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OIL NATIONALISM IN LIBYA, 1956-1969

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the ways in which U.S. oil companies transformed Libya's economy and society between the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the rise of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in 1969, as the country became one of the main oil producers in North Africa and the Middle East. It examines the forms of exploitation and resistance that were carried out in American oil fields and the role oil workers had in challenging U.S. labor policies by organizing trade unions, promoting strikes, and sabotaging pipelines. This paper argues that oil workers in Libya challenged the politics of informal empire pursued by U.S. oil companies and shaped the emergence of oil nationalism. They resisted the forms of segregation and discrimination introduced in oil camps and company towns, by demanding the right to redefine labor relations through trade unions. In the early 1960s, a concerted effort led by the Libyan government, conservative Libyan trade unions, the U.S. administration and the main American trade union, the AFL-CIO, marginalized them. Nevertheless, during the Six Day War of 1967, oil workers constituted one of the main forces behind Libya's attempt to promote oil nationalism, by placing an embargo on oil exports. By doing so, they set the stage for the emergence of Qaddafi's regime in 1969.

Keywords

Oil Politics, Libya, United States, Labour, Cold War, Decolonization, Trade Unions, Communism

Introduction

In February 1959, the American Embassy in Tripoli sent a dispatch to the State Department, highlighting the emergence of a radical trade union, the Petroleum Workers Union (PWU), which, it argued, “has been the most important (and nerve-wracking) event in the Tripolitanian labor field in the past two years.”¹ The dispatch followed a series of discussions between the U.S. government, international oil companies, the Libyan government and trade unions about labor relations in Libya’s oil fields. Indeed, after the discovery of oil in Libya in the second half of the 1950s, Libyan oil workers challenged U.S. and British oil companies by organizing trade unions, promoting strikes, and sabotaging pipelines. Their main aim was to resist the forms of segregation and discrimination introduced in oil camps and company towns and they did so by demanding the right to redefine labor relations through trade unions. In the early 1960s, a concerted effort led by the Libyan government, conservative Libyan trade unions, the U.S. administration and the main American trade union, the AFL-CIO, marginalized them. Nevertheless, during the Six Day War of 1967, oil workers emerged as one of the main forces behind Libya’s attempt to challenge international oil politics and promote oil nationalism, by placing an embargo on oil exports. By doing so, they set the stage for the emergence of Qaddafi’s regime in 1969.

This story of oil workers’ activism in Libya raises a series of questions about the ways in which the American and British governments and oil companies defined and reshaped their imperial interests in the Mediterranean after the end of the Second World War and, in particular, after the Suez crisis of 1956.² In 1951, Libya was the first North African country to be granted independence by the United Nations: through what has been called “a case of planned decolonization,” the former Italian colony was placed under the control of the British and, increasingly, the Americans.³ The Anglo-American alliance became even stronger after the Suez crisis, when U.S. and British oil companies expanded Libya’s oil production in an attempt to avoid the Suez Canal. Most research on postcolonial Libya has examined the “transfer of power” from Italy, to the UN trusteeship, to independence, or the relationship between U.S. and British oil interests and the Libyan state. As a result, scholars have interpreted the Sanusi Kingdom established in 1951 as a product of Anglo-American politics and the rise of Qaddafi’s regime in 1969 as the outcome of a popular revolution led by a coalition of tribal members, the middle-class and the military.⁴ This article takes a different approach and argues that the 1969 revolution was possible only because of a longer tradition of oil workers’ activism during the 1960s. Oil workers in Libya challenged the politics of informal empire pursued by U.S. and British oil companies and shaped the emergence of oil nationalism. However, once Qaddafi’s regime came to power, it declared oil workers’ trade unions illegal, thus excluding the possibility of redefining international oil politics through forms of social justice.

Building and Managing an Informal Empire

At the end of the Second World War, Libya was one of the poorest countries in the world, for Italian colonial rule had been characterized by extreme violence and exploitation, particularly after the rise of the Fascist regime in 1922. Whereas the previous Italian government, which ruled over Libya between 1911 and 1922, had established numerous forms of exchange and collaboration with merchants and the Jewish middle class in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the Fascist regime pursued a form of control based on racial segregation and subordination. Since Libya was to serve as Italy’s “fourth shore,” reviving imperial prestige and providing an outlet for Italy’s overpopulation, the regime seized much

¹ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 19 February 1959. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

² Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Decolonization,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 3 (1994): 462-511.

³ Adrian Pelt, *Libyan Independence and the United Nations: A Case of Planned Decolonization* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1970).

