

# LABOR MOVEMENT IN EGYPT: 1899-1952

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## I. THE PRELUDE

**T**HE RISE OF THE labor movement in Egypt resulted from the economic development that followed the breakdown of the monopoly system and the introduction of a market economy during the second half of the nineteenth century. There was no national substitute for the monopoly system, and the vacuum opened the way for foreign investments. Large amounts of European capital were invested in State Debt, agrarian land companies, mortgage credits, and public utility services such as water, gas, electricity, and communications.

The setting up of these enterprises increased the demand for labor power. Workers in these enterprises came out of three categories: (1) those coming from rural society, mainly landless peasants seeking employment in urban areas, (2) some craftsmen who suffered from the competition of European commodities, (3) unemployed skilled European workers of the Mediterranean countries who migrated to Egypt for work and to take advantage of the capitulations. These three comprised the Egyptian working class in the last decade of the nineteenth century [14, pp. 45-46].

Labor conditions were extremely bad, with no fixed working hours and low wages. Daily work hours averaged anything between thirteen to seventeen hours, and the main demand of the working class at that time was to secure a maximum ten-hour working day [8, p. 186]. The maximum daily wage was three piastres for unskilled and eight piastres for skilled workers.<sup>1</sup> But wages paid to European workers were higher than what were paid to Egyptians, even with similar qualifications.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century the Egyptian workers organized strikes, demanding improvements in their economic conditions. There is no accurate detailed information about the beginning of these strikes, but much information has unexpectedly been found about the strike that was organized in December 1899 and lasted three months by workers engaged in rolling cigarettes. The strike was well organized and these workers established the first trade union in Egypt. There can be no doubt that this strike was preceded by other strikes in which the Egyptian working class got training. Mohamed Farid states that in April 1894 there were strikes in Port Said, and claimed that "it was a European disease that had attacked Egypt"

<sup>1</sup> One Egyptian pound (=one hundred piastres) is approximately equivalent to one pound sterling (more definitely ninety-seven piastres).

[12, p. 79]. This means that strikes of workers had occurred in Egypt from the beginning of the 1890s.

## II. THE RISE OF THE TRADE UNIONS

In the first decade of the twentieth century, there were many labor strikes organized by Europeans, in which Egyptian workers participated. These provided a good opportunity for the Egyptian working class to gain experience of collective struggle against capital. Although their success was limited, it was sufficient to encourage them to establish trade unions, known as "workers societies." But these societies were not permitted to survive for long, being attacked by the authorities [8, p. 187].

There was a severe economic crisis in 1907, which brought about a sharp decline in people's living conditions. Entrepreneurs at the same time reduced wages and dismissed workers. This resulted in the Egyptian working class re-establishing trade unions and continuing the struggle for their economic demands. The bourgeois leadership of the nationalist movement supported the workers struggle against enterprises, most of which represented foreign interests.

In October 1908, the workers of Cairo Tram Company went on strike, demanding the reduction of working hours from thirteen to eight hours a day, a 40 per cent increase of wages, an annual paid vacation and sick leave, the same treatment as Europeans in respect of wages and promotion, and company's recognition of the trade union. Although the strike was well organized and was supported by the Nationalist party, it failed to win the demands, workers being attacked by the police, 180 being arrested, charged, and sentenced. The result of this strike, however, was the establishment for the first time of a trade union led by Egyptians.

The support given by the Nationalist party to the labor movement was aimed at recruiting the working class, peasants, and intellectuals to the nationalist struggle against British occupation. To confirm this aim, in 1910 the party established *Niqābat Ummal al-Sanāy' al-Yadawīya* [Trade Union of Craftsmen], with branches in Alexandria, Mansūra, and Tanta and a club in the al-Sabtīya workers district in Cairo. A series of lectures was organized by the club to awaken workers' consciousness [14, pp. 59-64]. Membership of the trade union increased from 979 in 1909 to 3,139 in 1912 [11, p. 88].

