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Lebanon

Hezbollah and the Workers

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Hezbollah's record shows that the party's interests are more aligned with elites than with workers.

Though its reputation has waned in recent years, Hezbollah has long earned plaudits from the Left for its military resistance to Israel. Many, too, have pointed to its provision of social services as a sign of the organization's progressive hue.

This latter claim, however, doesn't hold up to reality. Hezbollah has over time positioned itself on the wrong side of social and economic struggles in Lebanon and shed some of its former roots, aligning itself with an emerging fraction of the Shi'a bourgeoisie. It and other sectarian movements in the country continue to block the emergence of a broader class politics in Lebanon.

Party of God and the Poor?

Hezbollah has portrayed itself as the party of the oppressed, which challenges deprivation and champions the rights of farmers, the poor, workers, and the homeless. In its 2009 manifesto, the organization claims that:

Savage capitalist forces, led by the USA and Western countries and embodied mainly in international monopoly networks of companies that cross nations and continents, networks of various international establishments especially the financial ones backed by superior military force have led to more contradictions and conflicts . . .

Despite this rhetoric, Hezbollah's theoretical conception and policy orientation have not displayed any systematic alternative to neoliberalism "much less capitalism" in Lebanon. Professed social justice objectives are married awkwardly to support for neoliberal measures.

We can find this contradiction in the political thought of previous important figures of Shi'a Islamic fundamentalism such as Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, Iraqi Shi'a cleric and ideological founder of the Iraqi Islamic Dawa Party and especially Ruhollah Khomeini, who became the supreme religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

Among other titles, Al-Sadr wrote two books "Falsafatun" (Our Philosophy) in 1959 and *Iqtisadun* (Our Economics) in 1961 "with the aim of confronting Marxism and secular thoughts. His main thesis was to offer Islam as a progressive alternative to contending theories from the Left. Al-Sadr promoted an "Islamic economic system" as a third way between capitalism and socialism. In his view, social and economic problems were the result of the misconduct of man "the solution, then, had to be religious.

Meanwhile, Khomeini also used economic discourses to win support for his Islamic project. In 1979–1982, at the height of Iran's revolution and popular mobilization, Khomeini had presented Islam through the lens of social justice, praising the oppressed (who were equated with the poorest sections of society) and condemning the oppressors "understood as the rich, the greedy palace dwellers, and their foreign patrons.

This populist rhetoric was instrumental in mobilizing urban workers against the Pahlavi monarchy. But after 1982, during the consolidation of the new Islamic regime and the associated repression of the opposition (especially those

on the Left), he increasingly equated Islam with respect for private property and depicted the bazaar as an essential pillar of society. He now progressively delineated three main classes: an upper class constituted of the remnants of the old wealthy families; a middle class formed of clerics, intellectuals, civil servants, merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen; and a lower class composed of laborers, peasants, and slum dwellers.

The “oppressed” ceased to be an economic category describing the deprived masses, becoming instead a political label for the new regime’s supporters, including wealthy bazaar merchants. The class-struggle rhetoric was significantly reduced with Khomeini arguing that Islam sought harmonious relationships between factory owners and workers and between landlords and peasants.

In much the same way as Sadr and Khomeini, Hezbollah’s economic thought has consistently upheld the market and defense of private property as a key pillar, despite also professing allegiance to social justice goals. Throughout the neoliberal period in Lebanon, this orientation meant that Hezbollah’s support for measures such as privatization, liberalization, and opening up to foreign capital inflows has not been considered by the organization as being in contradiction to its commitment to tackling poverty and inequality.

Hezbollah’s sources of funding also explains its rather conservative economic program. The Islamic movement’s financial resources are based on support first from Iran (estimates range from \$100 to \$400 million a year) and then from the Lebanese Shi’a middle class and bourgeoisie, and the alms (zakāt) collected by Hezbollah on behalf of Khomeini.

Ultimately, like Khomeini, Hezbollah believes in the unity of the community and cooperation between classes, where the workers should not ask more than what is given by the bourgeoisie and where the bourgeoisie has an obligation to be charitable towards the poor. Class struggle is seen as fragmenting the community (the Ummah). Broader appeals to class unity across Lebanon’s fractured society are thus stifled.