⁴ See for example Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya Since Independence: Oil and State Building* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

of the land used by Libyans and established settlement farms through the *Ente per la colonizzazione della Libia* [Agency for the Colonization of Libya]. In Cyrenaica, where the Sanusi tribe resisted Fascist colonial rule, the Fascist regime deported over 100,000 people to concentration camps built in the desert, killing most of the region's inhabitants.⁵

By the time Libya became independent in 1951, its population had been reduced to 1 million. Most Libyans lived in the desert as semi-nomadic pastoralists and farmers or in the cities of Benghazi and Tripoli. During the Second World War and after independence, tens of thousands of Italians left Libya, about 20,000 stayed behind. They continued to live in the farms they had acquired during the colonial period, and many of them worked as merchants and businessmen in Tripoli, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in North Africa. Their status was regulated by a UN resolution passed in 1950, which defended the rights and interests of all minorities living in Libya, including those of the Italian population. In the early 1950s, Libyans and Italians living in Tripoli and Benghazi could interact with a growing number of American and British citizens working at the military bases of Wheelus Field and Tobruk and with an international group of technocrats employed by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).⁶

Starting in the mid-1950s, Libyan society changed dramatically as a result of oil exploration. The increased presence of international oil companies in Libya followed the government's introduction of a new Petroleum Law in 1955, which encouraged competition among oil companies by limiting the size and number of the concessions and forcing firms to develop their concessions within a specific time period and then relinquish them after ten years. With the introduction of the new law, dozens of oil companies applied for concessions, including independent ones from West Germany, Japan and Italy. Most importantly, the development of Libya's oil resources followed the decision on the part of U.S. and British oil companies and governments to differentiate the sources of oil coming from the Middle East, in order to avoid being entirely dependent on the Suez Canal. Libya's geographic position west of the Canal and close to the markets and refineries of Western Europe made it an ideal place for foreign companies to invest public and corporate resources.⁷

As dozens of international oil companies applied for concessions, thousands of male Libyans moved from the desert to the largest cities. Many found employment in the growing construction and service industries catering to oil companies and banks, they became night watchmen or domestic workers for the communities of wealthy oil-company employees or military personnel. Most of them, though, applied for jobs in the government sector. Indeed, between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s, the Libyan State used a large percentage of the revenues coming from the international oil business to expand government employment. In a context characterized by extreme poverty, the State offered higher wages and better benefits, such as family and housing allowances and pensions.⁸

In general, the percentage of the Libyan population employed by international oil companies remained extremely low during the 1950s and early 1960s. Compared to other oil producing countries, in Libya the oil industry did not act as a wage leader or as a promoter of employment. As Robert Mabro has argued, this was due to several reasons: as the government created highly paid and stable jobs, Libyans preferred to be employed by the State rather than by oil companies. Most importantly, the highly exploitative working conditions pursued by international oil companies kept many Libyan workers away from the oil fields. Especially the smaller and independent firms hired employees on a weekly or monthly basis and did not provide any benefits or allowances to those working in the desert.

⁵ Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance* (Albany: State University of New York State, 2009); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁶ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991); R.L. Swetzer, *Wheelus Field: The Story of the U.S. Air Force in Libya. The Early Days, 1944-1952* (Historical Division, Office of Information, U.S. Air Force in Europe, 1965).

⁷ Judith Gurney, *Libya: The Political Economy of Oil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁸ Robert S. Harrison, "Migrants in the City of Tripoli, Libya," *Geographical Review* 3 (1967): 397-423; Robert Mabro, "Labour Supplies and Labour Stability: A Case-Study of the Oil Industry in Libya," *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economic & Statistics*, 4 (1970): 319-338.

As a result, most of the Libyans employed by oil companies were often young, unmarried and unskilled migrants, who had recently moved to the cities and considered working in the oil fields a temporary and transient job.⁹

There were other reasons why international oil companies, particularly American and British ones, tried to avoid hiring or training Libyans. After the Abadan Crisis in 1951, which led to the closing of one of the main refineries of the Middle East and to the nationalization of Iranian oil, oil firms were well aware of the risks involved in employing a large number of local workers. At the Abadan refinery, which was owned and managed by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum), oil workers repeatedly went on strike demanding better treatment. In 1951, they were able to stop production and effectively halt the export of refined oil to Western Europe. The crisis had shown the power large numbers of concentrated and organized workers could have over crucial nodes of the international oil market, and had pushed oil companies to change their policies. After the Abadan crisis, oil companies decided to refine in Western Europe (especially in Italy) the crude oil they extracted in the Middle East. At the same time, they limited the number of workers they employed in oil camps and divided them according to nationality and skill, in order to prevent the emergence of organized political conflict.¹⁰

