

# The Coal Heavers of Port Sa'id: State-Making and Worker Protest, 1869–1914

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## *Abstract*

The coal heavers of Port Sa'id hold a distinctive place in Middle Eastern labor historiography as the first indigenous group of Egyptian workers to go on strike for higher wages (in 1882 and later). Existing accounts understand these protests in a somewhat objectivist and materialist way as the more or less inevitable outcome of the penetration of an otherwise rather passive Middle East by capitalist relations of production. This article revisits the protests of the coal heavers of Port Sa'id in the light of a rare glimpse of two documents authored by the coal heavers themselves. These documents show that coal heavers' protests were arguably linked to state-making, and were not simply the automatic product of capitalist development. The arrival of "guild" elections, intervention on taxation, regulative change, and reforming discourse operated in part to constitute worker grievance in Port Sa'id by providing a language in which to appeal, a "progressive" code against which to measure unjust contractors and employers, and a newly interventionist referee before which to make claims. Grievance formation was defined and constituted not just within economically defined "relations of production," but also within a broader context of state-making and reform in late nineteenth-century Egypt.

Political subjects and their modes of resistance are formed as much *within* the organizational terrain we call the state, rather than in some wholly exterior social space.<sup>1</sup>

## *I. Introduction*

In the 1960s and 1970s, a pioneering generation of labor historians began to write about the emergence in the later nineteenth-century Middle East of worker protests and strikes over wages and conditions at work. Inspired by victories won in the European historiography, these scholars sought a "social" history to transform a literature dominated by colonial officials and modernizing elite groups. Marxism provided the relevant concepts for many, especially a Third Worldist variant which, to put it crudely, identified indigenous wage laborers with the authentic core of a rising nation and pitted them against an unholy alliance of capitalism and imperialism. In this context, worker protest was understood primarily as the response of those proletarianized through the exploitative "penetration" of the Middle East by European capital. Thus, strikes were joined with increasing frequency as foreign investment in transport, harbors, and utilities increased after the 1880s in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, which, although occupied by the British after 1882, remained nominally under Ottoman sover-

eignty. The coal heavers of Port Sa'id held a distinctive place in these histories as the first large body of wage laborers in Egypt to go on strike—in 1882 and later—for higher wages.<sup>2</sup>

But in an age of globalization, the heady days of Third World nationalism and the political certainties of dependency theory are largely a memory. Socialism is under siege following the fall of the Soviet Union. The “cultural turn” in the social sciences, Gramscian Marxism, feminism, and the influence of Michel Foucault have all unsettled a problematic “materialist hierarchy” in labor history, in which capitalist exploitation is the prime mover, and where history, politics, and culture come a poor second. Historians are increasingly unhappy with the idea that worker protest was simply the automatic product of capitalist penetration of an otherwise somewhat passive Middle East. The relevance of nationalism, artisanal mobilization, ethnicity, moral economy, gender, guild legacies, and more complex employment structures are gradually being explored.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to add to this work by considering the relevance of state-making to the formation of worker grievance amongst the coal heavers of Port Sa'id between 1869 and 1914, in the light of an unusual glimpse of two documents authored by workers themselves. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the state has tended to appear in Middle East labor history as external to the process of class formation—at all times an adversary for protesting workers.<sup>4</sup> In this way “society” and “social forces” are preserved as autonomous and even authentic sites of resistance. Against such an “externalist” view of the state, this article suggests that certain practices associated with state-making—guild elections, taxation, regulation, intervention, legal change, and reforming discourse—operated in part to constitute worker grievance in Port Sa'id, by providing a language in which to appeal, a “progressive” code against which to measure unjust contractors, and a new and interventionist referee before which to make claims.

## *II. Port Sa'id*

Steamship traffic in the eastern Mediterranean was increasing during the second half of the nineteenth century with ongoing expansion in world trade and the victory of steam over sail in international commerce. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, ships could enter the Indian Ocean without rounding southern Africa. Port Sa'id—dredged and built as a harbor in the 1860s astride the northern outlet of the canal—served as a major coal station. Colliers brought coal from England. A number of shipping companies and at least four British and French coal merchant-houses established themselves in the European quarters of Port Sa'id.

