The Prince and the Pharaoh

APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

The Collaborative Project of Egyptian Workers and Their Intellectuals in the Face of Revolution

Brecht De Smet
Dissertation presented in fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD degree in Political and Social Sciences 2012
Ghent University
The Prince and the Pharaoh

The Collaborative Project of Egyptian Workers and Their Intellectuals in the Face of Revolution

Brecht De Smet
Dissertation presented in fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD degree in Political and Social Sciences 2012
Ghent University
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sami Zemni
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF RESPONDENTS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRONOLOGY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVERSATIONS</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVENTS</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This volume contains lists of respondents, a concise chronology of my fieldwork, raw and unedited transcriptions of interviews, and summaries of informal conversations and events. Even though it does not appear to be a tradition within the department to append primary sources to a dissertation, I have chosen to do so because of two reasons: firstly, readers of the thesis are given the opportunity to “retextualize” the fragmentary voices that appear in the main volume within the narrative flow of the interview; secondly, these sources are now fully disclosed to other researchers, who may peruse them for their own studies. Obviously, this “open access” renders my personal interpretation of the sources prone to criticism and falsification. However, it is, in my opinion, exactly this “vulnerability” that improves the scientific standard of the dissertation, setting in motion a chain of reinterpretation and reappropriation of the source material.

The interviews and conversations are listed alphabetically, according to last name of the respondent. Events are listed according to date. Comments, significant non-verbal activities, long pauses, interruptions, and so on, are indicated by square brackets. I have often “cleaned up” interview excerpts when I cited them in the dissertation: this mainly entailed an additional correction of the punctuation and grammar in the “rawly transcribed” text.

The interviews are generally transcribed in a mildly “denaturalist” way.¹ The natural speech of the respondents is not “directly” represented through detailed ethnographical annotations of pauses, stutterances, irregular grammar, dialectic idioms, interjections, “noise”, and descriptions of non-verbal communication. Instead speech has been roughly streamlined, standardized, and transformed into a “text” form. At first sight, the naturalist method seems more “correct” as it represents the encounter between interviewer and respondent more in detail and more fully. This is true if the transcription is part of a study where the activity of speech and communication itself is the object of research – simply put: “how do people talk”; instead of “what are people talking about”.

This line of reasoning is faulty, however, if one assumes that the “substance” or “meaning” of a research object can be best revealed through a thorough description of a conversation about the topic. An interview as a source of information is a chain of mediations. A conversation is a primary source, which is produced by the encounter between interviewer and respondent, both at the time of the conversation, and during the “post-processing” of the transcription activity. The act of transcription already decontextualizes the interview from its

“immediate” encounter. Subsequently, by citing and quoting respondents, this already decontextualized text is appropriated and entextualized by the author in a new meaningful whole. As most of the interviews have been recorded, should the need arise for a “naturalist” rendering of an interview, I can always listen to the sound files.

Different research objects require different scientific apparatuses. With regard to my object of study, the interviews I conducted are primarily a source from which a theory of the subject matter – the relation between intellectuals and the working class – can be constructed. Most of these interviews are not spontaneous or random conversations, but deliberate dialogues that are overdetermined by my intentions and motivations. To represent these interviews as the natural and unmediated voices of my respondents would be an act of academic colonialism. These voices are appropriated from the moment they chose to participate in the shared activity of the interview, and the transcription of these conversations is but an additional phase in this process of appropriation.

Even though the interviews were strongly determined by my own Subjectivity as a researcher, they were also a reciprocal dialogue, and often the respondent him/herself appropriated parts of the conversation. This reciprocity struck me most clearly when, for example in an interview with Hisham Fouad, my question was reflected upon myself: “what is your opinion on…?” was retorted with: “what is your opinion?” In such a moment I became immediately conscious of my own Subjectivity as a researcher and I was forced to recognize myself as a participating actor in a dialogue. While I could cloak myself in “objectivity” – by avoiding to answer the question and thus refusing to recognize myself as a participating actor – in the context of the type of interviews I conducted, I felt that the best method was to answer directly and honestly, rendering my own Subjectivity explicit. This reinforced the dialogicity of the interview and established a relation of trust, respect, and reciprocity between the respondent and the interviewer.

On the other hand, if the Subjectivity of the interviewer is fundamentally against the beliefs, values, or ideology of the respondent, this might alienate the conversation partner and even create hostility among the participants. The interviewer should always be cautious in displaying his own Subjectivity and make a quick and intuitive decision if his own opinions might endanger the extraction of information. When Said Husayni asked me about my political views before our interview started, I circumvented the question because I did not want him to give me the kind of answers he knew I would like to hear. This circumvention influenced the subsequent conversation as well, but not in a way that hindered my appropriation of his voice.

---

2 Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 13 March 2011.
3 Interview with Said Husayni, Mahalla, 20 May 2009.
In conclusion, I believe that the mode of self-recognition often spontaneously mirrors the way in which the conversation partner is recognized. In a relation of solidarity, whereby the researcher sympathizes with the respondent’s cause, an open display of Subjectivity creates a feeling of being part of the same project, and this strengthens the dialogue. Most leftists considerably “warmed up” during the interview when they recognized me as a fellow leftist, rather than a “commodifying” researcher who considered them as just sources of information.

In a commodifying relation, the researcher is honest and explicit about the teleology of the interview: the extraction of information. In this type of conversation, the Subjectivity of the respondent is but a means to an end. The respondent, for his/her part, may participate in the interview as a partner in an (un)equal exchange. The self-recognition of the interviewer is irrelevant, because it is the dialogical exchange itself that lies at the heart of the interview. Perhaps he or she enjoys the attention and the prestige that comes with the activity of being interviewed. Perhaps he or she uses the interviewer in a propagandistic way: to spread a particular point of view or agenda. In my experience this was often the case in interviews with certain political leaders, such as Rifaat Said\(^4\) and Essam al-Erian\(^5\), who used a “formal speech” as Haisam Hassan, one of my translators, ironically called it.

A colonizing relation celebrates the subjectivity of the interviewer or respondent, subsuming the other conversation partner into the personal project of the researcher. This happened to me, for example, during my conversation with Hassan Hanafy,\(^6\) which turned into a discussion about my PhD project.

Lastly, the non-recognition of the conversation partner makes any real dialogue impossible. The form of this interaction is not the reciprocal interview, but the unilateral questionnaire.

\(^4\) Interview with Rifaat Said, Cairo, 12 April 2009.
\(^5\) Interview with Essam al-Erian, Cairo, 10 March 2008.
\(^6\) Interview with Hassan Hanafy, Cairo, 18 February 2008.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Role and Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbas, Kamal</td>
<td>Director of the CTWS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbas, Muhammad</td>
<td>Muslim Brother student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Azim Muhammad</td>
<td>Worker and journalist in Mahalla al-Kubra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Azim, Salah</td>
<td>Caricaturist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Fatah Farag</td>
<td>Tagammu economist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Hadi, Amal</td>
<td>Leader in the NWF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Rady Sayyid</td>
<td>Worker leader in Tagammu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abd al-Razik Husayn</td>
<td>Leader in Tagammu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdu, Zaki</td>
<td>Al-Badil Al-Badil journalist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul, Baho</td>
<td>Leader in Tadamon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu al-Eita, Kamal</td>
<td>Leader of the RETAU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Zaid, Wael</td>
<td>Worker in Ghazl al-Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adly, Salah</td>
<td>Leader in the ECP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Aswany, Alaa</td>
<td>Writer and Kefaya activist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Bahary, Karim</td>
<td>Youth activist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Balshy, Khalid</td>
<td>Chief editor of al-Badil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Dhib, Ali</td>
<td>Leader in Tagammu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Din Hassan, Bahey</td>
<td>Director of the CIHRS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Gourd, Ahmed</td>
<td>Youth activist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Erian, Essam</td>
<td>Leader in the Muslim Brotherhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Hafiz, Abd</td>
<td>Leader in the independent teachers’ union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali, Khalid</td>
<td>Director of the ECSR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Mahdy, Tamer</td>
<td>Journalist in al-Badil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali, Muhammad</td>
<td>Muslim Brother teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sawi, Dia</td>
<td>Leader of the al-Amal youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sayyid, Abd al-Rahman</td>
<td>Leader in the Arab-Nasserist Party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sayyid, Ahmed</td>
<td>Leader of the independent health technicians’ union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Sayyid Muhammad Sayyida</td>
<td>Member in the Voice of the Nurses Movement and the RS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Zahed, Medhat</td>
<td>Senior journalist of al-Badil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(anonymous), Muhammad</td>
<td>Teacher in Port Said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahey al-Din Shabeen, Ahmed</td>
<td>Kefaya coördinator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakr, Sayyid</td>
<td>Engineer in Ghazl al-Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barakat, Sabr</td>
<td>Labor leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bassiouuni, Mustafa</td>
<td>Leader in the RS and journalist in al-Dostour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Björklund, Per</td>
<td>Swedish journalist doing research on social movements in Egypt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carr, Sarah</td>
<td>British journalist for Daily News Egypt, specialized in labor issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwish, Nawla</td>
<td>Director of the NWF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fahmy, Talat</td>
<td>Tagammu leader in Giza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farghali, al-Badry</td>
<td>Port Said MP for Tagammu, leader of the independent pensioners’ union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathi, Muhammad</td>
<td>Tagammu leader in Mahalla al-Kubra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fayyad, Sharif</td>
<td>Leader in Tagammu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foda, Mahmud</td>
<td>Tagammu leader in Dikirnis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fouad, Hisham. Leader in the RS and the SLCHR.
Habib, Sayyid. Worker leader in Mahalla al-Kubra.
Hanafy, Hassan. Leftist-Islamist professor at Cairo University.
Hassan, Haisam. Leftist journalist and leader in the UPY/UESY.
Hilal, Abd al-Rashid. Labor leader in Tagammu.
Husayni, Said. Muslim Brother leader and MP in Mahalla al-Kubra.
Ibrahim, Abd al-Nasser. Leader in Giza Federation of Teachers.
Ibrahim, Jihan. Leader in the RS and HASHD.
Kader, Abdul. Worker in Ghazl al-Mahalla.
Khalid, Menal. Leader in the Cinema Workers Union.
Labib, Fakhry. Leader in the AAPSO.
Lakusha, Faysal. Worker in Ghazl al-Mahalla.
Mehdawi, Abir. Al-Badil journalist.
Muhammad Khalil, Osama. Director of HMLC.
Murat, Muhammad Zaki (Mishu). Leftist actor and producer.
Mustafa, Ahmed. UPY member.
Na’ash, Farida. Chief editor of al-Ahali, former president of the Tagammu women’s committee.
Nasser, Bahig. Leader in the ECP.
Omar, Saud. Labor leader in Suez.
Qenawi, Hamdi. Tagammu and Kefaya activist in Mansura.
Ramadan, Fatma. Leader in Tadamon and the SRC.
Said, Rifaaat. Tagammu leader.
Said, Tareq. Editor of al-Karama newspaper.
Safti, Inas. Director of FWD.
Salah, Muhammad. Leader in Tagammu.
Sha’rawi, Helmi. Director of the African Arab Research Center.
Shabeen, Essam. Leader in the ECP.
Shabeen, Jihan. Leader in the SRC.
Shewada, Siham. Leftist labor journalist.
Shukr, Talal. Labor leader in Tagammu.
Suleiman, Nagwan. Project coordinator of the SLCHR.
Taher, Muhammad. Journalist in al-Badil.
Talal Shukr, Ahmed. Member of the UPY.
Talal Shukr, Omneyya. Al-Ahali journalist.
Tawfiq, Wael. Independent leftist activist.
Yusuf, Abd al-Rahman. Poet and coordinator of the al-Baradei campaign.
Yusuf, Osama. Tagammu worker (driver) in Mahalla al-Kubra.
Zaki, Nabil. Al-Ahali editor.
Zaki, Sabri. Political scientist at the HMLC.
## Chronology

### 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 February</td>
<td>Nawla Darwish. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 February</td>
<td>Fakhry Labib. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 February</td>
<td>Husayn Abd al-Razik. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hassan Hanafy. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 February</td>
<td>Ahmed Bahey al-Din Hassan. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 February</td>
<td>Amal Abd al-Hadi. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 February</td>
<td>Cairo International Conference and Liberation Forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 March</td>
<td>Essam al-Erian. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 March</td>
<td>Bahey al-Din Shabeen. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 March</td>
<td>Bahig Nasser. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 April</td>
<td>Ali al-Dhib. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 April</td>
<td>“Day of Rage”. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Belal. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 April</td>
<td>Khalid al-Balshy. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medhat al-Zahed. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 April</td>
<td>Abd al-Rahman Sayyid. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abdu Zaki. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Talal Shukr. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husayn Abd al-Razik. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rifaat Said. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 April</td>
<td>Abir Mehdawi. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 April</td>
<td>Hassanein “al-Fanan”. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharif Fayyad. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 April</td>
<td>Second Conference on Youth &amp; Parties. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Mustafa. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sarah Carr. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 April</td>
<td>Trip to Mansura and Dikrnis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mahmud Foda. Dikrnis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hamdi Qenawi. Mansura.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 April</td>
<td>Talal Shukr. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 May</td>
<td>Essam Shabeen. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 May</td>
<td>Per Björklund. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 May</td>
<td>Baho Abdul. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 May</td>
<td>Hossam al-Hamalawy. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 May</td>
<td>First trip to Mahalla al-Kubra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Belal. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muhammad Fathi. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Osama Yusuf. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 May</td>
<td>Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 September</td>
<td>Haisam Hassan. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 October</td>
<td>Tagammu election meeting. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 October</td>
<td>Khalid al-Balshy. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 October</td>
<td>Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 October</td>
<td>Abd al-Rashid Hilal. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ahmed Belal. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 October</td>
<td>Fatma Ramadan. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 October</td>
<td>Mustafa Bassiouni. Giza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 October</td>
<td>Hassanein “al-Fanan”. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Osama Muhammad Khalil. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 October</td>
<td>Sabr Barakat. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 October</td>
<td>First trip to Suez.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saud Omar. Suez.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 October</td>
<td>Faysal Lakusha. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khalid Ali. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 October</td>
<td>Farida Na’ash. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inas Safti. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 November</td>
<td>Medhat al-Zahed. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 November</td>
<td>Diaa al-Sawi. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 November</td>
<td>Helmi Sha’rawi. Giza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tareq Said. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 November</td>
<td>Second trip to Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sayyid Habib. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geber Serkis. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muhammad Abd al-Azim. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muhammad Fathi. Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 November</td>
<td>Salah Adly and Essam Shabeen. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 November</td>
<td>Sayyid Abd al-Rady. Cairo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
25 November
Essam Hanafy. Cairo.
26 November
Alaa al-Aswany. Cairo.
28 November
Parliamentary elections. Cairo.

2011
7 March
Haisam Hassan. Cairo.
Muhammad Salah. Cairo.
8 March
International Women Day. Cairo.
Nawla Darwish. Cairo.
Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.
9 March
Cleansing of Tahrir. Cairo.
10 March
Husayn Abd al-Razik. Cairo.
Sabri Zaki. Cairo.
11 March
Karim al-Bahary. Cairo.
Friday protests on Tahrir.
12 March
Talat Fahmy. Cairo.
13 March
Hisham Fouad. Giza.
14 March
Khalid al-Balshy. Cairo.
15 March
Ahmed Belal. Cairo.
Fatma Ramadan. Cairo.
16 March
Jihan Shabeen. Cairo.
Wael Tawfiq. Cairo.
17 March
Mustafa Bassiouni. Giza.
18 March
Second trip to Suez.
First meeting of the Alliance of Revolutionary Workers in Suez.
Saud Omar. Suez.
19 March
Constitutional Amendments Referendum.
20 March
Jihan Ibrahim. Cairo.
Kamal Abu al-Eita. Giza.
21 March
Abd al-Hafiz and Muhammad A. Cairo.
Abd al-Rahman Yusuf. Cairo.
Al-Badry Farghali. Cairo.
First meeting of the UESY.
22 March
Salah Abd al-Azim. Cairo.
23 March
Ahmed al-Sayyid. Cairo.
24 March
Ahmed al-Gourd. Cairo.
25 March
Menal Khalid. Cairo.
27 March
Kamal Abbas. Cairo.
Muhammad Ali. Cairo.
28 March
Muhammad Abbas. Cairo.
30 March
Muhammad Zaki Murat. Cairo.
Siham Shewada. Cairo.
ABBAS Kamal
27-3-2011

Respondent: Kamal Abbas, director of the CTWS (KA)
Date: 27 March 2011
Location: Cairo, CTWS HQ
Intervener: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: Now there are a lot of centers and movements engaged with the workers’ movement, but at the beginning of the 1990s, the CTWS was one of the first of this type of NGOs which was active among the workers. How was the center established and how did the work develop?

KA: The center was established by a number of labor leaders in 1991. The aim of the center was to defend the workers’ rights.

BDS: Were these leaders only workers, or were there also political activists?

KA: There were a number of leftist activists who supported us. The Center started in Helwan, but it was then established in a number of other labor areas. One of the most successful areas was Helwan, 10th Ramadan city, Mahalla and Nag Hammadi. In order to achieve our aims we worked with the workers, tried to attract them and organized a lot of campaigns. We intervened in all the daily labor problems.

BDS: During the last decade there was a big movement of the workers, in Mahalla, but also in other cities, how did the center support these movements?

KA: Supporting the labor strikes and these issues was one of the basic aims of this center. A lot of workers of Mahalla and in Helwan started their strikes with the support of the center.

BDS: But what do you practically, concretely do in order to support the workers?

KA: Firsty, we organize the leaders in the companies, exchanging the problems of labor in different factories, then working with them, organizing campaigns. When a strike or demonstration begins, we keep in contact with them, contact the media and keep in touch with them. In addition, we help workers with their negotiations, giving them ideas, and so on.

BDS: During these years there was a lot of activity of the textile and steel industries... but this did not create independent unions, yet there were independent unions of the teachers, health technicians, pensioners, real estate tax workers. How do you explain
that the industrial workers as the strongest force within the workers’ movement were not able to develop an independent trade-union?

KA: In fact, that is a good point and a lot of researchers are reflecting on this question. There are a lot of reasons. In Mahalla there was a strong leadership, but there was influence from the police [...]. The workers were surrounded by the buildings. The ideal example for the independent union was the struggle of the real estate tax workers and of the pensioners: they had a conscious and political leadership which was able to take good decisions and prepare for strategies and tactics.

BDS: The revolution had a big role in creating the atmosphere for new and independent trade-unions. You have taken the initiative for the formation of the federation of independent trade-unions?

[KA is on the phone]

HH: [addressing me] For how long will this continue, all these centers which do not create and organize leaderships in the factories.

BDS: Aren’t they trying to do so?

HH: But it was the political leadership, as he said, in the real estate tax workers’ and pensioners’ movements which created the unions by bringing organization and consciousness for the workers. This quickly brings consciousness and leaders into the workers’ organization, otherwise this is a very long process. It is interesting to see the mutual relations between workers and political activists: workers giving political activists class demands and political activists giving the workers political consciousness. This is an important relation in order to develop a purely political consciousness.

[KA returns]

KA: We are developing the skills of the workers inside the factories and before the revolution we already gave a lot of advice to the workers, but right now the atmosphere is much better.

BDS: So it’s only a matter of time before there will more and more independent trade-unions.

KA: The environment after the revolution is very fertile to make independent trade-unions. So we are making a lot of meetings to bring a lot of independent unions to the federation.

BDS: There are different discussion within the workers’ movement about tactics and strategies. For example, when we went to the cinema workers union, Menal Khalid said that they could not have an independent union yet, because first they want to fix the state union and fight the leadership there. Do you think there are a lot of workers
at the moment who want to battle inside the state unions and transform them into instruments for their struggle?

KA: It’s not the same situation between syndicates and trade-unions. I think that all the workers want to split from the trade-unions, because of the violence and repression of the state unions which benefitted the regime.

BDS: We also went to Suez and there were discussions about how to organize the unions: at the level of the factory, at the level of the branch, should we allow more than one union per factory (because that weakens the workers) – what is your opinion on this?

KA: As a start I think it’s necessary to make trade-unions at the level of the factory. A union will not happen if there are not enough workers who want to organize this committee. For example in the cement sector, first they establish local groups in the different factories, then they can make a union on the level of the branch.

BDS: What is the role of political forces and the Left right now in supporting the workers’ movement?

KA: It is positive, especially because they are encouraging the workers to establish their own organization. This is due to the left ideology which has been in Egypt forever. The problem is that the left is small and divided.

BDS: What is the best solution to solve this? Is it a good strategy to have a party of the workers themselves?

KA: It will be positive in the future, but right now we should focus on developing the trade-unions and the federation and we use up a lot of energy in organizing this.

BDS: Even though there is a better atmosphere for independent unions now, there seem to be still a lot of dangers. For example, the regime imposed the law which bans strikes. Do you think the regime wants to crush the social revolution which is in development?

KA: […] The main danger is not the law itself, even if they have to law, they cannot really implement it against the workers. The real danger is that the regime would split the workers. […] I cannot foresee the future, but in my opinion, if we want a new Egypt, with a democracy and social justice, we must have a powerful federation for the trade-unions and syndicates and a powerful social-democratic party.

BDS: What is the role of the Ikhwan in the workers’ movement? I have heard many contradictory opinions on their position. Kamal Abu al-Eita said that they were against the labor movement and played a negative role, while Saud Omar in Suez claims that some of their members have a positive role. What is your experience?

KA: […] They can agree with us that unions have the right to be free and independent and that they should have their own leadership and not be under control of the State or
anyone else, that they should be independent from the regime and the parties. The members of the unions have the same membership rights, we don’t distinguish between religious and non-religious members.

BDS: But what was the role of the Ikhwan as an organized force in the workers’ movement. For example, during the Mahalla strikes, did they support the workers or not?

KA: Since 1952 they were working against the workers’ movement, since 2005 they were closer to the labor movement, not because of the workers, but for their own benefit.

[...]
ABBAS Muhammad
28-3-2011

Respondent: Muhammad Abbas, Muslim Brother student (MA)
Date: 28 March 2011
Location: Cairo, Café
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Fatma al-Sayyid Muhammad (FM)
Also present: Haisam Hasan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: I’d like to ask about the conference of the youth of the Muslim Brothers which took place a few days ago, on Saturday. In the media there has been some confusion about the position of this conference, especially about the relation of the youth with the leadership.

HH: He’s saying jokingly it’s a split, but I’m lying; I got what you want to here, but I won’t say it. [...]

MA: In Egypt in the past the group was working in secret and our outlook was different. At the same time it has been a very long time since we’ve could communicate with our leadership. We had many ways to reform the group but we couldn’t directly communicate to the leadership. We will reform the movement in different stages. The first stage is that we become able to communicate our visions to the leadership and to show the other people outside how the Brotherhood is from the inside. Because there is a campaign to falsely represent us, from the ex-regime and the liberals. We want to present a lesson to the people through our publications and reforms. The Muslim Brotherhood was sponsoring the conference from the first day, then there was an organizational issue which led the Muslim Brotherhood to stop sponsoring the conference. The conference was only made by the young people, the youth.

[interruption]

BDS: Shall we now see another face of the Brotherhood because there is now democracy?

MA: Sure, the situation is different now. Now the face of the Brotherhood is the face of Tahrir. In the next period we will forge a relation of confidence with society in order to go through this period.

BDS: Does the new generation of youth has new ideas in comparison with the old generation.

MA: There is now an open society and we had new experiences in the revolutionary period. So there will be some differences, but no conflicts. We all work on the same base, but our strategies are different. We are all under the umbrella of Ikhwan and a part of the movement. And we will not work outside the organization.
BDS: There were differences of opinion, for example on the role of women, within the Brotherhood. What is your opinion? Is it possible to have a woman in the Guidance Bureau.

MA: The role of the women is not marginalized. In October 2010 three women were allowed to participate in the Bureau. By democratic changes the role of women will become stronger. This will happen in the next period.

BDS: How can this role of women be changed? Through conferences, or the Shura council?

MA: After 25th of January many people took the step right away in the administrational board. After some time this will be expanded in the whole Muslim Brotherhood. For more than sixty years we were under pressure of security and the destruction of our economic side meant that we were always be reacting. The freedom now will allow for many changes.

BDS: So the period of repression had a negative impact on the democracy within the organization?

MA: Yes, because we had to work on our own. We didn't have any freedom to communicate. There was fear. Perhaps the administrational board was under control of security. They were afraid that women would be treated the same way as men in these circumstances. [...] But after 1995 when the Shura council members were arrested, there were no meetings of the council and it was hard to elect the Shura representatives. Now it’s easy to do it. Maybe there will be a conference and debates and elections. That does not mean that there was no democracy in the organization. It took place not in the proper way, according to the pressure of security.

BDS: During the last ten years there have been alliances and coalitions between the Ikhwan and other parties, especially the youth. Do you think these alliances brought members of Ikhwan, liberal and socialist youth more together?

MA: Of course. One of the effects of the revolution was that the drops of rain in different places and in different times, the alliances which happened, were united. Before the revolution there were already coalitions around certain demands. The revolution brought all the Egyptian people together and put the ideologies aside.

BDS: The alliance was against Mubarak and against the regime and for democracy. Will this fall apart now after the revolution?

MA: Until now we haven't finished the revolution. The spirit of revolution has decreased because of the discourse of stability. But we have tried to unite all popular groups, so that the rest of our demands be accomplished. But in general it is normal that each person will go back to his own ideology. And there will be a normal competition in society. But I do not wish for this to happen in the next four years. In the first elections however I want to go all popular forces to go in the same direction to
achieve our demands. [...] We should first finish the program which we were united around.

BDS: During the referendum the Brotherhood took the side of the yes vote, while many socialists and liberal supported a no vote. Important figures within the Ikhwan such as Essam al-Erian said they rather supported the no vote. Why did the Brotherhood supported the yes vote?

MA: Let’s make clear that any popular organization wants the constitution to change. The question is how to make the constitution change. The Ikhwan said that it was better to elect first the parliament in order to choose those who will create the constitutional assembly. We see that it is a country of organizations and not individuals. The priority was to give control to the parliament and not the military council. [...] Another thing is that we want to kick out the military from the whole equation. In the first constitutional declaration of the army, the army gained 100% control over the country. So we had to take the power of the parliament from the army and push them out the equation step by step and as soon as possible. We had a bad experience with the army in the past. In 1952 we supported the army, in 1954 they send us to prison. The civilians should take the power over everything as soon as possible. If we do this too fast, there will be mistakes. This is the point of view of the Ikhwan.

BDS: But by supporting the yes vote of the military, did you not support the authority and legitimacy of the army?

MA: Those who were saying no also participated in the referendum and they asked the military to declare a constitution, so who gives the power to the army? The power should go to the people. The no vote gives the army the right to make a new constitution instead of the people themselves. So why was there a referendum? If you say no or yes, the result is the same. They said the new constitution will include the constitutional reforms of the referendum, but until now they haven’t declared a new constitution. [...] We focused on the main demands and we wanted that the administration is under control of the people and that the army is only a tool to achieve this.

[interruption]

BDS: At first the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization did not support the protests of 25th of January, they only formally supported the protests from the moment of the Friday of rage. What do you think of this attitude? Where there already individual Muslim Brothers participating in the protests?

MA: The Guidance Bureau said that they gave the freedom to their members in the governorates to protest. For example, in October City, the chairman of the Bureau there, uploaded a video before 25 January to call on people to participate. They gave freedom for members to participate. Those who want to participate individually are allowed. This was a message in one of the most stressful periods of the Brotherhood. If you read the situation politically you will see that they implicitly called for
participation. Should they have said “don’t participate”, people would not have participated. From the first moment of this invitation, large groups of Ikhwan organized together with other tendencies such as April 6, leftists, al-Baradei supporters, al-Gabha militants. We contacted them before the 25th and we agreed on how to protest on the 25th and after it. We had a plan. Those who say Ikhwan did not participate give a false image of the Ikhwan, such as the regime. The role of the Ikhwan was very clear in the square. They were a concrete force which stayed and slept in the square. Ikhwan knew that they would be executed when they went back home. So they stayed in the square. The Brotherhood called for the revolution on the 27th. When the Guidance Bureau announced that they would participate, 71 of the leaders of Ikhwan in the governorates were right away arrested. This did not happen with other political forces who invited people to protest. Others said that we wanted to take control of the revolution. During the revolution, in the square, the leaders of Ikhwan were in the square with the youth coalition. There was no decision which was not taken by the youth of the coalition, the youth of Ikhwan took the decision up to our leaders and they had to agree. We had a decision that the icons of the Ikhwan should not appear during the revolution. […] When they appeared they did not appear as members of Ikhwan, but as parliamentaries or committee members. The entrances and exits of the square were organized and controlled by the Ikhwan. The largest political enemy for Ikhwan said that if there were no Ikhwan in the square people would have been killed and executed.

BDS: The Brotherhood is preparing a new party, Justice and Development, party. Some Brothers are preparing other parties, such as the al-Nahda party. Do you think it is possible for the Brotherhood as a movement to have different political expressions, or should it speak with one voice?

MA: In my own point of view, the Brotherhood is bigger than one party. Al-Ikhwan are expressing their ideology in different parties. Ikhwan are becoming a lobby which includes everyone. […] Our role is big in Egypt, in the Islamic and whole world. We cannot introduce the ideas of the Brotherhood in only one party or organization. This is my opinion. […] People can express themselves and their own opinions but these parties will not be in competition with each other.

BDS: Should these parties be Islamic, or civil, such as al-Wasat?

MA: Ikhwan has always had the idea of a civil party with an Islamic background. This is basically the foundation of Islam, the country is ruled by civil rules.

BDS: Do you think Turkey is a good example for Egypt?

MA: Every experience has its own merit. The situation in Turkey is different than in Egypt. A simulation would not work out, neither for Turkey or for Egypt. We can be close, but we cannot apply the same strategy. Egypt has a different situation both in the Arab and Islamic world. There is a bigger burden on Egypt to achieve renaissance in the Arab world. I will consider the experiences and try to learn from them for the goal of Egypt.
BDS: If we can learn from experiences and mistakes, what can we learn from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

MA: In Sunni Islam there is no velayti faqih. And the Saudis have a monarchy. [...] 

BDS: Politics aside, both countries claim to apply the sharia. Do you agree with their application of sharia. Can this be an example for Egypt.

MA: Our constitution says that the sharia is the main source for legislation. We base ourselves on this. If we don't find a civil law to solve an issue or conflict. We have already laws which deals with murder etc. If these laws are insufficient we will turn to the sharia.

BDS: Before, during and after the revolution there has been a big movement of the working class. Do you think this is a positive movement, or do you think this movement endangers the country's stability? [...] 

MA: This movement is the most leftist movement of all movements in the world. [...] The threat to strike or the strikes themselves made Mubarak resign faster in Egypt. It was the last step which we had to make. We were talking about the rights of workers and that their role is very important. We have to take care of their interests. Even if we had an important role in the strike in 6 April 2008, the leftists had a bigger presence in the workers' movement. We should operate with the leftists with regard to the labor question. Ikhwan should represent society from the head to the toe: workers, doctors... The interests of the Ikhwan are the interests of the whole people.

BDS: A concrete example. During the struggle of the teachers the Ikhwan decided to fight within the state syndicate while the leftists moved out to create an independent trade-union.

MA: The strategies are different. Before 25th the Ikhwan wanted to reform the situation, not radically change it. The strategy of the left is different. They see change instead of reform. Revolution changed these ideas for everyone.

HH: In your opinion the revolution is not finished. What are the other demands which we asked for?

MA: The military only slowly removes the corrupt figures. Figures such as Fathi Surur are out of jail, they are responsible for the counterrevolutionary. After this big revolution and the sacrifices we gave we only see a partial and not a complete change. The policemen of the State Security who killed people are still free. We have a campaign: we want our rights, our money and our blood. We want to get back the money. And still Mubarak is in Sharm al-Shaykh under protection of the army. All of this makes us question: did we have a revolution to change the revolution or only to gain small reforms. We will not go back to the past situation. We will continue. Why are the killers and the corrupt people in Egypt not sent to the military courts, while civilians
are? We fear that there are attempts to get back the situation of before and to protect the ex-regime with different figures and we will not allow this.

HH: These are all the demands?

MA: The last point: the army wants to divide us and deal with our demands in pieces. We want the rule to the people. We wanted parliamentary elections in June and presidential elections in September. They postponed the parliamentary elections with three months, and the date of the presidential demands is not fixed yet.

BDS: The demand of social justice was also very salient in the revolution. This demand was not only about corruption, but also about wages, poverty, and so on. What will the Ikhwan do about this as a demand of the revolution?

MA: The unions say these demands in the name of the whole people. These are not demands of Ikhwan but of the whole people. We agree with all these demands. [...] One of the most important committees in Ikhwan is responsible for helping people in Egyptian cities. Ikhwan’s social role is clear. [...] 

BDS: Since Sadat there has been a liberalization process in Egypt, which has been reinforced with the policies of Ahmed Nazif a few years ago. During Sadat a lot of Muslim Brothers had a huge profit from the liberalization process, but a lot of ordinary people suffered from it. Will the Brothers continue the liberalization process?

MA: Islam is different in its economic and political ideology. It is different from socialism and liberalism. We take from the liberals that we are free to organize our economy and from socialism the right of workers. It does not mean because I’m a businessman that I should harm workers. Our economic ideas approve of the right to accumulate wealth, but at the same of the rights of workers. That’s our ideology.

BDS: But what happens when these two come into conflict with each other. In Suez for example a lot of foreign workers are introduced in the economy because they are cheaper than Egyptians. If the businessmen don’t do this, they will not be able to compete with other factories, for example with China. So it is not only a question of individual morality, but also of a system.

MA: The system in Egypt before the 25th was unfair for everyone. It opened the doors of Egypt widely for foreign workers and industries. It didn’t take care of the national industries to be able to compete with foreign industries. It is a problem of the system, not of individuals. The system protected the owners of the companies, and give them technology. We will not get foreign workers to work here. There is a decision, I believe, to limit foreign workers. For sure, before we are Muslim Brothers we are Egyptians, so it is important that the Egyptian people should work and be employed. In the companies of al-Ikhwan we do not have any foreign workers.
HH: You said you wanted to remove the figures from the former regime. At the same time you said that a more correct strategy is to reform and change.

MA: The revolution changed our attitude. We should take our rights now.

HH: Let’s be more specific.

MA: [...] For example. The workers must rule their own trade-unions. They should stop their strikes and set a clear timetable for the regime to allow changes. If they don’t change, they can strike again.

HH: One of the most important points of the workers is to change their leaders.

MA: Stopping the strikes will solve this problem. The military and the government told us that they would change the leaderships if the workers stopped the strikes. The corrupt figures are not only Fathi Surur. There are corrupt figures everywhere. [...] We agree with the rights of workers and we are also against the law of stopping the strikes. [...] It is not logical that the government which came from the revolution now criminalizes the revolution. [laughs] But the change must come from the top. These figures must be kicked out. These are our demands. The demand for stability will kill the revolution. We have the same view.

HH: Did you use religion to mobilize support for the revolution?

MA: Our youth did not use any religious slogan. In the countryside there are some problems and the Ikhwan are trapped in their own ideology. But to use religion? No. [...] We distanced ourselves from using religion. [...] The liberal tendencies are making conditions for political freedom. [...] If everyone attacked the other ones tendencies this will kill the revolution.

HH: Ikhwan did not use religion?

MA: Yes, and most of the Salafists did the same. [...] The Christians used religion. The Church ordered its people to vote no, even if the separation between Church and State is one of the Church's principles. Our priests should not talk politics. There should not be any political blackmail. [...] Because the press is sponsored by certain forces it focused on the Islamists and let the Churches do whatever they want.

HH: So Ikhwan attacked those who used religious slogans in the referendum? [...] What were Ikhwan's aims and demands then. How did the Brotherhood try to raise political consciousness during the referendum?

MA: What is the political consciousness which was introduced in 25 January?

HH: Leftists were working together with the workers on issues of social justice, for example, developing their aims and demands.
MA: We were the most people who were arrested. You ask this question to someone who was marginalized and arrested. This person is the one who has the most consciousness. However, they do not represent anything.

HH: But what's the political consciousness for the coming period?

MA: We need a plan for presenting political consciousness. Everyone should be united to make a plan for the people. We want a new Egypt and we need a new consciousness. We need a different press and media.

HH: You said you will take the Islamic sharia if we don't have any civil laws which can solve a case. Are there such cases?

MA: No, and besides I'm not a lawyer. The professors of law should decide this. [...] 

HH: So if an issue can be covered by a civil law, sharia isn't necessary?

MA: Some people say that Islamists approve of cutting off thieves' hands. [laughs] If this was applied people would not ask why do they steal in the first place instead of just why do you cut their hands. This is for punishment. But they only see a horrifying image, they do not see the reasons why someone steals or kills. [...] There are civil laws, but there must be a reference, a source.

HH: If there will be parties of al-Ikhwan, shall we see open ideological programs?

MA: Of course. We do politics with an Islamic reference. Islam doesn't go into details about ruling the daily lives. This must be represented in programs. [...] We should listen to our reference, however. A woman cannot be a president. [...] In Islam khilafa means that the president would have all the power. [...] The professors are still discussing about whether a woman or Christian can become president.
BDS: What do you know about the Sisters of Islam?

AAH: I'm not a member of their organisation, since it isn't a secular organisation. Egyptian women have the right to vote and to be candidates since 1946. Their representation in parliament is one of the worst [laughs] in the Arab world, compared to other countries. It's less than two percent. [...] It's not only this or that law, but the whole status of women that is weak. If a husband says "you don't go out, you don't continue your education" or whatever... then all the efforts and all the rights concerning work, employment and education are meaningless, so we concentrate on the family status and relations. We think changing this is necessary and possible. They are not divine, this year we will be having, inshallah, a national conference on this issue. I am also a member of the planning committee. It is a national committee which includes women over all the world. It is an initiative from the Muslim countries, or countries which have a Muslim majority. [...] I will be attending the meeting, but the NWF is not as an organisation part of that meeting. The good thing about this initiative is that it tries to bring together, for the first time, women who come from secular backgrounds and who come from religious backgrounds to work together.

BDS: What is your opinion on the cause of women oppression in Egypt and other Arab countries? Is it due to patriarchy, a patriarchal culture? Is it due to religion, despotism?

[...]

AAH: It's a combination of all these factors together in addition to Western hegemony. Should I add this? I think there is an identity crisis combined with domination at the political, economic and military levels. People have to find some sort of pride in a kind of identity. [...] People go back to times when they were very strong within their culture. The issue is then culturally about women: "our women are better than your women, they are dressed, they keep their proper conduct". Something like the question of the veil for example, which actually arose after 1967 [...]. And also people who were living in the West for years began to wear the veil. It's to have something to hold onto. I think it's about globalization and the general conservatism that's sweeping through the whole world. That's part of it. But sure it's patriarchy, intermingled with conservative interpretations of Islam, it's the political situation, the politicization of everything; female genital mutilation [FGM] is political... "there is a conspiracy from the West coming to spoil our girls and women because they kill our
brothers and sisters in Palestine and Iraq. They can’t kill us, so they are trying to spoil us.”

BDS: Is that a historical problem of the women movement in Egypt, the link between feminism and the West and imperialism? Is it more difficult to introduce these ideas here?

AAH: For sure. I think there is a lot of stereotyping. Like in the West there are the stereotypes of THE Arab women and THE Muslim women, which are completely two different terms, I mean Muslim women are not Arab women... actually the biggest Islamic nation is Indonesia [laughs]. Actually there are many links between feminism and the West because, between to brackets, because the women’s movement there began earlier than ours. When you come and criticize the collective within a culture in a stage of cultural crisis or identity crisis, people get very afraid and feel there’s some conspiracy. It happened that we as a women movement – women organizations, because we don’t think that there is a real women movement – were disassembled by the Nasserist regime. Actually most of the movements were. I mean, human rights groups began in the eighties, women groups began in the eighties... By the sixties, late fifties, everything was shut down. Unions, whether children unions, women unions, whatever unions [laughs] all the syndicates, the professional syndicates... everything was closed. It was their state and their organisation of the state, however the name changed over time, but that's the situation. So actually it lasted until 1976 when we had the "multi"-party system [laughs], I mean one party in the middle, one in the left and one in the right. It was so artificial, it took at least a decade for things to heat up and many of the very active human rights groups and women rights groups actually began from the middle eighties. The Egyptian organisation for human rights, the New Woman, ... many of them. [...] 

BDS: In the West, the position of women was partly strengthened because they had to work outside the household. Do you think in a country like Egypt, where there is often a precarious labour situation: it is a good thing that women go to work, can this lead to empowerment, or to a new form of repression?

AAH: I wouldn't call it repression, but for sure, there is that double burden and I don’t think Western women are free from that double burden either. You'll find many restaurants so that you don’t need to cook every day; it's available, it's accessible for me if I can pay for it. But still, women are still responsible for the upbringing of the children. If the government or the state invests in education, subsidizing food, the health system, and so on, usually then the dependence of women decreases a little bit. So I think that's the main difference with women in the West; the state, the system is investing a lot. But here, no, women have a double burden. For me, for sure, it makes a hell of a difference to be or not to be economically dependent of somebody. It's not that mechanical, but it's very important. If you want to take the decision to divorce, for example, in the current situation, you have to go back home to your parents with your children. If you can support them, then your ability of leaving an abusive relationship, or leaving ANY relationship if it's not working out, will be higher. Some women would not opt for marriage even. Not many, I have a sister who hasn't
married, she didn't find the right person, but I think if she wasn't working she would have to accept anybody. But she's working! And that is GOOD! Why should she sacrifice all this? [laughs] Working is empowerment for sure. Still... many women are working within the family, many work at home in old industries, like painting clothes which is done at home. It's not formal [...], many women are working in the informal sector which is bad. Actually we are having here a round table very soon, I think within two days, about the impact of structural adjustment on women work. So for sure, working is empowerment.

BDS: Are there important discrepancies between the situation of middle class, higher class and lower class women?

AAH: Sure. Class as a factor is there and for sure it has an impact on everybody. It has an impact on your level of income, which affects many things. Still conservatism is sweeping through all classes. You find high class Islamism and low class Islamism. [...] 

BDS: I have heard many different things regarding the Muslim Brothers. According to some there is something like a "left" tendency within the Muslim Brothers...

AAH: The “reformists”.

BDS: According to others, like Fakhry Labib, the Muslim Brothers constitute the gravest danger to the Egyptian people if they came to power. What is your impression?

AAH: I think the importance of the Muslim Brothers is that they are one of the best organized groups. And I think that a lot or a good part of their success is due to the failure of the others to organise. For years they provided no real program "Islam huwa al-hal" "Islam is the solution", which was a very vague slogan. They were doing something different. I mean, people are tired of this government and just want somebody to present an alternative. And I think they made that impression. However, the experience of Islamic investment companies wasn't a successful experience for them, but unfortunately, none of the other political powers really invested on that and tried to expose them. So that's one thing. They have changed, for sure. I mean instead of "the woman's place is at the house" directly and bluntly they say "no, women have the right to work and to education" and some of them even speak about al-imama, it's a minority – imama means leadership. But they put it in a different way. They say that and then they say "but, the woman is sacred. Her role is to support her family. This is a role men, even men, cannot do. Look how very important you are, and so on." But their program does not offer women specific things. It offers them no space in the leadership of the gama'a, no women in their central committee or whatever they call it, women are nothing, women are the ones being used to provide support. And they provide actually a lot of support! Still, this is something that hasn't been investigated by the leftist groups, to find out why women support a group that does not really promise them progress. The whole situation of conservatism, for sure, has done a lot. And they used it very vigorously and nobody responded to them.
For example, like twenty years, when my daughter was in pre-school... no she was in the school actually, it was the second grade or something... she came to me and said "mummy, I need a scarf because the lady who is teaching us religion told us to bring scarves". I went there, made a big quarrel... actually she was in San Fatima, which is a Christian run private school. I told the head mistress "I put my daughter in a Christian school so nobody interferes with her religion. She decides what she wants. So, this woman is telling them to do so and so, is this some ministerial regulation?" She said "no of course not". And then I "I don't want this to be said again, for the girl. And I don't want her to be persecuted for my decision". And it never happened again. And I think, being paranoid, but I think that I saved many of the young women, temporarily at least, from getting into these kind of issues, including my daughter. Because my sisters are veiled and at some point she was asking "mummy why don't you put your veil on?" And I tried to explain to her that I have a position on that, and I look to religion in a different way "we have been Muslims; my mother, your grandmother has been a Muslim without wearing the veil". So gradually she chose whatever she wanted for herself and I am very happy what she chose. But I mean, a kind of small protest helps sometimes. Actually you need to have a case... when we were with a women in the street, when we were at a pharmacy, she said "what are you doing to yourself and to your daughter? You are wearing trousers, you are like a man." [...] And my neighbor said: "ah you look very nice, may God guide you so you put the veil on" and I replied: "I am very well guided. I don't need your guidance and I have a very good relation with God. So never say that to me again." Of course, our relation after that... [laughs] But this was a message to my daughter, I mean, if we all do this it makes a difference. But I didn't do it beyond my territory, to tell you the truth... [...]

BDS: This is of course difficult to do, because there is a lot of social pressure, so you have to be strong.

AAH: But after some time people deal with you anyway, khalas, they take you as you are. And they begin to find good things in you. You keep these relations, if you treat them well. My sisters are very strict Muslims, but still if I go and visit any of them...

BDS: So you think it is easier to have an Islamic, or rather Muslim identity in a context where the conservative interpretation of Islam is dominant?

AAH: It's easier to have a Muslim identity, that's for sure. It's easier for many things. If I speak about sexual reproductive health, even if that is my domain, all that I say will be placed between two brackets until proven ok by Shari’ā. If somebody, an ignorant woman, spoke about that, but she would be wearing the veil, she would be listened to in a different way. But in the long run they will begin to listen to you differently. [...] Still, I discovered I had to be very knowledgeable about religion, because many people have a very superficial understanding of the religion, with a tendency to be more and more conservative. And when you say "this is wrong", they tell you "but religion says..." and then you have to reply: "no, I’m sorry, this is wrong, you don’t understand your religion. They will be stuck. It became a duty for me to understand religion very well, so that in the issues I am dealing with I know the position of
religion. I wouldn't advocate a religious discourse. But I am able to stop a religious discourse at some point. [...] I remember in 1994 [...] we called for an expansion of abortion, legalisation, so that women who are exposed to rape can have an abortion, of course we were called names, were attacked, and so on... That was the position of the New Woman. Now the Mufti himself is saying: "yes a member of parliament is putting a motion in parliament" the Shaykh al-Azhar is actually agreeing with our point of view more than we dared to suppose, he is even agreeing to abortion whenever. Whenever the woman wants, not only within three months... [...] But I am a very optimistic person and I think time is on my side. [laughs] So things will improve. And if things like this happen, people will listen to you in a different way. Even the biggest religious types will start to listen to what you say.

Still, sure it's very hard because of the religiosity of everything. The daily language is becoming more religious. We used to say in funerals for example "al-b'3if hayatak", "your life will be an extension of his or her". Now you won't say that, you'll say "bi-qawli illah", which means only God can do this, stay forever, which is stupid. "Allo?" - "Salam 'alaykum". For example my nephew used to do that with me, he says "salam 'alaykum", "bonjour habibi, how are you?" Now he wouldn't say "salam 'alaykum" to me. He knows this is my number: "hi tanti!" It needs a lot of struggle every day to confine this, but the process is so strong and I think the left has failed, a big failure.

BDS: And what do you think is the reason the left failed?

AAH: [thinks and laughs] Domestication?! They became domesticated by the limited, multiple party-system, or whatever. Self-censorship. When you try to be not provocative, when you try to be reasonable and moderate.... all these things make your position unclear, when you are not radical you do not make a difference for people, because we have to call clearly for social justice for people. Islamists claim that they are for justice for the people, but they are using them. Great, let us do that and say "we are not for that kind of justice, we are for calling for socialist justice". [...] The word secular is now becoming an obscene word! I remember, two years ago, there was a new party... [...] It was like "Leftist Alliance" or something. And none of their documents mentioned the word secular. At all. When I define myself, I am a secular feminist and human rights activist, because I want to provoke discussion in order to reclaim the positive meaning of secularism, of feminism, and so on. [...] I am not a member of any party.

BDS: Do you think it is possible to not be a secular feminist and fight for real women liberation?

AAH: For me feminism means secularism. You can be an activist for women's rights, regardless of your religious background. But to be a feminist, I think the two words, feminism and religion, don't go together. Because you are speaking about patriarchy and all religions are patriarchal. And there are very clear verses about beating wives, about men being superior to women, and so on. Despite all the interpretations, I think there are some... contradictions. For sure the renewal of religious though is important, but within the current circumstances I think it is very hard to be secular.
BDS:  What do you think of the role of social struggle within the women’s movement? In Mahalla it were the women workers who took the streets first, taking the men with them. Do you think this type of action plays a fundamental role in women empowerment?

AAH:  It’s only these actions, actually, that will make the real change. Because women getting down to streets and struggling for their rights, not just supporting men, will make a whole difference. Not only in the perception of women of themselves and their powers, but also of the community’s perception of women and their power. For example, one of the things I work on is female genital mutilation. I am completely against all projects which go to the communities and ONLY speak specifically about female genital mutilation. Unless we are addressing women’s status and power relations between men and women we will never end female genital mutilation. It’s a very patriarchal thing about controlling women’s sexuality because women are seen as uncontrollable sexual creatures, not even citizens and human beings. It dehumanizes women, the whole logic behind female genital mutilation. So I think the more women are involved in politics, in the wider meaning, in public discussions on anything, in referenda, in elections... until this becomes a real and essential part of the women’s movement,...I am not talking about “political participation” and “training”, whatever, no. Struggle! Training and so on is important, but it is part of the struggle. Until then there is no real movement and no real social change. And with the New Woman we decided a few years ago that we would try to link us with the different ways of women participation in the social movements, and help organising it, supporting it to organise, and so on. That’s politics. This was a good decision. Actually we are trying to read what’s going on and we felt that it’s important. We are a research and advocacy organisation, we are not at the grassroots level. We are not ashamed of that and we think we have a role. But creating connections with the ongoing movement is very important. Not to become members of them, no, but to help organise themselves. And I think this year was really extraordinary for women. [...] 

BDS:  Will there be demonstrations or celebrations on International Women’s Day?

AAH:  No demonstrations, only celebrations. We usually do it with other people, but this year we are doing it alone. It will be about women workers, celebrating them. [...] Every year we honor women, and men [...], we honor them and give them a badge. So this year we’ll have this meeting, we’ll hear the women about their experiences and honor four or five women, I’m not sure, but the rest of the day will be just fun. Singing and dancing and so on. It’s celebration. Our first meeting about the research on the effect of structural adjustment on women, work and women, will be on 25 February, one in February, one in March. They are workshops. So the research will be presented alongside testimonies of the women about their experiences. So this year is actually the working women’s year. It’s great. [...] Many of them are veiled women, but c’est la vie, that’s Cairo now. We have a website project, and as I searched for technical efficient women I chose three of them veiled and one I chose intentionally Christian to create a balance, putting equal
opportunities for those who really have the capabilities. We never had that many veiled women in the New Woman before. [...] 

BDs: In a way I was surprised seeing also here a lot of veiled women.

AAH: Some of our staff are veiled, sure. They are not closed-minded, they change a lot when they are here, but still, we are part of the society, it is reflected on us.

BDS: A question about female genital mutilation. According to the studies I read 97 percent of the Egyptian women are ...

AAH: ... 96 percent now. It's from a demographic and health survey. Of all ever married women 97 percent were circumcised. In 2005 the same demographic and health survey said that it had become 96 percent [laughs]. But the attitudes towards circumcising daughters decreased a lot, from 82 percent to 75 percent. I personally think the religious discourse around it and the public discourse around it had an effect. When you go and ask people about it, their neighbours are around. They wouldn't say to you "we haven't circumcised our daughter". Mostly... usually... people don't circumcise their daughters and tell you that they have circumcised them. I worked with an evaluation of a project [...] which depends on going to those who haven't circumcised their daughters. In 40 villages. And we see the same things repeat themselves: that when they go, first they find few people who haven't circumcised their daughters, but when they are gathered people got encouraged and they said "but we also haven't circumcised our daughter", "we never said that", "we didn't dare to say that". So, I think at some point you'll find a big drop when there is a critical mass that dares to say "we haven't circumcised".

BDS: On the legislative front, it's not unambiguous to ban FGM in hospitals because when parents want to circumcise their daughters, they cannot go to hospitals and...

AAH: ... in hospitals you are giving the message that this is a health or a medical practice. That was a discussion for a whole year, before we got to our point: no to FGM of any kind, anywhere, by anybody. Even if you do it in a five stars hospital it's a violation of women's rights. And that was the main change that happened. Before that it was a "harmful health practice", and then it became a violation of women's rights. Violation of women's rights is wider because it links it to its social aspects and makes it clear; it's a violation, even if the head of the gynaecology department does it... it's still a violation and so on. Throughout the years it was "medicalized", so the majority of those who are circumcised at a young age are now circumcised by nurses or doctors. Older generations were circumcised by traditional midwives, so actually the whole project of the past has ended in medicalization, because there wasn't a clear stand, or a clear message; "this is not a medical operation, this is a practice, a violation of women's rights". With regard to legislation, there are two levels. This wasn't a legislation, it was just a ministerial decree, but there are proposed changes to the child law, the child protection law. There is an article about punishments for those who do the circumcision, whether they are doctors or not, but not punishing the parents, which is still a struggle [...] It is difficult because this is an asset for their
daughters' marriage, which means that a daughter which is not circumcised will not be married. So they'll circumcise them, regardless if they feel pity for her, because it's painful and sometimes she may die, but c'est la vie. And that's actually the whole issue, for me actually the whole issue of legislation is about more chances for advocacy. A social habit that exists among 96 or 97 or 90 percent of the whole population means you need social change. You don't need punishments... [...] 

BDS: Al-Azhar plays traditionally a bit of a cowardly role in this issue, because they don't condemn the practice...

AAH: No they condemned it!

BDS: Have they condemned it?!

AAH: Oh yes, the Shaykh al-Azhar said it is haram, and actually it was on TV, they interpellated him after that girl who died. She wasn't the first and will never be the last one [laughs]. But they called him and they said "people are asking you", and actually a lot of people were asking how this was possible, although some people say that he is the employee of the state and they pressured him to say so. But in the long run, making it very clear that this is not an Islamic practice, is very important. And I think we have a real change in the situation. The national council for child and motherhood issues has put this in the priority area; the first lady has said that she is against FGM in the campaign "the beginning of the end". There are a lot of efforts, some of the media channels are working on it, and so on. But to achieve this, you'll need the religious authorities, both of them, saying it's not an Islamic or Christian sanctioned practice. And you have the medical syndicate, which hasn't decided their position yet, although they had a position in 1994, saying "this is a religious practice that we should follow, but by the specialists, which is us, the doctors" Me being one of them. [laughs]
ABD AL-AZIM Muhammad  
12-11-2010

Respondent: Muhammad Abd al-Azim, worker and journalist in Mahalla (MAA)  
Date: 12 November 2010  
Location: Mahalla al-Kubra, Ahmed Belal’s home  
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)  
Translator: Ahmed Belal (AB)  
Also present: Geber Serkus (GS), Muhammad Fathi (MF)  
Source: Notes and audio recording  

[...]

MAA: Most workers are only interested in their own direct goals, not political issues. The weakening of the political parties by the government and other reasons lowered the conditions of living. The corruption and fraud of the elections made by the government or by businessmen create a lot of social crimes in the society and the level of the wages are low. Although there are some 25 parties in Egypt the number of members is very low.

BDS: I heard two things about the role of parties in Mahalla and there is a conflict between those two things. The first is that the parties play a bad role because the parties divide the movement as each political group comes with their own program. The second thing is that the parties play too little a role because they are weak.

MAA: Parties played a role during the strike but not a great role. You can see its results. Normally we could have a good connection between the political parties and the workers and now we cannot. This shows that there were problems. Not only because the parties are weak, but also because the workers are scared of political parties and they don’t like to participate. Especially because the workers have specific class demands, not general political demands like the parties, for economic and social change. The role of parties was not prepared, it was only some meetings with workers in the factory, telling them how to deal with the problems they faced.

BDS: Which parties played a good role in the struggle?

MAA: Not all parties played a good role. Maybe Tagammu and Nasserists only.

BDS: Before Mahalla there were a lot of strikes, but journalists were not interested. Then with Mahalla the workers movement suddenly became in the picture. Why do you think this changes?

MAA: Mahalla plays an important role, because of its history and its number of workers. In addition all people in Mahalla depend on the factory. Therefore the effect of struggle in Mahalla is big for all people and there was a big struggle and people in Egypt followed this struggle. In Cairo, Alexandria, ..., many struggles followed.
BDS: Do you think journalists were more important than party activists in supporting the strike?

MAA: Yes.

BDS: What about the role of centers like Khalid Ali, Hisham Mubarak Center, Tadamon, … How did they help the movement?

MAA: There was a role by every center. But the role was different, depending on its agenda. Some centers wanted to finish the strike without any result. There was good help from centers which helped with legal assistance. […] Hisham Mubarak Law Center and the CTWS were two centers which played a good role in the struggle.

BDS: What centers played a bad role?

MAA: I prefer not to answer.

BDS: Do you think the campaign for a national minimum wage can be instrumental in uniting the workers movement behind one demand?

MAA: Yes, because it already happened about two days ago when we had a demonstration in front of the prime minister’s building. This demonstration had activists from various groups and also workers from different cities. There was also another demonstration with some workers and activists from centers in front of the court.

BDS: And who organizes these protests?

MAA: The Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights directed by Khalid Ali called the people and asked them to come.

BDS: Political parties are weak. Workers only move around economic and social demands. How can this be changed in the future?

[interuption]

MAA: The reason of the weakness of the parties is the government. In addition the parties have to change themselves. When the parties change themselves they will become stronger and when the parties are stronger they can lead the workers and then there can be a connection between workers and the parties.

BDS: […] Should Tagammu and the Nasserist party then better boycott the elections to gain the trust of the people that they are not dominated by the regime?

MAA: I agree but all the parties and political trends have to boycott.

BDS: Do you think this is the weakness of Al-Baradei? There are only few parties which boycott the elections. […]
MAA: Yes, because Al-Baradei failed to convince the other parties. He does not have a program on which all people agree. He takes some demands from this and that party and creates seven points. Through this he cannot convince the parties.

BDS: So he couldn’t convince the parties because his program was too restricted?

MAA: It was not a program, but just 7 points for the elections.

BDS: What about the support for Al-Baradei at the moment; is it big or small?

MAA: It is weak now. […] Maybe after the elections he will appear again.

BDS: Before the workers movement in Mahalla, there was the movement Kefaya. What do you think were the reasons for the downfall of this movement? And how strong is Kefaya today?

MAA: Kefaya started strong because there were a lot of activists participating in it. And because there was a lot of media support. The reason for its downfall was because it did not have a program; only the struggle against Mubarak and his son. It did not have a strategy for how stopping him and replace him. […] Only the media supported this movement. It does not have members in the cities.

GS: Another reason for the weakness is that parties don’t have money.

[interruption]

BDS: Can you tell me the background of the strike in the Samuli Textile Spinning factory.

MAA: The workers in Egypt live in difficult conditions, especially the workers in private companies. We have to work 12 hours in a shift. We don’t have a day off on Friday. We don’t have any syndicate or trade union in the factories. The labor law is worse than before. The factory owner has infinite power over the workers. He can do anything to the workers; fire them or change their role in the factory. The government supports the factory owners against the workers. During our strike the owner put a gun against my head while I was walking in the street. The strike was in 2001. It was the first strike in the private sector in Mahalla. There is no health care or health insurance for the factory. These are but a small part of our problems. […]

BDS: How did you organize the strike.

MAA: We organized it ourselves, without a union. If someone works twelve hours per day, how can he have an interest in politics, he doesn’t have time.

BDS: Can you tell me the story of the strike in detail?
MAA: There are three things which forced us into strike. The first is an illegal penalty for the workers when there is a fault in the production they have to pay for it. The second was about the water which was not good. The third was the way the owner treats the workers. The problems started when I had a problem with the manager and he wanted to fire me, but I knew the law and said that he couldn’t do it. The workers believe that the owner can fire them without reason. After this problem I sat down with the workers and spoke with them about their rights in the factory. After this meeting the workers agreed to delegate five workers to speak with the owner to solve their problems. When they went to the owner he refused them and dismissed them from the factory without hearing them. They had agreed before: if he acts like this we will make a strike. After he dismissed them all the workers made a strike. After that we agreed to stop the strike and the workers got all their demands except for one demand which the owner refused: that the five workers returned to work in the factory. The five workers went to court and they won and they got work in other factories. This factory will have another strike when the owner tries again to disrespect the rights of the workers. I taught them how to make a strike.

BDS: How did you know the law?

MAA: From the party and some centers.

AB: We have an institution in the party to train the leadership, but it stopped recently. […]

MAA: They arrested the five workers for one day. […]
| BDS: We would like to ask you about the role of art in politics. As a cartoonist you are well placed to comment on this, I think. |
| SAA: Have you seen the artwork in Tahrir Square? I did the major art in Tahrir. You know the cartoon of Mubarak, who is standing on the chair and sitting with the spiders? The blue, broken statue? I did artwork between 2004 and 2006 during the elections. I intended to publish it in a lot of newspapers in Egypt. It were only five cartoons, five pictures. They were the most famous pictures of Mubarak up until now, because no one was drawing him. I wanted to direct the courage of the people against Mubarak and destroy the image of his “divinity” in their consciousness. This campaign become stronger after Mubarak changed the constitution for the presidential elections, because these constitutional amendments showed that he isn’t a God and that there can be competition. In 2005 I imagined an end to the regime and an alternative society. |
| BDS: Were you inspired by Kefaya? |
| SAA: Yes, but I started before Kefaya. I started to publish my cartoons in al-Arabi and al-Karama newspapers. But these newspapers were put under pressure by powerful NDP members such as Sabri Sherif and Zaki Asmi. [...] |
| BDS: Why did you choose these newspapers, because they were the most free? |
| SAA: Yes, they were the only newspapers who wanted to publish my cartoons. You know the story begins in 2001, after the invasion of Iraq. I made a drawing in Tahrir about the Americans and our government. Within the five years after the Iraq invasion and my drawings, there was a lot of pressure on the government. I wanted to direct attention to Mubarak, but I was moving around his image, for example by drawing a throne, an empty throne in 2003. And then I put Mubarak on the throne in 2004. After the presidential elections, I was disappointed for two years. |
| BDS: Wasn’t the whole movement, like Kefaya, down at this point? |
| SAA: Yes. [...] Changing the constitutional articles like 77 and 75 in Kefaya’s opinion was a fake move from the government. The government made a show of it, adding a lot of elements and spent a lot of money on it to turn it into a propaganda. After the presidential elections, when Mubarak succeeded, the movement suffered a setback |
and was convinced that Gamal Mubarak would become the new president. In 2007 I drew two new cartoons, one is a famous portrait in Tahrir. In the background of Mubarak was written: Leave. The second one was for Mubarak wearing a police uniform, with the logos of the army and a gun and it referred to the thugs. This was the most effective one and I was afraid of its influence. Hamdeen Sabahi was the only one publishing it, but even then he said we will treat you like a madman and only publish it on our opinion section. So only al-Karama published it, I asked a lot of newspapers but only al-Karama dared to publish it.

In 2007 I started a publication house to publish novels and books. During the presidential elections I intended to publish my new novel, in the Dar al-Hilal publishing. But in this time [...] Magdi Da’a was planning on conducting the first cultural interview with the president and he was the chief editor of the publishing house so he put a lot of pressure on me. His assistant told him: if you want to make this interview, call Salah and ask him to draw the cover of the interview as a gift to the president. Then Magdi Da’a was able to delay the publication of my novel. I agreed to make the cover. I drew half of the face of Mubarak against a blue background without any retouches [...] Within a month I had my novel published, so I made a new cover for Mubarak.

BDS: Was it a political novel?

SAA: No, but stopping the publication of the novel would put pressure on my own company. After I published my novel, I created a new cover with my own opinion and imagination. And al-Karama refused to publish it this time, even though they ran a full edition on Mubarak’s presidency. They had a lot of problems with the government. I tried to publish it in Afaaq Ishtirakeyya, the ECP, and they refused. [...] I could only publish a new cartoon, not the cover. [...] One of the cartoons was killed “the last days”. In those days, Habib al-Adli called Tantawi, the Minister of Defence, to do something about this embarrassing issue for the army. Tantawi told al-Adli that they would make a committee to study it and that they would treat me kindly, because they didn’t want to have any international reaction. [...] This is the story of the cartoons before the revolution. In Muhammad Taeyma’s book: The Hereditary Republic of Mubarak’s Family, I published the cartoon. [...] Within the revolution... it wasn’t a revolution at the start. My wedding was in 22 January. And I agreed to protest on 25 January. We were not intending to sleep in Tahrir, I imagined it would only be one day of protests as usual. So I delayed my wedding to 26 January. So on 25 January we went to the protests. No one of my guests could make it to my wedding on the 26th, because half of them was protesting and the other half was escaping the police. [laughs] I had planned my honeymoon as a couple of weeks in Luxor, Aswan and Hurghada, but I only took five days and came back. During these days we hadn’t have any connections with others, no phone, no internet. In this time I came back to Cairo and agreed with my friends, artists, to create cartoons and distribute them in the square, in order to go against the state media campaign.

BDS: So there was a cooperation among artists?
SAA: No, not between artists, but between my friends. [...] I chose the middle of the Square to paint my cartoons, but the government of the Square...

HH: ... he says “government of the square”...

SAA: ... chooses to put all my cartoons at the entrances of the Square. To make it visible for everyone coming to the Square. After taking Qasr al-Ayni streets and occupying the streets around the parliament and the Shura Council, we put one of the cartoons on the doors of the parliament. Within the days in which Mubarak insisted in staying in the presidential chair we said everyone: today he’ll leave, or tomorrow. So I made a cartoon of Mubarak sitting in his chair and a lot of spiders climbing on it. As a symbol to say: stay in your palace, don’t move, and we will come to you. I made a lot of copies, small and big ones. Mubarak didn’t resign in the first days. After the speech of Mubarak when he said I will remain in the chair, a lot of people carried small copies of the cartoon in a demonstration to Mubarak’s palace. The biggest one is four to three meters, they carried it on a car and people wrote on it: don’t leave, we’re coming to you.

You asked about cooperation between artists? All the artists agreed to make an exhibition of the photos and cartoons, they put them in the entrances of the Square for everyone to see. That’s it.

BDS: What do you think is the role of an activist-artist towards the people? Is it to express the feelings which are already present in the people? Or to introduce new ideas to them?

SAA: I think it is both of them. The artists in Egypt did the two. The Egyptian artists had a big problem in connecting with the people. Most Egyptians didn’t see any art or knew any artists and for many Egyptians it was the first time to see artists in action, and for artists it was the first time to have a mass feedback and audience through the Square. That’s why I’m saying the two of them...

HH: ... When the audience saw the cartoons and pictures in the Square the people said: yes that is what we wanted to say, he describes our feelings and our demands. A cartoon like: “don’t leave we are coming” was like a message for all the people: “this is the time to do this, this is a good idea.” When they saw this...

SAA: ... it made them move.

BDS: Do you think that the role you played, as an artist, was at that point bigger than any political activist? Perhaps because you gave a clear symbol.

SAA: I think so. The Egyptians had this emotion about Mubarak as the father of the nation for thirty years. This was so effective. After seeing these cartoons and these symbols, they are tearing down the idols inside themselves. The art and the cartoon is the most important shortcut for the speeches, and articles and newspapers and opinions, all of this, the artist in the Square should not write a comment on the cartoons, it is only an
expression, but this step was so important: to see the feedback between me and the audience.

BDS: Since 2006 there has also been a strong labor movement in Egypt. Have you drawn anything with regard to this movement?

SAA: No, for me this was not important. Mubarak was using these elements to complicate the struggle: we have labor struggles, so let’s create a labor committee, putting the committee against the workers. And this became the struggle, between the committee and the workers. I don’t want to bring up worker issues in the Square, for me the struggle is foremost against Mubarak. This is the struggle. The soil is not able to grow everything. First we should change the soil, then we can plant anything we want.

BDS: Now Mubarak has gone, is there more freedom to publish your cartoons? Are there new problems?

SAA: Of course. The atmosphere is open to do anything right now. The Egyptian society tasted the fire, I think we should leave them for one year and not direct them to any directions, to see and discuss and learn from their mistakes and so on. All the discussions right now are on the constitutional reforms. I don’t want to direct the people to any direction now, because it may be false. Like what happened, in my opinion, in the constitution referendum: they were directed in the false direction. I do not want to influence the people. The political consciousness of the people is growing up these days, we shouldn’t interfere with this, we should stand by the people and support them in developing all these new attitudes, then we can involve them. The new project for me is the presidential and parliamentary elections, we will investigate all the candidates, what are they doing, what is their history, and so on, to make a new cartoon project. Within nine months all parties and movements will announce their programs and ideologies and then you will have a fair opportunity to judged and evaluate them all. Even if the people took a wrong decision they can fix it in a short period.

BDS: However, we see that other groups are now trying to conquer the consciousness of the people, for example the Salafis. Do you not think it necessary to have something like a counterweight to balance this?

SAA: I am participating in the media, in Facebook, to raise the consciousness, even my stepfather was making a new party, the Democratic Party, and he invited everyone to join the party. I am out of the big battle of the ex-regime, and I was well prepared for this battle, and now I’m going to a new battle with the future regime, but before that I have to know all the details. I am like all the Egyptians: I know everything of what has happened, but I don’t know the future.

BDS: There is an open and free atmosphere at the moment. Do you think this will change in the near future?
SAA: I am afraid so. But the people can’t go back to the past. They have broken all the idols of the dictatorship, they won’t accept any new dictatorship. […] With this environment and attitude of the people, there won’t be a new dictatorship. The army in this atmosphere cannot take control over everything, the Ikhwan used religious propaganda to direct the people, but the people won’t take these wrong ideas again and won’t obey any new dictatorship, military or religious.
BDS: First I would like to ask you about the origins of the Tagammu party

HAR: From 1953 to 1975 Egypt was ruled by a one-party system: the Arab Socialist Union. From the beginning of the seventies when Sadat came to power, he came after Nasser in 1970, many groups asked to change to a multi-party system en mainly the left in Egypt. At the same time the syndicates and the trade-unions began to be independent from the ASU and in 1975 the ex-communists – they had resolved their party in 1964 – established the ECP on 1 May 1975. After some months another group formed a new communist party, called the Egyptian Workers’ Communist Party. At last Sadat acknowledges that there is pressure from inside Egypt for a kind of multi-party system. There was pressure from outside, from the US, for a kind of democracy in Egypt, so he decided to divide the Socialist Arab Union in three sides: a left, right, and middle platform. There were 40 groups, but Sadat decided on three organisations: left, right, middle and we started to form the left, Tagammu, as it was called. In November, Sadat decided that these three groups became parties. [laughs] He declared in the Assembly that "ok you are three parties". [laughs] That was the beginning.

From the beginning we decided that we had to be independent and that all decisions had to be taken by us. There were many problems with Sadat because of that, mainly when the drivers of buses in Cairo decided to strike and our party encouraged them and defended their rights. Then Sadat was against our party and there were many, many problems and many of our leaders went to prison and the police attacked our HQ and so on. This was mainly after the demonstrations of January 1977, the so-called bread riots. That was the beginning.

BDS: And what are your relations, now and through history, with other leftist parties like the ECP and the Nasserist parties?

HAR: When we started our party the communist group was divided about this kind of political party, some were against it and so they attacked us and this kind of multi-party system. The ECP broadly accepted this experiment and some of their leaders and members decided to be individual members in our party and other were not against us, but decided to have their own party and to continue their role in the political life and, anyhow, from the beginning up until now we have had good relations with the ECP. Of course, the ECP is illegal, but anyhow, it is working in Egypt and has a role, even if it is not very important.

BDS: What are the ideological differences between Tagammu and the communist party?
HAR: There is no difference in the end goal. I cannot find real differences in this era, except for the fact that they use another terminology in criticising the situation, they say: "Mubarak is the agent of the US", [laughs] we don't use this slogan, but we criticise his relation with the US. That is the main difference I can see.

BDS: So during the strikes last year, both the Tagammu and the communist party worked within the movement?

HAR: Our members in the Mahalla factory and members of the communist party worked with each other, of course, but it was not organized by the leadership in Cairo, because these strikes were not political strikes.

BDS: According to you, what was the impact of the fall of the Soviet Union on Tagammu and the Egyptian Left in general.

HAR: From the beginning of Tagammu we ensured that we were not a branch of the communist movement. We were completely independent from the Soviet Union; we defended its role in the Middle East against imperialism, Zionism and so on, and we had good relations with them, but we were not taking their side. But Sadat and the regime insisted that we were agents of the Soviet Union. Some people in the country think that we are communists, but that we don't declare it, and that we are agents of the USSR, and so on. So when the USSR collapsed, some thought that we were collapsing also. At the same time the propaganda in Egypt after the fall of the Soviet Union declared that communism and socialism came to an end. For sure, these two reasons, for some time, were against our role in Egypt. But we think we have overcome this problem and that the people, because the problems of life, politically, economically and socially, are ready to accept what we ask for economically, socially and politically.

BDS: In order to have a real change within Egyptian society, do you think it is necessary to fight first for a true parliamentary democracy or do you think change will come from a kind of social revolution?

HAR: Our experience in Egypt... and in most of the world... dictates that the first step to any change is democracy; you can have power by any way and make very important changes politically and socially. But all of that can collapse and come to an end unless this change is fulfilled by the people and democracy, so that it will be very difficult to retreat. So we declare clearly that the first step must be real parliamentary democracy and our program is to have real economic and social reform. And our direction is socialism; if we have a majority we will not establish socialism immediately, but we want a long period until we reach socialism.

BDS: How do you define socialism?
HAR: We don’t have a model. We think we have a general trend and we invent our socialism with the people through the progress of our program and so on. We don’t have a ready form of socialism.

BDS: I don’t know if you follow the current political changes in Latin-America, with the Bolivarian revolution; do you think their experiences can be relevant for Egypt, or not?

HAR: It is impossible to have the same past as Latin America, but we study it and it gives us hope.

BDS: From which group do you think political change will come; the workers, the people in general...?

HAR: We think that in Egypt the middle class plays a very important role. But, unless we have very organised workers and peasants, the middle class can go to another direction. So we try to make an impression and have a role inside the workers, peasants and the middle class.

BDS: And what are your experiences with the Muslim Brotherhood? Are there different factions within the Muslim Brothers? Is there only one dominant vision within the Muslim Brothers, or are there more left-wing groups or individuals, with whom you can talk and work?

HAR: We worked with the Muslim Brothers in the eighties and the nineties, mainly from 1995 until 2000. For five years we had a committee to organize political work, with members from Tagammu, Wafd, Nasserists, Labor Party, the ECP and the Muslim Brothers. We worked with each others for five years. But, in the last years, we found that it is impossible to work with the Muslim Brothers. We worked mainly in the political field, searching for democracy. In the last program of the Muslim Brothers they declared for the first time clearly that they want to have a religious state and... they also are against women and Copts. So they are not democratic. In the last years we haven’t worked with the Muslim Brothers, of course, we think that our enemy mainly is the ruling party and this regime. But, we don’t think that the Muslim Brothers is an alternative; economically they are the same, politically they are maybe more to be feared. But anyhow, sometimes they invite us to discussions on problems and we go and declare our positions.

BDS: So there are still contacts.

HAR: Yes, we have some contacts with SOME of their leaders, mainly Muhammad Habib and Essam al-Erian.

BDS: Al-Erian, would you place him more at the left within the Muslim Brothers?

HAR: Yes, you can find ways to discuss with them [...]

45
BDS: You spoke of socialism as distant project, but what is your concrete, short-term political, economical and social program?

HAR: We call it: independent national development. It has some aspects of socialism, but anyhow, you are building in a capitalist world.

BDS: So there is not a concrete program of renationalising the economy, for example?

HAR: No, no, no. In the coming years it is impossible to ask for nationalisation, but we are against the selling of our public sector and if some companies are sold it has to be to Egyptians, not to foreigners. It is a middle program between socialism and capitalism. [laughs]

BDS: Do you not fear that with this "middle road" between socialism and capitalism, you will strengthen the position of the Egyptian ruling classes, instead of...

HAR: ... no, no. They are selling Egypt as a whole to foreigners and a very narrow sector of the capitalist groups are reaping the benefits. No, no, there is a very big difference between our program and their program.

BDS: I also heard that there will be a conference of the party? And elections? Does your party have a long standing tradition of democracy? How does democracy within your party function?

HAR: I think we are the only party in Egypt which has internal democracy and that's the reason that the last 35 years we didn't suffer any split. All the Egyptian parties had this problem because they neglected democracy. That is the reason why we insist to have a congress every five, six years, where we elect the leadership, and we have a rule that no one can be elected to the same position more than twice. The former chief of the party, in the last conference of 2003 did not put himself forward as a candidate because he already was president twice. [...] We need democracy in Egypt because, we always have this "one man", "one leader" and this tradition must be changed.
ABD AL-RAZIK Husayn  
12-4-2009

Respondent: Husayn Abd al-Razik, Tagammu leader (HAR)  
Date: 12 April 2009  
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ  
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)  
Source: Notes only

BDS: Between now and last year, when we first had an interview, much has happened, both on a national and international scale. Internationally, there is the economic crisis. How does the crisis influence the Egyptian economy, society in general and the politics of Tagammu?

HAR: Egypt is already in crisis for 10 years, due to the politics of the ruling party, which causes many social and economic problems. The development of the Egyptian economy is decreasing, while the poverty is increasing. Some 50 percent of all Egyptians live below the poverty line. Unemployment is on the rise. The current crisis only adds to these problems, it doesn't cause them. When the crisis hit, the government only supported the capitalists, not the ordinary Egyptian workers, farmers, etc. As Tagammu we issued a program how to deal with the crisis, and we published it in al-Ahali and discussed it at a round table conference with other opposition groups.

BDS: The word "socialism" has become fashionable again. In our interview last year, you said nationalizations were not an immediate demand of socialists at that time, while today even some capitalists are calling for nationalizations. How do you think the crisis will push the development of socialist ideology forward?

HAR: We have to rethink socialism, but with socialism we don't mean the same project as that of the USSR. There is no one true pattern for socialism. This won't be the end of capitalism, as it has always been successful in adapting and developing itself time after time. There will be far-reaching changes, however. There will be a new kind of capitalism and we must offer a new vision of socialism.

BDS: What about the political process in Latin-America? Do these experiments resemble more of an alternative road to socialism for Egypt?

HAR: It is a kind of alternative, yes, but still we have to find our own way. The priority for socialism in Egypt today is the fight for real democracy.

BDS: Which brings us to changes on the national level. During the last years Egypt has seen the rise of multiple social movements. There were protests of workers, peasants, villagers, students, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, etc.

HAR: These protests are important, but they can't change the political situation in Egypt. They have no political orientation. They only address immediate social and economic
problems. Every group fends for itself, and the government attempts to buy off the different sections and layers. And when movements have a political character, they lack organisation. So there are political organisations without a social base, and social movements without a political organisation. No political party has a real connection to the common people.

BDS: Many activists of the younger Tagammu generation seem discontent with the leadership, they criticise it for being too close to the regime and they think the party should focus less on unproductive elections and more on the work within the mass movements. What’s your opinion on these issues?

HAR: I agree with their criticism about the work within the masses. For years, Tagammu took no initiatives whatsoever, people only sat at the HQ and in the newspaper, discussing, not going outside, on the streets. The last two, three years, however, we have been more active, organising demonstrations, conferences and sit-ins in the streets.

About being close to the regime I don’t agree. They especially target Rifaat Said. But he has been a member for over 12 years now of the Shura council. This is not a new element. It’s not a real problem.

BDS: But isn’t it a fact that Tagammu has now a lot to lose, you have gained a license, party headquarters, a paper, limited room to manoeuvre, etc?

HAR: This is all necessary; a new way of thinking is required. Tagammu must again become a house of all the left and democratic groups.
ABD AL-RAZIK Husayn
25-10-2010

Respondent: Husayn Abd al-Razik, Leader in Tagammu
Date: 25 October 2010
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: This is the third time we meet for an interview. Now there are elections for the parliament and Tagammu will participate in the elections. What do you think are the chances for Tagammu in this elections?

HAR: In Egypt we don’t have free elections at all. Even before the revolution after the constitution of 1923 the first election was in 1924 and it was a free election. And the last election before the revolution in 1950 was a free election. And in these two elections the Wafd gained. Before 1924-1950 all elections were a farce. After the revolution we had one-party system, so the regime did not need to interfere, but from 1976 when we began a kind of controlled multi-party system all the elections were not free. Mainly because of the interference of the police and the government. And in the last years because of the role of money and so on. So we don’t have free elections. But the interference may be wide or narrow [...] In the coming election, especially after the election of the Shura, we expect that the government will interfere strongly because there is a political decision that the Muslim Brotherhood must lose this election. Of course not completely, but anyhow they will not be allowed to be the greatest opposition power in the parliament.

BDS: Why?

HAR: From maybe more than one year ago in a meeting Mubarak said to the Minister of Interior, Adli. No Muslim Brothers in the coming election. So it is a decision. Some analysts say the government needs al-Wafd and Tagammu in the parliament to have some kind of opposition. But when you begin this way of interference in the elections, you can’t manage it completely as you want. The candidates of the ruling party will fight against any interference against themselves, because everyone wants… So, I don’t think that Tagammu will have a great number of members [in parliament] but anyhow we have some candidates who have the opportunity to succeed, maybe not more than twelve or ten candidates. And I think if they succeed on their own, the government will not interfere against them. Al-Wafd may have more than Tagammu. I cannot expect any numbers, even for us or for them. But anyhow I expect that we will have a group inside the parliament.

BDS: And do you think this election matters? Do you think something can be changed through elections in Egypt? What role can Tagammu play?

HAR: All democratic parties and groups in Egypt want to have a great change politically and socially but according to these circumstances I think it is difficult to expect real
change through the coming parliament, because the ruling party will have the great majority, more than 2/3 of the members. [...] But our hope is that we have a kind of opposition which would combat the real problems in the country, because Muslim Brothers have a great number of members in the parliament but they don’t face the real problem of the people. Most of their questions and discussions are about films, something in the television, this kind of Islamic... their Islam if you can say. But if we have some members we can use the assembly to declare our opposition in the real problems of the Egyptian people. Really we can also stop new laws or change laws but if we have a mass maneuvering outside the parliament pushing in this direction. But on our own it is impossible.

BDS: So it has to be a combination of some people in parliament and street politics?

HAR: Exactly.

BDS: During the last years there have been a lot of movements in the street: Kefaya...

HAR: How can we cross the distance between our party and other parties and this mass movement in the streets. Because it is not politically, it is mainly economically and socially and so on.

BDS: How do you think Tagammu can make this connection?

HAR: I hope so, we are trying. I think the leadership of our party is hesitating between going to the street or continuing this policy inside the institutions ruled by the government. Anyhow, we succeeded last Saturday, few of us went to the street, but I think it is a small step, we shall analyze it and try to develop it and we’ll have another street movement and so on.

BDS: I’d also want to ask about Tagammu and the relation with the Ikhwan. In the eighties there was a big discussion in Tagammu about the nature of political Islam. One trend said that political Islam was a kind of fascism. Another trend said that political Islam was bourgeois. A third trend saw political Islam as an ally for the left. In the nineties this came to a conclusion: the Muslim Brotherhood are dangerous and a kind of fascist movement. Do you think this is still true today? They have changed because of their participation in Kefaya and so on. Or do you think they remain the same?

HAR: The problem with the Muslim Brotherhood come from many things. First their history and their ideological and political difference between them and the Egyptian left. Second we had a long experiment working with each other from 1995 until 2000: Tagammu, Wafd, al-Ahrar, Labor Party, Nasserist Party, Muslim Brothers and Communist Party. We worked with each other for five years. But in 2000 Tagammu mainly and Nasserists and the Wafd decided to stop this cooperation because the Muslim Brothers and Labor Party... we had some agreements how to work, when they have a bad relation with the government they work with us, when they think there is a calm between them and the government they don’t look to us at all. The third point is that we always say that we have a common purpose, which is
democracy. All of this parties and the Muslim Brothers and the communists want to change the politics, the constitution and the laws to have a kind of real democracy. But in the last years, especially from 2004 when Mahdi Akif declared his program, all of the parties were rethinking the Muslim Brotherhood: do they really want democracy or not. Their program means that they are defending not a secular state but an Islamic state. In the same time their program is against Copts and women to be elected as president or prime minister and so on. That is the third reason why the relation between political parties and the Muslim Brothers, even al-Wafd, not only Tagammu, differs from the past. But at the same time we declare that we are ready to work with Muslim Brotherhood about problems of which we are in the same position. As an example, when the American aggression against Iraq happened, we and the Muslim Brotherhood were with each other in the meeting in the Cairo Stadium. If we have some issues like this we can work with each other.

BDS: Do you think if the Muslim Brotherhood will be refused in the parliament that they will become closer to the left and the opposition, or that they will become even less democratic because they don’t think the parliament is an option to change the country.

HAR: I think Muslim Brotherhood are trying for a long time to have a good relation with political parties, even Tagammu and of course al-Wafd. But the problem is that Tagammu and al-Wafd are not ready for this relation. Whatever will come in the next election, the majority of Muslim Brotherhood think that their future depends upon how they become closer to political civil parties and to convince the majority of political life and the majority of the people that they are a democratic organization and they have no relation with their past and so on. They will continue this path, I don’t think they have a rift inside.

BDS: So you don’t think the new leadership will be more conservative than the last?

HAR: If we look at them from where they come we said that they are conservative, but when you see what they are doing in the last year, I don’t think that this analysis is correct.

BDS: Another question: about the relation between Tagammu and the Communist Party. From the seventies on there have been many members of the Communist Party in Tagammu. How did this relation develop and what’s the role of the Communist Party in Tagammu at the moment.

HAR: I think this relation must be written. There are many details not published. The Communist Party played a very important role in building Tagammu. Rifaat Said and myself and many of the leadership were members of the Communist Party. And the Communist Party decided that we, many of us, play a role in building this party and at that time the comrade Nabil al-Hilali who was the most important leader of the CP, had a meeting with Khaled Mohi Eddin and he gave them the names of the members of the CP who will leave their posts in the CP and become members in Tagammu, including of course Rifaat Said and others and many of the members of the CP from
Alexandria to Aswan became members of Tagammu. After few years the CP had the decision that those who took leadership positions in Tagammu must leave their leadership posts in the CP and they couldn’t attend any meeting of the CP and they don’t have any decision how to work in Tagammu. And there were documents about this and they give a copy of this to Khaled. I think after this long time…

BDS: When was this decision to go to Tagammu and…

HAR: I think at the beginning of the eighties. I don’t remember the exact date, but it was at the beginning of the eighties. In 1979 and 1980 there were two cases offered to the court against the leadership of the CP, the majority were members of Tagammu, so they decided you must leave and it happened from this time. Even some of the members of the CP whom became leaders in Tagammu, not all of them of course, few of them took a position against the relation with the CP. Anyhow, the relation between Tagammu and the CP is very clear now. The membership of Tagammu differs from the membership of the CP. The CP has also become weaker, because many cadres left to Tagammu and even if they have members in the CP the majority of them work in Tagammu. Also CP has lost many of its leadership, now there is a new generation. I don’t think that we have a problem. Anyhow, there is a dying connection between the CP and us. So some of the leaders of Tagammu and mainly Salah Adli from the CP.

BDS: What can you tell me about the conflicts in Tagammu, not only about the role of the CP, but also about the problem of generations. Some young activists want to become leaders themselves and they think that they don’t get a chance to become part of the leadership. Do you think this is a problem in Tagammu; this conflict of generations?

HAR: Leadership in Tagammu comes by election. In the last conference which was held two years ago, a group of the membership of the party which called themselves Group for Change declared that they want a new leadership, that they don’t want the same leadership which ruled the party from the beginning until now and most of them are coming from the CP and so on. But they failed in the election, they succeeded only that I lost my post as a general secretary and one of them, Said Abd al-Ad became the general secretary. The majority of the leadership comes from many generations, but they accused them that they are members of the CP. It is not true for the majority of the leadership. And I think nowadays we are trying to cross this problem. I myself have two meetings with some leaders of this trend and I think they are rethinking about what they said two years ago and that they ready to cooperate for the coming conference which might be within two years to become one group, not two groups as it was in the last. I hope, I am not sure of course.

BDS: Do you think if Tagammu becomes more active in the street…

HAR: Then we can cross any interior problem. I think that’s the main problem. We must leave our offices and our places and go to the people. […]
BDS: The situation has now radically changed since I was here last year. What role did Tagammu play in the revolution?

HAR: Before the revolution, neither Tagammu or the other political parties could imagine what would happen in 25 January. We thought that it would be the same as 6 April and 4 May and so on. Tagammu took the decision not to take part in the demonstration on 25 January but it allowed any member to take part in the protests. From the beginning, our youth organization, all of them, decided to take part and went to Tahrir Square and played a role in forming one of the alliances in Midan Tahrir. There were about three or four alliances, in one of them our youth organization took part and assisted them. Most of our members outside Cairo were the leaders of the demonstrations. From that day up until now our party, through its members and its youth organization are playing a role in this... what becomes a revolution as you say.

BDS: Do you think the regime is defeated in this revolution?

HAR: Not completely. If you have a revolution there is also a counterrevolution. The ruling party has fled from its ruling base, but they still have other strongholds, such as in Upper Egypt, 80 members of parliament formed a new party, the Hurreya party, Freedom party, which will participate in the elections. Of course, the police in general, mainly political police, plays a role in the counterrevolution, and so on. It is not finished.

BDS: What do you think are the next steps? What should happen next?

HAR: We have a referendum the next Saturday, and we think that the SCAF must change the roadmap, because the constitution has failed at the moment they took power, the constitution has come to an end. So we are against the referendum. Saturday there is a meeting of our Central Committee and we expect that the CC asks the people to boycott the referendum and demand an end to martial law and the many other laws against human rights, we have some of them since 1910, the beginning of another century, and also to have a new election law, and after that we can elect a committee for a new constitution, and after finishing the new constitution we elect the president and the parliament – even if it takes more than six months, that’s not a problem. If they don’t want to continue, the military I mean, it’s ok, we suggest with other groups and parties to have a three-headed presidential committee, two civilians and
one figure of the military, which continues until the election of the president and the parliament.

BDS: What do you think is the role of the military? Do they genuinely want democracy?

HAR: I think they really want to leave power in six months. All those who discuss with them have this feeling. But democracy... It depends on the political situation and the pressure of different groups and so on.

BDS: What do you think of the role of the Muslim Brothers during the revolution and now.

HAR: They were one of the groups which were organized during the revolution but they didn’t make the revolution. Now they are trying to say that they were the biggest group and played a special role... It is not true. They were a part and an important part of the revolution, but now they want to control the situation by one way or another, and I think the reaction to what they are saying is negative, because the youth and the people who were in Tahrir refuse that anyone says that they were leading the movement. But at the same time they are playing the game which we are against... to make this kind of bilateral committee... a kind of hollow thing. And also they try to make the youth revolution as a holy thing, which cannot be criticized... We are against this completely, we don’t want any other kind of dictatorship, be it from the army or the youth.

BDS: Do you think that, if we’ll have elections within half a year, the Muslim Brothers will emerge victorious because they are the strongest group?

HAR: I think that if we will have elections in the coming three or four months as they are saying... The Muslim Brothers and the members of the NDP, the two will have the majority. But if they accept what we ask: to postpone the elections at the end of this year or the beginning of the coming year, so at the same time new political parties are allowed to be created and developed and begin to work during six or seven months, and old parties like ours have the opportunity to connect freely with the people, I think that no group will have the majority in this parliament, even the Muslim Brotherhood or the NDP.

BDS: At this moment there are also a lot of social protests and strikes. Do you think these protests are a deepening of the revolution, a step further, or a danger to the process of democracy?

HAR: These protests are not against the revolution, or a danger. They will become dangerous if the ruling groups do not declare a plan for achieving these demands in one year, so we ask them to declare a clear plan about the minimum wage, how our money abroad will return, and so on.

BDS: The workers’ movement is now trying to organize itself against the state unions. There are a lot of independent unions, what does Tagammu think of these movements?
HAR: We support them completely. The state unions are traditionally controlled by the regime, the police and the capitalists, so we support the independent unions completely. We are in favor of a plural labor movement.

BDS: When we last spoke there was a conflict in Tagammu, a political discussion between the leadership and the youth. Do you think the revolution deepened this conflict? Or do you think the revolution presents an opportunity to bring these groups together?

HAR: When you look from the outside you may have the feeling that our situation is worse after the revolution than before, because there is a group inside the party pushing strongly against Rifaat al-Said and the ruling leadership. But when you go in-depth in the party the decision which will be taken at a certain day by the new conference in July – it was originally planned in March next year, but we decided to organize it in July after the revolution. Then will begin a new election in the governorates in April. This decision is accepted by a majority of the party. Of course we will have a new political orientation and a new leadership. Dr. Rifaat al-Said will not be the head of the party in the next conference because of the rules of the party.

BDS: There is also talk about a new leftist party, what do you think about this?

HAR: We prefer of course that most of the left comes inside the party, but if a new left party is formed, from our side, we hope to have good relations and hope to work with each others, and we don’t think that having one, or two or three parties is against the interests of Tagammu, each one will benefit from the other one. At the same time, when this meeting was held, ten days ago, many of the members... or those who attended the meeting of the left, decided after this meeting that they must become members in Tagammu and a representative of them came here and discussed if there was an opportunity if they came to Tagammu in playing a role in the new political declaration and so on. We hope after the meeting of our central committee that some of them will come to us. But we are not against any new left party.

BDS: Communists have always played a big role in Tagammu. Will they be in their own party now or will they remain in Tagammu?

HAR: Two weeks ago, some representatives of Tagammu met with three leaders of the ECP to discuss this problem, that some members of the ECP are at the same time members of Tagammu and its leadership. They informed us that in this year they want to declare the ECP and then these problems will come to an end. Those members of Tagammu who wish to become members of the official ECP must leave Tagammu, and those members who stay in Tagammu must leave the ECP. So we hope that after this year this problem will vanish.

BDS: Almost all political parties want democracy, in what does Tagammu differ from parties like al-Wafd or al-Ghad or al-Karama...?
HAR: We have two differences. Firstly, we not only ask for liberal democracy. We add to this... Of course we want bourgeois democracy which started in the West and so on, but we add to this principles about economic democracy and social democracy and so on. Secondly, our program for socialism and the transition period until we can reach socialism makes our party completely different from any other liberal or other party.

BDS: There has been a revolution in Tunisia. Now there is a revolutionary war in Libya. Do you think there is a new opportunity for Arab unity?

HAR: I think that the case for Arab unity during the last ten years differed... If we mean with Arab unity that we must have one state... it has completely vanished since ten or twenty years. But if we mean a bloc of Arab states, I think this change makes it closer. One problem for Arab states to work with each other was the rulers.
ABDUL Baho
10-5-2009

Respondent: Baho Abdul, leader in Tadamon (BA)
Date: 10 May 2009
Location: Cairo, café
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes only

BDS: Can you tell me about your personal and activist background?

BA: I am a graduate AUC student in English literature. I worked freelance as a translator and a teacher. My political activism started in 2001, when there were demonstrations and actions to support the second Intifada. In the past there was more student activity than now, as the AUC administration increased the work. In addition, students got arrested, and even though the AUC was with them, they don’t want this to happen. After the Intifada movement, I joined Kefaya, or rather the youth for change, the youth organization inside Kefaya. When activity in Kefaya went down, some of us made a critique of the movement: the urban middle-class intellectuals had failed to build relations with the workers. Then we started Tadamon, a solidarity movement which tries to bridge the gap between intellectuals and workers, political demands and real demands.

BDS: So Tadamon has come into existence from a political rather than a human rights perspective?

BA: Yes. We can’t compete with human rights organizations, they get a lot of funding, we get nothing. Our aims are different as well. We want to bring together the experiences of the different workers’ movements. We will be publishing a newspaper which will play this role. We have a group responsible for the blog, for the paper and for overall coordination. We changed our perspective. At first we tried to recruit activists, now we go to the workers.

BDS: Why a new organization and not joining an existing party?

BA: Well, what we do isn’t been properly done in other parties. In addition, we want to create an umbrella organization, with members from different parties. However, at the moment our members are either independent or from the RS.

BDS: What is your view on the Mahalla movement?