In Libya, the fear of political opposition coupled with the unavailability of skilled Libyan labor. As a consequence, U.S. and British oil companies relied on Italian technicians, who were not only more qualified to work in the oil fields, but were often less hostile to the American and British business world.¹¹ In the mid-1960s, international oil companies in Libya employed less than 10,000 people. Of these, about 6,400 were Libyan, 1,290 American, 600 British and 210 Italian, while the rest was divided between Canadians, French, Germans, Dutch, Maltese and Greeks. The divisions between different nationalities reflected and reinforced divisions and hierarchies between skills and salaries: whereas Libyans worked as laborers, drivers and service workers, Americans and British occupied the higher ranks as managers, professional and technical workers. Italians, on the other hand, were employed as clerical, professional or technical workers.¹² A typical crew was composed of approximately ten people and would include, for example, a Libyan cook, a Danish tool-pusher, a Berber driver, a British derrickman, an Italian driller, and several Arab laborers recruited from the tribes around the wells.¹³

Libyan oil workers challenged U.S. and British oil policies by organizing strikes and riots. In 1963 they rioted against the U.S. firm Bechtel Brothers, which was building a pipeline for the Oasis Oil Company. The camp it set up in the desert separated 90 American and 35 British employees, living in a trailer camp, from the 590 Libyan workers who were lodged in a tent camp. Following the beating of Libyan workers by American employees, the American Embassy reported,

a crowd of approximately 100 Libyans descended upon the non-Libyan camp. Under a barrage of stones and bottles, the foreign employees ran to the trailers and barricaded themselves inside. For the next two hours the Libyan mob battered the trailers with rocks, boards, and bottles, breaking most of the windows and damaging the air conditioners. At the outset of the riot they tore down the radio aerial and turned off the camp power so that no communication with Benghazi or Tripoli was possible. They also attacked the construction vehicles, buses and Land Rovers which were

⁹ Mabro: 328-337.

¹⁰ Katayoun Shafiee, "A Petro-Formula and its World: Calculating Profits, Labour and Production in the Assembling of Anglo-Iranian Oil," *Economy and Society*, 1 (2012): 1-30; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011).

¹¹ See for example the job ads published in the main newspaper of the Italian community living in Tripoli, *Il Giornale di Tripoli*.

¹² Kingdom of Libya, *Employment in the Petroleum Mining Industry in Libya, 1964* (Tripoli: Census and Statistical Department, 1964).

¹³ Don Sheridan, *Fahud, The Leopard Mountain: Oil Exploration in Oman and Libya in the 1950s* (Dublin: The Vico Press, 2000): 193-197.

parked nearby, tearing out radios and smashing windows. Total damage is now estimated at \$30,000.¹⁴

As U.S. and British oil companies expanded their activities in Libya, they also introduced a series of changes which had profound social and political consequences. In 1961, Esso Libya built a port in the town of Marsa el Brega, on the Mediterranean, in order to ship the crude it extracted in one of its main oil fields, in Zelten. A few years later, in 1965, the company decided to build a refinery, which would process the increased amount of oil coming from its concessions. Such a decision transformed Esso's presence in Libya and, with it, its social and political relations with the Libyan population and oil workers. With the construction of the refinery, Esso established a training center for Libyans, in order to meet the higher demand for technicians and engineers. At the same time, it built a company town for the growing number of American employees involved in managing and running the refinery. Whereas in the past Esso could rely on a pool of engineers and geologists that could move monthly between the company's domestic and international affiliates, with the refinery it needed a more permanent and more skilled workforce to live and work in Marsa el Brega. By transferring employees' families to Libya, Esso also aimed at increasing workers' productivity.¹⁵

Esso wanted to create what it called a "settler community," based on an architectural separation between white American, British and Canadian employees and the Libyan population, although a small minority of Libyan technicians lived inside the town as well. The term "wall" was the most commonly used by the guidebook Esso Libya published and distributed to its employees and their families. As many other oil towns built in oil producing countries, Esso built a gated community:

To assure Esso exclusive use of the area as set forth in the agreement [between Esso and the Libyan government], the entire Esso development is isolated and separated from the surrounding area by a fence 17 kilometers long, and like other oil installations, is guarded by security police.¹⁶

