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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *MERIP Reports*, No. 94, Origins of the Working Class. Class in the Middle East (Feb., 1981), pp. 14-23

Published by: [Middle East Research and Information Project \(MERIP\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012255>

Accessed: 03/02/2012 11:56

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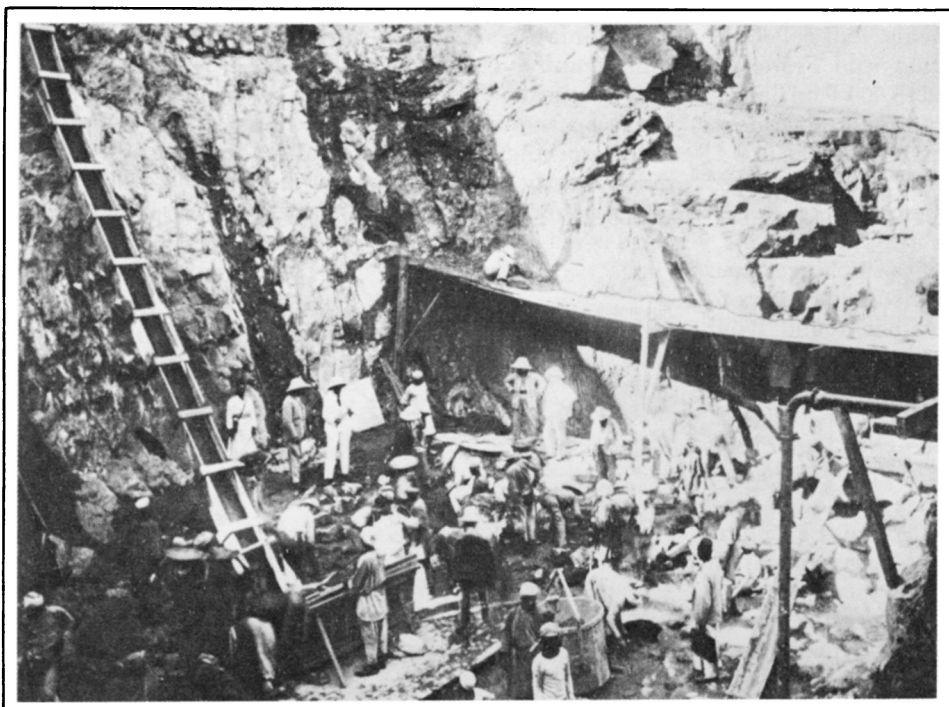
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Construction of the First Aswan Dam around 1900.

Formation of the Egyptian Working Class

By Joel Beinin

The roots of the Egyptian working class reach back into nineteenth century when Muhammed Ali (1805-1849), founder of the dynasty which ruled Egypt until 1952, initiated his abortive industrialization program. Beginning in 1819 his regime built European style factories in three major sectors: Military production, agricultural processing and textiles. The leading element was textiles. With the dramatic expansion of long staple cotton cultivation after 1820, by the early 1830's 30 cotton mills were in operation with a labor force of 30,000. But a decade later most of these new factories had failed because of inexperienced management, lack of adequate natural resources (especially fuel), peasant resistance to factory discipline, and competition from Europe.

Muhammed Ali's short-lived industrial experiment constituted a false dawn for the Egyptian working class. Production in the government factories was not performed by freely contracted labor. Workers were recruited by the *corvee* system, the traditional method of mobilizing labor to repair irrigation works, build roads, and construct public works in pre-capitalist Egypt. Labor and capital did not develop as distinct classes during this period since all control was in the hands of the government bureaucracy. The Muhammed Ali era, nevertheless, had important consequences which helped to lay the basis for the future development of the Egyptian working class. The traditional authority and functions of the Egyptian artisan guilds were weakened. Wage labor as a viable means of earning a livelihood became more widespread, even if it was imposed on unwilling peasants. Recruitment and conscription of

labor from the villages disrupted traditional social relations, making migration to the cities in search of work more necessary and feasible. Heavy taxes caused many peasants to leave their lands fleeing to the city or to Palestine or Syria.

Muhammed Ali's failure discouraged further attempts at industrial development in Egypt until cotton cultivation expanded rapidly during the first years of Khedive Ismail's rule (1863-1879). World supplies were drastically reduced due to the American Civil War. During this boom many gins were built throughout Egypt. The end of the war in 1865 precipitated a sharp decline in world cotton prices and Ismail encouraged diversified industrial development. He established 22 sugar refineries in Upper Egypt and the Delta, but by 1878 only ten remained in operation. In 1892 those remaining were taken over by the French-controlled Société Générale des Sucreries. Ismail also established two cotton weaving mills, a tarbush factory, a tannery, a bakery, several arms plants, and a paper mill; most met the fate of earlier efforts because high fuel cost and skilled labor recruited from Europe made their output uncompetitive with European products. Only the sugar refineries and cotton gins provided long term employment prospects for large numbers of workers, but most was seasonal in nature.

The Growth of Foreign Capital in Egypt

Although Ismail failed to establish a viable industrial

economy, his reign established the prerequisites for the formation of an Egyptian working class. Ismail encouraged the investment of large sums of European capital in Egypt, a process which had begun in the 1840's with the gradual imposition of the terms of the Anglo-Ottoman Trade Convention of 1838. European capital was heavily concentrated not in industry but in loans to the government, financing cotton cultivation, and the construction of a transportation network to facilitate the import-export trade. The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, was the crowning achievement of foreign capital in Egypt. This resulted in the development of the export sector of the economy and its necessary infrastructure while other sectors were largely neglected. The earliest concentrations of wage labor in Egypt were in the transport and public utilities sectors of the economy—sectors developed by European capital to meet its needs. The only significant exception to this trend was the establishment of a large scale cigarette industry by predominantly Greek capital and labor in the years after 1875. By 1906 there were 55-60 cigarette factories in Cairo and some enterprises employed as many as 500 workers.

