

**An Elusive Victory – Egyptian Workers Challenge the Regime
(2006-2012)**

**Appendix: B Examples of Other Significant Protests by
Egyptian Workers**

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Examples of Other Significant Protests by Egyptian Workers

The research presented thus far has focused on two types or categories of workers' protests: garment and textile workers specifically at El-Mahalla el Kubra and civil servants working as real estate tax collectors in the Ministry of Finance and municipal governments. The persistent wave of protests that lasted from 2006 to 2010 had an indelible effect on the rest of the working class, including white-collar professionals¹ in addition to blue-collar workers. In this appendix, I will review other worker protests, often referred to as “wildcat strikes”,² their repertoires of contention, mechanisms of diffusion, and the framing of their grievances to contribute to an ever-growing worker-based social movement. This

¹ White-collar professionals are organized into professional association referred to as syndicates, which wield power through their licensing authority. So for example for an journalist to practice his craft he/she has to be a member of the Journalists' Syndicate in order to receive their press credentials.

² Wildcat strikes are not sanctioned by the official ETUF trade union

appendix will add empirical evidence obtained through research, observations, and interview notes to the overall research project. This information will show the wide breadth of worker's discontent and collective action to challenge the regime for improved working conditions, initially. Workers from so many different economic sectors were in protest over socio-economic grievances that evolved and became political statements of discontent with the regime.

It is interesting to note that civil servants were better positioned to create independent unions given the balance of forces in Egypt. Factors include the public feud between the minister of manpower and the head of the ETUF; the government's embarrassment over criticism of Egypt and the ETUF at the 2008 ILO conference and in other international forums; [then the placing of Egypt on ILO's black list of countries violating the fundamental convention #98: right to organize and bargain collectively]; the tax collectors' advantages of being able to temporarily suspended tax collection, thus impacting government's revenues; civil servants' independent unionization does not threaten the privatization of the public-sector enterprises; and civil servants are not employed by an institution with a high degree of historical and political symbolism like El Mahalla el-Kubra.³

The following are the most significant protests that took place from 2005 to 2010:

1. ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, north of Cairo, February to May 2005
2. Ghazl Shibin Spinning Company, which was sold and became the Indorama Shibin Spinning Company, 2006
3. Estimated 526,000 administrative workers in the Egyptian public school system, 2008-09
4. Postal workers threatened to create an independent union, 2009

³ Beinun, *Justice for All - The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt*, Washington, DC, The Solidarity Center, 2010:32

5. Tanta Flax and Oil Company (Kitan Tanta), 2005-2010
6. Port workers at the Canal Company for Ports and Large Projects at the Suez Canal, 2008
7. Train drivers, January 2009
8. Omar Effendi department stores (retail workers) in Cairo, April to May 2009
9. Mansura-España Garment Company workers, April to June 2007
10. Information technology centers' workers, 2010
11. Teachers in elementary and secondary public schools, 2009-10

Background: The Legal Framework to Control Workers

In 1957, Egypt ratified the ILO convention No. 87 (1948) on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize. In 1954, it ratified ILO Convention No. 98 (1949) on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining. However, compliance with these conventions was undermined by national legislation, close links between the ETUF and the state apparatus, and intervention in trade union affairs by security forces, typically State Security. These state instruments were often involved in resolving “wildcat” strikes, protests, and prevention of independent labor organizations.⁴ As previously noted, the ETUF is closely aligned with the state apparatus with its leadership firmly under the control of the ruling party.

The Right to Strike in Egypt

It is important at this juncture to review parts of the Egyptian labor law that concerns strikes. Egyptian Labor Law No. 12 in 2003 also provided in Article 191: “(W)orkers have the right to a peaceful strike which is to be exercised by their unions in order to defend their vocational, economic, and social interests within the limits and according to the regulations stipulated in this law. If

⁴ Beinín, Joel. *Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt*, Solidarity Center, Washington, DC, 2010, page 27

workers of an establishment that has a union decide to strike in the cases allowed under this law, the establishment's union—following the approval of two-thirds of the members of the administrative board of the concerned general union—should notify the employer and the concerned government authority of the strike at least fifteen days in advance in a registered letter. If there is no union in the establishment, workers should notify the concerned general union of their intention to strike. In this case, the administrative board of the concerned general union—following the approval of the majority mentioned in the preceding clause—should make the aforementioned notification. In any case, the notification should include the reasons behind the strike action and its intended period.” Article 195 of Labor Law No. 12 of 2003 considers the period of the strike an unpaid leave for the worker.⁵

The following pages will present through mainly interview material the details surrounding the contentious actions by teachers, factory workers and information technology personnel.

