A Historical Mapping of Lebanese Organized Labor: Tracing trends, actors, and dynamics

Rossana Tufaro

Abstract

The paper provides a contextualized and easily accessible history of Lebanese organized labor from the mandate period up to this day. The paper is divided into six main sections, each corresponding to a distinct phase of the historical development of Lebanese organized labor. In each section, the paper identifies the main actors, demands, events, urgencies and constraints shaping the articulation and the trajectories of (de/) mobilization of workers' collective agency and organization, so as to provide a cumulative and genealogical overview of the changes, continuities and peculiarities characterizing each phase. The paper builds for the most part on the piecemeal and dis-organic body of scholarship currently constituting the bulk of scholarly knowledge on Lebanese labor, in an attempt to provide a synthesis and an index thereof. In so doing, the paper aims at offering a directory and a ready-to-hand compendium for researchers, analyst and practitioners interested in Lebanese labor, and possibly contribute to (re)ignite interest in this still widely under-researched topic.

Keywords: Lebanon, Labor Rights & Livelihoods, labour movement, socio-economic demands, Policy Intervention, Activism

To cite this paper: Rossana Tufaro, "A Historical Mapping of Lebanese Organized Labor: Tracing trends, actors, and dynamics ", Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support, November, 2021 . DOI: 10.28943/CSKC.001.90002.
[ONLINE]:
https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/historical-mapping-lebanese-organized-labor-tracing-trends-actors-and-dynamics

Introduction

When the Lebanese uprising of 2019 broke out, several observers noted the loud absence of trade unions from the squares, most notably the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon (CGTL) (Dirani et al. 2019; Slaibi 2019; Bou Khater 2020; Chahine 2020; Majed 2020; Maucourant Atallah 2020; Sharrouf 2021). This – indeed, bitter – ascertainment was usually paired with brief explanatory accounts which – either by recalling the process of cooptation that the CGTL underwent throughout the 1990s, its current weakness, or the prominent role that organized labor played in specific moments of Lebanese history – pointed out in one way or another how labor activism in Lebanon had indeed represented a prominent engine for conflict and change until recent years.

In effect, since the very dependent integration of the Levantine region in global capitalist markets, organized forms of labor activism pitting subaltern workers against their patrons or the central authorities according to divergent material and political interests have constantly represented an established, transformative presence in the Lebanese contentious scenario. Within the framework of

this perennial dialectical confrontation, organized labor managed to periodically transcend the boundaries of narrow, molecular demands to rise to the forefront of the political arena and determine from below the terms (and the achievements) of the subaltern struggles for socio-economic and political rights. Organized labor in Lebanon has also represented a prominent terrain for sectarian nesting and top-down cooptation, whose dynamics of penetration and resistance have constituted a prominent – albeit under-researched – component of the Lebanese horizontal and vertical political dialectics. However, despite this long and rich history, comprehensive and longitudinal accounts identifying the multiplicity of actors, grievances, as well as the structural and conjunctural triggers of the historical development of Lebanese organized labor, remain lacking.

The aim of the following paper is to fill this gap, by providing a contextualized and easily accessible history of Lebanese organized labor from the mandate period up to this day. The paper is divided into six main sections, each corresponding to a distinct phase of the historical development of Lebanese organized labor. In each section, the paper identifies the main actors, demands, events, urgencies and constraints shaping the articulation and the trajectories of (de/) mobilization of workers' collective agency and organization, so as to provide a cumulative and genealogical overview of the changes, continuities and peculiarities characterizing each phase. The paper builds for the most part on the piecemeal and dis-organic body of scholarship currently constituting the bulk of scholarly knowledge on Lebanese labor, in an attempt to provide a synthesis and an index thereof. In so doing, the paper aims at offering a directory and a ready-to-hand compendium for researchers, analyst and practitioners interested in Lebanese labor, and possibly contribute to (re)ignite interest in this still widely under-researched topic.

I – From guilds to unions: Birth, struggles, and affirmation of the Lebanese trade union movement (1920-1943)

I.I – Between the party and the union: the early seeds of Lebanese class trade unionism and the role of the emerging Communist Party (1924-1925)

Albeit some forms of organized labour activism pitting waged workers against their patrons, according to the conflicting position occupied in the division of labour, had already emerged in the Levantine region since the late XIX century, the birth and the affirmation of modern mass labour unions dates back to the mid-1920s. This occurred against the backdrop of the profound alteration of the dominant political and economic structures triggered by the imposition of the European mandates. A leading role in this constituent process was undoubtedly played by the emerging network of Communist parties and activists who, especially after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, had begun to engage all over the region substantial efforts towards the militant organization of Arab workers within the broader framework of the expansion of the Communist international spirit and political structures.

In the case of Greater Lebanon, the two pioneers of this constituent process were the tobacco worker **Fouad al-Chemali** and the young journalist and employee **Youssef Ibrahim Yazbak**.

The politicization of al-Chemali took place throughout the 1910s in Alexandria, Egypt, where, as a fresh Levantine immigrant in search for better fortunes, he was hired in the booming cigarette industry as a rank and file (Couland 1970, 98). By the time of his hiring, the city of Alexandria had become a

prominent regional catalyst for radical ideas and practices. This centrality had been enabled by the rapid development of transport and communication facilities, which, in addition to plugging major Egyptian cities to the global capitalist circuits, eased the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, including radical ones, vehiculated through the means of both texts and the arrival of politicized workers and activists from the whole Eastern Mediterranean (Khuri-Makdisi 2013). In the case of tobacco industry, the political current to earn predominance was the one coalesced around the Palestinian-born Jewish Marxist Joseph Rosenthal who, at the beginning of the 1920s, established the first the Profintern-affiliated General Confederation of Workers in Egypt (CGTE), followed by the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE) (Beinin and Lockman 1998, 137–54).

During his long years of Egyptian militancy, Chemali came to earn a certain popularity amid Lebanese radical circles for his contributions published in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram*. These writings were often re-circulated by Iskandar Riashi's Zahleh-based periodical *as-Sahafi et- Ta'ih*, in which the same Yazbak was an active contributor, and which, in the same years, began to devote increasing attention to the peasant and working-class question (Suleiman 1967, 134–35). The political partnership between the two began in the **summer of 1923**, as a deportation order issued by the British Mandate authorities in Egypt for "Bolshevik propaganda" compelled Chemali to return to his home country. The first site where his organizational labour efforts coalesced was precisely that of tobacco, with the establishment of the **General Union of Tobacco Workers in Lebanon (GUTWL) in April 1924**. The first branch of the union was established in the village of Bikfayya, in Metn where Chemali had found a job in one of the Régie-owned local plants for the production of cigarettes, before quickly taking root in the other major sites of tobacco transformation, such as Chiyah, Bteghrine, Khenchara, and Dhour el-Choueir, as well as in Beirut and Zahleh (Couland 1970, 98–100).

These early organizational efforts acquired a more structured dimension from **September 1925**, following the formation of the **Commission for Union Organization (CUO)**. The Commission was founded by prominent members of the GUTWL, and of the newborn **Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL),** such as Fouad Chemali, Youssef Yazbak, and the Armenian Artin Madoyan. Its purpose was to serve as a platform to both promote the creation of new unions and connect and coordinate the struggles of existing unions towards the achievement of basic collective labor rights. This activity was seen as an integral part of the broader struggle for the radical emancipation of subaltern classes from capitalist (and colonial) domination that Communist parties were carrying out at the four corners of the globe, through the means of both the militant organization of the working classes and their political acknowledgment. The Commission conceived labor unions– in the words of Fouad Chemali – as a "great political force (…), a weapon in the hands of workers against the despotic and oppressive capitalists," and, at the same time, as "a school where workers learn about how many rights they have been deprived of and undergo training on social, political and economic struggle" (Couland 1970, 157–59). This implied, as Couland notes, dislocating workers' struggles and organizational structures from "the corporatist solidarities with their patrons," which had represented the dominant form of workers' organization in the Ottoman guild system (Infra I.II), as well as from "the compulsory mediation and the patronage of local notables" who, in the same years, was earning an increasing importance in the shadow of the formalization of political sectarianism (Couland 1994, 293). Due to its organic relation with the CPSL, both the CUO and affiliated unions earned automatic adhesion to the Profintern, with whom the CUO's leadership managed to constantly maintain close relations. A fundamental accelerator for both the birth of the CUO and the integration of the CPSL into

the Communist International political networks was the first celebration of the **International Workers' Day on May 1, 1925**. The celebration was held at the Cinema Crystal in Beirut and organized by the GUTWL and the Peoples' Party, i.e. the legal alias of the embryonic CPSL, which had been founded in the month of October 1924 by Yazbak, Chemali and a number of other radical workers and intellectuals (Ismael and Ismael 1998, 7–8). The celebration revolved around the main questions and urgencies affecting Lebanese workers, which were addressed by the speakers within the framework of the notions of class struggle and capitalist domination. The solution was unanimously identified as being workers' organization, in the form of class-based labor unions, which were portrayed by all debaters as the sole genuine emancipatory weapon in workers' hands. The participants also issued a final document identifying a first list of common minimal goals to collectively strive for. These included the **eight-hour working day**, the **abolition of night labor**, the institution of a **legal minimum wage** bargained by workers, and the provision of **basic social security insurances** by employers (Couland 1970, 106–12; Ismael and Ismael 1998, 10). About 600 participants, consisting for the most part of workers, many of whom were non-unionized, took part in the celebration. This played a pivotal role in facilitating the organization of new workers' groups into unions, such as barbers and carpenters. Equally important, the success of the demonstration intensified the relations between the People's Party and the Communist parties of Palestine and France, as well as other radical leftist groups active in Lebanon such as the Armenian Spartacus League, whose merger with the People's Party soon after the May 1 would mark the definitive birth of the CPLS (Ismael and Ismael 1998, 13).

I.II – Workers before and beyond Communism: Other forms and trajectories of labor organization in early 1920s Lebanon

In the early years of the Mandate, class-based labor unions as theorized and constructed by Communist activists did not represent the sole new pattern for workers' organization.

