

# SYRIA'S TRADE UNIONS UNDER THE SCOPE

HISTORY, INSTRUMENTALIZATION,  
AND LABOUR DISSENTS

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# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 2  |
| 1. Brief Historical and Political Background of Syria's Trade Unions        | 2  |
| 2. Post-2011 Syrian Popular Uprising  | 4  |
| 2.1 Syria's Socio-Economic Context and Workers' Situation                   | 4  |
| 2.2 Re-evaluation of GFTU's Role after 2011                                 | 5  |
| 2.3 Structure of the GFUTW  | 6  |
| 2.4 GFTU: an Instrument of Control  | 7  |
| 3. Labour Dissent and Alternative Forms of Organisation                     | 8  |
| 3.1 Periodic and Small Acts of Labour Dissent in Regime-held Areas          | 8  |
| 3.2 Trade Unions and Professional Associations outside of Regime-held Areas | 9  |
| Conclusion  | 10 |

## Introduction

More than twelve years after the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria, which turned progressively into a destructive war with the involvement of multiple regional, international, and non-state actors and led to the fragmentation of the country into multiple zones of influence,<sup>1</sup> the initial objectives of the protest movement for democracy and social justice seem far gone.

At the beginning of the popular uprising in 2011, the most significant segments of society participating in the protest movement were economically marginalised rural workers, urban employees, and self-employed workers. However, these groups failed to establish and develop organisations based on their class identity during the uprising. Collective actions led by newly established professional associations, trade unions, and peasants' associations have been restricted after the uprising.<sup>2</sup> It is against this background that the present paper seeks to form a basic understanding of these dynamics amid the absence of significant active and independent trade unions in Syria before and after the uprising.

First, the paper briefly describes the history of trade unions in Syria since its independence in 1946, along with an overview of the country's political and economic developments. It also analyses the evolution of the role and functions that successive regimes have assigned to trade unions in Syria since 1963. Sections I and II of the paper place particular focus on the role of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The socio-economic situation of Syria and its workers post-2011 uprising is then examined in the Section II, as well as GFTU's representation and role in this period. The last section looks at forms of labour dissent in regime-held areas and the emergence of alternative forms of labour organisations in territories outside the domination of Damascus.

## 1. Brief Historical and Political Background of Syria's Trade Unions

In the mid-1930s, Syria witnessed the development and the structuring of an organised labour movement. In February 1934, the trade unions affiliated with the Red International of Labour Unions (printing press, railways, water and electricity, petroleum distribution company) organised the first "Workers' Congress" in Damascus, during which the Federation of Trade Unions of Damascus was established. In December 1938, the Federation of Trade Unions of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs came together to form the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). At the time, trade unions were fighting for the promulgation of a labour code, as well as for an eight-hour workday, a minimum wage, and the recognition of union rights. After threatening to stage a general strike in early 1939, a decree authorising the creation of trade unions for workers was finally voted on, but it was not implemented officially until June 1948, after the country gained its independence in 1946.<sup>3</sup>

Following the independence of Syria in 1946, the traditional large landowners and merchants ruled the country until the Arab nationalist military coup d'état in 1963, dominated by Baathist elements. Meanwhile, a process of early industrialisation produced a working class, which was concentrated in the cities. Despite its small size, this working class started to organise into trade unions. Paradoxically, trade unionism gained the most traction in small companies.<sup>4</sup> By the end of 1955, some 250 trade unions had been registered in Syria with over 28,000 members in total.<sup>5</sup>

The Baathist-led coup d'état in 1963 marked a break in Syria's political history, especially with the rise to power of the radical wing of the Baath Party, led by Salah Jadid, between 1966 and 1970. Jadid implemented policies such as agrarian reform, nationalisation, and the establishment of a large public sector. These policies significantly reduced class inequalities and concomitantly installed a social security system, free state services, subsidised housing, free education, and public healthcare.<sup>6</sup> Large sectors of the working class and the small peasantry benefitted from such decisions. The new regime sought to organise the politically active groups of workers and peasants into corporatist and regime-dependent, centralised associations. These various popular corporatist organisations in the Baathist regime had a threefold function: representation, mobilisation, and control.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, any autonomy of the labour movement and any form of alternative left and progressive opposition were violently repressed. The new regime repressed any militant orientation within the trade unions and opposition to the Baathist regime in the 1960s, which were led primarily by Communists and Nasserists. The working class was not granted independent political representation under the Baathist regime and was not able to take part in the political decision-making process. To neuter combative trade unions, the regime organised and structured its public sector in the same way as the Egyptian model, employing state-controlled entities called "General Organisations" to supervise production in specific sectors.<sup>8</sup> Continuing in this path of control of the workers, all trade unions were prescribed to be organised within the GFTU following the issuance of Law No. 84 of 1968 by virtue of a legislative decree.<sup>9</sup>

The Hafez Al-Assad-led 1970 coup d'état, and the subsequent "corrective movement" put an end to radical socio-economic policies and initiated a progressive process of slow but gradual economic liberalisation meant to rally support from sections of the bourgeois class in Damascus. Meanwhile, the new regime began to impose austerity measures on the population over time, especially in the 1980s. As a result, employment in the economy's public and administrative sectors was curtailed, and the real value of wages diminished as inflation increased steadily. In this context, the role of trade unions was gradually modified in order to support the regime in carrying out liberal economic policies and supervising and curbing the labour force, instead of defending the interests of the working class. The new Baathist state, headed by the new ruler al-Assad, officially defined the purpose of trade unions as being "political" in the conference of the GFTU in 1972. In other words, any independent and autonomous political role for unions was strictly limited, and

4. Ibid.

5. Industrial unions, characterised as those involved with manufacturing industries by the use of mechanical power, numbered 48 in 1954 and had a strength of 8,000 members. Allouni, A. A.: *The Labor Movement in Syria*. Middle East Journal, . XIII (1959) ,p. 74-75.

6. See Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

7. Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, I.B. Tauris, 1995, p.170.

8. Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press), 1990, p. 201

9. Law No. 84 of 1968 has been amended since then, but it remains the key regulating framework for the GFTU. GFTU, "Organisational Chart" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/41zx1Xw>.

1. The Syrian regime, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in the northeast, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish authorities in the northwest.

2. Among these various labour groups, the most active participants in the earliest phase of the protest movement were members of the Professional Association of Lawyers in different governorates.