Manual labor to load and unload coal was increasingly in demand after 1869 when the port was officially opened. The numbers engaged in heaving coal increased rapidly and then probably fluctuated between one and two thousand men, only diminishing after the First World War, as ships were increasingly oil-fired. Most workers were migrant local subjects from Upper Egypt attracted—often during the summer down season and at a time of deepening market rela-

tions—by the promise of cash wages comparable to and perhaps higher than those available in agriculture, construction, and security. By 1882, such persons unloaded from colliers and loaded up to ships' bunkers more than a million tons of coal per annum. In the 1880s, wages paid to coal heavers by coal merchants and by the shipping companies yearly amounted to more than a million francs—or about 40,000 LE.<sup>5</sup>

Some porters stayed for a season, others for several years, others were more or less permanently established but would return periodically to their villages and families in Upper Egypt and elsewhere. They stayed in the “Arab quarter” just west of the “European” town in accommodations built often with their own hands from wood, reed, and locally made clay bricks. They wore no shoes, and had practically no changes of clothes. Their diet (feast days and celebrations excepted) was the minimum necessary for existence. They described themselves as “poor people [who] do very hard work and [are often] leaving their family for the purpose of living”.<sup>6</sup> They probably worked seven days a week, and night work was normal.<sup>7</sup> As a travel guide noted of the coal work: “[o]ne unique phenomenon there is at Port Sa'id, the coaling by night—a hurricane of flying natives, lit up by braziers that flare through the uncanny mist of coal dust. They fling their boards against the ship, rush up with full baskets, hurl the coal into the bunkers and rush down again. It is a very inferno of haste and efficiency.”<sup>8</sup> For all their speed and stamina, the opinion that porters were thought of as a “very inferior profession”<sup>9</sup> is probably accurate.

Porters arriving in Port Sa'id were organized—like many but certainly not all other urban crafts, trades, and services prior to 1890—in a guild (singular *ta'ifa*, plural *tawa'if*).<sup>10</sup> Although their origins are still debated, guilds had been basic units of urban occupational and administrative life since at least the Ottoman invasion of Egypt in 1517. On the one hand, not all *tawa'if* had *shaykhs* or guild organizations. The word *ta'ifa* could be used in a very loose “social” sense, meaning just a group practicing the trade or craft. In fact, there were *tawa'if* that had no *shaykh* but which were taxed by the *shaykh* of another *ta'ifa*. On the other hand, most guilds were headed by an elected *shaykh* and his assistants who admitted members, were answerable for their conduct before government officials, other trades, and consumers, judged disputes, collected and assessed taxes, contracted and regulated labor, and collected dues for their own pockets. Guilds sometimes got involved in mutual help and maintained initiation and other ceremonies, although such practices were increasingly rare over time. Recent scholarship has shown that Ottoman guilds ran their affairs less according to Sultan-ic decree or Sacred Law imposed from above, and more by trade customs, which varied considerably by place and time.<sup>11</sup>

All over Egypt, because of the commercial expansion unleashed by the cotton boom of 1861–5, the deepening of market relations, urbanization, and the arrival of new consuming groups, numerous new or partially new crafts elected *shaykhs* and were organized as guilds during the 1870s and 1880s. Alongside the new guild of coal heaving porters in Port Sa'id, who elected a *shaykh* and were constituted as a guild in 1870,<sup>12</sup> were many other new guilds in Port Sa'id and

elsewhere in commerce, retail, manufacturing (such as construction and clothes-making), and service and transportation (such as carting and cab-driving). During these years new cadres entered the trades—including rural migrants and women—who had little longstanding attachment to guild or trade customs.<sup>13</sup>

The guilds had been retained by and were a minor part of an enormous program of state-building begun by Mehmed 'Ali (who ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848) and his successors, especially Isma'il, who reigned with ever more independence from Istanbul between 1863 and 1879. These rulers' quest for administrative centralization and revenue had partially co-opted semi-autonomous guild leaders to deliver more taxes from the urban crafts and regulate the urban populace. Whereas mamelukes (slaves), rural tax farmers, and elements of the religious establishment had been confronted head on by centralizers and often eliminated, guild leaders were generally retained for fiscal and administrative purposes, but were increasingly subject to the codified regulations of the new ministries and provincial offices that sought to replace "custom"—often figured as disorderly, arbitrary, and unjust—with order and regulation (*dabt wa rabt*).

Under Isma'il's tax-and-spend programs in particular, guild leaders had to levy more and heavier taxes from their rank and file, which brought the latter into conflict with their local leaders, a conflict which was partly expressed in the hundreds of petitions sent by various trades to government ministries complaining about the injustices of guild leaders. The ministries often saw such *shaykhs* as intolerably independent and "treacherous" in the matter of taxation, and thus were willing to listen to the complaints of the rank and file, and intervene in previously internal guild matters, such as the payment of customary dues. The government went a step further and issued democratizing legislation in 1869 that stated that *shaykhs* could only be appointed through a formal election in which guild members voted; ballots were counted by the police and appointments confirmed by the expanding Ministry of Interior. This legislation, and the practice that followed, made consent the formal basis of the *shaykh's* authority, and established the state as regulator and guardian of this state of affairs. All complaints arising from the ensuing struggles went to the police, the newly established secular law courts (*majalis ibtida'i*), and the Interior Ministry. These grievances—of which there were no shortage<sup>14</sup>—were couched in terms of and measured themselves against the new legislation. The ministry and the police responded efficiently to such petitions.