BA: Before 2006 no one in the political field was interested in the workers’ movement, because there did not seem to be a real movement. The strike in September 2006 changed all this. All parties went to the movement. In 2008 there was even a political strike, demanding a minimum wage of 1,200 EGP, which hampered the movement in my opinion. The strike was called by some forces in Kefaya, but the timing was bad.
In addition, they ignored the workers’ demands and did not listen to them. There were divisions in the movement and after the strike the movement went down.

BDS: There was a split in the movement?

BA: Yes, but it’s not a big deal, as the workers themselves don’t know this. It’s too soon for an independent union, because people don’t yet understand what it means, they don’t yet have the experience to run a union. Besides, the government will never accept it. They accept the tax collectors’ union because it isn’t a big threat to them. I am of course in favor of the organization of the workers, but a real union needs money and legitimacy before it can work.

BDS: How is the relation between natural/spontaneous workers’ leaders and political activists?

BA: We have much to learn from the natural leaders, especially their discourse and their ways to communicate. That’s why we’ll publish our newspaper in ‘ammiya.

BDS: What do you think of the other leftist parties?

BA: Tagammu? Their leadership is not at all leftist. Communist Party? They are still alive. The relation with them varies. We tried to work together several times, in the 28 March movement, in the mass campaign for change, which was an organization before Kefaya. Never successful. There are three reasons why left coalitions fail: (1) our position towards the MB and resistance in general, our view on anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle, and the whole issue about religion. The Muslim Brotherhood have indeed a double agenda and a double speech, but they are no more right than other right wing parties. (2) the question of reform or revolution, and trying to push change from below or above. (3) development, for example a group called Yisar Demokrati calls for privatizations!

BDS: What is the RS relation with the MB?

BA: I am myself a member of the RS. There was a temporary coalition during Kefaya, during only two months, with a few events, around some democratic demands. That’s all. But it’s true that the RS has a different opinion towards the MB, in the sense that we deal with them as we deal with every right-wing party. We are not like Tagammu: forging a “secularist” union. In theory, when in a demo with the Muslim Brothers, we don’t want each side to have their own slogans, but to have common slogans. In practice, when in a demo, the Brotherhood start shouting their slogans and we counter these with ours. They always break the rules. The original idea was to join the Ikhwan and criticize them. In practice, however, there has been little criticism.

The MP of the Ikhwan in Mahalla was very cooperative towards the workers, unlike the attitude of the Brotherhood in general. The Muslim Brothers never lead, but they help, for example with food distribution to strikers.
BDS: What about the relation between the SWP and the RS?

BA: We are completely separate organizations, but we value the members and leaders of the SWP for their ideas. Furthermore, we translate their texts and put them on our site.

BDS: How important is international solidarity for the workers' movement?

BA: Very important. Workers gain strength and hope, they are able to see the broader picture, see things in international class terms, etc. We tried to get international contacts, like in Cairo Conference.

BDS: What do you think of the process in Latin-America?

BA: I was just about telling about it myself! They had privatizations and repression, and now there's a revolutionary process. It gives hope and perhaps we can learn something from them.
BDS: I am not only a researcher, but also a member of the education trade-union in Belgium, and I bring a message of solidarity for the independent unions.

[interruption]

KAE: Thanks for the support and solidarity. Be sure that the Egyptian trade-union movement is developing and maturing. The independent trade-union already existed before Mubarak resigned. Maybe some three days before he resigned. In the last days of Mubarak the regime focused on trying to stop this movement. The Egyptian revolution was for us a safe place, a safe haven against the repression of the Mubarak regime and the state syndicate. It is not a secret that the Egyptian working class has been in a big revolution since Mubarak resigned. Maybe all the workers in Egypt in the whole society are striking and in revolution, organizing themselves outside the state syndicate, as an opponent for the state syndicate and organizations. This Egyptian labor revolution sometimes loses, sometimes wins. The ex-regime hopes that this movement will remain unorganized. Every time they saw a strike in a factory they stopped it. They were using all tools to terrorize and frighten us of the regime or give them little bits of their demands and benefits. For us as the tax syndicate, we were the first to organize strike committees in the whole country. When we had achieved all our demands, we doubled our wages from 340 EGP. We changed our leadership, the state union and the financial ministry, through the strike. We were allowed to have reforms. After we won our own demands, we came to another stage in our democratic struggle. We have organized a public and independent trade-union containing 30 committees in the whole country. It was by agreement of all strike committees in the whole country. A successful strike brings a successful independent trade-union. Using our own trade-unions and in the negotiations we succeeded in doubling our wages. And in July we’ll achieve another doubling of wages. We have already organized a new fund for the social care in the trade-union to give workers a pension. It costs 1.5 million. This makes the state syndicate fight us because it has never done something for the workers since it was created. It only did one thing: to take membership, to lose it and steal it. In the ex-regime days this state organization was fighting us and an opponent for us. They wanted to open an investigation with us because of the independent trade-union. They attacked our syndicate. They told the police that our trade-union was made to protest against the idea of Gamal Mubarak being the next president. They used my membership in Kefaya to prove this allegation.
KAE: We started to strike with 50,000. We involved men and women, Christians and Muslims. Nowadays we have 41,000 working in taxes. We have the biggest membership of a tax trade-union in the world. And we got a prize from the American trade-union. [...] 97% of tax workers are in our trade-union. All members in the state syndicate are forced to be members. We are not forcing the employees to be members. The leadership in the state syndicate are also leaders in the NDP. They enjoy all legal and illegal benefits. The membership before the revolution was fired and separated and transferred to other states and they suffered cuts from their salaries. All strikes were considered in the first line of the revolution. After Mubarak resigned, the ex-government of Ahmed Shafiq chooses the Minister of Labor from the state syndicate. We put pressure on the government to fire him. We made a new strike in front of the state syndicate and demanded his resignation because he was too close to the ex-regime. And we chose the new minister Ahmed Hasan al-Borai. We refused any other option. Even if he was chosen from the government to have this position. We are very happy with him and with the statement of the new minister: the freedom of making new trade-unions. This announcement will delete Egypt’s name from the blacklist of the ILO. And they are happy for us. The counterrevolution represented by the state syndicate and the remains of the NDP are putting pressure now to cancel this statement. They have collected a lot of benefit-seekers in front of the ministry of finance. The ministry of finance was an expert in the ILO, so he knows about the issues. He invited me for a lot of conferences and said that the ministry will support the independent trade-unions. Tomorrow the NDP will pay a lot of benefit-seekers to make a demonstration to cancel the announcement. The reply of the new independent trade-union will be the biggest labor strike in the world as an answer to what the NDP will do, and to show the world the difference between the counterrevolution and its forces and the workers and their independent trade-unions.

BDS: Before the revolution the best strategy of the workers was to create independent trade-unions. Do you think that now, with a situation changed by the revolution, it is possible to have democracy in the old state syndicate? Or is it still the best strategy to have independent trade-unions?

KAE: The state syndicate was made by the regime itself and cannot ever be transformed into a democratic trade-union. Most of its sections are related to the ex-regime, the whole leadership of the union are over 60 years. They have announced at the end of 2010 that they would delay the elections of the syndicate to renew their support for Mubarak or his son. They delayed elections for one year. After 25 January they had a big meeting to discuss how to strike against the revolution. Right now they are investigated with regard to the camel event. They tried to stop and attack strikes in the workers’ university and iron factories, but the workers stopped them and arrested them and jailed them inside the factories. This was during the revolution. After the revolution, right now, they are adopting a new strategy: supporting the workers and attacking the government and defending the minimum wage. They were waging fake struggles for workers’ rights. They are trying to create chaos in every case. This is their last chance. This organization was never elected. I have spent 25 years in this
organization. The elections were always fake. The real leadership was not allowed to be elected during the elections, only if you have relations with them you could become elected. […] During the last elections they defended the government and especially the president. […] A lot of people are now coming to us to ask for advice to make their own independent unions and to join our independent union. We haven’t enough time to answer all applications for new unions and jobs. The last one was the pilot trade-union. The teachers already have their union. Now we have organized the Egyptian union for tax workers, the pensioners, the health technicians, and the teachers. In this week we’ve had hundreds of applications. The only future for unions in Egypt is the independent union.

BDS: What political parties and movements were supporting the independent unions, before, during and after the revolution?

KAE: Before the revolution a lot of political activists and forces were supporting us, especially from the left. Not only financial support, but also solidarity. The international union members in the whole world supported us and this was important for us. We were accepted in the international service union when we asked for us. And as observers in the international union for workers. We believe that financial support destroyed a lot of good things in Egypt. The state syndicate is responsible for this, taking financial support from the state and from outside and from NGOs. It destroyed the state syndicate and transformed the leadership of the syndicates into just elements who take aid and support. And they stopped to ask about workers’ rights. And they were only occupied with how to spend the membership and aid money.

HH: Were it only the liberal NGOs which were responsible for this?

KAE: Yes. This aid aimed at destroying the workers’ movement in Egypt. The only aid we have taken is from Abdel Moneim Qarawiya. He is a famous worker in Egypt. Qarawiya donated a lot of money after his death to a committee which had to support the real workers’ movement. […]

BDS: Before the revolution there was a lot of support from the media for the strikes, but now a lot of media say that the strikes are a danger for stability etc…

KAE: Al-Masry al-Yawm supports more the state syndicate than the independent unions.

[interruption]

KAE: Al-Dostour before they fired the chief editor… al-Wafd is working with the old regime.

[interruption]

HH: Also in Tagammu journalists were fired because they supported the independent unions.
BDS: So today less newspapers are supporting the strikes? What’s the situation today?

KAE: Al-Dostour, al-Karama, al-Shorouk [...] 

BDS: What do you think is the role of the Ikhwan in the independent-union movement and the strikes? Before and after the revolution?

KAE: Nothing! No support. I only have Muslim Brother in a union of 50,000 members. Ikhwan owns a lot of factories which had strikes. That’s it. They are adopting capitalist policies. Even if they call it an Islamic economy it is capitalist. They are the sons of capitalism, even their trade and finance are capitalist. The government was using the Brothers to frighten the workers. [...] Maybe they are working in the professional syndicates. The ex-regime was using them in the state syndicate to frighten the workers of the independent unions: they will take over the independent unions.
SH: From 1975 I have been an active worker. So I have a lot of experience from past strikes, but at the same time every strike is different. Slowly we gain more experience, but strikes have different reasons. For example, in 1986 we had a strike in order to be paid on Fridays; in 1987 we had a strike for education money for our children; and in 2007 we had a strike for our unpaid bonuses.

BDS: Did you try to connect the struggle in Mahalla with other workers' movements?

AK: We tried to make an alliance but it failed. We try again to create coordination centers between different workers' movements.

SH: The other workers followed the workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla, and the demands of the Ghazl workers were for all Egyptian workers. If we succeeded it would have been beneficial for all Egyptian workers.

FL: Ghazl al-Mahalla taught a lot of different people how to strike, e.g. teachers, doctors. When our workers get their bonus and salary, all the workers benefit from it. We started to coordinate, e.g. In Kafr al-Dawwar. The coordination was not so good, however. They moved after us, not with us. We have to make additional efforts to make them move with us and to coordinate the struggle.

BDS: Can a political party play a role in this coordination?

All: No

FL: No party can play this role.

SH: Some worker activists are party members, but they strike as workers, not as political activists.

FL: We all agreed to struggle as workers, not activists.

AK: We are all activists, some of us are in parties, but we see our demands as labor demands, not political demands.

BDS: Isn't it difficult to separate labor and political demands in this regime?
AK: Yes, but sometimes we have to separate. If we give labor demands a political form we won’t succeed. In other circumstances, for example against our union, these demands become political.

FL: We have to say: this is a dictatorship. If we will say that we are supported by political parties, the government will attack us, both the workers and the parties.

BDS: Do you want to establish a new leadership in the trade-union or a new trade-union?

WAZ: We struggle for a new trade-union, because the union now is very weak and doesn’t support the workers. Our next step is to go to court to establish our independent union. Then we’ll create a general committee for the new union.

BDS: The tax collectors succeeded in establishing an independent union, do you think that’s an important example? And did the tax collectors win because of their strong action, or because they are not as dangerous for the government as, for example, the workers of Mahalla?

AK: Well they took our example, but they already succeeded. Kamal Abu al-Eita, their leader openly admits this. The government knows that if the workers of Mahalla succeed in setting up an independent union, the ETUF will collapse.

BDS: What about different factions in the workers' movement?

AK: The CTWS supported the workers many times and improved our cultural level.

FL: All the trends are represented in the factory, but we struggle as workers. But it’s true that in some strikes parties and activists intervene and support us. Inside the company we are all workers, outside the company we have our different political opinions. There are even NDP workers.

AB: He is an NDP worker himself.

BDS: Isn’t that schizophrenic? If the government makes a law against the Mahalla workers it will affect you inside the factory as well, for example.

FL: No, it’s useful, because then we can say, hey even NDP members are against this policy.

AK: The government wants to say that political activists are responsible for the strikes, that’s why the workers prefer to say that they are just workers. The company boss even said that the Muslim Brotherhood made the strike.
ADLY Salah and SHABEEN Essam
13-11-2010

Respondent: Salah Adly (SA) and Essam Shabeen (ES), leaders in the ECP
Date: 13 November 2010
Location: Cairo, Afqaq Ishtirakiyya
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Fatma al-Sayyid Muhammad (FSM)
Source: Notes and audio recording

[...]

BDS: As a leader of the ECP, can you give me a little background on the developments of the ECP since the seventies?

SA: The communist movement is a century old, but there were some ruptures. The first party was established in 1922, but it stopped in 1964, and then it was re-established in 1975. It continued to work. When the party was established in the seventies there was a huge communist and leftist movement, especially in the universities and the big factories, in Mahalla, in Nag Hammadi, in Helwan... At the beginning of the nineties there was a backward trend, for many reasons, which we cannot discuss now. There were some objective and personal problems. Since 2000 there was a political movement and after this a huge social movement since 2006, with the big strike of Mahalla, and after that smaller protests took place. In the beginning the communist party criticized the national question, and the capitalist and liberal policies of the regime, the World Bank and the IMF. In 1989 there was a conflict between the NDP which represents the power – the NDP is not a political party, but a representation of the regime – and Islamist forces. The ECP thought that there should be a third bloc, to make a balance, to unite the leftists and democrats and secularists. This force works towards a real change, from the roots, a democratic change, a national road which does not follow the US, and towards a minimum of social justice. Unfortunately the other forces either sided with the regime against the Muslim Brothers, because they see it as the main danger, or sided with the Brothers against al-watani. Within time, the realities of both sides were exposed and it became clear that the “third way” represents a real solution for the problems of Egypt. Between 1975 until now we had three conferences in the ECP: in 1981, 1989 and 1992. Three major conferences. We developed our aims and demands and our perspectives on the political situation in Egypt.

All opposition forces share the demand of democratic change and change the rules of the game. We are against participation in the elections, because they are fake and the government cannot guarantee any fairness in the elections. A boycott could strengthen the position of the opposition and weaken the legitimacy of the government, but unfortunately there are opposition parties, such as Tagammu, al-Wafd, the Nasserists and Ikhwan al-Muslimin, which participate in the elections,
even though they do not lead to a new destiny for Egypt. These elections are a general repetition for the presidential elections of 2011. We all know that the president has all the authority, and we know that, especially because we know now that it will be either Mubarak or his son, that the country will continue to be led into catastrophe upon catastrophe. This briefly highlights the politics of the ECP.

BDS: What is the relation between the ECP and Tagammu? Since the beginning of the communist party, there have been relations between the two parties. How have these relations developed in the eighties and up until today.

SA: In the seventies the ECP realized that the most powerful leftist party at that time was Tagammu. And of course there were a lot of communists then in Tagammu, Marxists, but they would not declare it, because the party law bans this kind of ideology, and we could not mention that some of the ECP’s members were in Tagammu. But it was widely known. The relation in the seventies and eighties between the ECP and Tagammu was good. We played a main role in developing the direction of Tagammu. At the beginning of the nineties there were some changes in the direction of Tagammu, they went to the right and became a moderate leftist party. Its political positions are very good on paper, but in practice it does not cross any of the red lines which the regime draws for it. It does not mobilize, either in the streets, or among workers or farmers or against the regime itself. Next year will be a decisive year for Tagammu’s future and the relation between Tagammu and the ECP.

BDS: Because of the presidential elections?

SA: Yes, after the parliamentary elections and during the presidential elections next year there will be red lights and the positions of all parties will become clear.

BDS: This change in Tagammu during the nineties, was it because of external events, such as the fall of the USSR? Or was it because of internal factors?

SA: Both. Because of external events and internal factors. At the end of the eighties a number of Marxists claimed that the direction of Tagammu, which opposed the government and took the side of the poor people and workers, led to a loss of support from the middle class and the industrial productive capitalists. They claimed that Tagammu had to diminish its class policies and to represent a more moderate policy, and to diminish its opposition towards the regime, so that it can use the media in a better way. But the results were devastating for Tagammu. Tagammu lost members in the parliament, members, and support in civil society.

BDS: You talked about the Muslim Brotherhood and that the communist party developed a “third way”. Can you tell me something about the discussions with the ECP about the nature of the Ikhwan: were they considered as fascists, part of the bourgeoisie, …

SA: The Islamist movement is broader than the Ikhwan, but they are the main force, especially after the other groups used violence and terrorism in their policies. There has been no terrorism since ten years now. The Muslim Brothers represent the major
Islamist power now. These minor groups are weak and the Salafists and the Sufists are huge but they are not politically active but serve the regime. Sadat, in implementing all his social and economic and political reforms, he depended on the Brotherhood and other Islamists who were supported by Saudi Arabia and the US. A lot of changes happened in the whole region. The Islamists were supported by the regime against the communists in the universities and in the work-places. There was a boost for the Muslim Brotherhood. We cannot say that they are a fascist group, but they strive towards a religious state, even if they state that they want a civil state. They talk about democracy, but in their practice and demands we see that they want an Islamic state – even if it will not be directly controlled by a religious authority, the basic frame of reference will be religion for economy, politics and the daily relations between people. They want to Islamize the country, the society. This will lead to a fascist country, but in themselves they are not a fascist group. They are active in the universities among the students, among the professional syndicates – it is logical that if they were strong in the universities in the seventies, they became strong in the syndicates during the eighties. They controlled most of the syndicates. At the same time they are present within the popular neighborhoods and in the informal communities, but they are weak, their presence is weak among the workers, among the poor farmers. They are strong in the villages, but not among the farmers themselves. They are strong in the media, because the Islamist speech controls the media for twenty years now, so they became more powerful as a result of their grip over culture. They don’t believe in science and rationalism, so this environment helps them to become stronger and influential. Politically they seek democracy in order to establish their goals, but they don’t strive for democracy because of its real meaning or value. For example, in their latest program they said that women and Copts cannot become president. They do not really believe in the freedom of speech, of thinking and believing. They are against any freedom in art and creativity and science. [...] They are supposed to be the biggest political opposition group, a force of opposition if they wanted to do, since 35 years. But they are still weak among farmers and workers, for example when the new land law was implemented, they took the side of the big landlords. And the privatizations, they are with privatizations and the new liberal policies. Most of their representatives are in the camp of the landlords and finance capital, they are reactionary. They are not different at their core from the social and economic policies of the government. They are only different on the surface, in appearance. They want democracy only to have fair elections and to gain power themselves.

BDS: So in order to achieve political change, the Brotherhood cannot be an ally for the Left. What are the other groups with which the Left can work together to achieve political change?

SA: In this context we agree with the Ikhwan in some points: we are against torture, the military courts, we all agree on free elections. So for these specific demands we regard them as a democratic force, but they use these alliances for their own benefit. We have to work with them in some respects, in order not to isolate ourselves, but in these alliances we have to stress the difference between democratic-secular forces and the Muslim Brothers. The main forces for secular democracy are the leftists, the
liberals and the Nasserists. The leftists groups have to unite, they are not united. Four years ago we established the Socialist Alliance. It consists of five organizations. This SA will be the core for future alliances for democratic and nationalist forces which represent the third option between Muslim Brothers and the regime.

BDS: Isn’t there a conflict between the project of democratic opposition on the one hand, and the class struggle on the other. For example, the problem of privatizations and the new land law, is a class issue, where you find the Wafd on one side and Tagammu and the ECP on the other, while in elections you find them together. Isn’t this a problem for the Left, these two-faced attitude?

SA: Yes, of course. Because it is not clear like the Latin American situation. There they do not have the problem of Israel. They do not have the problem of Islam. There is a clear contradiction between rightist classes and classes like farmers and workers. In our region there are huge problems. We place our hopes in the civil movement. It is a basic force upon which the Left has to rely for any change. The protest movements in Egypt are still spontaneous and developing, they are not politicized but they are the first steps on the path of change. And they are the first mission of the Left. The Left has not a presence in society unless it relies on these classes, these classes represent the force of change. Even if we don’t agree with the other parties in the social domain, the political problems take priority. [...] It is important to say that the struggle for democracy is different for leftists than for rightists. It does not mean only to freedom to elect and change the laws, but it means also the freedom of establishing trade-unions and organizations for workers, farmers, students, the poor... Without this there won’t be a real democracy. The shape of rule will change, but the same policies will be there.

BDS: What role did the ECP play during the recent political protests and the workers’ protest?

SA: In the political movement the Left and the ECP played an important role, from the first demonstrations which crossed the red lines, in 2001, the popular committee to support the Intifada, in its first demonstration the ECP and the Left were the main forces in the demonstration. In the political demonstrations before the last presidential elections, the Left also played a crucial role. There is a movement called “the Popular Campaign for Change”, which worked besides Kefaya, but the media did not pay attention to it. [...] In 2006, during the big protests in Mahalla, the Left played a big role in these demonstrations, not only the ECP, but all the leftist groups. But we cannot say that we have a big role in all movements. Most movements are spontaneous and the ECP and the other groups in the Left, for example the RS, try to organize these protests and unite the worker groups around the same demands, for example against privatizations. We made a kind of alliance which can act as a seed for a group for other workers with the same problems. The Left wants to develop these movements.
BDS: Since the last ten years a lot of youth have become political active, a whole new generation, but the parties have had difficulty in recruiting these youth as members. What do you think is the reason for this and how can this be changed?

SA: In the last ten years there were a lot of youth movements, stimulated by the Internet and the new media. But the weakness of political life and of the negative role of the political characters and the newspapers which are supposed to be a part of the opposition, give a bad image to the youth, because they exaggerate their capabilities. Their influence is not real. The youth movements are big, then weaken, then are divided, then disappear. These members are online, on the internet, they don’t go to the streets, there are only tens or hundreds in practice, and they exist only in the huge cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. They don’t exist in villages or smaller cities. It is an important movement, we should more interact with it and offer them a different discourse, so that we get the best elements from them to join the political movement.

BDS: During the protests of the seventies there was a lot of artistic expression of the protests; writers, singers, and so on. Have there been artistic expressions of the movements today?

SA: There are movements, but they are weak. In spite of what the government does, there are a number of youth who goes to cafés and present theater for fifty minutes and then the police comes and arrests them. So they have no opportunity to develop their art. There are bands of youth, for example Iskandrilya, it’s under the Zamalek bridge, it’s a famous cultural place. The tickets are not expensive, they present songs like those of Shaykh Imam, most of their fans are youth.

[...]

ES: This is important in Egypt: there is no sponsorship for independent art. [...] Political organizations try to support it, but it is difficult. For example we support the festival of short films. But in general these groups do not have financial support or an audience for their art. They are all youth during their university years, when they have more freedom and time. After university it is difficult for them to work in art, because they are forced due to the economic situation to search for jobs, but there are little opportunities for work, their salaries are very little so they have to work in two jobs and often they don’t have time for any political activity. Some political theories claim that people make revolutions when they are hungry, but in Egypt when people are hungry they are more afraid, so they don’t participate in demonstrations, and they are only searching for work, their livelihoods. The street theatre is a model for this. Artists get married, others look for jobs, there is no support or sponsorship for them. The cultural places don’t welcome them, because these places and even the parties only welcome the well-known artists, but they don’t encourage those artists who are still beginning. Here, in Afaaq, we welcome many theater artists, they are our friends and so on.

BDS: Do you think it is the task of a communist party to organize cultural events and support them?
ES: We are supposed to, but there are many obstacles. We try to help them as much as we can and organize them in many activities. We want them to feel that the represent something to the people. It is the message that they want to deliver to the people. But we are poor and cannot support them financially. But we are happy when we are able to support them in activities. We never refused them to participate in an activity, whether in Afqaq, or in another place, especially if there are groups working against privatizations, and we support all groups defending the farmers’ lands, housing for the poor, and so on. We want to secure for these artists a source of money so they can continue their ordinary life, for example so they can get married and have an ordinary life. […] The view of society towards the artist is that he’s doing nothing serious, that he’s doing nothing for his family. […] Culture is not welcome in our society, because it relates to the transformation of society. We feel sorrow and grief because we cannot offer the artists any bigger support than this.

BDS: Do you think for example the project of the UPY is positive? They have a relation with a silk factory where they can employ youth in this industry, to learn them a craft.

ES: Is it good in a political side, or with regard to their livelihood?

BDS: I mean: is it the task of the party to do these things?

ES: We don’t want artists to leave university and work in a textile factory, we want people to work close to their career and study. The main task of the political party is not to hand out jobs, but to raise the political consciousness of the people. It is optional, not mandatory. When people have the consciousness, they will demand for work and get a job.

BDS: I asked this question because in the history of socialism in the West, there have been a lot of socialist parties who owned bakeries, and other forms of cooperatives. This was positive, but it also entailed many dangers for the movement. Are cooperatives a good instrument for the communist movement in Egypt to both support people and raise their awareness?

ES: In the forties in the communist movement there were attempts to support the people for their weddings. This experiment is especially in the hands of the Brotherhood now, because they embed people’s livelihoods in their own capitalist structures. They use their networks to secure cheap labor, employees from the Muslim Brotherhood youth, who do not refuse this because they are members of the association. So there is a gigantic financial structure, an economic network, of mobile merchants, computer merchants, clothes shops, private hospitals, and the Salafists do the same thing.

BDS: But this was one of the reasons why they are strong now. Of course this was on a capitalist basis. But do you think that a socialist or communist movement can have this on a non-capitalist basis?
SA: I wish so! But we shouldn’t forget that the Brotherhood was able to build all this through a huge financial injection from Saudi Arabia in the seventies and eighties. So you’re not facing small groups but a huge system. This is not only politically distributed, but through civil associations. They are not at all interested in raising the political consciousness. Whatever happens if we do such a thing, the impact will be very limited.
AL-ASWANY Alaa
26-11-2011

Respondent: Alaa al-Aswany, writer and Kefaya activist (AA)
Date: 26 November 2010
Location: Cairo, AA’s dental practice
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: In your books, for example in the Yacoubian building, characters like Busayna have a clear mind of what is going wrong in Egypt and I wondered how much of your views are speaking through your characters?

AA: A novelist should not put his views in his characters otherwise you would destroy the art. The novelist should be able to induce real life in his characters. You cannot induce real life in your characters unless you leave them space to express themselves. For example in this novel, the old aristocrat is talking in his way or in his vision of the world of Egypt; the young Busayna is doing the same; the homosexual expresses his own vision; the Islamist as well. So I do not think it is possible to pick up my own opinion. If you want to pick up my own opinion you should read my articles where I put my opinion, but Busayna’s opinion is hers.

BDS: There have been a lot of movements the last ten years in Egypt. Against the war in Iraq, against the occupation of Palestine, the Kefaya movement, the workers movement. What role can writers play with regard to these movements? Should they stay at a distance from these movements or should they engage with them?

AA: I think a writer has a double vision, a double duty. A duty as a citizen and a duty as a writer. Many writers joined these movements, especially because these movements are not political parties. They are movements for a very determinate purpose, for democracy, justice and freedom. I cannot think of any writer who could stay away from the issue of freedom for example. [...] I believe writers should join these movements.

BDS: A writer risks a lot when joining these movements as there is censorship and pressure from the government. Have you experienced this yourself?

AA: Yes of course. I consider this as a great honor, that I am ignored by the dictatorship in TV channels or any award. I had many awards all over the world, some of them are the most prestigious literary awards in the world, but in Egypt they never celebrated what I published. The last celebration was through the syndicate of journalists which is an independent organization. It was a very big celebration because of the achievement award. The last award I had was from the university of Illinois in Chicago where I studied 20 years ago. Second I used to write [...] a weekly column in al-Shorouk newspaper, an independent newspaper, which appears every Tuesday and in al-Safir Lebanese newspaper and it was translated every week in English and most of my articles were published in international newspapers. The government
made lately severe pressure on the owner of the newspaper because of my articles and in the end he was really under pressure because they closed one of his factories and they gave him a lot of trouble as a businessman and they tried to lower to tone or change the subject. So I stopped writing now for six weeks. Despite the fact that I had offers almost from all other newspapers, all independent newspapers, very good offers, now I don’t have any offer because the security is putting pressure on the owners of the newspapers not to write.

BDS: Because of the elections?

AA: In Egypt we had since fifteen years a formula which did not allow freedom of speech, because as you know this is a democratic tool of change, which begins with expression. If you write an article in your country something should be done. In our case we have what I call the freedom of talk. You right whatever you want, I do whatever you want. Now they cannot tolerate it any more. So they closed the most important newspaper, al-Dostour, and they put pressure on the owners of TV channels not to allow or to ban some TV speakers and they put pressure on owners of newspapers just to ban some writers like myself. You have now a real problem to express your political opinion. I am trying to make a web site. […] It is almost impossible now to find a place in the newspapers to write my articles.

BDS: Looking back on 10 years of protest in Egypt, what do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the movement?

AA: I think the end result is very positive. Now millions of young people – and they are the most powerful element in the story. There are movements like 6 April and the al-Baradei movement, these people are the wonderful product of these protest movements. Before 10 years no one could imagine hundreds of thousands of young people going to the street and asking for democracy. I am in a different position as a famous writer. They put pressure on the newspaper but they did not attack me personally. As a young student you don’t have this privilege. These young students are beaten and arrested and tortured but they keep up. So I believe that this is very positive. Also the violence of the regime against the protestors is almost unprecedented. As we are talking now two people were killed, shot. To me I don’t see this story as a Coptic problem; it aids in its reasons, but what is significant is that the regime has reached the point where it finds itself obliged to shoot the people, the citizens. This is a very significant sign. That we are close to a real change in the country.

BDS: How do you know this change can be accomplished?

AA: I do not know, I do not think that anyone can claim to have a scenario. The most important thing is that you see that a political regime cannot really continue in this way.

BDS: There is a big gap between the movement for political democracy and the movement for better social conditions, for example the workers movement. However both need each other. How do you think this gap can be bridged?
AA: In a very normal way. If you read the history of revolutions you see that a revolution is not made because someone thought to make a revolution. It was always a social situation. The French revolution started because of a shortage of bread. The Russian Revolution had the same situation [...] These people did not have in their mind a revolution. So I think that I don’t see that protests for social events are away from a revolution. Even if these people don’t use the term democracy they are asking for justice and justice will never be achieved without democracy.

BDS: Do you think the current political parties can play a role in this change?

AA: We don’t have political parties. There are some secondary actors. Why? The Egyptian regime has a very unique way of making political opposition parties. The Guardian wrote a while ago that the Egyptian regime is the only regime which chooses its convenient opposition. To be a party you should be approved. They are infiltrated and under control and they play a very determinate role dictated by the government. The situation in Egypt, the opposition in the street is without political parties and political parties are without opposition.

BDS: The Muslim Brotherhood has always been in a double position, between opposition and the government. Now the government wants to push away the Muslim Brotherhood in favor of other political factors. Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood will play a positive or negative role in change?

AA: I think the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood has been very much exaggerated. The Muslim Brotherhood is an underground organization which has been existing since 1928. This regime has been using the Brothers to justify the lack of democracy. There was some pressure on the regime to make some democratic change so they made it possible to have 88 members in the parliament just to send the message to the Western governments: either you accept us or we’ll end with the Brothers in power. We were not lucky because after that HAMAS also won in Gaza which was another reference for Western diplomats and officials who were not really supporting the idea of democracy in Egypt. Both examples are not relevant. First, Muslim Brotherhood are too weak to take power. They are claiming that they have 1 million members, I believe that it is very exaggerated. We are living in a nation of 84 million persons. Practically speaking they cannot take power. Second, usually in the West people don’t see the difference between veiled women and the Muslim Brotherhood. They see all veiled women as potential voters for the Muslim Brotherhood. I must say that also the example of HAMAS is a bad reference. Egypt is not Gaza and we are not under Israeli occupation. I think Muslim Brotherhood could be integrated in a democratic procedure and this would be very good for everybody. I think also that if the Muslim Brotherhood did not exist, the regime would have invented them because it is very useful. If you imagine the scene without the Muslim Brotherhood the regime would have never been able to justify what it was doing.

BDS: You spoke about the influence of the West. In 2005 it created a small political space which Kefaya took advantage of. What do you think can be the role of the West?
Should the West stay away from Egyptian governments or should it play a more active role in supporting democracy?

AA: I don’t feel comfortable in using the West as a collective term. There is a difference between the West as a general opinion, the West as a group of freedom activists and intellectuals, and the West as governments, especially the right wing ones. It is not fair to put everything together. We should not forget that the protest against the war in Iraq was more in Western cities than in many Arab cities, but still many governments participated in the war. So I see a difference. When talking about the general opinion I see there is a problem in the Western opinion, a problem of information. As soon when people see what kind of problems people here are facing, they support us and fight for freedom and human rights. But the thinking of Western governments is more complicated. Beginning from the US to the EU you have this right wing vision of the idea that democracy cannot be applied for this people and that they are much better off with a wise dictator than having democracy. Also you have the entrance of multinational corporations transmitted through right wing governments. Given the history of the American foreign policy I do not expect anything positive from the Western official policies. They will do the same thing they are doing, supporting most Arab dictators and Israel without any condition, I think this is the way it is. I believe it is really very significant. My works have been translated into many languages, last five years I have presented my books in the West, and I see a very strong human sense of commitment in the West which is not very present here. In any place where people get the right information they are supporting you.

BDS: So solidarity from below.

AA: Yes, of course and it is even the position of myself. I am committed to humanity before anything else. I am a human being before being Arab, Muslim or anything else. When you are committed to humanity you have to support any struggle against violations of this humanity.

BDS: As a writer, how far can you go in this support and engagement with politics. In Egyptian history there is the example of Taha Hussein who eventually became a minister in the government. Do you think a writer has to take this responsibility for his people or do you think this is a step too far?

AA: No, I think... Taha Hussein was a professor of the university and a very great thinker. It was not something very far from what he was doing. But I do not believe that a novelist and an artist should be a minister. [...] I believe that you have a commitment for having a position but this is part of your duty as a writer, it is not very far of the nature of art. Because art is at its core a defense for human values. When you are defending human values in your writing or in the street it is the same. But being a politician and a minister is another story. So I believe it is a waste for any novelist to be even the president of the country. A real novelist is much more important than a president.
BDS: At the beginning of our interview we spoke about the distance between your opinion and what your characters say. You obviously have your own opinions, how do you try to write engaged novels?

AA: You can find it in my articles. In my novels I am like an actor, I prepare to get into character and at some point I am no more myself but the character. When I am writing an article, I express my own point; in fiction my own point of view should not be visible at all. I am an actor. I act like a gay, like an Islamist, like a woman whose heart was broken by a miserable love. Every time I act and I try to get out what is in the character. This is a very different technique than writing an article about my views.

BDS: Do you reach different audiences with your novels and with your articles?

AA: Well, I think it is in one sense... all literary readers read my articles and my last two books have been on the bestselling lists. But I am not quite sure that the opposite is true; people who are reading my articles are not interested in my literature. But if you are interested in literature you will read my articles.

BDS: Do you think your novel Chicago brought Egypt closer to the West in the minds of the Western audience?

AA: That was what was written by the Western critics, some of them in Europe and even in the US I had very good reviews... well I believe that literature is a human art. If you think of any good novel you have read you will never think of characters as Westerners or Muslims or Jews you will think of them as human beings. That is why I am very happy when I go for example to Norway. My audience in Norway for them Egypt is the pyramids and it is very far. And I discuss with my Norwegian readers the problems of the woman character in my novel Chicago and some Norwegian readers say that they understand her feelings. This is the real success of literature, to cross the barriers and to get to real human communication and to feel that we can be different in color and culture but that we are basically human beings.

BDS: Now with the elections approaching there have been different views on participating or boycotting the elections. What do you think is a good strategy to deal with these elections?

AA: Well I do not think we have elections. When you say elections you are using a term from political science and this has specific criteria which do not exists here. What we have is a miserable form of theater which is repeated over and over again for thirty years. The results of this so-called elections are in the desk of the generals and Interior Ministry. The decision is: no Muslim Brothers and they want to get the Wafd in. This is the last modification. The president of the Wafd is the one who closed al-dostour. He is a secondary actor because everyone was for the boycott and he pushed the party to play this miserable role. And he will keep this up because he will run for president so that Mr. Mubarak and his son will not be the only one. Mr. Badawi is working for the regime in fact. Egyptians do not go to the elections. Anytime the
Egyptians feel their vote count they go to the elections. For example here in Gezira Club in Zamalek, and I am a member of the shooting club as well and there were elections in the club and the participation was unbelievable. In the syndicate of journalists the participation in the last elections was unprecedented. Every time you feel you can make a change you go and vote, but if the story is like this why should I go? The government needs secondary actors. When you do not go you deprive the regime from this privilege.

BDS: Some political analysts claim that Egypt is not yet ready for democracy because there is little education and people would vote for the Muslim Brotherhood. Do you think there is any truth...

AA: The Egyptian prime minister said this and this shows that he is absolutely ignorant about the history of his own country. We had the first parliament in Africa and the first constitution in 1923. In 1926 there was a prime minister, Ibrahim, who made fair elections and he lost his post. After this you had the Wafd, the real Wafd, not the Saad Badawi Wafd, this was for thirty years the party supported by the poor people. The Wafd was called the party of the blue gallabeya, the sign of the farmers. These farmers every time there were free elections they voted for the Wafd against the landowners. We have this history and who is saying this, I am sorry to say he does not know anything about Egypt.

BDS: Do you think everything went wrong with the coup of Nasser?

AA: I do not think it was a coup, rather a coup supported by a real revolution. Nasser was a great leader and he made very positive things for Egypt. I cannot feel it myself because I am coming from the upper-middle class in Egypt; I was educated in French schools, my parents and grandparents could always afford to give me the best education, but many Egyptian had for the first time the opportunity to enjoy a good education, healthcare, food, because of Nasser’s revolution. So I don’t think it’s fair to forget this. But also we shouldn’t forget that the current dictatorship and regime is based on Nasser. Everything: the security state, the control system, the elections... everything is based on this regime. The irony is that he established a dictatorship while he didn’t need it. Nasser was supported to the extent that in any free elections he would have easily gained a majority. That was not the case with the presidents who came after him. He was the one who built the dictatorship machine. And the problem with this machine is that everyone can use it. Everything is ready for the dictatorship, the security, the torture. If you are in the driving seat you just push the button and the regime will keep on running.
Respondent: Khalid al-Balshy, chief editor of al-Badil (KB)
Date: 8 April 2009
Location: Al-Badil Offices
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes only

BDS: What are the difficulties independent newspapers and journalists face in Egypt?

KB: The government forbids us to cover some news, e.g. a campaign against the Ministry of Finance, recently. As there is no law to organise the news, ministries are not obliged to communicate. In Egypt there is a big problem of democracy, which requires a political solution.

BDS: What is the role of the press in this struggle for democracy?

KB: The press in Egypt plays a big role, because the political parties are weak. Newspapers function as NGOs and parties. For example, in Kefaya and the movement of Mahalla, we had a clear role. Before Kefaya in 2005, there was much anger in Egyptian society, but it remained unexpressed. After Kefaya, this anger is articulated through the independent media. The media play an important role in sharing the experiences of the movement on a national level. Now people who want to protest call us for information. However, as the problem in Egypt is a political problem, it has to have a political solution, and in the end the press can’t take the lead in this.

BDS: How will the international crisis influence Egyptian society?

KB: The crisis will have a big effect in Egypt, as there were already huge economic problems. 64 percent of the Egyptians live below the poverty line. Egypt depends on revenues from the Suez Canal, tourism and building companies. An estimated four million people will lose their jobs in the future. These four million jobless will come back to their towns and take on informal and precarious jobs. So it is not whether there will be protests and resistance, but how this will express itself. If they are not organised as a movement, it will take on an individual character and they will be seen as criminals. The crisis of al-Badil is a direct result of the crisis in Egypt in general.

BDS: If Mubarak dies now, all of the sudden, what do you think will happen?

KB: Nothing special, really. Everything is already prepared for Mubarak’s death. Another one of the regime will take his place in coordination with the army.

BDS: How can international solidarity help to carry the Egyptian struggle for democracy forward?
KB: Every democratic struggle needs every solidarity it can get. For example, in 2005 movements in other countries protested against the detainment of protesters which helped release them. Solidarity movements abroad resulted in realisation of workers’ demands as well. E.g. the health situation of workers in an asbestos company. Of course, this kind of solidarity has to come from grassroots movements, not from the governments in the US and Europe, which have a double discourse with regard to democracy.
AL-BALSHY Khalid
6-10-2010

Respondent:  Khalid al-Balshy, chief editor of al-Badil (KB)
Date:  6 October 2010
Location:  Cairo, Khalid al-Balshy’s home
Interviewer:  Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source:  Notes and audio recording

BDS:  Is there a future for al-Badil?

KB:  I am trying to get al-Badil back on the internet.

BDS:  Will there ever be a printed version again?

KB:  I don’t think so.

BDS:  What was the main problem for al-Badil? The lack of money?

KB:  Money yes, also the owner doesn’t want to publish the newspaper any more.

BDS:  Because of financial or political reasons?

KB:  They talk about money but I think the reasons are political. They are afraid of the government which put pressure on the advertisers.

BDS:  What do you think about the upcoming elections in November?

KB:  The government will do whatever it wants.

BDS:  What do you think is the best newspaper in Egypt today?

KB:  Al-Masry al-Yawm. The English version is still on the way.

BDS:  I’ve heard there are some problems now with al-Dostour as well?

KB:  Yes, the new owner is the leader of the Wafd and the government uses the Wafd to cleanse the paper from opposition journalists. A lot of journalists from al-Badil went to al-Dostour.

BDS:  What is your opinion of the upcoming parliamentary elections?

KB:  It will be settled with a kind of deal. I think the government will now choose for the Wafd, not the Muslim Brothers. It’s almost arranged. They wanted to “burn” the Muslim Brothers before, because now they have this new deal before the presidential elections. Now it’s safer to have al-Wafd as an opposition party. And then it will look as if there is a democracy before the presidential elections.
BDS: I’ve heard that there was a lot of discussion within the opposition to boycott the elections or not?

KB: Basically only the Ghad party and the Gabha party boycott the elections; the other parties will participate. Of course it is not effective to participate in elections. They will not be fair. Because the families and in some other places the tribes decide everything. Furthermore, the opposition is very weak. If they do not participate they lose an opportunity to voice their opinions. A boycott only works if the opposition is strong enough to have an impact. Now, participation is a chance for communication with the people and for disclosing the intimidation and manipulation during the elections. Only fifteen percent of the voters actually go to vote. If we’d boycott the elections than perhaps only fourteen percent would go to vote. Only the political activists, some 200 people, would boycott the elections. These people have a stronger voice through participation than through a boycott of the election.

The largest movement was in 2005-2006 with Kefaya, protesting the manipulation of the elections. In 2006 there was the movement of judges who wanted to shed light on the manipulations. Therefore participation in the elections now, despite all the manipulation and intimidation is important to shed light on and uncover all the manipulations in the coming presidential elections. If we were absent, the government would control everything and no voice would be heard.

BDS: What is your opinion of the presidential elections next year?

KB: The presidential elections will be a game. Until last week there was no clear picture. Mubarak almost declared that he would stand as a candidate. Almost. He did not declare it clearly. So it would be like a competition between him and some. If he participates, but it seems now that he will. Until recently the government was confused about the health condition of the president. Nobody cares if this uncertainty affected the economy or the pound. The living conditions are very hard, but they only care about their own benefit, not the people’s.

[interruption]

KB: So Mubarak’s decision to participate was postponed because of his health and the fight between different factions in the regime. Some are supporters of Gamal, some object to his candidacy. Among these there is no faction which will be good for the country.

BDS: What do you think is the role of progressive journalists in the struggle for change and democracy?

KB: In Egypt there is no press freedom, only “blabla” freedom, the freedom to chatter. So a journalist cannot be anything but a political activist. First we had the experience with al-Dostour from 2005-2006 and then al-Badil but both have been confiscated. To be a real journalist you have to be a political activist at the same time. This means that if progressive journalists had any power it would be just as part of a political
movement and the trend of this movement would reflect on the journalists. During the previous months the government sent out warnings against journalists. They arrested and released Amr Al-Dhib and Hassan Ibrahim Haisam. Amr Al-Dhib is from hizb al-Watani; he is part of the government. This is a show to terrify other journalists and to recruit new people for the next period. Amr al-Dhib is now a hero, despite he is one of the system. This is what is happening in the media scene. Only personal initiatives like websites with low costs reflect the opposition and real journalism. The government isn’t afraid of talking, but of facts. Al-Badil tried to uncover all the hard facts and that is why it was shut down. Now I’m looking for a group of people with the same ideas in order to create a website. Between the end of al-Badil and now I have gathered a lot of facts, but not a single media outlet wanted to publish it. So it is better to have individual, local initiatives to say whatever we want to say.
BDS: How did al-Badil develop since the last time we met, seeing that there were some serious problems with the newspaper?

KB: We established the website since last year and we were involved in the revolution. Our site was ranked number 5,000, now it’s 250. [...] 

BDS: Is there a plan to have a paper version of al-Badil?

KB: We suggested to republish the paper, but the owners refused. After this we wanted to collect money to republish the paper, but we think it is best to work now through the website and eventually create a new paper with a new name.

[interruption]

KB: The main issue now is to make the website a stable workplace. I am paying myself a lot of the cost of the website out of my own pocket. But I love this way of working and the internet as a means of doing journalism.

BDS: What is the role of journalists in the revolution? It was difficult to report anything because of the media blackout.

KB: A lot of journalists were involved from the first day, 25 January. But there are two types of media: the one who supported the revolution and the one who resisted, the counterrevolutionary media. A lot of independent journalists were split. Dostour and al-Badil supported the revolution since the first day. The government blocked our sites. The others were just watching what happened. The foreign media played a big role in the revolution especially when we didn’t have internet in Egypt, such as al-Jazeera. It played a role like Facebook in the revolution. The newspapers and websites like al-Dostour and al-Badil played a big and good role, not only with news coverage, but they were helping to organize the revolution: where can we meet etc. The national newspapers changed their voice because of the pressure from the streets.

BDS: So journalists in the revolution were not only playing a role as journalists, but also as activists. Can you tell me something more like this?

KB: Al-Badil and al-Dostour journalists already did this before the revolution. Especially al-Badil invited people to the revolt of 25 January, publishing the call for protest. We
wrote a lot of articles to invite people to attend the protests, because of this the government blocked us. After this the journalists could not cover the revolution. Within 24 hours after blocking our websites all our journalists were in the square, were we encountered other journalists of the opposition. The government transformed journalists into activists during the revolution by arresting journalists. On the first day in the square five journalists of al-Badil were arrested. So we were not only Egyptian citizens supporting the revolution, but also journalists supporting our colleagues, demanding their release. The government also transformed journalists into activists by attacking newspaper buildings. We reported these attacks on satellite media such as al-Arabiyya and when the government saw this they stopped the attacks. The ex-regime looked at al-Badil as an enemy, they chased all journalists of al-Badil and arrested a lot of us, also the military police. For example they arrested Omar Said, one of us, and Ashraf. Ashraf was present in 28 of January, the Friday of Anger. The Central State Security arrested him and when he declared that he was a journalist working for al-Badil, the officers answered him that he was theirs now and that they would never release them. […] A lot of journalists were participating in the revolution, even those of al-Ahram – which is a national newspaper – made a strike, occupying the chief editor's office and changing the policy of the newspaper after the Friday of Anger.

BDS: Was it possible for newspapers to publish something during the revolutionary days?

KB: It started with the camel battle. A lot of national newspapers changed their policy, especially al-Ahram and al-Akhbar. Al-Ahram made an edition called the youth of Tahrir. After this battle we won against the police and the NDP. A lot of journalists and newspapers changed their policy especially after this battle. This transformation was overturned when Omar Suleiman came to power, but it changed back to the people's view in a few days.

BDS: Before the revolution there were already movements: democratic and labor movements. How did the revolution change these movements which already exist since the last ten years?

KB: It didn't change these movements, it was a result of these movements. Before 2005 we had small movements and strikes, but after 2005 we broke the limit of going to the streets with big numbers. Strikes had 5,000 or 10,000 in the streets. In the last years Egypt had more than 12,000 strikes and within these strikes the voice of workers, villagers and all the people were raised. At the start of 2010 we were preparing ourselves for a new protest wave, but looking back we now realize the reasons of its failure: we didn't have a leadership. In 2010 we looked for a leader, we thought perhaps al-Baradei, but he didn't have the capacities to take the leadership. In 2010 the anger feeling rose, especially against Gamal Mubarak and the project of making him the next president. [...] A lot of people were asking where is the connection between the workers' leaders and their demands and the political leadership in order to collect these movements and start a new wave of struggle. But no one could imagine that it would happen like what happened in 2 January. […]
After the Tunisian revolution a lot of Egyptians discovered that the toll of revolution is not as heavy as they imagined. It isn’t such a big struggle. In Tunisia there were only 80 victims, so let us see how many people in Egypt should be killed to remove Mubarak. After the Tunisian revolution, a lot of Egyptians and my friends were asking ourselves if we could do the same or not. I wrote an article that the image of the Egyptian regime as being powerful is untrue, that it is in reality weak. I did not really believe in the article, but I played my role in encouraging people. What happens now in the whole Middle East is copying the Tunisian experience. [...] After the Tunisian revolution, especially on 24 January, I wrote something strange, and even members of al-Badil were asking: “what the hell are you doing now?!” I wrote on the day when Ben Ali resigned on the website: “The First One”. With the start of the Tunisian revolution I put the Tunisian flag on the logo of al-Badil. When Ben Ali resigned and the protests in Egypt started, I switched to the Egyptian flag, symbolizing the shift of the revolution to Egypt. A lot of my friends were asking: “what the hell are you doing, you are kidding”. On 24 January, we contacted political forces with the question: “will you attend the revolution or not?” And I wrote an article on 24 January to invite the people to the protests of 25 January because in my opinion it was the beginning of the end. And I said: “if you don’t participate in these events you will be outside of Egyptian history which will be written tomorrow”. My friends in al-Badil asked me after writing this article: “where are you going right now?” I answered: “we are at the regime’s end”. We all saw that something big would happen, but we did not expect it like this. In 28 January I realized something was happening in Egypt, especially with the changes in the whole of Egypt, even Tagammu changed and was attending the revolution. [laughs] After the speech of Mubarak, his feedback of what was happening in the streets, I realized that big changes were on their way. The Tunisian slogan “the people wants the fall of the dictatorship, revolution until victory” was published on al-Badil. On 27 January I made a map of the protest areas, and said that the 28th would be the day of the youth. [...] 

BDS: What about the situation today? The democratic movement is faced with problems, for example the referendum. On the other side we have the workers’ movement which are trying to make independent trade-unions. What are you thinking about the future of these movements? 

KB: It will not be a revolution if things stay as they are now. What happened in Egypt in the revolution was that we did not have a leadership so there could not be negotiations with the regime to end the protests, which made the people stay in the square until Mubarak resigned. But this was also a bad thing, because we do not have a leadership to direct the movement and put forward a program for the future of Egypt. We didn’t call on the army to assume control over Egypt. We were forced to deal with this organization in Egypt because it was the only stable organization within the ex-regime. [...] Not because they are heroes. Now we are forced into negotiations with the army for the benefit of the people, which is ironical because the majority of the leadership of the army is part of the ex-regime. A revolution where we should negotiate our rights is in my opinion not a revolution at all. What happened in Egypt until now is only replacing the existing dictatorship with the rule
of the army. Egypt now has the option of either carrying the struggle through to its end, or just reforming this and that. This is the struggle in my opinion. [...] We will not return to the situation before 25 January. Maybe we will have some kind of broad democracy which controls the powers of the police and fights corruption. But the army itself will be anxious to keep some figures and groups from the ex-regime in power with whom they have a lot of relations and share a lot of interests. We have two struggles in the future. The first is the struggle about the role of the army. We need a parliament which controls the presidency and a presidency with less powers than Mubarak had in the former regime. We have an army which tries to continue its power and control over parliament. [...] It’s better for the army to go back to the barracks now because now it will be attacked by the journalists and political opposition. For example now it’s torturing the students. The situation in Egypt will otherwise be a strong army with a weak democracy. Step for step we can reinforce the democratic institutions.

BDS: So it’s only a question of time to complete the revolution?

KB: We have had a lot of reforms, but we still haven’t made a successful revolution. The successful revolution forced the political powers to work with the people. [...] The army is creating fear in the form of the Ikhwan and the Salafis, pushing the people to ask for more security and stability. In my opinion the majority is understanding what happens in Egypt, but they are weak and frustrated. They lost a lot of energy in the revolution. When they regain energy we can continue the revolution. [...] When the people notice a return to the days of the ex-regime, they will explode again. As long as they see reforms they will remain demobilized. I hope that the army has a stupid desire to return to the ex-regime days, because then there will be a new revolution, even bigger than the last one and maybe we’ll have socialism in Egypt then. People tried to do this in Suez. [...] When the people organized the Friday of Revenge, they accused ten more officers of corruption. Now they are trying to protect ex-regime figures. When the regime continues to protect them, it will unleash the anger of the people. The same happened in Alexandria. In my personal opinion, however, the army is too smart to enrage the people. The army is anxious to return to the revolutionary atmosphere, because then it will be dissolved and lose its power as a powerful organization which controls the parliament, like in Turkey. [...] If the army is stupid we will transform the whole country and even get rid of the corrupt leaders in the army. I know that the army has a strong organization which studies and analyzes the situation in Egypt now. [...] It has a strong organization called the National Defence Council, which was already ruling Egypt. [...] It tries to achieve its interests with the lowest cost. [...] There were lots of clashes within the army itself, especially among the petty officers and soldiers. The army is a reflection of society. There is also corruption from the military leaders. The petty officers and soldiers will be the referees in the next battle. Even in the army there were two strikes during the revolutionary days. In two weak sections: the army’s music corps. The leadership of the military music corps was fired because of the strike and some soldiers to. It shows that there is also anger in the army. [...]
BDS: You spoke about the army’s leadership in society. You said the weakness of the revolutionary movement is its leadership. How can this change? What is the role of political parties and movements? Journalists?

KB: We don’t have any real parties. Of course there is Ikhwan. Other movements are developing in small struggles. But they can’t even win small struggles. [...] The old parties of the Mubarak era will never be effective. Perhaps individual figures. The parties are trying to create a role for themselves but they are weakened by internal fighting. [...] They should reorient themselves to their original social base, for example the workers. Then they will become strong again. But at this moment we are forced to lean on those social forces which instigated the 25 January Revolution. The ex-regime forced the newspapers to be parties. If we found four or five new newspapers which defend and represent social movements and other issues maybe we will have a new change in Egypt. [...] There is a new power: the independent trade-unions. They are the most able forces to rule in the next struggle. They are now busy defending the interests of their own particular members. If they realized they are powerful, maybe they will be like the Tunisian workers’ union. Maybe they will be the leadership which overcomes the Islamists and the ex-regime figures. In my opinion the traditional left will be losing the struggle, it is too busy with infighting, starting the new era splitting, cutting itself in new parties. [...] In fact the traditional left is making a strange bet. If it wants to exist, it has to be the most radical force. [...] A section in the left is defending al-Baradei, without having any doubts in him. Al-Baradei is thinking about an end to the free education system in Egypt, he is a liberal, we should not defend him. [...] If you ask me about the left forces of the future, it are the youth, the independent trade-unions, and maybe the workers’ party of Kamal Khalil. I fear that this party will again split in five parties. The liberals will gather around their old leadership, maybe they will create new parties, but with the same form. A lot of them will make alliances with the Ikhwan. This is the overall view. The exit from this situation is in the hands of the youth and the workers’ organization. Maybe there is something created like the Tunisian trade-union. This would be a real victory for the social-democratic movement in Egypt.
AL-DHIB Ali
3-4-2009

Respondent: Ali Al-Dhib, leader in Tagammu (AD)
Date: 3 April 2009
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes only

BDS: Tell me about your political activities and your position in the party.

AD: I was one of the founders of Tagammu in 1976, and at the moment I am a member of the council of advisors, which is a non-elected organ which advises the leadership. Before Tagammu, I was in the youth organisation of the Nasserist student movement.

BDS: What do you think are the main problems Egypt faces today?

AD: There are economic and political problems. The current financial crisis has an effect on the tourist business, on the revenues from the Egyptian workers in the Gulf states, on the price of oil and gas. It leads to a reduction in the production as well, which causes employment. The high inflation is reducing the standard of living. Before anything else, we should emphasize food production in Egypt. Then there's the problem of democracy. By making popular protest illegal and impossible, the government prevents common people from joining political movements. Elections keep the NDP and the regime in power. The 24 parties which exist in Egypt are impotent. As a party, you must acquire approval from the regime, through court, which can take ten years. And if you gain approval the regime is controlling your actions and restricting your freedoms.

BDS: As a socialist party, what is the goal of Tagammu for Egyptian society?

AD: The goal of Tagammu is socialism. The current crisis shows that capitalism fails; even the capitalists themselves now take recourse to nationalizations. This means that we should go back to the original role of a socialist party. The last five years have seen a wave of strikes, demonstrations, new NGOs, which confirms this.

BDS: What is the role of the labour movement in the fight against the regime and for socialism?

AD: The constant pressure on wages forces the working class to protest, however, they are not yet organised as a political force. Moreover, the movement is very fragmented, both in organisation as the level of political consciousness. Mahalla is the vanguard of the movement. Tagammu should join these movements and always be at the heart of the strikes.
BDS: Other left groups have accused Tagammu of having a double discourse; on the hand they support the independent workers' movement, on the other hand they have a representation within the official unions.

AD: We have both a presence within the movement and the official union, because they are both important spaces for political action.

BDS: Regarding a change in the regime, will it come through elections or a revolutionary mass movement?

AD: Officially and legally, Tagammu hopes the regime will give enough democratic room for reform. Personally, I am not sure of this strategy and don't think there will be this kind of opportunity.

BDS: Do you think this change can come through pressure of the international community?

AD: No, I don't think so. Other countries should not force Egypt on the road to democracy. We have to do it ourselves.
AL-DIN HASSAN Bahey  
20-2-2008

| Respondent: | Bahey al-Din Hassan, director of the CIHRS (BDH) |
| Date:       | 20 February 2008                               |
| Location:   | Cairo, CIHRS offices                           |
| Interviewer:| Brecht De Smet (BDS)                           |
| Source:     | Notes and audio recording                      |

BDS: Can you tell me about the origins of the institute?

BDH: The Cairo Institute was established in 1993 and started its activities in 1994. Its mandate is for the Arab region, not only Egypt. [...] Its mandate is mainly to address the problem of Arab culture with the universal principles of human rights, which means that we don’t focus only on the performance of the Arab governments, but also on the contribution, positive or negative, of the dominant culture to this issue.

BDS: If I remember correctly, in the nineties there was a conference on the "Islamic declaration of human rights" in Cairo?

BDH: You mean the Cairo Declaration about Islam and human rights, something like this? It was organized by the Islamic Congress which is a governmental organisation. Its members are the governments of the Islamic countries.

BDS: What is your evaluation of this declaration, in contrast to the "standard" declaration of human rights?

BDH: As far as I remember it - we discussed this declaration at that time and we debated it in one of our publications – it is totally contradictory to the universal principles of human rights. I think it damaged the image of Islam; it introduced Islam in a way which contradicts or does not accommodate the universal principles of human rights.

BDS: In the West it is often said that Islam is inherently contradictory to the principle of human rights, for example regarding the position of women in Islamic societies.

BDH: Islam doesn't explain itself. It is explained and interpreted by humans, by people. Everyone interprets it according to his or her cultural, social, political background, and even its interpretation differs from region to region. For instance, in Islamic Asian countries it is easy to elect a woman to be president; this happened in Pakistan with Benazir Bhutto, in Bangladesh; even in a very poor country like Bangladesh we see that leaders of opposition parties are women. In the Arab region this is almost impossible. It is so although you have in Asian and Arabic countries the same holy texts, there is no difference; the same speeches of the prophet Muhammad... but you have here this interpretation and there another interpretation. [...] The situation in Asia is also the result of elections, not of someone appointing women to be in a position; which means that the people [...] don't have any problem with it. In a country like Egypt, which is one of the most modern countries in the Arab region, up
until now the main Islamic group, the Muslim Brothers, debated "can we allow Muslim women to be the president?" and they said "no, this is against the Qur’an and Shari’ah" and so on, despite that it is the same Qur’an. So it is the interpretation of people and sometimes some political forces play a great role in this regard.

BDS: What is the relation between individual interpretations of Islam and, for example, the historic tradition of the four Islamic schools of law? How does one reconcile the principle of Shari’a with a secular civil code?

BDH: Shari’a is a human product, [...] it is not holy, and it is made several centuries ago, but people nowadays don’t live in such a reality; it has changed and there are now very basic problems which did not exist in this time. So therefore even what you can take from Shari’a and what you believe is up to the people and it differs from country to country. Even in the same region; compare Egypt to Saudi Arabia... Both of them say that they follow the Shari’a; the Shari’a is in the Egyptian constitution and it is the main source of legislation. But there is no similarity at all between the two communities. The situation of women here and there... in a country like Saudi Arabia the women are not even allowed to drive a car, while in Egypt women can run in elections -whatever their opportunity to win [laughs]; that is another question. This is because there are different interpretations, even within the same region and even within the same country. The Muslim Brothers say something, while other Islamists have other interpretations, sometimes more moderate, sometimes more conservative, like the militant groups. Even inside the Islamic institutions, within the senior clergy, you sometimes find opinions which cannot be reconciled. So it depends on the interpretation.

BDS: As your organisation studies the relation between Arab culture and human rights, do you think the declaration of human rights is too much orientated towards individual (Western) rights and neglects the rights of groups, communities and nations?

BDH: I don’t think so. I don’t think that this is a problem. The problem within the Arab region is mainly a political one, and the impact of this political factor on the culture. On the other hand there is the religious culture. Which is the dominant factor: the religious culture or the political game? That is the main question.

BDS: What are the relations of the institute with other human rights organisations, like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, ...

BDH: We have a very collaborative relationship with several international groups. [...] 

BDS: What are the main differences between these groups, regarding ideology, approach...

BDH: I don’t think that there is a difference in ideology. There is always a difference in priorities. Sometimes we have the same priorities in a given moment, sometimes we don’t. There are differences in the degree of sensitivity towards cultural and political issues. Because those who are working from abroad don’t appreciate as well the context, or maybe they have no authority to interact or accommodate and to
consider... differences in the discourse. Differences, of course, between well developed societies and underdeveloped societies. The level of institutionalization of the organisations here and there. But you find the same differences in a way within organisations within the same region or within the same country. Because, for instance, when we adopt such a cultural approach, and they a monitoring approach, we have such a mandate, they have another mandate. There are organizations mainly of volunteers, there are others which are mainly professional. So even in the same country you can find a lot of differences, but this doesn't mean that those organizations, when they are inside the same country or outside, don't cooperate. In fact we have good cooperative relationships with the international ones, the local ones or the Arab ones in other Arab countries.

BDS: What are the main resources and methods your organisation uses when defending human rights: legal action, political lobbying, research...

BDH: We are not a monitoring organisations, like HRW or Amnesty and so on. Our main tool is research, study... addressing the ideas, even behind such daily patterns of violations; how do we understand this, why does it happen, why is there no limit, and so on. What are the strategies behind such kind of developments? What should be the strategy of NGOs as a response to that? And so on.

BDS: Do you think there has been improvement in the human rights records of Egypt, the last ten, fifteen years?

BDH: No it is deteriorating. Seriously deteriorating the last two years.

BDS: And what are the main reasons for this deterioration?

BDH: The main reason is that the regime feels weaker. [...] There was an international interest in the democratization of the region; I mean after 11 September, in 2004 en 2005. The regime was shocked by the impact of the movements in the streets, the political mobilization which took place the last two years. So, now the international attention is gone, the regime is working hard to readjust the situation so that the opposition will not be able to respond in the same way even if the international attention returns. This is one reason. The second reason is that the regime, in a way, is in a transitional period. The president is too old and there are a lot of rumors about his health situation and his performance and it seems that there is no consensus on how the situation will change if the president disappears today, tomorrow, ... This is what makes the regime feel weakened. It adopts every day more and more defensive mechanisms, which are in fact very aggressive actions, in legislature and in practice against people.

BDS: Does a political force like the Muslim Brothers put pressure on the government to change certain laws?

BDH: They put pressure, but [...] the Muslim Brothers have a brilliant strategy for societal empowerment, for themselves. They are applying pressure, but not to the extent that
they will be subjected to severe attacks which may cause them a loss which they can't compensate. They put some pressure, but not with all their power.

BDS: At the moment there are also a lot of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in prison, do you think there is a kind of double-faced attitude from some human rights organisations when they criticise the imprisonment of more Western oriented intellectuals, but they don't criticise the imprisonment of Muslim Brothers to the same extent?

BDH: I don't think so. For instance, the same critique could be applied to the case of Ayman Nur. I mean, how much did the Egyptian NGOs work for this case? This case is colored also by the fact that he cheated and forged documents. Most of the people think this is untrue and it has been fabricated by the regime, [...]

BDS: What do you think was the role of the international community in the improvement or deterioration of human rights in Egypt? Has it played a positive role, a negative role, or both? For example, during the nineties, Egypt was put under pressure to allow some NGOs...

BDH: I think, generally speaking, it is positive, the role of the international community. But it needs a specific assessment; it is not consistent. If you're talking for instance about the years 2004-2005, they were the best, after that there was some sort of decline. Sometimes we feel that it is selective. But this concerns the governments or governmental institutions, but concerning the international NGOs; they are more consistent and they address all the cases without specific political bias. So I can't put all the actors of the international community in one basket [...]

BDS: So the civil society in Egypt and other countries is rather weak due to the strong state? What are according to you the main causes of the weak Egyptian civil society?

BDH: First of all because there is a continuous repressive regime, which was born 56 years ago, since July 1952. This regime, from the very beginning, targeted civil society, banned all political parties, the syndicates, and up until now that is the situation [...]. The press was "governmentized": all independent press was eliminated at that time. All types of NGOs were very, very active before 1952. So what you have now is the product of a long road of repression and working against an independent voice within society during five decades. Maybe the situation slightly differed from Nasser to Sadat to Mubarak. But it is the same philosophy, it is just the same. After the single party system there are now fourteen or twenty, twenty two political parties, but everyone knows that there is only one political party. And the country is not even ruled by this party! [laughs] All of this is just a decoy. [...] There is still a long way to go to have an empowered civil society, but there are of course factors, for instance, there is a problem of political culture and how it focuses more and more on outside threats and doesn't pay attention to the internal sources of threats and the economic development of this country. There is also the factor of the religious culture, which doesn't help resisting despotism and despotic regimes, because it is easily used to
serve despotic regimes, whomever is in power. There is a long history of such kind of religious culture [...] This is my understanding.

**BDS:** So which changes are necessary in order to strengthen the civil society in Egypt? Is it purely a political matter, or is it also a social and economic issue?

**BDH:** It is mainly political. I mean every factor can help to change the political formula, not only concerning the empowerment of civil society, but it would also help the economy. There is no minimum accountability for how this country is managed [...]. We don't have a real parliament, fair elections, the independence of the judiciary [...], a model with checks and balances... The key, not only for civil society, but for everything, is changing this political model.

**BDS:** Do you think it is possible, in a world with contradictions between North and South, with economic interdependency between North and South, that there can be an independent democracy in the South?

**BDH:** It could be and it has happened in several countries. Look to Latin America, you have countries where people were able to move to democracy and even to adopt leftist regimes against the main capitalist power, the US, which has dealt with Latin America a long time as their backyard. This doesn’t mean that I look to Latin America or every country in Latin America as a model, but you are asking "is it possible?" and I say "yes". So look at South Korea, which was also a model for despotism [...] but that region is now one of the emerging developing countries. [...] Is it possible? Yes it is possible.

**BDS:** But countries like South Korea and Taiwan have been injected by foreign capital, mainly from the US, as a dam against communism...

**BDH:** ... and how much do the Americans invest in Egypt? Two billion every year, for thirty years, how much does the EU invest in Egypt? Also, Japan, Canada, Australia... there is a lot invested here, even by Arabs, by the Gulf states. But the main question is: how is this used?
AL-GOURD Ahmed
24-3-2011

Respondent: Ahmed al-Gourd, youth activist (AG)
Date: 24 March 2011
Location: Cairo, Café
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Also present: Fatma al-Sayyid Muhammad (FMS),
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: Tell me about the beginning of your political activism.

AG: I became a digital activist after the Gaza war, basically. A year later, I moved on from being on Facebook and blogs and internet... to street protests. Wherever there was a protest I tried to participate in it, even though I did not necessarily agree with all what they were saying. After that I met Fatma and I got into the whole activist society that we had here. I used to go more to protests in solidarity with Palestine, but I moved on to protests on problems here in Egypt. The main one was police brutality. It went on from there, until the 25th.

BDS: This is a common scenario, youth activists starting their political militancy with solidarity protests with Palestina, against the war in Iraq, and so on, and then moving to more domestic related problems and the issue of democracy.

AG: For some people it is easier. It was a little bit safer to participate in protests which contested atrocities committed by another government than your own. It was easier for some people. But protesting for Palestine wasn't as easy as you might think, because the regime claimed you were funded by Hamas or so and that created problems.

BDS: On the 25th of January there was a start of the revolution. Did you expected this?

AG: I had a good feeling that a lot of people would show up. It basically comes down to this: after Khaled Said was killed last summer, a Facebook page, We are all Khaled Said, was founded. After a few months people started to join the page and started to read everything which was being said in it. After that came the fake parliamentary elections of November 2010. But also that wasn’t enough. The real trigger was the Tunisian revolution. It basically showed Arabs that they are capable of overthrowing their leaders. That’s where the idea of 25 January came from. 25 January was police day. It was implemented as a day to commemorate the police in Ismailiya and Suez who tried to defend their neighborhoods and districts against the Israeli war of attrition in the seventies, but that meaning is basically lost today. We wanted to challenge the cops by protesting that day. A lot of people were surprised to see that we had more than 25,000 people at Tahrir that day and things escalated from there.

BDS: Were you there from the first day?
AG: Yeah.

BDS: And when did you realize the protests were turning into a revolution?

AG: On Friday 28. The 28th was the point of no return. The whole city was like on fire with protests. Usually the police tried to disperse the people in order to surround the smaller groups. That’s what we did. We used their own tactics against them. We organized different focal points in different areas of the city, and most of these people marched on Tahrir. Some people did not even go to Tahrir, they had like their own shit going on in their own neighborhood. All the poor neighborhoods basically had their own huge protests, for example in Matareyya. So I can remember two main routes, one from Cairo all the way walking, all the way along the Salah Selim road to Abasseyya to Ramsis Square to Tahrir. From the other, western side: Giza, Mohandiseen, Muharram, Doqqi and even Helwan, they all converged on Qasr al-Nil bridge, entering Tahrir from that area. I was in front of the Ramses Hilton and we got everybody out in that neighborhood and started to push the cops back. The police in Downtown basically got surrounded and dispersed in a lot of different areas and they got pinned. And when they got pinned they unleashed all they got on the protesters.

BDS: And when the police disappeared, what did you think about the situation then?

AG: We were happy, trust me, we did not miss the police. Actually, that whole civilian neighborhood watch thing… a lot of people actually enjoyed that. Like: you live in a house and you don’t know your neighbors and suddenly you know everyone from your street. Not only your own building but they entire block. You meet people living in your own building, living in the building next to you, people living along the whole street, you start to get to know people, calling them to see if they are alright, you know. It was actually a way for people to get to know each other and it worked pretty good. And I think it was actually an awesome display of how people were self-aware of things like safety, there was no vandalism, no looting, people protected the library of Alexandria, people protected the Egyptian museum.

BDS: Do you think the popular committees were a good example of democracy from below because people had to organize themselves to defend their properties and families?

AG: The civilian committees? I think the best aspect of that was that it was decentralized. Basically people in their own neighborhood started to form their own groups. I am not kidding, we had like walkie-talkies, we communicated with each other, numbering check points, if a car gets searched more than once, we lifted one of the windshields to show that this car was ok. We had all these sorts of ideas which we used. We always had cell phone numbers of army officers guarding the area. If we caught thugs we just called the army and brought them over to the army.

BDS: What was your relation to the army? Did you feel liberated when the army came, or did you feel threatened?
AG: At first the army was not on our side. At the very beginning the presidential guard gave ammo to the police. At the beginning. So we burned two APC, two armored cars. We basically surrounded the cars, we got the soldiers out and set the whole thing on fire. After that, suddenly, the army became neutral. It did not actually support it, but it tried to push both us and cops back.

BDS: ... occupying Maspero...

AG: ... yeah, basically they wanted to safeguard a lot of key centers of Cairo and break off the clash between the cops and the protesters. Because I am telling you right now, it was very bloody. It was insanely bloody.

BDS: There are now reports about torture by the army. What do you think the role of the military is today?

AG: I think the military is tired of the protests. They are done. They don’t want to see the people protest any more. [...] It is starting to hate the idea of constant protesting, it is ruining the country’s economy basically, or whatever. They just wait for people to fuck up in the slightest way and start to arrest people on a random base, they don’t care. They round up people in a random way, thinking: we’ll take them all in now and separate them later, holding on to those who are thugs – or let’s say: looking like thugs.

BDS: About the methods used by the protesters. I’ve seen a document which was spread through the internet of how to protest, and so on. Where did these documents and guides came from?

AG: From activists and football hooligans. Football hooligans have experience with rioting and they were very helpful, because they knew how to handle security, how to deal with tear gas, trucks... They put small bombs in gas tanks and just ran off and the car would explode. No kidding. It was pretty awesome.

BDS: Was there help and advice from Tunisian activists?

AG: Through the internet. They created a proxy site for us to use Facebook. We used it for days after they cut off Facebook.

BDS: Do you have any idea how the organization of groups like 6 April is at the moment?

AG: From what I know of 6 April, is that their only work is making people politically aware. They are not after power or leadership.

BDS: They are not trying to create a party?

AG: No, not officially. If a 6 April member wants to join a party that’s ok, but he’s joining as an individual, not as 6 April. A lot of people are forming political parties, but they are not ready yet. It takes a while to create a very strong political party. You need to
have a sufficient amount of members, they need to be active, you need to have the proper funding... because when the parliamentary elections start we need all the parties to be ready because we don’t want the older and stronger parties to just take that chance and dominate the parliament, that wouldn’t be cool.

BDS: Because of the referendum there will be elections...

AG: ... that’s something I think a lot about, now: that people are too hasty, which is not good. You need to give time for the parties to be ready. I tell you. The Wafd party. A lot of people don’t like the Wafd party. They are just like... They were on our side, and on the government side, they were a mediator, they didn’t know who to go to, basically. But a lot of other parties were definitely in the opposition, for example the Rally party, the Ghad party, the Gabha party, 6 April, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, the Islamists basically, a lot of them were part of the revolution. But. They only joined in after the 28. After the shitty days. They didn’t want to join early because they didn’t think we’d actually make it.

BDS: After the revolution, a part of the groups which originally supported the revolution, especially the Ikhwan and the Salafists are now taking the other side, especially after the referendum. What do you think of this?

AG: There is a power vacuum and they’ll try their best to take whatever they can take from the cake. It’s a cool cake and everyone wants a piece of it. So, basically, I heard the same and I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard it from a friend, that some Muslim brothers say that the youth started the revolution and we made it work... No, you didn’t make it work, we did. Alright, you were helpful on February 2. You had the people to fend off the pro-Mubarak thugs, but so what? You were not the only ones there. I was there, and most of the people throwing rocks and pushing the thugs back weren’t Muslim Brothers either. They just want to take most of the credit for themselves. No matter what if the army... Technically in a revolution it is always the army which makes it work. They have the weapons, they have everything basically. They are the ones who ousted the president.

BDS: There are now also a lot of strikes, people calling for their own unions... Do you think this is a continuation of the revolution, or do you think that these people try to take advantage of the revolution to impose...

AG: ... no, no. The workers are doing strikes since... from a long time. Like in Mahalla, basically. That was known for strikes since 2006. The textile plants. So the workers they had a huuuge... they made a huge contribution to the revolution. They started with strikes on February 8 all the way to February 11. Strikes in basically every sector I can think of: energy, steel, textile, everywhere. Now, what they are trying to do, is take out the base on which the corruption is built. Mubarak was the top of the pyramid, now that he is out, and Shafiq is out and some people from the Ministry of Information, the media is out, now we need to take the rest of the media figures, people who were part of the old regime have to go. And after this: governors, heads of local councils, university professors, directors of some NGOs – rather GONGOs –
CEOs of banks, textile plants... I am telling you right now that basically every CEO or president of something, be it an institution, university, plant, factory, or company... they must have had something to do with the old regime. Most of them. I’m not saying all of them. These are the people who gave power to the old regime and they need to go. We’re not messing around. Right now in Cairo university they are holding a sit-in demanding the resignation of the president, also in Ayn Shams, in my and other universities.

BDS: Aren’t you afraid that this could become a witch hunt? Trying to bring every NDP member to court, people trying to get rid of their personal enemies, and so on.

AG: I don’t think so. It’s highly unlikely. People here just want to see justice, they are not after personal vendettas. I’m talking about the people in general, an individual who has a personal vendetta and who goes for that is probably someone who was and is with the government. The people however... no one has a beef with someone in person. Except for Habib al-Adli, that’s an altogether different case. I was with the protest before the court house in New Cairo when he was supposed to have a trial session, and there were like 2,000 security members surrounding the whole place. Tanks, police... Because the people... If this guy gets in the people’s hands they will kill him on the spot. They will probably hang him from some palm tree or pole. I’m not kidding. No one likes this guy. Everybody blames him for all the people who got tortured by State Security, all the people who got shot in the protests... This person, he has to die. People are not going to settle down unless this person gets executed. Done. Period.

BDS: How would you describe your own ideology?

AG: Well I’m liberal. And I’m secular too. She [points to FSM] is a socialist. We tend to agree on some points. She’s not a capitalist, but I will make her a capitalist. [laughs]

[FMS laughs]

BDS: I hope not. [laughs]

AG: I mean I’m not a hardcore capitalist. I believe in the capitalist mode of production, but people should combine this with social justice and welfare, we can tax really rich corporations, you can tax them a lot and use the money for welfare for those who don’t have homes and education. It’s not an easy process.
BDS: What is your position in the Muslim Brothers?

EE: I joined the organisation more than 35 years ago. I am described as one of the eminent figures in the middle-aged generation. I worked in many sections, in many parts of the group, and I am now responsible for the political section.

BDS: What is your definition of social justice and how does Islam contain social justice?

EE: The first one who wrote about social justice, the one who explicitly used this term, was Sayyid Qutb. Many Muslims and Muslim Brothers read his books. Also shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali wrote a very good book about Islam and socialism, and so the Muslims working in Islamic groups know that justice is one of the main pillars of Islam and Islamic principles. And justice is broader than social justice, because in Islam we believe that the people can be divided in classes; can differ in wealth as they differ in opinions, as they differ in colors, and so on. But this difference between people does not have to lead to conflict, because justice is one of the main bricks that prevents this kind of conflict. Of course, justice has to be balanced with equality and cooperation, and with many things that Islam introduced to the life of the people. Islam introduced many principles and regulations for our life and it obligates us to be just. In Islam "social" means that rich people are obliged to pay what is called zakat to the poor. This is obligatory. And they are also advised to pay more than the zakat, maybe like a tax, but not a tax by the state, but a tax through religion. More than that, the individual is responsible for offering the minimum life expenses to his relatives, not only to himself; he cannot live alone. He is responsible for his family, he is responsible for his close relatives, his parents, maybe his daughters... not his daughters, his sisters; and maybe also his disabled brothers. He is responsible. And if somebody brought him before court, he is obliged to help those. So social justice means in our view and in Islam a very broad principle which is not imposed by the regime or by the government, it comes from the roots, the grassroots of the people. When they believe in it, they can cooperate with each other.

BDS: But if necessary it can be enforced by court?

EE: Yes, if necessary it can be enforced by court. This is a religious aspect. Because a husband is responsible, his wife can enforce him to pay her for the cost of her life, before or after divorce.

BDS: So Islam is compatible with capitalism?
EE: No, Islam is Islam. This is a very long debate: is Islam compatible with capitalism or with socialism. And both sides see in Islam what is compatible with them, but Islam is Islam. When Blair came to power in Britain, he raised the slogan of the "Third Way", not socialism, not capitalism. Islam is Islam. It may be a third road for us also, or the fourth road.

BDS: Because in the Qur’an, if I remember correctly, you can find arguments in favor of private property, but also arguments in favor of collective property of national resources.

BDS: Sure, but it is against doing away with property, private property. But also, as I said now, it obligates people to be responsible, by their religion, not only by the law, and also it is against monopoly. This is important; this is a balance, a balance between private and collective property. And Islam, when it gives the individuals the right to be rich with property, it also gives them limited heritage rights. Heritage... you know that it is in detail in the Qur’an. You can only decide to give away one-third of your property. But sons and daughters and relatives [...] they have the right of heritage and this cannot change it. [...] 

BDS: For example, in Iraq, there is the situation of the oil industry, which has been nationalized in the past, and which now could be denationalized by law. Are you in favor...

EE: ... it was stolen by the Americans! [laughs] Yes. But look, this is not private property, I think it’s national property. This we can also have in Islam. As a rule Islam is in favor of the poor people, supporting them. When Islam imposes taxes, it is on the rich, not on the poor. And when Islam supports a class in society, it supports the poor, not the rich. It gives rich people the chance to spend money, not to save money for themselves, and this is important, even in capitalism, in Western countries, spending is one of the important elements of running the economy. Islam from the start said: "spend money, don’t hoard it". What is the image of religion among leftists? This may be historically very important. Because now there is a different landscape than 30 or 60 years ago. And the Left is a very broad term. Marxists denied a role for religion for some period throughout their history, now they accept religion, and accept religious people among them. Before fifteen years they would not accept one who would pray, one who would fast in Ramadan. I once participated in a conference at Tagammu, two years ago, and I have a very nice memory of it; there were many females who wore the hijab, the head scarf. And I asked Abd al-Razik, who was the general-secretary, and he said "we stop our meetings now for praying. [...] We are pausing our meetings now because people want to pray", and this was very strange. And I think you must have some historical survey about this subject, because it is not only the Muslim Brothers who are religious in this community; it is the whole of society [...]. And I read many articles in many media, in America, in Europe, about the rise of religion in their societies. And I hope that this orientation towards religion now encourages people to cooperate and to be more just, and not to create conflict as the neocons in America do. Islam asks people
to cooperate, to be with each other, to regulate their lives and cooperate with each other for safety, for justice.

BDS: What do you think and what do the Muslim Brothers think of the strike movement in Mahalla?

BDs: We were charged by leading it! Many of our members were charged, but it is also dangerous for the regime to say that it was headed or led by the Muslim Brothers, because it gives the Muslim Brothers more credibility in society. [...] We are supporting the people... I am a member of the Egyptian Medical Syndicate Movement, and we were going to have a strike on 16 March, but we now halted it to allow for more negotiations. [...] About cooperation with others... Now in the left you see that those who are described as the most extremist, such as the Revolutionary Socialists, such as Kamal Khalil, you will meet some of them, of course, they have now a very good cooperation with the Muslim Brothers, for example in our struggle against the military courts. The right-wing leftist groups, like Tagammu, they are in no way with the Muslim Brotherhood; they are against Muslim Brothers, but this is not to its benefit. They are working for the regime. And the regime puts pressure on them. And when you look in their newspaper it is hesitating. Sometime they support the Muslim Brotherhood against the military courts, but they also criticize Muslim Brothers for their views and so on. So you see, in the Left you have many divisions, many, many divisions, and this is one of the most famous characteristics of the Left, in Egypt.

BDS: This is true for a lot of places.

EE: Yes, in a lot of places. [laughs] I think it is because of the discussions between them. But among the Islamic groups we also have some divisions, but they are very few, and mainly about the way the Muslim Brothers are working. We work in the political arena according to the law and the constitution and we believe that the only way is peaceful reform and change. In the past some of us believed in violence, but they failed to change anything, and after their failure they turned back to the peaceful way.

BDS: In 2005 there was a front between Muslim Brothers, nationalists, socialists, ...

EE: Yes, yes, between 11 groups...

BDS: ... why has it collapsed?

EE: Due to Tagammu.

BDS: Tagammu?

EE: Mainly Tagammu, yes. They withdrew, they stopped attending meetings and they withdrew!
BDs: Was this because of pressure of the regime?

EE: Yes, because of pressure by the regime. The most powerful opposition group now is without doubt the Muslim Brothers. When we call for a protest or a demo in the streets, the other groups may mobilize one thousand. At most. One thousand. While as we, Muslim Brothers, call for protest, our members only may exceed ten or fifteen thousand. And when the people join us, they will be fifty thousand. Because when we are among the people, we work at the grass roots level, we support people, we encourage the people themselves, and the rich to support the poor, [...] and our ideas are accepted by the people. And these ideas are not slogans, they are practical; the people apply them in their life and they find them useful to face their suffering. The left mainly, and the intellectuals of the liberals also, suffice themselves with literature, with articles, ...

BDs: What is the goal of the Muslim Brothers? Is it to obtain an Islamic society? Or an Islamic state? Or both?

EE: The goal is reform and change. To be more compatible with Islamic regulations. Because we believe as Muslim Brothers from the start that this is an Islamic society, [...] by which we mean that a majority are Muslims, and the minority, which have a different religion, are not different in culture, they have the same culture as us, so they are Christian in religion, but Muslim in culture. Regarding the state... the constitution already states that Islam is the official religion. So we don't demand an “Islamic State” as other groups... some groups can go to the extreme to describe people as infidels...

BDs: Sayyid Qutb also...

EE: No, Sayyid Qutb has been misread [...]. He wrote in a way which allows for different interpretations, but he was one of the Muslim Brothers, and he belonged to us, and we do not accept this extremist interpretation. So we believe that he was misunderstood. [...] Hassan al-Hudaybi made a revision for this misreading in his book “Du’ah, la Qudah” [...] I think it's also translated to English. "Du’ah, la Qudah". It means we are not in the situation to judge people, to say that they are Muslims or not... No, they ARE Muslims! We don't search in their soul. It was a very clear declaration that we have remained the same as before Sayyid Qutb [...]. So we believe that our way, our programme, is working hard work for reform. Both the people and the rich should work hard to reform people’s lives, and also to bring change and reform in the regime, so it is more compatible with Islamic regulations.

BDs: And what role do elections play in...

EE: ... a very important role. A very important role. There is no way except through elections. What other way is there? It is the constitutional way for change. And I think that on this point we are coinciding with other groups who believe in democracy. Even the leftists, who were not very democratic in the past, they now believe that democracy is a safe way for change and reform. And this is what brought us, 11
factions, together in the 2005 front, from the extremist leftist to Ikhwan Muslimin and also others, nationalists and liberals.

**BDS:** But parliament does not have any power in Egypt.

**EE:** It has not any power. It is now maybe like a school or class [laughs]. It is really strange. I think the way is to put pressure on the regime, through this kind of coalitions between groups and the grassroots level. It forces the regime to make change, and it destroyed everything. Now we are facing a very strange situation: the people are prevented from filing their application for candidacy for the local councils. And these local councils are not responsible for anything! [laughs] They don't make any rules. And the regime also manipulated all procedures for the elections. They know that there is no supervision. There is nothing. But the regime is very tough against anyone, not only the Muslim Brothers.

**BDS:** Are they scared of the Muslim Brothers?

**EE:** They are scared of the people! They are not against the Muslim Brothers only, they are against anyone. I think that they are scared of the people because this year and these months are very dangerous for the whole of Egypt. Now you may face every morning a new explosion. Now in Syria, now in Lebanon, now in Palestine, now in Iraq, now in Iran, no one knows from which side the next explosion will come. So the regime is scared, but that is not the way; it could also try to negotiate and tolerate. And that is the end of any regime; when it is scared of the people, scared of itself. It is very dangerous for the people. And this moment needs a coalition, from all powers, because the regime also succeeds in separating the political powers, and they play a very dirty game with those licensed groups, like Tagammu. A very dirty game. They don't give them anything, except some posts and positions.

**BDS:** What do you think of the Iranian experiment? The Iranian Revolution and the regime in Iran, what are the positive and negative aspects of the revolution and the regime?

**EE:** The Iranian experiment was very important, in many aspects. And when you compare it with the experiment of Nasser, or other countries... they are better. In social, economic, and political ways. I visited Iran once, so I cannot be fair, but I monitored the elections. They are more democratic by all means: they have elections, there is political competition, they are changing their president more than us, [laughs], they changed their Supreme Leader without a crackdown in society. They are facing the West, they are gaining more power now in the region, they are [...] about to have nuclear power, for peaceful means they say, of course. And even in their relations with other countries, they are much better. They destroyed two enemies, who were assisted by America: Afghanistan and Iraq. And they have good relations with Turkey, and the Gulf countries are scared of them. We cannot be against Iran and cannot approve of any aggression against them, because this may result in destruction all around. [...] But of course they are facing many problems. By establishing this new republic in Iran, according to the Shi'at principles, they have distanced themselves further from Sunni Islam, because in their religion and in their thought they are waiting for the hidden Imam. And this of course is not logic. The
hidden Imam is not coming. So they have to regulate their lives according to a new theory. When Khomeini said velayati faqih, it was a very good invention, a solution for the problem of the hidden Imam. But now I think they are going to be more and more close to Sunni, giving the people the whole power, without any supreme leader.

**BDs:** Do you know the writer Abdolkarim Soroush?

**EE:** I have read some articles in al-Hayat of him, translated.

**BDS:** He argues that in Iran the Islamic state is a danger for Islam as a religion, because when state and religion go together, when the state discredits itself, when the state does bad things, it also has an impact on religion. In the eyes of the people, religion will be discredited, because...

**EE...** This is according to the Shi’at school, which gives power to some of the imams or ulama. And we are against this. But if the state is ruled by the people themselves, according to their will and according to the regulations of Islam, this will not destroy the image of religion, because it is due to the people themselves. This is what makes Islam different from Christianity. When Christianity was ruled by the popes in the Middle Ages, it destroyed the image of religion. When the Jewish established their state they didn't give it to the rabbi. They gave it to the secularists. And they described their state as a religious state. But who rules the state? Not the rabbi. If the rabbi have the state in Israel they will be destroyed. In Sunni Islam, the state is the people themselves, not anyone else. Those who are scholars or specialists in the Islamic field are just specialists, like any other specialist. They are effective and they have a very important role, but they don't have the power to rule by being a specialist. [...] So I think further developments in Iran will bring the state and the Iranians and the Shi’at closer to the Sunni groups.
AL-HAFIZ Abd  
21-3-2011

Respondent: Abd al-Hafiz, teacher, Tagammu member, and leader in the independent teachers union (AH)
Date: 21 March 2011
Location: Cairo, Café
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Also present: Haisam Hassan (HH), Muhammad A. (MA)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: I want to talk about the teachers’ union. When and how did it start? What political forces are supporting it, which are working against it? And so on.

AH: First I want to tell you something about how the former teachers’ syndicate works. It started with Saad Zaghlul when he was the Minister of Education, the Minister of General Knowledge. It started with the teachers’ association and due to some landlords and some rich people at that time, they devoted some pieces of their lands to this association. One of these is at one of the most wonderful places in Cairo along the Nile. And this is the teachers’ association club. If you go across the Qasr an-Nil bridge it’s on your right, just facing the Opera. So this is how it started. A Minister took a decision to make a trade-union for the teachers. It started as an association and then came Taha Hussein and he turned it into a syndicate, which is called the Syndicate for Educational Professionals. That was in 1951. Taha Hussein was also a Minister of Education. Then came Kamal Gidd Hussein in 1969 and he made some amendments to the law of syndicates and it continued after Kamal Gidd Hussein until today. This is the formal syndicate. The constitution of the syndicate allows the membership of everyone. For Taha Hussein it was a different matter. It was for him a debate between two schools. The first school sees the teacher as a pedagogue. The other school said that the teacher is just a teacher, just a professional. Taha Hussein thought that a syndicate should collect everyone who works in the field of education to discuss the manner of teaching and education. So it was meant to be something related to a scientific association more than a trade-union. And it continued until the sixties and Kamal Gidd Hussein came. He transformed this form more into something related to a political organization following the Arab Socialist Union more than a trade-union – again. It kept the soul and the spirit of being a political organization following the ruling party whatever its course, more than a trade-union.

The constitution of the syndicate until now makes the rule of the syndicate to advocate the national project planned by the state following the general policy of the Arab Socialist Union. Until now. It puts conditions if you want to be a candidate in the elections of the syndicate, you must be a working member of the ASU. And with the nationality of the UAR between Syria and Egypt. Until now. And every time during the parliamentary elections they depended mainly on the teachers and education employees to count the votes. Because their numbers are big and they are
obedient. There were some struggles done by small groups of teachers and they were punished severely.

BDS: When were these struggles?

AH: In the beginning of the fifties, the last days of the sixties and the last days of the eighties. So, in 2005 the criminal Mubarak gave a speech that he was going to put the teachers into a private cadre with private criteria for the salaries and so on, because, as he said, they are the most important people in Egypt. And instead of making this law, they made a law to measure the organization of education in Egypt. And this law threatened education itself. It was just a bridge to privatize education. So, in that year I started to unpaid vacations and started to devote my work and my effort to fight. I organized and founded the Egyptian Center for Educational Rights, an NGO, and I started to work with it. I started to fight against the law 82 in 2006. And also we started to fight for the rights of the teachers.

BDS: So it was especially against the privatizations.

AH: Yes. [...] We started to work for what the president promised to improve the work conditions for the teachers. I started it with a statement, I published it and I signed it with the teachers’ association in Cairo, in al-Arish, in Giza, in Alexandria, in Manufiya. But there was nothing. Then some teachers from al-Arish telephoned the newspaper and asked for my number and asked me we would like to join the teachers’ organization in al-Arish. I said ok. I have a friend in al-Arish so I called him “Ashraf, how are you, you are responsible for the work in al-Arish” and so it started. It started with small groups, then bigger groups, and then came the idea of a trade-union. When we suggested, me myself suggested it, of having our trade-union, this caused the movement to be divided into three groups. One group which is mainly headed by Muslim Brother teachers said “ok, we can wait first if the syndicate gives us a chance to change it from inside, if they don’t give us the chance we will do it”. The second group said that “no, our mission is to reform the teachers’ syndicate, the former one”. And a small group started to say “no, we are going to build a trade-union for the teachers as workers, as paid wage-workers”. And we started to discuss the idea with everyone. The teachers. Using every method we have. We had three to four thousand members. We planned to announce our union by the end of 2011 this year. But accidently it happened that seven teachers died, one per day during the secondary school examinations. It was because the Minister of Education decided to double the work hours and to give them no chance to get sick leaves. So those who suffered from bad diseases just started to die. So we decided to announce our call for a trade-union as a reaction. This was in July 14th 2010. And of course every day we have new members. We are getting stronger and stronger. We made our own constitution. We will have elections within two months.

BDS: Was this also an important aspect of the new trade-union; that it would be democratic, unlike the state syndicate.
AH: This is what we emphasized at the time: democracy. That from the beginning joining and leaving the syndicate is a right. Everything which ensures or emphasizes transparency was put in the constitution. For example, every decision will be made clear in three days in every branch and on the website. Every fifty members can revise any records they want in the syndicate, after two weeks after signing a demand to do it. Also every level of the syndicate must have twenty percent, sorry, thirty percent under the age of 35 and at least twenty percent females. Also any lower level can oppose, vote against, postpone, work without the decision of the higher level with a majority of 2/3. The highest authority is for the general syndicate congress. There are three cabinets: the executive cabinet which is formed from teachers to headmasters of school. [...] Anyone higher than a schoolmaster is not going to be elected in the executive cabinet. He can be elected as a supervisor and as an advisor. They are also elected from the general assembly and give their reports to the general assembly. They can join the trade-union but they are elected as consultants to the office of the trade-union. Three cabinets watch each other and give their reports to the assembly. [...] I think that the future for the teachers is their independent trade-union. Sooner or later they will come. [...] Now the money for the teachers’ syndicate is cut from the salary. Now we have a declaration signed by thousands of teachers to send to the government to stop this. This is very important. After that they are free to pay it or not. They are free to join or not. The independent teachers’ union is fighting severely from it.