Teachers on strike: “Education and Learning Are Not Taking Place in Egyptian Schools”

The overall decline in public education in Egypt is a result of the following factors: the dismal state of Egypt's antiquated educational system, the decline of state investment in infrastructure and personnel, and the increase in class size. “Abdel Hafiez Tayel directs the Egyptian Center for Education Rights (ECER), an activist organization dedicated to pressuring the government into investing more

⁵ <http://egypt.electionnaire.com/issues/?id=8> and <http://www.egypt.gov.eg/arabic/laws/labour/default.aspx>

into the education system. ECER just announced its report on the dismal state of Egypt's education system. The report showed that the current budget in Egypt calls for spending \$757 US annually to educate one student, compared to \$8,000 in Saudi Arabia and \$11,000 in Israel.”⁶ Teachers are state employees and depend on the government to allocate enough funds in the state budget for salaries and benefits. As Egypt has been prescribing to neo-liberal economic reforms, education has become a scapegoat for government's re-shifting of priorities while maintaining the most important state security apparatuses to keep the regime in power. The result has been a slow and gradual decline in the education system with teachers bearing the brunt. There are about 810,000 teachers from kindergarten to high school and about 28,000 school buildings.

It became apparent that government employees were better positioned than others to establish independent unions. The balance of power tipped toward those employees who could affect the government's performance and use that power to force the government to give in to their demands. This was clear with the Real Estate Tax Collectors when they closed their provincial offices and stopped collecting taxes. These taxes are direct revenue for the government and can impinge negatively on government's performance. The same situation describes another group of workers — 526,000 administrative workers in the Egyptian public school system. “These administrators — who manage student affairs, order and distribute school books, organization examination materials, and work in accounting, human resources, and legal affairs — demanded wage

⁶ Paul, A. “Egypt's Labor Pains: For Workers, the Revolution Has Just Begun.” *Dissent* 58 (4): 11-14.

parity with teachers.”⁷ So when those administrators threatened to stop administering exams or not to order and distribute schoolbooks, it could have had a serious impact on millions of students.

Historically, the salaries of teachers and administrators were the same and very low. In 2007, under pressure, the Egyptian Parliament passed a bill to increase teachers' salaries but not the administrators' since they were not classified as “educational staff”.⁸ The ETUF affiliated union for educational services workers did not support their members' grievances. So these workers formed an independent committee to provide representation for them instead of the official ETUF union. “The committee organized local strikes in several schools and local education authorities in February and March 2009, a demonstration in front of parliament on March 9, and a national school strike on March 29.”⁹ Their demands then included the creation of an independent union to their demand for increase or parity in wages with teachers.

The teachers' advocacy for their rights continued after January 2011.

1st March 2011: More than 6,000 teachers went in strike today in front of the premises of the Administration of Education in the Governorate of Qena. They called for permanent jobs for the teachers working according to temporary contracts. The Minister of Education issued a decision yesterday to appoint all the teachers who worked as temporary employees for a period of three years on condition that they pass the “Cadre Examinations” which the Ministry will hold on March 25, 2011. Commenting on the Minister's decision, Mr. Essa Aly

⁷ Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) report, “Subject to Discrimination” April 2009.

⁸ Beinin 2010:33

⁹ Ibid.

