

Peasant organizations in the time of the revolution

*The shortcomings of establishment, and the illusions of fulfillments*¹

Any entity does not acquire its identity from its mere *form*, but rather from its *content*, i.e. its function. A container, for instance, is so named because it has the specific function of containing a substance, such as water, oil or food. If it is not used for its assigned function, or if it is used for a completely different function, its given name will be simply meaningless.

The same can be said about a trade union. It is mainly a form of gathering a group of people, who belong to a certain profession, vocation, trade, or industry, for the purpose of unifying their efforts, defending their interests, and ensuring their rights. A union does not deserve its name unless it manages, or at least tries, to achieve such purposes. In other words, the union is a “form” with a specific “content”; the *form* is gathering a group of people of the same profession, and the *content* is achieving the function of unifying their efforts and defending their interests.

Therefore, establishing such a union without achieving its functions or purposes will make its name practically and legally void.

As societies differ in their levels of enjoying various freedoms, as well as in their knowledge of and ability to apply scientific and technological methods, the possibilities of building union organizations differ according to the social, political and legal conditions in different societies. These possibilities also differ in different classes, and sometimes in different sectors of the same class.

It is significant that union organizations appeared in the industrially developed societies with a relatively high level of freedoms earlier than the underdeveloped societies with a low level of freedoms. It is also significant that unions appeared first among certain professional groups concerned with thought issues, such as journalists and lawyers, prior to their appearance among other sectors of the society. Similarly, such organizations are likely to appear among the relatively skilled industrial workers before appearing among less skilled workers or peasants.

In addition, the levels of social movement, class conflict, and political activism are influential factors in stimulating the establishment of such union organizations.

The union organizational structure is usually composed of several levels that can be broadly grouped in three: the ground level, the intermediate level, and the top or leading level. The ground level among a group of employees of the same profession, vocation, trade, or industry usually includes the local unions formed in various factories, companies, institutions, farms...etc. The intermediate level usually comprises representatives of the ground level unions, and assumes the task of coordinating their efforts and activities. The top or leading level similarly comprises representatives of the intermediate

¹ The Arabic version was published on “Modern Dialogue” Site, Issue No. 3554, dated 22 November, 2011). See:

<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=284486>

level organizations, and assumes the responsibility of supervising the whole structure.

In order to guarantee a coherent structure, the higher level should not be established before establishing the lower level. This process of establishment means to secure the existence of both the form and the content of a union with a reasonable level of success depending on concrete experiences and results.

While establishing the “form” requires gathering individuals, who demand and voluntarily accept to form of a union, achieving the “content” requires the following basic factors:

1. a minimum standard of awareness of the necessity of the union and its role;
2. a minimum standard of awareness of the specific problems of the relevant profession, vocation, trade, or industry;
3. a suitable standard of ability to courageously advocate the cause and the objects of the union in public.

Naturally, this “minimum”, or “suitable”, standard cannot be defined in accurate terms. The criteria of measuring what can be considered “minimum” or “suitable” inevitably differ from one society to another and from a field of work to another. They also differ according to the level of class conflict and political activism, and according to the situation, of peace or of revolt for instance, in different periods.

In the light of this understanding, the criteria for establishing a union or a union federation can be discussed. This discussion is particularly important as several peasant union federations have hurriedly been announced in Egypt in the last few months, as if the earlier announcement will be awarded a prize! In this respect, the following points should be taken into account:

- Announcing the establishment of a national peasant federation, for instance, will be meaningless without forming coherent ground unions. Such announcement neglects the reality of the current social movement, whether it is spontaneous or planned, and indicates that the announcers only assume themselves to be the “leaders” of the proposed federation without having the necessary qualifications for this leadership.
- The establishment of a real union federation cannot depend upon authoritarian or “yellow” unionists, or upon the same unionists who were previously involved in leading failed unions or federations, without even bothering to think about the reasons for such failure. However, the new federation should not exclude those who are known to have been vocal critics of the leadership and policies of such failed organizations.
- Building a national union federation is a long and complicated process that requires much more than the mere announcement. This tedious process requires patience and wisdom in order to avoid the dangerous consequences of hastiness. It is only through the challenges and struggles associated with such process that the new federation is likely to become much more experienced and confident. This, in turn, is likely to help it make greater strides.

Establishing unions in the time of revolution: Shortcomings and illusions

The shortcomings of the establishment process manifestly lead to undesired results. *Announcing the establishment of a union federation on the national*

level, while lacking the ability to establish a ground union in a small village, unavoidably creates illusions among those who initiate such organization, and among the less-experienced members.

The mere legal registration of such a federation does not necessarily mean that its essential purposes of representing the relevant group of employees and defending their rights have been achieved. In fact, the inability to establish a ground union in a small village clearly casts serious doubts on the ability to establish a national union federation targeting all the peasants in Egypt. Logically speaking, the one who cannot write a single word is not expected to be able to write a complete sentence!

The existence of a union “form”, even with legal legitimacy, is not enough to create a real “content”. On the contrary, such immature “form” is vulnerable to quick collapse, as it lacks the necessary conditions and requirements of sustainability; namely the concrete functions and the concrete means to achieve such functions. It also repeats the same mistakes that undermined several union structures in the past. Moreover, it helps spread illusions among its members that the time of the revolution can simply and easily give life to unfounded structures. Such illusions cannot prepare the grounds for building a real peasant, whether they are promoted by former opposition representatives or by other officials who are competing to get a slice of the cake after the revolution.

Thus, instead of writing the mere names of our unions upon the sand in the time of storms, we should better engrave them on poplar trees. Can we do?

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