

# **From the Everyday to Contentious Collective Actions: the protests of Jordan Phosphate Mines Company employees between 2011 and 2014**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses the rationale behind Jordan Phosphate Mines Company (JPMC) employees' mobilisation within the context of the Arab popular uprisings. It discusses the claims of the protestors in light of their lived experiences of the workplace. It shows that the politics of JPMC is structured around the divide between the logics of meritocracy and the logics of wealth distribution rather than around the workers/owners divide. The origins of the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide can be traced back to the socio-historical trajectory of the Jordanian state. Yet, the article demonstrates that rather than merely reproducing tensions that shape Jordanian society at large, the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide is manufactured in the workplace itself, notably due to management practices that enable many employees not to work.

## **KEYWORDS**

Jordan Phosphate Mines Company, Arab popular uprisings, Meritocracy/wealth distribution divide

# I ntroduction

Workers' struggles in the Middle East have raised little attention in academic literature. The Middle East remains on the fringes of labour movement literature. The study of social movements in the region has focused mostly on identity-based mobilisations, human rights movements and the range of actions countering dispossession from urban mass protests to "quiet encroachment".<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, however, that the region has been spared from labour protests. Labour organisation and activism can be dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the magnitude and the motivations of labour activism have, indeed, greatly varied depending on national and local contexts, governmental policies and economic conjunctures. During the struggles for independence, labour activism was closely intertwined with the nationalist cause. After independence, however, authoritarian politics in the Gulf and the rapid growth of employment opportunities in the public sector after 1973 hampered the development of labour movements in most Middle Eastern countries. Yet, one can observe the resurgence of labour protests since the mid-1990s in different countries including Egypt, Iran, Jordan and the Arabic Peninsula among others.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the popular uprisings in 2011, thousands of workers and employees took to the street to protest with their colleagues.<sup>4</sup> The large mobilisation of workers and employees during the so-called "Arab Springs" invites us to take a closer look at the motivations behind these labour protests.

This article provides new empirical insights in labour activism in the Middle East based on the analysis of the contentious collective actions of workers at the Jordan Phosphate Mines Company (JPMC). The mobilisation began in April 2011, shortly after popular uprisings erupted in the Arab region. A group of approximately thirty employees launched a three-day sit-in in front of the company's headquarters in Amman. On the signs held by the demonstrators, one could read slogans denouncing corruption and mismanagement, asking for new bylaws, a new personnel system and the fair treatment

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<sup>1</sup> BAYAT, Asef. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> LOCKMAN, Zachary (ed.). *Workers and working classes in the Middle East: struggles, histories, historiographies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Among authors who noticed the increase in labour protests see DUBOC, Marie. "La contestation sociale en Egypte depuis 2004: entre précarité et mobilisation locale." *Revue Tiers-Monde*, Hors série, 2011, pp. 1-21; CHALCRAFT, John. "Labour Protests and Hegemony in Egypt and in the Arabian Peninsula." In: MOTTA, Sara C. [and al.] (eds.), *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 35-58; BAYAT, Asef. "Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East." Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2000 and ALEXANDER, Ann and BASSIOUNY, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Workers and the Egyptian Revoultion*. London: Zed Books, 2014. On Jordan see, ADELY, Fida. "The Emergence of a New Labor Movement in Jordan." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 264, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> BEININ, Joel. "Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011". *Le mouvement social*. 246(1), 2014, pp. 7-27.

of employees. Significantly, the General Trade Union of Mines and Mining Employees (GTUMME) did not take part in the sit-in. After three days, the company's managers met with sit-in leaders and trade union representatives, reaching an agreement with the trade union that failed to meet demonstrators' expectations. In response, sit-in leaders announced the establishment of the independent union on Labour Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. They then visited JPMC production sites in Hasâ,<sup>5</sup> 'Abyiad and Shyiddyieh and the fertilizer complex in Aqaba to mobilise and prepare employees to strike. The first general strike was held in June 2011 and was followed by a second in February 2012. All production sites took part in the strikes. The company had never witnessed any major strike before. Such mobilisation was unprecedented in JPMC. How do we explain this sudden upsurge in JPMC employees' activism in 2011?

Literature examining what drives recent labour protests in the Middle East usually implicates globalisation and neoliberal economic reforms.<sup>6</sup> Since the implementation of the first structural adjustment programmes (SAP) under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank during the 1980s, workers and employees have experienced privatisation, casualisation of work, a decline in real wages, price increase and cuts in subsidies. In this context, labour struggles have been predominantly interpreted as "defensive"<sup>7</sup> aiming to defend developmentalist era rights and entitlements now threatened by neoliberal reforms. In her well-known article, Posusney<sup>8</sup> demonstrates that the moral economy argument according to which protests "erupt when the feelings of entitlement have been violated"<sup>9</sup> best explains labour protests in Egypt. Are labour protests always defensive? As Duboc and Beinín rightly note, the "concept of moral economy only partially explains the dynamics of labour protests... [Since] it overlooks initiatives to challenge state-controlled unions and denounce corruption and bad management".<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the mobilisation of JPMC employees defies assumptions underlying the moral economy perspective on labour movement in the Middle East. Demonstration leaders did not seek to preserve existing rights, but rather to overhaul the long-established management system that, according to them, resulted in the unequal treatment of the employees. Yet, JPMC employees did experience economic liberalisation and budget

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<sup>5</sup> The transliteration of Arabic words follows the IJMES transliteration system with the exception of the following letters that are translated as follows: â for ا ; ḍ for ض ; ẓ for ظ ; ṭ for ط ; ḥ for ح .

