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Spotlight interview with Kamal Abou Aita (RETA - Egypt)

"This revolution, it's my lifelong dream coming true"

Brussels, 7 March 2011 (ITUC OnLine): President of RETA (*), the first independent union established under the Mubarak regime, in 2009, Kamal Abou Aita has lived through many years of fierce repression against free trade unionism. Having been arrested 21 times under Sadat and Mubarak, he tells us about his action with the workers at the heart of the revolution. As new trade unions emerge across the country in all sectors, he outlines the needs and challenges facing this newly emerging independent trade union movement, the driving force for a new Egypt focused on social justice.

After battling so hard for so many years, how did you feel during the initial days of the revolution?

I had a feeling of indescribable joy at seeing my lifelong dream coming true. We have been taking to the streets, holding small demonstrations for years, but to see Egyptians taking to the streets en masse, it was a moment of incredible joy.

How do you explain such a massive mobilisation in favour of the revolution within such a short space of time?

The young people used Facebook and new communication technologies very efficiently and managed to mobilise huge numbers of people in favour of the revolution. At the same time, since 2006, workers had started strike movements across the country, which prepared the ground for the revolution. It is through these strikes that they learnt to confront their fears, to dare to demonstrate in the streets and to organise themselves. The people's committees were set up to ensure security in the various neighbourhoods, but also to protect the tools of production in companies.

What were the main stages in the battle for social justice and trade union rights leading to the formation of RETA, the Real Estate Tax Authority Union?

We had already started to battle and demonstrate for a revolution of this kind back in 1972, within a students' committee. But its time had not yet come. In 1977, from 17 to 19 January, the massive popular uprising against the price of bread and other basic staples was a key moment in this long fight, over the course of which I was arrested twenty one times, under Sadat and then the Mubarak regime.

As of 1977, only the government-controlled union federation ETUF (**) was authorised, and creating a new union was impossible. The state put particularly strong pressure on the public sector. In 2007, we took a first step, by organising a group of workers and calling a strike. The response was very positive, with over 50,000 workers taking part. We set up 29 strike committees in each governorate and a coordinating committee here in Cairo. We were the first public sector employees in history to hold a strike outside the workplace, and we marched to the parliament building. The Finance Ministry finally gave in to our demands and we secured pay rises and better promotion opportunities. Following the success of the strike, we held discussions with the general and local strike committees, and they all agreed to become trade unions, in all the regions. The ETUF, which had called on the Finance Minister to ignore our demands, went on, in 2009, to file a complaint against our union, accusing it of being illegal. Our office was closed down and I was arrested by the internal security services. I put up my own defence, for hours, evoking the right guaranteed by the Constitution to freely establish a union, in compliance with the ILO Convention on freedom of association ratified by Egypt. The judge consequently dropped the case against me. During my trial, members of the union were demonstrating in front of the building where I was being held. If it hadn't been for that I would have been kept there for much longer. The ETUF leaders, which are part of the NDP (Mubarak's party) political committee, along with members of parliament, did everything in their power to force the workers to leave RETA. Some were transferred, demoted or had their wages cut as a reprisal. The ETUF also set up a competing union in our sector, where it did not have one, in complete breach of the law. In spite of all these

difficulties, RETA has 41,000 members across the country out of the total workforce of 48,000 employees in the sector. It is a very high level of representation.

The ETUF also, however, continued to force RETA members to pay the union dues automatically deducted from their wages to it. Following a series of protests, 6,000 were able to escape from this obligation, but most of the others are still forced to pay it today.

How critical have you been of the ETUF's attitude since the revolution broke out?

The first thing the ETUF did was to set up committees to stop any group of workers wanting to go on strike and join the demonstrators. The money the ETUF has accumulated through compulsory union dues and government funding was used to pay the thugs that descended on the streets to terrorise the population.

When the ETUF set up a union in our sector to compete with RETA, it did not manage to place anyone from the financial sector at its head and parachuted someone in from the banking sector, who was then replaced by another leader from the military production sector. This same person was part of the counter-revolutionary forces involved in the "camel attack" on Tahrir Square. I was on Tahrir Square with RETA members from Mahalla and other towns. He even went on to say in front of the cameras that they were going to punish the protestors and break the revolution, hurling the worst insults at us, before being stopped by the revolutionary demonstrators. And yet this fellow is still at the head of the ETUF's bogus union in our sector!

Many workers from all sectors have built up a great deal of anger against the ETUF. This is why when the university employees went on strike they abducted the vice president of the ETUF, who had come to put an end to it. The same thing happened at a steel plant.