Mister Muhammad A. here is from Port Said, they are of the newest group, they formed their group yesterday. He is an activist. He is the head of the trade-union there. The temporary head, because we did not have elections yet. Of course he will enjoy it for three months after which we will have the elections. We won’t have the right to be candidate in the first elections. He will now be some authoritarian and enjoy his authority for three months [laughs]. [...] BDS: [To MA] Why did you join the trade-union?

MA: This movement in Bur Said started to kick-out the state syndicate. We had a lot of problems caused by the laws of the state syndicate. Because of this law or this constitution the state syndicate is undemocratic and dictatorial. It does not allow change inside the syndicate. This was relevant for the whole teachers’ movement. I have also a personal view. It is a right to organize. If it is a political, syndicalist or NGO type of organization. We are co-operating with the teachers in Bur Said. We adopted two ideas in the discussion. The first one is to reform the state syndicate which already exists. The second was to associate their own independent syndicate. [...] It was an open discussion for all the teachers who are caring for the trade-union.

AH: A trade-union because we are workers, we are paid workers.

MA: At the same time we have already organized the popular alliance to defend for the revolution in Bur Said. Inside this alliance we have associated an educational committee. Within our point of view towards the popular revolution: this revolution has to focus on the social justice. This will give us the right to organize our own
shapes and structures. We decided as the alliance to become involved with the independent teachers’ union and to go to the teachers with this aim. Without forcing them NOT to deal with the state syndicate. They invited Abd al-Hafiz as the founder of the independent trade-union and sent him an invitation from the alliance. […] Only since yesterday we met Abd al-Hafiz with a big group of activists from Bur Said.

AH: We met at the square of martyrs in Bur Said.

MA: […] It was a good meeting. The teachers group which attended the meeting, most of them agreed the idea to join the independent trade-union. […]

BDS: So the revolution played a big role in organizing the people and attracting them to the independent trade-union.

AH: Of course.

MA: Certainly.

AH: Before the revolution some people took risks and started it. This was for us, for Kamal Abu Eita, for the health professionals, etc, a big risk because everyone who joined a syndicate was exposing himself to at least rumors that these people are spies and agents from abroad. And they sent us thugs many times. I was about to be killed more than one time. […] Of course we were mainly against the NDP, and especially against the policy committee which was head by the small criminal. He was just a small criminal. We had a criminal and then his followers, his gang. [laughs] And it was clear, very clear. Every Minister of Education was appointed by this gang, this small group in the NDP. In addition to the general policy concerning education and work in Egypt. They depended mainly on the fact that an ignorant people are easy to lead. So they just tried to turn schools into a tool to rule the society. Every time they did this. And we fought against this every time.

BDS: Do you think that the way teachers teach in the schools is supporting dictatorship?

AH: Egypt has a “stand up sit down” education. There is a book called this. It is written by the responsible for the USAID funds for the Minister of Education. They paid millions of dollars and saw nothing as a result because they are stupid. They thought that money talks. Money doesn’t really talk. We talk, using money. [laughs] I think that before the revolution it was a decision that we are going to have a trade-union. We were planning to have a general strike in education by the end of this year and then announce the trade-union. The strikes started with the revolution.

BDS: There were also strikes within schools during the revolution?

AH: Yes. From the first day schools were back we started one hour strikes demanding for a civil council for the president, a new constitution for Egypt. These were the demands of the teachers. Free trade-union for teachers. New laws and regulations for education. New point of view to education. Educating people for the future not from
the past. Every time they decide to educate the people according to the past. They want everyone to believe that the wonderful days are past and won’t come again. We are having these days now. [...] In addition they were also falsifying history. For example, they were telling that Avicenna is an Egyptian. He is not even an Arab! And this was led by the state security. Every school had a spy. Every administration has someone who is the contact with the state security. [...] They make the students to file reports on the teachers. And the teachers against the students and against each others. [...] You cannot hire a teacher temporarily or employ him without the agreement of the state security. [...] Others couldn’t start as teachers. They could join the administration but couldn’t teach. I had many hardships but that was because I come directly from a monkey. [laughs] I put the Communist Manifesto in the library of the classrooms because they used to put the extremely religious books in these classrooms. If this is allowed I do this to. [...]  

MA: I am specialized in libraries. Within any school which has a number of Christian students, they didn’t have one bible in the school library.

AH: It is forbidden by the government. Not by the Muslim Brotherhood.

HH: It is not to support the Muslims, but to weaken the Christians. You have to learn the Qur’an in the Arabic lessons. You have to study the Qur’an...

[...]

AH: I think, hope, dream that teachers will change their role in the society. First a change in their own working conditions.

HH: Also the subjects which are teaching.

AH: You have to find the right way. When teachers defend their rights to better working conditions they are indirectly giving their students the best pedagogical lesson. Secondary school students went to Tahrir square.

MA: Our students.

AH: And they were marching left-right-we are going to reform education. These were the school students. This is the right way to go on. Of course mainly because Ahmed Nazif was a corrupt person and his business was in communication and he gave us the middle finger. Then there was the internet. Because it was a matter of corruption and education was not an important matter students were on the internet reading what’s going on in the world. This was more important. Every dictator makes a mistake and this was their main mistake. [...]  

We have good relations with teachers trade-unions in Tunisia, Morocco, South Africa, Lebanon, America, Germany... And I think that this is important for us, for them and for education worldwide. Because teachers in some countries really changed their society. In Germany they played a very important role in the past.
BDS: So revolution changed the teachers and now the teachers have to change their society?

AH: Exactly. Teachers participated in the revolution from the first day. In January 25 teachers and members of the independent trade-union were in Tahrir and everywhere in the streets in Egypt and in some places even led the protests. They were very effective. [...] Some of our comrades in our trade-union did great work in the revolution already before it began. So we were in the heart of it, we are part of it and our task now is just to push it forward because the only organized people who talked about the renationalization of the lands, about taking everything back from the corrupt people and using it for the development of our society are the teachers. This is one of our main points: take back the lands and the factories and make them specially shared companies among the newly graduated, give them small pieces of lands of five or ten feddans, build houses, factories, schools, hospitals around this lands and you can solve the problem of unemployment and push development. The only people who said this in Egypt was the teachers’ trade-union.

BDS: What are the next steps in the revolution? What is the role of teachers?

AH: Everyone is confused now. Everyone is thinking what should I do? We insist to be effective because we know the army controls everything and that education and getting the schools opened is very important for the future of the revolution. We are ready to go on a general strike. We want different education.

BDS: Do you think it’s the role of the teachers to inform students about political events such as the referendum?

AH: Yes, of course. Every day we inform our students and their parents about things like the referendum, elections, and about the unity of Muslims and Christians. [...] During the days in Tahrir square, Muslims were praying and Christians were defending them and vice versa. This is our country. We are trying to remind the people of how they really are, what’s the truth inside them. This is a very important role to be played by teachers.

BDS: What political forces are supporting the independent trade-union and which forces are against the union.

AH: Against: Muslim Brotherhood, of course.

BDS: Why are they against?

AH: Because they want to keep the old regime or be attached to the old regime. They are against pluralism. They want only two colors, black and white, in the society, so they can be the good ones. Of course, you know who benefits from this issue: only the NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood. So they are against it. If you just turn it into civil society, a society based on freedom and pluralism, they will fall apart in separate groups and they will lose their influence. Also, I think, there is no one else against the
freedom to organize. Our leftist comrades used to talk about “we are afraid about the unity of the workers”. And we just said that in the past there was no unity of the workers; there was only one trade-union. Unity means pluralism. The last few months during the revolution everyone accepts the fact that difference between unity and singular. Ittihad and muhadiya. They felt that every group only should have one trade-union to get started. We asked them: to be strong or corrupted. [...] The ISTT, health professional union, tax workers, pensions union are making a federation now. We are suffering the problems of getting started, but we are starting it. Within a few months the school employees will also have their independent trade-union and we will have an education federation with them. We are also working every day discussing speaking having meetings even struggling against each other, but it is vivid and that’s the most important thing.

HH: Even before the revolution, two weeks or one week, the students had a strike in front of the schools to reinitiate work. After the revolution the students made their own strike to lower the bills of education.

AH: For a year we give 150 secondary school students training in their rights and they have their own committees: students committees for the reform of education. And they have a group on Facebook. And they started to tell everyone in Egypt: we have students and we have rights. Their first start was a strike against the delay of school books. They paid the school fees but didn’t have their books for three months after the start of the school. Meanwhile the Minister Ahmed Zaki Badr devoted twenty five million to develop a website for the Ministry of Education. This is under investigation now. In two or three weeks he will be arrested. He made 200 million for himself in eleven months. [...] He gave himself every day a pay of 1,000 EGP for attending the meetings. Every day. [...] He signed this for himself. He received the money for himself. [...] The Minister used to have a gymnasium room joining his office where beautiful girls were working in it. It cost two million EGP. And a sauna. [...]
ALI Khalid

25-10-2010

Respondent: Khalid Ali, Director of the ECESR
Date: 25 October 2010
Location: Cairo, ECESR HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Sabri Zaki (SZ)
Source: Notes and audio recording

[...]

BDS: I heard a lot about this centre also about workers in Mahalla who said that centre supported their strike. So as I first question I wanted to learn something about the history of the center and its goals and about Khalid Ali’s role in the center.

KI: First welcome to our center and to Egypt. I am Khalid Ali, a lawyer and human rights activist since 1994 and from then I am working in an organization “the association for legal aid”, an old organization which worked in human rights issues in Egypt. Afterwards I established the Hisham Mubarak Law Center with many colleagues in 1999, working in the HMLC until 2005 as the Cairo branch director, after that from 2008 until January 2009 I was the executive director of HMLC and in 2010 I established with many other colleagues this center. Throughout my activism I was working on labor issues and helped with the establishment of coordinating committee for labor and union rights since 2001. Throughout my work I was working with many angles to support the labor movement and workers. First as a lawyer I was doing this pro-legal advice and litigation and second as a trainer, I worked as a trainer for workers to raise their awareness of their labor rights. Also through publications. I issued many works on trade-unions and raising the awareness of workers and also through campaigns. [...] The most significant cases were during the trade-union elections. The first one 2001-2006, the second one 2006-2011. The most significant cases were during these trade-union elections. During these elections the cases raised were the privatization of health insurance. These cases were very important because it halted the privatization of health insurance. And about the insurance funds. In these cases I was able to bring this case to justice to prevent the state from taking this funds. There were two cases: first: the minimum wage and the center was successful in getting a judgment of the court in the workers’ favor. This is the first time a court set a minimum wage for workers. It was issued in March. Second, the case of Tanta company when the owner prevented the workers from the right to work. The workers right to work was always used against the workers during strikes but in this time they were able to use this right of workers to work against the businessman himself. The court sentenced him to imprisonment. [...] This were the most important cases I worked on during the last period. I also issued a lot of publications for workers to raise their awareness, for example, I issued a report told workers without trade unions and trade unions without workers, on the trade-union elections 2001-2006. I also issued many other publications about labor conditions, and
so on. And this is the most important and significant work I have done during the last period.

BDS: Can you tell me something more about your attempts to raise awareness among the workers; you said you train workers; there are the campaigns and training sessions; what are your aims? What kind of your consciousness are you raising? Political, social?

KI: There were many angles we worked on for raising labor awareness. The basis for this is raising the legal awareness of workers to be able to know their rights [...] This is the basic foundation for our work, but from these basic foundations there were many other projects, for example raising social and political awareness. We have done this through direct and indirect approaches. The direct approach is through training the workers, there are also indirect ways through publishing publications and the other important tool is through integrating them into the cooperating committee of labor rights. This is very important because it helps raising awareness of the political situation of workers and trade-unions. This coordinating committee was established in 2001 and is working up until now. It is held every month on the first Friday of every month and the first thing they do during the meeting of the coordinating meeting: exchanging news about workers and their issues. It helps them a lot in raising their awareness.

BDS: Perhaps a more personal question: why did you chose to join the cause of the workers movement as a lawyer?

KI: Actually it wasn’t from the beginning. I taught myself to be a lawyer in criminal cases and this was my work. But after working in the association for legal aid I was commissioned together with Ahmed Sayf al-Islam in trade-union elections in the nineties. So after working in this I discovered that it’s a very important issue and to work upon it. So it continued.

BDS: I have the impression that in Egypt since the nineties there have been much more NGOs and human rights organization than before. What are the reasons for this?

KI: Actually the number of NGOs in the beginning of the nineties was very small. But the number grew bigger and bigger in the late nineties, 1997, 1998, 1999, but their weight was not very big, because you are talking about moving from 5 centers to 10 or 15 and until now we still have many issues to work on and the number of NGOs working in Egypt is very small compared to all this issues so we still need more.

BDS: Do you think a lot of activists are more interested in joining this center or other NGOs than one of the existing parties because they think they can accomplish more in an NGO than in a party?

KI: How many organizations are working in labor issues at the moment in Egypt? You have a premise that led to a conclusion; you said that many organizations are
working on labor issues, but that’s not true, we don’t have this number of organizations. There are small NGOs working on labor issues.

BDS: So how does this center relate to other centers like Hisham Mubarak, why did you leave HMLC? Was there a difference of opinion or were there other reasons?

KI: First I would like to answer the previous question. Throughout twenty years there were only two centers working on labor issues, among them was HMLC. But actually, there are only four organizations for raising legal awareness and for advising workers and giving them legal advice. There are two more centers, the Land Center and SLCHR are only working on publications, not on legal awareness […] So there are only six NGOs, four of them are working and defending labor issues. So the number is very very low. You can’t say that activists are leaving parties and instead going to NGOs to defend labor issues. The whole staff working here are only fifteen. I left HMLC, but I didn’t “leave”. It’s a paradoxical situation. I left the management of the center. I left the administration, the management, because I thought working as a director will hinder my work in labor issues. But I’m still working with HMLC on programs and campaigns. So I didn’t leave HMLC or stopped working in HMLC but I just left the management. Then about the relationship between this center and other centers and NGOs. It actually depends on the work of the NGOs. With some of them are an integral part of us, other organizations we have a marginal relation. It depends on the activity of the centers. Most of the organizations in Egypt welcomed the establishment of our center and tried to give support to this new organization. After six months of working in this center I issued a statement about the real estate tax collectors. This statement was collecting more than forty NGO signatures. The relationship is very good. Most of the NGOs in Egypt supported and welcomed this center because it is the first center to work on the package of social and economic rights in Egypt.

BDS: What do you think was the significance of the Mahalla movement for the labor movement in Egypt as a whole?

KI: We can talk about two stages the Mahalla workers went through. One was up and the other was down. In December 2006 the Mahalla movement was on the rise and it collected many supporters and drove the other textile workers and factories to join them. In 2006 their movement was on the rise. But after this, in 2008 it went down, after the crush of the government of the demonstrators and it was a message: the government arrested three of the workers; a message to the other workers in other companies and to the whole textile sector: anyone who will follow the path of the Mahalla workers we will arrest them and punish them. So it was a passive significance to other workers and the labor movement. It had two stages.

BDS: Because of the Mahalla movement, in its first stage, a lot of lawyers, but also human rights activists were attracted to the issues of the labor movement. Is this true, have you also had this experience?
KI: Actually this was not true. It attracted many human rights activists but this didn’t start them to work more on labor issues. But actually what stirred it drove many political movements and political activists to jump on these movements and many politicians and political movements tried to reap the benefits of this. They were releasing conflicting statements which divided the movement itself. On the other hand, the most positive thing which happened in this stage was the attraction of human rights activists to work with workers and to try to support their strikes and movements, and also journalists. They covered many issues of the labor movement and labor conditions. Actually they were very very good at this. This is a positive side of the media and journalists covering the labor issues. This was due to their profession itself: they work on the level of the event. Something happened and I work on it the best I can. The most important effect on this movement was on the political parties in Egypt. They didn’t have a vision for the future of this movement and they couldn’t make a vision how to raise themselves and to try to make use and benefit from these movements. They couldn’t do this.

BDS: What is the relation between the center and more political movements and parties, for example an organization like Tadamun or political parties such as Tagammu, the RS...

KI: We participated and coordinated with many political organizations in Egypt. For example Tadamun, we cooperated with them on many issues and we hosted them. We opened our apartment until they opened their own office. Before this they hadn’t had a place to meet and the center here hosted them. We coordinate our works together. The same things happen with Tagammu and Ikhwan Muslimin. We try all the time to coordinate our work. For example Tagammu party is working on pensions and pension issues. Actually when they want to do any legal or do litigation for the court we will be the first to do this with them.

BDS: What about the Ikhwan, what is their view on the labor movement? Because on the one hand a lot of Ikhwan members are businessmen, so their interests conflict with the labor movement; but on the other hand there are also in the syndicates and in the factories a lot of members of Ikhwan.

KI: Actually they have two discourses: a political discourse which is not public and their public discourse. They have members in the parliament so they have to defend labor rights. This is their public discourse but at the same time they have another discourse, the political one, because they adopt neoliberalism so they have two discourses at the same time. But you have to differentiate between two things. When you talk about the Organization of Muslim Brotherhood they have two discourses. But when you talk with two individuals for example a member in the parliament, you can trust him and he’ll be defending labor rights. This is his voice, but the Muslim Brotherhood is a large organization.

BDS: So within the Muslim Brotherhood there are many trends?

KI: Yes.
BDS: Is there something like a more labor-oriented trend in the Muslim Brotherhood?

KI: There is of course a labor trend but I don’t know what’s its influence inside the organization, because it is a secret organization.

BDS: Perhaps a more general question to end with it: what do you think is the future of the labor movement in Egypt, how is this future for workers right connected to the broader struggle for more democracy in Egypt?

KI: We can’t see what will happen in the future. Right now we are in a transitional stage, higher echelons of the state are in a transition stage. This will be somewhat clear after the elections and in the upcoming presidential elections. Right now the future is blurred and actually the labor movement has taken many steps but I don’t think these steps will allow it to take its full rights in the future. I don’t think this will lead to concrete success, unless the movement will be able to organize itself. The only strong organization in Egypt for workers is the ETUF. This is the only organization in Egypt, but the workers themselves have not such an organization. Until this moment they are not able to get full worker rights. To do this they have to organize themselves like the real estate tax collector workers. They have made a trade-union and it is faced now with a harsh fight, but the workers need to organize themselves like this.

BDS: Do you think the tax workers union is an example for the other workers that they should follow?

KI: I hope this will happen. Actually the real estate trade-union is confronted with many difficulties and hard measures against it and pressure to abort it. I hope, but I don’t think they will be able to continue.
MA: I am a teacher of English.

BDS: You are a member of the Muslim Brotherhood?

MA: Before or after the 25th? Before the 25th I was not, now I have the right to say I am a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

BDS: So you have become a member through the revolution?

MA: Let me tell you the truth. The first move of this revolution was not a revolutionary force, it was a movement of youth, but exactly on January 28 all layers of the Egyptian people became part of it, including the Muslim Brotherhood with all its levels, from the Murshid to the lowest members, including me, one of the lowest members of the Muslim Brotherhood. I am not a leader, I do not have a kind of organizational role in it. I am a member.

BDS: Why do you think the Muslim Brotherhood became active in the revolution on the 28th?

MA: After what we have seen happen with our children in the midnight of the 25th we said no. These youth called for everything we called for centuries – with regard to myself only for a few years – but everything these people wanted will be true. So we should participate in it, otherwise we will become nothing if we don’t participate with the people against so many things: for justice, against corruption, anything.

BDS: So why did the Muslim Brotherhood did not participate in the demonstrations of the 25th?

MA: I have now the right to say that we did, but not in public. We were chosen to participate in it, but we didn’t want it to be connected to us, because if it was related to us, it would be destroyed. The police would not use just rubber bullet, but cannons, tanks, everything. Because if they succeeded to relate it to us, they would have a reason to eliminate us. Not us, the Muslim Brotherhood, but the people. […]

BDS: So individual Muslim Brothers were already active within the movement.

MA: From the 25th.
BDS: Aren’t you afraid that the people will now think that the Muslim Brothers only joined the revolution when they saw it was becoming big movement, a revolution?

MA: No. Because our history says that Muslim Brothers were demonstrating while people were just watching us. They didn’t want to participate with us out of fear to be beaten, captured, arrested. But now, we cannot do the same. It is our country, so if we didn’t participate in it, we will not be a part of it.

BDS: Why did you join the Muslim Brotherhood?

MA: Not because of religious reasons. This movement – I call it a movement, not an organization – calls for the dignity of the people, all the Muslims in the world. I will not be exaggerating when I say that they call for the dignity of the human race, without going into details.

[interruption]

MA: So we are not part of an organization and we are calling for something bigger than government: we want the people govern themselves, rule themselves. If the people choose justice so let it be. If they choose again injustice, we cannot change it. We are – I don’t know the exact number – about a million and a half, but I can say that each one of us can move around him ten or twenty people, if they want to be moved.

BDS: Now that Mubarak is gone there will more democracy in Egypt. Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement will create a party now and participate in elections.

MA: They are about to create a party. It’s name is Freedom and Justice. It will be not a religious party, it will be a party of all people, any Christian or woman is welcome. We believe in democracy and democracy is something we live in our movement. I can say that I Muhammad Ali was part of the process which chose our leader, our head. And we can remove him if we want, but as we said, it was a democratic process.

BDS: There has also been some opposition within the Muslim Brothers. Yesterday there was a conference of the youth which was not accepted by the leadership. What do you think about these voices in the movement? Is it good to have pluralism or will it weaken the movement?

MA: As I have seen and experienced myself, in this movement there is a lot of argument. In our meetings we argue a lot, but we know that everyone of us wants the best, so if you have a point of view and I have a point of view, say Haisam’s point of view is the one we elected and chose, then everyone of us must work for this point of view, because we believe that the unity has more value than being right. This is shura in our religion, not just in our movement. So I can tell you that maybe there is some form of protest inside the movement and we are not God, we are not angels, we can do something wrong, but in the idea that every one of us wants the right thing be
done we can accept another point of view. I cannot take you to one of our meetings but I can say you that we argue in these meetings. We have large arguments, but at the end we say: we all agree. No one wants something bad for this country or for our movement, so whatever the point of view, whatever the decision we have called for, it is the right one, even if…

[interruption]

MA: I asked about this in our movement, and I got the answer that there is no such thing because everyone of us can say whatever he wants to the Murshid himself and we have a proof for this, we have something called a former Murshid. If this man or anyone in the movement wants to be the head forever, this example negates it. Something which Mubarak could not do.

BDS: Some of the youth are also saying that under Mubarak it was difficult for the Ikhwan to organize themselves and even to hold meetings like the Shura Council. I think it has been ten years that the council was able to convene. Do you think that there will be more room now for democracy?

MA: Of course. Two or three months ago I could not use my phone here when I would talk to you. Everything I said would be recorded. We couldn’t do this. It is not freedom. Now we are free. We can do anything. […] We have our rights and they are universal unless it comes into conflict with the rights of someone else.

[Noise in the background. Discussion of it being fireworks or gunshots]

BDS: The Muslim Brotherhood is also an organization with different kinds of members, gathered around the goal of bringing dignity to society. Isn’t it a problem when there are members with different interests, for example workers want a good wage while businessmen want profits. Now there is also a big trade-union movement. Do you think these conflicting interests will be a problem in the Muslim Brotherhood?

MA: We have something called family, usra, in the Brotherhood. This family gathers five or six members and this is the unit. Some of the members of this usra may be workers, others may be owners of companies. And it is possible that the owner obeys the worker. It is not dunya, it is not life, they have much more than that. The one who pours water for someone else to wash is a professor in the university. And the one who is poured water on is poor. Any businessman, whatever if he is one of our members or anything else, surely wants profit. But the profit is not an aim itself, it is a means. […] An example of an engineer who owned five or six billion. One day his balance was freezed and he didn’t have money to bring his family a kilo of sugar. It didn’t matter to him in any way. This is the concept. We have workers, very poor workers, but they live. It is not our life that we are looking for. But something else. […]

BDS: These contradictions can perhaps be overcome within the movement, but especially in this period the Brothers have to make decisions in the political field. For example,
if there is a new labor law they will have to make a decision, favoring one group over the other.

**MA:** They can make a decision. They will participate in the people’s parliament by 30% or 35%. Our next people’s assembly will have no more than 30% of Ikhwan. 35 or 40 percent at most will not make a decision. They will stop any unfair decision and they will mean it. [...] They don’t want to have 100%. Because our people today is not ready to our concept. The Egyptian people are not ready for this yet. If we take it by force we will become something like Iran and we will never let ourselves rule a people which doesn’t want us. Never. It will be just like making your own society by your hand.

**BDS:** What do you think of the Salafi movement? Before the revolution they were not a political force, now they want to participate in politics? What are the similarities and differences between the Ikhwan and those who call themselves Salafis?

**MA:** I will give you an example. You are a driver and a clever driver of a car and someone whenever he rides with you, he sits in the backseat. One day you buy another car. Suddenly he wants to take the wheel. What do you feel? He will make an accident. He will probably kill people. Unintentionally or intentionally, I don’t know. I say this because I disagree with them. Frankly, where were you before? We suffered a lot during the elections and they said elections is something bad, evil, and now you want to take part of it? We were beaten in the past elections, we were arrested. In the night before the elections none of us slept in his rooms, because if we did, we were arrested before the elections. They were against the elections at all. Now they want to take part. The problem is, it is a democracy, they can take part just like anyone else, but they don’t have the keys, they don’t have the organizing way to deal with elections. They only have their religious background and the sympathy of some people which is by itself a loving of religion. The Egyptian people love religion and they are religious by nature, but don’t make religion the means to move them. Our prophet, when he made a state, he made a state with a political side, not a religious side. He made truce with the Jews, with the unbelievers, but he made his state out of politics, not out of religion. If he’ have made it out of religion, he would have gone to Madina and killed all of the Jews. But he didn’t, because even if they don’t have the same religion, they are people and they have the right to live. Our Salafi brothers cannot understand this. They want to take the lead, but as I said before, our country isn’t ready for this yet. Maybe it will be after many years, perhaps ten or fifteen years, but not now. I have read and heard this morning about a Christian man in some town of Upper Egypt whose ears were cut. We are not ready for this now. We should treat people with mercy, not with justice. Even in this time, people need mercy, not justice. We will not come to apply the hudud, cutting the hands of the thieves or killing the killer, they are not ready for that now.

**BDS:** But in the future this should be applied?

**MA:** If the people choose so. This is our rule: if the people choose. Whatever the people demands, it will be done. If the people wants us, we are their servants, if not, then we are not their employees. Our Brothers the Salafis don’t understand this. [...] Our
Brothers the Salafi use the feelings and passions of the Friday prayer, but the country will not move with Friday prayers only. It will move with economy, with agricultural development, and we need these two things now.

BDS: So there is the vision of the Muslim Brotherhood and the reality of the people. And only when the people agree with the vision of the Brotherhood you think there can be a fair society, a society with dignity...

MA: ... and when this happens it does not matter to us who rules. If it was one of the Muslim Brotherhood or not, until or if he makes sure that the rules which people put in place will be followed. We don’t want to be the ruler of this country. Do you think if we want to be the ruler, the next election we would succeed or not? If we want to make the next president of Egypt one of us, we will succeed, because we have a lot of respected members whom no one in this country disagrees about. But it will not happen like this. This will be harmful for this country and we will be like the former regime.

BDS: Can you tell me more about the vision of the Brotherhood of the future for Egypt and other Muslim countries?

MA: They have divided the country into three parts, we will, inshallah, take the third part with 30 or 35% members in parliament. We will try to make our vision to this vision by mercy, by services, by the rights these people need. After five years we will see if the people accept us in this third part, we will move to the second third part. After five years after this we will take the third part. If we succeeded in letting people believe in our vision we will have succeeded in our aim. But. If the experiment doesn’t work, it is not the time yet, we will use the other things that we were using before the revolution. We have our social section and the economic section and the educational section… We will use this to develop this country, if the people want it. If the people of Egypt refuses us, so be it. I think we will succeed. In the elections of 2005 88 of us became members of parliament. If you ask anyone who lives in one of these districts he will say that these PMs are good and serving men and they didn’t do it for their personal glory, or the glory of our movement, because no one is sure about his life. I may not go to my home. Death comes at any second. These people are not eager to rule because we all know that death comes sudden. We are a brick, a brick of a building. Brick over brick over brick makes a building. The lowest brick may be not seen, but it is necessary, it makes a building. I know it’s a theoretical speech, but it’s true.

BDS: If you look at two other countries who claim to follow the laws of Islam, Saudi Arabia and Iran, what do you think these countries do wrong, how do they differ with the vision of the Brotherhood?

MA: Let’s start with Iran, Khomeini was a leader. He has charisma. His people looked at him and saw him like a son. This is wrong, we don’t look at our religion as a person. There is right and wrong. Khomeini did some things wrong. He forced people to do
things he wanted to be right. Don’t force people things they don’t want people to do. We cannot be like in Iran…

BDS: … can you give some examples of things he forced the people to do?

MA: In Iran, Lobke cannot meet me like this, she must wear a veil. This is unfair, because I know, I believe that she must wear a veil, but if she doesn’t want to I cannot force her to do it. In Iran there is another example, there is no freedom. If Ahmadinejade says we are a free country, they are not. I saw some of their channels like al-Manar, they bring every protest in the world, Bahrein, Syria, Morocco, but they present nothing in Iran even though they are protesting there. There is no democracy there. Religion becomes the mosque, they rule people without democracy. Our religion cannot be forced. There is a verse in our Quran, which says I have my religion, you have your religion, you have the right to follow your religion. This is not happening in Iran. Saudi Arabia: the contrary. The King says – and we don’t have kings in Islam – we are the land of Islam, we have the Kabaa, we have Madina but in the country there is no democracy, as in any other part in the Arab world. Just try to say something about the ruling family. You will vanish. Not arrested, vanish. You will be sent beyond the sun.

BDS: You think democracy and freedom are important aspects of an Islamic society, but some Islamists say that these are Western concepts. Do you think this is true? Or are they a part of Islam?

MA: It is not Western. […] The love of life, of rule, of being respected and treated like a god, do you see Turkey? What do you think of it? It is some kind of Islamic concept. But a modern Islamic democratic concept, as I think in my personal point of view. They are walking along the right way, they are moving slowly to achieve democracy with an Islamic background. But first democracy, not Islam. And the two are connected in some way. Islam has democracy. Islam has more than democracy. The democracy that I learned in school is “you are opposing me and you are the minority, then my concept will rule and you sit in the seat of the opponent”. Shura is not like that. You have your point and I have my point. If we agree on something we should both work towards it. Have you read about our Islamic history? The history of our prophet Muhammad. We have had the battle of Uhud. The prophet made a council. The youth said we must go out of Madina and meet the unbelievers. The elder people say we must stay in Madina and defend it. Our prophet wanted to stay in the Madina, but the youth were in the majority, so the choice was to go out. After that the youth felt that they forced the prophet to do something that he did not want to do, but he said, if we agree about something, if the majority agree on something we should all do it. He didn’t say the majority should go out and we stay. This is the difference between democracy and shura. Shura is the whole movement, not the majority moves and the minority stays.

BDS: Do you think women should gain a bigger role in the movement? Or is this a foreign idea?
MA: In the elections of 2010, in our district we made a woman, she was an engineer, Amal Abdelkarim, one of our candidates. She is a respected woman in her company where she works. We don’t have the fear that women must take part, that she must take part.

[interruption]

MA: We don’t fear that women take part, she must take part... but not any part. We believe that there is no woman – I believe – could be the president of this country. I don’t want a woman to be a judge, personally. Suppose that a murderer killed two or three people, a serial killer, and the judge was a woman, and in the court this murderer’s children came and cry before the judge “our father will die” and shed a lot of tears. What will she say? She will say: go to him, go home. This is not... The woman has passion, the man has mind. There are some jobs that no man can do better than a woman. And vice versa. There are some jobs that a woman cannot do. Excuse me [towards Lobke, laughs].

I do not know the formal opinion of our movement with regard to this question, but I can tell me own opinion and they accept it as my opinion, but the decision whatever it will be, I will accept it. Because, as I said before, we all work for the best.

BDS: Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood can make political alliances with other parties?

MA: It can and it is moving towards this now. Because all of us, we and other parties, or other movements, we hope and we think, we believe that all of us work for the good of this country. [...] But I cannot agree or accept something that is not our way. There could be some divisions, but not a lot. We don’t want to be leading these movements. There is al-Wafd party, this is a respected party, an ancient party. We agree with them. We agree with Tagammu or some sort, not the whole way. If they want to come with us, from my knowledge, we don’t refuse. We welcome them. If we want to achieve the best of this country.

BDS: There is now an independent teachers’ union. Do you think as a teacher this is good? Are you a member of this union?

MA: We are in the club of our union, our syndicate. This is nothing. The bathroom is for animals. They took steps to remove this council. It began a month and a half ago, after February 11th we wanted this council to go away. We didn’t even want to try them or get them to court, but just to remove them. The syndicate should be ruled by its own members. We collected signatures, about one hundred and a half thousands teachers throughout Egypt and we will give the signatures to the council. Please we don’t want you, please go away, let the syndicate be ruled by its members. If they don’t accept it, we will take it to the martial council. Until the day before yesterday we were planning to make a sit-in, but the martial council forbade it, so we take all the legal moves to achieve our aim. We will not abandon this aim, because we are moving before this revolution and we were protesting, but let me say something about teachers. Teachers have their personal work. Now after this revolution I have met in Tahrir square some of my students. These students when they came back to
school talked about what happened. The teachers gained courage from their sons, their children. I think they began to move and I think they will not stop. The matter here is concerned with money. The teachers are frankly money lovers, because our work is money. We don’t have the right state, level, standard we should have. So we will not stop this until it is achieved or until we will be fired. We have the right I think to do this and we have the floor which we are standing on and it is a solid floor.

BDS: So it’s a better strategy to try and reform the existing syndicate from within than to create a new independent union?

MA: This is not happening in Egypt. You cannot make a parallel union, no. This is not happening in Egypt. In the last elections, al-Wafd, Tagammu and many parties and we also joined them and made a shadow parliament and Mubarak said let them amuse themselves. The government will not accept something like that. We want to free this syndicate from all its councils, from the head council to the councils in the districts and make another election and only accept them through elections. It is not like the revolution. The sit-in will not achieve our aims but it will be a step in achieving our aims. It will not be achieved but with elections. And we have the right to have elections. Free elections.

HH: First you said you had little conflict with other parties like Tagammu and al-Wafd and had a lot of agreements with them with regard to the interests of the country. What are the disagreements?

MA: An example from history. Again we return to our battles with unbelievers in Madina. When the battle of al-3azab came, the prophet made a truce with the Jews to defend their country against a huge danger which would destroy the whole Madina. We can make such agreements with whatever party. Because we want to stop a great danger which divide this country. We do not want a civil war. Mubarak wanted to start one before he stepped down, but God didn’t allow him to do so. We can make some agreements with them.

HH: But what are the specific conflicts and disagreements, which ideas are you not accepting?

MA: We don’t make conflicts, they do. They do not want to develop in a smooth way. Tagammu for example, dr. Rifaat Said, one day we sat together and I myself attended a conference which was held in the journalists’ syndicate. He said something good, very hopeful for this country, but after the conference he attacked us. He said that we don’t want to go with the unity of the conference. It is not like that. In this country there are a lot of people. Everyone wants to be the leader. Everybody wants to be the real ruler of the country. We are not as individuals. We want to rule according to rules, not according to the point of view of somebody. We don’t want to rule according to the point of view of our Murshid. If he does so, we will say thank you, stay in your home. We want people agree on specific rules. Not our own rules. If we want the people to live according to our own rules we become like Iran or Libya or Syria or Russia or the USSR.
HH: Those parties are trying to rule the country and force the people to believe in their ideas?

MA: Not force them. Some of them, not all of them. There are some of them and there are a lot who are really patriotic and want the good for this country, but some, few of them want to rule. They don’t want to force the people to do things, they just want to rule. Like Mubarak, he just wanted to rule and he didn’t care about what the people wanted. He wanted the wealth of this country in his pocket and to rule a people of animals. We don’t want the people to be like animals, like Libyans people. They eat well, sleep well, without nothing! They are like wealthy animals. They live like a pet, put in a golden cage, but it’s still an animal, not a human.

HH: You still didn’t tell me what the specific points of difference are... Also, can the Ikhwan be flexible in their demands if the people don’t agree with them. What if they don’t agree with specific Islamic rules?

MA: This morning in our school we discussed about what would happen if the Ikhwan would rule. After a victory in the elections... Will we close all the wine and whiskey shops? No. We will say no. We derive it from our history. When God forbade wine, he did not forbade it at once, it came gradually.

[interruption]

MA: If we force people to stop this and they didn’t want to stop it, they will make another revolution against us. We believe in gradual change. Anything must not come sudden. If we did this, it would as if we brought someone in a very hot condition and put him in a fridge. The gradual way of achieving anything is the best way to achieve. You make people believe. You make people refuse. We will not close the nightclubs, although we believe the nightclubs are places of evil, to sell whatever evil thing. But we will try to convince people, not force, not to go inside these places. These places will close themselves if they don’t have any customers. If they close they won’t die of hunger. What prevents them to change? To any other project? They were not born working in nightclubs, they can have any job and this country must provide the youth of job opportunities, good job opportunities with a respectful salary. I am working as –excuse me – as a whore. If you find me a good job with a respected salary I would not like this again. I can’t change my work. We will not close them, we will convince people not to do these things. If we fail to do this, then the people is not yet ready to accept our concepts.

About the parties. They want the quick step. [...] We must reach our aims with our without us. They don’t believe that. For example, Sa’ad al-Badawi the leader of al-Wafd party, what prevents from being a president? He himself is looking forward to it. No one guarantees his life. He wants to be the leader. He sees no one in Egypt must be the leader of this country except him. Maybe he is right. He needs to achieve this quickly, because he does not guarantee his life. We have a different idea. We must move slowly because the people must be convinced of everything we do. They do not
want to do that. They want to achieve the end quickly because they want to live in this state, in this world, in this country.

HH: You said that the Iranian regime of Khomeini and the Salafis are using religious issues and relations to influence the revolution and politics...

MA: ...a lot of Salafis were in Tahrir square...

HH: ... they are trying to use religious influence to rule the people. It is bad to rule the people through religion like the Salafis do. But a lot of parties and journalists say that the Ikhwan were using their religious influence just like the Salafis to convince them in political issues, like the referendum.

MA: Now or in the past?

HH: I am talking about the last referendum on the constitutional amendments.

MA: The Friday prayer has a lot of influence on the people. We wanted to say the people say yes. But we didn’t force them to say yes.

HH: I didn’t say you forced them, but convinced them through religion.

MA: It is true. There is a connection between what we want people to do or convince them to do and what they must do. A lot of people in Egypt, except for the sophisticated or the Christians, our Brothers, do not know what these elections stand for. So they want someone who they trust to tell them what to say. I will tell you about my own mother. She is illiterate and 61 years old. She asked me on Friday “Son what will I choose tomorrow: yes or no?” If you’d be in my place what would you say? I said to her: say yes. She said yes, not because I am one of the Brotherhood or because I used religious influence, she chose that because she knew that I am aware and I studied this carefully and my opinion will save her the effort of thinking and discussing and choosing. She trusted me. Most of the people are like my mother.

HH: So 77% trusted the Ikhwan.

MA: [laughs] Let’s say 60%, 17%...

HH: ... were the Salafists and others. In fact, a lot of left forces and Egyptians said yes and that’s their right.

MA: So you want to conclude that we, whatever, Ikhwan or Salafis, convinced or influenced people to say yes. Is this true?

HH: It is true but it is your right to tell people what to do in your vision...
MA: ... We can’t force people to do something which is not in their benefit. We don’t accept the results of this. If we want this country be ruled by Ikhwan, we can do it, but we must not...

HH: ... they are not ready yet?

MA: People trust us. That’s a fact and it’s a great responsibility. If my mother trusts me and I put her in a wrong way, God will let not me. We are living this life according to two things: the religious concept which controls us, but at the same way we have to obey the rules which God put in the world. People must live with us, with each other, people must be in societies. People are not a herd, with a shepherd and sheep. We must not do this. It’s politics. Politics sometimes circumvent the issue, not moving in a straight line. We sometimes this curve. This is politics. We agree about that.

HH: The prophet himself made a truce with the Jews to protect the town from danger and Ikhwan are making agreements with the parties with whom they differ in opinion. Within the 15 years you will rule the country, have the majority and then you will not need these agreements with unbelievers or parties who do not share your ideology. Will Ikhwan close the parties then if you are the majority in this third step? You will first convince the people in Egypt in the first five years. If they accept that you are working for their benefit. In the second period you will have more seats in the parliament. The people are already trusting you more. Then you will convince them to rule in an Islamic way. This is the third period. If the whole majority will be with you and convinced to rule the country with Islamic rules. Will you close parties who oppose this?

MA: You cannot do to people what we ourselves have suffered from. In Madina there were some munafiqin, if the prophet Muhammad would have killed or slain these people, it would be said that he killed his friends. If we closed the parties and don’t give them the freedom they should have we would be like another Mubarak and we would suffer from this. We will not allow ourselves to do the same thing. The world would not allow this either. We don’t live in a closed country. The whole world is looking at us now. They are waiting for a little mistake from our part. We can’t do this.

HH: You are afraid from the world...

MA: ... No we are afraid from God. We don’t want injustice to be in the world. We believe there is a paradise and a hell. We don’t look at life. We are looking beyond it. If we do something wrong, God will not forgive us. If we take one inch of anyone’s freedom it will be like if we took the freedom of a whole country. But we will accept it with anger. We have to accept it. We have to let anyone say what he want to say because this is freedom. If we don’t do that we will not be the kind of rulers, if you may say this, that we want. Let me go back to the Turkish example, there are a lot of opposing voices in Turkey now. If Erdogan closed these parties they will not deserve to exist [the Islamists]. This is a discourse which my God will judge me with in the future. We will not do that.
HH: Ikhwan will rule the country step by step and I know that ruling the country is not the aim of Ikhwan, they will do this in the interests of the majority...

MA: ... we don’t want to rule by our persons...

HH: ... but with your ideology...

MA: ... something like that. If there is a person who agrees to take this country to the good with a revealed Islamic concept or not he may take the country to the good and justice. Without the concept of Islam. For example, Japan. Japan is a respected country with justice. Without religion. If we have this kind of person who will take this country to this result we will follow him, because he will achieve half of our demands. Which is justice. Next Islam will come, simply, smoothly and logically...

HH: ... because the atmosphere is right. If an Egyptian Christian is a candidate for the presidential elections and he wins. What would al-Ikhwan do. Or a woman.

BDS: Make it a Christian woman.

[everyone laughs]

MA: You said: and he succeeded. The people chose. I am not of the idea that a woman could rule me. But if the people choose it, I will accept it. The other thing is that I failed. I failed to make my concept to the people clear. This means that I have to work harder to achieve my concept. And it will not be more than four years. I think four years, not eight. Because in this four years I will try to convince, to persuade, to show the people the way. If this Christian woman or man succeeds in achieving justice to this country, I will be one of the first to re-elect her. Because we do not talk about persons, but justice and dignity for people. If the next president is a woman, I will accept this result, because the people freely, without forging, chose so. Let it be like the people chose.

[interruption]

HH: Some people are saying that the prophet himself was a socialist and that there was socialism in the society of Madina. Is it true that Islam is close to socialism?

MA: It is a way of life, not a way of ideas. If we don’t live it, ideas become mere words. Yes, the prophet was a social man. He lived in Madina with two relations: one with God, the religious connection which no one can contest, because we are talking about the relation between man and God. Second: the relation between man and his brother in the “manhood”. One day the people of Madina came to him and said: prophet we used to take the seeds from the palm tree into the female palm tree before Islam, should we continue this, after the prophet came to Madina. The prophet said: no no. They thought it was an order from God because they thought that the prophet was the man who transferred the order of God to them. And that year the palm tree did
not have any harvest. When they came back to him he said: you are more aware of your life issues than me. They thought that everything the prophet said must be an order from God. And the prophet himself, I think God himself, wants this lesson be clear to everyone. Muhammad is a human. If matters concern the everyday life of people, why not? Many people know in everyday life more than Muhammad himself. He did not know how to write or read. So there were many people in Madina who were more knowledgeable than Muhammad in this domain. [...] We don’t want Iran. We don’t want the people to be blinded and take whatever we said into their heads and go on.

HH: Even because they trust you?

MA: It is a big responsibility, you know. My children, my sons, I am their father and they must, must obey me. It is my responsibility to show them the right thing, not what I want, even if my desire sometimes is in contradiction with this. Then I must abandon my desire and tell them what to do to their benefit. That’s the problem, the issue. We don’t want the people to live like they do. We want them to live a better life. Let it be clear that we don’t want all Egyptians to be Muslim Brothers. A lot of people cannot bear what we do. We live on sand on a winter’s night. People cannot bear that. They don’t have a martial training. We just want people to live a happy life, as everyone wants, but do not overcome any right of anyone else.

HH: So the prophet was a socialist?

MA: Yes he was a social person with a religious background.

HH: So is socialism close to Islam? [...]

MA: I will give you another example, we discussed it also this morning. Nikolai Ceausescu, the dictator of Romania. We also talked about the latest football match. One of my colleagues said: one day Nikolai’s football team failed a match. When the plane landed back in Romania he put all players in prison because you have a job, you are paid a lot to do this job, and you failed, so you have to be punished. If I fail my job as a teacher, I must be punished. When our team comes back, they shouldn’t go to jail, but they take a lot of money, what do you do to take this money? A dustman in the street does his best and takes nothing. A scrap of bread. We don’t want this, we don’t want anyone who does his best to this country, whatever his position, he must be paid. Anyone who fails must either leave his place or be punished. The money for this country is not for anyone to take.

HH: [...] So you said the relation with God, the religious relation, should not interfere with the social relation.

MA: If the relation with or orders of God does not concern everyday life matters. If God says do not do something, we must do it.
HH: [...] Do you agree that all mosques and religious buildings in Egypt open their doors for Ikhwan, the Salafis and other religious movements, so you have all these places to teach the people in the ways of Islam.

MA: I must reveal all the ideas and let people choose.

HH: Within an Islamic and religious background. So the mosques teach people and give them all the lessons about religion and make them understand the message of God and the prophet. And you said that socialism is close to Islam. And you said that there is a big difference between religion and the political domain. Why don’t you leave the political playground to the political organization, especially when you say that the aim is to give the people the right vision without religion influencing politics. Why do you not restrict your role to religion and leave politics to the politicians.

MA: Because God created us and he doesn’t want us to be two parts. A part of people who live on the mountains and in the desert who worship God alone, and a part who lives his life as he wants. If God wanted that, he would not send us prophets. Beginning from Adam to Muhammad. You separated them. We are not like that. We can do politics according to the laws of Islam or according to the concept of our religion. [...] Do you remember how Islam went to the Far East? It went with the merchants. China and Afghanistan and Africa. They were merchants. This phone is now 200 EGP. Tomorrow it will be 250 EGP. The man came to the Arab merchant and asked: how much is it? He said 200 EGP. He came the next day: how much is it? He was ready to say 220/250 EGP, he said 200 EGP. He was astonished. How? Every day the price changed. He said no. I sell it with just 200 EGP. This is Islam. The idea is that religion controls what people do in their life. This is the only way people are sure that the rules of life don’t change. [...] Our religion and our verses and our religion and our Quran rules these matters. I cannot speak my words which I want to give people only inside the mosque. I was looking forward to a question which you did not ask. How will you try to change people? Our brothers in Salafi movements only use one thing. One way, which is the mosque. People from Muhammad to now, hear, hear, hear, and they did not see an example. The difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and other movements is that I cannot change Haisam unless I am changed myself, I cannot change people unless I am an idea which they must follow. For example, I don’t smoke. I hope that one day you give up smoking...

HH: ... inshallah [laughs]...

MA: I will not give you a prayer and speech in the mosque that smoking is bad and prohibited. I will give you the good of not smoking by act, not by word. So our influence on people will not be inside the mosque, but inside every place. We can change people if we are changed ourselves. [...] If I don’t change myself from inside, people won’t change. On the way I can do wrong, I can be weak sometimes, I still do some things bad, but I ask God to forgive me and I hope that God will not show people this. [...]
BDS: It is interesting that you say that choice is very important. People have to choose to be good. If you remove all evil places, like nightclubs, people do not have a choice any more to be good or to be bad. Can people still be good if they don’t have the choice to be good or bad. Is not the role of evil in the world to be able to choose good?

MA: If we raise the standard of people, they will not think of some things they were thinking about in the past. For example, I grew up in this movement twenty years ago. As I said, and I am sorry to declare this example, I do not smoke, not because I didn’t like to smoke. I smoked three cigarettes and I remember the situations. This movement elevated my standards. Going to nightclubs, whatever, I do not think about them today. My standard is higher. So I do not think of things which ordinary people think of. All that we want is to elevate the standard of people so they will not look at these things. We will not close them. We will not close the cigarette companies. We cannot. But we will try and hope God will help us to let people give up. If so, this factory will change its activity to anything else. A factory of milk, for example. I say that we will not close them until people say that we do not want them. People will not stop going to nightclubs, etc, it will not disappear. We are not in a Platonic world or city. It will not end. If it ends, we will die. We will not find someone to call him to go to the mosque if there is no one who doesn’t pray. We need customers. [laughs]
DS: I am the secretary of the Labor Party and a member of the Kefaya committee and part of most youth movements. Hizb al-Amal is an official party. It was the head of the opposition. It has a paper called al-Sha’b which was very famous. It participated in a lot of propaganda. [...] In 2000 the party was frozen by the regime. After the freezing of the party, we did not agree with the freezing position and we deal with the Islamic Labor Party as an official party, not as a frozen association. Magdy Hussein was the chairman of the party, he was the first person to wrote an article, in 2001, about Mubarak and he was the first one to say “down with Mubarak”. And there were more than one campaign to collect signatures for people to get Mubarak down. This campaign became stronger through the Iraq war, then there was Kefaya, we were members of this movement. During this period the government did not stop to attack the Islamic Labor Party through arresting some of its members and filter their electronic website and through some actions such as illusionary appearances of members of the party, such as Ibrahim Shukri. He is the chairman of the party and he stopped its activities before the freezing decision. There was some false media propaganda about him and the party. It did not succeed because the party took its legitimacy from the street, from the radical movement. It is the leadership which represents the party. This all failed. We were the main source in Kefaya movement and we have dr. Magdy Hussein as the main secretary of the movement, in addition to other members who are members of the principle committee in Kefaya. The strike of 6 April was one of the most important strikes which happened in Egypt. We were one of the forces who accepted the proposal to strike. The first declaration written was from Magdy Hussein, our chairman. There were eleven members of the party inside Cairo who were arrested and the chairman in Suez and some members or youth in the other governorates. These are some general points about the Labor Party. The party is a pan-Arabist party with Islamic references: an Islamic party which believes in pan-Arabism or nationalism.

BDS: Before 1987 the Labor Party was socialist but not Islamist and then there was a coalition with the Muslim Brothers. Since then the Labor party has become more and more Islamic. My question is if the relation between the Labor party and the Muslim Brotherhood was a two-way street. If the Muslim Brotherhood became more socialist, just as the Labor Party became more Islamic?

DS: We didn’t turn to Islamism as a part of this alliance. We already had an Islamist orientation before this collaboration. We had a slogan like Socialist Labor Party and
our core was Islamist and we applied for the Islamist Socialism. In 1987 we liberated this expression and we completed this movement. [...] Our name changed a lot from Egypt Strength to Socialist Party to National Islamist Party. So the orientation of our party is Islam and the differences are about the expression or the name of the party. Ahmed Hussayn is the founder of the party. [...] We announced then Islamic Socialism. After the establishment of the party, in 1975 in the time of Sadat, we called the party the Islamic Labor Party in order to establish social equality or justice, especially because the government at that time was in a struggle against the socialists. And to make a link in the minds of the people between Egypt’s strength and a socialist party. In 1984 we held the main conference of the party, and at that time there was no coalition with the Muslim Brotherhood. Then there was a reformation in an Islamic direction. At that time the Muslim Brotherhood was in an alliance with al-Wafd and they did not achieve a huge number of members [of parliament]; only nine. Adil Hussayn was the chairman of the party at that time and he offered an alliance with Muslim Brotherhood at that time by the slogan of the Amal party which was Islam huwa al-hal. He wrote a program for elections. And he succeeded with the Muslim Brotherhood: 33 members and on the list are 64 members, so they were the head of the opposition at that time. The 64 members on the list were all Islamists whether they were Muslim Brotherhood or members of the Labor Party or two or three members of the liberal party. The party has an Islamist orientation but this wasn’t clear in the slogans, it appeared later on.

BDS: An Islamist orientation can have different meanings for the workers. There are tendencies and parties who defend more a Saoudi kind of Islamism which favors the businessmen, and there are other forms of Islamism which are more close to the people. During the eighties the Muslim Brotherhood were more close to the businessmen, for example in their election program. But in the nineties this changed. Is this because of hizb al-Amal that this attitude changed and what do you think about this change in the Muslim Brotherhood? For example in 1991 in the trade-union-elections, the Ikhwan had its own list, the Islamic Trend.

DS: If you are talking in general, the effect of Muslim Brotherhood on Labor Party and vice versa... We effected the Muslim Brotherhood in many cases like the situation of the women, the situation of Christians. The Muslim Brotherhood refused that women or Christians could be on the list. We insisted that there should be Christians or women. During the last years the Muslim Brotherhood became more flexible. It is not the perfect form, but there were some positive developments. In the economic fields the Muslim Brotherhood are only talking about general economy, the market. Through the election program, they gained a huge interest in social justice and workers rights. In spite of this there are some differences. In the nineties there was a law about the land rent, there were differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Amal party. The Muslim Brotherhood was with the law and the landlords against the people who rent the land. The Muslim Brotherhood doesn’t have an economic perspective, but there is a general opinion that they are with most of the people who own lands or wield economic power.
BDS: In the nineties there were a lot of privatizations. What was the position of your party on these privatizations?

DS: We were against it and our al-Sha’b newspaper organized a huge campaign against it. The union and the party made some demonstrations against it. Especially in the places where we related to.

BDS: When the land reform was implemented the party took the side of the farmers. There was also a big movement of farmers. Did the party do something to support them?

DS: The newspaper adopted this case and we were against this law and there were too many conflicts for the peasants in the lands and there were arrests of the chairman of the peasants in the party. So we had a huge campaign against it.

BDS: In the last ten years there have been many workers protests about salaries, but also against privatizations. How did the party support these protests of the workers?

DS: In the last ten years, no, unfortunately. Our existence became little. Before 2000 we had a big role, but in the last period we had not a big role among the workers, but we supported them through media, the paper and the website, through demonstrations in Cairo. Some delegates were used to go to the demonstrations of the peasants at that time. Also to the Mahalla demonstration. Political delegates of our party went there and supported them.

BDS: How is the cooperation between your party and other political groups? Are there groups which you have a bad or a good relation with? For example with al-Wafd, Tagammu, …

DS: We have a principle. On the one hand we have something against the American-Zionist cooperation and we struggle against Mubarak as he is the follower of the American and Zionists. Our closest collaboration is with Kefaya and Karama party and the RS. They are movements which adapt a single goal. Between us and the official parties since late there has been a huge distance.

BDS: Isn’t it a problem for your party to work together with organizations which are not Islamist but secular?

DS: Some groups are more similar in ideology, like the Muslim Brotherhood, while others are more similar in their political aims, like the RS.

BDS: So your alliance is determined by two axes?

DS: Yes. […] On the one hand there are those who are Islamist and on the other hand those who are against Mubarak and Israel. We give more importance to the last group. As a result the communists are our ideological opposites but most important allies. There are two cases: the Palestinian case and the opposition against Mubarak.
BDS: So your party is against imperialism and the regime. Is it also against capitalism?

DS: Yes.

BDS: What about the coming elections? What is the view of your party on these elections? Does your party participate in the elections?

DS: We will not participate in any elections.

BDS: Are you joining the boycott campaign?

DS: Yes.

BDS: How do you think this boycott campaign will effect Egyptian politics?

DS: The philosophy of boycott of the Islamic Labor Party is in the frame of not agreeing with the regime or not confessing or living in the regime. Our perspective is not adapting to the regime but adopting civil disobedience.

BDS: What about the presidential elections next year? What will happen?

DS: It’s fake. It will be either Mubarak the father or the son. There is a huge division in the system between the military groups and the businessmen. The businessmen support Gamal Mubarak and the military groups support Mubarak the father or another figure from the army.

[...]

BDS: So your party supports popular revolution? Do you think this kind of revolution is near in the future? Or is it a process of a long time? How can your party intervene?

DS: In the next couple of years there will be a change through a people’s revolution. The protests which are taking place now are the core of this revolution and at a certain point there will be a huge urge to unite all the leaders of this protest movements from workers, employers, students, and to unite them in one frame. At that time they will be able to say this is the change. What the movement lacks now: there is no united leadership to unite the people. This leadership could appear after the 6April strike, but the opposition could not realize this so this can happen in the next period.
AL-SAYYID Muhammad  
23-3-2011

Respondent: Ahmed al-Sayyid, leader of the health technicians union (AS)
Date: 23 March 2011
Location: Cairo, health technicians union HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and recording

BDS: Before the revolution there were already a few independent trade-unions: the real estate tax workers union, the teachers’ union, the pensioners’ union, and, yours: the health technicians union. Can you tell me about the creation of this union.

AS: These four trade-unions were already made before the revolution, they didn’t use the revolution as a springboard to become independent trade-unions. We announced the trade-union by the end of 2009. Those four trade-unions were working as a seed of the revolution, under pressure of the regime and the police. We didn’t make any strikes because our job is very sensitive. We started maybe in a café, at someone’s place, with some friends, we were delaying to start it formally. Then we noticed that our numbers increased, because the alternative was the state syndicate. With this amount of numbers we met Kamal Abu al-Eita. We learned from him how to set-up a good trade-union. Kamal Abu al-Eita started his trade-union with a strike, but we took the decision to first set-up our organization, gather a lot of members, announce our demands, and only then, when we did not get our demands, we should organize a strike. We organized a weekly meeting for the Cairo members, on Saturday and on Thursday, and a monthly meeting of all the members in the branches. Each month we went to the different governorates to spread our ideas, each first Friday of the month. We went to all the governorates of the country but we had a slow reaction, answer because people were afraid of the repression of the government. The old state trade-unions formed an obstacle for us because people thought that we would steal them, like the syndicates used to do in Egypt. For a whole year we didn’t take any fees from any member, we just invited people to join us and we were convinced that whomever we won in a governorate, city or village, that those people would be really engaged to become members in the trade-union. Not asking for fees in the beginning was a good tactic because it showed that we were not after the people’s money. During these trips and journeys we took a lawyer with us who knows the legal details about the law for syndicates in Egypt. Even I studied the law myself just to know about my rights. In addition to educate the people in their lost rights, we also encouraged them to be more active in their state unions, especially in the regions of Upper Egypt, because of their low wages. Despite these problems and atmosphere we succeeded in making our first trade-union meeting and created the trade-union to discuss the internal constitution and organization of the union. All of us lost our jobs because of this struggle. In addition to the police repression… We held a main conference in the journalists’ syndicate with the help of Kamal Abu Eita, and we announced the creation of the trade-union. We tried to announce the union to the Ministry of Manpower and all other Ministries, but they refused to accept our documents. So we
took the other legal way by sending the documents to the court. One of the advantages of the revolution was that it made our voices stronger, especially after having Ahmed al-Borai as a Minister of Manpower. But the only problem for me... al-Borai did a lot of good things, but he signed a new decision NOT to cut the membership fee from the wages, and this makes it hard for us to have independent funds and aid. I myself asked NOT to cut it for the wages, but to make it an option for the member. This issue is still under discussion. We have an account in the bank and that’s a start. We had a discussion to make a committee, the Health Technical Institute. That’s it.

BDS: What is the relation between the union and the state’s doctors’ syndicate and the nurses’ movement which was also very strong last year?

AS: This is the only obstacle for us, the doctors’ syndicate. They are the main force in Egypt to stop our union. Hamdi al-Sayyid has been the syndicate administrator for a longer time than Mubarak was president! I want to put him on fire! [laughs] What do you mean with the nurses movement?

BDS: Last year we talked with a nurse who was active in the movement, for example in Shibin al-Qom.

AS: Yes, yes. We attended a conference in the journalists’ syndicate, it was called The Problems of the Nurses, we made a speech in the conference. We are not directly related to the nurses movements, but we face the same problems. This is the fact for all the jobs in Egypt. The nurses have their own state union, but they have problems with it. This is the problem for all Egyptians.

BDS: After the Kefaya movement there were also a group of Doctors for Change, do you have a good relation with them?

AS: We have a good relation with Doctors for Change and Doctors without Rights, especially with their leader Mouna Mina. All of us have a good relation with them, for them it is one and the same movement.

BDS: Which kind of members does the Health Technicians Trade-Union contain?

AS: The laboratory technicians, the anesthetist assistants, machine technicians ... no nurses, all those who graduated from the health technical institute.

BDS: You said you had some supports from lawyers. Were there also centers who supported the union, for example HMLC?

AS: I am the most lucky one in Egypt. [ironic] HMLC contacted us but they were not serious about it. All the centers supported us... but in words only: we’ll be with you, supporting you, but we won’t do anything for you. As I said we had the discussion to stall the fight until our demands were not met. When we wanted to start our cases, the revolution began and now I’m the most lucky one in Egypt.
BDS: So today the climate now with the revolution is fertile for an independent trade-union?

AS: Yes, but we must be cautious because of two points. Firstly, it’s easier to get our documents accepted but at the same time it is a fake democracy. Before 25 January we were only the lion who can roar, and even now it remains the same. Everyone took the path of revolution, everyone wants to make their own trade-union, and that’s not right at all. Only if their numbers are high enough, the independent unions will have an impact, it’s not the number of unions which counts.

BDS: So you think it’s important to move slowly, to develop the unions, to have many members first?

AS: Yes, of course. Anyone who wants to make a new union has to have much more numbers in order to make a union. The one with the biggest number has the right to make one. This is democracy: if you have 10 members and 7 say yes, the other 3 have to say yes as well. Those 3 must obey this voting, and not take another way or direction. To cooperate in the state union is better than to split away.

BDS: There are also steps to create a trade-union federation. Do you think this is a step in the right direction, or do you think there have to be first strong unions to have a new federation?

AS: We should start with the federation because they can help to build the other unions. You should find a leadership or patron to support you. All of the people in Egypt need a union to take their rights, but they don’t know how to do it. So we employ for example a lawyer or someone else to help them.

BDS: What political forces are supporting the independent unions, both before and after the revolution, and what political forces are against the unions.

AS: Before the revolution there was nothing, only foreign agents with their speeches. After the revolution, until now, the Egyptian labor union, the state union, is controlling the state media, so we don’t have any support. The state unions give the journalists a lot of aid, and trips to foreign countries...

BDS: ... even opposition newspapers?

AS: Yes, even in the opposition newspapers. It’s not easy to develop democracy [...]. Those who are in power now are those who encouraged the thugs, and who opened the prisons, and they are writing the news right now. [...] After the revolution, our trade-union gives consciousness through conferences and seminars. We met with the state administration after the revolution. Also the ILO sent someone to us. I met him and he didn’t agree to meet the state union. He said he would give us training, but we haven’t got any real result up until now. Now I’m trying to build this with my own hands. Like what an old wise man said: who owns his right, owns his decisions.
BDS: At this moment there is a new law, the law against protests and strikes. Do you think this law was targeted at the labor movement, because there is now a lot of movement among the workers and that the regime tries to stop the workers with this law?

AS: It is a wrong decision. The only way to avoid a wrong decision is to write a period for this law: from this time to that time. The revolution came to ban these kinds of issues and now you can say it gives us more of the same with regard to strikes. First the culture of Egypt must be changed to show the real democracy and real social justice [...].

BDS: Do you think that perhaps a party made of workers and for workers can make a difference for the workers’ movement?

AS: First we have to make solid trade-unions, then we can have a party, but it takes a long time to create it. The ex-regime made fake parties, so people are not trusting the parties. Building independent trade-unions can create a party like the British Labor Party, a powerful and respected party. It may be happening in six months. Because the labor movement existed in Egypt for a while, since 2004. A lot of workers were arrested because of their strikes, but they never stopped striking. First we must destroy all the old figures and build the consciousness.

BDS: The problem, of course, is that this is a long process, and that there are a lot of problems now, and that there will be elections really soon because of the referendum. Aren’t you afraid that there will be a government hostile to the workers’ movement?

AS: That’s why we saying that in this short period we must start with a campaign to raise the consciousness of the workers. [...] 

BDS: The Muslim Brothers played a big role in the doctors’ syndicate is this also the case for the health technicians union?

AS: What you say about the Ikhwan supporting the doctors, it is not true at all. They didn’t support. Hamdi al-Sayyid is still present. If the Ikhwan really supported the doctors he wouldn’t be there right now. The Ikhwan is only an ogre. An ogre made by the ex-regime. It is not real. The Ikhwan are not playing a big role. The regime only uses them to frighten people. I never met one of them during my trade-union work. There is no problem between Christians and Muslims in Egypt it is only made up. The Egyptian is only Egyptian.

BDS: If the Ikhwan are not present in the labor movement, or do not have any influence over the labor movement, are they then afraid of an independent labor movement, because they will lose a lot of support from the people?

AS: They won’t be ever afraid. They were never afraid and they won’t be ever afraid. The Egyptian is natural and kind and he believes only the one who talks kindly. So that’s why I am saying that if we have justice and a fair media, all the people will follow the
right path. The answer of Ikhwan in Egypt is not good. They didn’t write Egypt’s history. Egypt’s history is written by people who hate the Ikhwan. They were the first in 1952 to support Abdel Nasser. And Abdel Nasser was the first to kill them, nobody else. I don’t trust them, but I am not against them. For me there is one perspective: we are all Egyptians.
BDS: I heard you were active in the nurses movement.

SSM: Yes, in the voice of nurses movement. We have strikes and are still organizing ourselves, each hospital is like an isolated island. The nurses have low salaries, they work twelve hours, they have one pound and 25 piasters each shift for the twelve hours in university hospitals like al-Qasr al-Aini, it’s a hospital of Cairo University. [...] They deduct taxes from our wages even if the shifts are like twelve hours through the night. We take, in the end, after the deduction, 59 piasters through 12 hours at night. [...] From 1996 and 1998 the Ministry of Health wanted to make a new budget, but it is not applied. The nurses are looking like beggars. They cannot stop begging. The government says that the nurses are like beggars. That’s why the nurse cannot even get money for living and eating. [...] Even if they applied the wage of five pounds, it will not have a value. Tomatoes are eight and ten pounds per kilo, imagine working twelve hours and only getting five pounds. It is nothing. [...] What are we supposed to do? [...] If I worked in the private hospitals, even if it was a very low class hospital, I would take 50 pounds per day.

BDS: Since when did the nurses movement began to organize themselves?

SSM: Since last January we started to gather ourselves and introduce ourselves. We started to know about the strikes and the leaders of the nurses movement and began to cooperate with them and take their mobile numbers and organize ourselves. On 19 July we had a conference in the Journalists’ Syndicate. Then we decided to make the Voice of the Nursery Movement [...] We talked about our problems, the low salaries and that our union doesn’t listen to our demands. We are connected to three unions. The number of nurses in Egypt who are officially in the state union for nursery: 230,000. The state union for nursery gathers all nurses, even from the university and the Ministry of Health. There is a special union for university nurses, they belong to the union for education and scientific research. There are also nurses working in the Ministry of Health and they belong to the union of health services. We are all related to the general labor union [ETUF]. [...]
SSM: It is weak, the doctors are afraid because nurses are strong in their strikes and demonstrations. We don’t fear anyone, we have nothing to fear, we are strong. The doctor can work in more than one place […] he begins in the hospital and then leaves to work for another hospital and takes special salaries, for operation. So doctors are different. Nurses cannot leave their patients because it is their work. When they leave their patients they will die. There are the Doctors Without Rights of Muna Mina. She is the leader of the movement.

BDS: How do you work organize the Voice of the Nursery Movement? How do you reach the nurses?

SSM: We try to first gather all the state decisions in order to demand our rightful salaries from the administrations of the hospitals. The Ministry of Health said that our salaries have their place in the budget. […] But we didn’t get them since 1999, there must be thieves. They must be stealing from the nurses. This money exists and we see it written in the budget and know something is wrong. This number is in the budget, so where has the money gone?

BDS: So what actions have you done with the movement?

SSM: There was a strike in Tanta, we made a strike because of the meals. We didn’t receive meals or even money in order to get food as a meal. […] Then they gave us only 8 pounds per month. So we told them “no! Take your money and we will take the food”. Because the meal actually costs more than 8 pounds. So if I work in the hospital and I am hungry 8 pounds will get me nothing. […] We negotiated that we could take a hot meal during our work at night. […] According to the ministry we get two uniforms per year, shoes, and a veil, but we get nothing at Tanta. They only gave us 50 pounds. So we negotiated to get uniforms instead of the money. This is better. The value and cost of the uniform is getting higher, so we want the uniform instead of the money. […] There was also a hospital at Qasr al-Sheebin. Normally they would get a 125% bonus as a motivation for them added to their basic salary […] The management didn’t want to give it to them, also not in Beni Suef, in Cairo, in any place, from Alexandria to Aswan. […] They should never stop giving us our money. […] The budget exists but they are trying to get away with it. They only give us 50% and say that’s enough for you. […] A funny anecdote: the Minister of Health made a statement in which he declared that our salary would increase and then the Minister of Finance cancels his decision. […] There are lots of contradictions between the ministers.

BDS: But if you have some decisions on paper can’t you take legal action against the management to secure your rights.

SSM: People already made strikes and signed petitions. […] But the management doesn’t listen to them. So we make a strike. We send our papers and documents because a case takes long time in front of the court. […]

BDS: So now the case is in court but meanwhile you take action in the street?
SSM: The places who went on strike got their money. Those who didn’t make their strike got nothing. And those who didn’t communicate with us didn’t get anything.

BDS: Is there still solidarity between those who went on strike and got their aims and those who still haven’t got their demands?

SSM: I always work on that. We work with the nurses of Tanta and Qasr al-Shibeen. We communicate with the nurses of Cairo and other hospitals around in order to communicate their problems. And there is also a nurse community in the university of Alexandria. Their number is small however. They can work through papers, documents, ...

BDS: Is there also some form of solidarity with other personnel in the hospital, cleaners for example?

SSM: Those who clean, office boys, these workers take 50 piasters in the shift, but in the third shift, 2 pounds each shift.

BDS: So they get more than the nurses.

SSM: Yes. But this addition is only on paper, they take only one pound. [...] We don’t get the extra bonuses unless we take it in court. This happened in the Tanta university hospital.

BDS: So are you working together to get your rights?

SSM: Yes. When I know any info I tell other people anywhere by telephone or I photocopy the documents and give them to others, in order to get them to know their rights. There is an idea in some of the human rights committees to gather all these Ministry decisions and to turn them into a book. And to be published and to be distributed for free so they know their rights. [...] Concerning politics. I believe that there are no politics in Egypt. All the parties are concerned with personal interests, and these do not agree with the rights of the workers, and they don’t do anything for the unions, such as the union of nursery. [...] There is a rule in our union constitution which states that the Minister of Health can select in the elections the head of the nursery union. This is against the law. He is a doctor and we are nurses. [...] It’s our problem and our union and our self-interests. [...] If there were real parties they would have educated us in the unions and protected us from this happening, because it is our right to choose the head of the union. Parties should defend our rights and not what the Minister of Health says. The head of our union should face the Minister in order to get our rights. How will he get our rights if he is dominated by the minister?

BDS: Part of the movement tries to raise salaries, but the movement is also about reforming the union?
SSM: We tried to enter the union but it did not happen before four years, because there are people inside the union and we try to gather them in order to have a voice everywhere. There are lots of members who not appear in the media and that’s in order to protect them because our number is small and in order not to get harmed.

BDS: So, are you still trying to reform the existing union or are you trying to make a new union?

SSM: We try to make an independent movement. And at the same time we catch-up with the union because it takes money from us as members. It doesn’t make any difference for them. […] Our union does nothing for us. No educational services. No conferences to explain the law or know our rights. They don’t do anything for us. And the nurses know nothing about their rights.

BDS: Can I ask you a question about the relation between your engagement as a RS and your activism in the nurses movement?

SSM: I am with the RS. I am a socialist. My father is a socialist. He leads the union of weavers and he founded the CTWS in Helwan. When he bought the first center for the CTWS, he wrote the contract in his name. He has seven other partners. They built this house of services and he acted as an advisor for the workers. […] I work with the RS, I participate in workers’ actions, I also attend the meetings of the real estate tax workers union. […] So I am a socialist and even my co-workers know I am socialist. I am a socialist because socialism talks about our rights and about the need for solidarity between people in order to take their rights from the government. I have relations with people from Tagammu, because my father was a member of Tagammu before he quitted them. I have good relations with them. I have relations with Karama party. But I am not a member of any party. Because they don’t achieve their goals. So as a result, we are not going to be members of these parties. These parties know are like businessmen.

BDS: When you are in the nurse movement and you are making a strike, do you then talk to your co-workers about socialism or do you just help to make the strike?

SSM: I talk first about the problem and I tell them I am a socialist and what socialism means. In general they don’t understand socialism. Later on I tell them about their rights. And then they think of making a strike. So before they decide to make a strike I say read the documents very well and create an organization and make a petition in order to get your rights. The strike is their last option because they try every other means. That’s why there is no one to blame later on when they ask for their rights. This happened in Tanta, in Munifaya. The results was that they made a strike. In the French hospital they wanted to take away one of our meals, so we gathered signatures and we presented it to the administration of the hospital. And the administration started to discuss it with us, and the admin gave us back the meal. They are the only hospital in Egypt which gives two free meals per day. […]

BDS: Is it more difficult as a woman to be political active than as a man in Egypt?
SSM: There is no equality in this issue. In nursery as in any other place they say that the woman should stay at home to raise kids and not even to work. What would make you work and go to demonstrations; you even might be arrested and go to prison. Why do you talk about politics? Why do you tire your mind?

BDS: Is it difficult to work together with your male colleagues or is there solidarity?

SSM: There is solidarity. The movement of nurses became more lively by the male nurses. The men talked more and moved more and they are more brave than women because the man doesn’t fear anything. Women for their part are sometimes afraid from being beaten by the police, they fear violence. The man doesn’t fear this. The nurses’ movement is still building itself. We want to free us from this fear. We start with asking for our rights in a peaceful way, and with organizing a cooperation with other workers and movements and even with the parties in order to know what’s going on, with an open mind.

BDS: Do you think social struggle like the nurse movement can be a tool for women to gain more equality and more respect from men? Because they see that they are both in the same position?

SSM: In Mahalla there were many men working in the factories, the men encouraged women to talk more and to be a part of the movement more because they protected them. In the nurses movement women are in the majority. This is an oriental or eastern society so people prefer the female nurse above the male nurse. When the male applies for the school of nursery, they tell him it’s a job for women, not for men, what are you going to do there. That’s why the nurse movement doesn’t move, except for the last period because the men became more prominent in the movement. And males entered the profession because nursery is a safe choice for employment. When they quit government hospital they find places in private hospitals. So it’s an easy major to find a job. And with a higher salary than in the governmental hospitals.

It’s very hard to claim our rights. We face a lot of difficulties from the union itself. In the strike of Shibeen they tried to break the strike, in other places as well, because when nurses made their strike they said that it was not organized and they said they put the lives of patients in dangers and they sent warnings of firing them. The strike of the nurses of Shibeen lasted for 26 days. It was the longest nurse strike. [...] In Mansura the faculty of nursery of Mansura university struck for 30 days. During these 30 days we didn’t do less about their efforts because we are professionals. During the strike half of the nurses were working and the other half was in the strike. The union and the hospital administration told the media that all the nurses were outside, threatening the lives of the patients, so they got nurses from other hospitals to work in one shift and gave them 60 pounds. So the nurse was asking for 5 pounds and didn’t even get it, only after three or four months, and to break this strike they paid nurses 60 pounds. The nurses of Qasr al-Shibeen influenced other nurses: there was a strike in Tanta and Cairo University. [...] We explained it and took the picture to our colleagues so they made strikes in order to take their rights. After this strike there was a period of strikes in many places. In the beginning of June or July. There
were five strikes in one day: Ismailiya, two places in Cairo, Benha, Minya. There were also strikes in Beni Suef. [...] There were strikes in many places. And thank God they were able to take a part of their rights, not yet all of them, but they will ask again for the rest of their rights.
**AL-ZAHED Medhat**

*8 April 2009*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent:</th>
<th>Medhat al-Zahed, senior editor of al-Badil (MZ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>8 April 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Al-Badil offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Brecht De Smet (BDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>Notes only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BDS:** What effect will the financial crisis have on the future of global capitalism?

**MZ:** The objective conditions for the overthrowing of the systems were already ripe, and they will be even stronger now. However, the subjective factor is weak and lags behind. Global capitalism, however, creates global protests. The demonstrations against the war in Iraq are the best example of this; they even mirrored the imperialist doctrine of pre-emptive strike, as they themselves were organised before the real outbreak of the war.

**BDS:** In which part of the world do you think the protest movements are strongest?

**MZ:** Latin-America is the centre of the protests, the vanguard of the movement, no doubt.

**BDS:** Do Egyptian left-wing intellectuals directly appropriate ideas from this Latin-American movement, or do they see it only as a symbol of resistance?

**MZ:** No, it has mostly a symbolic value, yet what is inspiring is the new model of democracy, participatory democracy, democracy from below, neither from parliament nor guerrilla like in Guevara’s days. Democracy is not a matter of elites, but the way you organise people to defend their interests. Democracy is a matter of the deprived people. The bourgeoisie only struggles for a share of the cake. Moreover, democracy is not a matter of making this or that statement, but it has a material dimension, emanating from below.

**BDS:** What is the role of the workers in creating such a democracy?

**MZ:** The role of the workers’ movement is very important. During the past years, movements escaped the legal umbrellas, as a party or newspaper cannot call for a demonstration. The parties are afraid of stepping outside the borders which the regime defined for them. Tagammu for example was curtailed after the bread riots of 1977; the al-Ghad party after Ayman Nur ran for presidency; the Labor Party after a demonstration in protest against a Syrian writer. These parties survived because they adapted to the regime. With the unions it's the same. Unions aren’t created from below, but appointed from above, under the control of the official government union. There is no freedom to establish unions outside of this umbrella. In addition, it is a corporatist union, gathering both workers and owners. Often the minister of a department is the head of the union or syndicate, for example the Minister of Health is the president of the doctors’ syndicate. This is a heritage of the
Nasserist period, where class differences were put aside under the motto of all people together. The privatisation programme of the regime made these unions even more reactionary as they stand by the owners vis-à-vis the workers. Nowadays, in almost each strike the "body" of the ETUF is mourned and buried in a symbolic way. Civil society is under control of the regime as well, through the ministry of social affairs. You have to obtain a license for everything, while supervision should be done through judges and the public.

During the last years, movements escaped from this umbrella, for example the 9 March movement of university professors (called 9March because then Taha Husayn was expelled from Cairo university) which opposes the interference of the Ministry of Interior in universities and calls for the independence of the universities. Then there's the Coalition for the Defence of Health, which opposes the privatisation of health assurance; the Teachers Without Trade Union; the Workers Without Rights; the Doctors Without Rights; the Workers For a Change; Kefaya... None of these organisations are licensed, but they were the ones organising demonstrations and activities.

A few years ago, these movements started as protest movements against international problems, such as Palestine and the war in Iraq, but now they mobilise for their own social and economic rights as well. A few years ago, this kind of movements was fragmented and limited to one company, one university. Now they cover whole sectors, for example all doctors, all weaving workers, etc. It has been a domino effect. A few years ago these movements were simple struggles, e.g. for wages, now they demand a national minimum wage, not only bonuses.

BDS: Do you think a new political movement will organically arise out of the workers' movement?

MZ: The problem of the political field in Egypt is twofold: (1) it is fragmented and must be united; (2) there is a divide between political activism and social movements. The petit-bourgeois trends and lack of experience form obstacles for the development of a political alternative. A good strategy, formulating suitable demands, etc is fundamental for the movement. For example, now on 6 April [2009], first they called for a general strike, even though they movement has not yet reached that level of consciousness. We suggested them to call it a day of rage. For each action you have to study the conditions and make a clever analysis of the situation. 6 April was important as a kind of general repetition, a spark.

Within three or four years Egypt will change, one way or another, the official structure will collapse as social conflict looks for a way to express itself beyond the limited pseudo-democracy. People don't like to go on the streets and protest, but they do it out of necessity. Anger will continue and accumulate. Through the struggle they will find a way to unify and the movement will gain a political dimension. Economic demands in a dictatorship always gain a political dimension.

Today, everything is open for discussion, this is reflected in the slogans used. Political consciousness is on the rise, people realise that they have to fight to realise something. The main task of the left is unifying the movements which WILL rise due to social and economic necessities. The quality of life is decreasing, while the cost of life is increasing; prices are increasing while wages are decreasing.
BDS: When we spoke last time there was a big problem with al-Badil and then al-Badil was finished. Now they are back with their website, do you think this is a good evolution for journalism in Egypt?

MZ: Yes of course. On 2 April or so it was closed. The board told the editors, such as Khalid al-Balshy, that there is a serious financial crisis and so they cannot go on. From this moment it stopped.

BDS: Khalid al-Balshy now says that there were not only financial problems but that there was also pressure from the government. Do you think this is true?

MZ: Have you met Khalid al-Balshy?

BDS: Yes.

MZ: I think when he analyzes this, he is not basing himself on real information. But it is a possibility. Two months before the closure, al-Badil took another floor. We were on the 8th floor and we took the 7th and they appointed 50 editors. As businessmen, after two months of this expansion with all this infrastructure, they saw this chance. Also because there was a proposal to continue the website. There is no money for printing, that is the actual cost. We paid already for the website. [...] Then no one said no, but actually, no one would help to keep the website. When the audience of the website increased, it also increased those who read the printed version, because those of other Arab states came and see the website. I suggested to work for the website for free, but no one agreed or took any step for the website. [...] The surprise now is that they invited the members of the general assembly to meet on the 20th and they said they would discuss cancelling the discussion of liquidation and as a company resume the print. But they are saying they agree with Ibrahim Eissa to be the chief editor and they also want to involve Husayn al-‘Awa – he is an Islamic thinker, the labor secretary of the Islamic World Council. And he was the one who said two weeks ago that the Christians had weapons and were hiding them in the churches and depended on Israeli assistance. [...] And also hizb al-Wasat. Those are the ones who will expand the financial sharing and they will buy us out. So I don’t know if it’s a project to resume al-Badil and if it’s a credible alternative.

BDS: What is your opinion of the crisis in Dostour? Is it also the government which plays a role?
MZ: Of course. There is a very strong contact. Said al-Badawi, the chief of al-Wafd, who said that the big part of the government and al-Wafd in elections who went and sent Ibrahim Eissa away, buying Dostour. He has al-Wafd and he can create any new newspaper and he can buy Dostour if he likes and keep Ibrahim Eissa. Dostour without Ibrahim Eissa is not Dostour, he is a... character.

BDS: He sets the political line of the newspaper?

MZ: You know it’s not a problem of political line. Said Badawi says that he will keep the political line. Any journalist will say that he is anti-corruption. There is the corruption of the employers and the government. Anyone will say that he is for freedom, responsible freedom, and so on. And anyone is for the defense of the country and social peace and so on. There is a general discourse which everyone agrees with. But the actual school or trend of Dostour was its method of struggle. People didn't buy al-Dostour because they wanted to understand what was happening but to take their feelings against the regime and their anger... but there is no message of understanding in Dostour, not like in al-Badil or in Masry al-Yawm. But the character of Ibrahim Eissa is that of a hero who can abuse Mubarak and who can tell anything. So people are satisfied with this. You will not find many things in the newspaper. And I think for some extent this was good for the regime.

BDS: Because it channeled the anger?

MZ: Yes. So they were patient. But now is a very sensitive time, with the elections. There is a theory that you can make space for criticism and so on, but if the circumstances will change and these criticisms become dangerous than the space is closed. So they were patient for Ibrahim Eissa and Ibrahim Eissa himself took care of some areas. So politically Ibrahim Eissa was targeted and Said Badawi is not innocent about this. [...] 

BDS: Do you think other newspapers will be targeted also? For example al-Masry al-Yawm?

MZ: No no.

BDS: Why not?

MZ: Because al-Masry al-Yawm is in a zone between opposition and the government. Al-Dostour was not committed to professional rules of journalism, al-Masry al-Yawm is more committed to these rules. [...] There is a crisis for government and opposition newspapers and they play in between. Sometimes it is very supportive of Ikhwan, and then it is against them. [...] There is a link to the government. They may also give it some information which the government wants to be published.

BDS: What about the party newspapers, such as al-Arabi and al-Ahali? I spoke with Farida Na’ash of al-Ahali and she claimed that al-Ahali was still against the government but they try to be “objective” and not be as aggressive like Dostour in the way they tell their stories.
MZ: You know. In Egypt before the crisis, the uprising forces are not about who oppose the government; thirty years ago many parties already opposed the government. The question is how to build an alternative. Kefaya has no program as strong as Tagammu or the Nasserist party. But it put its demands in the street and in contrast to the government. So Kefaya, the March 9 movement for academic freedom and Doctors without Rights... these are the uprising forces, and even though they are still elite, they are at least a mass movement. They are those who do not only wage opposition in words against the government, but who are candidates against Mubarak or who call people to sign for these three or four democratic demands – which you can find more strongly phrased in the programs of Wafd, Tagammu or Nasserist party. The problem for these parties, however, is that going to the streets, the students and the workers and the farmers is forbidden. But these new movements cross the red lines, not with strong demands but with a greater capability to create an alternative. The actual challenge for al-Ahali is going to the streets, not to be supportive of the regime or not. But in some way they are content with this rule, to stay inside their offices in Talat Harb and use a moderate discourse. So they become less influential. And actually to somewhat you are with them. Somewhat. They are not allies, but in some ways there is a strategic area for cooperation. So you can understand the bargain for election. And Farida made this rule and especially Rifaat Said who is controlling everything in Tagammu.

The big fight for Tagammu is against Muslim Brothers, I am against them but that is not the story for Egypt, it is not the whole story, but for Rifaat Said it is and this fight makes the link with the government. So he leaves Mubarak outside and Gamal to some extent and they are committed to many red lines. They make many demonstrations and you take the license of the police and you go in few numbers and you stand for the parliament, you go for the décor.

You know, once I was working in al-Ahali. I was manager and editor in al-Ahali before al-Badil. And I was chief editor of the Tagammu newspaper in Alexandria with Abdel Aziz al-Hariri. It wasn’t national but on the rise and when it was approaching the same numbers as al-Ahali it exploded. Then I returned to al-Ahali. And once I went to the chief editor of al-Ahali at that time to meet Hassan Heikal and Heikal asked why al-Ahali is retreating and he noticed that its discourse was weaker. Al-Bakouri said that it was because it was a weekly newspaper instead of a daily, and so on. Heikal then said that is not the problem, he said, that there are many strong weekly newspapers which have something to say. He said to al-Bakouri: imagine that you love some girl and you meet her on Wednesday, which is the day of al-Ahali, when you go to your beloved what do you want to say to her, how do you dress, that is absent from al-Ahali. Those were Haykal’s words. [...] If you take the platform of Tagammu, or al-Wafd or al-Arabi you will find many good things, especially among the left in Tagammu you will find social things. But there are no clashes like with al-Ghad or Ghabha.

BDS: During the last ten years there have been many movements in Egypt: anti-war movement, Kefaya, workers movement in Mahalla. What role have journalists played in these movements and how important were journalists?
MZ: It depends on the journalists and the newspaper. So it differs. In general of course al-Badil played a role. It went into depth into these issues. And al-Badil covered all these protest movement and it was the best, number one.

BDS: So the goal of al-Badil was really to be the voice of these movements?

MZ: Yes. That is what made al-Badil. And also al-Ahali, but al-Ahali, al-Arabi and even al-Masri al-Yawm and al-Dostour, but less. You know you can open any newspaper and you can find in any newspaper that the news is the same everywhere. But you will find in some newspapers the main subject is Mubarak launching some bridge or something like this. [...] In al-Badil you will find stories about the workers movement. Also in other leftist newspapers or in other newspapers, but where do you find it? Journalists and newspapers supported the movement. [...] But now the space will be very slim.

BDS: Because of the elections?

MZ: Because now the government system wants to avoid a big clash. Anywhere you will find some protests they will intervene very quickly with force. I think they feel that there is anger in the streets. They are afraid that in the period of elections there will be explosions like the 6 April. In January 1977 there was an uprising and the year before there were elections in November and they put this in their minds.

BDS: Especially with the rising prices.

MZ: So you will find that there was a military court for the workers a few months ago and one of the NDP members called to shot those who were in a sit-in before the parliament and put their demands forward. And what happens in Ayn Shams university a few days ago. The March 9 movement in Ayn Shams was attacked, a few days ago they beat them. […]

BDS: So they are very nervous for anything to happen?

MZ: Yes and they want to take it at once, because they are not going to commit Sadat’s fault of the September massacre when he gathered all the opposition forces, Muslims and leftists and put them in prison, which resulted in his assassination.

BDS: Another question about the elections. There has been a big discussion in the opposition about boycotting or participating in the elections. What do you think is the best strategy for leftist parties and movements?

MZ: For me participation. But there is big nuance. Those who call for boycotting... The aim should be to change the regime, not to participate or to boycott. This requires another introduction. You know about the soviets and Lenin. When in the revolution of 1905 the people built soviets and there was a storming and sweeping popular movement. And the people themselves made something more democratic than the
Douma: soviets. And then the slogan became: all power to the soviets. But when the revolution retreated, Lenin called for returning to the “al-hazira”, to Douma, which he described as a very bad thing, but one should return to. It was a very big mistake to boycott the Douma after the revolution of 1905. They considered it a very big mistake. Now in Egypt there is neither a victorious or defeated revolution. When you participate this means you give them legitimacy? Who said so? In Vietnam they went to the parliament. The Arabs in Israel go the Knesset. When Sadat saw sixteen opposed MPs in his parliament of 1976 he wanted to cancel it. The parliament in 1976 was dissolved in 1979 because of sixteen. The issue is how to participate, with principles and the right methods, not to be honest and to be revolutionary is to boycott the elections. [...] The left should participate in the elections and meanwhile do something in the streets. There are many social problems: prices, wages, many things. The problem now is who will participate makes a bargain with the government and so it is not so much important. [...] You speak about individuals, can I say that Hamdeen Sabahi for example and his campaign in his city, should he leave his seat to boycott the parliament to prove the parliament is not legitimate, and others. [...] And the discussions in the parties are very important for the media and all the society, that’s a game.

I believe in participatory democracy, which is different from liberal parliamentary democracy, but liberal democracy, even if it is restricted like here in Egypt doesn’t mean that I neglect it or parliamentary struggle. The problem is to build from down. You know of course Latin America and participatory democracy, there are very important experiences, to change the balance of power, not to go with their demands to the ruler and ask him, no you take it and you build it and then elections are one of the chances you will take. But all the time you should organize the people in the way that’s happening now. There is a law which restricts the right to organize for unions, for parties, for all civil society... this is official civil society. All these shapes are missing the grassroots, unions begin from the general union and civil associations are mediating organizations, not grassroots, and parties are just empty buildings and newspapers. All the people are out on the streets. To organize people the parliament is not so much important, but it is a way with many others also absent. How to organize people? Farmers have many many problems, you shouldn’t put the matter as the elite in Egypt shouts “yaskut yaskut Hosni Mubarak”. They are content, no problem, let them say it. But the question is how to create a force for positive changes on the policy in all its levels. That is beginning to take place in Egypt years ago, in Mahalla they defended their demands and actually the matter of democracy is the cause of the deprived people and when they defend their interests they will find a way or another to build weapons and that is the secret, to build weapons and organizations to defend their interests.

But at the high level the bourgeoisie is very good organized, in all parties they exist, in the palace, in business, in the army, everywhere, in newspapers; they are organized and they quarrel about who will take what. But those who are deprived from it... The elections are one of the occasions you can use to mobilize and organize resistance. The matter is not that they will take the whole majority, that’s not the problem, the weight of the opposition is measured not in its numbers, but in its ability to affect.
BDS: There is a need of grassroots organization and organization of the people from below. What role can intellectuals, journalists, and political activists “from above” play to organize these people “from below”? […]

MZ: There are many ways. One is the discussion about the launch of the Egyptian Social Forum. You will find that the problems here is that these movements and trends are defensive and only on small demands: wages and so on. There are big social problems which affect us all. You can raise your wage and then you will find that health and education and so on is privatized. The problem will reproduce itself every time. You must be conscious with your strategy. The mass movements have not this attitude yet. But step by step they affect the political movements to some extent. It is not necessarily the party. 6 April may affect this. All these social movements will influence each other and the illegal political organizations – according to the law, not the constitution. And of course there is a necessity of a party, a leftist party. The social forum may […] help in this.

For journalists there is a big problem. In Egypt there is no journalism for workers or peasants. […] Leftist journalists should think about mass journalism, how to go to people who cannot read and who have no television with tapes, video, cinema, theater in the streets, websites, electronic journalism for their sons and so on. […] That is the problem, the workers, which are the majority of the people, they don’t have journalism. Of course civil society plays some role, you will find magazines of this or that organization. It is limited, but possible. Some workers made some conferences, there were things like that happening. But the television influences the mind of the people. They see very bad things, or things without any message, like songs. That’s a very big challenge for leftist journalists. You can go to the people by many ways.

BDS: Do you think because of the strike movement in Mahalla more journalists became interested in workers?

MZ: Yes, of course. But also in many other places. Helwan, Shibin al-Qom, Alexandria, … journalists according to their trends were interested in movements. But of course when there is an active movement it will attract attention.

BDS: I also heard from some activists in Mahalla and the farmers movement that they sometimes blame journalists because they are interested when something happens, but when the struggle is over and the police starts its repression, then the journalists are away and there is no media coverage any more.

MZ: I think it is true. […] The wave in journalism and the media in general is what is exciting. That is even in politics true. Football and stars are now on the top. That’s the trend of the market. […] That happens in cinema and take-away films, depending on stars. The message is out. […] When demonstrations happen in the street this is exciting and most trends will report it. But only then. Journalism in depth is weak. You will find exciting stories, but not meaningful stories. In television also. Talk shows and so on. This is for the elite. […] Going to the streets and the downcast and humiliated people is not their job.
BDS: So for most journalists when they went to Kefaya and the Mahalla strike movement, protest was just another product to sell?

MZ: Yes. [...] You know the time spent on demonstrations here in the journalist syndicates would be better spent on going to the people in the streets. It is important to a degree, but it should not be the priority.

BDS: So, at the moment there is little organization from below of the people, socialism is weak in Egypt, what do you think is the power which will profit the most from a revolt in Egypt at the moment? The Ikhwan? Like in 1977 there was a spontaneous revolt of the people and there was no strong socialist movement to guide it.

MZ: I think the army will control it. The Muslim Brothers are not interested. They were strong in 1977, not like now, but they were. You will find the left. And there is ground for socialism. Socialist propaganda. The problem now is socialists themselves rather than the circumstances, the circumstances are ripe. Many years ago when we spoke about privatizations and so on, no one listened, but now they feel it with the bills of electricity, water, telephones, they pay for education, housing, health, of their sons and daughters, now there are problems everywhere, in every flat. The people feel it. And now also there is a very big gap between the political construction and the facts on the ground. People now are outside the legal structure with their protests. In a few years there will be change. You cannot say when, but within a few years there should be change. And I think the left may be strong again. Now you can see the left in parties only, but in many activities outside parties there are leftists, civil society organizations and so on. They affect to some extent. They are not a united force, they are a scattered force, and they are in many places.

BDS: How will the left became stronger?

MZ: I think the circumstances will help them. Now they are stronger in their criticism of the soviet party model. As long as they see that there are other party models which allow variety and diversity. It is not necessary to dispute and agree on every matter. The possibility is to unite in a broad party.

BDS: Do you think the struggle is first for liberal democracy to create the space for this type of party, or do you think the left has to organize itself now and go for participatory democracy?