From the late XVIIIth century until the Young Turk Revolution (1908), the main representatives and regulatory structure for Ottoman urban workers were the ***?aw?'if*** (sing. ***?aifa***, in Turkish ***esnaf***), or **guilds**. The latter consisted of paternalistic, craft-based organizations grouping together all the practitioners engaged in a specific trade (es. wavers, carpenters, porters, etc.) according to master-labourer internal hierarchies and power relations, charged with overarchingly regulating both the trade's exercise (es. apprenticeship, licensing, provision of raw materials) and the relations between the guild members and the imperial authorities (es. tax collection, advocacy) (Yildirim 2008). Thanks to their flexible structure, the *?aw?'if* also remained the basic organizational structure for the modern trades that emerged or were reconfigured after the integration of the Ottoman polity in the global capitalist circuits, such as dockers, modern factory workers, taxi and train/tramway drivers (Chalcraft 2004). When the *?aw?'if* system was formally dismissed after the Young Turk Revolution, the Ottoman law on associations (1909) provided to craftsmen and professionals (es. surgeons, lawyers, hoteliers, importers, artists, hairdressers, mechanics) a new normative framework to formally organize into representative bodies. The law kept preventing waged workers from organizing autonomously from their patrons and, after the Empire's dissolution, was fully adopted by the French mandate authorities in the territories of both Syria and Greater Lebanon. The first attempt to group this type of professional associations in a broader political structure dates back to **1921**, with the establishment in Beirut of the **General Workers' Party of Greater Lebanon.** The party was established by a group of local notables with the aim of uniting workers and patrons under the latter's paternalistic leadership (Eddé 2002;

Couland 1970, 83). The party boosted relations with twelve associations, including tailors, hairdressers, carpenters, musicians and teachers (Couland 1969, 63). However, according to the few sources available, its experience remained scarcely effective and short-lived. Two further examples of corporatist and paternalistic organizations during this early phase were the **Workers' Syndicate of Zahleh** and the **Drivers' Solidarity Association of the Lebanese Republic.** The Workers' Syndicate of Zahleh was established in 1923 upon the initiative of a local *retourné* emigrant, under the patronage of local notables. The syndicate grouped a variety of associations and workers' groups and was characterized by a certain mutualistic and paternalistic approach (Couland 1970, 91–96). For its part, the Drivers' Solidarity Association was established in 1926, against the backdrop of an outstanding wave of strikes which hit the Lebanese modern transport sector. These strikes were instigated in June by carters and the workers of the French-owned *Societé des Tramways et de l'Electricité de Beyrouth*, who went on strike to demand salary hikes. Following the success of their mobilization, in the month of November, the taxi drivers of Beirut and Jounieh also opted for organizing and taking to the streets to demand lower taxes. However, while the mobilization of carters and the workers of the tramway company was characterized by a certain class posture, the Drivers' Solidarity Association configured itself as a corporatist association lobbying to defend its own privileges, rather than to advocate for universal rights. Furthermore, the Association reproduced the dominant clientelist patterns of political relations, by routinely demanding the support of prominent local notables, such as Henri Fir'awn or Riad al-Sulh, in exchange for electoral support (Couland 1970, 180–83).

Between these corporatist experiments and the organizational efforts promoted by Communists, the first half of the 1920s also saw the emergence of class-based but reformist organizations, stemming from the autonomous proto-unionist reorganization of several existing professional associations, under the thrust of the structural changes that the Lebanese economy underwent during the mandate. A major example in this context is the **Union of Typography Workers of Beirut**. The union **was established in 1926** from the pre-existing Association of Typographers, born before the mandate within the framework of the Ottoman Law of 1909, and then legally recognized by the French authorities. The input for its creation came from a group of affiliated workers who became increasingly dissatisfied with the incapability of the Association's leadership to effectively advocate for the protection of typographers against the protracted periods of non-work triggered by the increasingly recurrent administrative suspensions of newspapers by the Mandate authorities (Couland 1970, 169–80). As Louis Massignon notes, from a legal point of view, the passage from association to union consisted of nothing but an operation of "political camouflage" by the members, who arbitrarily changed the denomination of the organization without communicating any formal change in the statute to the authorities (Massignon 1953, 36). On the other hand, the transformation marked a substantial dislocation for the former corporatist set-up, with waged workers taking the lead of their representation.

In this early phase, the union adopted a **reformist posture**, **privileging formal petitioning** vis-à-vis the authorities to more radical forms of mobilization (es. strikes) as a dominant advocating strategy. Their vision of union was in fact that of a representative intermediate body to perform its functions through the means of dialogue and institutional channels, according to the European liberal model (Couland 1970, 178–80). However, the limited gains achieved through this strategy paved the way for its progressive radicalization and evolution to become more of a Communist-led organization in the years to come.

I.III – Towards common action: The 1929 economic crisis and the partial legalization of class unionism

With the exception of the transport sector strikes of 1926, until the end of the 1920s the Lebanese organized labor scenario experienced little substantial upheavals. A major obstacle in the production of change was the harsh repression of Communists after the outbreak of the Great Syrian Revolt in 1925-1926, which led to the arrest of many prominent militants, and hence to an abrupt slowdown of their organizational work.

The situation began to change rapidly from 1929 (Couland 1969, 127–28). Due to the repercussions of the Great Depression, until the mid-1930s the economy of Greater Lebanon experienced a deep recession. Its social costs were further exacerbated by the global crisis of sericulture which, in 1937 Lebanon, still employed over 80% of manufacturing workers (Gates 1998, 28). The modern economic sectors the most hardly hit were the tobacco sector, additionally penalized by a succession of bad harvests and rapid mechanization, the industrial sector and that of the French-owned concessionary companies, which paid the price of the sharp devaluation of the Lebanese currency against the UK pound. Furthermore, due to the parallel decline of the traditional craft industries and subsistence agriculture, the problem of unemployment became endemic, and the purchasing power of salaries underwent a sharp downfall. This produced an unprecedented wave of mobilizations affecting all the economic sectors, including the unemployed.

Amid these social dynamics, following a general amnesty, from 1928 onwards Communist militants began to be released from prison. Although many of them were soon re-arrested, the active role they played in the organization of several strikes and workers' mobilizations (tobacco workers, typography workers, tram company workers, petroleum and port workers, to name a few of the most important segments) in the biennia 1929-1931 and 1934-1935 enabled them to enlarge their popular base and re-boost the organizational activity of the Committee for Union Organization (Couland 1970, 147–61). This expanding presence provided the enabling conditions to start engaging in coordinated campaigns to demand basic collective labor rights. From 1934 onwards, **structured petitions** addressed to both the political authorities and the public opinion in the form of specific lists of demands became a recurrent practice. Also, the recourse to strikes became increasingly recurrent. At the center of the collective demands stood the **struggle for the legal recognition of labor unions** and the application of the new legislations on child and night labor approved by the mandate authorities in 1934-1935. Another important front of collective mobilization was the one against the repression practiced by Mandate authorities against this wave of labor unrest. The most important initiative in this context was the creation, in **1930**, of the **Permanent Committee for the Defense of all Workers and Peasants Imprisoned for their Social Principles (PC)**. The PC was led by CUO militants and coordinated grassroots solidarity initiatives in support of workers and peasants imprisoned for their activism, including subscriptions to sustain the costs of trials. The early subscribers included the tobacco workers of Bikfayya, the radicalized Armenian workers of Karantina (Beirut) and a group of typographers from the Union of Typography Workers. The Union had joined the CUO in 1930, as a group of dissatisfied members headed by Muhi el-Din al-Kuza managed to take the lead and give the organization a more radical orientation. The first beneficiaries of the PC initiatives were instead the workers of the **General Union of Workers' Cooperation of Zahleh**, who suffered from a severe repression for protesting against the prohibition of the union by local authorities (Couland 1969, 167–69). The organization had

been established in 1928 by a group of local Communists and coalesced, after a short while, a variety of workers from the whole district. Other workers' groups which, in the same period, organized into unions under the CUO umbrella included carpenters and cooks, the workers of the concessionary companies, Tripoli shoemakers and construction workers. This expansion and growing activism began to bear fruit starting from 1936.

Following the growing popular pressure, the ascension of the Popular Front to the government of France, and the emergence of a more favorable domestic political context, most of the illegal unions which had mobilized in the previous years became progressively licensed (Couland 1970, 226-233). This was propaedeutic for the licensing in **1937** of the **Committee for Unions' Unity (CUU),** i.e., the new legal alias of the CUO which grouped all the formerly affiliated licensed unions within a federal framework. The first nucleus included the unions of carpenters, shoemakers, bakers, tailors, mechanics, and construction workers, with the union of typographers playing a leading role (Couland 1969, 66). On the other hand, the unions developed within the concessionary companies failed to obtain legal recognition.

It must be noted that, while representing de facto class-based labor unions, the legal form whereby these organizations obtained licensing was still that of professional associations. Nevertheless, their exit from illegality and the licensing of the CUU endowed the whole class trade union movement with a renewed strength and legitimacy, which will be capitalized upon in the next years first and foremost to obtain an organic legislation on labor. Equally important, the CUU remained organically linked to the Communist party which, in the same period, kept consolidating its presence in both Syria and Lebanon (Couland 1970, 231).

In 1939, the involvement of France in World War II and the coeval advent of the Vichy Regime triggered yet another wave of repression against class-based labor activism and Communist organizations (Couland 259-263). This phase lasted until 1941, as the arrival of De Gaulle's troops in the Levant re-established the constitutional life of the country. The reinstitution of civil and political liberties went hand-in-hand with a relatively sustained phase of industrial expansion, triggered by the import-substitution policies implemented by the Allied forces to answer the needs of the war economy. This coincided with the implementation of several labor legislative initiatives resonating with the CUU agenda. In 1941, for instance, the notion of minimum wage was introduced for the first time in the polity of Greater Lebanon. Also, a number of initiatives were undertaken to adjust salaries to the inflation rate (Couland 1970, 288-289). This endowed the CUU with a renewed strength to push forward its struggle for the full legal recognition of class trade unions and the implementation of an overarching labor law, which will be ultimately fully capitalized upon in the liminal triennium of the Independence process (1943-1946).

