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هيئة التنسيق النقابية

## Social Movements in Lebanon: The Case of the salary scale movement

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Arab Forum For alternatives



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## **Social Movements in Lebanon: The Case of the salary scale movement**

In the past few years, Lebanon has been through the worst economic crisis in its modern history and one of “the worst three crises across the world since the mid-nineteenth century”<sup>1</sup> according to the World Bank. Inflation and unemployment rates soared, institutions collapsed one after the other, and the local currency lost more than 90% of its value hence its purchasing power.

The crisis was attributed to several reasons such as the corruption of state institutions and the incompetence of policies they adopt as well as reliance on a system in which the minority accumulates wealth and the majority is left with the minimum, the latter being the core cause of the crisis. Demands for raising the salaries of public sector employees were resisted by financial institutions and business owners, backed by politicians and journalists, and senior employees in the private sector, who have the upper hand in the local economy. This was accompanied by the absence of new policies and reforms that are capable of curbing inflation rates. Debates over the issue of salaries concluded with a decision to increase allowances rather than basic salaries for the public sector. This followed a slight increase to private sector salaries. Meanwhile, no decisions were made regarding necessary reforms to ensure that those increases would not lead to further inflation, hence reducing the purchasing power of the new salaries.

The same business lobbies that rejected salary raises attempted to crush the strike staged by public employees through several repressive measures. These included threatening employees who are absent from work for more than two days with disciplinary actions and the deduction of new allowances<sup>2</sup>. When high school teachers started a strike in early 2023 and demanded an actual increase to their basic salaries, senior employees at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education asked school principals to spy on the teachers and report the ones who take part in the strike<sup>3</sup>. However, until January 17, 2023, the strike was still ongoing.

On September 16, 2022, the parliament approved a minimal raise in the salaries of public sector employees, the military, and the retired. The raise was equivalent to double the basic salary, was in Lebanese liras, and was part of the so-called “social aid” that followed the ratification of a defective budget on September 26, 2022, only three months before the end of the year. Later, employees could only go to work one or two days a week because the new transportation allowance (95,000 liras/day) was not enough to cover the entire week. This demonstrates that all decisions made in this regard were only temporary measures devised by interest networks while not in any way alleviating the impact of the financial crisis on the people. Even the proposed allowances such as cost of living allowance, overtime, and productivity incentives were not all paid.

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<sup>1</sup> "Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction", "The World Bank", 1/ 6/ 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

<sup>2</sup> Nada Ayoub. “Crushing public sector strike: Will the government encroach upon the custom dollar? [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, Aug 2, 2022: <https://bit.ly/3QwUgvj>

<sup>3</sup> Fouad Bazzi. “High school teachers to the ministry: It is up to us [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, Jan 10, 2023: <https://bit.ly/3ZIXLnF>

It is worth noting that the Lebanese law gives private sector employees the right to create and join trade unions yet bans public sector employees from doing the same<sup>4</sup>. This led to the emergence of semi-unions in public sector departments under other names like “leagues” such as the Public High School Teachers’ League<sup>5</sup>. The political and economic system in Lebanon does not really make room for the creation of effective trade unions. This led to the creation in the 1990s, following the end of the civil war, of “false unions controlled by federations that thwarted the work of the Lebanese General Labour Federation<sup>6</sup>.” Most recently published research about trade and labour unions and professional orders in Lebanon attributes the weakness/absence of union organization to two reasons: “the first is the control traditional and sectarian political parties exercise over trade and labour unions hence on the federation”<sup>7</sup> and second is the negative impact neo-liberal policies adopted after the civil war on the labour movements<sup>8</sup>, which led to the marginalization of trade unions and the growth of informal economy. This sheds light on an important fact—that the shortcomings of social movements in the Arab region are not only linked to defects within those movements but are also the result of a political system whose values contradict the nature and demands of those movements.

Parties that objected to salary increases blamed the financial crisis on the salary scale draft law that approved salary raises following initiatives by the Trade Unions Coordination Committee and the minister of labour starting 2011. Those parties argue that the law, ratified in 2017, “played a major role in the crisis whose manifestations started in mid-2019”<sup>9</sup> and that salary increases “constituted a huge burden on the treasury and put a lot of pressure on society in general”<sup>10</sup>. However, according to the Ministry of Finance, the amounts allocated to salaries and related allowances did not increase remarkably following the approval of the salary scale law<sup>11</sup>. Linking the financial crisis to the salary scale law is only a pretext to avoid looking into the real reasons behind the crisis, on top of which is the economic system that made the minority rich at the expense of the majority, and to deprive employees and workers of their rights.