MZ: Both. Liberal democracy is not a sin. The right to demonstrate, people beg for this. So you can use every opportunity to strengthen yourself, but democracy is about enabling and empowering the weak people, taking benefit of every available opportunity. But all the time I want to empower weak groups. And how to understand that the national question, the democratic demands and social demands are connected to each other... Democracy will not happen first and then social demands will start. No, you cannot focus on democracy to solve the other questions. On the contrary, on focusing on social matters you will make democracy. Because
those people who are deprived of democracy when you find you fight with them for their own interests they will organize themselves and they will make their weapons during the battles. That is the way I think.

L: Last week there was a newspaper article with the title “this is how revolutions start” about the rising prices of vegetables. Do you think this is something people believe in or do you think it just made a good headline?

BDS: Or perhaps a warning to the government: do something about the prices otherwise there will be a revolution.

MZ: You should be conscious of your strategic interests to make a revolution. Rising prices may be one of the aspects. But you will find people surrounding the parliament for raising their wages and refusing political activists who want to be with them. And when they raise their wages they may shout for Gamal Mubarak. It is not necessary to fight for this. When people realize their near interests is connected with their strategic interests and when they are conscious as a class, and a class has an attitude towards all matters, and so the workers will find that it is very important for them to protest privatization of health and so on. Civil society organizations and parties have to make this connection. And this will take time. But the spontaneous movement itself can make a revolution, what happens in this explosion depends on many circumstances. [...] Sometimes an explosion may help militarizing the regime and this is very dangerous, the democratic exchange is better than explosion. But there are many aspects of the matter that may in some circumstances help some reformist attitudes in the regime. They are not one block. You will find some who said that the state should control everything, that the businessmen are corrupt, and so on. That’s the actual debate concerning Gamal. His social base is businessmen who threaten the strategic interests of the class as a whole. There should be some balance in so much corruption and everything for businessmen. For example the case of Madinati. [...] This degree of corruption is very disturbing for them.
BDS: Can you tell me about the history of Kefaya and the aims of the movement?

ABDS: The group that established Kefaya came from several ideological backgrounds: nationalists, Nasserists, leftists, Islamists, liberals. [...] The first group of Kefaya came from the seventies generation. They knew each other from the university. The main tendency in Kefaya is the Left. The Islamists are also in Kefaya, but not the Ikhwan Muslimin, but hizb al-Wasat, the al-Wasat group. This is a new idea of Islam, a civil Islam, which can accept the Other: the women, the Copts, the West, ... It's a civil Islam [...].

In November 2003 we met during Ramadan [...] and we talked about what happens in Egypt and where Egypt is going. Everyone of our group understands that Egypt has lost its way. And the regime is coming, in a bad manner, to a closed road, and our people are in a very bad position. And we agreed to start a discussion about the future. And we had the idea that we all could reach unity for this. And our perspective is that we want to change our country, in a peaceful manner, to be a democratic country. Because we all came to the idea that the absence of democracy is the most important reason of our bad situation. And this is the main aim of Kefaya; we want to make democratic change, peaceful change, to build a democratic regime in Egypt, because we all understand that the dictatorship of the Mubarak regime leads our country to a closed road. And this was the beginning of our organisation Kefaya. Its original name is the Egyptian Movement for Change. And Kefaya means "enough". It is a very important word, because it points to the people what we need exactly: enough to poverty, enough to austerity, enough to dictatorship, enough to corruption... this is a brilliant word, "Kefaya". And we talked about what we could do. First we wrote a manifesto and got the signatures of about 300 persons, important persons in Egypt, journalists, people from the syndicates and other groups signed the manifesto, which states that the only solution of our problem is to make a peaceful change in Egypt, we want democracy, we want a good regime, a good governance, and we must struggle for the fate of our future. In this period the war against Iraq began, the aggression of the American army in Iraq, and we told in this manifesto that the only way to protect our country from aggression is to be a democratic regime. In this book I put the manifesto [gives book to BDS]. We had 300 signatures and we discussed again about what we should do.

After the discussion, we agreed to go to the streets. We must. If you want to be effective in Egypt, you must go to the streets. And this is the first time we went to the street to call for a political demand which had an impact on Egypt itself. The last few years we went to the streets, many times, but to support Palestine, to support the Iraqi people, against Zionism, against imperialism, but no one went to the street to
defend the interests of the people of Egypt. This was the first time. And that’s why there was a big reaction, throughout the country, from the authorities, from the police, from the army, from the media. It was a very important step and all the people in Egypt understood that something new was emerging. After this first time we repeated this kind of street mobilization. In the beginning we were only with a few hundred people. The number increased to three or seven thousand in the streets. [...] The regime in the beginning said that it was very weak, but after some time it understood that it was a very effective movement, because the people realized that it was very important to go to the streets and demand their rights. Thousands of people wanted to be in Kefaya, from every governorate, from Port Said, from Alexandria, from Upper Egypt... Soon we had 50,000 members, but we did not develop the organization to use this great power. Going to the streets was the first and the most important action of Kefaya. And up until now we have been to the streets about 200 times in three years. This is for Egypt a very, very important thing. In every demonstration we are surrounded by the police and every time there are thousands of soldiers about, with guns, and sometimes they kick us and arrest some of us. But we continue our struggle in the street up until now.

BDS: Are there also supporters of Kefaya within the army or the police? Or is it very difficult?

ABDS: No it is very difficult, even though the soldiers are also just poor Egyptians, and they suffer as we suffer. And they are ordered to kill us, but they are ordinary persons, they just want to eat, they want to have fun, they want to live in a good manner, and the leaders of the police are afraid of this.

BDS: Kefaya is a very broad movement, with a lot of ideological tendencies. How do you reach agreements within the movement for slogans, mobilisation, ...

ABDS: We discussed a long time about our slogans and targets. I think that, because we have democratic slogans, there are no real problems. Because every part of our founders are suffering from the absence of democracy. But problems arise when we discuss social slogans. But up until now, as the main issue is about democracy, there is no problem.

BDS: Kefaya also had a demonstration in support of the strike movement of Mahalla.

ABDS: Yes, there is no a problem of participation of the Kefaya movement in all these movements. We all know that this movement is very important for the future. [...] 

BDS: So the Muslim Brothers do not participate in Kefaya...

ABDS: No, no...

ABDS: ... but in 2005 there was a front between nationalists, Tagammu, leftist parties and the Muslim Brothers. What was the relation between that front and Kefaya?
BDS: In fact we are united against the Muslim Brothers. We know that the Muslim Brothers are very dangerous, and that they want Egypt to be an Islamic state. We, leftists and nationalists and liberals, want Egypt to be a civil state. There is a very important difference between us and them. We cooperate in the activities about democratic rights; against prisons, against laws... But we know that the Muslim Brothers is a dangerous power. They are a smart organisation. If we allowed the Muslim Brothers to enter Kefaya, they will devour it... But in public we don't say a word about this. We are friends. In fact we are against the Muslim Brothers and we defend our organisation against any intervention of the Muslim Brothers. This is for you only. [laughs]

BDS: also talked to Essam al-Erian...

ABDS: Yes, yes, [ironic] my comrade Essam al-Erian... [laughs]

BDS: ... and according to him, Kefaya, at the moment, is a bit "down" and the activity of the moment is at a low point.

ABDS: In fact, Kefaya, in the last year, is at a low point, partly due to the general situation, but also due to internal issues. All the founders of Kefaya are now abroad... they are out of the movement, the original leaders. We all agreed that we are a democratic organisation, and that we want to change the leadership. But I think that in the future, the near future, we will reorganise Kefaya, because we still have time until the end of this year to change the leader of Kefaya. Perhaps... some voices in Kefaya want me to be the coordinator of Kefaya. Perhaps. But either way, I think that Kefaya must work hard to restore its original force. Now the coordinator of Kefaya, he is a great scientist and a very good man, but he is ill. His period as a leader will be finished in December, and the next December we will choose another leadership and I think this will be a crucial step.

BDS: What do you think will happen when Mubarak dies and they...

ABDS: ...he won't! He won't die... [laughs]

BDS: Well, at a certain point he has to...

ABDS It is a very difficult situation, because no one knows what will happen in the future. No one knows when he will die. No one knows what will happen when Gamal Mubarak is the next president. This is dangerous. No country can live in this uncertainty. No one in Egypt, unless the leader of this regime, knows what happens. If he dies now, who can rule Egypt? The army?

BDS: Is that a possibility? That the army takes over?

ABDS: Of course, because it is the only force which has the power to claim the authority. The Muslim Brothers? Perhaps, but that is a very dangerous scenario. Egypt could be destroyed, because all Egyptians now are suffering because of this regime and they
are very angry and stressed. This morning I saw in Ayn Shams people fighting for some bread. It is a very dangerous situation. Egypt is a great country... to have reached to this situation... this regime is very bad, very corrupt. Sometimes I ask myself: why do the Europeans support this regime?

BDS: That's my next question: there are a lot of internal factors, but there are also external elements, like...

ABDS: The support for the Mubarak regime comes from outside.

BDS: For example, the US who gives two billion dollars each year.

ABDS: They are the main supporters for the Mubarak regime, because they have many interests in the region: oil, Israel, supporting other bad regimes in Arab countries, like Jordan. The Mubarak regime mainly depends on the support of the USA. You can ask everyone in the street about the Mubarak regime, they will say that it is a very corrupt, bad and hard regime. Without the support of the US this regime could continue no longer than one month. Sure, when Bush said that the US wanted democracy in our region, the Mubarak regime allowed demonstrations in the streets. When they said that they supported the Mubarak regime, they repressed our groups.

This regime exists in Egypt because of the support of the US and Europe. I ask the US: is this democracy? I know that the US does not want democracy in our country. Because democracy in our country would put an enemy of the US in power. All the groups in Egypt are against US. Not only the Islamists and leftists and nationalists, but also the liberal and democrat powers in Egypt. And I think that Americans will lose many things. We know that the US are against democracy. It is only a slogan they use, and they do not seriously support democracy in our country.

BDS: Do you think that the situation will change if there will be a new president in America?

ABDS: No, no. The interests of the US do not depend on this president or another. The interests of America in our country are very big. They know that oil is the key to the whole civilisation, to the whole world, and to protect their countries from China and the other emerging countries. I think that the US in the next years will go to war for oil and “stability” in the region. But stability in the region means misery for us, because all regimes in the region are corrupt, and they do not do anything for the people, as you know. I am very happy because you can see with your eyes what we tell you about the regime. Please ask any citizen in the street, in a taxi, they can tell you about the theft that happens in Egypt. All the people in Egypt are suffering. There is a lack of everything. Of roads, of education, of medicine, of food ... nothing is easy [...] everything is very difficult. Not for the workers and the peasants only, but also for the middle classes. I have established a print company [...] but I am suffering every month to get money for the workers, because everything is bad. Corrupt. They give all the common wealth to a few people who are called businessmen. These are very corrupt businessmen. They have a good relationship with Mubarak and Gamal Mubarak, his son, and the group around Mubarak.
BDS: I also wanted to ask you about al-Wasat, you said it differs in important ways from the Muslim Brothers? But they came from the Muslim Brothers?

ABDS: Yes, but they are not the same.

BDS: So you think it is possible for a political, liberal party to base itself on Islam?

ABDS: They say that Islam is just a reference, and they have a good idea about political relations, political struggle. I think that this part of the Islamic movement is very important to support us. [...]
SB: My name is Sabr Barakat. I am a worker in the iron factory since 45 years. I am working in Delta Steel factory company in Shubra al-Khayma. I am a labor activist since 40 years. I am a member in the Egyptian left. I participated in a lot of projects to connect the workers to political activists. The last one is the committee for workers’ and trade-union rights. I established it in 2001, it still exists until now. It is working with labor activists in sixteen countries and regions and twelve different sectors: iron, wool, and so on. This committee is trying to keep in touch with the labor problems and to support the labor movements and trying to connect these strikes whatever the political idea they have. The committee has a lot of members from all the organizations, from the far left, the communists, to the far right, to the Ikhwan. We had leaders from the communists and Nasserists and the governmental party and the Ikhwan. We are all active in only the labor rights. Whatever the differences and conflicts in the political area. We succeeded in the last nine years to connect a lot of different labor movements and to deal with the labor leaders with the labor spirit and we stepped over all the political problems and conflicts. We succeeded to participate in the union elections in 2001 against the government. And we did this again in 2006, and we started to prepare to do this again in 2011. We have every five years elections for the labor unions. We are preparing right now for the next elections by organizing seminars for the labor leaders in the whole country who are candidates in the elections. At the same time we are preparing a labor program which depends on the independent unions, on the union independents. And to push the workers more and more to the way of their own independent unions. Away from the government and the governmental trade-union organizations because the union law in Egypt forces the workers into one organization. In fact we are out of the official union a lot. And I think workers in Egypt are near to snatch their own union. But it is related to the freedom of rights.

BDS: So the labor committee consists of people from different parties, even al-Watani, but during elections the committee has its own list, so isn’t it a problem for al-Watani and Ikhwan candidates because they have their own lists?

SB: No one is making their own list, neither Tagammu or al-Watani. All unions are governmental syndicates. The purpose for all of us is to participate in the basic union committees in the factories and on the site. But the highest and biggest union organizations are controlled by the government through the Ministry and the Security. We have a union program and we published the program and our candidates participate in the election with this program. We agreed firstly to the
principle of freedom in the union and we never look at the political issues. The importance is the freedom of the workers to create and go to the unions they choose, freely, of their own choice, independent from the government, the businessmen, and the parties. The members of the committee agreed that the unions work independent from the political parties work.

BDS: But political parties differ from each other in the field of labor. For example, there are different views on privatizations, how do you deal with these differences?

SB: Even the governmental workers are against the privatizations. All the workers have paid the price of the privatizations, all of them were damaged because of the privatizations. Both the workers of al-Watani, of Ikhwan, or Tagammu are damaged by the privatizations, all workers, all they know the privatizations have injured and endangered and destroyed their livelihoods.

BDS: So you have been active for forty years. What do you think are positive and negative changes in the labor movement during this whole period?

SB: In the beginning of the work of the labor movement, the movement was infected by the paternalist control of the government: the Abd al-Nasser state was a state which gave us social rights but stopped our freedom. After this came Sadat, who stopped our social rights AND our freedom. Then came Mubarak, who introduced us to global capitalism.

BDS: Do you think the labor movement has become stronger since the nineties and during the last ten years? Because there have been more and bigger and stronger strike movements.

SB: I am one of the people who believe that the labor movement didn’t stop at any time. It differed in shape from era to era. In Abd al-Nasser days we tried to complain to the government and we directed our complaints to him, Abd al-Nasser. We thought he was protecting us against capitalism and we discovered that this was wrong. In the Sadat era we were working against Sadat himself and capitalism directly and our freedom was like a disaster. By law we were prevented from participating in the unions, and we were cut off from the candidate lists in the elections. And we were arrested and jailed. And in our struggle we have never stopped the strikes and actions. The difference is the multimedia and the press and the newspapers moved to the strikes and labor movement and covered it, so our voice became louder and the strike image became clear. Never the labor movement stopped.

BDS: Do you think the success of the labor movement can be accomplished by either patient work in the law, for example making new laws for independent syndicates or minimum wage, or that success for the labor movement can only be won through strikes and actions from below?

SB: The strikes are a tool to obtain the independent unions. The end solution is: independent unions. But the union organization itself is a tool to get our rights and to
protect them. And to further develop the labor rights. And I have an open mind to work with political powers for national and labor freedom. And to be a member of a national workers’ movement.

BDS: What do you think are the relations between workers and journalists, as you said a lot has changed because of the multimedia and journalism. How do you think journalists and human rights activists can help the workers?

SB: In fact they give all they can. By their help during the past few years the voice of the workers became louder. And their ability to contact each other has improved. So we can organize a lot of strikes, more widespread strikes, more class strikes. The movement gained a new political aim.

BDS: About this political aim. What do you think is the role of political parties towards the labor movement. Can they play a good role, or a bad role?

SB: The political parties in Egypt are struggling like the labor unions. There is no freedom for the parties and there is no freedom for the unions. I can say clearly that there are no political parties and there are no labor unions in Egypt; all of them are attempting to get their right to organize. They are in the beginning of their organization.

BDS: I heard from some activists that political parties are weak, but other activists said that the Mahalla movement has been stopped by the intervention of political parties. Is this an example of a bad influence?

SB: It’s not right. The labor movement is a political movement. We had our own afflictions and our own sickness which created a bad atmosphere in our own movement. And the government never finished their tricks by interfering in the political organizations and the labor movements, or with the tool of the security which has a lot of tricks. A lot of times the security has succeeded in splitting the movement and importing problems in it. And in their history all political organizations, all the labor movements, they tried to split them from inside. It happened with al-Amal, and Tagammu, and Wafd, and the communists, and the labor syndicates and the labor movements and the committees. My committee is a result of tens of attempts and experiences. The government each time destroyed it. That’s why we leaving our political differences aside, to be sure that we have the minimal chance to be destroyed.

BDS: But if the government is so powerful that it can destroy a strike of more than 25,000 workers in Mahalla; how can the workers ever change something? If you have such a powerful government, how can you change the regime?

SB: History tells us that whatever the power of a government the labor movement can enforce their aims and needs, and to make capitalism and the government pay a big price in order to get their own rights.

BDS: Yes, but how?
SB: The last strikes show that there were a lot of strikes with different demands forcing the capitalists and the government to give the workers concessions.

BDS: So do you think things will change step by step, as the labor movement grows step by step and the government gives in step by step.

SB: Not exactly. Every time the workers had their strikes and demands the next time is more powerful. It is not step by step, but steps above steps, like “building”.

BDS: At the movement the strike movement is at a low point. Do you think this will change at the near future?

SB: I don’t agree it is at a low point. The labor movement had a lot of demands in the last few years and it forced the government to halt capitalist demands and to stop the capitalists to take a lot of labor rights. This time the workers gained a lot of concessions, salaries for months, bonuses; in 2009 they gained 10,000 EGP as a bonus without any strikes, without any demands. The food salary raised to 120 EGP instead of 60 EGP through a government decision. This was forced against the businessmen and capitalists, because the government was afraid of new strikes. The workers are seeing this attitude of the regime and they smile; they know that this is a temporary concession, related to a political problem in this period. And they believe this is a good moment to get their demands. Now they are moving problems which hadn’t moved since 20 years. They are demonstrating right now before the parliament with regard to the issue of temporarily employment. They are temporarily employed since 20 years; they know that this is a good time to be employed and to attack and get a lot of their demands. At the same time at the syndicate organization a lot of comrades from the government employees succeeded in gaining their own syndicate for the first time since 60 years. After them we have now the teachers, the drivers, the administrator employees in the government, the hospital and ambulance workers; they have now a syndicate organization which did not exist since before. It is a new kind of struggle. The movement grows more than in the past. Maybe the shape and the image is not bigger, but they are having a big success and a deep impact. And they are creating a new dynamic for the Egyptian working class. And they are pushing the consciousness to new areas where the old labor movement experience never penetrated. Because there were areas which were closed and where the old labor movement did not reach. Now they are connecting their struggle. They know that organizing themselves will make the situation better and that a connection with the old experience of the labor movement will push them more towards a national action of the workers.

BDS: Connecting workers is very important; there are also other organizations trying to do this, for example Tadamon. Do you work together with these organizations?

SB: Of course, our committee is the mind of these organizations. All of these organizations have members in the committee. We are organizing their work in the committee. However the other tendencies have another political line. The committee
is trying to bring all the forces together, whatever the political line. The committee does not refuse any labor movement, even the Muslim Brother labor movement. On the political field we would have a lot of conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood, but on the labor field we are working together. We are building the future of the workers movement of Egypt and we are changing the country’s future.

BDS: So one of the goals of the committee is to let the committee speak with one voice. But if there is for example a concrete strike, is it then not difficult for the committee to speak with one voice because different parties want to speak with their voice? As happened during the Mahalla strike.

SB: A lot of political activists are using the labor movement as an area to take off. I did this in my youth, but it is a big mistake. The working class are the strongest at the moment and have the biggest effect, larger than any other movement at the moment. What happened in Mahalla, the raise of the workers movement, was used by political activists but it was not good for the movement’s progress. It tried to push the movement in a certain direction. It made the workers doubt.
BASSIOUNI Mustafa  
12-10-2010

| Respondent: | Mustafa Bassiouni, leader in the RS and journalist in al-Dostour (MB) |
| Date:       | 12 October 2010 |
| Location:   | Giza (Cairo), Center for Socialist Studies |
| Interviewer:| Brecht De Smet (BDS) |
| Translator: | Haisam Hassan (HH) |
| Also present:| Sayyida al-Sayyid Muhammad (SSM) |
| Source:     | Notes and audio recording |

BDS: My first question is about the history of the RS. The RS is a relatively new party, a new group, perhaps you would like to tell me something about the history of the organization.

MB: I will describe the history from my own point of view, you’ll have to listen to others to have a full picture. The RS began in the end of the eighties. It was a group of youth who had a lot of criticism on the Soviet Union. Those youth were not convinced that the Soviet Union was a socialist state. They translated a lot of books, like on state capitalism, Russia: how the revolution was betrayed. A lot of books from Trotsky, from Tony Cliff, …

Besides this perspective on the USSR, we had a lot of questions about the one party rule in Egypt, the Palestinian case, democratic centralism, etc. We start to build an opinion which differed from the Stalinist line in the Egyptian and global communist movement. Our ideas were based on the classic ideas of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. We started at the end of eighties, but then we were weak, the real start was in the trade-union elections of 1991. Our perspective was based on the working class. We wanted to connect to the labor movement in order not to lose our revolutionary ideas.

In the nineties era it was very difficult to build the organization because of the dictatorship and more importantly because of the fall of the Soviet Union and the impact on the global left. Our first aim in this time was to protect the socialist ideas and how to raise the socialist flag.

We started to criticize the Stalinist and capitalist ideas and at the same time to work among the workers and peasants.

We grew through our participation in the peasant (1997) and worker (1991) struggles. We moved away from the other leftist trends because our fight against Stalinism. The Second Intifada and the solidarity movements in Egypt brought us back in touch with other trends. All political trends agreed with this movement and joined it. We worked together with other political forces, leftist and nationalist. We were participating in a lot of alliances. The movement continued through the anti-war movement. Those movements opened the organization for other fronts and alliances. This continued until the democratic movement in 2007, Kefaya. During all this time we kept believing that the workers movement was the central force. In 2006 with the raise of labor movement we started to orient their papers and decision back to the workers movement. We were active in these movements, such as in Mahalla. We saw that this was an environment in which a revolutionary socialist movement could
grow. We continued to produce ideas in our newspaper and magazine, to give analyses of the movements and events.

BDS: Today, what do you think is the main difference between the RS, Tagammu, CP…

MB: I want to avoid Tagammu from the story, because it is one of the official parties which has a lot of relations with the government. The basic motor for Tagammu is not ideology but pragmatics. Tagammu is not on the same level as the other organizations.

BDS: But in the past other leftist trends which were not legal operated from inside Tagammu as it gave them a legal cover for their work?

MB: This is not possible right now. There is a tendency in Tagammu controlling the party and dominating the other groups. In the nineties I was a member in Tagammu in a regional area and the party was not active there. About the other leftist organizations… there is only the ECP. We have to keep in mind that the ECP is the only radical party which is working from the Stalin era up until now. The party did not change any ideas, but it changed its tactics. It endured a lot of hard times, but it was strong enough to continue. We had meetings with the ECP party and discovered a lot of differences between us and them: the nature of the Egyptian class struggle and the Arab-Israeli struggle. But after 2000 we worked together.

BDS: Of course there are conflicts and discussions in each party. What were the big discussions in the RS? In the nineties there was a conflict with Tahrir al-‘Umal? Can you tell me something about this?

MB: Since the eighties we had a lot of discussions and conflicts and there was never one dominant idea in the party. We always adopted the central democratic principle. We are convinced that minority groups have to agree with the majority. We always had lots of opinions, there were always minorities and majorities; this is democratic centralism. When some members of the minority think there is a fundamental problem, they retire from the party. While other members of the minority stay and continue the discussion. For example. In 2004 there was a big conflict in the RS about how to work with the Ikhwan.

BDS: About the united front tactic?

MB: No, no, it was not about the united front, but about one issue. There were conflicts about working with the Ikhwan in a specific strike or action. There was a big conflict, because some groups said that they’ll never want to work with the Ikhwan, while other groups saw it as a tactic to gain a big advantage. The biggest group was the one agreeing with working with the Ikhwan. A lot of people retired from the organization because of this decision. A lot of the retired people are now members of the Al-Baradei campaign and they are working together with the Ikhwan. We have always had a lot of opinions and this is a healthy attitude.
BDS: About the united front. This is the most heard criticism from other leftist groups on the RS; that you work together with the Ikhwan in a united front. Was there a united front or were there only cooperation in specific actions.

MB: The basic idea of the united front was: march separately and strike together. So it was always related to a specific action. For example if a union has a lot of Ikhwan members and it strikes against the government we have to work together. It doesn’t mean we have to agree with the Ikhwan’s ideas about women etc. We work together and we are independent before and after the struggle. We had a lot of meetings with the Ikhwan, especially when there were actions. We also had a lot of meetings with leftist groups and parties.

BDS: Are you working with other rightist parties such as the Wafd?

MB: It depends on the action. If all political powers move against the emergency law, we will join the protest in this action. It is the same tactic as with the Ikhwan: it depends on the action. In the long term discussions we only cooperate with radical left and left-nationalist parties such as al-Karama.

BDS: What about the Socialist Alliance?

MB: We were attending these meetings but since the Shura Council elections last year we refused to attend the meeting because the elections were manipulated in favor of Tagammu. Since this time we refuse to work in the SA.

BDS: What about the connection between the RS and the SWP?

MB: It’s a good question. The break with Stalinism went hand in hand with the break with Stalinist ideas on internationalism, the domination of one world party which hurt the revolutions in France, China and Spain. Also the recognition of Israel, the class struggle. We are internationalists, but not in a Stalinist way. The labor movement is a struggle and we see that the strikes in Greece and Spain and the whole world is a continuing line of internationalism in the world. We profit from these global experiences. We are ready to be active and discuss this with all leftist powers in the world. But we are against bureaucratic centralism which controls all parties from one center. We enjoyed the ideas produced by the SWP. We profited from the revolutionary organization building in the whole world. But internationalism isn’t about central orders to different parties. We profited from the ideas of the SWP but we are not working under them as a centralized party. There are a lot of revolutionary groups in the world which can grant us sometimes more experiences than the SWP.

BDS: So there is only an ideological and not an organizational relation between the RS and the SWP.

MB: Exactly. And of course we’re all comrades. [laughs]
BDS: Now I wanted to ask you about your role as a journalist and activist, especially during the Mahalla strike movement. I have the impression that since the beginning of the Mahalla movement a lot of journalists and political activists became oriented towards the labor movement.

MB: Yes, that’s true. [interruption] The newspapers and the multimedia are dealing with the labor movement in a pragmatic way.

BDS: What role can the journalists and activists play to make the workers movement stronger?

MB: Journalists can be positive or negative, you have to specify if they are “national” or not. “National” journalists are writing against the strikes. Other journalists can be very positive for the labor movement. I will talk about my experience. For me journalism was a tool to be near to the labor movement. I started as a journalist only in 2005. My basic aim and target to work as a journalist was to have a pass to get near to the workers without worrying about security and so. I profited from being a journalist in the labor movement because I could transfer the image as it is. I could transfer the degree of the organization of the workers; they were so organized during the strikes. And how the workers were curious for new ideas and how they were not violent but tried to protect buildings etc. The long term strikes like in Mahalla gave me a chance to transfer a chance to transfer a clear image of the daily struggle of the workers and how the strike changes the political atmosphere. It was more interested for me than for the workers. I learned more from the workers than the other way around. I wrote a lot about the labor movement as a leading force, but the reality surprised me because it was much bigger than I expected. To see more than 20,000 workers having a strike in the streets without violence etc, was a big surprise for me. If the political activists and intellectuals have a demonstrations it are at maximum 200 people. During the Mahalla strike we used a lot of whistles and drums, and when I went to the taxes workers’ strikes we exchanged the experience of the drums and whistles and they used it. A small example to show the transfer of experiences. Also about the negotiations, how to strike, how to deal with the security. This is so important to be transferred, through newspapers or through individuals.

BDS: What was the role of the RS during the strike? Only support the workers or also to push their consciousness forward?

MB: First, in our relation with any labor strike we learn more than they learn from us. Secondly, we give solidarity and support. The goal is not that the labor movement raises political goals and aims. To have 20,000 people in the streets raising the same demand is a political action in itself. There is a big difference between making the labor movement a political movement and a party movement. We think that the political parties are attacking and destroying the labor movement, because it’s only for their own profit.

BDS: It’s strange then that every party I interviewed say that other parties are destroying the movement.
SSM: There are no real parties in Egypt. They are using the labor movement for their own profit.

MB: We are not saying our opinion is right and we are not judging anyone. For example the tax workers’ union. The RS was best connected to this movement, but the leader of the movement was Kamal Abu al-Eita, a member of al-Karama. We had a clear agreement between RS and him: we will support the strike and the union to become independent from the government and us, al-Karama and RS. Our role is just to support it. Since 2007 we are cooperating on this idea: to support and not to influence. Kamal Abu al-Eita said in an important interview that the RS was the best force in the struggle and that the RS created the union; we however said no, it was the workers struggle and it is their union. When Hamdeen Sabahi of al-Karama asked the tax workers to support him for the presidential elections, Kamal Abu al-Eita himself refused to support him; and he was a member of al-Karama. This is a clear example. We had a lot of profit from supporting the tax workers strike. During the Mahalla strike we profited more than any other political power. We recruited more than any other one active in the labor movement. We believe that the resurgence of the workers class creates opportunities for all leftist and progressive forces. But the struggle for small party profits will destroy the labor movement. This is what we believe and are doing.

BDS: Isn’t it difficult to balance support for the workers without dominating the movement on the one hand and building your own party?

MB: If you are building your party like a gang and close-minded logic you will believe you are close to the people but after 20 years we believe that quick profits mean you will lose your members quickly.

BDS: What is the future of the labor movement?

MB: During the last period of the labor movement since 2006 we gained the right to strike. We exchanged the idea of independent union. This has been more than five years ago. The labor movement is in a lull at the moment, but with the price rises and social pressures, the movement will rise again. But there are a lot of elements which makes us believe that the movement will start from a next step, not again from the beginning. The same leaders and the same workers and the same members of the movement will join and attend the next strike wave. The appearance of the independent union will make it easier to have an example of independent syndicates for the next wave.

BDS: Some activists say that the rest of the labor movement is not yet ready for independent unions. Do you agree?

MB: I will not say yes or no; the workers are ready when they are ready. We can’t say that a movement with strikes and demonstrations and demands can’t have an independent syndicate – because in practice they were already operating as an
independent syndicate. In Mahalla in September 2006 the workers chose 25 workers for them to negotiate. They organized strikes and were bringing food for 20,000 strike members. There were a lot of hard times, I saw it myself. And a lot of times I thought the strike was going to be finished. If that was not a syndicate, what is then a real syndicate? The labor movement showed it was ready. If the workers are ready we must be ready too. And if they aren’t ready, we should not ignore them and say “oh they are not ready for our ideas”. I am not an anatomist of the movement.

BDS: Perhaps some activists are afraid that they will push the workers against the government and create problems for them when they create an independent syndicate and they want to protect them from this?

MB: We are not taking any decisions for the workers movement. If the movement has a bad decision we will support them even if we see it’s a bad decision. Before the independent tax syndicate a lot of activists were afraid of this idea. The example of the tax workers will help other workers. We believe that the workers movement is much stronger now. In 20 December 2008 the strike committee of the tax workers strike called for a conference. A lot of workers said “we won’t come if there’s no financial profit in it”. But the attending number was more than we imagined: 5,000 were attending in the journalist syndicate. We had to refuse people because the union would be destroyed and people had to return home. The trust we gave to the workers was right and we keep on trusting them.

BDS: So if the most important task for leftists today is supporting the workers, why do we need a revolutionary party?

MB: The working class is not only the class with low salaries and no syndicates. For us the working class is the only class which can make a change through a social revolution. The working class is the only agent which can play this role: destroying capitalism. This is something the unions cannot do.
BASSIOUNI Mustafa
17-3-2011

Respondent: Mustafa Bassiouni (MB), leader in the RS
Date: 17 March 2011
Location: Giza, RS HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes only

BDS: What was the role of the RS in the revolution?

MB: We supported it, like any other opposition force. We tried to mobilize towards 25 January as we had mobilized towards the labor strikes and the protests against the torture of Khaled Said. We hoped that 25 January would become a big day of protest, because of the Tunisian Revolution, and that it would be the seed of the Egyptian revolution. We organized a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior and after the successful mobilizations of 25 January we started to organize ourselves for the revolution. On 28 January we realized the movement was taking the shape of a revolution.

BDS: Do you think that after the resignation of Mubarak the revolution ended, or are we now in a second phase?

MB: At this moment we are still in the process of revolution. All participants demanded the end of the regime. After the resignation of Mubarak, the RS realized that this revolution was not finished, the police state was still there, and this opened the door to another revolution. The capitalist class still exists and rules the country through the army. The revolution did not touch upon the power base of the capitalists. Shafiq and other government figures still adhere to the free market. Even small reforms, such as the minimum wage and fair taxes, are not discussed by the government. The popular movement in the streets will not stop until they realized a social change. [...] The people demands social reforms, so the revolution will be permanent. This opens the door for a new wave, a social revolution which may lead to a socialist revolution. The local revolutionary committees and the independent unions are the forms of this social revolution as they express a lot of social demands. The establishment of a labor party is the road to a political organization of the Left. The establishment of a labor party is a rallying call for the social struggle. This is not an utopia. We cannot separate the event of 25 January from what happened with the whole labor struggle since the last ten years. The first uprising was on 6 April and this had a labor background. The great number of worker strikes from 2006 had a big impact on the social consciousness in Egypt. The Tax Union had 40,000 members, the Health Technicians’ Union 20,000. The labor struggle was the only struggle which cleared the path for the women movement. During the revolution there were a lot of worker actions. The university workers had their own strike, Suez steel workers went on strike, also in the fertilizer companies, in solidarity with the revolution. Within the last three days before Mubarak left, there were mass strikes in the whole of Egypt.
Many writers said that the labor strikes were the main reason for Mubarak to retire. After 11 February the number of strikes increased. On the other hand, the regime tried to stop the strikes, framing them as a danger for the revolution. The media also claimed that the strikes were organized by the old regime. Still, the strikes are continuing up until today; workers fight against corruption and insist on social reforms. This strike wave is but the beginning of a huge strike wave which will hit us soon. The capitalist forces will attack the strikes in the revolution.

BDS: What about the role of the Muslim Brothers during and after the revolution? Are they now part of the counterrevolution?

MB: During the first days of the revolution the Ikhwan said that they would not participate in the protests, but later, from the Friday of Anger on, they began to participate in an open and clear way. On 28 February there was the prayer at noon, led by a famous Ikhwan leader. From then on the Ikhwan were clearly in the streets. Even though they didn’t show their signs, their organization was clearly present in the square. After Mubarak retired, the Ikhwan established a good relation with the regime. The constitutional amendments, the attacks on the strikes and the call to bring back the police render this connection obvious. The coming days will render this connection between the Ikhwan and the regime even more explicit. At the moment, the Ikhwan are but a stabilizing factor, we cannot as of yet speak of a counterrevolution, but in the future it is possible both the Ikhwan and the liberals will be part of the counterrevolution. It is too early to estimate what attitude towards the Ikhwan is best for the Left.

BDS: How did the revolution transform the Left?

MB: The revolutionary movement has been productive for the Left; it allowed it to spread its ideas. The RS has two priorities at the moment: supporting the formation of a new labor party and defending the independent unions. We will help the workers in developing their own demands, which are not necessarily the demands of the RS. Additionally we try to unite all leftists in one front. The Popular Alliance Party wasn’t our initiative, but we participate in its meetings. However, collecting all the small leftist groups will not have the same impact of that of a good strong party. It is better to orient yourself directly towards the people than towards other parties. It is only when the Left is active in the streets that the new leftist leadership will become clear.

BDS: With the advent of the revolution, is the RS now no longer an “underground” organization?

MB: We were not really an underground organization before the revolution: we talked about ourselves and people said they were revolutionary socialists in newspapers and so on. We are Leninists. Because we are still in a capitalist system we need a Leninist organization, now more than ever. Our openness is not in disagreement with our Leninist roots. As long as there is a capitalist regime we will remain a Leninist organization. I hope we will be able to transform the organization: this would be a sign that there is no longer a capitalist regime. This Leninist structure is the main
difference between the RS and other socialist movements in Egypt, who say that we are past the phase of Leninism. Loose centers and movements are no substitutes for a Leninist organization, however.
BDS: Can you tell me something about your political activities and the organisations of which you are a member?

AB: I am a member of the Central Committee of my party, Tagammu, and I’m at the head of the Union of Progressive Youth.

BDS: You are from Mahalla al-Kubra. What kind of impact has that on your political activity? Is it easier for you to connect to people, because you know them?

AB: For me it's easy, because I struggle together with them, not only with statements, but I also join their demonstrations and speak with them every day. We have comrades now among the working class in Mahalla, and they are also our friends. So I think it's easy for me.

BDS: Last year there was a big strike on 6 April in Mahalla. Can you describe what happened?

AB: Last year the workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla company called for strike. There are about 27,000 workers in this company. So you speak about 27,000 families, so you speak about all of Mahalla's population. So there was a great strike in Mahalla, but the police and security forces used thugs. They called them two days before the strike in the police station in Mahalla and they gave them walkie-talkies and orders to beat people and set fire to schools, etc. The strike started in Mahalla at 15h, before that people started to stand in the streets and shout that they are poor and want to eat. Until then there were no clashes, these started when one policeman, Haisam al-Shami, spoke with an old woman who wanted to cross to street, and he blocked her, but she refused and said that she was an old woman and couldn't come back again. But the policeman beat her. People started to become angry and to beat and throw stones. The police started to use gas bombs and there were clashes for two days, 6 and 7 April, and during these days, three youth died. One of them, Ahmed Mabruk, was fifteen years old and they shot him when he was in a department store, not in the street. An officer shot him twice. After that, they handcuffed the people who went to hospitals to mourn to the beds. A lot of youth lost their eyes. The police made fire in two or three schools and destroyed Mahalla, destroyed my city. [...] I’ve written about this before.

BDS: Today, again, there is a kind of 'strike'. What do you think is the big difference between now and then.
AB: The difference is that last year, the workers in Mahalla city called for the strike. This year, some youth, called for the strike, just on Facebook. They can't organize it. When we speak about workers in Mahalla, we speak about the whole population of Mahalla. We have members in the streets, in the company, among the farmers, we, our party, can organize a protest, not a big protest, but they only struggle on Facebook. And they haven't an agenda or plan for the future. Let's imagine if all Egyptian people will make a strike today. What will happen tomorrow? Nothing, they don't know. You know, they make just a group on Facebook, but no one struggles one day between the workers.

BDS: What kind of people are the members of the 6 April group? Are they workers, intellectuals, middle-class, shopkeepers...?

AB: We can't say they are either middle-class, rich-class, workers, no. The technological revolution allows all people to use internet.

BDS: How many people in Egypt do you think use internet?

AB: I don't know exactly. So we can't say that they are rich or poor, or that they liberal or socialist, that they are Islamist or something else; they are youth and they are angry. But we have to organise our anger, just to be angry is not enough.

BDS: The leadership of Tagammu decided not to participate?

AB: No. Tagammu published a statement three days ago and stated that it will join the protest of the people. We can't let the people struggle alone, we have to be one step in front of them. But to make a general strike? It's not real. We want to make a general strike but... you know, today, when I came back from Zamalek there was a lot of traffic on the road and I asked the driver what is happening today? And the driver said I don't know but I heard someone say they are on strike today. And he isn't sure, because this man doesn't use Facebook.

BDS: It's bad because the driver sees everything is normal...

AB: Yes, what do 40 demonstrators mean? We've made bigger demonstrations in the Journalist Syndicate than this and today is a strike? I prefer then not to do anything, it's better.

BDS: Do you think the situation in Egypt has changed since last year?

AB: Look, the situation in Egypt changes every day. Now a lot of people start to demand their rights, not only workers, but also judges, doctors, pharmacists, bakers, farmers... a lot of people now start to demand their rights. But they do not demand anything political up until now. They just demand their rights. For example, the engineers want to have an independent syndicate. Doctors: the same. Workers: the same, they want a bonus, salary, etc. But no one calls for political demands.
BDS: But if I remember correctly, last year there were political elements in the strike.

AB: Look, we have a political movement since many years, but we are small. We can't make real change.

BDS: How do you think the movement will become political engaged then?

AB: I think that all activists have to work with the people in the companies. The activists in the parties, movements and groups have to work with the workers in the companies and they have to teach them that their demands are the same. We can't separate labor and political demands. We can't change their situation, without changing the political situation in Egypt. Only few activists do this. For example, the group on Facebook really wants change, they are really angry, but they don't know how. They stay on Facebook, ok then, but you have neighbours, workers, speak to them! For example, Ayman Nur is from Zamalek. Have you felt any change in Zamalek? Ayman Nur from Zamalek, who wants to be the president, he can't make an impact in his own neighbourhood! How can he make an impact in the whole of Egypt?

BDS: So the biggest problem in Egypt is the divide between activists and the masses? How did this happen?

AB: Everyone makes mistakes. The Egyptian regime is a dictatorship and makes a lot of mistakes. We as well in the parties, movements and groups. Because the Egyptian regime is a dictatorship, we have to be strong. For example if I make a demonstration in the factory, they will arrest me. So we have to make more demonstrations, today he may arrest me, but tomorrow they have to arrest 100 people. But because at the moment it's dangerous, you can be put in prison and tortured, the people say no. Mubarak governed Egypt for 28 years. All these years we've made the same mistake – and those on Facebook are making it now as well. The Mubarak regime says that the parties are weak and that people have to go to the NDP, because in other parties you go to prison, you are without job. Now when I'm in the party I can't work in any government job, I didn't serve in the Egyptian army because I'm a leftist. So people are scared, and say we won't join or participate any political party. The youth on Facebook say the same: don't join the parties because they are weak! They came one day to the party and I said to them, if the party is weak come to them. But they say no. But they are soldiers without officers, and we are officers without soldiers, we can't make war. They refused to join the parties. So the parties will be weaker.

BDS: And when the parties are more weak...

AB: ... yes then we can't stay in touch with the workers and other people.

BDS: Do you think there's a possibility that through the struggle of the workers themselves there will be a new party/movement?
AB: Some people tried to create a labor party. But they faced some problems as well. Because if someone wants to make a party, you have to struggle for political issues, not only worker issues. But I don't know exactly why this person stopped. They can't make a party. Because if they want to make a party, they can make a movement, but a party has to have a program, an agenda, and this program has to speak about political issues, not only about salary. If they make a movement they can only speak about salary, but if they want to make a party they have to speak about our relation with Israel, with the US...
BELAL Ahmed  
9-10-2010

Respondent: Ahmed Belal, leader in Tagammu and UPY/UESY  
Date: 9 October 2010  
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ  
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)  
Also present: Haisam Hassan (HH)  
Source: Notes

BDS: Can you tell me about the history of the Trend for Change?

AB: It started in 2007 to prepare for the party conference of 2008. In 2007 some party leaders started to talk about the future of the party and they made statements. We were against these and tried to organize a tendency for the party elections of 2008. We lost the elections because there was another group, called “Unite”, which was more organized than us. This was the first election for our Trend and as we had no experience like the others they won. They are members of the Communist party and sympathizers of these members. We refuse the domination of the Communist party as they occupy all important leadership positions, while Tagammu should be the house of all left tendencies. Before 2005 I was a member of the Communist party myself, but I left. There were parliamentary elections in 2005 and I supported a member of the CP but then I discovered that he did not have any support in the factories or streets at all. They were saying that the workers and people supported them but it was a lie. Also, after this I discovered political differences with the CP. I don’t believe in Israel, but in one democratic country for everybody. The Jews are a religion, not a nation. If we believe in a Jewish country we should believe in an Islamic and Christian country. Moreover, the CP is funded by American aid organizations. I refuse funds from capitalist organizations. In 1947 the CP agreed to the split between Palestine and Israel because the Soviets agreed and we should now be able to say that this was wrong and we should develop new ideas.

BDS: Is the Trend for Change attracting more young people?

AB: “Young” is a relative concept: in the Trend for Change 50 years is young because the other group consists mostly of people between 60 to 70 years old. Young people can be found in the Union of Progressive Youth. There the CP created another problem. Because I had left the CP they hated me and when we had a conference with the UPY in 2006 I lost with two votes. Before the conference we had no UPY in al-Minya. During the conference there suddenly was a branch in al-Minya with many members and now there are three members of al-Minya in the leadership of the UPY, while other, bigger and more active branches have only one member in the Central Committee of the UPY. Some provinces have no UPY but during the conference they suddenly had. But although we lost the elections then, we are working now together with them. For example, the Beni Suef branch was against us in the conference, but now they are the biggest participants in our Trend. The party branch in Suez is in the CP Trend, but the youth are on our side. The most important thing for us is to make
the youth think, even if they are Communist. Because when they think, they’ll come
to our Trend. We do not command people to do this or that.

BDS: When is the next conference and will the Trend be stronger in Tagammu?

AB: The next conference is in one and a half years. I don’t know if the Trend will be
stronger, but we’ve made a lot of actions in the provinces and we do workshops and
so on. In Beni Suef, in Fayyum, we do this everywhere. We did a solidarity day
concerning students in Helwan. We have two leaderships now, and we are the real
leadership because the people know us even though we are not the official
leadership. We have our own website. We are active and the other Trend is not and
they do not have the support of the people in Cairo. In the Trend for Change we have
a small leadership and I am one of them. But the Trend has also a problem. We can go
to the provinces and organize activities but you cannot only go there to present
yourself as a front for the elections. It is the activities which attract people to support
us. People are disappointed in the Trend because they are only an electoral front and
they do not organize activities. A comrade said he wanted to quit, but I convinced
him to stay because we are the youth. Others in the Trend are old and they do not
want to do anything. If the Trend loses the next party elections we will be finished. I
believe the youth is the real actor of change because we do not only work about
elections; we want to change the party. We are young and we have a lot of personal
problems, problems of marriage, problems of work, while they have money and time.
I told my Trend that we should call the leaders in the provinces and organize
activities to prepare for the elections, but the older members in the Trend do nothing.
The current old guard in Tagammu does not want to pass on the leadership to the
youth. We say: give us the leadership now, while you can still advise us. I wanted to
be in the CC and they made war and when I got elected they said they didn’t know
who voted for me.

BDS: Has the Tagammu youth contacts with active leftists from other parties?

AB: Yes, but these contacts are not organized, they are just between comrades. There is of
course the Socialist Alliance, which started in 2006, but our group cannot be officially
represented in this Alliance. The Alliance consists of Tagammu, CP, al-Karama party,
the Revolutionary Socialists, and some centre parties such as Democratic Left and
organizations such as the ECESR. But there is no one who represents Tagammu, as
the member of Tagammu in the SA is a member of the CP. Moreover the SA doesn’t
do anything. Each group competes against each other and the meetings do not result
in anything. Even if we all left our party and started a new one together, we would
compete with each other and split again.
The problem of the Mahalla movement today is the problem of the competition
between the left. When the strikes happened I said that all leftists should work
together as comrades and support the workers. This did not happen. The activists of
the leftist parties joined the movement as activists of their party and they tried to
recruit workers’ leaders for their party. We let the workers’ leaders alone in Mahalla,
while they tried to recruit them. The last years there were no strikes because each
leftist faction has taken one worker leader each. We should support the movement,
not try to lead it in the place of the workers' leaders themselves. Now the leaders are divided and they compete against each other and this destroys the movement.
BDS: Tell me about your personal experience in the revolution.

AB: During the night of 25 January I was in Cairo and I realized this was no ordinary demonstration, so I went to Mahalla around 12 PM because I have role to play there. However, the military police was everywhere and they closed off the roads to Mahalla. At 2 AM there were people in the street and I heard bombs everywhere. On 26 January we called a meeting of activists. When I arrived I only found 31 people. We were arrested. They switched off our mobiles, put us in a wagon and moved us to Tanta via Mansura. We didn’t know what would happen; if we would get a trial or not. Nobody told us. Kids of fourteen and fifteen years old were arrested as well. Why do they arrest them? We didn’t know night from day. They took us to civil court via the back door and they accused us of everything possible. It appeared that I was a powerful terrorist, because 17 soldiers told that I had beaten them! [sarcastic] But I knew the law was on my side. The judge was an honest man.

I wanted to call my family but the police wouldn’t let me. They told me that I would be free after four or five nights. We told them we would go on hunger strike if they did not release us immediately. We didn’t know what was happening outside the prison. The judge asked us about the protests, but we said that we didn’t know why we were there. After a few days we heard people shouting outside. We realized it had to be a revolution, because in Tanta normally nobody is interested in any protest movement. We heard gas grenades near the prison. We heard from some soldiers that the army was in the streets. I was afraid because I thought they would support Mubarak. But the army refused to shoot.

The next day there were again demonstrations. An officer came to free us and told us to leave. After that we finally got some sleep. I had a shower in Mahalla. In Mahalla we started to create a civilian guard. We called the workers to create more guards and to organize daily demonstrations. We made statements to tell the people that we were there to protect them. The government promised the working class an increase in their salary. But the workers came and stood with us in the revolution.

BDS: What was the role of the Left in Mahalla?

AB: The demonstrations were not organized by one party. We worked and met with different political forces. Sometimes we had problems with the Muslim Brotherhood. We had a sound car and every trend could use it to spread its message. I said I represented Tagammu and the communist party. I also said that we shouldn’t make religious speeches. They took the microphone from me when I spoke, because I spoke against the capitalists, while they were only against Mubarak. They also didn’t like
that I shouted slogans against the police. When we made a committee for the revolution I wrote the statement and somebody from the Brotherhood promised to print it… but they didn’t.

BDS: What was the role of workers? Did they organize strikes?

AB: The workers organized strikes from 1 February and the government closed the factory. Then they made a new strike and they fired the manager. […] The first popular committees came from Sinai, then there were committees in Mahalla and everywhere. We made a conference every Thursday in Cairo, Giza and Helwan. The committees played a big role, but now they are not mobilized for the constitutional referendum. […] We believe that real change will come from the parties, not the Facebook groups.
BDS: First I would like to know something about the history and the aims of the NWF.

ND: The founding members of the centre here came from the students' movement in the seventies, well most of them. They were from the Left and they were involved with the Egyptian communist movement and they were frustrated by the attitude towards women...

BDS: From the communist party?

ND: From the left in general. In 1984 they decided to form a group of women; just an informal group, a group for study and discussion, trying to understand why the Egyptian women movement was broken at a certain time. Etc. This was in 1984. The group remained informal from 1984 to 1991. It was an informal group but they had a sort of... newsletter. They called themselves "the New Woman".

ND: I joined the group in 1989 because up until 1989 I was still in the communist movement. Around 1990, we discussed what to do and we wanted to expand our activities. And so we decided to register legally, but we didn't want to register at the Ministry of Social Affairs, because it intervenes in your work, the civil society in Egypt is not free at all. So we registered as a civil company, a non-profit civil company. And we remained a civil company until 2002. In 2002 a new law was passed about NGOs and private foundations and we discussed for months whether we should apply at the ministry or not and then we decided to do it; "it's a fight and we are going to win it". We applied in 2003 and... after some legal delay we received a letter from the Ministry of Social Affairs – which is called now the Ministry of Social Solidarity – saying "we apologise that we cannot register you because of the security" and so on. So we had a big campaign internally and abroad and we had a lawsuit. We went to court and we won. But we won in December 2003 and we were only able to register in May 2004. Even before that we have done lots of research, work, awareness raising; a lot of those thing, but not service providing, we are an advocacy organisation. But we have decided that there is a momentum in Egypt and that there are growing social movements.

BDS: And how do you relate your work and awareness programs regarding women and woman emancipation to other social movements?
ND: Well, firstly, we are part of the human rights organisations. During the last year we have conducted an important research on women's labor and structural adjustment programs and this research was conducted with 600 women workers in factories from the private and public sector. We are going to release the first findings sometime this month. We are even reconsidering the idea that work would be liberating women. Also we are conducting campaigns now. The most important campaign we are conducting now is about freedom of organisation, because there was an attempt to introduce amendments to the law and introduce additional obstacles and boundaries to the freedom of association and activity. So we are leading a campaign of 44 organisations and I think we have succeeded to do several things. Firstly, we have demonstrations of solidarity with organisations which are attacked, with the CTWS. We provide training, services and legal aid. We go to court, we have protests in the streets, we issue statements of course. Until now the proposed law has not been passed. So we think it is, partly, because of our action. Of course, this doesn't give us a very good reputation with the security, but we don’t care about it.

The second type of campaigns we are mainly working around, concerns violence against women. Sexual violence, especially sexual violence, meaning rape, sexual harassment, the right of affiliation to the father, and... there was a fourth thing I don’t exactly remember now. Anyway this is mainly what we are working on... And also we try to... because we are what you could call a medium between organisations, not a grassroots organisation. So we are trying to help grassroots organisations to include gender in their agenda. And we help some grassroots organisations, providing training, helping them to build their own libraries, we give them books, and things like this. And we have also our publications. For example, every year we have an agenda and this year... I’m just going to show you because we only have one copy now.

[ND shows BDS the agenda]

ND: [...] If you look at the pictures inside you'll understand what we are talking about. [...] Women demonstrations all over 2007. [...] Our agenda is very popular, people like it. Every year we have a special theme, for example, last year we had an agenda about men who deserve respect and consideration because they have positive attitudes with women’s rights. Every year we do this and people accept it... So this is how we relate to people.

BDS: In your objectives I read "contribute to changing predominant patriarchal culture which pervades society". How do you define this patriarchal culture and what do you think are the roots of that culture?

ND: I think personally that this culture is pharaonic. For over 5,000 years Egypt was ruled by despots, up until now... And it has strong roots in our society; it's not only towards women, it's class against another class, other people towards younger people; it's all patriarchal, yes.

BDS: But in other African or Arabic countries you often see the same structures. In Western Europe hundreds of years ago you could see the same type of relations. In the West...
ND: ... but that doesn't mean it's good!

BDS: No, no. I don't say it's good. [laughs] In the West it is often said that Islam is responsible for these patriarchal relations. I want to know your opinion on this...

ND: ...you know, I'm not very aware of Islam. [laughs] But I think for the case of Egypt it's more than Islam. I'm not trying to protect Islam or something. I know that there is much discrimination in Islam between men and women, but this patriarchy I think... you said for example that in Western countries it exists and it is not due to Islam...

BDS: ... yes.

ND: It's since men took over control that the patriarchal societies exist.

BDS: And what do you think are good and bad elements in Western society for women to emulate here in Egypt? What are the positive and negative elements for women in Western societies?

ND: I think women in Western societies gained many things, in terms of laws, protection, and even... for example here, in our society, it's very difficult to raise some issues. In 1993 we were the first group in Egypt who talked about violence against women and we were attacked much, and somebody, a high official, send us a note saying "even if there is violence in women in the whole world, it does not exist in Egypt". This is one of our roles; we raise taboo issues. It's our niche, if you want to say it like that. But in the West you talk about these issues.

BDS: [...] And even in the West it's not a paradise for women.

ND: No of course not. We know that violence for women exists everywhere, in the whole world, we know it. But we have to fight in our lands. [laughs]

BDS: Yes, of course, but sometimes I get the impression that some groups in Egypt or in other countries are trying to copy the Western model with all...

ND: ... please, please. This is the governmental acquisition of our agenda and we say: no. [...] We have violence and women are all the time exposed to violence. Domestic violence, violence in the street, violence through the institutions... all forms of violence.

BDS: So the government has a double-faced agenda towards women emancipation? On the one hand they have made some laws and improvements, but...

ND: ... yes but they have all the time this very big wrist attitude. They don't follow it to the end. They want to flirt with the Islamic trends. They want to prove that they are THE Muslims, while we are calling for more. Much more. They have passed some laws.
They are trying now to change the family code but I don’t think it will be as successful as for example as in Tunisia or in Morocco...

BDS: And how would people react when drastic changes would come from above instead from below...

ND: ... you know the government was trying to pass a law about the right of women to divorce because of incompatibility. It’s called “khol” in Arabic. And you can’t imagine the reaction in the parliament. The opposition also. Men from all trends saying “Ah you want encourage women to become prostitutes and to torture their husbands”. It was unbelievable. You know, the change must come from here [points to her head] It are not only the laws, we need a cultural change... and we are working a lot on the cultural aspect.

BDS: You said you work towards women workers. Were you active in any way in the strikes last year in Mahalla?

ND: No, no. We were not active but we want to establish a link with these women and every year we have a celebration on the occasion of 8 March. We do it sometimes during the month March and this year about these women and we’ll invite these women. And we would like to honor them.

BDS: Do you think the attitude towards women within the left has changed? Or is it still the same as in the seventies?

ND: I’m not longer very much involved with the Left. There is a jargon that has been used over almost twenty years in Egypt. So people use the jargon but how, in fact, it is done, I don’t think it has really changed. If you go and talk for example with the president of the women’s union at the Tagammu party, she will tell you or just push it away; “I’m not a feminist”. She would consider it an insult to be a feminist.

BDS: Perhaps also because within the feminist movement there have been more right-wing groups?

ND: Yes of course, but the way we are presenting ourselves or seeing ourselves... we are feminists with a social perspective and we are of course influenced by our origins. And at least some of us are still Marxists.

BDS: What did you think about the fall of the “communist” states in 1989? What were your feelings about it? Did you expect it? Were you depressed or happy about it?

ND: I was not very surprised. You know when the Bolshevik revolution took place, there was an internationalist school in Moscow and five men from the first Egyptian communist party went to a meeting there and when they tried to return to Egypt, the Egyptian government withdrew their Egyptian nationality and it was very difficult for them to enter Egypt and since that time there were no Egyptians communists
going to this school any more. I was one of the first of the next generation who went to this school. So I lived for three months in the Soviet Union...

BDS: ...in what year was that?

ND: That was in 1981. And I saw that there was something for me that was not compatible with my idea of Marxism. [...] I don't know... I'm a Marxist, yes, and inside I am a very democratic person and I can't accept to follow blindly.

BDS: For me Marxism is more a way of looking at things than a doctrine.

ND: ... exactly...

BDS: ... so you can be a Marxist and a democrat or a Marxist and a feminist...

ND: My father was a Marxist, you know. He was a very convinced Marxist and communist and he remained a communist until he passed away one year and a half ago, at the age of 95. He believed in Marxism and he believed in the workers.

BDS: If there will be a change in Egyptian society, from which groups do you think it will come? [...] 

ND: I'm afraid that it will come from the Muslim Brothers. [laughs] It would be a drama. [serious]

BDS: Do you think that when Mubarak passes away they would come to power?

ND: No, if they come to power... it won't be easy, because there is much resistance and there is this whole project of the "prince" [=Gamal]. It won't be easy when he dies because the army is very infiltrated by the Muslim Brothers and the army will want somebody from the army. It's a very complicated matter. We are in a chaos, really. Sometimes I wish he [=Mubarak] just stayed. [laughs]

BDS: What are your relations with the Muslim Brotherhood? Are there, within the Muslim Brothers, different factions, divisions between more reactionary and more progressive?

ND: Yes, yes. I was in a meeting at the Center for Political and Strategic Studies of al-Ahram, one or two months ago, and there was a group of them. We were discussing the issue of quota for women in parliament. I'm against it, personally. But anyway, I don't know if you've heard of Essam al-Erian? He is one of the Muslim Brothers and very open-minded, but I know that he has problems inside the Muslim Brothers, because he made statements "I don't mind if women or Copts become the head of the state", and after that he was prevented from making statements. So yes, I think there are some more progressive minded Brothers, but I'm not very near, not very close to them. And I know that the younger generations of the Muslim Brothers are also different.
BDS: They are more radical?

ND: No they are more open. They want more internal democracy.
BDS: Why is the party falling apart?

HH: Something like the camel’s battle is going to start now… [laughs]

TF: Why is the party falling apart? For the same reason the Stalinist and Communist parties fell apart: the bureaucracy and the change in the Tagammu leadership from struggling leaders to businessmen. And Mubarak used the police to damage the parties, especially Tagammu. But a lot of Tagammu members remained in the party because they didn’t find any other place for the left in Egypt. After the revolution the Egyptians inside Tagammu captured the right to organize, to organize parties and movements. The left in Egypt didn’t fall apart and goes forward. The only thing which stops the people to be engaged in parties like Tagammu is the fact that the leadership in these parties is too old and the that the organization of these parties does not correlate to the aspirations of the people. In addition, there are a lot of people who have seen that Tagammu as an organization of the Egyptian left had relations with the old regime. […]
PART 1

BF: The union started in 2008, because of our will, not because of the law or the constitution, because we have a big number of pensioners, eight million and a half.

BDS: How many percent of the Egyptians have a right to pensions?

BF: Maybe around 40% of the Egyptians. The government attacked us and wanted to destroy our pensions because we cost them a lot. Four hundred and thirty five “milliard” of Egyptian pounds are in the back accounts and those accounts are in America and the West. The government stole this money and spent it. They only gave us documents instead of the money. They were stupid because they did not invest the money in order to create more money, but they only spent it. This caused a pressure on the pensions, so in Egypt four million people have less than a quarter dollar per day. On the other hand, according to the World Bank, the poverty line is under two dollars a day. A lot of people died in Egypt because of the low pensions and their poverty and bad health. This caused a separation between the pensioners in Egypt. The government attacked a lot of pensioners during the last few years, but we also succeeded in organizing a lot of protests in and outside Cairo. The ILO agreed to our membership and we created a federation for independent trade-unions. The government union sold and spent all the rights of the workers in Egypt to the benefits of a small group of investors. It was like an invitation to foreign investors because in Egypt we had workers without rights. Two days ago the Ministry made an official statement to acknowledge the main independent pensioners union in Egypt. The state union attacked this decision, but the international unions and syndicates denied the membership of the state union and put it on the black list.

BDS: Who was the first to have the idea of creating an independent pensioners’ union, the workers themselves, or political activists?

BF: I was the first one…

HH: … and that’s true…
BF: … In 2007 I was over 60 and I didn’t find any state bureaucrat to deal with me as an Egyptian citizen. They were dealing with anyone over 60 as someone who had left their work out of laziness. I’ve made an interview with the Ministry of Economy and I was convinced that we were in a class struggle and under a class attack. I was also convinced that the ex-Minister of Economy and Finance was attacking us and creating a lot of problems for us. Talking about us as if we should be ashamed and so on. The victorious army of 1973 and those who have built Egypt are those who are pensioners now. I am from Port Said and I was an MP member during three elections. Hosni Mubarak himself was attacking me inside and outside parliament and in Port Said. Two times he attacked me in the elections and Mubarak didn’t succeed in beating me during the elections.

HH: He was one of the best voices of the Left in the parliament. Since 60 years he is wearing the same suit and the same trousers. […] One of the most famous and effective members of the Left in the parliament. […] I think they have stopped a lot of laws which were adopted by the NDP in parliament, such as the insurance and health law. These were the most important laws they succeeded in stopping.

PART 2

 […]

BDS: Which political forces were supporting the independent pensioners union and which tried to resist it, both before and after the revolution?

BF: Tagammu, of course. But there are no political forces or powers in the union, we are independent. Those who worked against us were the regime, the security, and the state’s union, and especially the Minister of the Economy.

BDS: What about the liberal parties such as al-Wafd, al-Ghad, and al-Ikhwan?

BF: Parties such as al-Wafd are no enemies to us. Parties such as the Ikhwan and the Salafists are always keen to start a class fight with us, they are an enemy for us. They are dealing with the issue of poverty in an Islamic way, that poor have no rights except for thanking the ones who tip them.

[BF is interrupted]

BDS: [to HH] It’s interesting to hear these different opinions on the Muslim Brothers. Kamal Abu al-Eita agreed with Farghali, but Saud Omar says they play a more complex role…

HH: … the workers of the Ikhwan. It is in their interest.

[BF is back]
BDS: Are there members of the Ikhwan in the pensioners union?

BF: Ma fish, never.

BDS: Do you think that now, after the revolution, the independent union will have more problems, because the liberal forces will also act against the union, as they desire economic stability and so on.

BF: No. All of these powers are trying to befriend the union. Especially because we are the most powerful group and our members are bigger than any party.

BDS: What do you think about Kamal Abu al-Eita’s project of a federation of independent trade-unions?

BF: Of course we agreed with this and we are one of the four unions who have created this federation.

BDS: How is the prospect of more unions joining the federation?

BF: All workers hate the state unions, so in the next days we will have tens or hundreds of applications to join the union and this started right now.

BDS: After the revolution there have been some reforms, for example the amn ad-dawla has been abolished. Do you think it is possible to introduce democracy in the state union.

BF: It will be destroyed. That’s all. You are forced to be a member in it. There can’t be any democracy in it.

BDS: What are the newspapers and journalists who have supported their struggle up until now?

BF: Most of the independent newspapers and channels and media supported us, and the national media was attacking us.

BDS: Do you think this will change now, because most of the newspapers are in the hands of liberals and capitalists?

BF: We are not disagreeing with the businessmen and capitalists as a whole group. A lot of them support us, and a lot of them don’t, attacking the union, and this will continue now. Some of the independent newspapers will continue to support us and other will transform and attack us.

BDS: Will there be a new labor law? Are you preparing this labor law now?

BF: This law was made by the government and the ex-regime. Right now we are making new laws, for the workers, for the unions, a new law to cross every line of the old
regime. And if we don’t succeed in implementing these new laws, we will go back to the streets to end the old laws, like what happened during the revolution. This is the era of the revolution, and the benefits of the revolution must go to the workers, this class of Egyptians.
BDS: What was the role of Tagammu in the strike movement?

MF: You have to differentiate between “Tagammu” and the Tagammu activists. The Tagammu activity in Mahalla was organized by some specific activists. In Mahalla it were the UPY and some leaders who decided to participate in the strike. The official leaders refused to participate in order to protect their gains with the government.

BDS: What was the opinion of the labor committee in Tagammu?

MF: This committee only exists on paper. All actions and struggle and solidarity with the workers only came from specific persons, not from this committee. The government accused Ahmed Belal, and he is a journalist, and I am a teacher. Where are the workers of the party? The government accused the two of us in 2006 of making the strike. We believe that solidarity with the workers is important in the struggle against capitalism.

BDS: How do you try to support the movement: through leaflets, through talking to the workers, …?

MF: On September 23, the day of the strike, the Union of Progressive Youth organized a demonstration in solidarity with the workers in front of the City Council. […] We discussed with the workers how we could advance their demands and we spoke with the media and the newspapers, asking them to come to our city. We called the leaders in our party, demanding them to take a more radical position because we believed that this strike would be the locomotive which would pull all the future strikes. We asked our party in Cairo to appraise this movement in a good way. We also called some people who could bring food for the workers. […] We told the workers that their strike was a good action and we talked with them about their rights. […] We also tried to organize international support. […] We were in the factories for six days, side by side with the workers, and we smuggled statements inside and distributed them. We cannot achieve everything in every strike. In Mahalla we achieved that workers in all Egypt can gain their rights through strikes. Now people believe it and they are no longer skeptical as they used to be. […] After thirty years the Egyptian people can achieve their social demands and then we will struggle for political demands.

BDS: Which groups, other than certain Tagammu activists, have played a good role?
MF: Sayyid Husayni came to the strike and the Muslim Brotherhood said that he would make a statement for them. But he only came for show. The CTWS played a role because they have a place and money for food but they are not political. The Nasserist party is weak but they have the same ideological view. There are Nasserist workers but they are not organized or in a party. You cannot depend on them to make an action in the street.

BDS: What about the new groups such as Tadamon and the Revolutionary Socialists?

MF: Tadamon was not there yet, it is a new organization. The RS came to join the demonstration. They focused on achieving all the demands of the workers but you have to be realistic; when you have ten demands you may only achieve five. But they came from Cairo with their Western culture and did not have a high influence. The workers would not work with them. They said they supported the workers but at the same time they tried to recruit new members. It is not a problem that they came to the strike, but the workers thought that their attitude was opportunistic and that they did not really support their cause. The class conflict in Egypt is not mature. It is thieves’ capitalism not real capitalism. They did not understand that the RS supported them because they were working class. They could not come to this ideological conclusion. I do not agree with their ideology because in Egypt we have another culture. When you want to make a revolution you need to study it. In Egypt you need a democracy first, then people become organized in classes and they will fight as classes.
BDS: How long have you been a member of Tagammu?

MF: I have been a member for 18 years. I am a member in the Central Committee. I am interested in labor issues, but also in other fields of political work. We assist the workers, give them logistical support. In 1994 we had a big strike in Mahalla, and in 2006-7-8 again.

BDS: Do you only support the workers or do you offer them a political perspective as well?

MF: The general direction of Tagammu is one of support for the workers, only the demands of the workers, giving no political direction at all. But here however, in Mahalla, we give them a political perspective. We hope that we convince the members of Tagammu next year to have a political perspective for the workers.

BDS: As you have been a member for 18 years in Tagammu, a lot of things changed in the party?

MF: Yes, the party changed for the worse. It has become less connected to the common people, for example. Even the political program and perspectives are bad now. Some of our leaders are close to the government, while most members are for the struggle against the regime.

In our party there are three trends: the leadership, which is the most organized trend; the trend for change, which is not organized but it’s supported by half the party members, Ahmed Belal & I are two of the leaders of this trend. Ahmed Belal in the Union of Progressive Youth and I in the party. Then there is a faction around Abu al Ezz al-Hariri, he is a historical leader in the leftist movement, one of the leaders who established Tagammu. This faction is really centered on Abu al Ezz though. We have some similarities and some differences with them.

We are all members of the party. We want to save the party, but if the leadership is able to continue like this, we’ll have to separate. The events in Mahalla have made Tagammu members more conscious about the need to be close to the common people in the streets and factories. But the leadership obstructs our Mahalla branch in working with the workers. For example in December 2007, when there was a strike in Mahalla for 6 days, the leadership warned the workers not to speak with us or the police would come and arrest them.

BDS: Can you tell me about the background of 6 April?
MF: There were political problems, as the dictatorship allowed the prices to increase. People are angry, especially in Mahalla, because the government deals with the workers with more repression. When the people started clashes with the police all anger appeared.

BDS: Why where there only in Mahalla clashes and mass demonstrations and not in the whole of Egypt?

MF: Mahalla has a long history of workers’ demonstrations. In addition, services here are almost non-existent.

BDS: What about the trade union in Mahalla?

MF: They play a negative role. The government controls the union. There are no members of Tagammu in the leadership. The trade union gives only services to the workers, but doesn’t defend their demands. In reality: workers make their own leadership.

FAYYAD Sharif
14-4-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent:</th>
<th>Sharif Fayyad, leader in Tagammu (SF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>14 April 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Tagammu HQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Brecht De Smet (BDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>Notes only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BDS: Since the last time we met, a lot of things have changed, both on the local, regional, and international level.

SF: On the regional level, not much happened, except for Gaza of course. On the international level, the two important events were the financial crisis and the election of Obama. At the local level, there were no elections, so nothing new. Only district elections. The opposition parties gained a little in this fake democracy.

BDS: But what about the movements from below, such as Mahalla?

SF: Ah yes, Mahalla is very important, the strikes and labor movement, and also the doctors, pharmacists, lawyers... But! Some people try to control it... the workers must do it themselves. Non-left-wing movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, try to control the workers and other immature movements. At this point society is not mature enough.

The workers succeeded in their movement before 2008. They gained their demands. However, the movements must become mature. Tagammu must support them, not impose its own policy on them. You should ask Ahmed Belal for more information about this. Tagammu stood by the workers with propaganda, with interventions in parliament, by media, and so on. Also, there were some elections for the governorates.
and the regime left seeds to the opposition so the international community would consider these elections as democratic and legitimate. Especially the Wafd and Tagammu to a lesser degree won some seats. The Muslim Brotherhood was barred from the elections, so they couldn't put a candidate for the presidential elections.

BDS: That must be dilemma for Tagammu. If they participate they win a political platform and gain some influence, but if they do, they strengthen the illusion that the system is democratic...

SF: Yes, indeed. Perhaps another big event was the catastrophe [mud slide] where a lot of poor Egyptians died, and the government did nothing to help them. It showed that the system does not care about the poor. Internationally, there was the big financial crisis. Some left-wing economists expected this already a long time ago, as crises are part of the capitalist system, every 20 to 30 years or so. These are systematic, worldwide crises.

Our capitalist government has injected enormous amounts of money into the capitalist class, while the poor and middle classes needed the support, the most. The capitalist class, however, made no investments at all. The government tells us we must “trust” the capitalists, but we see no return whatsoever of these capital injections.

In Egypt, due to the deflation, the regime could lower the subsidies on food and give this money to the capitalists. So the people who pay the price of the capitalist crisis are not the capitalists themselves, but the middle classes and the poor. However, the reduced inflation has come through a crisis and not through increased production...

At the moment, the poor people in Egypt don’t care much about the crisis.

BDS: On the other hand, the crisis has resulted in an ideological shift; the capitalists themselves speak openly about nationalisation and socialism isn’t a taboo any more

SF: Don’t confuse nationalisations with the injections of capital. It’s only a transition period, the injection is only for a short time and there are no conditions for the capitalists. So it’s not a socialist solution. Socialism will only come through a real struggle, through the workers, workers, and the poor, not automatically.

The only positive thing about the crisis is that it decreased the prices of food. So the crisis has been good for many third world countries in this regard. Also, for those parts of the third world which have a net import of oil, the situation was better with the reduced oil prices. In theory this would allow the regimes to have more investments, but in practice we see that the capitalist dictatorships like in Egypt don’t give a damn.

On an ideological level, what has changed is not a transition from capitalism to socialism, but a re-evaluation of the role of the government in the economy. Now some capitalists realize that the free market does not fix or correct itself, but that intervention is necessary, especially liberals with social accents. Socialists are for interventions in the benefit of the people, not the capitalists. So what we have is a rethinking of the mechanics of capitalism.

Most of the poor Egyptians are out of the system and are not (yet) affected by the crisis.
In Egypt we have only a few big companies who dominate the market, such as ORASCOM. Most companies in the private sector are small and can't stand a long period of crisis, the oligopolist capitalism will become even more strong through the crisis. Big capitalists such as Ahmed ‘Ezz will gain even more power.

About Obama, he won't change the system, he is part of it, but! He can make some issues negotiable. There will be a change in discourse. Islamic fundamentalism was strengthened by Bush's policies. A new US policy can reduce American violence, which will reduce religious fundamentalism and military regimes, and favour the civil movement.
BDS: What is your take on the problem of the peasants?

MF: In 1963, on 12 July, Nasser issued decree 26, which called for the distribution of lands among poor farmers. Through instalments, farmers paid the lands in 40 years and now it's their legal property.

Suddenly, during the years of Mubarak, they put a hold on the distribution of lands among the farmers. The state and the landlords made a deal, so that the landlords could take back the lands. The case was brought before court, which resulted in a decree in 1991 against the farmers. In fact, there were two letters from the state concerning this case, one against us and one in favor of us. However, the Ministry of Agricultural Reform, in league with the landlords, suppressed the letter in favor of us.

So the police came to get the land from the farmers.

BDS: How many peasant families are there, here in Dikirnis?

MF: In 1962 there were some 50 families, now there are 2,000 families. There are five landlords, owning more than 60 percent of the land. Under the regime of Sadat they began to be very close friends with the regime. The landlords sought ways to quickly increase their capital and decided the seizure of the land was a good solution.

So. When the police came to the lands of the farmers, they hit the people and the journalists and activists. Among the journalists there was someone from Switzerland, Belgium and France. They were arrested, but thanks to the intervention of their embassy they got free.

BDS: How did the farmers organize themselves in the time between the decree of the court and the attempts at seizing the land?

MF: The peasants stood by each other, and organised themselves. They were sure of their right to own their land, as they had already paid the price for it. They realised that the recent decree was a result of corruption and a deal between the ministry of agricultural reform and the landlords. They decided to protest as for them it's a matter of life and death. They formed a cooperation to protect their land, cultivate the crops and create solidarity between themselves.
The activists were all from left-wing and nationalist forces and they stood beside the farmers. We brought their protest to the media, even on an international level, and in conferences in Rio and India, French organisations were supporting us, etc. The police studied the situation and when it seemed they were not able to drive back the farmers by force, they sought other ways. So they sent thugs to the lands to break through the peasants, which failed. They tried to buy off the farmers as well, which obviously failed, as without lands they don’t have a means for existence.

The occupation of the land happened in steps, from 2002-2003 on. Now the peasants own their land in practice, they plant it, cultivate it, fight and defend their rights. They have a strong ability to sacrifice themselves for their land. 24 farmers were arrested and put before court.

Political and judiciary forces helped the solidarity movement, left movements, not the right wing opposition which, together with the Muslim Brothers, supported the landlords. There are regular meetings here where we discuss the struggle and the future.

BDS: What will happen in the future?

MF: In the end the state and the landlords will have to obtain the lands by force. Yet the farmers announced that they will fight for their rights and they are ready to sacrifice themselves, as it is the source of their existence. Right now we are attempting at establishing a syndicate for the farmers. The state has two choices: (1) they admit the land is the property of the farmers; (2) they oppress the farmers by force. They will conduct trials and arrest people, but in the end they cannot arrest all farmers.

BDS: How was the solidarity campaign organised?

MF: There was solidarity between the peasants, but also by the workers of Mahalla. Both want to get rid of the regime, as the regime is allied with the capitalists and landlords. The regime represents these interests.

BDS: What kind of role did Tagammu play in the movement?

MF: We supported the case of the farmers and workers. But we were not the only force in the field. In the end the political field is an obstacle because the regime weakens the political movement in Egypt against the interests of the Egyptian people.

BDS: As democracy from above, e.g. through elections, seems impossible, can it perhaps be achieved from below?

MF: It is my opinion that all political sectors must unite.

BDS: While this seems a good strategy on the level of the fight of the regime, how do you combine such a coalition with a presence within social movements?
MF: We have a common interest and a deal between all opposition parties. We only have one aim: to create a democratic atmosphere.

BDS: Yes, but I see some difficulties with this strategy. For example, how will you motivate the farmers here to vote for a coalition which consists both of left-wing parties which support his cause and right-wing parties which side with the landlords?

MF: The situation is different here than in Belgium. We don't have a democratic government. The politicians here work in a narrow framework. In a democracy it will be the street who judges. The left has only been in the street in 1977.
BDS: As a first question I would like to know more about the history and the aims of the center.

NS: This center started in 2004. A lot of activists of the land center started this center. The first objective was to enhance the situation in the countryside. We work with two groups: workers and farmers. We try to enhance the situation of workers and their families.

HF: We also work in civil research and towards the media.

BDS: In 2004 there was a split in the organization?

NS: No, it was in the other organization.

BDS: Why did the center separated from the Land Center?

NS: There was a disagreement with the members.

BDS: Was it a political disagreement or political disagreement?

HF: Different reasons, we don’t want to recreate the past.

BDS: I heard that the center is especially focused on publishing reports about the peasants. How do you do your investigations?

HF: We have one than more source. There is a network and we communicate with them about important cases. There is a level to deal with the leadership. Whenever there is a movement we consider it and know it. We try to help in the legal aid and on the media level and how to form demands. We develop them and their leaderships through seminars and conferences. How we can study these movements? We have published a book about the nurses, their fate in Egypt. We focus on a certain class.

BDS: After 1997 there was a big movement from the peasants against the enforcement of the land reform law. How did this movement develop? Where there any successes of this movement? How is the movement today?
HF: In 1997 as a result of the absence of unions for the peasants, there was not an opposition, a good opposition for the peasants.

NS: In 1997 the farmer movement made a real action against law 96 which freezes the relations between the tenant and land lord, and the farmers they don’t have a body or association to gather them, so that was the biggest difficulty. [...] The farmers faced many problems. [...] Because they haven’t the experience in organizing in themselves they do not have the same influence as the workers. [...] Usually their actions become violent, they fight with each other because of water forces and their basic needs. They are different than workers movement, whose movement is more organized, they have experience, but the farmers don’t have this experience. The labor movement is peaceful, they know what they are doing, but farmers they don’t know it.

BDS: There were a lot of spontaneous occupations of the lands by the farmers.

NS: After 1952 the government issued the confiscation of the land by law and gave it to small farmers. Now the land changed, the government policy changed, so now they are laws to give back the land to the big landowners. Many farmers used to give their land in many places.

HF: The movement took many forms: they formed cooperatives, they blocked the roads, they blocked the railways, they had demonstrations, some violent actions with the police and the owners of the land. And there were many conflicts in this period, [...] many slogans, “the land for those who farm” “Don’t expel us from the land”. We were trying to delay the execution of this law for four or five years. Few times the farmers gathered and came to Cairo. There were conferences of thousands in the parties, or in Tagammu, or in al-Amal party. The government started to arrest some of them, a big number of political activists and some of the leaders of the movement. They started to fight this law with violence, the police entered the villages and arrested most men, tortured them in the police stations and forced them to sign contracts to leave the land. There were many murders of farmers. There were many farmers who were arrested. The government faced this movement, they decided to defy this law, but they delayed the execution of the law for those who rent the land in order to divide the farmers. This delay ended two years ago and some movements followed after this law two years ago and the center played a big role in these movements. Concerning not expelling the farmers from their lands and houses. And the government ignored a very important part of the law namely that the farmers should receive other lands in order to continue their living.

BDS: The problem of the farmers movement is that they lack organization. What role did political organizations such as Tagammu or this center play in trying to supporting the farmers, giving them advice, organizing them?

HF: The basic problem is that the parties are weak organization, they don’t have a real existence, and then there’s the government. They could not use this movement to play a big role as parties. I pray that this role of organizing the farmers, there were
many ways and trials to make organization in the villages, like communities, for example in Serando village and al-Baheira governorate the struggles of the farmers there... where Faysal Marakbi was killed. The farmers made an organizing committee there, and there were many figures in different places on a united level. There was no big organization, there are many questions for the farmers movement now: how to organize those who rent the land, how to organize themselves, because their needs are not equal. We believe that the future is about this.

BDS: About the differences between the workers and farmers movement. Do you think the workers movement can support the farmers, and if so, how can this support be realized, and if not so, why not?

NS: I would like to say no. Even inside the labor movement, like dozens, oppose each other. The workers movement exist in different companies which do not support each other. There are demands which are similar, like minimum wage. But at the same time workers of these companies are not come to peasants and work with peasants. Those people have similar demands, but at the same time they cannot work together, so I don’t think they can support the farmers. The workers movement here is just economic, up until now they don’t have any political objective. As an economic movement they just seek to enhance their situation, but they are not seeking to enhance the economic situation for all Egyptians.

HF: What is your point of view of the labor movement to support the peasants, what do you mean by this question?

BDS: I talked with people from Tadamon, for example, and they have as a goal not only to unite people from the workers movement and they want of course unite the workers, but they also want to connect workers with peasants, fishermen, and so on. Their immediate goals may be different but they are fighting the same system. For example the land reform law is the same tactic of the regime in the countryside as the privatizations are in the industrial field. They have, in theory, the same interests, the workers and the peasants.

HF: These are far goals to be accomplished. We can talk now about how the workers affect the farmers movement. How the distance that the workers took for the demonstrations and the protests and the walk-outs and to challenge the law. How this reflect the ability of farmers to move more and to be encouraged more. There are many factories in the governorates, there are interior actions between the villages and the workers and some of the workers are peasants originally, some of them rent lands. In 2006 some of the reasons about the relation between the landlord and the person who rents, this relation, a huge number of workers depended on these lands, when these lands were taken away from them or when the rent was doubled: working in a factory is basically his only source of living. This base of anger started to increase. This interaction happened just like that. The connection with the parties is far away. It needs that the farmers unite together and the workers also unite, when there is 1,200 pounds as a minimum wage aim. It is not a private demand, it is a demand of all the workers together. And the workers started to work and there are
demands, with ups and downs there are movements to reach this. This is an important step to unite the movement, like how the workers movement challenged the labor union and they made the first independent union in Egypt. It is banned due to law. There were many opinions from those who are interested in labor movements for these independent unions this should happen in a democratic atmosphere, more than now. But the reality: their capability to have this independence is a good example for the workers; even if they succeed or not. It is a very important step in order to attain democracy. On the other hand those who talk about democracy and who advance democratic demands cannot accomplish any of these demands, but the workers accomplish these demands without using any political slogan.

BDS: Can you tell me something more about the last part, how the democratic and workers movement interact? And how activists try to bridge these two movements?

HF: The workers’ movement is a democratic power itself. When workers organize a demonstration in Cairo, they have to occupy the streets and arrange transport for their comrades. When they want to negotiate with the Minister, they have to elect delegates from the different governorates. This is an example of workers’ democracy.

BDS: This democracy is an internal process, it is not brought from without?

HF: Not all workers are politicized, not all of them are in parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. It is true, some of them have a political base. But the workers’ movement teaches itself. This is what happened in Mahalla. It is a role model for the workers: how they became strong, how their protests developed and how they learned and built their own road. If the workers did not enter in a direct way in the Movement for Change it is because of two reasons: the Change movement did not form any social demand and the workers did not add their social demands to its agenda. The other thing is that the leaderships of the workers movements and the historical and political leaderships went away through a policy of early retirement. There are new leaderships. Their political and class mentality is not formed. They do not have political confidence yet.

NS: It happened on 6 April. They were new groups which did not have a certain ideology, they were not members in the political parties.

BDS: So if the workers can teach themselves, what role can political parties or activists or human rights activists play in this movement to move it from an economic struggle to a more political fight?

NS: The problem is in the politics, with the political activists and the civil activists. Before the political activists start to organize the workers they should start organize themselves. Later on they can agree on a certain agenda on how to interact with the labor movement. But the labor movement will not be developed into a political movement without this.
HF: In addition to what she says, I believe that is the role of political activists: reinforcing the protests through media support, trying to unite or to gather the labor communities, and developing, uniting and diffusing the existing demands. The problem is how to connect with the workers. There is often an attempt to politicize the movement without developing the demands of the movement itself. One should wait until the movement reaches a good level before turning it in a political one. When there are no labor unions or labor parties there is an absence which we cannot fill. We only have a little number of activists. We should support the workers’ demands themselves. Through this process the workers’ aims are developed, and they develop into an independent group and from there they start to form demands which relate to the society at large, for example the demand of the minimum wage. Through the process of creating groups like this they will develop their demands from an immediate, low state to a higher form. On the other hand, they are facing a huge enemy. This enemy has to be conquered first and only then you can pose higher demands.

BDS: Can I ask something about your political engagement?

HF: Concerning the center or myself?

BDS: Yourself.

HF: I am a leftist and in the Socialist Studies Center. That’s it.

BDS: Are you a member of the RS?

HF: Yes.

BDS: Can you tell me something about this organization, its history and its aims?

HF: What’s is relation to the workers movement?

BDS: I hope you could answer that as a member of the RS?

HF: The relation between the RS and the workers movement?

BDS: Yes. It is important for my research which political groups are active within the labor movement. That’s why I want to know something more about the different political groups, their goals and their backgrounds.

HF: The Revolutionary Socialists were founded in the beginning of the nineties. The organization was basically concerned with the idea of change in Egypt, how to make enormous change in Egypt. And the struggle for socialism. It is related to the idea of change in the whole world. To create new people who believe in their issues.

BDS: Where this young and new members or members of other organizations?
HF: Not from other organizations.

BDS: Do you know something about the cooperation of the RS with the Ikhwan, which started with the Second Palestinian Intifada. Can you tell me something about this.

HF: We have an important principle: to cooperate with most of the political forces – except for al-Watani party – around specific goals, for example during the Intifada, during the Movement for Change, concerning the Palestinian case. Which are the political communities that support the Palestinian case and want to face the Zionist occupation. We don’t shout the same slogans unless we are grouped around the same goal. We cannot deny the role of the Muslim Brothers in the Arab Zionist movement. Even if we are different from the ways of the Muslim Brothers or the Nasserists. We share the same tactic which was applied during Kefaya and this period. […] We advance the same aims with regard to democracy. There was an agreement of most of the movements and they applied the same concept, despite differences on specific aims or demands. We have to accept that the Islamists are the major political group and opposition power in Egypt. The issue is the democratic struggle not the struggle for Islam. This was the main idea about the alliance. When the social movements emerged, the connection with the Islamists became less, because there is a contradiction in our main goals. We don’t exclude the possibility that there could be a struggle in a company, whereby leftists and Ikhwan move together to achieve their goals.

BDS: In Helwan there was a student union between RS and the Ikhwan? Was this a successful experiment?

HF: There was a fraud in the elections of the student union. And we tried to form an organization of students, an independent organization of the students, away from the fake student union. And hundreds of students were banned from the elections. It attracted a large number of students. This experiment did not last long. We believed that there were many mistakes, from the Islamists and maybe from the RS. The main problem is that in any real struggle the Islamists cannot be simply ignored. Even if you believe that you are correct you cannot ignore them. This is the balance of power in Egypt.

BDS: Isn’t it dangerous when you work together that the RS will be absorbed by the Muslim Brotherhood because they are bigger and more strong and that your politics will be dominated by their politics and issues, for example in the university the fight for the wearing of the veil.

HF: What’s the problem?

BDS: I mean that if you work together with the Muslim Brotherhood, and they are such a big force, then the danger is that you will become the tail of this organization; when they move forward some political issues, your activity will be dominated by these issues instead of your own issues.
HF: We are not saying that we are one party or that we are on the same side. We are talking about one case we were working together. And during this cooperation we protected our own independent propaganda and publications and we tried to appear different from the Muslim Brotherhood. We are not talking about becoming one team, we are talking about a cooperation which is limited in a certain time concerning one issue and one case. If there is an issue with the higab, we are with the right of girls to wear the higab, we don’t have a problem with this. But we are in opposition to the Islamist point of view of women in general. About the different size of RS compared to Muslim Brotherhood. This is a problem of course. Agreed. But this is the situation. And on the other hand, the story of the cooperation with the Brotherhood or others is not the only thing. We are concerned basically with the social movement and the labor movement and we try to have a huge impact. We aim to work with youth and with the left in general and build our presence in the street. This will create a new balance of power in the streets and reinforce the Left in our society, but until this happens we have to deal with reality.

BDS: What is the attitude of the RS towards the labor movement. I spoke with Mustafa Bassiouni and he said the RS were always oriented towards the labor movement. During the Palestinian Intifada, the war against Iraq, the Kefaya movement, the activities of all leftist groups were towards the youth and when the Mahalla movement became strong, the revolutionary socialists became oriented again towards the labor movement. How did they approach this strike? Did they gain a lot of workers from it?

HF: You talked with Mustafa about this issue? I will not say something different, I agree with him.

BDS: I don’t want to catch you on any differences with Mustafa, I just want some more details.

HF: No problem.
FOUAD Hisham
13-3-2011

Respondent: Hisham Fouad, leader in the RS and the SLCHR (HF)
Date: 13 March 2011
Location: Giza, SLCHR centre
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: What was the role of peasants and the countryside in the revolution. In the media we
hear a lot about the people in the cities and industrial workers, but very little about
peasants.

HF: I have a report about the peasants in the revolution. [...] The role of the peasants was
relatively small in the revolution, but when they entered the revolution, they
occupied the lands which the state had taken from them, they attacked the State
Security and confronted the landlords and the army which tried to drive them from
their lands. There are a lot of movements in a lot of governorates, concentrated on the
land and the reappropriation of the land, in Alexandria, Daqhaliyya, Fayyum and
other governorates. Now the peasants try to organize themselves in unions and
associations. Now many peasants gathered in front of the cabinet to demand their
right for land, and put pressure on the government to give them documents which
prove that they own the land and that they won’t be driven from it again.

BDS: Do you think the experience of the peasants in the second half of the 1990s, when they
occupied their lands, played an important role?

HF: Yes. The current conflicts began many years ago, the peasants tried since many years
ago to change their situation. Now the moment is right for them to attack the regime
and take their rights.

BDS: Why is there so little attention to the peasants in the Egyptian media.

HF: Also with regard to workers. There are two reasons. Firstly, the media concentrated
on political movements and youth movements and they tried to make an impression
that these youth and political movements led the revolution and that their demands
are the basic demands of the revolution. These demands speak about the liberal and
democratic ideas, they are not social demands from workers and peasants. This is the
plan of the State, to separate between these two types of demands and to concentrate
on the groups which only focus on political demands. The second reason is that the
peasant movement is not strong enough and that their participation was little during
the revolution.

BDS: During the last days of the revolution workers played an important role, was this also
a decisive moment in the revolution?
HF: Yes. The demonstrations and sit-ins in Tahrir Square did not affect the production. But the workers' strikes affected the production and also, when the workers entered, they rapidly raised other demands connected to the mode of production, redistribution of wealth, and so on, and this did not agree with the capitalist classes. So they thought: we have to enter rapidly to stop this movement and concentrate on political demands only and avoid social demands and so on. Also the transport drivers entered into the strikes had a huge impact on Cairo. There were no buses at all. All transportation stopped. The whole of the Cairo population depended on this transport. So there was no movement, a paralysis of the economy, the society. In the Sons of Land Center, here, we see that the movement of the workers was during the three days before Mubarak resigned, very large in all governorates in all sectors and this was a danger to the capitalist system.

BDS: In Mahalla the regime recently made a deal with the workers. Do you think the regime will try to buy off the workers?

HF: I think the regime will do two things. First it will raise the minimum wage and adopt the right to create independent trade-union. The Minister for Manpower said that he will recognize any independent trade-union. So there is no longer any obstacle for the workers, and also for the peasants. This is a great victory for the workers. The Prime Minister spoke about the minimum wage and he will raise it to about 900 for the highly educated workers and 600 for minimal educated workers and 500 for the non-educated. It is not enough but it will give the workers the courage to push for other reforms and they will be successful in this, I think. But on the other hand, they attacked workers who organized strikes and sit-ins and they say that this is the main danger in Egypt now: the protest of workers. This expresses their fear, that the democratic revolution transforms into a social revolution. They try to stop the revolution of the workers in various ways, including the use of military force and the arrest of workers to stop these protests.

BDS: What role did leftist activists play in the revolution? The revolution was spontaneous, but what part did leftist activists play?

HF: We can talk about two things. First. Who made the initiative to begin the first demonstrations. In this regard the Left played an important role, together with other groups. They played a role in the start of the revolution, but after Friday 28, it is a very broad movement and the Left was much too small to affect the movement. The Muslim Brotherhood with its one million members... The Left cannot affect it strongly. The revolution belonged to the people, there were no political groups which became leaders of the movement. All political organizations, left or right, were unable to catch the movement of the people in the streets, which went very fast. They constantly ran behind the events. All Leftists groups, however, participated in the movement. A part of them tried to mix political with social demands, but there is no big party or union which could play a directive role, like in Tunisia, so this makes the movement of workers and peasants separate from the broader events.

BDS: Do you think there’s a bigger chance of a united Left, now, after the revolution?
HF: I think that a lot of leaders are attempting to unite the Left, but we cannot say that they will succeed. We have to wait two months or so before we can see how this movement will develop, because our colleagues in Tagammu party tried to fire Rifaat al-Said and we have to wait how their battle will turn out. It’s the same scenario in the ECP where they are trying to make a party, and it’s the same with other groups who try to create a Socialist Renewal party. Other groups try to make a Popular Alliance party. We are in a state of flux. All of the leftists speak about unification and stand united against the regime, the Islamists and the liberals. Other groups try to make a Labor Party and gather the leaders of the movement in the factories to make a political party for the workers. A Democratic Labor Party which has gathered around 300 worker leaders. This is important now, to build a Labor Party.

BDS: In your opinion, what is the best leftist strategy, is it best to spend time and energy now to unite every leftist force, or create a connection with the workers’ movement?

HF: What is your opinion?

BDS: In my opinion it is best to create a link with the workers’ movement.

HF: Ok, I agree with you. [laughs] I belong to the Revolutionary Socialists and this is our strategy. We have to connect with the workers and we have to help the workers to build their party. At the same time we partially participated in the Popular Alliance Party, but we don’t put too much hope on this project.

BDS: If we compare the Egyptian Revolution to, for example, the Russian Revolution, we have seen that in the Russian Revolution there were organizations of the people, sovjets. The popular committees here in Egypt, do they play the same role? Or are they different? In the factories there were moments of workers’ control. How important was this?

