

## REVIEW ESSAY

# The Workers' Movement and the Arab Uprisings

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ABDELRAHMAN, MAHA. *Egypt's Long Revolution. Protest Movements and Uprisings.* [Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Democratization and Government, Vol. 4.]. Routledge, London [etc.] 2015. viii, 162 pp. £90.00. (Paper: £34.99.)

ALEXANDER, ANNE, and MOSTAFA BASSIOUNY. *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Workers and the Egyptian Revolution.* Zed Press, London 2014. xii, 387 pp. £29.10.

BEININ, JOEL. *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.* Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2016. 164 pp. £10.99.

CHALCRAFT, JOHN. *The Invisible Cage. Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon.* Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2009. xv, 310 pp. £37.59 (Paper: £15.99.)

HANIEH, ADAM. *Lineages of Revolt. Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East.* Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL 2013. 273 pp. £14.99.

*Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf.* Ed. by Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar. Hurst, London 2012. xii, 238 pp. £23.38.

TALANI, LEILA SIMONA. *The Arab Spring in the Global Political Economy.* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2014. xiv, 251 pp. £68.00; € 93.95; \$100.00. (Paper: € 93.59; \$95.00; E-Book: € 76.99; \$69.99.)

YOUSFI, HÈLA, L'UGTT, *une passion tunisienne. Enquête sur les syndicalistes en révolution* (2011–2014). Karthala, Paris 2015. 262 pp. £18.77.

It has been six years since the Arab uprisings. In the meantime we know not only more about their outcome, but also about their background, the balance of forces that drove them, and the obstacles they faced. With this new knowledge, the slogan of the uprisings “Bread, freedom and social justice”, has gained in depth. This review article will draw special attention to the role of labour in the uprisings. To do this I will first situate the workers’ movement in the broader economic setting of neoliberalism on the basis of the works by Leila Simona Talani, *The Arab Spring in the Global Political Economy*, and Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*. For labour and migration the volume edited by Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar, *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf*, and John Chalcraft’s study, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, have been used. For the workers’ movement itself I have used Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*, Hèla Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne. Enquête sur les syndicalistes en révolution* (2011–2014), and Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*. Finally, Maha Abdelrahman’s *Egypt’s Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* has been included as an addition to the focus on the workers’ movement. Together the studies reviewed here present state-of-the-art research on the introduction of neoliberalism in the region, on the changing class relations, and the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces active in the region. They concentrate on Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and the Gulf, but more general conclusions can be drawn from them for the whole region.

#### NEOLIBERALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

All the authors reviewed here agree that the uprisings can be understood only by taking into account the effects neoliberalism has had on the region since the 1980s. Neoliberalism has put an end to the developmentalist state, or what Beinin calls “peripheral Keynesianism”, which was based on a tacit agreement between the population and the state in which the population received social services, free education, health, housing, and other infrastructural facilities, such as electrification and roads, and in which the public sector was expanded and jobs guaranteed in exchange for political quietism. This social contract has also been called the “authoritarian” or “ruling bargain” and its gradual unravelling during the past thirty years due to economic austerity measures is usually regarded as the source of the Arab uprisings. Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Plans (ERSAP) and agreements with the US, EU, WTO, IMF, and the World Bank within the region from the 1980s onwards

included lowering custom tariffs and taxes on imports; opening up markets to foreign investments in telecommunication, the financial sector, transport, and energy; privatizing public sector companies and deregulating the labour market (lowering minimum wages, ending severance pay, making hiring and firing more flexible); and liberalizing real estate. These measures aimed to transform the state-led import substitution economies of the 1960s into export-oriented economies based on private foreign and local investment and deregularized cheap labour. As Hanieh points out, "privatization and labor market deregulation were two sides of the same process".<sup>1</sup> Earlier revolts against these measures occurred in the form of the "bread riots" in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan.

Not all authors agree on the extent of the globalization of the Middle Eastern economy. Talani argues that the three countries she analyses (Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya) can scarcely be said to be globalized when it comes to the main indicators: percentage of direct foreign investments, mergers and acquisitions, and exports. They also score below average with regard to access to the Internet, markets, and education. At the level of regional integration they do even worse: they are more intensely economically connected with the world outside the Middle East than with neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> Alexander and Bassiouny have called this uneven and combined economic development: uneven because some sections (telecoms, transport, cement, steel, auto assemblage) have become integrated into the global economy, combined because these new sectors affect other, less integrated parts of the economy.<sup>3</sup> Hanieh argues that the Gulf as a global economic and financial hub also affects the rest of the region not only through its direct investments but also through its political interference.<sup>4</sup>

However, the authors concur regarding the negative effect of these measures in the context of globalization. Economically, austerity measures have led to low growth rates (in comparison with other regions such India and China), low investment, the failure of exports to take off, growing unemployment, increased exploitation of cheap female labour, and increasing dependency on remittances, foreign aid, and rentier income from tourism as a source of income.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a major shift has taken place in favour of informal labour at the cost of formal labour. In 2008 in Tunisia, sixty-eight per cent of contracts in the textile branch were temporary.<sup>6</sup>

1. Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 53.