Based on the above, this study examines the social, labour, and trade union movement created in Lebanon in 2011 to demand salary increases, approved later in 2017. It aims at understanding the nature and role of this movement and evaluating its performance. The study also investigates the possibility of reviving trade union movements considering the financial crisis through which Lebanon is going and subsequent encroachments on the rights of employees and workers. The study will be divided into five

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<sup>4</sup> Karen El Ghazawi. “Trade union freedom selectivity: Yes, to creating trade unions, no to strikes [Arabic].” *Legal Agenda*, April 18, 2022: <https://bit.ly/3ZIXLnF>

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed El Aasi. “The role of trade unions in the transitional phase [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, Dec 16, 2019: <https://al-akhbar.com/Issues/281149>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lea Bou Khater, "Lebanon's October 2019 Revolution: Inquiry into Recomposing Labor's Power," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021) 464- 472.

Also see: Jamil Mouawad. "Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations: A Review in Light of the Popular Movement", "Arab Reform Initiative", 9/ 11/ 2019, [Arab\\_Reform\\_Initiative\\_en\\_lebanese-trade-unions-and-independent-professional-associations-a-review-in-light-of-the-popular-movement\\_20470\(2\).pdf](https://arab-reform-initiative-en-lebanese-trade-unions-and-independent-professional-associations-a-review-in-light-of-the-popular-movement_20470(2).pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Nadim El- Kak, "Alternative Labor Unions in Lebanon: Comparative Reflections and Lessons, The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, April 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Profit increases at the expense of salaries [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar* July 25, 2022: [https://al-akhbar.com/In\\_numbers/341857](https://al-akhbar.com/In_numbers/341857)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

main sections. The first section provides a general overview of the political and economic context of the movement and the reasons behind its creation, both direct and indirect. The second section focuses on the structure of the movement, the alliances it made, and the demands it put forward while the third focuses on the movement's activities and strategies and the fourth examines internal and external challenges (the countermovement). The fifth and last section tackles the outcome of the movement's activities such as the ratification of the salary scale law, the successes and failures of the movement, and the movement's link to the October 17 uprising and its aftermath.

## **First: The history of the movement**

Understanding the political and economic context of the salary scale struggle necessitates going back to the circumstances that initiated the movement in 1995-1996. First, it is worth noting that labour movements in Lebanon started before the creation of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920. At that time, Lebanon witnessed a series of demand-based popular protests led by peasants against landowners and the feudal system. The protests came in response to an Ottoman law passed in 1919 and which specified the functions of associations in Lebanon. This led to the creation of labour associations, in which workers and employers alike were involved. Those associations evolved over time until in 1944 the Lebanese General Labour Federation and labor unions were established. Right before the civil war, when the financial situation got worse and salaries dropped, "trade unions played a substantial role in demand-based movements which were led by students and workers, and which were forcefully suppressed"<sup>12</sup>.

In 1970, five years before the civil war started, "the Lebanese General Labour Federation was re-established and reunified. It consisted of nine trade unions." At that time, the federation played a major role in social and trade union movements for it "succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of workers and low-income individuals around a program that catered to the needs of peasants on one hand and all those impacted by rising costs of living on the other hand."<sup>13</sup> During the war, the role of the federation was not restricted to trade union activism and extended to politics, which was shown in its efforts to put an end to the war. There were also several grassroots labour movements before the war, and they took part in many activities including the strike staged by the workers of Ghandour Confectionary Factory. The workers, 1,200 men and women, constituted the largest group outside trade unions. The workers started the strike in November 1972 and demanded a salary raise, equality between male and female workers, recognizing the factory committee, and acknowledging the workers' right to organize. On November 11, the police shot protestors at the entrance of the factory<sup>14</sup>.

### **1. The first "battle" for salaries:**

During and after the civil war, which ended in 1990, half of the current trade unions had been established and most of them were fake ones based on religious and sectarian grounds<sup>15</sup>. Those trade unions were

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<sup>12</sup> Jamil Mouawad, Op. Cit.

