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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF THE EGYPTIAN WORKING CLASS IN MUBARAK'S OUSTER

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ABSTRACT: The downfall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt has often been portrayed as a 'pure event' – that is, something restricted to a couple of weeks in a single and specific square. This article seeks to directly challenge this standard narrative, which has focused simply on what happened in Tahrir, arguing instead that Mubarak's ouster from power was the result of longstanding anti-regime struggles that developed throughout the 2000s. In the implicit formation of that cross-class and cross-ideological coalition that eventually defeated the regime, a crucial role was played by workers' mobilizing against neoliberal policies. There are three main reasons for this: *a)* since the late 1990s workers were the most serious challenge to Mubarak's regime; *b)* during the now famous eighteen days of relentless protests, workers were at the forefront in the Nile Delta centers, as well as an important element in Tahrir; and finally *c)* when public enterprises were re-opened on February 6, an unprecedented wave of strikes paralyzed the country, forcing the military to oust Hosni Mubarak in order to deflect the growing social soul of the uprising.

KEYWORDS: Arab Uprisings; Egypt; Mubarak; Tahrir; Working Class

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1. Introduction

The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak and the masses gathered in Tahrir Square have come to symbolize the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-11. Mainstream accounts have presented the now famous eighteen days of relentless protests and Mubarak's subsequent ouster from power as a pure event – that is, a unique occurrence geographically limited to a square and spatially restricted to a couple of weeks. Once the decade-long molecular process of accumulation of anti-regime energies through 'economic' strikes and 'political' protests had been blurred, liberal pundits have been able to frame the revolutionary process into a farcical and nearly Biblical-inspired clash between Good – that is, 'the people' as a coherent and homogenous body – and Evil – that is, the despotic and cruel regime (Zemni, De Smet and Bogaert 2013, 888). Besides, stressing the anti-authoritarian nature of the protests and locating freedom in the realm of the market, the revolt has been enclosed into a long-standing struggle between the authoritarian state, on the one hand, and political and economic liberalization, on the other. This all-too convenient dichotomy overlooks the anti-neoliberal character of the protest (Hanieh 2013, 5). The main goal of this article is precisely to challenge the standard narrative of the Egyptian uprising, focusing on the decisive role played by the working class in the decade-long process that led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak from power.

It is argued that the Egyptian working class was critical for three main reasons. First of all, the workers' movement in the last decade of Mubarak's rules was the most serious threat to his regime. From 1998 to 2010 nearly three million people participated in strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, and other collective actions in the "longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the late 1940s" (Beinin 2012, 92). This unprecedented mobilization forced the regime to deal with workers' requests, showing that collective actions can be successful, and therefore inspiring other social classes to take to the street and challenge the regime. Secondly, during the now famous eighteen days, the workers were an important element in the physical formation of the broad coalition that the military was unwilling to repress. Moreover, workers were not only the leading player in many industrial centers in the Nile Delta, but they were also present in Tahrir. Exactly in this square, on January 30, the meeting among already existing independent unions and representatives of workers from a dozen factory towns determined the birth of the founding committee of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). Finally, when public sector enterprises re-

opened on February 6, after they had been shot down since January 28 in the attempt to immunize the vital and productive sectors from the revolutionary fervor, workers' protests spread to up to twenty of Egypt's twenty-nine governorates, also affecting several strategic production sites. Stabilizing the exact weight of this tremendous wave of strikes in the military's decision to get rid of Mubarak is impervious. For sure, officials had to resolve a political crisis that was quickly escalating towards an extremely high level of social confrontation. This was possible through either ferocious repression or the sacrifice of the 'Modern Pharaoh'. Having already excluded the former as part of an internal cost-benefit calculation, the military opted for the latter.

Before starting, however, a couple of additional observations are necessary. First and foremost, stating that workers were crucial does not mean that the defeat of Mubarak's regime was due solely to the collective action of workers. Supporting a similar view would be simply naïve. As made clear by a vast and convincing literature, the recipe for a successful revolt rests on the contemporary mobilization of almost all sectors of society throughout nearly the whole country for a significant period of time (Foran 2005, 15; Abdelrahman 2012, 615-618; Angrist 2013, 549-550). In other words, the defeat of authoritarian regimes from below is the product of the implicit establishment of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition, in which traditionally-at-odds political forces and social classes with different material interests mobilize together against the common enemy – that is, the regime. Although this article is fully aware that this kind of convergence was critical in the Egyptian case too, it remains crucial not to obscure everything in that generic and meaningless expression 'the people', but to understand the specific contribution that each group, class, and actor gave to the uprising. Other studies have already analyzed this phenomenon by focusing specifically on the middle class (Kandil 2012) or on the peasants (El-Nour 2015). This article, on the contrary, restricts its attention to the workers. In so doing, it claims to be original and fruitful. Secondly, rather than understanding the Egyptian uprising as something simply related to a cycle of contentious politics circumscribed to the Middle East, it is argued that this should be seen as one of the most significant episodes of rebellion to those neoliberal diktats that have affected the living conditions of billions of people all around the world in the last few decades. In this regard, the Egyptian revolt was part of that class-based response from below to that strategy of capital accumulation – by "dispossession", as termed by David Harvey (2003, 144) – which has become typical during the neoliberalist counterrevolution (Joya 2011, 370; Beinin 2013,