<sup>6</sup> See among others: BAYAT, A. "Social Movements, Activism and Social Development in the Middle East." *Op. Cit.* ; DUBOC, M. "La contestation sociale en Egypte depuis 2004: entre précarité et mobilisation locale." *Op. Cit.* ; CHALCRAFT, J. "Labour Protests and Hegemony in Egypt and in the Arabian Peninsula." *Op. Cit.*; BEININ, J. "Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011." *Op. Cit.*

<sup>7</sup> BEININ, J. "Le rôle des ouvriers dans les soulèvements populaires arabes de 2011." *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> POSUSNEY, M.P. "Irrational Workers: The Moral Economy of Labor Protest in Egypt". *World Politics*. Vol.4, n. 1, October 1993, pp.83-120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>10</sup> DUBOC, Marie and BEININ, Joel. "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012." In: BEININ, Joel and VAIREL, Frédéric (eds.), *Social Movements, Mobilization and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2nd edition, 2013, p. 208.

austerity. Crippled by unsustainable level of debts, the Jordanian government initiated market-oriented reforms as early as the mid-1980s. This shift was further supported by a series of IMF and the World Bank agreements during the 1990s. However, observers agree that the most substantial reforms were not undertaken until King Abdallah II acceded to the throne in 1999.<sup>11</sup> Analyses of the political and economic consequences of neoliberal reforms in Jordan stress the growing tensions between East Bankers and Palestinians. As the main beneficiaries of the state welfare system, the former bore the brunt of cuts to subsidies and public sector downsizing whereas the latter, historically confined to the private sector, benefited from the reforms.<sup>12</sup> Yet, these conclusions usually rely on macro-level analyses and little is known about how ordinary Jordanians perceived and responded to on-going transformations.

For JPMC employees, structural adjustment policies resulted in the privatisation of their company. On closer inspection, however, JPMC employees' experience did not match with the neoliberal prophecy of rationalisation, efficiency gains, and casualisation. JPMC holds the monopoly on phosphate mining in Jordan. It was publicly owned from 1953 until 2006. The privatisation of JPMC was particularly controversial for two main reasons. Not only did the government sell 37% of its shares to Kamil Holding Ltd., an offshore company registered in the tax haven of Jersey, UK,<sup>13</sup> but also Walid el Kurdi, the brother-in-law of the late King Hussein, was personally involved in the process of the privatisation and became the head of the company in 2006. Hence, for many Jordanians, JPMC was not privatised but rather taken over by the Hashemite monarchy. In addition, the injection of private capital did not lead to major reforms in management practices and labour organisation. The company remained largely overstaffed and, thus, the workload was relatively low. In fact, while remaining on the payroll, many employees simply did not work. The sale agreement prevented the new owner from dismissing any employees after 2006 and employees' social and financial benefits increased between 2006 and 2010. Whereas no other recently privatised companies – some of which had experienced cuts in jobs and management rationalisation – witnessed protests of the same magnitude, JPMC became a hotbed of labour protest in 2011. To understand the emergence of protests at JPMC, it is thus important to take a closer look at how privatisation affected the employees' lived experiences of the workplace.

Based on an ethnographic study of JPMC employees' mobilisation efforts, this article explores the motivations driving these workplace-based protests. More

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<sup>11</sup> EL SAID, Hamid. "The Political Economy of Reform in Jordan. Breaking Resistance to Reform?" In: JOFFE, George (eds). *Jordan in Transition (1990-2000)*. London: C. Hurst&Co, 2002, pp. 254-277; KNOWLES, Warwick. *Jordan since 1989. A Study in Political Economy*. New York: Tauris, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> This view masks the fact that the reforms were tailored-made to best serve the interests of the ruling elite from among which the majority considers themselves as East Bankers (See EL SAID, H. "The Political Economy of Reform in Jordan. Breaking Resistance to Reform?" *Op. cit.*).

<sup>13</sup> Source: JFSC Companies Registry Website. URL: <https://www.jerseyfsc.org/registry/documentsearch/NameDetail.aspx?Id=31488> (accessed on 18 July 2015).

specifically, I examine the role of everyday workplace experiences shaping the motivations and aspirations of employees. I argue that, behind the denunciation of privatisation, corruption and favouritism, JPMC demonstrators were divided between two contrasting demands: the claims to meritocracy, on the one hand, and claims for a larger share in the wealth allocation, on the other hand. I argue that this divide was rooted in the everyday experience of the workplace. I focus on the emergence of mobilisation efforts rather than their later developments, paying particular attention to employees' morality of employment.<sup>14</sup> Hence, I share with the moral economy approach particular attention toward the role of everyday life in shaping how employees differentiate good from bad, fair from unfair, and right from wrong, and in turn intimately fashioning the nature of their demands and actions. This constitutes the frame of reference through which they define their demands and actions. In this respect, I pay specific attention to the workplace because it constitutes the shared framework of reference through which employees formulated their demands.<sup>15</sup>

Section one depicts some of the distinctive traits of the employees' everyday experience in the workplace by focusing more specifically on their daily encounter with management practices that allow many employees not to work. In section two, I explain the emergence of employees' protests in 2011, highlighting how employees' grievances converged upon a critique of privatisation, corruption and favouritism associated with Walid el Kurdi. Firstly I examine how employees associated their frustrations with the privatisation of JPMC and, secondly I demonstrate the central role the "Arab Spring" played in defining demonstrators' desires and strategies. Section three unravels the contrasting views and experiences that divided the employees between those who aspire to meritocracy and those who emphasised the allocation of wealth. These differences shaped how employees formulated their grievances, interpreted the consequences of privatisation and articulated their demands and expectations.