Privatization and Disinvestment

The manifestations of this ideology are hard to miss. Following the 2003 Paris II Conference, Hezbollah “then part of the opposition” did not comment on or assess the social consequences of [privatizing state assets](#). This despite the fact that the target for privatization was Middle East Airlines (MEA), which employed several hundred Shi’a who were laid off after the company was sold.

The prospect of 1,200 to 1,500 workers losing their jobs produced considerable unrest. “Ali Tahir Yasin, the current head of the Hezbollah-aligned al-Wafaa trade union” its name literally translates to “the Loyalty Union” “was involved in the MEA negotiations as a workers’ representative. He claimed in an interview that the proposed privatization did not hurt workers or the wider population.

The next year, the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) called a general strike to protest rising prices and inflation. The mobilizations paralyzed the country. According to “Abd al-Amir Najda, president of the Federation of Public Ground Transportation Drivers’ Unions, the political elite pressured the CGTL to end the strike. Workers, however” especially those in the transportation sector “[opposed their leadership](#) and called for the strike to continue.

The CGTL leadership eventually withdrew from the strike, which allowed the army to intervene. The government forces opened fire on demonstrators, who were gathered in Hayy al-Sallum, one of the poorer Shi’a

neighborhoods in south Beirut. Five workers were killed, and dozens injured.

The main political parties, including Hezbollah, supported the army, saying that “the army is the red line.” Most of the media portrayed the strike as a “barbaric attempt by Shi’a to attack the army.” The CGTL stayed completely silent.

In a press conference a few days later, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah [accused individuals](#) linked to the US Embassy of instigating the violence between protesters and the army. He claimed that “after the shooting in Hay al-Sellom area, groups linked to the embassy worked to spread chaos and violence in other regions in the southern suburbs.” He added that the instigators wanted to undermine the close relationship between the government and Hezbollah, and he denied claims that his party had any interest in seeing Premier Rafic Hariri leave office.

Soon after, following the withdrawal of Syrian forces, Fu’ad Siniora formed a new government that included the March 8 Alliance, the March 14 Alliance, and, for the first time, Hezbollah. Trad Hamada, a Hezbollah-appointed minister and ally of the party, served as minister of labor.

He was soon faced with a major mobilization by the teachers’ union. Defending public services, they gathered at least a quarter of a million people and forced the government to withdraw and cancel some of its decisions, including “diminishing pensions, increasing VAT from 10 percent to 12 percent, raising fuel prices by 30 percent, and imposing short-term contracts on government workers and teachers.”

[Hezbollah participated in these protests](#), alongside the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Lebanese Communist Party. The ruling parties attacked this coalition, saying it was mostly Shi’a-orchestrated and was infiltrated by Syrian workers. Once again, the CGTL stayed out.

The party’s uneven opposition to the ruling party continued in January 2007. Then, the CGTL called a demonstration against the Paris III agenda. Only two thousand people showed up, in large part due to inaction from Hezbollah and the rest of the March 8 forces. While critical of some aspects of the upcoming conference, Hezbollah explained that they did not want to [jeopardize its outcomes](#). Indeed, Hezbollah MPs, even after resigning from the government in December 2006, supported the reform program Prime Minister Siniora presented.

On January 23, however, Hezbollah joined with the March 8 Alliance, Amal, and the FPM to call for a general strike. The target of their action was not a labor dispute but the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, an international investigation into the former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination in 2005, which Hezbollah and its allies considered unconstitutional and specifically aimed at the Shi’a Islamic group.

This turned rapidly into a popular uprising that blocked the main roads of transit in the country. The situation overwhelmed the strike’s initiators, and they decided to end the protest, declaring that it might “create confessional tensions.” According to the left-wing activist Bassem Chit, the March 8 Alliance feared that the popular movement was beginning to cross sectarian lines in order to address socioeconomic issues. The organization preferred to emphasize only Shi’a interests.

One of the characteristics of Hezbollah’s orientation toward labor struggles, particularly those that emerged after 2008, is its unwillingness to support large-scale, independent mass worker mobilizations, preferring to rely instead upon small-scale, armed actions against its political opponents. In this sense, Hezbollah has reinforced the sectarian dynamic of these struggles, undercutting any broader class impulse they may have potentially developed.

The aborted general strike in May 2008 exemplifies this. Called by taxi drivers, teachers, and farmers, protesters

demanded a minimum wage increase, higher public wages (which had been frozen since 1996), and anti-inflationary measures.