It is important to underscore that under Isma'il and later, new government regulations did not represent a dry and soulless codification, but were invested with a discourse of reform. Leading figures in Isma'il's administration were educated in European schools and supported the idea that only through such codification could Egypt be made strong and disorder overcome. Hence we hear 'Ali Mubarak's lamentations over the lack of legislation regarding contracting activities of *shaykhs* in the domestic service guilds. Initiatives in the Ministry of Finance throughout the 1880s were predicated on the notion that fiscal reform could only be affected in the trades by bringing *shaykhs* to heel through legislation. The Ministry of Public Works frowned on the monopolistic activities of

construction contractors in 1889. Those working in emerging liberal professions—journalists, doctors, lawyers, and so on—expressed similar opinions. As noted in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper in 1890, the arbitrary, high-handed, and unchecked activities of the *shaykhs* were responsible for injustice and asymmetrical taxation in the guilds.<sup>15</sup> Codification was thus married to stirring notions of reform and progress. The new administrative-legal order was to sweep away injustice now associated with the past.

In Port Sa'id, rapid increases in demand and the nature of coal operations meant that as the guild swelled in number during the 1870s it was rapidly subdivided into contracting teams (singular *zama*), each headed by a chief (*ra'is*). The companies disbursed wages usually at a rate of one franc per ton to the chiefs, who in turn were supposed to distribute the wages amongst the workers under the oversight of the *shaykh*.<sup>16</sup> Labor contracting was becoming the principal function of the guild.

But with fiscal reform at the top of the agenda after the debt crisis of 1876–9 and the takeover of Egypt's finances by a European Debt Commission, the fiscal functions of the guilds in Egypt generally were abolished, partly in 1881 and finally in 1890. *Shaykhs* were deemed too autonomous and “treacherous” in the matter of taxation. The Ministry of Finance took over the job. In 1890, furthermore, the freedom of the trades was announced, which meant that crafts no longer had to operate under the jurisdiction of their *shaykhs*. The guilds had been quietly abandoned. The coal heavers, however, were one of the few exceptions to this general pattern. Regulations issued by the Interior Ministry and the Governorate in 1891 and 1893 maintained the guild—minus its tax functions—as the official, regulative unit of the coal heavers. These regulations also specified rules for contracting procedures, and gave the commercial houses the right to dismiss and appoint the *shaykhs*, in consultation with the Canal Governorate. Guild-like organization was too useful to the companies to be wholly abandoned in the dockyards. The head *shaykh*, in coordination with the heads of the teams, was to ensure that a number of scribes recorded in a register the amount of coal shifted by each porter. Every two weeks, accounts with the porters were to be settled. The chief correspondent of the Canal Governorate was to supervise the whole process and ensure order and discipline (*dabt wa rabt*) amongst the porters and contractors.

But, as is quite well known, the decades leading up to the First World War were times of protest amongst the coal heavers of Port Sa'id. There was no easy symbiosis of cash-hungry migrant laborers, foremen, and labor-needy coal merchants and shipping companies. Protest ranged from isolated incidents of violence and noncooperation to more systematic collective action in the form of strikes, which sometimes became violent. In the 1870s, complaints by the rank and file against chiefs and *shaykhs* were little different than those advanced in other guilds. Members complained to the local administration (the recently established Governorate of the Canal Zone) about the injustice of their heads in the matter of taxation, usury, wage cutting, and allocating work to outsiders rather than guild members. In response, the Governorate made *shaykhs* sign

pledges (singular *ta'ahhud*) of good practice. But these conflicts escalated into mass strikes over largely the same issues, especially in April 1882, sometime in 1894, April 1907, and December 1907.<sup>17</sup>

### III. Making the Case

In order to understand the grievances of the coal heavers, one can examine how, in two documents, they made their case to the authorities. The first is a five-page petition, "numerously signed," and delivered to Lord Cromer in 1896 by a number of coal heavers who traveled to Cairo for this purpose. The petition has been alluded to in the historiography, but its language—a version of English—has never been extensively analyzed. I found the second document in 1997 in the Egyptian National Archives. It is an eight-page report, ostensibly written by a coal heaver (one Abu Habaga) and submitted to the Commission on Commerce and Industry sometime between 1916 and 1918. It was written in Arabic and translated into French. It may well have been a response to a request by the commission for information about coal operations in Port Sa'id as part of the commission's more general investigations about the state of commerce and trade of the country. In my view it is worth paying close attention to how the coal heavers state their grievances in these two texts, especially in view of the almost complete absence of such voices in the historiography, and the new interpretation they suggest.