II – Workers in the "Merchant Republic": Independence, sectarianism, and the Cold War order

II.I – From victory to Trojan Horse: The Independence process and the enforcement of the Lebanese Labor Code (1946)

The triennium of the independence process (1943-1946) marked a period of particular strength for the Lebanese trade union movement. The first source of strength came from the structural stresses and changes impressed on the Lebanese labor structure by the war economy. Following the imposition of

import-substitution policies, the number of people employed in the industrial sector grew steadily. When the war ended, most of them remained unemployed, amid an exponential rise in the cost of living. This fueled a variety of strikes and mobilizations which, thanks to the CUU presence, revealed pivotal for the organization of new unions. The mobilizations were particularly intense in the textile sector and the concessionary companies, where they were characterized also by a marked anti-colonial undertone (Couland 1970, 296–319). The result of this post-war expansion culminated with the establishment, in **1945**, of the **Federation of Unions of Workers and Employees in Lebanon (FUWEL)**, i.e., the ultimate federal upgrade of the CUU which, especially after the appointment of its Secretary-General Mustafa al-Aris as Arab delegate in the newborn World Federation of Trade Unions, gained the popular and the political weight necessary to finally see its collective claims turning one by one into laws. In 1944, for instance, the law of 1939 on the adjustment of salaries to the inflation rate was expanded to cover all categories of workers. In the same vein, the following year, another law expanded the application of the existing Lebanese labor laws to the employees of foreign and concessionary companies. More importantly, in **1946**, an organic **labor law** recognizing, inter alia, the rights to strike and unionization, was finally enshrined. It should be noted that the achievement of these major victories was not an easy task for workers (Couland 1970, 333–57).

As Elizabeth Thompson notes, the expansion of French colonial welfare in the late WWII period was part of a broader control strategy aiming at securing its domination over Lebanon through greater integration of citizens in the colonial civil order (Thompson 2000, 163–69). These efforts notwithstanding, however, the elections of 1943 marked a fully-fledged victory of the Lebanese nationalist elites which, on November 8, unilaterally declared the independence of the Lebanese republic. The declaration was paralleled by the firm refusal of Lebanese political leaders to sign with France a bilateral agreement allowing France to maintain a tight directive control over the independent Lebanese polity. Faced with this double challenge, the French reaction was tremendous. Two days after the declaration of independence, the main promoters of the initiative were arrested, and Senegalese troops were deployed all over the country to repress protests against the coup. The leaders were released on November 23, as the combination of popular and international pressures pushed French authorities to formally recognize the independence of Lebanon. On the other hand, French troops did not fully evacuate until 1946, as a last round of confrontation in both Syria and Lebanon in late 1945 ultimately shifted the international balance of powers in favor of the French departure.

Despite the fact that Lebanese elites had historically refused to recognize workers' rights, the active participation of the labor movement in the struggle for the French evacuation provided the enabling conditions whereby, as long as French troops kept occupying the Lebanese soil, the nationalist elites in power ended up addressing all the main workers' collective demands, albeit reluctantly. However, as the perspective of a definitive French evacuation began to concretely reify, this self-interested and contradictory attitude began to emerge in all its strength. The litmus test for this step back was precisely that of the Labor Law.

Since the very draft of the law was submitted to Parliament in November 1945, a consistent portion of Lebanese political elites deployed significant efforts to obstruct tout-court or to revise in a corporatist direction the measures that the class trade union movement had relentlessly struggled for. One of the major sabotaging initiatives in this regard was the inclusion in the preparatory committee of the Law the sole **Labor Front**, i.e. a newborn federation grouping professional associations organically linked to

prominent urban notables, at the expense of FUWEL (Couland 1970, 357–68). The FUWEL responded to this political exclusion by submitting a variety of petitions demanding to incorporate in the Law a number of amendments resonating with the democratic and emancipatory spirit which, in the past two decades, had informed their quest for labor rights. To this end, it created an ad hoc commission which, in the month of January 1946, formally presented to Parliament its list of claims. The zenith of the political confrontation was reached in the summer of 1946.

On May 20, a general strike was held to protest the umpteenth postponement of the parliamentary discussion of the Law. Soon afterwards, two open-ended strikes were announced at the Régie and the public transport sector (Couland 1970, 366–68). The balance of powers ultimately shifted in the month of June, as the murder by the Lebanese security forces of the young workingwoman **Warda Boutros Ibrahim**, when suppressing a strike at the Régie plant in Chiyah, triggered an outstanding wave of protests all over the country (Abisaab 2010, 68–79). This gave Parliament the last push it needed to finally enact, on **September 23,** an amended version of the **Lebanese Labor Code** partially addressing FUWEL's demands**.** These included, most prominently, the recognition of the right to strike and unionization of workers autonomously from patrons, the eight-hour working day, the regulation of overtime, female, and child labor, the introduction of basic social security provisions in case of illness, maternity, dismissal, and end of service, and the formation of several agencies charged with regulating employer-employee relations. These important achievements notwithstanding, however, the final text fell short from the democratic recrafting that FUWEL had sought for (Donato 1952).

First, albeit the right to unionization was formally recognized, the licensing mechanisms enshrined by the Code gave State authorities free rein to deny or revoke the authorization to legally exercise the union activity to any ideologically-oriented organization engaged (even episodically) in any type of political activity or advocacy "exceeding its competencies." In a similar vein, albeit the right to strike was formally enshrined, its exercise was subjected to severe limitations, especially when used against the State and its institutions. Finally, **the Code excluded from its provisions peasants, domestic and daily workers, and public employees, and left the main bulk of bargaining power in the hands of employers**. As a result, the new law transformed a potentially emancipatory instrument into a major disciplinary tool in the hands of Lebanese sectarian political elites, which were now capable of retaining and armoring their paternalistic control over the legitimate intermediation between the citizens and the State and the distribution of social rights.

II.II – Workers in the "Merchant Republic": Cooptation, resistance and the Cold War order

When, by late 1947, the Labor Code definitively entered into force, the Lebanese organized labor scene underwent a substantial reconfiguration. The main trigger was the political use that the Lebanese post-colonial ruling class made of the Code's licensing provisions to both get rid of potentially transgressive political opponents and possibly turn trade unions into effective mechanisms of workers' hegemonic incorporation in the Lebanese post-colonial sectarian order. This strategy was implemented along two major trajectories. The first one was to constantly deny to FUWEL and, more broadly, to leftist unions and federations, the authorization to legally exercise the union activity. This denial was compounded by the over-licensing of scarcely representative, corporatist unions organically linked to the sectarian elites in power, created with the double purpose of containing the influence of leftist federations in the economic sectors where their presence was stronger, and compelling workers to politically socialize

within co-opted – and hence controlled – political structures.

The most important federation of this kind was the **League of Unions**. The League was created in 1948 under the patronage of the President of the Republic Bechara al-Khouri and other prominent notables, such as Saib Salam, and was eloquently led by the president's brother Khali. Furthermore, by taking advantage of his position as Minister of Interior, Saib Salam managed to build the League's early nucleus of affiliated unions by aggressively penetrating the FUWEL-affiliated organizations and fostering splits and defections. Also, the League immediately established close relations with the US Embassy which, within the broader framework of the emerging Cold War order, fully endorsed its anti-Communist policies and functions (Snyder 1961, 202–3; Buweiri 1986 v.II, 39-46)

Until the end of al-Khuri's term in 1952, the League remained the only legally-licensed Lebanese union federation. This played a crucial role to profoundly alter the political composition of Lebanese labor unionism at the expense of the left, as the political and economic benefits of the League acted as a powerful pull factor for many newly-established unions to join its ranks. In 1950, out of **forty licensed unions**, only four had a strong Communist presence, and more than a half were affiliated with the League. These included, for the most part, associations of self-employed and white collar workers, a variety of elite-sponsored façade unions created with an explicit anti-Communist function, and an important minority of independent, reformist blue-collar workers arose within the ex-concessionary companies (Régie, railway workers, maritime transportation) and the newborn oil sector (IPT, Socony-Vacuum). This latter group had ultimately opted for joining the League after the Ministry of Labor had denied them the authorization to form a federation on their own in 1951 (Van Leeuw 1994).

This early post-independence scenario underwent a partial recrafting under the presidential term of Camille Chamoun (1952-1958).

In 1951, an important wave of strikes hit the textile sector, as a response to the severe impact that the dismantling of the war economy apparatus had on the Lebanese industry. These strikes coincided with the increasing dissatisfaction of several unions affiliated with the League towards its pro-government attitude, at a time when unemployment and inflation were peaking. This was particularly the case of the blue-collar independent unions which had just joined the League and which, that same year, decided to defect. In the same year, Communist unions scored an important victory in the struggle for hotel and restaurant workers to obtain better salaries, despite their illegal status (Buweiri 1986 II, 74-76). This pushed President Camille Chamoun to partially revise the co-opting strategy adopted by his predecessor by providing licensing to new, independent, moderate-reformist organizations which could naturally attract dissatisfied workers at the expense of Communists. This change in strategy was fully validated by the US embassy, which likewise feared that persevering in the tight autocratic strategy of al-Khouri could ultimately lead to nothing but a further radicalization of workers.

The main federation which benefited from this new political climate was the **Federation of the United Unions of Lebanon.** The federation was licensed in **1952** and grouped together the largest independent licensed unions not affiliated with the League under the solid leadership of **Gabriel Khouri** and its Union of Bank Employees (Snyder 1961, 208–9; Buweiri 1986 II, 64-67). Gabriel Khouri had built his unionist vision upon the Church Social Doctrine, which made him both a sincere anti-Communist and a charismatic union leader advocating for the establishment of a solid workers'

leadership through which to mediate and defend workers' labor conditions. This made him a reliable point of reference for workers and authorities alike, and it therefore made the United Unions as the privileged State referee for the resolution of the most delicate labor disputes and the collective representation of Lebanese workers in official bargaining conferences. The federation became the privileged point of reference also of the US embassy which, especially after the adoption of the Eisenhower Doctrine in the aftermath of the Suez War (1956), granted it consistent economic aid and eased its accession to the US-backed International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (Gendzier 1996, 116–28). This put the United Unions in a position of force whereby, by 1956, out of a total of four licensed union federations, all the most representative blue- and white-collar unions were under its umbrella, leaving crafts and artisanal specializations to the others. The convergence of interests with the State also proved successful in containing the left.