<sup>13</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Dar Riyad El Rayess for Books and Publishing, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Dar El Saqi, 2016.

controlled by federations that thwarted labour movements<sup>16</sup> after having mobilized thousands of members and workers who demanded their rights<sup>17</sup>. The General Labour Federation lost the independence it once had when it managed to mobilize different powers from both the right and the left that worked together for the welfare of workers<sup>18</sup>. During that time, labour union movements were almost non-existent since “Syrian factions in Lebanon took control of the federation and all ministers of labour were managed by Syrians who succeeded in fragmenting dozens of trade unions. For example, the Carpenters’ Union in Tripoli was made up of three or four divisions.”<sup>19</sup> This aimed at “curbing opposition to economic initiatives by governments.”<sup>20</sup> Added to that was banning public sector employees from establishing trade unions.

The coming to power of Rafik El Hariri<sup>21</sup> in 1992 constituted a major turning point as far as crushing labour union movements is concerned. After the end of the civil war and the signing of the Taif Agreement<sup>22</sup>, “opting for neoliberal policies meant crushing trade union movements at the hand of parties in whose best interest the approval of those policies was”<sup>23</sup>. When Elias Abu Rizk became the head of the Lebanese General Labour Federation, labor union movements were revived, and mobilization of relevant powers gained momentum<sup>24</sup>. That shift was related to Abu Rizk’s background and his alliance with leftist powers that opposed state policies especially as far as workers’ rights are concerned. Abu Rizk started his battle with the government during the 1993 federation elections. The impact of Abu Rizk’s victory was immediately felt as “the federation started organizing protests that demanded increasing salaries to enable people to cope with rising costs of living. This marked the return of trade union movements to Lebanon as people started taking to the streets again. However, Hariri’s government banned protests citing security concerns.” Before that, the federation staged several strikes that were violently suppressed<sup>25</sup>.

Abu Rizk opposed Hariri’s government on several levels and “called for the implementation of fair social policies that would contribute to fixing budget deficits and raising the living standards of workers

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed El Aasi, Op. Cit.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, head of the Independent Trade Union Movement and member of the Public Secondary Schools Teachers League, Nov 7, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Maron Al Kholi, head of the Lebanese General Labor Federation, Dec 1, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud, head of the Private Schools’ Teachers’ Union, Nov 23, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Alexi Touma. “Lebanese Civil Society organizations and the Implementation of a new Public Wage Scale.” Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and international Affairs: [https://aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/programs/civil\\_society\\_actors\\_and\\_policy\\_making/projects/breaking-the-mold/case\\_6\\_new\\_public\\_wage\\_scale\\_lebanon.pdf](https://aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/programs/civil_society_actors_and_policy_making/projects/breaking-the-mold/case_6_new_public_wage_scale_lebanon.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Rafik El Hariri is a Lebanese politician and businessman who served as Lebanon’s prime minister. He took office in 1992, two years after the end of the civil war. His had an economic project that relied on boosting the private sector and supporting business owners from Lebanon, the Arab region, and across the world. His economic policies relied on two main factors: stabilizing the exchange rate of the Lebanese lira and implementing a massive reconstruction project. In 1998, Hariri’s government proposed restructuring public debt, which meant borrowing in foreign currency. The parliament ratified the proposal and Lebanon started borrowing in US dollars from both inside and outside the country, which had grave consequences on the national economy together with economic and financial policies that were approved earlier. Hariri was assassinated in Beirut in 2005.

<sup>22</sup> The Taif Agreement, also called the National Reconciliation Accord, was signed by warring factions in Lebanon with Syrian-Saudi mediation on September 30, 1989, in the city of Taif, ending the Lebanese Civil War.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

<sup>24</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>25</sup> Joelle Boutros. “Remembering for the present: The most important debates on salary scales, 1995 and 1998 [Arabic].” *Legal Agenda*, Aug 8, 2014: <https://bit.ly/3zXMHY0>

and employees. He also called for a comprehensive plan that protects the right to food, shelter, healthcare, and education.”<sup>26</sup> However, not everyone agreed to Abu Rizk’s approach, and some even accused him of prioritizing his thirst for power at the expense of people’s demands in his last term at the federation<sup>27</sup> in 1998. Others saw his return to the public scene as part of an agreement with the authorities and claimed that he was part of a conflict between state institutions.

