

The TUC is no friend of the Egyptian working class

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The working class is assuming an evermore dominant role in the revolutionary struggle unfolding in Egypt. It is in order to ensure that a mounting strike wave involving millions does not threaten the survival of the pro-Western military regime that the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has assumed the pose of an ally of Egyptian workers.

The ITUC's Global Day of Action, centred on today's demonstration in Trafalgar Square, is a political fraud. The real aim of the ITUC, Britain's Trades Union Congress, the AFL-CIO union federation in the United States and other international affiliates is to champion an "orderly transition" dictated by Washington, London, Israel and Egypt's generals. Behind the ITUC stand the US State Department, the CIA, FBI and MI6. The union bureaucracy's every move will be coordinated with the secret services, the White House and Number 10.

No support for the Egyptian working class can be expected from organisations like the TUC and AFL-CIO, which collaborate with the corporations and the governments in their own countries to suppress working class opposition and destroy the jobs and living standards of British and American workers. Far from being genuine organisations of the working class, the AFL-CIO and TUC have far more in common with the state-controlled Egyptian and Tunisian unions.

The chief concern of the union executives is to prevent Egyptian workers from challenging the imperialist domination of the region. The American trade union federation, in particular, has a long and predatory history in North Africa and the Middle East. With funding from the CIA, the American Federation of Labor formed the International Conference of Free Trade Unions—the forerunner of the ITUC—in 1949 to battle the influence of left-wing trade unions and help establish anti-communist and pro-Western regimes in the region. Among its first "successes" was the bringing to power of Habib Bourguiba—Tunisian dictator Ben Ali's predecessor—who brutally suppressed the working class and incorporated the

General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) into the state.

The protests today are being organised in the name of supporting "independent trade unions". In Tunisia, whose people provided the example that inspired the mass movement against Mubarak's regime, the ITUC works through its affiliate, the UGTT, a long time ally of Ben Ali, which initially denounced the mass demonstrations against him and then, after he fled, joined the bogus "national unity" government of his henchmen until protests forced the UGTT officials to resign.

In Egypt the ITUC has sought to co-opt the recently formed Egyptian Federation for Independent Unions (EFIU). In both cases, the TUC and the AFL-CIO have made clear their intention is to suppress any independent political movement of Egyptian workers and subordinate them entirely to the perspective of placing "pressure" on the "transitional regimes" favoured by the US and UK.

In Tunisia the new regime is led by the former allies of Ben Ali, headed by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi. The new regime in Egypt is a naked continuation of rule by the military, in the form of its high command, with Mubarak retired and his appointed vice president, the spy-chief and torturer Omar Suleiman, sidelined.

In a February 3 letter to Conservative Foreign Secretary William Hague, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber called upon "Dear William" to scale up the pressure "on the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes". He thanked Hague "for your positive words about our UGTT colleagues."

The UGTT backed Ben Ali's regime for decades until it was forced to assume an oppositional pose at the eleventh hour of the mass movement against him. Hague does well to praise it. The UGTT is now calling for the counter-revolutionary Tunisian government to establish "a Council of Revolution... in order to fill the legislative vacuum".

The same role is being envisioned for the recently created non-state unions in Egypt. The programme of the new union federation, adopted January 30, calls meekly for "a society that allows *all people categories and classes* to defend their interests and negotiate freely". [Emphasis added] All it

offers for the working class is an appeal for unemployment benefits, a minimum wage, a right to bonuses and benefits and fair social security—all framed as an appeal to a regime still headed by the military.

The AFL-CIO is seeking to play a key role in the US intervention in Egypt. In a letter to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka urged the US government to “urgently intervene” and “assert the full influence of the American government with the Egyptian government to stop the violence and stand with the Egyptian people in this moment of crisis.”

Trumka knows full well that the US government’s intervention in Egypt is designed to politically neuter and demobilise the mass movement and ensure that a de facto military junta does not face a continuing challenge. The same is true of the AFL-CIO.

The AFL-CIO made an immediate bee-line for the new trade unions when they were first recognised in Egypt in 2010, seeking to cultivate its leaders in order to mould them in Washington’s interests. In August last year, it awarded the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award—named after two notoriously anti-communist union bureaucrats—to Kamal Abbas, general coordinator of the Oxfam-affiliated NGO, the Center for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS), and Kamal Abu Eita, president of the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers (IGURETA).

Naturally, the AFL-CIO and the TUC do not advertise either their ultimate purpose, or their real allegiances. They have called today’s demonstrations precisely in the hope of concealing their behind-the-scenes scheming. But an indication of the role being planned for the newly created trade unions is provided by the endorsement they received in an opinion piece in Britain’s *Guardian* February 10, “Trade unions: the revolutionary social network at play in Egypt and Tunisia”.

Authors Eric Lee and Benjamin Weinthal claim that trade unions were instrumental “in the demise of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, and the weakening of Hosni Mubarak’s grip on state power in Egypt”. In Tunisia, the “trade unions played a kingmaker role during the end phase of the uprising... [helping to] not only eradicate Ben Ali’s regime, but [determine] the shape of the post-Ben Ali government,” they boast.

After falsifying the UGTT’s role, Weinthal and Lee argue for Egypt’s new unions to also act as “kingmakers” and to “shape” the new regime. “Today’s pro-democracy revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia are the culmination of that process, and where it will lead we cannot predict—though Poland does provide an appealing model.”

Solidarnosc (Solidarity) is the template being advanced for

the trade unions in Egypt and Tunisia. After the fall of the Stalinist regime in Poland in 1989, Solidarnosc provided the basis of the new government that also included representatives of the old regime. It saw through privatisation and the transition to capitalism that thrust millions into dire poverty. In Egypt the trade unions will be called upon to endorse the “reform” credentials of the military high council and whichever opportunist and politically pliant forces can be portrayed as civilian representatives of “the opposition”.

Weinthal and Lee speak directly for the upper echelons of the US ruling elite—only more openly than Trumka or Barber. Both are attached to the neo-Conservative think-tank, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), which was founded shortly after 9/11 and is dedicated to combating Islamic fundamentalism.

The FDD is headed by Dr. Paula J. Dobriansky, a former Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs. Its leadership council includes R. James Woolsey, a former Director of the CIA, Judge Louis J. Freeh, former Director of the FBI and Steven Pomerantz and Oliver “Buck” Revell, who were also in the leadership of the FBI. Other security figures include Charles E. Allen, the former Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis at the Department of Homeland Security. Other political reactionaries include Richard Perle, Newt Gingrich, William Kristol and Senator Joseph Lieberman.

The Egyptian working class should reject the blandishments of Barber, Trumka et al, with contempt. Workers urgently need to construct their own independent organisations of class struggle. To accept the leadership of the ITUC, even through the filter of the recently created unions, would be to sign away any possibility of such political and organisational independence.

Workers in Britain must not only build solidarity with their Egyptian brothers and sisters, but take forward an equally determined struggle against their own government. For this reason, they too must reject the mis-leadership of the TUC and its affiliated unions, which play the same role in defending Britain’s rulers as the UGTT does in Tunisia and the official state-controlled unions do in Egypt.



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