberal and they are very elitist and they will not do anything in favor of the poor classes so they won't change anything*"? And then the military comes to power and you get the fights, "*ok do we like the military now because they are getting rid and disposing us of the Muslim Brotherhood or we support the military regime just because it seems more secular than the Islamists*".

You know it's been a roller coaster and you have to imagine how much going from one regime to another, has entailed groups, people getting into fights, not even groups, families. Families stopping to speak to one another. "*You are supporting the Muslim Brotherhood? I am not talking to you anymore*", literally this way. So, you have also to imagine how this impacted youth movements and labor movements. The actors of these movements are citizens at the end of the day, and yes they have a big absence and lack of class consciousness and so they are acting like any citizen on the street whose like "*oh I like the Muslim brotherhood, or oh no I absolutely hate the Muslim Brotherhood*" and that can get you into a fight that can completely destroy the entire structure. And what has happened with EFITU and, you know, like what started up as one independent labor union had developed into six or seven, now we have three strong ones, but we have at least seven existing independent labor federations. So what started as

EFITU developed into different ones based on fights like these. And those who are not necessarily the fights that you would like to have seen from the EFITU, like I would have liked to see them fighting on how far should we go in negotiating membership fees or how far should we go in negotiating member switching from the official Union to the independent union, because that was one of the catastrophes of the independent labor unions, the fact that you can establish a independent Union but the workers who have been paying membership fees for twenty, thirty, forty years in the official Union, now they will lose all the money if they leave it and that's their pension money. If they leave the official union how, how should they switch to the independent union and make sure they switch their money with them; that was one of the big crisis and I would have love to see the fight erupting over stuff like that as a push erupting over the Muslim Brotherhood and whether we support the military or not.

I would say these kinds of struggles also in addition to the lack, the complete lack of labor experience. And that's a similar argument that is being used to the political parties. The fact that, you know, that Egypt was not a 100% authoritarian country but in terms of organization nobody was organized, in terms of joining political parties and doing, you know, in organizing politically or socially for workers, even you know like, even the basic kinds of organizations were not existent. So yes there was a couple of political parties but we didn't really play politics. If you join a political party you're like 1 % of the 1 %. So the fact that all of a sudden you have these independent labor unions that are being led by people who have never been experienced in syndicalization and syndical work. They have never had this kind of experience; they have had the kind of experience of organizing strikes and speaking politically and mobilizing support, so they were good at framing their demands but they were not good at actually creating and maintaining a sustainable institution and I think that was one of the biggest problems that EFITU had. I have seen it live because when in 2011 we finally managed to get the declaration for independent labor unions, which was the only official document for independent labor unions to exist back then at the absence of a law for independent trade unions to exist; once we got that and people were interested yes, and the workers were interested yes we need to establish our independent labor unions, they had no idea what to do or how to go about it. They know they need a union to support their struggle and they know they are ready to create a union but they don't know what it entails they don't know how to establish one, you know, how many members you need to have, how can you negotiate, will you be able to negotiate as an independent union? All of these things they were completely like big news and in my centre, at ECESR, we literally organized tens or hundreds of trainings and advisory meetings with different workers from across the nation just on the questions "do you really need a union? This is why people need unions. Do you think you need a union and if you think you need a union, how many do you have, the law looks like that. This is the way to go about it, you will have problem in getting funding and you'll have problems in getting membership fees and you'll have problems in negotiate things with the establishment", and looking at them case by case. The workers had absolutely no experience and it was a phase and is still is a phase of trial and error "lets try this oops it failed", and should we put women into the union leadership? That was a big issue. Should we allow women to be Union leaders or not specifically in the sectors that are women intensive, like the Spinning and Weaving. So can you have 90% of the workers being women and then all the union leadership is men? Let's push more women.

CEMMIS: Now from what you were saying I can feel that there is a sense of enchantment from the workers' side regarding the new established independent federations. Is this true? Is there a sense of diffused corruption in other realms of society and especially towards the independent trade unions?