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

Two factors in the development of the Egyptian working class proceeded from the war: (1) the number of workers increased from 457,269 in 1907 to 639,929 in 1917 as a result of increasing industrial production during the war; (2) collapse of trade-unionism because of martial law, with workers unable to struggle for

their economic demands [1, p. 82]. Although the cost of living doubled during the wartime, wages were fixed [13, p. 50].

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

### III. INTER-WAR PERIOD AND THE RISE OF COMMUNISM

In the postwar years, labor conditions were very unsettled, most industrial enterprises established by the military authorities during wartime being suspended, with thousands of workers unemployed. The labor supply far exceeded the demands of the labor market, and wages were reduced, while the cost of living was increasing as shown in Table I.

TABLE I  
COST OF LIVING IN EGYPT: 1919-23

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

Source: [13, p. 51].

The workers were therefore unable to support themselves. Strikes were organized on the issue of labor legislation and the availability of jobs for unemployed workers. These are the social background which prepared the active political movements of socialists among the working class who were gradually awakening to their class consciousness.

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

Joseph Rosenthal did not initiate the manifesto of the party, so as to avoid the appearance of it being the work of foreigners. It was initiated by Salama Mūsa, Ali el-Inani, Mohamed Abdulla Inan, and Mahmūd Hosnī al-Urabi. The manifesto sets out the political aims of the party as the liberation of Egypt and

the evacuation of British troops; struggle against imperialism, militarism, and dictatorship; support of the peoples' struggle for independence; and the cancellation of secret treaties. Economic aims were: the establishment of a socialist state in which natural resources and productive power will be devoted to the well-being of the masses; distribution of production should be made according to the productive capacity and qualifications of each individual; termination of capitalist competition. Social aims were: free education for all males and females; the teaching of democracy; improvement of labor conditions by increasing wages and provision of social insurance; and emancipation of oriental womanhood. The stated aim was for the party to carry out this program by political struggle, depending on the trade unions and the socialist members of Parliament and the provincial councils, to which elections must be free and voting rights assured for all Egyptians, including women.<sup>2</sup>

Although the party was quite moderate and avoided revolutionary action and class struggle, a severe reactionary campaign began, charging that socialism is against Islam and social security [4, Aug. 20-24, 1921]. Mohamed Hussein Heikal, the well-known liberal intellectual, claimed that socialism was not suitable for agrarian countries, particularly Egypt [4, Sept. 17, 1921]. Salama Mūsa, one of the party leaders, defended the party. In one of his articles [4, Aug. 18, 1921], he claimed that there was no conflict between landlords and tenants, and the party should be a friend to both. In another article [4, Aug. 31, 1921], he stated that the party was anti-Communist, following Fabian principles, and its slogan was "development without revolution or coup d'état."

Ideological disputes had been carried on between the leadership of the party in Cairo and the radical members of the Alexandria branch. In July 30, 1922, the latter invited radicalist members of other branches to confer in Alexandria, and this conference decided that the Alexandria branch should become headquarters, communism was to be the doctrine of the party, and its title changed to the Egyptian Socialist party, Egyptian Branch of the Comintern [4, Jan. 9, 1923].

The leaders of the new organization were Joseph Rosenthal, Antūn Marūn, and Mahmūd Hosnī al-Urabi. The latter was appointed delegate to the fourth conference of the Comintern held in Moscow, and applied for Comintern membership for the party. Returning, he reported that the Comintern could not admit the Egyptian Socialist party to membership unless it changed its name to the Egyptian Communist party, prepared a program for the peasants and expelled Joseph Rosenthal and other European members.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1923, a conference was held to discuss changing the name and adopting a new manifesto. This manifesto stated that the party struggle is for the emancipation of Egypt and the Sudan; the strengthening of relations between the peoples of the two countries; to struggle together against native and foreign enemies; the formation of a united front with the nationalist bourgeoisie to struggle against imperialism; nationalization of the Suez Canal; abolition of

<sup>2</sup> See the confessions of Joseph Rosenthal to the Parquet, reported in [4, March 7, 1924].

<sup>3</sup> See Footnote 2.

State Debt and the capitulations; organizing trade unions and seeking their legal recognition; introduction of an eight-hour working day; equal payment for Egyptian and European workers; and formation of producer and consumer cooperatives.