182). Accumulation by dispossession is characterized by the continuous presence of those predatory practices that were typical of the process of "primitive" or "original" accumulation, as described by Karl Marx (1867, 874-875). In this way, a set of assets – land, raw material, public-owned enterprises, and even labor power – are released at a very low cost and an over-accumulated capital can turn them to profitable use. This strategy of accumulation has become increasingly crucial after the 1970s – that is, when the capital's need to constantly valorize itself has taken place in a context of stagnant effective demand. Capital has therefore switched from a demand-management stance towards a supply-side stance, cultivating those conditions for maximizing the production of surplus value – reducing workers' salaries, dismantling their organizations, and enhancing the degree of class exploitation in general (Harvey 2014, 81). These policies have been challenged by an array of grass-roots movements, labor strikes, occupations of lands, and the like. It is precisely in this context that the Egyptian uprising should be framed. Thirdly, the outburst of the Arab uprisings has reinvigorated the debate over the role of social media in mobilizations. Given the sensitive character of the topic, many scholars have tried to carve out a bit of space, proposing astonishing statements either exaggerating or completely neglecting the role of the Internet. This article calls for moderation, underlying as the web is "both a product of imperialist and capitalist logic and something that is simultaneously used by millions in the struggle to resist those logics" (Alexander and Aouragh 2011, 1344). It is certainly true that Facebook "provided an invaluable logistic infrastructure for the initial stage of protest", allowing ordinary people to share their grievances and coordinate themselves (Howard and Hussain 2013, 23). Yet, social media should be never analyzed in a vacuum, but in a dialectical interplay with offline political actions. In this regard, it can be stated that the Internet was an important tool available to protesters in their strife against the regime, but it is completely meaningless to talk about – as someone actually did – of a Facebook or Twitter revolution. Finally, there is no interest here in explaining the Egyptian trajectory after Mubarak's downfall. In this regard, assessing why new and more severe authoritarian rules emerged, or why the social demands expressed by the protest movement were not achieved, are far beyond the scope of this manuscript.

The article proceeds as follows. Part one reviews the existing literature on labor movements, pointing out the formidable bias towards the study of democratization and the consequent misinterpretation of the real strength of workers' protests in destabilizing and defeating authoritarian regimes. In the second section,

state-labor relations in the post-colonial Egypt are analyzed, showing the sharp difference between the corporatist pact forged by Nasser and the complete ejection of lower classes from the ruling bargain after the signature of the Structural Adjustment Program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in 1991. The third part is dedicated to understand the roots and forms of the Egyptian workers' movement, providing empirical evidence of the relevance of the working class' mobilization in the downfall of Hosni Mubarak's regime. Finally, the conclusion briefly reviews the main findings.

2. Abandoning the theoretical lens of democratization studies

The role of social classes in politics is a classic and contested issue. Some theoretical traditions have seen the continuous struggle among classes as the engine of history, whilst other schools of thought have simply neglected the appropriateness of class analysis. This is not the right place to re-open this long-lasting debate, and it should be enough to state that this article embraces the former strand of research. As already stated, the interest here is strictly related to the working class; arguably, the most analyzed, evoked, and feared social class. As made clear by Samuel Valenzuela (1989, 447), the exceptional place occupied by labor among the forces of civil society is the result of its unique capacity for mobilization, thanks to the common interests shared by workers and their organizational networks. Even more significantly, labor is special because through strikes and other forms of protest, it can interrupt the process of capitalist accumulation, therefore touching the heart of the system. However, the academic concern towards the working class has been largely restricted to its role in democratization, producing a continuous tension between scholars who have seen it as the class agent of democracy and others who, on the contrary, have attributed that status to the bourgeoisie (for a brief account of this literature, see Bellin 2000). The last wave of democratization, started in the 1970s, has reinvigorated this debate. Thus, in response to the elite-centric explanation provided by the 'transitologist' literature, a new interest towards the role of labor has emerged (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Collier and Mahoney 1997; Collier 1999). In general, this literature has been characterized by three aspects that will be treated as problematic here: *a)* class consciousness is seen as a stable and immutable feature that once achieved tends to be re-

produced through nearly natural mechanisms; *b)* 'economic' and 'political' demands are regarded as distinct, with the latter seen as the expression of more ambitious and far-reaching requests; and *c)* the role played by the working class is believed necessarily mediated by the action of trade unions and labor parties.

The overwhelming dominant economistic and positivist reading of Karl Marx's works tends to represent the working class as a fixed entity merely defined by its objective position within the capitalist structure. Over time, it is argued, workers acquire greater class consciousness and act as a coherent and homogenous body that, pursuing its own interests, brings a social revolution and the establishment of a class-less order. Although romantic, such a narrative is completely unrealistic. Certainly, classes are the structural product of the objective relationship that is formed in the process of production between those who own the means of production and the direct producers. However, as long as classes do not self-recognize themselves as forces who share material interests and common experiences, their class potential remains latent. This is elegantly expressed by Brecht De Smet (2015, 68): "[..] whereas the process of formal and real subsumption of labor under capital [..] creates a workforce, it does not constitute the working population as a collective subject". What transforms a *class in itself* into a *class for itself* is a long-lasting and fiercely disputed question. As far as this article is concerned, the crucial aspects to understand why workers sometimes behave as atomized individuals, whereas in other occasions transcend themselves into a broader subject, rest on two premises. To begin with, class is a social relation. In this regard, class formation is continually being made and remade in an open-ended and always ongoing process, in which greater class solidarity is always challenged by the continuous capitalist transformations and reorganizations, as well as by the turnover – both natural and legal imposed – of workers. In short, class formation is not something that happens once and for all to produce a working class with a fixed character, but a process of continuous ups and downs. Secondly, workers' consciousness can be effectively examined through the investigation of collective actions by workers (Posusney 1994, 212). That is, work-stoppages, wildcat strikes, public demonstrations, workers' requests, and factory occupations say much more on workers' consciousness than is generally assumed by scholars. The implicit assumption here is that emancipated men and women do not exist in a state of nature. On the contrary, workers learn by struggling in a complex process that can be described as a "pedagogy of revolt" (De Smet 2015, 89-101). Seen in this light, what has often been considered as the lack of consciousness among Egyptian

workers was actually the effect of an implicit comparison with a standardized and stereotyped narrative on the working class. One of the main elements on which these misleading views has been built is the compartmentalization of 'economic' and 'political' demands into two rigidly separate fields.