There were only 15 modern European style factories employing 30-35,000 workers in Egypt in 1916.² Most manufacturing enterprises in operation before World War I were owned by foreign capital. Foreign capital dominated the formation of the Egyptian working class, not only by establishing an unbalanced pattern of industrial development and concentration. It also determined that working class consciousness, when it was eventually expressed, would be forced to consider not only the class struggle, but the national struggle as well. The years 1882-1914 were the formative period for the Egyptian working class. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 crystalized many of the economic trends which had been maturing since the era of Muhammad Ali. By 1914 foreign capital represented 70 percent of the total capital invested in Egypt. The British occupation also confirmed Egypt's total dependence on the sale of its cotton crop to Europe. In 1870 cotton represented 70 percent of Egypt's total exports. In the years 1910-14 this figure rose to 93 percent. The British also initiated legislation which encouraged the dissolution of pre-capitalist production relations. The agricultural *corvée* was abolished in 1889, resulting in an expansion of opportunities for agricultural wage labor. The passage of the Professional Permits Duty in 1890 abolished all remaining guild monopolies in trades. Henceforth entry to any occupation was legally unrestricted, making it much easier to obtain wage paying jobs in the cities.

The British occupation provided political support for the domination of foreign capital in Egypt. Lord Cromer, the virtual ruler of Egypt from 1883-1907, was a devout believer in *laissez-faire*. Labor conditions reflected the almost unlimited power of foreign capital over a small and unorganized working class. The purchasing power of wage laborers in Cairo declined from 1800 to 1907 and the majority of industrial workers earned barely enough to survive.⁴ A thirteen-hour work day was common. Wages in the cotton gins of the countryside were even lower than in the cities and the seventeen-hour day was not unknown. These conditions provided the context for the emergence of a trade union movement around the turn of the century. But

to understand the specific characteristics of the Egyptian workers' movement we must consider not only the accumulation of foreign capital and the nature of the productive forces it developed, but also the social origins of the Egyptian working class itself. The cultural and ethnic composition of the Egyptian working class greatly influenced the character and direction of its early struggles.

Social Origins of the Egyptian Working Class

The single most important source of recruitment of Egyptian wage labor was the mass of landless peasants whose number grew continually during the second half of the nineteenth century. Most agricultural land in Egypt was traditionally the property of the state (*miri*), but it could not be alienated from the cultivator. Muhammad Ali began the transformation of the Egyptian landholding system by concentrating vast holdings in the hands of his own family and favored notables. In 1846 the right to mortgage and transfer land was recognized. Private ownership of land became more firmly established with the *Muqabalah* Loan Law* of 1871 and the creation of the Mixed Courts in 1876. By the time of the British occupation, private property in land was generally recognized. This meant that peasants could be dispossessed for non-payment of taxes or other debts. In order to stave off bankruptcy the government resorted to a 70 percent increase in land taxes from 1865-68. During this period peasants lost over 3,000,000 *feddans*** as a result of the tax increases and other indebtedness. By the early 1870s one-third of the rural population of Egypt was landless.⁵ As rural indebtedness increased and the concentration of agricultural holdings became more pronounced a steady stream of peasants was forced into the agricultural wage labor force or into the cities.

The collapse of the Egyptian guilds provided another manpower source for the working class. In the early nineteenth century the members of transport and service sector guilds—domestics, messengers, door keepers, camel drivers, boatmen, and water carriers—were predominantly of peasant origin, since no long apprenticeship was required. Recruitment of large numbers of former peasants increased the total number of guild members, but these guilds lost their traditional mutual aid functions. In the porters', stevedores' and coal loaders' guilds the guild *shaykh* commonly became a contractor supplying labor of the guild members and taking a percentage of the wage for performing this function. These guilds thus split into two antagonistic classes—common laborers and *shaykh* entrepreneurs.

The first recorded strike in modern Egyptian history was called over this issue by coal loaders in Port Said in March 1882. The *shaykh* contracted the labor of guild mem-

* This law stemmed from the financial difficulties of Khedive Ismail: "tenants" who paid their land taxes for six years in advance acquired full ownership, and a permanent reduction of their land tax by 50 percent. Bonne, writing in 1948, noted that "a considerable part of the privately owned land in Egypt passed into the hands of its present owners on the strength of this law."
—Eds.

** One *feddan* is approximately one acre.

bers to the foreign companies servicing ships in the port. The strike for raises and direct payment of wages (instead of through the *shaykh*) was directed against both the foreign companies and the remnants of the guild system.⁶ A ten day strike of 6,000 coal loaders in April 1907 finally put an end to the coal *shaykhs* of Port Said, but remnants of this system continued to dominate the relations of production in this service until at least the 1930s. Remnants of the guild structure which could be incorporated into the European dominated capitalist sectors of the economy thus persisted until the guild was eliminated by the struggle of the guild members/workers themselves.

Artisan guilds did not polarize into opposing classes. In these guilds the entire membership was driven out into the ranks of the working class as their skills and methods of production were driven out of the marketplace due to competition from Europe. In his Report for 1905 Lord Cromer observed:

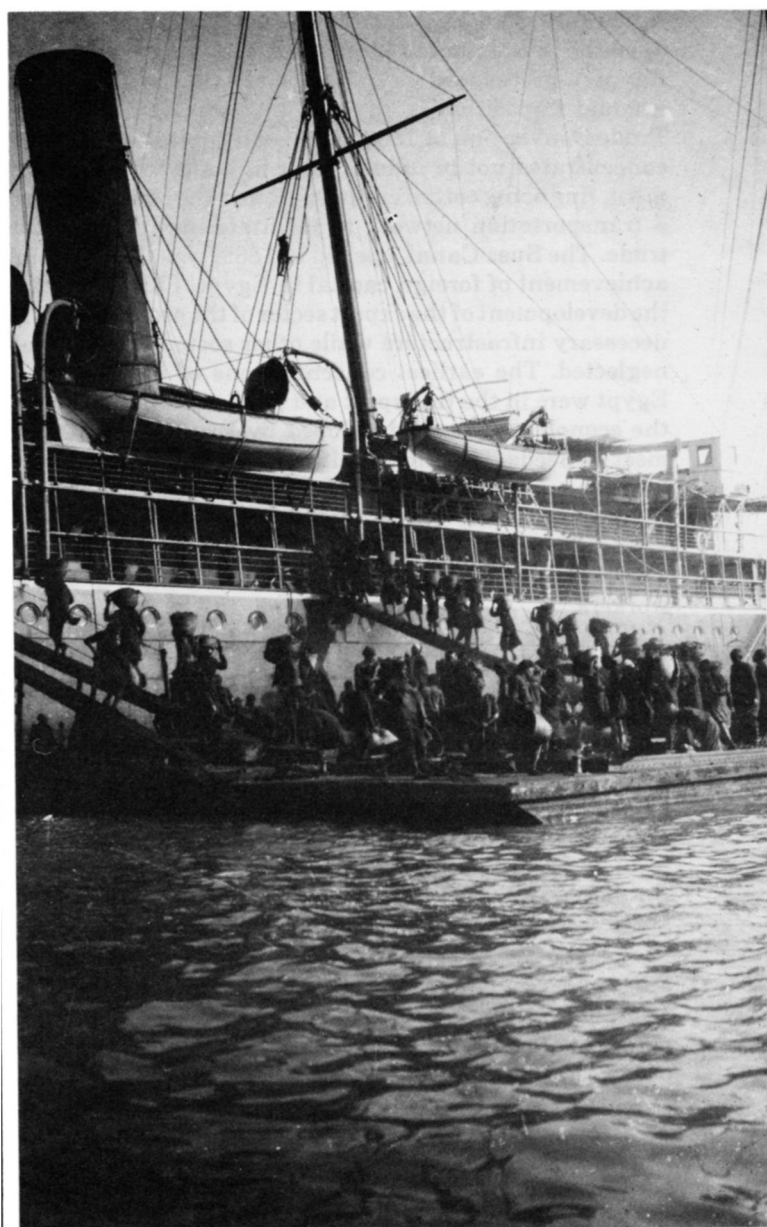
Quarters that were formerly hives of busy workmen—spinning, weaving, braiding, tassle making, dyeing, tent-making, embroidering, slipper making, gold and silver working, spice crushing, copper beating, water skin making, saddle making, sieve making, wooden-bolt making, lock making etc. have shrunk to attenuated proportions or have been entirely obliterated. Cafes and small stores retailing European wares are now to be found where productive workshops formerly existed.⁷