### **1. Setting the context: the everyday encounters with management practices**

It's 9.30 am. I am at the 'Abyiad mine to meet with an employee who played an active role in the strikes. We are sitting in one of the offices of the administrative building. Shortly after our discussion begins, two employees join us and the initial interview turns into a lengthy group discussion on working conditions in the mine, privatisation and the strike as well as religion and cultural differences. A thick coat of dust covers the furniture and the office equipment. It has probably been a while since someone has sat here. The discussion goes on for hours. Around 1pm, we hear the call to prayer and the three men leave the room. After their return a few minutes later, the discussion continues, but is not

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<sup>14</sup> By morality of employment, I mean the set of values on which the duties and entitlements inherent to the employment relationship are grounded.

<sup>15</sup> The workplace is not the only locus of the production of the employees' subjectivities. The latter is also shaped outside the workplace. See THOMPSON, Edward, P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966. The study of factors outside the workplace, however, goes beyond the scope of this article that aims to explain how the workplace shapes the mobilisation of the employees.

as lively as before. Everyone looks tired. Some are close to dozing off. The three employees keep checking the time on their mobile phones. At 3.30pm, they decide to move towards the main gate to clock-out. It is half an hour before the end of official working hours. None of them was requested to work at any point during the day.

In the `Abyiad mine, as in other facilities of JPMC, many employees simply do not work. According to the mine directors, between 60% and 80% of the workforce is unnecessary. The fact that some employees do not work at JPMC results from overstaffing and a lack of rationalisation of the labour organisation. Recruitment practices aim not only to hire skilled and efficient labour, but also to provide for livelihood, to fuel clientelistic relations and to co-opt those who are too openly critical of the company. In the 1970s, JPMC started to hire Jordanian citizens exclusively. In the mines, JPMC used to recruit largely from neighbouring populations, who usually occupied low-skilled positions, such as guards and drivers, whereas high-skilled employees were predominantly from the northern and urban areas. According to a former General Director of JPMC, the hiring among the local population aimed to contain unemployment and, thus, to prevent the migration of southern population to the poor urban areas in northern Jordan.<sup>16</sup> The company also recruited local leaders, such as members of parliament and tribal leaders, who played a role as intermediaries between the company and the community. However, overstaffing was not restricted to low-skilled labour. During the 1980s and 1990s, when access to Gulf markets was closed to Jordanian labour,<sup>17</sup> JPMC started to recruit more widely among engineers and geologists to reduce unemployment among high-skilled Jordanian labour.

In this context, there was no need to mobilize the entire workforce. While the sociology of work usually assumes that managers aim to put employees to work, at JPMC managers do not need to mobilize the entire workforce to achieve production objectives. For this, they could rely on a few skilful employees. In fact, managerial practices provided few incentives for employees to work. The best and brightest employees were often compelled to work longer hours with no adequate compensation whereas absenteeism was rarely punished. Yet the lack of incentives to work did not mean a lack of rules or hierarchy. While most employees' productive capacities were not tightly controlled, their freedom of speech was. Managerial practices prioritized the ability to mobilise social capital and obedience rather than hard work, and those who were too critical of management were given disciplinary transfers. Most employees believed that it is more efficient to rely on personal connections than on hard work to be promoted or to obtain a salary increase. The management vacuum in controlling employees' productive capacities provided a wide room of manoeuvre for the employees which resulted in an uneven allocation of the workload between employees. In practice, a complex combination of factors influenced who did and did not work, such as the nature of the job, employees'

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Amman, July 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See BEL-AIR, Françoise. "Politiques d'immigration de travail et construction nationale en Jordanie (1975-2002)." In: JABER, Hana and METRAL, France (eds.), *Mondes en mouvements. Migrants et migrations au Moyen-Orient au tournant du XXIème siècle*. Beirut: IFPO, 2005, pp. 159-178.

qualifications and personality, the personality of his superior and the location of the workplace.

The impact of the privatization on the workload was ambiguous. Prior to privatisation, the Board of Directors ceased hiring after 1999 and the company launched an early-retirement scheme in 2000 (known as the *hawâfez* 2000; *hawâfez* literally means incentives) to reduce the number of employees. As a result, between 1999 and 2010 the number of employees decreased from 6,425 to 3,767. However, this did not result in an increase in workload. In 2013, most of my interlocutors associated privatisation with a diminution of the workload. In the mining sites, workload reduction was a direct consequence of an extension of the company's outsourcing strategy. Outsourcing was not new to JPMC but has significantly increased since 2010, to the extent that JPMC teams are completely replaced by contractors for mining activities. The production departments in the mines were the most directly affected by this evolution. This situation has created resentment among employees who used to be committed to their job and who found themselves useless after the privatization. In addition, many employees at headquarters felt isolated by a concentration of decision-making power in the hands of those working closely with Walid el-Kurdi. However, while some departments were deprived of activity, others such as the maintenance department remained understaffed. This resulted in the increase of the workload for some employees who were already working hard.

