Unintentional Democrats –
Independent unions in post-Mubarak Egypt
Kristian Takvam Kindt

Introduction
The Egyptian labor movement is one of the most active forces of Egyptian civil society today. While youth activists on Tahrir square have been the focus of media lenses and public debate, Egyptian workers have been on the rise for almost a decade. Between 2006 and 2011 over 2,000 strikes were organized and it is estimated that over 1,5 million workers participated [1]. These strikes have been deemed essential in bringing about a “culture of protest” that delegitimized Mubarak and made the 25th of January revolution in 2011 possible [2, 3].

While a fair amount of academic work has been conducted on the pre-revolutionary strike wave in Egypt [see 4, 5-9], much less is known about the workers role in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak. The lack of research is puzzling considering that it is only after the revolution that the Egyptian strike wave really has taken force. In 2011 and 2012 alone, over 1,000 new independent unions have been created and 3,346 strikes and protests were initiated by workers [10]. That is more than four strikes per day. The work that exists on Egyptian workers after 2011 relies only on strike statistics and the developments of the trade union federations [10-13], not the development of the local unions that initiates these strikes.¹

Many analysts agree that these new independent trade unions play an important role in the current transition. Joel Beinin has called Independent trade unions “the strongest nationally organized force confronting the autocratic tendencies of the old order.[2]” and Rabab El-Mahdi [6] similarly argues that ”Labour (sic) is now poised to become the most important social (...) opening new paths for democratization.” Despite this acknowledgement no one has investigated the relationship between trade unionism and democratization in Egypt after the revolution. Empirical data on what the unions are actually doing, and a framework to assess their impact on the current transition is lacking. This is what I hope to provide in this report. I will briefly present the overall developments of Egyptian trade unionism the last decade, before I review two case studies in-depth and analyze their role in contributing to the current political transition. My findings question the existing notion that strikes must aim for political change in order to have positive implications on democratization. In fact, I argue that the Egyptian trade unions contribute positively to the Egyptian transition because they focus exclusively on higher wages and better working conditions rather than entangling themselves in the polarized political scene in Egypt.
The rise of independent unionism

Before the early 2000s, strikes were rare in Egypt. The industrial relations system put in place during the Nasir era was designed to curb dissent. Only one trade union federation was allowed, (the Egyptian Trade Union Federation; ETUF), where membership was compulsory. Strikes were banned until 2002, and after 2002 you still needed permission from the state-controlled union to strike [15]. Trade union elections were subject to widespread fraud, and only candidates loyal to Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP) were on the ticket [13]. Egypt was put on the so-called “black list” of the International Labor Organization (ILO) because they did not fulfill convention 87 and 98, guaranteeing freedom of association and the right of collective bargaining [16]. In short, the Egyptian state used the trade union federation as an instrument to minimize dissent among workers, rather than as an instrument where they could promote their interests. As May Kassem [17] wrote in 2004 “The autonomy of trade unions has been marginalized to such a degree that it is difficult to distinguish them from the state.”

This undemocratic industrial relations system remained relatively unchallenged for over 40 years. Between the 1950s and the end of the 1990s, Egyptian workers were to a large degree loyal to the state, and did not engage in widespread protests [17, 18]. This changed in the mid-2000s when a massive strike wave started, emerging from the textile sector but spreading to (among others) doctors, teachers, transportation workers, in both private and public sector [6, 15, 19]. The development of this strike wave is seen clearly in Figure 2.1. There was a marked increase in workers protests in 2004, which continued to rise until the peak year of 2009. After the revolution however, the numbers really exploded. 1377 strikes and workers protests were registered in 2011 and 1969 in 2012 [10]. All these strikes were initiated without consent from the trade union, and were therefore illegal and officially punishable by law.

Figure 2.1: Collective action from workers in Egypt 1998-2012

![Chart showing collective action from workers in Egypt 1998-2012]

Source: Annual Reports from the Land Center for Human Rights, that can be found at http://www.lchr-eg.org/. The numbers for 2011 and 2012 are from [10]

There are different explanations in the literature for why this strike wave erupted. The most cited reason is the material consequences of the IMF structural adjustment package that Egypt signed in 1991. As a result, many public enterprises were privatized leading to worse working conditions in many cases. This angered the workers and pushed them to strike [15]. A second explanation
also points to the neo-liberal policies, but to its cultural rather than material effects. Chalcraft [9] and El-Mahdi [6] argue that the privatization initiatives represented a “rupture in the post-1952 ruling pact” established by Nasir. The main reason workers did not strike during the 60s, 70s and 80s was that they saw themselves as a part of a national development project. Now, when many public enterprises were privatized, workers in the public sector felt betrayed. The loyalty of Egyptian workers toward the state was gone. The third explanation points to declining state repression of strikes in the 2000s compared to previous decades, combined with and the opening of political opportunities [8].

