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Between Control and Repression: The Plight of the Syrian Labour Force

Joseph Daher

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

Research Project Report
27 July 2020
2020/11

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Middle East Directions
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report
RSCAS/Middle East Directions 2020/11
27 July 2020

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With the support of the
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Between Control and Repression: The Plight of the Syrian Labour Force

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Executive Summary

The deepening of economic liberalisation following Bashar al-Assad's rise to power in the decade prior to the Syrian uprising intensified the unfavourable living and working conditions of various sectors of the labour force in the country. The general situation only worsened in all respects when the war broke out, while the employed labour force in the country shrank considerably due to large-scale infrastructure destruction, militarisation and the forced departure of millions of Syrians from the territory. At the same time, the participation of women in the labour market increased markedly, without, however, enhancing their social and economic status in society.

The Syrian regime's past and present repressive practices have been employed against forms of independent activism by labourers and peasants. The mechanisms of control imposed through the General Federation of Trade Union Workers, the General Federation of Peasants and other professional associations, in addition to a body of policies based on clientelism, political loyalties and sectarian and ethnic discrimination, have imposed severe obstacles to any significant collective labour self-organisation and class-based identification. Under the leadership of the Baath Party, the role of workers' and peasants' federations and professional associations as part of the regime's networks was also significantly regenerated in the state's internal and external official representations and in the provision of particular services after 2011. The function of the General Federation of Trade Union Workers has been to strengthen the regime's policies and its domination over society.

These conditions have not prevented small forms of labour dissent and protest over socio-economic frustrations from emerging, but to date they have not really challenged the regime's stability. The absence of a labour movement in Syria constitutes a significant obstacle to improving the living conditions of the various segments of the labour force.

Introduction

While the socio-economic situation in Syria has been partially tackled in research on the outbreak and subsequent development of the uprising in mid-March 2011,¹ the role of the labour force² and the conditions for its engagement are nearly completely absent from most analyses, or are only found in analyses which predate the recent events.

The shifting terrain of class and state formation in Syria since Hafez al-Assad's ascension to power in 1970 – the beginning of the era of economic opening – and its relationship to the state's political practice have impacted the socioeconomic dynamics of the Syrian uprising and its trajectory.³ The state has become increasingly responsive to the concerns of the country's business community in various religious communities – people from or with close social, political and/or financial ties with the ruling elite – while the wider labour force and large sectors of society have suffered deteriorating living conditions and impoverishment.

The most important protagonists in the uprising were economically marginalised rural workers, urban employees and self-employed workers. These segments of the population did not, however, develop organisations on the basis of their class identity during the uprising. In fact, collective action led by workers remained limited, even when their social situation worsened as a result of the armed conflict. This quasi-absence of independent workers' organisations is still a reality in 2020, although criticism and protests against the Syrian government's economic policies have been gaining traction since the beginning of 2020.

This study seeks to understand the situation of the labour force in Syria and the reasons why a labour movement and collective labour action did not emerge during the uprising or in the years following it. What tools does the Syrian regime use to prevent the emergence of collective action by labourers? What role do the state-affiliated trade unions play in further hindering this development?

The paper first provides an overview of the evolution of the labour market during the twenty years of the Bashar al-Assad presidency, with a specific assessment of the situation of women. It then studies the repressive role of workers' and peasants' trade unions and professional associations and their transformation into tools of control and mobilisation by the Syrian regime. In this context, the paper examines in particular the General Federation of Trade Union Workers (GFTUW)⁴ and then isolated cases of labour dissent, notably in certain Russian-managed companies in Syria. The study makes extensive reference to media reports and newspaper articles published in Syria on these issues.

¹ Omar Dahi and Yasser Munif, "Revolts in Syria: Tracking the Convergence Between Authoritarianism and Neoliberalism," *Journal of Asian and African studies* 47(4), August 2012, 323-332; Gilbert Achcar, *A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Actes Sud 2013.

² The labour force comprises all persons of working age who supply labour for the production of goods and services during a specified time-reference period. It refers to the sum of all persons of working age who are either employed or unemployed.

³ Elisabeth Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning" (in French), in Raymond A. (ed.), *La Syrie Aujourd'hui*, 1980, 327-358, <https://bit.ly/30PUohh>; Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1981; Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, I.B. Tauris, 1995.

⁴ The GFTUW was established in 1938 following nearly a decade of development and restructuring of the labour movement. Following a legislative decree in 1968, all trade unions were required to be organised within the GFTUW.

1. (D)Evolution of the Labour Market (2000-2020)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the radical wing of the Baath Party introduced policies (such as agrarian reform, nationalisation and the creation of a large public sector) which put an end to the more rigid class inequalities and simultaneously created a social security system, free state services, subsidised housing, free education and public health care. These measures satisfied large sectors of the working class and the small peasantry. Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970 marked the end of these policies and the beginning of a process to win the favour and support of the private sector by implementing gradual economic liberalisation measures. At the same time, severe austerity measures were implemented, employment in the economy's public and administrative sectors was capped and wages lagged behind inflation. Consumer subsidies of agricultural and industrial inputs were significantly reduced in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵ Government spending as a proportion of GDP dropped from 48 per cent in 1980 to 25 per cent in 1997.⁶ The transition from a command capitalist economy to crony capitalism was thus accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s due to the gradual abandonment of a centrally directed economy. The end of the 1990s brought an increase in socio-economic problems: poverty reached 14.3 per cent in 1996-1997 and the purchasing power of Syrian workers decreased by 12 per cent annually between 1994 and 2000.⁷

1.1. Profits versus Labour in the Pre-War Decade

The acceleration of economic liberalisation during Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power increased the detrimental effects on the formal labour force and prompted an expansion of informal labour.⁸ The labour force participation rate of people aged 15 years and above declined from 52.3 per cent in 2001 to between 39 and 43 per cent in 2010. High rates of unemployment and underemployment were reached, particularly among young people, and the labour market which the government had created was unable to absorb potential entrants, especially young graduates. Before 2011, Syrian universities and technical institutes supplied the labour market with 200,000 new highly skilled workers each year, while the state could only provide some 60,000 open jobs a year and the private sector could do little to compensate for the overflow of 140,000 persons.⁹

At the same time, Syria's agricultural workforce shrank by 40 per cent between 2002 and 2008, dropping from 1.4 million to only 800,000 workers. In conjunction, land privatisation occurred to the detriment of tens of thousands of peasants in the north-east. This was felt particularly harshly due to the 2007-2009 drought, during which a million peasants needed recourse to international aid and food supplies and a further 300,000 migrated from the north-east to Damascus, Aleppo and other cities. A number of further laws benefiting landowners at the expense of peasants contributed to a reduction in the agricultural workforce. Law No. 56 of 2004 regulating agricultural relationships allowed landowners to terminate all tenancy contracts after three years, permitting them to expel peasants from land they had worked for two generations in exchange for meagre indemnities (which often went unpaid) and to replace them with temporary workers. Implemented in 2007, this law resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of tenants and workers, especially in the coastal cities of Tartous

⁵ Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, 37.