JPMC management was compelled by two imperatives. It needed not only to produce phosphate, but also to sustain a certain kind of relation between the sovereign and the population based on the considerable allocation of wealth through employment, subsidies and other material benefits. This duality of the management system shaped the employees' everyday experience of the workplace characterised by an unevenly allocated workload, favouritism, and a failure to recognize hard work. They realised that access to jobs, as well as better salaries and positions depended less on qualifications and experience than on the ability to mobilise social capital. As the following sections demonstrate, JPMC employees' protests reacted first and foremost to the immediate experience of the workplace. However, while all employees shared a sense of unfairness, they expressed contrasting moralities of employment and, thus, diverging demands.

## **2. Converging grievances: the uprising against favouritism, corruption and the privatisation**

### ***The uprising against favouritism***

To rally the workers, strike leaders circulated the pay slip of Walid el Kurdi's son, who is also the King's maternal cousin, and who was paid five times more than experienced engineers despite his lack of experience and qualification. For employees, this represented an extreme case of favouritism whereby some employees obtained special benefits according to their personal relations. This strategy of circulating the pay slip was very successful for two main reasons. First, the inequity of Walid el-Kurdi's

son's salary echoed the employees' everyday experiences of unequal treatment. When asked about the reason for unequal treatment, the employees have no word but "*wâstah!*" In this context, *wâstah* takes on two different but interrelated meanings. First, in spoken Arabic, the term *wâstah* (literally "the middle") refers to the person who mediates or intercedes on behalf of another person.<sup>18</sup> In the context of JPMC, the *wâstah* might act as a mediator during the recruitment process. In this case, the *wâstah* is the individual, usually a member of parliament, a tribal leader or other official, who intercedes on behalf of the job seeker. The *wâstah* might also interfere in decisions regarding the personal situation of an employee such as promotion, transfer, leaves and housing among other things. In this case, the *wâstah* is a superior. The *wâstah* as intercession, however, has a negative connotation. This leads us to the second meaning. The term *wâstah* is more largely employed as a catchword for any action that is considered unfair. My interlocutors often used it to discredit decisions and behaviours that put them at a disadvantage. This entailed a wide range of practices that did not necessarily involve the intercession of a *wâstah*. Most of the time, it implied decisions based on personal relations (*âlaqat shakhsieh*) such as, for instance, the hiring of Walid el-Kurdi's son in JPMC. In this sense, the term *wâstah* implied favouritism more than intercession. JPMC employees used it to refer to any decisions or practices that resulted in the unequal treatment of the employees.

In addition, by targeting the head of the company and his relatives exclusively, the leaders of the independent union revived the employees' frustrations with regard to privatisation. Privatisation of JPMC remains highly controversial. The decision was taken in the utmost secrecy fuelling rumours regarding the new owner and the potential consequences for employees. The owner of Kamil Holding Ltd., the major shareholder of JPMC, remains unknown. In addition, the fact that the new head of JPMC, Walid el Kurdi, had matrimonial ties with the Hashemite monarchy nourished suspicions of corruption. Employees largely shared the opinion that JPMC was taken over by the ruling family rather than privatised. A number of Walid el Kurdi's decisions further enhanced suspicions of corruption and embezzlement. Not only was he concurrently holding the function of both Chief Executive Officer and President of the Board of Directors, but he also suspended most of the standard decision-making procedures. He personally appointed new recruits. The deals he concluded with several contracting companies were regarded with great scepticism. In this context, the pay slip of Walid el Kurdi's son exacerbated existing evidence of corruption. In 2011, employees united against Walid el-Kurdi, who had become an emblem of the corruption associated with JPMC's privatisation. Moreover, such accusations directed toward Walid el Kurdi hinted at the perceived corruption of the Palace. Given the matrimonial ties, many observers interpreted the protests against Walid el Kurdi as an indirect attack on the King. This dimension was explicit in the narratives of some of JPMC employees who took part in the strikes, showing that these grievances had been latent at least since the privatisation.

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<sup>18</sup> See CUNNINGHAM, Robert, B and SARAYRAH, Yasin, K. *Wasta. The Hidden Force in Middle East Society*. London: Praeger, 1993.



Why did the employees not launch protests earlier? To understand the timing of the protests, it is necessary to look at them in light of the regional and national context.