Just four months earlier, a different strike had been called with the same demands. It escalated into deadly battles in Beirut's southern suburbs, with roads cut off and taxis refusing to take passengers.

The second strike was called off due to street fighting between opposing political forces. The March 14 Alliance "which held governmental power at the time" had threatened to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunications network. In response, Hezbollah declined to mobilize for the general strike and instead launched armed attacks on pro-March 14 neighborhoods.

These fights ended popular mobilization in the streets and stalled any possibility of joint worker struggles across sectarian lines. A few weeks after the cessation of hostilities and the formation of a new national unity government, the minimum wage was increased two-thirds, from LP300,000 (\$200) to LP500,000 (\$333). This was far lower than the workers' demands and only benefited private-sector employees, leaving public-sector workers with the same pay they'd been earning for twelve years.

Trade unionist Ahmad Dirani explained that Hezbollah's military intervention was "aimed against the possibility of a large trade union and workers' mobilization taking the lead against the government in a democratic way. Hezbollah did not favor this option." Dirani argued that if the general strike had been allowed to go on, it could have achieved social gains around wages while also addressing the threat to Hezbollah's telecommunication system.

The Nahas Plan

In June 2011, a new government led by the March 8 Alliance and headed by Najib Miqati was formed. Hezbollah held two ministries in this government: agriculture (Hussein Hajj Hassan) and state (Muhammad Fneich). Hezbollah's experience in this government is instructive, as it demonstrates the party's unwillingness to support significant reform measures aimed at helping Lebanese workers.

The initiative advanced by Minister of Labor Charbel Nahas became the center of these debates. His plan contained a number of significant social reforms, particularly the establishment of a social wage that would adjust the public- and private-sector salaries in line with inflation and expand the range of subsidies, including transport allowances and a universal health-care system. Higher taxes on finance and other rentier activities would have funded these wage increases. Had it gone through, Nahas's initiative would have reversed the weakening of labor vis-à-vis capital that had been characteristic of the previous years.

A range of political forces opposed Nahas. Initially, Amal's minister of health, Ali Hassan Khalil, opposed the health-care plan because he believed it encroached on his domain, despite the fact that the labor "not health" ministry controlled the National Fund for Social Security. Lebanese journalist [Zbeeb](#) has argued that Khalil's opposition came from the fact "that the Ministry of Health and Social Security are part of Nabih Berri's share of the pie, and he cannot concede his share while the shares of other political forces remain in place." Likewise, trade unionist Adib Bou Habib claimed in an interview that "Amal and its Minister of Health did not want this project because they wanted to use the universal health coverage for their own political and clientelist interests."

Following pressure from Amal and Hezbollah, Nahas agreed to separate the health care from wage reform. The latter would soon become the new line of battle inside of the government.

Nahas's first wage initiative called for a LP890,000 (\$593) minimum wage plus transportation allowances. Private-sector employers, however, firmly refused this, arguing that adding transportation allowances to the basic salary would unsustainably [increase costs](#). Instead they signed the [Consensual Agreement on Wage Reform](#) with the leadership of the CGTL and Prime Minister Najib Miqati. This gave less to workers, as it did not include transport allowances and would only raise the minimum wage to LP675,000 (\$450).

The government adopted the Consensual Agreement (CA) in December 2011, with the two Hezbollah ministers "Fneich and Hassan" voting to support it. Referring to CGTL's role in the negotiations, [Fneich](#) argued that "workers and employees reject[ed] the wage adjustment plan proposed by the Minister of Labor Charbel Nahas."

Following immediate and widespread criticisms of its ministers' position, Hezbollah shifted its position. They supported a strike and demonstration organized against the agreement. Hezbollah ministers claimed that they voted in favor of the CA to punish Nahas for a lack of coordination, not because they opposed his plan. Indeed, they called the approved wage proposal far too low.

Despite this, the party declined to participate in a demonstration supporting the Nahas plan. [The December 15 protest](#) drew more than six thousand people in Beirut. CGTL also refused. The Hezbollah representative on the CGTL, Ali Yassin, stated that the party decided not to mobilize because it opposed the CGTL executive. At the demonstration, many protestors expressed their frustration with CGTL through placards, chants, and group discussions.