In both documents, the complaints of the coal heavers centered on what they described as the unfair, greedy, and coercive activities of the *shaykhs* and foremen of the guild in Port Sa'id. As the petition of 1896 claimed, the heads of the coal teams are "always iltreating [sic] us and taking away most of our wages by forced, [sic] they considering to buy and sell us like slaves."<sup>18</sup> The coal heavers asserted that these headmen (and they named seven particular culprits) banded together "every night" and specifically planned how to defraud the coal workers of their wages, "so every one of them is in a great of influence not in every other Kingdom especially in the matter of taking our wages by force."<sup>19</sup> Abu Habaga began his report in a similar vein: "The misfortunes which have for a long time afflicted our guild have been considerable, and have made it easy for its *shaykhs* to give free reign to their ambition which has carried them to divide the salary of the workers."<sup>20</sup> Abu Habaga's report also directed a few complaints toward the shipping and coal companies—their vengeful and lying behavior and their various threats to lower the wages of the men.

The headmen, it was said, tampered with the books, fragmented the payment process, bribed officials and scribes, systematically paid the men less than they were due according to the registers, and sacked those who complained. The headmen were accused of falsifying the books from which wages were paid: Abu Habaga wrote that article {15} in the regulations, which required that the superior *shaykh* and his scribe establish a "regular account" and "supervise the distribution of salaries," was "of no effect." Moreover, whether the books were corrupted or not, *shaykhs* often did not dish out the wages recorded as due. Thus, in 1896 we hear that "when he [the workman] signed in the register the Head-

men don't give him his pay completely but he gives him a little of it—such as the workmen [is] entitled to get 100 Francs, he . . . only gives him 30 Francs or 35—without any body to interfere them nor the Government.” Those who complained would lose their jobs: “If a man happened to interfere then the Headman will at once send him away from the works.” The worker would then report to the Governorate and be accused of some wrongdoing or other, whereupon the headman would be able to send him away from Port Sa'id entirely.<sup>21</sup> Or, in 1916 it was said that the “foremen of the teams distribute the salaries in different places and the head scribe is nearly always absent, and when he is at his post one finds him in a state of inebriation.” Wage levels were said to vary not according to fair shares but “according to the strength of the headmen.” As we hear in 1896, “we inform your Lordship that every workman has no regular sense in care to know what is his wage”—yet wages were supposed to be clearly delineated according to government regulations in the registers.

The service offered by the porters in Port Sa'id was said to be fragmented and corrupted in this way by the “intrigues” and “malevolence” of certain headmen. In 1916 we hear that “Ahmad 'Uthman al-Bayumi and 'Awad al-Din, members of this guild, have by their intrigues and their malevolence caused the disorganization of the service and the contravention of the regulation. They have provoked the sacking without reason of various heads of the workers. These two are assisted and encouraged in their work by other individuals too well known to be personally mentioned.”<sup>22</sup> Again, anyone who opposed the system of illegal cuts from wages received no work. Abu Habaga went on to say that “these actions are unjust and unfair and have given place to the complaints addressed to the Governorate.”<sup>23</sup>

The headmen were also accused of subverting government regulations over licensing. Until 1893, the *shaykhs* were solely responsible for admission to the guild. Regulations of that year, however, established that workers had also to obtain a license from the Governorate on payment of five Piastres and registration. The headmen managed to insert themselves between Governorate and worker, however, taking hefty bribes for admission—apparently two LE—and then themselves buying just one license (for five Piastres) from the Governorate for every ten or so workers—thus making a profit at the expense of workers and the government. To add insult to injury, if a coal heaver left Port Sa'id to visit his family or village, on return he was forced to pay a bribe to the headman in order to take up work again.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond this, the porters indicted their chiefs for their involvement in various corrupt commercial practices. It seems that the headmen married their new-found resources to existing power in the dockyards to enter the market and build up a system of monopoly enterprise and forced purchase in everyday items bought by the coal heavers. According to the coal workers, certain headmen opened two shops and forced workmen to purchase their needs from them: “The Headmen owing to their ability and richious [riches] in taking away our claims some of them is opened 2 shops which containing of grocers and of other different trade and all the workmen of El-Zama following to every Headman regis-

tering their names in the coals list and that in the condition the whole crews of Zama either they come 2 hundred or 3—in each Zama they are draw all what they required from the grocers and the commercial trade etc and even one of the workman a handkerchief from another place, they at once send him away from his place and try [?] him as to the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.” According to the coal heavers, items cost twice as much in these shops as they did in the village, but coal heavers were nonetheless forced to buy from them. The porters pointedly remarked that this exploitative system also applied to luxury items of religious significance sought for celebrations. Hence, “in the feast in every year the Headmen will get the nuts and almonds and etc they get it very old rotten in the stores and they buy it very cheap and they will sell it in high prices more than in fresh nuts . . . [and] if the workman interfere with him he will be sent away.” Further, “in Bairam they will get the cattles the old ones as sick cows and buffaloes and then will sell it on the crews as to the above stated chapter.” And “the said Headmen in the season of dates comes out from the east to Port Sa'id they get one kind of date called aglami black dates, and covered with sand and dust and dirtiness and it is from the common and they sell it in high prices in each oke 16 soloi and same kind the merchant sell it in each oke 4 soloi.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the headmen were accused of shoring up their corrupt activities by bribing local officialdom. The porters wrote in 1896 that any complaint they lodged had to go through Muhammad Effendi Zabit, the chief correspondent of the Governorate, but that “this Gentleman received in every end of month £20 as bribe from the Headmen in the way of rejections and complaints etc.” In this respect the porters asked, “is it right [that] the Government Employe remain in one place more than 4 year or 10 or 15 years in service. . . . [T]his does not imagine to any wise man as the capacity of your Lordship [especially as] this day the Government has become in progressive manner . . . [yet] he [Zabit] passed for a long time in sheeting and bribing all these amounts mentioned during the 29 years service in the Government, is the Government not to look the inticidents [*sic*] of this Gentleman . . . [and] looked in these complaint[s].”