Part of the manifesto was devoted to the peasants, and called for the abolition of large-scale landownership, confiscation of holdings of over one hundred feddans, the surplus to be distributed among the landless peasantry or to become "peoples farms" managed by peasant Soviets, cancellation of debts of peasants owning less than thirty feddans and elimination of land tax for peasants owning less than ten feddans.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after the announcement of the new manifesto, the Communist party reorganized the Confederation of Trade Unions which was established by Joseph Rosenthal in 1921. In February 1923, "direct action," a slogan issued by the party, was put into effect and labor strikes were held in Alexandria. An attempt was made to organize a general strike, but the occupation authorities arrested Hosnî el-Urabi, Antûn Marûn, and two leaders of the confederation: Hassan Hosni and Amîn Yehia. They were tried by court martial [4, Mar. 19-24, 1923].

The Communist party did not agree with the Constitution drawn up in 1923 [4, May 1, 1923]. This perhaps implies the attitude of the party toward the Wafd and the nationalist bourgeoisie, but supports the "direct action," organizing the proletariat struggle to win economic demands. Before launching strikes, the Communist party asked Saad Zaghlûl, the Wafd leader and premier, to legally recognize the trade unions, to establish a governmental office to make jobs available for unemployed workers, to approve formation of landless peasant unions in order to improve the standard of living, and to recognize the Soviet Union [4, Dec. 19, 1924]. The strikes started in November 1923, and continued through March 1924. In Alexandria the workers occupied factories and dismissed the entrepreneurs. Strikes occurred simultaneously in Cairo.

In March 1924, the government interfered to restore order and eliminate the strike movement. Gamal ed-Din Pasha, Undersecretary of State for the Interior was sent to Alexandria to examine the situation there. Returning to Cairo, he told the cabinet that the best solution would be to disband both the Communist party and the Confederation of Trade Unions. Police attacked the headquarters of both institutions and the houses of members, arrested them and confiscated documents [4, Mar. 6-27, 1924]. A new provision was added to the penal code: "Sentence to five years' imprisonment those who urge people to oppose the regime by spreading revolutionary ideas against Human Society" [4, Mar. 4, 1924]. The investigation found that there were branches of the Communist party in Cairo, Tanta, Zagazig, el-Mahalla el-Kûbra, Shebin el-Kûm, and Abu-Qûrqa [4, July 7, 1924].

To obviate the danger, the leaders of the confederation announced that there

<sup>4</sup> Translation of the Arabic text included in summation of the trial of the party, published in [4, Dec. 19, 1924]. Agwani quoted the English text from *Labour Monthly* (London), Vol. 2, March 1922, pp. 276-79, which differs slightly (see, [3, pp. 4-5]).

was no connection between the confederation and the Communist party, and that the confederation had no interest in politics. It was interested mainly in improving the economic conditions of the workers, to make them equal to the condition of European workers [4, Mar. 10, 1924].

In May 28, 1924, eleven people were brought before the court, among them six leaders of the Communist party and the Confederation of Trade Unions, including two Russians.<sup>5</sup> They were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment ranging from six months to five years.

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

#### IV. LABOR MOVEMENT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF NATIONAL BOURGEOISIE

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

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

A manifesto published in the early thirties proclaimed: The direct and immediate purpose of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolution in Egypt is to throw off the imperialist yoke and get rid of the reactionary monarchy, to win complete independence for Egypt, to carry through an agrarian peasant revolution, to introduce an eight-hour working day, the radical improvement of the conditions of the workers, and the establishment of a revolutionary and democratic dictatorship of the working class and peasantry in the form of the Soviet government of workers and peasants [3, p. 8].

But this was no more than the expression of hope, for Communist cells had no effective communication with the trade unions. On the contrary, the national bourgeoisie dominated the trade unions by founding and holding leadership of confederations. Instead of unifying trade unions in one confederation, some

<sup>5</sup> The six leaders were: Mahmūd Hosnī-al-Urabi, Antūn Marūn, Safwan Abūl-Fat'h, and el-Shahat Ibrahim; the Russians were: Ibram Catz and Hillel Zanberg.

intellectuals, mostly lawyers, founded a confederation first and then organized trade unions to create a workers' base to support their political party. This was a unique phenomenon in the development of the labor movement in Egypt.