In 1956, two major waves of strikes involved the workers of the Lebanese branch of the Iraqi Petroleum Company and the workers of the textile sector. Thanks to the privileged role assigned by official authorities to Gabriel Khouri in the resolution of the two disputes, the United Unions managed to win over the leadership of the federations of oil workers and textile workers at the expense of Nasserists and Communists respectively. The United Unions also managed to defeat Communists for the leadership of the DHP, the Régie, and the EDL. As such, by the end of the 1950s, Communist influence was re-circumscribed to the sole hard nucleus of illegal unions united within the equally illegal FUWEL, and the influence of Nasserists only to a marginal section of oil workers who remained outside of the United Unions' spectrum (Buweiri 144-147; Snyder 1961, 263–75). This guaranteed Khouri a position solid enough to start asking and obtaining important concessions from the Government. In 1955, for instance, Khouri's Union of Bank Employees obtained, after a strike, the first sectoral collective labor agreement (the so-called Statut Interbancaire) including, among various other benefits, the payment of the 14th month, a 36-hour labor week and a particularly advantageous set of social security provisions (Snyder 1961, 251–55). In early 1958, amid mounting inflation and the first specters of the political crisis ultimately culminating in the first civil war, the Federation presented to the Government a memorandum with a list of comprehensive labor and social demands including, among others, the **enactment of a social security law,** and the implementation of a **program for social housing** (Snyder 1961, 299–301).

The two other federations that earned licensing during the term of Camille Chamoun were the Federation of the Independent Unions, and the Federation of the Unions of Workers and Employees of the North. The **Federation of the Independent Unions** was licensed in 1952 and grouped a cluster of craft unions formerly affiliated with the League, which split under the leadership of Abd el-Majid Mihyu. The **Federation of the North** was established in **1954** under the patronage of the prominent Tripolitan *za'im* Rashid Karameh, and grouped a variety of predominantly craft unions of the Northern district.

On the eve of **May 1, 1958**, the United Unions, the League, and the Independent Unions obtained the ministerial authorization to unite in **the first union confederation of Lebanon, the General Confederation of Workers' and Employees of Lebanon (CGTL**). The confederal project was conceived yet again in an eminent anti-Leftist function, with the aim of enhancing the legitimization of systemic union bodies as the sole recognized workers' representatives (Slaibi 1999, 46). The leadership was unsurprisingly assigned to Gabriel Khouri, who became, henceforth, the leader of the most representative labor organization in the country. A few days later, the short Civil War of 1958

broke out, changing once again the rules of the game. Nevertheless, the groundwork to make the CGTL the most prominent Lebanese labor organization for the years to come had been laid.

III – Workers in the "long 1960s": Unification from above, transgression from belo*w*

III.I – Fouad al-Chehab and the attempts of reforming the Lebanese civil order

When General Fouad Chehab was elected as new President of the Republic in September 1958, Lebanon was crossing a delicate tightrope. From early May to late August, a "**short" civil war** had ravaged the country (Gendzier 1996). The war pitted the partisans of the outgoing president Camille Chamoun against a heterogeneous opposition front supported by "lower-class urban Muslims who felt that their own community, now constituting a majority of the Lebanese population, was being discriminated against and impoverished by the country's wealthy, predominantly Christian rulers" (Owen 1970, 28). Albeit the immediate trigger factor that sparked the conflict was related to the decision of Chamoun to unconstitutionally run for a second term, in fact, much of the powder keg which propelled the hostilities was rooted in the sharp socio-geographical and sectarian inequalities that the post-Independence transition to the so-called "Merchant Republic" economic model had ended up producing. The model stemmed from the exasperation of the extraverted and tertiarized economic orientation given to the polity of Greater Lebanon by the Mandate authorities, which aimed at consolidating the intermediary role of Beirut as a prominent regional node for international trade, finance and tourism. The means whereby it was implemented based on the adoption of *laissez-faire* economic policies included low taxes on capital, goods and custom duties, compounded by ad hoc currency and banking policies fostering monetary stability and the quick attraction of large amounts of foreign capitals. This was paralleled with the concentration of the main bulk of public investments in favor of the development of telecommunication, touristic and international transport facilities at the expenses of industry and agriculture, and by outsourcing to the private sector the main bulk of the provision of social services (Gates 1998). As Carolyn Gates points out, the choice of this economic orientation was strictly related to the apical position that the commercial-financial oligarchy, which emerged throughout the 30s and 40s, came to occupy in the political structure of independent Lebanon. A second major input came from the particularly favorable regional context, whereby the Gulf oil boom, the isolation of the port of Haifa, and the rise of Arab Nationalist regimes in neighboring republics created the enabling conditions for the convergence of an outstanding influx of capitals and goods towards Beirut (Gates 1998, 80–85). The result was a decade of rapid economic growth, whose fruits, however, remained unevenly distributed across classes, sects, and geographical areas. Those who paid the highest price were the predominantly Muslim rural regions of the Beqaa, the South and the North, which also suffered from significant educational and developmental gaps compared to Beirut and the predominantly Christian Mount Lebanon, where most of the investments and the collateral benefits of the Merchant Republic converged. Furthermore, as subsistence agriculture underwent a steady decline, the new economic system failed to produce a labor market heterogeneous and dynamic enough to decently absorb the army of rural migrants which every year migrated to the capital in search for better fortunes.

Against this backdrop, Fouad Chehab was well aware that no social and political pacification would have ever been achieved without the implementation of sustained developmental and redistributive economic policies. Within this spirit, a number of ambitious programs for rural development were

launched, accompanied by a variety of infrastructural works bringing basic facilities (streets, electricity, water) and health and educational structures to deprived peripheral areas. These initiatives occurred in parallel with the enhancement of the public higher education system and major reforms in the public administration, which played a pivotal role in boosting the social mobility and the integration in the state apparatus of a comparatively consistent portion of the national Muslim population (Traboulsi 2012, 140–41).

It should be noted that to retain full control over state and society and build a loyal power base, Fouad Chehab made an extensive use of the intelligence services since day one of his presidency (the so-called Deuxiéme Bureau) to penetrate the structures of civil society, manipulate elections, and control the political opposition. This was coupled by the creation of a veritable parallel bureaucratic-administrative apparatus under the direct presidential control, to circumvent the interference of the technocrats organically linked to the opposition *zuama*. Finally, to further tighten his disciplinary control over Parliament and the streets alike, the president integrated in the post-war governing apparatus the major popular opposition forces that emerged from the war, most notably the Kataeb Party and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), which, thus, established presence in Lebanese parliamentary politics (Traboulsi 2012, 138–40).

Chehab's attempt to readjust the Lebanese system culminated in **1964** with the rationalization and reform of the Lebanese banking and currency system and, more importantly, the enactment of the **Social Security Law**, which finally provided the country with an organic set of provisions and institutions aiming at guaranteeing to the whole spectrum of waged workers health insurances, retirement pensions, and a comprehensive set of allowances. From a labor viewpoint, the president enacted also a **Law on Collective Labor Agreements** which, reflecting once again the double nature of his regime, while finally systematizing the relations between workers, entrepreneurs and the state, also put labor contention under strict state control (Traboulsi 2012, 139).

The Lebanese labor movement did not remain immune to these profound changes. The major development of this period was the configuration of a **favorable window of opportunity for leftist unions to temporarily catch up with the United Unions' hegemony**. The first enabling condition relied on the renewed consensus that the expanding plethora of Lebanese leftist groups was experiencing following the participation in the war. These groups included the LCP, a variety of Arab Nationalist organizations (most notably Nasserists, Baathists, and the Movement of Arab Nationalists), and, above all, Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), whose integration in the Chehabist governing apparatus guaranteed to the leftist forces a wider margin of political maneuvering.

The first fruits of this new political climate already became apparent in 1960 when, in light of a massive wave of mobilizations shaking the cement industry and the transport, water, electricity, and communications sectors, the ex-communist and PSP member Assad ?Akl succeeded first in taking over the leadership of the Beirut Electricity and Transport Union, and later in fostering its split from the United Unions. A similar scenario occurred in the unions of railway workers, the Régie, the Port of Beirut, and the IPC, which went to form the PSP-led **Federation of the Autonomous Offices and Public Enterprises**. **Eventually, about 4,500 workers left the United Unions from a total of around 11,000** (Buweiri 1986 II, 188-191 and 202-203). Equally important, in 1962, thanks to the appointment of Jumblatt as Minister of Interior, a new law on political parties was exploited to legalize the **Labor**

Liberation Front (LLF), i.e. a party alias meant to work as legal avatar for the informal coalition of leftist unions consisting of the FUWEL, the Federation of Autonomous Offices, and the newborn **Federation of the Union of the Workers and Employees of the South** (Federation of the South), a Saida-based interprofessional organization of Nasserist orientation led by Maarouf Saad (Buweiri 1986 II, 222-223). In the face of these rapid developments, Khouri and Chehab did not lay still. Soon after the aforementioned defections, a number of initiatives were undertaken in cooperation with the Deuxiéme Bureau to intervene in the elections of several union bodies and successfully prevent their capture by the left. The two also managed to foster the prompt counter-split of the white-collar sections in several unions to autonomous offices which, once again, subscribed to the United Unions (Buweiri 1986 II, 214-215). Another major blow to the Federation of the Autonomous Offices was the birth, in **1964**, of the **Federation of the Unions of Petroleum Workers**. The federation grouped all the nine licensed unions of the petroleum sector and was born as a result of another major wave of mobilizations that erupted in the spring of that same year (Buweiri 1986 II, 234-235). The federation was led by Georges Sakr, the prominent representative of a new generation of reformist union leaders who, in the same period, had started to earn the trust of workers, the Chehabist apparatus, and the US embassy alike. Another prominent leader was Antoine Bechara, secretary of the Union of Port Employees, who, between 1964 and 1966, managed to foster the split of five further unions from the Federation of Autonomous Offices and obtain licensing for a new, reformist mirror federation, **the Federation of Autonomous Offices and Public and Private Enterprises** (Kardahji 2015, 173). This played an important role in temporarily halting the expanding leftist influence. However, the upcoming socio-economic and political crisis will soon turn the table once again.

III.II – Diving into social crisis: The unification of the labor union movement and its strengths and contradictions

The aforementioned mobilizations and developments notwithstanding, the years of Fouad Chehab's presidency were a period of relative labor and social peace. This peace was structurally underpinned by the low levels of inflation, and the generalized economic growth that the country had been experiencing, whose fruits, thanks to the reforms, began to finally reach regions and social strata that had previously been excluded. Furthermore, the constant expansion of the tertiary sector triggered the formation of a variety of new white-collar unions against a stagnating growth of the blue-collar ones, which guaranteed a constant influx of new affiliates to the United Unions, and hence the perpetration of its dominant position. This position of power was testified by the unchallenged **confirmation of Khouri as the head of the CGTL in the internal elections of 1964**, despite the statute of the confederation envisaging a rotation of leadership among the affiliated federations.