HF: We try to move in two ways. Firstly, we try to organize popular committees. Secondly, we encourage the people to self-organize. We hope that these attempts succeed, because this is crucial to the success of the revolution. Even if we only speak about the democratic revolution. Because there is a counterrevolutionary going on, so it is important for the people to be organized in these types of committees. Also, there are a lot of attempts to organize workers in the factories, under different names. These attempts will succeed on many occasions and they will achieve huge things: fire their bosses, occupy their factories, and so on. We try to transforms these committees into independent unions in the factory. These are important issues, I think. If the leftists and the people succeed in creating these committees, it will be a precious instrument in winning the revolution.

BDS: Do you think that the revolutionary forces are weaker now than a few weeks ago: Tahrir has been cleansed by the military, the police are back in the streets, ... Is this a victory of the counterrevolution, or do you think this can change back all of a sudden?
HF: I think it can quickly change and come back. The state tries to organize itself again, and the revolutionaries tries to organize themselves. It is a battle. We forced the State to dispel Ahmed Shafiq and bring in Essam Sharaf and we won this battle. We said that we are against the referendum and against the constitutional amendments and that we want a new constitution. Who will win this battle? We will see. The State tries to put pressure on the workers and peasants not to strike and to protest, but the workers continue their strikes and this is another battle. We will see in these transitional months a lot of battles. […]

BDS: What was the role of the Ikhwan in the revolution?

HF: They entered lately in the revolution, but they played an important role in the revolution. Before Mubarak left, they held talks with the regime and came to some form of arrangement. They had some demands and the State and military accepted these demands. There is a dialogue. This does not mean that they are against the people with regard to all demands. They will fight to abolish the emergency law. They will fight for a lot of things. But they will avoid fighting the regime directly. They also want stability in the factories and their members in the factories are trying to convince the workers to wait, to be calm. They play a role in this. They also play a role in retaining the police office and asking the police to come back, but in another way. They play a role to bring back “stability” but we cannot say they are completely against the revolution.

BDS: What about the Muslim Brother Youth? There seems to be a confrontation between the youth and the leaders. Will this become important in the future.

HF: Up until now I cannot say there is a big difference. But I expect that they will be divided in two or three parts. Because the Ikhwan have to take a decision in the next months and this decision will not be acceptable to all members.

BDS: Before the revolution there was a conflict between the neoliberal capitalists like Gamal Mubarak and Ahmed Ezz and the “national capitalists”, especially the military. Do the recent events mean that the military, these national capitalists, have won? How will this change the situation in Egypt with regard to privatization and so on.

HF: The way of Gamal has ended. Egypt will wait around two years until it returns to this style of liberalism. It resembles that what happened in 1977, when Sadat tried to raise prices, people went to the streets, so he waited until 1979. When the revolution ends, they will return. We are still in a capitalist regime, but they will adopt a lot of measures which are concessions to the poor, the workers and the peasants, in the health and education departments, with regard to prices, and so on. So they will have some policies which contradict Gamal Mubarak’s neoliberalism.

BDS: Do you think this will create confusion among the workers and peasants, this social policy?
HF: I do not think they can hand out great concessions. So it will not have a great impact on the workers’ movement. But if they make concrete concessions which affect the workers, it will confuse them. But I don’t think they can make these concessions. Up until now they refused to return the privatized companies to the State. They refused this law. They will not make a law which nationalized monopoly companies like cement, steel, ... I think it is very different, but it will depend on the pressure. If we put pressure on the State we can achieve a lot and if we have achieved a lot we can demand other things. It will have a positive effect on the workers because they will realize they gain these concessions because of their pressure and not because it is a gift from the State. It will make them stronger.

BDS: Do you think that within the Left there are groups which have illusions in national capitalism and development?

HF: Yes, in the fringes there are groups of leftists... there are two groups: the democratic leftists or liberal leftists who support al-Baradei, Tagammu and the ECP also say something like this. There is also a group, the Revolutionary Trend, something like that. They want to have an independent State and economy.

[...]

219
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BDS:</th>
<th>There has been a big strike movement between 2006-2008 in Mahalla, what were the results of the strike?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SH:</td>
<td>We have achieved all what we called for in 2006 and 2007. But we only called for bonuses and salaries. From 2007 they started to transfer the leaders to cities outside of Mahalla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS:</td>
<td>There was also a movement against the labor union. Workers from Mahalla refused their membership of the union. Is this struggle still going on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH:</td>
<td>We collected 14,000 signatures against the union and we have 1,200 signatures to stop the Mahalla membership in the ETUF. Now we want to make an independent trade union and we plan to make this now especially since ETUF wants to delay the elections of the syndicates with one year. We want an independent union just as the tax union in Cairo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS:</td>
<td>How will you create this independent union?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH:</td>
<td>We try to collect the workers who are members of the trade union assembly. The members of this assembly are all the workers in Mahalla al-Kubra. Before we withdrew our confidence but the trade union ignored it. We will not withdraw our confidence again, but we will collect these members to create an independent union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS:</td>
<td>Is this decision supported by all the workers or only a specific group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH:</td>
<td>All the workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS:</td>
<td>The union of the tax workers faces many difficulties, how will you solve these with your union?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH:</td>
<td>There are no big problems in the tax trade union, only problems between the trade union and the ETUF from the government. The tax workers went to the labor ministry and gave them the papers and documents and there are people from the ILO here in Cairo and they gave them the same documents and papers. According to the law if the ministry does not answer after 30 days the union is legal. In Mahalla we will do the same. We will go with our documents to the labor ministry and send it to the ILO. This will mean that we have an independent union like the tax workers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BDS: The emergency law makes it difficult for an independent union for example in collecting membership fees, will this not be a problem?

SH: If we cared for the emergency law we couldn’t do anything. Our strikes were illegal under emergency law. After this all kinds of workers made their strikes, even the employees of the government. We don’t need money at the moment, now we only have to choose the time we will go to the labor ministry to give the papers. After this the union will be legal. Even if the minister does not answer us the union will be legal after one month. And our subs will also be legal.

BDS: About the strike itself. How did the workers organize themselves in this strike?

SH: In 2006 we called for our bonuses. The prime minister said that the bonus would equal the salary of two months. But in Ghazl al-Mahalla they gave us only 100 EGP. So we called for bonuses of two months. We organized ourselves. The leaders in Ghazl al-Mahalla organized groups in every section of the company. These smaller groups spoke with the workers every day, calling them to make a strike. We already succeeded to organize our strike for three days 27,000 workers refused to take their salary. It was a great success. On 7 December we made another strike.

BDS: How are the leaders elected? Do the workers elect their leaders, or is it difficult because of the factory security?

SH: All the leaders have led the workers in Mahalla from 1975 until 2007. Then new leaders from the youth started to appear. The new leaders started to make strikes in 2007 and 2008 and 6 April. Election is difficult, they will all be arrested.

BDS: But if you have an independent union there will be held elections?

SH: Some of those leaders have put themselves forward as candidates in the trade union elections of 2007. But they didn’t succeed because of the security. The workers who were elected came to me and asked me to support the decision of the prime minister for the two months bonus. But they didn’t anything. The ones who didn’t succeed made the strike in 7 December. They already have put themselves forward as worker candidates but they didn’t succeed because of the security.

BDS: How important was the solidarity of the Mahalla community.

SH: It was very important. Most of the workers in the factory are from Mahalla. All the people in Mahalla earn their salaries and their livelihood from the factory. It was war, the workers and the people of the city were on the same side. In 2006 workers went to buy bread and the seller noticed that this man bought a lot of bread and asked why you buy so much bread and the worker answered for the strike and the seller refused to take money. In 2007 during Ramadan the workers made strike in their factory and people brought food in the afternoon. The solidarity from the people in Mahalla was very great.
BDS: What about solidarity from the factories outside Mahalla?

SH: There are a lot of factories in solidarity with us, but it isn’t a continuous solidarity. For example the workers at Kafr ad-Dawwar made a symbolic strike for two hours only. Shibin al-Qom also two hours and in Giza for three hours in solidarity with Ghazl al-Mahalla. Some factories made statements in solidarity with us. That’s all.

BDS: For many journalists and political activists Mahalla also become important as a symbol. Some people say these journalists and activists play a good role, some say they play a bad role. What do you think?

SH: There is a real solidarity from some parties and political trends and some students from Tanta university. They were in solidarity with us. The CTWS and some members in al-Tagammu party and some journalists from al-Dostour and al-Badil.

BDS: Where there also groups which played a bad role in your opinion?

SH: Some organizations... but it is not important to say which organizations exactly. The played a bad role but finally they were not effective; the workers do whatever they want. [...] For example, the Muslim Brotherhood, now in the elections they say we succeed in solving the problem of Ghazl al-Mahalla and they didn’t do anything. The candidate of the NDP is saying too that he solved the problems and he didn’t do anything. He was against the strike and the Nasserist party they spoke a lot about helping the workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla but they haven’t workers. Al-Wafd and al-Gabha too. About al-Tagammu: some activists in the party supported us.

BDS: What do you think of the struggle about the minimum wage. Do you think this is a type of struggle which can bring all the workers together?

SH: Sure the workers will come together again. This time the court set 1,200 EGP as a minimum salary. Before the court said that the salary must be suitable with the prices. Now they set an exact minimum wage. The national council for salaries did not make any meetings before to execute the decision of the court. Now they met and decide to make the minimum wage is 400 EGP only, not 1,200 EGP. They said 400 EGP is enough. Now the workers start to speak together about the wages and they are thinking about how to move to get the wage the court decided to.

BDS: Do you think the elections are an instrument to achieve this demand?

SH: The government did not apply the decision of the court. Elections will not solve the problems in Egypt. Only the workers can solve this problem. The workers and the pension people are like a time bomb. If the government doesn’t solve this problem they will explode. I don’t trust the elections.

BDS: I heard that women played a big role in the Mahalla movement?
SH: Women played a great role in the strikes, especially in 2007 when they made the tents in the factory and when women slept with their husbands and sons in the tents in the factory and during Ramadan they brought food and made food for all the workers in the factory. About 4,000 workers in Mahalla are women.

BDS: In 2008 on the 6 April there was going to be a big strike in Mahalla, but the security prevented it from happening. In the end the workers gained a lot of their rights. Do you think the movement was a success or a failure?

SH: There were some mistakes and we have to learn from our mistakes. The mistakes from 2008 were useful for us to learn from. Our achievements were not only for Mahalla workers but for all Egyptian workers. When we achieved one demand for example for our bonus, the government gave it to all workers in Egypt. It was a start.

BDS: Can you tell more about the mistakes?

SH: We invited all workers for the strike in 6 April, but some Islamic and political trends invited the people to make a general strike in this day. The biggest mistake was that they called people for strikes and they could not organize the people. In Ghazl al-Mahalla we decided to stop our strike. When people outside the factory made an action we participated as people and not as workers. So it was a big mistake that political trends called the people to make a strike and at the same time not organizing the people. We have to organize ourselves now. The political trends have to be more close to the workers and the people if they want to make a general strike. But now it is difficult. […] Because the political trends and the intellectuals have to be more close to workers. They have to catch our way of living. The awareness of the workers is low. Political leaders have to speak the same language of the people. They don’t want to go to the workers but they want the workers to go to them. That’s why the political trends and the workers are far from each other.

BDS: I also heard that the Mahalla leadership is divided now, because the government sent some leaders to other places, some leaders were bought off, some became like superstars, and so on. Do you think this is a problem for the movement?

SH: The labor movement is always creative. There are new leaders now in Ghazal al-Mahalla. I know them very well. Maybe some workers are transferred to other cities and want to come back. But there are new leaders now who work against the factory and they went to court. There is a law in Egypt: the youth who finish university and work in a factory, their service time in the military is added to their time in the factory. Those who didn’t go to university don’t have this. The leaders went to court to make it equal for non-university workers. The minister agreed and added the time of military service to service in the factory. This shows that the movement is creative and we have new leaders.
[introduction]

BDS Perhaps you can tell me about your work and how you make the connection between politics and the art of caricature?

EH [...] The caricature is related to the society. The caricaturist has to follow up social and political events, especially subjects involving workers and peasants; those who suffer social and economic problems due to the current policies of capitalism in Egypt. He has to follow the news and check what happens with his activist friends. The cartoonist’s mission is not only to make jokes, but also to make the people conscious. He expresses the situation in pictures. We were with the peasants against the landlords. Peasants were killed. Art must express the problem at hand, for example the insurrection of the Mahalla workers. There was a big pressure on the workers. The cartoonist acts upon events and of course he should sympathize with the workers and the peasants.

BDS I have met with Hassanein and he told me that the art of caricature has changed a lot since the sixties and seventies. Today there are less cartoonists engaged with politics than before, because it is more difficult.

EH I learned and decided to be a cartoonist after I had seen al-Ahali newspaper. In the sixties and seventies there was a huge number of cartoonists, especially after the uprising of 1977 – there was a social uprising against inflation – and I was drawing not only cartoons but paintings in general. So in that time I saw that painters were expressing the problems of that time. After a short period Sadat closed al-Ahali as a result.

BDS Do you think that during the last ten years a new generation of cartoonists arose?

EH Yes, the newspapers choose the cartoonists which defend their vision. [...] So the cartoonists are close to the new economic liberal policies. [...] They are obliged to express the interests of the owners of the newspapers and not national and social interests. They express the big capitalists. It is not in their interest to express the farmers or workers who face danger. There is a huge number of cartoonists but as Hassanein says there are few who are engaged.

BDS Which newspapers employ the best cartoonists or the ones most in opposition to the government?
EH Even in al-Ahali today Hassanein cannot express himself fully. I draw for al-arabi al-masri, it is close to the nationalist left. We express ourselves as much as we can. The oppositional newspapers are poor newspapers, however.

BDS Are there other means instead of newspapers to distribute caricatures?

EH Sometimes I publish in al-Jazeera net. [...] I used to draw for al-Sha’b, the People, ten years ago, and I was imprisoned because I draw a cartoon about the former Agricultural Minister, Yusif Wali. They made a case in court for this cartoon. I said that Yusif Wali has a policy that demolishes agriculture in Egypt as a result of the cooperation with Israel. Most of the cartoonists in the seventies and sixties had a strong case against the normalization with Israel. During the seventies some of the drawers were expelled from their jobs at Rose al-Yusuf. [...] These were my professors and we have to continue the road they started.

BDS How are new cartoonists trained? Is it difficult for political cartoonists to find other cartoonists and to educate them?

EH Education depends on the development of each artist. He has to read about cartoons and art. In Egypt there is no school for cartoonists. I was trying since twenty years ago to meet other cartoonists and to show them my cartoons and know their opinion.

BDS Do you think a cartoonist should only criticize or also offer an alternative?

EH Both.

BDS You said you were imprisoned. How difficult is it to draw? What are the limits of the things you can draw?

EH Theoretically there is no limit. You can draw but there are legal rules which can put you in court. There is no justice. They depend on some courts and they judge you on their interpretation of the content of the cartoon and not what is exactly drawn. In 1999 and 2001 there were three cases.

BDS Do you apply self-censorship in order not be in court?

EH Sometimes the head of the newspaper doesn’t want something to be published. He thinks that some cartoonists will make problems and he sends them away.

BDS Are you politically active?

EH I am lazy [laughs] In the university I was active in the protest movement against the normalization, in 1978. I graduated in May 1982. The 1979 incident provoked the students law which restricted student rights so we had a movement against this law which until now kills student activity.
BDS In general today there are less politically engaged artists than in the sixties and seventies, not only cartoonists, but also singers, painters, etc. [...] Do you think the movements of the last years can invigorate these artistic movement or are there big obstacles?

EH Some laws threaten the artists to express themselves. Then there is social pressure. For example there was a political cartoonist who was engaged to be married, but the family of the bride broke the engagement because it was too dangerous. This was my friend [...] 

BDS So only if there is democracy there will be room for progressive cartoonists?

EH The solution is that the artists should express themselves whatever what will happen. The cartoonist has to challenge the obstacles that he faces with different artistic forms of expression.

BDS I also heard that there is a difficulty between political activists and workers and farmers, for example because of the different language between the two groups. Do you think art and especially cartoons can bridge this gap?

EH Yes, paintings in general are in closed expositions like here [in the Journalists' Syndicate], but cartoons are the art of the poor people. They can see it in the newspaper when they buy the newspaper itself. So it is the goal to gather political activists and the people in the street. The cartoonist is therefore put under pressure and imprisoned because they are dangerous. I wrote an article that writing a cartoon is like walking on a field with landmines. [...] 

BDS What is the most important cartoon you have drawn?

EH It is hard to choose but there was a cartoon when I was in court for another cartoon. During the case I drew another caricature about the fake judgment against the people. The court took a huge offense and decided to make a case against me separately. And I was imprisoned separately and for a separate case. This was the most dangerous and important caricature I drew because it was just me at the court. I said I was talking about the people, not about the newspaper. [...]
BDS: I have some questions about your paper: Darb al-Ahmar. Whose idea was it?

HH: The idea... you know, it was not the first edition for a member of the party in the elections. We had an experience before it, it was called “Ahalina”. Ahalina is the edition for the Tagammu member who will be the candidate for the elections in the Abdeen neighborhood.

BDS: For what kind of elections?

HH: Parliament, majlis as-sha’b. And Darb al-Ahmar too. When the member of Darb al-Ahmar saw Ahalina, this edition. He told me we should make another one for the people of Darb al-Ahmar. Al-Ahali means people. So it is “our people”.

[interruption]

HH: As I told you, al-Ahali means the people. Al-Ahalina our people. Al-Ahali Darb al-Ahmar the people of Darb al-Ahmar. The candidate for the elections in Darb al-Ahmar told me that we should do something like this for the people of Darb al-Ahmar, talking about people’s problems and conducting propaganda for Tagammu. The paper has reports about Tagammu and election meetings in Tagammu to inform people how Tagammu thinks about elections in Egypt. And how Ahmed al-Sandayuni, our candidate, will dedicate himself to the elections and how he thinks about their problems. He is a lawyer, and has a law center in Sayyidna Zeynab, a district in Cairo, near to Darb al-Ahmar. The law center is in Sayyidna and serves people in Sayyidna and Darb al-Ahmar. You know Tagammu has not a lot of money, and this paper was not expensive, unlike al-Ahali which costs so much money for printing and salaries and so on. This edition cost 2,500 EGP for the salaries, the editing, the printing, and so on.

BDS: And the party pays?

HH: No. The party pays for the propaganda of the candidate, not for something specific. They give money, for example 3000 EGP, and brochures, and banners. Everyone will have, for example, ten banners, one hundred brochures, and so on. The party will take the decision to go to the elections or not on the next Saturday. But the members are already working on the streets for the elections until the party decides. I think the party will decide to go to the elections, whatever the result is.
BDS: So, you have this idea for a paper and then you start writing articles. You say that you want to write articles of what happens in the lives of the people. Do you then go to Darb al-Ahmar and speak to the people, or how does it work?

HH: Yes, of course. It works like news stories and investigations. Stories like Ahmed al-Sandayuni told us. He told me to get journalists, my friends and colleagues and then told me the problems of this area: taxes, police, and housing. He told me names; for example, you should go to someone named Zidane, he has a chicken market. He was talking about this section of labor; the chicken selling problems, and his problems and what the police does to this area. Zidane has a lot of customers in this area and Zidane is like a leader, the people loves him and trade with him a lot, buying and selling. So when we talk with Zidane in the newspaper the people know him and trust us.

BDS: So you look for leaders in the community?

HH: Leaders who have problems. [...] Darb al-Ahmar is a city of workers. They make a lot of hand-made things like clothes, shoes, those things. Those people have a lot of problems because of taxes. Taxes in this area and for these small projects are randomly defined. The tax man comes in the street and looks at the project whatever it is and says we should let him pay a thousand. It is not based on any document.

BDS: The tax man is accompanied by the police?

HH: The tax man doesn’t go to the streets a lot. He will go to the streets to tell you “I will get a lot of taxes, you should pay now 50 EGP”. We call this in Egypt “give me tea”. It will cost you about 50 pounds. He does not need to go to the streets and define the taxes. He can estimate it from the office. He has the names of the projects and then decides 400, 300, 500 EGP, this is random and the owners of this small projects don’t make a lot of profit. Zidane can make a 1000 EGP per month. He told me of the problems of the chicken selling. The chicken traders can give him diseased chickens. The problems of the flue. We had the pig’s flue and before the bird’s flue. The government had to kill all the pigs and chickens in Egypt. It makes chicken more expensive and as you know chicken in Egypt is the easy way to eat proteins.

[interruption]

HH: The chicken is the easy way, especially for the poor, to eat meat. Before the flue the price for a whole chicken was about 10 pounds, after it was crazy, like 30 or 40 pounds. He talks about this and how this illness affects his project. He talks about democracy and Tagammu.

BDS: I wanted to ask about that, because it’s easy to talk about the problems in people’s lives on the street, in their homes and with the police. But how do you connect these problems with the political program of Tagammu.
There is no connection. I don’t make a connection between those problems and the political program. It goes like this. I told Zidane: Mr. Zidane these are your problems. After the interview I told him, as an example, these are Tagammu’s problems, you should read it. In page number “blah” you will read it. These are not the problems of you alone, but of all workers and small projects. Or I can write it in the paper so Zidane can read his interview and on the other page he’ll find the Tagammu problems on taxes and small projects. What can Tagammu do with its political program for the small project owners. Especially taxes. Tagammu’s political program has an important point about taxes. When you have a very small project and are working with only one employer, you shouldn’t pay taxes. That is Tagammu’s point about taxes for the small projects. Zidane can read his interview and there is a positive effect of this. Zidane will see himself in the newspaper and the neighborhood will talk about him. And for the local people this is so important: look I am in the newspaper! And this is good because they will be interested to see the next edition. In al-Ahalina, in Abdeen, it took about three months before people knew what is al-Ahalina and what is Tagammu, and people were afraid of the security when they would read it. Now let’s go to Abdeen and see what happened. Me and journalists in al-Ahalina, the regional newspaper of Tagammu in Abdeen, work in the streets and people laugh at us and say “won’t you make an interview with me because I have problems” and so on. A lot of people have our numbers in Abdeen, especially leaders, and they will call us and tell about their problems in their streets [...]. And we took pictures for the newspaper and try to solve this problem. [...] We try to solve their problems with money from our own pockets, or whatever. For example, in Abdeen we have someone called Hisham Ashraf. People tell him their problems, for example, “my boy has a problem in education, I want to transfer him to another school“. This is a problem in Egypt even though it’s so easy to solve, it’s only a routine. Ashraf is from the party and takes papers from this man and gives them to dr. Rifaat al-Said and whoever can solve his problems with the government. He sends his papers to the ministry of education and within a couple of weeks or days it will be solved.

What’s the difference then between Tagammu and other parties which perhaps do the same and perhaps their members have even more money, for example the Ikhwan.

Let’s be clear about this. Tagammu is not giving money as a way to succeed in elections. The members of Tagammu don’t have much money; and most of them have no money at all. Most of them only conduct propaganda for Tagammu. [...] We know we won’t succeed or there should happen a miracle. But it’s about the battle, the election battle, to do a political battle in Darb al-Ahmar, to make people know what is Tagammu. In Abdeen we won a lot of new people, like Adel, like Karim, I know names, I am friends with them. Three days ago we had a conference and a lot of the guys from Abdeen came, just to hear, they are not educated, but they are interested. [...] It is the first time they see in a regional area a journal for this area, the first time in Egypt I think, they read a political program which talks about all the problems they have. Hassan Ashraf, as an example, we gave all the people in Abdeen his pamphlet. His program had two sections. The first was Tagammu’s social program, the next part are Abdeen’s problems – what are Abdeen’s problems and how can we solve them?
So the people know about the problems’ sources and how we can solve them. When they read it once, twice and for a third time they’ll believe it. It’s not money that solves their problems. “It’s not money that will solve my boy’s problems in education”. It is the education system itself; we have to change the education policy. Ahmed al-Sandayuni is trying this too. […] He had a first edition of his journal and got a good feedback from the people in Darb al-Ahmar. […] In Abdeen I told you we make interviews, they come to conference, they call us when they have troubles, and we become friends, and within a couple of days a lot of these boys will become Tagammu members. But it’s not about “hey I am interested, let’s be a Tagammu member”. It’s not this for us: you should believe in Tagammu’s ideas, and you should understand it, and you should be working with them. And that’s it in the first place for all members of Tagammu. Maybe we have about seventy five members of Tagammu who’ll go to the elections in the whole of Egypt. Only four or five of them in the best conditions will succeed. The other seventy members will make a good and perfect political battle. Not like the Ikhwan, the Wafd, or the governmental party. We have a good party. Our members are trained to do this. Let’s be fair, the Ikhwan is talking about “give me your vote and God will bless you”. That’s it. Their slogan is Islam al-hal. Islam is the solution and that’s it. And they will pay money, like al-Watani. […] I will steal your money, and I will give a little bit of it back during elections to get your vote. […] And they make people afraid of the left parties through the police, in the case of al-Watani, and through religion, like Ikhwan. […] Tagammu is the only party which has a political program. In Abdeen we have a political program for Tagammu and a regional program. In Darb al-Ahmar and in any town in Egypt we have a regional program. No party in Egypt, no other candidate in the elections will give you a program. They will only say “I will do this and I will do that”. And that’s the biggest problem in Egypt. The people don’t want someone who solves their problems through laws, but that is his [MP’s] job, when he is elected he should change the law for the people. But in Egypt people want the candidates in elections to give them one hundred pounds and that is what happens with al-Watani party. In 2005 it was so obvious. So obvious. “You can vote, I will give you one hundred pounds, this is part of it, go and vote and capture an image with your mobile and come back. If I see you voted for me I will give you the rest.” That’s it. […] Another example. Our member in Dimyat, he won the Shura elections. Al-Watani when he saw the results he said: “al-Tagammu’s candidate has won with 125.000 votes”. No other candidate in Egypt has this. He had won, but only with 4000 votes. They said this to discredit Tagammu: these are false elections; al-Watani helped Tagammu. But our candidate was a winner, he won political battles in Dimyat which no one else could win. He protested against chemical projects like Agriom. There was a chemical factory. We had a good battle in the elections and all the Dimyat people were around him and made a good battle with him under the name of Tagammu. The government could not do anything against him in the elections. What will they do without police? They acknowledge that he won but they tried to make him a “bad winner”, they let it appear as if they have given him the votes and that he has relations with al-Watani. Whatever. […] Look at Youtube or elsewhere to see how the police deals with people who want to vote. They have gangs waiting in the cars of the police, running in the election place, with knives, not to kill people but to frighten them so no one will go to vote. They go into the committee office and open
the election boxes and check all the papers with al-Watani or al-Ikhwan or whatever they want.

[shows how meddling with the tickets can be proven because of the way they are refolded]

**HH:** However when we participate in elections only the people can give us the power. Dr. Rifaat al-Said had an interview with the governmental television last night. You should have seen it. It was about how we could win. He said “frankly we are a poor party.” The interviewer told him: “your party hasn’t done anything for thirty or forty years”. He said “no, Tagammu did a lot of things with two or three parliamentary members against the whole of parliament.” Another example. Ikhwan in 2005. They won 88 seats. But they haven’t changed any law. But Tagammu party has stopped a lot of laws which would damage the people. For example the health insurance and pensions. Tagammu had the first committee for pensions, created by the Tagammu member in Port Said. He had about 50 labor members in the committee. […] But let’s get back to the newspaper. […]

**BDS:** How do you distribute the paper?

**HH:** In Abdeen for me the first time to distribute the paper was the first time to distribute any political paper to the people. I had about a thousand journals in my hand and distributed them to people saying “this is our journal, it is talking about you your problems in the neighborhood. It is called Ahalina, made by Hasan Ashraf, a member of Tagammu. That’s it. We make a conversation with the people, not just give and run away. A conversation to tell what is Tagammu, what is this newspaper, how to contact us. They ask us a lot of questions: what will you and Tagammu do? How do you pay for this newspaper when you say you are poor? Some people say frankly: give me money and then I will vote for you. Once, twice, third time, we had about 13 editions in al-Abdeen. Now a lot of people who were asking money before are working with us now. [interruption]

**HH:** I will tell you about an accident we had a week ago. When we were distributing our paper in a café in Abdeen, one of the people asked our friend Zizu for his ID. Well he wasn’t distributing the newspaper, but the political program. […] Zizu hadn’t a lot of experience in the social work, so he was grabbing for his ID. I asked him what happened. He told me “this man is asking for my ID, he told me he’s an investigator in the police”. I said “what about his police ID? He is not wearing any uniform.” So I told the police man “I will show you my ID but afterwards you will take me to the station”. And then there was a discussion, everyone was saying “what are you doing, give him your ID”. Then the people were saying “don’t take him to the station” and I was the one saying “we will go to the station and what will you do there”. And Zizu learned from it. And people should know that they should not be frightened when dealing with the police. That is the problem of the Egyptian people: they are so frightened to distribute or receive political material. “No we won’t take it, no we won’t read, perhaps the police will come to me thinking I want to make a revolution”. We don’t want to make a violent revolution. We want to make a mind revolution with the newspaper. […] And that’s what makes the government afraid from
Tagammu. The police in Egypt doesn’t know how to deal with this. They are only educated in how to be violent, how to hit people, how to make people afraid, how to stop everything which is not serving the government party. The government party can do work in the street, they can have banners anywhere: in the school, in the mosque, in the church; they may use the governmental ministries to make propaganda for their members. The police is protecting them when they are doing this. If I am working for al-Watani and I am distributing this newspaper the police man will come to me to see what the hell he’s doing. If he sees al-Watani or Mubarak is a good man, or whatever, he will say “hi, do you need any help, do you need any protection?” That’s it. Al-Watani members can have any conference in the street without documents from the police stations, with police protection. Tagammu can’t do this. As a party it cannot do this. Candidates for the elections can’t do this. Me as a journalist can’t do this. These police men and soldiers don’t know what is refused and allowed. I am allowed to take a photo in the street, whatever is going on? [...] They don’t have knowledge about the law itself. [...]
BDS: The revolution. When did it start, when were you on the street…

HH: Before the 25 of January… Let’s go back to the Tunisian revolution. The reason of the Tunisian revolution was the man who set himself on fire. In Egypt we had this kind of actions four or five times. But it did not push us to revolution, it was not a reason to make a revolution, because the men who did this, asked for demands like: “I want to live, I want to have an apartment, I want to go back to my wife,” things like that. I covered this news and in the feedback of these cases it became clear to me that this revolution would not start like the Tunisian revolution. These days we know that a lot of youth in Facebook invited people to the revolution on 25 January. They chose this day because it was the feast of the police. No one, neither the political activists, nor the youth, were sure of what would happen on this day. All that we said was that it would be an ordinary demonstration like usual. […]

Before the revolution it was a success to have 100 people demonstrating in the street. So we were laughing: tomorrow we will have a revolution. [laughs] We always said this when someone says: let’s do this revolutionary action. In the first edition of al-Shababna, the youth edition of our party’s newspaper, I told them, in 2009, we should make a demonstration in Talat al-Harb Square and not leave until the emergency law has been lifted. And it was turned into a joke and they said tomorrow it will be a revolution. So I went to the street as a journalist to cover what would happen. I discovered hundreds of people walking in the street and this was unusual for Egypt. The police were not ready to deal with these numbers in the streets of Downtown. The best thing was that it was not only in Cairo, it was also in cities like Suez and Alexandria – especially in Suez and Alexandria.

I was walking in the streets when I heard a voice shouting. I just got out of the metro, so I saw the most… I haven’t ever seen these numbers of police in the streets. No one was in Tahrir. Were was the people? So I went back to the newspaper and then I heard shouts, I saw hundreds of youth walking in the streets and calling “the people want to end the regime”. It was marvelous and I started to follow the youth in the street. We went from Talat Harb Square until we reached Tahrir Square and then there were police officers and soldiers stopping us. The same happened in all streets near Tahrir Square. I couldn’t go to Tahrir and I thought that these were the only numbers of the revolution in the streets. I thought: “I can’t leave them”, because I didn’t know that there were thousands outside. So I went back with them from the streets to the square and through another street without soldiers which led to the square. We were running as if thinking: if we get through this street without soldiers we will get our freedom. I was excited and I ran to be in the first line of the running youth and I saw Tahrir Square before them and I saw, oh my God, thousands! So I
ran to the square to get this image of how the people coming from Talat Harb Square came to Tahrir and saw these thousands. It was marvelous. The people stayed in the square and the police tried to separate them. This wasn’t successful. Then they did not yet use rubber bullets and live ammunition. [...] Only water and sticks. We stayed for the evening in the streets and the image of the Tunisian revolution was in our mind, so the people, the women began to get food and the youth were talking to the soldiers: this is not right, and the soldiers said: you are right, but this is our role. A lot of officers and leaders of the Ministry came to the street and were surprised with the huge number. There were a lot of arrests in the streets, and I think this was the cause of the Friday of Anger: they arrested a lot of people and they did not accept any of the demands. They also refused to deal with the people: no speech, no statement, nothing. And the state media said: tens, maybe a hundred demonstrating in the streets, making violence and so on. So I went back to home. And a Tunisian friend concluded that we could make a revolution on Friday and he sent us advice on what to do if they started to use tear gas: using cola and vinegar and onions. And I went with Ahmed al-Sorur of al-Ahram newspaper to the Husayn Mosque to cover the Friday anger as a cause to stay in the streets. And we decided to be in the strike and join them. People came out of the Mosque and we joined them. This was the day when the police started to use the rubber bullets and tear gas. A lot of gas. I was unconscious because of the gas and Ahmed Talal saved me then. A lot of gas. A lot of noise. A lot of women and children. They dealt with us as terrorists and a lot of people were injured by the gas and bombs. The number of people and their courage were however more powerful than the police.

BDS: Didn’t the people realize that this was their only chance of pushing through change?

HH: No, not in this day, not on Friday. There was something strange, even with me. Why am I staying in the street? I could be killed because of the gas. But when I woke up I went back to share the revolution with the people. I left al-Husayn and went back from Tahrir Square to the newspaper. I was angry. There were a lot of officers and cars in the square, stopping the protests in the streets. So I went back to the square to see the people battling the bombs, using coca cola. Until 5 o’clock when the soldiers and officers in front of the party [Tagammu] began to lose consciousness because of the gas. Themselves! The first field hospital in Tahrir and mid-town was in Tagammu, in the youth union, with one of the doctors of the party, we made a room in the party itself and the first people who came to be treated were the soldiers themselves. The officers were standing in front of the party and using their gas bombs had finished their weapons and were standing idle, but the other officers continued to throw bombs on us and the officers shouted: stop, they are healing our soldiers. Three or four soldiers slept in the party because they lost their consciousness. In 30 minutes or so there were no officers left in the streets, they had run away. We didn’t see the images of Tahrir square and Qasr al-Nile bridge, killing the protesters with the cars, and so on. But we played a good role, we started to shout in the streets: right now there are no officers, anyone who needs healing bring him to the party. The movement was very speedy. The people went back to the square and realized that it was the first time in Egypt that there was such a big number gathered. Thousands. There were no officers. They started to go to other streets to see what happened. And
then ordinary Egyptians, without the order of no one, decided to create the people’s committees and councils in order to protect the streets. You know, the police made this trick. They left the streets. And I’m sure they organized the burning of the headquarters and cars and all the damage. This was because of the police themselves. Until this moment, we didn’t realize that it was a revolution. We also feared the feedback: what would happen. There was no reaction, no move from the officers. What will happen? So we go to the square and decide to start the revolution. Asking the people to come to the square. After hearing about the fires and damage to building, the people started to go to the Ministry of Interior. [...] This was the start of the Egyptian revolution. Killing people by bullets, snipers... I heard about it but I didn’t believe it until I saw the injured coming in the party, in their legs and hearts and heads. Oh my God I should go to the Ministry and cover what is happening. The images I saw in the streets, the youth are carrying their brothers and sisters and children who are dead. I didn’t realize what was happening and I went to the mosque, the second hospital in Tahrir Square, near to the Ministry. I didn’t have the courage to go and be killed, but eventually I had my report. So this is a revolution: people getting killed by the police and committees protecting the streets and this huge number in the Square. All of the parties, well except one or two of them, decided NOT to go to the protests before they saw it was a real revolution. Rifaat al-Said said that we shouldn’t go, because it was the feast of the police and there were police killed defending Egypt in 1952. So make it at 26 etc. The youth were refusing all his words, and in the other parties as well. We insisted at opening the party’s building on the 25 and the Friday. We were inside the building, refusing to close it. We realized that this was a revolution when the people started to shout “we want an end to the regime”, while Rifaat al-Said and the political parties were saying “this government should go away”. What the hell. We want to destroy the regime and you are talking about the government and Ahmed Nazif?! He was talking like Mubarak. And until Mubarak retired, Rifaat al-Said came to the balcony and said: hey people, you chose to end the regime, you are heroes and these kind of things. Of course the people shouted against him. Ayman Nur too. He didn’t talk to the people, but his photo, his image was published and they told the party to take this picture away. This revolution is non-ideological and not for any party, no party was its leader. This started a lot of problems and strife between parties. About al-Ikhwan. The Ikhwan are the most organized opposition in Egypt. They are so smart. With these numbers of Ikhwan members they said: we are not the leaders of the revolution. To get the trust of the people and their emotions, like: al-Ikhwan are in the streets but they are saying they are not the leaders. This revolution showed that all of the parties are not organized. Maybe all of the youth of these parties were in the revolution and a lot of them were killed. But they were not organized. There were no orders from the parties. From their organizational secretaries. This was the same in Tagammu. Even in the Youth Union. Youth like me and Hani Abdelradi, and Ahmed Maqdi... lots of them who are organizing activities in the party, came to the party and made a place in the square for Tagammu. We made a presence in the square in Tagammu, not by our words, but by sleeping in the streets, and so on. Like the
Ikhwan. There was no real organization. Like: Hani knows a lot about media and mixing sounds, so he will do this. Haisam knows about publishing papers and leaflets and talking about demands, so he will do that. A lot of people in the streets did not have any consciousness. Without these actions and publications from Tagammu and other parties and the Ikhwan the people would have left the square after Mubarak said that he would fire the government. But it was not acceptable because he left the regime intact. Without these statements, this spontaneous organization, we would not have been effective in the streets. So we did play a role, an organized role of the party. We were the organized force and members of the party. And those who claim to be the leaders of the party and youth union didn’t do anything. You know Khalid of the youth union, he is my friend and the organizing secretary of the youth union. My laptop was sleeping in the square for four or five days while I was working in the streets for Tagammu, but Khaled was standing near to the media of al-Ikhwan, which was the biggest, to talk in the micro, to show him. We all saw him and judged him. Now we have fired the leadership of the Youth Union and formed a committee which will rule the Union until the elections. We know that betraying the revolution did not start in the revolution, betraying the people started when these leaders did not support the revolution. Al-Ikhwan was so organized and so they took the benefits of the revolution until now. The problems within the parties and their relation with the regime did render them ineffective during the revolution. The parties’ weakness did not make our rule more effective in the streets. It was effective, but not like Ikhwan. They were the most organized force. But when they switch to a party the people will have the consciousness and will ask them for a program. Tell me about what you do in the revolution? What is your program? The people’s committees in the street are continuing their activities until now, and we have a lot of relations with them – this is how to build a party and to distribute your ideas and thoughts in the streets. That’s it.

BDS: […] Tell me about the popular committees.

HH: Ahmed Belal and Hani Abdelradi are coordinating our work with the committees. They hold meetings in the party and we make visits in the neighborhoods. Every week we go to a neighborhood, like last week we went to al-Manial, to distribute documents and to see the members of these committees and to be sure that the regime is not gaining control over the neighborhoods by clearing the streets by al-watani party members, and by distribution of our ideas. […] Every Thursday we have a meeting. […]

BDS: I think it’s very good that as leftists you try to create connections with these popular committees. I also heard about a new leftist party being formed?

HH: I told you that the party had a big meeting of the Central Committee and this meeting aimed to withdraw the trust from Rifaat al-Said and fire all the leaders, but they failed to do this. […] In this meeting they said: if Rifaat al-Said doesn’t resign from the party, we will resign ourselves and make a new party. In my opinion, if you can’t fix your home you cannot go out and make a new home and say: this is my new home. This is not right, you have to stay in Tagammu and proof that you are a leftist
member and that you are a leader who is able to solve the problems. You cannot surrender with the first problem in the party. So we tried to tell them: please stay in the party. […]

I think there will be a new leftist party, but it won’t be effective in the streets. I was talking to the financial chief editor in al-Ahali. We are making an edition about this problem in the party and the question of a new party. And I see right now… my opinion is that all the left forces should come to Tagammu and be undivided to work in the elections of parliament and presidential elections; everyone… also the Revolutionary Socialists, if they make a party, maybe they will be effective with 100,000, and Tagammu too, and other parties too, but if they are one party with one program, one force, they can really do something in the elections and would have the numbers to have a lot of votes in the parliament and then we could agree to have one leftist candidate for the presidential elections. So it will not be effective, and it will not be a real party, but it will cause a lot of weakness for Tagammu. The ECP can make a party now, even Ikhwan can become a party, so the ECP members can remain in Tagammu as individuals only, not as members of the ECP, not as a party inside the party and rule as a party…

BDS: Of course they will say the same about you and others; that you are an organized group inside the party trying to change the party.

HH: We are. We are an organized group, that’s right. But we are not trying to kick them out of the party, that’s first. We are not another party. That’s second. We are not working to rule the party. But if the leaders of the ECP or Rifaat al-Said or any other group in the party are not making statements which connect to the people in the streets and the revolution, we will have to rule it and switch the leadership, because the ECP members and Rifaat al-Said are not working with the Tagammu program and the people. They should try to really attack the regime forces. So we will try to rule the party and try to work with the people, not to fire other members. Tagammu really means…

BDS: … rally, a gathering…

HH: Yes, that’s it. That are its roots. Don’t tell me that al-Ghad can come to Tagammu, become members and try to rule Tagammu through its members. […]

BDS: Do you know HASHD? It’s a relatively new leftist front, from last year.

HH: I don’t know it.

BDS: And the Socialist Renewal Current?

HH: I know about them, but I don’t have any information about them.

[…]

237
HH: You know that my grandfather was the secretary of the ECP. And now we are working against them in the party, against their ideas. We are not attacking them as persons, but because they are working as a group inside the party against the party.

[...]

HH: [looks around] What is this... a clean street in Egypt! [laughs]

BDS: [laughs] It is a revolution in every sphere of society.

[...]

HH: The new and good thing is that the youth itself, with the leadership of Ahmed Belal and Ziyad Farag, we have made a revolution in the Youth Union. The Youth Union did not have a committee in Cairo because of the leadership in Cairo. After the revolution and after the strike in the newspaper I asked the leaders of Cairo in the party to sign the document of a new leadership of the youth in Cairo. [...] I made the existing leadership of the youth union sign it. It will be a good thing, it will be effective and it will be fair. [...] It was a miracle for the Cairo youth to have a Cairo committee without elections... because there are no members in Cairo, only paper members who are mobilized in elections to come and vote.

[...]

HH: So, we made the committee and before it the leadership of the ECP tried to call all the members of the youth union asking them not to attend the meeting in order to boycott the voting. But we were able to hold a meeting and vote to fire the leadership and make a council to rule the youth union until elections. [...] We used the “trick” of Cairo to be able to go to the national youth committee. The committee has chosen five members. [...] Today we have a meeting to develop a new vision and program for the coming months, for activity in the university. The university is asking for activity right now. This is the thing which changed in Egypt, people are now willing to listen to and accept our ideas. The people in 25 were saying Tagammu ideas, like social justice, bread and justice... So we have a students’ secretary in the national youth union and the students’ secretary of Cairo today to arrange the activities in the universities of Egypt, Cairo, Helwan and Ayn Shams. It is work and activity which judges the leadership. The ex-leadership of the youth union did not organize any meeting of the central committee for one years and seven months in order not to be fired. They didn’t do anything. Only the newspaper which me and Fatma made, and the website which Ahmed Belal made. [...] This revolutionary moment makes it possible to connect with the students, today and yesterday they had a protest in the universities asking for a students’ union. We shouted for thirty years: make a union. And now they are calling us, please help us and give us ideas.

If this revolution succeeds in killing all the regime elements and getting real democracy, this will be the first step, a first step, for the socialists or communists or whatever, but the first thing in this era: take the opportunity to give people the consciousness to play a role in the democratic process. Everyone has a role in the
democratic era. Like voting. If we make elections tomorrow, al-watani members will have 90%... so consciousness is the question in this era. Perhaps over 5 or 10 years. People are asking for it. Not directly, but through protests, in the universities to have a youth union, in the streets to have a minimum wage. After the attack in the revolution, all the people in the streets attacked the parties: they are not doing anything, and this and that. But in the end they will ask for a program. It will be perfect. There is a political life in Egypt now.

BDS: What are now the remaining regime obstacles for the movement? Because Mubarak is gone, Ahmed Shafiq has been fired...

HH: It was a network of cancer in the country. The regional governors are still ruling today. They were not elected. It was a trick of al-watani to rule these regions for financial benefits. We want to fire them and want to elect new ones from the popular committees. Now the people know who protected them from the revolutionary days. These boys and youth and maybe old men, they are the sons of this neighborhood and played a role to protect this neighborhood because they didn’t have any interest but protecting it. If he becomes a member of the regional council they will do a real service to the neighborhood. People already made pages in Facebook saying: we will choose him for the council in our neighborhood, we will choose him for parliament, we will choose this boy from our sons and boys who were in the streets. And this is good. [...] The councils should make a new constitution, form a new presidential council, and fire all the regime elements. [...] The new prime minister is choosing new ministers.

BDS: What do you think of the new prime minister?

HH: He is good. Abul Abd al-Khalid, a Tagammu member is now Minister of Social Affairs, of Solidarity. He chooses good names and characters who were fired and purged by the ex-regime. Two or three of the old ministers have still to be fired. But Ikhwan is having the most benefits from the revolution up until now. The constitutional council has only one member of the opposition and it is of the Ikhwan... Tareq al-Bishri. They didn’t send any proposal to the parties before they will put it to the referendum. They didn’t reform the parties...

BDS: What do you think about the military and the army?

HH: They are working slowly and accepting our demands slowly, and this is dangerous. You have to be speedy. You just have to accept a decision to fire the councils and government. It took a long time to fire the old prime minister. Why did it have to take so long? And this gives an opportunity for new demonstrations, asking for apartments and so on... and these are fairs. But this is my idea: you have to defend your rights, but wait for protesting until the new minister has presented his program or formulated his idea on the issue. Like Abdul al-Khalid said: we will give you new salaries. But you have to wait, he can’t give you money immediately, today. Make your protest, but wait...
BDS: Of course, a lot of workers are not protesting against their management…

HH: … like we in al-Ahali [laughs] …

BDS: … and they think: if we can have a revolution in the streets, we can have a revolution in the factories and companies.

HH: That’s it. I think that the military is trying to get the presidency with Sami Anan. He is 59 right now and he will retire after a month or two and he will wear the civil suit and say: I will be elected. I won’t accept it and the people shouted in the street: no military leader! Even the unconscious, apolitical people in the street shouted: no military leader! He will try to, but he won’t succeeded.
HAASANEIN “al-Fanan”
14-4-2009

Respondent: Hassanein “al-Fanan”, al-Ahali caricaturist (H)
Date: 14 April 2009
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes only

BDS: What is your opinion on the surge in protests in Egypt during the last years?

H: There are two kinds of movements. First there are the social movements, which are not organised and not healthy, because they are not directed by political movements; and secondly there are those liberal democratic movements made by American and Israeli agents of imperialism. Marxists are against Kefaya, because it is supported by the US government. It has the same nature as the Orange Revolution in Georgia, which has been a tool of US interests. Ayman Nur did not understand that the US was using him to put pressure on Mubarak. We don’t want any foreign interference. Egyptians must change themselves. However, our parties are not organised. We lack the financial support. The situation is growing worse, sooner or later there will be a revolution. Tagammu has changed, however. In the seventies we had 170,000 members, from Alexandria to Aswan. The left-wing was more powerful than the Muslim Brothers. The US supported the Islamic movements to crush the left. Now they still use the Brotherhood as a decoy for the real problems.

BDS: If Tagammu failed to lead the uprising in 1977, why would it succeed now, when it has grown much weaker?

H: The movement has to be spontaneous. When a revolution happens, Tagammu must be there to guide, not to lead or control. The child of the revolution must pick a side itself. Today, political leaders are arrested and detained. Tagammu cannot go to the streets and make demonstrations. The police have a special department for dealing with the communists. When there was the catastrophe [mud slide] people were afraid to come to Tagammu because “they don’t believe in God”.

BDS: Do you think the international crisis of capitalism signals a new era for socialism?

H: There will be revolutions in this new era. These revolutions will come spontaneously, not through one party, or organisation.
HS: The leftist movement created the writers and artists in Egypt. As an example there were workers in the factories who drew caricatures and who made poetry like Ahmed Fuad Negm. And he is made by the leftist movement. And our case was always the workers and farmers. The cause was to make the workers know and love caricatures and poetry. The poetry made them also know their goals. I was trying to draw what the workers want and the things as they see them. This helps the workers to think. The caricatures make the workers know their interests and goals as a shortcut; they can understand everything from just a small picture. This makes them appreciate caricatures. We know the problems, but we know from them what the problem is really like, what and how they really see it.

BDS: In the seventies there was a big movement of students and workers; but in the eighties this movement was very low; does this have an impact on the artists. Because the movement was less the artists were also less active?

HS: This was caused by an attack on the leftist movements from the government through the religious ideology. The system created a group of religious movements that attacked the socialists and the leftist movements in college and the streets and that was disturbing and made us move slowly and got us out of the universities. The universities in the seventies were talking about socialism and communism; but now they are talking about religion and how to make Egypt a religious country. They stated the idea that drawing is forbidden from God; God forbids to draw because if you draw something you cannot give it a soul. They started a way of thinking that some things are forbidden and some things are allowed by God; which made a whole generation grow up by this ideas. The artist students of this generation were raised this way. They moved away from the criticism of the government and of imperialism and instead focused only on what is refused and allowed by God. Their ideas are backward.

Rose al-Yusuf was a school of caricaturists who were drawing for causes, not only for money, they were communists. Drawing was a cause in itself, not a way to make money. And then they made a school which learns to draw caricatures for money. Rose al-Yusuf was distributing 120,000 copies, in the age of Sadat there were only 4,000 because they tried to destroy it and they did. Caricatures changed from being a cause in itself, a universal language, to draw just to make money and to distribute ideas which move the society backwards.

The drawing of caricatures is now not attacking the policies of the government, they made them only speak about unimportant things. For example, making fun of the
prime ministry as a person, not of his policies and the system. I stopped drawing because I cannot draw watermelons and so on, because I cannot attack the policies the way I want it; it will not be published. Even if the newspaper is against the government it cannot publish an idea against the system. As an example, in discourse we try to speak about democracy, but when I tried to say something against the policies of the party I was stopped for work for four editions of al-Ahali. The drawing was about the election and there was a turkey in front of the government and he is eating the turkey and the opposition are sitting around him and he throws them a bone of the turkey. Just like now!

BDS: The last ten years there was a new movement with the Second Palestinian Intifada, with the war against Iraq, with Kefaya, also with Mahalla al-Kubra and 6 April. Do you think these movements also have an artistic expression?

HS: It’s not related to art by any means. It destroys art. It stops art. Because of all of these movements they don’t speak about change, they only copy the American way of protesting. Who will teach those youth why we say “no”. They only go in the streets and say no. We have to make the next generation, like the seventies. When in the eighties the generation wasn’t radical it stopped the whole movement. If they are able to change something now, what will they change? Who will lead? Nobody will lead. What are their aims? We don’t know they only say no. Most of them are liberal or something and we are not – liberal in economic sense. This doesn’t mean that they will change something. They will privatize, they will do everything the government does. When there is a real protest out there, a real movement, we have to make room to make the new generation understand the meaning of saying no and why we say no and to what we say yes and how we learn to think. That’s the way this country will improve; but only say no without concern for this kind of change, then we don’t change anything.

BDS: What do you think about the labor movement in Mahalla? Was this another type of movement than Kefaya and the democratic movement?

HS: All the other movements are jumping on the Mahalla movement and are trying to recuperate it, to gain something from it. They emptied the contents of the Ghazl Mahalla movement by jumping on it and making them believe there were forces behind them, but there weren’t there was only television propaganda. Even if they are sincere and there are some people who are really interested in this cause and they try hard, but they made them believe that there are forces and that they are powerful but they aren’t.

BDS: Do you think it is possible that art comes from below, from example with the Mahalla movement that the workers themselves can produce art, or is it only the artists who produce art for the workers?

HS: The workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla are the reason ideas are made, they make the artists move, the artists do not move the workers. They are the ones giving artists ideas. Artists base their ideas on the workers.
BDS: Do you think it is possible that workers become artists themselves?

HS: It is very possible, because the idea of caricature is the most important. It’s all about the idea. The workers are the creators of the ideas. The art of the caricature is not about drawing pictures but about making the lines say something and they can do it. The drawing itself is something the workers can learn in three months or so if they wanted to. But the ideas... of course. It’s not only possible, it’s a reality that some workers are artists.

BDS: Do you think artists can help the workers becoming artists themselves?

HS: The artists can make them learn to draw, but THEY have the ideas. Their ideas is what makes the artists draw. It’s not about that they will sit down and that the artists will them what to do. It is about a way of thinking, a way of speaking, a way of living to learn art. Artists can help, but if the workers want they can make themselves in the right way and teach themselves.

BDS: Do you think a party like Tagammu should try to either create a new generation of artists, or should they try to stimulate the workers to become artists themselves?

HS: It’s the Tagammu party rule to make the workers not only artists, but to be educated, to understand everything, so they know about the present issues and how to solve problems and how to deal with problems and how to stand for their rights, and how to help them write, draw, and so on. But the reality is that the party is empty, there were workers in Tagammu in the past, but now there aren’t as much workers, we are not in the factories as we were in the seventies or the eighties, now we are away from them. And second, the way I try to gather children and to teach them... there is no money for this. So I get the colors and the pens from my own salary. And even when they know they do not encourage me. When the children draw a gallery the party does not encourage me.

BDS: Why does the party does not encourage you?

HS: Only God, the Prophet, and Mubarak know. [chuckles] When I gather the children and make them listen to Shaykh Iman, or play the oud, or draw, it is a way to make their consciousness revolutionary. When they become older and listen to Shaykh Iman they will listen and understand things they didn’t understand when they were children. It is a way of understanding and thinking, to raise them in their role to become leaders, to make them think for themselves, and to let them make decisions, and to let them make a revolution. Not a bloody revolution, but revolution.

BDS: You said that before in the seventies there were lots of workers in the party, now there are very little workers in the party. Now there has been a big movement in Mahalla, do you think now is the time to be again with the workers and get the workers back to the party or not?
HS: It’s difficult. It needs a lot of effort to restore the public work, to go in the streets, and so on.

BDS: Is it difficult because of the government or because people in Tagammu don’t want to connect with the movement?

HS: To restore the connection with the workers you need to volunteer. And to volunteer you must have nothing but yourself. Most of the leaders in Tagammu now have families and children and grandchildren that they provide for, so if they go in the streets and go to the workers and so on, they have to make time for that. The youth can, but the old leaders and the people who lived in the seventies, they cannot, because they have other mouths to feed, they have to have money. And also, the system prevents us from going into the universities and that’s the source of every demonstration; they prevent us going to the street without telling them first; if we go to the factories we broke the law.

BDS: Isn’t it a negative view, a pessimist perspective on the future. Because if Tagammu cannot do anything, how will things change? Perhaps the youth in Tagammu can play a role in change?

HS: The youth and the children that are trained will draw the future of Egypt and Tagammu in the next fifty years. The program of the party is strong; it is about how to make Egypt economically and politically a democracy. We have a good program. The youth can make a lot of things, but the truth is that we are in internal problems now, when we finish them, the external problems will be our only problem.

BDS: Internal problems in the party?

HS: Internal for the youth. The children, the journalists I trained them and they are still here, like Sahar and Brania, they draw caricatures and they make the newspaper. I trained Heba and Haisam and Mohammad Galab, how to write as a Tagammu activist should write. They should be the leaders in the future, of the journalists and the whole party. The leftist movements and the party had always the tradition that they trained them and then left them to go where they want like Rose al-Yusuf. Now this is made by only the effort of one member, myself. It is not a plan. If Tagammu would make this in an academic way it would be different and better. Now I have to do it myself. They had programs to make youth leaders, how to do politics, to speak and write in a political way, to be journalists. Tagammu had written programs, it used to train people, but now I have to do it by myself. They tried to arrange training sessions and I talked to academics in the Faculty of Multimedia, like dr. Rawat Abdul-Rahma, and like other journalists, to gather the youth and others who are interested to teach them who to write as a journalist and to draw caricatures and how to run a website. In the future they will be the ones who run the website. This is our way to make those people our allies. Our members used to train the young members, like Ahmed Belal. I tried to keep Belal here, but here they are like murderers, they see a talent and they murder him. Ahmed Belal is a leader; I dreamed that when Belal was in his twenties, he should be a leader in the party. But here they are murderers,
they want him to be sixty first before he can say anything. Now the whole thing is “in the air”, we are trying to restore balance in the party.
ABD AL-RASHID Hilal
9-10-2010

Respondent: Abd al-Rashid Hilal, labor leader in Tagammu (ARH)
Date: 9 October 2010
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

BDS: Tell me about yourself and your position in Tagammu.

ARH: I am a worker in the iron factory and a member of the factory syndicate and a member of the public syndicate for iron work. I am the leader of the Tagammu labor committee. The goal of the committee is to go to the workers when they have problems. There are two ways to solve the workers’ problems. The first way is to go to the union and the second way is that the workers come to the party. The workers who come to the party are the workers who do not have a union. Not all the workers have a union. Some of them have unions and the ones who haven’t unions come to the party.

BDS: The workers without syndicates, are they primarily employed in private companies?

ARH: The most of them, yes. There are 24 million workers and only 4 million of them are in unions. The committee encourages these workers to make their own unions.

BDS: And these unions which the committee tries to create are non-governmental?

ARH: In the last few years in Egypt we created a lot of independent unions. But our system of unions exists since the Nasser era. They are governmental unions but they are trying to make them a little bit independent. They do not want to be ordered by the government but to establish independent syndical work.

BDS: And perhaps this kind of independent work is more possible at the local, factory level than at the top level of the syndicate?

ARH: You have to start from the factory. It is the easy and normal way to start syndical work. And after a while the people in the syndicate and the government see that you have 50 workers – in Egypt 50 workers have the right to establish their own union – so when the workers collect 50 people, they can make their own union and a lot of workers from other factories can come.

BDS: There were a lot of strikes in the nineties and in the last decade, but the official union did not support these strikes. How can Tagammu be with the workers on the one hand, and remain close to the state union on the other hand?
ARH: The committee is standing at the side of the workers. They always come to the workers as an independent committee, as an independent party. And when the committee has a link with the state union they will try to push the union to solve the problem. But the party's committee is always trying to connect to the workers as an independent organization. And the committee always organizes solidarity with the workers to defend their rights, even if it is only one person.

BDS: In the nineties there were a lot of strikes, but the last years something changed in the nature of the strikes. In the nineties the strikes were more isolated and individual. And then with Mahalla it started to spread, and there was more solidarity. There was also a political aspect of the movement. How did Tagammu approach the strike movement which had this political characteristic?

ARH: Since 2006 the labor movement adopted another line because of the privatization program of the government. Tagammu tried to deal with this problem and contact the workers and it works in the strikes and among the workers as a party. So it works among them as a political party. For Tagammu it's a political issue first and then a labor issue.

[interruption]

BDS: What do you think is the role of the workers movement in the broad struggle for democracy?

ARH: The strike movements are isolated, as you say, and they do not want democracy as a goal. It would only be like this if the leaders were political, for example as members of Tagammu. Even though it were individual movements they developed politically. The workers took the first step and then the political organizations came to speak their discourse. The translation of this movement in a pro-democratic movement is the responsibility of political activists such as Tagammu workers in the committee. They have the task to move these strikes towards a political-democratic goal.

BDS: Isn't there a contradiction sometimes between the aims of the democratic opposition which contains many different parties, such as Tagammu, Waf, Ikhwan, al-Baradei, and which does not contain a social perspective, and the aims of the strike movement which has a strong social dimension but not a political perspective. Now concerning Tagammu: will it attempt at giving the strikes a political dimension, and/or give the democratic opposition a social dimension?

ARH: This is the missing link between the political activists and the workers. Tagammu is trying to connect political and social demands, but they are never forcing the workers to fight for democracy – Kefaya is doing this. Tagammu gives the workers just a little bit political advice and explains the causes of their problems and tries to solve their problems with salaries and food and so on. Kefaya is not interested in these problems but it just wants to promote its democratic agenda.
BDS: Perhaps the key to bring these two movements together is in the fight for an independent union? The union is both responsible for the social dimension and its part of the regime. So perhaps this is a field of action where the demands and goals of workers and democracy activists can meet, in this struggle?

ARH: That’s right, but the union is related too much with the system and the government. The union is not free to do what it wants. Of course Tagammu aims to have a union which solves the social problems of the workers, but until this happens, Tagammu will struggle to create new tools to fix it.

BDS: Is the new union of the tax workers which is really independent from the government an example for the workers to follow, or is it better to try and work inside the existing state union?

ARH: There won’t be a new example like the union of the tax workers. It was a group with the same aim. Their leaders had a political view. They wanted to change the salary system. It’s hard to make independent union, like the tax workers’ union, because the government does not recognize it as a real union and the regime will not negotiate with them. The international labor unions are recognizing these independent unions but here they are not recognized. So we have to make our own local small committees in the government union so we can have the independent union step by step. Otherwise the government will not recognize it, it won’t be a real union. We can’t work in the government unions unless the workers have a political perspective and unity. And that is what Tagammu wants to do: to organize the workers around one goal and one interest and give them political ideas and make small committees in the unions. Then we can gather all these small committees to make an independent union.

BDS: So it’s a bit like a circle. First you have to have the small local groups of workers. But you cannot have an independent union without democracy, so there should be democracy first. And then you are able to establish an independent union?

ARH: If we had the freedom to rule our own union we would do this. The independent union will not come without democracy.

BDS: Can I have an example of how Tagammu in practice approaches a strike, step by step.

ARH: First the committee sends reports to all the newspapers, not only al-Ahali. Second, the committee goes to the strike to see the aims of the workers and to send documents to the union as the Tagammu labor committee. We also give legal help. If the workers need a lawyer, Tagammu will offer them for free. We will give them food, clothes, blankets, etc.

BDS: Do the workers sometimes ask for advice in their strike?

ARH: For example, in Alexandria there was a strike from the Ghazl Alexandria workers. The workers were in the street and started the strike but there were a lot of problems
for food and transport, it wasn’t easy to give them money and food quickly. So they asked advice from me and asked me what to do. “When we finish the strike this will leave us weak and broke”. So I started to call the union manager in Alexandria and told him “you have to ask the strikers to delay their strike for three days until negotiations start”. The manager of the union and someone of the Ministry of Labor went to the strike and asked them if they could delay their strike for three days.

BDS: The program of Tagammu concerning labor has it changed the last ten years, because of the Mahalla movement. Has labor become more important in the party.

ARH: When the government drafted the labor law, Tagammu helped to make the law. Since then the problems of labor has changed and now the Tagammu members in parliament are working according to our contemporary program and trying to edit the labor law. The workers’ aims change every year so we had to adapt our program.

BDS: When and how has it concretely changed?

ARH: In the last few years most demands concerned salaries so Tagammu showed it to the government. When the government refused the demand to pay a minimum wage of 1,200 EGP per month, we went to court. Now we say it’s too little and we demand a raise.

BDS: And the strike movement made the labor committee more important in Tagammu?

ARH: The leaders of the committee have a lot of experience in the union. In the Sadat era the privatized factories worked with little workers and the unions were cut off from these workers. So it was due to factors outside the committee that it became weaker. However, it was only a matter of time if the situation would reinforce the committee again.

BDS: What about the changes in the Tagammu program during the nineties? Tagammu was moving away from socialism to a Third Way theory between socialism and capitalism, accepting privatizations.

ARH: There was a conflict in 1991 between the political office and the labor committee. The labor committee said that the privatizations should be stopped and only in 1996 did the political office follow us in this. Before they would cut us off the party. In 1996 there was a new view and new program in the party.
BDS: What’s the historical attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards the workers’ movement?

SH: We could be considered socialists. [chuckles]. From the beginning the Muslim Brothers were interested in the workers. We had a workers section which supported and still supports the workers’ rights. The Muslim Brotherhood was established by Hassan al-Banna and a group of workers. In 1946 we joined the big strike. Personally I have been active in the workers’ section for 10 years. I helped making the new labor law in 2003. The Muslim Brotherhood struggles to obtain trade-union rights, but the government and security are against us. They are against everything the Muslim Brotherhood and the other trends struggle. So we struggle in elections. The reason the Muslim Brotherhood are weak in the trade-union, is that the regime represses us. We have a great number of workers in the factories.

BDS: What is your attitude towards strikes?

SH: Workers have the right to strike. Egyptian laws make it difficult for them to strike, as they have to get permission by the official union.

BDS: What is your opinion of 6 April last year? It was not clear to me what the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood was.

SH: The Muslim Brotherhood supported the first strike on 7 December, 2006, which was a historical strike. I supported it, as an MP and a businessman. The Muslim Brotherhood workers participated in the strike. I went to the workers in the company and gave their demands to the management and the parliament. The 6 April however was a call for a general strike, which was published only in some websites and newspapers. The Muslim Brotherhood did not receive an official invitation from any party or movement to join this movement. Furthermore, there were no clear demands of the movement. The Muslim Brotherhood published a statement that we are supporting the right of strike for workers. We are with the Egyptian people. But at the same time we said that this is not the right movement to make change against the regime, because (1) it’s a hard dictatorship. The regime will use all ways to defend itself; and (2) the world regime won’t support a revolution at this moment, as our government supports Israil. So a general strike will not succeed at the moment, but perhaps in the future.
BDS: What is the role of social justice in the theory/philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood?

SH: We support all strikes. The workers of the Muslim Brotherhood join all strikes. Some strikes are led by the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the lawyer and doctor strikes. The Muslim Brotherhood are in the leadership of these movements.

BDS: What about privatization and the role of the state?

SH: As I said before, the Muslim Brotherhood can be considered as socialist. Real socialism can be found in Islam. Islam is better and older than socialism. Social justice and the rights of the poor are in Islam. It is a religious duty to care for the poor. A Syrian member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mustafa as-Saba‘i wrote a book; the socialism of Islam about the nature of Islam as a socialist religion. During my studies, I read books about work and labor rights in Islam, about how to pay a good salary for workers, give them clothes, food, houses, ...

There is zakat and sadaqa in Islam which are a kind of social security taxes and alms. There is a tradition that the Muslim governor can raise additional taxes and use the money for state security and investments. Our belief is an impulse to help the poor.

There are many examples in the teachings of Hassan al-Banna or Sayyid Qutb. They had the same ideology about social justice and rights for the poor.

About privatizations... We, the workers' section, wrote a blackbook about the crimes of privatization in Egypt. But the Muslim Brotherhood is not against privatization in principle. Some people can own, control and manage factories. It depends on the sector. The state must play a role in strategic areas: oil, weapons, transportation, electricity, and gas, for example. If the private sector can play a good role, it's alright. If it cannot, than no.

BDS: If the state wants to privatize Ghazl al-Mahalla, do you support it or will you act against it?

SH: We will be against. The problem of privatizations in Egypt is that we have lost ownership of our industry. It is transferred to criminals or foreigners. The whole process is illegal.

BDS: If the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power, what will they do to improve social justice?

SH: Yesterday in parliament we discussed salaries. Now salaries are 20% of the public budget, while bonuses are 40%. But the government distributes these bonuses to its allies. The bonuses must be spread equally. Furthermore, it's impossible that people who have worked for 15 years only get 100EGP, while others gain 30 million pounds as a salary. If we take the lands from 5 members of parliament we will have solved the 30% shortage in the budget. The state should give money to the poor. The Egyptian state supports the rich, not the poor. The state should support export.
IBRAHIM Abd al-Nasser
22-5-2009

Respondent:  Abd al-Nasser Ibrahim, leader in the Giza Federation of Teachers (ANI)
Date:  22 May 2009
Location:  Cairo, café
Interviewer:  Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Source:  Notes only

BDS:  Tell me about your activist background

ANI:  I am a teacher and a member of Tagammu since 1991. First I had an office in Tagammu, then I became active in the teacher's union in Giza. This attracts a lot of people from different sides. It's an independent union since two years. We have no relation with the government union. Tagammu has given us a place to meet. We had demonstrations in front of the parliament, and in front of the official unions, to defend our rights.

BDS:  What are your demands?

ANI:  Firstly, the government said that they would raise our salaries. It's a law which has not been implemented yet. Secondly, they have made a law to improve the quality of the education, but through these laws the government wants to privatize the school system. We are against this. Thirdly, the government wants to test the teachers, in the name of improving the education, but they will be able to fire teachers if they fail. We don't know how to prepare for this test and what the standards will be. So we move against our low salaries, against the low quality of education, and against privatization and repression.

At first we met with the Minister of Education, Sharif Younis. He listened to our demands and we talked about our salaries. After fifteen years we gain but 600 EGP. We gain extra money through private lessons. They are necessary to gain our means for existence. In the media and in politics we are represented as only a few crazy teachers. Because all our legal channels are blocked, we need something else. When there are laws, movements and unions, people dare to ask about a pay raise. They joined movements all over Egypt. In 2005 and 2009 we organized conferences about our rights and problems. Our biggest challenge is to make a connection with society at large. Families in Egypt spend 30 percent of their income on education. They look on teachers as greedy people. Our real private salary comes from the people in private classes. Once we have a higher salary, we'll stop our private classes.

BDS:  Is there a lot of solidarity between the different movements?

ANI:  Every movement wants their own organization, but we can help each other, through joining demonstrations and defending each others’ rights. All movements have the same aims: to live a good life. We have the same goals. So, there is no real relation, but we defend each other. We don’t want to appear against the state and Mubarak.
The first step is to be active, and then, when we are strong enough, we can talk about other things.

At the moment the people have a very bad education. There are no good books, activities, classes. In some schools there aren't enough desks. The government turns the teacher into a policeman. The books serve to keep the pupils quiet. Don't discuss, don't ask! We are the first police officers in society. We kill their ideas and deliver them to the government to take their freedom away.

BDS: What was the impact of the 6 April in the schools in Cairo?

ANI: Some students joined the demonstrations. Some students went to the conference on education. Teachers sometimes don't want to have anything to do with the 6 April movement. The youth of 6 April are politically advanced, and so the workers fear them for their ideas.

BDS: What is the biggest challenge for the teachers?

ANI: To expand our union. Firstly, we want to connect to the parents of our students. Together we'll fight for better books, better salaries, no privatization, and a good education for their children. After the parents we'll try to reach out to the pupils.

Between 1995 and 2005 the state didn't want to build schools. They wanted to offer this activity to the private sector. After the GATTs it was even worse. Now they have five years to open the market to investors. They use the law which defends the quality of education as a battering ram for privatizations – because 95 percent of the schools in Egypt don't have a good quality. It's open invitation for the private sector to come.

The government doesn't want the movements to unite at the same time, although it's necessary for the movements to reach out for other movements and other sectors in society. Some human rights' organizations try to do this, but then some teachers refuse their support, because they think they get money from Europe and the US. As a teachers' union we try to finance ourselves.

BDS: Can Tagammu play the role of bringing the movement together?

ANI: No. The leaders in Tagammu don't have the view for this. They don't want to play this role, but the members in Tagammu want them to play this role and have a political perspective. In every movement you can find a member of Tagammu, but the leaders of the party are a tight circle and they only support their members in words. They don't prevent us from doing anything, but neither do they listen to us. This is a big problem in Tagammu. I wonder, we have a lot of members, why don't we gather them and support them. The leaders are close to the regime, they are afraid of the state, so they keep things under control.

BDS: What about the trend for change in Tagammu?

ANI: It is a good thing. We should have different ideas and ways in the party. This trend is against the leaders and the lackeys of Rifaat Said. Now Tagammu has the best chance
to transform, because the regime is actually very weak. Tagammu is the only party with members in all the movements. But only if the party has the will to do so. The leaders don’t want this, they have a good relation with the regime. We want to change the party.

BDS: What is the relation between the left faction and the communist party?

ANI: Some people in Tagammu have a close relation with the government and don’t want any change. They are liars, they don’t work with us, they don’t participate in any movement. These people are often from the ECP. We have no problem that someone works in Tagammu, but let’s work together then. The Tagammu leadership wants to change the party’s constitution. We are afraid that this change will be in favor of the leaders and the ECP. During previous elections, the opposition gained 45 percent and the leaders 55 percent. Rifaat has good relations with the communists, as he allows them in the party in exchange for their support for him. He accuses the opposition that they want to divide the party. But, there are good people in the communist party as well. Some of them did not vote for Said in the last conference. Rifaat Said picks people in the leadership for their loyalty, not their capabilities.
IBRAHIM Jihan
20-3-2011

Respondent: Jihan Ibrahim, member of HASHD and the RS (JI)
Date: 20 March 2011
Location: Cairo, Bursa cafe
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Also present: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

[...]

BDS: Can you tell me something about Hashd?

JI: I became strongly involved in Hashd last year, in 2010. Their main launch was basically the national minimum wage campaign, of 1,200 EGP. That would put every worker or Egyptian citizen to the poverty line, so that’s not even... It was battled in a court case and that was actually won with two sets of minimum wage, but it didn’t specify what exactly and then they said it will be 400 EGP which is ridiculous. I got involved with Hashd and specifically I was put in a committee which deals with media and awareness. I basically took part in all the demonstrations or sit-ins and strikes and so on and I would cover them through pictures and videos and post them on our page or blog or write something about it, because I am better in English I would also translate... You know. Spread the word through twitter and youtube and facebook and so on in English.

BDS: Was Hashd set up by the RS or were there other groups which participated?

JI: Yes... How Hashd was formed... It was not a hierarchical structure, it didn’t have a leader, it were basically committees and it revolved around a program, there is an actual pamphlet which discusses each issue that we see, that has to do with the political and social and economic life in Egypt. Under each subject there is a set of ideology and demands. For example when it comes to the workers we have a statement on what should happen with the free association of unions and the minimum wage and workers rights and so on. Women. Religion. Minority groups. Christian groups... Things which have to do with the Palestinian issue and Camp David and our stance towards the treaty. Things which have to do towards the emergency law and our stance towards emergency law. And political and democratic situation in Egypt, which is in reality just authoritarianism. [laughs]

BDS: But the national minimum wage was really the spearhead of the campaign?

JI: Yes it was the spearhead and it was led by it basically. It was a collaboration with different groups like the independent unions, especially the real estate tax workers. They were really a part of the campaign. Kefaya and Karama and so on. They took part in the campaign as well. But Hashd always focuses on issues of the workers or democratic issues or the Palestinian cause and it deals with situations when they
arise. For example when Khaled Said happened we had a lot of mobilizations against the emergency law and in solidarity with Khaled Said and so on. We have the center of Socialist Studies, that’s where we hold our meetings and have our lectures and so on and discussion groups and so on. We normally invite speakers who give a talk and then we hold discussion afterwards. It is a way where we can build a center where we can expand our movement and share our thoughts and debate them and challenge people to discuss our program and act upon it and debate it. It is a very open platform and democratic. Even if it is set up... there are different committees. There is a committee which deals with socio-economic demands, like the minimum wage, like workers’ issues. There is a committee that is just focused on democratic and political issues, like the emergency law, like whenever we had parliamentary elections... then there is a committee for governorates, for going and traveling to Suez, Sharqiyya, Helwan, Kafr al-Shaykh, Alexandria and so on. And we coordinate between all these places. There is a youth committee in which all the youth takes part in a day to day kind of activity of spreading leaflets, increasing discussions, getting members, or spreading basically the program. And then there is the media or the awareness committee. I was in both the youth committee and the awareness and media committee, which was responsible for the blog, for writing, for covering events, for spreading the messages and so on. And from each committee there was a secretariat and each two members from each committee that are the secretaries form the general secretariat which invites everybody and sends messages and emails and type up things and do all of the logistics, keep coordination... So there is not really one figure who is a leader or a president, but...

BDS: ... more like a front or campaign...

JI: ... exactly.

BDS: Are there other leftist organizations active in Hashd?

JI: There is the Socialist Renewal Current. They also... I’m not exactly sure how their movement is set up. But we coordinate with them, just like other groups. We coordinate with Kefaya, with 6 April, with We are all Khaled Said people, with al-Baradei campaign… not so much with them, but especially when there is a big protest, or before the parliamentary elections when we’re doing an anti-NDP candidate campaign we coordinate with them: we cover this area, you cover that area. Before all the major protests we would sit together and organize meetings and agree on the time, the place, the chants, the banners, and so on. If we create group banners or just... You know. And so on. This was actually done, three of them before January 25, not knowing that it would turn into a revolution. I went to a meeting, the Thursday before the Tuesday and there was a representative basically from each group which was taking part in the protest. We agreed on the final places, the locations, the time... What will we do, if we GET to Tahrir, what will happen, and so on [laughs]. We normally do this anyways, even before 25 January: we did it for the 21 September protest that was in Abdeen Square, for example. We were used to hold these kind of meetings for protests against the emergency law thing, or in favor of the
minimum wage, or against high prices, and so on. We faced that for some time last year.

BDS: And how did the revolution change Hashd or the relations between the left? Because now I have the impression that a lot of leftists have their own parties, their own alliances, their own this and that, so how is cooperation working out now?

JI: I think that is given within any kind of revolutionary context. You are bound to have splits and things and groups that are you forgetting about the old ways we used to do things and just taking a lead and taking the opportunity to expand and formalize their institutions, which is normal and I guess acceptable to some degree. With regard to Hashd we don’t see politically... and I’m not exactly sure that I can talk on behalf of Hashd... but from my point of view, being involved, we don’t see any main gains from the revolution other than Mubarak leaving and the fact that parliament is dissolved. Which was already in our eyes non-sensical anyways [laughs] almost non-existent. What we are doing is expanding our work and continuing to do what we did already, which is being in urban poor areas, having close ties with workers within key factories, coordinating that very well, even though we are not many. We are not like 6 April who do have a large base number-wise, however we have, I think, an impact in places like Mahalla, like Suez, like Alexandria, like factories in Helwan. A lot of these sectors are formalizing their demands into independent unions through which they form the basis of a workers’ party, this is truly where we see our gain from the revolution: having this official, political platform that is not taking Hashd into an institutional political party, but through our connections and web of coordination, we are able to connect all these movements to build a workers’ force that we believe is the key in defending the revolution and in continuing the revolution and ultimately having the workers to be truly representative in whatever process may come. This is not necessarily a vision shared by... Maybe it is a vision shared by a lot of people, but not necessarily by the same mechanism. I was just talking with a friend who claims to be a socialist. He is not a part of Hashd per se, but he is a socialist friend and he sees... that the only way which will guarantee is to be in parliament to defend our rights. Whereas someone in my point of view, as I understand as being a Hashd member or a socialist, would not necessarily be aligned in that sense. [laughs] Because our battles are not in parliament, but in the factories, in the unions, in setting up the workers’ party, in using these strikes and workers’ power into a political weapon. Like: if you don’t do this, we’re going to go on strike. This could be a political, a social, could be whatever demand it is, or may be labeled. I think this is where as Hashd and as socialists we should and are focusing on right now, aside from whatever is happening. With the army being there we must continue the pressure, because, again, one of the main arguments why left-wing and socialists voted yes [in the referendum] is that they do not want the army to prolong their presence in power. I think that is naïve. Completely naïve. The army has been there since 1952. Voting yes, or having parliamentary elections and speaking of the process, would not necessarily lead to the army leaving. What we can do as Hashd and leftists is to keep on exposing the army’s behavior towards protesters and strikers from torture and arrests, or the political detainees who haven’t been released, until the emergency law which hasn’t been
lifted up until now... and that everybody somehow is... acting as if we were in this democratic state, complete democracy [laughs] where actually our vote means something, most of the people who voted yes were persuaded by religion and propaganda, and so on. And that is not necessarily representative of what the revolution stood for. And it is building all these assumptions. This is based on these huge assumptions that... Because now the people are for the revolution they will never vote for someone who is part of the old regime, or the NDP, which is nonsense in my view, as a socialist, as a Hashd member, as everything which I experience, even for just the last year, compared to the decades which I have studies and read about and analyzed and so on. So this is the left today... where it stands, it is in a very critical and pivotal moment where we can completely lead and take a strong stand, or completely be buried and face another decade of mobilizing at a minimum level like we have been doing for decades.

BDS: So the future of the left is really connected to the establishment of a strong workers’ movement? How do you think this workers’ movement is now developing? Two days ago we were in Suez, and there was a meeting of a revolutionary workers’ alliance, which gathered workers from Suez and they were discussing if they should, either have democracy in the state union, or have their own independent unions; should we have more than one union in the factory, or not... These are some of the discussions happening right now. What are the main issues according to you and especially obstacles for the workers’ movement at this moment?

JI: I think falling for the trap of democratization of the state union; this is completely nonsense and hugely problematic in my view. The regime still exists, those institutions have been corrupted to the core for decades. We can’t assume that after a couple of weeks, after the revolution, that they will be gone or cleansed. Even Husayn Megawer is still the head of the federation of workers. The head is still in place. There is no possible way that we can be democratic within the state corrupted system of unions. Even before the revolution we were pushing for more and more independent unions to be born. Right before the revolution, actually, in November, the health technician workers set up their independent union, which is composed of 15,000 workers and they didn’t even have a union before. They just announced their own, new union and more workers now, and more sectors, and more factories are doing the same and following in these footsteps. This is what I think we should keep on doing. With this opportunity this gives us a great boost, with workers already going on strike and having... doing it on their own anyways, this is ideal for us with the lawyers that we have, with the people experienced in these fields, to go out to them and reach out to them and help form the federation that would be an alternative or would take over the state federation of independent unions which would then become a platform also for our foundation for the workers’ party. That I think is the crucial thing that we need to keep mobilizing. The fact that we have all this noise, basically, going on in the background... It is a challenge to not hear it and mute it out and focus on doing so, doing that. Because time is against us. Now with the yes vote being passed, that means that within six months or five months or three months or whatever, we will have parliamentary elections and we want to make sure that the workers’ party is set up by then and would lead and take a huge part in these
elections. Because at the end this is what we want. We want the workers, the true workers, representative and be part of the political process that they completely been out of for decades.

BDS: Before the revolution we already saw a big movement of the workers, especially in Mahalla. I think that during this period we could see a new consciousness developing among the working class, from only economic demands to a more national-syndical consciousness, do you think the revolution has further developed this consciousness? Or do you think there is still a lot of corporatism and only economic demands within the movement?

JI: Yes, this is part of the challenge also for the leftists. Already this revolution raised the consciousness of having political demands alongside socio-economic demands. Because if you talk to a lot of workers, they are very politicized, even if they don’t know it, they are very politicized, they are not only for a higher wage, they are asking for the head of this corrupted institution, or syndicate or factory to be removed. This is a very political demand because who has put this guy in charge? Mubarak or his cronies and so on. The thing is that awareness and the people and they still view workers’ demands as a socio-economic one and not necessarily a political one. This is the propaganda, we have to say: no it is political. Or actually we have to take it to the next level with the workers’ party and create a political force out of these so-called social demands. The revolution definitely helped that, because the workers did it on their own, instead of us being in touch with Mahalla and Suez, it started all over the place without our coordination or everything. Now it is our role to connect it all and facilitate it basically.

BDS: A question about the role of the Ikhwan. During the revolution the Muslim Brothers played an important role in organizing protests. But after the revolution they immediately sided with the regime. According to some leftists activists I spoke with, the regime wants to use the Ikhwan especially against the workers’ movement because they want to pacify the protests. Do you think this is true?

JI: Yes, absolutely. The Muslim Brotherhood is as much a part of the old regime as anything else. They have constantly been utilized and coopted by the regime and they are what they are because of the regime. This is a fact that we cannot ignore, but at the same time they have strong ties, for example in Mahalla. They have a huge base in Mahalla. And actually I was speaking in al-Husayni, what is his name, he is the MP representative for the Mahalla district...

BDS: ... Said al-Husayni...

JI: ... yes that’s him. That was during the revolution and he announced that this was... they day after Mubarak’s speech or the camels... I was telling him that this is your time, your moment, your call for strike in Mahalla and do that and so on. And he told me, well... you do it. You know. I’m like what do you mean, this is what you’ve been waiting for. This the moment you can actually lead and take charge of these masses. You have the masses, so move the masses, mobilize the masses. [laughs] This what
they always stood for. They didn’t take part in the 25 January, officially, in the mass demonstration. They only came in part, when now when there will be elections, or towards the end of the revolution, when it became clear that Mubarak is going... And this is something surprising. At the end of the day we have to look at the Ikhwan, especially the people at the top. In the core of the Ikhwan. They are professionals, they are elites, they are businessmen, who economically, their interests lie strongly with the old regime. It is not surprisingly that they are now pushing to protect those interests, and using the religion factor to mobilize the masses like they have always done. But if you look at their agenda they are a very neoliberal, conservative force.

BDS: Do you think this will create problems within the Muslim Brothers? Especially some youth within the Muslim Brothers have played an active role in the revolution. They are perhaps more radical than the leaderships. We have seen signs of opposition... Do you think this will result in a split or do you think this can be contained within the organization?

JI: I think the split has happened a long time ago. You can just see... a part of it is the Salafi uprising, where they are all radical. With regard to the working force and that, this will only make the working class stronger economically, because at some point the clashes will be happening depending on wage and labor and economic things, so the worker will go more for a higher wage than for Islam, this is what they depend on anyway. A split from that towards more radical... they are losing legitimacy as it happens... people are looking at them and they are like, no you are just crazy, you are extremist and we don’t want that. Only an Islamist and fundamentalist person would buy. I wouldn’t think that average people would want like to live this way. [...] But like within the working force, the Muslim Brotherhood... they either will lose ground based on economic and social issues, or they will have to reform and become more what the workers, or the masses want, the masses they belong to or the masses that belong to them.

BDS: Do you think this is possible? They could follow a middle ground, having a more corporatist or nationalist attitude, for example against privatizations by foreign firms and turn this whole social issue into a more sectarian issue, into an anti-foreign issue. Do you think it is a possibility?

JI: It is a possibility and it is a concern. This is where the left has to draw and defend its ground strongly and get those masses before they get them thinking that this is the proper or good way for them, because we know in the heart of hearts that the Muslim Brotherhood is just another face of the regime. We don’t want them in power. Unless they align with what the workers want and what they really stand for and ultimately mean, then yeah, I have no problem with them, but if they are protective of what we already got rid of... then yeah, this is something that we have to fight.

BDS: What about the liberal democrats. They were also playing a progressive role during the revolutions, all layers in fact of the opposition. But now I have the impression that they are caught between, on the one hand, the regime and the Ikhwan, and, on the
other, the social revolution. What is there position according to you? Will they join more the social demands…

JI: … if you look at the liberal circles and parties, like al-Ghad or al-Baradei or Amr Moussa or even al-Wafd, they are losing… look at what happens at al-Baradei, it is sad. It shows how much the majority, who are the poor, the workers, the farmers… they don’t want this liberal agenda. They see Ayman Nur or Wafd or Amr Moussa, or any of these liberal figures and they automatically think American associations and Israel and all these still liberal agendas that yes, the middle class and upper-middle class and elites completely support and fall for and this is where their masses are, but that doesn’t appeal still to whom the socialist appeal to.

[HH joins in]

JI: The only person that I would say is out there who maybe would have a great popularity is perhaps Hamdeen Sabahi, because he is like the left I guess figure as of now that has appeared and who is not for this liberal agenda. They played the role in the revolution in bringing out the upper-middle class and now because what’s keeping them in the forefront is their figures: Ayman Nur, al-Baradei, Said al-Badawi, whom people have lost... or at least you get the sense that a majority of the people doesn’t want them in power, or don’t want them to lead, or don’t see them as legitimate candidates. They also see their parties as corrupt, as a part of the old regime. They played the game of politics with the NDP, they played along the Ikhwan in a different sense, without the religion part, but all in all old regime interests, neoliberal agendas that do not necessarily favor the working class.

BDS: I also have the impression that before the revolution many opposition papers were in solidarity with social questions like the Mahalla revolt, because it was also an opposition against the regime, but now they have more like a tone of: it is damaging the economy and stability...

JI: … yes because it is hurting the elites’ interests. Look at who owns these newspapers and who benefits from workers working for really low wages. Respondent: The businessmen, the elites, the upper-middle class who use this propaganda of: enough of these strikes, we need stability. As if the thirty years before when workers got paid nothing, 2 dollars a day, that was stability… That was not stability. [laughs] A family living on 300 EGP or 200 EGP or even 99 EGP per month, was their life stable during Mubarak’s time? The stability’s question regards a perception: for whom is the situation stable? For you or for the average person, whose life is already unstable. And that now is the battle. It is turning because it is a class struggle. It is a class issue. We live in capitalism... this whole neoliberal agenda was pushed in Egypt in the 1970s, then in the 1990s with the structural adjustment programs, and then the vicious privatizations which happened in the past ten years, that started affecting everybody in society, even the elite, and definitely the poor person felt it on a daily basis. That was one of the main forces which made this revolution. It was only on February 9 when all the workers went on strike, calling for a general strike, that toppled Mubarak. Really. Because it started to hurt the elites pockets and it created
enough pressure for Mubarak to leave. It wasn’t Wael Ghoneim, you know. [laughs] Sorry. Yes he brought solidarity for more people to come to Tahrir, but that didn’t make Mubarak to step down. Yes, it was part of the pressure. But it was only two days after the call [for general strike] that Mubarak left.


BDS: The revolution now has transformed from a real popular revolution into a class struggle and the domain has changed from Tahrir Square to the factories and the streets…

JI: … it has always stemmed from a class struggle, but in addition to the class struggle there was the obvious repression and corruption that everybody faced no matter what class, age, or sex or background or location… everybody faced the corruption of the Mubarak regime and this was a main drive for the revolution. But the class struggle has always existed in the background. You saw it in Mahalla, in the working class throughout the whole of Egyptian history, and now that each group, even the women and this is very interesting, because in every division, in an authoritarian regime division are highlighted, whether class, gender, religion… anything, any subject, any classification, divisions are highlighted within an authoritarian regime. Now that this is alleviated or being lifted or being in the process of democratization, you get more divisions advancing than others. For example the idea of the divide between Muslim and Christians: a lot of them calling for unity and the end of sectarianism. This was shown at the end of last year in the Alexandria bombing. On the other hand you see women mobilizing for women rights and it is completely harassed and backlashed by whomever… Uneducated men, backward thinking elements, thugs, state police, who knows who they are, but they faced a counterattack. So you have these contradictions where one area is very progressive and in another area… because the division is so entrenched… even women in the Western world in so-called democracies can’t have their full rights. These divisions will take longer…

BDS: … this is an interesting issue. I wanted to ask about the women movement; especially in the revolution you saw the image of men and women in the square… did the revolution brought women and men closer together, did it have an impact on the consciousness of people participating in the revolution? Or was it only superficial and did it not go deep enough?

JI: People changed through the experience of being in Tahrir or being part of the revolution. Really, of the 18 days I was in Tahrir I felt no harassment whatsoever. I was among stranger and people I never seen in my life, of all walks of life, poor, rich, elites, middle-class, upper-class, different religions, all age groups, it didn’t matter. I never felt safer, I didn’t get harassed. Before, I was getting harassed daily when just walking down the street. Any woman goes through it in Egypt. It was through the collective struggle and this experience of fighting in Tahrir Square together that shed away all these stereotypes and dogmas that we are being trained to think. And it was out of this experience that people changed the ways in which they think. Because the
day that Mubarak stepped down and people came to visit or came to look and see Tahrir for the first time, that’s when sexual harassment towards women was there again. It was because it was being done by other people. Those who had gone through the experience of the revolution, of the awakening of consciousness of equality between age, or class or religion. They didn’t experience that. They were still back in the Mubarak days basically. People were changed through the experience. The more the revolution continues, the more the divisions will be brought closer. However, some are harder than the other. Class is one of them. If I can rank them, religion is one that we can get over because it already doesn’t exist and the regime has constantly played on it so much to divide and rule between using the sectarian thing. They used class, now you see it: ok, let’s have stability, go back to work, blablabla, enough with these strikes, enough with the protests. That’s the class issue. The deepest rooted issue is that between men and women and that is globally.
BDS: Thank you for making some time for us, seeing that you’re so busy.

[...]

BDS: Can you tell me about the cinema workers’ union?

MK: It’s a trade-union, not a syndicate or a state trade-union. But it’s connected a little bit with the cultural syndicate and the Ministry of Culture. So there is an influence of the State in the form of the Ministry of Culture. In this year we will try to have a fully independent union, independent from the Ministry of Culture.

BDS: There have been attempts by other unions, like the health technicians, teachers, pensioners and real estate tax workers to have an independent union. Now there are talks on creating an independent federation. Do you think you will be a part of this federation?

MK: No. We don’t have an independent trade-union yet, and it could be that we won’t succeed in having a trade-union of the cinema workers at all, because they are “shadow” workers. Besides, we haven’t had any information on this federation yet. If we get some documents on it we could discuss it. I am not against an independent trade-union federation, but in my opinion the struggle has to start with our own trade-union, we have to fix our own room first. Then perhaps we can have an independent trade-union and after that a federation.

BDS: Do you think it’s possible to fix the problems in your trade-union first?

MK: I think that the problem of the trade-union is the leadership, whom we already fired. This is connected to the ex-regime and the revolution; the leaders of the trade-union were pro-Mubarak and organized some elements of the counterrevolution near the Mustafa Mahmud Mosque. Up until today they are supporting Mubarak. So we have to destroy this leadership first in order to start with a blank slate. They not only supports Mubarak, but also arranged attacks on Tahrir, and were one of the first who accused the protesters in the Square of accepting foreign aid, and so on. They did this in the government newspapers and the state media.
BDS: Working as a film or television worker under Mubarak… I can imagine it’s difficult because there are a lot of red lines. How did you deal with censorship? What’s the situation now?

MK: […] In Egypt there were three red lines in the cinema: religion, sex and politics. Trade-unions and syndicates should defend the interests of authors and cinema workers when they create and publish new ideas, but under the old regime they only defended the interests of the regime. Even the professionals in the cinema were working for 18 hours per day, and this is not fair. […] The trade-unions should defend a wage which matches the energy you put into your work. […] There were a lot of non-professionals and non-members of the trade-union with a low consciousness working in the cinema, and this was the role of the trade-union: not protecting our jobs and interests. We tried a lot to fix the issues in our trade-union. We attended all the central committee meetings, we tried to show the situation for the workers and professionals, there were a lot of actors working even without professional contracts… that’s why we have to change our trade-union. If those aren’t reasons enough to fix the trade-union… [laughs]

BDS: Were the members of the cinema union active during the revolution and what role did they plan?

MK: It wasn’t an organized role in the revolution, but an individual responsibility. We were supporting the popular movement which was a real revolution. We created two stages in the square. One for the actors, the other for the professional workers, we were supporting popular people’s consciousness. The supporting role of famous actors and figures in the Square was just being there, they didn’t have to fight or something like that. Their presence was support enough.

BDS: Tell me about the stages.

HH: Yes, I saw them, there were performances and songs, and so on.

MK: There were speeches from famous actors, there were poems and songs. […]

BDS: Before the revolution there were lots of demonstrations and strikes by the Kefaya and workers’ movement. Were there directors who made films or documentaries about these movements?

MK: A lot of members of the cinema trade-union were members in these movements. Khaled Yussef for example, inserted elements of the Kefaya movement in his film. They made a whole movie about Khaled Said. A lot of authors were writing about these movements, but they were blocked by the regime. We also made documentaries about Gaza and the Wall. […]

BDS: Are there directors or producers specialized in labor issues, strikes…?

MK: Ahmed Fawzi, Tamer Said, Aida al-Kashef, Olfat al-Osman, Hela Lutfi... […]
By the way, in the revolution the trade-union brought blankets and food to the demonstrators. [...] 

BDS: What do you think is the relation between an artist, or in your case a film maker, and politics?

MK: Date: Before or after the revolution?

BDS: If you ask the question it points toward a change, so I am interested in this change. [laughs]

MK: Before the revolution only politicians were working in politics, artists were doing art; only a minority of them were involved in opposition movements. But after the revolution, all the Egyptians are talking about political issues, so a lot of cinema workers are now working in political projects. This is the reason why we haven’t in Egypt good movies, most of them didn’t have a social and political background, which made them lacking as film.

BDS: Do you think it is the role of an artist and director to raise the political consciousness of the people, especially in this period?

MK: Being in the Square now is only a symbolic movement. You should be in the neighborhoods. Conscious actors and artists should go to the neighborhoods, especially the poor neighborhoods, to raise consciousness, and through their work and movies they should raise awareness.