Almost all the new and growing demand for European style products was supplied by non-Egyptian workers—Greek and Armenian shoemakers, Greek grocers, Jewish, Syrian, and European drapers, and Jewish tailors.⁸ Egyptian skilled craftsmen had no role to play in the new economic system; and most artisan guilds were entirely eliminated some years earlier than the service and transport guilds. In both cases the majority of guild members became candidates for recruitment into the working class.

The third source for the recruitment of wage labor in Egypt was the influx of foreign workers. Skilled foreigners had been employed as early as Muhammad Ali's time as foremen, repairmen, or instructors in the factories. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries many skilled workers came to Egypt to escape the impact of European economic crises, especially the crash of 1907. Greeks, Armenians, and Italians were the largest communities with smaller numbers of French, British, and Belgians. In 1911 there were an estimated 6,000 foreign industrial workers in Cairo.⁹ Many of them had been exposed to trade unionism, socialism, and syndicalism in Europe, and their influence was important in the first years of organized working class struggle in Egypt.

Early Workers' Struggles

The earliest sustained struggles and organizations of workers in Egypt were led by foreign workers, especially Greeks. The drive of cigarette factory owners to mechanize the rolling process and eliminate the jobs of hand rollers was a constant theme in the workers' struggle until mechanization was fully accomplished in the 1920s. Greek and Egyptian cigarette workers struck in Cairo (December



Loading coal on a steamer at Port Said.

Credit: The Matson Photo S

Egypt: Employment by Economic S

Year	Total Population	Economically Active Population	Agriculture	Mining and Industry	Transport
1830's	2,3,000,000			30,000+	
1897	9,714,000	3,013,299	2,049,643	345,075	242,
1907	11,183,000	3,458,645	2,244,003	380,453	101,026
1917	18,670,300	4,286,498	2,936,352	492,388	150,633
1927	14,083,276	5,259,834	3,525,206	555,969	196,000
1937	15,811,084	5,789,225	4,002,444	609,733	139,000
1947	18,805,826	6,801,241	4,244,951	835,102	823,

These figures have been compiled from several sources and can only be considered approximations. Most of the class relations prevailing within any economic sector. For example, factory owners, independent a included in the category "Mining and Industry." Roughly 50-65 percent in this category (percent considered members of the working class, i.e., wage laborers. The percentage is probably higher in tr and services.

1899—February 21, 1900), Alexandria (March 1901) and again in Cairo (December 1903). The 1903 strike led to the formation of one of the first workers' organizations in Egypt, the Mixed Association of Cigarette Workers, uniting both foreign and Egyptian workers.

Foreign workers also played a leading role in the Cairo tailors' strike of November 1901. According to a report in the daily *al-Muqattam* of November 5, 1901, the overwhelming majority of the workers were Greeks and Italians, with a smaller number of Jews and Armenians. Greeks led the strike and only a small number of Egyptians participated. Representatives of the cigarette rollers and others attended a meeting of 1,500 workers at which the strike vote was taken. The workers then held a street demonstration attended by 3,000 people at which the flags of the United Tailors' Association were unfurled with inscriptions in all the languages of the workers. The strikers demanded the establishment of a regular piece rate, reduction of hours, Sunday afternoon off, and regular rest and meal periods.

Egyptian workers were not passive during this wave of strike activity. There were strikes at the port of Alexandria, al-Ahaliyah Spinning and Weaving Company in Alexandria, and Kuredy Printing Company of Cairo. One of the most significant strikes of Egyptian workers in this period was the November 1900 Alexandria tramway strike. The workers demanded better promotion opportunities for Egyptians, an end to the arbitrary determination of wages by management, replacement of one of the European supervisors, deposit of fines levied against workers for disciplinary infractions into a workers' benefit fund, and a monthly rather than a daily wage rate.

Although this strike failed, the demands raised clearly demonstrate the close connection between the economic and national struggle for Egyptian workers even at the earliest stages of working class collective action. Because national identity was such a prominent issue in Egypt during the British occupation, it is probable that the high degree of internationalist solidarity displayed during the Cairo tailors' strike was exceptional. One reason might be that few Egyptians were involved and the solidarity was mainly among various European nationalities. Employers took every opportunity to divide workers on national lines. Europeans received higher wages than Egyptians in all

enterprises where both were employed.¹⁰ National solidarity between European workers and employers was generally stronger than class solidarity between European and Egyptian workers. In strikes involving a mixed workforce, Europeans were sometimes induced to scab on Egyptians.