3. Elisabeth Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning" (in French), in Raymond A. (ed.), *La Syrie Aujourd'hui*, 1980, 327–358, <https://bit.ly/30PUohh>.

any material demands came second to the higher obligation of augmenting local production and assisting in the struggle for liberation and nation-building. Any and all movements expressing "demands" or "grievances," particularly regarding socio-economic issues, were characterised as counter-productive under the (so-called) "socialist" regime in power in Syria and a form of "sabotage" of the socialist course.<sup>10</sup>

By April 1980, the Syrian regime had dismantled by decree all the professional associations (including those representing engineers, lawyers, and doctors), created new, state-controlled professional associations, and appointed their leaders.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, punitive and repressive measures increased against trade unionists affiliated or associated with leftist and democratic sectors of the opposition who had been elected over official Baathist candidates in the 1978 and 1979 elections.<sup>12</sup> These actors were attacked because they posed a threat to the existing regime's authoritarian policies during the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s through the organisation of wildcat strikes and protests. In the summer of 1982, the Baath Party reimposed its near total domination on the GFTU following the new elections. Opposition dynamics since then have been at their minimum, although there were some wildcat strikes in the oil fields and construction sector in the mid-1980s.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the GFTU endorsed and promoted a labour law in 1985 pertaining to all state employees, which conspicuously forced them to comply with the political objectives of the Baath state and prohibited strikes described henceforth as illegal.<sup>14</sup>

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad and the accession of his son Bashar al-Assad to power in 2000, the patrimonial nature of the state in the hands of the Assad family and its relatives was greatly strengthened through a process of accelerated implementation of neo-liberal policies and the replacement of sections of the old guard by relatives or individuals close to Bashar al-Assad. Simultaneously, the old system of corporatist organisations, including trade unions (together with the GFTU) and peasant associations, which previously enabled the regime to have contacts and some presence within rural and peripheral areas, was considerably weakened. By contrast, security services in these areas were strengthened. The new ruler considered these structures to be impediments in the path of neoliberal economic reform. The regime incrementally deprived the "popular" corporatist organisations of funds or considerably diminished their funding, and it undermined their powers of patronage. At the same time, the GFTU continued to serve the regime's interests. For example, it supported Law No. 50 of 2004 regulating labour relations in the public sector, which notably compelled workers to follow the objectives of the state. Furthermore, if public employees block or interfere in the operation of state services, that could potentially lead to the suppression of their civil rights.<sup>15</sup>

In 2005, the Baath Party, at its tenth regional conference, adopted the "social market economy" as a new economic strategy. In other words, the private sector would become a partner and leader in the process of economic development and in providing employment instead of the state. The aim was to encourage private wealth accumulation principally through the marketisation of the economy, while the state withdrew from key areas of social welfare provision, aggravating

pre-existing socio-economic problems. Extensive privatisation and liberalisation, coupled with reduction of subsidies on many products and services, were key features of this policy. Nevertheless, this process was not absolute. The Syrian state retained a relatively important role in the economy by employing a large number of Syrians, estimated at around 25% of the work force. Moreover, it did not sell major state assets, except some plots of land around the Euphrates.<sup>16</sup> These neoliberal policies, together with austerity measures, largely benefitted the Syrian upper class and foreign investors, particularly from the Gulf monarchies and Turkey.

This came at the expense of the vast majority of the popular classes in Syria, who were hit by inflation and the rising cost of living. This was also reflected in Labour Law No. 17, promulgated by the government in 2010, which regulates the relations between workers and employers in the private, public-private, and cooperative sectors. This law clearly favoured employers at the expense of workers, as Article 64 thereof notably granted employers the right to dismiss their workers without any justification and with very limited compensation.<sup>17</sup> In addition, while the right to collective bargaining is officially recognised in Labour Law No. 17, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL) retained wide prerogatives and powers to deny and contest the registration of finalised collective agreements. Furthermore, while strikes are not officially prohibited in the private sector, the right to strike is commonly undermined by the prospects of punitive measures and fines. In specific sectors, such as transport and telecommunications, strikes involving more than 20 workers are penalised with fines and even prison sentences.<sup>18</sup> In the public sector, workers' rights are also limited as mentioned above.

On the eve of the uprising in 2011, the GFTU and professional associations were therefore collectively transformed into corporatist tools of the Syrian regime. The Baath Party by and large dominated and controlled them. The chairmen and the bulk of other leaders of the GFTU and professional associations were always – and still are – methodically chosen from among the senior members of the Baath Party. The GFTU developed policies and practices in the past few decades aimed at mobilising their members for continued productive efforts, garnering support for regime policies among the working class, and acting as a protective shield to the regime itself when needed. The GFTU, for instance, collaborated with the security services in the 1980s and 1990s to repress and put an end to various unorganised workers' actions and mobilisations in the private and public sectors protesting against their poor working conditions.<sup>19</sup> The Federation, nevertheless, continued to provide its members with particular services (although diminishing), which were generally free or reasonably priced in comparison to institutional alternatives.<sup>20</sup>

10. Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning," Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, 176.

11. Michel Seurat, *The Barbarian State, 1979–1982* (in French), Presses Universitaires de France, Proche-Orient, 2012, 100.

12. Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime*, Yale University Press, 1991, 14.

13. *Ibid.*, 84.

14. Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning."

15. Syrian Arab Republic People's Assembly, "Law No. 50 of 2004 is the Founding Regulation System for State Workers" (in Arabic), December 4, 2004, <https://bit.ly/3N2sSH8>.

16. See Joseph Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria*, December 2018), <https://bit.ly/3gKebq3>.

17. According to official statistics, 100,000 Syrians have been dismissed from their employment since its implementation until the beginning of 2019. Tishreen Newspaper, "Regime Government Amends Private Sector Labour Law," *The Syrian Observer*, March 13, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N326Ov>.

18. International Trade Union Confederation, "2012 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights – Syria," June 6, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2N8zofj>.

19. Joseph Daher, "Between Control and Repression: The Plight of the Syrian Labour Force," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria*, July 2020), <https://bit.ly/3jyebth>.

20. The GFTU was notably very active in the field of public health. By 1992, trade unions were managing three hospitals, some 25 health centres, and more than thirty pharmacies, mostly in working class neighbourhoods and in industrial zones, and union committees also organised kindergartens. Services granted by the establishments were usually free of charge or comparatively cheaper than other institutions.

## 2. Post-2011 Syrian Popular Uprising

### 2.1 Syria's Socio-Economic Context and Workers' Situation

Syria suffered massive destruction throughout the years of conflict and war. The economy's structure has been radically altered. The massive destruction in the manufacturing and agriculture sectors resulted in a highly diminished production capacity and a significant reduction in the volume of exports from USD 12.2 billion in 2010 to around only USD 1 billion in 2021.<sup>21</sup> The growing need to import foreign products and the depreciation of the Syrian national currency, the Syrian pound (SYP), further augmented the cost of goods and services in Syria. The balance of trade has been profoundly negative in the past years, reaching a negative USD 4 billion in 2021.<sup>22</sup>

The manufacturing and agriculture sectors are facing continuous and deep structural challenges that have been worsening in the past few years. The ongoing socio-economic deterioration in the country also represents a serious obstacle for manufacturing and agriculture, especially with the sustained rise in the cost of production, the shortage of key commodities and energy resources (particularly fuel, oil, and electricity), policy mismanagement, instability of the Syrian pound, migration of workforce (especially qualified workers), and sanctions.