Following attempts at undermining its work, “the federation threatened to go on a strike and called for staging protests all over the country. The military was instructed to stop protests by force if necessary. The federation withdrew for fear clashes would erupt with the military, and truce was agreed upon with the government provided that the latter would investigate salary increases and the activation of the Price Index Committee. The committee, however, suspended its meetings when businesspeople refused to agree to more than 10-12% salary increase while the federation had asked for 76%. The government rejected the federation’s demands, and an escalation took place between both”<sup>28</sup>.

At that time, the salary scale crisis started<sup>29</sup> and so did the movement relate to it. The term “salary scale” was used for the first time in 1994 when public employees started demanding laws that protect their rights<sup>30</sup>. Starting 1995, demands by public sector employees expanded through several movements, on top of which were strikes organized by different entities within the public sector. At the time, the education division led the protests Hariri’s government and its economic policies<sup>31</sup>. Before parliamentary elections, the government partially gave in after the federation called upon its members to vote against government representatives. Most of the demands put forth by teachers were met while the demands of employees from other divisions were postponed till August-September 1995<sup>32</sup>. At the time, Hariri tried to put the entire salary scale draft law to vote as a means of encouraging parties that have demands to take part in the elections. However, several MPs rejected the proposal, which forced Hariri to allow voting for only the demands of the education division since employees from that division were supposed to monitor the elections<sup>33</sup>.

The federation went back to work after parliamentary elections ended on September 4, 1996<sup>34</sup>. In 1997, several strikes took place and the government promised to ratify the salary scale law in its entirety<sup>35</sup>. Confrontations between the government and the federation reached their peak on March 24, 1997. Elias Abu Rizk won once more the chairmanship of the federation but was arrested and the Ministry of Labour made his rival Ghanem Zoghby, who lost the election, the chairman. Abu Rizk, backed by leftist trade union movements that make up the National Trade Union League, declared splitting with the federation and the International Labour Organization recognized him. The Lebanese government responded with

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>29</sup> The public sector in Lebanon depends in its evaluation of civil servants on a ranking system. Based on this system, employees are divided into levels and each level is divided into ranks. Salaries are determined based on an equation that takes into consideration the salary and the rank. According to this system, employees are promoted based on performance and merit and move to higher ranks based on seniority (years of work). See Maha Zerkat, “ABC salary scale [Arabic].” Al Akhbar, May 24, 2014: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/32008>

<sup>30</sup> Joelle Boutros. Op. Cit.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>33</sup> Joelle Boutros. Op. Cit.

<sup>34</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>35</sup> Joelle Boutros. Op. Cit.

arresting Abu Rizk two more times in 1997<sup>36</sup>. Attempts at controlling the General Labour Federation did not stop at splitting it up and rigging its elections but also extended to finding a legal way to undermine its influence when the minister of labour proposed a law that regulates trade union activities. The law was made up of ninety-six articles, thirty-one of which allowed the Ministry of Labour to interfere in the federation's internal affairs<sup>37</sup>.

Debates over the salary scale continued until the law was ratified in 1998. However, reforms included in the law did not meet all the demands and were seen as unjust. This can be attributed to two factors: first, the ruling elite's reluctance to respond to the demands and second, internal problems within the federation and trade unions and which rendered them unable to continue the fight<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, Hariri's government ratified three salary increases, none of which managed to face price hikes and inflation rates especially that prices always go up whenever there is talk about salary increases, hence making those increases futile. This led trade unions to call upon the government to monitor prices<sup>39</sup>. Although the minimum wage was raised to USD 333, a family had to have an average income of USD 500 to go above the poverty line<sup>40</sup>.