According to a widespread belief, workers focus on 'economic' requests rather than on more general 'political' issues have a lower revolutionary passion. The general idea here is the presence of a "hierarchy of struggles", in which economic 'demands' are regarded as more moderate and sectorial (Abdelrahman 2012, 614). However, the separation between 'economic' and 'political' spheres is – at least, for two main reasons – falsely conceived. First and foremost, capitalism as mode of production is a social phenomenon – that is, it cannot be fully understood if a separation between the economic structure, on the one hand, and social, juridical, and political forms, on the other, is drawn (Wood 1981, 78). Rather 'base' and 'superstructure' are continuously interconnected, although the former defines, so to say, 'the limits of the possible'. The crucial aspect here is the peculiar character of capitalism. In sharp contrast to the previous modes of production, in fact, it has economic rather than extra-economic powers of exploitation, whilst at the same time it tremendously lacks direct coercive power. This means that whereas, for instance, in a feudal system the transfer of surplus labor to a private lord took place by rents, taxes, or labor services, in capitalism appropriation is determined by the complete separation between producers and the means of production. In this regard, coercion or extra-economic powers are, in principle, unnecessary to force workers to give up their surplus labor, although they remain crucial to sustain private property and prevent serious challenge to the system. Therefore, the concentration by workers on economic demands does not reflect their lack of consciousness, but it is something determined by the perfect coincidence in capitalism between the organization of production and the appropriation of surplus value (Wood 1981, 89-93). Secondly, as well-testified by those who have tried to re-read the Egyptian uprising through Rosa Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike* (1906), the degree of state repression is also an important issue (Abdelrahman 2012; Zemni *et al.* 2013; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 97-101). In an authoritarian regime where the simplest expression of discontent is severely forbidden and "strike is a political crime, it must logically follow that every economic struggle will become a political one", showing that the "separation of the political and economic struggle and the independence of each other, is

nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentarian period" (Luxemburg 1906, 41, 59).
Finally, as pointed out by many scholars, it is something to bring down the existing order, it is something else to build a new society. The former is what Luxemburg (1906, 23) – exactly in *The Mass Strike* – described as the process in which "the apparent order is transformed into chaos", whilst the latter encompasses the development through which "the apparently 'anarchistic' chaos [is] changed into a new order". Despite the full acknowledgment of the existence of these two rather distinct processes, focusing simply on the establishment of new procedures and institutions through which conflicts in society are resolved, a vast literature has stated that the working class cannot be a positive element in the process of building a new order without relying on, or organizing itself in, trade unions and labor parties. Moreover, it is interesting to note that this view has been shared by democratization studies (Rueschemeyer *et al.* 1992, 9; Collier 1999, 16) and analyses on social revolutions alike (Tilly 1973, 436; Skocpol 1979, 29). These previous findings are not challenged here, since it is fully recognized that without being organized in stable, representative, and numerically relevant political structures, workers cannot play any significant role in the reconstitutive phase. This article, however, is interested in studying the former part of the process – that is, the defeat of the old regime or, to use Luxemburg's lexicon – the transformation of order into chaos. In this regard, it will be shown that the working class can also express its disruptive power in a much more indirect and consequential way, through scarcely organized and centralized networks, which are largely the product of the workers' mobilization themselves.

3. From corporatism to the Washington Consensus

On July 23, 1952, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led eighty middle-ranking 'Free Officers' in taking charge of the country and toppling the corrupted and inefficient monarchy. In the following years this intervention was considered by many Egyptians as a revolution – essentially thanks to the September 1952 agrarian reform and the wave of nationalization in the 1960s – but it was essentially a military coup with a defensive character, in a period of political chaos and high social mobilization that had risked to tear the country apart (Kandil 2014, 15). The Free Officers were animated by a high level of political eclecticism, but internal constrains (the presence of an extraverted economy, which