HH: That’s true, it is a duty for them to play a role in raising the consciousness.

MK: Especially this movement, when the army doesn’t allow us to protest in key sites like Tahrir, we should go to the poor neighborhoods and start raising consciousness.

BDS: What is now the biggest danger or obstacle for the revolution? Some people say the army, others say the Ikhwan, others say al-Watani remnants…

MK: These are all elements of what we call the counterrevolution. After Mubarak stepped down we should not have left the Square, because the whole regime still exists. The danger right now is the leadership of the army. A lot of people who were not participating in the revolution, who remained at home, are thinking that the army is protecting the revolution, but that is not right, the army was forced to protect the revolution and forced to go the way of the people. Not the other way around. It is unconstitutional for the army to take over power after the president resigns, but the army used the mobilization of the people in the streets to legitimate their leadership. The army right now starts to use violence to split the protests, they did it with the students, with the Christians, with the actors, and so on. I think that the army and Tantawi himself are part of the regime, and they couldn’t start their violence as long as the numbers in the streets were big, but now they start the counterrevolution step by step. The people now should start to understand that the army supports the old
structures of the regime. Today, while going to a protest, I noticed that little people shouted the old slogan of “the army and people are one”.

BDS: Since the last thirty years the cultural sphere in Egypt has been strongly influenced by Islam. Do you think this will increase because the Ikhwan and the Salafists are now stronger and in the open?

MK: Of course. They have a big opportunity now, especially after the referendum. If we had any elections now, the only organized groups are the Ikhwan and Salafists. That’s why it was dangerous to make a referendum in these days. The Ikhwan and political Islam are using every means to gain an advantage, now they are negotiating with the regime to gain the upper hand. The ex-regime allowed only the Ikhwan to organize because it was using them to create fear among the people: if this regime ends, the Ikhwan will come to power. The Americans and the ex-regime were using the Ikhwan to keep the Egyptian people in line. A lot of political groups, especially the left, could have a strong organization, but it wasn’t allowed in Egypt. The only ones allowed were Rifaat al-Said’s Tagammu.

I was in the RS before I was in the cinema workers. The SCAF has a big influence in what is happening in the trade-unions in Egypt. They already took a decision in the constitutional court to destroy the leaderships in the old syndicates and trade-unions. The army did not interfere in this decision, but they insisted on keeping the old leaderships and connections between trade-unions and regime. Only the faces changed. The number two guy changed places with the number one guy. The administrations remained the same. The real revolution still has to start. Everything which happened was only a beginning for a real revolution. The next one will be against the army.

BDS: My final question is about actresses and actors. During the revolution a lot of actors and actresses were supporting the regime… what will happen to them now?

[laughing between HH and MK]

MK: The military is using the old figures of the regime to keep the people busy. […] Like what happened to Ashraf al-Zaki, the leader of the actors’ syndicate. They left him in the cinema, he had resigned, but they put him in the state syndicate, so the actors made new strikes for employment and so on, and they had not the time and the energy to go to the neighborhoods and raise awareness and so on. Those figures and actors still exist and still play an important role and the army is using them to push the people to lose their energy in this branch of struggle. As long as the regime exists, these figures are present. The revolution continues, and those figures will be finished when the revolution is finished.

Tamer Said was tortured by the army and suffered a lot of violence by them. Shadi Yusri and Aida al-Kashaf also. Rami Essam. He was tortured by electricity. These people were present in the protests at Maspero until the last moment. They were all singing on the stage. The army separated them from the masses. Ali Sobri also. He was an actor and arrested in the square and was punished and tortured and judged as a thug. […]
BDS: First I would like something more about this organisation, its history and its aims.

FL: I'll give you a brochure about the organisation. So you can have the details, because our organisation is very old. Within ten days we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the organisation because it was established on 1 January 1957... 1958, 1 January 1958. You know the Bandung meeting? The Bandung meeting in Indonesia was a very important meeting for the leaders of the South, of the liberation movements. Nasser was there, Sukarno, Nehru, ... It was a very big meeting where they made important recommendations and decisions, mainly for self-independence and for the liberation movements, for development, and a lot of things. The Bandung meeting was a meeting of governments. This organisation is the organisation of the people. African and Asian. Not Latin American because that was somewhat too far for us, but there is another organisation, including Asia, Africa and Latin America. They made their headquarters in Egypt as a privilege to Egypt, because during this time, Nasser was an important national leader, so they made their bureau here, as a privilege to Egypt, for its fight against imperialism, the occupation forces, and so on. This organisation, at the start, had a big number of national committees in India, in Japan, in Sri Lanka, in Nepal, in different places of the world. Also in the eastern part of the Soviet Union. Also in China before the clash with the Soviets and the Chinese. And only a small number in African countries, because liberation movements had not yet liberated as many countries as now; we are talking about 1957! It's very early. But later there was a big number of African committees. During the start of the liberation movements, there was the ANC in South Africa, the liberation movement in Angola, in Mozambique, in Namibia, ... all these liberation movements were members of the organisation. In this room here, there were seven or eight African leaders who are now very important people in their countries. At least they are ambassadors. At least. One of them is the president of Namibia. A member of this organisation. The foreign minister of South Africa was a member here also. He died two years ago. A lot of the leaders started from this organisation.

You know, after a number of years you can say that the sixties were the high point of the struggle for national liberation. During the seventies and eighties the liberation movement started to change. It was not as before. You had the non-aligned movement afterwards; it was established after the AAPSO. Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation. That is our organisation. The non-aligned movement started after us. That is why we have membership in the non-aligned movement [...] as observer. The ONLY organisation that has had this privilege is our organisation. We are in the economic and social council, we are in the UN, members in UNESCO, UNIDO, UNCTAD, and also in the African committee for human rights.
FL: This is our brochure in English since three, four years; now we are making a new one. So this organisation has a very important history. In the South, mainly in Africa and Asia, all the countries are now officially liberated; they have governments which are represented in the UN, they have flags and songs and so on, all except Palestine. Palestine is the only country which is not liberated of all the occupied countries in the different places of the world. So the organisation started, not to change its attitude, but to deal with new problems. Before we were mainly concentrating on liberation movements, now we are dealing with democracy, human rights, development, conflicts like these [points to a book: Clash of Civilizations or Dialogue of Cultures], inner conflicts, ecology, environment... So we are dealing now with a lot of problems which are very important to the South, mainly development and democracy; they are very important to discuss.
We have lost some of our influence after the fall of the Soviet Union. Not because the Soviet Union was supporting us, but as you know the liberation movement was greatly supported by the Soviet Union in Africa. When the USSR collapsed, these governments collapsed also and with them collapsed some of our committees.
Our meeting will start on 26 February and it will be the fiftieth anniversary of the movement and we hope to have a new start. Because now we have problems of globalization, of debts; we are in a new era now, and we must understand our new positions and see how we can live in these new conditions, in Africa and Asia. The conditions now are completely different compared to the situation at Bandung. In the past there were two blocs: the Soviet and the imperialistic bloc, now there is only one bloc: the imperialists. There were two poles, now we only have one pole. The liberation movement now is "down", only in Latin America they are rising, but in many places the liberation movements are going down.

BDS: And although now there is formal, political independence, a lot of countries suffer economic dependency.

FL: I think the whole of the South is losing its independence now, they are becoming dependent again. Who is independent now in the South? All of them are with America. All of their governments are with America. See Iraq, for example, the new rulers ask America to stay in their country. So it is a very difficult time, it’s not easy, but I hope the conditions will be changed in the favor of liberation movements again. I think we are facing AGAIN a liberation area. Because now we are dependent economically, we have lost our independence. Our companies which were nationalized are sold to the foreigners AGAIN. What have we done? All these people who sacrificed their lives, what was the use? Now we have to start from zero again. Our land is sold today to enemies. [...] The conditions we are facing now are not good, and I think it is difficult for the whole world. But, the Latin Americans give us hope that things could be changed, because they are the guardians of America and they are changing America itself. And I think that America will lose its power. America... truly you can say it’s a tiger, not of paper, but of wood at least [laughs]. And I think China is now a very dangerous country. Russia is becoming some power
again, not socialist, but at least another power trying to retake its place in the face of Europe and America. And India and Japan. So I think the conditions will change EVEN if the struggle is now not between socialism and capitalism, but an inter-capitalistic struggle. It will be a fierce struggle, it will not be an easy struggle. Again I think that the liberation movement will take its place once more, because this time, you have different parameters for justice, social life, for everything. So the people now are becoming more and more conscious of what is going on. And I think this will lead to something better. I hope. And I believe, not only do I hope, that the conditions will be better in the future. Everywhere, in America itself, in Europe itself, there will be changes.

BDS: Do you think the discourse of someone like Ahmadinejad is a genuine form of anti-imperialism or is it something else?

FL: He is a capitalist. And as a capitalist he is a part of the system. Najad is fighting because I think Iran and Turkey and Israel – now they have excluded Egypt, it’s very bad – these three forces are trying to be the leaders of the Middle East. That is why he’s fighting, so he will reach a compromise with America, I think. And in the newspapers we see there are negotiations under the table, even with America. [...] You know Iran, once, during the fight against Iraq, had very good relations with Israel. Israel was giving them weapons! So America was giving Saddam weapons and Israel was giving them to the Iranians, while they were fighting. I think that these are not main contradictions, and I don’t think that the Iranians are a danger to us. Nor the Turkish. Israel is a danger, because Israel is anti-Arab. Very clearly. Israel is not giving the people of Palestine a chance. They are your friends, give them the chance to be your friends! [smiles] Give them a chance. And how can Israel imagine it can continue living in the Middle East like this, like a very fierce beast, killing here and killing there. [...] How can you live?! How you can live... How can you continue with this continuous fighting, against Egypt, against Syria, against Jordan... It is fighting everybody! It will be the end for your people... So I think Turkey is no danger for us, Iran is no danger for us. The true danger is Israel and what they are doing with the Palestinians is inhuman. In Gaza now especially. In the name of fighting HAMAS... [...] The people is suffering, not HAMAS. They are very big leaders living in very good conditions; but the poor people in the camps THOSE are the ones who are suffering now. And at the same time at the West Bank the poor people are suffering. But HAMAS is not suffering, those who are in government are not suffering. Instead of punishing the governments, they are punishing the people.

I’m not against Iran having peaceful nuclear power. Why? Like any country in the world it has this right. Even if it made an atomic bomb, can it make use of it? America and Russia have not used their bombs in many wars, in the “third world war” – we had a third world war; the second stopped and the third started, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, in Kashmir, all these are elements of the “third world war” – but they didn’t dare to use atomic bombs, because it is not easy to use atomic weapons. It was used for balancing the forces. If Israel uses an atomic bomb, Israel would be the first to be hurt. If Iran uses the bomb... it would be destroyed by America, if they destroyed Israel. America would destroy them completely. Nobody would give Iran the chance to destroy anybody with atomic bombs.
So these are only excuses. They want the petroleum of Iran, they want the [strategic] position of Iran, and, as they have said in Iraq, they have MWD, and there was nothing at all. There was Saddam; THEIR man, the man of America. He was there, not atomic bombs or anything at all. And now, the conditions have become worse than under Saddam Hussein, even worse than in the time of Saddam Hussein! I hate Saddam Hussein. I refused to go to Iraq in a conference before the Americans entered, because I don't like Saddam Hussein. But now! The Iraqi will say, o God, Saddam was an angel compared to the Americans now. Shi’a, Sunni, Kurdi, Arabs, Christians, Muslims... what is this? They destroyed the country completely! Is this the new Middle East? Can you imagine that this is the new Middle East? [...] The Americans are pushing the world to a very horrible, horrible condition. Lebanon was destroyed by the Israelis during the last war. Condoleezza Rice said "this is the start of a new Middle East". What? Killing people is the new Middle East? Destroying couches and ... what is this new Middle East you are imagining? So I think now America is completely hated in the Middle East, even those who are working with America are hating it. They don't show their true face but they think it, because there are no friends of America, only interests. If it's in their interest to kill their best friend, they will kill him. No problem. Like cowboys killing Indians, they have the same culture.

BDS: You spoke of the effect of the changes in Latin America. I know your organisation has not any formal ties with Latin American organisations, but what do you think of the impact of the Bolivarian revolution on the Arab world? Is there any media coverage of what is happening in Venezuela and other Latin American countries?

FL: Yes, to some extent. Because I think they are afraid of this experiment, as it is something new, coming from America's back. They are anti-American and not afraid to say this. [laughs] This I think is very important. We get hints here of what is happening, but not much.

BDS: In what direction has the left, in Egypt and the Arab world in general, evolved since the fall of the Soviet Union?

FL: I think it became weaker BEFORE the fall of the Soviet Union, not because of it. The fall of the USSR surely affected it, because it was the example, the model, and it was destroyed. When we were in the party they were saying that we were fighting for socialism like Soviet socialism and how great the Soviet Union was, how strong, and that the people there were living in prosperity... [...] in health, in teaching, in culture, in anything, but then this "mother" was destroyed and it affected us much. I was in the Soviet Union in 1986 and they made an interview with me for the Arab radio in Moscow, and I told them – they asked me very strange questions "what is your idea about Western democracy, which is a crime, a very bad thing"; I told them "I don't call it 'Western democracy', I call it 'democracy in the West'" because I believed that it is a democracy of the people there, they fought in order to have democracy; it is not a gift from the capitalistic world. But they say it was Western democracy so we would not like it. They called it imperialistic democracy... but the English people paid a lot of blood in order to have this democracy; they took it by force from the capitalistic
forces. It is not a given. But when I speak about your democracy, where is your democracy? Where is your democracy? What is the meaning of it in your socialism? Anybody can criticise the rulers? Only criticise? I told them "I challenge you, nobody can criticise, neither here, nor in China, nor in Yemen" where there were socialist people fighting each other. [...] This is no Western democracy, no Eastern democracy, it is nothing at all. And this caused us problems. Because they gave us a bad model for democracy. Now it [the Soviet Union] became a bad model for democracy, for economics, for everything [laughs]. This surely affected us, and harmed us much. I was shocked when I went the first time to the USSR in 1986. I was shocked. I could not imagine... I found that people were afraid, and I spent a lot of my time in concentration camps and prisons, and I know what it is to be afraid. Being afraid, you don't think of anything but defending yourself. You cannot be creative, you cannot be someone who wants change; you want to defend yourself. So I don't think that such a society is a social society; it cannot be a socialist society if an individual, a person is fighting for his daily life. And this was a shock to me. And when I returned back to Egypt and met our fellow comrades I told them it was very bad in the Soviet Union. Nobody told us about the true things there. There are very good things, very glorious things, but the disrespect for human beings was a problem. I as a socialist believe that human beings are the priority, if that isn't a priority, for whom am I doing this? [...] So, sure, it affected socialists and the people as well.

But on the other hand there was an objective thing, a very important thing; that you had to stop saying "Lenin said", "Marx said"; you had to say: "I say, here, in Egypt". Because now I believe that some of the socialist forces are fundamentalists. They don't use their minds, they use their books. This must be finished. Because I will not change [the situation] here with Lenin. I respect what he said, but he said it for his country. Whether he succeeded or failed, it was for his country. I must understand his methodology, and apply this methodology to my country – and this is marxism! I will have my theory here, my theory of revolution, my theory of Egyptian revolution. And without developing this theory of revolution in Egypt and in the Arab world and in every place, there won't be any changes. We must understand our conditions.

In the past... I was a communist when I was thirteen years. 1942-43. You were not born. [laughs] Perhaps your father was not born in this day. But I became [a communist] first and foremost because I was living with my people. I was in Aswan, I saw the troubles, the people, the peasants, the workers. So it must start from them. The change must start from them. You need an exact understanding what is going on in our countries, because in order to change I must understand. First I have to understand how to change and what the change will be. So you must understand, you must have a program; a new program, according to your problems. Because we have new problems, which were absent during our time in the forties. They are finished, for example, in the past we could say "down with feudalism!". If you said now "down with feudalism!" people would laugh at you. You have no feudalism, but very complicated problems, agrarian problems in the countryside. You have to understand what is going on there, that's your priority. The working class has changed, the constitution of the working class has changed. In the past they were mainly peasants and they had the mentality of peasants, even if they were workers. Now there are a lot of different workers; petit-bourgeois coming from university,
secondary school... like this. So there are different mentalities; how do you deal with them?

But also, I believe that the working class is not the same. There are different interests in the working class. I cannot imagine that the workers who are working in building - they have no skill, they are just carrying cement, carrying bricks, carrying sand, ... they have nothing to do but carry. Like petroleum workers. Or like workers in automation places. It is different. So I believe now that there are different interests within the working class and we must understand them very well.

BDS: Do you still consider the working class a potential revolutionary force in Egypt...

FL: I believe it. But it must be expanded. Now we have the marginalized people who are suffering more than workers. Marginalized people are a very broad strata and they must be understand, because if you do not take care of them, they will be fascist. This would be horrible. They would be fascist. But I believe in something new, something different than the past. In the past we believed that there should be only one communist party in one country. Now I believe in plurality. You can have three, four, five parties, no problem. Coordinate together, but do not fight each other. We spent a lot of time fighting each other. So it destroyed a lot of time, it destroyed ourselves. Today we say "you have a party, ok, have a party, let's work together". Perhaps there is a party in Alexandria, a party in Mahalla, a party in Aswan. Ok. But work together, coordinate together.

BDS: What do you think of the Muslim Brotherhood at this moment? Is it a danger for the left? Or a potential ally?

FL: They are very dangerous. They are enemy number one because they are fascists. This is not a problem of religion. They are the most rightist strata in capitalism. And in the countryside also, among peasants. So it is not a problem of religion at all, it is a problem of class interests. They are primarily an anti-revolutionary force. They are a problem. I feel that they are greater enemies than Mubarak. Not Mubarak as a man, but as a system, as a regime. They are more dangerous, because they will not grant you any reform. You see what they are doing in Sudan: destruction. Or in Iraq. Or what they have done in Palestine. They divided Palestine. Anywhere they divide and destroy. They are very dangerous. We want to go forward, some parts of the rightist strata want to keep the status-quo, but others want to take you back. Back to Location: To Date:

BDS: Do you think they have become stronger because the left has been weakened?

BDS: No. I think they became strong because the rulers have spoiled them. We live under very bad conditions and they make use of it. We supposed that the contrary would happen, that the Left would make use of these conditions for its benefit. To my sorrow, I feel that there are some of the left, some communists, who are making alliances with them. This is a very bad thing. And they are trying to tell us that the our situation is comparable to South America were you find the liberation theology of the priests and so on... But this is completely different. Completely different.
BDS: What do you think of the role of Hizbullah in Lebanon? Is it...

FL: Different. No, I met Nasrallah twice, I met him in Kanaa in Lebanon and in Teheran in Iran. He starts to speak for one, two minutes and becomes a "national man". Speaking about his country, his liberation of his country. So I think they are different. And they have social tendencies also. But anyhow, I am against any religious rule. Any religious system I am against: Christian, Muslim, Jewish... I don't believe that they would do something good. But people who are religious, I am ok with that, but they should be first and foremost a nation, defending a national interest and liberation, fighting enemies, and so I think they [Hizbullah] are not like those here [Muslim Brothers]. Although they are creating problems, big problems in Lebanon. Did you know that they had a front together with the communist party? I discussed it with them. I spoke about democracy and said that if you want to make an alliance, this alliance must be very clear, and for what purpose? What do you want? Do you want religious rule at the end? Or are you against it? I they want religious rule, the communists must get away. I spoke to them frankly. This was a meeting in Beirut and the man who was speaking there was the "vice" of Nasrallah, the second man. And I spoke like this and the leaders of the communist party who were my friends I asked them: "what are you doing"? They were members of the political bureau. What are you doing? The strange thing is that some of them came to me after my speech and said "very good; it's very good what you are doing". It gives you an idea...
The left became hesitating here and there, maybe it was searching for some force to attach itself to. This is very dangerous. Look at Iran and what happened in Iran. The first thing they did was killing the communists. Also in Sudan, and in every other situation like this. The first thing they do... They make use of them and then they slid them into pieces, skinning all of them... Anyhow, God help, what do you do?

BDS: March separately, strike together?

FL: No, there's a split in the left in Lebanon. Some are completely against contacts between the communist party and Hizbullah and they are standing at one side - although I don't like the others either; those of Hariri and so on. Anyhow, also in Egypt there are splits. Some are standing with the Muslim Brothers, some are against.

BDS: What do you think of the movement Kefaya?

FL: Kefaya, bwah, maybe now they are going far away from the Muslim Brothers, but they started with them. I said "this is very bad, this is no good at all". Because, they will not give you a chance at all to make use of them, but they will make use of you. But they are very intelligent and clear to themselves what they want: to make use of you? Ok. And now they are making declarations that they are against women, Christians, ... What is this? Is your program against women, Christians, ...? It is impossible to be a communist and to have such a program. So when we speak of people to make a front together, please there must be a program, even with different ideologies at least there have to be some common program points.
BDS: On a total different note, do you think it's possible to be a good Muslim and a Marxist at the same time?

FL: I saw people like this. And good Christians too; they were making the cross and were in a concentration camp because they were communists. Some of them were Muslims, believing in God, praying, fasting during the Ramadan, and also very good communists. I remember that there was even something like this in the communist party in the Soviet Union, before it became authoritarian. In Russia there were Christians. I believe in something; you are making the revolution not only by yourself, but by the people, you will not go to the streets alone and succeed, but all this people are religious! How do you make a revolution with religious people and then you destroy their religion?! This is one thing which was bad in the Soviet Union. And I think Stalin is responsible for this point. In the past I believed too much in Stalin; when he died, I wept for him. But when I knew what he had done to people I hated him completely.

BDS: Do you think that a lot of people have come to the same conclusions, or are there still a lot of people on the left who admire the Soviet Union?

FL: No, you see, the Soviet Union did good things for Egypt: the High Dam, industry, educating people to become doctors, engineers and so on; circus, cinema, ballet, ... The Soviet Union did for Egypt a lot of good things. We were suffering from our own rulers, not from the Soviet Union. I am a geologist, and I was working with Soviet experts, and they did very good work for us. They were working as hard as the Egyptians or even harder. So when you remember them, you remember them as people who were good to you. They were giving us new cars while in the USSR they were riding old cars. [...] To the Egyptians the Soviet Union was to them a country which could defend them against America and Europe. Now, nobody is defending them. So the Soviet Union has a good reputation, not a bad one. Even the bourgeoisie speaks of the USSR – from their point of interest at least – that as long as there was the Soviet Union they had good relations, money, ... because then there was a competition [between the US and the USSR], and they were making good use of this contradiction.

BDS: What is your opinion on the current situation in Sudan and the reaction of international community?

FL: I don't think the international community cares about anything, anyplace. [...] The problem to them is petroleum and uranium, which is discovered in Darfour. This is the main point. So they are searching for ways to "have their legs there", a spot to stand. I think the government is giving them the opportunity. The government of Sudan is a Muslim Brother government. So they don't care about racism; in Darfour there are Muslims, but they are African, not Arab. So they don't care about them. The south: Christians and non-religious people... they don't care about them. Because they want an Arabic-Islamic world. Islamic: they don't care for any other religion. Arabic: they only care for the Arab race. This is horrible. If you only want an Arab and Islamic race, what about Christians who are living in this country? If you only want
Arabs, what about the Africans, Turkish, Kurdi, Berber? We have a lot of minorities here in Egypt. We have African minorities, like the Nubians. And in the Siwa oasis we have Berber. But they are living as Egyptians. Sometimes we have problems between Muslims, Christians and others, but not as others; perhaps Shi’ā and Sunna are fighting more than Christians and Muslims. [laughs] [...]

BDS: Do you still believe in the project of Arab unity?

FL: I do believe in Arab unity, but not as a nationality, as in the past. Now the world is divided in blocs: in Europe, Asia, Africa... The Arabs can make a bloc together; they have both very rich areas and poor areas which they can integrate together. I think it is very difficult, because now the Arabs are suffering internal disunity. If you are suffering internal disunity, how can you make external unity? All have internal disunity: Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Maghreb also, Berber and Arab. Only when you can succeed in having unity inside, you can make unity outside. But, as a bloc, which would have similar interests, they should unite. They must think of one market... and some things like this. Because now, the world is living in blocs. Latin America is going to make a bloc, Asia, Africa... anywhere. The Russian Federation and so on...

The project of Arab unity today is not like in the sixties, and it will not be easy, because you are not in the time when there were strong national ties... now all kinds of secondary contradictions are coming to the surface and they are bad things, not good things. We hope... We have also different kinds of societies: Bedouin society, agrarian, culture, ... different cultures, different societies. This is a problem, because in one country you have different cultures. The Bedouin people who are living here don't think in the same way as I who am living in Cairo, for example. So there are a lot of things which must be dealt with before you reach a stage where you can make unity between the different countries. I think it needs time.
LAKUSHA Faysal
20-10-2010

Respondent: Faysal Lakusha, worker leader in Mahalla (FL)
Date: 20 October 20 2010
Location: Cairo, Café
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

FL: I was in the 6 December strike and I don’t deny that the media were standing next to us and supporting us. The first strike was on the 6 December 2006 and we continued a lot of strikes in 2007. We had a lot of demands. […] The role of the media was very important, and they were supporting and covering us. After the failed strike of 6 April 2008, the government started to fire worker leaders and the media did not stand by us. After the fire is out we have victims, but the media is not talking about the victims of the fire. The chief editors don’t talk about the worker victims because there were no big actions. The workers in Mahalla paid for all the strikes in Egypt because Mahalla was the biggest strike.

BDS: I’ve met someone who said that before Mahalla there were big strikes but it was the role of the media that Mahalla became a national movement. Do you think this is true, or was Mahalla in itself a bigger and more important strike?

FL: No, it was the first strike. Do you have the date of the other strikes? After this was the tax strike. When others saw this experience they made their own strikes. The consciousness started from Mahalla. When Mahalla citizens had their demonstrations in 6 April, no one in the country had a strike, no one supported them, no village or town had a strike. If you look for any profits you find only Mahalla, I’m not talking about myself but the movement.

BDS: Why do you think the strike on the 6 April 2008 failed? Because the security intervened. Why was the movement not stronger and why wasn’t there stronger solidarity by other factories.

FL: It was a successful strike. The citizens supported the workers. […] They were terrifying the citizens and the workers. They said in the television and the media that if any worker did not come to his work that they would be fired or jailed and other citizens and workers in Egypt didn’t support the strike. They were terrified.

BDS: Now there is a lull in the movement of Mahalla. Is it because the workers have gained a lot of their demands, or is it because the leaders have been split and the movement is weaker now?

FL: Of course because of the two reasons. A lot of workers gained their demands and the government started to fire the workers leaders. […] And sent them to Alexandria, and elsewhere.
BDS: So the workers in Mahalla made their strikes in 2006, 2007, and 2008, what were the political parties and human rights centers which helped them the most?

FL: The Syndicates’ House, Khalid Ali Center, Hamdi Husayni, in those days the media played a good role. They played the role they can afford. A lot of organizations and centers said that Mahalla is our strike. And it wasn’t right. The support wasn’t financial, but through media, texts, coverage. And the centers were sending a lot of activists. Khalid Ali and the CTWS were making a lot of cases for the workers.

BDS: So the two most important pillars of support are giving a voice to the movement and on the other hand legal support against security etc. What about the political parties? What role did they play?

FL: There are no cooperating political parties. No political party played a role in the strike. There were a lot of members of different political parties in the strike. I am an al-Watani member. Inside the factory I am a worker calling for the workers’ rights and the strike was a labor strike, not a political strike. […]

BDS: As a member of al-watani do you agree with the economic program of al-watani?

FL: I am accepting change, but I don’t want to destroy the system. I don’t want the experience of Iraq where the citizens want to get rid of Saddam and now there’s chaos. We should call for our rights, and other organizations should call for their rights, but we shouldn’t destroy the system. Step by step we should edit the system and the laws.

BDS: Do you think that after the strikes the consciousness of the workers is raised, or that it remains the same until there is a new strike or movement?

FL: There is no consciousness within the workers. […] The workers faced the profit of the strikes and they had a consciousness before and during and after the strikes but the clue of having this consciousness is that there is no support of the parties and media after the strike and after the leaders are split. When the workers saw that a leader such as me has support after the strike they will feel safe to make another strike. But now when they don’t have support from the media and so on they don’t feel confident to make another strike.

BDS: Do you blame the media and political parties of abandoning the movement after 2008.

FL: Yes.

BDS: The leaders were split by the government after 2008. How do you think this can be changed, how can the movement in Mahalla prevent this in the future?

FL: We have to create a layer of substitution leaders. […] I distributed a lot of texts to the centers and labor committees in Egypt, but no one supported me and that weakened
the labor leaders and the process of creating substitution leaders. We lack support but at the same time I am making substitution leaders.

BDS: What do you think of centers like Tadamon or the labor committee of Sabr Barakat? Can they play the role of creating substitution leaders?

FL: These centers play a limited role. They help with legal issues.
BDS: How long are you working with al-Badil?

AM: Now it's two and a half years, from the beginning of 2007. Before al-Badil I worked in a radio and television network. I have inherited the ideology of my family, they were left-wing as well and I grew up in an open-minded climate.

BDS: Are you politically active?

AM: No I did not join Kefaya. I don’t trust the movements and I don’t want to be a member. There are too many fissions for old reasons. However, I supported the movement of Gaza and helped people during the catastrophe [mud slide]. In addition, I support the situation of the journalists.
I think the global situation is getting worse and it provokes people into action, such as workers, journalists, etc. However, this is not enough. It represents a change in mentality, the fight for their rights. Parties play a very limited role, due to the pressures of the government. Something is missing in the political landscape of Egypt.
Now, people start to organise themselves and journalists and left-wing movements help them, but not in a patronizing way. They stand side by side with the people and listen to their questions and help them. But in the end, a political solution is needed which gathers all the people.

BDS: What do you think is the responsibility of journalists towards change?

AM: Journalists should tell the truth. But some journalists are also activists, more and more nowadays. They play a role in sharing experiences and bringing local issues to the regional, national or even international level. They help spreading the culture of protest. While the opposition newspapers are often overexaggerating and hysterical, the national newspapers tell lies. People must trust again the journalists, and this can only be done by being close to the people and tell them the truth. E.g. with the disaster we were with the people and showed them the truth of our articles.

BDS: Do you think that newspapers today play the role of parties, like Khalid al-Balshy says?

AM: Perhaps.

BDS: You spoke of ideology, how would you describe your ideology?
AM: Communist. I believe in fairness and equity, justness, honesty, etc. My father translated Marxist books into Arabic.

BDS: You say you're Communist, what's your opinion of the USSR? Is that an example to emulate?

AM: Each theory needs to be developed and adapted to the specific time/nation. The USSR imitated one model. At the end there was a bureaucracy and a dictatorship and it even invaded other countries. At the very end they were nothing better than capitalists. They also failed to address the national question within the Soviet Union. The failure of the USSR gives the capitalists an excuse to attack communism. People don't need liberators. Nasser and Chavez, leaders from the army are always dangerous.

BDS: You don't like Nasser?

AM: No. He arrested and detained my grandfather, he was against all forms of protest and opposition and locked many people away. He promised a big change in the economy, in civic liberties, etc, but in the end he did nothing. Under King Farouk society was more free, although, of course, there was the British occupation. The last real national uprising was under Saad Zaghlul. When Naguib took power, it seemed he was alright. Nasser fucked up and showed Sadat and Mubarak after him the way. Mubarak is the worst.

BDS: What do you think of the Muslim Brotherhood?

AM: They use religion in a smart way. People like to talk about religion, they don't know communism, but they know Islam. In the end the Muslim Brotherhood is not against the government; there is a lot of cooperation between them. They have money which makes their movement strong. Businessmen and companies support them and invest in the movement. The Muslim Brotherhood knows how to get to the people and they use this in an opportunistic way. The left condemns the Muslim Brotherhood in a bad way, by only saying the Muslim Brotherhood are bad you don't convince the people. Only through activism, people accept our otherness after a while, e.g. people started to accept me as a smoking woman when I helped them during the accident, and after a while we even could talk about communism.
MUHAMMAD KHALIL Osama
13-10-2010

| Respondent: Osama Muhammad Khalil, director of HMLC |
| Date: 13 October 2010 |
| Location: Cairo, HMLC HQ |
| Interviewer: Brecht De Smet |
| Translator: Haisam Hassan |
| Also present: Nurwan Sarwat, HMLC secretary (NS) |
| Source: Notes and audio recording |

OMK: We work with workers’ problems and the problem of fired workers. Sometimes the journalists bring us workers cases, sometimes workers bring us their cases directly. We only accept cases which deal with unions and firing. A lot of the employees in the center are activists themselves. Everyone knows about the HMLC; when there is a strike the center establishes a committee to help the workers in the strike.

NS: Also the center hosts the committee for workers rights and we have adopted a campaign to change the trade-union law in Egypt.

BDS: So is it only a center for lawyers, or also for political activists?

NS: It’s for all. All activists come to Hisham Mubarak and we have relations with journalists and political activists.

BDS: Can you tell me something about the history of the center?

NS: Before 1999 there was a center for legal aid, mus’ada, but there were problems and the workers in the center were divided into two NGOs. One of them was Hisham Mubarak, he was the founder of the old NGO. Since 1999 the center played a role not only in worker cases, but also in political cases. The center isn’t specialized in workers cases. The center was hosting the meetings of the popular committee to support the Intifada and the committee for the workers. Those campaigns made a change for the activity of the center; it’s not just legal aid. We support in many ways. The workers we can help them with some cases, and we can give them contacts with journalists; there are so many ways we can help them, not only legally. The central work of Hisham Mubarak is legal assistance however.

BDS: Do you think it’s because political parties in Egypt are very weak that journalist and human rights activists can play this big role?

OMK: It’s not about weakness. In the last few years the law and human rights centers played this role because the non-governmental media played a new role. Some of the parties come to the center to solve their problems.

NS: I don’t think that the two roles are divided, they complete each other.
BDS: Workers often haven’t much money, political activists neither; so how does a center like HMLC finance itself?

NS: We have a contract with one organization; Novib-Oxfam in Holland. And they support us financially.

BDS: Can you give me a concrete example of how HMLC support a strike, for example during the Mahalla movement?

OMK: We have created a front for the strike members. We went to the workers in the strikes because in the strikes there were a lot of injuries and we helped them. We were informed by the strikers. When we were informed we started to make a front with the other centers to defend the workers. A lot of lawyers joined this front and after the strike joined the center. We created work groups engaged with the crime investigation of the strike, and at the investigation office they treated the lawyers of HMLC kindly. When the strikers were arrested in the morning they started the investigation in the second morning and they kept them in Mahalla for four days and they defended the workers in this case. There were two investigations. One for the strikes and one for the thievery and vandalism. About 600 boys were arrested in Mahalla and there were more than 40 investigators, because most of the boys were under-aged. We started to work with the workers as well, they arrested more than 40.

NS: These cases were dismissed.

OMK: The court for the local cases claimed that a lot of workers stole computers from the company. There is a lot of differences in the cases in Egypt, there are different courts in Egypt, we continue the case until it goes to the African court.

NS: This is a new court. If you don’t succeed in Egyptian court, you can take your case to the African court. There is a sexual harassment case by a policeman to a young activist. The legal system of Egypt didn’t give the activist her rights, so now the appeal is in the African court.

BDS: I have the impression that in Egypt the legal system is still quite independent. The parliament and the police is dominated by the government, but the legal system is still quite independent? Because you are able to win cases for workers and activists.

OMK: Semi-independent.

NS: That’s the law, the legal system itself. There is a labor law in Egypt and a labor court. To succeed in court depends on the judge.

OMK: There are governmental judges, so we sometimes try to move the case to another judge. In a lot of cases we know the decision beforehand. For ordinary cases. A lot of cases go to the military courts.

BDS: Are the military courts a way to avoid the civil courts?
OMK: The law identifies who goes to civil and military court.

BDS: In the nineties and still today there are a lot of Ikhwan who are tried by military instead of civil courts...

NS: That’s not legal; civilians judged by military courts.

OMK: The last case for HMLC in a military court was for workers who work in an army factory. They had damaged tools...

NS: It’s a debate between lawyers in Egypt, this kind of situation. Sometimes it’s legal to send someone to a military court.

BDS: Is it because of the emergency law this is possible?

OMK: It is the law which decides who will go to civil and military court.

BDS: What about the emergency law from 1981, they want to change it into an anti-terrorist law; what impact does the emergency law have on the legal system in Egypt today?

OMK: The emergency law is not just since 1981; Egypt has only had small periods without emergency law. The problem is that when there is an emergency court and there is a decision by a military judge and he accept this decision, there is no appeal. The anti-terrorist law is more dangerous than the emergency law, because it takes more rights away than the emergency law, e.g. going into homes without any warrant. In the emergency law there are two types of arrest: political and criminal. In the emergency law the arrests are random; people who arrested can be set free and then arrested again. We work against these cases until the government is tired of re-arresting them and releases him.

BDS: Do you have much support from international organizations and does this support sometimes push the government to release someone or recognize his rights?

OMK: In the last few years I haven’t seen this effect from international organizations, but I always try to transfer the atmosphere and situation here in Egypt. The centers try to counter the government’s propaganda. If the regime arrests someone for something he’s done in the strike they’ll never dismiss him like that. We had an experience in Syria to attend the court for a lot of Syrian activists, but our attendance wasn’t effective. We couldn’t influence the judge, we were only observers.

BDS: How do you deal with the police and the security? Do they bother you because you are defending political activists and workers; or do they not touch you because you are lawyers?

OMK: We had a little pressure from the police at first. But after we attend a lot of course and we had a lot of activity they want to give us a good impression and they try to be near
to us. A lot of times when there are strikes, the state governor and the police officers know us and they try to influence us: “please can you make it quickly, we want to go home”. The police chief sometimes call us in the strikes and they want to know about the strikes, what is happening, what are the workers demands, ... The police tries to shield investigation areas, but as we have a lot of groups we always discover the investigations and bring it to court.

BDS: A final question. A lot of problems in Egypt are caused by the lack of democracy. How do you think this can be changed; that there will be democracy in Egypt. And what role can a center like HMLC play in this process of democratization?

OMK: We are those who defend those who defend democracy. We have a lot of activities, also political, as members of the center. We can make the balance between activism and legal defense.

NS: We also arrange meetings here of a lot of activist organization which do not have a place to meet like 6 April Youth. Our door is open.
BDS: Can you tell me something about your work?

MZM: I am an actor and art producer.

BDS: Did actors and artists play a role during the revolution?

MZM: Everyone played an important role: activists, artists... I’ll describe the square. The revolution stayed for 17 days in the square, excluding the day of resignation. Seventeen days with a continuous presence in the protest. This continuous presence made it necessary for us to create a substitution for life and society in the square. In order to hear each other within the millions we had to create a sound system, so we needed specialists with expertise in sound systems. They were using electricity from the State without permission because they stated that they owned the country and its electricity as well. So if there was an electricity engineer in the Square he played his role as an electricity engineer. While the thugs attacked the people in the Square we moved a lot of vehicles to the boundaries of the square and we couldn’t do this without a lot of mechanic engineers who showed us how to do it. A lot of times the people in the Square panicked and all the artists in the Square played the role of continuing the spirit of the revolution by songs and poems, and the role of entertaining the people in Tahrir Square. For example, the role of musicians, in addition to the cartoonists. We didn’t know them but we saw their works in the Square. They increased awareness inside the people and created a lot of new symbols and ideas by their drawings. Within the life of the Square we needed security. The only security means we had was the media. We had to give the media a message every day. So the artists inside the Square made a new art, a new shape, which was to write the demands and symbols in the soil, the land, the rocks, the stones. This was a message, not only to the media, but also to the people outside and inside the Square in order to change the Square into the real society we were dreaming of. The most important practical thing we all agreed about was the security and the cleaning of the Square. And the healing of the injured. Of course the doctors played an important role. This is a brief overview of the life in the Square.

BDS: There were also stages in the Square.
MZM: There was more than one stage. Every political power in the Square made its own stage in the Square to distribute its ideas and ideologies. These stages were named after the political forces. But the artists and actors and musicians made a big stage in the Square and called it the Revolution Stage in order to produce this art message in the revolution. The one who wants to give a speech about his son who was killed in the Square will do this in the Revolution Stage. Everyone was allowed to participate on this Stage. This was the Square. I was present with my tool, the camera to transfer these experiences of Tahrir to all the Egyptian people.

BDS: Do you think it is correct to say that now we are in a second phase of the revolution. Whereas the first phase revolved around Tahrir, now the experience of the Square has to be transferred to the whole Egyptian society. What role do you think actors and people from the cultural world should play in this distribution of experiences?

MZM: Art is the most effective tool in the whole world, because it is the easiest and fastest means to determinate the feelings of the people and to push them in the right way, in my opinion. This role of art won’t be finished until the revolution has ended and the regime has ended. The first phase of the revolution will be finished when the whole regime has been changed, and the artists are with the people during this task. The role of art now is focused on finishing this stage of the revolution. The art we are using now, and the material in the Square, are pushing people to collect themselves again in the Square on Fridays and stop this normalization of revolutionary activity.

BDS: For example, tomorrow there is again a day of anger, a protest that the revolution is not yet finished. Do you think this will change something? During the last Fridays there were less and less people. Are people not becoming tired of these continuous mobilizations?

MZM: To be fair, during the government of Ahmed Shafiq, we still had a great number in the Square, and when he resigned, the Square chose a lot of names for the new government, among them Essam Sharaf, so we tried to give them a chance to see what they could do. But in this period we see that they are not betraying the revolution, but moving too slow to implement the necessary changes. That’s why I believe tomorrow we’ll see again big numbers in the Square.

BDS: What’s your opinion on the referendum with regard to the constitutional reforms? Most leftists campaigned to vote NO, while most ex-regime figures and Muslim Brothers and Salafists campaigned to vote YES, and the YES vote won. Why did the Left not succeed in convincing the people to vote NO?

MZM: Because the Left in Egypt are away from the people. I take the responsibility as well. The Left in Egypt can’t play the game of politics in Egypt. Politics entails gambling and negotiations but the Left is not good at this, because it thinks its own ideas are the best and greatest and that just be telling the people these opinions they will be convinced. The Left in Egypt is so perfect in making analyses and drawing conclusions, but it is so bad in creating new tools which are effective among the people and which grant it a new popular base. It is like the ex-regime: too slow to
take decisions. It’s not good what the Left is doing now, focusing on splits and new 
parties... It’s good to have democracy, but opening the gates of democracy now is 
dangerous for the left, because people do not yet have sufficient political 
consciou
sness, and establishing democracy while the Left is focusing on splits and its 
own internal problems and creating new organizations.

[points to a picture] That is Zaki Murat, the famous Leftist activist who was killed 
after a speech in Tagammu about Camp David. He was my grandfather.

BDS: [points to a police helmet and shield] A souvenir?

MZM: [laughs] Yes, from the Friday of Anger.

BDS: We’ve talked about the role of artists in the revolution. Let us now talk about the 
reverse: what role will the revolution play in the cultural production of Egypt within 
the next years?

MZM: It will have an impact on the cultural production, but only after we finished the old 
regime. And then it will take sixteen years to transform Egypt. Why sixteen years? 
Because this is the time for education to change. The Left can change the politics, but 
a new regime with a new educational system will change the whole society within 
sixteen years. Within these sixteen years we will have a good cultural production in 
Egypt. I will not talk about all the artists, but only about myself, the role that I want to 
play. In Egypt we had an organization called the Popular Cultural Organization. The 
ex-minister of culture destroyed this whole organization. In my opinion Egypt is not 
Tahrir Square, Alexandria or Suez. We need an organization to spread the cultural 
production of the revolution in the whole of Egypt. There is Upper Egypt, poor 
neighborhoods in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez.

BDS: Workers are now forming their own independent trade-unions in order to escape the 
state unions. Do you think actors and people in the cultural world should have this 
kind of organization?

MZM: It has started and there are already a lot of unions, for example the independent 
cinema union.

BDS: We’ve talked to Menal Khalid and she said it wasn’t completely an independent 
union.

MZM: Menal knows about the independent union from myself, but she wants to fix the state 
union first, and gather the independent union and reformed state union into one 
trade-union. I am not one of the founders of the new union. Ibn Battut is one of the 
founders. In my opinion, gathering the two unions is a good idea, but the problem is 
that the state cinema workers are working with old ideas. We have to make a new 
independent union, and only when this union is strong, we can unite with the state 
union. In my opinion, these independent workers and artists and actors are those 
who waged the big struggles of the last years, so why should we stop our work? Why 
should they stop their work and go to the state union to fix it? That’s not fair.
BDS: I have found very little artistic or cultural production focusing on the workers’ movement. Why do artists focus more on democracy and not on social issues?

MZM: This question makes me sad. The Left is taking care of this cultural struggle since there was a Left in Egypt. Independent leftist artists who work on democratic themes did not have any supervision or direction from the leftist leadership which pushed them to the workers’ movement. In addition, there is a more dangerous reason. Sixty percent of the independent cinema workers and artists are taking benefits and aid and patronage in addition to their wages, so they focus on liberal cases. The small number of leftist youth in Egypt confuse between the liberal and Marxist cases. The leftists on Facebook and internet are writing a lot of liberal ideas, but they confuse liberalism with the idea of personal freedom.

BDS: Do you think the role of a leftist party is very important to create the shape of progressive culture? In other words, individual progressive artists should not work in isolation, but they need the direction of a party, which pushes them, for example, to the workers’ movement.

MZM: We need a real party which is engaged with labor issues and which engages artists with workers in order to produce a progressive culture. The condition in Egypt now is a special case. It doesn’t need a party, just the distribution of consciousness among the people.

 […]

BDS: Tagammu is clearly not playing its role as directing leftist artists to produce progressive culture. Do you think that after the revolution there could be this leftist party? How can this leftist party be established?

MZM: Tagammu plays a reversed role [laughs]. One year of real working. It takes one year of real working in the streets which will create such a party.

BDS: And what is the seed of such a party in Egypt?

MZM: In my opinion, there is now a perfect atmosphere to create a truly leftist party in Egypt, but it is the Left itself which does not want it. […] For example, I am working now on a documentary which discusses the injured people during the revolution, without any support from the Left – only through individual leftist activists. I will say something which is a perfect proof of the fertile atmosphere in Egypt thanks to the revolution. The main demands in the Square were: Freedom and Social Justice. These are leftist demands. The people only saw these demands once in the Square and they started to repeat them, over and over again. Because the Ikhwan is organized in the streets and very cunning, they can kidnap these demands for their own benefit. They changed it into: Freedom and Justice... without the important adjective “social”!
BDS: I’ve heard that you were and still are important in the women’s movement of Tagammu? Can you tell me something about this?

FN: I was, now I’m leading a feminist association, Forum for Women in Development, but not in Tagammu. Ten years ago I was responsible for the Tagammu feminist department. And now I am member of the political bureau of Tagammu.

BDS: Can you tell me something about the history of the women’s movement and Tagammu’s role?

FN: Of course Tagammu inherited the legacy of all the leftist movements since the beginning of last century. There was a feminist movement that started in Egypt by the end of the nineteenth century. Women established newspapers and magazines. Women participated in the 1919 revolution against the British occupation and the kingdom. They demonstrated against occupation. Four of the women were shot during this manifestations. At the time they established the federation of Egyptian women by Huda Shara’wi. She was a prominent leader of the feminist movement and of 1919 revolution, she was the wife of one of the leaders of the revolution. At the time they had a program on divorce, marriage, the personal code – they asked for a new personal code, they asked for restrictions of polygamy. They also demand the participation of women in the political life but later on the constitution of 1923 – the first modern constitution of Egypt – it didn’t include the right of women to vote or to be elected. They continued fighting for their rights up until 1946. In 1946 there was a huge movement all over the universities in Egypt, led by the left in coalition with the Wafd. There were women in the leadership of this committee, the committee for students and workers it was called. It did not only lead the manifestations and demonstrations in the universities but all over the country they organized a very big movement against occupation, against British occupation. Two of the leaders of this movement were communist women at that time, in 1946. Later on there was an organization by Durea Shufi [?]. She was a poet, a bourgeois woman, but a fighter for the rights of women and she organized a huge movement all over the country for the rights of women and she and her colleagues organized a strike, a hunger strike in the press syndicate in 1954, because at the time discussions about the new constitution in Egypt was being run all the time. And later on Muhammad Naguib the president at the time promised them to include the rights of women in the new constitution and it happened later on in 1956 the first constitution that included women rights in Egypt. [...]
BDS: What kind of women for example in 1919 participated in the movement? Middle classes, upper class or workers?

FN: All types of women... upper, middle, popular, workers, peasants... because at the time the authorities of the British occupations arrested thousands of men, those who participated in the revolution, so women replaced them. Women played all the roles during the movement. And mainly during the manifestations against the British occupations most of those who died were of the working class and the poor people, they were killed.

BDS: In the Nasser era there were women rights and the new constitution. How did women rights develop after this period? How did Nasser tried to incorporate women in his project?

FN: During Nasser there were big ambitions. The five year plan. The ambition to industrialize Egypt and so the regime opened the way for women to go to work by thousands. Before that there were women who were working in the factories in the offices of the government but very few, during Nasser it was opened, to work and to be educated. There are three areas where women gained new rights during Nasser: political rights, the right to work and the right to be educated. Education was free during Nasser’s time and so all the poor people sent their daughters to the schools.

BDS: What is the biggest problem for women to be emancipated: religion, the social question, ...?

FN: There is a new phenomenon now in Egypt. There are two main powers which restrict the emancipation of women: that of Muslim Brothers and the fundamentalist movement; and the other one is the social and economic program of structural adjustment which includes privatization. Most of the working women during Nasser’s time worked in the public sector. When they privatized, most of those who were fired were women. So structural adjustment harmed very much the question of emancipation of women, for they are fired and unemployed, jobless, so before they were members of the syndicate and unionized, and now they are out of all this, that harms very much their consciousness of themselves as human beings.

BDS: After Nasser when Sadat came to power, did the position of women became less strong?

FN: Yes, it deteriorated. The position of women deteriorated. You see now not only the higab, but also the burqa, this very black veil, this is new for Egypt, we didn’t know this before.

BDS: The influence of religion has become stronger on women since the seventies?

FN: The influence of religion was always there, but now it is related with the influence with the Muslim Brothers who put women as a second rate citizen because they are
women and they established this vision on religion. There are other visions of
religion, but they are weak, there are those who interpret the texts in a modern and
secular way, but their influence is not as big as Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim
Brotherhood and other jihadist groups.

BDS: So the problem isn’t religion but the way…

FN: It is not religion in itself, which is the problem, because religion was always there, so
it is the influence of political religion.

BDS: In the seventies Tagammu was founded. How did Tagammu try to support women?

FN: Tagammu established its feminist federation from the very beginning. It has branches
all over Egypt, in all the governorates of Egypt, it is based on secular views on
emancipation of women, it is deeply related to social and economic change.

BDS: How did they try to involve women in the organization?

FN: We have a problem, it is renewed every year according to what happens in the area
and there are meetings, cultural training for the new members. Of course it’s very
difficult because the influence of other groups, which is very very big because of the
social crisis, not only because of mental influence. The Muslim Brothers are very rich,
they offer services for the people, for education, healthcare and so on. Tagammu
cannot do this because they don’t have money, so they are much more powerful.

BDS: Since the last ten years there have been many social and political movements in
Egypt; against the war in Iraq; the Kefaya movement; the student movement; the
workers movement… what role did women play in these movements?

FN: They played a very prominent role, especially within the student movement; within
the workers movement; within all manifestations and demonstrations and strikes of
the workers […] women are there, all of the time, but all of them or most of them are
veiled. But they participate, they defend their rights, they defend the rights of
workers, of peasants. Very long ago there was no organized movement of peasants in
Egypt and within this ten years there are very clear movements of peasants including
women who are defending their rights, the right to water, the right to protest against
the prices, their needs of agriculture, the distribution of water and so on.

BDS: You mentioned the veil, do you think it is a problem that women wear the veil, or is it
just an expression of their religion?

FN: It is not a real problem, it became as if it was a sort of dress, a choice of dress. But
when you ask them, when you interview them, they say that many of them, not most
and not all of them, many of them say it is cheaper. You don’t go to the hairdresser,
you are not obliged to change your dress every day, it is related to poverty also.
Some, not all of the veiled women, are a real result of the influence of the Muslim
Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.
BDS: You also play(ed) an important role in the newspaper of Tagammu.

FN: I am a journalist. I started my life as a journalist. In Tagammu I was editor in chief of the monthly “literature and criticism” and now since four years editor in chief of al-Ahali the paper of the party. I am the second woman in the history of Egypt who became editor in chief of a political newspaper.

BDS: I heard that al-Ahali at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties embarked on a new policy?

FN: It was a policy of less confrontation, yes. It was not a change in al-Ahali itself, but in the whole atmosphere at that time: the collapse of the USSR, the retreat of the left all over the world, and the police state, the hegemony of the police state in Egypt, and the martial law, the emergency law all over since Mubarak came to power in 1981, so there are many factors that led to the change to the political view of al-Ahali. But it is still the main organ which is in real opposition to the political choices of the regime.

BDS: Do you think that since the last ten years, because there have been new movements...

FN: Yes, new movements and new media. When we started in 1978, al-Ahali began in 1978, the internet was not yet there. Now there are the new media. The new media is a real problem for the newspapers, the written newspapers.

BDS: So there is a competition with the new media?

FN: Yes there’s a real competition with the new media, even though not all Egyptians deal with the internet, but still, all the new generation deal with the internet, computers, and so the written papers are retreating.

BDS: What is the relation between these new forms of communication and the struggles of the last decade? Was it easier for activists to communicate with each other? Did it make the struggle stronger?

FN: Yes, of course. The most important thing about this new media is that the regime cannot control it, although they try to control it, but it is not easy, so it is becoming a new way of communication between people and used to organize manifestations, to invite groups to work together and so on.

BDS: Can I ask about the limits of what you can publish in al-Ahali? Is it a problem to criticize the president?

FN: We can criticize the president, yes. We discuss what he does and so on, but very politely. The problem is that there are newspapers, for example al-Dostour, which are somehow vulgar in criticizing policies and people. We don’t do that. We are very very deep, very radical, but at the same time very objective. We will not be as vulgar.
BDS: What do you think about the recent problems with al-Dostour.

FN: Of course there are rumors that the regime asked Sayyid al-Badawy to liquidate the newspaper before the elections. These are rumors, but we don’t have proof. It is preparing for the elections, not only for the parliament but also for the president next year.

BDS: Had al-Ahali journalists faced some problems with the security because of what they published?

FN: Yes most of us faced problems. In the eighties we had more than two hundred cases in the courts against al-Ahali and its journalists. But now you’ll see there are so many newspapers, so many parties, the view is changed. Not al-Ahali changed lessened its opposition, no it is the atmosphere itself.

BDS: Do you think the atmosphere since the last decade has changed again, because the opposition has become more strong?

FN: Yes.

BDS: Does this reflect on the newspaper?

FN: The paper is objectively radical since the very beginning, it is the discourse itself which changed.
OMAR Saud
17-20-2010

Respondent: Saud Omar, labor leader in Suez (SO)
Date: 17 October 2010
Location: Suez, Port Tawfiq, Workers’ Club
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

SO: I am Saud Omar, sometimes they call me the Saudi. I am a member of the union for workers in Suez and the organizer of the civil national forum in Suez. We are not like the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, or a legal committee. We are a number of activists working in social and freedom issues and giving the workers an idea of their human rights. This committee exists since 2005. We have a lot of political organizations, factions, and activists of different political strands in the organizations. Liberals, leftists, nationalists, …

BDS: Also from al-Watani?

SO: There are some friends from al-Watani, but they are not so active in the committee. Should I start with the syndical work or the forum?

BDS: The syndical work if you please.

SO: First the historical background. […] There are a lot of stone working factories between Suez and Cairo. Granite, ceramic, cement. The branch of the Canal Authority in Suez has 2,000 workers. It is part of the whole Canal Zone administration which employs 13,000 workers. The others are in Ismailiyya and Port Said. The canal administration does not only work in the guiding of ships, but also in the construction of small ships and so on. There is a big cultural difference between workers working in cement factories and those in the Canal Zone, with regard to salaries for example, there is no harmony between them. The nature of the union’s work is different for them. There is no struggling in Cairo, the unions are not struggling. Cairo is the place where workers make their demonstrations. […] In the seventies the state destroyed the public factories and the privatizations started which began to disperse the workers. […] After the seventies there was a new industry: the petrochemical industry. […] A dangerous industry which needs a lot of workers. […]

[interruption]

SO: […] The government said that they would make the Gulf of Suez an active area and they made the workers a lot of promises. But after a while they discovered that it was like a trash can. All the polluting industries were transported from Europe to Suez. […] Suez and Helwan have the greatest pollution in Egypt. They have eight of the ten industries which pollute the air in Egypt. […] They have low health and low salaries. There is no fairness. We have a lot of working hours, more than the international
standard allows. We have a bad working situation, it’s so polluted. This is in addition to the security issues, and so on. […] The most dangerous case is in the desert northeast of Suez, in Ataqqqa 1 and 2, where the workers made a strike. Every worker and activist say that they started from the Mahalla strikes. I am not proud to say it, but it is a fact. The last strike wave started in 10 August 2006 in Ayn Sokhna before Mahalla. But it didn’t spread because it was in the desert, away from the communities. The workers wanted a higher salary and to develop their working situation which is related to their health situation and so on. And also a demand which always exists: the right to associate and form an independent union committee. This demand was agreed by Mohammad Abdal Al-Een, owner and member of the Watani party and a member of parliament. At first, he refused. The company was surrounded by a lot of security forces, they surrounded it during three days. The connection started through the mobile phone, a new experience. We had a hot connection point inside the factory and we started to connect the workers inside with a lot of centers such as Hisham Mubarak, the committee of Sabr Barakat… I am a member of the committee of workers’ union and freedom rights. This connection played a role to call the internet activists, the labor journalists, independent newspapers, and the party newspapers. The active connections created a big pressure on the owner of the factory. The result was that he accepted the demands and he decided to give them more salary, like a quarter. But as happens always with businessmen in Egypt; after the strike finished he looked for the leaders and he fired a lot of the strike leaders and split them. But it was a good experience and important and it transferred the strike spirit from Ayn Sokhna to Mahalla. In Mahalla the workers are related socially and they work inside a housing area and they have a great community so they have a louder voice. […] The spirit of Abdal al-Een factories transformed a lot of working sites. They depend on the special tactic of connecting the workers. And they started to build new leadership. The labor movement became active in a paper factory which is called “Imak”, which belongs to al-Kharafi. And in Suez Cement Factory and Suez Steel. And the oil factory. And “Trust” which makes clothes. It spread like a fire in Egypt. And the Gulf was on fire. And there were a lot of labor leaders. In addition to these factories there were factories in Tanta. In addition to the cement factories there were a lot of food factories and oil factories. And factories related to the sea, and ceramic, and so on. They all had this inclination to strike. The experience was transferred. We discovered a lot of labor leaders which had a lot of consciousness. There was a lot of support from the media. We gained a lot of experience: how to organize the strikes, how to define the demands, how to organize demonstrations. The media support was so important. Sometimes there was political support, and the political leaders were making a lot of sit-ins and demonstrations against the regime and sometimes they made demos in front of the administration of the company of the factory. There was a problem, however, there was no connection between the old and the new factory leaders. But the new labor movement has developed with its own specifics.

BDS: Is it a new labor movement because it is a new generation or it are other industries?

SO: The two. The women workers were attending the strikes of Trust and this is important. The strikes were a new fact, but the security was stronger. The strikes of
the labor movement discovered the bad relationship between the official union and the state administrators, for example the Ministry of Work; and the relation between the businessmen, the state, and the security. The state and the security are serving the businessmen. Working against this alliance the workers continued their strikes. I forgot the exact numbers, but Suez was in 2007 on the fifth place concerning the number of strikes. […] The strikes have continued and the businessmen are trying to keep the workers from their rights, which they have already lowered and want to make them even lesser; they refuse to write contracts; they refuse to pay salaries. They have always a lot of new industries outside and inside Egypt. This is the last trick; that a lot of factories employ temporary workers. There is a new movement in the factories and companies which is that they ask another company to organize the workers for them. The legal relation is not between the worker and the factory but between the worker and the smaller company. […] They are pressing the workers to write the contracts with these service companies […]. For example the United Sugar Company refused to obey the workers’ demands; they all say “your relation is not with me but with the service company”. […] The workers are tortured by splitting their leaders away and firing them. […] In multinational companies they will fire the unionized workers. […] Trust company is putting pressure on the labor leaders, they fired a lot of labor leaders. In Ceramic the same. In all the factories the same. A lot of factories is doing this tactic in order to stop the workers to organize their strike.

About the Forum. We are active since the 2006 union elections. A big number of the workers who are working in a lot of industries wanted to raise their labor consciousness and know their rights. The international agreements, the human rights agreements, the ILO agreements and the agreements of the social rights were the material which gave the workers consciousness in addition to their own experience in connecting with each other. On another level, the Forum cooperated with a lot of the law centers such as HMLC, ECESR, and a lot of activist centers the RS, […] and the Hilali center.

BDS: How do you contact the workers?

SO: It is an existent relationship. They are my friends and they are supporting my campaign for parliamentary elections. We are trying to create an organization for the workers under the name of Union of Suez Workers, like a brotherhood. We had a lot of workers with lots of connections. We had a lot of experiences with workers sites. And we have a lot of relations with law centers. We are working with activists. Contacting is not a problem as a lot of workers are using mobile phones. We have a lot of their addresses. And sometimes we meet in a café or a club.

BDS: The Forum, does it have most of its contacts in public or also in private companies.

SO: Both.

BDS: I want to ask something about the Mahalla movement and its relation to Suez workers? Were there actions of solidarity between workers of Mahalla and Suez?
SO: The solidarity was by publishing texts by the labor activists. Sometimes they go to demonstrations; sometimes to the labor union; and sometimes they go to the parliament to demonstrate. [interruption]

BDS: So they go to Cairo to protest? They don’t protest here?

SO: By text and by going to Cairo. But I have to say something important. The Mahalla strike was a surprise. There were no leaders with charisma who could move the workers. There are a lot of differences in salary and working conditions between the factories. [...] Today there is a strike and solidarity campaign in front of the labor union, this is a celebrated form of solidarity. A lot of the labor leaders in Suez go to Cairo to attend the strikes when the whole company strikes. We are playing this role as a Forum and because we are part of the committee of the workers’ rights in the union.

BDS: Another question, about the role of political parties. You said that political parties support the strikes, but also that they organize demonstrations. What is the role of the parties? What are the most active parties?

SO: [...] I have a long time experience working in political parties, since 1979 until 2005. The political parties only comment on the action and write on them. And to say that this is the best class form or something. The political parties are not really active in these problems. And they are pretending that they have a powerful role in the strikes. A bigger role is for newer organization: Tadamon, the RS, and a lot of the labor leaders who are members of the labor committee. In Suez: the Forum. There are a lot of members in the parties ready to play a role, but it is not an extended role, a small role. The secretary of the Nasserist party attended one or two meetings with the committee, and Tadamon and the RS. He organized a lot of training and conferences in the Nasserist party. There are other political parties which are active, such as the liberals, the Ghad party with Ayman Nur, they are cooperating and playing a good role. But there is no role for the political parties.

BDS: In Suez or in the whole of Egypt?

SO: I don’t know how to judge it. In Cairo the central labor office in Tagammu is more active and it has a lot of labor leaders which are smart and active and we are cooperating with a lot of strikes. But it’s a pity a lot of Tagammu leaders are so old. [...] They worked in the pension reform.

BDS: But then again, many of the party people we interviewed said that they don’t want to dominate the movement; but now you say that they are too little present in the movement.

SO: They are pretending. [...] There is a bad relationship between the labor leaders and the party leaders. The party leaders have a good relation with the company owners. The owners support the leaders during the elections. They advertise during elections.
HH: He is talking about al-Ahali.

SO: They gain a lot of employment chances for their youth.

BDS: And other parties such as al-Karama, RS...

SO: al-Karama has a reporter who works in al-Shorouk, active in covering the actions. [...] In the Yawm al-Saba’ newspaper. [...] The Nasserists… the secretary is good, but the newspaper is very lazy. In al-Arabi I have a friend Hisham Fouad who writes about the labor movement in Suez. It are individual ties instead of relations with parties.

BDS: So party activists behave more like journalists than political activists?

SO: Exactly. [...] Some of them are using their job to get something from it, by publishing or not publishing something.

BDS: When Hamdeen Sabahi of al-Karama party says in a recent interview that the workers are the most important force of change in Egypt, does he really mean this or does he try to recruit workers for his political campaign?

SO: It’s not only HS his words. The labor leaders know that the labor movement is a dynamic force. [...] Because of lots of reasons the workers have left the political live and they struggle for their own livelihood and rights. Let’s talk about Karama. There are some leaders in the Karama leadership, which say some truth. The same for Tagammu party. Or the Nasserist party. And al-Ghad. It’s not parties, not organizations, only individuals. The political parties are only writing their opinions using newspapers. [...] Everyone has to come and say something about a case he doesn’t know something about.

BDS: Do you think the future of the workers movement will be a workers’ party with all the pro-workers activists from the existing parties, who will make something new?

SO: We are trying hard to do this.

BDS: Do you think that organization like Tadamon, the Forum, etc, are the seeds of this new workers party?

SO: According to the political parties law we cannot have a labor party. Otherwise the political parties are playing the role; to defend the workers’ and voice the social cases. In Germany there are a lot of parties defending workers, in England there is Labor. All of these parties in these countries act as defenders of a social class. In Egypt it is not accepted ONLY for the workers. But other classes can associate their parties: al-Watani clearly has this base; and al-Wafd defends capitalism. [...] There is no legal party defending workers rights; I judged Tagammu for a while with this role, but I do not think it plays this role any more.

BDS: What is the influence of the Muslim Brothers on the workers in Suez?
SO: They don’t have much influence among the workers. In the old society they had a powerful presence among many workers. But they are not working among the leadership of the workers. I will say my opinion. The Muslim Brotherhood is a political power with its own project, but inside this organization there are a lot of social forces. The Muslim Brotherhood is an extension of these forces and vice versa. So the Muslim Brotherhood is defending workers demands. It is not correct to judge the Muslim Brotherhood on the whole or to be an enemy for them. Let’s learn from the dialogue. Step by step the Muslim Brotherhood is transforming slowly maybe but there is an exchange, an understanding of the labor issues and they support and form opinions about the labor movement. There is an MP of the Muslim Brotherhood, Bayumi, he is so famous. We cooperate with him in all the strikes and he is a strong defender of the workers.

BDS: Isn’t this a problem for the Muslim Brotherhood if they came to power: they have a lot of workers but also capitalists in the leadership.

SO: Of course. There is a conflict. […] The cultural and religious elements play the role of masking political choices. Thousands and millions are joining the Ikhwan, the workers are joining the Muslim Brotherhood on the base of this culture-religion. The battles we had and the labor struggles played the role to exchange the experience of the workers, also those of the Ikhwan. The Muslim Brotherhood stopped to judge the strikes then they accepted and started to support them.

BDS: When was this change?

SO: The last few years, since 2006. Sometimes the workers even go and lead the strikes. There is a change in the Ikhwan. But it is difficult to know it.

BDS: Also in Suez?

SO: Also in Suez.

BDS: Do you think that when there is a strike and there is an exchange of ideas between workers that there is a chance for the workers to go to the left?

SO: The passenger goes to the good car which can transport him to the right direction. [smiles]
OMAR Saud
18-3-2011

Respondent: Saud Omar, leftist leader in Suez (SO)
Date: 18 March 2011
Location: Suez, Cafe
Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source: Notes and audio recording

PART 1

BDS: Can you tell me the story of Suez in the revolution? The media has focused on Cairo and Tahrir Square, but Suez played an important and militant role during the revolution.

SO: Suez took the brunt of the revolution, from 25 until the end of it we had street wars. In al-Arbayin neighborhood we had a street war from 25 January until 28 January. Sixty-four percent of the citizens in Suez are living in al-Arbayin so it was the most active part of the city. Al-Arbayin is the neighborhood of the poor people, the workers, and it has high crime rates, and so on. Suez was ready for the revolution because of a lot of reasons. The main reason was the parliamentary elections and what was done for al-Watani members and their allies in the so-called opposition parties. In the first day, after the result of the elections, Suez had a demonstration of five or six thousand people standing in front of the police station, the governorate and state security buildings, which are close to each other. This day was a try out for the revolution for Suez, it started from 8 o clock in the morning until the results. We had a protest in the morning demanding an end to the regime, the police, and so on. This was during the elections, three months before the revolution. By the end of the day and after the results there was a huge demonstration in the streets of Suez, 15,000 citizens, and this was a huge number in these days. […]

BDS: Who organized this demonstration?

SO: It was a spontaneous protest, all the candidates were participating in it, myself, the socialists, the Ikhwan, al-Wafd and even the al-Watani members who failed in the elections. This showed how much anger there was in Suez. After the 1973 war 85 percent of the buildings was damaged by the war and the opportunities to have education was diminished by low wages and salaries and this continued until the regime resigned. This protest in the elections showed the anger of the citizens in Suez. It was like an experiment for the revolution in my opinion. This resistance continued since the war until the revolution today. In the regime reports of development in Egypt Suez was number one, but you won’t find it in practice, the result is clearly a failure. Suez has the highest number of unemployed youth. It is number five with regard to crime. It is number two with regard to divorces. Before the revolution Suez was busy fighting two struggles. Number one is that Ahmed Ezz bought foreign workers from Taiwan to build a factory in Suez. Secondly, the governor of Suez, Saif
Galal issued a lot of statements before the revolution, saying that he would bring workers from Bangladesh to clean the streets in Suez, promising them high wages. The Suez streets became active because of these issues. The reaction of the Egyptian government, especially the Ministry of Manpower, was a shock for the street in Suez. The regime issued statements and was lying because it said that Egypt did not have a lot of clever workers who could build this kind of factories. The Suez people are loving foreigners and are not aggressive towards them. But this issue was connected to our livelihoods. The biggest problem in Suez was the unemployed youth and the desire to work in the government buildings and factories... and suddenly you are talking about bringing in foreign workers? The youth of Suez were always working in the northeast economic zone, the productive areas in Suez, a huge area, but the wages from these factories are very low. So the youth of Suez was sensitive about sharing their work opportunities, not only towards foreigners, but also towards youth of other governorates. They are paying a big price because of the pollution in these areas and they do not get a fair compensation for this. In addition to this, they have to accept other workers from other areas and other countries. For a while, the Suez citizens were able to contain this anger, but before the revolution, maybe two or three days, we had the first fight with foreign workers. All this prepared the appearance of the revolution in Suez.

We already had a criminal experience with the police before 25 January in Suez. It was with the godfather of the police in Suez, when we distributed the call for the protest on 25 January via Facebook and the sites of the Egyptian youth, demanding an end to the emergency law, the police violence and even social demands, such as the minimum wage. In Suez especially we know the importance of these demands and the power of the opponent, who was already an enemy for the Suez citizens before the revolution. This was the reason for the violence which started swiftly in Suez because of this background. Against this violence of the police, striking them, the youth of Suez started to use the violence against them. At 25 January there were three killed, at 26 January two, at 28 January there were eighteen youth killed. Between 25 January and 28 January it was relatively quiet in the whole country except for Suez, who had all these people killed. The violence and the strike continued until 28 January. At the Day of Anger, there were 80,000 people on the streets... in a region like Suez! There are half a million people in Suez, so there was twenty percent of the population in the streets. The police aimed to killed the protesting youth in Suez, especially in the Friday of Anger, using bullets and snipers. [...] If we know that in Suez those killed were 30 and Suez only represents a half percent of the whole Egyptian population, we realize the sacrifice that Suez gave to Egypt. Ten percent of all people killed during the revolution was from Suez. [...] Each time a man was killed, it was a new provocation for us to protest and come to the streets. Within this continuous protest and killing in Suez, the image was clear and the demands as well, such as firing persons like Mubarak and the governor and the police officers. Especially the police in Suez was very violent. There are five police stations in Suez, we burned three of them. We burned a lot of police trucks. [...] We burned the firemen station, because they were using the firemen trucks to transport weapons and kill protesters. This played a big role in the revolution in Suez.

The Left was present. The Nasserists and nationalists too. The liberals was clearly present as well, in the form of the Ghad party. But within these waves of non-political
youth they were all transformed into ordinary individuals in the revolution. It was clear that it was a popular revolution, much wider than the political elements in Egypt. It was easier for the youth and non-employed youth and workers in the revolution. The women were strongly present throughout the revolution. Even Ikhwan women…

HH: ... in my opinion the Ikhwan women were present by order and with a larger number than the Left or any other political power…

SO: ... It was so fine and great to find such cooperation in the streets. A lot of time we found both women with loose hair and women of the Ikhwan with the hijab leading the protests. The Egyptian people in Suez was experiencing a real struggle…

[emotional, sheds tears, leaves the table for a while]

HH: [proudly] A lot of men would not cry because of the humiliation of the police, but they are crying because of this great revolution. And it is the first time for me to be happy to see a man cry.

PART 2

SO: We were all saying that the people should pay a price for freedom. And this is what happened in Egypt, and especially in Suez. This was the only way for us to get rid of the regime. It was not only Mubarak, the struggle continues until today. It was also about the governor and the chief of police, and all the “ugly faces” who had to leave Suez. The NDP label became a shame for anyone who carried it. Suez and all the Egyptian people have taken back their rights, but there is still a lot of uncertainty about the unformed future. The ex-regime planted a lot of forces before it was defeated: Ikhwan, the Salafists... And the criminals. It was clear and we made sure that workers were involved in this. […]

HH: ... I have to interrupt you [points to the television screen]. This is the first time in Egypt that the public during a football match is carrying political signs. […]

SO: There was a big political movement in the streets. There was a big presence for political powers which were not allowed to come to the streets before, like the Ikhwan al-Muslimin. [...] The workers had to get out to get their social demands, which were not directly related to the revolution, but so important to them. These demands were a change in the social demands of the worker struggle. New changes because they called for democracy and independent trade-union committees. […] The curfew was not obeyed by the movement. We know that businessmen in Egypt had a lot of relations with the regime and harmed the working class and pushed the West and capitalist regimes to put pressure on Mubarak to resign. The people marching on Europa palace in Cairo and calling labor strikes in Suez had an equal impact on the outcome of the revolution. These two were revolutionary actions which put pressure on the president to resign.
BDS: Which factories in Suez were on strike during the revolution?

SO: Abu al-Ainin Ceramic, Ezz Steel – Mohammad Abu al-Ainin is one of the most famous businessmen in Egypt and worked close with the regime, Ahmed Ezz also, he was the organizational secretary in the NDP. Ghazl Egypt-Iran. Trust for clothes and weaving. Electricity factories. Petroleum factories. Construction companies. Suez Canal Authority. The whole economy. The two of the most important labor areas in Suez, Ataqa 1 and 2 gathers all the factories and companies in Suez and it was fully on strike. These are the most important and famous factories. The power of those ugly faces was cut loose. The workers voices were loud, asking for freedom and justice.

BDS: What concrete demands did the workers move forward, which differed from the demands of the whole movement?

SO: I said this in America’s Voice, the workers called for a fair wage, that the working hours should be a maximum of 7 or 8 hours per day. Safety and health in the workplace. Healthcare. The right to make their own trade-union. All these demands were attacked by the businessmen who had a strong relation with the ex-regime. I remember that I said that the working situation was like slavery.

BDS: You said that at the beginning of the movement, all the political opposition parties and movements were present, like al-Ghad, al-Wafd, Tagammu, the Ikhwan... But what did these liberal and Islamist parties think of the workers’ demands when they started to strike?

SO: Let’s agree that the main demand which everyone agreed on was Justice, Change, Freedom and that “the people want an end to the regime”. Remember that all of us talked about social justice, but everyone with its own idea of social justice. After the revolution the situation of the labor strikes was different: the left supported them; other powers called them a particularist strike. I am talking about the REAL left. [laughs]

BDS: So what are the leftist powers now in Suez? After the revolution we have seen new leftist parties and alliances in Cairo. Are there also new parties or coalitions in Suez? How did the revolution change the left in Suez?

SO: I won’t lie. The left in Suez are only individuals, an embryo. There is the Democratic Forum of Suez. We had a big presence among the people. But you cannot talk of the left in Suez as an organization with hundreds of members. Tagammu participated in the revolution, a lot of individuals of Tagammu participated and cooperated, the leadership wasn’t very excited to be involved in the revolution and did not take up their responsibility. Al-Wafd likewise. Ikhwan were hesitating, but since 28 January they were involved as an organization. This involvement was effective and powerful. [...] We all agree on democracy, even the Islamists. The new Islamists, who are connected to the Egyptian middle classes, and who have a real knowledge of democracy. I am not talking about the traditional Islamists. Of course Egypt and a
city as Suez needs ten years to get a clear perspective on these political powers. It takes ten years, maybe more, to figure out these political powers and get to know their ideas and programs. The revolution was a group work. Everyone is talking about the revolution as if he owns it. It belongs to all of them. Everyone tries to create its own organization. And everyone will accept the result of elections. The Salafists however are an enemy to “the life”. We know that the citizens and the Egyptian people who came out in the streets against a dictatorship will not accept a new dictatorship. The army is a reactionary force. It was working along with the Salafis, the right-wing, and a little bit the Ikhwan. The army wants to protect the foundations of the regime and it wants to create a new atmosphere of silence. The gun doesn’t know the way to democracy. This era will take a lot of time. The people, again, will have the ability to build effective and powerful parties. The workers will have a lot of experiences and build networks which will enable them to have a social and class struggle. The most important benefit of the revolution is this image: the alliance between the regime and capital. We are working against a gang. [...] They are working together to steal this country’s wealth. This is an experience, the Egyptian people and workers won’t easily forget it. We won’t allow a new Ahmed Ezz, Mohammad Abu al-Ainin, or a new Mubarak.

BDS: Before the revolution there were attempts at establishing a new, independent trade-union for the workers. How is this developing?

SO: At six o clock we will meet the Alliance of Revolutionary Workers in Suez, it’s close the Lawyers’ Syndicate. There are a number of friends from different factories and companies. The revolution and the labor strikes fired the old trade-union organization as one of the regime elements, which was made by the State Security. The most pleasant image of the revolution was that of direct democracy. [...] This alliance, are there members of al-Ikhwan or rightist forces?

SO: Yes. We will also talk about the labor alliance in the whole country. The situation of freedom now allows us to meet with a lot of forces. But there is a big “traffic jam” of agendas and ideas for this discussion, so we need 48 hours a day to work. We have a lot of projects. [...] We need an organization to be more effective as workers and to strengthen the Egyptian economy and to enjoy our freedom and to build our own trade-union organization and a parliament and regional councils and to build our own party, which has to be democratic. There are a lot of projects which we have to accomplish. Before the revolution this was a disaster...

HH: ... What do you mean with the need for a “democratic” party?

SO: There should be a new Labor Party because the political parties should be rooted in the social reality. A lot of leftists say that we need an ECP. I am not against this, of course. But I think that building a party on a class basis is more effective and powerful in society. Having a new Labor Party without any ideology, like communism or something, will grant it a larger influence than an ECP Labor Party. It will allow the “bearded men” to join it, women, Christians, poor men, ... to join and
become involved in this party, and all of the people here are asking a share in the wealth and power of Egypt.

HH: [asks BDS] But, think with me, why couldn’t the “bearded men”, the women, Christians and poor join a communist party?

BDS: I understand what he means, but I’ll first ask some other questions before we can discuss this issue. I want to ask about the Ikhwan. They are now moving to the right, they are clearly with the regime, especially with the constitutional referendum now. This is on a national level, is it the same in Suez?

SO: It is the same place in every place.

BDS: But how can they join this labor alliance if they are against the strikes?

SO: I will say an important thing. There is a clash. Ikhwan was involved in the labor strikes and they were agreeing in these strikes during the revolution. But after the revolution... [...] They have changed their view on the situation. [...] With regard to the alliance... it’s the first meeting. [laughs] The nature of a region as Suez force the leadership to take the situation of the workers serious. Any leadership in any political movement has to take the workers serious. [...] 

HH: That is the trick of Ikhwan. Their leadership in Suez plays the role of supporters of the workers, while attacking them in Cairo. In Facebook they say no to the strikes.

BDS: But can they do this without creating internal divisions or even a split?

HH: They can because they are so organized.

BDS: But when they become a party and have to write a program, they will have to choose between different political and economic projects.

LG: They can’t both support strikes and condemn them in the same breath.

HH: I will ask him this question, but I will answer too: when the Ikhwan will have a party it will spell the end of them. And the leadership can simply lie about its support for strikes.

BDS: But then the membership will know. Will they accept this?

SO: Take into account that the religious movement is much more wide than the Ikhwan. There are a lot of religious movements which disagree with the Ikhwan, but are supporting the workers.

BDS: The Salafis?

SO: No, not the Salafis, but others.
BDS: I heard from several activists that Tagammu was stronger in the seventies than it is now. What is your explanation for this?

HQ: It's true, the role of Tagammu is weak today, compared to the seventies.

MT: We shouldn't blame it on the social circumstances, but on processes in the party itself.

HQ: There is a dialectical interaction between the party and the society. During the seventies, Tagammu was very strong because it sided with the workers against the government. When Sadat moved to the right and the US, there were many protests and demonstrations. My first demonstration was already in 1968. It was a student demonstration against the defeat of 1967. It was a student demonstration against the defeat of 1967. When in 1981 Mubarak replaced Sadat, he continued the policies of Sadat, but disguised his intentions better in the beginning. At first he made a lot of promises; he promised to be fair and just, and he released 1,400 activists whom Sadat imprisoned. Some people in Tagammu, like Rifaat Said, believed that the presidential administration of Mubarak differed from Sadat. Sadat used the Islamist movements in the seventies to combat the left-wing, so the communists were all the time busy with defending themselves. He believed that Tagammu must give the regime a chance to change Sadat's system. This was the starting point of our current weakness. We cut the relation between the party and the people.

BDS: Some other activists name the bread riots and subsequent repression as the turning point for Tagammu?

HQ: No. Even in 1980 there were still demonstrations and actions by Tagammu, such as the student movement of 1980. The real turning point was the new presidential regime in 1981 and the idea within the ranks of Tagammu that the situation would change.

MT: From then on there were good relations between the party and the regime; which is logical as they needed to obtain a license from the regime to exist.

BDS: But now we are almost thirty years later, and there is the same leadership in the party, Rifaat Said, and the same strategy towards the regime...
HQ: That is correct.

BDS: During the last years, there have been movements from below. Is this a possibility for Tagammu to restore its bond with the common people?

HQ: We try to restore the connection, but movements like Mahalla only fend for their own rights.

BDS: Isn't that always the case, in the beginning? Isn't it the task of a party to intervene in these movements?

HQ: That's a question of consciousness. There will be a political consciousness through experiences in the future. At the moment these movements belief in reform, not change. You need a qualitative leap.

BDS: But what about the role of Tagammu? Is this (1) patiently waiting for this consciousness to come; or (2) try to raise the political consciousness by intervening in the movement?

HQ: About this there are two views in Tagammu; the classical view is that these movements in fact postpone the idea of change and as the government allows them it gives it a democratic face. The second view is to intervene in the movement.

BDS: How can the regime ever have a democratic façade if it violently oppresses any of these movements?

HQ: Well, the regime leaves important persons and opponents alone until they connect with the people. For example, when Kefaya started in 2004 it only consisted of five persons. The regime let them be, as they were isolated. When there was a demonstration of 10,000 people, the regime hit them with shoes and electric sticks. Also, in key sectors such as the judiciary, the regime immediately acts.

WA: All opinions formulated here are personal, Tagammu tries to gather all of the left, that's why it's called Tagammu.

BDS: Gathering all the left sounds great, but in the end there has to be a leadership which makes decisions which affects all tendencies and individuals.

HQ: Indoors we discuss openly and freely about our ideas, outdoors we close our ranks.

[discussion about imperialism, capitalism, Hizbullah, Nasser & Chávez]

HQ: The society isn't ready for our protest, we find ourselves against the state organisations. There is no independent union or syndicate. The whole situation is still under control of the government, to prevent the connection between the political and the social.
About the peasant movement. The government is giving back the land to the landlords, for example in Dikirmis. Against this there were protests: sit-ins on their land, they faced the police, there were attacks on the peasants and journalists, even foreign journalists. The agricultural department made the contracts disappear and the courts took the side of the landlords in the conflict.

BDS: How was this all organised?

HQ: Mr. Mahmud Foda, the party secretary, was standing side to side with them. Because he is living there, he helps them, with food, finance, access to media, and so on. The farmers have organized themselves in cooperatives for protesting and cultivating the lands.
**RAMADAN Fatma**

**11-10-2010**

**Respondent:** Fatma Ramadan, leader in Tadamon and the SRC (FR)

**Date:** 11 October 2010

**Location:** Cairo, café

**Interviewer:** Brecht De Smet (BDS)

**Translator:** Haisam Hassan (HH)

**Source:** Notes and audio recording

BDS: Would you like to tell me about the aims and goals of Tadamon?

FR: The main idea of Tadamon is that change won’t come from above, from politicians, journalists and writers, but from the bottom. So we began to think how workers can be unified, how they can learn from each others’ experiences and how they can overcome their problems.

BDS: Can you tell me about the history of Tadamon? When did it start, how did it develop?

FR: First, Tadamon started since three years. The Mahalla strikes were like an earthquake to all the people, so we were thinking how to change the workers and how to connect the workers to the villagers and fishermen, and how to make a network between them, and how to support them, not only financially, but also through exchanging experiences.

A year after starting Tadamon we realized that they had one aim: connecting to the workers and giving them support, but we realized also that there were a lot of questions: such as how to connect with the labor movement. So we had a lot of salons and conferences with workers and villagers to get inside the movement, not to support it from the outside.

At first we just gave advice and aid. Step by step the workers came to Tadamon to ask for advice concerning a strike. Between February and May last year there was a new strike wave from workers of seven to eight factories and they began a series of demonstration in front of the parliament. Tadamon was trying to connect the workers of the seven to eight factories with each other so they would be stronger. To connect Ominestu and Amon Situ and Tanta workers and show them that their aims about salaries are the same and to bring them together to the union, to make them write a joint statement, to unite the movements.

In the next step we saw that a lot of organizations and a lot of people support the workers, but everyone on its own. Like Tagammu and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights supported the workers but on their own. So we tried to make one committee which brings all the supporters of the workers together so they can speak with one voice and give one advice. Otherwise Tagammu for example advises to end the strike and Tadamon gives them the advice to continue the strike. So they decided to create this committee to speak with one voice.

Now there is a lull in the movement. After the Amon Situ strike was finished by the security forces there are no more strikes. So Tadamon as an organization is now in a
reflective phase, trying to see what the tasks and goals of the movement are now that there are no strikes.
This moment we are making a lot of visits to the workers who have finished their strikes, such as Ominestu, and Mahalla and others to see if they have achieved their aims and demands and to solve new problems and to write about them.

BDS: Change will not come from politics but from the workers themselves, but the activists of Tadamon are, a majority, not workers but political activists, journalists, etc. How do you see the role of activists and journalists in transforming the workers into a force for political change?

FR: In Tadamon you find students, journalists, researches, political activists, ..., but they are all connected in their idea that the workers will change the political situation. Activists and journalists which are members in Tadamon are trying to create a network between us and the workers and the villagers and we want to think together with the workers how they can push for change.

BDS: So the most important thing for Tadamon is to connect all different kinds of workers, villagers, fishermen, communities to each other. Isn’t it a problem for Tadamon that there are a lot of people from different parties and organizations in Tadamon and that they try to push the organization towards this or that political line?

FR: In fact, we had a lot of members from the Ikhwan and all political organizations. The problem is however how people outside Tadamon perceive us. Most members are leftwing so people see us as a leftwing organization, whatever is going on in Tadamon. This was a problem Tadamon had with connecting to people from outside.

BDS: Are there no problems with the left inside Tadamon?

FR: No, there are no problems in Tadamon, even between the left and independents or apolitical members.

BDS: Can you tell me about the Ikhwan in Tadamon?

FR: We had youth from the Ikhwan, because it’s logical for them to join Tadamon because of the social and economic situation. We did not discuss the problems between the Ikhwan, who are right, and the left because we have an agreement on the idea that it is the workers who will change the country. The social problems are the connection between the different groups so we do not discuss political differences. When Ikhwan and other leftists joined Tadamon they joined as individuals and they had an agreement that they will never discuss problems between the Ikhwan and the left. Tadamon is there only for the workers.

BDS: Did members of Ikhwan join Tadamon because they were really concerned with the situation of the workers? Or was it a means of gaining more influence among the working class?
FR: It wasn’t like this. The youth of the Ikhwan were individual members of Tadamon and they joined because they saw the problems in their neighborhoods and family, so it was logical for them to join Tadamon.

BDS: And now there are no Ikhwan in Tadamon anymore?

FR: Now there’s a lull in the movement so all the members, including the Ikhwan, are not active because there are less strikes. This proves that the workers are the agents of change, but there are still tasks for us in this phase to connect the workers and share experiences.

BDS: So there’s a small circle of Tadamon activists who remain active and when there’s a strike movement the circle grows because many people are enthusiastic about the strikes and when it’s calm, like now, the circle shrinks back again to its core activists. Another question, about the strategy for the workers towards organizing themselves in a syndicate. I’ve seen two strategies, the first is like Tagammu’s: building independent committees at the factory level, but they are still within the governmental syndicate. The other strategy is like the tax workers, which is to begin from nothing and have an independent union of their own. What do you think is the best strategy for the workers?

FR: In fact we are not pushing for the workers to form independent unions and committees. We are looking at the facts on the ground: the conditions for the workers are not good to form independent trade-unions on their own. The workers are on the defensive and the government is defending the State trade-union, so until the workers unite and take a stand, it is not a good moment to create independent trade-unions. Now it’s not the independent trade-union era, but the workers need organization, however you call it: a committee, a trade-union. Everyone in a factory should be organized in a committee. Step by step the workers will join, but even in Mahalla where they had the biggest strike, if the leaders would call their members to establish an independent union they would be isolated. All the leaders are now in Alexandria and Ismailiya and other towns, they were separated and now they cannot organize the workers.

BDS: On Mahalla, at the 6 april in 2008 there was a big uprising but the security moved in and crushed the movement. What do you think was the problem with this action, was it the lack of organization, was it too soon, what was the problem with Mahalla?

FR: The government was not ready for this movement. Since 2000 the government had faced political movements such as Kefaya, but when Mahalla happened it was a new movement which had the potential of connecting the social to the political dimension and the government was afraid of this and tried to cut this connection. On the one hand they granted some of the social demands, on the other hand they repressed the political activists. This is what the government makes afraid: the connection between the social and the political.
The political movement only touched the social movement, there was not a strong connection yet. The political activists went too fast, raising the idea of a strike in the whole country, which was not possible at that moment. This made the government use violence against the workers, and they paid some of the workers leaders to side with the government, and the prime minister, and the Minister of Manpower and the Minister of Investments went to the workers to grant them some of their demands.

BDS: After 6 April 2008, what was the impact of the police repression on the consciousness of the workers? Did it have a negative influence, because the workers became less organized and afraid of the government; or did it have a positive effect, because the workers saw the true nature of the regime?

FR: The violence of 6 April only lasted for a few days, five or six, and after this the movement rose again. A lot of strikes happened. So it wasn’t the violence which made the workers afraid, but it makes them more organized and it gives them the knowledge of how the government will react. But the government and the labor union created new pressures through firing the workers, especially the leaders. The workers see the leaders which were in the streets and now are fired and they don’t have money or food and they think twice before they join a strike. That’s the new system. In addition: the economic crisis had an impact on the labor movement.

BDS: So Tadamon tries to connect the workers. Do you think there will be a need at a certain point of a party? Is there now a party which can play this role?

FR: There is no existing party which can solve the problems of Egypt at this moment. The workers need their own party. But first the labor leaders in the whole country must be unified, then there can be a party.

BDS: Do you think the current leftist party play a bad role towards the workers movement because they want a piece for their own, or do you think they play a constructive role? Like Tagammu, RS, Communist Party, ...

FR: All the leftist parties are playing a good role with the maximum of energy they have. But the workers have to have their own parties because the leftist parties are tiny.

BDS: So if there comes into existence a workers’ party it would be spontaneous? And then the leftist parties and individuals should join it?

FR: I don’t know what will happen, but it’s my opinion that the workers need this party and that the workers should be in this party. For example, Rami Lekah, a businessman who owns a lamp factory, left Egypt because he had problems with the banks. The workers themselves started to take over the factory and run it for themselves. They had not any salary until they switched on the machines. This shows that the workers can run things on their own. This factory is in 10 Ramadan City. The problems of the factory started in 2002-2003, and the problems began again when Rami Lekah came back to Egypt; he solved his problems with the banks and fired the workers and tried to bring in a new workforce. I went to the lamp factory and the
workers let me in without problems. In the same area there’s another factory of Rami Lekah, a laundry factory of which the profits still went to Rami Lekah. When the government needed money to give to the workers, they didn’t think of taking the profits from this factory and give it to the workers. This is a role the government and the political system should play.

BDS: It’s a very good experience when workers are able to run their own factories; it gives the workers self-consciousness and the experience that they can run factories by themselves and that they are able to lead and to organize. Has Tadamon tried to spread these experiences?

FR: The system will not let the workers to re-experience this again. The lamp factory self-control was stopped by the government and the syndicates when Rami Lekah came back. The electricity ministry cut the electricity of the factory. The labor and solidarity ministry had issues with the workers and told Rami Lekah to fire the workers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent: Fatma Ramadan (FR), leader of Tadamon</th>
<th>Date: 15 March 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location: Cairo</td>
<td>Interviewer: Brecht De Smet (BDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator: Haisam Hassan (HH)</td>
<td>Source: Notes and audio recording</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FR: I am helping to organize the conference of independent trade-unions.

BDS: Before the revolution there were only a few independent trade-unions, is the movement of independent trade-unions getting stronger after the revolution?

FR: After the revolution the workers gained the ability to organize themselves in independent trade-unions, they became conscious of the importance of independent organization.

BDS: Did the revolution change the consciousness of the workers or their ability to organize?

FR: It is a new general direction in Egypt to be conscious and to be able to organize. So the answer is: both; they are able to organize and to gain consciousness. Not only for the workers, but for the whole population.

In the first days of the revolution there was a lot of chaos and the four independent trade-unions which already existed – pensioners, health technicians, teachers, and tax civil servants – these four trade-unions made a conference and they announced in a political statement a new trade-union. It was only a political statement, because they did not yet construct the organization itself. After the revolution the new Minister of Manpower Hassan al-Bora3i made a new announcement and sent it to the ILO that independent trade-unions were free to organize themselves. It was an attempt of him to escape the blacklist of the ILO. Only today the tax workers trade-union has been officially accepted. Today the new minister, Hassan al-Bora3i, accepted the tax workers trade-union and announced that they were an independent trade-union and so they finally were able to get a bank account to get member fees.

Yesterday we had a workshop on how to conceptualize the union and how to build it. We talked about a lot of things. A number of workers were present in the workshop and they will go back to their workplaces and distribute the consciousness back into the rank-and-file and to talk about the importance and necessity of having an independent trade-union.

BDS: Is it possible now for the workers to deploy this kind of activity in the workplace?
FR: Yes. And we are also gathering experts for arranging the rules and laws of the union. We are thinking about making conferences in labor communities such as Helwan. This is a step towards a national trade-union. This time it will be different. During the revolution it was a political announcement. Now it will be a real organization.

BDS: What role did workers play in the revolution? The workers entered the revolution as workers quite late. Why? What role did workers play in the resignation of Mubarak?

FR: I am not analyzing the revolution since 25 January, but since 2000, since the anti-imperialist movements and the social movements and the strikes. All the worker strikes, the continuous strikes since 2006 were an introduction to the revolution. In Egypt the situation differed from Tunisia, where the trade-union played a key role. In Egypt this role was lacking. In addition to the non-organized people in Egypt there was a lot of labor leadership which did not belong to the workers, e.g. Abdelrahman Khayr of Tagammu […]. They were opponents of the revolution. When the revolution started workers were in the streets as individuals, not as an organized working class. You cannot imagine the three cities Suez, Mahalla and Alexandria, Suez; they had a million demonstrating, Alexandria too, and the workers were the biggest number, but they were not organized as a class. In the first days of the revolution the government had given the factories holidays, so when the workers came back to the companies, they made their own strikes. This is one of the important reasons for Mubarak to resign and it was the introduction for a general strike in Egypt. The continuous worker strikes up until now are driving the revolution towards social demands and a social revolution.