### The “Arab Spring” effect

In 2011, the Arab region experienced some of the most momentous changes in its post-colonial history. Whereas Arab societies were perceived as crippled by political passivity, Ben 'Ali, Mubâarak, Qadhâfi and Sâleh, who had ruled for decades, suddenly fell under the pressure of popular protests. In Jordan, social and political tensions were palpable before 2011. The mobilisation of the daily workers in the agricultural sector in 2006, the Aqaba port strike in 2009, and the government teachers' campaign for union representation in 2010 paved the way for the organisation of the independent labour movement in 2011.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Manifesto released by the National Committee of Military Veterans on 1 May 2010 marked the first infringement of the “red lines” that had spared the Palace from direct criticism until then. In the wake of regional uprisings, street protests started to mount in January 2011 with youth activists, leftists, nationalists and the Islamist movement demanding political change. The leaders of JPMC employees' movement took the decision to launch the sit-in in this context. The latter were certainly inspired by the on-going events. Yet the organisation of JPMC employees' protests in the midst of the popular uprising was not self-evident. The context in itself does not explain why JPMC employees took to the street with their colleagues. They did so because their shared experience in the workplace constituted the common ground through which they related to the slogans and grievances shouted out by other protesters. Ordinary people construe and construct their understandings of the state through lived experiences and through the narratives about the state and their rules.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the matrimonial ties, the narrative of corruption surrounding the privatisation of JPMC and the employees' daily encounters with management practices were instrumental in forging the employees' representation of a homogeneous ruling elite crippled by corruption, from among which Walid el Kurdi was only an example.

Two dimensions of JPMC employees' lived experiences found particular resonance in the “Arab Springs.” First, like many other Jordanians, they dared to take to the streets to protest in 2011 because they considered the *nizâm* (lit. regime or system; it usually refers to the ruling regime or the state) weakened. This belief was reinforced by the fact that, unlike previous labour protests and strikes, the labour protests were not violently disrupted in 2011. In Jordan, the possibilities for labour protests are restricted

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<sup>19</sup> ADELY, F. “The Emergence of a New Labor Movement in Jordan.” *Op. Cit.* ; TELL, Tariq in ABURISH, Ziad. “Jordan's Current Political Opposition Movements and the Need for Further Research: An Interview with Tariq Tell (Part 2).” *Jadaliyya*. Web. 24 August 2012. URL: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7007/jordans-current-political-opposition-movements-and> (accessed on 18 July 2015).

<sup>20</sup> GUPTA, Akhil. “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State.” *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), 1995, pp. 375-402; GUPTA, Akhil. “Narratives of corruption: Anthropological and fictional accounts of the Indian state.” *Ethnography*, 6(1), 2005, pp. 5-34.

by the tight legal and security controls over labour. Jordanian law requires the workers to express their demands through the trade unions only. Since the 1970s, however, the official trade union structure had more often served to hamper labour protests than as a voice to raise employees' concerns.<sup>21</sup> Beyond institutional and legal constraints, JPMC employees also felt insecure to talk inside the workplace. As one employee explained to me: "Kurdi was a very strong man and he is the husband of the Princess... So, no one can talk, really!" The connection between the head of the company and the ruling regime nourished fears among the employees. In this context, not only JPMC employees' protest demands, but the act of protesting itself, challenged the company's management rationale. For many employees, the sit-in held in front of the headquarters in April 2011 broke the "wall of fear" that prevailed in the workplace. The employees did not express their grievances before 2011 because the institutional constraints, the authoritarian nature of management practices in JPMC and the connection to the King prevented them from doing so. In this context, the "Arab Spring" effect provided them the opportunity to voice their demands by relieving the fear of punishment.

Moreover, the employees identified their struggle with the "Arab Springs" because, beyond the claims against corruption and favouritism, they were challenging the establishment. This transpired at two levels. First, they defied Walid el Kurdi himself. Under the pressure of the protests, Walid el Kurdi left the company in March 2012 and was tried for corruption in June 2013. For the leaders of the ITUP, toppling the head of the company was their revolution. Second, they challenged the official trade union structure and the control of the General Intelligence Department over labour organisation by establishing the first independent labour union in the phosphate sector. Unlike other parts of Jordanian civil society, labour representation did not benefit from the relative political liberalisation after 1989.<sup>22</sup> In the mining sector more specifically, the GTUMME was regarded as crippled by corruption and the co-optation of its leaders. It was increasingly cut-off from the employees' daily concerns. This perception was solidified in April 2011 when the president of the GTUMME decided to stand on the side of the managers during negotiations. The official union's illegitimacy in the eyes of employees facilitated the establishment of the independent union. On Labour Day 2011, the leaders of the independent union in the phosphate sector joined labour activists from other sectors including daily-workers in agricultural sector, electricity sector, municipalities, printing industry and medical industry among others to announce the establishment of the Federation of the Independent Labour Unions. The labour activists soon got drawn into another struggle whose scope extended beyond the workplace, namely the struggle for the right to pluralism and freedom of association for labour. In JPMC, the employees' protests turned into a competition between the two unions over the claim for legitimacy to represent the employees.

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<sup>21</sup> AL-HOURANI, Hani. *The Jordanian labour movement*. Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, the protests of JPMC employees can be seen as a manifestation of the “Arab Spring” effect in two respects. Not only did the “Arab Spring” enable the protests by reducing a sense of fear, but it also provided the frame of reference in which the employees embedded their struggle, namely the struggle against corruption and authoritarian rules. During the general strikes in 2011 and 2012, favouritism, *wāstah* and corruption were the rallying cry. These three words encapsulate the sense of unfairness shared by employees. JPMC employees, however, did not all share the same views regarding what constituted fair treatment. In the following section, I discuss two contrasting views prevalent among employees. The first one, which was expressed by the leaders of the sit-in and their followers, alludes to meritocratic values whereas the second one emphasises the fairer distribution of wealth and opportunities.