In April 1930, the Wafd succeeded in founding a confederation of such a kind. Azîz Mirham, the well-known Wafdist, organized the General Confederation of Trade Unions headed by Ahmed Mohamed Agha and Hüsni el-Shentiniawi, both Wafdist lawyers [5, May 26, 1930]. At the same time, Dawūd Ratib Bey, a wealthy landlord and member of the Liberal Constitutionalist party, founded a confederation which he called by the same name. Three trade unions, mechanical transportation workers, Cairo municipality workers, and barbers, were established by the confederation. It was expected that it would win the support of the working class for the party, which really represented the interests of landlords and the upper middle class. In December 1930, the Wafdist members of the council of this confederation expelled Dawūd Ratib Bey and appointed Prince Abbas Halim, member of the royal family and friend of the Wafdists, the president of the confederation [14, pp. 88-89]. One month later, the Wafdist confederation headed by Ahmed Mohamed Agha merged with the confederation of Prince Abbas Halim and the Wafdist intellectuals acted as consultants [14, p. 91].

The government of Sidqi Pasha<sup>6</sup> was very hostile to such a confederation, which was under the influence of the Wafd. On March 15, 1931, the authorities disbanded the confederation and rounded up the leaders of the trade unions. But in July, the confederation sent Ibrahim Zein ed-Din, the general secretary, as a delegate to the conference of the International Federation of the Trade Unions (IFTU) in Madrid. He complained of the hostility of the Egyptian government and the suppression of trade unionism in Egypt. The conference protested to the Egyptian government, requested the mediation of the British labor government and sent Walter Scavenlis, the general secretary, to Egypt to examine the situation of the trade unions [17, p. 29]. In an attempt to lessen the danger of a strong labor movement, the government invited H. B. Butler, associate manager of the International Labour Bureau to study the labor situation in Egypt and propose draft labor legislation. The government also established a labor office affiliated with the Ministry of the Interior, but the question of labor legislation was ignored.

The trade unions suffered not only from the hostility of the authorities, but also from the disputes of the bourgeois leadership. Prince Abbas Halim tried to get rid of the Wafdist influence from the General Confederation of Trade Unions. But, in February 1935, the Wafd founded another confederation which they called the Supreme Council of Workers. Most of the trade unions which had been affiliated with the confederation headed by Abbas Halim joined the new Wafdist confederation, but instead of struggling for the improvement of

<sup>6</sup> In June 1930, Sidqi Pasha held the premiership, and in October, he canceled the 1923 Constitution and proclaimed another one, which gave voting power to the intellectuals, and the middle and upper class of landowners. The masses were prevented from voting, and the Wafd could not come back into power.

labor conditions, they were fighting each other. These were good chickens for the police, and many trade unions were disbanded and the leaders arrested [14, pp. 95-102].

In spite of the conflicts of the bourgeois leadership, the Egyptian working class participated in the demonstrations of November 1935, calling for the restoration of the 1923 Constitution. Together with the students, they forced the political parties to form a national front against the monarchy and against British imperialism. It was because of this movement that the Constitution was restored [2, pp. 202-12].

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

In the absence of any efficient confederation that could organize strikes to win their economic demands, most strikes were violent, and workers destroyed both machines and factories. The police shot workers at al-Hawamdiya and transportation workers in Alexandria [15, p. 31]. The worsening labor conditions and the hostility of the authorities and entrepreneurs persuaded the trade unionists to found a confederation free from the influence of political parties. In September 1937, some radical trade unionists founded an Institution for Organizing the Labour Movement, as a way to establish a confederation and organize a labor party. Mohamed Yousef el-Meddarik, the well-known Communist trade unionist, was the leader of the institution.