Meanwhile, the informal economy, which was estimated to account for approximately 30% of employment (1.5 million persons) and between 30 and 40% of GDP before 2011,<sup>23</sup> has likely grown significantly, notably due to the rise in smuggling and criminal activities.<sup>24</sup> In 2021, the share of the informal economy in Syria surpassed 70% of the country's official GDP according to the Strategic Policy Alternatives Framework. Alongside the sanctions and their effects, the Lebanese financial crisis since 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have further exacerbated Syria's socio-economic problems, with the poverty rate exceeding 90% in early 2023, compared to an overall poverty rate of 33.6% in 2007.<sup>25</sup> In January 2023, approximately 15.3 million people in Syria required humanitarian assistance.<sup>26</sup> In addition, a report by the ILO at the end of March 2023 estimated that some 170,000 workers in Syria lost their jobs as a result of the February earthquakes, while approximately 35,000 micro and small enterprises were also impacted.<sup>27</sup>

The devastation and shattering of large sectors of the economy, the militarisation of society, and the forced departure and flight of

millions of Syrians dramatically diminished the country's employed labour force. Between 2011 and 2019, the total registered employed population dropped from 5.184 million to 3.058 million,<sup>28</sup> of which just over 1 million were state employees.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, approximately 760,000 were private sector employees, and 1.2 million were categorised as self-employed workers. Another impact of the war on the labour composition lies in the rising share of women in the labour force.<sup>30</sup> More and more women had to secure the livelihood of their families under dire conditions and take over economic duties instead of male breadwinners, who often were either absent (military conscription, emigration, imprisonment, etc.) or suffered from significant injuries as a result of the war. The percentage of women workers in the public sector, for instance, rose to about 38% of the total workforce in that sector in 2021, compared to 24% in 2002 (the earliest available data).<sup>31</sup> The World Bank estimated that Syria's female labour force participation doubled between 2011 and 2022, rising from 13 to 26%,<sup>32</sup> although real figures are most probably higher, given the prominence of informal labour. Despite women's increasing participation in the labour force, they are still far from being equal with men, as women obtain considerably lower salaries and encounter significant discrimination and barriers in the workplace, including rising sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, the significance of wages and salaries in the production of wealth in Syria has decreased consistently throughout the war. One estimate puts the percentage of wages at about 13% of the national income, while profits and rents constituted the remaining 87% in 2021.<sup>33</sup> In comparison, the share of wages of the national income was approximately 33% between 2008 and 2009, and profits and rents represented more than 67% of GDP.<sup>34</sup> High levels of unemployment, low wages, and a lack of skilled workers are also some of the main characteristics of the country's labour force scene.<sup>35</sup>

Across all the different zones of influence in Syria, little attention has been paid to the situation of workers and popular classes regarding their wages and working conditions. In regime-held areas, the Syrian government has continued to neglect the living conditions of the labour force. Only negligible wage increases have been implemented in the public sector, as the MoSAL amended 26 articles of Labour Law No. 17/2010 in 2019 with a very minor impact: a small rise in wages (roughly 9% at the time) and a guarantee of entitlement to maternity leave. The monthly minimum wage for all sectors was increased on several occasions passing from SYP 16,175 to SYP 47,675 in December 2019 and then to SYP 92,970 in December 2021. These measures did not, however, address the deteriorating living conditions of workers. The periodic bonuses allocated by the Syrian government did not alleviate this bleak situation for workers, with the latest being a grant for pensioners and state employees, including military personnel, amounting to SYP 150,000 (equivalent

21. UN Comtrade, consulted on April 23, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3AlqSTX>.

22. UN Comtrade, consulted on April 23, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3AlqSTX>.

23. International Labour Organization (ILO), "Gender, Employment and the Informal Economy in Syria," 2010, <https://bit.ly/2lb958X>.

24. Smuggling activities decreased in the 2000s in some sectors following the liberalisation of trade. Moreover, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq ended Syria's direct involvement in various smuggling activities, especially of oil. However, other illegal trafficking and smuggling activities appeared in this period, for example drug and arms trafficking surged, driven by new routes. Transborder smuggling in Iraq also recovered and intensified in the years following the invasion.

25. "Overall poverty" is defined as the share of the population whose expenditure lies under the upper poverty line; Khalid Abu-Ismael, Ali Abdel-Gadir and Heba El-Laithy, (2011), "Poverty and inequality in Syria (1997- 2007)," UNDP, <https://bit.ly/3SOIQFU>.

26. OCHA, "Flash Appeal: Syrian Arab Republic Earthquake (February - May 2023)," February 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3YKl8eC>.

27. ILO, "Over 725,000 People Affected by Loss of Livelihoods after Syria Earthquakes," March 28, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3K5qtlv>.

28. Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), "Justice to Transcend Conflict," June 1, 2020, 9, <https://bit.ly/3dA3iE1>.

29. This number diminished to less than 900,000 the following year.

30. See Synaps, "Syria Becoming Women's Tough Bargain," August 15, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3O9qywj>.

31. The Syria Report, "Chart: Number of Public Sector Employees (2002-2021)," May 16, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3oFs15h>.

32. The World Bank, "Syria Economic Monitor Lost Generation of Syrians", Spring 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Xgn4qh>.

33. Milad Chawki, "How to Extract Wealth From Workers" (in Arabic), Qassioun Newspaper, January 16, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3TwHhfW>.

34. Nabil Marzouq, "The Lost Development in Syria" (in Arabic), in Bishara A. (ed.), *The Syrian Revolution's Origins*, Syrian Studies (in Arabic), Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013, 42.

35. The high unemployment rate is the result of multiple elements, starting from the destruction of large segments of the economy resulting in a lack of opportunities, to the threats of arrest for failure to conscript, which led many young men to stay at home or pursue insecure, underpaid, and informal daily work in order to escape forced military service.

to USD 23 at the official exchange rate of 6,532 SYP/USD) in mid-April 2023.

By contrast, the minimum salary in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) region was raised in March 2023 to SYP 520,000 (USD 79.6 at the official exchange rate of 6,532 SYP/USD), with the exception of the minimum monthly salary of judges which remained unchanged at SYP 468,000 (USD 71.6). The AANES is the most significant employer in the northeast, employing between 200,000 and 230,000 people, 100,000 of whom are within the armed security forces (Asayish) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In April 2023 in the northwest, the salary of an employee in the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which employs around 70,000 to 75,000 workers in the education and health sectors and the Syrian National Army, was between 600 and 1,000 Turkish liras per month (between USD 85 and 143), while the salaries of administrators start from 1,200 Turkish liras and reach 3,000 liras (respectively USD 171 and USD 428.6). In Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) territories, the average administrator's salary ranged in April 2023 from 500 to 720 Turkish liras (between USD 72 and 110).

This high inflation rate has eroded the purchasing power of the population at all levels. Salaries have generally not been indexed to inflation rates, whether from the state or private employers. Inflation rates have skyrocketed throughout the last decade in the absence of any indexation of wages, reaching somewhere between 113.5% and 114% in 2020, between 101% and 111% 2021, and between 55% and 55.7% in the first half of 2022.<sup>36 37</sup> A public state employee at the beginning of 2023 needed 350 years to purchase a house.<sup>38</sup> The value of a state employee's salary based on the current living standards should range between SYP 3 and 5 million per month (equivalent to USD 461.5 and USD 769 at the official exchange rate of 6,532 SYP/USD) to maintain "pre-conflict" living standards.<sup>39</sup> However, more than half of the workers in the public sector receive a monthly wage of less than SYP 200,000 (USD 44.2). The average monthly salary in the private sector was estimated at SYP 300,000 and 500,000 (equivalent to USD 46 to 77 at the official exchange rate of 6,532 SYP/USD). These high inflation rates have impacted the purchasing power of the population by massively increasing the cost of living. The Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB), based on World Food Programme (WFP) measures, has doubled since the series started in September 2021, reaching SYP 1,348,451 in March 2023 and marking an eighth consecutive monthly increase. The March 2023 MEB was 76% more than a year earlier and 161% more than at the start of the current MEB series in September 2021.<sup>40</sup>

This situation forces workers to seek alternative sources of income to supplement their monthly budgets, reinforcing the dynamic that had already existed prior to 2011. In the public sector, a much higher number of employees take on additional jobs, while the cost of bribes is also increasing. Many workers are also dependent on remittances<sup>41</sup>

and humanitarian assistance. Significant numbers of highly skilled workers, on the other hand, emigrate in pursuit of better living and working conditions.