Ironically, Marsa el Brega had been the site of an Italian concentration camp for those Cyrenaican tribes that had attempted to resist Italian colonial rule. The town had been abandoned after being destroyed by Axis and Allied forces during the Second World War. Esso Libya preserved the memory of colonial violence, by having "concrete fences constructed around four of the Brega cemeteries, two of which are within the boundaries of the present terminal."¹⁷ Americans, however, quickly forgot about this past, in the name of a new town based on new forms of segregation and violence. As Richard H. Tallman, Community Development Advisor for Esso Libya, stated during a lecture at the University of Tripoli in 1968, before the oil boom Marsa el Brega had been "little more than a point on the map marking the location of a police post, a few shallow water wells and a very small community."¹⁸ Yet, Libyans continued to draw parallels between the two camps. In an article published in the Cyrenaican newspaper *Al Zaman* in 1963, a journalist defined Marsa el Brega as an "empire" and living conditions of Libyan laborers as "concentration camp conditions."¹⁹

By 1969, about 1,000 people lived in the residential area. Esso encouraged (male) employees to bring their wives and children, although it also provided bachelor quarters. The "houses that oil built", as one Esso publication called them, were standard concrete blocs of two, three or four

¹⁴ Amembassy Benghazi to Department of State, 17 July 1963. Box 3622, Central Foreign Policy File, 1963, RG 59, NARA.

¹⁵ *Esso in Libya*, ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18. On oil towns: Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (London: Asgate, 2003).

¹⁶ Residents' Guidebook, *Introduction*: 4. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

¹⁷ Residents' Guidebook, *Introduction*: 34. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

¹⁸ Richard H. Tallman, "Marsa El Brega Community Development": 1. Esso Seminar Series on Aspects of the Oil Industry at Libyan University Faculty of Commerce and Economics, April 8, 1968. NARA.

¹⁹ Amembassy Benghazi to Department of State, 18 October 1963. Box 3622, Central Foreign Policy File, 1963, RG 59, NARA.

bedrooms.²⁰ They were “neat rows of bungalow style houses equipped with both central heating and central air conditioning.”²¹ Employees could express their status by hiring domestic servants, who could only be houseboys, as female servants were not allowed on the compounds. While houseboys were allowed to eat at their employers’ homes, they could not live with them. The town was also equipped with a school, a supermarket, a clinic, a cinema, a bowling alley, and several recreation facilities. American employees were thus assured a continued access to the standard of living they were used to in the U.S., with the supermarket providing “a wide selection of canned, packaged and frozen food products imported from Europe and the United States.”²²

Marsa el Brega aimed at building an informal community of white collar employees. It did not require them or their wives to dress elegantly, and stressed the importance leisure and recreational activities had for the town as a whole. Indeed, the company provided horse riding facilities, as well as the possibility of visiting archaeological sites, playing tennis, basketball and cricket, or watching movies. Esso had also built a golf course, made “by rolling a mixture of oil, sand and sea weed.” While boys and girls were encouraged to become members of scout organizations, women (or, rather, ladies) could devote their time to “cooking, painting, bridge, study.”²³ As one publication put it,

A recreation center with swimming pool, restaurant, lounge and sailing facilities provides an atmosphere, a view of the Mediterranean and – most of the time – a climate taht most people have to buy with vacation money.²⁴

Marsa el Brega reproduced many of the features that characterized other American oil towns across the globe. As Robert Vitalis has argued, U.S. firms exported to Latin America, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia a model “rooted in Jim Crow,” with its ideas of “white supremacy, norms of discrimination, and segregation and, at its margins, of paternalistic racial uplift.”²⁵ Such a model drew on and replicated the forms of segregation that had characterized mining industries on the American frontier, as well as the expansion of U.S. businesses in Latin America in the early 20th century. Not surprisingly, many of the geologists and engineers who worked for Esso Libya during the 1960s had previously worked in Venezuela, Texas and California.

Despite Esso Libya’s efforts to describe Marsa el Brega as a tourist resort, many residents felt isolated. Indeed, the town was hundreds of miles away from Benghazi and Tripoli. As one company publication put it, Brega was located between the Mediterranean and the desert, and “seem[ed] to come up out of nowhere almost mirage-like.”²⁶ Children and teenagers, however, enjoyed the segregated town, as it provided a range of activities and forms of entertainment. As one resident recently wrote, commenting a home movie on You Tube, “Thank you for bringing back old sites & memories from the greatest part of my childhood & teen age years!”²⁷

²⁰ *Esso in Libya*: 16. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

²¹ *Esso in Libya*: 20. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

²² Residents’ Guidebook, *Introduction*: 7. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

²³ Residents’ Guestbook, *Introduction*: 30. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18. Myrna Santiago, “Women of the Mexican Oil Fields: Class, Nationality, Economy, Culture, 1900-1938,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 1 (2009): 87-110.