2. Talani, *The Arab Spring in the Global Political Economy*, pp. 76–87, 119–133.

3. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 72–73.

4. Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 123–144.

5. Talani, *The Arab Spring in the Global Political Economy*, pp. 117–212; 149–204; Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 47–60, 145–147; Beinín, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 55–59; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 45–76.

6. Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, p. 59.

In Egypt, tariff reduction led to a fivefold increase in textile imports and the stagnation of the textile industry. Privatization caused a decrease in the number of workers across all countries in the region. In Morocco, the number of people working in the clothing industry fell by ten per cent from 2004 to 2007.<sup>7</sup> In Egypt, the Shin El Kom textile mill laid off fifty per cent of its labour force between 2005 and 2010.<sup>8</sup>

These measures led to a fall in wage levels in Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan (in Egypt median real hourly wages declined by 6.7% from 1988 to 2006; in Jordan real hourly wages in manufacturing declined by 1.5% between 2001 to 2008), a deterioration in labour rights, declining educational services (expenditure on which dropped from 14% to 12.1% of Jordan's national budget, 7% to 5.7% of Egypt's, and 27% to 25.7% of Morocco's in the period 2004 to 2010), declining subsidies for basic foodstuffs, and a growing percentage of the population below the poverty line (in Egypt 16.7% in 2000, 19.6% in 2005, and 21.6% in 2009; more critical unofficial estimates put the figure as high as 40% in Egypt and Morocco), while the top 1% became richer.<sup>9</sup> To ensure the implementation of these measures, the regimes started to rely more on repression, which led to an increase in the size of the security forces.

The difference between the analysis of the authors reviewed here and the more conventional analyses of the neoliberal orientation of the Middle East is that the authors analyse them in class terms. They claim that the decision to downgrade the public sector and rely increasingly on the private sector was the result not of economic necessity, or economic "rigidities", as the IMF holds, but of class-based decisions. Those who directly benefited from deregulation and privatization were the ruling elite, in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, the presidents and their families, their "crony" business relations, ministers, or, in the Gulf states, the "citizens", who became the beneficiaries of an even more rigid exclusionary system. Over time, the new class alliances produced a new regional capitalist class supported by the rise of the Gulf as a global financial and economic hub. Foreign and Arab capital was available to implement the neoliberal project in the region at the expense of workers and the population as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

#### WORKERS' MOVEMENTS IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA

Because of rapid restructuring, a decline in trade union membership, an increasing percentage of informal labour, and dispersion over new and smaller units of production, one of the central questions is how the labour

7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

8. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 75.

9. Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 68–73.

10. *Ibid.*; Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 55–59, 65–70; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 49–57, 65–76.

movement still managed to play such an important role in the Arab uprisings? In fact, Alexander and Bassiouny argue that the workers' movement in Egypt was just in time; when in 2006 and 2008 massive strikes broke out in the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company it was still a huge company of 25,000 workers who could set the tone of resistance to restructuring. Moreover, on account of the uneven and combined nature of the globalized economy, where formal and informal workers in the public and private sectors interact, the "disruptive power" of labour remained strong.<sup>11</sup> By its nature, they argue, neoliberalism "knits together the apparently disparate parts of the working class into a variegated whole".<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in Tunisia it was the declining Gafsa phosphate mining area of the interior that became the centre of the uprising. The Gafsa Mining Company (Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa), the main employer in the area, had been in decline during the previous decade, firing many of its workers, with unemployment reaching between twenty and thirty-nine per cent and the percentage below the poverty line at forty per cent. Yousfi shows how, in 2008, demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, and clashes between the unemployed, students, their families, and the police in Redeyef, lasting for six months, became the dress rehearsal for the 2010 uprisings in Sidi Bouzid. Having learned from the earlier mistake of becoming isolated, trade union activists immediately organized support demonstrations in other regions after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010.<sup>13</sup>

The second reason was that the deal between trade union movements and the state was at the heart of the social contract in Tunisia and Egypt. In exchange for higher wages, a share in net profits, job guarantees, the introduction of social welfare programmes, social security systems, as well as the legalization in 1957 of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), the Egyptian trade union movement supported the Nasserist authoritarian state that suppressed democracy and reneged on its right to strike. In Tunisia, the inclusion of the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT) in the nationalist project during the Neo-Destour Conference in 1955 led to the same exchange of rights. Beinín calls this deal a "class compromise", Alexander and Bassiouny the "*political* suppression of the independent trade union movement but its *social* inclusion", while Yousfi calls it "une alliance inédite" (an unprecedented alliance).<sup>14</sup>

Here, however, the similarities in the Egyptian and Tunisian narratives end. In his short comparative work, Beinín brings out their different trajectories. His study can be supplemented by the superb analysis by Anne

11. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 83.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

13. Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, pp. 57–97.