⁶ Robert Goulden, "Housing, Inequality, and Economic Change in Syria," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 2, 2011, 192.

⁷ Linda Matar, *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria*, Palgrave, 2015, 109.

⁸ Joseph Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2018), <https://bit.ly/2wQ43Jn>

⁹ Arabic Sputnik, "The Head of the Syrian Labour Federation: Reconstruction Will Take Place with Syrian Hands, and We do not Need Anyone" (in Arabic), 30 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Y72aTU>

and Latakia.¹⁰ Agriculture's share of employment in the country fell from around 31 per cent in 2000 to just 13.5 per cent in 2011.¹¹

By 2010, the general unemployment rate was estimated to be around 25 per cent, in contrast to the official 8.6 per cent statistic announced by the state, and the youth unemployment rate reached 48 per cent a year later.¹² The contraction in the labour force participation rate was mirrored in both rural and urban areas, but was more pronounced in rural areas as more highly skilled workers often chose to emigrate in search of better wages.

The share of wages in national income actually decreased from 41 per cent in 2004 to less than 33 per cent between 2008 and 2009.¹³ Therefore, profits and rents represented more than 67 per cent of GDP prior to 2011. Even the state-controlled GFTUW made a statement in 2009 deploring the fact that "the rich have become richer and the poor poorer ... low income earners who make up 80 per cent of the Syrian population are looking for additional work to support themselves."¹⁴

These dynamics were also reflected in the field of labour rights and laws in the private sector. After several years of preparation and discussion, Labour Law No. 17 was promulgated by the government in 2010. The law, which regulates the relationship between workers and employers in the private, public-private and cooperative sectors, favoured employers at the expense of labourers. It expressed the Syrian authorities' preference for capital and profits over labour protection and notably gave employers the right to dismiss their employees without any justification and only limited compensation. According to official statistics, 100,000 Syrians have been dismissed from their employment since its implementation.¹⁵ In 2020, the Labour Observatory for Research and Studies, the research centre of the GFTUW, stated that most workers in the private sector, with the exception of the finance and insurance sectors, did not enjoy the most basic rights enshrined in Law No. 17, such as periodic wage increases, medical and health insurance, and inclusion in social insurance schemes.¹⁶

More generally, although the right to collective bargaining is acknowledged in the 2010 Labour Law No. 17, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL) has maintained extensive powers to oppose and reject the registration of concluded collective agreements. Moreover, while strikes are not officially forbidden in the private sector, the right to strike is often compromised by the threat of punishment and fines. In certain sectors, such as transport and telecommunications, strikes involving more than 20 workers are sanctioned with fines and even prison sentences. Obstruction of the operation of state services by public employees may result in the deprivation of their civil rights.¹⁷

¹⁰ Myriam Ababsa, "The End of a World Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007–2010)," in Hinnebusch R. (ed.) *Syria: From Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution?* Syracuse University Press, 2015, 200.

¹¹ World Bank Group, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria," 10 July 2017, 9-10, <https://bit.ly/2z3zxx9>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nabil Marzouq, "The Lost Development in Syria" (in Arabic), in Bishara A. (ed.), *The Syrian Revolution's Origins, Syrian Studies* (in Arabic), Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013, 42.

¹⁴ Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl, "Syrian Uprising and al-Assad's First Decade in Power," in Hinnebusch R. and Zintl T. (eds.), *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Volume 1: Political Economy and International Relations*, Syracuse University Press, 2015, 296.

¹⁵ Tishreen, "Regime Government Amends Private Sector Labour Law," *The Syrian Observer*, 13 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N326Ov>

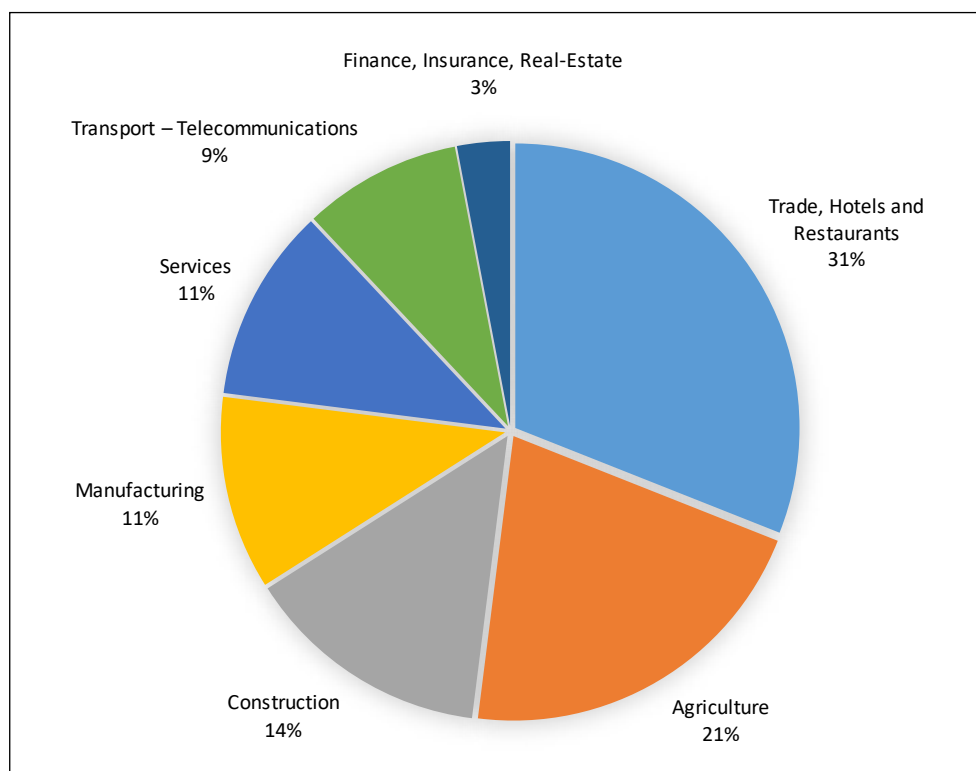
¹⁶ Rasha Shirub, "Corona Shock ... and Private Sector Workers" (in Arabic), *General Federation of Trade Unions Labour Observatory for Research and Studies*, 2 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Y0UBQK>

¹⁷ International Trade Union Confederation, "2012 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights – Syria," 6 June 2012, <https://bit.ly/2N8zofj>

1.2. The Labour Force after Nine Years of Destruction

The destruction of large sectors of the economy, the militarisation of society and the forced exodus of millions of Syrians considerably reduced the size of the employed labour force in the country. Between 2011 and 2019, the total registered employed population decreased from 5.184 million to 3.058 million,¹⁸ of which just over 1 million were state employees, including in public sector manufacturing, around 760,000 qualified as private employees and 1.2 million were classed as self-employed workers.¹⁹ Wages have become less and less determinant in the production of wealth in Syria throughout the war, with one estimation putting the share of wages in national income at around 20 per cent, while profits and rents represent the remaining 80 per cent at the time of writing in July 2020.²⁰

Chart 1. Distribution of Workers in Private Sectors of the Economy (2020)



Source: General Federation of Trade Unions Labour Observatory for Research and Studies²¹

Policy has continued to neglect the living conditions of the labour force. Only symbolic wage increases have occurred in the public sector, while in 2019 the MoSAL amended 26 articles of Labour Law No. 17 of 2010 with very minor effect: a small rise in wages (roughly nine per cent) and a guarantee of entitlement to maternity leave.²² The monthly minimum wage for all sectors was increased from SYP 16,175 to SYP 47,675 in December 2019. These measures did not, however, address the deteriorating living conditions of workers.

