

CAPITALISM AND TRADE UNIONISM IN EGYPT

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EGYPT is an agrarian country. Three-fourths of the population are tillers of the land. Having no developed industries, Egypt constitutes, despite her nominal independence, merely an object of economic and political domination by the British Empire.

We are not going to dwell on the history of the subjugation of Egypt by British imperialism; we shall only recall a few phases which characterise the relations between Great Britain and Egypt. Prominent among these phases are such facts as the crushing of the national-revolutionary movement in the post-war period by armed British forces and the bestowal of a constitution on Egypt which made her the direct vassal of England. Or let us recollect the ultimatum in 1924, in connection with the murder of Lee-Stack, which furnished a pretext for the seizure of Sudan and the violation of the Treaty concerning the joint British-Egyptian administration of the Sudan. Finally, the very latest action of British imperialism in Egypt is the British naval demonstration in Egyptian waters in the summer of 1927 as an answer to the questions raised by the Egyptians about reforms in the command of the Egyptian army, about nationalisation of the State apparatus, about frontier lines and so on. In reply to the demands, which simply meant that the Egyptians did not wish to be dragged into a future war, and were an attempt at securing the real independence of Egypt, the British Government dispatched armed cruisers to the shores of Egypt.

It is in the interest of British imperialism to retain Egypt as a feeble agrarian country. By artificial methods Egypt was transformed by England into a country cultivating only one kind of crops, namely, cotton to supply the English textile industries (England being the principal consumer of Egyptian cotton). The results of this policy may be seen from the fact that Egypt,

ever since the forced development of cotton cultivation, has steadily increased the importation of various crops. Thus, in 1897, the Egyptian imports of foreign crops amounted to 1,793,940 Egyptian pounds sterling. Since then these imports have increased, reaching in 1925 the amount of 8,983,140 Egyptian pounds. The reason for this is readily seen, since the area under cotton was increased at the expense of other crops. The great mischief of such a state of things becomes particularly revealed in years of crisis (such as a drop in cotton prices), since Egyptian exports are based chiefly on cotton (over 93 per cent. of the total exports). Hence the sudden drop in cotton prices last year was the cause of a catastrophic crisis in Egypt.

Egyptian society has lately become confronted with the acute problem of the rationalisation of national economy, of the cultivation of a series of new crops, and of *industrialisation of Egypt's national economy*.

The Egyptians realise quite well that only through economic rationalisation and industrialisation the country will acquire the power and force for securing economic and political emancipation from the yoke of imperialism. This aspect has become quite prominent lately in the nationalist press.

The opponents of industrialisation, consisting chiefly of the big cotton-growers and the landed aristocracy, as well as the Anglo-Egyptian bourgeoisie and its associates among the native merchant classes, usually talk about Egypt being handicapped by a scarcity of fuel which does not permit the building up of a native industry despite the abundance of raw materials. But these arguments are baseless if we bear in mind, for instance, Egypt's extensive resources in water-power. Naturally, the basic branch of Egyptian industry in the future will be the textile industry. Nevertheless, Egyptian economists are pointing out a series of other lines of industry that are capable of great development in the future, such as the chemical, paper, glass industries, &c.

For the purpose of encouraging native industry the Egyptian bourgeoisie has founded the new bank (the Egyptian National Bank), its capital stock subscribed entirely by national capitalists. This new bank, according to the Paris newspaper, *Le Temps*, is

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destined to play a great part in the new industrial developments and in the new economic life of Egypt.

A great part is also beginning to be played by the "League for the Encouragement of Egyptian Industry," whose president is M. Viso-Vasif-Bey, one of the leaders of the Nationalist Movement. This league comprises representatives of the various branches of Egyptian industry with a total capital stock of 40 million Egyptian pounds, giving employment to no less than 200,000 workers. The League presented a memorandum to the Trade and Industry Commission of the Ministry of Finances in June, 1927, in which it urged the need of relieving the customs duties and taxes on the new industries and on their products, and suggested a series of measures for furnishing credits to the new industrial enterprises, such as the participation of the State in the newly organised industrial concerns, the buying up of most of the shares of a number of foreign companies, and so on. The basic slogans of the League are : (1) Governmental preference to the native industries ; (2) protection of native industry against foreign competition ; (3) improved means of communication and adaptation of the railways to the new conditions (the transportation of raw materials &c.).