14. Beinín, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 31–32; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, p. 38; Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, p. 31.

Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny of the Egyptian trade union movement and by Hèla Yousofi of the UGTT. Part of their analysis of developments leading up to the uprisings is focused on the struggle within the movement between bureaucratization and incorporation into the state versus independence and the right to resist state policies. From the beginning, the ETUF was a state organ established to control the workers' movement. The state appointed not only its secretary general, but also its lower echelons, and controlled its cadre members, even assigning it a role in the unified party by making fifty per cent of its representatives members of parliament.

In contrast, the Tunisian UGTT always remained far more independent, negotiating collective agreements for its members with the employers' organization, L'Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat (UTICA), defending the interests of the workers, and fighting the political leadership of the country, protesting against its capitalist policies when it started to change its policies in the 1970s – to the extent that the trade union secretary general Habib Achour was thrown into jail after he supported a general strike – and following the bloody clashes with security forces in 1978. Even after Ben Ali took over power from Bourguiba in 1987 and the higher bureaucracy of the UGTT had been co-opted by the state, many of its regional and local cadres, especially in the Gafsa area, remained more radical and activist, retaining close contact with their members and voicing their grievances. In contrast to the ETUF, the UGTT was able also to absorb the leftist movement of the 1970s, whose members came to dominate certain sectoral and regional trade union branches. Throughout the following period, they organized strikes, channelling the class struggle through its organization. In the words of Beinin, the UGTT maintained an “unstable cohabitation between a neutralized leadership and an uncontrolled base”.<sup>15</sup>

This difference would play itself out during the next phase of restructuring and ERSAP. Although both trade unions dragged their feet over privatization, afraid they would lose control over their public sector members, they eventually accepted austerity. The decline in oil prices and remittances at the end of the 1980s was problematic for Arab governments, forcing them to turn to the IMF. In 1991, in Egypt the ETUF accepted the plan for privatization, and Law 203 subsequently designated 314 public enterprises for sale. By 1999 137 had been sold, and in 2004, after the instalment of the “businessmen cabinet” of Ahmad Nazif, the process was accelerated. It further discredited itself by accepting the deregulation of labour through Labour Law 12 of 2003, which replaced previous fixed contracts with flexible, temporary contracts. These laws affected one

15. Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, p. 73.

million of the 5.5 million government employees, 3.8 million of whom were members of the ETUF (of a total labour force of 15.2 million). As Maha Abdelrahman points out, between 1996 and 2006 the percentage of workers with a permanent contract declined from 61.7 per cent to 42 per cent; by 2004 informal workers outnumbered formal workers in the private sector by 8.2 million to 6.8 million.<sup>16</sup>

As Alexander and Bassiouny note, the introduction of Labor Law 12 and its acceptance by the ETUF meant that the state turned its back on the social contract of 1957. The turning point came with the collective action at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company at Mahalla in December 2006, when, for the first time since the social contract, the strike became the main instrument of resistance in Egypt. Its success inaugurated a new phase in the labour struggle, one that was distinguished by the duration of the strikes, their frequency and geographical diffusion, the number of strikers involved, as well as the new level of self-organization and self-consciousness. Collective protests increased from 33 in 1985 to 114 in 1998, and from 264 in 2004 to 614 in 2007. Between 1998 and 2010 between two and four million blue- and white-collar workers took part in 3,400 to 4,000 forms of collective action. New, too, was that demands were no longer restricted to the economic grievances at the plants themselves. Raising the minimum wage to a reasonable level, for instance, became the main demand of the major strike in 2008, and when this was refused demands became increasingly more political, targeting the whole economic policy of the government.<sup>17</sup> The last phase in this politicization was reached when demands were made to boycott the ETUF and organize independent trade unions. Fatefully, this step was taken not by the textile workers, whose massive numbers would have made a difference, but by the much smaller tax officials, led by Kamal Abu Eita. In 2009 they founded the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU) as the first independent trade union, its members leaving the ETUF-affiliated union. It was the first democratic trade union speaking in the name of all employees of the Property Tax Authority and being fully accountable to its members. Its example was followed in 2010 by the Public Transport Authority Union, the Health Technicians Union, and the Independent School Teachers Union.<sup>18</sup>

These different backgrounds in the trade unions manifested themselves during the uprisings. While in Tunisia the UGTT played a central role in diffusing the protests, the revolution in Egypt was greatly hampered by the counter-revolutionary role of the ETUF and the weakness of the

16. Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 13.

17. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 97–124.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 157–191.

newly independent trade union movement. In Tunisia the UGTT organized solidarity demonstrations in the region immediately after the uprisings in Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010; these spread to Tunis on 25 December with a lawyers' sit-in, peaceful solidarity marches in Thala, a lawyers' general strike on 6 January, ending in the general strike on 14 January which brought down the Ben Ali regime. However, the major uprisings following the fall of Ben Ali, Kasba I and II, which subsequently ousted the government of Ghannouchi, were led by youths and the unemployed.<sup>19</sup> In Egypt, youths organized the occupation of Tahrir Square; workers took part as individuals but they were not unorganized. The ETUF stood with Mubarak and it organized the "Battle of the Camel" against the occupation of Tahrir Square. In line with the spirit of the revolts, on 30 January the RETAU (54,000 members), the Health Technicians Union, the Independent School Teachers Union (40,000 members), the Pensioners Union, and some other unions formed the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). In March it demanded the dissolution of the ETUF. By September 2011 it claimed to represent 24 national unions, 118 workplace unions, and 1 regional union (Alexandria). It was accompanied by a rival Egyptian independent trade union federation, the Democratic Labour Congress. By 2013 a total of 1,000 independent trade unions had sprung up. In 2012 3,817 labour incidents were reported, a fourfold increase since 2007.<sup>20</sup>

#### THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE REVOLUTION

Revolutions are made not by the working class alone however. In order to form a broad revolutionary movement it is essential that alliances be forged with intellectuals, leftist political currents, advocacy NGOs, and other classes. For a long time the main alliances were always sought on the right, between different sections of the Islamist movement. Among the books reviewed here, Talani's views the Islamist movement in Tunisia and Egypt as an alliance between the middle classes and the poor classes to counter the effects of the austerity and to create a "counter movement".<sup>21</sup> However, most authors are critical of the Islamist movement. They point out that the Muslim Brotherhood did not differ from the Mubarak regime in its support of the neoliberal economy and of restructuring. It was adamantly opposed to the recognition of the independent trade unions and the EFITU.

19. Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 101–107; Youfsi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, pp. 58–97.

20. Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 107–115; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 192–223, 240–251.

21. Talani, *The Arab Spring in the Global Political Economy*, pp. 93–103.



Yousfi points out that, although it cannot be compared with the Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's Ennahda (the main Islamist movement, which became a party in 2011) clashed with the UGTT.<sup>22</sup>

But if the Islamist movement is largely regarded as the counter-revolution,<sup>23</sup> nor are the authors very enthusiastic about the left. Beinín, especially, is critical of the Egyptian leftist movement. Except for two organizations, the Centre for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) and the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), it was fragmented, marginal, and largely detached from the workers' movement. Neither official left-wing parties, such as the Tajammu' Party, nor informal movements protested against austerity measures or were involved in strikes. With the exception of the Revolutionary Socialists, a Trotskyist group, during the last strike wave of 2007–2010, their activities remained limited to supporting strikes. For instance, the famed 6 April Youth Movement, which established a Facebook page in support of the strikes at Mahalla in 2008, was never present on the ground. The support the left gave to the Mubarak regime in its repression of the Islamist movement further undermined its credibility. Beinín argues that in the end a class division separated the liberal middle-class intelligentsia from the workers, who, through their strikes, did far more than the intellectuals to undermine the regime. The same applies to Tunisia, where bloggers protested against the clampdown on the Internet but were weak in their support of the Gafsa rebellion in 2008. They failed to realize that in an authoritarian regime the “non-political” economic demands of the workers were in fact highly political.<sup>24</sup>

Alexander and Bassiouny adopt a slightly more generous view of events. They argue that the revolution was the product of a much broader “culture of protest” that sprang up after 2000 and consisted of a political and a social dimension, the “social soul” of the revolution. The political dimension was represented mainly by pro-democracy activists who had demonstrated in support of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, the Kefaya movement against the re-election of Mubarak in 2004, and the judges' movement in 2006, whereas the workers represented the social dimension. The strike brought the two together. When they flowed into each other, such as during the call to support the Misr Spinning strike in 2008 and the eighteen-day occupation of Tahrir Square, “a perfect fusion of the social and the political” was established and the revolution was pushed forward.<sup>25</sup> At the structural level, the political and the social also merged in the demand for “cleansing”

22. Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, pp. 190–200.

23. Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution*, pp. 75–80; Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 217–223; Beinín, *Workers and Thieves*, pp. 117–128; Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 168–173; Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, pp. 93–100.

