

TEXT & PHOTOS:
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LOCATION:
Middle East and
North Africa

feature

MAIN PHOTO:
Protests across Egypt
calling for the resignation
of President Mohammed
Morsi on 30 June, 2013.
IndustriALL

PHOTOS OPPOSITE:
Workers of Bahayra Company
for Land Reclamation,
demand their salaries at
the picket line in Egypt.
IndustriALL



In the wake of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has irrevocably changed the political and social landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). MENA is a priority region for IndustriALL Global Union, and these past 18 months have provided key moments with opportunities to build unions and promote social and economic rights of workers. But recent developments also show a worrying trend when it comes to fundamental trade union rights.



Workers have been given promises about democracy, human and trade union rights, but too often there is little to show in reality. Cases from Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria clearly show that peaceful freedom of association is under heavy pressure. A new Law on Associations adopted in Algeria in 2012, for example, fails to protect the freedom of association by limiting access to foreign funding and complicates the registration of new and existing organizations.

IndustriALL, together with its affiliates, continue the struggle for democracy in the MENA, fighting for the respect of human and trade union rights.

Organizing and campaigning in Egypt

The dawn of the Arab Spring paved the way for a new trade unionism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The region witnessed the emergence of new independent unions, not least in Egypt.

A wave of privatization in the late nineties marginalized a large portion of the labour force and resulted in severe layoffs. In 2004, Egyptian workers started an unprecedented phase of struggle for freedom of association and better living and working conditions. Between 2006 and 2008, hundreds of wildcat strikes were conducted outside of the formal union structures. Workers of Misr Mahalla Textile and Spinning Company, the largest factory in the MENA region employing around 22,000 workers, led the struggle. A series of strikes by workers in other sectors followed, opening for the foundation of the first-ever independent union in Egypt, the Real Estate Tax Authority Union in 2008. On 30 January 2011, independent unions gathered in Tahrir Square declaring the foundation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Unions (EFITU). The EFITU immediately called for a general strike to increase the pressure on Mubarak's regime to resign.

Since the beginning of the revolution on 25 January 2011, IndustriALL has closely followed the political developments in Egypt, as well as the implications for trade unions and workers. IndustriALL supports independent unions in Egypt through education, organizing and campaigning in order to build stronger unions.

With the support of the solidarity center of AFL-CIO (the American Confederation of Labour) and the ITUC, IndustriALL has held four seminars with independent unions since the beginning of 2013. The first planning and assessment seminar took place in Cairo with 50 participants from IndustriALL's industrial sectors. The seminar welcomed leaders of the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC) and EFITU, as well as representatives of ILO, ITUC and FES. The participants discussed key challenges facing their unions, such as non-recognition, state intervention and barriers over collection of union dues.

The project continued with three more seminars on capacity building of the new unions. In Alexandria, the 25 participants of the second seminar focused on the energy sector. During the two-day seminar, participants



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were able to express their challenges as independent unions in oil, electricity and mining industries in Egypt. This included subcontracting, employers' resistance of non-recognition for independent unions, companies' approaches on employing agency workers and refusing to make decent work contracts.

Mahalla El Kobra city, the home of Egypt's textile and garment industry, hosted the national seminar focused on the challenges of textile workers. Participants from various branches of the industry bore witness to the large number of layoffs and early retirement experienced by the textile and garment industry in Egypt since the 1990s. This is due to economic restructuring, privatization and widespread corruption as many factories stopped work due to poor management. There is a need to establish national mechanisms to face privatization and to restart the inactive factories, as well as applying modern and efficient management in state-owned factories. The lack of organizing capacity in the private sector and absence of collective bargaining need to be countered.

Sadat city is one of the fastest growing industrial cities in Egypt. The city hosts foreign and national private enterprises, a number of which benefit from the "Qualified Industrial Zones agreement between Egypt, Israel and the USA". This is where IndustriALL held the fourth seminar; supporting youth-dominated independent union movement. Workers received training on collective bargaining skills, as well as raising their knowledge on recent developments on labour and trade union laws.

Within the framework of the IndustriALL special program several groups of workers have been inspired to found unions, and then joined larger regional and national structures. IndustriALL has recently affiliated the General Trade Union of Electricity and Energy as the first independent union affiliated from Egypt.

The revolution managed to change the regime, but has not been able to eliminate inherited policies and their repercussions. Recently, Egyptian workers from IndustriALL affiliates have faced several violations of

their rights. IndustriALL has campaigned on their behalf and brought the cases to the attention of the Egyptian authorities and public.