This scenario began to drastically change starting from the late 1960s. In 1966, the major Lebanese credit institute, Intra Bank, cracked., leading to a sharp acceleration of the direct penetration of foreign capitals in the key sectors of the Lebanese economy. This process intertwined with the devastating collateral effects of Chihab's programs of rural development which, despite the original good intentions, ended up spurring the rise of monopolistic agribusiness all over peripheral Lebanon, and hence further expediting the ongoing process of disaggregation of the rural world. Last but not least, against the backdrop of mounting inflation, the Lebanese formal labor market reached saturation, failing to provide sufficient and adequate jobs to both the army of landless peasants produced by the rural crisis, and the young graduates of popular origin produced by the educational boom (Nasr 1978). The impact of the

socio-economic crisis was further exacerbated by the progressive recapturing of political power by the anti-Chehabist opposition, which definitively closed the redistributive phase inaugurated by Fouad Chehab, and subordinated once again Lebanese economic policies to the desiderata of the commercial/financial oligarchy controlling the national economy (Traboulsi 2012, 144–45). This triggered the explosion of the broadest and most long standing wave of labor conflict ever experienced in the history of independent Lebanon, which transversally hit all the economic sectors and productive activities. Equally important, the increasingly common triggers and pressures paved the way for the progressive coalescing of labor struggles around a minimal set of common demands, and, from there, for the unification of the entire trade union movement within the CGTL. In particular, the two main burdens which came to affect the entirety of Lebanese waged workers were the question of the **adjustment of salaries to the steady rise in the cost of living,** and the relentless obstructionism practiced by Lebanese business circles against the executive enforcement of the Social Security Law, through a variety of sabotaging initiatives. These latter included, most notably, **the organized boycott of the payment of the due fees to the National Social Security Found (NSSF)**, the systematic enforcement of **mass dismissals** so as not to pay workers their due indemnities, and a variety of lobbying initiatives (Traboulsi 2012, 146).

Against this backdrop, the idea of unifying the trade union movement within a single confederation began to fit, from late **1967**, within the framework of the **Supreme Council of Labor Unions**. The Council was established in spring as an informal coordination platform reuniting together all the nine licensed union federations to elaborate a common agenda of demands in response to the worsening economic situation (Buweiri 1986 II, 298-299). These included also the three leftist federations, which, in 1966, thanks to the appointment of the Joumblatist Jamil Lahoud as Minister of Labor, had finally managed to obtain licensing. The proposal of the unification was initially launched by Gabriel Khouri, who saw in the project both a powerful mean to better protect workers' rights, and a strategic maneuver to maintain his hegemonic position against the rise of the left and the new generation of reformist leaders embodied by Sakr and Bechara. The unification was completed after a long bargaining on **April 22, 1970**, as all the licensed union federations **were formally admitted as full members of the CGTL**. The bargaining was met with the firm opposition of the old guard of corporatist/right-wing federations to admit leftist unions as members. What triggered their change in attitude was the convergence, in 1969, of the left and the new reformist current around a project of reorganization of the Lebanese trade union structure along industrial lines which, if approved, would have shifted the balance of power in their favor, as they constitute the base of the corporatist federation, consisting for the most part of craft associations or scarcely representative white or blue-collar associations (Buweiri 1986 II, 351-368).

The unification of the Lebanese trade union movement undoubtedly played a prominent role in coordinating and coalescing blue- and white-collar workers around a common agenda demanding first and foremost the **adjustment of wages to the cost of living** and the **application of the Social Security Law**. Also, the inclusion of the left enabled the CGTL to incorporate a number of struggles which had so far remained on the margins of the official trade union agenda, such as the **right to housing**, the **inclusion of peasants in the NSSF**, and the **abolition of Article 50 of the Labor Law** enabling arbitrary dismissals. On the other hand, however, the numerical predominance of right-wing federations quickly ignited a political short-circuit whereby, while the threat of general strikes allowed the CGTL to constantly bargain with the state, this option was no longer available after the achievement

of the first, meagre economic gains, leaving all the questions related to labor rights unaddressed (Traboulsi 2012, 166–67). The predominance of right-wing federations was guaranteed by the adoption of a “one union, one vote” internal representative rationale, which tilted the internal balance of powers in favor of conservative forces despite the greater representativeness of the leftist and reformist ones. This soon triggered a profound crisis of legitimacy for the CGTL in the eyes of the waged workers’ groups the most severely affected by the crisis. On the eve of the Civil War, this crisis took labor conflict straight to the streets and pitted it against the CGTL itself.

اضراب عمالي وطالبي شامل اليوم
يشل حركة النقل البحري والبري
والمصارف والافران ومصالح المياه والكهرباء

ينفذ اليوم نحو ١٥٠ الف عامل ومستخدم في لبنان اضرابا شاملا تنفيذا لقرار الاتحاد العمالي العام واحتجاجا على المعاملة التي لقيها عمال معامل غندور « وحدادا على ارواح الشهداء » .

ويشمل الاضراب مبدئيا كل القطاعات الاقتصادية باعتبار ان النقابات المنضمة (نحو ١٢٦ نقابة) الى الاتحادات التي يتكون منها الاتحاد العمالي العام (١٢ اتحادا) تشمل معظم النشاطات الاقتصادية في البلاد .

نداء الاتحاد العمالي

وكانت فشلت المحاولات التي بذلتها وزارة العمل وجمعية الصناعيين مع الاتحاد العمالي العام للعدول عن الاضراب ، الا انه اصر على تنفيذه ووجه الى جميع عمال لبنان النداء الآتي :

« في الجلسة الاستثنائية التي عقدها الاتحاد العمالي العام صبيحة يوم الاحد ١٢ تشرين الثاني ١٩٧٢ ، على اثر الاحداث الدامية والمؤلمة التي وقعت في معامل غندور وذهب ضحيتها اخوان لنا ابرياء ، وبعد عرض هذه الواقعة المفجعة من مختلف نواحيها قرر الاتحاد العمالي العام بالاجماع اعلان الاضراب الشامل السلمي لمدة ٢٤ ساعة اعتبارا من الدقيقة الاولى من صباح يوم الثلثاء ١٤ تشرين الثاني ١٩٧٢ استنكارا لهذه الفاجعة وحدادا على ارواح الشهداء .

— التتمة في الصفحة ١١ —

An-Nahar newspaper on the November 13, 1972, general strike in Lebanon. Image source: https://thepublicsource.org/power-withholding-labor-general-strike-cultu...

III.III – Resisting the social crisis: Labor conflict outside of the unions

Along with the variety of waged urban workers represented by the CGTL, the socio-economic crisis of the late 1960s triggered the protracted, contentious mass activation of a variety of workers’ groups struggling and organizing themselves **outside of a formal unionist framework**. One of the most heated fronts was that of **peasants**. The first major movement developed between **1964 and 1965** among the **apple growers of Mount Lebanon** who were the first to experience the consequences of the early transition to monopolistic agribusiness. The mobilization was ignited by a crisis in the apple exports, which was exploited by the cartel of monopolists controlling the apple marketing and the cultivation and storage facilities to further push purchase prices downwards to barely sustainable levels. In 1965, their mobilization earned the active support of the emerging coalition of leftist forces composed of Communists, Arab Nationalists and the PSP. It reached its zenith in the month of September, as a

solidarity demonstration organized in Btekhnay (Aley) managed to gather about ten thousand participants. This pushed the mobilization straight to the core of the national political debate, setting the stage for the right-left division wherein the Lebanese political spectrum would radicalize and polarize (Petran 1987, 82–83; Traboulsi 2012, 146–47).

The bulk of the agricultural mobilizations exploded from 1969 onwards, as the effects of the rural crisis and the rise of monopolistic agribusiness reached the rest of peripheral Lebanon. In the North, the most important mobilization was the rebellion of the **sharecroppers of Akkar against the semi-feudal labor conditions** imposed by absentee landlords and the protracted **waves of forced evictions** to which they were subjected as the lands began to be massively sold to agricultural entrepreneurs. By the end of 1970, the rebellion took the shape of a veritable armed insurrection, supported by the Lebanese branch of the Syrian Baath, which since day one had represented the main political ally of sharecroppers (Petran 1987, 132–34). In the **South**, the core of dissent was represented by the thousands of **tobacco planters** working under the Régie monopoly which, over the years, had become a prominent clientelist base for local *zuama*. The main demand of planters was the setting of better purchase prices, a fairer distribution of the cultivation licenses among peasants, the full nationalization of the Régie, the inclusion of peasants in the NSSF and the recognition of the right to unionize. Last but not least, in the **Beqaa**, another powerful movement emerged against the speculative policies pursued by the informal monopolies managing cultivation facilities and the rent policies imposed by absentee landlords. Equally important, and due to their organic connection with Communist, starting from the early 1970s the two movements engaged in an important constituent process which, in **1973** and **1975**, led to the creation of the **General Union of Tobacco Growers and the Union of Beqaa Peasants and Farmers** respectively. Also, several congresses of peasants and farmers were held, with the aim of coordinating efforts around a common political and demand agenda (Traboulsi 2012, 165–66; Petran 1987, 135–38).

Together with peasants, another important force mobilizing outside of a formal unionist framework was the **public sector**. A first major mobilization occurred throughout the summer of **1966** when, after a mass strike, **public employees** managed to earn a salary adjustment of 6.8% and an increase in the minimum wage (Traboulsi 2012, 146). The most important mobilization was the wave of open-ended strikes staged by 16,000 **public school teachers throughout the winter of 1972-1973**. The first round occurred in the month of November 1972 to demand higher salaries and the right to unionize. The open-ended strike was resumed in January 1973, as the government failed to address their demands. The Minister of Education responded to this second wave of strikes with the mass layoff of more than 300 teachers accused of leading the protests. This sparked a wave of outrage and solidarity demonstrations all over the country, at a time when student and labor dissent was peaking. Nevertheless, teachers' demands remained unaddressed (Traboulsi 2012, 171).