H.K: Well, the way these kinds of struggles have developed is that they were literary wiped out by bigger problems. So the fact that the independent labor union was thinking about membership fees and switching from old to new Unions and the logistics of how to negotiate if there is an official union, how you can allow the independent union to negotiate, or how many women to let in, all of these struggles were the struggles that the unions, were the real struggles that independent unionists had and had to grapple and fight over for a couple of years but now it is not just under Sisi regime, the Muslim Brotherhood has started the trend, but now under the Sisi regime we have gotten back to a trend where if workers need to organize and need to strike in a specific facility even if they are part of an independent labor federation, they are likely to do it on their own and this is very similar to what we had before 2010. So the fact is when the Mahala strike happened it happened outside of the umbrella of the official labor unions and for a long time was opposed by the official federation. In 2011 in fact the official federation on during the 18 days, when many unions and many workers declared that they were on a strike because of the revolution the official federation told them that they cannot strike and there is no reason to stop the wheel of production. What we have now unfortunately is that the independent federations are starting to develop into one other kind of framework that is empty of meaning, where you have the unions within, you know, like a union for a specific steel factory, the union will decide to strike but they wouldn't get either they wouldn't get an answer from EFITU whether EFITU was support the strike or not, or they would get a no answer or "this is not the right time" or "lets negotiate more". So we have gone to a point where the independent labor unions have become so fragmented and so weakened, specifically fragmented, on the front of nationalism vs labor. Should we just shut up and support the military regime until you know this kind of emergency time passes and nobody knows what exactly makes up this emergency time, but you know in Egypt you are always told it's a time of emergency. So people need to shut up and work and respect the president and so on; so and this time polarization exists within the independent unions, or within the independent federations more importantly to the extent that you can have one board member of EFITU telling you that yes we support the workers who strike in this facility and another board member saying no we do not support them. So they are becoming failing federations in a way. The space theoretically still exists but unless you get mobilizing leaders, who can create one federation or who can take over one of these independent federations and make out of it a strong representative body that is very institutional, not based on persons and friends you know and money because also money is very corrupting to the independent unions; independent federations getting all of a sudden funding from European Union and you know European federations starting getting interest in the independent labor federations in Egypt and the easy answer to them is "ok we'll give them money" but of course, unless money is directed towards a specific training or directed towards you know renting a place or something specific, money is very corrupting, because you get workers fighting over who is getting that money and how the money is being spent. You know people wanted to go on trips; I am not saying that all the independent unionists are this way but unfortunately many of the elite leaderships of the independent unionists like Kamal abu Eita they have all of a sudden switched sides based on things like that.

CEMMIS: They have been also accused, for example Kamal abu Eita has been accused of corruption.

H.K: Yes.

CEMMIS: Can you tell us a few things about the freedom of association in Egypt the last years, I mean does the government targets just the "enemy within", which is considered to be the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists Organizations or does it also focus on other parts of the political geography in Egypt like, for instance, more progressive and more radical leftist groups?

H.K: Aah, no it definitely includes everyone I mean remember that by now the 6th of April movement that started as supporters to a general strike for the Mahala workers, for the rights of workers; the 6th of April movement is now gama'a mahzura (a banned group), it is a terrorist organization in Egypt, considered a terrorist organization by the government of Egypt, so it's of course it's the big part of defaming in the media is going against the Islamists and specifically to the Muslim Brotherhood who are considered now the "other", you know like they are the even geniuses responsible for everything that is happening in Egypt. All the conspiracy theories lead to the Muslim Brotherhood so when Regeni was killed, it was the Muslim Brotherhood who killed him in Egypt, that's the story that was told to the Egyptian people by the Egyptian government that he was killed by the Muslim Brotherhood and tortured so horribly so as to defame Egypt in the international media and you know make Egypt's friends internationally hate Egypt. So the Muslim Brotherhood are still at the forefront of the enemy but many of the independent groups and many of the leftist groups, anyone who dares speak up, is automatically seen as either an accomplice of the Americans/the West or an accomplice of the Muslim Brotherhood. So whether will be a completely independent liberal or leftist author, caricaturist, you know whatever, and you know like the big group that has been officially banned is the 6th of April movement obviously a very secular and left wing group.

CEMMIS: Do you consider the Brotherhood or other Islamists Organizations as an integral part of the Egyptian labor movement? I mean, are they considered to be an ally or an obstacle to labor struggles?

H.K: Well, the independent unions in general are very anti-Muslim Brotherhood and they are not forgiving the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders but also if you look at how the Muslim Brotherhood infiltrated the independent labor union movements you would understand why the independent unionists cannot forgive the Muslim Brotherhood and they see them as a similar elite actor like the State's sponsored Unions. Specifically when Morsi was president for the entire year that he was a president a long part of a year, the parliament in Egypt was also controlled by the Freedom and Justice Party of the Muslim Brotherhood, they had passed several legislations to control the independent Union's movements including one that was passed at the end of 2012, I think it was in November 2012, where the Freedom and Justice party was given the right to appoint members of the party on to the board of any of the Independent Trade Unions. They were trying to control both the independent Union structure and the Official Union structure so for example one thing that they did was they had banned any board member of the official or independent Unions, but there was a bigger problem with the official Unions, to be older than 60 years so they said anyone

who is older than 60 years and is on the board of one of the Federations or Unions will be dismissed, so will consider him in his pension age and he will just be dismissed out of the Union and instead we will bring youth that can be drawn from the pool of Freedom and Justice party membership.