Antagonism to the commercial houses, shipping companies, and boat captains was another—although comparatively small—component of Abu Habaga's report. In 1916, Abu Habaga stated that adverse conditions had “allowed commercial establishments to impose their conditions on us,” and suggested that the demands of the commercial houses had been made because of a desire for “vengeance.” He claimed that the commercial houses had falsely accused the porters of slow work, and that they were wrong to claim that the profits of unloading were greater than the profits of loading. Nor did the porters want to work by the day as the houses demanded, because it was against the principles of the regulation and was just a way for the commercial houses to avoid paying taxes. Finally, the commercial houses wanted to pay lower salaries to the workers—which would be one of the results of paying the workers by the day.<sup>26</sup> Abu Habaga also spoke of the unjust behavior and unfair extortion of boat captains, but did not elaborate on what this meant. No mention was made of these grievances in the petition of 1896.

Abu Habaga's report, unlike the petition of 1896, went on to recommend reforms to rectify the situation. He approached these suggestions with some trepidation. He wrote that: "Our guild is ruled by a ruling that was elaborated by sincere and enlightened persons having been thoroughly studied. But this rule, so good in its type, would nonetheless require modification to better assure regularity and good order in the guild. The goal in view is that implicitly indicated in the dispositions of the ruling where it confers extended powers on the Governorate." He went on to suggest a series of reforms to the regulations, which were essentially aimed at safeguarding the full payment of the salaries of the workers from the cuts taken by the *shaykh* of the guild, the foremen, and (to some extent) the boat captains.

Abu Habaga suggested that the heads of the work teams should be reduced to the number suggested in the regulation, and that these heads should be chosen from amongst honest people. Corrupt scribes should be dismissed. The superior *shaykh* should have a special office with his own scribe where payments and worker registration took place. At each unloading the boat captain must present to the superior *shaykh* and his assistant a detailed statement showing how much coal came from each hangar and the number of workers who work there. This was a basis for controlling work. The scribe of the team must at the end of the day deliver a list written in his own hand showing the number of workers in his team. This should be delivered to the assistant of the guild *shaykh* and compared with the statements made by the boat captains and the work registers. There should be, in turn, a registration of the works of the team and worker salaries in the government register. The assistant of the team must present the register to the superior *shaykh*. He would verify the account and compare the number of workers and the quality of work with the contracts prescribed and indicate if they were exact or not. The *shaykh* of the guild, his assistant, the boat captain and the team captain must be present at the moment of the payment of salaries of the workers. The head of the team must write down that the salary has been paid in full to workers. He must sign this note. All present should confirm this. The assistant must conform to the orders of the heads of the teams. Finally—and out of ten recommendations this was the only one which applied to the commercial houses—Abu Habaga argued that if salaries were to be reduced, then this must not be by much as "life is much more expensive here than in Alexandria."<sup>27</sup>

#### *IV. State-Building and Protest*

Throughout both documents the coal heavers went to considerable lengths to stress their loyalty to the government: its regulations, its desire for order, its beneficent purposes, its "wisdom," and its "progressive manner." At the outset in the petition of 1896, they declared to Lord Cromer that "your justice is remarkable to every nation" and begged "most humbly and respectfully" to be permitted to state their position, identifying themselves as "the coal workmen in Port Sa'id." They sought little more than that the government in its "good-

ness" would look into the matter and judge it as it saw fit. They hoped that "the God Almighty will keep your Lordship with family always in happiness and prosperity." This petition suggested nothing more radical than that the government should enforce its own regulations. No reform was suggested even to the existing regulations. The report of 1916 does suggest further regulations of its own, but Abu Habaga was very careful to suggest that there was nothing wrong in principle with the existing regulations, and that alterations suggested were entirely in keeping with its spirit. He wrote that existing regulation "was elaborated by *sincere* and *enlightened* persons" and that the "goal in view is implicitly indicated in the dispositions of the [existing] ruling." The porters did not so much make demands in 1896 as suggest that the government would certainly agree with them on its own terms if only it knew what was going on. In 1916, Abu Habaga was careful to ally his motives with those of the government: "[A]s the Government desires keenly to assure order and regularity in the guild of coal heavers and to give to each worker his rights as a member of this guild, permit me to propose the following measures which are of a nature to ensure the good running of the service and to put an end to all complaints in this regard."