The most radical urban labor vanguard in this period was the **new class of young rank-and-file produced by the industrial boom** that the country experienced from the end of the 1960s onwards. At the core of their grievances were the precarious and hyper-exploitative labor conditions to which they were subjected, and to which both the existing industrial labor unions and the CGTL failed to provide adequate responses. Their process of transgressive activation was ignited by the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL) which, from 1970, engaged a process of militant organization of rank-and-file in the form of **Workers' Committees**, i.e. informal, semi-clandestine, grassroots

organizational platforms aiming at improving workers' conditions through the means of direct action (Tufaro 2020). Their field of struggle encompassed all aspects of working-class life, from the abolition of Article 50 and the full right to unionization, salary rises and the respect of social security rights, to the right to housing. Their emergence on the national political arena took place on November 11, 1972, as a wildcat strike organized at the Ghandour chocolate and sweet factory was brutally repressed by the army, leaving two dead and dozens of injured. The popular reaction to the massacre – as it was labelled by the press – was massive. For the following days, mass mobilizations demanding justice and political accountability unfolded all over the country. Equally important, the popular pressure pushed the CGTL to finally call for a general strike, which saw a massive adhesion at the national level. This unprecedented popular and political pressure was, however, not sufficient for Ghandour workers to have any of their demands addressed (Traboulsi 2012, 166–67). On the other hand, the repressive state attitude ultimately served to further radicalize the rank-and-file and consolidate the Committees' base. This radicalization was further underpinned by the hesitant attitude that the CGTL maintained against the deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the protracted iron fist that the state continued to wield against workers. Just ten days before the mass layoff of school teachers in January 1973, a protest of the tobacco planters at the Régie plant of Kfar Remman, near Nabatiyyeh, was violently repressed. Furthermore, most of the collective labor issues at stake were still unaddressed, and the salary increases achieved remained widely insufficient to cope with the inflation rate.

The crisis of legitimacy of the CGTL reached its peak in the first months of 1974. The first major challenge came from the Workers' Committees, which, on February 6, responded to the umpteenth last-minute postponement of a general strike with a mass wildcat strike which paralyzed the industrial district of Mkalles for two days. On April 2, 1974, a general strike was declared unilaterally by the leftist federations, preceded by a major demonstration against inflation. This paved the way for the achievement of the first major victories, starting with the partial reform of Article 50 and the integration of peasants in the NSSF (Tufaro 2020, 31–32). However, the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1975 led to a drastic change in pace.

IV – The labor movement during the Lebanese Civil War: From collective bargaining to civil resistance

IV.I – The Civil War and the reconfiguration of the Lebanese socio-economic and political fabric

On **April 13, 1975**, the so-called "Ain el-Remmaneh incident" marked the formal beginning of the **Lebanese Civil War**. Before the escalation which followed the incident, yet another brutal repression of a **fishermen's strike** by the Lebanese army two months earlier in Saida pushed the fishermen's struggle straight to the forefront of the political confrontation. The fishermen were primarily voicing their opposition to the project of granting the monopoly over fishing in territorial waters to Protein, a private company whose headquarters was located at a Gulf capital and whose majority shareholder was ex-President Camille Chamoun. The project blatantly contradicted a resolution adopted in 1972 to create a mechanism for fishing cooperatives to ensure employment and decent labor to fishermen and modernize the sector (Petran 1987, 163). The strike was staged on February 26 and was accompanied by a massive demonstration in Saida, in which all the main national leftist and progressive forces took part. Following the army's intervention, about twelve people suffered gunshot wounds, including the secretary of the Federation of the South and leader of the Popular Nasserist

Organization Maarouf Saad, who died from his wounds. This ignited an escalation of tensions between fishermen, the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian resistance on the one hand, and, on the other, the army and the Kataeb party, which foreshadowed “many of the internal ingredients that were to ignite the Civil War” (Petran 1987, 167).

The Lebanese Civil War led to a profound change in the Lebanese socio-economic and political fabric. The first sector to be affected was the expanding industrial one, as the Beirut suburbs, where most of the industries were concentrated, became prominent battlegrounds in the first phase of the conflict. A similar process affected the peasant movement, which likewise got disrupted by the Israeli occupation of the South of Lebanon and the fighting and military occupation in rural areas.

Starting from the late 1970s, the Lebanese Civil War underwent a steady sectarianization, in parallel with the progressive cantonization of the national territory into a variety of homogenized sectarian enclaves under the control of militias, which progressively took over the direct management of administrative services, infrastructure, and key economic activities and resources in their respective areas of influence. This laid the groundwork for the emergence of a veritable militia counter-economy combining the accumulation of primitive capital through the means of illicit activities (smuggling, racketeering, counter-taxation) with its reinvestment into profitable formal businesses (Picard 2005).

The widespread destruction and the emerging militia economy notwithstanding, until the early 1980s the Lebanese economy did not experience severe economic shocks. As stressed by Salim Nasr, this apparent paradox was enabled by five basic factors. The first two were the large amount of state and private reserves accumulated over the years, which provided an important cushion to the economic losses caused by the fighting. Second, the state still managed to collect revenues, and hence to keep the national accounts safe, pay wages, and provide basic services. Another fundamental factor was the consistent inflow of “political money” delivered to the militias by international powers, which, in one way or another, managed to keep the national banking system healthy. The most relevant source of such funds was undoubtedly the Palestinian resistance, which also managed a variety of institutions (schools, newspapers, hospitals, administrative agencies, etc.) estimated to contribute altogether to about 15% of the Lebanese GDP. The last factor was the substantial contribution by the remittances of the expanding Lebanese diaspora in the Gulf, following the oil boom (Nasr 1990a).

These favorable conditions began to dissipate one after another from 1982 onwards. The two major factors which contributed to the economic collapse consisted in particular in the departure of the PLO from Lebanon and the definitive collapse of state institutions, which left the field open for militias to seize the bulk of economic and administrative resources. This resulted in a steady increase of the public debt, which, from 1982 to 1987, rose from quasi zero to 147 billion LBP. The increase of state deficit coincided with a sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound and an equally dramatic inflation spiral. The peak was reached in 1987, when the cost of living increased by more than 400% (Nasr 1990a, 7). The evolution of the war economy also had a significant impact on Lebanese class structure. The most important consequence was the emergence of new middle and upper classes strictly related to the war economy. The middle classes included the array of white-collars stemming from the militia administrative apparatuses and service agencies, and the plethora of small and medium intermediaries and middlemen which emerged in the wake of the new militiamen’s commercial and logistic circuits. Another section consisted of the fighting cadres, estimated at about 30,000, which, together with often

receiving a wage, could also benefit from a variety of collateral socio-economic advantages. At the bottom of the social ladder stood the thousands of displaced as a result of the hostilities and the compulsory “reterritorialization of the identities” which accompanied the affirmation of the militia order, who were permanently uprooted from their places of origin (Nasr 1990b). The reterritorialization deeply impacted the articulation of the country’s sectarian geography, disrupting a variety of mixed urban conglomerates which, on the eve of the war, had represented an important incubator of cross-sectarian contention.

IV.II – The CGTL and the Lebanese Civil War: From collective bargaining to civil resistance

During the war period, and following the drastic downsizing of the grassroots alternative organizations which had challenged its authority on the eve of the hostilities, the CGTL progressively became the undisputed leading force and the main catalyst of the Lebanese labor movement. The two major factors that triggered the downsizing consisted of the partial destruction and jeopardization of the industrial space, and the transformation of working-class neighborhoods and rural areas into prominent areas of armed confrontation, which severely compromised the material conditions enabling the reproduction of the mobilization capabilities of the pre-war period. The second major reason consisted in the progressive decline of the political weight of leftist organizations in favor of sectarian ones, most notably of the new left that emerged in the early 1970s which, by the second half of the 1980s, virtually disappeared.

During the “war in times of abundance,” the bulk of the activities of both the CGTL and remnants of the peasant and workers’ committees revolved for the most part around the mitigation of the economic consequences of the hostilities which, albeit comparatively contained with respect to the second phase of the conflict, were affecting the average living conditions of the Lebanese workers. The methodologies of struggle, the demand agendas and the relations between the two poles developed to a greater extent in close continuity with the pre-war period, including the tentative attitude of the CGTL towards the use of general strikes. This did not prevent the CGTL from obtaining, until 1982, successive increases in the minimum wage directly proportional to the rise in the inflation. The CGTL also managed to achieve important sectoral milestones, such as the extension of social security protection to taxi drivers. Last but not least, periodical corporate and sectoral strikes and single mobilizations continued to be held concurrently with the emergence of specific incumbencies.

Another important element of continuity with the pre-war period were the attempts of co-optation of the administrative bodies of the CGTL by the political forces in power. A major confrontation in this sense occurred during the CGTL elections of 1983.

By the time of the elections, Amin Gemayel had just succeeded his brother Bachir as both President of the Republic and of the Kataeb Party, following Bachir’s assassination only three weeks after his appointment as president-elect. During the pre-electoral phase, Gemayel exercised heavy pressures in favor of his party comrade Joseph Nasr to be elected as CGTL’s Secretary-General, within the framework of Kataeb’s broader process of consolidating its authority over state apparatuses (Traboulsi 2012, 220–22). This severely alarmed the leftist unions, whose political peers were fully engaged in the armed resistance against the Israeli invasion. The outbreak of a government crisis on the eve of the elections, however, changed the priorities of the President, which provided favorable conditions for the

free election of the independent and transversally appreciated candidate Antoine Bechara (Slaibi 1999, 64-65).

The election of Antoine Bechara as president of the CGTL coincided with the definitive disaggregation of the Lebanese state apparatus in favor of the consolidation of the militia order. This ended any possibility of political intervention for the General Confederation to effectively advocate for the improvement of workers' conditions via the orthodox channels, at a time when the economic crisis started peaking. This triggered a progressive shift in the main focus of its discourse from the “particular effects” (inflation, rising unemployment, general impoverishment, etc.) to the “general cause,” i.e., the war and its political management. As a result, starting from 1986, the end of hostilities became the CGTL’s first demand, setting the stage for the General Confederation to become the leading force of the movement of civil resistance to the conflict (Slaibi 1994).

The first collective action in this sense was carried out on July 3, 1986, when, after having declared July the “month of the popular struggle for the salvation of Lebanon from the war,” the first national general strike in a long chain of such mobilizations took place. This paved the way for the organization, on October 15, 1987, of the first historical march on the demarcation line which had been dividing Beirut into two autonomous and conflicting enclaves for years (the so-called “Green Line”). Finally, on 5 November, an open general strike was announced, paralyzing the country for five days. In both cases, the main demand was the **end of the war and the formation of a special committee including labor unions and the national social partner organizations to find a concrete solution to the hyperinflation and elaborate adequate social security measures** (Slaibi 1994). The growing pressure by militias and the resumption of large-scale hostilities decreased the frequency and the level of participation in subsequent demonstrations, which continued to be staged until, on 22 October 1989, a peace agreement (the so-called Taif Agreement) was finally signed.