²⁴ *Esso in Libya*: 20. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

²⁵ Robert Vitalis, “Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf,” *Diplomatic History*, 2 (2002): 200. See also his *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

²⁶ *Esso in Libya*: 21. ExxonMobil Historical Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, box 2.207/H18.

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15eASM9VdtU>.

By 1968, 1,000 people had settled outside of the residential area, in an area located between the industrial plants, the desert and the few paved roads. Most of them were mercants and mechanics providing services to the Libyan truck drivers who worked for Esso Libya. During the 1960s, Libyan oil workers and newspapers became increasingly critical of the forms of segregation pursued by Esso at Marsa el Brega and its oil fields. In 1965, Esso received a series of attacks: Libyans placed bombs in the homes of two of Esso's employees, as well as at the British embassy, the American and the German Consulates in Benghazi. Furthermore, they sabotaged oil wells and storage tanks in Marsa el Brega. During a meeting with members of the State Department, a representative of Standard Oil (N.J.) expressed his views by stating, "in this situation, there is virtually no existing Libyan capability to cope with the problem."²⁸ Esso's response was to build more fences and increase the security for its employees, while the State Department recommended the establishment of a National Security Force, which could patrol pipelines, oil fields and storage facilities.

The Libyan Government, Trade Unions and the "Libyanization" of the Oil Workforce

As U.S. and British oil companies pursued their interests in Libya, the Libyan government started considering the importance oil resources might have for its self-determination. In the late 1950s, it passed a series of reforms aimed at "Libyanizing" the oil workforce, in order to create a privileged class of skilled workers that could constitute the backbone of the country's economy and independence. The new Labor Laws spurred a strong discussion between the Libyan government, international oil companies, the U.S. and the British governments, which contributed to the emergence of oil nationalism.

The decision on the part of the Libyan government to regulate labor was in many ways tied to the behavior of international oil companies. Indeed, in order to quickly set up their businesses and carry out their activities in Libya, in the late 1950s oil companies adopted the habit of hiring people working for the Libyan government, who were also politically influential, in order to "act as expeditors in cases where quick government action is necessary."²⁹ Faced with the threat that oil companies would hire the more educated employees, in 1957 the Libyan government introduced a new Labor Law. One of its main aims was to make sure that all workers were registered and hired through provincial and federal labor offices. Oil companies were thus required to apply to the Commissioner of Labour, "stating their requirement of local staff, i.e. number, qualifications, personal qualities, details and duties, proposed salary and duration of service."³⁰ The Law represented an effort on the part of the Libyan government to promote the employment of non-agricultural Libyan workers. The hiring of foreign workers, including that of American and British geologists and engineers working in the oil fields, had to be approved by the Department of Immigration.³¹

One of the main issues addressed by the Labor Law had to do with the forms of discrimination between Libyan and foreign workers, as well as between Libyans and Italians. The law recognized minimum wages, and the right to meals and proper living conditions, which included sanitary facilities, bedding and first aid, in order to "assure some degree of social justice for workers in the field."³² In particular, it introduced a series of "provisions requiring oil companies to pay the subsistence of all workers in the field...extending social welfare benefits to Arabs as well as Italians."³³ While the Labor Law concerned all categories of workers, the Libyan government applied it primarily to oil workers employed by foreign oil companies. By doing so, it sought to establish a

²⁸ Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 15 September 1965. Box 1395, Petroleum, Economic, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-66, RG 59, NARA.

²⁹ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 1 October 1959. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³⁰ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 3 October 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³¹ Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA; See also: Box 23, Classified General Records in Tripoli, 1950-1961, U.S. Consulate, Legation and Embassy, Tripoli, Libya, RG 84, NARA.

³² Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 25 July 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³³ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 25 July 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

clear separation and hierarchy between a class of protected Libyan oil workers on the one hand and unskilled workers on the other.³⁴

U.S. oil companies and the U.S. administration reacted vehemently to the Labor Law. The American Embassy in Benghazi argued that the Law would go against the interests of American oil companies, forcing them to hire unskilled workers through the Labor Office. U.S. oil companies argued that the Law constituted a “harassment of American oil companies,” and complained that their exploration activities were delayed because of the need to hire Libyan labor. The final draft of the Law was discussed and approved by a range of U.S. oil firms, which agreed on the introduction of fixed pay scales for field and manual laborers, as well as on the need to hire workers through the Labor Office. However, they requested the Libyan government to allow the hiring of some government employees, who would constitute the backbone of their Libyan skilled personnel.³⁵

The 1957 Labor Law was not only aimed at “Libyanizing” the oil workforce, but at introducing a series of fundamental social rights. Indeed, it had been drafted by a representative of the International Labour Organization (ILO), a native of Pakistan, in an effort to assure Libyan workers the right to a minimum wage, proper working and living conditions, and the right to organize trade unions. The Law was part of a wider project carried out by ILO after the Second World War and aimed at promoting the social rights and political freedoms of the citizens of the decolonizing world. While the Libyan government used the Law to further its control over the Libyan workforce and the country’s oil resources, other groups transformed the language of social justice into a tool to claim social and political rights.³⁶

In a context characterized by the absence of political parties, Libyan trade unions acted as a particularly important political force, redefining labor relations and social rights, and reshaping Libya’s relationship with the U.S., Western Europe and the Arab world. In the late 1950s, the Libyan government maintained a strong control over Libyan trade unions. A series of strikes organized in 1956 by street sweepers, bakers and tuna fish canners had led the Libyan government to introduce a State of Emergency Decree banning strikes. By 1959, the decree had been rescinded, although the government continued to suppress strikes and controlled trade union organizing through a variety of means. It required each trade union to register with a central office, and kept the right to control union meetings and gatherings. As the American Embassy put it, “strikes are permitted, but are hedged with so many restrictions...that the right to strike has, for all intents and purposes been abolished.”³⁷

Despite such restrictions, in the late 1950s Libyans organized a variety of trade unions, such as the Printing Press Employees Union, the Banks Employee Union, the Fishermen Union, and the Oil Companies Employees Union. The most important one was the Libyan General Workers Union (LGWU), which was divided between a Tripolitanian section led by Salim Shita, and a Cyrenaican one led by Rajeb Naihum. In 1958, a smaller but well-organized union, the Petroleum Workers Union (PWU), emerged to challenge the control the LGWU had over the Libyan trade union movement. Founded by Abd al-Latif Kekhya, the PWU aimed at representing all the employees of the oil companies operating in Tripolitania. In 1958 it had a membership of 600 people and soon joined the International Federation of Petroleum Workers (IFPW), based in Denver, Colorado.³⁸

Kekhya came from an influential family. He had married the daughter of Prime Minister Mahmud Muntasser, and had been Chief of Protocol in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had studied at an Italian school in Alexandria, Egypt, and then at the University of Rome, where he earned a

³⁴ Representative Data on Wages and Hours. Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 25 July 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³⁵ Amembassy Benghazi to Department of State, 12 March 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³⁶ International Labour Office, *Report to the Government of Libya on Labour Legislation and Labour Administration* (Geneva: ILO, 1966); Daniel R. Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940-1970* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2012).

³⁷ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 19 February 1959. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

³⁸ John Norman, *Labor and Politics in Libya and Arab Africa* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1965).

degree in political science in 1959. In the late 1950s, he worked as Assistant Manager for Industrial Relations with Mobil Oil Canada in Tripoli and was discharged because of his activities in the LGWU. The American Embassy in Tripoli reported Kekhya's rage and rapid turn to activism,

According to all who were there he suddenly became violently agitated. Announcing with full lung power that Mobil Oil could not fire him, he began running at top speed around a small office stating that he was willing to fight anyone who tried to throw him out. [...] He then got in his car and began driving around the city, stopping in every place where he knew a group of unionized laborers were working. In each place he issued a call for a general strike of all workers in Libya to protest this imperialist outrage.³⁹

Kekhya believed strongly that members of the educated elite like him should play a significant role in organizing workers and protecting their social and political rights. In order to challenge the forms of discrimination carried out by oil companies, Kekhya and the PWU denounced employers for not respecting Libya's Labour Law. The most common political tool they used were court cases, along with reports sent to the Labor Commissioner's Office. One of the main issues addressed by the PWU had to do with the hierarchies oil companies promoted between Libyan, Italian and foreign workers. Indeed, one of union's main aims was to "protect the Libyans from discrimination in favor of third country nationals (usually Italians or Palestinian Arabs)."⁴⁰ Kekhya argued for "a true Libyan organization."⁴¹ He by filed a case with the Libyan Labor Office to accuse Mobil Oil of hiring a large number of Germans for jobs that could be carried out by Libyans, and pressured the Department of Immigration to expel a Greek and an Italian technician employed by Esso.⁴² While the language used by Kekhya was in many ways similar to that adopted by the Libyan government, Kekhya and the PWU promoted rights for unskilled as well as skilled workers.