The strike wave started in the mid-2000s as illegal uncoordinated wildcat strikes, but developed a more sophisticated organizational network within a few years. In 2007 the idea to create trade unions independent of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was launched. This would mean to break the legally sanctioned monopoly of ETUF and was therefore met with harsh repression. In 2009 however after prolonged legal battle, the somewhat unlikely group of real estate tax collectors managed to establish the first independent union in Egypt since the 1950s [4]. Only two other groups managed for form such unions before the revolution. After 2011 however, it became easier to establish such unions and the numbers have exploded. By June 2013 over 1000 independent unions had been created. The legal status of these independent unions is unclear. A “Trade Unions Freedom Act” allowing full freedom for trade unions to be established has been demanded by trade unionists, but is still not implemented. After Mohammed Mursi was ousted July 3rd 2013, the legal status of independent unions remains in limbo. Kamal Abu Eita, the previous head of Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions was appointed labor minister in the interim government of Hazem Biblawy, but it is not certain that he will be able to issue the trade unions freedom law in the precarious situation Egypt is currently in. His first statement as minister was that the Egyptian workers have been heroes of strikes, but “now they must become heroes of production” [20]; not necessarily an indication that trade union freedom is among his first priorities. So as of today, and for the whole period that this thesis covers, the independent unions are officially illegal in Egypt. Despite their ambiguous legal status, their numbers are growing and the pressure to grant full freedom of association is increasing.

When looking at their demands, it becomes clear that the majority of striking workers focus on workplace issues rather than political change Table 2.2 shows what type of demands that were raised in strikes by local union in 2012. The majority of protests are either over wage issues, work security, or fear job loss. Demands of legislation change or any other structural changes were not raised in any of the 1969 protests and strikes in 2012.

Table 2.2: Demands Raised by Striking Workers (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demands raised by striking workers (2012)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage or bonus increase</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing work security</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>19,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest against employees being fired</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor treatment from the administration</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3,6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption in the administration</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>5,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest against closing factories</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed payment or promotion</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>5,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>22,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Amin Al-Din [10]
In addition to these local unions, two national federations for independent unions have been created, (The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and The Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC)). They raise more structural demands like a national minimum and maximum wage and a law guaranteeing freedom of association. However, these federations are generally considered weak. They do not organize protests or strikes and are often in conflict with local unions [21]. In other words, it’s the local unions that are driving the movement and they seemingly focus on their own immediate interests.

The fact that Egyptian workers are more concerned with wages and working conditions rather than broader political change is seemingly in contrast to analysts like El-Mahdi [6], who argues that this new labor movement is “political in nature”, and that they express a “heightened class consciousness.” It also has implications for the trade unions’ role in the Egyptian transition. Can a high number of strikes with an exclusive focus on traditional bread and butter issues like we see in Egypt, be conducive to a democratization process? According to traditional transition theory, the high number of strikes would be deemed destructive for democratization. In a fragile transition period, consensus is needed to lay the grounds for prosperous democracy. Narrow minded strikes only disrupts such a process [22-24]. According to more radical or Marxist perspectives, the high number of strikes seen in Egypt can be positive, but it will not lead to much change unless the demands are oriented towards structural change. Only when workers embrace a political agenda can they become true democratizers [25]. According to existing perspectives therefore, the Egyptian labor movement would have to be deemed destructive for democratization.

Does that mean that we must conclude so as well? No, not necessarily. I argue that these previous perspectives are an odd fit to the Egyptian case. The only two factors they rely on are number of strikes and type of demands. In order to comprehend more fully the role of trade unions, one must have a more comprehensive framework that investigates their role in democratization more broadly. One must look into how individuals participating in the union are affected and how the unions influence the institutional environment in addition to studying their relation to the political level. This is based on insights from Social Movement Theory (SMT) that all movements and organizations indeed have an impact on the individual, institutional and political level (ref). In addition, democracy – understood with Stein Ringen [26] as a system where “citizens hold the ultimate control over collective decisions in a securely institutionalized manner.” – does not only evolve on the political level. It requires active citizens (individual level) that participate in democratic and strong institutions (institutional level) that can mediate their concerns [27].

In the remainder of this report therefore, I look beyond the number of strikes and list of demands and explore two case-studies in depth to investigate how these local strikes influence democratization. The cases chosen are the Independent Union of Public Transportation Workers (Independent Transportation Workers) and the Independent movement in the Doctors’ Syndicate (Independent Doctors). I will present the cases briefly and argue why I have chosen these particular cases before I discuss the role they play for democratization on the individual, institutional and political level. Last, I discuss the implications of my findings for our understanding of Egyptian trade unions and trade unions in transition in general.
The cases

Independent Transportation Workers

Egyptian public transportation workers represent the formal part of public transportation in greater Cairo. With their around 40,000 workers, organized in 33 different garages, they are responsible for the city buses in greater Cairo, as well as the Nile river boats. Their employer is the Cairo Public Transit Authority (CTA) which is owned by the Cairo governorate. I chose this case because they are a paradigmatic case of new independent unions in Egypt. Their history reflects the history of the Egyptian labor movement. Such paradigmatic cases are good when there is very little research on a subject, which is the case here. In-depth knowledge of one typical example might prove to have broader relevance than deviant cases.