¹⁸ Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), “Justice to Transcend Conflict,” 1 June 2020, 9, <https://bit.ly/3dA3iEI>

¹⁹ Shirub, “Corona Shock.”

²⁰ Kassiou, “Kassiou Editorial 971: Increasing Wages is a Necessity ... Humanitarian and National” (in Arabic), 21 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2NqIjJ6>

²¹ Shirub, “Corona Shock.”

²² Tishreen, “Regime Government Amends Private Sector Labour Law,” *The Syrian Observer*, 13 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N326Ov>

The purchasing power of the labour force, like that of the population as a whole, is continually falling, with estimates suggesting a staggering 93 per cent contraction between May 2010 and 2020. Monthly expenses for a family of five in Damascus increased from SYP 380,000 in January 2020 to SYP 550,000 at the beginning of June 2020 because of the massive depreciation of the Syrian pound.²³ The average monthly wage in the public sector in 2020 is in the SYP 80,000-100,000 (between USD 32 and USD 40) range, and around SYP 120,000-150,000 (between USD 48 and USD 60) in the private sector.²⁴ In mid-June 2020, a report published in Syria calculated that the average monthly salary should be raised to SYP 310,000 (USD 124) to reach the same purchasing power as in 2010, which would require raising the current wage level by 420 per cent. This increase in salaries would cost the government an additional SYP 500 billion (USD 200 million) a month.²⁵

This situation obliges workers to seek alternative sources of income to supplement their monthly budgets, reverting to and reinforcing the dynamic that existed prior to 2011. In the public sector, many more employees take on additional jobs, while the cost of bribes is also increasing. Important numbers of highly skilled workers, on the other hand, emigrate in pursuit of better living and working conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only contributed to a further deterioration in the living conditions of the vast majority of the labour force, with sectors of the economy (tourism, trade, construction, etc.) effectively paralysed. In these sectors, workers have not received any salary during the pandemic as their activities ceased, while some private companies have provided their employees with a reduced wage. Public employees have fared better and their wages have generally been guaranteed.

The Syrian state lacks the financial means to compensate the economic loss experienced by hundreds of thousands of workers as a direct result of the pandemic. Under the auspices of the MoSAL, in mid-April 2020 the government launched a ‘National Campaign for Emergency Social Response’ to assist individuals employed in the sectors most impacted by Covid-19. Several weeks later, registrations on the Ministry’s website were suspended after more than 450,000 persons applied.²⁶ By the end of May, fewer than 5,000 individuals – as opposed to the 20,000 beneficiaries anticipated – had obtained a one-off allocation of SYP 100,000 (equivalent to USD 54 at the exchange rate during this period of SYP 1,860 a US dollar).²⁷ About 80,000 workers are expected to receive a similar amount within the next 5 months and at the beginning of July 2020 18,500 individuals received the allocation (according to the MoSAL).²⁸

The labour force is additionally characterised by high levels of unemployment, low wages and a lack of skilled workers. High unemployment may be explained by the destruction of large segments of the economy leading to a lack of opportunities, but also as a consequence of threats of arrest for failure to conscript, which result in many young men remaining at home or seeking insecure underpaid informal daily work in order to avoid forced military service. The shortage of opportunities for gainful employment was epitomised in mid-June 2020 when 11,000 citizens applied to fill 180 jobs in the Judicial Palace of Tartous.²⁹

²³ Kassioum, “Kassioum Editorial 971.”

²⁴ If not otherwise indicated, an exchange rate of 2500 SYP/USD is assumed.

²⁵ Economy 2 Day, “Report: 310,000 Pounds of Monthly Wages Required to Raise the Purchasing Power of the Syrian Family” (in Arabic), 24 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3duVLWV>

²⁶ The number of people registered with the MoSAL was eventually reduced to less than 400,000 in July 2020 after an initial list of names was leaked, causing controversy and criticism as many individuals listed were not deemed to be in need of financial assistance.

²⁷ The allowances were scheduled to be paid prior to Eid al-Fitr, but the MoSAL encountered numerous problems, including a need to reassess the list of people qualifying to receive financial assistance for actual eligibility.

²⁸ Nibal Ibrahim, “It Includes 18500 Beneficiaries ... Al-Qadri for ‘Al-Watan...’” (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, <https://bit.ly/3ffHPSc>

²⁹ Al-Watan, “11,000 Citizens Applied to Fill 180 Jobs in ‘Justice,’ Tartous!” (in Arabic), 15 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2YHrBu5>

Daily workers in the public sector also face very precarious labour conditions, including not benefiting from specific social advantages. In July 2020, for example, Damascus governorate officials announced a decision not to renew the contracts of more than 1,000 daily workers because of its difficult financial situation and the rise in minimum wage requirements. After receiving strong criticism, the decision was apparently overturned a few days later in a statement by the Governor of Damascus, Engineer Adel al-Olabi, explaining that funds had been transferred to the budget in order to remunerate these jobs and protect the livelihoods of these employees.³⁰ This nevertheless demonstrated the unstable and tenuous conditions faced in the labour sector, even if between 2015 and 2020 the GFTUW was able to transform the status of 8,000 workers – out of a total of 13,000 – in state institutions and entities from daily workers to annually contracted employees.³¹

1.3. A New Space for Women?

The gradual liberalisation of the economy in the past few decades has also had an impact on women's participation in the labour market. In the early 1970s, the total number of women in the workforce began to steadily increase, notably in the state-controlled public economic sector, but by the end of the 1980s this percentage was decreasing significantly. The same occurred in the services sector, in which the percentage of women workers increased from 18 per cent in 1970 to 47.2 per cent in 1981, but dropped back to 30.2 per cent in 1995.³²

The percentage of women working in the public sector has always been higher than in the private sector, but the contribution and economic output of the latter work force in the 2000s was much higher, reaching 70 per cent in 2010 while it was only 30 per cent in the public sector. The labour force participation rate of women aged 15 and above declined from around 20.5 per cent in 2001 to 13 per cent in 2010 – one of the lowest rates in the world. Even in the revitalised private sector, the number of women dropped. The functioning of the uncontrolled private sector reflected the dominant patriarchal system in Syrian society and its development came at the expense of the economic situation of Syrian women.³³

The sudden shortage of men in Syrian society due to war and/or emigration and the lack of employable men because of injury or imprisonment created a new space for women to occupy particular niches in society and in a workforce which was previously male-dominated or inaccessible to women.³⁴ For example, according to FAO estimates, in 2015 65 per cent of the economically active population in agriculture were women, an increase of 6 per cent since 2009. In some specific areas, women may constitute up to 90 per cent of the agricultural labour force. As a result, by 2016 female-headed households constituted 12-17 per cent of the population in Syria and up to a third of the Syrian

³⁰ Al-Baath Media, “The Governor of Damascus Resolves the Issue of More Than a Thousand Workers by not Separating Any of Them and Securing Additional Investments” (in Arabic), 8 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZoSi8x>

³¹ Snack Syrian, “The President of the Workers’ Federation Promises the Daily Workers to End their File” (in Arabic), 5 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/395JBn3>

³² Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar Al-Assad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, Oxford University Press, Routledge, 2004, 10.