From 1899 to 1903 at least eight workers' associations were formed, mainly under Greek, Italian and Armenian leadership.¹¹ But the steady expansion of capitalist relations of production in Egypt and the continuing British occupation provided the conditions which soon led to the appearance of native Egyptian working class organization and leadership. The crash of 1907 produced a sharp rise in the cost of living and provided the economic incentive for another round of working class struggle. At the same time the Egyptian national movement was about to assert itself as a significant new political force. The conjunction of these factors was the basis for sustained struggle and organization of native Egyptian workers.



Sa'd Zaghlul

The Working Class and the National Movement

On December 27, 1907 the Nationalist Party (*al-Hizb al-Watani*) formed around the anti-British newspaper, *al-Liwa*. Mustafa Kamil, the editor, had never shown any special concern with the working class or its problems, but he died soon after the party was formed. The party's new leader, Muhammad Farid, had an interest in socialist ideas and developed relations with a number of figures in the Socialist International. Under his guidance, the Nationalist Party and *al-Liwa* began to actively support workers' causes as part of an effort to build a mass based nationalist movement. The party established Peoples' Schools in working class sections of Cairo, Alexandria, Tanta and Mansurah where adults were taught reading and basic subjects. Party intellectuals, especially lawyers, provided the leadership for the formation of the Handicraft Workers' Union (*Niqabat 'Ummal al-Masani' al-Yadawiyah*) in 1909.

service

ector

Rise in Cost of Living Index Due to World War I

Commerce	Services	
		1913 = 100
		1918 = 211
		1919 = 231
		1921 = 316
278	376,303	
161,320	375,816	
180,562	426,563	
359,322	523,337	
459,986	578,062	
623	897,565	

Source: *Tarikh al-tabafah al-'amilah al-Misriyah: 1919-1929.*

Moreover, they give no indication of artisans and wage laborers are all age increases with time) can be transport and lower in commerce

The union grew from an initial membership of 979 to over 3,000 in 1912. Although some industrial workers joined this union, most of the members were skilled artisans whose status was being threatened by Egypt's economic transformation and elimination of their trades.

But the Nationalist Party also developed ties with workers in the railroads, tramways, and public utilities where the largest number of native Egyptian workers was concentrated. In October 1908 Cairo tramway drivers and ticket collectors conducted a militant strike for an eight hour day, wage increases, paid vacation and sick leave, and other fringe benefits far in advance of the prevailing standard. The Nationalist Party mobilized public support and provided legal advice to the strikers. Cairo's masses responded to appeals of the Nationalist Party by helping the workers to block the trams from moving out of the barns, contributing to the strike fund, and helping to repel police attacks on the striking workers. The demands were partially won. But the most important achievement was the establishment of a union led by Egyptians (including Nationalist Party intellectuals)—The Cairo Tram Workers' Association.

The existence of a strong union and a politically conscious leadership made the Cairo tram workers one of the most militant and nationalistic components of the working class. Police repression during the 1908 strike did not deter the workers from calling a second strike from July 30 to August 6, 1911 around similar demands, but this time on behalf of all the company's employees including a large number of Europeans who worked in the barns and repair shops. Nationalist Party members again provided legal support for the strike and helped to mobilize public support. Residents of the Bulaq and Abbasiyah quarters joined the workers in fighting the police and burning the trams when the companies tried to move the trams out of the barns under police escort, an incident known as the "Abbasiyah massacre."

The Nationalist Party leadership supported the strike as a vehicle for mobilizing popular sentiment against the Belgian-owned tram company and the British dominated government. But the party's propaganda line also encouraged the development of a class consciousness and unity with European workers, as this excerpt from *al-Liwa* shows:

Your cause is not only the cause of the tramway workers but the cause of all Egyptian workers. Your events coming after those of railroad workshops is proof that a power has emerged in Egypt which cannot be ignored—the awakening power of the workers of the East and their realization of their interests and rights and desire to be men like other men. . . Let the previous massacre of the train workshops and the Abbasiyah massacre be a lesson to you. Unite and strengthen and increase your numbers by fraternizing and uniting with the European workers, your comrades, and form unions and provide them with funds and give them a large permanent supply of money which can be spent in time of need. . .¹²

The largest employer in Egypt during this period was the Egyptian State Railways and Telegraphs with nearly 12,000 workers. The Nationalist Party began to organize these workers in 1909 and as a result, they were able to call a strike on October 18, 1910. After a bloody clash with police the main demands of the strike were met.

During the high tide of national and economic struggle of the years 1907-1911 at least ten workers' associations or

unions in addition to the Handicraft Workers' Union were formed.¹³ Not all of these organizations engaged in strikes. But most were led by Egyptian nationalist intellectuals who saw the urban working class as an important mass base for political organizing. Egyptian workers relied heavily on these intellectuals for leadership, although in some trades the role of European workers was still important. Some of the associations formed during this period were organizations of legal clerks and office workers. The social position of these semi-professionals was hardly comparable to the railway or tram workers. The fact that they organized themselves into unions and participated in the struggles of this period is an indication that lines of class demarcation were not yet clearly drawn.



Lord Kitchener at the opening of a new quay in Cairo.

British Repression and World War I

British repression temporarily halted both nationalist and working class struggle. Press censorship was imposed in March 1909, and in July a Law of Administrative Expulsion was enacted. When Lord Kitchener became British Agent in 1912 the repression was intensified. The Nationalist Party was smashed and many of its leaders exiled. These measures crippled the party's ability to function. Though it continued in existence until 1953, it was never again a major political force. Workers who had been involved in nationalist politics fled to the countryside.

Following the outbreak of World War I, press and foreign mail censorship were again imposed. Public gatherings of more than five persons were banned. The Legislative Assembly was dissolved. On November 2, 1914 martial law was instituted. On December 14, Great Britain declared a protectorate over Egypt. More members of the Nationalist Party were jailed or expelled from the country, including many who had played a leading role in the trade union movement. As a result there was little trade union activity during most of the war.

The economic impact of the war on Egypt was severe. The cost of living rose steadily during the war. Food and fuel were particularly affected. Unemployment was high

throughout the war, although over one million Egyptians were recruited to serve in the Egyptian Labour Corps and the Camel Transport Corps—auxiliary units created to provide unskilled labor for the British army. Enlistment was theoretically voluntary, but village *mudirs* and *umdahs* conscripted whomever they chose when quotas could not be met.