24. Beinín, *Workers and Thieves*, p. 98.

25. Alexander and Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice*, pp. 196–201.

(*tahrir* in Arabic). Alexander and Bassiouny argue that the demand to purge pro-regime cronies in universities, neighbourhood councils, workplaces, the government bureaucracy, official media, hospitals, and public companies could have had revolutionary consequences because it would have meant the replacement of the existing authoritarian structures by a democratic, social revolution that would have fundamentally transformed the “*content* of relationships within the state”.<sup>26</sup> However, in the years after the fall of Mubarak the political and the social dimensions of the revolution were “interlaced, rather than merged”. This was the case during the uprisings of November 2011 and February 2012 against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), when a general strike in support of the demonstrators at Tahrir failed to materialize. The revolution failed in June 2013 when the revolutionary political trend merged with the counter-revolution on the basis of a false opposition between Islam and secularism, paving the way for the military to remove not just the Muslim Brotherhood but also to eliminate the revolutionary threat to the existing order. By then, despite the growing wave of strikes, attempts to establish a broad independent trade union movement, represented by the EFITU, and to dismantle the state-led ETUF had failed. Alexander and Bassiouny give two reasons for the failure of the revolution: one was that “the opposition to Mubarak lacked organizations that were rooted in the workplace and had a political perspective capable of uniting the social and the political”;<sup>27</sup> the other was that the CTUWS and Revolutionary Socialists encouraged the bureaucratization and internationalization of the newly established independent trade unions at the expense of relations with their members and of the creation of a revolutionary leadership that became “dislocated” from its base.<sup>28</sup>

In her social-movement analysis of the Egyptian uprising, Maha Abdelrahman situates the labour movement in an even broader perspective than the previous three authors by analysing it within the larger Egyptian cycle of contention that emerged in 2000 and whose “new forms of contentious action evolved around myriad informal political groups, activist forums, political coalitions and protest activities that were to alter the face of Egyptian opposition politics and to mobilize, and even radicalize, wide sections of the population”.<sup>29</sup> She describes these different movements in detail, showing how they broadened their slogans to include the regime and developed new forms of contentious action forming broad coalitions. Central to this process were the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) and the Egyptian Anti-Globalization Group (AGEG), and Kefaya. She analyses how they

26. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 187–188.

29. Abdelrahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution*, p. 30.

built on each other's experiences and developed new forms of contestation, such as sit-ins, petitions, and marches. This new culture of resistance also included normal citizens who protested against the wider result of restructuring and the "total breakdown in the provision of basic services such as water, electricity, education facilities, health care and housing, which characterized the second half of Mubarak's rule".<sup>30</sup> These forms of protest included localized, short lifespan actions on the part of housewives, families, and farmers evicted from their land, until at some point "normalization of protest" was reached. Crucially, Abdelrahman also points out that the weakness of these broad movements cannot be ascribed to their middle-class background or their distance from the workers' movement; it was inherent in their organizational form: their non-hierarchical, loose organizational structure was both their strength during the existence of the regime as a means to avoid repression as well as their weakness after its fall.<sup>31</sup> Convincingly, she shows that the cross-ideological coalitions consisted of groups that were much too diverse, with too strongly divergent ideologies and opposing backgrounds, often entertaining long-held mutual antagonisms and only agreeing on certain limited goals, which enabled them to take advantage of specific opportunities and unite for short-term tactical purposes; however, they were unable to form "a coalition of political forces acting together in unity".<sup>32</sup> What compounded their problems was the division in tactics, which weakened their capacity for "widening and deepening the radicalization of the workers".<sup>33</sup> In a hostile environment of an authoritarian state and a counter-revolution that was adamantly opposed to the emergence of an independent labour movement these divisions were fatal.

From Hèla Yousfi's detailed analysis of the UGTT it becomes clear that the problem in Tunisia was not that labour was not politically organized or that it was weak; rather it seemed to be located in the fact that the UGTT embodied both the political and the social dimension of the revolution. It was this fusion that allowed local and regional offices of the UGTT and certain sectoral branches such as health workers and secondary teachers, transport, and telecomm trade unions to channel, coordinate, visualize, voice, and communicate grievances underlying these spontaneous uprisings, and to focus the revolution (a process called *encadrement* by UGTT leaders).<sup>34</sup> After the fall of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, the UGTT was able to play this intermediary role during the uprisings of Kasba I and II, but after the general elections of 2011 it gradually became integrated into the

30. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

34. Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne*, pp. 63–69.

political process, its bureaucratic tendencies becoming stronger. Yousfi makes clear that the UGTT missed the chance to reform itself internally at its 22nd Conference in December 2011, its first conference after Ben Ali's fall. It failed to democratize, open up to women – half the membership of the UGTT – devise new strategies to gain members in the private sector, or incorporate the unemployed union. Worse, it failed to develop a new vision on the neoliberal economy and come up with an alternative economic plan based on social justice. Instead, it became engrossed in a battle with Islamist Ennahda. Although it won the Nobel Prize by bringing together the political parties, it lost its contacts with the revolutionary elements that were located largely outside the trade union: precarious workers, unemployed graduate students, the marginalized in the interior of the country, and the impoverished neighbourhoods of the large cities. As one of the protestors reminded Yousfi, the slogan of the uprisings was “work is a right, you pack of thieves”, which was not a workers' slogan but a slogan of the unemployed.<sup>35</sup>