The U.S. administration, along with the oil companies, became increasingly worried about Kekhya's activities. The State Department, in particular, feared that "Kikhya [sic]...could well become a matter of serious concern to Western petroleum and political interests for years to come,"⁴³ while the CIA described Kekhya as "a rabid opportunist with strong grievances against the Wester companies," and worried that the PWU had made "the lower echelons of the bureaucracy – customs, immigration, and tax officials – uncooperative and antagonistic."⁴⁴ The American Embassy in Tripoli, for its part, stated bluntly, "one might ask whether a person of Kekhya's emotional immaturity and instability could be anything with conviction, or anything more than an exhibitionist and opportunist. Whatever the case might be, he has acted enough like a Communist to deserve the appellation."⁴⁵

In order to undermine Kekhya's growing power, the American government, with the support of U.S. oil companies, offered Kekhya a fellowship to study at the Centro Studi CISL in Florence. Funded by the anti-Communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the Center was run by the Italian trade union Confederazione Italiana Sindacato Lavoratori [Italian Confederation of Trades' Union] and played an important role in shaping pro-Western trade unionists from Italy and, increasingly, from Latin America, Africa and Asia.⁴⁶ While Kekhya accepted the fellowship, once he arrived in Italy he also met with representatives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and received

³⁹ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 10 July 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴⁰ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 6 January 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴¹ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 6 January 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴² Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 10 July 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴³ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 6 January 1958. Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 6 January 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴⁴ "Indreasing Harassment of Western Oil Companies in Libya," *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 20 October 1958.

⁴⁵ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 19 February 1958. Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 6 January 1958. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁴⁶ Federico Romero, *The United States and the European Trade Union Movement, 1944-1951* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

some training in labor policies. When he returned to Libya in 1958, he took steps to organize a major labor federation, which would include the LGWU and receive support from the Soviet Embassy in Tripoli, the Tunisian Communist Party and Arab Communists more generally.⁴⁷

As in other contexts, the U.S. administration reacted by offering its support to an anti-Communist trade unionist, Salim Shita, and mobilized the AFL-CIO to establish a strong relationship between the LGWU and the ICFTU.⁴⁸ The U.S. strategy became part of the new policy introduced by the National Security Council (NSC) in 1959. Fearing that Libyan oil workers might be influenced by Arab nationalism and by Nasserism, NSC 6004 recommended the “use of Libyan labor organizations to further U.S. interests in Libya.”⁴⁹ According to the new document, the U.S. should “encourage the Free World orientation of Libyan labor organizations with a view to influencing Libya to follow courses of action favorable to U.S. interests and U.S.-Libyan relations.”⁵⁰

In 1957, the U.S. government assigned an American labor advisor to Libya, to work both with the government and with trade unions, and sent an economic officer, Michael Pearson, to report on labor activities.⁵¹ That same year, Irving Brown of the AFL-CIO visited Libya and met with the Libyan Prime Minister and with members of the LGWU.⁵² All parties involved agreed that the U.S. should support Shita as the main leader of the Libyan trade union movement. They thus promoted his leadership inside the LGWU and his participation in the ICFTU and the ILO. Shita, for his part, took advantage of the support he received from the U.S. to marginalize all other Libyan trade unionists. At the same time, he kept strong ties with the pro-Egyptian Arab Confederation of Labor Unions (ACLU).⁵³ With the support of the U.S. government and the AFL-CIO, in 1958 Shita “seize[d] the money, furniture and everything the oil workers’ union had, and terrorized[d] the others.”⁵⁴ The LGWU marginalized Kekhya and placed the more conservative Ali Batar at the head of the PWU. By 1959, all Libyan trade unions were placed under the control of the Libyan General Federation of Trade Unions (LGFTU), directed by Shita.⁵⁵

The policies promoted by the U.S. administration and the AFL-CIO weakened the forms of political pluralism that had emerged in Libya in the second half of the 1950s. In 1961, the Libyan government took advantage of the situation and proceeded to repress a general strike promoted by the LGFTU. It arrested Shita, along with several trade union representatives, including Taher Fathaly of the Petroleum Workers’ Union, thus further undermining the possibility for Libyan workers of voicing

⁴⁷ Istituto Gramsci, Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano. Chiara Loschi has traced the long history of cooperation between Italian Communists and Libyan trade unionists in “Fuori dal regime fascista: organizzazioni politiche degli italiani a Tripoli durante la fase postcoloniale (1948-1951),” *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 1 (2011): 1-14.