While the Egyptian masses suffered greatly Egyptian capitalism grew rapidly as a result of the sharp reduction in imports of many consumer goods from Europe. Textiles, olive oil pressing, tanning, grain milling, food processing, furniture making, and iron founding expanded during the war; wage labor grew in industry and transport. The formation in 1916 of the Commission of Commerce and Industry to investigate policies to alleviate wartime shortages and to encourage the development of Egyptian capitalism constitutes the first organizational expression of an Egyptian bourgeoisie.

The Working Class and the 1919 Revolution

Despite the lack of workers' organizations, the dispersal of their leadership and the continuing repression by the British, a strike wave began in August 1917 and continued through the national uprising of March 1919. The Greek cigarette rollers began this movement when, due to a shortage of raw tobacco, many employers sought to break pre-war labor agreements and fire workers or reduce wages. There were also strikes against the Cairo tramway, the railroad, the port of Alexandria, and the Cairo Water Company.

The Nationalist Party continued to advocate that all manual workers, self-employed and traditional craftsmen as well as industrial workers, join one Handicraft Workers' Union. Primarily concerned with the national struggle, their goal was to build the Handicraft Workers' Union into mass nationalist political organization. Despite the increasing urgency of the national question towards the end of World War I, the Handicraft Workers' Union never regained the strength it had attained before the war. It was not a viable form since it could not express the divergent needs of both traditional craftsmen and a growing proletariat at the same time. By 1921 its membership dwindled to 1,043.¹⁴ The formation of separate trade unions of workers employed in a single enterprise was clearly the rising trend, reflecting the expansion of capitalist relations of production. But though it was no longer the leading political force, the Nationalist Party continued to provide a bridge linking the national movement and the workers' movement.

The tremendous outburst of anti-British sentiment precipitated by the British decision to arrest and deport the nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul on March 9, 1919 was anticipated by Zaghlul's *Wafd* organization. The *Wafd* had no ties with the working class and was, in many respects, a continuation of the *Ummah* Party, a pre-war moderate nationalist party based among large land owners. Despite the *Wafd's* lack of interest in the working class, workers responded readily to Zaghlul's arrest by intensifying their

strike movement.

Cairo tram workers struck from March 13 to April 15, 1919. The strike succeeded in winning some of the workers' economic demands and in reestablishing the Cairo Tram Workers' Union. On March 15, 4,000 railway depot workers struck, and on March 18 workers at the Royal Printing Press in Bulaq went out. These two groups of workers held a demonstration aimed at breaking down the blockade which the British had erected around the Bulaq and Sabtiyah quarters to prevent their residents from joining demonstrators in downtown Cairo. The railroad workers initiated the tactic of cutting the railroad tracks—the most direct and serious challenge to British authority in this stage of the nationalist uprising. On March 16 Alexandria workers joined the strike movement. Railroad, port, lighthouse, post office, and government workshop workers held large demonstrations; ten workers were killed in clashes with the British army. On March 20, Alexandria Customs Authority workers struck; tramway workers followed on March 22. The militant actions of the working class—cutting the railroad tracks, boycotting and blocking the movement of the Cairo trams, demonstrations by striking workers—were important factors in the British decision to allow Zaghlul to return from exile on Malta on April 7, 1919.

In the second half of 1919 strikes spread beyond the transport sector, with strikes at the Cairo Gas Company (June), Alexandria barber shops (July 12), Kom Ombo Sugar Refinery (July 16), International Cafe in Alexandria (July 28), the port of Alexandria (August 4), and once again the Cairo Tramway Company (August 10). The major demands were for higher wages, an eight hour day, severance pay, paid vacations, and union recognition. The momentum of this strike movement forced the government to take notice of the working class. On August 18, 1919 it announced the formation of a Labour Conciliation Board intended to mediate grievances between workers and employers. Two of the five members were British; the other three were government functionaries. Despite its anti-labor composition and lack of executive authority, its establishment legitimized the principle that workers had the right to make demands on their employers and negotiate improved conditions of employment.

The formation of the Labour Conciliation Board was intended to put an end to the strikes, but it did not. From August to November 1919 there were 24 major strikes. The largest was a 65-day walkout of Cairo railroad workers. From December 1919 to 1921 there were 81 strikes in all branches of the economy, including 67 industry-wide strikes.¹⁵ The soaring inflation during and immediately after the war years was a major factor in the strike movement in addition to the general upsurge of nationalist feeling. The second report of the Labour Conciliation Board covering the December 1919–February 1920 period recognized the severity of the inflation and recommended “reasonable” wage increases. When appeasement and conciliation failed, the government resorted to repression. On January 21, 1921 a law was enacted prohibiting payment of dues to unions or cooperative associations; this was reinforced by an order of General Allenby on February 3. Most unions ignored this attempt to suppress their activities.

The strike wave led to the formation of new and more soundly organized unions. There were 43 trade unions functioning in 1919-20: 19 in Cairo, 18 in Alexandria, and 6 in Port Said, Damietta, Damanhur, and al-Mahallah al-Kubra.¹⁶ Six had been established before World War I. At least three had mixed foreign and Egyptian membership. In the Cairo Gas and Electric Company Union internationalist solidarity was quite strong and it successfully passed two trials of strength in bitter strikes during January-February and October 1920. In the Cairo Mixed Printing Workers' Union, on the other hand, there was evidence of friction between Europeans and Egyptians. Most of the unions were limited to workers in a single workplace.

The leadership, although almost entirely Egyptian by this time, was largely in the hands of *effendis*, *beys*, lawyers, and other intellectuals. Abd al-Rahman Fahmi Bey of the *Wafd* and Dr. Mahjub Thabit, an old Nationalist Party sympathizer, were prominent among the non-workers who played a major role in organizing and leading the workers' movement in the early years after the 1919 uprising. Although these non-worker elements played an important role in bringing political consciousness to the workers and linking their economic demands to the political struggle, their presence and domination blocked the emergence of a leadership from the ranks of the working class itself. The habit of relying heavily on leadership from outside the working class would have increasingly detrimental effects in the years to come.