#### CLASS, CITIZENSHIP, AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

The failure of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt cannot, however, be ascribed only to the role of the left, social movements, lack of organization and unity among the social movements, or the drifting apart of the political and social “soul” of the revolution, as Alexander and Bassiouny argue. An important influence on the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria are the labour regimes in the rest of the region and the forces that support them. Kamrava and Babar's edited volume of studies on migrant workers in the Gulf, John Chalcraft's book on Syrian labour in Lebanon, as well as Hanieh's work on the financial role of the Gulf states remind us that the conditions for labour can be a lot worse and that the Gulf as a financial and economic hub of the globalized economy exerts a tremendous role on the rest of the region. Where they are migrants, completely shorn of rights, where trade unions are banned and the scope for protest non-existent, workers come to resemble the perfect embodiment of the neoliberal market as commodities. While in Tunisia and Egypt workers still had notions of rights and social justice that could be violated – the background to the Arab uprisings – in Lebanon and the Gulf the migrant falls together with the non-citizen. In these countries class divisions run along lines of citizenship, as many citizens have been given a stake in this system of exclusion through the *kafala* system.<sup>36</sup>

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 63, 66–67, 74, 160, 210, 214–220.

36. Under the *kafala* system a temporary migrant labourer enters into an agreement with a citizen of one of the Gulf States who acts as a *kafeel*, a sponsor or guarantor, who is responsible for the

Chalcraft shows how, for a short while during the period of reconstruction of the Pax Syria (1991–2005) under the prime minister Rafiq Hariri, Lebanon aimed to become a “hub” of neoliberal development based on Lebanese and Gulf capital and cheap Syrian labour.<sup>37</sup> Of a total population of 4 million, in the period 1991–2005 between 500,000 and 1.5 million workers were Syrians.<sup>38</sup> Because they were unorganized, Syrians were cheaper, more docile, manipulable, worked harder, were more willing to accept poor working conditions, and could be more easily fired than the Lebanese.<sup>39</sup> Surveys showed that 84.5 per cent were not protected by a contract. Ninety per cent were not covered by social security, nor did they receive an end-of-service payment. There was no minimum wage and no maximum number of working hours per week. A working week of one hundred hours or more was not exceptional. Remittances amounted to eight per cent of Syrian GDP in the 1990s.

Worse conditions, however, prevail in the Gulf. In Lebanon, Syrian workers spoke the same language as their co-workers and their environment, shared the same culture, could travel home across open borders unencumbered by visa formalities, and, although they were preponderant in certain jobs such as construction, they did share the same jobs with the Lebanese. In the Gulf, workers are completely excluded from local society, live in isolated compounds or in designated overcrowded sections of cities, and are completely dependent on their hosts or large companies. They are abused, coerced, and exploited. Hanieh gives evidence that this system was introduced intentionally after the Gulf crisis of 1990–1991. While it is often assumed that support among Egyptians, Palestinians, and Yemenis for Saddam Hussein's invasion was the reason for their massive expulsion afterwards, it had been agreed even before the crisis that Asians were a much more flexible, submissive, and obedient workforce because they could not demand rights.<sup>40</sup> By 2008 fifteen million Asians had replaced Arabs, constituting forty per cent of the total population; in countries such as Dubai and the United Arab Emirates the figure was as high as ninety per cent. The chapters in Kamrava and Babar's anthology, written mostly by anthropologists, provide deep insight into the human dimension of migration and the networks they have built with their countries of origin, the system of recruitment, and the many ingenious ways they survive. At the same time, the chapters provide new insights into the endless ways in which labour is exploited.

labour contract and the labourer's visa. The labourer is completely dependent on the *kafeel*, who can end the contract at any time and keeps their passport.

37. Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage*, pp. 138–140.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159.

40. Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, pp. 123–132.

## CONCLUSION

Although, clearly, the books reviewed do not give a complete and exhaustive picture of labour relations in the Arab world over the past few decades, they do give ample insight into the role of labour and the labour movements in the uprisings from 2010 onwards. Joel Beinin has studied the labour movement in Egypt since the early 1980s and written numerous standard works on labour in the region.<sup>41</sup> Maha Abdelrahman's work is based on over a decade of research into the Egyptian protest movements. She has been at the forefront of the introduction of social movements theory in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> John Chalcraft has written previously about labour in Egypt and recently produced a work on contested movements in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny combine a remarkably detailed knowledge of the Egyptian workers' movement with a sophisticated theoretical approach in one of the best studies to emerge from the Arab uprisings, while Hanieh's more general work draws heavily on his earlier studies of the Gulf.<sup>44</sup> Talani's other works are also concerned with globalization.<sup>45</sup> These works can be read together with other recent studies on workers' movements and social movements in Morocco,<sup>46</sup>

41. Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, NJ, 1999, new edition); Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2001); *idem, Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt* (Washington, DC, 2010); *idem, The Rise of Egypt's Workers* (Washington, DC, 2012); *idem* and Frédéric Vairel (eds), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford, CA, 2011).