³³ Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba’thist Secularism*, Routledge Studies in Political Islam, 2011, 99.

³⁴ According to a study published in May 2017 by the Damascus Centre for Research and Studies, 82 per cent of the people who died in the Syrian war were men, the majority of whom were of working age. In addition, 1.2 million men were disabled or injured as a result of the war, making it difficult for them to return to the labour force. “The Repercussions of the Crisis/War on the Reality of Syrian Women” (in Arabic), *Damascus Centre for Research and Studies*, 2017, 5, <https://bit.ly/37zSkwW>

population in refugee-hosting countries.³⁵ This trend has continued over the years. In April 2018, a MoSAL official declared that there were four times more women than men in the labour market. In the public sector, the ratio was estimated to be 3 to 1.³⁶

However, gender participation in the economy is far from equal, with women receiving substantially lower pay and facing significant discrimination and barriers in the workplace. Income in female-led households tended “to be below that of male-headed households,” according to research published in 2016.³⁷ Furthermore, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted women as they are more likely to work in informal and/or low-paid jobs.³⁸

2. Damascus Policies: Repression, Division and Control of Labour Forces

Collective actions by professional associations, trade unions and peasants’ associations were limited during the uprising.³⁹ Among these various labour groups, the most active participants in the initial stage of the protest movement were members of the Professional Association of Lawyers in various governorates. In areas outside the Syrian regime’s control, the main aims of the newly created professional associations and federations of trade unions have mostly been restricted to democratic demands, serving local opposition institutions and denouncing human rights violations, while no, or only very limited, socio-economic agenda or class-based discourses are mentioned in their programmes.⁴⁰ This reflects the political orientation of the main Syrian Arab opposition actors, particularly the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which limited their demands to a democratisation of the political system and did not address the socioeconomic issues which were the priority of a large majority of the country’s population – especially at a time of rising social inequalities, unemployment, and general impoverishment. No particular programmes or activities were introduced to mobilise the labour force or encourage the establishment of independent trade unions. At the same time, these opposition actors, alongside rebel groups, increasingly adopted exclusionary discourses and practices along sectarian and ethnic lines, encouraging and contributing to the formation of deepening rifts and divisions among Syrians.⁴¹ The increasing militarisation of the uprising and the growing presence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces only further undermined civilian collective action, including the activities of the newly created professional associations.

³⁵ Beatrix Buecher and James Rwampigi Aniyamuzaala, “Women, Work, and War: Syrian Women and the Struggle to Survive Five Years of Conflict,” Research Study (Amman: CARE International, March 2016), 4 +31, <https://bit.ly/2WXMTnu>

³⁶ The Syria Report, “State-Owned Companies Report Manpower Shortages,” 16 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/3fCxAHH>

³⁷ Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, “Women, Work, and War,” 5.

³⁸ Maria al-Abdeh and Champa Patel, “COVID-19 and Women in Syria Deepening Inequalities,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3j4EEz9>

³⁹ In the second half of December 2011 a campaign named ‘Strike for Dignity’ called for general strikes and civil disobedience and paralysed significant parts of the country. It predominantly targeted shopkeepers and to a lesser extent self-employed workers, while the public administrations and large sectors of private companies and manufacturers were operating in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

⁴⁰ This article will not tackle the labour dynamics in areas ruled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

⁴¹ Joseph Daher, “Pluralism Lost in Syria’s Uprising, How the Opposition Strayed from Its Inclusive Roots,” *The Century Foundation*, 7 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3fXCHCK>

In regime-controlled areas, labour protests and other forms of dissent have remained very restricted in spite of the continual worsening of the socioeconomic situation. The lack of activity and independent labour organisations are connected to the absence of any labour movement or form of opposition in the existing official trade unions and professional associations. This is a result of the Syrian regime's historic repression and control of unions, alongside decades of policies to divide society through clientelism, political loyalties and sectarian and ethnic discrimination – including in state employment – which have created obstacles and made collective labour action extremely difficult to organise. In this context, the GFTUW's role is emblematic of the regime's instrumentalisation of 'popular' corporatist organisations to control the labour force.

2.1. Historical Repression and Control of Unions

With the arrival of the Baath party in power in 1963, the living conditions of workers and peasants improved but no autonomy of labour and peasant movements was authorised. The regime actually fought a combative orientation within the trade unions and opposition to the Baathist regime in 1960s, which were staged predominantly by communists and Nasserites.⁴² The working class was not accorded independent political representation in the Baathist state and could not participate in the political decision-making process.

Similarly, following its establishment in 1964, non-Baathists were initially excluded from the General Federation of Peasants (GFP),⁴³ which led to the exclusion of the most active sectors of the peasant movement,⁴⁴ and in 1969 the Baathist government forcefully suppressed a peasant uprising denouncing a system that indebted peasants to the Agricultural Bank to reimburse businessmen in the Ghab region.⁴⁵ In the founding years, most leadership cadres of the cooperatives and the GFP were middle-class peasants and they often exploited their positions to negotiate in their own interests to obtain credit, machinery, seeds, etc. The gap between this peasant middle class and large-scale landowners diminished in the 1960s, while the equivalent divide between agricultural workers and medium-size landholders increased considerably. Thanks to their positions in the cooperatives, in the GFP and in the Baath Party itself, middle-class peasants became the leading class in the countryside in political terms but without being or becoming its wealthiest social stratum.⁴⁶ The GFP increasingly served the interests of its wealthier members – namely peasants with medium-sized holdings – while rural landless peasants and smallholders were left without any organisations to systematically defend their interests.

In April 1980, all the professional associations (such as those representing engineers, lawyers and doctors) were dissolved by decree and the regime established new professional associations and appointed their leaders.⁴⁷ At the same time, crackdowns against trade unionists affiliated with or who identified with opposition parties, who had been elected over official Baathist candidates in the 1978 and 1979 elections, intensified.⁴⁸ These actors were targeted because they played a significant role in counteracting the authoritarian policies of the government during the 1970s and the beginning

⁴² Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, 39.