Mohamed, a teacher at Abu Mannaa Bahry School said it disappointed all the teachers employed by temporary contracts. He said that the strike will continue until the Ministry responds to their demands.¹⁰

Several additional workers and government employees threatened to form independent unions to advocate for their rights. They demanded improvements in working conditions, increase in wages (in many cases wage parity), and job security. In 2008-2009, postal workers, train drivers, and port workers were additional examples of such actions and how the government used State Security and the official trade union to pressure workers to end their protests and accept an inept agreement. "On May 18, 2009, postal workers in Kafr al-Shaykh governorate went on strike for six days (...) They demanded wage parity with the Egyptian Telecommunications Company (ETC) workers, who earn up to three times as much as the 52,000 postal workers (...) They also demanded that the 5,000 temporary workers employed by the Postal Authority receive permanent status."¹¹

Workers at Omar Effendi, the largest government-owned department store chain, also joined the strike wave, reported Carr, in April and May 2009. "(Workers) went out on strike for three days in April 2009 and again on May 5, 2009. In 2007, the Saudi Arabian-based clothing retailer, Anwal United Trading, bought a 90% share of the previously publicly owned firm. Strikers claimed that the new owners violated a contractual commitment that the work force would be

¹⁰ CTUWS press release; http://ctuws.com/labour_movements/?item=836

¹¹Beinin 2010:34 and <http://www.arabawy.org/2009/06/08/disgruntled-postal-workers-call-for-independent-union/>

cut by no more than 600 and that new employees had been hired at higher wages than more qualified workers doing the same work.”¹²

Garment and textile workers who were primarily women at the Mansura-España Garment Company protested for better working conditions and wages. “These women were the principal force behind a two-month strike April - June 2007. In the course of the strike, several women went on a hunger strike, and five threatened to commit suicide. Even though the strikers nominally won their demands, management and the government did not fulfill their promises. Their culturally supposed ‘docility’ and ‘traditional’ background did not inhibit active participation in the strike.”¹³ Women workers played an important role in several of the protest strikes that took place in Egypt from 2006 to 2011.

“Women are also part of this revolution,” is the title of a chapter in *Arab Spring in Egypt* by Sholkamy. She presents the concept of liminality which highlights that moments of solidarity and popular mobilization “are also ‘liminal’ moments in which hierarchies and structures of distinction are temporarily suspended (Turner 1969; 1974); they are also moments that (are) impossible to sustain as they are temporally and spatially bounded.”¹⁴ The liminal phase is when anything is possible under particular circumstances and taboos, rituals, and traditions are broken. “Liminal moments are wedged between two states of normalcy as they mark the disruption of one order and clear way the debris of what used to be the norms (...) In order to create a new set of norms.”¹⁵ Working women at the Mansura-España Garment factory, in addition to many other

¹² Carr, Sarah, Daily News Egypt, April 2 and May 7, 2009 and from Bein 2010:52

¹³ Bein 2010:72

¹⁴ Sholkamy, page 154

¹⁵ Ibid. 155

workplaces, engaged in those liminal moments and broke with traditions to advocate for their rights. They became “equal” with their fellow male workers and free from the strictures and structures that had defined them.¹⁶ This condition is defined by Turner as one of “*communitas*”,¹⁷ a necessary condition from which a transformed order emerges and into which women and others are reintegrated, creating a new state of relations between men and women workers in this particular situation. This condition of *communitas* existed in several worker protests over the period of 2005-2010 and into those eighteen days in Tahrir Square in 2011 and beyond.

Sholkamy further supports the thesis of this research project: “(W)ith hindsight it is now clear that the protest movements that had been taking place for a decade, and that were initiated by rights activists belonging to workers’ and civil liberty groups and other social movements, became the revolutionary agglomeration that toppled the elite echelons of the regime.”¹⁸ The elements of time (more than a decade of organizing and protesting) and the increase in miserable economic and working conditions made these protest movements more successful despite the lack of a larger coordinating organizational body.