Now, we are receiving daily messages from the ETUF, which is suddenly saying that it recognises the right to freedom of association and is proposing that we work together.

But the only strike that the ETUF supported was that at a linen textile mill in the Tanta industrial zone last year. It intervened to push the workers to accept an early retirement plan. But after being on strike for six months the workers were left to their fate and are all still out of work. The aim was to close down the factory, not to defend the workers who are now all jobless.

Does the new government set up following Mubarak's departure meet your expectations?

We have serious concerns about the Labour Minister. I had a sleepless night after learning from the television that the new government's labour minister was a member of the ETUF leadership. There was no way we could accept it. The deputy prime minister then asked to meet Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS (***) who supports independent unions and offered him the post of labour minister. But we recommended Ahmed Hassan El Bouray, who has been an ILO expert. The latter's nomination had already been announced by some media but, to our great surprise, it was the treasurer of the ETUF, who clearly has a hand in all the corruption mechanisms, who was appointed. He contacted us, as well as Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS and other independent trade unionists, but we refused to see him. With the resignation of the prime minister on 3 March, we hope that he will also be replaced. The candidacy of Ahmed Hassan El Bouray, which we support, is still valid.

On 2 March, the first conference was held of the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions in the offices of the journalists' union, next to Tahrir Square. How can it be made into a powerful instrument to defend the rights of all Egyptian workers?

A few days before the revolution on 25 January, myself and the other leaders of the four independent trade unions had already decided to establish a new federation, but some of us preferred to wait until May Day. When the revolution started, we quickly decided to announce the creation of the new federation on Tahrir Square where we were all gathered, on 30 January. We immediately launched a call for a general strike.

Before the revolution, we were all very afraid, we wondered who and how we would be punished. But with the revolution, we felt safer.

This first conference on 2 March gave us the opportunity to publically present our main demands for a minimum wage, social protection and respect for freedom of association.

Hundreds of workers are contacting us every day, asking to form unions, in all sectors, public and private alike. We try to advise them and tell them what the procedure is. It's a huge task.

How do you envisage the future development of this brand new federation, where everything still has to be built?

An idea to develop would be the construction of a federation that is really capable of quickly bringing together all Egyptian workers. Putting together the workers' unions and the syndicates that currently represent doctors, lawyers, journalists, engineers. But we should also open it to the rural workers, the "fellahs", who have never seen any kind of organising and yet they represent the heart of Egypt, which is traditionally a country of farmers.

How are you going to go about this?

The idea is to establish general trade union centres in all the governorates. For example, if a group of agriculture workers ask to join, they elect a trade union representative, which will allow them to then affiliate with the federation. Afterwards, they could also launch sectoral federations.

What is the position of women in the new independent trade union movement?

Thirteen out of the 46 members of the RETA Executive Committee are women, and our vice president is a woman. They are also well represented at grassroots level. Women played a key role during the strikes, handling a lot of the practical organisation of a strike involving as many as 50,000 workers. Twenty five percent of the leaders of the independent health technicians union are women.

What are the main difficulties you now face, in concrete terms?

Thanks to the revolution, the threats against our members and the attacks by security forces and employers have stopped. Our main challenge now is managing to handle the huge amount of requests we are receiving for the formation of first-level unions so that they can be established quickly and in line with the principles of trade union rights and freedoms. Having lived for decades under the single union system, a great deal of work is needed to change people's mindsets, as individuals, as well as to change the trade union language and habits. Most workers have never been able to exercise trade union rights. It is going to require a huge educational effort.

What kind of support are you expecting from the international trade union movement?

The ITUC's support, from our very beginnings, has been really important. The ITUC has always remained faithful to the principle of free trade unionism, refusing to work with the ETUF, which has helped a great deal.

Our affiliation to Public Services International (PSI) has also helped us a lot. The PSI has already given us the opportunity to benefit from training, and the letters of solidarity sent to President Mubarak and the ETUF by PSI affiliates throughout the work were a great support to us.

So education and training are the main demands you are presenting to the international trade union movement?

We do not want money. A range of experiences has shown that the influx of money from abroad does not produce good results and leads all too easily to a downward spiral of corruption. Education and training are our priorities. We would also like to strengthen our ties with the trade unions in other North African countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco. These have more experience in the area of training, for women and young people, for example. We have solid experience in the area of strike action. We could exchange experiences and learn from one another.

Interview by Natacha David

(*) Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETA)

(**) Egyptian Trade Union Federation - ETUF, part of the Mubarak regime

(***) Center for Trade Union & Workers Services (CTUWS)

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