Indeed, as is emphasized throughout, problems only arose in Port Sa'id at all because the beneficent projects of the government were subverted. Abu Habaga wrote, for example, that "the Governorate was made responsible to the Government for any contravention to the dispositions of the regulation which has not been faithfully observed, and the violation of the regulation has led to the current state of affairs." Hence in both documents the porters made their case as faithful servants of the powers-that-be.

The coal heavers emphasized that their opponents, on the other hand, were those who through "malevolence," "ambition," "intrigue," or "bribery" subverted government regulations and held back its projects. Throughout the petition of 1896, it is stressed how the headmen operate outside of government control: They "don't care from the Government," "no one from the Government has to interfere with them [the contractors]," "without any body to interfere them nor the Government," "in the Government and else and no one could interfere them in their business," or "also the Government has no to do with them." As Abu Habaga emphasizes: "It is incontestable that it is the chiefs or *shaykhs* who have so violated the regulation that it has truly become a dead letter." It is crucial to note that the employers, too, were characterized as straying from government regulations. On the one hand, employers were said to have made "false allegations" out of desire for "vengeance," and, on the other hand, they sought to undermine government regulations: Their demands were against the principles of the regulation; the captains sold coal on the side and did not pay the necessary dues to the government, and they wanted to pay workers by the day again in order to avoid paying taxes. Hence the porters made themselves out to be opponents of those corrupt persons who strayed from the beneficent, "progressive," and orderly regulations imposed by the government.

This loyalist position may explain why the coal heavers in 1896 prominently displayed what was, at first glance, the rather curious scandal of the foremen

imitating the Council of Ministers. Directly after the introduction to the petition, one reads that “the said headmen are taken over charge on the coal crews . . . and promoting themselves as they like such as making the 1<sup>st</sup> *Rais* as the chief of ministers and the 2<sup>nd</sup> as the Minister of Finance and as they are . . . making a society every night and 1<sup>st</sup> *Raies* had to give instructions what to do tomorrow.” In this way the headmen aspired to power “not in any other Kingdom.” Here, the headmen were not only depicted as avaricious and conspiring underhandedly in pursuit of wealth, but, by imitating the Council of Ministers and taking on the titles of its leading members, they were also obviously and prominently aggregating *government* functions to themselves—a serious transgression.

The appeal to government *regulations*—writ large in both texts—masked a tremendous absence. Nowhere do we read of custom or the law of the trade (*qanun al-kar*). Nowhere is there an appeal to old times (*qadim zaman*) or old ways.<sup>28</sup> Instead one finds an appeal to a code elaborated and enforced by the rising institutions of the centralizing state. This language thus diverges sharply from what studies have shown over and over again about language in petitions and court cases involving urban traders and members of guilds from Plovdiv, Bursa, Istanbul, Aleppo, and Cairo from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. The porters were thus using the government regulations of 1893 as a yardstick by which to judge their contractors. In doing so, the coal heavers were not pioneers, but acted alongside others in making an appeal that had become relatively common in the late 1860s and 1870s amongst the urban crafts and guilds as centralization went forward under the Khedive Isma’il.

Hand in hand with this appeal to government regulations are a number of references to “order,” “regularity,” and “irregularity.” This is linked, of course, to what the government “keenly desires.” The coal heavers—whilst speaking of justice and fairness—introduced a new language of order and regularity into their vocabulary of grievance. This trope involved the appeal to distinctively modern methods of enumeration, the organization of space, scheduling, book-keeping, and so on. Hence, coal heavers indict those who fragment the payment process, fail to make the correct notations in the books, pay out less than what is due for the porters in the books, and so on. They condemn the *shaykhs* who subvert the licensing process. There is even a whiff of technocracy in Abu Habaga’s language where he says that the regulations are those of “enlightened persons” who came to their conclusions after “thorough study”—not, we note, through goodness or piety. In this context, furthermore, one is bound to be struck by the complaint about the inebriated scribe, who is surely condemned here more for his failure to implement regulations and keep accurate registers than he is for his impiety. This is in keeping with the resolutely secular tone of both documents.