So the way they were trying to infiltrate both movements was very similar to the way that, of course back then the Muslim Brotherhood was the State, but they were adopting the same Mubarak's strategies and before Mubarak, Sadat's and Nasser's. Those for the same strategies that the state in Egypt historically has adopted to infiltrate the Labor movement and so the independent Unionists specific have never been forgiving and have always see the Muslim Brotherhood as an elite and of course the more Marxist within the Labor movement in Egypt will tell you, that you know, if you are part of the Muslim Brotherhood then by default you lack the class consciousness. Even if many workers, most workers in Egypt lack this kind of class consciousness, they at least don't replace it by any other kind of consciousness, they will tell you, which is the Islamist consciousness.

CEMMIS: How do the leftist Trade Unionists see the cooperation in the past of some leftist trade leaders or groups like Kamal abu Eita from Karama for example or the Revolutionary Socialists with the Muslim Brotherhood?

I think there is a difference between the kind of cooperation that existed with the Muslim Brotherhood before the Muslim Brotherhood came to power and now. So the fact that Kamal abu Eita run for the parliament on the lists of the Freedom and Justice party so when he won the parliamentary seat he was a member for the Freedom and Justice party because his party al Karama, which was officially his party, didn't have enough seats to even run, it didn't have enough members to even run for the elections, so he had to run under the Muslim Brotherhood. But back then that was seen as one of the networks and one of the tactics that could be adopted that didn't create, of course it created disagreements, but it didn't create fights or people see the other as betraying the movement or something like that. So it didn't create the kind of problems that we would see now if one of the independent unionists declared that, even declared that what was happening to the Muslim Brotherhood is, you know, too repressive and that they shouldn't be repressed in that violent way by the government. So even showing the least compassion for members of the Muslim Brotherhood as human beings as citizens can get you into trouble and the general public but also then the labor movement and I think to me the way the independent labor movement has developed in Egypt is in a way that makes it impossible to speak of "the independent labor movement" you would have to speak about specific persons within the independent labor movement. Who is in control of what federation, makes all the difference. In mid 2014, I think it was mid 2014, Malek Bayoumi who was the president or the director of EFITU had signed a declaration accepting for a year, EFITU won't allow any strikes, I mean EFITU is not representing, you know, steel workers in one place. They are representing all kinds of sector workers nationwide. How can you say on behalf of your members, who at some point were at least a million and a half or 2 million, now I doubt you can count any membership for EFITU cause it has become this very, you know, its a very empty framework is a very empty institution... How can you say that you we are going to hold strikes for an entire year, you know, and sign a declaration with the Ministry of Manpower saying "yeah don't worry about it no strikes?". I mean is a joke.

CEMMIS: We know that in Egypt there is a huge informal sector of the economy. How the formal Trade Unions or the Human Rights Organizations deal with this phenomenon and with this kind of economy? Is there any endeavor to include them somehow in their own ranks or to protect them?

H.K: I would totally think that you have individual unions who are much stronger than federations than EFITU as a federation. And I would also say that there are you know Independent unions for informal sector, and I think this was one of the biggest successes of the independent union movement to create a space for the informal sector to organize. The informal sector previously could never organize under the official federation because well come with contracts first and let's talk about your organization that would be the answer from the official federation but now that we have the independent unions there is a lot of organizations and to me those are those were the successful candidates of the independent labor movement; and they are not successful in terms of creating sustainable institutions but in terms of using the independent union structure for their own use and for their own needs. And we had several, the street vendors specifically in Cairo when they were kicked of the downtown area and they were given replacements spots to sell their merchandise in areas that are literally abandoned by by passers and they held a big, you know, like a very big not just protest... but they had so many so many repertoires and they had so many tactics: they organized, they started writing about themselves, they started inviting authors to write on their behalf on you know how many people are involved, how many families are involved, they cooperated with different parties but mostly with human rights organizations so we worked a lot with the street vendors, you know, holding several press conferences. To me their success, even though they didn't establish an institution that would be sustainable and would be safe across any political happenings, was that they have managed to find this open door or this opportunity and they managed to capitalize on it at a specific moment when they need it to capitalize it on it. The women domestic workers had a Union and the Union was cooperating a lot with the New Women Foundation, which is a human rights organization that works on women workers issues and rights and the women, you know, domestic workers women, or so called maid, organized their own independent union.