⁴³ In 1974, the Cooperative Federation was merged into the GFP.

⁴⁴ This included members of the Arab Socialist Party led by Akram Hourani and the Communist-allied movements of the Kurdish peasants in the Jazira, Horns and Safita areas. John Galvani, "Syria and the Baath Party," *MERIP Reports*, (25), 10.

⁴⁵ The Baathist regime did establish cooperatives to try to win over the local peasants after their repressive actions. John Galvani, "Syria and the Baath Party," 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 87.

⁴⁷ Michel Seurat, *The Barbarian State, 1979–1982* (in French), Presses Universitaires de France, Proche-Orient, 2012, 100.

⁴⁸ Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime*, Yale University Press, 1991, 14.

of the 1980s by organising strikes and demonstrations and because of their open sympathy with, or membership of, the leftist and democratic sectors of the opposition.

The GFTUW and GFP have developed over the past few decades to focus on mobilising their memberships for constant productive efforts, garnering support for regime policies among the working class and providing protection to the regime itself whenever necessary. For example, the GFTUW cooperated with the security services in the 1980s and 1990s to suppress several unorganised workers' actions and mobilisations in the private and public sectors against poor working conditions,⁴⁹ while the GFP also mobilised its members into militias to crush revolts in a number of cities at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

However, the GFTUW and GFP continued to play notable social roles for their members and other segments of the population who benefited from certain services they provide, which are usually free or relatively affordable in comparison to institutional alternatives. The GFTUW, in particular, was very effective in the field of public health.

During the 2000s, Bashar al-Assad consciously weakened the GFTUW and the GFP because he perceived them to be obstacles in the process of neoliberal economic reform. The regime increasingly starved the 'popular' corporatist organisations of funds and attacked their powers of patronage. By the beginning of the uprising in 2011, neither organisation could effectively mobilise because of the political marginalisation they had experienced in the preceding decade.⁵⁰ This situation changed as the Baath Party and 'popular' corporatist organisations were revalued in Syrian regime networks in the period after 2011.

The GFTUW, GFP and professional associations have collectively been turned into a corporatist arm of the state and the ruling Baath Party generally exerts strict control over them. The presidents and the majority of other leaders of the GFTUW, professional associations and the GFP have always been – and still are systematically – selected from among the senior members of the Baath Party.

The GFP's prerogatives provide Damascus with a particular power to promote patronage and clientelist networks by favouring peasants and farmers loyal to the Federation and the Syrian government more broadly.⁵¹ The GFP disposes of a number of prerogatives, including managing the distribution of loans, primary agricultural products (such as fertilisers and fodder) and the marketing of some agricultural crops, while it provides its members with various services through the centres and units which it runs selling agricultural products, medicines, gas and other indispensable products for peasants. The GFP's membership base is officially estimated to be a little less than one million strong (994,820), of whom nearly 97,000 are women, together with 5621 cooperative societies.⁵²

Numerous personalities in the professional associations and the GFP were 'elected' as MPs in the past and many stood as candidates in the legislative election in July 2020, while some play more significant roles in various government delegations to international conferences.

⁴⁹ Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, 174-178.

⁵⁰ Nazer Madi, "Cultivating a Crisis: The Political Decline of Agriculture in Syria," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2019), <https://bit.ly/3ir5QrR>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² These numbers are most probably inflated. National Progressive Front, "General Federation of Peasants" (in Arabic), 19 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2CRGBhM>

Table 1. Leaders of Professional Associations and of the GFP (June 2020)

Personality	Current Position	General Description
Nazir Ali Skayf	Former President of the Professional Association of Lawyers until November 2019	Member of the Baath Party and elected as an MP for Latakia Governorate in the 2016-2020 legislature. He was previously a member of the government's delegation to the Sochi Conference. ⁵³ Member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee on the Syrian government's list. ⁵⁴
Al-Firas al-Fares	President of the Professional Association of Lawyers since November 2019	Member of the Central Committee of the Professional Association of Lawyers since 2014. He is also the son of a military intelligence officer, Brigadier General Mazhar Faris al-Munhdar, accused of having committed crimes during the rule of Hafez al-Assad. ⁵⁵
Dr. Ghayath al-Qutayni	President of the Professional Association of Engineers	Member of the Baath Party, elected MP for Idlib Governorate in 2016 and 2020 on the National Unity List. ⁵⁶
Dr. Fadia Deeb	President of the Professional Association of Dentists since October 2019.	Member of the Baath Party and elected MP since 2007. ⁵⁷ Elected as MP on the National Unity list in Homs in 2020.
Wafaa Kichi	President of the Professional Association of Pharmacists since February 2019	Candidate for the Baath Party in Homs for the legislative election in July 2020, but ultimately not selected on the National Unity list. She subsequently presented herself as a Baathist member. ⁵⁸
Ahmad Saleh Ibrahim	President of the GFP since 2016	Elected as MP on the National Unity list in Aleppo Regions district for the legislative elections in 2016 and 2020. Prior to this, he held the positions of secretary of the branch of the 'Arab Socialist Baath Party' in the governorate of Aleppo between 2013 and 2016 and head of the branch of 'the General Federation of Peasants' in the governorate of Aleppo. ⁵⁹
Khaled Khazaal	Vice President of the GFP	Elected as an MP in the 2016-2020 legislature and Secretary-General of the General Federation of Arab Peasants and Agricultural Cooperatives. ⁶⁰ Member of the Constitutional Committee on the Syrian government's list. Candidate of the Baath Party in Quneitra in the legislative election in July 2020, but ultimately not selected on the National Unity list.

⁵³ Syrian Arab Republic Lawyers Trade Union, "The Lawyer Nazir Ali Skayf" (in Arabic), 6 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2D6apHB>

⁵⁴ Al-Modon, "Who Are the Members of the Constitutional Committee" (in Arabic), 24 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/3gTJ228>

⁵⁵ Sy-24, "Establishment of a Committee to Monitor the Publications of 'Lawyers' Related to the Syrian Regime" (in Arabic), 22 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3hqFJjg>

⁵⁶ Syrian Arab Republic, the People's Assembly, "Member of the People's Assembly: Ghayath al-Qutayni" (in Arabic), 6 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/38wsPgf>

⁵⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, the People's Assembly, "Member of the People's Assembly: Fadia Deeb" (in Arabic), 6 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2O5OceV>; Al-Iqtisadi, "Who is Fadia Deeb" (in Arabic), 6 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZIHhCf>

⁵⁸ Wafaa Kichi, Information retrieved on 6 July 2020 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2DiEHHv>

⁵⁹ Al-Iqtisadi, "Ahmad Saleh Ibrahim" (in Arabic), 1 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZuCnED>