Privatization and workers’ fear of losing their jobs became a regular occurrence, and there are several examples. One example is the ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, 12 miles north of Cairo, where a strike took place from February to May 2005. “By 2005 the number of workers in the six ESCO textile mills had been reduced from more than 10,000 to 3,500 through a combination

¹⁶ Sholkamy page 155

¹⁷ Ibid.155

¹⁸ Sholkamy, Hania. “Women are also part of this revolution,” *Arab Spring in Egypt*, editors Korany and El Mahdi, AUC Press, 2012, page 153.

of attrition, early retirement, and a long-term hiring freeze following a major strike in 1986. When the 400 ESCO workers learned about its impending sale to an Egyptian investor they began a campaign to reverse the privatization of their workplace.”¹⁹ They wanted job security, and if that as not possible, then to receive adequate pensions. However, as soon as Prime Minister Nazif's government took over in 2005, ESCO Qalyub Spinning Company's privatization process began. This was part of a larger strategy of the privatization of the textile industry as a whole. The ethos of the public sector being owned by the workers was still relevant, and so workers felt the sale of the company to private hands without the their participation and consent was illegal. The ETUF affiliated union did not stand by the workers, and they supported the government's policies. “While the ESCO workers did not stop the privatization ... they did receive a pension package according to the Unified Labor Law of 2003. This strike set the tone for many that followed in the public sector... the ESCO workers conducted an orderly strike and sit-in. They were not subjected to violent repression. And they achieved economic gains well beyond anything that other striking workers achieved in the 1980s or 1990s. As a result, Egyptian workers received the message that collective action might achieve real gains.”²⁰

Another example of privatization that became a disaster was the Ghazl Shibin Spinning Company, which was sold in 2006 and became the Indorama Shibin Spinning Company. The company employed 4,200 workers and was sold to a private foreign company. The contention between the workers and the new

¹⁹ Beinin 2010:48

²⁰ Ibid.

management continued from 2006 to 2009 with the management failing to meet the minimum agreements. The agreement stipulated that workers could take the early retirement package (referred to by workers as the “early death plan”) in addition to not hiring any new employees until they reached the “optimal” workforce. “In February 2009, the company sent out a letter announcing that due to the international economic crisis it would not be paying workers their annual bonus, equivalent to 228 days’ pay. This provoked an 11-day sit-in strike beginning on March 5.”²¹ In this case, the ETUF affiliated union supported the workers and after negotiations they did receive their bonuses. However, in May 2009, four of the strike leaders were punitively transferred to the company’s warehouse in Alexandria. In addition, the company managers continued to accuse the workers for the company’s financial losses. Indorama Shibin has experienced two major strikes and 100 brief work stoppages and other protests since it was privatized.²²

Tanta Kitan (Linen) Factory in the City of Tanta, El-Gharbiyya Province

On Tuesday, June 11, 2013, I met with three workers and trade union leaders from the Tanta Kitan factory, Gamal, Ashraf, and Mohammed²³ at a local coffee shop in the city of Tanta in the El-Gharbiyya province of the Delta region. Their story is that of struggle and sacrifice, and it begins one year before the January 2011 revolution. They told me that Hussein Higazy Street in front of the Council of Ministers headquarters building needed to be renamed “Egyptian

²¹ Beinin 2010:52

²² Ibid.52-53

²³ They asked me to use their first names only

Workers' Street" since it has witnessed so many protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins for days on end in the last few years in particular. The Tanta Kitan factory workers stayed in that street for seventeen days, probably the longest number of days compared to other worker protests. Tanta Kitan was (and in the workers' minds remains) a public sector factory. It was sold under suspicious terms to a Saudi investor, Abd el Ellahy El Kahky, who built the City Stars Mall in Nasr City in Cairo. This was a profitable factory that employed 2,300 hundreds of workers, but today there are 166 plus a few hundred contract workers earning about LE 500 (about \$71) per month. The ten factories in the complex make use of every part of the linen plant, including linseed oil, various types of linen, plywood, and even furniture.

The following narrative is their story in a detailed timeline based on the facts and stories that they shared with me.

2004 – This was the beginning of full privatization program. The prime ministers that implemented this full privatization program began with Prime Minister (PM) El Ganzouri, then by PM Atef Ebid and final coup de grace was delivered by PM Ahmed Nazif who took office in July 2004)

2005 - 2006 — There where successive problems between the new owners and the workers.