Three aspects of the coal heavers’ case briefly mentioned above tied it in more specific ways to elite, reforming concerns. First, one cannot help noting the historicity of the coal heavers’ protests about the contractors’ monopoly system. Such a monopoly would hardly have been self-evidently a “bad thing” even a few years prior to the coal heavers’ petition. Systems of mandatory purchase and

sale, local jurisdictions in the trades (pertaining to the guilds prior to 1890), and forced provision of services and labor (outlawed in 1892) were common features of the earlier nineteenth- and eighteenth-century landscape. The monopoly politics of Mehmed 'Ali in Egypt involved monopoly systems of forced purchase and sale on a broad scale. Such monopolies were outlawed in the Anglo-Ottoman convention of 1838, which allowed European merchants to deal directly with producers and merchants in the Ottoman Empire. *Shaykhs* and deputies of guilds prior to 1890 admitted members, contracted labor, solved disputes, and had the right to levy dues from their rank and file. These jurisdictions had finally been tacitly abrogated in 1890 when the freedom of the trades was announced. This was a further blow to the allocating authority of local headmen in the trades. Finally, the requisitioning of labor, goods, and services on a grand scale was abolished in the 1880s and finally in 1892. This abolition probably acted to further delegitimize the actions of those who sought to "interfere" with the "market."

Second, why did the porters state early on in the 1896 petition that the foremen "buy and sell us like slaves"? This claim may have embodied a certain self-consciousness about the recent abolition of slavery in Egypt, a cause that the British were eager to claim as their own. Manumission was an ongoing and high profile policy, and antislavery activities were covered in the press and surely gossiped about on the streets. To appeal thus to Cromer was not just an assertion of the age-old rights of free-born Muslims, but also another way of putting their own case in terms of yardsticks felt to be in place in sites of power.

Finally, what of the charge of bribery? In making this part of their case, the coal heavers were striking the same note as a powerful reforming discourse—especially in regard to fiscal reform—emerging from British and local government cadres. This discourse was part of centralization and bureaucratization. The corollary of reform and bureaucratization was the arrival of the crime of bribery. The gifts, presents, spheres of influence, patron-client networks, "leakages," and "treachery" of bygone days—so the narrative went—were to be swept away. It is possibly significant that it is precisely when leveling the charge of bribery against Muhammad Effendi Zabit that the porters remind Cromer that "the Government has become in progressive manner."

Thus, in these two documents, instead of a working class advancing rights, we find loyal subjects seeking order and government regulation. The coal heavers attempted to depict themselves as wedded to the concerns of dominant elites. They did so with a string of powerful nineteenth-century ideas. They appealed to the government and its good, "progressive," and even "enlightened" purposes to regulate their trade using nothing more than the secular administrative code, mainly with the goal of order and regularity in the portage "*service*" (as Abu Habaga refers to it), and in opposition to the malevolence, intrigue, and bribery of the foremen, boat captains, and certain government officials, who sought to either subvert the government's purposes or usurp its functions. The petitioners opposed slavery, unjust monopoly, and bribery. Thus, the porters ostensibly placed their faith in the new order and the rising bureau-

cratic agencies and officials of the centralizing state. They looked to codification to grant them satisfaction from the local tyrannies of their *shaykhs*, contractors, employers, scribes, and boat captains. They apparently were looking to the progressive state to sweep away injustice.<sup>29</sup>

### V. Conclusion

The coal heavers' protests against their headmen and employers were thus related to the promise and practice of intervention and reform held out by the expanding and centralizing state of Isma'il and his colonial successors. It would appear that the disputes of coal heavers were likely emboldened and inflected by the ever-increasing presence of a would-be referee that provided an avenue for protest, a language in which to air grievances, and a set of regulations against which to appeal. State-building under Isma'il brought the government ever closer to the activities and disputes of journeymen, laborers, and masters, who were encouraged to seek redress from the centralizing bureaucracy over the heads of and against their local *shaykhs* (who were formally elected after 1869), small masters, employers, and contractors. Reforming discourse, which tied state regulations, the "free" operation of the market, and the abolition of the guilds to progress could further be used by workers and others as a resource to fight battles at home. Specific regulations drafted in 1893 gave the coal heavers a written code against which to judge their contractors and employers. Workers may have felt injustice at the hands of contractors not only in a simplistic way but also in proportion as they believed that the powers-that-be would also take such injustice seriously. In other words, the changing shape of the state and elite reforming discourse shaped what was experienced as grievance. In this context, the language of "injustice" was interlaced with appeals to "order" and "regularity" as well as correct enumeration, and we hear of the "injustices" of monopoly, bribery, and slavery—which were only so figured in recent times. Overall, grievance formation in Port Sa'id cannot be understood as simply the automatic product of capitalist relations of production, but was inspired and shaped by, amongst other things, the practices and discourses of late nineteenth-century state-building. Therefore the state was not at all times an external adversary to worker protest, but worked in part in its constitution.

### NOTES

1. Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991):93.

2. Ra'uf 'Abbas, *Al-Haraka al-'Ummaliyya fi Misr 1899–1952* (Cairo, 1967); Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton, 1987); Donald Quataert and Eric Jan Zürcher, eds., *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1839–1950* (London, 1995).