had prevented the formation of a strong national bourgeoisie during the British domination) and international conditions (the US timid military support to the new regime and the new pragmatic approach adopted by the Soviet Union towards national liberation movements in the Third World) imposed a clear model of economic development and placement in the Cold War. The new 'Arab socialism', as constantly evoked by Nasser after the 1956 Suez War, was actually a state capitalism based on import-substitution industrialization policies and characterized by planned economy, tight control over foreign capitals, partnership with the USSR, accelerated industrialization, ever-expanding welfare programs, and overarching control of the state on society. The populist pact between the state and labor was the quintessential of corporatism in which all the groups of society are organized "into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly" (Schmitter 1974, 76). Through the establishment of the General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (GFETU) in January 1957 – the sole legal and compulsory channel of workers' organization – the vibrant labor movement of the 1940s was sharply curtailed and trade unions' independence severely restricted. The new corporatist pact granted socioeconomic benefits to workers who enjoyed a period of wages rising and an improvement of their living conditions in exchange of their political support to the regime (Bianchi 1986, 431; Goldberg 1992, 154-156). In 1964, for instance, real wages were 68 percent higher than 14 years before, while the number of hours worked per week decreased from 50 to 44 between 1959 and 1964 (Posusney 1993, 90-91). In addition, the government took on a distributive function, providing basic food items and energy at low prices. However, the corporatist bargain did not bring labor to win all. Workers gave away the opportunity to organize themselves autonomously, and the strong anti-imperialist stance assumed by the regime brought to criminalize work stoppages as a potential threat to national production in a period in which the country was trying to free itself from imperialist dominations (Pratt 2001, 112). The nationalist and developmentalist discourse became hegemonic and the Egyptian working class remained silent for a while. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s the import-substitution industrialization policies had already shown their main limit – that is, a crisis in the balance of payment. Nasser was therefore forced to embark on austerity programs that devaluated the Egyptian currency, increased working hours, and forced down workers' wages (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 45).

Then, the Egyptian military intervention in Yemen, the catastrophic – both in economic and symbolic terms – defeat in 1967 war against Israel, and the demise at the global level of the Keynesian regime of capitalist accumulation established at Bretton Woods determined the conclusion of the first important phase in the republican history of Egypt (Beinin 2016, 18-19).

In 1974, Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, launched a series of reforms (Infitah), which were aimed at liberalizing the economy and distancing the country from its alliance with the Soviet Union, instead embracing pro-Western foreign policies. A new strategy of capitalist accumulation, characterized by the liberalization of trade, the shrinking of the state's role in the economy, and the attraction of foreign investment, was therefore followed. However, this second period, which lasted until the signature of the Structural Adjustment Program with the IMF and WB in 1991, was largely transitory. The volatile character of the 1970s and 1980s rested on two elements. On the one hand, the development of a cycle of class struggle, culminating in the January 1977 bread riots, alarmed the regime, which softened the initial radical posture embraced and turned towards a rent accumulation and distribution strategy (De Smet 2016, 170). This was possible thanks to a favorable international context, in which the oil boom of the 1970s brought significant and fresh resources into the regime's coffers. These resources came both directly – oil and gas rents, as well as Suez tools – and indirectly – Egyptian workers' remittances from the Gulf countries. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the role of the state was not rolled back, but subsumed to the requirements of the new class alliance forged among commercial capitalists, the bureaucracy, and foreign multinationals. Besides, the significant flow of revenues renewed the centrality of the public sector as an employer and sustained – at least, partially – redistributive policies (Beinin 2016, 37). However, this does not mean that workers remained silent as they had been in the period of Nasserist hegemony. On the contrary, the shrinking of the ruling coalition, the limited political legitimization enjoyed by Sadat, and the deterioration (only partial, but still real) of the living conditions of the lower classes determined the sudden reappearance of labor protests. As insightfully demonstrated by Marsha Pripstein Posusney (1993), these can be explained through the moral economy approach developed by E. P. Thompson (1971) in his studies on the eighteenth-century English workers' movement. The key aspect here is the implicit presence of a pact between labor and the dominant elites. In sharp contrast to what orthodox Marxist scholars would expect, subaltern classes accept their exploitation as long as this is engulfed into a set of norms and values

to which the working class has become accustomed to. Conversely, the attempt led by those in power to break the deal is challenged by workers' protests that can be seen as restorative – that is, they aim to resurrect the status quo ante rather than advance new requests and threaten the system. Within this framework it seems possible to read and understand all workers' mobilizations in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s: the 1971 protests in the iron factories in Helwan as well as in the textile plants in Shubra al-Khayma; the radical and violent January 1977 riots after the reduction of subsidies; the 1984-9 iron and steel factory workers' actions; and the 1986 railway workers strike. To be more precise, even the first serious agitations after the 1952 military coup in late 1966 and in 1968 – when after the war defeat the workweek was increased from forty-two to forty-eight hours without compensation, forced savings augmented, and paid holidays cancelled – were rooted in the moral economy discourse (Posusney 1993, 92-93). There are at least three clues to believe that this interpretation is correct. Firstly, all the protests were reactions to takeaways – that is, they erupted when workers felt betrayed and a sense of injustice pushed them to publicly show their anger. Secondly, the vast majority of these actions tended to be plant-based, confined to hyper-sectorial requests and with scarce possibilities to travel from a factory to another. Finally, the particular forms of protest chosen. They were generally articulated around three techniques: sending telegrams to government officials; boycotting cashing paychecks; and carrying out in-plant sit-ins during which management was ejected and production maintained – if not implemented – as a clear sign of workers' commitment to the national endeavor in the supposed anti-imperialist struggle (Posusney 1993, 111-114).