Albeit the Agreement was imposed on Lebanese citizens as a fait accompli, its signature was welcomed with a certain enthusiasm by the CGTL. What gave the CGTL high expectations was, in particular, the inclusion in the document of the principles of equitable and balanced development among the mainstays of unity and stability, to be pursued through the means of an ad hoc commission inclusive of social partners charged with designing the country’s socio-economic policies. This consistently resounded with the demands proclaimed by the CGTL during the demonstrations, which opted therefore for endorsing the initiative. The enthusiasm, however, was meant to be short-lived.

V – The Labor movement during the Pax Syriana: From conflict to cooptation

V.I – Reorganizing the Lebanese civil order: The Pax Syriana and the making of post-war sectarian neoliberal Lebanon

Soon after the adoption of the Taif Agreement, a new round of overlapping fighting between the troops loyal to the General Michel Aoun and the Syrian army, and between Aoun and the Lebanese Forces, protracted the hostilities for another year. When confrontations came to an end upon Aoun’s defeat, Syrian authorities assumed the task of restoring civil peace, exploiting the role of external supervisor of the transition assigned to them by the Agreement to reorganize the institutional life of the country so as to maintain the hegemonic position acquired by force during the conflict. The reorganization passed

first and foremost through the selective implementation of Taif's provisions, which was strategized so as to exacerbate the structural deficiencies of the new power-sharing arrangement and keep Syria as the ultimate arbiter of the process of decision-making (Salloukh 2015). Such exasperation included also the politicization or the disbanding from the political agenda of the measures meant to enhance state institutions and sovereignty, promote reconciliation, and overcome sectarianism, starting from the three-year deadline set by the Agreement for the Syrian mandate. Equally important, the dismantlement of the militias was exploited as an entry point to penetrate the Lebanese security apparatuses and, from there, the structures of civil society, the media and the judiciary. As such, elections, civil and media freedoms, the rule of law, were substantially manipulated to favor Syrian allies and penalize opponents, while maintaining a certain plural functionality. Last but not least, the Syrian political agenda foreshadowed a division of powers among the ruling elites, giving Syria and its allies control over domestic and foreign politics, and granting the "creative Lebanese merchants" control over economic politics.

The great architect of the remaking of the Lebanese post-war economy was the Sunni billionaire Rafiq Hariri. Rafiq Hariri was first appointed as Prime Minister after the 1992 elections and remained the undisputed protagonist of the Lebanese political and economic life until his assassination in 2005. Notwithstanding his close political and business ties with Saudi Arabia, he had managed to earn Syrian backing thanks to the good economic relations he built with the Damascene regime in the last phase of the conflict. His economic vision of post-war Lebanon consisted to a greater extent of a neoliberal upgrading of the Merchant Republic model, aiming at re-establishing the central role of Beirut as a prominent regional financial center by recreating the enabling environment for the rapid attraction of foreign private investments. Within this broader vision, he pivoted the country's reconstruction policies around the physical recovery of infrastructural facilities and, above all, the promotion of high-end redevelopment megaprojects for strategic war-damaged urban areas though public-private partnerships. These policies were compounded by the heavy deregulation of the real estate sector and the implementation of mechanisms of currency stability based on the massive emission of treasury bills and, later, Eurobonds at very high interest rates. On the other hand, expenditure for the recovery of social infrastructure and the development of productive activities remained marginal. The two institutions assuming the management of this double operation were the central bank and the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), which was inflated by technocrats loyal to Hariri and endowed with an extraordinary decisional autonomy at the expense of social partners and municipalities. This played a pivotal role to channel procurements and building licenses in favor of politically connected contractors, including Hariri himself, and have the state bear the cost of business risks and contractors' speculations. Hariri's control of BDL and CDR was part of a broader process of distributing state institutions among ruling elites, whereby Hariri's control over key economic institutions was counterbalanced by the capturing of service ministries and public agencies by ex-warlords who, in a similar vein, exploited them as instruments of political patronage. As a consequence, while public expenditure rose exponentially, funds were for the most part directed towards the clientelist hiring of new personnel, by channeling funds for individual profit or along the lines of patronage logic. Equally important, this distribution further increased the social costs of neoliberal reconstruction and left unaddressed the question of the displaced.

Hariri's self-serving neoliberal policies were consolidated in the late 1990s, as the combination between the end of the reconstruction boom and the peaking of public debt triggered a phase of

economic recession. This paved the way for the implementation of a wave of privatization and austerity initiatives (es. introduction of VAT, decrease of public expenditure) to reduce state deficit, compounded by a further deregulation of custom duty and direct taxes to re-boost the rentier economy. Those who benefitted from these policies were once again domestic banks. The result was the consolidation of a dominant pattern of economic activity "pitting rent against the rest," within the broader framework of ever-tighter political liberties and a "shrinking civil space."

V.II – Resisting neoliberal reconstruction: The CGTL in the post-war period

Thanks to the leading role it played in the civil resistance to the conflict, the CGTL came out of the Civil War with robust popular support. Furthermore, due to the decline in the political power of most of the pre-war ruling class, the CGTL was able to obtain an unprecedented degree of political independence. This eased the redefinition of its political agenda and practices according to more radical terms, to become the most vocal opponent of Rafiq Hariri's neoliberal policies. A pivotal role in this process was played by the election, in May 1993, of the leader of the Federation of United Unions Elias Abu Rizk as its new Secretary-General.

The election of Abu Rizk took place amid a tense political climate. On **May 6, 1992**, the CGTL had organized a massive general strike to protest against the failure of Omar Karameh's government to prevent and address the new inflationary spiral which had caught the country by storm since the beginning of the year. The mobilization resulted in a stunning success, forcing Karameh to resign. This unexpected proof of force did not go unnoticed in the eyes of the emerging post-war ruling class, which sought to softly neutralize the transgressive power of the CGTL by trying to downsize the political weight of leftist federations. The first attempt in this sense occurred in the winter of 1992, through the launch of the project of a state-sponsored structural restoration of the CGTL according to a "one profession one union" principle (ILO 1994). The attempt was shipwrecked by the CGTL, which managed to mount an effective campaign and mediate directly with the Syrian authorities to make sure that the project was abandoned. This pushed the Minister of Labor Abdallah al-Amin to revise his pressure strategies and try to exploit the upcoming CGTL internal elections. In particular, in order to subvert the alliance between Bechara and the left, he paired the public endorsement of Abu Rizk with a series of underground talks with Bechara, offering him the guarantee of a re-election in exchange for a change in alliances. The plan of the minister was sabotaged by the last-minute endorsement of Abu Rizk by the leftist federations, which secured Abu Rizk's election. Furthermore, the 1993 elections further increased the political weight of leftist federations which, for the first time in the history of the CGTL, came to occupy most of the administrative positions (Slaibi 1999, 65-69).

The main pillars around which the CGTL pivoted its post-1993 political agenda were the defense of the acquired workers' social rights and, above all, the defense of the purchasing power of wages, including via the quest for robust policies of price and rent control (Baroudi 1998, 544–48). The first round of heavy confrontation with Hariri on this terrain unfolded during the summer 1995. Hariri's decision to finance a long-awaited salary rise for public employees through a sharp increase of oil prices sparked controversy. In response to this measure, the CGTL called for a general strike and for a day of national mobilization on July 19. Hariri reacted to the challenge by imposing a national ban on demonstrations and public gatherings, which managed to temporarily halt CGTL street initiatives (Baroudi 1998, 542–43). The latter resumed again at the beginning of 1996.

In the month of February, public school teachers and professors at the Lebanese University went on strike to demand an adjustment of their salary scale to the inflation rate. Their mobilization was actively supported by the CGTL which, furthermore, renewed its call for a general strike against the government on February 29. The strike was defused once again through the imposition of a new three-month ban on demonstrations, compounded by a strict military-enforced curfew on the strike day. The ban was violated by the CGTL on April 4, when the Confederation sought to exploit the visit of the French President Jacques Chirac to relaunch its struggle for a 76% salary increase for both the public and private sectors. This was accompanied by an overall critique of the government's economic mismanagement and shortcomings, as well as the sharp restrictions on political and media freedoms. The mobilization ultimately resulted in a contained, but highly mediatized sit-in staged inside the CGTL headquarters, after that the army prevented militants from reaching the Parliament.

One week after the April 4 sit-in, Israel launched the operation "Grapes of Wrath" against the South of Lebanon. When the bombing ended, and to try to defuse the mounting social tension, Hariri unilaterally proposed a plan for raising the salaries of private sector workers. The plan was firmly rejected by both sectors and the CGTL which, in close cooperation with public school teachers, returned to the offensive. The pressure strategy to which they resorted this time was to combine the boycott of the official baccalaureate exams with the threat of a massive abstention campaign from the sensitive parliamentary elections scheduled for the summer. The escalation was powerful enough to compel Hariri to meet teachers' demands. On the other hand, it persuaded the entire spectrum of ruling forces that the time to get rid of Abu Rizk had finally come.

V.III – From resistance to co-optation: The CGTL and the costs of the Pax Syriana

Already in the aftermath of the elections of 1993, the ruling powers had sought to contain the influence of Abu Rizk by recurring to the old technique of promoting the formation of – arguably scarcely-representative – party-sponsored unions to undermine the representative legitimacy of the CGTL and manipulate its internal composition. In **1994**, a first nucleus of these party-controlled federations was set up by **Antoine Bechara** within the **General Federation of Sectoral Unions (GCSU)**, an inactive federation originally established in 1970, which became henceforth the main incubator for this type of unions and the privileged official interlocutor of the ruling parties at the expense of the Confederation. At the same time, while freezing GCSU's membership in the executive council of the CGTL, Bechara continued to remain active in the General Confederation and work from within to create an internal block hostile to Abu Rizk. This strategy underwent a steady aggressive shift on the eve of the **1997 CGTL elections** as, once ascertained that Abu Rizk would win the majority, the Minister of Labor Asaad Hardan licensed five new federations affiliated with the Amal Movement and arbitrarily admitted them to the CGTL, despite the latter's firm opposition. These federations were for the most part South-based and had the specific purpose of disrupting the hegemony of the leftist federation of the South, which by that time had become the one of the strongest and most representative federations in the country. The battle between the two poles was fierce. In Saida, so as to guarantee the election of the Amal-sponsored delegates, on the election day journalists and prominent delegates of the Federation of the South were detained for hours, and many others were intimidated with the complicity of the army. To avoid the risk of facing a similar situation as in Saida, on the Beirut election day Abu Rizk and his supporters decided to hold the elections one hour earlier. Since no ministerial observers were present, one hour later the Minister declared the results non-valid and compelled them to repeat the elections.