[interruption]

FR: This describes what’s happening now: the workers’ strikes are under attack and they are said to be supported by the NDP, to destabilize and so on.

BDS: Did the workers have social demands in the revolution which differed from the democratic demands?

FR: The workers had one main demand in the revolution: to fire their corrupt and bad company management. The demands did not came from the revolution, but already developed before, since 2000. The main social demands were the minimum wage, employment of temporary workers, return privatized companies back to the state and to reinstate workers who were fired because of their strikes, and equal pay for workers, e.g. in the petroleum industry. Every group in the working class has its own demands, but these were shared. Every group adds his secondary demands.

BDS: Were there factories or companies which were occupied by the workers during the revolution?

[interruption]
FR: Not up until now. Only the Ghazl al-Shibeen factory, now Endorama Textile, which has been sold to an Indian investor. Ninety workers were fired and they made a strike for 10 days in the factory. All workers in the factory joined them in the strike and they asked to return the factory to the state and they destroyed the sign of the Indian investor and changed it into the previous sign. They arranged a new administration for the factory, and the majority of workers organized a petition directed towards the military asking to run the factory themselves and organizing the administration. The army could not accept the petition, so they are still striking. The Indian administration published an announcement in the three main newspapers, al-Ahram, al-Gumhurriya and al-Akhbar, that “we have already solved all the problems of the workers” and that the remaining strikers were baltageyya. So the Indian administration is pushing the army to deal with the remaining strikers as thugs, especially with the new law against thuggery, called the thugs law.

HH: [phone call] The Minister of the Police just announced that all Central State Security forces are fired. Yesterday we were free, now we are even more free.

FR: They won’t leave them in the streets, but they will create a new organization. Returning to the strikes... It is a problem for the workers, especially the media coverage, in the same way the Egyptian television was covering the revolution. Right now we have a new problem, independent newspapers like al-masri al-younm are not covering the strikes as they covered the newspapers.

HH: Al-Ahram journalists occupied during the Friday of Anger their newspaper and blocked the entrance of the chief editor. The board of editors is running the newspaper until now. Yesterday they chose a new chief editor, I don’t know if he’s already employed.

BDS: Do you think that there is now a split in the revolutionary movement between a democratic and social faction, between those who pay attention to what happens with workers and peasants and others who say that these groups’ actions are a danger for the country’s stability and that there has to be democracy and a constitution first?

FR: There is a clear split. I am sorry that the majority of the democratic forces are calling to stop the strikes and they are telling the workers to be patient and stop their strikes...

HH: ... and by the way yesterday in Aswan there was a conference in Aswan of Tagammu, Nasserist party, the Egyptian coalition for change, Kefaya, 6 April and 25 January movement and they met with the governor and they all told that they were not accepting the strikes except for the local Tagammu leadership, which told that they should continue. Even al-Ikhwan was against the strikes.

BDS: This brings us to the role of Leftists in the revolution. What was the role of Leftists in the revolution and what is their role today, perhaps in connecting the political democratic with the social movements?
FR: This an answer to the second question. At the start of the revolution all Egyptian political forces had an alliance against the Mubarak regime. The leftists knew that this alliance would not last, so we are building a new leftist party now which hopefully will unite all leftist forces: the SRC, the RS, the ECP... in order to discuss and to develop the social dimension of the revolution. Like all other forces the Left took part in the revolution. The Left had a big role in the youth alliance, the media and it had a role in the square, especially in establishing the stages. Like all other forces it played a role. We were also the ones who called for the protests in Imbaba and Giza.

BDS: Did you try to spread the demands of the workers in the revolution?

FR: The presence of the workers in the revolution was one of the reasons why the demands of the movement became more radically democratic.

BDS: Can you give me a picture of the different leftist groups and movements, and your opinion on what direction the Left now should take?

FR: You could answer it. [laughs]
The Egyptian Left still consists of its old shapes, such as Tagammu and its splits, the ECP, the RS, the SRC, the Popular Alliance Party, which is under construction. The PAP has different committees. [...] Then there is the Democratic Labor Party, which was announced recently. These are the leftist groups in Egypt. [...] HASH existed before the revolution. It is the same group which made the DLP.

HH: So now we have like 80 million leftist parties in Egypt... [ironic]

FR: Within this mess Tadamon took the decision that they could not be isolated from these groups, but that they should be united.

HH: I told you, we are free after the revolution, we can do whatever we want. We should make the Peanuts Independent Union. [laughs]

FR: [laughs] We try to gather all these groups into one organization or platform, which is called the Workers’ Alliance, it is still under construction. [...] We’ve only had two meetings. We had from thirty worker areas two workers. All the activists in the labor issues are working in this alliance. Tadamon, SRC, RS, Afaaq Ishtirakiyya, ... The ECESR, the HMLC, the Muslim Brotherhood – but they [MB] are still on the fence with regard to the strikes... In our last meeting with the Ikhwan, they said that they will have a new opinion concerning the labor strikes.

BDS: Do you think that there is an internal discussion going on within the Ikhwan with regard to the strikes?

FR: This was clear from our discussion with the members in the Alliance. In the first meeting they said that the anti-worker opinions within the Brotherhood were
individual opinions. Now the Alliance asks of the Ikhwan leadership to accept the strikes and to support them.

BDS: Do you think, when the leadership of the Ikhwan refuses the strikes, that all members will follow this attitude? Or will there be discussions, splits, …

FR: It won’t happen.

BDS: So they’ll follow the leadership.

FR: It didn’t happen and won’t happen ever that they’ll split.

BDS: What do you think is the most important task for leftists at this moment: (1) focus on elections and create one big party, uniting as many leftists as possible; (2) or try to connect with workers and people in the streets, and build a membership from the people itself?

FR: There is a problem right now. We are not talking about elections. Even the PAP which we are creating... there are still a lot of leftist forces outside it, like Tagammu, like the split from Tagammu, like the ECP which treats Tagammu as its own party, the RS which established the DLP. We do our thing and we’ll see. […] Most groups call themselves leftists or socialists and are waiting for a big leftist party to join it and support it demands. We need a HUGE leftist organization to attract these groups and individuals.

BDS: What about the role of women in the revolution? Did the revolution create a change in the consciousness OF and TOWARDS women?

FR: Women played a big role, just like the men in the revolution. One look at the Square proves it. Women from all tendencies, leftist, politicized, non-politicized, even all-Ikhwan or the Salafists women, were present. It did not only have an impact on the consciousness of women, but also on that of the men. During the days of the revolution in the Square, they were together, close together, in the Square, and there were no cases of harassment. One of the Salafi leaders came on the stage and said: “I apologize for the women who are not wearing the veil”, because he thought that they were bad women, but after he talked and discussed a lot with them, he apologized because he found that they had a high political consciousness. That was great.

BDS: On International Women Day, we’ve seen some women demonstrate, but there were also protests by men. Do you think these attacks were organized by some groups, or do you think they were spontaneously organized by men who still don’t understand the role of women in society?

FR: Of course this was organized, it was like the attacks on the youth in the Square. These attacks were organized from the army and the ex-regime.
BDS: I’ve met with some women from women organizations, for example the NWF and the FWD. Do you think these organizations play a positive role, or are they too bourgeois or middle class?

FR: They discussed a lot of women cases, but they were not deeply involved in the social issues of the women. They talked about divorce and so on, but did little about the social and political interests. The NWF was connected to women labor issues, though. In the last two years they organized a lot of good things with regard to working women, but they are still focusing too much on harassment. It is an NGO, so it takes foreign aid and has to work according to a certain agenda.

BDS: To conclude with. I have also a solidarity message from my union for the independent unions in Egypt. Can I send the message to you and can you spread it to the federation of independent unions?

FR: Sure. [laughs]
BDS: What are the most important problems which Egypt faces today?

RS: Egypt faces its fate. It began by a political will and the social choice of the regime to serve the extremely rich people under the pretext that we need investments in order to build the economy. But they developed a very strange phenomenon: during the last years there was a centralization of wealth in the hands of very few persons—ten... or less than ten have some 80 percent of the national income in their hands. Extreme wealth stands in opposition to extreme poverty. At the same time, all laws benefit these very few. When you lose 80 percent of national income, how can you secure housing for the poor? If you look at the pages in al-Ahram you see flats selling for millions of pounds, but nothing for the poor. Of course there are some credit programs to buy your own house, but very very few. And even when the government sponsors housing for the poor, they only sponsor 62 square meter of housing. And still, even with the government subsidies a poor man still has to find 30,000 EGP to buy his house. The situation is constantly deteriorating. There is no way out. And the taxing system is also crazy in Egypt. We need a new system, which requires the rich to pay a higher percentage based on their income. But the regime refuses to consider anything like socialism, it refuses to follow Sweden, France, even America, which they follow slavishly. Without fair taxes, there is no way out. There is parasitic capitalism, corruption, and so on.

BDS: What is the role of Tagammu in securing change?

RS: We write and speak and fight all this. [...]

BDS: But how can you change the regime? Will it come through elections or social movements, for example?

RS: What happened in Mahalla al-Kubra... even if it accumulated a thousand times, it cannot the change the regime. In 1977 we had an insurrection and moved thousands, millions of people, from Alexandria and Aswan. The regime didn’t feel the emotions of the people. It is the same in Europe, when millions went on the streets to contest the war in Iraq. Did the British government accept this revolution? No. So what happened. We demonstrated and suddenly in the morning we found the army in the streets. So we stopped. The Egyptians used to respect the army, not to be afraid the army, to respect it. Secondly, we didn’t want the return of the army as an influential
force in politics. So, in my imagination it needs a patient accumulation of protest and oppositional actions and protests and sit-ins, and then, perhaps, the regime can retreat. We have the experience. We have changed a lot in this regime. If you were here twenty years ago and if we said such questions and replies, we were both imprisoned and all the people here would be in prison. We have vaccinated the regime to accept what we are saying. And we have vaccinated the people to be more courageous. What has happened historically, should change historically. If you imagined a revolution or something like that, it is too far-fetched, in my imagination. Poor people don’t make revolutions, believe me. Poor people need to return in the afternoon with some pieces of bread to their family. They are too afraid. And if the poor didn’t find a way out, they usually return to God. And that is the main influence of Islamism today.
TS: [...] If we talk about a political movement in Egypt then this is a broad subject. There are a lot of movements, like Kefaya. It was big in 2005 but there were a lot of efforts before. A lot of political movements played a big role before Kefaya, such as Karama, al-Wasat, and the youth movements. These helped to build Kefaya. Now it is not strong anymore, it has a lot of problems. The 6 April movement for the youth and the Kefaya group are still there. Al-Karama is not recent. It has been there for 20 years. It is a Nasserist group and we built a club for Nasserist thinking with Hamdeen Sabahi, Abu al-Eita, Azizi, Bassiouuni and other leaders of al-Karama. After some problems we decided to build a group which expressed our tendency better. Only the name is new. Nobody can do the change alone. Not the Nasserists, not Islamists, not Marxists, no one. In al-Karama we made a group for all those who are against change. If you are against Mubarak and for change; welcome to al-Karama group. That’s also a difference between us and the Nasserist group: we move in the streets and do strikes. The other group prefers to go to elections.

BDS: What is the social program of al-Karama?

TS: Socialist. We are socialist but we also believe in democracy. This is a new age, we can change the world around us. We must try to change things in Egypt.

BDS: What is the difference between socialist parties like Tagammu, the Communists, and the RS with al-Karama?

[moving to another office]

BDS: How do you think political change will take place?

TS: It is not about elections. In my opinion the elections are corrupt, they are elections of thieves. It is about the new independent movement in Egypt. There is no doubt that the return of al-Baradei has meant a lot for Egypt. For the first time we talk about independent presidential candidates, like Hamdeen Sabahi, Mohammad al-Baradei en Ayman Nur, it is not about contact between them and Mubarak, but about connecting with the people as a public president. It is a new thing in Egypt to have a public contract between anyone and a politician like Hamdeen Sabahi or al-Baradei. This was number one. Number two: people before the last ten years were afraid of the government. Now there is no fear. There is a lot of courage. Doing good steps against the government. The new media plays a great role, the internet, especially Facebook, there are thousands, hundreds of thousands young people who strike against
Mubarak and his rule. What happens in Belgium or in Russia we see in Egypt and learn from it. No one can isolate Egypt any more.

BDS: But isn’t the new media sometimes diverting the attention away from the streets? It is one thing to call for a strike on Facebook but another thing to go to the streets, for example the “strike” on 6 April 2009 compared with the movement one year before in Mahalla.

TS: I don’t think internet will replace the strikes in the streets. Internet plays an additional role. There is a role for politics through internet. There is a lot of use of politics through it. Not for me and my generation who go to the streets. Internet adds new generations to politics in Egypt. It happens in two ways. Old ways like myself and other people do and new ways. Last time the 6 April youth failed. But the 6 April before they succeeded. This is politics. One time you succeed, another time you fail. We don’t say that it is easy to change things in Egypt but it is not impossible. If it does not happen soon, it will happen. I can say I will die before it will happen and my sons and daughters will see it. This is Egyptian politics. You cannot always get what you want. But every single moment in your life you must try and try. In my opinion this is politics. […] You must always have hope in yourself and your people. […]

BDS: Within the people and society there are many groups and some of them are stronger and can make a change because they are more organized than others. In an interview Hamdeen Sabahi said that the workers have historically been the strongest force for change.

TS: I cannot anything new to this. Workers are everywhere, and in Egypt, they are strong. In Egypt as you have noticed there were a lot of strikes by the workers to take their rights. But workers will play an important role, but not alone. Also farmers, engineers, and so on. Everyone will play a role. I cannot say that the workers will do it and sit at home and let them do it. Journalists also play an important role in the freedom of press. Journalists play a very important role in the case of freedom which the political activists did not play. It is our role to do this. Workers do this, farmers do that, there are a lot of strikes of farmers. In front of Cairo University recently there was a demonstrations of students, today. […] Every man and woman in Egypt must play a role if you want change in Egypt. No one can do anything alone. […]

BDS: A lot of groups are making their strikes and actions separate from each other. Do you think in the future these groups can be united?

TS: The big problem in Egypt is the separation between political and social actions. When political activists do action, social activists disappear, when social activists do action political activists disappear. There will only be change in Egypt when the two unite. A lot of people in Egypt don’t care about freedom or democracy, they care about their salaries, their living, how to raise their children. When people understand change will happen only connected to politics, then change will happen. How many political activists are there in Egypt? One hundred thousand? There are 80 million Egyptians. How can they do the change? The government knows it can repress the politicians
but it cannot repress 80 million. When the people decides to move every obstacle in the way of change will disappear.

BDS: How do you think parties and progressive journalists can make this connection?

TS: I am not talking about parties. A lot of parties in Egypt made a deal with the government. I talk about the new movements, the new groups like Karama and al-Wasat. Movements like Kefaya. [...] Only these movements will move to change. The others are a part of the regime. Ordinary Egyptians in my opinion will do the change, not parties, not politicians. You can also talk about the unions in Egypt. These will play a very important role, for example the Journalist Syndicate.

BDS: Isn’t it a problem that groups such as al-Karama have two faces? They have a political face because they want to gather as many parties and groups against the regime. But on the other hand they make alliances with groups such as al-Wasat which are their opponents in the social field.

TS: In 1997 when we first thought about al-Karama... in 1952 Gamal Abd an Nasser led the revolution and the Free Officers. In 1997 we said that there was al-Karma [dignity] call: free Egyptians will do the change. There is no change without the people. There is no change without democracy and social demands. For example al-Wafd is rightist, and al-Watani, in Egypt change must be socialist, not rightist. Egyptians don’t really care about democracy and freedom. Freedom came for the benefit of politicians. We are Egyptians and we have social demands. [...] We want to live as human beings. Ordinary Egyptians will say to you: ok all this democracy is very good, but how will we live? Democracy comes on the second and not on the first place. [...] 

BDS: Do you think this is a weakness of the campaign of al-Baradei: he talks very little about social issues and focuses on democracy and corruption?

TS: al-Baradei has been a long time away from Egypt. I respect him, but I don’t think he understands the Egyptians very well. He travelled a lot. A leader should fight with his people second by second. What about social demands? He doesn’t talk about social demands. And they are very important for the Egyptian people. [...] The right only talks about democracy, like al-Gabha, al-Ghad, al-Wafd... we in Karama talk about there are two ways, together, political demands like freedom and democracy; and economic and social demands. Together. You cannot separate them. [...] 

BDS: Does al-Karama support the boycott campaign?

TS: Al-Karama group elected Hamdeen Sabahi... there is a campaign for Hamdeen Sabahi. [...] In an election in internet between Hamdeen Sabahi, al-Baradei and Ayman Nur, Hamdeen Sabahi won. He is close to his people and goes to the streets. Twitter and the internet is not enough. If you want to be a leader of the people you must stand by them. Hamdeen Sabahi can be this leader. He was elected, not in Cairo, but in a small city. If there was a real democracy in Egypt I would vote for Hamdeen
Sabahi, but I am with al-Baradei’s right to be a candidate. HS as a student stood against Sadat and he was a leader in the university of Cairo. Until now he connected with his people. The government arrested him eleven times. Last time was in 2003 when America invaded Iraq. He was in the streets. I respect al-Baradei. But he had his chance and he is responsible for losing his chance to be the leader of the Egyptian opposition.

BDS: Do you think the elections now are an instrument for al-Karama to go to the people?

TS: Our decision was to boycott the elections, but there are two exceptions: Sa’ad Aboud in Beni Suef and Hamdeen Sabahi in al-Proles [...] We respected the decision of the peoples. If they want to boycott it’s ok, if they don’t want it’s ok. And the people there decided to go to the elections.

BDS: How do you organize this boycott campaign?

TS: Boycotting is not staying at home and not participating in the elections. We go to the people and encourage them to boycott and we say that those with the government will steal the elections. [...] Only 3,000,000 go to vote from the 25,000,000 voters. [...] The people asked Hamdeen Sabahi to stand as a candidate. And he said to his people: you are the generals and I am the soldier. If you say fight I will go and fight, even if I want to boycott. [...]  

BDS: What do you think of the attitude of the Ikhwan with regard to the boycott?

TS: Boycott is not a moral obligation. It is a tactical decision. [...] We shouldn’t let the NDP take all the seats. If Hamdeen Sabahi does not stand for election al-watani will take it. Who will stand there for the people. If all groups go to the elections, al-Wafd, and the Muslim Brothers and Tagammu included, the boycott will be very weak: we cannot take the decision to boycott alone. When all take the decision to boycott it would be strong. If only the Muslim Brotherhood boycott the elections, it would be a strong boycott but they decided to participate. Another point. The groups which boycott the elections, al-Ghad and al-Gabha, they boycott the elections because they don’t have someone elected, they don’t have anything to lose. And thirdly. A boycott should have a strong effect, when you call for a boycott everyone in the world has to notice it. Now when you go the streets you see that there are elections. You can’t be blind. [...] It is a good decision to boycott, but not in this moment. Now we must decide how to fight al-Watani. This is politics. [...]  

BDS: Were there any meetings before the elections to create a common attitude?

TS: There was a meeting but there is no common attitude. [...] We could not organize it before the elections. In some places the leaders of the opposition can make a front against the government. [...]
BDS: When was the Forum for Women in Development established and what are its aims?

IS: When FWD was founded in 1996 and it was not called Forum for Women in Development, but NGOs Forum for Women in Development. It was a kind of umbrella organization at that time and it was a good experience in putting NGOs together and coordinate between 22 organizations at that time and after the NGOs law in Egypt in 1999 we had to relist ourselves as FWD and it was not permitted to have NGO in our name because it’s a kind of union, so we had to change our name. In the nineties it was an experience to try to put these organizations together through three kind of activities: information and documentation because we have a real problem of information in Egypt so we have to gather data and document our work; the second activity was about capacity building and raise staff and members as a team in the 22 organizations; and the third one was about media. We tried to have a kind of channel, it was a magazine, a channel to be a voice of these 22 organizations. Now, after 14 years of work we are a central NGO working all over Egypt. Our focal point is organization. We are nearly in all Egyptian governorates, working on four programs: documentation and monitoring; we have a monitoring center, centralized here and in fourteen Egyptian governorates, in gathers info on discrimination against women and efforts to eliminate this information and we are working on research of this information. The other program is on leadership promotion and it was a kind of promoting the capacity building program, and we are working now also in all the Egyptian governorates. The third one is about networking and advocacy. We have two main campaigns now which are the family law and the right of the Egyptian women to nationality. And the fourth one is also about media. These are our four base things.

BDS: How does this forum differs from other women organizations, like the New Women Foundation?

IS: Of course the NWF… there are a lot of similarities. The main difference is that the NWF is working on the policy level. We are now working on estimating the credit system in Egypt to answer the question of whether it is a mechanism to empower women or it is just a relief of poverty among women and after this monitoring we will issue an initiative to improve the credit system in Egypt and try to distribute the results of the monitoring group. We are working on the law level, we are working the policy level in general. The NWF research center it was a research center and it has a real concern about the campaigns and the specific campaigns. Campaigns is their target.
BDS: So you are policy oriented. How to difficult is it to defend women’s rights in a country such as Egypt where democracy is a problem and where it is not easy to have your voice heard. What are the main obstacles for a policy oriented organization like the forum.

IS: We have a lot of problems. One of them is how to communicate with state builders on the output. And how we can develop a dialogue in order to have our voice heard. For example, in 2004 a lot of initiatives regionally, locally, internationally, targeted the Arab region. We tried to have our own initiative and it was from people we visited in eight governorates and we had NGOs, media personnel, professors from 24 governorates, and we tried together to have our own initiative. And we already issued this initiative. But after we launched this policy, we began to send it to Ministries, to parliamentarians, but we face the problem to make this policy true, to make it carry out. Another problem is that generally people in Egypt... we have real discrimination in Egypt, not only regarding democracy, but we have of course problems with the government. The people in Egypt really discriminate against women. We have to make a lot of efforts to link the women issue as one of the social issues in Egypt. We are trying to present our issue as one of the social issues in Egypt, not women as a person from another planet. When we talk about the labor issues facing men and women... but because women are less educated, because women have less opportunities, they face problems more than men. So we try to put our issues all the time as social issues, not women issues isolated from other problems. Now, we are facing problems regarding the NGOs law. We have a good campaign on the right to organize and so on. Even when we have a project, we have to have the governmental approval, and sometimes it takes a whole year. So we try to work on moving the government [...]. So sometimes we work on the central level until we have the approval on a project and also one thing that differs from other NGOs; we are not working central: we are working all over Egypt and we are putting stress on how to have input NGOs all over Egypt especially those concerning women issues.

BDS: So the government is one of the problems. Do you also have some difficulties with religious lobbies and groups?

IS: Not concerning all of the topics of women, these lobbies confront us in one specific area: family law. Yes we are facing a lot of problems and because we have leftist leaders and members, sometime any initiative regarding the family law the conservatives are putting our member on the floor: look Farida says, the leftist person says so and so. And we have a very good guideline to say what we needs to be changed in the family law and these groups objected strongly against it. We are facing this problem in the family law and sometimes nationality. [...] 

BDS: Since the nineties there have been economic changes, the privatization program, what was the impact of these social and economic changes on women, both women as workers and women as peasants?
It had a deep impact on women especially in the labor sector and especially the peasants. But the difficulty in Egypt. Female workers were able to organize them fairly well. Of course the crisis had an impact on workers in general, but women workers were able to organize themselves [...]. The outcome of the organization was not that they could attain their rights or what they demanded, but they were still able to organize themselves, which is an achievement in itself. The real problem were the peasants. They were the most influenced sector or group during this time because the impact was even worse. They are outside the official labor sector and part of the marginalized sector. The resources they needed for agriculture, pesticides and whatever they use for the land, the surmounting prices were affecting them badly. In addition to this there is the ambiguous, mysterious governmental policy towards agriculture which impacts its citizens but it has a worse impact on the peasants especially. Adding to this the corruption of the businessmen and how they deal with agriculture and land and how they are not supervised by the government and the corruption of these people, especially the businessmen they have the worst influence on agriculture. The male peasants especially started to realize that agriculture is not profitable anymore and they migrated to cities like Cairo to find work. Hence the one who really suffers in this situation of male emigration are the women peasants. So now the duty falls or the responsibility of fighting the surmounting prices and of the corruption of the businessmen and of all the problems relating to agriculture are all thrown on women peasants and they also have to face the blaming of the citizens: citizens are blaming them for the surmounting prices of the food and the crops. Now they have to face this double responsibility: facing corruption and handling the lands themselves as the males have migrated and facing the citizens because of the crisis. I blame the journalists and the media and of course the businessmen and decision makers of this situation, but also journalists and media because they are not focusing on their situation.

Since the land reform law in 1991, but especially in 1995 there were lots of actions against the new law. Did women participate in these protests and if they did how did they relate to men in these protests

They did participate massively in these protests. They were extremely successful in these protests and influential to the point that some of them were actually killed. [...] We work closely on the peasant situation in cooperation with the Union for Egyptian Peasants, we work closely with this organization and we are actually members of the organization.

I have the impression, but it can be wrong of course, that these types of protests are an important step for women, both in peasant and workers movement, because they can gain more equality and respect in the eyes of men. Is this true?

From the organizations’ work with female peasants and the peasants in general we realized that women who participate in these demonstrations only demand their rights as peasants, they don’t have a gender perspective. Gender is not a part of their vision. They don’t have a feminist outlook on the whole situation they just demand their rights, they don’t see women rights as a part of their movement. There were two
studies. One on the women peasants and these studies were on female peasants and female workers in general, part of the studies dealt with the gender perspective and how they see things. […] The researcher, Mona Ezzat, she conducted the study only with female workers and part of her study dealt with how these women lack political perspective and they don’t have a political understanding and so their organization is very fragile, it is so easy to break them because they don’t have an understanding they just want their rights. […]

BDS: There is a story, or a myth, I don’t know if it’s true, during the Mahalla strike at a certain point the women get out on the street and called here are the women where are the men, to stimulate the men and get them out on the street. So I agree that there is no advanced political consciousness but perhaps they are playing with the gender perspective?

IS: Yes, they were asking where are the men. It is true, but again from a feminist perspective they were simply saying we are needing support from the men. They have a great awareness, a great consciousness of their rights in general but they just don’t have a feminist perspective on things; they definitely lack consciousness. Some feminist organizations and well-established women’s rights organizations in Egypt worked directly with some female workers groups. Their situation and their awareness of the feminist perspective and the gender side of things was a little bit higher and at the end of the day you have to differentiate between groups which were close to women rights groups as opposed to those who were not exposed to these ideas.

BDS: The consciousness of gender issues is then more brought from without by women’s organization, more than it is produced spontaneously from this kind of struggles.

IS: Women, even the women workers, definitely understand there is discrimination against them because they are women. They get less education because they are women, they get paid less because they are women. They do the same jobs and the same tasks as men. They take the minor positions, I wouldn’t want to say low positions, but they are not allowed to take leadership roles in their workplaces, just because they are women and they do realize this and understand this. But as much as they understand that there is discrimination they just can’t tell what could become or that this is something which can and should be fought. They think that these are our rights, but they are not really conscious of women advocacy or women rights. They don’t want to create an effective social change. They just think “if we get our rights we are good”.

BDS: Do you think leftist organizations and parties and human rights activists sometimes play a negative role in this because they focus perhaps more on general class issues than on gender issues as they think we have to have first the basic human rights and afterwards we can do something about the gender situation?

IS: The question needs further contemplation to be honest, how the leftist groups affect women’s groups. On a direct level and in our own experience the leftist women
groups had the right effect and the right impact on women. In a previous stage or in the last stage women groups were focused on political rights. The current stage or situation they are starting to think that now the focus should be on economic and social rights. As we said in the current stage everyone is aware of the importance of social and economic rights. On a different level, yes, somehow there was a negative impact of leftist groups and parties on women’s rights, because the whole idea of strikes and protests, and representing opposition was the main concern, those women workers were not politically empowered to realize that they demanded political rights, so somehow it had a negative impact, as they were not politically empowered and politically conscious. They were led only by their demands and supported by leftist groups and women rights groups. [...] But they didn’t get what they wanted, so there was another side to the story. Basically those women were together with men demanding their rights. At some time they demanded their rights and didn’t get them, they are now on a black list with the government. [...] If you look on the overall situation however you will see that there is a big, wide movement of workers demanding their rights and they are actually impacting change. Change is in the process. There is another problem of course. The workers are currently demanding their rights from a government that doesn’t own their right anymore. It doesn’t know what to do, the government is at a loss. This is another problem on a different level; they are demanding rights and the government doesn’t know how to respond.

BDS: About the difference between female workers and women peasants. The situation for women peasants is now much more difficult because they are left alone in the countryside.

IS: And marginalized. Workers are better off. Some of them. Of course there are the workers in the informal sector. I am putting the informal sector with the peasants.

BDS: Most men of the countryside, do they end up in the informal sector?

IS: Yes.

BDS: Women in the factories, are they better organized, while female peasants are more isolated?

IS: No, the countryside is a lot more coherent than you think. Women are spontaneously part of a group together. They work together. The bigger problem in the countryside with the communities there is that they feel completely unheard and unseen by the political and public opinion. And that makes it more difficult to organize themselves. They work collectively but there is a differentiation between two situations. The women in the countryside work together to solve their problems alone, they don’t feel they are part of the mainstream society. They don’t have the skills to organize themselves into a political power. They figure out solutions on their own without approaches either the government or advocacy groups. Workers on the other hand have an organizing consciousness or they do have the skills more than the peasants. The peasants think they are unseen. There is a good example of a leadership
workshop we conducted with the university students of the countryside who still saw themselves as marginalized and who had to figure out things on their own.

BDS: When I spoke to some of the workers leaders in Mahalla they said that the reason the journalists and the media were suddenly interested in the movement was because it was an event, something which could be covered. Perhaps the protests against the land reform took the form of an event and then the media came; but other problems are so local and small that they are not interesting for journalists as they don’t constitute an event?

IS: You are trying to say that Mahalla workers were a huge task force and had a huge impact they were seen better?

BDS: Yes, and after the strike had finished there were still a lot of problems as the security imprisoned and intimidated and tortured strike members, but this wasn’t covered.

IS: It comes back to a lack of awareness. There has always been a difference between the sector of informal labor and organized labor, with the syndicates and unions. […] They don’t understand like the Mahalla workers for example, they don’t understand even that there is a Minister for labor who should be addressed. Mahalla workers are complaining that there is no media coverage for their situation after the event is done more or less, because they don’t have the political view that lets them see that there is a change overall. There are strikes happening everywhere. There are other factories like Qenawi factories, there are groups of workers going on strike days and days. Change is definitely, there are eruptions in the center of labor in general. The Mahalla workers are not aware of this, they are not conscious. The thing is that because they lack political consciousness they don’t understand that you shouldn’t measure it by how many rights you have attained, but that it comes by the fact that the protests are going all over the sectors. And the sector is becoming more heard than before. And then how these small strikes and groups of protestors can interact and collaborate and work cooperatively to build and to organize the labor movement again. They don’t have this awareness. And actually people who are trying this awareness, this political awareness and try to organize the workers into a movement is the civil society or the NGO sector. These are the people who are trying to build this awareness and raise the consciousness, for example, there is the Socialist Horizons Center and they are basically trying to organize huge meetings where workers from different factories and places come together in order to make their demands collective and trying to organize them. And at the end of the day it all comes down to the workers. […] They have to play this, they have to lead.

BDS: In the Mahalla strikes there were little or no women leaders in the movement, but now in the nurses movement, because the majority of them is women, the leadership is also female. Do you think this kind of movements, like the nurses, can help women not only in defending their social and economic rights, but also create leaders among worker women?
IS: In the Mahalla strike there were actually women leaders. They were not as visible maybe, but they were still there. The nurses movements can be perceived differently, especially from a gender perspective because they can have another role ADDED to what you mentioned. Unfortunately the nurses sector in Egypt is extremely prejudiced against and they are extremely underprivileged. Because socially it is looked down upon, it is really perceived in a negative way socially. It’s very degrading to women nurses and for very awkward reasons that do not apply to female doctors or surgeons. Nurses work late at night and that’s why they are perceived in a bad way socially... but the same applies to doctors or surgeons and they are not frowned upon.

BDS: Because they are more educated?

IS: Maybe? [laughs] The nurses movement does not only represent a good example of organized labor, it is not only a role model for workers, it is also taking the role of defending this sector and defending their image and presenting a better image of nurses because they are always looked down upon.
**SALAH Muhammad**

**7-3-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent:</th>
<th>Muhammad Salah, leader in Tagammu (MS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>7 March 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Tagammu HQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Brecht De Smet (BDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator:</td>
<td>Haisam Hassan (HH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also present:</td>
<td>Ahmed Belal,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>Notes and audio recording</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HH:** Muhammad Salah is a member in the Central Council of the party.

**MS:** And of the Giza committee.

**BDS:** What is your opinion of the revolution?

**MS:** The Egyptian revolution transformed the science of revolution in the whole world. It started without the direction of any political center. The social background was clear. At the time of 25 January I thought that the initiators of the movement would fail because of the absence of real political parties, organizations and movements in Egypt. So I didn't think it would become a revolution because there was no leadership and no organization. But it was a perfect revolution, with a perfect organization and leadership. So we have to study what happened, how this was possible. What happened in this revolution proved that so-called Egyptian culture and our religious background are not the determinants of the Egyptian society. The revolution showed this. The historical Egyptian culture is not the one that was built since the pharaohs... it was the one we saw in Tahrir Square. The revolution destroyed the mystification of our culture and showed that this perceived culture was untrue – the relation between man and woman, between religion and politics, and so on. There was no central leadership in this revolution and this is an important point.

**BDS:** I remember that I had an interview in 2009 with Rifaaat al-Said and he told me that the experience of 1977 showed that the revolution was not a path for Egypt.

**MS:** Any leftist, any socialist, any communist, must bet on the people. Rifaaat al-Said forgot that there are people in the streets. He only betted on his relation with the regime and he could continue his rule in the party through this relation. This is the clear reason of the current internal struggle, the political opposition between us and dr. Rifaaat al-Said. The revolution revealed the right opinions and statements.

**BDS:** What is the role of a socialist party during a revolutionary process, in general and in Egypt?

**MS:** A socialist party should support the people in the streets. Its role in the society is related to its relation to the people. As long as it is a mass party with strong connections to the street and the people, it will play a big role. If this relation is
severed it won’t play any role, especially in the Third World. Tagammu? It has no future. This is the end of the road. With the current leadership there won’t be a future for Tagammu.

BDS: How did the revolution have an impact on Tagammu?

MS: The struggle in Tagammu became more deep and the party will split, the next Saturday.

HH: Wait and see.

BDS: Until now the revolution was a success because it forced Mubarak and other members of the regime to resign, but what are the next steps in the revolution?

MS: The main challenge is the destruction of the whole of the ex-regime, all ex-regime elements. This project is not yet finished. It is related to the people’s ability to organize and mobilize in the streets. The problem is how to build a new regime without a leftist leadership. The social program and base of the regime will depend on how strong the left will be present among the people and in the streets. If the left is powerful and connected to the people, the new regime will have this background and this social base. [...] The problem of the Egyptian left is part of the problem of the left in the whole world, but there are problems specific to Egypt. It is clear that our only option is a new left in Egypt. I am from the seventies generation and I am saying bye bye to the seventies generation.

BDS: What do you think about the current strike movement? Some in the left are against these strikes because they say that there has to be democracy first, before any social demands. Others say that these strikes are a deepening of the revolution, a social revolution.

MS: All people who are attacking the strikes are trying to stop the revolution and denying the social roots of the revolution. They are siding with the regime. The strikes are the only instrument which will make the revolution succeed, even the purely political demands.

BDS: What is your opinion on the role of the army?

MS: In the revolution the army made a coup, the army forced Mubarak to resign. The leadership of the army is a part of the ex-regime. The evil Hosni Mubarak was its leader and the current leadership, like Tantawi, is as evil as Mubarak. Their relationship with the US and Israel is not right. The problem for the army is its own base, the common soldiers and low-ranked officers. There will be a moment and this moment is not far away, when the army will face its own base.

BDS: Do you think the military leadership wants to keep its power, but at the same time it wants a civil face?
MS: Yes, correct.

AB: Alright, stop this, we have to celebrate now!
The Nasserists belong to the labor class. Gamal abd al-Nasser, when he was the president of Egypt, gave them a lot of rights and he made many laws to support and help them, for example he gave them a margin of the profits and allowed them to participate in the boards of the companies and factories and the leadership of the trade unions. One of the most important points in Nasserist program is the defense of the workers. Together with Tagammu and other organizations they belong to the labor class in Egypt. Gamal abd al-Nasser established that 50% of the parliament should consist of workers and farmers. Today this is no longer the case, but during Nasser’s regime they were real workers and farmers.

How did the Nasserist party support the workers in Mahalla?

The Nasserist party supported the workers in all their strikes from 1975, especially through one of the biggest leaders in the party now, who led the biggest strike in Ghazl al-Mahalla. In this time there were 35,000 workers in Mahalla. […] This strike was the most successful strike in the history of the factory. The Egyptian regime gave in to all their calls and this was not only useful for the workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla, but for all Egyptian workers. In the last years, the workers refused any support from their parties and the Nasserist party respected this, because they saw that workers were divided in the factory among Nasserists, leftists, and communists. But we continue to support the workers but also respect them when they say that they don’t want parties standing with them.

Do you support the workers only through al-Arabi or are there other means of support?

Not only from al-Arabi, but also side by side. During the last strike the labor secretary of the Nasserist party and others came from Cairo and entered the factory, despite the security, and give the workers statements to support them and to support their legal calls. We also have some Nasserist workers in Ghazl al-Mahalla.

Abdel Nasser created one trade union for the whole country. Do you agree with the existence of only one trade union or do you think there can be different unions?

I think that every factory and company has to have a union. But I also think that we have to have a general union where all unions belong to. But these trade unions have
to be independent, not belonging to the government. The Egyptian businessmen have a group and this organization has candidates for the parliament to make the laws serve them and their business. We hope to have an independent trade union to support the workers and pressure the government to get the rights of workers in Egypt.

BDS: So you support the workers of Mahalla if they want to make an independent trade union?

GS: Yes.

BDS: At the end of the nineties there was a split in the Nasserist party with al-Karama. What are the differences between the Nasserist party and Karama?

GS: Karama and the Nasserist party do not have any ideological difference. We have the same opinions and we support the poor people and the workers and farmers. The difference lies only in how to show your opinions. Al-Karama is more radical and has more youth than the Nasserist party, because the Nasserist party is not radical like al-Karama in this time. There are other Nasserist groups in Egypt. All agree on the same Nasserist ideology and principles. We exist not only in Egypt, but in all Arab lands. Mauretania, Lebanon and more. We have meetings which gather the Nasserists from all Arab lands to discuss Nasserist ideas and to adapt them to this time. We have created a committee, General Nasserist Congress, in order to make one Nasserist movement all over Arab lands. The General Congress has a conference every year, each time in another country. During the year we have some action to unite the opinions of the Nasserist organizations. Leaders from the Nasserist party in Egypt and al-Karama and other Nasserist groups participate in this congress.

BDS: How do you think political change in Egypt will happen? Will it happen through elections, or popular intifada? Or something else?

GS: We work through our party, we coordinate with other parties through a coordinating committee. It is a committee from some parties here in Mahalla. We believe that no party in Egypt can make change on its own. Even if the party is very strong. So we have to coordinate together and create a climate for change by the people; a popular uprising.

[interruption; Muhammad Abd al-Azim enters]

GS: The task of the party is to create a climate for change. We make a lot of demonstrations, many demonstrations per year. The last one was in 6 March 2008 before the uprising in Mahalla. It was between 5, to 7,000 people who demonstrated in this demonstration. The newspaper wrote that the wind of change in Mahalla started from this. Nasserist party, Tagammu or Muslim Brothers cannot make change on their own. We have to work together to make a general change. [...] About April 6, you can see what happened in the independent newspapers such as al-Masry al-Yawm and al-Badil. [...]

339
BDS: Do you think it is enough to create a climate for a popular uprising or do you think you have to organize the people to make a change?

GS: We have to say that the parties in Egypt do not have many members. The security is very strong. We struggle in very difficult conditions. We believe that the role of parties is to create a climate now, not organize the people because the parties are not strong. In addition the people are very angry but still far from the parties. We have faith in the popular movement otherwise we would sit in our parties and houses. We have hope in change and we believe it is near, not far. After 2005 some movements started which wanted to be the change of the Egyptian people, but they did not succeed and we in the parties do not want to be heroes. The only hero is the people. We believe that there are some leaders among the Egyptian people. Those leaders will come forward and call for change. Parties cannot do anything but create a climate until some leaders from the people rise up and call for change. This happened in some countries, not only Egypt. The members of the parties are now not of the normal people, but they are elite. The elite can only create a climate, but it cannot make a real change. Only people can make a real change. The parties now cannot face the state because the parties are not strong and do not have many members. The state is stronger than the parties. But if the people start to stand against the state the state will be weak, not strong. The people will make the change. We have to increase the membership in the parties but we work in very difficult conditions. We have to attract the youth but it is difficult because the Egyptian people face a lot of problems which make it difficult for them to participate in parties. He who knows the Egyptian people knows that they do not move but after a long time, for example during the pharaonic regime we did not fight the Hyksos but after 150 years. Mubarak is now only 30 years in power. However I believe he will not stay more.

BDS: I agree that the parties are weak in Egypt, but they are still needed because we saw that in 6 April there was an explosion of the people because they were not organized. Perhaps this will happen again when the uprising is not organized. Should parties not try to go and organize them?

GS: All the parties including the Nasserist parties are controlled by the state. Leaders in the cities, but not in Cairo, are still alive and still struggle to get their party back again and I believe that we have to change our parties before we can do anything else.

[interruption: Muhammad Fathi arrives]

GS: That is why we do not bet on the parties but we bet on the leftist and Nasserist leaders in the cities and also, for sure, we are betting on the people, those only who can make the change in Egypt. Before the change came by army, but this time we hope the change will come by the people.
It differs, the term “labor force” or “working force” from “working class”. I was in the Senate and in the Congress party [Tagammu] in the eighties and we were making our first bibliography on the working class in Egypt. It was the beginning of this center. In the Congress library the man was surprised. What is this, “working class”, the terminology was not in the classification of the Congress library. It was a big thing but he said you will not find material under this title, it is not working. Then I found everything but under this. This is important for you, for us, to see whether it is labor force or working class. Even if we are in this theoretical frame, there is a difficulty in the Third World to speak of a working class, with a Marxist or scientific even definition. Now in meetings of the Left I tell them that you should be aware – I am not against those revisionists – but you have to be aware of the labor forces, then investigate who is working class and who is not. Seventy percent of Egypt are labor force, not working class. That is the question of definition. It may even affect your framework, your theoretical frame. That is one of the things which are of our interest here. That is why this center before all these centers and movements, we are since 1987-88-89-90 following this movement and trying to write about it and so on. That is why we are interested in this. [...] The other methodological point is that we are going to the roots of the labor and working class movement, especially within our following up of the communist history. We have a strong committee with a lot of production about the history, oral history and written history, of the left. The democratic movement, socialist movement, Marxist movement, within the working class, as you know they were only interested in the working class – I smile because you are ignoring the whole mass of people for the working class. Part of this history of the left was concentrated on the working class, before, during and after Nasser. We recorded before Nasser up to seventies. These are the roots of the labor movement now. Some of the leaders of this period still exist today. [...] Then you have to follow this either with one of your or our methods, this movement of now is coming from the history, a long history of labor protests, labor movements itself. We have historical symbols, the man here he is working on documents, but he was leader since 1946-47. Amar Attiya. He was engineering. Amatiya Serafi, he is a very old man, but he is in the streets. He is from the transport workers but he is fighting all the time in the political movement, in the democratic movement, in Tagammu and they don’t like him because he is noisy and they don’t like him. You have to study one of these leaders as a case study because one of them died on 91 years old. He was here up to two weeks before he died, telling us his experiences and so on. He educated two new generations in the labor movement. Let us stop at the methodological points.
BDS: So how would you define the working class in Egypt in opposition to the broader labor force?

HS: In Egypt as in any developing society it are those who are working in industry, import and export materials, that was the working class, the others are the peasantry the petty bourgeoisie, the middle class, you know the Marxist classifications. But now in this global economy and structural adjustment... What is structural adjustment? Adjustment means that you will change, adapt to new circumstances. Structural means that it will be a structural attitude. Changing the whole structure. Sadat changed the structure with this new structure. [...] The structure of economy, privatizations, constituted the working people not only in these strategic sectors. Usually the working class is just the people in the streets. For the postgraduates it is better to work in the oil stations than you get 100EGP every day why should you go to a center, the Arab African Center to work all day. These are the marginalized sections, the informal economy. Some of our scholars say that our informal sector is going up to sixty percent of the economy. Who are working? They are labor force. [...] All the leftist movements are speaking of the working class, but the whole of Egyptian people are in the streets, part of them as labor force, here and there, as commercial sections. The old free sections of society. Anyhow, let us focus on the core of your theme. [...] From this point we start to study the movement, like other centers, but we more from a historical point of view. Of course at the end of the nineties the movements went up and we were studying it from different aspects of society. We made a lot of things about the memories of the working class struggle and Attiya and others and in the end we have been active in comparative study of protest movements on the African level and within this the working class force. We found that a great number of all these centers are following and studying it. We don’t have a problem with this. But we have to translate it in English to be able to compare it. I am an Africanist, Samir Amin is the chair of the center, we are concerned with the Third World with comparative experiences and so on. We studied the phenomenon in general. I won’t give you the details of it, it is written in Arabic and English everywhere. [...] I will give some remarks which you should follow. The middle class has been shocked and deteriorated. Some of the protest movements or as conscious sectors in the society, they were more present in the movement. The professional syndicates: lawyers, medicine, pharmacy, commerce, journalists, and so on. This you should consider as middle class movement. With structural adjustment they were the first section – the poor are the poor all the time – who were affected the first from the policies, their salaries, their pensions and so on. But they have a long history of protest against Sadat through the nationalist issue. The nationalist issue is raising through the Palestinian issue, Israel and so on. The last ten years we found people going out for food, bread, salaries, and so on. But always the protest movements were about national issues. Then freedom and democracy movement. Then at last the workers issues. This led the syndicates and professional middle class in the advance. Then came the working class to participate because of the starting from privatizations facilitating foreign investment, and so on. Then the working class started to feel problems, the textile industry and other industries.
That is one remark in your frame you should consider. We are suffering also of the trade unionist concepts. Suddenly it was clear with the real estate tax workers. What does this mean? The employees of the government, this petty bourgeoisie and the middle class were not involved in the protests but suddenly they are in the advance, fighting for a free union, which was a problem since Nasser, which was the problem of the nationalization of the trade unions. But it was the nationalist phase – I consider myself somewhat as a Nasserist. But anyhow even this middle class put the issue of professional syndicates and the trade unionism on the floor. It was not like that. Unfortunately up to now we find that most of the protest movements still have very limited demands. You will read about thousand or twot thousand or three thousand strikes and sit-ins, but it is still very sectorial or sectarian. Even if we fight for democracy, for Al-Baradei, the masses are divided. That is the problem, because this type doesn’t have traditions. The traditions were working class fighting, like in Mahalla, in steel in Helwan, and very politicized. Politicization without negating the movement itself of this section was the problem; either to find some leaders very politicizing the movement; or others ignoring the political issues. I think in the end a regime can use this gap between politics and the social. We always speak about socializing or the movement with politics, but the great issue in Egypt is still the religion and politics, not only the social demands and politics. Still the frames are moving like this.

The last that I can see is that we feel in one way of another that the movement is coming to a low profile now in political and social life, for many reasons. One of these is that the government is raising elections issues, the transition issues, the regime is happy to put the people out of the basic issues in society. [...] This low profile is because people are busy, a great section of the very poor people are getting some profits out of these elections, billions of pounds are spent. These informal people are working in this frame, for them you cannot ask them to come for a strike. This is one type. The other is that the president himself decided to be the star of the presidential election, then people became calm, they were terrified with the hereditary issue and so. And then the money. Yesterday I read in one of the newspapers that the migrants outside, the Egyptians in the world, are transferring about 7 billion dollars on the national income. This is influencing the social life. The estimation differs from 2 to 3 million Egyptians outside, in Europe, America, of course the Gulf, and they are transferring money. If everyone of these 2 million have 5 people to transfer to than 10 to 15 million Egyptians are dependent on this foreign, external flows. We are studying this.

No development of the legislation of the working class, and trade union. They are putting this minister, a trade unionist, who is clever and strong, and the other one of the trade union federation and they are working hard. They are not working for the working class but the middle class among the working people. Once I was in the labor university [...] I was a lecturer on Africa, and even the people in the class refused the term ‘umal. You have to study the Nasserist traditions of control and domination in the trade union and also the legislation it are Nasserists products but also the tradition to elect leaders without them being really elected. All those leaders seem to be elected but they are not elected at all, and they are leaders in the centrals. This is also influential and many other things.
BDS: The trade unions were strong in the Nasserist period and even in the seventies and in the eighties because the regime could distribute a lot of wealth through these institutions, but since the nineties and structural adjustment these power relations have changed and the leaders of the trade unions find them in a difficult situation because they try to defend the regime but they are pressured by their members at the same time. I also wondered: what is your opinion on the development of class consciousness among the working class? Class consciousness in Egypt has been weak, because of nationalist ideology and also because the class is divided on a sectorial basis, on the other hand we have seen the weak beginnings of activists trying to make connections between different sectors. Do you think the movement we have seen in Mahalla and other places and different political actors trying to make this connection this can be a move forward to class consciousness or do you think we are still far from this consciousness?

HS: We should recognize that consciousness is growing, despite of what some say about the influence of the security forces. A regime in crisis is more dependent on security mechanisms. It depends on how the democratic movement is moving peacefully to put the consciousness instead of violence for example. It is very serious to depend on security: security means violence and counter-violence, we will not know who is wrong and who is right at that time. Some government speakers are saying that these movements are threatening social peace and development and stability, there is a certain logic for them but what about 80 millions. Some big officials when they say 1,5 cars in Cairo... on the northern coast in the Mediterranean, you will find 100 kilometers of villas and more. I know because I have one there by the way [laughs]. When you see this you say what wonderful country, what wonderful class, living here. Everywhere there are people suffering and striking, in Holland, in France, that is right but it is not fair of course when we know that there are 1,000 ashwayiyat. [...] I know that you are concentrating on the working class. Unfortunately there is a remark, the working class, the expression on behalf of the working class through these types of centers and committees which is very high and important is not the real expression of the working class. In civil society always we have this types of movements and expression, in any country the political party should have such a center, not separate centers. If I am part of the hizb at-Tagammu I am more fruitful and engaged, but to be outside in however big and important center... I am 70 years old I have experience and I won’t glorify our work or other works. Sometimes they are exaggerating the expression of trade unionism and the working class movement in Egypt but with these protest movements they were more and more engaged, they were in Mahalla and Helwan and so on. Before they were just mobilizing for consciousness and so on. Anyhow, this is a criticism to all of us in the end. This type of conscious expression.... Did you see anywhere a working class without politics, without media, without leaflets, no. You will find Kamal Abbas getting donations like here and then making noise with his politics. But this type... You are a scholar you see it in Europe and sometimes in Africa, I have seen it in Tanzania, leaflets expressing these groups and people. Up to now we can say that the consciousness of the working class is not yet strongly trade unionist [...] Normally political parties have this wing. Here sometimes you find them afraid, shy, ignorant of this type of
relations. You have to study what type of relations between working class movements or working movements or working people or labor force people. […]

BDS: Is the reason why the political parties are very weak towards the workers that parties like Tagammu had illusions in the democratic opening and did not go to the streets.

HS: Yes. And also other parties, like al-Wafd and the Muslim Brothers. Hassan al-Banna always advised to work within the workers but they were in general out of it. They were not working on peasant and working class issues because usually they are for liberal economy. They don’t like this sectarian look in society: you are a Muslim and part of the Islamic community and that’s all. That’s an ideological reason. But also because of economic reasons. They are liberal and capitalist and defending the commercial life of the petty bourgeoisie. If the Muslim Brothers go through the working class it would be a catastrophe for the left and the working class because they would control them through Islamist ideas.

BDS: Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood are still ignoring the working class today?

HS: Yes, they are still ignoring it. Of course Mahalla was a big issue, the Muslim Brotherhood have money and they can provide food for whole Mahalla. Prestige of helping and being helpful is important, not being in the movement.

BDS: What do you think is the future of the movement? How can the movement become stronger?

HS: To be politicized. This does not mean be revolutionary, but demanding trade unionism as part of the political process towards democracy. Some parties are only speaking about democracy without social demands. They are mobilizing us as elites and sometimes syndicates or judges and journalists, but that is not politics, that is not real politicization. That is why we here in the center started to study social movements. To what extent working classes were a part of the development of other social movements. It is a problem up until now. Then come the protest movement. To what extent you call a movement a protest movement? We should be clear of terminology sometimes.

BDS: So the future of the movement is politicization. Do you think this politicization will come from below through the movement itself, or do you think this will come from without, from journalists, and the intellectual elite which will play this role?

HS: In a very short answer. We have to move with the protest movements to let them be at least a protest movement, the target is them to become a democratic movement and to make them help the democratic movement. At least at the beginning you should help crystallize the demands, the social economic demands, then you can call the workers of Egypt to protest against this and that policy. There is no protest against policies of society. We are feeling shy. It is shameful that this privatization has been happening like that without any protest. Workers were dismissed from their factories without any protest movement. What is this? I myself am surprised, from 1975 to
1995, during 20 years the whole economy has been reorganized and transformed, the whole society was changed, dismissing people from their work, giving them pensions to leave with hundreds. How? Without experience of protest against privatizations. [...] If it will continue it will be a failure of the whole progressive movement in Egypt. We have the hope that this protest movement will continue because the economic program has failed to make any progress in Egypt. If this failure continues the protest movement will be a strong social movement with a political uprising or consciousness. The political parties were sleeping but they have become better now. Whatever the corruption of life and so on. If so, this competition of the political parties will make them depend on social movements and protest movements. The government always pushes political organizations to be for stability and so on. We hope that these organizations become defenders of the interests of the daily life in Egypt. Social and political progress start after the daily life demands. The daily life in Egypt affects the political field and everything and it keeps the people silent because they are just fighting for their daily food. Very poor people don’t make revolutions. We don’t need philosophy but what is going on in Egypt. The daily life is very affected in Egypt now. The regime should be aware of this. People are in a very critical situation. The investments now are very modest, 7 to 8 billion dollars, we should have at least 100 billion dollars of investment to move Egypt to the level of other countries. The regime feels that with the politics and the stability in the region and similar regimes may help more chances for investment and work for the people. But that’s just an imagination, the world is not easy going like that. You must make something from the inside. Investments are still a problem. The labor force will not be easily become a working class because industry has a problem. Textile is deteriorating. That type of development. The relation with the world and our capitalists are depending on international, global relations. The Sawiris have billions from Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, ... seven billions only in Algeria. The family had twenty billion dollars. [...] At last he is saying I am a Copt, and as a Copt he wants to support the Coptic interests inside the regime against Muslim Brothers and he speaks about his return to Egypt and partially working in Egypt. [...] You find them in the NDP, such as Mohammad Ibrahim. You have to study the mentality of certain Egyptian capitalists to understand where the working class is going.

BDS: Do you think the regime is more and more divided? There are factions who want stability but other factions want profits as quickly as possible. These elements destabilize society. And do you think that now with the elections these conflicts will become stronger?

HS: I am not with these talks about division. It is a conflict for power only. But the concepts of capitalism are the same. There is no division and no facts about division. When they are speaking sometimes they are deceiving us. They are speaking about stronger government to protect their interests, to protect them from the dumping forces of the world market. The people in the streets find the Chinese products very cheap, it’s better, why should we protect “our” industry against the market? Who is “our”? Who is “we”? Sometimes I capture myself thinking like this. These globalizing Chinese products are very helpful for the poor people. They don’t go to our malls, we have malls like in New York, like City Stars. If the Chinese are giving this just for 50-
60 pounds for al eid it’s ok. Why should we fight for our capitalists. Some of our master voices are speaking about protecting the industry in Egypt... what industry? [...] The socialists themselves should look at the world in a different way. We don’t like the Chinese way, ok. But like this lighter, it’s only one pound. Perhaps it only works for a week, ok, but I get it for one pound. [...] This type of economic life is not helping national capitalism in the end. It is focused on construction of new townships, such as Madinati, twenty million EGP. Or Katameyya Heights. It is working, using workers, but the working class is not of the construction sector.

[interruption]

HS: The great issue for Marxist trade unionists is to either create new unions or fight within the existing trade union. In the movement you will find those who are pushing for independent unions. Of course we agree with this principle, but in the current atmosphere it will be very weak, how to collect your contribution or shares and so on. How? It is not allowed under emergency law which you are living under. It is impossible to collect your contributions and other regulations it is difficult. [...]
BDS: Tell me about your political activities and background.

ES: I am a researcher in political, social and economic studies in Afaq Ishtirakiyya [Socialist Horizons]. I also work in other places, such as the Land Center. I am interested in the workers movement, but also in the movement of the poor. These have made some big movements, demanding housing and a decent standard of living. The government only builds houses for the rich and it wants to move the poor out of the center of the city. It’s a project of liberalization called “20-50”. With Afaq we supported this movement, we flyered, wrote articles, and organized some actions like a sit-in before the Cairo governorate. We demanded housing and money for the poor. The police intervened and hit us. But it had an impact. Some people have new houses now, thanks to our actions. Furthermore, through these actions, people learn how to fight for their rights.

BDS: What is the relation between Afaq and the Communist Party?

ES: Historically, many members of Afaq are members of the Communist Party. The Communist Party still exists, but underground.

BDS: What is the relation between Afaq/ECP and the other leftist organizations?

ES: According to Tagammu and the Trotskyists, the poor are not a revolutionary class, so they ignore them. But these people have nothing, a real Marxist party should help these people and stand by them. It is wrong of the other parties to ignore these groups.

BDS: How do you think change will be accomplished in Egypt?

ES: The existing movements must make a network and we need an active leftist party. It must grow through the movement. The leftist parties now are small and weak. As leftist we have problems, however. We don’t have many members, like the Muslim Brothers, and we don’t have official recognition – Tagammu is not a leftist party.

BDS: However, I heard that many young activists disagree with the Tagammu leadership. What do you think of this?

ES: I have been the national organizer of youth in Tagammu. In the end there’s always opposition to the leadership, but it doesn’t change a thing.
BDS: What do you know/think of the Trotskyists?

ES: They are a small group, and they have a research center in Giza. Most of their members haven't read Trotsky! They are actually anti-left. They are working with the Muslim Brothers. However, we are leftists, the Muslim Brothers are rightists, although they are anti-governmental. The Muslim Brothers have the same economic program as the government. They have land, money and factories. In the future they will turn against the workers and farmers. The MB have many representatives in the parliament, but they are with the government on the question of land appropriation and liberalization. We can only cooperate with them on the subject of freedom; against detention and torture.
JS: You should also meet Fatma Ramadan, she is my comrade…

BDS: I met her yesterday.

JS: Ah ok. [laughs]

BDS: I want to ask you especially about the Socialist Renewal Current.

JS: If you are talking about the RS they are present in Egypt for more than twenty years. It started in the eighties, with a group of students, as a group to read and discuss things. They were all Marxists, Trotskyites in a way, and it started with the book of Tony Cliff about the capitalist State in the USSR. It started from 1989 because they had an idea about the problems of Stalinism.

BDS: Were they active in the Communist movement before that time?

JS: No. There was no movement at that time, in the late eighties and nineties. We cannot talk about a real movement, but there were intellectual students and they were Marxists by reading books. In 1991 they organized themselves, before they were related with elder people, orthodox Trotskyites, but in 1991 they organized themselves as an independent group. In the early nineties they were but a small propaganda group. In 1995 there was a problem, a difference in view. Some said that it was not the time to conduct real work in the streets, and that we should only be a propaganda and reading group and produce a magazine, so there was a split in 1995. In 2002 with the Intifada movement the difference in point of view became nonsensical because there was a movement. And there was a reunion of the movement.

BDS: What was the name of the group which split?

JS: Sharara... Strike... no, not strike, what happens when you do this... [hits hands together]

BDS: Spark, like Lenin’s group.
JS: Yes, and then the other group was the RS. In 2002 there was the reunion. But the difference in point of view continued. So there was another problem in 2006, when the democratic movement went down. Then there were two points of view. One of them said that it wasn’t right from the beginning to be involved in the movement, because it was petty bourgeois, and as a small group we could not affect it and that they should focus on the organization and build it. The other group said that it was right to be in the movement, but that we should discuss what went wrong and that we cannot build the organization independently. If you build anything you have to build it inside the movement. It begins like this, and then at the end of 2006 there is the rise of the workers movement. At that point there were two groups in the organization. One group had the initiative and developed an orientation towards the working class. Not all members were involved with this. It was a division of labor. The other group was oriented towards the paper and the organization, and we had a split in the organization along these lines. We had other problems to think about, for example to support or not independent unions for the working class. Those people who said that it was not right to be involved in the democratic movement now said that this is the time to start building independent unions throughout the whole of Egypt.

BDS: And how was this faction called?

JS: It was not yet a different group, but you can see inside the paper already two different tendencies. So the first problem was the analysis of the democratic movement, and the other was how we should orient towards the labor movement. The main problem was that of the independent unions. We said that it was not enough to talk about independency because that is a merely democratic demand, but it also necessary to build the union from below and to make it completely democratic, and that this was not the time to talk about independent unions for workers, we had to look at every place, and see how they can and want to organize themselves, even if they want to organize themselves legally. The issue is to organize themselves, or making small groups to do whatever necessary, not talking about independent unions. There was another problem because of the Mahalla strike. We analyzed our involvement in the strike as sectarian. Our activists were issuing very high demands and splitting the movement, they were not issuing the demands which regrouped the movement and unified the movement, making it succeed. These were tactical discussions, but in the end it developed into something more ideological. At the end we had the analysis that small organization such as us see themselves as the nucleus of the revolutionary party. Even if the militants themselves are very good and not sectarian, this point of view will make them act sectarian. If I see myself as the nucleus of the revolutionary party, and there is another group behind me, I will see him wrongly, and I will see him as...

BDS: … a competitor?

JS: A competitor, yes. We had the analysis that a revolutionary party was never built this way, as a small group of revolutionaries of fifty, or tens, and that they would recruit people, becoming one hundred next year, and then the year after that... It is never
built that way and working in several strikes and struggles... You are not thinking how these struggles can succeed. You are only thinking: that man is a very good one, I can recruit him, and so on. This is the way we can name... the party-building approach. We were against this approach. We thought that building the movement was much more sophisticated than that. There are several radical points in the society and we can only be a catalyst to reunify those people and making a bridge between them. It will be a process, not a straight line, but with twists and turns will the revolutionary party be build. And we are not the nucleus of this. We just think of ourselves as a group of revolutionary activists who are inside the movement, who just exchange experiences and constitute a bridge between people and movements, enabling people to get to know each other, develop their demands and ways of struggle. In this way, in this dialectical way, we can have the party in the end. So in 2010 we had a split. This is how the SRC began. This is our history. [laughs]

BDS: How did the revolution influence the Left in general in Egypt and the SRC in particular?

JS: All the activists in the two groups were present in all movements in Egypt, starting with the Intifada, the anti-war movement, the democratic movement, the working class movement, we were always there. We were noticeable, we were young... we are not so young now, but we were young compared to other leftists, and we were active. We loved to work in the streets. In the few months before, during and after the revolution, we have the opportunity to play a role – you can say that a group of like fifty people couldn’t play it – but we play it. We were working since a year ago openly with everybody, we have a good relation with everybody, we have the old relations of twenty years of work, but at the same time we are not chained anymore to anything or anybody. We had a real active year. Our organization or current consists of a majority of young people, involved in the youth movements and universities. A few months before the revolution they started to have a relation with the administrator of the Khaled Said Facebook group and they succeeded in putting their event on the page. They have this relation because they started with organizing the demonstration after the death of Khaled Said. They were involved in this and proved that they were active and so on. So this was the first step for our group of youth to have this relation and putting their events on his group. On New Year’s Eve there was the bombing of the Alexandria Church and the movement of Copts in which we were involved. Eight of our members were arrested in Shubra and brought before court. Every week when they were presented before court we had a demonstration in front of the court. We worked in these cases and before this we started to have a connection with other youth and coordinated with them. After the Copt problems and the court case we had, we decided to do a demonstration on the 26. Our demand was to take al-Adli down. This was our demand, and our only demand. We did not dream of anything more than that. So we started to organize the event and then Tunisia rose up. Tunisia changed everything. Since twenty years ago we couldn’t convince people that things would change through the people’s power itself. Tunisia changed everything. We all saw on the television how Egypt could change. I was in a meeting and I said that we could not set a date for the revolution. I don’t know if they believed me or not, but I said that we would succeed in having a
demonstrations of hundreds and maybe thousands, that we would perhaps even get into Tahrir – we were banned from Tahrir since 2003. Maybe we would succeed, maybe not, but they were also enthusiastic and they also agreed with the plan not to go to Tahrir directly, but to start from different areas, especially poor areas. And it happened. [laughs]

After this, our youth members started a movement called Liberty and Freedom, on the left of 6 April. They had been members of 6 April, but there were some frictions and they left the group because 6 April met with American donors, taking foreign aid. So there was a split and their movement developed after this and it existed in other places than Cairo. The alliance which organized the first demonstration on 25 January was composed of those people representing Liberty and Freedom, 6 April, the Muslim Brother Youth, and the youth of al-Gabha party: the Democratic Front Party. After the revolution they called themselves the Alliance of the Revolutionary Youth, but this was after the revolution. [...] This is how we had a role in the organization of the protests. We had also a small journal from the beginning of the protests and our office was near of Tahrir Square and it became like the Mecca of the revolutionaries. This is how a very small group like ours can play a big role.

[...]

BDS: How has the revolution changed the Left in Egypt?

JS: Everybody felt that there were several attempts in the past to unify the left and every attempt was a real disaster. But the problem in those years was that we were thinking about creating an alliance or a party or something like this in order to solve the problems of the Left itself. After the revolution we had to keep another point in mind. There were those who said that the revolution was great and started on the 25th and ended on the 11th and that now it is the time to go home and celebrate the event each year, but that the revolution is in the past. Against this we have to work now. There are those, for example the Muslim Brothers, who find that it is better for them to block the revolutionary process now. But there are also those who think that there is a leftist tendency in the revolution. Perhaps it is not clear, but we can see the tendency through the huge masses on the streets, who were in the street by millions and millions. It is not the youth, it is not the middle class, who really created the real possibility for this revolution. This is indirect, because they were not organized. There were poor and working class people in the revolution, on an individual basis. But during the last three days there were major strikes in major factories, even military factories. And I think that it was a major force in ousting Mubarak. There is that leftist tendency. From the beginning of the revolution the slogan was: Change, Liberty, and Social Justice. From the beginning. So we cannot stop right now. There are people who think that we cannot stop now and that we have to continue this revolution [...]. In another way, even the minimal democratic demands we cannot realize these demands unless the mobilization of the masses. There are those people who want to demobilize the people and there are those who want the mobilization to continue and to let the people feel that there is a change in their life.

This is another point of view of the Left: we are not talking about a party in the sense of a tool to solve our own problems, but as a tool to continue the revolution, that
those people have to have a political instrument to renew their struggle and to let
them work together to transform them into the real beneficiaries of the process.
Within this new spirit we try to create a new party, a broad leftist party, in the sense
of a broad leftist party like in Europe or Brazil. We started already a month ago.
Inside the revolution we had our first meetings. This party will be democratic and
heterogeneous, people are allowed to create their own platforms. We are entering, as
the SRC as a platform, not an ideological platform, but a political one. We have
started working with this and I am hoping that it will become another power. The
Popular Alliance.

BDS: Does the PAP also tries to connect with workers?
JS: We are but in the beginning. We are creating our papers, are trying to organize
ourselves, to approach people and groups to join the party. What I am sure of: we are
in the party. The leftists who left Tagammu are in the party…

BDS: … are there other organized groups at the moment in the PAP?
JS: There are groups with one foot inside the PAP and one foot outside so we cannot yet
say their final decision. Those participating are our group, the left of Tagammu, all
the important independent leftists…

BDS: … the RS?
JS: Mmm. Yes, they attended some of our meetings.

BDS: I heard they are trying to set up their own party?
JS: There are trying to build a Labor Party.

BDS: Will this project not come into conflict with what you are trying to do?
JS: I felt this conflict when I talk with workers themselves: what party are you exactly
trying to build. I don’t know. It is not enough for workers to have a party calling itself
the workers’ party in order to join it. For example there is the Labor Party in England.
The most important thing is to let the worker feel that the party is a real… alternative
for change. So the RS are building their own party but are attending some meetings.
The Democratic Left are also attending some of our meetings. But I don’t think they
are really leftist, because they are trying to build a liberal party. There is another
group. A very small group called… the Socialist Bloc. They are some people from the
seventies. They want to be part of a party with a clear reference to socialism and the
Left. But I think we can involve them after some discussion. So. We are building our
paper. We are trying to organize ourselves. We are having a meeting today at four
o’clock with the newcomers and we will start to make workgroups. We will create
three initiatives: one with students in the university, with workers, and with Copts.
There is a group which started ten days ago, working on the street, organizing what
we will do in Tahrir on Friday, and another group around the campaign against the
BDS: What is your opinion on the committees formed during the revolution?

JS: Some of them still exist today, some of them are radical, some of them are not. It depends on the location, if they are in Suez or Mahalla, they will be effective, in a poor place in Cairo or Zamalek... You can find committees in al-Ma’adi, in Zamalek and Mohandiseen having police officers, judges and businessmen in the committee. This is not the right committee which I prefer. I prefer committees built on a class basis. But, why not? We had thirty years without any form of organization, so it is a good start that the Egyptian people is no longer atomized.

BDS: How do you connect to these committees?

JS: We are trying, yes. Other leftist groups doing this as well.

BDS: Will these groups play a role in the further development of the revolution? Or will the most important field of struggle be found in the factories, or in the elections...

JS: That are two questions. Firstly, there are people who participated in the revolution, who were part of the marches and the sit-in in Tahrir. They went back to home but they want to continue their activity and there is no party to organize them, because the parties are weak. So they only have the committees which were organized in the revolution itself. Maybe through the influence of some activists they can continue their struggle in their neighborhood, dealing with local problems and so on. I think this will continue until these people will find another way to become a part of the political life. Secondly, we have to have priorities. We would love to connect to all these organizations. But we don’t have the time or the power to do this. If I choose, I choose to go to either that factory strike, or to that committee in that neighborhood [...].

BDS: Do you think that these groups could play a role in the struggle for a new constitution?

JS: The referendum came very quickly. No one did the proper job to let them play this role. I thought that the referendum would be on Tuesday and suddenly I saw in my agenda it was on the Saturday.

BDS: What do you think about the role of the Ikhwan in this whole process? The RS had a relation with the Ikhwan, what do you think of this relation? What role did the Ikhwan play during the revolution? Is there a difference between the Ikhwan youth and the leadership?

JS: We were one group and even after the split we are the only groups that say that we have to struggle with the Islamists if necessary. We don’t have the analysis that they are fascists. That the Muslim Brothers are fascists, that they are reactionaries with an
Islamist badge. We conclude that their organization has conflicts and that the base is not the same as the leadership. We had some relations with them during the ten years of the democratic movements. We organized with them an annual conference, we participated in it with them and with the Nasserists, the nationalist groups, an annual conference against imperialism and Zionism and war. So we have such a relationship. And we have the relation with the youth I talked about. But I think we are in a second phase now. In the past the Muslim Brotherhood were in the opposition. They were the ones who had the biggest numbers of detainees and tortured activists, being subjected to military courts and these things. It wasn’t right to be only democratic with those who have the same color as you. But now the game has changed. The Muslim Brothers started with meeting Omar Suleiman, they have a relationship with the SCAF, and they will be in the government. There is now... I think that the constitutional amendments referendum will be, in a way, choosing between YES or NO, it will be, in a way, as choosing if you are WITH or AGAINST the second article of the constitution. In a way. That’s why all the Islamist groups are in the same line now. Before they were enemies. We were working with the wives of the detainees of al-Gama’a Islameyya and when the Muslim Brothers entered our center they asked: why are you working with these people, they are not democratic... They were enemies for years. The al-Wasat party was split... But now they are all in the same group, all supporting the amendments: the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Amal Party, al-Wasat Party, al-Gama’a al-Islameyya or al-Jihad... It will be, in one way or the other, as choosing if you are pro or against the second article. Those amendments, in another way, will be like a choice between peace and continued mobilization. I don’t think that all the people... I think all Copts will be against the amendments, but not in a democratic point of view. So there is the same problem there. Our tactic was always being together, doing something together, but being critical. But now, I think it is the time for the criticism to be very hard. For example, I have to attack some things Essam al-Arian is saying or even... […] In any case, we will face a problem.

BDS: So the progressive role of the Ikhwan stopped after the resignation of Mubarak.

JS: Yes. They have the Turkish scenario in mind all the time. They participated in the revolution. They had a major role in the revolution. On the 25th the organization refused to be on the streets, but the youth group – and I know this because I was close to them – they were part of the Alliance who organized the demos on the 25th. But on 2 February, Wednesday 2 February, during the camel battle, and the evening with the molotovs and bullets... they played a major role in protecting Tahrir. They have the “staff” to do this. So they played a major part until the 11th. But they want to stop everything now. They want to stop the Friday protests. The last one was against their will. I don’t think that they really participated. The one before was a showing of their strength. Who is the sheikh...

BDS: Qaradawi?

JS: Yes, Qaradawi was there. By the way, I don’t love Tahrir anymore. I went to Tahrir and I found people as if they were going to the zoo with their children, taking photos of the tents, and so on. But anyway, they didn’t participate in the last Friday, and I am
sure they won’t participate in the next Friday, because they say it is only for those people who are against the amendments.

BDS: Do you think the Ikhwan youth disagree with the leadership?

JS: Which youth? I don’t want use that word intellectually, “youth”, but there are those who met others in the university, and have accounts in Facebook, and have a chance to discuss with each other, even within the Brotherhood, and they have some real problems with the leadership, and some of them even left. For example, Ibrahim al-Hudaybi, who is the greatson of al-Hudaybi. He left the organization. Tens of youth like him left, who were bloggers and maybe middle class or upper-middle class and were in the AUC or something like that. There is also youth inside the organization who has a progressive role to push the leadership to be on the streets. But if you talk about the youth in the countryside and outside Cairo, they are affected not by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, but by the Salafists. They are against the leadership because they are not Islamist enough. [laughs]

BDS: And what role did the Ikhwan play in Alexandria?

JS: Alexandria is like a Muslim Brotherhood city. They had the masses. But, from the 28th until the 11th, yes they played a role. But the mobilizations against the amn ad-dawla, no, they refused to be a part of this.

BDS: Do you think the military, the Egyptian army tries to negotiate with the Brotherhood because they see them as a means to pacify the movement, because they are also against strikes, and so on.

JS: I cannot talk in the name of the SCAF. [laughs] But what I can tell about this committee is that in 1952 the military had a coup d’état and they had power. Now, in 2011 we had a real popular revolution, but the army is still in power. Why? We had nothing. We had not a single organization which could take the power. We did not have a party like in India, or South Africa, or a union like in Poland or Tunisia. We had nothing. Mubarak succeeded in destroying every single organization in this country. So we had nothing. […] I am a socialist [laughs] I cannot but see the army from a class perspective. The army is not a single unit. Tantawi is one of the regime. Enan is the CIA man in Egypt. All the major figures, the generals, are part of the ruling class. I don’t know what they have in mind, but I am sure that they are doing everything in their power to stop reform. They know that the real organized power is the Muslim Brotherhood. They know that they are reformist, if that’s the correct term. So why not having two or three of them in the government. Why not? Changing the government is like plastic surgery. Even cancelling the constitution they won’t mind. Making the presidential elections before the parliamentary elections, why not? But there are red lines for them. They won’t accept a civil committee to supervise the transition period. They won’t allow workers struggle. So there are red lines. You can say that there is some alliance now between them and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not a permanent alliance. This is why the reformists are crazy in my point of view. Whenever the pressure of the people will weaken, the first thing the SCAF will do is
putting the Muslim Brothers in jail. It is this way all the time. Reformists cannot see the power of the people.
BDS: We saw you at the meeting in Suez of the workers to make an independent trade-union. Can you tell us something more about the different initiatives of workers trying to make independent unions?

SS: I was attending the meeting of the Revolutionary Workers Alliance in Suez. The media are trying to make their own union. They are thirty two thousand workers in the whole country. They made a lot of strikes in the last period. They are not officially employed and only get 99 pounds a month. The ex-parliament took a decision that we would be employed with a wage of 380 pounds, but this has not been implemented yet. Egyco and Abesco and the petrol industry in Suez are right now trying to establish their own unions. All the workers who are making their own independent unions could not get their rights in the state syndicates or unions. The transport workers made their own union. The health technicians. The real estate tax workers. The sugar workers are now trying to make a union [...] And workers in Nag Hammadi. [...] The journalists are trying to make their own independent union. The journalists are trying to collect money on the internet and trying to make a union through the internet before making a real union. Also the nurses in Mansura and Tanta and we are trying to forge an alliance between them. On 4 April we’ll have a mass strike of all temporary workers, demanding to officially employ them and to ask for each section an independent trade-union. [...] Ceramic al-Batra company is right now making a strike in Suez. We are having a strike right now in Suez of the private companies workers. Even the private workers are trying to make their independent unions. The workers who already had their state union, will kick out their old leaders and try to fix their union. They send documents and information to the workers in the private companies to explain how they can make their own unions. I have travelled to Naga Hammadi, Asiyut, Eina, Suez, Ismailiya, Alexandria, I’m going to Fayyum on Sunday, to Gharibiyya and Daqahliyya, to give the workers the consciousness of how they can organize their own committees in the companies. The workers had the false idea that they needed the permission of the state union leadership to create a committee in their company. This is not true. It is allowed now for all the workers to organize their own union and to block the automatic deduction of the state union fee from their wages. That’s it.

BDS: Is there a big discussion among the workers about the strategy of reforming the state unions or establishing new, independent unions?
SS: No. [laughs] They are trying to destroy the state federation of the Egyptian workers in order to be free to create their own unions. The state federation made its own image worse during the protests in front of the union headquarters because they used violence against the workers. The workers already started the struggle against the state federation but they must have support from the political forces in Egypt to organize the new independent federation which has been founded by Kamal Abu al-Eita and his comrades.

BDS: For example in the teachers’ syndicate there is a discussion between different groups, some of them, especially the Ikhwan, want to reform the syndicate and get rid of the leaders, others went out of the syndicate and created their own union. What is your opinion on this discussion?

SS: The Ikhwan changed their own policies. Now they are saying they want to kick out all the old regime leaders in the state unions and syndicates, but the workers refuse this strategy because they know that the Ikhwan wants to occupy these positions for themselves. The Ikhwan wants new elections because they are the ones who would reap the benefits from these elections. All the workers lost their trust after the conference of the Ikhwan, especially when Essam al-Arian said that the workers’ strikes are not an expression of the revolutionary demand of social justice.

BDS: Tell me about the cooperation between the workers and political forces.

SS: There is a labor committee and there are a lot of political powers supporting it: the ECESR, HMLC, the SRC, the RS… we have kicked the Ikhwan out of this organization after Essam al-Erian his statements. That doesn’t mean that all Ikhwan are evil and working against the workers. For example, Yosri Bayumi is with the workers and says that the strikes are an expression of the workers’ struggle for social justice. We asked first the Ikhwan to make an official statement on Ikhwan online which supported the strikes, because they only claimed to support it in internal meetings, but never in the open, they never published this. I asked Yosri Bayumi about this situation and he said that even he could not do anything about this situation, that this was too hard for him to change. Also Tadamon participates. The independent trade-union federation of Kamal Abu al-Eita, the CTWS, HASHD… Only Tagammu and Ikhwan are not present. Talal is present, as a member of the pensioners union, not as a Tagammu member. Talal refused to talk as a Tagammu member. […] This committee has secretaries which are elected every year from the workers themselves. I am one of the secretaries. It exists since nine years.

BDS: What is the most important task of this committee?

SS: Supporting all the workers and strikes in Egypt during the last nine years, arranging support for the strikes, media support, legal support. The legal support was very effective to create the workers’ committees in the factories. The nine secretaries in the committee were responsible for all workers in Egypt, all the strikes, and raising the consciousness. We are having monthly meetings, the second Friday of every month in
the HMLC. Now this labor committee is trying to unite the different unions and committees. […]

**BDS:** There is also a lot of discussion about the need for an independent Labor Party. Do you think this committee and an independent trade-union federation could be the basis for a Labor Party?

**SS:** We already have three labor parties. The Popular Alliance Party. From the Ikhwan there is the Current Party. And the Revolutionary Socialists are establishing the Democratic Labor Party. I will be a member in the Popular Alliance Party because the workers themselves are creating the party. Tanta al-Qitan workers were dreaming about making this Labor Party: a Labor Party with a political background, not a political party with a labor dimension. Through cooperation with important worker leaders we are trying to raise the consciousness of the workers. Conscious workers are now writing the program of the party. The party will not have any clash with the independent unions. You can both work in the party and work in the unions.

**BDS:** Why do you choose for the Popular Alliance Party and not for the Democratic Labor Party?

**SS:** The leadership of the DLP is trying to make a political party with a labor background, but the PAP the workers are the base which create the party. The workers are the ones writing the program and arranging the organization and demands.

**BDS:** Do you think that before the revolution, and even now, journalists played the role of political activists because parties were and are very weak?

**SS:** The journalists always played the role of journalists: transferring information. Every newspaper has its own editing policy. […] But, some journalists have a good political consciousness. I wasn’t in a party, but working with this committee for all these years gave me a form of political consciousness. The journalists don’t have their own trade-union. If they want to be effective towards the workers, they should be effective among themselves. [laughs]

**BDS:** Do you think it is strange that workers like the teachers, real estate tax workers, the pensioners, and so on, were able to make their own independent unions, while the most powerful sections of the working class, the Mahalla textile workers or the steel or cement workers, up until now have not been able to create an independent union?

**SS:** After the strike of 2008 in Ghazl al-Mahalla they didn’t have any labor activity anymore. The reason was that there wasn’t a real worker leadership there, despite what the media was telling us. In 2008 the state union leadership started to kick out the active worker leaders in Mahalla and transferred them to Cairo and Alexandria, and it was as if they killed them slowly. If there was a real leadership, the factory would have made a strike to support those who have been kicked out. If they were a real leadership, there would have been strikes in solidarity with them. So they were not real leaders. In 6 April the workers of Mahalla did not join the general strike.
What happened was that the citizens started protest and after a woman was hit, only on 7 April the workers joined. The majority of the workers in the steel sector are political leaders... so they never agree on something. This is what we are trying to do within the association for revolutionary workers, to organize the workers and political forces.
BDS: Can you tell me something about your personal history of activism?

TS: In 1974 Tagammu was established, and I became a member of the organization. I was an employee of the company Nasr, which produced television and electronics. I was a technician which repaired malfunctioning devices. I have been a member of the trade union council of the company since 1979, after I joined Tagammu. I did trade union work among the workers, respected them, and tried to solve all their labor problems. In the company union, there was a division between the bosses and the workers, and when there was a conflict, the workers had a clear victory, as they were in the majority. The council achieved workers’ demands, such as a raise in our salaries and the bonuses which depend on these salaries. Furthermore, we realized equality in workers’ pay. As it is my dream to realize the workers’ hopes, I focused on trade union and not political work, trying to change the trade union.

BDS: In the past, Tagammu was really active in the trade unions, it seems.

TS: Yes, we were active in various companies. After some years we established the committee of workers in Tagammu, with the intent of gathering workers and strengthening them. Many of the workers of Tagammu became elected to represent their interests and we were a strong force in the trade-union. However, the government has a red line: members of Tagammu cannot enter the council of the ETUF. In addition, the government manipulated the results of elections in the interests of its own supporters. So we work at the low level of the unions; in the company committees.

BDS: What do you think of the Mahalla movement?

TS: Well, the movement of the workers exists since 1976, it is a continuous movement and has not stopped since then. But in December 2006, the workers of Ghazl al-Mahalla made a great movement. They demanded a salary raise. Other workers gained hope through the Mahalla workers’ victory and struck as well. They advanced the same demands: a good salary, decrease in the cost of education, etc. A good salary is necessary, it’s a means to lead a decent life. In addition, the strike was an important learning experience: it showed the workers the power of a strike as an instrument. Tagammu made a study about the national minimum wage necessary to live a good life. You will need 912 EGP minimum. The law stipulates a minimum wage of 35 pounds, and in 1997 this has been raised by 10-15%, and recently with 30%. Still not a
fraction of the real cost of food, rent, transport, medicine, education. So today there is still a struggle going on to improve the minimum wage.

BDS: I heard that the Mahalla workers were against the official unions, and demanded an independent union. Isn't it difficult for Tagammu to both work in the official unions and stand by the Mahalla workers?

TS: We have encouraged the workers to create their own, independent union, with their own ways, far from the regime union. Tagammu was with the independent movement and supported the demand for a new union. Already in 2001 we had a committee in the party to steer workers towards the idea of an independent movement.

BDS: Do you think the workers' movement can change the regime?

TS: Now? No. They only want to raise their salary and standard of living. Maybe in the future there will be a combination of political and syndical actions, but this will take several years. Some political movements use the workers for their own objectives. The workers fear politics, they just want to reach their objectives, like salaries etc. We must wait, in the near future they will understand the relation between the economic and the politics. They will understand the necessity of making this connection.

BDS: What is the current role of Tagammu in the workers' movement?

TS: We support the workers' movement at any place, for example through our solidarity articles in al-Ahali. We gather workers, give them training and raise syndicalist issues. We make coalitions with other parties. Now we are preparing a law for the organization of an independent syndicate. We will present it to the parliament and put pressure on the regime. However, we need signatures before we can present it to the parliament. Each second Friday of the month, we have a meeting, here at Tagammu, where we discuss labor subjects and take decisions. It's also the organ which prepares the law. 27 civil society organizations and fourteen parties participate in this meeting: Nasserist, al-Ahrar, communist party, Muslim Brothers, ... Not the Wafd.

BDS: The Muslim Brothers as well?

TS: Yes, we work together on syndical questions, not on political ones. The Muslim Brotherhood takes the same side of the workers. In the past the Ikhwan did not work in this field. Muslim Brotherhood began working with the other organizations last year, and now they are participating in the creation of the new law. Muslim Brotherhood MP Yosri Bayumi, for example, he is with the workers. On the 1 May celebrations, we prepare workshops to discuss the law and Bayumi will introduce the principle in Tagammu. It's important to all political parties to achieve a victory in this field. Cooperation in this field is necessary.

BDS: So the Muslim Brotherhood supported the Mahalla movement?
TS: In the beginning they declared their participation. After a few days, they withdrew. They are continuously balancing. In most situations they take steps back, as they don't want to anger the government. The workers do not accept this attitude and they know that labor is not the field of the Muslim Brotherhood. Workers don't want politics interfere in their work. When the workers organize a movement, the government treats them kindly, when political parties enter to control the movement, the government reacts very strongly. So the workers want to be independent from the parties.

The tax collectors of buildings have developed an independent union. The ILO supports it. This is the first time since 1952 that there's an independent union. It sets an example for other movements. At the same time it's only a show, an illusion of liberty. The government allows this union to deceive the ILO.
BDS: To start with, can you tell me something about your personal intellectual and political development?

WT: My political activism started in the university. First I became a member of Tagammu in Beni Suef. Step by step I started to participate in the building of a new movement in Egypt: the Revolutionary Socialists (RS). After a while I lost contact with Tagammu and I joined the RS. Then there was a split. There was one group, Tahrir al-‘Umal, Workers’ Freedom, which had a journal “the Spark”. The other group, the RS, had a journal with the same name. Between 1994 and 2002 these groups were separated. They united in 2002 because of the Second Palestinian Intifada. This was part of a broader tendency to unite different political currencies. But after the unification there was a tactical discussion about the united front (a front like Trotsky proposed in the past in the context of France).

BDS: Was the united front only composed of leftist groups or was it also directed towards the Ikhwan and other political groups?

WT: The invitation to the Ikhwan was one of the causes of the discussion as in principle the front should only contain leftist forces. Me and a group of people in the RS posited that the front should only be composed of leftists. In the discussion the other side had the majority. Our group didn’t have any leaders but consisted mostly of mid-rank cadres. We had no party resources at all to our disposal to spread our ideas. There was no democratic discussion in the whole party. My articles and opinion pieces were only distributed in the branch, so they did not have an impact on the rest of the organization. First I thought I stood alone, but then other members voiced their opposition and we united and became a tendency. I suggested the party that the discussion should thus be conducted through the whole organization. In each branch someone of the majority and someone of the minority should voice the standpoints of each group and then there should be a discussion and a vote. However, after the discussions I discovered that my articles were still only distributed in my own branch. In 2002 the new paper “United” published the majority point of view and I asked if this was a decision of part of the discussion. They claimed it to be part of the discussion. However, when the discussion really started in the branches, the majority got afraid of the minority’s views and when the minority got majority votes in the branches they stopped the discussion about the united front altogether.
BDS: What was the role of the British Socialist Workers Party in the discussion about the united front?

WT: The SWP had a big influence and wanted to impose its political line on other Trotskyist parties in the world. I had to gather signatures to reopen the discussion. Even though a lot of members of the majority did not agree with the ideas of my group, they signed my call for discussion because they thought it to be the right of the minority to speak up. Yet the majority cut off the discussion. After a while a lot of people from the media asked why we had “left” the organization and we were surprised because we did not leave the RS at all. So we had to learn from the media that we were kicked out of the organization. This was in 2006-2007. I had to start all over with my group and it was very hard because we did not have any resources. No paper, no computer, nothing. So after a while I decided to leave the group and join Tagammu. The members of my old group are still discussing their political and organizational future.

BDS: I have noticed that there are some people in the RS who speak English very well. Are they the ones who have a good relation with the SWP?

WT: Yes, they have a very good relation with the SWP. After the split we discovered that there were a lot of splits in the world and that they were with the SWP.

BDS: What do you think was the right approach to the united front?

WT: It had to be based on workers because of the social situation of the country. We said that their version of the front was actually Stalinist. A united front should have a class perspective. But the Stalinists do not care about the class aspect of the united front. They unite with all kinds of people fighting for political freedom, even from the right. We should remember the experiences of China and the Spanish Civil War.

BDS: In 2002 there was the movement in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, then there was the anti-war movement, then there was Kefaya. All these movements were first and foremost political movements directed against imperialism and the government. But then there was the workers movement of Mahalla. How did this class movement impact the left?

WT: The workers movement has been mostly weak, sometimes it was strong, but it was always there. I was chief editor of the Tagammu newspaper and I was responsible for the weekly paper about labor. Then the Tagammu labor section was the only one in Egypt. We wrote about strikes and all other kinds of labor problems. Already in the nineties there were a lot of strikes. Labor reports say that in 1996 alone there were 500 actions against privatizations and to keep salaries and pensions. Until 2001-2003 there were 200 to 400 strikes yearly. The difference with the Mahalla strikes was, first, that there was no interest of the media and politics to engage with it. So the strikes remained isolated as there were no successful examples to strengthen them. The Mahalla strike in December 2006 gave other workers the powerful example of a successful strike. However, before Mahalla, there were already good examples of
strike movements, such as Cement Helwan in 2005-2006. The example of Helwan was like a chain reaction for other strikes and it made the media aware of the strike movement.

Even before that, in 2001, there was already a powerful strike in Ominestu against their Syrian-American investor. The factories in al-Goub, in Cairo and in 26 Ramadan were shut down. They had 5,000 workers and some 200 of them came to the parliament which was a good start of the action. It was the first time they went to the parliament and they asked for Said Rashid, the president of the labor union and a member of parliament. And they complained about not having received their salaries for four months. Said Rashid listened to their complaints and then said he would see them again after viewing their evidence. I was there and I said it would be good if they didn’t go back home but waited in the labor union. I was surprised that the workers agreed and we walked then from the metro at Midan Tahrir to the labor union. The security forces wanted to separate us but when they saw that they weren’t able to do so, they started to organize our walk to the union, stopping traffic and so on. The workers protected me against the security forces. When they were in the union I saw that the workers needed support and I went with a few workers to the nearby Earth Center to make some calls. When I came back the 200 workers had disappeared. The workers had an appointment with Rashid at the Textile Union (Rashid was also the president of this union). I said that they should try to go to the appointment with all workers. To my surprise some 1,000 workers showed up and the security tried to separate the workers. I tried to find the workers I knew, but even though I knew nobody all the workers seemed to know my name. They lifted me up to stand on an elevation and I started not a speech, but a discussion as to what to do: go back to the labor union or stay at the union. I wanted to stay because the security would try again to separate and isolate the workers. However, most of them agreed to go back to the union. These workers followed two different ways to get to the union so they got separated. The group going along the Maspero TV tower was surrounded by the police and they started to attack them. Some workers were heavily wounded, and their limbs were broken. When I saw the split and the police violence I thought it was the end of the protest, but after a while the workers who had fled the police came back together. There were a lot of women workers and the police brutality against them enraged the male workers. They became angry and threatened the security to use violence themselves if they not stopped their attacks. In the end we went to the labor union. We then called the workers who had remained at the union. We told about the police attack and we called around to send lawyers with the injured workers to the hospitals. We also agreed that we would negotiate as one group. The negotiations were held in the syndicate. The workers demanded the pay of their salary. They had also heard from the chauffeur of Adil Aga, the owner of the factory, that the boss was planning on fleeing Egypt. However, they arrested him at the airport. The workers wanted their salaries and to start up production in the factories again, and Aga had to pay. The workers did not trust Rashid any longer and demanded that he would be fired. Instead they wanted to talk with the Minister of Economy, Boutros Ghali. Finally they got an agreement and their salaries were paid directly and in cash in the union from the Ministry. They also had a conference with the workers, the labor union and the labor Ministry about restarting production in the factories. The land was owned by Adil Aga, as factory owners get their lands for free
as a means to stimulate investments. The machines were bought through a loan from the bank, which the owner had not yet paid for. The profits were realized by selling the products abroad and the money did not return to Egypt. Adil Aga was placed in jail for three years and he had to pay the salaries. However, after three years the bank wanted its money back and when Aga got out of jail he started firing workers and he sold the factories, which started a new wave of strikes. Only three papers wrote about this whole experience: al-Ahram Weekly, the paper of the union, and the Tagammu paper. All governmental newspapers had covered the events but the publication thereof was refused. This makes clear that the media was absent during this experience.
WT: Let’s start from the beginning. I left the RS and this group split into two groups. One of them is led by Tamer Wageh and the other is led by Sameh Naguib. Wael Gamal left the group before the split. He was the leader of the group before the split. He got out as an individual. Fatma Ramadan is the labor leader of Tamer’s group and Hisham Fouad is the labor leader of Sameh’s group. Tamer and Sameh are the political leaders, Hisham and Fatma are labor leaders.

BDS: I talked with Mustafa Bassiouni about the collaboration with the Ikhwan. And he told me “no no there is no united front but we work together only during specific actions”.

WT: The RS reached this conclusion. It begins from 2002 and ended in 2006. The Ikhwan tried to say “we are with you” and the socialists tried to work with them and after a while, after four years of trying, they had this conclusion. They had a lot of activities and cooperation together, but the Ikhwan wasn’t really truthful, they say one thing and do another, so in the end the RS didn’t believe in the Ikhwan’s political attitude.

BDS: But I’ve heard also that there were student unions, I think it started in Helwan, which were together with the Ikhwan and the RS.

WT: This is during one of the cooperation experiments, which happened in Helwan, but the Ikhwan refused to do this cooperation in Ayn Shams because of the weakness of the RS in Ayn Shams. They always had a lot of joint activities, in different shapes, but the nature of this conflict was ideological. The Ikhwan feels powerful and strong. The Ikhwan pretends that they want to cooperate with other political powers to give themselves legality by working with these organizations.

BDS: Originally the idea was that the RS would work together with the Ikhwan to recruit young people from the Ikhwan?

WT: They pretend and said that they would bring a lot of Ikhwan youth but it was not right. The RS isn’t that stupid to say that this was the original idea in this cooperation. But they imagined that there was a possibility to do this. Up until now they didn’t succeed in bringing one new member of the Ikhwan. But the basic idea was cooperating with the Ikhwan, because they are a real power in the street – I don’t accept all of this, I refuse this type of cooperation between two powers with this kind of ideological difference. The RS says that we can have some profit from the feelings
in the street towards the Ikhwan, that we can use this relation between the people and the Ikhwan and benefit from the street, from the citizens.