As many other workers at the time, the Independent Transportation Workers organized strikes before the revolution, namely in 2007 and 2009. These strikes were small but significant as they were the first strikes among the transportation workers since the 1970s. As most strikes during that time, they did not have an organizational backing and were deemed illegal by the administration. After the revolution, in March 2011, they founded an independent union, like several other groups of workers as we have seen. The leaders of this union were the same people who had organized the strikes in 2007 and 2009. After the revolution and with the founding of the independent union, the number of strikes also increased [28]. Whereas two strikes were organized between 2007 and 2011, no less than five strikes took place the next two years: February 2011, September 2011, March 2012, July 2012 and October 2012 [10, 29, 30]. Their demands tie in well with the general picture described in table 2.1. They wanted increased wages and bonuses, new buses and more spare parts for the existing buses. In addition they demanded that the CTA should be moved from the Cairo Governorate to the Ministry of Transportation [28]. The reason for that was that the Ministry of Transportation had more money, and was therefore better able to actually implement their wage and work condition demands. Summing up, the Independent Transportation Workers represent a paradigmatic case of the independent trade unions in Egypt after the revolution, following the general developmental trajectory of similar organizations.

Independent Doctors

In addition to a case representing the workers, I chose a case which is normally deemed outside the scope of labor studies, namely the Independent Doctors. In Egypt, the professional syndicates constitute an active part of Egyptian civil society and they organize a substantial amount of the protests and strikes in the country. Syndicates are however organized somewhat differently than trade unions. It is not an organization only for employees but also employers. A doctor who runs a private clinic can be a member. The syndicates have historically enjoyed larger freedom, because they have not been subject to the ETUF umbrella. The doctors’ syndicate has local boards and a national board that is voted in on general assemblies. Large decisions, like the decision to go on strike, can only be taken at a general assembly where all doctors who have paid their fee have the right to attend. The syndicates, and in particular the doctors’ syndicate has also been an arena for politics to a larger degree than the trade unions. Since the 1980s the doctors’ syndicate has served as a stronghold for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In 1992, the MB won the majority of seats in many large cities (including Cairo). Mubarak feared MB’s influence and effectively banned elections in the syndicate, a law that stayed in effect until 2011 [31].

The Independent Doctors and the Independent Transportation Workers constitute a good pair of cases both because of their differences and because of their similarities. Becker [32] argues that the golden rule of sampling is to select cases that you believe to be different. Dissimilar cases challenge your thinking and prevent you from jumping to easily to conclusions. The Independent Transportation Workers and Independent Doctors are different on many levels. In addition to having different institutional structures as described, their members represent different social groups, different educational backgrounds and they belong to different parts of the status hierarchy. At the same time, they share several similarities with the Independent Transportation Workers regarding the subject of this thesis, namely their recent strike history and activism. In the mid-2000s the Independent Doctors emerged, critical of the MB and critical of the Mubarak regime. Given that the syndicate was in a political deadlock, those doctors interested in fighting for change had to take their struggle elsewhere, before the revolution. The Independent Doctors won a general assembly majority for starting a strike in 2008, but it was never implemented [33]. After the revolution the supporters of the Independent Doctors grew substantially. In a general assembly in March 2011, only one month after the ousting of Mubarak the Independent Doctors
managed to vote through early elections in October 2011, where they won several seats on the board, running as “The Independent List” [34]. In May 2011, they decided to organize a strike demanding the implementation of their demands. The strike lasted only for one day, but it was the first strike in the doctors’ syndicate since 1957 and was in that sense an important step for the independence movement [35]. The following year they managed to get a majority for another strike in a general assembly. By this time, many doctors were fed up with the new government not implementing their demands. The strike started October 1st and lasted until December 21st 2012, making it one of the longest strikes in Egyptian history [36].

The fact that the Independent Doctors developed in a similar way as the Independent Transportation Workers, make them a good pair for comparison, despite the rather large differences between the groups. My argument is that if I find similar developments or similar patterns in these two cases despite the differences it is unlikely that they are attributed to the social background of their members or the institutional structure of that specific group. It is more likely to be the result of union activity, which is what I’m trying to assess.

I rely on three main sources of data in this report. First, newspaper articles and the groups’ own declarations are used to describe factual information about the strikes and other important events. Second, I conducted in all 20 in-depth qualitative interviews in the period between October 2012 and June 2013 with rank and file members as well as the leadership within these unions. I interviewed the leadership to get their perceptions of the goals and strategy, as well as the impact of their actions. The people outside the leadership were important in order to assess how ordinary workers were impacted by the participation in the trade union. The third source of data was ethnographic observation conducted between October and December 2012. It consisted of participating in one strategy meeting in each union as well as spending time in one hospital and one bus garage. The observations do not amount to an independent field work, but should rather be seen as an addition to the interviews and archive material. It proved very important to get a sense of how strategy was made in the unions, and how previous strikes had affected their strategy.