2007 – Tanta Kitan workers went on strike in addition to many other workers all over the country in a variety of workplaces such as building material workers,

transport workers, Cairo underground metro workers, food processing workers, bakers, sanitation workers, oil workers in Suez, and many others.²⁴

2009 – Tanta Kitan workers held a thirteen-month strike where the infamous nine trade union leaders (union committee) were fired. This was actually the first ever “legal” strike because it was approved by the ETUF affiliated union (under the leadership of Saeed el Gohary, the ETUF garment and textile union president at the time). The strike initially lasted five days and then continued to thirteen months. It took the ETUF affiliated union six months to publicly announce that the strike was legally sanctioned. After those first six months, Minister of Manpower Aisha Abdel Hady, Saeed el Gohary, and the Saudi owner signed an agreement without consultation with the workers or their leaders. The agreement stipulated the end of the strike, giving the workers six months leave without pay and that the workers had to pay back their social insurance payments for those six months. “Talk about a massive slap in the face,” said Gamal. “After that incredibly outrageous agreement, nine trade union leaders stayed in the factory for seven days in protest. And no one could move them off of the factory premises. For those six months they were able to get their base wages yet without any of the additional allotted allowances, etc.”

“The factory occupies a large space of land, approximately 74 feddans²⁵ and so it is a large complex that is worth a lot of money (for) just the land itself and this is without the buildings, equipment, and raw materials. It was sold for much less than its value, and rumor has it that the minister of manpower and the

²⁴ Beinun, *The struggle for worker rights in Egypt*, 2010, page 14.

²⁵ Feddan definition, an Egyptian unit of area equivalent to 1.038 acres

ETUF leadership received a monetary sum under the table to ensure that all goes smoothly and that the new owner does not have any labor trouble which was not the case,” said Ashraf.

January-February 2010 – Another strike began mid-January and lasted for seventeen days, one year exactly before the January 2011 uprising. One of their many chants was: “Build the walls/the fences of prison and make them higher; tomorrow is the revolution that will rise and bring down these fences.”

All three workers interviewed agreed to the commonly heard statement made by workers that the government’s early retirement scheme is referred to as the “early death”. They usually received a lump sum payment between LE 25,000 (\$3,571) to LE 50,000 (\$7,143), and then they received a monthly “pension of pittance” between LE 250 (\$36) and LE 300 (\$43). “The new Saudi-owned management forced those with terminal diseases to leave the factory so not to incur additional health insurance costs,” said Ashraf.

June 30, 2010 – An agreement was made with the Saudi owner in Beirut, Lebanon since there was a court order in Egypt against the new owner for two years prison. He was could not travel to Egypt or he would be imprisoned. There is an archaic statute called “attack on the rights of others” that was used in this case by Khaled Ali, the workers’ lawyer. The court, in this case specifically Judge Hamdy Yassin Okasha (head of the Judges’ Club in Maglis el Dawla) handed down a decision (72 pages long) in favor of the workers, but it has not been implemented. This court decision called for the Tanta Kitan factory complex to return to the government’s ownership as of 2005 and that the sale to the Saudi

investor was null and void. “Sadly, the government after the 2011 revolution went to court to say it does not want Tanta Kitan factory back,” said Gamal.

Gamal, Ashraf, and Mohammed returned to sharing the details of the Beirut agreement between the Saudi owner and Minister of Manpower Aisha Abdel Hady. “The agreement called for 450 workers to go into immediate retirement on June 30(end of fiscal year). So Gamal, for example, was re-instated back to work on June 30 and then put on retirement on the same day, 30 June. This deal called for LE 50,000 (\$7,143) lump sum payment and then the small monthly pension thereafter. The local ETUF union committee and national union played an incredibly negative role adding more pressure on the workers. There was a lot of “buying time” through delays and wasting time. The next date in court will be on September 28, 2013.²⁶ Today, two factories out of the ten are working and at one-third production rate with only one shift of workers at work.”

