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Obituary

Reda Ibrahim Farag - Egyptian revolutionary Marxist

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

Publication date: Friday 17 September 2021

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Reda Ibrahim Farag, a former leader of the Egyptian revolutionary Marxist current, died in Cairo on 4 August 2021. He played an important role in the constitution and leadership of a revolutionary organization from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s.

Born in 1948 to a middle class Egyptian family in Tanta, the main city of the Nile Delta, he was politicized in the context of Nasserism, the June 1967 war that accelerated the crisis of the Nasserite regime and the right-wing turn led by Sadat in the 1970s. From 1968, significant student and worker mobilizations took place. A strong political and social turmoil favoured, among other things, the revival of Marxist left organizations such as the Egyptian Communist Party, the Egyptian Workers' Communist Party, the Revolutionary Current, the Communist Party-8 January or the Communist Party-Congress.

In the early 1970s, Reda Farag was one of the driving forces behind a small secret circle that gradually formed, discovering revolutionary Marxism and adhering to the analyses of the Fourth International, notably with the English-language literature of the US Socialist Workers Party and that produced in Arabic of the GCR (Revolutionary Communist Group) of Lebanon. Contacts were established with Trotskyists from Lebanon and Iraq.

In the authoritarian context of the Sadat regime, a small militant network began to produce analyses, to structure itself and to intervene among educated youth and trade union circles. A militant and clandestine organization, the Revolutionary Communist League, was founded in a situation marked by repression, surveillance, and even police infiltration that affected the entire Egyptian left.

Reda co-led the League which became a small and very dynamic group offering rich revolutionary Marxist analyses on the stakes of the situation in Egypt and the Middle East (nature of the Egyptian regime, economic reform, workers' question and trade unionism, student movement, Palestine, fundamentalism and so on). Important texts of the Fourth International were translated into Arabic. With very few resources, the Egyptian LCR produced several periodicals, the result of an enormous amount of work in view of the modest forces and limited resources available to these militants. Despite the great difficulties in publishing, they produced the fortnightly newspaper *Ma al- 'amal* ("What is to be done?"), the monthly *Al-thawra al-da'ima* ("Permanent revolution") and a series of notebooks.

Their activist interventions mainly concerned student youth with activities in the capital but also in the governorates, especially in Alexandria where there was an effervescence in both working class and student environments and in the cities of Minieh and Assiut, in Middle and Upper Egypt. In this central and southern region of the country, the Marxist left had some influence among educated youth before the rise and hegemony of fundamentalism in its radical variant of *al-Gama'at al-Islamiya* in the late 1970s. The RCL also conducted some limited trade union work.

If this anti-Stalinist Marxist voice remained modest, it managed to gain a certain influence in the movements of the radical left of the time, among critical youth and combative trade unionists. On three occasions, this current suffered repression: in 1975, 1980 and 1985. Each time, Reda Farag was arrested with several of his comrades and detained for several months.

In the early 1980s, the political and economic situation in the country deteriorated severely. In addition to splits and departures, there was a real exhaustion, not to mention severe social and professional difficulties. The organization gradually withered away, especially after the last repression in 1985. Some activists from the RCL continued to defend a propagandist orientation of self-assertion. The central core that was maintained proposed refocusing on working to preserve militant achievements in what appeared as a crossing of the desert, including educational work.

At the end of the 1980s, what remained of the radical left (Egyptian Workers' Communist Party, CP-8 January, CP-Congress, the *al-Matraqa* group) regrouped within the United Workers' Party. With a handful of comrades from the RCL, Reda Farag planned to regroup around a publishing house, but without any help or support, this idea did not succeed.

In the early 1990s, young activists launched the Revolutionary Socialists current, adhering to the variant of Trotskyism represented by the SWP of Great Britain led by Tony Cliff, with a state capitalist analysis of the USSR. Contacts and exchanges with former members of the RCL went rather badly and did not lead to anything. The latter, including Reda, continued to be active in different frameworks and mobilizations.

From the end of the 1990s, with rare effective support, Reda undertook long and patient work recovering the archives of his organization. For him, it was a question of preserving this rich experience, unknown and/or too often caricatured. This documentary research was very complicated. Recovery was difficult. Documents printed with very basic equipment in the 1970s and 1980s were of poor quality or now very difficult to read. He digitized them and devoted enormous efforts to make them readable with a slow and tireless proofreading work. This task turned out to be very thankless, but he persevered. Having come into contact with the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (IISG), he negotiated the deposit of the recovered archives, obtaining their direct access to the institute's [website](#).

A cultured man, he read a lot and was interested in the literature and visual arts of the Arab world, particularly the Egyptian branch of the Surrealist movement. In the 1980s, he embarked on professional retraining as a dental technician, to obtain a decent income. Later he worked as a tourist guide. He was thus able to put his great knowledge of Egyptology as well as botany and ethnography to good use. Known and highly appreciated for his immense human qualities, his kindness, his generosity, he showed impressive modesty and humility. He had a real affection for Upper Egypt, a region he discovered in the late 1960s through a job in Aswan. He would continue to visit regularly as part of his new professional activities.

The cessation of militant activity around 1986-87 did not mean a change of ideas, quite the contrary. Present at the heart of the militant left, Reda followed political and social developments with interest and precision. A keen observer, he continued to defend positions in line with his commitment, until his last breath.

In the early 1990s, Reda met Josiane Bellochovique, a French worker turned educator. A former activist of the French LCR in the Lyon region, in Grenoble and then in Bourg en Bresse, this personality with a strong character came to visit Cairo during a simple holiday. From this meeting was born a very strong passion for Reda, based on love at first sight and deep political and human affinities. After a period of exchanges from a distance, she joined him and settled in Cairo. Their love story lasted two decades. Unfortunately, it ended in early 2012 with the death of Josiane following surgery. Passionate about photography, she had an ability to establish a link with the people she wants to take pictures of. She thus took pictures of great beauty, especially in working-class neighbourhoods in Cairo but also in Alexandria or Luxor.

If the revolution of 25 January 2011 surprised Reda like all activists, despite the warning signs, he was passionate about the occupation of Tahrir Square in which he participated, finding his former comrades there also. There, he made the link with young people whom he directed towards reading the founding texts of revolutionary Marxism. In the heated discussions in the cafes, he criticized the positions of the Revolutionary Socialists, especially towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

Despite a deep and sincere modesty, Reda always maintained a positive spirit. Following the death in 2019 of Bechir al Siba'i (the Arabic translator of Henry Laurens' work on Palestine among others), another former co-founder and leader of the RCL who became a renowned critical intellectual without having renounced his ideas, the last

representative of the Egyptian Trotskyist group of the 1970s has left us. We hope future generations can benefit from its contribution, made accessible through Reda's efforts.

PS:

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