The Origins of Egyptian Socialism

The first seeds of socialist thought and action began to sprout in Egypt shortly after World War I. Dr. Mansur Fahmi and a group of Egyptian intellectuals agreed on the establishment of a socialist party. By the time their plans materialized in September 1919 they had become convinced that conditions in Egypt were not ripe for the propagation of socialism, and the name of the group was changed to the Democratic Party. At about the same time a group of foreigners in Alexandria led by an Italian-Jewish jeweler, Joseph Rosenthal, began meeting. Rosenthal had been active in trade union organizing among European printers, bakers, and tailors in Cairo and Alexandria before the war. Rosenthal's group formed itself into a Socialist Party in 1920. In August, 1921, Egyptian intellectuals led by Salamah Musa and others who had been active in the short-lived Democratic Party fused with Rosenthal's group to establish the Egyptian Socialist Party (ESP), with headquarters in Cairo. The party was based on an inherently unstable alliance between Salamah Musa's Fabianism and Rosenthal's anarcho-syndicalist tendencies. Rosenthal recognized that the ESP had to be Egyptianized in order to be effective, so he did not play a public leading role in its activities. Egyptian intellectuals—Salamah Musa, 'Ali al-'Inani, Muhammad 'Abdallah Inan, and Mahmud Husni al-'Urabi—led the party's work. The party program clearly revealed the dominance of the Fabian elements, and Salamah Musa clearly articulated his anti-Bolshevik and reformist views.¹⁷

The work of the European socialists in the trade unions had already led to the establishment of the first Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (FETU/*al-Ittihad al-Masri lil-Niqabat*) in February 1921, several months before the formation of the ESP. The federation united 20 unions with a combined membership of 3,000 workers, among them a relatively high proportion of Europeans.¹⁸ The ESP moved to assume the leadership of the FETU.

A new strike movement began in July 1921 and lasted until March 1922. During these nine months there were 81 strikes at 50 different enterprises including a 113-day strike at the Suez Oil Refinery, a 102-day strike on the Cairo Tramway, a 52-day strike at al-Ahaliyah Spinning and Weaving Co., and a 45-day strike at the Cairo Gas Company. The number of new unions during this period nearly doubled to 95, mostly in Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁹

The ESP and the FETU did not play a prominent role in this workers' upsurge. Some members of the Alexandria branch felt that their efforts to forge closer ties to the working class during these months were thwarted by the Cairo branch with its large number of lawyers, merchants, and even landowners. The struggle between the two wings of the ESP contributed to its inability to participate actively in the ongoing economic struggle of the working class. During this internal party debate the Alexandria branch crystalized a Marxist-Leninist perspective. On July 30, 1922 the Marxists precipitated a split in the party, expelled the Fabian group, and applied for membership in the Communist International.* In December 1922 the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE) was officially established.

The new party devoted all its energies to revitalizing the FETU and recruiting Egyptian workers into the party's ranks and leadership. By March 1924 the CPE had 1,500 members and FETU membership reached 15-20,000.²⁰ The CPE played an important role in the Alexandria Gas and Electric Company strike of February 1923, and on March 18, 1923 organized a demonstration against the anti-worker bias of Labour Conciliation Board. In November 1923 the 1,200 workers at al-Ahaliyah Spinning and Weaving Company organized a slowdown because the company tried to reduce wages and fire workers. When the management refused to implement the agreement which had ended the slowdown, the workers occupied their plant.

Sa'd Zaghlul's first *Wafd* government came to power in January 1924 and perceived as a challenge a CPE-sponsored workers' conference in Alexandria called for February 23 and 24. Government permission would imply legal recognition of the CPE's right to exist and would help consolidate the party's influence among the Alexandria workers. In order to assert its ability to maintain "law and order" and to beat back any challenge to its claim to represent the entire Egyptian nation, the government announced it would not permit the conference to be held. This created a rallying point for the Alexandria workers. The sit down strike of al-Ahaliyah workers on February 24 was the catalyst to a workers' uprising which spread throughout the city. The next day Egypt Oil Company workers occupied their plant. Their union of 700 members,

* The Executive Committee of the International stipulated four conditions for accepting the new party's membership application: 1) convening a party congress; 2) changing the party's name; 3) formulation of a program for the peasantry; and 4) expulsion of Joseph Rosenthal (presumably for his anarchist views).

mostly foreigners, was one of the strongest unions led by the CPE. On March 5 several other plants were occupied and red flags were seen waving from some of the buildings. The CPE called for a general strike.

Zaghlul's government took energetic steps to crush the Alexandria workers. All the leading communists and worker activists were arrested. The FETU was disbanded and its membership dispersed. Seven Egyptian party members were given prison terms and twenty foreign party members and workers were deported.

The CPE never recovered from this blow of March, 1924. Emissaries of the Comintern sent to revive the party during the middle and late 1920's were never able to establish a mass base among Egyptian workers. The government periodically arrested or deported Russians, Palestinian Jews, Greeks, and Italians who attempted to reestablish Communist activity in Egypt. It was only after World War II that the communist movement succeeded in restoring its links with the Egyptian working class.

The failure of the CPE was due to two major errors. The party misunderstood the importance of the national struggle in Egypt and its link to the class struggle. It called for an all-out attack on the Egyptian bourgeoisie and threw down the gauntlet to Sa'd Zaghlul's popular nationalist government even before the British had been decisively expelled from Egypt and long before the vacillation and conciliation of the *Wafd* was apparent to the Egyptian masses. Perhaps because of the high proportion of foreigners in the original ideological leadership of the party, the CPE failed to understand the importance of the struggle for Egypt's independence in the eyes of the Egyptian people and objectively as part of the class struggle itself. The party devoted all its efforts to organizing the urban working class, which was still a small minority—less than 10 percent—of the Egyptian population. There is no evidence of party activity in rural areas. The party's overall influence among the Egyptian people was not broad enough to sustain and defend the aggressive actions it advocated in February-March, 1924. The party was young and weak; the new *Wafd* government was popular. The CPE had no chance to emerge victorious from a decisive confrontation in these circumstances.

Offensive of the Egyptian Bourgeoisie

Great Britain's unilateral recognition of a limited Egyptian independence in 1922, while continuing its military occupation and *de facto* rule, gave the Egyptian bourgeoisie a chance to consolidate itself as a new and rising social force. The founding of Bank Misr in 1920 and the Egyptian Federation of Industries in 1922 symbolized this development. Bank Misr provided the financing for the establishment of several new industrial enterprises, and the interwar years were a period of significant growth for Egyptian industry. But capitulations restricting the right of the Egyptian government to enact protective tariffs remained in force until 1930. Egyptian enterprises which flourished during World War I in the absence of competition from European products were thus threatened by the resumption of imports from Europe after the war. In addition, the

cutback in the size of the British occupation army diminished Egypt's internal market and declining real wages further reduced consumer purchasing power.