The Factors, and Organizations that Helped and Supported the Tanta Kitan Factory Workers

“The independent media played a very important role,” Ashraf said. “Daily there were news reports, articles, and headlines from *El Masry el Youm* newspaper to Al-Jazeera television broadcast. There was an independent union at the factory yet without an official name. They were daily fighting the ETUF affiliate union for survival and for the workers' rights. There were no profits, no raises, no meal allowances, and no promotions since the new Saudi owner took over. It seemed that they were running the factory into the ground on purpose in

²⁶ The government again did not wish to re-possess the factory complex and the agreement has yet to be implemented leaving the workers in limbo

order to sell it as property and make a large profit. The workers were accused by (the) minister of manpower of being 'politicized' in a bad way and influenced by the Communists, Revolutionary Socialists, and others but not the MB,"²⁷ he continued. This tactic is similar to those carried out in Central and Eastern Europe, and former Soviet Union states and Russia post-Communism.

El Masry el Youm ran a report called: One night living on the street with the Tanta Kitan workers.²⁸ «المصري اليوم» تقضى ليلة اعتصام كاملة مع عمال «طنطا للكتان» أمام مجلس الوزراء فرشوا الأرض «كراتين» وأعدوا ١٢ «صفيحة جبنة»... وقالوا: ننتظر عودة نظيف

Translation: "El Masry el Youm spends the night in a full sit-in with the Tanta Kitan workers in front of Ministers' Council; they spread cardboard boxes and prepared 12 large cans of cheese, saying: we are waiting for Nazif's return." A journalist spent the night with the workers during their sit-in and wrote a story. Gamal recounted parts of the story: "For about fifty to seventy meters on the pavement in front of the Council of Ministers' building on Hussein Higazy Street (which includes the Prime Minister's office) slept the workers for seventeen days. The businesses and inhabitants in the apartment buildings on the street were very supportive. There was one shoe maker/cobbler on the street who did have a hard time getting business, so Hussein el Masry (head of education and training at the CTUWS) asked him to make a pair of shoes for him just to give him some business. The food establishments all benefited from having the workers there day and night. Once the police and state security forces got so fed up with these hundreds of workers not leaving that they decided to cordon off the area and not

²⁷ Notes from interview with workers from Tanta Kitan Factory on Tuesday, June 11, 2013

²⁸ A report by El Masry el Youm journalist on one night spent with the workers on strike at a sit-in in front of the Prime Minister's office <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=244156>

permit them to leave to go to the bathrooms so the workers just went to the bathroom at the feet of the security. It sent a message. Then the workers' representatives told the security forces, 'the tents are coming tomorrow, and then our wives and children are coming too' the security forces recognized that these workers (were) not going anywhere and they (were) staying." Again, this is a preview of the Tahrir Square events, tactics, and repertoires.

According to Gamal and the others, there were several civil society organizations that helped the 450 striking Tanta Kitan workers for the seventeen days sleeping in front of the Council of Ministers building on Hussein Higazy Street. They were The National Organization for Change; Dr. Abdel Galleel; the CTUWS; the Kefaya movement, especially George Ishak, who brought thirty-seven blankets for the workers sleeping on the street; Hisham Fouad representing the Revolutionary Socialists organization; the Lawyers Syndicate's human rights committee; the El Hillali Center; and the Solidarity Workers' Group led by Fatima Ramadan. They began a "living support fund" with each organization contributing about LE 1,000 to feed the workers. Tents were also brought in so that they could sleep in a bit warmer area since it was January and got cold at night. The tents caused lots of discomfort and anxiety for the police and state security forces since it meant that the workers (were) staying and not going anywhere. The state security apparatus did arrest for a few hours some of the supporters of the striking workers, including Fatima Ramadan and other activists. The workers got very irate and threatened to attack — the police then quickly released them. "Al-Jazeera news, written and television, also played an excellent role in keeping the issue alive," said Mohammed.

Gamal continued to say: “Daily the workers would release a press release, so they had seventeen in all, one for each day. They bought whistles and used them, which annoyed the Council of Ministers building employees. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif got married during that time and so they chanted: ‘Ya Nazif, ya aarees (new groom), we are sitting on the pavement; Ya Aisha [minister of manpower] the blind, you burned the banya (okra).’ The Ghazl el Mahalla factory (Misr Spinning and Weaving factory in El Mahalla el Kubra) workers stood in solidarity with us and so did the Amonscito factory workers, too. They protested in front of the Shura Council, and each day they removed one piece of clothing to protest.” They had very creative mechanisms of protest, slogans, songs, and repertoires.