⁴⁸ This was not a new story in the decolonizing world: Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels, “The World’s Longest General Strike: The AFL-CIO, the CIA, and British Guiana,” *Diplomatic History*, 2 (2005): 279-307.

⁴⁹ NSC Briefing Note, US Policy toward Libya, 8 March 1960. Box 5, Special Staff File Series, National Security Council Staff Papers, 1953-61, White House Office, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter DDEPL). On the importance of Arab nationalism and Nasser in shaping U.S. foreign policy: Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004). See also Mark Philip Bradley, “Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War, 1919-1962,” in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 1, The Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 464-485.

⁵⁰ NSC 6004, Statement of US Policy toward Libya, 15 March 1960. Box 45, Disaster File, National Security Council Staff Papers, 1948-61, White House Office, DDEPL.

⁵¹ Amembassy Tripoli to Department of State, 23 June 1956. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

⁵² International Affairs Department, Country Files, 1945-1971, box 11, file 12, Libya, 1950-1963, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.

⁵³ Willard A. Beling, *Pan-Arabism and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁵⁴ Istituto Gramsci. Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano.

⁵⁵ Amembassy Benghazi to Department of State, 6 May 1959. Box 4865, 873.001/8-2857, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA.

their opposition.⁵⁶ Oil workers' activism continued throughout the decade and emerged as a crucial force during the Six Day War of 1967. Oil and dock workers in Tripoli and Benghazi, together with students, organized a series of strikes to stop the export of oil to Western Europe and the U.S.⁵⁷ The embargo they placed on oil exports was unprecedented: it forced the U.S. government to come to term with the Arabs, and set the stage for the emergence of Qaddafi's regime. While over 100 trade unionists were arrested in 1967, after Qaddafi came to power in 1969 he placed Mahmud Sulaiman al-Maghribi, one of the leaders of the 1967 embargo, at the "head of a team to renegotiate the terms of the country's contracts with foreign oil companies."⁵⁸ Born to a Palestinian mother and a Libyan-Sirian father, al-Maghreibi had studied petroleum engineering and geology at George Washington University in DC and law at Johns Hopkins University, before being employed by Esso Libya to work as a lawyer. As in the case of Kekhya, he advocated the need for the Libyan educated class of advancing oil workers' rights through forms of oil nationalism.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, international oil politics in Libya were defined not only in terms of oil revenues, development aid and diplomatic relations, but also in terms of labor policies. The U.S. and British oil companies that established their control over Libya's oil resources in the aftermath of the Suez crisis brought with them forms of discrimination, exploitation and control that were typical of British colonial or informal rule in India and Iran, and America's informal empire in Latin America and the Southwest. In a context characterized by the lack of Libyan skilled labor, firms reinforced the hierarchies between Libyans and Italians that had existed during the colonial period, by hiring Italian technicians and assuring them better working conditions.

In order to challenge U.S. and British labor policies, the Libyan government and Libyan trade unions advanced their own interpretation of workers' rights and national independence. Whereas the former advanced the idea that Libya should gain control over its oil resources by developing a skilled Libyan workforce, trade unions such as the PWU adopted the language of social rights available through the Labor Law to argue for skilled and unskilled oil workers' right to a minimum wage and decent working conditions. Both embraced the idea that the Libyan workforce would be crucial in assuring Libya's full emancipation from American and British imperialism. Yet, the PWU also viewed the future of Libya as one characterized by a set of international alliances with pan-Arab and Communist unions in Western Europe and the Arab world.

An analysis of labor relations in Libya and oil workers' activism sheds new light on the history of decolonization as a whole. It highlights the important social factors played in shaping the process of decolonization, in places such as Libya where the end of Italian colonial rule was characterized by the establishment of new forms of imperial control by U.S. and British oil companies. Furthermore, it shows how different actors actively redefined the meaning of decolonization and, more specifically, of the State, self-determination and national identity, political and social rights, by debating about and struggling over labor.

⁵⁶ F. Elwyn Jones, Report on a Mission to Libya from 19th to 27th November 1961. International Affairs Department, Country Files, 1945-1971, box 11, file 12, Libya, 1950-1963, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.

⁵⁷ Harold H. Saunders to Bundy and Rostow, 3 July 1967. Box 6, Files of the Special Committee of the NSC, National Security Files, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson, President, 1963-1969, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

⁵⁸ Mitchell: 166.

⁵⁹ John K. Cooley, *Libyan Sandstorm* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982): 17-19.