The low wages and the high level of inflation have also created a situation in which state employment is less and less attractive for large segments of the population. The government launched a campaign to recruit 100,000 public employees in July 2022 (it later reduced the number to 80,000), but it only managed to hire 33,000 employees. Throughout 2022, several hundreds of state employees in various sectors—from agriculture, water, and textiles to education and healthcare—have resigned over exorbitant transportation costs, meagre wages, and better opportunities in the private sector or abroad.<sup>42</sup> This dynamic continued in the first semester of 2023 (see below).

At the same time, the situation of human rights has been worsening in Syria, particularly in government-held areas. Serious violations have notably been recorded against children, including recruitment, killing, and maiming. The economic crisis has worsened negative coping mechanisms and has particularly affected female-headed households; it is contributing to the normalisation of gender-based violence and child exploitation, which predominantly affects girls and boys. The unprecedented levels of poverty in Syria have also paved the way for growing exploitation of women in the form of prostitution.

## 2.2 Re-evaluation of GFTU's Role after 2011

At the outbreak of the uprising in mid-March 2011, neither the GFTU nor other corporatist organisations had the capacity to rally their members as a result of the political marginalisation they had suffered in the previous decade.

The roles of "popular" corporatist organisations, such as the GFTU, and of the Baath were re-evaluated by the Syrian regime after 2011. The GFTU was incorporated in the regime's networks, alongside the Revolutionary Youth Union, which is the youth organisation of the Baath Party, and "popular" corporatist organisations such as the General Federation of Peasants, to collaborate in the repression of the protest movement and more generally control society. Similarly, regime security services ordered professional associations to exclude all members who participated in the protests.<sup>43</sup>

The GFTU, alongside other corporatist pro-regime organisations, delivered some services and forms of humanitarian assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These actors saw their role and value increase gradually throughout the years. Major and leading members of the GFTU and of professional associations were "elected" as MPs in 2016 and 2020, and they served as representatives in multiple government delegations to international conferences and regional and international organisations.<sup>44</sup>

The GFTU has also delivered to its members various types of services such as free collective weddings, financial compensation for martyred and injured family members of workers, supplies of food and essential goods, humanitarian assistance, and financial subsidies for workers in need in multiple regions. It also took part in charity and social

36. The Central Bureau of Statistic has only reported prices until the end of 2020. The SCPR, which uses field workers based in the country, seeks to provide a more comprehensive and accurate estimate of consumer prices. It collects prices based on markets located in governorate city centres, as the CBS does, and markets in smaller towns in each governorate.

37. Inflation rates have also significantly increased since the beginning of 2022 in the northwest of Syria in the areas controlled by HTS and the Turkish Army as a result of the depreciation of the Turkish lira.

38. Athr Press, "Its Establishment is 'Ink on Paper'... Real Estate Companies Did Not Implement What Was Required of Them" (in Arabic), December 28, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3YSa4N1>.

39. Ibid.

40. WFP, Syria Country Office, Market Price Watch Bulletin March 2023, May 2023, <https://bit.ly/3VWwN9ax>.

41. Remittances represent a major source of cash inflows to Syria. They are estimated at several billions of USD per year and in the past decade supported the livelihood of large segments of the population. They have

mainly been transferred informally into Syria, including through informal networks of money transfers (hawalas) and hand to hand.

42. The Syria Report, "Public Sector Recruitment Campaign Falls Short Despite Fears of Labour Shortages," October 4, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JpXXRo>.

43. The Professional Association of Lawyers, for instance, dismissed all members involved in the uprising, whose numbers amounted to several hundred, while others were arrested and imprisoned.

44. Joseph Daher, "Between Control and Repression: The Plight of the Syrian Labour Force."

campaigns in cooperation with state institutions. These services are provided to members along with regime propaganda, particularly on certain dates, including the annual Labour Day celebrations.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the GFTU promotes the Syrian regime's propaganda before other international and regional federations and trade unions in conferences outside the country or when it welcomes them in Syria. In March 2023, participants in the annual meeting of the Presidential Council of the World Federation of Trade Unions, which was held in Nicosia, Cyprus, called to lift the sanctions imposed on Syria.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Jamal al-Qadri attends meetings and conference of the ILO at its headquarters in Geneva and promotes the regime's propaganda.<sup>47 48</sup>

## 2.3 Structure of the GFUTW

The current structure of the GFTU is composed of an Executive Board and a General Council, comprising 11<sup>49</sup> and 75 members respectively, which are elected by the General Congress of the Federation every 5 years. The latest one was the 27th Congress of the GFTU in 2020, in which 479 delegates took part.<sup>50</sup>

The GFTU and other trade union organisational structures are organised in the following way:

- Workers' assembly – at the level of small and medium companies;
- Trade Union committee – for firms employing fifty and more workers;
- Trade Union – gathers workers of a similar profession at the level of a governorate;
- Professional Association – gathers workers of a similar profession/sector at the national level;
- Governorate Federation of Trade Unions – gathers workers of different sectors and professions in one governorate;
- GFTU – gathers all professional associations and Governorate Federations of Trade Unions around Syria.<sup>51</sup>

The GFTU comprises seven branches:

- Public services (administration, banks, health);
- Food, agricultural development, tobacco, and tourism;
- Transport;
- Oil and chemicals;
- Electricity and metal;
- Culture, printing, and information;
- Construction.

Union membership is practically mandatory to public sector employees, and a union subscription fee is deducted directly from their salary. Meanwhile, the GFTU's influence and membership in the private sector is very limited. Trade unions in the private sector have not been able to play any role in protecting workers' rights. At the same time, the majority of private employers refuse to allow the creation of union committees in their establishments and put pressure on workers, directly or indirectly, to prevent them from joining trade unions. Similarly, private employers often do not register these workers with the General Organisation for Social Insurance. Only 11% of workers in the private sector benefitted from social protection in 2022.<sup>52</sup> Socio-economic rights were already very limited in the private sector prior to 2011. Data from the 2004 Labour Force Survey shows, for instance, that while 89.5% of workers in the public sector were registered with the General Organisation for Social Insurance, only 9.5% of workers in the (formal) private sector were.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the Syrian companies in the Syrian private manufacturing sector, more than 99% of which are small, micro, and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs), do not favour activities related to trade unions.<sup>54</sup> The research centre of the GFTU, namely the Labour Observatory for Research and Studies, pointed out that most employees in the private sector, with the exception of the finance and insurance sectors, did not enjoy the most basic rights enshrined in Law No. 17, including periodic wage increases, medical and health insurance, and integration in social insurance systems.<sup>55</sup>

The Federation governs and supervises most aspects of trade union activities, including the control of sectors and professions which can be represented by a trade union and decisions relating to the conditions and actions for the utilisation of trade union funds. It also has the prerogative to dismiss the executive committee of any union.<sup>56</sup> All workers' organisations must be part of the GFTU. At the same time, the law authorises the MoSAL to determine the composition of the GFTU's congress and to set the conditions and procedures for the use of trade union funds.<sup>57</sup>

Prior to 2011, the GFTU had an estimated 1.2 million members. The head of the GFTU stated in 2018 that the membership had dropped to approximately 950,000,<sup>58</sup> while the newspaper Qassioun – affiliated with the regime tolerated People's Will party founded by former MP and Minister Qadri Jamil<sup>59</sup> – estimated the number of members at around 600,000 based on a report submitted to the 27th General Congress of the GFTU held in 2020 with the presence of 479 delegates representing different provincial and professional unions.<sup>60</sup>

45. SANA, "Approval of Granting Bakery Workers 11,500 liras as an Additional Work Allowance and Regularising the Conditions of Daily-Workers in Hama Cement Company" (in Arabic), July 29, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3fBGzsn>.

