The Trade Union Movement in Egypt

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Even to-day Egypt is still mainly an agrarian country, but among all the countries of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean it takes the lead as regards capitalist development. In some places conditions are still patriarchal, and in one and the same village there may be seen both the iron plough and the up-to-date tractor. Home industry in its most primitive form is being subjugated by workshops and factories equipped with the latest machines. The economic revolution has as yet not been carried through quite painlessly. It has created new conditions of existence for the peasants and tenant farmers driven from the villages, and humbled into the minds of these classes an understanding of the social differentiation of the Egyptian population, and of the process of capitalist development in 1918:

1. Agriculture: a) day laborers 2,150,000; b) large holders 28,000; c) small holders 1,300,000.
2. Fishery and hunting: a) day laborers 8,000; b) large leaseholders 100; c) independent 25,000.
3. Textile industries: a) large employers 100; b) owners of undertakings 525; c) independent craftsmen 32,000.
4. Metal industry: a) workers 16,000; b) owners of undertakings 390; c) independent master workers 10,000.
5. Clothing industry: a) workers 42,000; b) owners of undertakings 1,730; c) independent master workers 70,000.
6. Furniture industry: a) workers 18,000; b) owners of undertakings 330; c) independent master workers 14,000.
7. Building trade: a) workers 48,000; b) owners of undertakings 450; c) independent master workers 1,450.

Besides these important branches of industry, in which the greatest masses of the proletarian and of the artisan class are concentrated, mention must also be made of the transport industry, which is fairly highly developed in Egypt, and occupies about 150,000 workers and employees. About 30,000 workers and 25,000 transport workers are agriculture and various branches of industry. If we take into consideration that the total population of Egypt does not exceed 13½ millions, we have thus a proletariat which is weaker proportionately, than in any country of the Balkans. The process of proletarianizing the masses of Egypt may best be recognized from the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch of Industry</th>
<th>1907-1910</th>
<th>1917-1920</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textile</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>76,500</td>
<td>144,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furnishing</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>47,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>4,100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other branches of industry, as for instance in the metal industry, and in the building trade, there is, on the other hand, a reduction in the number of workers employed; in the metal industry from 53,000 in 1907 to 22,000 in 1918, in the building trade from 75,000 to 45,000 in the same period; this is however mainly attributable to the perfecting of mechanical production and by the lessening of public works.

Until the war the native workers had practically no trade unions; only the European immigrants, especially the Italian, had trade organizations, which were quite isolated. The privileged position and prejudices of the European workers caused them to hold aloof from the native workers, and to refuse them admission into their unions. Where the natives possessed organizations at all, these were purely guild character. Before the war the strike spirit among the natives were considerably reduced, and were not followed by any organization of forces. The war effected a radical change in this state of affairs. Besides requiring Labor Corps composed of native workers, the English military authorities also required a great number of technically experienced workers, and for this purpose set up some special schools giving technical vocational training. This created the central point which had fallen to the native proletariat.

Immediately after the war, when waves of national revolutionary movement swept the country, carrying with them even the native cultivators, the unions which were isolated by the native proletariat became evident. The nationalists at once grasped the importance of so powerful a factor, and endeavored to utilize it for their own aims. It was of course not difficult to organize the fairly concentrated masses of workers.
already filled with hate against the English military dictatorship, in trade unions, and to induce them to enter upon strikes which frequently received support. Unions sprang into existence one after the other, and very soon these underwent their baptism of fire. The general strike of the railwaymen at the beginning of 1919, the strike of the civil servants, and a number of other conflicts, convinced the English government that it was not merely confronted by a few privileged rebels but by the masses of the working people. But the nationalist leaders were also disappointed in their expectations, for they had hoped to find at last a living and independent element. The workers speedily ceased to act on the orders of the nationalists, and proceeded to independent action, to struggle for their own economic interests.

It will suffice if we mention that between August 18, and November 31, 1919 twenty-four strikes took place, of which the railwaymen's strike in Cairo lasted 56 days, and three others lasted 40 days. The demands of the strikers were exclusively of an economic nature.

61 strikes in Egypt, of which 67 were general strikes (comprising the whole of the undertakings of the branch of industry concerned), and 14 partial strikes. 2,000 to 2,500 workers participated in each of these strikes. In most cases the strikes were carried through determinedly, and no native worker acted as blackleg. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the European workers, who more than once betrayed the strikers in the fullest sense of the term. The native proletariat, which is organized on a national basis (the majority of the large factories are managed by nationals), is not concerned with the European unions.

Despite this, the strike wave has by no means sufficed to create a powerful centralized and actual class organization of the Egyptian proletariat. The native working class is not politically active to the same extent as the European, due to the experience of all movements solely from the standpoint of a means for attaining its own political aims, it failed to appreciate the importance of the movement, and in many cases sabotaged it.