**Individual level**

On the individual level, participation in trade unions can contribute positively to democratization in two ways. First, by making workers feel an increasing sense of agency. Or put differently: Making workers feel able to control and affect their own work situation. Democracy is about giving control to the citizens of their own life situation, and if the unions are able to enhance this feeling among their members, that’s important for facilitating democracy. Second, by building a *democratic consciousness* or increasing workers trust and participation in democracy on a national level. Many theories argue that unions function as so called “schools of democracy” [37]. By participating in organizations on a local level, people learn democracy on a national level [38]. A negative impact on the individual level is if the union enhances social cleavages or sectarianism and make workers feel apathy (unable to affect their work situation) instead of agency.

On the first indicator of increased agency, my data suggests that both the Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors contributed positively. The Independent Transportation Workers talked about how the old unionists from the state-controlled union did not represent them. They were aware that their situation was bad, but they didn’t have anyone to speak to. After the strikes in 2007 and 2009, and especially after the revolution and the founding of the independent union in 2011 this changed. Adel, a repairman in the imbibe garage gives a representative image of how my informants viewed the new independent unionist.

“I felt that they [the independent unionists] managed to convey the problems that we all felt, but were unable to convey ourselves. (...) Instead of a unionist that was not present for 6 years like the old union, he was a unionist that was with us 24 hours a day.”

All my informants stated that the independent union had made it easier to voice their protests, and all expressed that their work situation had gotten better the last years. They appreciated the concessions the administration gave, the increase in bonuses and more spare parts This does not mean that all of them supported every strike initiated. But they felt they had someone to turn to, someone to complain to and that the union was actually helping them to change their workplace for the better. This finding is confirmed by the fact that the membership numbers in the independent union is rising, and that the strikes initiated by the union has gained increasing support the last two years.
Among the Independent Doctors we see the same tendencies. Before the revolution, there was not much activity inside the syndicate and my informants expressed both fear of voicing their concern, and a general sense of apathy. As one of my informants put it: “People either acclimated to the system, or fled from it. No one fought it. The syndicate was weak (…) and part of the regime, really.” The revolution increased the will to mobilize drastically. My informants described themselves as having “sense of euphoria” and a “revolutionary spirit”. “We wanted to change something”, Amr, a leader in Doctors without Rights expressed. This was evident in the very high participation in the general assemblies in March and May 2011. Even though the strike in May 2011 essentially failed, the Independent Doctors managed to win seats in the syndicate elections in October 2011. In 2012, they also managed to mobilize one of the longest lasting strikes in Egyptian history. In the first weeks of the strike the participation rate was 95%. This dropped gradually as the strike lasted longer and longer and was down at 60–70% (depending on the region) in December.

In a general assembly 23rd of December 2012, a vote was passed to cancel the strike, even though their demands were not implemented. All my informants outside the leadership expressed that even though they were fed-up with the strike after three months, they were happy that someone finally put the bad situation for the doctors on the agenda. The fact that the strike in May 2011 failed, but the 2012 strike succeeded also shows that organizing strikes is a learning curve. “We were not ready for the strike in May 2011, we didn’t know what it was.” This shows that the Independent Doctors played an important role in increasing the ability of doctors to voice their grievances, and thus also their felt ability to change their situation.

For the second indicator, there is no indication that my informants’ democratic consciousness or interest in democratic politics increased as a result of their participation. First off, neither the transportation workers nor the doctors see their participation in strikes and the union/syndicate as a part of a democratization project, or a political project at all. “You will never get a worker to strike for anything else then wages” one of the leaders in the Independent Transportation Workers told me. My informants to a large degree confirmed this picture. Wages and working conditions was the dominant reason for their participation. Other reasons were also cited, like demanding removal of “corrupt officials” and a sense of a “revolutionary right” to strike. Still, none of my informants mentioned engaging in strikes as part of any form of political project. Confirming this picture, very few of my informants were politically engaged at all. Some of them voted, but most of them did not. Those who were politically engaged had been so since long before the revolution. There is in other words, no indication that participation in the unions has made the workers more politically active or committed to democracy.

The role of the Independent Doctors and the Independent Transportation Workers on the individual level is therefore mixed. On the one hand, they do seem to increase the sense of agency among workers, giving them a sense that they can change their work situation. However, there are no signs of increased political engagement or commitment to democracy as a result of their participation in union activity.

**Institutional level**

On the institutional level, unions can also contribute positively in two ways. First, by fighting for democratization of industrial relations. This means moving towards an institutional system where workers are represented and their views are forwarded to the employers through democratic channels [39]. Second, unions contribute to democratization on an institutional level if they are strong and able to actually implement the demands of the workers. Without a strong union, the workers voice will not be heard. A negative impact on the institutional level would be a union that consolidates an undemocratic industrial relations system (like the ETUF in Egypt) or a union that is weak, unable to forward workers’ demands effectively.