46. SANA, "WFTU Calls for Putting Pressure on US Administration to Lift Blockade Imposed on Syria," March 5, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3yxnlKy>.

47. SANA, "Al-Qadri: Siege and Coercive Measures are Policies of Collective Punishment that Are Condemned and Rejected," (in Arabic), June 7, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3J4TEek>.

48. SANA, "Syria Participates in 111th Session of ILO Conference, Calls for Lifting Coercive Measures", June 7, 2023, <https://bit.ly/44hoY2B>

49. The Executive Board includes Jamal al-Qadri as Chairman, Rafik Allouni as Vice-Chairman, as well as Mariette Khoury, Haider Hassan, Bashir al-Halbouni, Jamal Al-Hajji, Talal al-Alewi, Hasnaa Kowara, Abdul Qadir Nahas, Bashar Khristin, and Muhammad Khair Kamal as members. (SANA, "The Twenty-Seventh General Conference of the Federation of Trade Unions Concludes its Work with the Election of the General Council and the Executive Board" (in Arabic), February 16, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3mXmshM>)

50. Al-Binaa, "The Twenty-Seventh Conference of the Federation of Syrian Trade Unions Concludes its Work and Re-Elects Al-Qadri as Chairman" (in Arabic), February 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3oEkaET>.

51. GFTU, "Organisational Chart" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/41zx1Xw>.

52. Nabil Akam, "Informal Work is on the Rise" (in Arabic), Qassioun Newspaper, July 19, 2022, <https://bit.ly/407EGLI>.

53. ILO, "Syria: Social Security Programmes," consulted on March 22, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Zbp6NU>.

54. See Joseph Daher, "Syria's Manufacturing Sector: The Model of Economic Recovery in Question," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2019), <http://bit.ly/35aCIEk>.

55. Rasha Shirub, "Covid-19 Shock and Private Sector Workers" (in Arabic), General Federation of Trade Unions Labour Observatory for Research and Studies, April 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Y0UBQK>.

56. GFTU, "Organisational Chart" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/41zx1Xw>; International Trade Union Confederation, "2012 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights – Syria," June 6, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2N8zofj>.

57. GFTU, "Organisational Chart" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/41zx1Xw>.

58. Arabic Sputnik, "The Head of the Syrian Labour Federation: Reconstruction Will Take Place with Syrian Hands, and We Do Not Need Anyone" (in Arabic), April 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Y72aTU>.

59. Qadri Jamil was expelled from Syria's Parliament in 2015 after he boycotted the 2014 presidential elections.

60. Nabil Akam, "The Working Class: Between Poverty and Trade Unions" (in Arabic), August 28, 2022, <http://bit.ly/408APy0>.



The GFTU is a member of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), whose regional office for the Middle East is based in Damascus,<sup>61</sup> and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU). More recently, the GFTU signed a cooperation protocol in Damascus with the Federation of Workers in Italy on Saturday, May 13, 2023.<sup>62</sup> The ILO also re-established its physical presence in Syria in February 2023,<sup>63</sup> with the appointment of a Country Coordinator, after having suspended its activities and operations in Syria following the outbreak of the uprising in 2011.<sup>64</sup> Following the earthquakes in February 2023, ILO Deputy Regional Director for Arab States Peter Rademaker visited affected neighbourhoods in Aleppo as the ILO prepared to implement an emergency employment scheme, which combines efforts to rehabilitate destroyed infrastructures and provide much-needed income through immediate decent job creation in the Aleppo region. Among multiple meetings, the ILO Deputy Regional Director met with representatives of local trade unions and chambers of commerce and industry.<sup>65</sup> A few weeks later, in mid-March, the ILO decided to provide grants to support the Damascus Chamber of Industry (DCI) and the GFTU, offering USD 25,000 for each entity, in order to rehabilitate destroyed businesses in the cities of Lattakia and Aleppo, support business operations for impacted enterprises, and mitigate some challenges facing workers and their families.<sup>66</sup>

## 2.4 GFTU: an Instrument of Control

The GFTU has not presented any practical or formal opposition to the government's economic and political dynamics. Quite the opposite: within the GFTU, no type of opposition is permitted. Any form of criticism or of defiance to the regime and the Baath Party are sanctioned.<sup>67 68</sup> In this context, forms of dissent within the GFTU remain very isolated and restricted.

Jamal al-Qadri, Chairman of the GFTU since 2015, is a member of the Baath Party, an MP since 2016, and a member of the United Nations-facilitated Constitutional Committee on the Syrian Government's list. He has also been elected for a period of five years as Secretary-General of the International Federation of Arab Trade Unions in

August 2021. Al-Qadri, who was re-elected as Chairman of the GFTU in February 2020, has not delivered on the commitments made at the beginning of his mandate, particularly amending the 2004 Law on Public Employees and offering yearly contracts to all daily public wage earners.<sup>69</sup> Daily wage earners in the public sector face very precarious labour conditions, including not benefiting from specific social benefits such as health insurance and the daily meal allowance. More importantly, the real value of salaries has continuously diminished as explained in the previous section.

More broadly, the GFTU under the leadership of al-Qadri has continuously promoted the traditional neoliberal discourse on the need to enhance the efficiency of state-owned companies and public institutions by developing more flexibility and improved working mechanisms and reconsidering the legislation under which they operate. Al-Qadri stated that the most essential measure to be taken in upcoming reforms was to eliminate "bureaucratic routine" from the state-owned manufacturing sector so as to enable the financial reform of companies and handle each production unit as an independent administration with freedom in decision-making, while simultaneously requiring accountability for their results. He has nonetheless rejected a full privatisation process for profit-accumulating public companies. Instead, he has declared that the PPP Law should only encompass state-owned companies in deficit, including those that have suffered damages or destruction, and has rejected the adoption of any kind of long-term solutions in the current phase.<sup>70</sup>

Alongside these dynamics, the GFTU has bolstered the regime's system of instrumentalising employment in public services as a tool to consolidate and ensure obedience and recompensate individuals and communities considered as loyal. Numerous decrees and laws enacted by the state in the past few years demonstrate this orientation. In December 2014, for example, the government promulgated a decision stating that 50% of new work opportunities in the public sector would be allocated to families of martyrs" of the Syrian Army. In October 2018, a measure by the Council of Ministers denied all employees who had not performed military or reserve service of the right to apply through the public employment recruitment process. The GFTU supported these laws. Similarly, most unions at the regional level are aligned with the regime's policies, generally against workers' interests. In February 2023, for instance, the Damascus Workers' Trade Union annual conference endorsed the proposition of the government to set the retirement age at 65 years instead of 60 years, despite the worsening labour conditions.<sup>71</sup>

The lack of any form of dissent within the prevailing official trade unions and professional associations is a consequence of the Syrian regime's historical repression and domination over unions, together with decades of policies and practices to divide society through clientelism, political loyalties, and sectarian and ethnic discrimination, including in state employment, which have generated serious impediments and constraints. This context has made collective labour action tremendously challenging and complicated to develop.