### **3. Diverging moralities, diverging aspirations: tensions between meritocracy and equal allocation of wealth**

#### ***Diverging moralities of employment***

The initiative for the sit-in came from a small group of employees who used to sit together in one of their offices to kill time. Among the four who took the lead, three were engineers and one was a geologist by training who had been working as an IT expert since the late 1990s. Besides religious differences (they are Muslim and Christian), the instigators of the sit-in shared similar backgrounds. Originally from the northern part of Jordan, highly educated, they belonged to the urban middle class. As members of their respective professional associations, each had previous experiences in collective action. Some were politically close to the Trans-Jordanian nationalist left, yet in 2011 they made the strategic choice to keep the independent labour movement distant from any political label. Each of them joined the company in the early 1990s working together in the Shyddyieh mine. They were transferred to the headquarters at different times after the privatisation. At JPMC, transfer from the field to Amman is usually regarded a promotion. For the four employees, however, it was a disappointment as they were appointed to a position that did not meet their skills. In 2011, they were all posted to the exploration department where they had nothing to do. Nasim<sup>23</sup> was one of the engineers who led the protests. When I asked him about his personal motivations to launch the sit-in, he told me: “We can’t take our salaries for doing nothing!” “The right to work,” he continued, “is a matter of dignity!” In JPMC, there had always been employees who worked and others who did not. After the privatisation, however, it became a matter of contention for those who felt excluded from their previous tasks. These frustrations pointed to a certain morality of employment. “Some people don’t want to work. But others, without job they can’t find themselves, they lose their confidence. Now I can’t imagine how I would be

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<sup>23</sup> To ensure anonymity, I changed the name of my interlocutor.

able work again.”<sup>24</sup> This is the testimony of one of the employees who took part in the sit-in in April 2011. Like the four leaders of the protests, she had been appointed to a position where she had nothing to do. In this testimony, she expressed her desire to work. For her, working was a means of achieving personal fulfilment. In JPMC, this view was more widely shared among the skilled employees, including high and low skills, who took (or used to take) part in JPMC activities. Moreover, among my interlocutors, those who were compelled to work long hours did not complain about the workload itself, but rather about the lack of recognition of their hard work. They denounced the fact that some employees who did nothing were promoted to higher positions whereas others who had worked hard were not rewarded. When they described what they believed the company *should be*, they usually referred to meritocratic values. For them, the company should hire, promote and allocate rewards based on the qualification, experience and commitment of an employee. This view builds upon a certain idea of modernity as the rational, technocratic and democratic organisation of the workplace. It is possible to trace the genealogy of concepts regarding modernity in Jordan back, at least, to the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan in the 1920s when the supporters of parliamentary rule were opposing the chieftaincy-like ruling practices of the King.<sup>25</sup>

This meritocratic ethic of employment stood in sharp contrast with another ethic, equally shared among JPMC employees, which saw employment as a form of wealth distribution. In this perspective, employment was not necessarily linked to work. Employees who grew up in the mining basin more often, but not always, expressed this view. The prevalence of this morality of employment among JPMC employees has to be seen in relation to recruitment practices in which access to jobs was not necessarily tied to qualification and where managerial practices did not force employees into work. This morality of employment, however, was not specific to JPMC employees. Like the meritocratic one, the morality of employment as a form of wealth distribution emerged from the historical trajectory of the Jordanian modern state. Its origins can be traced back to recruitment practices in the army and in the public sector that served to enforce the authority of the ruling regime over the population. This was particularly significant in southern Jordan where the public sector reached up to 90% of total employment in the late 1980s.<sup>26</sup> These practices have shaped the morality of employment in two ways. First, the experience of employment was disconnected from hard work and effort. It was rather perceived as a means to secure income and to be entitled to several rights. Second, public employment sustained a certain type of rulers-ruled relationship by which the state sought to induct the population into the system of wage labour and thereby introduce economic dependency on the public sector. In this perspective, employment as distribution

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, Amman, March 2013.

<sup>25</sup> See ARURI, Naseer. *Jordan: A Study of Political Development 1923-1965*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1972; TELL, Tariq and ROGAN, Eugene (eds.). *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*. London: IB Tauris, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> See BAYLOUNI, Anne Marie. “Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy.” *Middle East Journal* 62(2), 2008, pp. 277-303.

represented a “relation of explicit hierarchy”<sup>27</sup> between the rulers and ruled that created certain obligations for the rulers based on habits and customs.<sup>28</sup> For employees who shared this morality of employment, the motivations to join the strikes were different from those expressed by the protest leaders. They did not want to overhaul the management system, but rather to seek further benefits from JPMC.

The divide between “those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment” and “those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution” in many ways maps onto the sociological divide between the “urban northerners” – considered to embody modernity – and the “Bedouin southerners” – considered to embody tradition.<sup>29</sup> This overlapping mirrors the fact that JPMC was, to a certain extent, the receptacle of tensions that shaped Jordanian society more broadly. But JPMC was not solely the receptacle of these tensions. The “urban northerners” / “Bedouin southerners” divide, which is the most common key for reading Jordanian politics, cannot account for the numerous employees who stand as exceptions to this determinism. As a matter of fact, the proponents of the meritocratic morality of employment were actually found among employees who belonged to tribal families from the South whereas many of the “urban northerners” felt threatened by the demands for a meritocratic system. Furthermore, the divide between those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment and those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution did not match with the hierarchical organisation of JPMC. Both views were shared by employees at all levels of the labour organisation, from the workers to the engineers and managers.