Supported by the royal court, Prince Abbas Halim announced his intention to continue leading the labor movement. In March 1938, his agents in the Institution for Organizing the Labour Movement elected him the president of the General Confederation of the Egyptian Kingdom Trade Unions, established by thirty-two trade unions. After a month, the radical members of the confederation displaced Prince Halim and elected Mohamed el-Dimirdash, a weaver of Alexandria and member of Parliament [14, pp. 106-8].

Under the radical leadership, the confederation organized a demonstration on May 8, 1938, calling for the recognition of the trade unions, and demanding compensation for labor accidents, reduction of working hours, fixed minimum wages, and solution of the unemployment problem [6, May 8, 1938]. Although the government promised to improve labor conditions, a year passed but no positive action was taken.

On June 13, 1939, the confederation initiated a hunger strike to force the government to submit to the Parliament a bill for an act granting recognition to the trade unions. The government had no choice but to submit the bill for enactment by the Parliament, but with most members belonging to the upper middle class, entrepreneurs and landlords, it was impossible to get the bill through



[17, p. 42]. A manifesto was issued by the confederation declaring that the working class could not rely on political parties and politicians, and the struggle must continue for the improvement of working conditions. But then came the outbreak of the Second World War and the proclamation of martial law, which provided the government with the chance they sought to disband the confederation and round up its leaders [14, p. 109].

## V. THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND AFTER

The Second World War greatly stimulated Egyptian industry. Imports were drastically reduced, but in addition, the large-scale spending of allied troops stationed in Egypt greatly increased the demand for industrial products. Some two hundred thousand Egyptians, of whom eighty thousand were skilled or semi-skilled workmen, found employment in British Army workshops and camps. The Middle East Supply Centre also assisted some essential industries. Several industries expanded considerably, especially textiles, preserved foods, chemicals, glass, leather, cement and other building materials, petroleum, and mechanical industries, and new industries were established such as the dehydration and canning of vegetables, rubber goods, jute processing, the making of spare parts and tools, and more especially, a wide variety of chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

The first three postwar years were a prosperous time for Egyptian industry: imports of foreign goods were limited, and pent-up demand was sufficiently high to maintain, and in some cases even raise, output. Much new machinery was imported and many factories were re-equipped. Then, by 1949, foreign competition began to weigh heavily on all sectors: stocks accumulated, working hours were reduced, and some factories had to close down. The outbreak of the war in Korea gave Egyptian industry a new stimulus, both by raising the price of cotton, and with it, internal purchasing power, and by diminishing foreign competition. By 1951 however, both these stimuli were spent forces, and several Egyptian industries, especially textiles and construction, were once again facing difficulties [9, pp. 141-42].

In wartime, the demand for labor increased and thousands of peasants moved

TABLE II  
PRICE TREND IN EGYPT: 1939-45  
(July-August 1939=100)

December	Wholesale Price Index	Cost of Living Index
1939	122	108
1940	143	122
1941	183	156
1942	251	215
1943	292.7	257.2
1944	330.3	292.2
1945	333.4	290.5

Source: [13, p. 75].

into urban areas, especially Cairo and Alexandria, seeking work. However, the closedown of British Army workshops and factories created unemployment problems and wage reductions, while the cost of living continued to increase rapidly, as shown in Table II.

By the end of the war, the Egyptian working class was in poor conditions. In 1942 the Trade Unions Recognition Act was passed and trade unions were registered. Strikes began, and the authorities introduced legislation covering governmental workers, while workers in the private sector demanded conditions equal to governmental workers.

## VI. THE RESURRECTION OF COMMUNISM

The war period saw the rebirth of the Communist movement in Egypt. Marxist study circles sprang up in Cairo and Alexandria, some Trotskyist, others Stalinist. The former were located in Al-Majalla al-Jadida, and published a monthly magazine edited by Salama Mūsa. The latter had two different titles: *Harakat-ul-Abhath al-'Ilmiya* [The Scientific Research Movement] and *Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqafa al-Haditha* [Committee for Spreading Modern Culture] [7]. The history of these circles until this present time continues enormously complicated.