By the end of the 1980s Egypt had become an international mendicant. The semi-rentier state developed by Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's successor after his assassination in 1981, was depended to a great extent on those non-tax incomes that had started shrinking in the wake of the sudden and violent downfall of oil prices in 1985-86. Fearing a repetition of January 1977 events, the government refused to cut subsidies and partially redistributive policies, accepting heavy fiscal deficits that eventually fostered an unmanageable situation. The 1991 Gulf War provided a completely unexpected way out to this standstill. In return to Egypt's participation in the US-led coalition, Western donors cancelled about half of its foreign debt. Nevertheless, the pact also forced Egypt to adopt radical economic reforms. The program agreed with the IMF committed the Mubarak's regime to a set of macroeconomic stabilization and liberalization measures as

prescribed by the new Washington Consensus. Public expenditure was reduced; subsidies on goods and services including health and education were curtailed; agricultural rents were liberalized through Law 96/1992; and 314 public enterprises were listed to be sold thanks to the legal framework provided by Law 203/1991. Despite the great emphasis put by the government on privatization, the rate of state divestiture was particularly slow between 1991 and December 1995, when only three companies were sold and sixteen were partially alienated through the stock market (Pratt 2001, 115). Then, the process speeded up in the following years and by 2004 nearly 200 companies had been – completely or partially – sold by the state (Farah 2009, 45). The attempt to make attractive the highly centralized public enterprises was pursued through two strategies. Firstly, they were broken into smaller parts in order to create openings for private investors. Secondly, the number of workers employed in these companies was reduced through the implementation of an early retirement program and by not replacing those who had already left. According to Alexander and Bassiouny (2014, 52), by 2001 the workforce employed in the aforementioned 314 public enterprises had been already reduced by more than a half, declining from around one million workers to just 453,000. The assault on workers' living conditions accelerated sharply with the new Labor Law (12/2003) – which undermined workers' rights to job stability by introducing temporary contracts as the norm for the whole labor market – as well as with the appointment of Ahmed Nazif's cabinet in 2004. The businessmen's government, as it became known given the presence of members of the business community at the head of six major ministries (trade and industry, housing, transportation, health, agriculture, and social welfare), hastened the pace of neoliberal reforms. The weighted average tariff was reduced by nearly a half, a new flat and therefore regressive income tax of 20 percent was introduced both for personal incomes and corporations, and in the short period July 2004 - March 2006 80 public companies were sold (Farah 2009, 49). However, this process of privatization did not lead, as argued by neoliberal pundits, to a free and competing market. On the contrary, almost all sectors of the economy became dominated by monopolistic and oligopolistic powers. Many scholars have explained this as the effect of the scarcely transparent and highly corrupted environment in which privatization took place, often summarizing the whole with the over-simplistic term 'crony capitalism'. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that monopolies were not an unlucky and unwanted event, but the effect of the new strategy of capitalist accumulation based on dispossession. In this context, the role of

the state is not, as erroneously too often supposed, reduced. On the contrary, the state is crucial in establishing a capital-friendly environment and providing the tools for the privatization of the commons. It is the presence of too much capital in search of valorization that has imposed the rolling back of those Keynesian-inspired reforms that had subtracted some areas to the market in the previous decades. This capital's need led to the formation of a new coalition among the state, multinational corporations, and local commercial-turned-industrial capitalists; whereas workers, peasants, and the lower classes in general were the main losers of this new consensus. Workers' adaptation to this new scenario was slow and throughout the 1990s their reactions were still inspired by the moral economy principles (Pratt 2001, 115-119). Then, the increasingly acute neo-liberal restructuring completely smashed the previous framework, releasing the trapped energies. A new, and without precedent, wave of workers' discontent therefore emerged in the 2000s. It was a class-based reaction to neoliberal policies. The long journey to Tahrir was already on track.

4. The long way to Tahrir

As stated before, Mubarak's downfall was the effect of mass-based physical protests across most of the country's territory in which different social classes and diverse political traditions took part. However, the sudden outburst of the uprising in late January 2011 did not come out of a clear blue sky. On the contrary, it was a rapid acceleration in the long-lasting wave of contentious politics, which had developed throughout the 2000s. One crucial actor in paving the way to Tahrir was certainly the workers' movement. Its mobilization, affecting public and private sectors alike, and spreading from traditional industrial sites in the Nile Delta to new satellite cities around Cairo, was indeed the most serious menace faced by Hosni Mubarak's regime in its last decade. In this regard, it seems worthwhile to understand where this avalanche came from.

A crucial turning point in workers' mobilizations was the strike at Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006. Although this should not be interpreted as the beginning of the protest wave, there has certainly been a 'before' and an 'after' Mahalla. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, one fifth of all public sector textile workers were concentrated there in the largest factory of the whole Middle East where

24,000 workers were employed. Secondly, since it was established in 1927, the Misr has been the beating heart of the country. In September-October 1947, for instance, a ferocious strike demanding an independent trade union blew up there, marking the qualitative shift in the long cycle of contention that eventually brought to the 1952 military coup; whilst in 1960, not casually, the Misr was the first important firm to be nationalized by Nasser's regime after that the so-called Arab socialism had been embraced (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007). In short, throughout its history the factory has been the litmus test of Egyptian social and political transformations. Finally, Mahalla's events played a "transformative role" in workers' actions, bringing to an intensification and radicalization of them (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 101). The protests in Mahalla erupted as a response to unmet promises. In March 2006, in fact, Prime Minister Nazif announced an increase in the annual bonus given to all public workers from 100 Egyptian pounds to two months' salary. However, when December came, workers found just 89 pounds – that is, the same old 100 pounds less deductions for taxes and social benefits. On December 7, production ceased and the factory was occupied. After four days, a forty-five-day bonus, assurances that the factory would not be privatized, and a promise that in case of profits higher than 60 million pounds 10 percent of these would be distributed to workers were granted by the government (Beinin 2016, 76). This victory galvanized workers in the textile sector and in the following three months about 30,000 of them in a dozen textile mills in the Nile Delta and Alexandria took part in several different forms of protest (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007). Moreover, Mahalla carried the features of the subsequent agitations. Occupation of factories during which production was maintained and even incremented were substituted by strikes; these strikes were much longer than the mobilizations of the previous decades and in general ended peacefully by direct negotiation; workers' tactics and requests were replicated in different economic sectors, becoming viral and spreading to almost the whole country; and new demands – from the sacking of company management to the establishment of independent unions – were raised (El-Mahdi 2011, 392)[1].