BDS: Isn’t this tactic dangerous?

WT: Of course! We warned them a lot. Real cooperation is not possible because of the weakness of the RS. We would end up as the tail of the Ikhwan or in the tail of any other rightist organization or power which is not at all to our benefit.

BDS: So there were no members of the Ikhwan joining the RS, but what about the other way around? Were there members of the RS attracted to the Ikhwan because they were stronger?

WT: No. No one joined the other side. The most famous cooperation between them was the mobilization against the Palestinian and Iraq war and the presidential referendum. The problems became clear during the parliamentary elections of 2005. There were two or three candidates of the RS, Kamal Khalil and others, they are not famous. They pushed Kamal Khalil to put forward his candidacy in Imbaba because the al-Watani member was strong there, and the Ikhwan didn’t put forward any candidate of their own. This was a trick. In the weaker areas they had a lot of Ikhwan members, and the Ikhwan didn’t support Kamal Khalil by vote. In Imbaba they have more than 4,000 Ikhwan members but they didn’t vote for Kamal; for them it was enough not to vote for the al-Watani member. Kamal only had 400 votes and this is only the vote of the Left. So they revealed the illusion of cooperation with the Ikhwan. And they started to change their discourse about the united front with the Ikhwan. And they started to say as they say to you know “it was about little activities and little situations” but in their publications they write clearly “the united front between RS and the Ikhwan”. But now they pretend it wasn’t a united front but only little instants of cooperation here and there.

BDS: So the new perspective on the united front was it only because of changes in Egypt, or also because of problems within the British SWP?

WT: [...] It wasn’t a new vision, it was a step back from before.

BDS: So what they say in 2006 is a step back from before? Because they say that the Ikhwan is no power in the street?

WT: No. They say that they are a power in the street, but now they are saying that they cannot cooperate with them and that it wasn’t a united front etc. No one can say that the Ikhwan isn’t a power in the street. [...] The new perspective was because of changes in Egypt. Because of the relationship with the SWP they cannot say that it was a bad idea, they only say now that it is impossible and that they only had little collaborations. The new vision in the SWP, in my information, is to cooperate with the NGOs, and to be aligned with them. An important group of the SWP [...] around Chris Harman had the idea to cooperate with the Brotherhood. [...] That was the cause of all this. Then they entrenched the cooperation during the mobilizations
against Palestinian war, Afghanistan, and Iraq. [...] Chris Harman was coming to Egypt during the meetings of the Cairo Conference which started in 2003. It was organized by the RS and the Ikhwan and a lot of syndicates controlled by the Ikhwan; the doctors and engineers syndicate. And al-Karama party. This is one of the moments of collaboration and this was the second time for Chris Harman to come to Egypt. He was one of the main defenders of the idea of cooperating with the Ikhwan.

BDS: So these conferences were an important meeting place for the SWP and the RS?

WT: The Conferences were held for three or four years, but the conference itself had a “heart attack”; they had no real results because of...

BDS: They said it was because of the security, but wasn’t it because of the organization itself?

WT: It’s not because of the organization or the security, but because of the subject which united all of them around the conference. The best conference was the first one in 2003, because of the Afghanistan and Iraq war and there were a lot of demos and strikes and there was a possibility to cooperate but afterwards there were no possibilities to continue the cooperation. [...] I had an idea to transform the meaning of the conference from working on the Afghanistan and Iraq war to work on labor and the unions. Especially in creating independent organizations in the areas which hadn’t grassroots organizations. Also dealing with the hunger and poverty cases. And capitalist violence. Capitalism has become a monster towards all the poor people. They talked about this text but they only read it, they didn’t try to do anything about it, they didn’t take any decision about it.

BDS: The Mahalla movement had a big potential, but it failed. What are the reasons why the Mahalla movement hasn’t become stronger, organizing more and more people?

WT: There are a lot of reasons, most of them related to organization and consciousness. The main issue for the political organizations which were active in Mahalla in 2006 was how to win a lot of members from this movement. However, the movement itself needed a lot of organization and development. About the leadership. There was a lot of pretension and hypocrisy. I was one of the ones interested in it; to protect the workers leaders and to protect and keep these leaders a secret and encourage them to create other leaders, the backline leaders. But there were problems from two sides: on the one hand, from the political forces which discovered these leaders, and on the other, from the leaders themselves who didn’t create the substitution leaders. After the destruction of these leaders because of the security or because of themselves, because they love to be famous, there was a gap between them and the base of the workers’ movement. The leadership was destroyed by transferring them to other companies, by early retirement and by making them famous; they became like superstars and this made the public and base workers not trust them. For example, in one of the fights, three of the workers leaders were invited to a conference in the Journalist Syndicate. And I said: “it’s not logical, you are supposed to be in your power base and the media must come to you and not the other way around”, but
because of the influence of the political forces and their “superstar” aims, they gave the security and the administration the opportunity to create an image of these leaders, that these leaders are not defending the workers’ demands, that they are becoming superstars and only defending their own personal interests.

There is a third reason. The political forces which emerged on 6 April transformed the strike into a “superstar” action, making the state and the government extra careful for the movement. No one imagined that the government could be so smart and use violence in such a subtle way. The security went to every place where the strike was and they finished the strikes. The way to do it was to say to the workers that the political forces would not support them, but that they need the workers and will use them and control them in order to become famous and so on. Then there is the violence which the workers in Mahalla and the strike members face up until now. Did you know there were no strikes on 6 April?

BDS: Yes, the police went in the factories before the strike.

WT: The minister came to Mahalla, Nazif came to Mahalla and agreed to all the workers demands. One of the labor demands, and they thought it was not possible, was firing the management, and it happened. Nazif realized it for them. The management was officially investigated and that was for the workers a big victory. Especially because they thought it was a near impossible aim. And it was possible for the government to convince a lot of the workers, by their deeds, by money, and so on. [...] The end of the strike was because of the lack of organization and the attempts of the political forces to control it and to use it and not to support it. The leaders of the strikes when they did not make any substitution leaders and the power of the state were the reasons of the failure.

BDS: Do you think there is a contradiction between the two shapes of political intervention: to support and organize the strike; and to use it for the development of your own organization.

WT: A lot of political organizations treated the Mahalla movement as a launch pad for a new workers movement and they didn’t treat it as what it really was: a big strike. There was a big struggle between the political forces, criticizing each other, trying to win members and elements from the strike instead of supporting it. There were a lot of documents which were distributed and which created a lot of conflict; each political organization had its own text which conflicted with the others.

BDS: It’s ironical. When I was in Tagammu they told me that the problem is that “other” political parties come to the strike and try to get workers on their side; when I was in the RS, Mustafa Bassiouni said the same: other political powers...

WT: That’s true. All the political powers did it. It was a reality and all the people saw it. The most important thing was that they didn’t calculate the moment and the power of the movement. Any start of any strike, if it is big or small, the most important thing is to support it, to organize it and to push it forward. Especially because of the low consciousness, the low level of political ideas of the workers and the Egyptian street
and the lack of organization. All of this created this outcome, it made the struggle fail. All these movements are not organized because of the attitude of the political organizations. The biggest political powers in the strikes had only two or one member and said “it is our struggle!” because of their numbers. In the same time, their members didn’t work to make substitution leaders or to organize the factories. You have to do some things before distributing your program. You must be present in the strike and make sure that the workers trust you. Most leaders in the Mahalla strikes were not in any organization. They were natural leaders, spontaneous. The most important thing before distributing your program is to search and find these leaders and work with them to organize the movement. And work in two ways with them. Firstly, you have to raise their consciousness [...]. Secondly, you have to prepare them to work against the government. This is the real work which must be present in any strike, not only in Mahalla. I will give you an example. In 2004 in Ghazl al-Lib, we started to work four months before the strike. Those four months we were working to build the minds of the people and to raise their consciousness and to organize them and to make them strong against the government and because of this work before the strike, the strike continued for two months as a good strike, and this became the longest strike in Egypt for a working factory. The workers switched off the machines in order to make the strike. They were not switched off before the strike. They struck and stopped the machines. And when they arrested the leaders and used violence this did not stop the strike. We suffered a lot of repression by the state, but we weren’t afraid. We created substitution leaders. [...] Working in the strike before it actually starts is the most important thing. I remember that the workers said that “we want to make the strike tomorrow” and I said “no we should wait and prepare ourselves”. We didn’t win even four people from the strike, but it had a big impact on all the strikes. There was a strong relationship between the workers and us. But we only won about four members.
BDS: I have some questions which flow from other interviews, for example with Faysal Lakousha.

WT: Who is Faysal Lakousha?

BDS: He is a workers leader in Mahalla.

WT: He is no leader, he is just Faysal, an individual. [laughs]

BDS: [...] Lakousha blames that the media and the activists abandoned the workers after the strike, is this true or not?

WT: I understand the blaming of political parties and organizations. But the problem is that workers and individuals such as Faysal Lakousha create a conflict between the political work and professional work for a journalist who has to cover an action.

BDS: Of course afterwards there were workers imprisoned and charged and tortured and I have seen some human rights organizations doing actions against the torture of the workers and so on. Perhaps this is something the journalists could have covered more?

WT: I will give an example which shows the difference between the Mahalla and the tax workers’ experience. After the Mahalla strike was finished, because of the bad organization there was no group able to speak for Mahalla, and this was different for the tax workers’ strike. A lot of political organizations, especially the leftists, asked the Mahalla workers to make a substitution union, but it was so obvious that they were thinking that they would play the role of organizing the workers and creating new actions. And I think this was a bad idea of the parties. In addition, the government and political organizations started to work against the substitution leaders.

BDS: Why?

WT: A lot of organizations, especially the rightists, said that this view, the substitution union, is brought from the leftist parties. [...] It was like a fight between the left and
the right, and the leftist ideas failed. Every organization which had this idea about making an own union started to say: “we have won three or four worker leaders, we will start from them, we will build a new organization, not with all the leaders from all organizations and all parties”. And this destroyed the idea. The second thing is that the workers themselves were divided on the issue of creating an independent union. This discussion also created a split in the RS. One group was opposed to the idea of making an independent union and they split from Tadamon.

BDS: Why did they think it was wrong?

WT: They think the workers aren’t ready yet to make this move.

BDS: Who is the leader of the other organization?

WT: Tamer Wageeh and Yehya Fikri. I suggested to make a substitute group for the union committee without it being too obvious like the idea of an independent union. Our goal is to continue supporting the workers and work on the labor consciousness.

BDS: What do you think is the type of party organization or workers’ organization in Egypt? In history there have been two types of organization; in Russia there was a dictatorship and the organization was very secret; and in the West there was democracy and the organization was very open. Now in Egypt there is a dictatorship but there are also forms of press freedom and so on.

WT: Egypt needs an organization of educated Marxists especially with Trotskyist ideas about the permanent revolution. The main strategy is the revolution and at the moment the tactic is to organize the basis: the workers and the villagers. The leftists in Egypt, however, are ridden with conflict, between groups and between persons.

BDS: So there is a conflict between leftist groups. Do you think the solution for this is to try to unite the leftist groups on a very broad program where everyone can agree upon; or to have your own organization which has the best ideas and try to gain as much workers and peasants for this organization?

WT: I wish that all the powers, even the democratic powers, work on organizing the people and defend whatever labor case. It is an illusion that in Egypt only one group can work. First you need to stimulate the people’s consciousness so they can feel their real power, and this cannot come without organizing them around their interests. After a while you can make this wider. Had the political leaders in the nineties discovered the reality that workers have the same aims and problems because of the privatization, then they could have stopped the privatization itself.

BDS: Why did they not stop it?

WT: Because of a lot of causes. There were no ideas which suggested this. The people in Egypt were so afraid in making a step back. Perhaps it was too hard in that time. But right now the possibility is not easy, but more so than in the nineties. And the
privatization experience made a lot of different group discover the importance of working together. Our reality needs it. A lot of political groups and organizations wish to unite the Marxist powers, but in reality it is too difficult. A lot of Marxist groups in Egypt are rooted in a lot of different traditions: Stalinists, Maoists, Leninists, Trotskyists... Then there are the personal problems between individuals.

BDS: Isn’t it easy to unite the left around the necessity to unite and organize the workers, but, like you said, your opinion of permanent revolution comes into conflict with the majority of the left, which I think still have illusions in national capitalism. They want first democracy and development and only then socialism. I think you can work together on the question of the workers, but afterwards you will always have this conflict of ideas.

WT: One of the biggest problem of the Egyptian Marxist history is the national question, the national struggle, Arab nationalism. The big problem of the seventies generation was that it saw Egyptian nationalism as a priority. The national question was the primary issue for the seventies generation and they did not pay attention to the question of organizing themselves as leftists. You are attacked by a lot of people if you say that the struggle is a class struggle, even by those who said they are Marxists. Furthermore, the majority of the leaders in Marxist organizations are sons of the bourgeois class and a lot of them preferred to work with the rightist powers and at the same time they refused to cooperate with other leftist powers. This was the case with the RS: they were working with the Ikhwan, while attacking the ECP because of its Stalinist ideas. The cooperation between the RS and the Ikhwan was closer than that between them and the Stalinists.[…]

BDS: So the RS did in fact the same as the Stalinists?

WT: Exactly. At the same time when they were attacking the Stalinist ideas, they were working with the same methods. Instead, they should be searching for points of agreement and cooperate around this points with the other leftist powers.

BDS: You are confirming what I thought: the Stalinists are making their anti-imperialist front; and the RS also made an anti-imperialist front but with the Ikhwan.

WT: There were examples in China and France and Germany – the German Revolution failed because of this reason. Since a week we are organizing the Egyptian Social Forum and we invited a lot of people and this forum is gathering a lot of social movements. […] I was invited as the administrator of the Egyptian journalists’ committee. When I attended this forum I saw that a lot of organizations like the tax syndicate and my committee were attending together with a lot of organizations and centers which receive foreign aid. I protested against this. And then Tamer’s group said that this was their idea and anyone protesting it had to leave. So the Social Forum is only about making a good impression. It is not about organizing the Left, or cooperation between organizations, it’s only about propaganda and projecting a nice image to the outside world.
BDS: What do you think about Tagammu and the nature of the party, and why do you join Tagammu and what do you want to do there?

WT: There is a conflict in Tagammu right now. There are those who want Tagammu to play a bigger role than its limited part as a democratic power which gathers all tendencies. We are working against the party leadership. I think that Tagammu has the most leaders with the ability to work in the streets and around social issues. Of course not as strongly as the RS, but they have more numbers and they are an organization which exists in the whole country, and they are legal and have a lot of sites in the country and a big number of members and leaders.

BDS: You see Tagammu then more as a field of work then as a real instrument for change?

WT: The leadership does not want to become a power of change in Egypt or to take on the government. That is the problem of the Tagammu leaders. I would call the Tagammu program corporatist, not socialist. One of the most important aims of the Tagammu is to organize people in civil society. [...] Civil groups should ask for their demands and rights and cooperate with the state to play a role in changing politics. As a first step it is an important step, but only if it is done right. It should be a step towards the revolution.

BDS: I see in Tagammu a lot of possibilities, but also a lot of problems. Possibilities because it is a legal party, you can go to the streets, you can have a paper, you have a party office, etc. But it is also difficult because it is a legal party; the leadership wants to keep it legal and they are afraid of going to the streets and organize the people.

WT: In my opinion, if they take this first step and they will be punished by the state, their popularity in the street will increase, because through this step they made a connection with the people.

BDS: A lot of people left Tagammu in the nineties, for example Mustafa Bassiouni, because they tried to change Tagammu but they didn’t succeed. Does he think that there is a bigger possibility now to change Tagammu?

WT: I am one of the individuals who left Tagammu for years, but the presence of a lot of individuals inside the party, who have a good perspective on the reality and who want to change the party, encourages a lot of members to come back to the party. During the last conference of the Socialist Alliance a lot of people who were out of Tagammu and leaders of the seventies generation asked the leftists to go back to the party, in order to transform the party. They said that the members in Tagammu are starting to use the right perspective. I hope that this happens, but I don’t know if it will happen or not, we will have to try. If it will not happen we will go out of Tagammu again.

BDS: I also spoke with Ahmed Belal, he is a leader of the Trend for Change in Tagammu. [...]
WT: The Trend for Change in Tagammu gathers a lot of different people; the people who only want to make one step and the people who want to make a lot of steps.

BDS: Ahmed also told me that within the Trend there are also older members who speak a lot but don’t act…

WT: A lot of members in this Trend have personal aims, that’s a fact.

BDS: He also said that now in the Union of Progressive Youth there is also a conflict, can you tell me more about this?

WT: If you search for the causes of this conflict, you will find all the things we have said before. A lot of personal problems, and a lot of people who had a real vision, and in both sides there are members like this. I am not with the official youth union in Tagammu, but they have a lot of good members. This is a result of the whole conflict in Tagammu, because the personal reasons and the political reasons make the members in the youth union blind, they cannot see the right reasons. Both sides have the two types of members, both good and bad, which have personal problems and those who really care for the party and have a vision.

[discussion between WT and HH]

WT: The two trends have a lot of stances, and they changed their basic ideas and stances and aims through their work in the party. They started to transform these aims and ideas to fit their personal aims right now. Only one committee has the same aim and same stance since this conflict and that’s the Giza committee of Talat Fehmi.

BDS: Returning to the nationalism in the Egyptian left. Do you think the nationalist ideas have become less strong with the recent strike movement and ideas of class struggle have become stronger within the Egyptian left?

WT: You can discover this fact from the articles and the speech. Liberalism is the strongest line, it avoids the Marxist speech and ideas.

BDS: But an example; Hamdeen Sabahi of al-Karama which has nationalist ideas, said in an article that the workers are the primary, the most important, force of change in Egypt.

WT: Al-Wafd is saying the same. Compare Sabahi’s speech with some of the leftist organizations and you will see that Hamdeen Sabahi’s speech is better and more progressive, because he clearly identifies his direction. But there are a lot of differences between him and leftists trends. He is not a proponent of the revolution. He is against force and violence in revolutionary change. I think it will be necessary to use force and violence, it is not a desire but a necessity. Hamdeen talks about nationalist ideas but the struggle is international. He is attacking America through Arab nationalism, but capitalism is present in the whole world, from America to Asia. But it is clear for a lot of Marxist forces and the RS at their head, that they are working towards revolution but that they are also thinking about the steps to reach the
revolution. They differ in tactics. Of course they share the same strategy, but differ in tactics. Working with Hamdeen Sabahi is possible, but not with the Ikhwan.

BDS: I agree with what you are saying. But I wondered if the speech has changed, just the speech, containing more of a workerist perspective than ten years ago.

WT: Of course. Kamal Abu al-Eita is a member of Karama, he is one of the leaders of the tax syndicate. They are using this and may have a vision for this, but their vision is limited. This is happening at the same time with a lot of Marxist and Nasserist groups. When al-Karama supported the tax syndicate and led the organization for the independent union, at the same time Tamer’s group said that they are against the independent union, well, they are not clearly against them but they think it’s not the right time. When al-Karama and these nationalist organizations share an idea or project with the workers, it brings them much closer to the workers than the left, such as the RS. Yes, they are starting to use “workers” in their discourse and may have a perspective on them. Sometimes in the democratic movements in Egypt you will find a discourse which is very similar to the leftist discourse, or even among the Ikhwan. But is it real? Their discourse is not the only way to measure them. Sometimes they are using it to attract workers, but their program is the only real tool of measurement. For example, Tagammu is acting in a worse way than the Ikhwan, its program is better and closer to the street and the workers. So the program in Tagammu is waiting for the one who will act right, on the base of the program itself. […]

BDS: I agree that their discourse is for their own benefit, in order to attract workers. But perhaps it’s also positive that they use this kind of speech because it makes the class consciousness stronger? It is an indication that the workers movement became more important.

WT: Sure. You will discover the reality of the Ikhwan in the labor strikes. Especially the factories which had a lot of Ikhwan labor leaders. You have to connect with them because they are workers in the factory, but they are also members in Ikhwan. But meanwhile we connect the workers themselves and they move to the left, and then they move to the Ikhwan because of their discourse, because the left discourse is about facing the facts whereas the Ikhwan have a weaker speech, to settle down and so on. In Helwan Cement strike a year ago, there were two union committee members who were from the Ikhwan. They were acting like the leaders but when they started the strike… after they accepted two of the five demands in the cement strike all the workers went to the left side. The Ikhwan members started to say “come on let’s finish the strike, we have achieved two of the five demands”. I and a lot of comrades made a speech and it made a row between them and the Ikhwan members and they started to attack our group, saying that we wanted to destroy the workers’ future and the workers started to defend us against the Ikhwan members. The “accidental consciousness” was raised by action in the movement.

BDS: That’s interesting. The Ikhwan is playing a bit the role like the Christian right-wing parties have played in the history of Belgium. Because they, on the one hand, sometimes support the workers, but they always stop very soon after they
accomplished a small aim. They say that’s enough, because they don’t want class conflict. And they are always telling the workers to know their place and position in society. It’s an interesting parallel.

WT: Of course. At the moment the Egyptian left has a historical role to play, if it cannot play it, the ability to wage revolution will be stolen from it. It can happen after a lot of years. But the Left has to be ready for the revolution. [...] What we need to do right now is to invest our energy in organizing the people so that they can defend their interests [...]. In the last period the Wafd, after Saad al-Badawi became president, had a lot of popularity which Wafd hadn’t enjoyed since 20 years. But he destroyed all this with al-Dostour in one day. It revealed him in front of all people. The left has an opportunity but it has to make the effort to invest. No trend can do it alone. We are sure that Tagammu has a big chance because it is an already existing organization [...] You can make it a strong party. [...]

BDS: In 1952 there was a revolution but Nasser took power, in 1977 there was also a revolt against Sadat. Both occasions were the biggest revolts up until now in Egypt. Two times the revolt failed. Because, I think, of the weakness of the organization of the left.

WT: Yes. In 1952 we had two strong trends HADATU and the labor group. The Marxists leaders had a false perspective because they had a lot of Stalinist ideas, for example that Nasser was the start point to develop socialism. At the same time Stalin was supporting the national liberation movement. The group which was acting and depending on Stalinist ideas thought that this was the start of the transition to socialism, a step towards the socialist society and one of the tools to reach socialism. As a result they accepted 1952 and some of them started to say that “we have to be elements to defend this revolution” and make an end to the party. After this a lot of the leftist groups began to make their own organizations, but Nasser did not give them the chance to organize and arrested them. There was a strike in Kafr al-Dawwar and the government hanged two of the workers, leaders of the strike. Then the Marxists discovered that Nasser was working against the workers. At the same time the government discovered the elements who wanted to reorganize the workers. After the cooperation between the Nasserite system and the USSR Nasser released the communists. And for the second time they were misled by the idea of Nasser creating a socialist society. And a lot of them agreed with Nasser and those who refused stayed in jail. Abd al-Nasser employed them in ministries and he made them control the union. Nasser had a famous speech in 1959 when he said that Egypt was honored to be a socialist country and to stay a socialist country. In the same year he made the agriculture reform law. Three years before he had nationalized the Suez Canal. These moves and acts of Abd al-Nasser made the Marxists leaders at ease. At the same time the system attacked strongly and violently everyone who thought of making their own organization. The result of this era was a weakness of the Left. After 1967 the debate shifted to the national question. 1967 was a big event which pushed a lot of individuals to reorganize their organizations. Independence and nationalism became the keywords of these organizations. It shifted the internal struggle to an external struggle. Until 1973 it was the best era for the left. But the national question could not point the way to revolution and only in 1977 this was
discovered. The leftists were surprised with the uprising in 18 and 19 January. The main activity was working among the students and there was little engagement with the workers’ movement. There were no organizations which profited from this moment, because of the absence of a strong organization and the weakness of political consciousness blocked the workers of making a connection between their own social problems and the nature of the system. So they were not working against the system, they had reformist demands. Whenever the government accepted it, the protest was finished. The parties could not lead their supporters. The leftist organizations were also too closed. They had a huge number of members but they were not effective among the base of society. And the parties only discovered their weakness and little effectiveness during their actions. And it was easy for the system to find and destroy them after encouraging the Islamic groups in the universities. These were the two reasons of the failing of 1977.

BDS: What can we learn from these two experiences and is the situation today better or not?

WT: We have learned many things: the reasons for the failure of the USSR; that the national liberation movements are not a way for social change; and that a powerful organization does not necessarily means it is effective in society. Now we need a strong organization and we need a powerful organization, which can have an effect on the street. For example the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The Mensheviks had a huge number, but the Bolsheviks were more effective and could lead the revolution and this was a result of two things: the organization was taking good decisions and they had a good timing.

BDS: So there is a problem in Egypt today. In Egypt the left is so small and there are many conflicts so the situation is worse than in 1952 and 1977.

WT: Even in the next year there could be a revolution, we should be ready and start organizing right now or we won’t have a successful revolution. We have to learn from the lessons of the past. We should not organize the people in Marxist organizations. We should not create Marxist organizations. They should not even be class organizations. But Marxists should be the leaders and directors of the movements in order to ensure two things: creating a strong organization and raise their effectiveness.
BDS: This afternoon we had an interview with Tareq Said of al-Karama, do you know him. We spoke about the politics of al-Karama. According to him Karama is part of the new movements in Egypt and these new movements, such as Karama, Kefaya, ..., are very different from organization such as Tagammu because they are more oriented towards the street and the ordinary people. But at the same time it was not very clear how they do this. Because I tried to ask him how do you do this street politics concretely. And this was not very clear. [...] 

WT: Karama and Kefaya are similar in their orientation towards the street. But there is a difference between the two groups. Karama is part of the Nasserite tradition in Egypt, even if they differ from the Nasserist party they have a shared goal. Their membership is conditioned to accept these ideas. Kefaya is a gathering of members from different movements. The same thing with 6 April. Karama is one of the parties which has a specific point of view and a strategy. Karama is one of the Nasserist movements in Egypt. They seek ruling through Abd al-Nasser’s strategy. But the way to achieve this is through civil disobedience, they believe in the power of the people, not like a revolution, but through a civil opposition and peaceful movement. Hamdeen Sabahi is one of the most important people in the left of the Nasserist orientation. [...] This is Karama. These are their ideas in brief, their main references are the declarations of Nasser [...] and the conclusions of Ahmed Sayf ad-Dawla and his son Mohammad Sayf ad-Dawla. He is one of the most important people who discusses these ideas of pan-Arabism and nationalism; the idea of the regional union. They are like an extension to the Baathist movement in the region. [...] 

BDS: Do you think they have also drawn some lessons from the Nasserist period? They say they are democratic now. Do you think they will try to combine the socialist ideas of Nasser with liberal democracy? 

WT: Before the nineties they did not admit that Abd al-Nasser was not democratic, but since ten to fifteen years they found that this kept people away from them. Some of them now are saying that they are with all Nasser’s policies except for the issue of democracy. Yet they still defend this and justify it because they say that the period needed this. After the revolution an iron hand was needed because there was a danger from the outside. And that’s the only thing they are correcting. Most important Nasserists are enemies of the Marxists. They see that Marxism is different. When they approach religion for example they are more rightist.
BDS: Also their view on the people differs very much from the Marxist point of view, because they view the people as a unit on its own, while as a Marxist you look at society as divided into classes. So I asked what's the role of workers in change in Egypt. And he said of course workers will play a role, but not more important than other sectors in society. Another thing is that they don't seem to see the necessity for organizing the working class and its allies to prepare for revolution. They seem to think that the popular revolution was spontaneous. But perhaps I have only seen part of the problematic through this interview.

WT: You should read two things: the declaration of Abd al-Nasser and the explanation of Sayf ad-Dawla. He explained clearly the difference between the Marxists and the Nasserists. According to the Marxists the workers are the main force for change, of course the other classes are important as well, but they come later on. But the Nasserists depend the class of the people, on all the people, all the poor people, those without authority will make the change. [...] There is an illusion in the idea of Nasserism that you do not organizing this people. According to Marxism you need to have a party which has a theory and a vanguard. You need to help develop the movement to a political movement. The Nasserist movement don't see the urgent need to organize but depend on propaganda. It is like Kautsky, his party depended on propaganda without differentiating between the classes. [...] They don't differentiate between the classes and they have a collective view of all the classes of the people and this is their tool.

BDS: [...] This morning I had also an interview with Helmi Sha’rawi. I think that he as a Marxist has a better view on the situation. He pointed however to a problem in the working class of Egypt: that the industrial working class is becoming smaller, because of the privatizations, and that the labor force active in the informal economy is growing. For example with the land reforms in the nineties, up until today, peasants are driven from their lands and end up in the cities in the informal economy. In Europe, in the West, in the 19th century when this process happened it led the peasants to the factories where they were organized as a working class. Now in Egypt the organized working class is becoming smaller. Do you think this will become a problem for change and social revolution in Egypt, as the social base of the working class is becoming smaller?

WT: I disagree with this theory. This is not a correct point of view. The number of workers as a working class is growing, the productive working class in general. There is a new feature of capitalism, however, at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties up until now: there are less workers in one factory. For example, Esco textile factory, there were thirteen to fourteen thousand workers in the factory, but it turned into a group of small factories, because of the privatizations. In addition there are a number of private factories turning away from heavy products towards service or food products – but still: iron, textile and cement factories are growing. Talking about the decreasing number of workers is not correct, but there is an organic transformation of capitalism in Egyptian society. It turned away from the state, a capitalist state which used to have ownership, towards the power of some businessmen with strong ties to the government. In my own point of view: are peasants turning into workers or not? I
am from a village. When the peasant sons grow up, a number of them go to work in factories and companies. Part of them are ignorant and they turn into day laborers, paid each day. They are handicraftsmen and they are paid per day. Talking about the decrease of their number is not correct, the main thing about the recent development is that it splits big groups of the working class into smaller groups. […]

[interruption]

WT: Of course there is a part of them turning into workers. The law 96 in 1992 applied in 1997… do you know about this law?

BDS: I know something about this law, but not the details.

WT: Briefly it takes the lands which were given to the peasants for good and it gives the original owner the right to take it back from the farmers. It turned those who rent the land into worker-farmers. Most of them turned into employed farmers on the same stretch of land. The peasant is still there, but instead of renting or owning the land he takes money as an employed farmer.

BDS: So you do not think that the industrial working class is shrinking?

WT: No, not in numbers, no. There are changes in the labor class, sure, but one of the main features is the change from big to small groups. Furthermore there are different working conditions, a more cruel capitalist way. Lastly the new industrial cities. There is also a law which deals with the new situation which is called law 2003, implemented in the year 1999, the unified labor law. The second main feature is that the new owners or businessmen start to deal with factories in a different way. They ban any relations between workers and the society outside. They banned the buses from entering the factories to get the workers and deliver them to their working places. There is no relation between the factories and the new cities. The working hours are longer and the number of workers per factory decreased. The policies of privatization… one of its main methods is to apply new pensions and send workers leaders with important experiences on early retirement. This are the main features of capitalism which the working class faces.

BDS: Within Marxism there are different opinions on how class consciousness is formed. According to some Marxists class consciousness arises from the situation of production, for example if workers are gathered in a factory they have the social environment to organize themselves as workers; they are exploited together and this creates class consciousness. On the other hand, there are Marxists who say that class consciousness is especially formed through struggle. Especially Rosa Luxemburg is of this opinion. I think it is an important discussion because if you believe in the second point of view than it’s not important how workers are organized in capitalism, because it does not determinate their capability to gain class consciousness.

WT: I am close to Lenin in this debate between Lenin and Rosa if this is what you mean. Both Lenin and Rosa were convinced of the importance of the party. Their difference:
the nature of spontaneous class consciousness and its relation to theory. Lenin agreed that the party’s main role is to gain new intellectuals from the working class and to work through them and with them to apply theory on reality, how to make a combination between theory and the real world. [...] Before the idea and presence of socialism there are already workers who make strikes and demand certain things in a direct way. But Marxism directs this struggle from a syndical fight to a political struggle. It is important to conduct two main struggles: (1) organizing the workers; to exist with them in the ups and downs of the workers movement, to be there in this process; (2) through different ways of propaganda, a newspaper, publishing ideas and criticisms – Rosa thought that it was only enough to attack the political system of that time and to make the working class revolt; but as Marxists we say that it is necessary to give the social classes an alternative. Marxists should organize and criticize and offer an alternative for the existing society. In a more clear meaning I am with this point, the point of the theoretical struggle between Lenin and Rosa, before the revolution after 1905. Is this an answer to your question?

BDS: This is part of an answer because this is about the tactical relation between the party and the mass movement. My question was about class consciousness itself; of course what you say also impacts class consciousness.

WT: Your question was about the nature of work and its role on class consciousness. Of course, the nature of work and the difference of the production influences class consciousness. It has an impact on the rise of consciousness and the effectiveness of it. If you want to increase the consciousness and effectiveness of the working class you should take this into account. This discussion will take us into two areas, the advanced nations and the other countries.

[interruption]

WT: It depends on the nature of the product, iron or steel, or electronic products, these workers have a bigger impact than those of smaller products. [...] There are features of working which weaken the class consciousness and here comes the role of the revolutionary party.

[interruption]

BDS: By the way, what’s the name of the group which split from RS?

WT: It is called the SRC. I am more close to this group. [...]  

BDS: Another question. We also spoke with someone from the al-‘Amal party and it was interesting to hear the mix between socialist and Islamist ideas. According to them they were more close to their anti-imperialist allies than towards the Muslim Brothers. But hizb al-‘Amal seems to me like a weak party, they don’t have a lot of active people?
WT: They are close to Kefaya and 6 April. Their number is small but not less than other groups. The group of Mehdi Husayn is the biggest group in al-‘Amal, he has a Marxist education, and this created the mixed orientation of the party. Their current weakness is equivalent to the weakness of other groups. The main problem is their orientation. All those who have a real ideology build their movements upon it and this weakens the way the media sees them. When they organize a protest and some people of 6 April are seen participating in it, the media will frame it as an activity of the 6 April. Al-‘Amal’s situation is similar to other groups.

BDS: Perhaps a last question. […] I am looking for artists who express the struggle of the workers movement today in painting, singing, poetry, caricature, but it is very difficult to find them.

WT: This is still a problem. Those who have an artistic talent and an ideology to defend are a minority. There were some movements but they do no longer exist, for example Mastaba, which presented the art of “kalam”, a specific type of music. It was a group connected to the socialist Workers Party. But now the group has been dissolved despite all they represented of talent and art. They are relying on sponsorships. Now they are more engaged in defending the artistic heritage than performing new things.

BDS: Yes, that’s an interesting phenomenon. When I ask about art for the working class people are constantly referring to Fuad Negm and Shaykh Iman, but there is little new…

WT: There is no person or band that does this in a direct way. There is an actor… Khalid al-Sawi, who is active in cinema and theater. […] He had a theater group which existed for four years. He created a film about Abd al-Nasser. After this he crossed to film and cinema life. He stayed all the time a leftist. […] There is also Mohsena Towfeek, the famous artist, first an artist, than an actress. […]

BDS: Do you know any workers who have become painters or artists or singers?

WT: I know more people but they don’t do real art work. They have to live and have to make money and this impedes them from following art. […] I have a friend, Osama, he did street theater. The problems of finance creates the necessity of sponsorships: experiments such as al-Mastaba die. Mastaba is like “stage”. All artists of this band were members of the Communist Workers Party. The Party sponsored them. They continued until the end of the eighties because the Communist Workers Party was sponsored by the Soviet Union. After the end of the USSR there was no sponsorship and they didn’t have anything but their art. T

BDS: So from the nineties on professional leftist art disappeared?

WT: Exactly. But the new youth in Egypt has small experiments. Starting in 2005 for example with defending Ayman Nur against Mubarak. Some people were singing in a band and playing music. It did not produce influential or great art. Kefaya has spawned some groups. But these groups and their experiences died.
WT: Also Ahmed Ismail, who used to be in Tagammu. [...] There are lots of people who write poetry. [...] One of the problems is that political activists don’t use art to express their ideas and this is a reflection of the weak situation in Egypt. The UPY made some theater, but it is little.

BDS: Sometimes it is said that theory is the mind of the revolution, but art is the soul.

WT: Khaled al-Sawi is from the RS. He is the only Marxist who decided his political direction through the artistic movement. [...] al-Haraka “the movement” has last for years, it is a band with a great following, its last performance was about the Iraq war.

BDS: I am interested in two thing: artists becoming interested in leftist politics on the one hand, and on the other hand how workers try to express their views through art. Of course this last issue is very spontaneous, it can be only one time that they do this, writing something on the wall, or making a caricature. This makes it hard to research for me and to find these people.

KB: In every factory you will find a theater. So workers become artists. [...] Every year in Mahalla you will see that artists perform the birth of Mohammad. You will cry after seeing people do this. Every year they do something special, something new. There are actors inside the factory, but who will lead them.

WT: In each strike of the strikes that took place in Egypt, especially during the last period, some artistic things appeared, people who wrote poetry and so on, but each time it dies. The consciousness appeared in an artistic performance which expressed their problems. There were some experiments in the big factories in the past in the Nasserist period. One of the main things were the theaters in the factories. In that time it expressed how they were satisfied with the regime and Abd al-Nasser and it expressed new sources for the inspiration of this thing. In Mahalla there was a theater, but I don’t know if it’s still working or not.

It happened in the factories and the movies. The directions were well précised and they were the directions of the government. But at least the process of art and the theaters were important at that time. Theaters in villages and popular theaters were related to people in villages. It was controlled like Stalin used to do. But in the Sadat era motion pictures production were dominated by the market and the open economy and directed against socialism. In Mubarak’s period, it didn’t happen directly, but there was still control over this process. I have a friend, she is an assistant-director: Menal Khalid. She has made a movement about the peasants and went to Gaza. She has a Marxist reference and she is an activist. [...]
[...] It is a means to appear in many places instead of expressing an idea. Not an idea for an alternative. Like Shaban Abd al-Rahim, he sings about the tomato prices but he does not criticize the polices let alone give an alternative. He sings that he hates Israel but in an ordinary form of support. But Abd al-Rahim is a huge star. His last song was about voting for Mubarak and if Mubarak wouldn’t go to the elections he would vote for Gamal. He is one of those with interests in the regime. It is a low form of class art in order to be famous. [...]
When I got the invitation to protest on 25 January I didn’t expect it to be a revolution. In fact, I thought it was silly to claim that these protests would become a revolution. But Tunisia gave us a new image of how a revolution could be achieved. I attended the 25 January protests, assuming they would become a big protest, but thinking I would get home at night. The reason why 25 January became a mass protest was that it started from below, from the popular neighborhoods. The same happened on 28 January, which really became a turning point.

We agreed to meet in a place in Imbaba. Before we got there we ran into several, six or seven, youth who came out of a small mosque, using slogans such as “the people want to end the regime”. Our number reached twenty as we started to demonstrate in a poor neighborhood. The most important thing was the attitude of the normal people, demanding their rights, and continually asking others to participate. The demonstration in the poor neighborhood attracted thousands. When we reached the Kit Kat Square we found a huge number coming from the famous Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque. I took my group and went to the square. I encountered a huge number of people who were injured and who came from the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque, the gathering place from where also a lot of Mubarak supporters started their demonstrations. I noticed a lot of political activists. We began to walk in the Corniche. The police started to shoot on us and we went to the side streets. With every step we got more numbers from the streets. At 6 October Bridge we encountered a huge number of police. With a huge number of gas grenades. Then we went back to the Arab League street, Gama’t al-Dawwal. We found huge numbers, tens of thousands gathered there. At this moment the people pushed the police away from the streets. The policemen tried to block the roads to Tahrir Square. There were a lot of clashes. The most important clash was the one on the 6 October Bridge. We tried to go back to the square through al-Gal’a Bridge. On the way to Gal’a bridge we found another huge number of people. At this moment in my opinion we reached 100,000. We found some 5,000 people clashing with the police on the bridge. We told the policemen: “stop and surrender”. We told them: “we will not hit you”. The police leaders took their forces and withdrew and even left two trucks, and the people attacked the empty trucks. From al- Gal’a Bridge to Qasr al-Nil Bridge, the Opera neighborhood had a huge number of protesters. The policemen started to watch the side streets. Some of us were thinking about attacking the policemen, but most of us shouted “peaceful, peaceful!”. In the entrance of the Qasr al-Nil square there were a lot of trucks awaiting us with gas grenades. The number of protesters was huge, which made the effect of the grenades more effective, because there was no room to retreat. The police tried to push the people back. Every one or two minutes a
policeman was throwing four or five bombs, and then the people threw them back. I was afraid that with all these people the bridge could collapse. There was a continuous game of going forth and back between the police and the people. This is an important image in the revolution — the most important image in this day which made me realize that the regime was going down. We did not know what was happening at the other side, at Tahrir, but we were hearing a lot of grenades and noise and we were afraid that a lot of people were dying at the other side. And we thought that the number at the other side was less than ours. We had some 150,000 people on the bridge so there HAD to be less people in Tahrir. So we started to think that we had to make a lot of noise, making the police concerned about our number, and draw them to us. So they would stop shooting the other side. This mood made me realize that the regime was falling. I was afraid and the ordinary people were also afraid, but still they spontaneously took this decision. This lasted for twenty minutes and the people insisted on going to Tahrir and save the others. We went to the NDP headquarters. At this moment the most violent clashes started at the bridge.

[interruption]

HH: Me myself, I wanted to go back to the square and experience it. Before Mubarak retired no one was convinced that it was a revolution. Everyone saw the numbers in the streets, but no one could really believe it.

WT: After a lot of people were killed with trucks, and after the people who came from Ramsis and other streets had regrouped, there was the biggest demonstration of that day. This was the moment the police chose to surrender and go back to... we still don't know yet. [laughs] I myself was very happy with the surrender of the police, but I was concerned with what would happen. The people were stopping the police trucks and taking whatever they could find. A lot of people took a trophy from the police: sticks, helmets, etc. At this moment, ordinary people started to burn the NDP and other symbolic sites of “evil”. We started to make a committee to protect the museum. There was a victorious mood when the army came to the square, but I did not trust them.

HH: I thought that there would be a new battle with the army.

WT: The invasion of the square started. I was going to Maspero television building and thought about occupying it, but the army had already occupied it. I had the trust of a lot of protesters because of my leadership in the streets, so I took the decision to go to Maspero and to occupy it. But we found the army protecting it.

[interruption]

WT: The call to occupy the Maspero building was not successful, so I returned to Tahrir square where I saw that people were starting a sit-in, making homes in the square, and the main slogan was “the people want to end the regime”.

391
HH: I remember this moment, it feels like a year, or ten years ago. [...] The committees protecting the neighborhoods and the streets... [...] [interruption]

WT: We had clear demands: ending the regime, firing the parliament and the government, ending the Central Security, the NDP. It were liberal demands, not connected to the social issues. We started to talk about social demands: ending the state unions, and implementing the minimum wage. It was not easy to talk about the demands and make them revolutionary demands. There weren't any organizations organizing the square. The people started to make spontaneous committees to protect the streets. The first doing this were the Ikhwan. They avoided taking leadership because they were afraid that the revolution would be perceived as a purely Islamist movement. In the first five or six days it was a fresh movement and it became a normal attitude to be in the square. I saw that the working class did not move until the day of the camel. It made a new atmosphere in the square. Before the camel battle people were eating, sleeping and working in the square. The Egyptian media represented us as an isolated group, as a closed community inside the square. The camel battle transformed the atmosphere and attitude inside the square. It started at 14h and it lasted until 18h. It came after the first statement of Mubarak. At that point some people were still sympathetic towards Mubarak: he is an ill and feeble man, he will retire eventually. People were becoming tired and there were few numbers in the square compared to other days. Even though they were terrorized by the attack, there was a big resistance. It was revealed that being in the square was effective, after six days of little change. After 18h we were gaining the upper hand and people were feeling stronger again. People felt that victory was near. After sustaining a lot of injuries, the attackers locked the streets to Tahrir square, and the defenders were on their own. The most important image of this day was that the square transformed into organized working groups. Everyone in the square was organized. Girls, women, even the girls with a niqab. All of them were united without thinking about ideology or religion. Everyone did what he could to his ability. I had a broken arm so I started to break rocks to help others. The women with the niqab were carrying the rocks. A lot of people removed their jackets to carry rocks, even if they got cold. We established a group for military planning.

[interruption]

WT: You remember the image on al-Jazeera of the molotovs. The attackers had taken a building and threw rocks and molotov cocktails on the people. The military group made a plan to send 100 youth to the building. The Ikhwan participated with 90 in this group, thinking of martyrdom. Fifty of them infiltrated the building while the other fifty distracted them from outside. I and the military group took the decision to open the locks and send a group to throw rocks. A lot of people were running towards the attackers, other groups were creating barricades and throwing rocks. When the attackers ran away, it was a victory for us. The camel battle changed the atmosphere. Before the attack when a man was injured he went to hospital and stayed at home. But now people who were injured
immediately returned to the square after seeing a doctor. We started to make a civil prison of the revolution. In the first days when we arrested a policeman we handed them over to the army, but they released them. So now we made a prison. The resistance and organization of Tahrir influenced the whole of Egypt and transformed the meaning of Mubarak’s speech.
Respondent:  Wael Tawfiq, independent leftist activist (WT)
Date:  16 March 2011
Location:  Cairo, café
Interviewer:  Brecht De Smet (BDS)
Translator:  Haisam Hassan (HH)
Source:  Notes only

BDS:  What happened after the Friday of Anger?

WT:  The Saturday was a new beginning for the revolution. People were discussing the protesters who were killed. The most important question for the Left was: where is the working class and how can we organize it. We began to connect with the worker leaders in many areas and we got a positive reaction from the workers. We encouraged them to become active in the revolution. We distributed this statement in all the big factories in Egypt. This statement made the workers move. Unfortunately we weren’t able to reach the workers in Mahalla. To be fair: a lot of workers were demanding particularist demands, but they were united by one main demand: the minimum wage. The movement of the workers was more effective in bringing down the regime than Tahrir was. The support of the workers was clear, for example in Helwan the workers had a sign saying that the workers supported the revolution. This support was the main reason for the success of the revolution. […]

BDS:  What are the tasks of the Left now?

WT:  At this moment the main question for political leaders in the square is: to stay or to leave? Most political leaders agreed to stay, but the festival atmosphere after Mubarak’s resignation made it impossible for them to discuss this issue with the crowds. […] We had a meeting with our group to see if we should stay or not. […] The Ikhwan decided to leave and they weighed on the decision because of their numbers. After a while only 500 protesters remained in the square. The main demand was the resignation of Shafiq’s government. For the Left, at this moment, the most important thing is the formation of popular committees in the neighborhoods, but it is difficult. […] The most important thing is to organize the people themselves, not only the leftists. We should create groups from the popular committees to protect the people’s demands. Furthermore, we should organize the workers in independent unions. A lot of groups are organizing independent unions. This is the most important step in this phase of the revolution. In the Iron factory in Helwan we organized a committee to protect the revolution. We were the first ones to do so. One of our main achievements is that the Minister of Manpower has legalized independent unions. […]

There is a big discussion within the Left now. Should we use the word “socialism” or not? And so on. I think we should start from the base, from the unions. We should establish strong unions before a workers’ party. Establishing a new workers’ party now only brings about a new leadership. In my opinion, the best way is a broad
political party with a minimum of social demands and with a real popular membership. The social demands should be those from below, not imposed from a leftist leadership above. In time the best of all these organizations will rise to the surface. In the mean time, all leftists should try to organize the workers. The small groups will grow and create a bigger Left. […]

BDS: Can the army appropriate the workers’ movement through corporatist reform, as in Nasser’s time?

WT: If the Nasser-effect happens it will not be as strong as before. The military might go the Bonapartist road, like in France. It may come from the army itself, or the military can push someone to do this for them, for example Amr Moussa. His mission is to be the arm of the military and break all social demands. The army pushes the Muslim Brotherhood to agree with the constitutional amendments to make them weaker in the streets and prevent them from reaching their own demands through mass mobilization. […]
YUSUF Abd al-Rahman  
21-3-2011

Respondent: Abd al-Rahman Yusuf, poet and coordinator of the al-Baradei campaign  
(ARY)  
Date: 21 March 2011  
Location: Cairo, ARY’s HQ  
Interviewer: Susanna Chui-yung Cheung of Asia Weekly (SCC) and Brecht De Smet (BDS)  
Translator: Haisam Hasan (HH)  
Source: Notes and audio recording

SCC: [...] You are participating in the democratic process by supporting Al-Baradei. What  
do you think is the role of intellectuals? When I talk with youth, such as April 6  
activists, they have a lot of enthusiasm, but not many ideas or ideologies, as if they  
want to change the system through trial and error, step by step to see what model fits  
Egypt. What do you think is the role of intellectuals in the democratic process? What  
is your view as a poet, a writer. [...]  

ARY: We are talking about the spirit of the revolution. In the revolution a lot of different  
forces and ideas came together. It was not only a political issue, but also a humanist  
and ideological protest. The words of writers and poets had a big role in charging  
people with emotions and ideological ideas. The Egyptian revolution is the result of a  
long struggle, prepared by writers, poets and political activists. The revolution is  
about rejection, how to learn to say no. This rejection has been part of organized  
writers' opposition since the formation of Kefaya. This helped the political and trade-  
union movements.

SCC: So the role of writers was to encourage people to say no. [...] For writers, for example  
in Latin America, it is difficult to separate literature from politics. Is it the same in  
Egypt and the Arab world?

ARY: For me, certainly. For a lot of writers in Egypt it wasn't possible to separate writing  
from politics.

HH: In my opinion Abd al-Raham Yusuf was one of the most critical writers about the  
regime. In the last two or three years, the most famous poems Abd al-Rahman wrote  
were his political ones, in which he talked about the regime.

SCC: How long have you been politically active?

ARY: Seven years now. From 1st of June 2004, this is when my website was created. When I  
started to publish – I was already writing before – I didn't find any place to publish  
because of the nature of my poems. So I decided to make my own place, my own  
location to publish my poems, my own "stage" because all the other were occupied by  
the government. On the first day of the website I published my first political poem: "a  
toast for the homeland". The internet, I felt, was the stage with the biggest and widest  
audience and also the place where I could get the most feedback.
I saw that the television and radio, the Minister of Culture, did not accept my message, so I decided to create my own stage in order not to obey their orders. [...] I became my own patron and also published books.

I hope to receive soon the 10th million visitor on my website. In six years that’s a large number for a personal website. Without this stage I wouldn’t have had any feedback. Without this website the audience wouldn’t have found a way to me. The government had experience in dealing with figures such as me. They knew that they would only strengthen me, turn me into a martyr, by prosecuting me. So they started to investigate and interfere in my personal life. They did not deal with my political ideas, but with my personal life. I was patient, I endured these tactics from the government. I translated my anger in my poems.

SCC: [talks about the experience of writers in China]

ARY: The difference with the government in Egypt is that it did not interfere in a direct way, but by detour of the personal life of the writer, in order to not to make him a hero by arresting him. The Egyptian people have a tradition of making heroes from people who are arrested.

SCC: So Mubarak was more smart than the Chinese government, because it always makes heroes. [laughs]

ARY: I started to write a lot of political poems and a lot of them were aimed at president Mubarak himself. But I did never mention Mubarak’s name, because I wouldn't want to make Mubarak a part of the poetic tradition, and also because my poems retain their validity for criticism of a dictator in any era and any place.

SCC: Are you a formal member of a political movement or party?

ARY: On 9 April 2003 I moved to the political plane. On this day Baghdad was occupied by the Americans. At this moment I felt I was no longer able to remain silent. I had to interfere in politics and I felt I was able to bear the consequences of this involvement. [...] 

SCC: So in Egyptian literature there are a lot of metaphors. [...] Is it an important aspect of Egyptian literature?

HH: I can answer this. Any writer or caricaturist uses this.

SCC: I visited Egypt in 2002 and then Palestine was under attack of Israel. [...] I remember the very popular song "I hate Israel". [...] The voices of Egyptians have not only been repressed by Mubarak, but also by the US. [...] I felt a lot of frustration of the Egyptian people with the relation between Mubarak and the US. Do you share this frustration as a writer and an artist? [...]
ARY: The Mubarak dictatorship manipulated the institutional framework so the regime and the president could remain in power, without thinking of its relations with other countries. The relation with Israel and America and other countries in East and West was based on how Mubarak could stay in power, without thinking of the Egyptian benefits from these relations. So a good relation with Israel was more important for Mubarak than a good relation with the Nile countries, for example. The Egyptian-American relationship was more important for Mubarak than that with Palestine, for example.

BDS: Until Kefaya the orientation of Egyptian politics was really anti-imperialist, directed against America and Israel. For example in 2003 there were big anti-war demonstrations in which even al-Watani participated. Kefaya turned the criticism inwards, to the regime itself. Do you think this was a turning point in the politics of the Egyptian opposition; in the sense that it no longer just criticized America, Israel and imperialism, but also the regime itself?

ARY: The Egyptian movement had a good balance between its criticism of external and internal issues, but I don't deny that Kefaya played a good role. The glow of Kefaya made outside observers think that this was a transformation of Egyptian politics. The Egyptian political movement already asked to change the constitution since 1984. The glow of Kefaya rather made it clear for the world outside that Egyptians had these demands. The Egyptian political movements were asking to edit the constitution since Mubarak became president. [...] 

SCC: Since Kefaya there have been many political opposition figures. What is the role of al-Baradei?

ARY: The story of al-Baradei starts in the summer of 2009. I started to watch al-Baradei since September 2005. He got the Nobel prize in the same week as Mubarak was re-elected as president. In this time he succeeded in the elections because there wasn't any real opponent. The only opponent who could beat Mubarak, would have to be an outsider, an Egyptian from outside Egypt. Because he had to avoid to be connected to any political party or movement in Egypt. We were searching for an opponent who would not be attacked by any political group, because he would be "owned" by all political groups. At this time I thought that al-Baradei had a double nationality. At the end of 2008 I discovered that al-Baradei had only the Egyptian nationality. It is a lie that he also has the Swiss nationality. In the summer of 2009, the grandson of Mubarak died. In this era, this time the media were spreading the news that Mubarak would retire and leave the chair for his son, because he was so sad for his grandson. So I tried to tell the political movements to think out of the box. I suggested Muhammad al-Baradei as a presidential candidate because he was not related to any political group. I don't blame that the big leaders of the political movements did not have the imagination to accept my proposal, because the political environment in Egypt blocked such imaginative ideas. I alone began to develop the idea of al-Baradei as a presidential candidate. I discussed it with a lot of political leaders and activists and I found that many people accepted it. But I failed to reach al-Baradei himself. So I decided to write the idea. So I wrote an article in the Sawt al-Umma newspaper
in November 2009, called "al-Baradei as a president, why and how". Three days after the article al-Baradei showed up on CNN with dr. Zakariya saying that he might run for president. The spotlights were on my article because it was the beginning for the idea of al-Baradei in Egypt. Because a lot of youth trust me this idea mobilized a lot of youth. The stupid reaction from the regime helped us, because it sent more youth to use and also gave trust to al-Baradei himself. The popular campaign to support al-Baradei was created at this time and I was honored to be the overall coordinator for this campaign. The movement started from this moment. The result of this movement is the Egyptian revolution, because the al-Baradei talks and discussions and campaigns were the thing which politicized the youth. [...] 

SCC: Recently I read an article which claims that al-Baradei says that America can help Egypt with implementing democracy. The article then asks if al-Baradei is naive if he thinks that America can help Egypt to establish Egypt. Is it true that al-Baradei ever said this?

ARY: al-Baradei does not think America can help Egypt in establishing democracy, but he asked America and other countries not to support the dictatorship.

BDS: I have a question about the program of al-Baradei. The last ten years in Egypt we have seen two movements. On the one hand the democratic movement against imperialism, the war in Iraq, solidarity with Palestine, Kefaya, and so on, and on the other a social movement, in the countryside there were peasants occupying their lands and in the factories workers engaged in strikes. I have the impression that al-Baradei and his campaign are only part of the democratic movement and that his demands and aims are only democratic and I wondered about his social program. Haisam told me, for example, that on a talk show al-Baradei said "I am a democratic socialist", so is al-Baradei a socialist, what is his program, what are his social-economic demands?

ARY: Sure he is a democratic socialist. Within a short period the details of the program will be published and I cannot talk about the program right now.

HH: That was my question to. The interviewer in the talkshow was talking to al-Baradei as if he was already an elected member of parliament. "What would you do about the sidewalk, what would you do about this or that." Questions about details but he is not concerned with details, he has a vision. 

ARY: The interviewer kills you with details, and there does not remain an overall vision. al-Baradei’s main program is the constitution.

BDS: Of course the details are not important, but people want to know what his views are in general. For example towards privatization, towards land reform, ...

ARY: Eventually you have to go to these details, but the real program is the constitution.
HH: al-Baradei said in the interview that he will depend on specialists in every domain. He gives the general vision in the sense that he says "I am a democratic socialist". That is the direction he will take the country to. But he is not concerned with the details. […]

SCC: That's an interesting question, the view of al-Baradei on privatization, because the Egyptian economy has been destroyed by neoliberalism. Mubarak had deals with IMF and the Worldbank which introduced neoliberalism in Egypt and which led to the suffering of the people. If al-Baradei says "I am a democratic socialist" I expect him to deal with this neoliberalism and advance a new platform of economic development in Egypt. Has al-Baradei ever mentioned something about the question of neoliberalism? The trigger for the revolution was the poverty, the economic injustice. People suffer, they want to regain their dignity and escape poverty. If anybody wants to run for president he has to deal with these political-economic issues. I don't know if al-Baradei has any ideas on this subject. What kind of model would he like to adopt?

ARY: Whatever the model is, it will be on the side of the poor guys.

HH: So Abdelrahman is insisting not to mention anything of the program. [laughs] I have to mention that al-Baradei first conference was from an area in the ashwaïyyat. So he aims at this level of Egyptian people, the poor.

[…]

BDS: Is the reason why there is not yet a social-economic program perhaps that there are a lot of different opinions and tendencies within the al-Baradei movement? There are liberals, perhaps more of the Wafd tendency, more right-wing on economic matters, then there are socialists, perhaps also people who are sympathizing with the Ikhwan. It is very difficult to have a united socio-economic platform. It is easy to be democratic and be pro a new constitution because every opposition party wants this, but it is very difficult to have a coherent socio-economic program.

HH: What you are saying is that al-Baradei is afraid of losing the support of one of these tendencies by taking an explicit position on socio-economic issues?

BDS: He tries to listen of course to his members and the other leaders if there are a lot of opinions it will difficult to make a clear choice.

SCC: Yes, because in the revolution everybody came together and had a united voice, but after the revolution people came back to their original ideas.

ARY: It is normal, it is a natural process. […]

SCC: What is your view of the Muslim Brotherhood?

HH: Now you are jumping over Brecht's question. [laughs]
BDS: And I think he [Abdelrahman] was glad. [laughs]

[everybody laughs]

HH: You [Susanna] saved Abd al-Rahman from the answer, but I was so interested in the answer, so I propose we go back to the other question. [laughs]

ARY: Alright. [laughs] We have a lot of ideas on restructuring the economy in order to fulfill the demand of social justice. All the groups agree on this.

HH: Abdelrahman deals with the question in a smart way.

[everybody laughs]

ARY: The ideological part will come later, after we shaped the program and have an agreement of all groups. All political groups are agreeing on the basic direction of the country.

HH: I have enjoyed this answer. [laughs]
BDS: How long have you been a member in Tagammu and what are your political activities?

OY: I have been a member for ten years. I attend political demonstrations, conferences and aid in setting up services for the workers. I try to be close to the workers.

BDS: How is your struggle linked to the workers' movement in Mahalla?

OY: I struggle with the drivers, we share some problems with the Ghazl al-Mahalla workers, some are different. For example, the government can take our license to work, while they can't stop the workers from being able to work.

BDS: Is there a transport union?

OY: Yes, but it is controlled by the government. Some of us tried to make a new union, but the security intervened and makes it impossible.

BDS: What was the background of the 6 April movement?

OY: Increasing prices, decreasing wages, incapable government.

BDS: Yes, but why did it all explode on 6 April, and here in Mahalla?

OY: Because the workers in Mahalla went on strike. They had given the government an ultimatum of one month to meet their demands. If not, they would strike. The government did not meet their demands, so they struck and the people of Mahalla with them.

BDS: Are the workers of Mahalla the vanguard of the whole movement then?

OY: Well, when they strike over salaries and so, the people are in solidarity with them and stand by them.

BDS: Salaries, yes, but on 6 April there was also a strong political aspect, no?

OY: Yes, the government changed the constitution, was against the people. We protested against the rising prices. We even stopped a train, here across the street.
BDS: On 6 April there was a big repression from the state, what will happen in the future? Are the people and the movement down at the moment?

OY: All the people will move again, if they don’t, they will lose their means of existence.

BDS: What do you think constitutes the biggest problem for the movement?

OY: The fact that businessmen, who are all members of the NDP, fire workers if they protest.

BDS: Are you happy with the role of Tagammu in the movement?

OY: Sure, if I was not happy, I’d leave. Tagammu is a political “fury”. There are bad persons in the party, but the program and ideas are good, at least Tagammu is the biggest leftist party.

BDS: Did you cooperate with other movements in 6 April?

OY: The only political party and movement which played a role was Tagammu.
SZ: It is an interesting time now to hear people reflect on the revolution, and all the elements in this revolution.

BDS: As a first question I would like to ask about the role of workers in the revolution? In the Western press there was a lot of coverage about the popular nature of the revolution and the role of the youth, but there has been less attention to the role of workers as an organized force (or not) in the revolution.

SZ: Actually the role of workers was not very exploited during this revolution, because many classes and strata were participating in the revolution. So it is difficult to say that one class of society was having a leading role in this revolution. But I think what happened during the last few years was very important to ignite this revolution and I think workers played a key role in this with their strikes in their workplaces. During this period they ignited this revolution and it is very important to talk about the economic indicators which led to this revolution. The government of Ahmed Nazif in 2004 led a kind of privatization that privatized many companies and factories and led off many workers. This helped a lot during the last six years to ignite the revolution.

BDS: A few days before the resignation of Mubarak there were strikes, especially in Suez, but also in Mahalla and other cities. Do you think these strikes played a key role for the military to no longer support Mubarak?

SZ: I think so. This is a very important question, I think. The army itself is a big business tycoon in Egypt. It is not only an army, I call it the first businessman in Egypt. They have many companies, many factories and seashore resorts, they work with billions of dollars. They are very interested in keeping the workers outside these gains. So when the workers started to strike, they were afraid that it would become a very fierce revolution. That’s why I think it was important.

BDS: Do you think there was a conflict of interest between the military entrepreneurs and the neoliberal faction like Gamal Mubarak, between on the one hand a kind of national capitalism and on the other a type of neoliberal capitalism?
SZ: Yes I think that is what happened. You have to separate between two kinds of businessmen. The nationalist ones, like the army for example, like Naguib Sawiris, or Hossam al-Badrawy, … this kind of nationalist businessmen were against the businessmen around Gamal Mubarak, because they sold Egyptian lands and many assets and give priority to foreign investors, not national investors, so there was a great conflict of interests between them. The army tried to get rid of these businessmen and Gamal Mubarak himself, this is very important.

BDS: Do you think the military used this revolution to further their own agenda?

SZ: I think so, yes.

BDS: What do you think are the next steps in the revolution, both from the people and other groups, such as the military?

SZ: We have to look at the elements of both sides: the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary elements in Egypt. On the part of the counterrevolutionary elements, we can say, number one is the army, number two is the businessmen around Gamal Mubarak and the National Democratic Party, number three is the Ministry of Interior and on top of this the State Security apparatus and maybe – it is a bit blurry these days, but it can be used as an element of counterrevolution – it is the Church, in Egypt. Let us talk about everyone of these elements. The army is the first businessman in Egypt. It is a nationalist, middle-class of businessmen. They have many companies and factories and resorts. There is a kind of contradiction for them. They want to be loved by the people, but at the same time they want the people to go home for the economy to continue. This is going on in the army. I’m not actually sure about this, but when reflecting on the army, along Mubarak’s reign in Egypt the army took about 40 billion dollars from the United States as military aid. This, I think, has played a key role in the army. On the one hand, is, you know I want to go back to the Sadat era, by the way. When he met Henry Kissinger he said, why don’t you treat us like the state of Israel? Kissinger said, we can’t do that, because Israel is a state of institutions. You don’t have this. I can make deals with you, but what happens after that. Then the US thought deeply about creating an institution in Egypt, like the military establishment, which is very important to them, to be able to, in case of crisis or revolutions, to play a major role in this, to have the upper hand in this. To have an institution like this is better than to rely on one man. For example, like Nasser. […] It is easier to contain an establishment like the military through military aid and so on, so it is very important for them. So I think the military in Egypt plays this role. And it tries to make a balance in every crisis and in this revolution. This is the role of the army. I noticed in the speech of Mubarak himself, it was on Tuesday before the camels and horses on Wednesday, when he said, alright I want to make a peaceful transition: this was what the army wanted. After the speech the army issued a statement, saying that we understand what you want and go home, but you could read between lines: go home. The speech of Mubarak was directed towards the military establishment: this is what you want, a peaceful and orderly transition of power. On Wednesday the army did not convene and it was left to the pro-Mubarak thugs to kill the demonstrators on Tahrir Square.
The army will try to maintain the status-quo because of its interests in the status-quo. The military is a state within the state. It has its own budget and revenues. Its budget and revenues are not revealed. No one can question this in the parliament. So it’s very important for the military to keep the status-quo and the regime as it is. It will go into battle with some elements who have a conflict of interests with this establishment, like the group around Gamal Mubarak. But this is what the military wants. After this everything will remain like it is. So they began to be a counterrevolutionary element.

The second element, the businessmen around Gamal Mubarak and the NDP. They are trying all the time, from day one to combat, to beat and defeat the revolution. Their interests are against the revolution. This is clearly understood I think. [...] It is a lesson from history that those who begin the revolution are not the ones who reap the benefits of the revolution, but those who can bring the revolution to a conclusion. It is a game right now who is going to bring an end, a conclusion to the revolution and gain the benefits.

We can talk about the Church in Egypt. It is a sensitive issue, I know that. I’m not speaking about Copts, but the Church as an institute. The Church fears the rise of the Islamists, the Church respond to events, it doesn’t have the initiative because of this fear. If you are afraid you do not have the ability to take the initiative. The Church itself didn’t try to participate in the events. Shenouda himself did not say anything about the revolution. During the revolution he called upon the people to go home and after the success..., I don’t like to use this word... after the step down of Mubarak he didn’t say anything even during the Sunday address of the Church. He didn’t say anything. [laughs] Some Christians said on the internet “we don’t think Shenouda lives in Egypt. [laughs] He didn’t say anything about the revolution. So the Church and Shenouda are afraid of the rise of the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and there is something else. During the last ten years the Church tried the whole time to bring back a system we call... not dhima... but...

BDS: Like in the Middle Ages...

SZ: Yes, you know. Al-milla system. According to this system the Church will govern its own people. It has its own law and tries to get court cases and rulings, like this. This was very clear during the last couple of years. Shenouda [...] asked all the time to revert court cases if it was against the Church, with regard to marriage for example. There was a case, for example, of a Christian man who wanted to divorce, who went to court to marry again. Shenouda tried to appeal this ruling. The Church wanted to bring back the millet system. The revolution will destroy his dreams. Actually I’m against this. I want all Christians and Copts to be like Muslims, in the sense that we are all Egyptian nationals, citizens, participating in political life, not to be inside the Church and taking orders from Shenouda or anyone else. [laughs]

BDS: So the Church itself encourages a form of sectarianism.

SZ: Yes. This kind of system tries to bring back the situation before the 1919 revolution. In 1919 there was the slogan of Christians and Muslims are one hand. That was years ago.
So what is happening now is against the dream of someone like Shenouda. [...] Some businessmen of the NDP, together with the Ministry of Interior and with the sanction of the Church ignited the current clashes between Muslims and Christians, this sectarian strife. These are the elements of counterrevolution and they are actually very strong. We are talking about a class, you know, when you have a system of despotism for a long time, thirty years, it creates a class of its own, a corrupted class, that class doesn’t want any kind of change. They fight it with all their strength, to keep the status-quo. Mubarak stepped down but his class, a huge class, tries to defeat the revolution and bring an end to it and gain the benefits for itself. It is a long battle. Anyone could see the joy of the people in Tahrir Square when he stepped down... I said at this moment, Oh my God, we only brought down one man, but we have to bring down a whole class of corruption. [laughs] And actually, this class, I can remember a writer from more than one hundred years ago, Abdelrahman al-Kawakibi, he wrote about the roots of despotism. He was talking about this class of despotists. When a despot, a ruler like this stays in power for such a long time he creates a class like this. And Gramsci, Antonio Gramsci talked about this idea also, a kind of class created by despotism. So these are the counterrevolutionary elements right now.

About the revolutionary elements... I think they have been diverse. Mubarak himself couldn’t face this revolution. Not because it was a strong revolution, but because of his stupidity. Because he had a chance to stay in power until September. In this case all the people would have called him the patron of democracy. After Tuesday when he made his speech that he wouldn’t stay in power after September, and after the statement of the military, I thought that there were two scenarios of what would happen the day after. The first scenario, if Mubarak is intelligent enough, he will give us our freedom, saying that: “I see people are still in the Square and I will give your freedom to decide if I stay in power until September or if I leave now”. And I am sure he would have won. Because, in every society, the majority of 60 percent are fence sitters, all the time, and the 20 percent are the ones who make the revolution. He would have gotten 70 percent who said yes, continue until September. But thank God he was stupid enough. [laughs] He was stupid! I think it was not only a matter of stupidity but also of policy. The policies he used during his rule were the same policies which brought him down. He used to, all the time, to deal with demonstrations through the Interior Ministry, State Security and the Intelligence Service. The revolution began as a reform movement, not a revolution, so he ordered State Security and the Ministry of Interior to deal with it. When they failed he said I will deal with this issue. If you remember he didn’t deliver any speech until the fourth day. So, oh my God, security has failed, I have to deal with it myself. This remembers us of many other things. For example, the treaty of the Nile water and the failure of the State to deal with it... it’s alright, it’s a presidential issue from now on. He sent Omar Suleiman to Africa with Ahmed Abu al-Gheit. Ahmed Abu al-Gheit meant nothing [laughs], but Omar Suleiman did. You remember how Omar Suleiman was the first to come down the plane and only then Ahmed Abu al-Gheit. [laughs] So he followed this policy all the time. The security was in control and when they failed he stepped in. This same policy brought him down, because he left everything to the security apparatus until the reform movement turned into a revolution. So the ceiling of the demands became higher and higher and at the same time he had an
opportunity when he gave his speech and said: “I am not intending to remain in power after September”. Actually he was addressing the military and not the people. For any speech it is important to discern to whom it is addressed. So he addressed actually the military to give the green light to beat the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square. But if he thought about speaking to the people in Tahrir... I have seen many people in Tahrir cry when he talked about being buried on Egyptian ground. [laughs] My sister cried and asked me “what do you want from him? Leave him alone.” Actually she always discusses everything with me about politics. She deals with me as her mentor. At this time she said: what do you want from him?! But we are lucky he didn’t address the Egyptian people, if he had addressed them he would have made a referendum and he would have won it for sure.

Mubarak stepped down, not because of the strength of the revolution itself. I admire many things which happened in Tahrir and Egypt. Many of us died due to snipers and so on. I never thought this kind of courage and boldness was in the Egyptian people. It was amazing to see this. Of course this played a key role. But he stepped down because of his policy and stupidity and only in the second place it was because of the character of the people. From this point you can evaluate the situation right now. This revolutionary process began without a leader. It is a kind of leaderless organization. It is like a starfish organization. When you cut any hand of the starfish it brings out another hand, if you cut it in half it becomes two starfish. This was very important at that time, to have a leaderless organization, because Mubarak failed to find someone to talk to. This was very important at that time. If he found someone he would have been able to buy time or to strengthen his position, but the strength of the revolution at that time was to be a leaderless organization. If you cut it from any side it brings back that side and swells all the time.

But this is not alright now. Something which is an advantage at a certain moment can become a disadvantage at another time. In the beginning it was an advantage. It reminds me of the war between the Spanish and the Apache tribes in America. The Spanish tried hard to defeat them for about 200 years but they couldn’t. Because the Apache tribes were leaderless, so they couldn’t buy anybody for them, or give anyone property rights, and so on. And they also didn’t have any property and kept moving and so on. It is a similar situation. But what happens right now is... you know to defeat this kind of leaderless organization... With a decentralized organization you have two options to defeat it. The first is to make it centralized and this what they did. They brought some youth from the coalition of youth and many other youth organizations and invited them to television and talked with them. They tried to bring some heads to say they are the heads of the revolution, so they can talk on behalf of the revolutionaries and some of them said, alright, this is enough. Some of them said we won’t go to Tahrir Square for Essam Sharaf because we have to give him some space to work. So they did this. And actually they are doing something else now. They decentralize themselves. Since more than thirty years central power has become decentralized. You can see that the army is working right now against the revolution, businessmen around Gamal Mubarak and the NDP, and State Security, and the Church... the blows come from different sides. They decentralized themselves. So they made two important things: they centralized the revolution and decentralized themselves to beat the revolution.
I think right now the picture is quite... I don’t want to say black or anything like that, but it is a blurred picture. You can’t know for sure what will happen tomorrow, but when you read the events of what happened the last few days, you will find that, oh my God, they are moving in any direction and what happened yesterday, they diversified, the protesters were banned from Tahrir Square and at the same time the sectarian strife so they are moving in many directions. I don’t want to use the words optimistic or pessimistic but...

BDS: ... the counterrevolution has now the upper hand?

SZ: Yes.

BDS: How and what forces in the revolution should counteract this?

SZ: The forces of the revolution are now diverse. Every faction of them has its own agenda. It is very hard to be united again, like what happened during the earlier days. They haven’t learned the lesson that when you keep united you WIN. But now they are diversified and every faction has its own agenda. But I think they should do something. Revolution is a long pattern, it is not an issue of a month or two months or that, sometime a revolution takes years and brings nothing. For example the French Revolution brought Napoleon. [laughs] [...] So it’s a long battle and we have to admit this. You know... of course you cannot plan it. Life itself... you cannot plan it. But you can plan to be prepared. Because nothing happens and then everything happens. Before the revolution nothing happens and then during the revolution everything happens all the time. But who expected it? No one expected it, even though there were many indicators, but actually no one expected it. So we don’t have this kind of character of having prepared ourselves, in Egypt or the whole Arab world, but we need this kind of character now, to know that we have to plan for the upcoming events. It is a long battle so we have to strengthen the political parties in Egypt. All political parties in Egypt are just cartoon parties, up until the revolution and today. So we have to have a long term objective, we have to strengthen civil society itself, we have to gather every revolutionary in one political party [...] and we have to have new political parties which are able to compete for power. This is the first step we ought to do right now.

Now, staying in Tahrir is an old game. I think it has brought many successes and gains for us, but we have to be creative, because a revolution by definition is a creative thing, so we have to be creative in doing this, we have to pour in our perspective, because any change is multi-perspective so your objectives has to be multi-perspective to bring change. It is not ONLY Tahrir Square, we can do this, sure, but at the same time we have to think about other venues and other ways to spread this revolution and to think positively and to know that the gains we brought, we are not the only ones who brought this – I am talking about the revolutionaries and demonstrators – but also the luck and the stupidity of the regime. If we keep this in mind we can build something very important, but if we tell ourselves that everything happened just because of our will and courage I think we will make great mistakes in the future so we have to be realistic. Any leader who led a revolution succeeded because of this realistic thinking. Like Mao for example. Mao fought for many years.
against a group of Bolsheviks inside the party who said that they wanted to make a revolution on the Russian style and he said that no, we cannot do this. We have a small number. We cannot confront the nationalists directly, but we have to unleash a different kind of war. Not this war, but a guerrilla warfare, not a confrontational war. And he won. So we need to face ourselves and to be realistic and creative at the same time.

BDS: Do you think the center of gravity, for the moment, has shifted from the political to the economic, because of a lot of strikes are happening since the last weeks? Perhaps the workers’ movement can give a new lifeform or more structure to the revolution?

SZ: I hope so, actually. But we can look at the past. The last couple of years we witnessed many strikes and sit-ins and actions of workers, and actually we cannot say that they pulled off a revolution, because the revolution was inspired by the Tunisian revolution. Everyone said: “oh my God, it’s possible, they ousted Ben Ali, they can do that. The audacity. And we can do this too.” But at first they didn’t think they could do this to Mubarak. At first the protest movement went to the streets to demand the resignation of Habib al-Adly of the Ministry of Interior. And then everything went as you know. So there is something else. Why Habib al-Adly? You remember Khaled Said and the facebook page of We are all Khaled Said about six or seven months ago. I cannot remember exactly. But this incident alongside Tunisia, ignited this kind of revolution. I think so. Because you can look at the spearhead of this revolution: the middle class. Not the workers. They invited everyone through twitter and facebook, we are making a revolution, join us… [laughs] So we have to look why they have been motivated. Because Khaled Said represented every one of them. Before this incident they were thinking like this: “ok, the torture and police station is something normal because they use it against criminals or baltageyya, thugs, or anyone who is related to this Ministry and it is happening against the lower classes, ordinary people in the streets, squatters, and so on. But when this happens to one of us, belonging to the middle class, oh my God, we are not far away from this, this can happen to us.” So this was a very important incident which ignited a lot of middle class people. “We will not allow them to do to us what they dared to do to Khaled Said.” This is one of the factors which explain what happened, I think. [laughs] To go back to your question… I hope that what happens now will ignite the revolution again, but I think it is a remote dream, because the army will try to bring these strikes down, because it wants the economy to continue and the losses are very huge for the establishment. They want the tourists and investors to come back, they have many coastal resorts, companies, and so on, so they want badly the economy to be moved again. They will not allow this to continue for a long time.

BDS: Do you think the military’s discourse on economic stability and the need for an upturn has an effect on the middle classes in Cairo and on the pro-democracy movement who see these strikes more as a danger than as an ally to them?

SZ: I think so. Because the spearhead of the revolution was the middle class and most of the military belongs to this class too. And no one of this spearhead believed at first that this was a revolution. They thought it to be a protest movement before they
realized it was a revolution. They could not imagine it and were not prepared enough to think: we are making a revolution and thus this the first step, that is the second, and so on. To bring down this regime. But they didn’t have this kind of mentality. You can see them after Mubarak stepped down. Some of them said to themselves: we brought the revolution to an end, it is a great victory. So I think there will be some… although a lot of the actions of the army show that they are not impartial, and in fact, no one is impartial [laughs], but they don’t want to see that. They say: the people and the army are one hand. And this is not natural, because everyone has two hands [laughs]. So it is not natural, it is against the laws of nature itself [laughs] They are trying to convince themselves because if you confront the army… where will you go after this? So it is the army now.

BDS: One last question, about the role of the Muslim Brothers today. Do you place them in the camp of the revolution? Or the counterrevolution? To be blunt.

SZ: Yes, this is very important. The Muslim Brotherhood plays all the time two roles, they stand with one leg in the regime and with the other in the opposition and they constantly play so. [laughs] And they believe that, if you stand like this [stands with feet adjacent to each other], anyone can push you. But if you stand like this [stands with feet wide apart], no one can push you. [laughs] So, they are keeping all the time one leg here and one leg there. This is what happened before the revolution itself. They said: we are not going to participate in this protest movement. But after pressure from the youth and their organization they said: ok, we will tolerate this, everyone can go on his personal capacity, but not the organization itself. It is a kind of “choose a frame”. But after this, many youth of the organization participated and they were there in Tahrir Square and this is natural because they are part of this society, actually, and they are the most organized political party. I always say that they are a political party already and not a Society. We can differentiate between two stages: before the eighties and after the eighties. Before the eighties they had the role of a religious society, after the eighties they played the role of a political party. They participated in the elections of the professional syndicates and tried to gain the upper hand in these elections, they participated in parliamentary elections. They tried to become a political party, and because it is a big organization it is natural to have dissidents, and opposition and conflict between different wings inside this kind of organization because it is a big organization – and this is natural by the way. But I think this split is right now benign. […] I think this split could become vicious, because right now, and especially before the revolution, the split was not vicious. But I think if they play on the ground and are allowed to become a legitimate political party they will face many splits, because this organization has many different kinds of people who have many different kinds of interests. So there is a kind of conflict of interests in this organization. There are the businessmen in the organization, and they are with the military because they know that the military is a nationalist middle class businessmen and they deal with them in the same way. This wing will try to be with the army, but the youth itself within the organization will think in a different way. They want to join the civil movement. I think we will bear to come witness to many splits in the organization, unless they are attacked by the regime. If they are attacked they remain united because of the attack. If they gain all the space and become a
legitimate party they will face splits. If the regime is intelligent enough it will grant them this space, to hang themselves. [laughs] This kind of rope and space. I also want to say something else. The organization itself will not try to play on the limelight especially during the presidential elections. They will try to play in the shadow, because there are many fears towards them: the Americans, Israel and the secular movement here in Egypt. So they will remain in the shadow with the presidential elections, or ally themselves with, for example, someone like al-Baradei, who will lose the election, I think. [laughs]
Conversations

These are some of the many informal conversations I had during my fieldwork. They are listed alphabetically, according to the last name of the respondent.

ABD AL-FATAH Farag
26-2-2008

Respondent: Farag Abd al-Fatah, Tagammu economist
Date: 26 February 2008
Location: Cairo, Cairo University

We talked about the evolution of the economic program of Tagammu and the question of “national development”.

ABD AL-RADY Sayyid
14-11-2010

Respondent: Sayyid Abd al-Rady, worker leader in Tagammu
Date: 14 November 2010
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ

We talked about the workers’ movement in Egypt. Some of the main points of the dialogue: (1) The workers’ movement is spontaneous and is active because of class “instinct” rather than class “consciousness”. (2) The Tagammu labor committee supports the formation of independent unions. (3) The difficulty is not so much the State as conscious workers to establish these unions. (4) The Muslim Brotherhood as a whole acts against the interests of the workers’ movement. They supported the NDP labor law. They want Islamic unions. Individual MB leaders such as Yosri Bayumi support the workers.

ABDU Zaki
12-4-2009

Respondent: Abdu Zaki, journalist in al-Badil
Date: 12 April 2009
Location: Cairo, al-Badil offices

We talked briefly about the financial problems of al-Badil.
AL-BAHARY Karim
11-3-2009

Respondent: Karim al-Bahary, youth activist
Date: 11 March 2011
Location: Cairo, café

We discussed about the role of youth in the 25 January revolution, the various youth alliances and coalitions, the transitional regime, and the position of the army towards the revolution.

AL-HAMALAWY Hossam
14-5-2009

Respondent: Hossam al-Hamalawy, leftist journalist, blogger and member of the RS
Date: 14 May 2009
Location: Cairo, café

Thanks to Guardian journalist Jack Shenker I finally got hold of Hossam al-Hamalawy. In a brief conversation we talked about various topics regarding the Mahalla and the workers’ movement.

Concerning the Brotherhood and Mahalla. He claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood had a presence during the Mahalla strikes, but that they did not give any “real” support to the movement. Individual Muslim Brothers, however, stood by the workers. MP Said Husayni was denounced by the workers during their 2007 strike because of the lack of support from the Brotherhood.

Concerning the Brotherhood and the RS. The “anti-religious Left” has exaggerated the alliance between the RS and the Ikhwan. Al-Hamalawy claimed that in the university of Helwan the radical Left had become stronger than the Brotherhood.

Concerning the split in the Mahalla leadership in 2008. According to al-Hamalawy, in the first strike of December 2006 the CTWS and Kamal Abbas played a crucial and center part in organizing the protests, but their role changed. Trade-union leaders such as Kamal Abbas change through pressures from both “above” and “below”. Pressure from below transforms them into “spontaneous” leaders, pressure “from above” re-integrate them into the bureaucracy. In 2009 the CTWS had become a typical NGO, only educating and not directing the movement.

Concerning the tax collectors. They succeeded in establishing a trade-union because their leadership was unified. In Mahalla in 2008, the leadership was fragmented. There are many factions in Mahalla, but none of them has the ability to lead the whole movement.

Concerning Afaaq Ishtirakiyya, the ECP and Essam Shabeen. “Essam Shabeen is a disgrace for the Left. They are a corrupting force, they don’t have any influence in the factories, but take someone from a demonstration, a youth, and call him a strike leader.”

Concerning the Textile Workers’ League. This organization played but a secondary role in 2006, but they became the main focal point during the September 2007 Strike. On April 6 they formed a strike committee. Kamal Fayumi and Sayyid al-Habib are its main leaders. They helped organizing the biggest Mahalla demonstration, in February 2008. According to al-Hamalawy the Textile Workers’ League “… is close to the RS”.

Concerning Tagammu. Its labor leader Abd al-Rahman Khayr had been recently been kicked out of the ETUF and, according to al-Hamalawy, this is the reason of him voicing a little dissent. He shouldn’t be trusted because he had betrayed the workers’ movement before.

Concerning the RS. “Today the RS goes through a period of change. For years we have been a small group under siege. Our industrial presence was weak. In 2006 with the Mahalla movement, things
changed radically. Either we now move towards becoming a workers’ party, or the party will explode. There is a change in our social base, as we recruited some strike leaders. At the same time our students’ organization is growing, and this creates other problems.” With hindsight this was a foreshadowing of the split with the SRC in 2010.

Concerning journalism and activism. Al-Hamalawy stressed that “The easiest way to engage with the workers is being a journalist, as any political activism is a priori suspicious. Being the media means having authority.”

ALI Walid, AL-MAHDY Tamer, TAHER Muhammad
9-4-2009

Date: 9 April 2009
Location: Cairo, Afqaq Ishtirakiyya and café

We had an interesting and long, reciprocal discussion (a true dialogue), which dealt with a lot of different topics: socialism, religion, the Iranian revolution, position of woman, the role of Tagammu in the Left, Palestine, Trotsky, classes, Venezuela, and so on.

AL-SAYYID Abd al-Rahman
12-4-2009

Respondent: Abd al-Rahman al-Sayyid, leader in the Arab-Nasserist Party
Date: 12 April 2009
Location: Cairo, al-Badil offices

I had a brief conversation with al-Sayyid, mostly about the differences between al-Karama and the ANP.

BELAL Ahmed
20-5-2009

Respondent: Ahmed Belal, leader in Tagammu and the UPY/UESY
Date: 20 May 2009
Location: Mahalla al-Kubra, café

I had many conversations with Ahmed Belal over the whole period of my fieldwork between 2008 and 2011, but this conversation was particularly revealing about the internal conflict in Tagammu. Ahmed Belal claimed that… “Fifty percent of the members in the party are against the leadership. Almost all active members are against the leadership. The leadership occupies the party positions but does not act as real leaders. They are an old generation which throws obstacles in the way of the youth to be in responsible functions. They call on non-active, “paper” members to win in elections. But in the meanwhile, some of these non-active members have become active and are now against the leadership. The most important vehicle of protest against the leadership is the Union of Progressive Youth. They have a monthly magazine of their own, which the party refuses to sponsor, and they get reprimanded if they criticize the leadership.” There was an interesting notion of the conflict between the youth and the older generation on the one hand, and between active and “paper” members on the other – a conflict which was present in all political formations, e.g. the Brotherhood.
BJÖRKLUND Per
5-5-2009

Respondent: Per Björklund, Swedish journalist doing research on social movements
Date: 5 May 2009
Location: Cairo, Per’s flat

Per Björklund pointed out that many of the “spontaneous” leaders of the Mahalla strike were in fact part of the state union and were kicked out of their positions after the 2006 (rigged) trade-union elections. Most of these leaders are supervisors and educated layers who describe themselves as workers but often have a different social status in the factory. He also claimed that the RS had a much more critical stance towards the Muslim Brothers than one would think at first sight. Lastly, he stressed that the state union often opportunistically sided with the workers when there were labor conflicts in foreign-owned companies, and that this was dangerous because it confuses the reactionary role of the state union.

CARR Sarah
15-4-2009

Respondent: Sarah Carr, British journalist for Daily News Egypt, specialized in labor issues
Date: 15 April 2009
Location: Cairo, café

Sarah Carr graduated in 2003 and she came to Cairo initially to improve her Arabic. At that time she was working with a human rights’ NGO. She has obtained a Master’s degree in international human rights law. She was disappointed with the NGO she was working for, and left the organization to become a journalist. When I ask her why she writes almost exclusively on labor issues and protests, she doesn’t agree, and sarcastically remarks she writes about stories which have never a good ending. She has never been involved in political activism, but says that this is changing gradually. According to her, there was a split in the Mahalla movement between the RS and the CTWS, led by Muhammad al-Attar. This split was one of the main reasons of the failure of the strike, according to her.

HANAFY Hassan
18-2-2008

Respondent: Hassan Hanafy, leftist-Islamist thinker and professor at Cairo University
Date: 18 February 2008
Location: Cairo, Cairo University

We talked about the relations between leftists and Islamists, and the possibility of a progressive Islamism.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>NASSER Bahig</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>14-3-2008</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We talked about the history of the communist movement in Egypt, with an emphasis on the movements between the Second World War and the Free Officers Coup.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>TALAL SHUKR Ahmed</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>12-4-2009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We discussed the problems between the UPY and Tagammu, and between the young and the old generation of leftists in Tagammu.
Events

These are some of the major events I attended and observed, listed by date. Apart from these events, there were many more smaller events, for example demonstrations near Talat Harb, meetings in Afaoq Ishtirakiyya, theatre and festivities in Tagammu, and so on.

Tagammu Cultural Celebrations
26-2-2008

Organizer: Tagammu and the Russian Embassy
Date: 26 February 2008
Location: Cairo, Russian Institute in Doqqi

An evening with leftist poems and songs in the cultural institute, organized by Tagammu.

Cairo International Conference and Liberation Forum
27-2-2008

Organizer: Al-Karamah Party; the Muslim Brotherhood; Al-Wasat party, Al-A’mal party; the Revolutionary Socialists’ Organisation; Arab and African Research Centre; al-Nadeem Centre for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims; Egyptian Association for Combating Torture; Egyptian General Committee for Boycotting Israel and the US; the South Group for Culture and Development; Hisham Mubarak’s Centre for Law; Centre for the Freedom of Thought and Expression; Arab Network for Human Rights Information; Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya); Popular Association for the Protection of Citizens from Unfair Taxation and Corruption.

Date: 27-30 March 2008
Location: Cairo, Journalists’ Syndicate

The Cairo Conference was a perfect opportunity for conversations and discussions with various leftists, Islamists and Nasserists. I also attended seminars with presentations and discussions of the struggles of movements such as the real estate tax collectors and the Mahalla workers.

“Day of Rage”
6-4-2009

Organizer: 6 April Youth Movement
Date: 6 April 2009
Location: Various

I had many conversations with activists during this day of protests as I walked from the ETUF headquarters to the Journalists’ Syndicate. After the event I wrote a little summary of the protests, which was later reproduced on Marxist.com: [...] On Monday, 6 April, the “6 April Youth Movement”, called for a “general strike” and a “day of anger”. This quite ambitious Facebook event was organized in commemoration of a strike which happened exactly one year ago, the culmination of a powerful workers’ movement with at its heart the workers of the Misr Spinning and Weaving
company in Mahalla al Kubra. The movement was heavily repressed by the security forces, which shot and killed three youth and wounded dozens of protesters. Trade-union leaders and political activists were arrested, intimidated and tortured. National and international campaigns of solidarity demanded the release of the detained and denounced the dictatorial nature of the regime.

As one of the solidarity networks which sprang up after the repression of the mass movement, the 6 April Youth Movement claims to have more than 70,000 “members”, mostly urban youth, discontented with the regime for various reasons. Not surprisingly, today their call for action resonated most clearly in the universities. In Mansura 1,500 students took the streets; in Helwan 800; in Cairo University 300. Students of Ain Shams University clashed with the police and some of them were arrested and detained. From the perspective of a student movement, the 6 April group seems to have done a rather good job at mobilizing its members. Of course, one should realize that the protest of the students was less a consequence of the virtual call for a “day of anger”, than of the efforts of grassroots’ student groups to patiently organise and carefully direct the students’ sit-ins and demonstrations.

The 6 April group did not only call for students’ actions, however. In a statement it explicitly called upon all working people to strike and either protest at their work, or in a mass demonstration at noon at the headquarters of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in Cairo. I was there at noon, and except for hundreds of policemen in uniforms, plainclothes thugs and secret services, and a handful of disappointed journalists, there was no one to been seen. According to a poll organized by the Youth Movement 90 percent of the people in Downtown Cairo were willing to participate in the strike. On Monday, however, throughout the city it was business as usual, and the man in the street didn’t seem to know or to care about any protest going on. Only at the journalists’ and lawyers’ syndicates, there were limited protests attended by a few dozen demonstrators - the majority of them representatives of the various, small democratic opposition parties and groups. Salwa A., a twenty year old girl and member of the liberal Democratic Front Party, claimed that the manifestation at the journalists’ syndicate was a success: “look at all the police!” According to her, Facebook nowadays connects everyone, and things will change if they only call enough of these demonstrations. When asked why the workers did not heed the call for a general strike, she stated that they had been “bought off” by the government and were too afraid to participate in any action. The memory of 6 April in Mahalla seemed far away at that point. [...]
spread its ideas, and have discussions with other parties in a relatively open atmosphere. Moreover, it’s also seen as a place and moment for the recruitment of youth.”

### Trip to Mansura and Dikirnis
17-4-2009
Date: 17 April 2009
Location: Mansura and Dikirnis

An interesting trip to Mansura together with al-Badil journalists Walid Ali and Tamer al-Mahdy. Lots of discussions with the duo. Interview and discussion with Hamdi Qenawi in the old Andrea building in Mansura. Subsequently a trip to the village of Dikirnis. Interview with Mahmud Foda. Conversations with Dikirnis farmers.

### Trip to Mahalla
20-5-2009
Date: 20 May 2009
Location: Mahalla al-Kubra

Ahmed Belal showed me around the city. Along the way we had many discussion on Tagammu and the situation of the Left in Egypt. I interviewed Muhammad Fathi and Osama Yussef in the streets, a group of Mahalla workers in the center of the CTWS, and Said Husayni the MP for the Brotherhood in Mahalla.

### Election meetings in Tagammu
2-10-2010
Date: 2 October 2010
Location: Cairo, Tagammu HQ

A press conference where Rifaat Said declared Tagammu’s intent on participating in the November elections. After the conference I had interesting discussions with Tagammu members and youth about the sense and nonsense of participating in the elections.

### Trip to Suez
18-10-2010
Date: 18 October 2010
Location: Suez

Saud Omar showed Haisam Hassan and me around the city of Suez and Port Tawfiq. I interviewed him and we had interesting discussions about the workers’ movement and the Muslim Brotherhood in Suez.
Parliamentary Elections

**28-11-2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>28 November and 5 December 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observing a polling station a popular neighborhood in Islamic Cairo.

International Women Day on Tahrir

**8-3-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>8 March 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Tahrir Square</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observing the women demonstration and anti-women protests; talking and discussing with women demonstrators. Conversation with Nawla Darwish:

“Since 2005 the role of women in protest movements has changed from passively supporting men to actively demonstrating and even leading demonstrations. This was clear in the Mahalla and RETAU struggles. During the revolution there emerged a revolutionary ethics towards women: there was no harassment of women, for example. But after the revolution has “finished” women are stepping back again, they are being marginalized again. The NWF is pleading for a quota of 30 percent of the seats of parliament for real women representation. […] The parties don’t have the strength or will to ensure women’s rights. In strikes women are first workers or farmers. But still there are some point of lights, for example, during the strike movement for the first time women demanded for a nursery for the children, which can be see as a women’s demand within the class struggle.”

Cleansing of Tahrir

**9-3-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>9 March 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Tahrir Square</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observing how the military, using teargas and force, removed the remaining squatters from Tahrir Square.

Friday Protests on Tahrir

**11-3-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>11 March 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Cairo, Tahrir Square</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observing demonstrations and talking with the remaining squatters and protesters.
### First Meeting of the Alliance of Revolutionary Workers in Suez
**18-3-2011**

| Date:     | 18 March 2011 |
| Location: | Suez          |

* A new interview with Saud Omar, followed by an observation of the first meeting of the revolutionary alliance of workers in Suez.

### Constitutional Amendments Referendum
**19-3-2011**

| Date:     | 19 March 2011 |
| Location: | Cairo         |

* Discussing the results of referendum with political activists and ordinary Egyptians.

### First Meeting of the Union of Egyptian Socialist Youth
**21-3-2011**

| Date:     | 21 March 2011 |
| Location: | Tagammu HQ    |

* Observing the first meeting of the UESY, a radical split from the UPY, followed by discussions about the role of leftist activists in Egypt and the future of the revolution.