

Unionism and social policies: notes on conceptual and strategic linkages **Aurora Sottimano**

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all at the OIB, a special thank to our guests who come from abroad and to Dr. Charbel Nahas, we are honored to have you here.

I will take only a few minutes to illustrate (i) the reason why I am pursuing a research on labour unions and (ii) the hopes that I have got about what we can achieve in this workshop.

Well before the 'Arab spring' I prepared a research project on Arab unions, with the aim to focus on social actors with a stake in qualitative change and viable reform of Arab polities. In my view, unions are essential to a viable reform process for two reasons: First, to ensure that the interests of people are taken on board as one elite replaces the other. Unions have their roots in 'progressive' parties and leftist thinking, hence they are in a privileged position to take up those demands for social justice, which has been betrayed by dictators and sidelined with the rise of neoliberal thinking. Second, consulting with stake holders increases the efficiency and effectiveness of reform programs.

The vital role of unions in bringing about change has become evident during the Arab spring especially in Tunisia and Egypt - as our guests from Cairo will illustrate. In order to ensure that reforms integrate the concepts of justice, equality, non-discrimination and workers rights, unions had to shift from a defensive position to a more proactive role in public life, promoting alternatives on the economic, social, and political fronts.

Even now, in the midst of this 'Arab autumn' - in terms of both weather and politics - unions still are in a unique position to play a role for qualitative change, i.e. a move away from authoritarianism and antagonism: their own mission and practices are based on the concepts of negotiation, agreement and composition of interest; moreover trade unions are among the few non sectarian and non religious social group. Hence they are key elements of a democratic life and a pluralistic polity.

This is what I learned and thought before coming to Lebanon. The case of Lebanon well illustrates the crisis of Arab unionism. Here the practices of the General Confederation of Lebanese Unions, which officially unites and represents all Lebanese workers, mirror the elitist and fragmented political system that dominates the country too closely to be able to influence it, let alone change it. Rather than aiming at social justice and solidarity, unionist activity is centered on advantages: For many Lebanese citizens, successful unionist activity means to get from politicians favours and privileges in exchange for loyalty. Hence we see small niches of privileged employees, whilst most workers are not represented (or mis-represented) and deeper social problems affecting a majority of the population – including workers - remain neglected.

The reason for this state of affairs is beyond the scope of today's discussion. I will only make two points that are relevant to the issue of workers' mobilisation. First, it would be naïve to argue - as someone put it – that unions need an economic model to confront and contest : something that Lebanon does not have. On the contrary, Lebanon is firmly within a neoliberal - shall we say ultra-liberal - economic model, which has become the dominant and uncontested paradigm. Indeed within such a context, the problematisation of reform as ways to limit the 'perverse' effects of capitalism – as it is often presented in Europe - cannot become part of a convincing union strategy. Here we need to think about unionist work in a different way. Nevertheless, many people look at the state as a source of social services and social protection: There is a social demand, although not clearly expressed nor institutionalized and in need of representation.

Second, the Lebanese economy is not really integrated into the world economy. Lebanon is not a producer of wealth, but a place of transit and financial flux – although now largely closed (but not to smuggling) due to the ongoing revolt in neighboring Syria. In a service economy such as Lebanon, where the size of waged labour is small, it is certainly more difficult to mobilize masses of workers (compared with Egypt). This said, the crucial point is that in the Lebanese system, social justice is not a byproduct of the economy. A welfare state of sort exists only for parts of the administration,

all the rest is captured by communities, parties, religious and ethnic factions. Islamist associations and parties (such as Hezbollah) provide services; syndicates offer benefits; churches and charities give social assistance – all according to criteria of birth place, social group, religion and political affiliation.

Against this framework, what is *amal niqabi* in Lebanon? Lebanese unions simply mirror the political system - thus sustaining the status quo - rather than criticise and challenge it. Most union activists operate within the hegemonic discourse of the political leadership; hence there is no serious discussion about reforming social and economic policies or about competing perspectives - let alone negotiations of the costs and benefits of the chosen track versus alternative strategies.

Crucially, Lebanese trade unions have failed to link social or community concerns with those of workplace. The failure to do so has two consequences: First, a perspective in which workers' demands and social concerns are separated and unions have no say in public policies only allows for a narrowly corporatist activity on part of workers' unions. Second, from a tactical point of view, a question arise: How can workers get the support of a large segment of society - and thus eventually be able to put real pressure on government - if their demands are not even integrated with the need of the social sector to which they belong? Who else but teachers, for instance, have the necessary experience and expertise to contribute to educational policy strategies, and a stake in them as workers and citizens? The same could be said for health workers and health policies; for engineers and environmental concerns and so on.

To conclude, Arab unions are now much closer to the processes of policy-making than before. Because misuse of power and corruption have swallowed most of public life in Lebanon, many activists claim that their activities are 'not political'. Yet there is no such thing as an a-political unionist work, isolated from active engagement with social concerns and public life. To pretend so, is tantamount to choose not to look at the politics which is implicit in unionist practices; to ignore the costs of such paradigm; and ultimately to loose the ability to devise alternative strategies.

Now I invite you to a brainstorming session, in which we question the organisation, structure, models and strategies of Lebanese unions. What is *amal niqabi*? From which perspectives can we effectively defend workers' interest? What are the consequences of adopting this or that model? What are the conditions for successful unionist work and the viable strategies in the Lebanese context? How do we define success and failure in unionist work in relation with social development and the trajectory of the Lebanese labour movement?

I give now the floor to Professor Longuenesse, who will elaborate on other questions that we would like to discuss today.