

“Independent” trade unions join military-backed government in Egypt

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22 July 2013

A centerpiece of the program of the petty-bourgeois left Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and their international apologists, the American International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), has been the claim that they are fighting to build an independent union movement in Egypt. With this claim, they have sought to present themselves, particularly to naïve middle class layers in their political periphery, as champions of a struggle for higher wages, for workers' rights, or even for socialism.

In the two and a half weeks since a military coup ousted President Mohamed Mursi and the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) from power, however, the real character of the RS' project to build independent unions has become ever clearer.

The new Egyptian minister of manpower is Kamal Abu Eita, the president of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and general manager of the Giza Real Estate Tax Authority, the first independent union in Egypt established in 2009.

Eita has joined a government which is controlled by the army, largely consists of ex-Mubarak regime officials, bankers and free-market economists. It is preparing for massive attacks on the working class.

Eita is working alongside Finance Minister Ahmed Gelal, a managing director of the Cairo-based Economic Research Forum since 2007 and a researcher at the World Bank. Gelal announced in a statement last Wednesday that a new loan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was “part of the solution.” He called for curbing public spending and bringing the budget deficit under control; planned cuts include slashing bread and gasoline subsidies, on which millions of Egyptians depend.

In a speech on Thursday, interim President Adly

Mansour vowed to “fight a battle for security until the end” to “move towards stability.”

Workers can expect nothing from the new government but violent repression. Code words like “security” and “stability” will be used to justify suppressing protests and strikes. Since the July 3 military coup, dozens have been killed and hundreds wounded or arrested. Two weeks ago, in one of the bloodiest crackdowns since Mubarak's ouster, the Egyptian military killed at least 51 protesters in Cairo who opposed the coup and were demanding Mursi's reinstatement.

The coup and the subsequent bloody campaign for “stability” have the independent unions' and Eita's full support. Immediately after the military takeover, the EFITU called upon workers to end all strikes and protests. It issued a statement hailing the Egyptian army and its role in the protests that began on June 30 leading up to the July 3 coup, which it called the “30 June revolution.”

It also called on workers to give up their right to strike. Eita wrote that “workers who were champions of the strike under the previous regime should now become champions of production.”

The RS and their international allies play a central role in this counter-revolutionary offensive. These pseudo-left groups have long sought to promote independent unions as “fighting organizations” of the working class and a progressive alternative to the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). The SWP's Marxism 2011 congress in London cheered Eita personally as a progressive, even “revolutionary” figure.

As Eita's appointment as minister of manpower and his comments make clear, the RS' claims about the character of the independent unions were lies. In

reality, the EFITU, far from being “independent,” functions like the ETUF as an instrument of the Egyptian state and its imperialist backers to prevent protests, end strikes, and block working class struggles.

Eita himself has longstanding ties to the Egyptian state and US imperialism. He is a founding member of the Nasserite Karama Party and a former ETUF bureaucrat who headed the Giza local until 2006. In 2010, together with Kamal Abbas—the head of the Committee for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS)—he received the AFL-CIO’s George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award for his efforts to build independent unions in Egypt.

The independent unions are closely aligned with the US and European union bureaucracies which, besides policing workers in their own countries, are notorious for their efforts to build unions abroad to defend the interests of American and European capitalism.

Needless to say, these organizations are anti-communist and pro-capitalist to the core. Their main aim is to create new structures to control the workers as international finance capital seeks to intensify the exploitation of the working class.

Over the past decade in Egypt, working class resistance has grown steadily to an IMF-imposed structural adjustment program which has had devastating consequences for the working class. Strikes and protests mounted, especially after 2004, when the cabinet of former Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif launched a massive wave of privatizations and slashed workers’ wages and living standards. As a result, the ETUF—which entirely supported the offensive against the working class—was increasingly unable to control the workers.

In response, sections of the Egyptian ruling elite and its imperialist backers in the United States and Europe sought to create a new trade union bureaucracy—so-called “independent” unions—to pre-empt a revolutionary movement of the working class. The CTUWS, one of the main labor NGOs involved in this project, received increasing support from the American AFL-CIO and the European Confederation of Trade Unions (ETUC).

After the 2011 revolution, during which workers turned against the ETUF and attacked its facilities, imperialism stepped up its support for the independent unions. When the EFITU held its founding congress

early in 2012 in Cairo, high-ranking international delegations were present, including representatives of the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC), the ETUC, and the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The goal of the independent unions and their pseudo-left apologists in the RS has always been to become Egypt’s officially-recognized trade union bureaucracy. After Mubarak’s ouster, the independent unions wrote a letter to the then-ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces junta, offering their services to control the revolutionary movement of the Egyptian working class.

They wrote, “The thousands of strikes which spread across the country in the five years before the revolution were all outside the legal framework established by the government, (although if genuine unions had been allowed to exist, they would not have been ‘illegal’). Since the role of trade unions is to take part in negotiations and to improve working conditions through dialogue, genuine trade unions in Egypt will avert unrest and strikes.”

The integration of the EFITU into the military-backed regime exposes the anti-democratic character of the affluent middle class elements that the “independent” union bureaucracy and its RS apologists represent. Faced with a mass movement of the working class, they are prepared to support a military dictatorship against the danger of social revolution.



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