In January 2012, parliament undertook a final round of voting on the CA and the Nahas initiative. In the debate, Nahas proposed a slightly lower minimum wage plus transport allowances. Despite numerous meetings between Nahas and Hezbollah, Amal, and the prime minister, no agreement was reached. His plan was eventually rejected in favor of the CA, and he resigned from the cabinet the following month.

Hezbollah trade unionist Ali Taher Yassin justified the vote and CGTL's rejection of the plan stating that:

It was a special situation, you have to weigh how much you can mobilize and how much you want to destabilize this government. With strikes and demonstrations you put in danger the stability and the security of the country.

Yassin echoed these sentiments at a conference in March 2012. He argued that it would be difficult for workers to demand higher wages because of the country's instability and the damage they might cause the Lebanese economy. While declaring his support for "humane" salaries, Yassin argued that they should be reached through negotiation with employers. He defended the CGTL leadership from audience members who complained that the federation no longer represented workers' interests.

Other trade unionists linked to Hezbollah, Akram Zeid and Abdallah Hamadeh (head of the al-Wala transport federation), agreed that the party could not support the Nahas initiative because of the potential for economic and political instability.

The Union Coordination Committee

Hezbollah adopted a similarly hostile attitude to the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), which brings together more than forty independent trade unions and between 140,000 and 176,000 members, mainly employed in civil service or as teachers.

The UCC grew massively during national labor struggles in 2012 and 2013. In 2012 alone, it held fourteen strikes, sixty sit-ins, and four mass demonstrations. In the spring and summer of that year, for example, more than 2,500 contract workers at the electricity company EdL protested the government's privatization plans. The workers claimed that the Ministry of Energy and Water (MoEW) had failed to provide them with permanent employment, social security, a decent monthly salary, or job security.

At the time of the protests, the minister in charge, Gebran Bassil, refused to meet with workers and described them as troublemakers and outlaws. He also sent in security services to prevent strikers from reaching their sit-in location. His restructuring plan would have made 1,800 workers redundant.

Hezbollah, who had been in charge of the MeOW from July 2005 to November 2006 under Minister Muhammad Fneich, supported the privatization process. It endorsed [Bassil's plan](#) and voted for a draft law allowing contract workers at Lebanon's state-run electricity company to become full-time employees. During this period, Hezbollah did not criticize Bassil's vocal and sectarian attacks on the workers' mobilization, despite the fact that the vast majority of affected workers were Shi'a.

In February and March of 2013, UCC-led teachers called for massive demonstrations and open-ended strikes. The year before, the minister of education had promised a salary increase, but it had yet to come into effect. Tens of thousands of teachers demonstrated nationwide, and the strikes lasted for more than three weeks.

The UCC played a major role in these mobilizations, which continued through 2014 as teachers still waited for their promised raise. Throughout, the union resisted government proposals to fund the program by shifting the burden onto the poorer layers of society, including measures like new taxes, benefit reductions for teachers, cuts to retirees' pay, or an increase in contractual employment.

Other struggles that emerged in 2013 should also be noted. The Federation of Bank Employees tried to defend the last remaining collective agreement in Lebanon; employees of the Spinneys supermarket chain fought for their right to organize; and contract workers and those without fixed contracts in the education sector mobilized for protection and job security. Using a national campaign and allying with popular local organizations, UCC circulated a petition for a million-person rally to support the labor movement.

But the teachers' struggle best underlines several salient and interrelated features of the Lebanese labor movement. First, it demonstrated Hezbollah's unwillingness to support independent worker mobilizations, particularly given its participation in government. During these strikes, Hezbollah refused to stand up for the salary increases and did not mobilize its membership to join the actions.

In fact, on several occasions, Hezbollah representatives directly opposed these strikes. At a November 2013 meeting of the southern branch of the Public Secondary Schools Teachers League in Lebanon, Hezbollah and Amal representatives argued against a strike that the majority of participants supported. Hezbollah teachers also did not participate in the open-ended strikes led by the UCC and refused calls from Hanna Gharib, a prominent labor activist and current head of the Lebanese Communist Party, to escalate the protests.

Likewise, during a grading boycott in the summer of 2014, Hezbollah representatives called for an end to the action and supported the parliamentary decision to automatically pass all students in an attempt to break the action. Nonetheless, the UCC decided to continue the boycott and to join further strikes called by various sectors of the public administration to implement the increased salary scale.