Theories that study social movements differ in their approach. Some study micro interactions, hence focusing on the behaviour of individuals, while others opt for macro analysis, hence focusing on social processes. A third type of theories tackles the meso-level, which is the link between micro and macro levels<sup>41</sup>. Another approach is the snowball effect that deals with a movement that starts small then gains momentum until it becomes influential on a large scale. Social movements the demanded salary increases in Lebanon were launched in 2011 yet were the result of the accumulation of years of activism and came in response to a long economic and political history that necessitated action on the part of workers and trade unions. However, the influence of politicians and capitalists, the creation of fake trade unions, attempts at undermining the General Labour Federation, and banning public employees from forming trade unions are all factors that contributed to weakening the role of those movements. Added to this is the way public schools came under the control of different political and sectarian factions, hence losing their independence and failing to nurture critical thinking<sup>42</sup>. Those obstacles, however, did not in any way put an end to trade union activism in Lebanon and did not hinder the creation of a movement that called for salary increases to reach its peak between 2011 and 2013. In fact, several factors aided in the creation of this movement.

## **2. Paving the way for the movement:**

The second salary scale battle started in 2011 with the formation of a new government in Lebanon under the leadership of Najib Mikati, hence giving rise to the salary scale movement. The movement took two

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<sup>36</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Joelle Boutros. Op. Cit.

<sup>39</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>40</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>41</sup> David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, eds. *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi, regional coordinator of the International Union of Public Service Workers and consultant at the General Labor Federation from 1983 till 1993, Dec 16, 2022.



paths: the first is a political path through Minister of Labour in the new government Charbel Nahas<sup>43</sup> and the second is a trade union path through the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee. The movement started when Nahas called upon then head of the Trade Unions Coordination Committee Hanna Gharib and head of the Civil Servants League Mahmoud Heidar to "break the pattern" and representatives of that "pattern" were adamant to crush the movement<sup>44</sup>. The Trade Unions' Coordination Committee is an alliance of public sector workers that was created of five entities that played a major role in the salary scale struggle: public high school teachers, public elementary school teachers, public vocational schoolteachers, private school teachers' syndicate, and public administration employees. This movement filled the vacuum that resulted in undermining trade union activism owing to adopted policies. In fact, the committee was the product of the expansion of this movement<sup>45</sup>. According to Hussein Gawad, head of the Public-School Teachers League, "the committee is not a licensed association but rather an alliance of teachers in the public sector in addition to private school teachers and public administration employees." The committee, Jawad added, started its work with meetings held by the leagues of elementary and high school public teachers to discuss salary raises and then other entities joined later since they all shared the same demands<sup>46</sup>.

Activism related to salary increase was always driven by the same reasons whether in its beginnings in the early 1990s or when the movement took shape in 2011: undermining the public sector through driving away all skilled employees and only appointing individuals that pledge allegiance to the ruling elite<sup>47</sup>. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of employees in the public sector are redundant owing to an old tradition in Lebanese politics, based on which many of the unemployed were given jobs at the public sector even if they are not needed. This practice eventually proved a failure when faced with budget deficits and pressure by the World Bank and local banks to fight deficits and deal with inflation. The ruling elites, many of whose loyalists are appointed in the public sector, manipulated their way through this problem by resorting to two ruses: increasing the number of daily wagers and appointing retired employees or changing the status of permanent employees into retirees<sup>48</sup>.

Calls for reducing the labour power in the public sector is linked to austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions and are always supported by politicians, capitalists, and recently the Central Bank of Lebanon. They are also linked to alleged reforms that are expected to alleviate the impact of the financial crisis. A link was also established between salary increase demands and the crisis and the same entities started calling for freezing the implementation of the salary scale law for three

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<sup>43</sup> Charbel Nahas was the minister of communications from 2009 till 2011 and the minister of labor from 2011 till 2012. He studied engineering and planning in Paris and returned to Lebanon in 1979 and taught at the Lebanese University for 12 years. He was in charge of the reconstruction of downtown Beirut between 1982 and 1986 and worked in the banking sector until 1998. He ran in municipal elections against the list backed by the ruling class. He designed a financial reform program in 1998-1999, was a member of the team that drafted the Land Use Master plan between 2002 and 2004 and led the team that set the general investments plan in 2005 and 2006. He works in urban and economic consultancy and published several studies on education, immigration, and labor. In 2016, he established a political party called Citizens in a State.

<sup>44</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, July 21, 2017: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/235186>

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh. Op. Cit.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad, head of the league of public elementary school teachers, Nov 21, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Mohamed Wahba. Op. Cit.