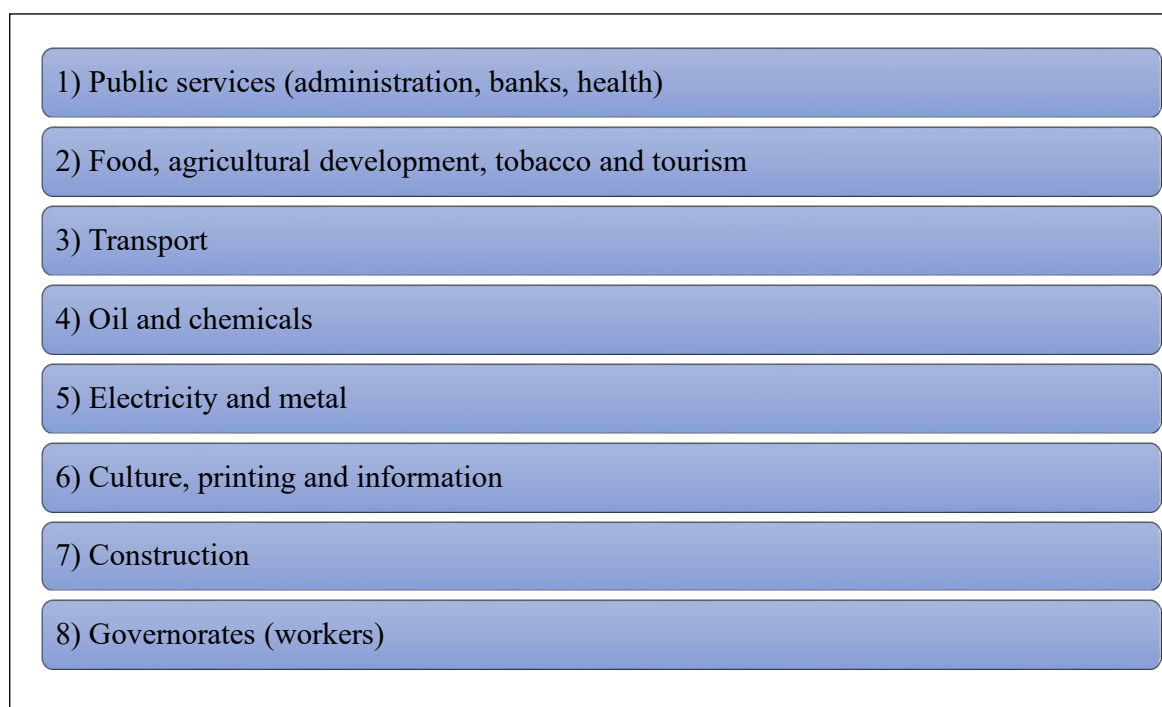
⁶⁰ Al-Iqtisadi, "Khaled Khazaal" (in Arabic), 2 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2NShIKs>

2.2. The GFTUW: A Control and Mobilisation Instrument

Following Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970, the trade unions were gradually transformed in order to assist the regime in implementing liberal economic policies and controlling the labour force, rather than defending working class interests. In 1972, the conference of the GFTUW characterised the role of trade unions in the Baathist state as 'political.' In other words, any independent and autonomous political role achieved by the unions was restricted and any material demands were subordinated to the higher imperative of increasing production and contributing to the struggle for liberation and nation-building. 'Demanding' struggle was described as counter-productive in the (so-called) 'socialist' regime existing in Syria and a form of 'sabotage' along the socialist path.⁶¹

In 1985, the GFTUW supported a new labour law relating to all employees in the public sector, which notably required them to follow the political objectives of the Baath state and forbade strikes characterised as illegal.⁶² In 2004, a new law for state employees was officially introduced with the same political orientation. The GFTUW is composed of eight trade unions in the public sector (chart 2). In the public sector membership is almost compulsory, while the GFTUW's influence in the private sector is very limited. All workers' organisations, on the other hand, must belong to the GFTUW.

Chart 2. Composition the GFTUW Including Eight Trade Unions in the Public Sector



Source: National Progressive Front ⁶³

⁶¹ Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning;" Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, 176.

⁶² Longuenesse, "Industrialisation and its Social Meaning."

⁶³ National Progressive Front, "General Federation of Trade Unions" (in Arabic), 19 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2B8fQoN>

Table 2. President of the GFTUW, Presidents of Federations of Trade Unions and Some Members of the Executive Committee of the GFTUW (June 2020)

Personality	Current Position	Additional Information
Jamal al-Qadri	President of the GFTUW since 2015 and re-elected in February 2020.	Member of the Baath Party, elected as an MP on the National Unity list in Rural Damascus Governorate in 2016 in 2020. Member of the Constitutional Committee on the Syrian Government's list.
Rafiq Alouni	Vice President of the GFTUW and President of the Professional Federation for Electricity and Metal Industries.	Candidate for the Baath Party in Latakia in the legislative election in July 2020, but ultimately not selected on the National Unity list. ⁶⁴
Nabil 'Aql	President of the Professional Federation for Public Services (since before 2011).	Secretary-General of the Federation of Municipalities and Tourism Workers.
Imad al-Dughaim	President of the Federation of Transport Workers.	Elected Secretary General of the International Transport Workers Federation in March 2019. ⁶⁵
Khalaf al-Hanoush	President of the Professional Federation for Building, Reclamation and Dam Workers.	Member of the Baath Party. Candidate for the Baath Party in Aleppo in the legislative election in July 2020 but ultimately not selected on the National Unity list. ⁶⁶
Talal Alaywi	President of the Federation of Deir ez-Zor Workers since February 2020 and member of the Executive Bureau of the GFTUW.	Candidate for the Baath Party in Deir ez-Zor in the legislative election in July 2020 but ultimately not selected on the National Unity list.
Burhan al-Abd al-Waheed	Member of the Executive Bureau of the GFTUW since 2020 and Secretary for Services in the GFTUW. Former President of the Federation of Deir ez-Zor Workers.	Member of the Baath party, elected as an MP on the National Unity list in Deir ez-Zor Governorate in 2016 and 2020. ⁶⁷
Mariette Khoury	Member of the Executive Bureau of the GFTUW, and Secretary for Cultural Affairs and Information. ⁶⁸	Member of the Baath Party in Aleppo. Elected on the National Unity list in the Governorate of Aleppo in 2020.
Bashir Suleiman Halabouni	Member of the Executive Bureau of the GFTUW and Secretary for Legal and Legislative Affairs. ⁶⁹	Member of the Constitutional Committee on the Syrian government's list.
Mustafa Ibrahim Khalil	Member of the Executive Committee of the GFTUW and President of the Workers' Trade Union of Hama	Elected as an MP on the National Unity list in Hama Governorate in 2020.

