

# The Washington Times

## DINE: Egyptian workers key element in uprising

By Philip Dine

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### ANALYSIS/OPINION:

The extensive press coverage of the evolving situation in [Egypt\(/topics/egypt/\)](#), though seeming to cover every angle from the use of social media to the nuances of the [American administration \(/topics/american-administration/\)](#)'s approach to the maneuverings of the [Muslim Brotherhood \(/topics/muslim-brotherhood/\)](#), is overlooking one key element — the role of Egyptian workers and labor unions in the uprising.

While neglected by the U.S. media, labor has been pivotal in terms of laying the groundwork for the political explosion that seemingly came out of nowhere in the Middle East's most populous country.

"I don't think that the key thing in launching the Egyptian movement — or revolution if it's going to be a revolution — was [Facebook\(/topics/facebook/\)](#) or the Tunisian example," [Stanford University \(/topics/stanford-university/\)](#) Middle East specialist [Joel Beinin\(/topics/joel-beinin/\)](#) told me this week. "There's been 10 years of mobilization around worker and labor issues. I think the mobilization and the breaching of the barrier of fear is probably more significant than [Facebook\(/topics/facebook/\)](#) or [Tunisia\(/topics/tunisia/\)](#)."

In February 2010, a symposium on "Labor Protest Politics and Worker Rights in [Egypt \(/topics/egypt/\)](#)" — by the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace\(/topics/carnegie-endowment-for-international-peace/\)](#) and by [Solidarity House\(/topics/solidarity-house/\)](#), which deals with international labor issues — discussed worker protests of recent years. [Kamal Abbas\(/topics/kamal-abbas/\)](#), executive director of the [Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services in Egypt\(/topics/center-for-trade-unions-and-workers-services-in-eg/\)](#), said the Egyptian labor movement had achieved several breakthroughs in pushing for worker rights, including strikers being met with negotiations rather than armed police violence.

[Mr. Beinin\(/topics/joel-beinin/\)](#), who has spent a total of a decade studying or teaching in [Egypt \(/topics/egypt/\)](#), presented findings from his report, "The Struggle for Worker Rights in [Egypt \(/topics/egypt/\)](#)." The longstanding state of emergency in [Egypt\(/topics/egypt/\)](#) had allowed the government to massively violate labor rights, he said. Yet the past half-dozen years had seen more than 3,000 labor actions, including strikes and demonstrations, with 2 million workers taking part. He called it the largest social movement in the Arab world since World War II.

Both [Mr. Beinin\(/topics/joel-beinin/\)](#) and [Mr. Abbas\(/topics/kamal-abbas/\)](#) said that for years outside attention had focused largely on intellectuals or political elite pressing for democracy, but that the building blocks of reform were more evident in the labor movement, with hundreds of thousands of

Egyptian workers engaged in recent years in determining goals and tactics and then peacefully expressing their demands.

[David Macaray\(/topics/david-macaray/\)](#), a Los Angeles playwright and author and former union representative who has written in recent days about labor's role in the Egyptian drama, stated that "[Egypt\(/topics/egypt/\)](#)'s labor unions deserve some credit" for moving the country off its authoritarian dime.

"Arguably, the case can be made that [Egypt\(/topics/egypt/\)](#)'s current political unrest was inspired and energized by the actions of the country's labor movement," [Mr. Macaray\(/topics/david-macaray/\)](#) wrote, calling the 3,000 protests "an astounding number."

Egyptian labor has an interesting history. The country's workers didn't win the right to form unions until 1942, but now about 28 percent of Egyptians workers are organized, more than double U.S. union density.

I asked [Mr. Macaray\(/topics/david-macaray/\)](#) why we haven't heard any of this in the media. He gave three possible explanations — a media tendency to minimize the value of labor, reporters' ignorance of the role of unions in [Egypt\(/topics/egypt/\)](#), or perhaps that the unions themselves "want to keep a low profile" should the current unrest end in a crackdown.

In any case, unions often play a lead role in spurring political and economic change — as, for example, in the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, where the efforts of the Solidarity union in Poland were well known but those of other labor groups in Eastern Europe were overlooked.

Why can labor's efforts be so critical? Because independent labor unions are an inherently subversive institution in authoritarian or repressive states, since they fight for economic justice and workplace rights. That can be particularly inconvenient for regimes that purport to rule in the interest of ordinary people or the working class.

It's no coincidence that among the first institutions despots ban or control are the labor movement and media. That's why I find the conservative onslaught in this country against the U.S. labor movement so counterproductive. It's one thing for corporate types to battle unions on economic issues, but it's quite another for political conservatives — who so loudly proclaim their love of freedom — to disparage the very existence and value of American labor. That is, it seems to me, a position they would do well to reconsider.

• *Philip Dine, author of "State of the Unions: How Labor Can Strengthen the Middle Class, Improve Our Economy, and Regain Political Influence," is a Washington-based journalist and a frequent speaker on labor issues.*

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