<sup>48</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

years to save the Lebanese lira from collapsing<sup>49</sup>. This argument, however, started in 2018, that is before the start of the financial crisis and the collapse of the lira.

According to Lebanese economist Mohamed Zebib, “all talk about redundancy in the public sector is linked to military and security entities.” Zebib explained that those entities need more staff because of the responsibilities they have and for this to happen, employees from other departments in the public sector like education are laid off. Meanwhile, many families transfer their children from private to public schools because of the financial situation. This means overcrowded classes in understaffed schools. “What kind of education are we expected to offer then” wonders Zebib. “And how can we hope to build a strong economy without an educated population?” Zebib argues that overspending in the public sector is not because of salaries but rather because of debts that must be paid to banks and investors, hence channelling money towards the rich. That is why austerity measures should only be applied through doing away with this kind of spending, cancelling those debts, and breaking away from a system that gives creditors the upper hand<sup>50</sup>.

The interval between 2012 till 2015 constituted a significant phase in the movement as it was characterized by several forms of civil disobedience that reached its peak in 2013 and 2014 as demonstrated in the strikes staged by workers and public sector employees. At the time, Lebanon was going through political instability and most governments were inefficient in addition to the country having no president from 2014 till 2016. The Lebanese parliament extended its term three times despite popular protests. The parliament was elected in 2009 and its term expired in May 2013, yet it stayed till 2018. In the first time, members of parliament did not agree on an election law so some of them proposed extending the parliament’s term under the pretext of avoiding conflict and maintaining stability. On November 5, 2014, members of parliament extended their term once more and on June 14, 2017, an election law was agreed upon based on fifteen constituencies and extended the term of the parliament till May 20, 2018<sup>51</sup>.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Syria, which started in 2011, led to an influx of refugees. In fact, Lebanon received the largest refugee percentage of its size and population compared to neighbouring countries. Migrant labour had impacted the Lebanese economy long before the war in Syria. The Lebanese labour force “underwent a major structural transformation with the increase in the export of skilled labour and the import of unskilled labour. Also, wages tend to decrease as cheap labour increases and the ruling elites took advantage of this development to freeze the wages of the Lebanese. They also started replacing Lebanese workers with foreign workers who are paid less and do not get insurance until entire sectors such as industry, tourism, and domestic services became dependent on migrant labour”<sup>52</sup>. On the other hand, Ghassan Ghosn<sup>53</sup> was elected head of the General Labour Federation for the fourth time in 2011. This position was previously occupied by loyalists, which led the federation to act against the

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<sup>49</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Warnings of financial collapse: The poor paying for the rich [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, Nov 11, 2018: <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/262282>

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mohamed Zebib: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZtKrC3tY5I>

<sup>51</sup> Salwa Abu Shakra. “From 2009 till 2017: What are the reasons for the first, second, and third extensions? [Arabic]” *Al Nahar*, June 16, 2017: <https://bit.ly/3SRHTMb>

<sup>52</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>53</sup> Ghassan Ghosn was elected as head of the General Labor Federation in 2001 and was reelected for four consecutive times. Ghosn was a loyalist and known to be close to parliament speaker Nabih Berri. His last term ended in 2015 yet he stayed until he was elected secretary general of the World Federation of Arab Trade Unions. Ghosn was succeeded by Beshara Al Asmar in whose term the federation is still unable to do its job in defending workers’ rights.

best interest of workers at times. This was demonstrated when the federation cancelled a general strike for salary increases, which drove the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee to stop working with the federation and several influential trade unions to suspend their membership in it<sup>54</sup>.

The second round of demands pertaining to salary increases started when the salary scale law was approved for judges and professors at Lebanese University in 2011<sup>55</sup>. This created a gap between university professors and schoolteachers<sup>56</sup>. Professors at the Lebanese University also withdrew from the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee following their salary increase<sup>57</sup>. The government, therefore, succeeded in separating university professors and judges from employees in the public sector as part of its attempt at fragmenting the movement and driving a wedge between different parties involved in it<sup>58</sup>. The government also approved salary increases for the private sector in February 2012, hence the demands of schoolteachers and public employees were not met, and their salaries underwent no change since the last raise in 1996.