[1] The restrain adopted by the state surprised many scholars who have provided several and contrasting explanations to explain this unprecedented behavior (El-Mahdi 2011, 396; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 113; Abdelrahman 2015; 59). As far as this article is concerned, no equivocal evidence has been provided to analyze the sudden government's turnabout from brutal violence of the 1980s and 1990s to much milder responses in the 2000s.

Table 1 – Collective labor actions and number of workers involved, 1998-2010

Year	Number of Actions	Alternative Number of Actions		Workers Involved
1998	114		115**	
1999	164			
2000	135	102*		
2001	115	132*	138**	
2002	96			
2003	86			
2004	266			386,346
2005	202			141,175
2006	222			198,088
2007	614	692*		474,838
2008	609	447*		541,423
2009	432	478*		
2010	371	530*	530**	

***Sources*: Beinin (2016, 66); * Abdelrahman (2015, 57); **Alexander and Bassiouny (2014, 108)**

As stated before, Mahalla was not the starting point of the long labor protest wave. From 1998 to 2003 there was an average of 118 contentious collective actions per year, marking a significant increase from what had happened in the previous cycles of protests. Then, in 2004 alone – the year in which Nazif's businessmen government was appointed – there were 265 episodes of workers' disturbances. However, not only did workers' actions skyrocket in number and assume a more militant character, but they also spread to the private sector that until 2004 had remained substantially untouched. In this regard, the strike at the ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, north of Cairo, and the mobilization at the Ora-Misr Company were paradigmatic. An Egyptian investor had leased the ESCO for three years for 2,5 million Egyptian pound a year. Then, in 2004, he was able to buy the whole enterprise for only 4 million. In October 2004 the

four hundred workers struck against this privatization, without, however, being able to halt it. Even their second strike in February 2005 did not succeed in reversing the process. Despite this, workers obtained economic conditions much better than those previous offered and forced the state to take responsibility even though it had already sold the enterprise (Beinin 2013, 191-192). Arguably, the collective action at the Ora-Misr was even more significant, given the location where it was staged and the form of protest chosen by workers. This factory of manufactured building materials was established in 1983 in 10th of Ramadan City, one of the satellite cities around Cairo where many middle-size private enterprises have been located. For over twenty years asbestos – a substance banned in the US and Europe – was used in the production. The sad result was that eighteen workers died between 1997 and 2004 and forty-six more were diagnosed with lung cancer. Under international pressure the government ordered the company to close down and pay compensation to workers and dead workers' families. The refusal from the proprietor to do this brought such a strong reaction from workers that it triggered the establishment of an encampment outside the factory that lasted for over nine months. This was one of the first times that workers chose as the stage of their protest a public space: probably taking inspiration from the pro-democracy movement that since the outburst of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 had constantly tried to cross this red line for the Egyptian regime. The emergence of what can be termed a new 'culture of protest', favored this reciprocal fertilization and contamination between 'economic' and 'political' struggles in which protests travelled from a social class to another, as well as demands and repertoire of contention used by a group became a source of inspiration for others.

Coming back to Mahalla, the December 2006 strike did not wear out workers' protests. On the contrary, in the wake of the astonishing success that was obtained, the elected strike committee launched a campaign to impeach the official local union committee, accused of being corrupted and supportive of the government rather than of workers' demands. Thirteen-thousand employees signed a petition asking for new elections after that the previous ones in 2006 had been characterized by fraud and misrepresentation. Some three-thousand workers resigned – an illegal act – from the General Union of Textile Workers. These measures were not accepted by the GFETU and therefore remained ineffective. At the same time, the mass resignations were indicative of that Mahalla's militancy spirit that erupted again in a new strike in September 2007, when the promises made at the end of the previous agitation regarding the payment

of an extra bonus in case of company's massive profits went once more unmet. The strike lasted six days and resulted in a new and complete victory for workers that went far beyond the relevant economic gains acquired. In fact, CEO Mahmud al-Gibali was dismissed and GFETU President Hussein Megawer together with government representatives were forced to negotiate with the strike committee. Stimulated by these events the strike committee at Mahalla proposed a national labor strike day on April 6 in order to advance the new great rallying cry of the working class: a monthly minimum wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds – that is, eight times more than the prevailing basic salary. The effort was huge but the national strike was a fiasco. Not only coordination among Delta area workers was too feeble to self-organize a similar protest, but also the regime's response was ruthless, deeming the link between labor grievances and national mobilization as an impassable red line. On April 2, the factory was occupied by security forces and the whole city was kept under strict control. Likewise, an intense pressure was exerted on the labor committee to call off the strike, proposing in return of this social benefits and free transportation to and from work. The strategy of 'the carrot and the stick' was successful, and on April 6 in Mahalla, as well as elsewhere in the Nile Delta, workers remained silent. However, the city was rocked by two days of furious confrontation between angry demonstrators who were protesting against the high prices of unsubsidized food items and security forces. The level of repression was exceptional: 331 people were arrested, 9 seriously wounded, several workers transferred, twenty-two of them sentenced to 3-5-year jail terms, and a fifteen-year-old boy was shot dead (Beinin 2013, 199). Despite the failure to stage a national strike, through their direct and indirect action workers were able to pose a new and serious menace to the regime. Besides, the labor movement was no longer confined to the public sector alone. As a matter of fact, whilst until 2004 nearly all the protests were located there, between 2006 and 2010 contentious action spilled over to include the private sector too. In this regard, the most famous agitation was staged at the Mansura-España, a private garment factory in the Nile Delta where 284 workers – many of them women – fearing that the company would be liquidated after the number of employees had been reduced from more than 1,200 in a few months, went on strike for over two months (Beinin 2016, 68-69).