Looked at it more closely, the divide between employees along the two moralities of employment can better be explained by the divide between the employees who were qualified for their job (low-skilled and high-skilled alike) and those who were not. The former aspired to work and to be rewarded in accordance with their labour. The latter, however, had little to contribute to the performance of the company. There would be no place for them in a meritocratic system. They could nonetheless justify their position in JPMC based on the mutual expectations between the rulers and the rules with respect to subsistence. This suggests that the divide among JPMC employees, between those who aspired to a meritocratic system and those who viewed employment as distribution of wealth, did not reproduce the identity divide between Southerners and Northerners, but was rather “manufactured” in the workplace. It reflected the divide between the skilled and the unskilled employees. By allowing some employees not to work while compelling others to work for long hours, the management system made possible and, to some extent,

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<sup>27</sup> GRAEBER, David. “On the moral grounds of economic relations: A Maussian approach.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14(1), 2014, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Graeber defines the logics of the hierarchy as follow: “Whenever the lines of superiority and inferiority are clearly drawn and accepted by all parties and relations involve more than arbitrary force, they will be regulated by a web of habit or custom... In other words, any gift to a feudal superior was likely to be treated as a precedent, added to the web of custom and as such expected to be repeated each year in perpetuity.” *Ibid.* p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> MASSAD, Joseph. *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

encouraged the coexistence of two opposite moralities of employment among JPMC employees.

### **Different interpretations of the consequences of the privatisation**

The tension between the meritocratic morality of employment and the one that regarded employment as a form of wealth distribution was further increased by the consequences of privatisation. On the one hand, the experience of privatisation further increased the frustrations of the employees who shared meritocratic values. Privatisation was not a mere transfer of capital from governments to private investors. It also entailed certain notions of how private companies should function, including the rationalisation of the labour process, technification, profit maximization and heavy workload. This idea was well embedded in the minds of JPMC employees. The project of the privatisation raised fears for the employees who worried for their rights and entitlements; but it also raised hopes for those who were aspiring to a more rationalised mode of management. Contrary to employees' expectations, however, the privatisation of JPMC did not lead to an increase in work pressure. On the contrary, many departments were deprived of their productive activities. While privatisation did not introduce substantial material and managerial changes to the company, it widened the gap between the employees' lived experience in the workplace and their notion of how things *should be*.

On the other hand, the privatisation of JPMC reinforced the economic exclusion of the population living in the mining area. If JPMC employees were not personally affected, those who grew up in the mining area shared the opinion that the company should further support their community. In this respect, employment was a key issue. While JPMC used to be the primary employer of the population living in the mining area, the company stopped hiring among this population after 2000. The victims of this decision were not the employees themselves, but their sons and relatives who struggled to find a decent job. As mentioned above, the employment relation in JPMC used to sustain a relation of explicit hierarchy between the sovereign and the local population. From the Maussian perspective, this means that through privatisation JPMC sought to absolve itself from obligations stemming from the tradition of hiring the local population. This tradition referred to the rulers-ruled relationship and, thus, this obligation would stand annulled as soon as the rulers step out from the company's ownership. For the local population, however, the company was still under the control of the ruling regime. In other words, they considered that the privatisation of JPMC did not disengage the company from its obligation. The employee resentment was further fuelled by the fact that, despite the closure of the regular recruitment process, Walid al-Kurdi did nevertheless appoint a few hundred employees between 2006 and 2011. Moreover, during 2008 and 2010, the profits of JPMC skyrocketed as the result of the sudden peak in phosphate market prices.<sup>30</sup> While newspapers were reporting the excellent results of their

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<sup>30</sup> Phosphate prices increased from 35 USD/tonne on average in 2007 to more than 400USD/tonne in 2008. Source: Jeune Afrique, *Au royaume des phosphates*, January 11th, 2011. Link:

company, employees found it increasingly unfair that Walid el Kurdi earned millions while themselves and their families remained poor.

### **Diverging aspirations and further challenges for the JPMC employees' movement**

Employees' expectations regarding the outcome of the strikes reflect the different moralities of employment and different interpretations of the privatisation. Like the four leaders of the movement, many employees went to the streets to request the complete restructuring of the company. They prioritised implementing new by-laws, restructuring the organisational chart to cancel redundant positions and revising the human resources management system based on meritocratic values. Those who saw employment as a form of wealth distribution, however, did not want to reform the management system. They hoped to obtain higher salaries and, eventually, a job for their sons. Besides these two contentious groups, JPMC employees also included a minority group that decided to stand on the side of the managers. These included employees who had long been co-opted by the establishment, such as the active members of the GTUMME, as well as employees who believed in order and hierarchy. Hence, the politics of the workplace in JPMC cannot be reduced to the struggle between owners and workers. On the contrary, the mobilisation of JPMC employees suggests that the divide between the two moralities of employment discussed in this article (meritocracy vs. allocation of wealth) superimposed a further division on those already imposed by virtue of the hierarchical organisation of labour. This explains how high-qualified employees – who would be expected to occupy managing positions such as engineers and geologists – could become leaders of the employees' movement in 2011.