3. Donald Quataert has done more than anyone to show that the Ottoman economy during the nineteenth century did not produce an employment structure dominated by capital, on the one hand, and wage labor, on the other hand. He drew attention to the vitality of crafts,

household production, female activities, outworking, and so on. Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1993). For Egypt, see John Chalcraft, "The Striking Cabbies of Cairo," in *The Empire in the City*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Jens Hanssen (Tübingen, Deutschemorgenslandgesellschaft [DMG], forthcoming). In a key article of 1994, Zachary Lockman argued that the category of "worker" in practice and discourse in early twentieth-century Egypt was a result not just of capitalist exploitation but also a new elite, nationalist language. "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914," *Poetics Today* 15 (1994):157–90. Lockman's edited volume of 1994 searched for nonteleological, nonobjectivist understandings of open-ended and complex processes of class formation. Zachary Lockman, ed., *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies* (New York, 1994). In this volume, Sherry Vatter usefully showed that journeymen in non-European-managed enterprises also went on strike: "Militant Journeymen in Nineteenth-Century Damascus: Implications for the Middle Eastern Labor History Agenda," *ibid.*, 1–21.

4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Labor History and the Politics of Theory: An Indian Angle on the Middle East," in *Workers and Working Classes*, ed. Lockman, 321–35.

5. PRO FO141/160 No. 9 Wolff/Malet Port Sa'ïd, May 18, 1882. An Egyptian pound (LE) was worth slightly more than a pound sterling.

6. Coal Heavers' Petition.

7. See, for example, *Egyptian Gazette*, December 21, 1907.

8. A. O. Lamplough, *Egypt and How to See It* (London, 1908), 14.

9. Germain Martin, *Les Bazars et les Petits Métiers Arabes* (Cairo, 1910), 76.

10. Gabriel Baer, *Egyptian Guilds in Modern Times* (Jerusalem, 1964). The translation of *ta'ifa* as guild involves a debate, which must be bracketed here.

11. 'Abd al-Salam 'Abd al-Halim 'Amir, *al-Tawa'if al-Hiraf fi Misr 1805–1914* (Cairo, 1993); André Raymond, "Les transformations des corporations de métiers au Caire du XVIIIe au XIXe Siècle," in *Les Institutions Traditionnelles dans le Monde Arabe*, ed. Hervé Blanchot (Paris, 1999), 29–40; Pascale Ghazaleh, "The Guilds: Between Tradition and Modernity," in *The State and Its Servants: Administration in Egypt from Ottoman Times to the Present*, ed. Nelly Hanna (Cairo, 1995); Haim Gerber, "Guilds in Seventeenth-Century Anatolian Bursa," *Asian and African Studies* 11 (1976):59–86; Donald Quataert, "Manufacturing," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Halil Inalcik with Donald Quataert (Cambridge, 1994), 888–98.

12. Zayn al-'Abidin Shams al-Din Najm, *Bur Sa'ïd* (Cairo, 1987).

13. The standard view asserts that small-scale crafts underwent general attrition during these years. This view is increasingly under fire; see John Chalcraft, "Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2001).

14. Juan Cole discovered and analyzed a rich series of these petitions in Juan R. I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1993), 164–89.

15. *Al-Ahram*, January 16, 1890.

16. For a broader sociological description of a meshing of guilds with capitalist contracting, witness Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, 1998), 27. "Craft labor markets institutionalize occupations, with members of a trade admitting and certifying those who are allegedly competent to practice it. . . . Such markets fit neatly with subcontracting, in which a foreman, household head, or *padrone* hires workers with an employer's authorization, supervises their production, and essentially sells their collective product to the employer, taking a profit from the difference between the amount they received from the employer and the amount paid to the workers."

17. For an account of these strikes, see Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 27–31.

18. Coal Heavers' Petition.

19. Coal Heavers' Petition.

20. DWQ MW NM 19 *Lajnat al-Tijara*. "Report Presented by Abou-Habaga," 1–8.

21. Coal Heavers' Petition. Complaints about the corruption of gang bosses in dockyards worldwide have been legion over the last two hundred years. For one example, see Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront* (Chicago, 1988), 105–6, 116. One reason why complaints inhaled in such work was its irregularity; resentment was generated when men were turned away.

22. Habaga's Report.

23. Habaga's Report.

24. Coal Heavers' Petition.

25. One should not miss that the headmen actually used some of the new regulatory tech-

nologies to shore up their “corrupt” practices. By using the “coal lists” of workers, contractors could ensure that all bought from their shops.

26. Habaga’s Report.

27. Habaga’s Report.

28. See note 11.

29. To argue thus is merely to highlight one of a variety of guild responses under changing conditions. Donald Quataert’s research on guild petitions elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire has revealed various possibilities: appeals to the clemency of the ruler, to guild customs and the practice of past times, to more solidary claims to a continued monopoly, and so on. Donald Quataert, *Workers, Peasants and Economic Change in the Ottoman Empire, 1730–1914* (Istanbul, 1993); and Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881–1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York, 1983).