Regarding the democratization of industrial relations, neither the Independent Transportation Workers nor the Independent Doctors had an explicit strategy aiming at democratization of the industrial relations system. They did not participate in any broader struggle for freedom of association or other general demands. For example, even though the Independent Transportation Workers sympathized with the struggle for a national minimum wage and the trade unions freedom law, they did not want to engage in such struggles as a union. Their agenda was to get their localized demands implemented. In order to do this however, they contributed to democratizing industrial relations, albeit unintentionally.

The Independent Transportation Workers contributed to democratizing industrial relations through breaching the organizational monopoly of ETUF by founding their own independent un-
ion. To found a new union was a direct challenge to the old corporatist system. It enforced trade union pluralism even though freedom of association was not recognized in Egypt’s laws. And even though the independent union was not legally recognized, it has in practice have become the representatives of transportation workers negotiating on their behalf in disputes. It was during a strike in September 2011 that they first were recognized as legitimate representatives of the transportation workers. The employer tried to negotiate a deal with the state controlled union and called of the strike [29]. The Independent Transportation Workers refused to accept this deal, since they were not represented in the negotiations. They therefore resumed to strike [40]. After one more week the employer agreed to negotiate with the Independent Transportation Workers, and reached a deal [41].

The story of the 2011 strike reveals how change in the industrial relations system is implemented through struggle, not legislation. There was no legal reason for why the independent union should be brought to the negotiation table, but they were the ones who started the strike, so the administration was pushed to talk to them. In the following strikes the Independent Transportation Workers were consulted as representatives of the workers. By founding a union and being recognized as representatives of the workers, they created trade union democracy on a local level and thereby contributed to a democratic industrial relations system even though that was not their main intent.

The Independent Doctors did not have a strategy to reform the syndicate or industrial relations system either. It was not their agenda. But in order to get through their demands, they had to do get majority votes in the doctors’ syndicate. It was not as easy to create an independent syndicate because doctors get their license from the official syndicate. They chose to fight from inside instead. In many instances, they forced the syndicate to behave by democratic rules. They managed to mobilize doctors to participate in general assemblies, making the participation rates record-high in 2011 and 2012 which in itself is important for the legitimacy of the assemblies. But during these general assemblies, the MB-affiliated syndicate leadership attempted to trick the Independent Doctors by breaking democratic rules, like invalidating their votes, or hindering them from entering the general assembly. Essam El-Erian, who led some of the assemblies also refused to sign decisions for strikes even after they were voted for. The Independent Doctors fought this on every occasion and made sure that the syndicate abided by the rules. They also showed commitment to democratic rules through accepting losses. When they Independent Doctors did not win a majority for a demand or strike action in the general assembly, the accepted it. And when the MB won the majority of votes in the syndicate elections, they accepted it, and did not demand their removal, as we have seen happen on the national scene. This means that without the Independent Doctors there are good reasons to believe that democratic rules would have been breached in the syndicate. In that sense, they contributed positively to democratization of industrial relations.

Regarding the strength of the unions, their actual ability to implement the demands they forward, the picture is mixed. The Independent Transportation Workers have gotten some concessions like increased bonuses, and some new spare parts for the buses during the last two years. The doctors also got through their demand of increased security in the hospitals. But neither of them have been able to implement their most ambitious demands. Even after several strikes, the oversight of the transportation workers is not moved to the Ministry of Transportation like they demanded, and the doctors have not gotten the pay raise they wished for. One factor which might contribute to their lacking success is their unwillingness to working with any federations or actors on a national level to address structural reform in for example the wage structure or a general law of working conditions. “No one speaks in our name” as informants from the Independent Doctors and the Independent Transportation Workers say. The transportation workers report being tired of the centralized structure that was in place during the ETUF-era and want more locally anchored unions. For the doctors, there are no federations in place where they feel they belong. There has never been a strong tradition for cooperation between syndicates in Egypt.

There is more than one possible interpretation of these findings. The unions have managed to implement some demands, but not the most important ones. Their strategies are hindering them, especially the Independent Transportation Workers, from supporting structural demands like a minimum wage which would benefit them directly. By this measure, the unions under study appear weaker than their proven mobilization capacity suggests. However, if we are to measure strength as the unions’ ability to influence the state and their employers, the picture that emerges is somewhat different. Both the Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors conduct regular meetings with their employers, relevant ministries, the Prime Minister and the President’s office. They have both formed delegations that have addressed the Parliament
and Shura council, and especially the Independent Doctors have succeeded in attracting media attention. The fact that the Independent Transportation Workers have become legitimate representatives, and are listened to and that the Independent Doctors managed to mobilize one of the longest strikes in Egyptian history, are signs of strength in themselves. The Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors have not proven their full strength, but have the potential to become strong unions in the future.