⁶⁴ Al-Baath Media, "Latakia Selection ... 15 New Names and a Greater Willingness for Renewal!!" (in Arabic), 27 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZrRTIH>

⁶⁵ Latakia Sports Network, Information retrieved on 13 March 2019 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2DxFvIm>

⁶⁶ Khalaf al-Hanoush, Information retrieved on 9 June 2020 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/3eOwYP4>

⁶⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, the People's Assembly, "Member of the People's Assembly: Burhan al-Abd al-Waheed" (in Arabic), 13 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3gUi3DE>

⁶⁸ Syrian Arab Republic, General Federation of Workers' Trade Union, "Comrades, President and Members of the Executive Bureau of the General Federation of Workers' Trade Unions for the Union Session 26" (in Arabic), 27 January 2015, <https://bit.ly/3fvIP6i>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The Federation manages most aspects of trade union activities, including the regulation of sectors and occupations which can be represented by a trade union and decisions concerning the conditions and procedures for the use of trade union funds. It also has the authority to dissolve the executive committee of any union.⁷⁰ Before 2011, the GFTUW had an estimated 1.2 million working members. In 2018, its membership had decreased to roughly 950,000.⁷¹

After the uprising broke out in March 2011, the GFTUW became involved in the regime's networks, and in particular in Baathist and 'popular' corporatist organisations, to repress and control society and provide certain services and forms of humanitarian assistance.⁷² This concomitant role with the Baath Party gained increasing value in 2013-2014. As in the Professional Associations and the GFP, leading members of the Federation were 'elected' as MPs in 2016 or 2020, and they acted as representatives in various government delegations to international conferences and regional and international organisations.

The Federation provides its members with free collective weddings,⁷³ financial compensation for martyred and injured family members of workers, supplies of food and necessary goods, humanitarian aid and financial subsidies for workers in need in multiple regions, and it participates in charity and social campaigns in collaboration with state institutions.⁷⁴ These services are delivered to members along with promoted regime propaganda, especially on specific dates such as the annual 1 May celebrations.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the GFTUW also formed voluntary emergency teams in all the governorates to support the regime's networks and it ran campaigns to supply sanitary products and disinfectant liquids. It announced assessments of the socio-economic effects of the pandemic on workers and the unemployment rate. At the same time, it stated its readiness to participate fully alongside the government in all efforts against the pandemic.⁷⁵

The Federation also promotes the Syrian Government's propaganda to other international and regional federations and trade unions in conferences outside the country or when it hosts them in Syria. In September 2019, for example, more than 100 Arab and foreign trade union representatives, together with journalists, took part in the third International Trade Unions Forum entitled 'Solidarity with the Syrian Workers and People Against Terrorism, Economic Siege and Imperialist Intervention.' On this occasion, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) all expressed their support for the Syrian government.⁷⁶

The Syrian regime uses the GFTUW, like other networks, in the north-east to dilute the influence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. State employees of the General Electricity Company and the Syrian Grain Corporation in the city of al-Hasakah, for example, organised a continual sit-in from the end of June 2020 until mid-July in front of the buildings of these public

⁷⁰ International Trade Union Confederation, "2012 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights – Syria," 6 June 2012, <https://bit.ly/2N8zofj>

⁷¹ Arabic Sputnik, "The Head of the Syrian Labour Federation."

⁷² Professional Associations excluded all members who participated in the protest movement.

⁷³ SANA, "200 Brides at First Collective Worker's Wedding Ceremony in the Sahara complex" (in Arabic), 30 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/39yArja>

⁷⁴ Arabic Sputnik, "The Head of the Syrian Labour Federation"; SANA, "The Workers Federation Launches the 'Retail Sale' Initiative for Workers in the Country - Video" (in Arabic), 29 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2D7bWNR>

⁷⁵ Arabic Sputnik, "The Head of the Syrian Trade Unions: Compensation for Professionals Who are Unemployed Due to the Curfew" (in Arabic), 4 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2URDE7b>

⁷⁶ SANA, "3rd International Trade Union Forum Kicks Off in Solidarity with Syrian People and Workers," 8 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/32XCwUh>

companies after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) seized them by force and prevented their employees from going back to work.⁷⁷ The sit-in lasted for 16 days until the SDF allowed them back into the buildings. It is probable that the GFTUW encouraged (and perhaps even partially organised) the actions and demands of the state employees, which received full attention and coverage in state and pro-regime media.

As mentioned above, no forms of dissent are allowed, and criticism of or opposition to the regime and the Baath Party are punishable offences. For example, on multiple occasions the GFTUW has forbidden the newspaper Qassioun, which is linked to the tolerated People's Will party founded by former MP and Minister Qadri Jamil,⁷⁸ from reporting on the sessions of the Federation of Trade Unions.⁷⁹ Moreover, in June 2020 a video was published on social networks of an employee of the Ministry of Education publicly condemning the authorities after he was dismissed from his work with his salary suspended because he participated in a protest (in front of the City Council in Sweida at the end of May 2020)⁸⁰ denouncing difficult economic living conditions and the failure of government policies to tackle them. Forms of dissent within the GFTUW remain very isolated and limited.

More generally, the GFTUW has supported the regime mechanism to use employment in public services as an instrument to build and buy allegiances, while rewarding loyalist individuals and communities. This is reflected in various decrees and laws passed by the government. In December 2014, for instance, the government announced that 50 per cent of new jobs in the public sector would be awarded to families of 'martyrs.'⁸¹ In October 2018, the Council of Ministers excluded all employees who failed to perform military or reserve service from applying through the public employment recruitment process, despite a presidential amnesty a few weeks earlier pardoning them if they settled their status with the authorities.

2.3. Forms of Labour Dissent (2019-2020): Case Study of Russian-Controlled Companies

As the Syrian regime's armed forces – assisted by their allies, Russia and Iran – recaptured large swathes of territory, Damascus faced increasing criticism because of the entrenchment of the economic crisis in the country. Demonstrations in Sweida and Daraa in June 2020 expressed this rising frustration. In addition to these recent protests, more moderate forms of labour dissent linked to the consequences of the government's economic liberalisation policies on working conditions have also begun to surface.

The Public Private Partnership (PPP) law, passed in January 2016, is a cornerstone of this policy framework and it allows the private sector to administer and expand all public resources and estates except oil. Numerous state officials and businessmen have since publicly called for widespread implementation of the policy. The conditions of workers and some of the benefits they enjoy as public state employees would most likely be undermined by the PPP and privatisation processes as they would fall under Labour Law No. 17, which is deemed to be less protective than the law pertaining

⁷⁷ SANA, "QSD Groups Continue to Prevent Workers of Electrical Company and Grain Corporation in Hasaka from Offering Services to Citizens," 8 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/39xqaU9>; Al-Watan Online, "For the 14th Day, Workers at the General Electricity Company of Hasaka Continue their Sit-In" (in Arabic), 8 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3elpJNn>

⁷⁸ Supported by Russia, Qadri Jamil was expelled from parliament in 2015 after he boycotted the presidential election in 2014.

⁷⁹ Snack Syrian, "Federation of Trade Unions Prevents a Newspaper from Attending its Meeting!" (in Arabic), 27 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2AJcJUe>

⁸⁰ Suwayda 24, Information retrieved on 24 May 2020 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/3egVrff>; Suwayda 24, Information retrieved on 4 June 2020 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2YhcxDA>

⁸¹ Jihad Yazigi, "No Going Back: Why Decentralisation Is the Future for Syria," Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 September 2016), 4, <https://bit.ly/2B3dyHO>

to public employees who, among other things, are generally provided with free health insurance. Very few cases of labour dissent have been voiced in companies now managed through the PPP law by the Russian company Stroytransgaz.