This divide constituted the major weakness of JPMC employees' movement. In February 2012, after the second general strike, the leaders of the independent union had strong legitimacy among the employees whereas the president of the GTUMME, Khaled Zaher Fanatseh, was completely discredited. They had just reached an agreement with the head of the company.<sup>31</sup> This agreement was seen as the most generous collective agreement in the history of JPMC. The leaders of the independent union were aware that the restructuring of JPMC would not be sufficient incentive to rally all the employees and, thus, they had also included a set of financial and material benefits to their demands. The agreement thus included three sets of clauses. The first set of clauses was related to the restructuring of the company and met the initial demands of the strike leaders. The second set of clauses included financial and social benefits for the employees including

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[http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articleimp\\_ARTJAJA2607p076-078.xml0\\_au-royaume-des-phosphates.html](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articleimp_ARTJAJA2607p076-078.xml0_au-royaume-des-phosphates.html) (accessed on April 28th, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> The leaders of the independent union played an active part in the discussion, but they were not allowed to sign the agreement since they were not considered as the official representatives of the employees. The agreement was signed in February 14, 2012 by the representative of the company, the president of the GTUMME, the representative of Ministry of Labour and several Members of Parliament who signed on behalf of the independent union.

an increase in wages, a 16th month of salary, the raising of the end-of-service allowance, scholarships and the extension of health insurance after retirement among other benefits. The last set of demands was related to the establishment of an early-retirement scheme, known as the *hawâfez* 2012. This was not part of the initial demands of the employees, but appeared in the outcome of the negotiations.

Two years later, in May 2014, JPMC witnessed a new general strike. This time, however, the strike was not led by the independent union but by Khaled Zaher Fanatseh, the president of the GTUMME! The latter rallied the employees against the restructuring plan and the new personnel system that were put in place by the company as part of the requirements of the agreement of February 14, 2012. To end the strike, the company decided to withdraw the changes recently introduced. In the meantime, it pulled the rug from under the feet of the independent union and secured the *status quo* within the company.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the assumption that contentious politics is grounded in the everyday life of workers, this article analyses the rationale behind the mobilisation of JPMC employees in 2011. It discusses the claims of the protestors in light of the employees' lived experiences of the workplace. In the context of the Arab uprisings, like many other Jordanians, the employees of JPMC united against corruption, favouritism and the authoritarian rules. More specifically, they protested against the privatisation of their company that brought an individual closely related to the Hashemite monarchy to the head of JPMC. In this context, the "Arab Spring" effect played the role of catalysing the protests and provided a common frame of reference for demonstrators. Behind shared feelings of unfairness, however, JPMC employees were divided between those who hoped for a management system based on meritocratic values on the one hand, and those who asked for a larger share in wealth allocation on the other hand. These contrasting aspirations reflected divergent moralities of employment: one viewed employment as a medium for personal achievement through work, whereas the other considered employment as a form of wealth distribution. This divide was also manifest in the way employees interpreted the consequences of the privatisation: for the former the privatisation widened the gap between their expectations and the reality while the latter denounced the increasing economic exclusion of the poorest.

The study of the mobilisation of JPMC employees, thus, shows that the politics of JPMC was structured around the broad divide between the logics of meritocracy and the logics of wealth distribution rather than around the workers/owners divide. This has important consequences for the study of labour movements as it forces us to question the meaning(s) of employment that underlie labour demands. Moreover, in light of the latter development of JPMC employees' mobilisation, the coexistence of different moralities of employment in the workplace appeared as its major weakness. It hampered the possibilities of the emergence of working-class consciousness. In this respect, the case of



JPMC employees provides some insights into the *non*-making of the Jordanian working-class. Finally, the origins of the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide can be partly explained by the socio-historical trajectory of the Jordanian state. It reflected tensions between modernisation policies and chieftaincy-like ruling practices that have shaped Jordanian politics since the establishment of the modern state. The demands of JPMC employees suggest that ideas of modernity and chieftaincy-like ruling practices penetrated spheres of the social life beyond the realm of the state by shaping the way ordinary people related to the world they live in.

Sociologically, however, the divide between those who shared a meritocratic morality of employment and those who regarded employment as a form of wealth distribution cannot be reduced to the “urban northerner” / “Bedouin southerner” cleavage commonly invoked to explain Jordan politics. Even though the two often overlap, there were many exceptions among JPMC employees. The article argues that the dynamics in the workplace better account for the employees’ divide along the two different moralities of employment. Empirically, the meritocratic morality of employment was widely supported among the qualified employees (low-skilled and high-skilled employees alike) whereas employees who were poorly qualified shared the morality of employment as a form of wealth distribution. This divide can be traced back to recruitment and managerial practices that allowed for a large proportion of employees to not work in JPMC. This means that the meritocracy/wealth distribution divide in JPMC was manufactured in the workplace itself. In this respect, the study of JPMC can contribute to a better understanding of Jordanian politics by showing how the cleavage between the “urban northerners” and the “Bedouin southerners,” which is usually construed as an identity-based cleavage (and which, in relation to work, often alludes to the myth of the “lazy Bedouin”), is (re)produced in the workplace.