**Political level**

Both the Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors described themselves as “non-political” and “non-politicized”. As one of the leading Independent Transportation Workers said: “The workers struggle has nothing to do with politics, the two are completely disconnected”. In his view, workers’ rights are not divisive issues like political issues are. To grant workers what they need is not an ideological standpoint, but just something everybody agrees on. Omar, another leading figure in the transportation workers union elaborated:

“Worker’s issues are not sectarian issues, like politics and religion. When I fight for workers’ rights, do I fight for only Muslim workers’ rights, or for the right of Muslim and Christian workers? Do I fight for the Islamist workers’ rights, or the socialist workers’ rights? When the worker is in line to get his wage, is it written Muslim or Christian on the pay check? The salary does not know religion and has no political affiliation”.

Others, both among the Independent Transportation Workers but especially the Independent Doctors had a more nuanced view of the relation between politics and unionism. They agreed that unions should not engage in political activity, but nevertheless argued that the two spheres were connected. Ali, a member of the central leadership in the Independent Transportation Workers also argued that there needed to be cooperation between the political sphere and the union sphere.

“Politics is a game that is played by the different political parties. That is the high politics (siāsa ‘āliyya). But then you have the workers politics (siāsa ‘umāliyya.) And it is important to recognize that they are connected. So, there has to be a connection between the political parties and the unions. They cannot work separately. Because the country will not rise, without the rise of the workers and the workers will not rise without the rise of the country”.

When asked to specify how unions and political parties should cooperate, it became clear that they did not envision any deep alliance. Instead he felt that political parties should support unions, not necessarily the other way around: “We accept that parties issue declarations of support, but if they try to enter in the way we work or are organized, we completely reject this”. The leaders of the Independent Doctors had a similar view, claiming that they accepted support from political parties, but as an organization they could not meddle with politics. The Independent Doctors were frustrated with the doctors affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and saw their explicit political support for them as a traitorous act to the doctors’ profession. They were afraid, as were the Independent Transportation Workers, of political control of the union. Despite slight differences, there was agreement in the leadership of both unions that politics and workers issues are separate spheres. Whereas politics is the realm of sectarian and divisive issues, workers’ rights are more universal and not subject to political differences.

The perception of the Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors of themselves as non-political might seem at odds with conventional understanding of trade union activity as essentially a political enterprise, even if they only fight for wage and working conditions. It is therefore important to emphasize that “non-political” in this context refers to what the workers themselves define as political and non-political. It is clear from the statements above that politics for them is something confined to the parliamentary sphere, to the politicians, while grass roots work is defined as something else. This non-political outlook in both cases had several consequences for how they related to political parties and political institutions, which is highly relevant to understand their role on the political level. Three manifestations of their non-political outlook stand out. First, none of the unions made any declarations supporting a specific political party or even candidate in the different elections. They did not officially advise the workers how they should vote in the national assembly elections, the presidential elections or the referendum on the constitution. Second, both unions claimed to practice an unwritten rule that no one was allowed to talk about politics in the union meetings. These unions did not see political discussion as relevant to the union issues. Third, the Independent Transportation Workers cited political disagreement as one of the main reasons for refusing to cooperate with the Egyptian Federation
for Independent Trade Unions (EFTIU). According to the Independent Transportation Workers the federation was too politicized: “They are all socialists, and they want to oust President Mursi. We are a trade union, and have no business engaging in these issues”. This reached a high point during the Tamarrud-campaign in 2013 that ended with the ousting of President Mursi on the 3rd of July 2013. The federations announced public support of Tamarrud [42], whereas the Independent Transportation Workers refused to support a campaign they deemed as “politicized”. One might think that the explicit aim to remain outside of politics would lead to a separation of politics and workers issues. Before we can assess whether this is true, we must consider what the consequences of this non-political unionism actually are.

The non-political attitude expressed by the Independent Transportation Workers and Independent Doctors has both negative and positive implications for their role on the political level. On the negative side it is not likely that a workers’ party will emerge from these two cases. To establish a strong workers party has historically been an effective way for workers to affect the political level [43]. No initiative has been taken for forming such a party. And as explained, none of the cases under study are interested in fighting for issues not directly related to their work situation. This, combined with their wish of not being politicized, makes it unlikely that they will pursue such a strategy in the future.

The non-political strategy of these two cases also has positive implications for their role on the political level. Both the doctors and transportation workers are able to influence the existing political parties through their individual political engagement. There are people with very different political affiliations in the two unions under study. And they use different means to connect to their parties. Some try to promote workers’ rights to parties that are skeptical of their cause. For example Saad, a member of the Independent Doctors explained how he is negotiating with the salafi party Ḥizb al-Nūr for them to change their position on strikes. As he explained:

“I try to convince the people of my party, Ḥizb Al-Nūr that strikes are a good thing. I mean, they are shaykhs, and all they know is really religion. They are not that experienced in politics, and do not know that much about the problems in society. They are against the strikes from a general standpoint. Because strikes which affect normal people badly, and that is forbidden in Islam. But they do care about social justice, the right of sick people etc. So when I explain it that way, they listen”.