42. Maha Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (London [etc.], 2004).

43. John Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914* (New York, 2005); *idem, Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2016).

44. Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York, 2011).

45. Leila Simona Talani, *Globalization, Hegemony and the Future of the City of London* (Basingstoke, 2012).

46. On the labour movement, see especially Matt Buehler, "Labour Demands, Regime Concessions: Moroccan Unions and the Arab Uprising", *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42:1 (2015), pp. 88–103. On social movements, see Anja Hoffmann and Christoph König, "Scratching the Democratic Façade: Framing Strategies of the 20 February Movement", *Mediterranean Politics*, 18:1 (2013), pp. 1–22; Koenraad Bogaert, "The Revolt of Small Towns: The Meaning of Morocco's History and the Geography of Social Protests", *Review of African Political Economy*, 42:143 (2015), pp. 124–140, 143; Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Mohamed Jekhllal, "The Protest Dynamics of Casablanca's February 20th Movement", *Revue française de science politique*, 62:5 (2012), pp. 867–894; Irene Fernández Molina, "The Monarchy vs the 20 February Movement: Who Holds the Reins of Political Change in Morocco?", *Mediterranean Politics*, 16:3 (2011), pp. 435–441; Ahmed Benchemsi, "Morocco's Makhzen and the Haphazard Activists", in Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (eds), *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Baltimore, MD, 2014), pp. 199–235; Montserrat Emperador Badimon, "Un positionnement ambigu: Les Diplômés-Chômeurs à l'épreuve de 20 Février", in Amin Allal and Thomas Pierret (eds), *Au coeur des révoltes Arabes: devenir révolutionnaires* (Paris, 2013), pp. 82–83.

Algeria,<sup>47</sup> Tunisia,<sup>48</sup> Egypt,<sup>49</sup> Syria,<sup>50</sup> Bahrain,<sup>51</sup> Saudi Arabia,<sup>52</sup> and Yemen.<sup>53</sup>

47. Frédéric Volpi, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa* (London, 2016); Naoual Belakhdar, "L'Éveil du sud', ou quand la contestation vient de la marge", *Politique africaine*, 137 (2015), pp. 27–48.

48. For the labour movement, see Sami Zemni, "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution", in Nouri Gana (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh, 2013), pp. 127–146; Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development* (Ithaca, NY, 2002). For the social movement, see Laryssa Chomiak, "The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia", *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3:1–2 (2011) pp. 68–83; *idem*, "Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia", in Khatib and Lust, *Taking to the Streets*, pp. 22–51; Habib Ayeb, "Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: The Alfa Grass Revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, 38:129 (2011), pp. 467–479; Andrea Khalil, "Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19:2 (2014), pp. 186–199; Eric Gobe, "Les avocats: Un corps professionnel au coeur de la 'révolution' tunisienne?", in Allal and Pierret, *Au coeur des révoltes Arabes*, pp. 180–181.

49. Marsha Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt* (New York, 1997); Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi (eds), *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond* (Cairo, 2012); Vickie Langohr, "Labor Movements and Organizations", in Marc Lynch (ed.), *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York, 2014), pp. 180–200; Marie Duboc, "Challenging the Trade Union, Reclaiming the Nation: The Politics of Labor Protest in Egypt, 2006–11", in Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East* (London, 2014), pp. 223–248; Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron, *Why Occupy a Square?: People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution* (London, 2013); Michaëlle Browers, "The Egyptian Movement for Change: Intellectual Antecedents and Generational Conflicts", *Contemporary Islam*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 69–88; Ray Bush, "Coalitions for Dispossession and Networks of Resistance? Land, Politics and Agrarian Reform in Egypt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38:3 (2011), pp. 391–405; Amy Austin Holmes, "There Are Weeks When Decades Happen: Structure and Strategy in the Egyptian Revolution", *Mobilization*, 17:4 (2012), pp. 391–410; Salwa Ismail, "The Egyptian Revolution against the Police", *Social Research*, 79:2 (2012), pp. 435–462; Ray Bush and Habib Ayeb (eds), *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt* (London, 2012); Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution", *MERIP Report*, 258 (2011), pp. 2–13; Rabab El-Mahdi, "The Democracy Movement: Cycles of Protest", in Rabab El-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet (eds), *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (London, 2009), pp. 87–102; Bassem Nabil Hafez, "New Social Movements and the Egyptian Spring: A Comparative Analysis Between the April 6 Movement and the Revolutionary Socialists", *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 12:1–2 (2013), pp. 98–113.