Out of the Marxist study circles two political groups emerged in 1942: The *Mouvement Egyptien de Liberation Nationale* (MELN) headed by Henry Curiel, a descendant of a millionaire French Jewish family; and *Iskra*, led by Hillel Schwarz, a Jew of European origin. Together, their membership numbered not more than thirty intellectuals. Differences between the two factions centered mainly on the practical problems of a Communist movement in Egypt—should it seek to become a mass movement or should it try at the initial stage to educate cadres? Should it attempt to get as many native Egyptians into the ranks of the movement, even at the cost of lowering the level of political maturity? Disputes on these issues continued for many years, with MELN considering the party cell as the fighting unit, and *Iskra* stressing the training of cadres. MELN stood for “Egyptianization” and “proletarianization” of the party, while *Iskra* maintained that under present conditions most cadres would have to belong to the intelligentsia, and frequently to national minorities, and no artificial attempt should be made to attract elements which would lessen the Communist character of the party. In September 1943, a further split occurred when a number of MELN members founded a new organization known as *Tahrir al-Sha'b* [Liberation of the People], which was emphasizing the necessity of Egyptianizing the party [10, pp. 42–43].

The recognition of the Soviet Union by the government in 1943 and the alliance with the so-called democratic bloc, provided a good opportunity for the development of the communist movement in Egypt. Between 1943 and 1945 several Communist groups came into being; a group of Wafdist students and intellectuals, mainly concentrated in Alexandria, established *At-Talif'a* [Vanguard]. Others organized two groups: the Marxist League *Citadelle* and *Al-Fagr el-Jadid*

[New Dawn]. Other than MELN, none of these groups commanded a large following, but that did not deter them from quarrelling fiercely, and they split even further over the question of the relative significance of the proletariat and the intelligentsia in Communist organization [3, p. 32].

In spite of the disputes, Communist organizations tried to dominate the labor movement by organizing a confederation of trade unions. The Recognition Act of 1942 prevented the working class from setting up a confederation. To meet this the trade unions shrewdly set out to organize a de facto confederation which they called a "conference." In December 1944, a Conference of Company and Private Institution Trade Unions was founded by twenty-five Cairo trade unions, to organize the workers' struggle for labor legislation for the private sector, to make them equal to governmental workers. The MELN trade unionist cadres led this conference. In September 1945, a delegation of three members,<sup>7</sup> well-known MELN cadres, represented the conference at the meeting of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Paris.

At the same time, the Al-Fagr el-Jadid Communist organization tried to lead the labor movement. In August 30, 1945, trade unions were invited to a meeting to elect another delegate, Mohamed Yousef el-Meddarik, a prominent cadre of the Al-Fagr el-Jadid, to represent the Egyptian trade unions to the meeting of WFTU.

The Conference of the Company and Private Institution Trade Unions, however, was more successful in its influence on the movement. On May 1, 1946, the conference invited trade unions to a meeting to discuss the establishment of the Conference of Egyptian Trade Unions as a general confederation of trade unions. The police failed to prevent the meeting and the conference was founded [14, pp. 118-26] and organized the workers' struggle for the improvement of labor conditions. Some textile factories in Shūbra el-Khîma, a suburb of Cairo and in Alexandria had to close down, others curtailed production, and reduced manpower and wages. The workers demonstrated, attacked the factories, and clashed with the police. On May 10, 1946, the conference issued a manifesto calling for the evacuation of British troops, demanding that the labor legislation covering governmental workers should be expanded to include private sector workers, that entrepreneurs be prevented from closing down factories, that the government buy the British and American Army workshops to continue operations, that unemployment insurance be introduced, a forty-hour week without reduced wages, that May the first be a paid holiday and that trade unionist detainees be released. A deadline of one month ahead was fixed for the start of a general strike.

Five days before the deadline, the government negotiated with the conference to delay the strike until the League of Egyptian Industries examined the claims. But the league refused to accept the claims, and it was decided that the strike would begin on June 25. To obstruct the execution of the strike, the government negotiated with transportation trade unions and made a separate agreement with

<sup>7</sup> David Nahūm, Mohamed Abdūl Halīm, and Mūrād Ilias el-Qaliūbī.

them, which made it impossible to wage a successful strike. On July 11, 1946, the authorities rounded up the leaders of the conference in an attempt to put an end to the political opposition. Members of the Communist groups and pro-Communist Wafdists were arrested at the same time [14, pp. 118-33].