Others are writing policy for different political parties. One of the doctors who were in the strike committee is now writing the health policy for two large opposition parties, al-Dustūr and Maṣr al-Qawiyya. A leading figure among the Independent Transportation Workers is writing the labor policy for a smaller socialist party while another was a co-founder of Ḥizb al-Hadaf, a Salafi party where he has the responsibility for labor policy.

The non-political strategy also enables the unions to include members of different political factions in the same union. There were socialists, Salafis, moderate Islamists, liberals and people who did not care about politics in both the Independent Doctors and the Independent Transportation Workers. By not talking about politics, they managed to put ideological rivalries aside and focus on real life issues instead. If the trade unions manage, as the two case studies here do, to forge a political space that is actually inclusive, this is a positive contribution to democratization and depolarization. It could serve as an example for the rest of Egyptian society because it enables them to affect the policies of many different political parties.

To sum up, the cases under study do not have any explicit goals to influence political institutions. In fact, one could argue that they ignore them to a large degree, claiming that they are not relevant. When looking at their actions however, it is clear that they have many positive, often unintended, consequences for democratization. The very act of distancing themselves from politics has positive implications on the political level. Through creating a political space where members of different political currents can join and be active, the unions prove as an example of how cooperation is possible, despite the polarized reality of Egyptian politics. The importance of this cannot be overstated. To my knowledge, this is the only political space in Egypt where people with clearly different ideological background manage to work together towards the same goals. After the ousting of President Mursi, polarization is threatening to destroy the possibility of inclusive democracy in Egypt. The trade unions have a potential to limit this polarizing divide.

In addition, the unions’ relation to politics is a bottom-up approach that could be described anti-
Leninist unionism. Lenin [44] argued that the workers would never reach political consciousness by themselves. A strong political party was needed to lead the workers in the right direction. In my cases however, the unions are afraid of political alliances, afraid that it would compromise their agenda. They do not opt for the Leninist strategy of allying with a supposedly supportive political party. In Egypt today, we see how the unionists advise the parties, and formulate their policies, rather than the other way around. Whereas Lenin thought the workers were too stupid to be political and therefore needed help from political parties, the Egyptian unions under study think the political parties are too stupid and unable to make sound policies without their help. In other words, Egyptian unionism is Lenin turned on his head. This act of contributing to policy is constructive to democratization in itself. It helps the parties formulate policy grounded in people's experiences rather than written directly of an ideological platform. It increases the legitimacy of the political parties among the workers, and contributes to workers interests being promoted on a political level. The role they are playing is in many ways similar to what Habermas [45] has described as the ideal civil society organization. They function as whistleblowers to the political parties, voicing legitimate concerns, that the political parties then adopt in their programs and (eventually) might put it into law. How effective their influence on the political parties is, remains to be seen.

Discussion: Narrow focus, broad implications

The Independent Transportation Workers and the Independent Doctors have one very important trait in common, that transcends and influence their impact at the individual, institutional and political level. They have what we can call a narrow focus, meaning that they are only concerned with demands that relate directly to their own cause and do not explicitly engage in broader struggle to democratize industrial relations, or any other political struggle. What implications does this narrow focus on their contribution to democratization? According to the existing perspectives presented in the beginning of this paper, I concluded that the Egyptian workers movement could not be seen as constructive democratizers. The findings presented here could be interpreted to support that hypothesis, namely that their narrow focus hinders them from being a democratic player in the current transition.

At the individual level we saw how my informants have not gained any broader democratic consciousness as a result of participating in a union. My findings question the link between union participation and democratic commitment. On the institutional level, we saw how this narrow focus was a problem for the unions' possible impact. They fight for narrow issues, relating to their own wages and work-conditions instead of focusing on broader struggles. Also, by refusing any initiatives to work for collective bargaining above industry-level, they make it difficult to get through real structural reforms in the industrial relations system, like securing freedom of association and securing a fair minimum wage. On the political level, their narrow focus hinders them from cooperating with other workers in creating a strong labor party. It is unlikely that a strong workers party will emerge, when they are not even cooperating with the national federation for independent unions, because it is too political.

There are however, also strong arguments for the opposite hypothesis. Namely that the narrow focus of the unions enable them to contribute positively to democratization. On the individual level, my informants report an increased sense of agency. They feel they are able to affect their own work situation, and feel that participating in the union gives the opportunity to affect political decisions. On the institutional level, both unions fought important battles to democratize industrial relations. The transportation workers founded an independent union and thereby challenging the non-democratic trade union monopoly. To be able to break this monopoly and establish themselves as real democratic representatives for the workers, is a positive contribution to the current transition. The independent doctors’ movement similarly fought to increase transparency and forced the syndicate to abide by democratic rules, pushing it out of the undemocratic prac-
tices that existed during the Mubarak era. On the political level the unions have created a political space where people from widely different political affiliations are members of the leadership and they manage to draw support from and directly influence political parties on different sides of the political spectrum, both through giving them advice and help writing their political platforms.