50. There is actually hardly any literature on the workers' movement in Syria. For social movements, see Cécile Boëx, "Mobilisations artistes dans le mouvement de révolte en Syrie: Modes d'actions et limites de l'engagement", in Allal and Pierret, *Au coeur des révoltes Arabes*, pp. 87–108.

51. For the most recent and extensive account of the uprisings in Bahrain, see Ala'a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones, *Bahrain's Uprising: Resistance and Repression in the Gulf* (London, 2015). For the workers' movement in Bahrain, see Fred Lawson, "Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain", in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, 2004), pp. 89–111. On social movements in Bahrain, see International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt", *Middle East/North Africa Report*, 105 (2011); Katja Niethammer, "Cycles of Conflict in Bahrain: The Limits of Monarchical Reforms", paper presented at the internal workshop "Rethinking the Monarchy-Republic Gap in the Middle East", University of Marburg, 20–21 September 2012.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these works. First, trade union organizations in the Middle East are extremely weak. Most trade unions have been incorporated into the state, as is the case in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, or closely controlled, as in Jordan. Where they are independent, as in Morocco, Lebanon, and Bahrain, they are highly divided politically, ideologically, ethnically, or religiously, and strongly opposed by the government. Second, they are weakened by the Islamist movement, which in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt has been antagonistic towards trade unions or has tried to control them and incorporate them within a larger paternalistic framework of their organizations. Third, the workers' movement has been weakened by the tenuous link with broader social movements. This is partly the result of the nature of these movements – non-hierarchical, horizontal, flexible, and based on flexible tactical alliances – partly because of the middle-class nature of civil society. Fourth, the rapid restructuring of the economy throughout the region has weakened the workers' movement in those countries where they have a presence. Any attempts to organize in the Gulf were undermined after 1991, when Arab workers were largely

52. For the workers' movement in Saudi Arabia (mainly in the Eastern Province and among Shi'is), see Toby Matthiesen, "Migration, Minorities, and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950–1975", *International Review of Social History*, 59:3 (2014), pp. 473–504; *idem*, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge, 2015). For Sunni social movements in Saudi Arabia, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices From a New Generation* (Cambridge, 2007); and Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford, 2015). For Shi'i social movements, see Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province, 2011–2012", *The Middle East Journal*, 66:4 (2012), pp. 628–659.

53. For labour in Yemen, especially migrant labour, see Marina de Regt, "'Close Ties': Gender, Labour and Migration between Yemen and the Horn of Africa", in Helen Lackner (ed.), *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (London, 2014), pp. 287–303; Marina de Regt, "Employing Migrant Domestic Workers in Urban Yemen: A New Form of Social Distinction", in Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger (eds), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 465–483. For unemployment, see Susanne Dahlgren, "More than Half of Society: Southern Yemeni Youth, Unemployment and the Quest for a State Job", in Lackner, *Why Yemen Matters*, pp. 142–158. For social movements in Yemen, see Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs", *Middle East Policy*, 18:3 (2011), pp. 79–85; Ibrahim Sharqieh, "Yemen: The Search for Stability and Development", in Kenneth Pollack (ed.), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington, DC, 2011), pp. 221–229; Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge, 1998); *idem*, "Yemen between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", in Lackner, *Why Yemen Matters*, pp. 29–49; Helen Lackner, "The Change Squares of Yemen: Civil Resistance in an Unlikely Context", in Adam Roberts *et al.* (eds), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 141–168; Marine Poirier, "De la place de la Libération (*al-Tabrir*) à la place du Changement (*al-Taghyir*): transformations des espaces et expressions du politique au Yémen", in Allal and Pierret, *Au coeur des révoltes Arabes*, pp. 31–51.



replaced by Asian workers. The same structures as those found in the Gulf are now being built in the new industrial zones in Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere. Fifth, where trade unions were powerful, as in Tunisia – a rare exception – they have become incorporated into the political structures and “domesticated”. Finally, it seems that Middle Eastern capitalist classes are becoming more integrated within Gulf capitalism and becoming regionalized. Because of the conservative Islamist trend in the Gulf, this has also stimulated the counter-revolutionary trend. If, indeed, as most of the authors argue, workers’ movements have been crucial for the Arab uprisings, it seems it will become even harder for them to organize in the future. On the other hand, it is clear that without a new social contract based on an inclusive economic and political system the region will remain instable. From a global labour perspective on the effects of neoliberalism, the position of labour in the region is affected by the huge differences between the oil-producing economies of the Gulf states, which are based entirely on imported migratory labour that has no rights whatsoever and that can be evicted at the whim of the employer, and an increasingly marginalized labour force in the rest of the Arab world, whose rights are increasingly being chiselled away because the state has reneged on its responsibilities to protect social rights. It seems that, through its unique combination of Islamic conservatism, capital accumulation, and authoritarianism, the Arab world has developed its own specific labour regimes.