When the government failed to keep its promises and increase salaries in a way that enables people to deal with growing inflation rates, the movement started growing stronger and more organized<sup>59</sup>. Several other factors contributed to the growing strength of the movement and the increasing influence of its leaders. These include the fact that the movement included many of the few associations in which democratic elections and rotation of power took place, which meant they had actual legitimacy on the ground. In addition, most of the people elected to head those associations were independent and not loyal to the authorities. The movement also managed to fill a vacuum in trade union activism at the time<sup>60</sup>. Former head of the Civil Servants League Mahmoud Heidar confirms this argument: "Leagues that formed the coordination committee at the time were democratic. They had elections and there was rotation of power"<sup>61</sup>. Other factors that consolidated the movement included banning employees in the public sector from forming trade unions and the fact that the General Labour Federation was no longer seen as legitimate. The federation had cancelled the strike scheduled for November 11, 2012, in case the government does not approve a minimum wage of USD 800 then retracted its decision when the government made the minimum wage USD 460 only and despite the federation's failures, that second call still had an impact on pushing the movement forward<sup>62</sup>.

Additional factors contributed to launching the movement. According to the Central Administration of Statistics, the consumption price index increased by 35% between 1998 and 2011. According to the Consultation and Research Center, this percentage amounts to 58%. In addition, transportation costs increased four-fold between 1996 and 2011. Based on those developments, wages should have been raised by 121%. However, the raise did not exceed sixteen%<sup>63</sup>. Tension reached its peak with a decision

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<sup>54</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Walid Al Shaar, former deputy head of the league public employees and a trade union activist, Nov 21, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Alexi Touma. Op. Cit.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj, a journalist specializing in the education sector, Nov 22, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah, head of the National Federation of Worker and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), Nov 11, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar, former head of the Civil Servants' League and former member of the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee, Nov 17, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>62</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

that coincided with the Paris III international donor conference<sup>64</sup>: to freeze wages and salaries (from 1996 till 2011)<sup>65</sup>.

While the history of trade union activism played a major role in the emergence of the 2011 movement and in giving workers and employees more leverage to face business owners and ruling elites, several factors had a negative impact on the movement's power. These included the dominance of a defective quota-based system that works for the benefit of the privileged minority and the integration of a considerable percentage of public employees into this system to guarantee their loyalty as well as the absence of strong organizations that can tip the balance in light of constant attempts at undermining the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee. More obstacles emerged in the aftermath of the October 17 uprising in 2019 until many of the trade unions and leagues that took part in the protests split from the movement and each started fighting for the rights of the group it represents only. For example, the league of civil servants split from teachers' leagues and started working independently<sup>66</sup>. In addition, the government overlooked trade unions and leagues and produced a set of laws and numbers under the alleged "social aid" without consulting with the representatives of teachers and employees<sup>67</sup>.

The development of this movement is like the snowball pattern since the movement started gaining momentum and making progress in a relatively short time yet was soon fragmented because of several historical and organizational factors. The question is whether this fragmentation meant the disappearance of any impact the movement made. In fact, the history of trade union and labour movements shows that every movement leaves a legacy, not necessarily on the organizational level but at least on the level of discourse, experience, and ideology. This, in turn, could help in creating new movements at a later stage.

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<sup>64</sup> Paris I international donor conference was held in February 2001 in the French capital to discuss ways to save the Lebanese economy. The conference concluded with the International Community pledging to give Lebanon 500 million Euros in aid and facilitated loans. This was followed by the Paris II conference in November 2002, which provided Lebanon with 4.2 billion dollars in loans. Paris III was held in January 2007 and provided Lebanon with loans in billions of dollars. In April 2018, CEDRE Conference was held. All this meant that Lebanon's debts increased by billions of dollars.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib, member of the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee and former head of the Public High School Teachers League, Nov 22, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Faten Al Haj. "Trade unions and public employees' leagues: Surrender, fragmentation... and treason [Arabic]" *Al Akhbar*, Oct 26, 2021: <https://bit.ly/3UIEAO5>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

## Second: Structure and components

### 1. Trade union coordination committee: The revival of an old tradition:

As previously mentioned, the influence of the General Labour Federation had started dwindling over time. This was particularly shown in the fact that around 70% of workers became no longer members in the federation<sup>68</sup>. This led parties affected by the economic crisis to resort to demand-based social movements<sup>69</sup>.