I would argue that the indicators of positive impact from the trade unions have not occurred in spite of but as a result of their narrow focus. It is not unique for trade unions to focus on their own interests. In reality it follows quite closely what Richard Hyman [43] describes as the “business unionism”. In this tradition, unions see themselves first and foremost as labor market actors (not actors of class interest) with the objective of securing basic rights for their workers through “standard rates of pay, normal working hours and basic health and safety requirements” [43]. Unions that wish to follow this strategy often end up in a situation where they are forced to fight for democratic rights. The reason is that in order to negotiate better working conditions for themselves, the unions need a predictable and transparent industrial relations regime, and they need to secure representation. Their strategies evolve into what Hyman [43] labels “political economism” meaning actions that “extend beyond the searching of material gains to the establishment of rights in industry. This image fit well with how the unions in this study behave. They do not work for democratization of industrial relations because that is their end goal, but as a means to an end. The increased sense of agency on the individual level and the democratization of industrial relations is not a part of the unions’ strategy, but an unintended side-effect. On the political level, we have also seen how this narrow focus, which would be deemed by Lenin as their biggest disadvantage, is actually their foremost strength. Through explicitly stating that they are pure labor market actors and not interested in politics, they draw support and members from a wide variety of political affiliations, and generate policy for different political parties. This is Lenin turned on his head. In short, the democratizing impact of the Egyptian trade unions is an “unintended consequence” of a strategy void of democratizational promise.

Even though this “narrow focus” could be argued to serve the case studies here well, it is still a question whether a broader focus would have helped them contribute even more to democratization in Egypt? To this, I would actually argue the opposite. I would argue that a large part of their positive contributions to democratization can be described as what Jon Elster (ref 1981, 431) has called “states that are essentially by-products” which means states that “can only come about as the by-product of actions undertaken for other ends.” On the individual level, the increased agency of the workers would not have come about if the unions had an explicit strategy to “increase sense of agency” (even though they might appreciate it in hindsight). Workers joined, as we have seen, mainly because they wanted to better their wages. Similarly, workers did not express any interest in national democracy. To mobilize workers around a general demand of “democracy” would have been difficult if not impossible. To mobilize workers around a general demand of democracy would have been difficult if not impossible. First, because many of them were not politically active and it is therefore unlikely that they would take to the streets for a demand that did not directly affect them. This is in line with research findings from a variety of contexts suggesting that political motives are not on the mind of workers when they join unions [46]. Second – and perhaps most important – any demand that could be interpreted as politicized, supporting a specific party or political current, would most probably have created
deeper cleavages within the union. The pluralistic membership structure including people with different ideological convictions would most likely have disappeared, and the unions would have become yet another example of a polarized political sphere. The positive effects of depolarization would not have been upheld with unions advocating an explicit political strategy.

Implications and further studies

This report highlights the impact of two cases of workers mobilization in Egypt and argue that they do indeed contribute to democratization despite having an explicitly non-political strategy. Even though these findings cannot be generalized to the whole flora of independent unions in Egypt, they have some implications for how we should understand general developments in Egypt. First, there is no reason to hope for a higher number of strikes in the future. The point is not how many strikes a union manage to mobilize, but what their impact is. Second, we should not only look at the political level when studying trade unions. To assess how strikes affect individuals and institutions is just as important. In the near future, to what extent the trade unions contribute to increasing polarization or not for example will be important. What will happen with the relation between the trade union federations and the local unions will also be important to follow. Third, we cannot read their political role just from their demands. A union may have narrow demands but still impact politics. They may have broad demands, but not impact politics. We need to investigate what they do, not just what they say they do.

Many signs indicate that the workers movement will impact the developments in the following years. First, the Egyptian labor movement has through mobilization built up potential power to cripple the economy and political stability which they aim to use. Second, the new Minister of Manpower comes from the independent labor movement and expresses a wish to include labor in political processes. Third, labor movements in other Arab countries, like Tunisia, has emerged as a key player in securing an agreement between the Islamist and opposition. Fourth, the labor movement is the only political space in Egypt that mobilizes across political and ideological differences, making them a potential player contributing to reconciliation and depolarization. Despite these signs of increasing importance, this report is one of very few studies dealing with the post-Mubarak labor movement, and further studies are needed. We know that the labor movement will continue to impact the transition. This report has given some indications, but there is still a need to understand why and how.
References


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Endnotes


2. Estimate according to the Egyptian Federation for Independent Trade Unions and Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress.

3. The numbers were published on the strike committee’s Facebook page every during the strike. They can still be found at https://www.facebook.com/docstrike2012