Ashraf shared information about another workers' protest movement at the Amonscito factory. He said, “Mohamed Farid Khamis, (a) well-established Egyptian investor in the tenth Ramadan industrial city, wanted to buy Amonscito factory, yet the workers knew his terrible, bad reputation and actions. So having knowledge played a good, important, and positive role, confirming the old adage that knowledge is power. Workers of the information centers, disabled workers, and the Amonscito workers all protested in front of the People's Assembly, too. So the government was under siege – protests and sit-ins at many of its institutions Hamdeen Sabahi (political figure, leader of Karama political party and ran for president after the uprising) came very often to check in and see how to help the striking Tanta Kitan workers. There was and still is a strong feeling that those industries that were nationalized under Nasser should never be privatized. The Tagamu political party also supported the workers. In the report

of the manpower (labor) committee in the People's Assembly, there is great stuff, including Saeed el Gohary (president of the garment and textile workers affiliated with the ETUF) supposedly 'crying' for the workers. All the while Yusri Bayoumi, an MB member of parliament, quietly advised the workers to go against the management and to oppose the government. They were not upfront in their support at all."²⁹

The workers from Tanta Kitan Factory were not surprised by the January 2011 uprising for them it was just a matter of time. The uprising was a culmination of a tsunami of labor protests that had been taking place regularly for several years. "So January 25, 2011, was not a surprise at all," said Gamal. I asked, "Why were the workers not 'obviously' present in the first few days?" He responded, "1) anything that threatens their daily bread they are cautious about and not always eager to not get paid. 2) Bad to poor organizing; they did not come down to Tahrir as a block/group, they came as individuals – this changed as the days went on and Mubarak gave them one week paid vacation (first week of February 2011). Afterwards, they came in droves."

Gamal continued, "On May 1, 2011, there was a huge worker presence in Tahrir Square. Public sector ideology needs to be understood and included in analysis – it is very hard for workers growing up under the Nasser days to give that up. So privatization has to be done very, very carefully, with the workers' participation and understanding. We need a true labor and trade union law that is correct and fair. The public sector did play a good role – this cannot be ignored – it provided employment for so many (people), health insurance, and a living

²⁹ Notes from interview with Tanta Kitan factory workers on Tuesday, June 11, 2013

wage to eat and raise our families. With the sale of public sector companies, there are many unemployed workers, wages are still low, and consumer prices of goods are going higher daily. What is needed is good, expert management to make these public sector factories profitable and competitive.”³⁰

Gamal, Ashraf, and Mohammed, worked between 23 and 31 years at the Tanta Kitan factory and now get a pension of LE 200 (\$29) to LE 400 (\$57) per month. It is clear that for these workers and many others, privatization is a dirty word. Pension reforms have been negative for workers and government employees. They were also very keen to mention the “indispensable role of cell phones” and how cell phones (mobiles) were effective organizing tools. There was no mention of Facebook or Twitter.

The Information Technology (IT) Centers' Workers: “We Just Want to Live” (November 2010)³¹

The number of workers in these centers for Information Technology (IT) is around 32,000, and the centers are located all over Egypt. They were hired as the result of a national contest held in 2001 and 2002 based on students' academic achievements and cumulative grades in college. These employees signed a document saying they would not take on additional part-time jobs so that they can be full-time focused on this work. Their salaries were LE 150 (\$21) per month for those with a university-degree, LE 120 (\$17) per month for those with a technical/vocational college degree, and LE100 (\$14) for those with a two-year associate's degree. They worked on several national projects gathering

³⁰ Notes from interview with workers from Tanta Kitan factory on Tuesday, June 11, 2013

³¹ Information obtained from the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) Arabic press releases and personal interviews in June and July 2013.

information and inputting data, such projects included a national literacy program; creation of tourist maps for the governorates; collection of data on the bread crisis and the bird flu epidemic; and field research on gathering data on numbers of street lights, numbers of water pumps, and wells in rural areas; initiatives for improving girls' education; the population census in 2006; and the census of disabled persons. These workers started their strikes and protests in March 2010 raising the following demands: 1) receive unpaid salaries several months past due and full salaries for some who had only been receiving LE 99 (\$14) for the last eight years; 2) end of contractual arrangement to make them full-time workers with benefits given to other civil servants, increase salaries and bonuses, create clear job descriptions, receive health insurance, and receive social security; and 3) regular payment of salaries every month instead of getting paid every three months per an agreement made between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Local Development.