During the last two years, in which the various actions within the nationalist movement became evident, the nationalists ceased to take any interest in the trade unions, and these fell into the hands of various political career hunters. Communists and revolutionary trade unionists endeavored to lead the trade unions into regular channels. In 1919 an attempt was made to organize the establishment of a labor exchange in Cairo, and was at first supported by all the European unions. But the English government speedily put an end to this attempt by expelling this comrade from the country. A second attempt was made at the beginning of 1921 by the young Communist Party of Egypt. After two conferences, participated in by the representatives of the largest unions, the "Labor Confederation of Egypt" was organized, but its initiators were lacking in experience and organizational forces, and the union existed more on paper than in reality. The organization itself was at first a complete wreck.

The above will be better understood if a few words are given on the influence of the RILU in Egypt. It is hardly necessary to mention that the native worker has little idea of what the RILU stands for. After the collapse of the Berlin conference in March 1919, which only could be brought about through negotiation with the head organizations, it is an equally great error to believe that the united front can only be achieved through propaganda among the great politically indifferent mass of the workers.

The Question of the United Front

The aims of the Communist International, towards the creation of a united front of defense against the world-offensive of Capitalist, showed that a united proletarian front can only be realized by a fight against the principal strongholds of the Social Democratic parties and trade unions, and only through a widespread Communist-proletarian movement. Between 1919 and 1921 this movement under the leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist International, the peace conference and of the peace comedy at the Hague, negotiations between the Communist International with the principal bodies of the Second International and the Amsterdam Trade Union International, or of the executive of any Communist Party with the Social Democratic parties of the same country have become much more difficult and, at present, to all practical purposes, impossible. But there is still another question whether we should confine ourselves to the proletarian and politically active elements in the Social Democratic Party and the social democratic unions, in this propaganda for a united front. It is true that circumstances may make it possible to concentrate the efforts of the Comintern in sharpening the political situation, which might make it possible for the Communist Party to assume control, and to unite in the struggle the great mass of workers who are not members of the party. But our propaganda for bringing about a united front is an act without any political conscience.

Propaganda is a means to overcome the apathy of the despairsing masses of workers in Central Europe, to prepare them at least to decide to take some action. But to accomplish this, the propaganda must be concerned, not so much with the broad sections of the politically indifferent. It must be extremely dexterous in spreading its agitation among the politically active groups of the social democratic parties and the unions under their influence. For, unless these groups are won over to the tactics of a united proletarian front, the Communist International and its parties will find it difficult, for some time, to lead the masses into the struggle, and above all to retain control in central Europe. The problems of the differentiation between such groups to the tactics of a united front is undoubtedly possible but it demands propaganda and action of a considerably greater elasticity, a considerably greater adaptation to circumstances and a greater skill than the simple Communist proletariat and the politically active groups (party functionaries and shop-committee men) in the social democratic parties, and the trade unions are bound by a hundred ties, to their party and unions, through the tradition of many years membership, through the old habits, through personal bonds and friendships that would be very difficult to completely alienate the politically active elements of the old parties and unions from their organizations and to bring them into the Communist Party. But it is possible to win over to a real conception of the Communist Party, and to unite in no dependent relations as an employee of the party or the union, which actually works in the workshop factories and mines.

The agitation within each group must deal, in the first place, with the economic and political questions of the particular country, with the increased cost of living, Fascism, etc. We need mention here only one of the international questions which should be points for propaganda, namely, the question of the attitude of the world-proletariat to Soviet Russia. Immediately after the victory of the Communist Party in Russia in the autumn of 1917, and even more so in 1918 and 1919, a storm of abuse came from the hands of its enemies, banks of the world-wide campaign against it. Even the non-Communist sections, the still numerous Centre parties yielded to the pressure of the enthusiastic workers and declared themselves solidly with Soviet Russia. A certain reaction among the masses appeared and the Communist propaganda was faced with the task of rejuvenating the movement.

The workers from St. Petersburg, Bratsk, Moscow, etc., after every machine-throws or a proletarian labors at the forge shouldered their share in this relief. The workers of all organizations and parties combined in this unified action. The feeling that the fate of the worker is bound up with the fate of the world proletariat, which is the mass of the workers in the course of the famine campaign. We are firmly convinced that today, even more than in the last few years, the question of Soviet Russia and its significance for the international working class no longer stands in the background, but that the question of Soviet Russia and the problem of this question can and must be used as the starting point for winning over the politically active groups in non-Communist organizations.

In 1921, when the international solidarity of the workers for Russia reached its apex, Soviet Russia was in a worse position and the international proletariat's position in the world was not as bad as it is today. To the extent that Soviet Russia has established and strengthened herself, has raised and improved the economic condition of her workers and peasants, the political and economic position of the workers in Europe and America has grown steadily.