These unfavorable economic conditions and the relatively low level of capital accumulation and productive forces laid the Egyptian bourgeoisie's ability to survive and prosper on its ability to dominate decisively the Egyptian working class. The only competitive advantage of Egyptian industry was an abundant supply of cheap labor and the freedom to exploit it with minimal restrictions.

The Egyptian bourgeoisie, although it never held uncontested control of the Egyptian state, was able to convince every Egyptian government from 1924-1952 of the need to oppose or restrain the economic demands of the workers' movement. Trade unions were not legally recognized until 1942. No minimum wage law was enacted until after the fall of the monarchy; until 1933 the only legal protection afforded to Egyptian workers consisted of weak and poorly enforced health and safety and child labor legislation from 1904 to 1909. The British actively encouraged the repression of the trade unions.

In the mid-1920's many enterprises fired workers and attempted, with some success, to disregard or revise agreements reached with trade unions in the first years after the 1919 uprising. There was a series of strikes in 1927 in response to these actions—the Alexandria Water Co., Alexandria Tram Co., railway porters, silk weavers, Cairo cigarette workers, and Suez Canal workers at Port Said. But by 1927 the number of trade unions had dropped to 62 with a total membership of somewhat more than 21,000.²¹

The decade following the installation of the first *Wafd* government in 1924 was characterized by a defensive struggle of the working class to retain the gains won in the 1917-1924 period. The elimination of the CPE limited the potential for building a sustained political opposition to the offensive of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. The coalition of nationalist intellectuals, traditional craftsmen, and new proletarians which built the trade union movement and gave it its political direction in the struggle against the British occupation and foreign capital reached the limits of its potential when the Egyptian bourgeoisie emerged as a formidable class in opposition to the working class.

The early strength and success of the workers' movement were due in large measure to the significant role which it had played in the national struggle. When the nationalist intellectuals proved unwilling or unable to persist in struggling for workers' demands after independence was achieved, the labor movement was disarmed and confused. Rank and file workers had not previously needed to develop themselves as leaders and did not yet see themselves as capable of playing such a role. Without an independent leadership the trade unions became pawns in the struggle between the *Wafd*, the minority parties, the Palace, and the British. The political vision of the working class itself, except for the small minority which accepted the leadership of the CPE, had not yet developed beyond the limits of the national struggle. Egyptian workers were taken by surprise when Egyptian capitalists proved just as harsh (or more so) in their exploitation of labor as the foreign capitalists.

The rapid growth of the urban working class in the 1920's and 1930's was both positive and negative. A larger

working class implied a potentially stronger working class, but the steady influx of former peasants into the ranks of wage labor weakened the solidarity and fighting capacity of the workers, at least temporarily. New workers were manipulated and dominated by their employers until they gained enough experience to assert themselves and struggle for their rights and needs. The development of Egypt's textile industry provides examples of this phenomenon. In 1927 Bank Misr established the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, a symbol of Egyptian economic nationalism because it represented Egypt's desire to control its most valuable resource by producing cotton cloth in the country rather than shipping raw cotton to Europe. It was built at the Delta town of al-Mahallah al-Kubra, not in Cairo or Alexandria, because the management preferred to employ inexperienced peasants who were politically weaker and less aware of trade unionism than veteran urban workers. Political and economic peace in the mill was considered more important than the greater efficiency and other benefits of a more central location employing a veteran workforce. Similar considerations governed the selection of a village about 15 miles outside of Alexandria, as the location for the Kafr al-Dawwar Textile Co., established in 1938. Company policy was to hire young ex-peasants with no previous industrial experience.²² In both cases this strategy succeeded for many years. At Misr Spinning and Weaving the 26,000 workers were disciplined by a company union until the fall of 1947 when a violent and protracted strike led to the formation of a new union. In Kafr al-Dawwar the 9,000 member union was led by the management of the enterprise and labor peace was maintained until the strike of August 1952 which was crushed by the new military regime.

Another factor which delayed the development of class consciousness was the persistence of relations of production derived from the guild system. Although the coal loaders' guilds disappeared before World War I, the work of loading the coal onto ships continued to be organized as it has been when the guild was in existence. In February 1935, 1,500 coal loaders in the Port of Alexandria struck, demanding that they receive their full rate per ton from the labor contractor who employed them. This labor contractor functioned exactly as the guild *shaykhs* had before, mediating between the workers and the foreign companies who were the actual employers. This allowed the contractor to cloak his role in the exploitation of the coal loaders' labor with the mantle of guild traditions. Although there are not many specific examples of guild traditions surviving this late, it is reasonable to assume that at least in certain industries this was the case.

Political Parties in the Trade Union Movement

The continuing struggle against the British occupation and domination provided the *Wafd* with the opportunity to enter and in many cases lead the trade union movement. But it was inconsistent in the anti-British struggle and

frightened of the popular forces it would have had to mobilize in order to decisively expel the British. The first *Wafd* government, acting as a direct representative of the young Egyptian bourgeoisie and the British overlords of Egypt, had no hesitation about suppressing the workers of Alexandria. But the *Wafd* led opposition to the dictatorial and anti-national governments of Ziwar Pasha and Muhammad Mahmud Pasha. It gained influence among workers and succeeded in winning the leadership of four major Cairo unions including the important Cairo Tram Workers' Union.

When the *Wafd* came to power between March and June, 1928 it tried to reestablish a trade union federation (*al-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal al-Qatr al Misri*). But this attempt also collapsed as soon as the *Wafd* government fell. When the *Wafd* returned to power for the third time from January to June 1930, several *Wafdist* lawyers—again formed a new trade union federation (*al-Ittihad al-'Amm lil-Niqabat*). At the same time, Da'ud Ratib, associated with the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, established a competing federation (*al-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal al-Qatr al Masri*). British sources reported that Ratib received E£ 1,000 from agents of King Fu'ad for his effort to split the labor movement. Pro-*Wafd* elements within Ratib's federation ousted him from leadership in December, 1930 and installed Prince 'Abbas Halim, a renegade of the royal family, in his place.

'Abbas Halim and the *Wafd* cooperated in trying to mobilize the trade unions against the dictatorial regime of Isma'il Sidqi which came to power in June 1930. Sidqi anticipated worker resistance to his government by establishing a Labor Office in the Ministry of Interior attached to the General Security Administration, revealing Sidqi's conviction that labor questions were primarily a police matter. Sidqi closed down the headquarters of 'Abbas Halim's trade union federation and confiscated its funds. Fifty-four unions with offices in the same building were paralyzed as a result of its sequestration. Many union leaders were arrested or fired from their jobs.