All these events showed that, by the end of 2007, the soil had been ploughed and the blossom of the first independent union in Egyptian republican history seemed close to be achieved. With great surprise, however, this was not the

achievement of militant textile workers, but the result of the mobilization of traditionally pro-regime clerical workers. The trigger of the protest was a salary disparity between the municipal tax assessors and central government workers. The mobilization started in the fall of 2007 and gained momentum at the end of the year when an eleven-day massive occupation of the street, in front of the Ministry of Finance building with more than three thousands workers, took place (Beinin 2012, 103). Eventually, tax assessors employed by local authorities won a 325 percent wage increase and, building on this success, the strike committee spent the following year organizing an independent union, which became known as the Real Estate Tax Authorities Union (RETAU). By December 2008 the permanent committee had already recruited nearly 30,000 workers across all twenty-nine Egyptian governorates (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 168). Then, with a completely unexpected movement, the Ministry of Manpower and Migration recognized the union in April 2009, ratifying both on a symbolic and effective ground the dismissal of the corporative bargain.

Table 2 – Number of contentious actions by ownership sector, 2006-2010

Sector/Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Public sector	156	400	374	272	200
Private sector	66	214	235	160	171
Total	222	614	609	432	371
Private sector action as % of total actions	29,7	34,8	38,5	37,0	46,1

***Sources*: 2006-2008 El-Mahdi (2011, 393); 2009-2010 Beinin (2016, 68)**

5. The workers in the storm of the uprisings

The continuous and reciprocal interplay between 'economic' strikes and 'political' demands throughout the 2000s determined the accumulation of anti-regime energies, which blew up in a mass-based revolt in late January 2011. As constantly stated, this uprising did not come out from nowhere, and workers were crucial in the long journey to Tahrir. Seen in this light, it does not seem an exaggeration to state, as a prominent labor activist did, that "workers did not

join the revolution; the revolution joined the workers" (quoted in Bishara 2012, 83). Nevertheless, it is hard to deny the prominent role of middle-class youth to prepare and organize – through both the traditional means and virtual networks – the 'Day of Rage' on January 25. In this mobilization, the working class was simply absent and uninfluential. Arguably, this has led many scholars to conclude that workers did not play any part during the now famous eighteen days, or that they just had a partial and delayed entry into the uprising. As far as this article is concerned, this was not the case at all.

A crucial element that has to be taken into account here is the government's decision to close down from January 28 to February 5 all public sector enterprises in a desperate and vain attempt to weaken protests. For sure, this had a tremendous impact on the capacities of mobilization of the working class. In fact, not only the strongest weapon in workers' hands – that is, strike action – was excluded from their repertoire by default, but the absence of a national organization that could coordinate and lead the action of all public workers meant that – with some partial, although remarkable, exceptions – they acted more as individuals rather than as a collective actor (De Smet 2015, 346). Seen in this light, the role of the working class in the first part of the uprising should be neither overlooked nor overestimated. It was – to a degree that is hard to assess – important. There are at least three main reasons for this. First of all, workers were certainly at the forefront in all the manifestations that took place in the Delta cities, as well as in those Cairo suburbs and working class neighborhoods where the 'soul' of the uprising has to be found (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 202). Revolts in Suez led by workers, for instance, turned immediately violent on January 25, when police stations and NDP headquarters were attacked. Besides, in this city the fire of protest was kept alive in the following two days, whilst downtown Cairo was strictly checked by security forces. It was in Suez that shipyard workers went on strike as early as January 26 and 27 (Beinin 2016, 108). Secondly, on February 2 workers did not answer to the GFETU call to mobilize for the regime. The plan prepared by the dominant elite to weaken the protest movement was based on two elements. On the one hand, there was the intention to clean up Tahrir through the recruitment of thugs. On the other, the mobilization of workers was supposed to show the presence of sectors still loyal to Mubarak, delegitimizing in this way the opposition. However, the plan failed miserably. Not only protesters who had erected barricades in the square held on in the 'Battle of the Camel', but also the rally organized by President Megawer and other GFETU bureaucrats found simply no positive answers. This

was a tremendous proof that the basis of the regime had shrunk dramatically in the previous years. Finally, workers were physically present as both individuals and groups – as testified by the establishment of the founding committee of the EFITU on January 30 – in Tahrir Square. This means that the middle class was not alone in revolting against Mubarak's regime, bringing to the implicit formation of a broad coalition that the military – who was deployed to the streets on January 28 after that the police had been over-numbered and defeated by demonstrators – was unwilling to repress.