These struggles illustrate Hezbollah's orientation toward the Lebanese labor movement. The period witnessed a

significant upsurge in worker militancy, marked particularly by the call for general strikes in 2004 and 2008 and the fierce debate around the Nahas initiative in 2011. These struggles revealed the tensions between Hezbollah's claim to represent the poor and marginalized layers of the Shi'a population and its integration into the political elite which link it to the emerging bourgeoisie.

At all major points, Hezbollah has expressed a rhetorical concern for issues like privatization, the Paris agreements, and the decreasing value of real wages. At the same time, it has strongly resisted attempts to mobilize its base in a manner that would support independent initiatives across sectarian lines. In general, these tensions have been resolved in favor of neoliberal reform, particularly in those periods in which Hezbollah has held governmental positions.

Hezbollah's Changing Composition

Hezbollah's record toward labor protests reflects the party's changing class interests. From its roots in Lebanon's poor Shi'a population, Hezbollah has become a party whose membership and cadres are increasingly dominated by a fraction of the Shi'a bourgeoisie, especially in Beirut. In the capital's southern suburbs, many wealthy families and most of the merchants have been integrated into Hezbollah, while the party's activities — particularly those connected to real estate, tourism, and leisure — cater to middle-class Shi'a residents.

This transformation appears most clearly in the party cadres, which are no longer composed of lower middle-class clerics, but are now largely drawn from a professional class who hold secular college degrees.

The party holds increasing weight in professional associations, and some companies, especially in real estate, tourism, and trade, under Hezbollah's direct influence have gained power in the Lebanese business community. A new fraction of the bourgeoisie linked to the party through Iranian capital and investments was created, while the rest of the Shi'a fraction of the bourgeoisie, whether in Lebanon or in the diaspora, came increasingly under the umbrella of Hezbollah — or at least close to the party because of its political and financial powers. These characteristics of Hezbollah's political representation and social base indicate that though the organization continues to draw support from all levels of society, its priorities are increasingly oriented to the highest strata.

The development of class-based movements present a potential threat to all the sectarian and ruling class parties in Lebanon, of which Hezbollah has become part. Thus Hezbollah has never mobilized around socioeconomic demands from a cross-sectarian perspective. Its support for the CGTL and other social movements has been purely rhetorical.

Indeed, Hezbollah, along with other political forces in Lebanon, has actively worked to weaken of the labor movement. The party formed separate, Shi'a-based federations and trade unions in a number of sectors, including agriculture, transportation, construction, printing, the press, and utilities. This proliferation of federations and trade unions allowed it to win significant power in the CGTL. Today, Amal and Hezbollah control the majority of the federation's leadership seats. As a result, the CGTL refuses to mobilize workers despite the intensification of neoliberal policies.

It seems likely that the Association of Public Secondary Education Teachers, which has played a leading role within the UCC, will have a similar fate. At their January 2015 election, the sectarian political parties — including Hezbollah and the March 8 and March 14 Alliances — united against Hanna Gharib, who only drew support from independents and the Lebanese Communist Party. These elections mirrored how sectarian political forces undermined the CGTL. Indeed, the UCC's activities have diminished following this election.

Hezbollah has not been engaged in building a counterhegemonic project that challenges the capitalist system. Rather, it aims to use religious mobilization to reach the largest possible section of the Shi'a population, while presenting no threat to the dominant capitalist and sectarian political system in Lebanon or the region. In fact, it actively sustains that system.

Hezbollah's service provisions resemble most other Lebanese political and sectarian communities " although its network of organizations is larger and more efficient. They all promote the private- and patronage-based mitigation of suffering.

Any real counterhegemonic project would break with the sectarian political system, as well as the regional and international imperialist system. In this sense, Mehdi Amel's description of the Islamic bourgeoisie's behavior in the 1980s also applies to Hezbollah:

the aspiration of fractions of the Islamic bourgeoisie to strengthen their positions in the power structure, or rather to modify the place they occupy within the confessional political system, in order to better share the hegemony and not to change the system . . . This solution is not actually a solution; it will lead only to a worsening of the crisis of the system.

Hezbollah's record confirms that the party's interests are more aligned with elites than with workers. It remains firmly in line with Lebanon's other dominant political parties as an impediment to the emergence of a popular movement that could raise deep social and economic questions.

This shouldn't be a surprise: those types of class dynamics would unravel the ground on which Hezbollah itself stands.

[Jacobin](#)