61. The Director of the Middle East Regional Office is Adnan Azouz, a Syrian citizen based in Damascus. He is also the dean of the Faculty of Arts and the head of the English language department at the private Qassioun University.

62. SANA, "A Cooperation Protocol Between the Labor Unions in Syria and Italy," May 13, 2023, <https://bit.ly/43rxg85>.

63. The Syrian state has been a member of the ILO since 1947 and has ratified 50 ILO Conventions, including all eight core Conventions. In 2008, the ILO extended its cooperation with Syria through the country's first Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP), the ILO's main vehicle for delivery of support to countries.

64. The ILO had resumed its work in Syria in 2018, but only by providing support in several key areas such as child labour prevention and labour inspection. ILO, "Syria," consulted on April 24, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Amfaay>.

65. ILO, "ILO Visits Aleppo's Damaged Neighbourhoods in Preparation for Emergency Employment Scheme," February 17, 2023, ReliefWeb, <https://bit.ly/3LvnGul>.

66. The Syria Report, "ILO to Provide Grants to Damascus Chamber of Industry and Trade Unions," March 28, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3n18vQ1>.

67. For example, the GFTU has prohibited on several occasions the newspaper Qassioun. Snack Syrian, "Federation of Trade Unions Prevents a Newspaper from Attending its Meeting!" (in Arabic), May 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2AJcIUe>.

68. In June 2020, an employee of the Ministry of Education was dismissed from his employment and had his salary suspended because he participated in a protest few weeks earlier in front of the City Council in Sweida, condemning the difficult economic living conditions and the failure of government policies to tackle them. Suwayda 24, Information retrieved on June 4, 2020 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2YhcxDA>.

69. Snack Syrian, "Without Securing the Price of a Meal for the Workers... Al-Qadri Chairman of their Federation Again" (in Arabic), February 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2CzoXiC>.

70. The Syrian Ministry of Industry, information retrieved on May 16, 2019 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2N9BN9j>.

71. Muhammad Adel Lahham, "In All Honesty: Damascus Workers' Union Conference Discredits Demands" (in Arabic), Qassioun Newspaper, February 19, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3JVfEsh>.

## 3. Labour Dissent and Alternative Forms of Organisation

### 3.1 Periodic and Small Acts of Labour Dissent in Regime-held Areas

There have been various forms of dissent and criticism against the Damascus regime because of the deepening economic crisis in Syria. Protests have erupted in Sweida and Daraa in the past few years against the deteriorating political and socio-economic conditions. In addition to these protests, more modest forms of labour dissent related to the outcomes of the government's economic liberalisation policies on working conditions have also arisen.

Employees of the General Fertilisers Company and at the fertiliser production complex close to the city of Homs,<sup>72</sup> which has been managed by the Russian company Sroytransgaz since November 2018 after the completion of an extendable contract with the Syrian government under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Law, organised a strike in mid-April 2019 demanding better working conditions and spoke out against excessive working hours and low salaries.<sup>73</sup> A few months later, in October 2019, approximately 3,600 employees also protested against the Sroytransgaz management in the port city of Tartous, after the company tried to compel them to sign new contracts that are unfavourable in terms of working conditions and rights.<sup>74</sup> The new contracts offered were based on Labour Law No. 17 of 2010 regulating private sector employment, rather than on Labour Law No. 50 of 2004 regulating public sector employment, which was more favourable to them in terms of salaries and incentives, including meal allowances, free transport, health and social insurance, pensions, and personal protective equipment.

The company Sroytransgaz, which handles management and decision-making, including employment issues, is run by a Russian central public administration and has imposed a centralised, top-down management approach to deal with Syrian managers and workers in both institutions. Moreover, to deal with Syrian workers at the Tartous Port and General Fertilisers Company, Sroytransgaz has contracted a Syrian private company, Sada Energy Services, which is owned by businessman Khoder Ali Taher.<sup>75</sup> Sada has been in charge of contracting workers and paying their salaries on behalf of the Russian company.<sup>76</sup> In February 2020, the private company Sada ultimately offered new employment contracts to port workers after they were all laid off. Only 2,500 of them have signed the new contracts out of a total of around 3,600. The rest either refused because of their opposition to the terms of the new contract or as a result of administrative obstacles, such as compulsory military service.<sup>77</sup>

In the following years, new protests and demands were raised by the workers of Tartous Port. In July 2020, workers refused to accept their salaries to denounce the Russian company's failure to abide by their contracts and working conditions, including a lack of official documentation for their salaries, a decrease in the value of food allocations from SYP 700 to SYP 100, and the delayed payment of incentives to workers.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the nominal wages of the workers in both Tartous Port and the General Fertilisers Company were subsequently decreased by approximately 40% that same summer, one year after the Russian company took control of the management of these entities. In addition, workers suffered salary cuts without clear explanations and accused the private company Sada of embezzlement.<sup>79</sup>

By September 2021, Sroytransgaz had only kept 400 workers out of the 1,800 workers originally employed at the General Fertilisers Company, while the rest were considered redundant. The Chairman of the Federation of Trade Unions of Homs Governorate, Hafez Khansar, initially stated that the agreement concluded between the Russian company and the workers guaranteed they would keep 85% of the workers.<sup>80</sup>

In November 2022, Tartus Port workers reiterated their demands for higher wages and compensations, as well as for free meals, free transport, and health and social insurance.<sup>81</sup>

The GFTU has not encouraged employees to organise strikes and labour actions in order to pressure the Russian employers, but rather sought to contain them in these rare events of public labour dissent. Their role has been limited to trying to negotiate in favour of the workers, but with rather poor and negative outcomes as explained above. Furthermore, state authorities have served the interests of the Russian company and the Syrian businessmen affiliated with it.

Other forms of labour dissent have been reported. In August 2022, there were rumours circulated by activists on social media that al-Salamiya Hospital had to close its doors as a result of the doctors' refusal to work due to low wages, lack of medicine, and difficulty in securing hospital supplies.<sup>82</sup> In September 2022, the head of the State and Municipal Workers Union in Lattakia, Fawaz al-Kanj, revealed the resignation of more than 500 workers in the institutions and companies in the cotton mills, water resources, tobacco, health, municipalities, and agriculture because of the low salaries and the high cost of living.<sup>83</sup> By the end of May 2023, around 400 workers in state institutions have either resigned or took early retirement since the beginning of the year due to the low wages.<sup>84</sup> Amani al-Arida, the Director of Education in Sweida revealed in mid-June 2023 that hundreds of resignation requests from across the education sector had been made since the start of the academic year for similar reasons.<sup>85</sup>

72. The General Fertilisers Company is the largest chemical industrial complex in Syria and ensures the agricultural sector's needs of all types of fertilisers.