The major effect of the arrests was to bring about a rapprochement between the main Communist factions. In the winter of 1946-47 talks took place between the leaders of both groups, and after lengthy debates they decided to merge in May 1947, and the new movement became known as Al-Harakt-ul-Democratīya lel-Taharūr al-Watani (HADITU) [Mouvement Democratique de Libération Nationale (MDLN)]. This new union lasted about one year, until July 1948. Several months earlier the People's Liberation and Citadelle had gone out of existence, some members joining MELN, others Iskra. Only Talī'a remained separate, though the Iskra leaders had tried very hard to win them over [10, p. 44].

Despite police repression and inner dissensions, the Communist influence continued to increase. In September 1947, the Communists organized a strike of twenty-seven thousand workers in Shūbra el-Khīma. In January 1948, strikes were organized in the University of Cairo on the Sudan question. In April, Communist students came out in support of striking police who were demanding a raise in salary and an eight-hour working day. Massive demonstrations were organized in Cairo and Alexandria, leading to clashes with the police. The Communists used this opportunity to raise the wider demand for bread and work. Further, a large number of new Communist cells were established in educational institutions, trade unions, and the armed forces. In the prison camps at Hukstep and Abūkīr, the Communist detainees were able to influence the minds of several Muslim Brothers and radical Wafdists whom the Egyptian government had rounded up at the time of the Palestine war [3, pp. 45-46].

At the beginning of 1950, trade unionist cadres of HADITU made a big effort to organize a confederation of the trade unions. The project for the confederation was published in a booklet entitled *Al-Nasiha ilal-Ummal fi Misr* [Advice to the Egyptian working class] by Yasīn Mūstafa and Mohamed Fat'hi, both HADITU worker cadres [16, pp. 14-22]. The project formed the basis of the Preparatory Committee for the General Confederation of Egyptian Trade Unions founded at the end of 1951. It was decided to invite the trade unions to a meeting in January 27, 1952 to discuss the establishment of the confederation, but the proclamation of martial law and the rounding up of leftists immediately after the burning of Cairo on the morning of January 26, destroyed the possibility of holding the meeting.

The preparatory committee issued a manifesto entitled: "To the Egyptians and the Egyptian Working Class," which condemned the burning of Cairo, stating that the violence and troubles only serve the aims of imperialism, and that there is no way to ensure the evacuation of British troops except by the organization of a positive struggle and achievement of national solidarity [14, pp. 136-40].

The burning of Cairo marked the collapse of civil authority. The Communists

and Muslim Brothers appeared to be the natural heirs to political power in Egypt. The Communists had even succeeded in harnessing the nationalist upsurge into anti-imperialist revolutionary channels. And yet in this most decisive moment of Egyptian history, the initiative was seized by the Free Officers, a movement that cautiously disclaimed any political ideology. The revolution carried out on July 23, 1952 gradually transformed the entire setting of Egyptian politics [3, p. 48] and marked a new epoch in the history of the Egyptian labor movement.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In summary, the first half of the twentieth century marked the rise of entrepreneurship in Egypt and the creation of the working class, which had to suffer worsening labor conditions and government hostility. The attempt of the national bourgeoisie to dominate trade unions obstructed the workers' struggle for the improvement of labor conditions and class consciousness. The Egyptian Communists misunderstood the nature of the epoch as a national liberation movement, and provided the excuse for the national bourgeoisie to eliminate the party. When the movement was resurrected during the time of the Second World War, the Communists concentrated on intellectuals and minorities and paid no attention to the recruitment of workers. But when the Egyptianization of the Communist movement was realized at the end of 1950, it was possible to organize trade unions and awaken class consciousness. However, the revolution of July 23, 1952 caused the abortion of the Communist movement, and transformed the structure of Egyptian politics.

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