Workers for the General Fertilisers Company and at the fertiliser production complex near Homs,⁸² which has been operated by Stroytransgaz since November 2018 following the conclusion of a renewable contract with the Syrian government under the PPP law, went on strike in mid-April 2019 to demand better working conditions and denounce unreasonably long working hours and low wages.⁸³

Some 3600 workers similarly protested against the Stroytransgaz management in the port city of Tartous in October 2019, when the company pressured them to conclude new contracts that were unfavourable in terms of working conditions and rights.⁸⁴ Another problem arose in July 2020, as employees refused to receive their wages in protest against the Russian company's failure to respect their contracts and working conditions, including a lack of official documentation relating to their salaries, a reduction in the value of food allocations from SYP 700 to SYP 100 and the postponement of incentive payments to workers.⁸⁵

Criticisms were also levied by some workers that these institutions and resources are national and should be managed by the state rather than foreign private entities. This was a feeling shared by larger sectors of the population, including among communities considered to be 'loyalists.'

The state-controlled GFTUW, for its part, did not present any formal opposition to these economic and political dynamics. Al-Qadri, President of the GFTUW, actually stressed the traditional neoliberal discourse on the need to improve the performance of public institutions and companies by creating more flexibility and better working mechanisms and revising the regulations and legislation under which they operate. Al-Qadri considered that the most important step in the reform was to remove "bureaucratic routine" from the public industrial manufacturing sector so as to facilitate the financial reform of companies and be able to deal with each production unit as an independent administration with freedom in decision-making, while at the same time demanding accountability for their results.⁸⁶ However, he objected to complete privatisation processes targeting profit-accumulating public entities. He declared that PPP law should only include public companies that suffer deficits (having been damaged or destroyed) and called for no long-term solutions in the current situation.⁸⁷ The GFTUW is, therefore, to all intents and purposes, backing government policies and trying to control and suppress forms of labour dissent.

More generally, Al-Qadri, who was re-elected as President of the Federation in February 2020, has not been able to fulfil the promises made in his mandate, which included raising the daily allocation for food from SYP 30 to SYP 300 (despite official approval of this measure in 2019), amending the 2004 law on public state employees and providing annual contracts to all daily state workers.⁸⁸

⁸² The General Fertilisers Company is the largest chemical industrial complex in Syria and secures the agricultural sector's needs of all types of fertilisers.

⁸³ The Syria Report, "Increasing Number of Strikes Highlights Severity of Economic Conditions," 5 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YIKj15>

⁸⁴ Al-Khabar, "In its first Weeks of Work, Problem Between the Workers of Tartous Port and the Russian Investing Company" (in Arabic), 24 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UTrL0p>; Snack Syrian, "Problems Between the Russian Company and the Workers of the Port of "Tartous"... The Workers Are Afraid for their Rights" (in Arabic), 24 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ABDudn>

⁸⁵ Al-Watan, "A New Problem Between the Workers of the Port of Tartous and the Investing Company..." (in Arabic), 4 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Z0SLO0>

⁸⁶ Al-Iqtisadi, "General Federation Supports Participation but with Conditions" (in Arabic), 9 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YvLyFq>

⁸⁷ The Syrian Ministry of Industry, information retrieved on 16 May 2019 (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/2N9BN9j>

⁸⁸ Snack Syrian, "Without Securing the Price of a Meal for the Workers ... "Al-Qadri, "President of Their Federation Again" (in Arabic), 17 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2CzoXiC>

Conclusion

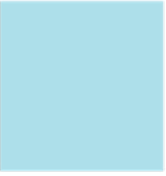
The regime's repression of combative and independent trade unionists and of political actors on the left who promote working class interests, alongside policies controlling and instrumentalising the GFTUW, GFP and professional associations, have created severe impediments in relation to possible labour mobilisation and collective action during the uprising. These measures have been accompanied by policies exploiting clientelism and primordial identities in Syria to nurture divisions. The use of clientelist political loyalties, sectarianism, tribalism, codes of ethnic discrimination and regionalism by the regime have played major roles in dividing the labour force and Syrian society more generally, while reinforcing the regime's armature of power. The Syrian regime has used these same factors to consolidate its own power, control society and guarantee the accumulation of capital and profits.

These tools provide a powerful control mechanism over the course of class struggle by creating ties of dependence between the working classes and the regime. In this manner, the working class are deprived of an independent political existence and are instead defined (and act politically) through their particular (clientelist, sectarian, tribal or ethnic) status. During the uprising, rather than challenging these socially constructed divisions, large segments of the opposition forces instead contributed to and participated in their exacerbation.

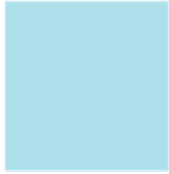
In this context, collective labour action and self-organisation struggle to find roots. The absence of an autonomous labour movement in Syria to encourage cross-identity mobilisation is a major weakness in ensuring the protection of workers' interests and living conditions, and the ability of workers to self-organise and act collectively is further restricted by repressive security forces and pressures on a labour market with high unemployment rates in the midst of an ongoing socioeconomic crisis. These obstacles create a situation in which workers cannot effectively oppose or counteract the deterioration of their living conditions or the authoritarian structures of the state. For many, the only option left – if it is, in fact, a possibility – is to emigrate in search of a better life.

The more influential role that the regime has accorded to the GFTUW and the GFP during the past few years in conjunction with the Baath Party has not been in an effort to promote workers' and peasants' interests but rather to consolidate the regime's networks and increase its control over society. These institutions have done very little to defend the interests of workers and peasants in general as their working and living conditions worsened. Quite on the contrary, the government policies introduced have sought to defend the regime's propaganda in various local and foreign institutions and conferences.

Furthermore, the absence of a mass organised labour movement has been a major weakness of the Syrian uprising. Strikes and collective action by workers and the unemployed were key elements in the overthrow of regime heads in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, and similarly in Sudan in 2019. The examples of the movements led by the Tunisian General Labour Union (known by its acronym UGTT) and the Professional Associations in the two countries in the uprisings in Tunisia and Sudan demonstrate the importance of mass trade union organisation in generating cohesive and successful mass struggle. Similarly, feminist organisations played crucial roles in Tunisia and Sudan promoting women's rights and winning them additional democratic and socioeconomic rights. In both countries, significant democratic gains have been achieved by the protest movement, although they remain fragile and are not fully consolidated. The Syrian protest movement did not have these mass organised forces, which weakened its potential. It will be essential to build these kinds of mass organisations in future struggles to ameliorate the living and working conditions of the labour force in Syria.



Research Project Report
27 July 2020
2020/11



ISBN:978-92-9084-917-9
doi:10.2870/890096