'Abbas Halim and the *Wafd* were unable to organize an effective response, and the Egyptian working class faced the depression disorganized and divided. Real wages were lower in the early 1930's than they had been before World War I.²³ Unemployment was quite high. There were sit down strikes at the Hawamdiah Sugar Refinery, Al-Ahaliyah Spinning and Weaving Company, the Alexandria Tramway, Kafr al-Zayyat Cotton Company, and Alexandria Oil Company. But most of these strikes failed.

When the Sidqi government fell in September 1933 'Abbas Halim and the *Wafd* cooperated in the reestablishment of the trade union federation (*al-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal al-Qatr al-Masri*). Earlier in July, 1931, the *Wafd* had quashed 'Abbas Halim's attempts to set up a Labor Party as an instrument of opposition to Sidqi, and they split again in 1935 as the *Wafd*, anticipating its return to power, decided to establish a Higher Council for Egyptian Trade Unions as the party's instrument for leading the workers' movement. After the split the *Wafd* transformed its Higher Council into its own trade union federation. The King also financed the establishment of a trade union loyal to himself (which never gained a significant mass following). Thus by 1938 there were three competing trade union

federations in Egypt.

The struggle for hegemony over the trade unions which occupied the energies of the *Wafd*, the Liberal Constitutionalists, Prince 'Abbas Halim, and the agents of the Palace took place in an arena far removed from the day to day struggle of the working class itself. There is no hard evidence that any one of these parties was more resolute than another in pursuing the economic or political demands of workers. The working class supported the *Wafd* in the struggle against the succession of anti-national dictatorial regimes installed by the British and the Palace. In opposing these regimes the *Wafd* articulated the demands of the masses of Egyptian people and won overwhelming popular support.*

But the *Wafd* was too frightened of an independent working class movement to attempt to mobilize the masses for direct action against the government and the British occupiers. Just as Misr Spinning and Weaving and Kafr al-Dawwar Textile companies willingly sacrificed economic benefits to secure labor docility, the *Wafd* curbed its struggle against the King and the British to avoid unleashing a social force that it might not have been able to control. The *Wafd*, a loose coalition of big landowners, aspiring industrialists, and urban professionals bound by personal political alliances, did not unequivocally promote specifically bourgeois class interests. It represented, though, an amalgam of social forces sharing opposition to the political and economic demands of the working class.

Because the *Wafd* was so rarely in power from 1924 to 1936, it was generally able to appear as the defender of the interests of the entire nation. Only after the *Wafd* negotiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which failed to win the national demands of Egypt, was the vacillation and conciliation of the *Wafd* exposed to the Egyptian people. The signing of the 1936 Treaty inaugurated a new period in Egyptian history. New political forces—the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt, and a renewed communist movement—began to compete successfully with the *Wafd* for the political support of Egyptian workers. During this period the working class reestablished independent trade unions and political organizations free from the control of the *Wafd* and the other parties of the landowners and industrialists.

* One of the fiercest strikes of the 1924-1936 period was conducted by Bulaq railway workshop workers on May 14, 1931 as a political protest against Sidqi's rigged elections. The workers were responding to the *Wafd*'s call for an election boycott. Bloody battles between police and strikers resulted in the deaths of 16 workers while 120 were wounded, 120 arrested, and 477 fired from their jobs.

FOOTNOTES

¹ E.R.J. Owen, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820-1914* (London, 1969), p.45

² "Report of the Commission of Commerce and Industry" in Charles Issawi (ed.) *Economic History of the Middle East, 1800-1914* (Chicago, 1966) p. 453.

³ Shudhi'Atiyah al-Shafi', *Tatawwur al-harakah al-wataniyah al-Misriyah, 1882-1956* (Cairo, 1956) pp. 7-8.

⁴ Yacoub Artin Pasha, *Essai sur les causes du surencherissement de la vie materielle au Caire de 1800 à 1907* (Cairo, 1907), quoted in Jean Vallet, *Contribution à l'étude de la condition des ouvriers de la grande industrie au Caire* (Valence, 1911), p. 27

⁵ Owen, pp. 144, 148.

⁶ Gabriel Baer, *Egyptian Guilds in Modern Times* (Jerusalem, 1964) p. 99

⁷ Great Britain, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol. CXXXVII, 1906. "Report by H.M. Agent and Consul General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Sudan (1905) p. 572.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

⁹ Vallet, p. 34

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26

¹¹ Amin 'Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-tabaqah al-'amilah al-Misriyah mundhu nash'atiha hatta thawrat 1919* (Cairo, 1967), p. 69; 'Abd al Mun'im al Ghazzali, *Tarikh al-harakah al-niqabiyah al-Misriyah, 1899-1952* (Cairo, 1968), p. 26.

¹² Quoted in al-Ghazzali, p. 45 (my translation from Arabic)

¹³ 'Izz al-Din pp. 118-123.

¹⁴ Ra'uf 'Abbas, *al-Harakah al-'ummaliyah fi Misr: 1899-1952* (Cairo, 1967), p. 62.

¹⁵ al-Ghazzali, pp. 74, 89.

¹⁶ A,om 'Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-tabaqah al-'amilah al-Misriyah, 1919-1929*, pp. 94-103 (hereafter 'Izz al-Din II).

¹⁷ *Al-Ahram*, August 31, 1921.

¹⁸ 'Izz al-Din II, p. 127 (These figures are derived from Joseph Rosenthal's testimony in his trial of September, 1924 and may be slightly exaggerated, but there is no hard evidence to disprove them).

¹⁹ 'Abd al-'Azim Muhammad Ibrahim Ramadan, *Tatawwur al-harakah al-wataniyah fi Misr min sanat 1918 ila sanat 1936* (Cairo, 1967), pp. 527-528.

²⁰ 'Izz al-Din II pp. 134-135 (See note 18). See also *The Egyptian Gazette*, July 24, 1924.

²¹ Amin 'Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-tabaqah al-'amilah al-misriyah, 1929-1939* (Cairo, 1972), p. 12

²² William Carson, "The Social History of an Egyptian Factory," *Middle East Journal* II:366 (1957).

²³ Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire: Etude de geographie urbaine et d'histoire economique*, II (Cairo, 1934), pp. 154-58.

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