Since the foundation of the first Egyptian trade union structure in the late 1950s, Egyptian workers have been deprived of the right to freely organize outside of the official unions recognized by the government. A long struggle has resulted in the current discussions on the adoption of a new trade union law guaranteeing freedom of association. For the past two years, a number of drafts have been discussed and submitted to government and parliament. Due to conflicting interests of some of the groups that came to power following the overturn of the Mubarak regime, the law is still waiting to be adopted.

Egyptian workers, the ILO, IndustriALL and other Global Union Federations are urging the Egyptian government to issue the law as soon as possible. IndustriALL will continue to support Egyptian workers until they win the demands of their revolution: bread, freedom and social justice.



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New unity in Iraq as IndustriALL campaigns for fair labour law

Iraq still lacks legislation protecting workers' rights, guaranteeing freedom of association and governing industrial relations. In an effort to coordinate and consolidate forces, the new IndustriALL National Council was established in Baghdad on 10 July.

The current legislation, inherited from Saddam Hussein's regime, rules out the existence of labour unions carrying out free and independent labour union activity. It prohibits independent organizing and collective bargaining in both the public and private sectors, as well as prohibiting unions from holding funds, collecting dues, and maintaining assets. There are no provisions for the right to strike, and workers in essential services are explicitly prohibited from striking. In addition, harsh anti-union practices at workplaces through threats, intimidations, kidnappings, torture and murders are not uncommon.

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PHOTO 1:

Protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square calling for the resignation of President Mohammed Morsi. *IndustriALL*

PHOTO 2:

On 24 April, the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC), a new trade union centre saw the light in Egypt. *IndustriALL*

PHOTO 3:

Protests across Egypt calling for the resignation of President Mohammed Morsi on 30 June, 2013. *IndustriALL*

PHOTO 4:

Hundreds of workers protest against the South Oil Company in Iraq on 19 February 2013. *IFOU*

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In spite of this adversity, Iraqi workers have managed to form their own unions. In the last few years, six Iraqi affiliates representing workers in oil, petrochemical and electricity sectors have joined IndustriALL, and there is a large interest for further affiliation.

Establishing the IndustriALL Global Union National Council by six Iraqi affiliates is a great step towards joining forces in fighting for trade union legislation.

While visiting Baghdad, IndustriALL met with Mr Osama Al-Nujaifi, Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mr Nassar Al-Rubuiee, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, and Mr Kanna Yonadam, Chair of Labor and Social Affairs Committee at the Parliament, discussing the current legislation. Under local and international pressure, the Iraqi government has drafted a new labour law, far below the trade unions' ambitions.



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IndustriALL made it clear that the law must cover the public sector. Legislation should also make it easier to form a union by ensuring that requirements follow ILO norms and standards – trade unions must be allowed to determine and establish their own democratic structures, and the law must provide effective guarantees against interference in trade union movement by government and employers.

IndustriALL, in cooperation with International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Iraqi affiliated trade unions and national centres, campaigns for enactment of trade union legislation. For this purpose, IndustriALL and ITUC have sent a joint letter to the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament.

Somalia

Offshore East Africa is one of the newest areas for oil and gas, and Somalia is one of the latest countries to attract the attention of large multinational companies. IndustriALL has been in interaction with the ITUC-affiliated National Centre in Somalia, Federation of Somali Trade Unions, FESTU, lending cooperation and assistance in organizing workers and defending workers' rights. FESTU is the first independent and democratic trade union centre in the country and has now ten affiliated trade unions.

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Libya

In 2011 Muammar Gadhafi's autocratic government ended after a six-month uprising and civil war. The main opposition group, the National Transitional Council, NTC, declared the country liberated and pledged to create a pluralist, democratic state. Following Libya's first free election in six decades the NTC handed over power to a newly elected parliament, the General National Congress, in August 2012. The country now faces many challenges including a plethora of armed groups who refuse to disarm. Libya is plagued by instability and is almost entirely dependent on oil and gas that account for over 95 per cent of its exports.

Armed guards, including rebels who participated in the civil war, were formed by the defence ministry to protect the oil industry. A tug-of-war with the former militiamen has ensued, with the guards responsible for recent strikes leaving only two of the country's oil terminals functioning and oil exports at just 160,000 barrels of oil per day (p/d). Production has fallen from 1.5 million to 500,000 barrels p/d. Oil sector workers, members of the Oil and Gas Sector Workers Union OGSWU, are reported to have protested outside Congress demanding that the government reopen the country's oil fields and export terminals.