73. The Syria Report, "Increasing Number of Strikes Highlights Severity of Economic Conditions," April 5, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YIKj15>.

74. Snack Syrian, "Problems between the Russian Company and the Workers of the Port of Tartous: Workers Are Concerned about their Rights" (in Arabic), October 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ABDudn>.

75. Khodr Ali Taher, known as Abu Ali Khodr, was not a widely recognised businessman figure before 2011. He has become one of the Fourth Division's most important contractors for convoy protection since 2016.

76. Azzam Al-Allaf and Salam Said, "Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges," Policy Brief, Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3N5C25G>.

77. Ibid.

78. Al-Watan, "New Problem Between the Workers of the Port of Tartous and the Investing Company" (in Arabic), July 4, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Z0LQ00>.

79. According to workers, Sada would receive salaries from Sroytransgaz in USD and remunerate them in SYP at the official exchange rate, which is less than the value of the SYP on the black market, permitting Sada to illegally benefit from the price difference. Azzam Al-Allaf and Salam Said, "Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges,"

80. Hibr Press, "Once Again: Russian Company Dismisses Employees from Homs Factories" (in Arabic), September 2, 2021, <http://bit.ly/3ZEKiNo>.

81. Al-Wehda, "Tartus Port Workers are Calling for Increasing the Wage Threshold and Including their Previous Services" (in Arabic), November 8, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3H9TVMS>.

82. Adib Khaled, "Wages Cause Government Paralysis," Qassioun Newspaper, August 22, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3Jxv0N>.

83. Facebook, "Lattakia News" (in Arabic), September 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3lfjBzN>.

84. Abir Saymoua, "Due to Poor Salaries: 400 Employees Give Up their Jobs in Government Departments in As-Suwayda Within Four Months" (in Arabic), al-Watan Newspaper, May 29, 2023, <https://bit.ly/45E1m9C>.

85. Abir Saymoua, "Hundreds of Resignation Requests of Teachers and Employees" (in Arabic), al-Watan, June 20, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3NjJYG>.

## 3.2 Trade Unions and Professional Associations outside of Regime-held Areas

In areas outside the Syrian regime's control and controlled by Turkey in the northwest, there are numerous trade unions, including the "Free Teachers' Union," established in January 2022,<sup>86, 87</sup> and some other professional associations such as the "Central Union of Free Lawyers,"<sup>88</sup> the "Union of Free Syrian Engineers,"<sup>89</sup> and the "Free Doctors' Union."<sup>90</sup>

The primary objectives of the entities have mostly been limited to making democratic demands, generally assisting local opposition institutions and condemning human rights violations and interventions in their work activities by local armed groups and Turkish occupation forces,<sup>91</sup> in addition to protesting any form of normalisation between the Syrian regime and the Turkish state. Class-based discourse in their programmes has been limited, although they have staged protests and strikes regarding working conditions on different occasions. The city of al-Bab and several towns and villages of eastern Rural Aleppo witnessed at the end of 2021 protests and strikes organised by teachers against low wages and local administrative corruption.<sup>92</sup> In November 2022, sit-ins were also organised by teachers in northern Aleppo to demand higher salaries and the development of the educational process at schools. However, they were unsuccessful in achieving their demands because the protests were suspended by the Free Syrian Teachers' Union. In the city of al-Bab, the civil police actually intervened to forcibly remove the protest tent 24 hours after it was erected, and some teachers were threatened of being dismissed from their jobs.<sup>93</sup> Such circumstances led numerous teachers to leave their jobs and seek other employment opportunities with better wages.<sup>94</sup> In the summer of 2022, dozens of medical workers staged a vigil in al-Bab, rejecting pay inequality between Turkish and Syrian doctors and medical workers.<sup>95</sup> In the aftermath of the 2023 February earthquake, the Union of Free Syrian Engineers has been active in gathering information from local communities regarding damages and destroyed buildings, and the Aleppo branch formed consulting engineering teams to assess the condition of buildings.<sup>96</sup>

86. These unions generally register with local councils or the SIG. In HTS-controlled territories, some of these unions have been forbidden from operating, and other unions affiliated with HTS have been established (interview with Sinan Hatahet, Syrian expert, May 3, 2023).

87. Syria TV, "Establishment of the 'Free Teachers Trade Union' and the Election of its Members in Eastern Aleppo" (in Arabic), January 8, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3JJpf6F>.

88. The "Central Union of Free Lawyers" was established in December 2019 and includes lawyers from various opposition-controlled areas.

89. The existing Union of Free Syrian Engineers was formed in 2018 and includes two branches: Aleppo and Idlib governorates.

90. The Free Syrian Doctors' Union was initially established in December 2013 in Gaziantep, Turkey.

91. For instance, the Professional Association of Free Lawyers in the city of al-Ra'iy in northern Aleppo countryside organised a protest to denounce Turkish interference in their activities. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), "Aleppo, Free Lawyers Syndicate Protests Against Turkish Interference in Judicial and Criminal Issues," February 28, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3YUw3TB>.

92. Syria TV, "Establishment of the 'Free Teachers Trade Union' and the Election of its Members in Eastern Aleppo."

93. Walid al-Nofal, "12 Years On: 'Revolution' Service Institutions Under Turkish Authority," Syria Direct, March 18, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3JQD2bP>.

94. Oula Abu Amsha, "Education Crisis in Syria - Teacher Perspectives", Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), February, 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/43PNWGN>

95. SOHR, "Suffering Pay Inequality: Medical Cadres in Al-Bab Call for Salary Increase and Equality with Turkish Counterparts," August 22, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3yWpKUI>.

96. Walid al-Nofal, "The Earthquake and Years of War Transform the Buildings of North-western Syria into 'Graves above the Ground'" (in Arabic), Syria Direct, February 14, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3IRFR39>.

Meanwhile, political and socio-economic conditions have worsened considerably, making trade union activities more difficult. Some armed opposition groups have not hesitated, for example, to threaten to persecute journalists and media activists critical of their actions.<sup>97</sup> The Turkish authorities, for their part, have taken more structural measures by imposing strict control of local administrations and intervening decisively in specific sectors, particularly health and education. The Turkish education coordinator in Afrin has prevented the creation of a teachers' trade union in the town, characterising it a "political act." In addition, teachers have been forced to sign volunteer work contracts, which includes clause that forbid them from participating in any protest or any form of objection against any party, whether it is the Syrian regime or others.<sup>98</sup>

In the areas controlled HTS, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) has not hesitated to dismiss – or even arrest – employees of the administrations if they do not comply with their directives. The SSG has also prevented lawyers affiliated with the Central Union of Free Lawyers to be active in their areas and formed a separate union which is called "Free Syrian Lawyers' Union,"<sup>99</sup> and it raided the headquarters of the Union of Free Syrian Engineers in Idlib, after the latter's entire council resigned in protest of the practices of the SSG.<sup>100</sup>

In the areas of north-eastern Syria controlled by the AANES, most federations and trade unions are affiliated with the Democratic Civil Society Movement (TEV-DEM), which was officially established in July 2011 and comprises around 27 organisations, trade unions, feminist organisations, cooperatives, and associations.<sup>101</sup> TEV-DEM's official objective was initially to develop "the democratic system of municipalities and councils in Rojava." After the establishment of AANES in 2018, TEV-DEM focused on acting as an umbrella organisation for civil society actors, including for trade unions and other institutions, which are part of the networks of organisations affiliated or linked with the Democratic Union Party (known by its acronym PYD). These organisations can be considered part of "civil society" or the network of influence of the PYD; they generally follow and implement the party's strategy, although they are also sometimes able to transmit demands from their members.