Due to heavy clashes and strong pressures by the army, the minister-backed candidate Ghanim Zoghbi won. The elections were declared illegitimate by Abu Rizk who, after filing a lawsuit to contest the results, was put under arrest (Slaibi 1999, 69-78; Bou Khater 2019).

In 1998, the rivalry between Berri and Hariri paralyzed the executive council of the CGTL, pushing Zoghbi to resign. The leadership of the CGTL was recaptured by Abu Rizk who, thanks to last-minute backing by Amal, managed to secure his victory against the Hariri-backed Bechara. However, the process of political infiltration of the CGTL had already become too pervasive. By 1999, the number of licensed federations had risen from 14 to 37, and the number of unions up to 210, at least two thirds of which were believed to be mere façades. Among them, the majority was linked to pro-Syrian parties (most notably Amal, Hezbollah, SSNP, and Baath), which came to control 29 out of 70 seats in the CGTL executive council, against 18 held by Abu Rizk and the LCP, and 13 by the Future Movement, the Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces (Salloukh et al. 2015, Tab 5.1 and 5.2). The political implications of this new arrangement became evident during the internal elections of 2001, which marked the fully-fledged victory of the Amal-backed candidate Ghassan Ghosn. Amal's hegemony within the CGTL was definitively consolidated in 2004. On May 27, the CGTL organized a general strike and a day of mobilizations to protest Hariri's aggressive austerity fiscal policies, including a new increase in oil prices. On the way to Beirut's southern suburbs, the rally organized by the unions of taxi and mini-van drivers, controlled by Amal, Hezbollah, and the LCP, was brutally confronted by the army. This triggered an uncontrolled wave of clashes and rioting all over the area, including the storming of the Ministry of Labor, with a dramatic final toll of five deaths and hundreds of injured. Following the incident, Hezbollah's delegate resigned from CGTL's executive council, and LCP and PSP also withdrew or boycotted the General Confederation, which became henceforth an undisputed Amal bastion (Salloukh et al. 2015, 70-87: 76-77).

VI – The labor movement after the CGTL: Recent struggles and trends

VI.I – Workers without unions and unions without workers: Lebanese organized labor after the cooptation of the CGTL

Tab. 1 - Growth of Unions and Union Membership

	1949	1956	1961	1972	
Number of Licensed Union Federations	1	5	5	14	
Number of Licensed Unions	34	72	101	141	
Number of Unionized Workers	18.837	18.439	21.568	50.708	

Following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the Lebanese political spectrum became polarized into two

rival ruling blocks according to the respective international alignment: on the one hand, the Syria-aligned March 8 coalition, led by the Shiite tandem Amal-Hezbollah, and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM); and, on the other, the Saudi/Western-aligned March 14 coalition, led by the Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces and the PSP. This polarization extended to the CGTL which, in the face of a March 8-aligned majority, saw the emergence of a March 14-aligned opposition front, which definitively split the CGTL along sectarian and political lines. This took place simultaneously with the further inflation of the General Confederation with fictious or party-sponsored unions and federations which, by 2010, reached the record quota of 580 and 51 respectively (Salloukh et al. 2015, 70-87: 77). The same polarization also affected professional associations which, just like the CGTL, became henceforth nothing but a terrain for political patronage and competition completely void of socio-economic concerns.

The co-optation of the CGTL marked a crucial setback in the capability of Lebanese organized labor to build and mobilize around a shared collective agenda. This significantly eased the process of undermining workers' social rights inaugurated by Hariri's neoliberal transition. The cooptation also deprived workers of an effective formal representative structure through which to champion their grievances and demands. As a consequence, labor conflict was progressively reconfigured within the framework of informal or extra-CGTL insular organizational structures mobilized around a specific corporate or sectoral claim. Furthermore, due to the broader disintegrative implications of neoliberal globalization, these recent manifestations differed profoundly from the extra-CGTL experiences that emerged on the eve of the Civil War, as they lacked both the political-ideological horizon and the external militant and coordination infrastructures to turn them into powerful alternatives to the CGTL's hegemony.

These tendencies rose to the surface with a great clarity during the wave of labor conflict which, in the triennium 2011-2014, shook the Lebanese labor scene after a decade of quasi-quiescence. This wave consisted of a variety of overlapping autonomous mobilizations which, despite their heterogeneity and insularity, brought the labor question once again to the forefront of the political confrontation.

The first one to explode was the mobilization of the **EDL daily workers** in November 2011. The mobilization was ignited by the announcement of a project to outsource external services to three private companies, which would have implied a 70% cut in personnel over a period of two years. This movement reached its peak in May 2012, when the company and Parliament refused to address the demand for full tenure and work continuity in the company. Workers responded by announcing an open-ended strike that lasted for 93 days, coupled with periodical sit-ins and demonstrations all over the country, under the coordination of an informal committee founded (albeit it remained dormant) in the early 2000s. The strike was suspended after all workers were hired temporarily in the three subcontracting companies, with the hope of receiving full tenure. Mobilizations resurged again in 2014, as the three subcontracting companies announced that they will hire less than a half of the workers, pending the participation in a public tender. EDL workers reacted by announcing an open-ended occupation of EDL's headquarters in Beirut which lasted for four months. However, this was not sufficient to see their demands addressed (Mandarino 2016; CSKC – EDL Workers).

Another major wave of mobilizations was triggered by the ambitious program to adjust workers' wages and social benefits to the inflation rate, launched by the reformist Minister of Labor Charbel Nahhas in

2011. The project was firmly opposed by both business circles and the majority of ruling parties, as it foreshadowed the main source of financing the taxation of rent profits. Another prominent bone of contention revolved around the source of financing for the adjustment of the salaries of **workers in the public sector**, after the private sector minimum wage was ultimately set at 680 thousand LBP. This ignited three years of fierce confrontations between the State and public sector workers, along with an equally harsh conflict between Nahhas and the political and economic establishment. The mobilization was coordinated by the **Union Coordination Committee (UCC)**, i.e. an umbrella organization grouping the League of Public Sector Workers, the leagues of primary and secondary public school teachers, and the Association of Private School Teachers, at that time under the leadership of the left-leaning Hanna Gharib. The UCC was **established in 2006** to coordinate the efforts of the public sector to protest the cancellation of public sector contracts in line with the new austerity imperatives imposed by the Paris III aid conference to reduce public debt (Bou Khater 2015a). The UCC demands mainly included a salary adjustment by 121%, and an adjustment of their salary scales. The mobilization included a variety of strikes and mass rallies characterized by mass popular participation. The UCC supported and participated in many other important social mobilizations at the time, including anti-sectarian ones (Bou Khater 2015b). Their potential to become a new catalyzer for the collective struggles for socio-economic rights, however, was definitively defused in 2015, as the independence of UCC succumbed to the successful infiltration and cooptation by the ruling parties (Salloukh et al. 2015, 70-87: 86-87). As such, their struggle remained at stake. On the other hand, the blatant anti-worker attitude adopted by the CGTL in the confrontation between Charbel Nahhas and the political establishment, and between the establishment and public employees, provided the last push for **FENASOL to definitively split from the CGTL**.

Although it failed to impose itself as a mass force, FENASOL actively participated in a variety of anti-systemic social movements from 2011 onwards and supported the labor struggles which unfolded outside of the CGTL spectrum. Along with the struggle of UCC, the most important one was that of **migrant domestic workers to obtain the right to unionization.** The constituent process of domestic workers started in **2012** with input from the International Labor Organization in partnership with FENASOL and the NGO Kafa (Tayah 2014). The union (**Union of Domestic Workers in Lebanon**) was finally created in 2015 and repeatedly demanded formal licensing from the Ministry of Labor. Despite the outstanding advocacy campaign that the union managed to carry out, however, its request for licensing was constantly denied. On the other hand, the union's struggle ostensibly raised awareness on the condition of migrant workers in Lebanon and connected the union with a variety of feminist and anti-racist organizations.

Even more fruitful were the struggles within the private sector, whose greater disenfranchisement by the national political elites left more room for workers to successfully exercise pressure. The most important ones were the struggle of bank employees to obtain the renewal of their collective contracts in 2013 and that of the workers of the supermarket chain Spinneys for salary increases and the right to unionize, which was granted in 2012 (Safieddine 2012).

VI.II – Re-igniting organization? The October 17 Uprising and its impact on organized labor

On October 17, 2019, an unprecedented popular uprising took over Lebanese streets demanding, through a variety of slogans, practices and solidarities, a radical redefinition of the Lebanese socio-

economic and political order on more accountable and equal grounds. Furthermore, the uprising immediately assumed clear anti-establishment stances. It lasted for four consecutive months and traversed geographic regions, social classes, and sectarian, gender and generational boundaries.

Due to its organic relationship with the contested elites, the CGTL remained absent from the mobilizations. On the other hand, the uprising activated an important process of alternative labor organization among professionals under the umbrella of the **Lebanese Association of Professionals (LAP)**, challenging altogether the hegemony of the CGTL and sectarian parties. The early nucleus of LAP was the **Association of Independent University Professors (AIUP).** The AIUP was established with the onset of the Lebanese uprising by a group of university protestors who took active part in the mobilizations. The idea of the LAP drew inspiration from the Sudanese Professional Association, mirroring the prominent role that the latter played in the coeval Sudanese uprising(el-Kak 2021). Its founding statement was published online on October 28 and managed to quickly gather a variety of professional groups by combining grassroots networking and web activism. The most prominent of these groups included journalists, lawyers, physicians, engineers and architects, and workers in the arts and cultural sector, each of whom organized into specific alternative organizations. The organizations are progressively eroding the hegemony of sectarian forces within professional orders (Bou Khater 2020). The first victory in this sense was scored in November 2019, with the election of the independent Melhem Khalaf as new president of the Lebanese Bar Association (Abi Raad 2019). Another important victory was scored by the opposition list “Naqaba Tantafid” in the Order of Engineers of Beirut in July 2021. This has certainly been marking an important breakthrough with the recent history of Lebanese organized labor. On the other hand, no substantial organizational developments have been observed on the front of waged and informal labor, which remain mostly atomized and/or underorganized.

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