In March 2010, around 4,000 workers participated in a sit-in protest in front of the Council of Ministers' headquarters in Cairo, a favorite and effective gathering place for worker protests. They came from the following provinces: Beni Suewayf, Damietta, Kafr el Sheikh, Port Said, Alexandria, Sharqiyya, El Gharbiyya, Ismailia, El Minya, El fayoum, Sohag, Menoufiyya, Qena, Cairo, Giza, and El Behera. This protest included a large number of women who set up "picnic-style" blankets on the pavement facing the building, and many brought their children including babies. One of the female protesters said, "What can we do? The house is empty without food and money, we cannot leave our children alone at home, and we just cannot continue living this way." Many suffered from

a lot of pressure by the governors to produce information, and the government refused many requests for days off or vacations, especially in Menoufiyya province. In Kafr el Sheikh province the governor threatened to fire the workers if they did not comply with his order to open literacy classes and work there, even though this project was considered voluntary. Fifty-three workers from all of the IT centers in the province then held a sit-in protest in front of the city council building. In El Minya province, security forces prevented a bus with IT center workers from leaving for Cairo to participate in the larger protest per the instructions of the governor. In Sohag province, 380 workers conducted a sit-in protest with their families in front of the governor's office building as a result of the unreasonableness of the governor's actions and decisions.

One of the protesters reported that they presented more than three official signed petitions to the member of the parliament on the committee of grievances, Ehab Othman, and each time he told them to be patient and that he was working on their situation. Many parliament members took an interest in their situation so they presented a formal request on March 29, 2010, to the parliamentary committee for labor and social issues to discuss this problem. The members of the committee agreed to solve the problem by making all the IT center employees permanent civil servants and ensured they would receive their owed salaries within two weeks. Based on the committee's decision and declarations, the workers suspended the sit-in protest that had been taking place for nine days. However, the workers never got these basic demands met despite the parliamentary committee decision, and they returned to protest again on April 17, 2010. This time more than 1,500 workers protested in front of the parliament

building, and this continued for thirty days. This resulted in repeated sessions of negotiations until finally an agreement was signed providing for the following: increase in salaries so that the minimum wage is LE320 (\$46) for those with technical college degrees, LE381 (\$54) for those with university degrees; yearly raises; and to transfer their current work contracts to permanent employment civil servants' contracts. At the same time, the government announced the allocation of LE150 million from the state budget to raise salaries in the IT centers, which meant an increase of LE100 million from the current allotment in the budget. The increase in wages would begin from July 2009. The story does not happily end here, for on September 14, 2010, over 4,000 workers returned to a sit-in protest in front of the Cabinet of Ministers' building to demand that the aforementioned signed agreement be implemented.

These workers continued to push for the implementation of the signed agreement. They faced many threats of firings and some were transferred to other IT centers far from their homes. Supervisors implemented rigid work rules, and there were threats of reporting workers to State Security. Then came another insult: the salaries were paid but at the old rate. These protests continued again in October and November 2010 without serious resolution or implementation of the negotiated agreement. One female protester said, "My husband does not work regularly, and when he does he brings home LE 300 (\$43) and my salary is LE 119 (\$17). We have three children and two of them go to school. Our combined salary is around LE 400 (\$57), and we cannot afford to buy two kilos of meat (about LE 160=\$23) in one month. After we slept on the pavement, they promised us that our salaries would increase to LE 300 (\$43), which is really not

enough money but it is at least something a little more to help us live. That is all we are asking for, we are not asking for more, we just want to live.”³²

³² Information obtained from the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) Arabic press releases and personal interviews in June and July 2013.