The military's behavior during the uprising has spread fierce debates. This article challenges the view that the armed forces' decisions were simply dictated by cold or rationalistic calculation, which considered the chaotic situation an opportunity to reaffirm the military's prominent political role after decades in which it had faded away (Kandil 2014, 5). On the contrary, the military's position should be seen as a constant attempt to react to a magmatic and increasing exceptional situation. In this regard, the military's take-over on January 28 was first and foremost a response to the meltdown of internal security forces and political apparatuses alike (Albrecht and Bishara 2011, 15). Then, up to February 10, when the SCAF convened without President Hosni Mubarak and issued its first communiqué, through which it announced that it would remain in permanent session, the military's position remained ambiguous. It is true that after a few days in which the use of force was not ruled out, the military announced that it would not fire upon peaceful demonstrators as early as February 1. Yet, as testified by the restraint shown towards armed Mubarak supporters who entered Tahrir the following day, this was not a provision of protection for protesters, but the sign that Mubarak's regime was the military's first option, although the armed forces refused to do the dirty work to keep this in power (Brownlee 2012, 145). In other words, the military gave the presidential circle the full opportunity to manage the crisis through its own tools. It was Mubarak's failure to do so that brought to the astonishing military's decision that he had to leave office. A decision not so much dictated by the occupation of a square in central Cairo, but rather related to the astonishing wave of strikes that hit the country since February 6 – that is, after that public enterprises were re-opened. The decision was a mixture of government's economic necessity to do so, as well as an attempt to show that the situation was under control and normalization was on the way. The result was certainly something not expected by the dominant elite. The first strikes took place on February 6 and 7. These were simply the initial signs of the coming seismic shift in the balance of power.

By the end of the week about 300,000 workers all around the country had been involved in a form or another of collective action (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 200). The traditional strongholds of the working class – from Suez to Mahalla, from Kafr al-Dawwar to Helwan – led the way. Steel and fertilizer workers in Suez immediately occupied their workplaces, while the vital activities of the Canal were disturbed by workers' agitations, including the open-ended strike proclaimed by four subsidiary companies. This first wave was immediately followed by an even more radical and vast-spread one. Workers' protests reached textile plants in Mahalla al-Kubra and Kafr al-Dawwar, as well as steel and iron factories in Helwan. Likewise, thousands of employees of Telecom Egypt asked for the resignation of the top manager and a 10-percent pay rise (De Smet 2016, 195). The petroleum sector, with the workers' agitation that travelled from Suez to Ismailia, up to Port Said, was completely paralyzed; whilst the strike proclaimed by the Cairo and Alexandria public transport workers made it difficult to get around the two main cities of the country. Medical doctors joined the fray too, staging sit-ins and protests in front of public hospitals. Even more significantly, military-run factories, which represent a significant, although complicated to assess, part of the Egyptian economy, were in ferment as well. The fact that conscripts, used as manpower, and 'normal' workers as well broke the strict discipline imposed by the military in their own economic complex was a clear sign that the established procedures and hierarchies were crumbling. In short, this tremendous wave of strikes and protests posed a serious threat to the existing order and made clear that a solution was needed. Eventually, the military decided to get rid of the old Pharaoh-turned-lame duck, and on February 11, 2011, after nearly thirty years, Hosni Mubarak was forced to leave the presidency of Egypt. Three main elements give account of the decision taken by the SCAF. To begin with, a crackdown on workers and protesters would have had high costs and unpredictable consequences. In particular, given the strength of the uprising and its 'national' character, the risk of mutinies, desertions, and split in the military's ranks was extremely high. That is, repression could have meant the dissolution of the armed forces as organization. Secondly, the strategic interests of the economic complex owned by the military had to be protected. In this regard, the best option was to distance the armed forces from Mubarak's dynasty (Achcar 2013, 174). Finally, the growing social soul of the protest forced the military to take the lead, with the precise aim of deflecting the uprising itself (De Smet 2016, 205). In this regard, it should be concluded

that whereas Tahrir was the heart of the uprising, it was the working class mobilization that tilted the balance of the confrontation in favor of protesters.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that workers' mobilizations were crucial not only in paving the way to Tahrir, but also during the eighteen days of relentless protests that led to the astonishing sight that was Mubarak's downfall. For sure, this does not mean that the defeat of Mubarak's regime was simply the product of sit-ins, strikes, and occupations of factories staged by workers. On the contrary, it was the establishment of an implicit cross-class and cross-ideological coalition, through which different social classes and political forces often at odds mobilized together, that transformed the impossible into the inevitable. Nevertheless, assessing the specific weight of each actor is crucial to reach a more nuanced understanding of a complex and extremely rich phenomenon as the Egyptian uprising became. Besides, this article has pointed out two theoretical aspects that travel far beyond what happened in Egypt. Firstly, the long wave of mobilizations of workers – and lower classes more in general – throughout the 2000s has to be understood as a class-based response to the neoliberal savage attack on the living conditions of millions. In this regard, it was part of that great, although incoherent and fragmented, movement of resistance – that through ups and downs – has constantly challenged the new diktats of the market all around the world in the last decades. Referring specifically to Egypt, it was the violent turn from a strategy of accumulation based on rents and partial distribution of wealth to one fostered by dispossession and barbarian exploitation that fostered a reaction. This, after some years, moved from the attempt to regain the previous bargain to open confrontation between labor and capital. Secondly, it is true that the working class cannot play a direct and proactive role in building up a new order without operating through its own organizations – that is, trade unions and labor parties. However, when the focus is turned on the process of challenging and defeating the previous existing procedures and institutions, workers can be instrumentally decisive even when acting through loosely organized and scarcely centralized networks. In this regard, this article suggests that workers might have played a much more relevant role in several political transformations than has been generally assessed by previous studies. Arguably, this could be a good starting point for further analyses.

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