IndustriALL makes strenuous efforts to be in support of the new unions in Libya, particularly in the oil industry. A number of multinational oil companies are active in the country, including the ones with which there are Global Framework Agreements (GFA).

Tunisia

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia and the trade unions of the General Union of Workers of Tunisia, UGTT, were at the forefront of the struggle. UGTT emerged as the key mediator of the revolution, winning trust from divergent political forces.

It was within the union that the committee which regulated the transition to the elections of 23 October 2011 was formed. The unions have also secured victories for their members and for workers in general, including permanent contracts for over 350,000 formerly temporary workers.

Two meetings in Amman, Jordan, brought together Arab trade union organizations affiliated to or associated with the ITUC, the Global Union Federations, Solidarity Support Organizations, and the ILO-ACTRAV.

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Tunisia is now in a political and economic crisis with growing terrorism, rising unemployment and a collapsing economy. Tunisia's ruling three-party coalition has turned to the UGTT to help break the political stalemate. UGTT has remained decidedly outside the control of the Islamist government, which has had to come to terms with the union's role and status. Recent discussions have seen the coalition agree to a one month timeline to finish the constitution and organize new elections, after which the government will step down.



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With over 500,000 members and a strong support-base in the rural areas where the revolution started, the UGTT is a powerful force. After the revolution it became a target yet again. On 4 December 2012, as the union prepared to commemorate the 60th anniversary of a former leader's assassination, its headquarters were attacked, wounding ten people. In response UGTT called a one-day national strike.

IndustriALL now has three affiliated trade unions, all members of the UGTT, in Tunisia. Tahar Berberi, leader of Fédération Générale de la Métallurgie et de l'Electronique is a member of IndustriALL's Executive and Finance Committees. With his assistance a joint affiliates' meeting and seminar is to be held in Tunis to discuss how the international movement can support the unions in the present situation.



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Palestine

IndustriALL has three affiliates in Palestine. All are industry federations of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, PGFTU, led by Shaheer Sae'd. Shaheer Sae'd is the 2011 winner of the prestigious Arthur Svensson International Award for Union Rights, an annual award from Industri Energi, IndustriALL Norwegian affiliate, commemorating a leader of the Norwegian labour movement.

The PGFTU and its member unions fight for trade union rights in Palestine, as well as for Palestinian self-determination. Many of IndustriALL's affiliates, particularly Belgian La Centrale Generale of FGTB, continues an extensive partnership with the petrochemicals union to support their struggle for social justice.

Arab Women organize

The Arab Women's Network runs under the auspices of the ITUC, bringing together women trade unionists. The aim of the network is to strengthen women's standing in the labour market and in trade unions across the region.

In May and June training was done in Egypt to discuss the deterioration of women's rights. The agenda also included the constitution and its impact on women, women and the labor market in Egypt, promotion and discrimination at work, child care needs at work and male domination in unions. Training has also been conducted for women in Morocco and Algeria.

IndustriALL has taken the first steps to create its own women's network in the MENA region.

Democratic Arab Union League of ITUC – on the road to an Arab region trade union organization

Within the framework of the ITUC, a new trade union organization for the Arab region is being created. Two meetings in Amman, Jordan, brought together Arab trade union organizations affiliated to or associated with the ITUC, the Global Union Federations, Solidarity Support Organizations, and the ILO-ACTRAV.

Participants welcomed the proposed structure aimed at strengthening democratic trade unions and agreed to provide support during this critical time. A new, independent structure is regarded as essential for trade unions to be able respond effectively to the legitimate political and social aspirations expressed by the revolutions in the Arab region. A charter setting out the fundamental principles for action is being developed, emphasizing the struggle for freedom, social justice and equality.

PHOTO 5: Hundreds of workers protest against the South Oil Company in Iraq on 19 February 2013. *IFOU*

PHOTO 6: Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) members Commemorate the World Day for Decent Work on 7 October 2013. *FESTU*

PHOTO 7: Second ITUC meeting in Amman, Jordan. *IndustriALL*

PHOTO 8: Rally opening of the World Social Forum in Tunisia, March 2013. *IndustriALL*

PHOTO 9: Ahead of the World Social Forum in Tunisia, IndustriALL met with the government and UGTT unions to reconfirm its support for the democratic development process in Tunisia, March 2013. *IndustriALL*