What is the position occupied by the working class amid the present economic developments in Egypt ? Naturally, the question of labour power comes to the forefront. Bearing in mind the general growth of the population (every ten years the population increases by nearly 2,000,000),¹ and the intense pauperisation of the agricultural population, coupled with the growing concentration of land-holdings in the hands of the large proprietors (40 per cent. of the entire land proprietors), it is easy to understand why Egypt has such a great abundance of labour power. For a long time already there has been talk in Egypt about a surplus of 2,000,000 workers. If Egypt's industrialisation, on the one hand, will have a favourable effect upon these large numbers of unemployed workers, on the other hand, owing to the excessive supply of labour power, it contains the menace of increased exploitation and a general capitalist offensive against the working class. The bourgeoisie

¹ The following figures are sufficient indication : in 1882 the population was 6,831,000, in 1900 it increased to 10,176,000, in 1917 to 12,751,000, and in 1927 to 14,168,000.

naturally intends to build up the national industry by means of imposing worse conditions upon the working class.

Owing to last year's crisis the conditions of the masses of the workers have grown bad already. The question of labour power and of the relations with the workers has been lately debated in the bourgeois press. Hence it is the most essential task of the working class in Egypt under the new conditions not only to secure the normal working conditions, but also to fight for a general improvement in the conditions. An intensification of the class struggle is dictated by the very facts and circumstances of actual life.

Standing upon the threshold of the new phase in the economic development of the country, the working class in Egypt is confronted with the question whether it should sacrifice itself for the sake of the native bourgeoisie or whether it should take up a class struggle directed at the same time at the foreign capitalists as well. That the workers are bent on taking the second course is evident from the mass demands presented by the workers for increased wages, better conditions of labour, and specific labour legislation.

This trend of the working class is particularly manifest in the fight for labour legislation and for the recognition of the workers' unions. Let us deal with these two aspects.

The campaign for labour legislation became particularly strong in 1926. It had already been started by the revolutionary Confederation of Labour, but the subsequent reaction had put an end to the activities of the Confederation. In 1924, a labour member of parliament, Hasan-Nafi (one of the leaders of the Cairo Federation of Labour), moved a resolution in parliament for the election of a "Commission on labour questions." Owing to obstruction by the bourgeoisie the question was shelved, and only in 1926 the resolution was brought in again by the re-elected Hasan-Nafi and carried this time by parliament under the pressure of a great clamour from the working class. A commission was then elected, with Hasan-Nafi as chairman. The government did its best to hamper the work of the Commission, appointing reactionary members to take part in its deliberations. So far there has been published no parliamentary Bill dealing with labour legislation.

The fight for recognition of the unions is vigorously carried on.

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A number of unions appealed to the Egyptian government for official recognition. In many cases the government replied to the effect that owing to the absence of a Trade Union Act it could not extend to them recognition *de jure*. Of course, such conditions have always handicapped the work of the trade unions. Nevertheless, in Egypt there is hardly to be found any more or less considerable industrial enterprise without a trade union or some other organisation of the workers. Most of these unions are controlled by the firms, and they are numerically small and dwarfish. If among the industrial workers we find a relatively high percentage of organised workers, on the other hand the agricultural labourers are entirely unorganised. Besides, the absence of labour legislation hinders the formation of a strong trade union centre in the country.

True, there exists the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions at Cairo which at one time embraced about 100 small unions (according to official data for 1925). Nevertheless, this Federation is quite inactive, carrying on a precarious existence, and having no contact with the trade unions. The Federation was founded in 1924, after the suppression of the revolutionary Confederation of the Egyptian trade unions. Taken under the high protection of King Fuad, it carried on a reformist policy from the very first day of its existence. Its popularity among the masses of the workers is quite insignificant. At the present time the Federation is in very bad condition, and the number of its affiliated members has considerably shrunk. The largest trade organisations of the Egyptian working class do not belong to this Federation, and its future is by no means bright. One of the largest unions is that of Government employees, which has its branches in all the important commercial and industrial towns. Its headquarters are at Cairo, whilst in the Cairo branch alone there are 7,400 members. Altogether this union has a membership of 13,000 people. Next in importance are the Tramway-men's Unions of Alexandria and Cairo, the unions of the railwaymen, tobacco workers, sugar refinery workers, textile workers, the union of Suez Canal workers, the union of motor-drivers, &c. Altogether there are in Egypt at present about 120 unions embracing from 50,000 to 60,000 workers. Notwithstanding the hard conditions generally prevailing, there is at present going on a brisk growth of new unions, which no doubt indicates the growth

of class consciousness among the workers. The demands of the workers, which we have already mentioned, reach beyond the existing organisations and attract ever increasing masses of the workers.

It is hard to tell as yet whether the Egyptian working class under the new conditions of capitalist industrialisation, containing the menace of worse conditions to come, will be able to rally to the pure class-slogans, or whether it will follow its leaders who drag the movement in the train of the bourgeoisie. Will the existing trade union organisations prove capable of taking the proper class-struggle course? Upon this depends not only the future of the Egyptian labour movement, but also that of the whole struggle for national independence in Egypt, which can be successfully carried on only by the working class in alliance with the Egyptian peasantry.