The trade unions active in AANES-controlled areas were generally formed after the Syrian regime's withdrawal from the areas of north-eastern Syria and its replacement by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and subsequently the AANES. These include the Union of Free Media (Yekitiya Ragihandina Azad - YRA),<sup>102</sup> Toilers' Union (Itihad al-Kadihin),<sup>103</sup> Doctors' Union, Pharmacists' Union, etc. Large segments of these trade unions in the AANES are officially independent and have an elected leadership. However, their leaders are all members of the PYD or part of its networks of influence.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, the local authorities try to pressure members of certain professions,

97. Syrians For Truth and Justice, "Northwestern Syria: Journalists Live in Constant Fear of Assassinations," March 20, 2023, <http://bit.ly/3ZRH2yl>.

98. Focus Aleppo, "Syrian Teachers' Union in the Countryside of Aleppo Deemed Illegal by Turkish Decision" (in Arabic), November 4, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3yOk5A3>.

99. Bassel al-Muhammad, "Lawyers of Northern Syria: How do they practice their profession and what are the difficulties they face?" (in Arabic), Syria TV, July 20, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JtFzXm>.

100. Faez al-Daghim, "The Salvation Army Raids the Engineers Union in Idlib: What is the reason for the disagreement between them?" (in Arabic), Syria TV, October 7, 2020, <http://bit.ly/3ILSH2S>.

101. ANHA, "Democratic Society Movement: TEV-DEM from A to Z," February 7, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3yP6Qix>.

102. It was established in 2012.

103. It was established in 2018 and comprises more than 40,000 members according to its leaders.

104. Interview with Hamza Hemiki, journalist, originally from Qamishli, March 2023; Interview with an anonymous specialist on AANES governance, March 2023.

such as doctors, pharmacists, or workers in the AANES public administrations, to join their respective unions affiliated with PYD's network.<sup>105</sup>

Meanwhile, limitations and repressive measures on civil society actors and trade unions outside of PYD networks have occurred, including restrictions of the freedom of expression or the freedom of association by AANES authorities. For instance, AANES authorities forced journalists operating in the northeast to join the Union of Free Media to obtain press credentials. This decision was criticised by some journalists and human rights groups as an attempt to regulate and restrict the region's media.<sup>106</sup> There have also been arbitrary arrests in different areas across north-eastern Syria carried out by security forces affiliated with the AANES — the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) and Anti-Terror Units (YAT). These forces arrested 30 teachers in January and February 2021 in the cities of al-Darbasiyah and Amuda, as well as the towns of Rmelan and Maabadah/Girkê Legê, for providing high and middle school students with private lessons using the Syrian regime's curriculum without obtaining an official permission from the AANES administration. They were, however, all subsequently released.<sup>107</sup> The following year, in March and September 2022, teachers in eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside organised strikes to protest against the deteriorating economic situation in the area and the decrease in their monthly salaries.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

The historical repression by the Syrian regime in the past decades of combative trade unionists and leftist political actors promoting working class interests, together with policies controlling and instrumentalising the GFTU and professional associations, have severely hampered any potential labour mobilisation and collective action following the eruption of the uprising in March 2011. The GFTU has acted as a tool of control and repression in the hand of the regime, and it has defended its policies and propaganda nationally and outside the country at the expense of the interests of large sections of the working classes.

In addition, Damascus has resorted to policies favouring clientelist networks and primordial identities (ethnicity, sect, region, etc.) in the country to foster divisions among the population and more particularly the labour force. These factors have been key tools of the Syrian regime to fortify its own power and domination over society and to ensure the accumulation of capital and profits. These instruments are a powerful mechanism to control class struggle by generating relationships of dependence between the working classes and the regime. Within this framework, workers are stripped of an autonomous political existence and are rather characterised (and acts politically) through their specific (clientelist, sectarian, tribal, or ethnic) status. Throughout the Syrian popular insurrection, wide sections of the opposition have rather played a role in the aggravation of these socially constructed divisions instead of challenging them. The political orientation of the main Syrian Arab opposition actors, particularly the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, restricted their (mostly

rhetorical) demands to the democratisation of the political system, and they did not tackle the socioeconomic issues which were the priority of large segments of the country's population — particularly at a time of increasing social inequalities, unemployment, and wide impoverishment.<sup>109</sup> With the exception of a few small leftist groups at the beginning of the Syrian popular uprising, no significant independent and progressive political camp was able to develop a massive following after 2011 to oppose both the Syrian regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces.

In this context, collective labour action and self-organisation have faced significant obstacles and barriers to their emergence or existence.

The lack of an independence labour movement in Syria to promote cross-identity mobilisation is a substantial challenge to protecting workers' interests and living conditions. The capacity of workers to self-organise and act collectively is also limited by repressive security forces and the pressures caused by a labour market with high unemployment rates, amid an ongoing and deepening socioeconomic crisis. These impediments generate conditions in which workers cannot meaningfully confront or resist the degradation and worsening of their living conditions or the authoritarian structures of the state. For large sections of the country's population, emigration has often become the only option for a better life.

Strikes and collective action by workers and the unemployed were major factors in toppling the heads of state in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 and likewise in Sudan in 2019. The examples of the protest movements led by the Tunisian General Labour Union (known by its acronym UGTT) and professional associations in the uprisings in Tunisia and Sudan showed the significance of mass trade union organisation in strengthening effective popular struggle. Such mass organised social forces did not exist in the protest movement in Syria, which undermined its capacities. Similarly, earlier sociologists such as Göran Therborn have argued, in the case of the democratisation process in Europe at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, "that the working class, represented by socialist parties and trade unions, was the single most important force in the majority of countries in the final push for universal male suffrage and responsible government."<sup>110</sup> In addition to workers' movements, feminist movements have also played a historical role in the democratisation processes of various societies throughout the world. Feminist mass organizations have for instance been of particular significance in the Tunisian and Sudanese uprisings and in promoting women and socio-economic rights. The construction of autonomous and mass organisations in the future in Syria will be essential to improve the living and working conditions of the labour force in the country.

105. Interview with Hamza Hemiki, journalist, originally from Qamishli, March 2023; Interview with an anonymous specialist on AANES governance, March 2023.

106. Sirwan Kajjo, "Mandatory Union Membership Adds to Hurdles, Say Media in NE Syria," May 24, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3ZR4prR>.

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108. Walid Nofal, "Empty Promises and Unrelenting Economic Crisis: Syrians Leave 2022 behind, Expecting Worse," Syria Direct, December 8, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3WcAWaQ>.

109. See Joseph Daher, "Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising," The Century Foundation, May 7, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3AxYlJy>.

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