Coordination committees are not, however, new to the Lebanese scene and have for a long time been part of trade union activism. Before the civil war started in 1975, several “coordination committees existed and took different organizational forms.”<sup>70</sup> After the war, trade union activism focused on unifying leagues in the education sector, which were split between east and west Beirut because of the war. This was particularly applied to the Private School Teachers Union and the Public High School Teachers League. A teachers’ association was also created. After the Taif Agreement, there were no leagues for vocational education or public administration. Also, the Public High School Teachers League was not an actual entity but was made up of several coordination committees between east and west Beirut and the Public Elementary School Teachers League was divided into five leagues, one for each governorate<sup>71</sup>. In the early 1990s, the Teachers’ Association, which coordinated the different teachers’ independent leagues and demanded the ratification of the salary scale law in the mid-1990s, allied with the General Labour Federation and together they formed the Trade Unions’ Coordination Committee. In the late 1990s, the federation suffered from serious internal divisions<sup>72</sup>. However, the federation did play the leading role in labour movements at the time since it had not yet become allied with the authorities<sup>73</sup>. In the early 2000s, public high school teachers joined forces and so did private school teachers. One of the most prominent protests staged by the movement was in May 2006. In this protest, more than 200,000 workers protested fixed-term jobs promoted by the Lebanese government following the Paris III conference that restructured Lebanon’s growing debt<sup>74</sup>, hence rejecting IMF instructions that aimed at undermining the welfare state and eliminating permanent contracts in favour of fixed-term jobs. The head of the General Labour Federation tried to make a speech during the protest yet had to withdraw after protestors stopped him. They also stopped several ministers and MPs from leading the protest<sup>75</sup>.

### 2. The committee diversity:

The movement started a mobilization process in 2012 through different channels that all aimed at lobbying for a new salary scale<sup>76</sup>. The growth of the movement and the progress it made were the

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<sup>68</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>72</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>74</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>75</sup> Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

<sup>76</sup> Alexi Touma. Op. Cit.

culmination of years of struggle that started with the demand-based movement launched by teachers in general and public-school teachers in the mid-1990s<sup>77</sup>. Added to that is the role played by the Civil Servants' League, which was created in 1993 under the name The League for the Graduates of the National Institute of Administration then was renamed in 2012 and became the body representing all employees in the public sector. The expansion of the employees' league is linked to a great extent to the achievements of a similar league created by teachers. Through this league, teachers managed to get promotions, hence salary increases. This created a gap between the salaries of teachers and employees. The employees' league prepared a salary scale draft law that was discussed with the Civil Service Council but was not approved. The league was still weak at the time<sup>78</sup> and was faced with several challenges, including the fact that public employees were not used to strikes. However, the deteriorating financial situation, the freezing of salaries, and inflation rates that reached 120% drove them to take an action. Being part of the coordination committee, hence collaborating with people with more expertise in the field of activism, also helped the league. Other factors contributed to the league's ability to push the movement forward. These included having a leader who believed in the cause and would not give in to pressure by the authorities and reaching a dead end in negotiations with the government<sup>79</sup>.

Unlike most trade unions, membership in the Trade Unions' Coordination Committee is automatic. According to some sources, the committee represented at the beginning "15,554 public employees, 92,900 public and private school teachers, and 82,300 retired public employees"<sup>80</sup>. Other sources say the committee represented 250,000 public employees and teachers<sup>81</sup>. According to a study conducted by Information International in 2017, the number of civil servants was estimated at 300,000<sup>82</sup>. All those numbers underline the problem of redundancy in the public sector and bring to the forefront calls for reducing the number of civil servants.

The Trade Unions' Coordination Committee was one of the most diverse in the history of labour activism in Lebanon, for it succeeded in bringing together leagues whose voice was not heard in the past, especially in the fields of public vocational and technical education. Also, no social classes were excluded from the membership of the committee<sup>83</sup>. Yet class distinction constituted a major obstacle within sector. This was particularly demonstrated in some parties favouring private to public education, hence overlooking the right to free education<sup>84</sup>. In this regard, it is worth noting that the National Institute of Administration League was made up of senior public employees, hence the elites in administration, and those voiced their objection to including lower ranks in the league. Eventually, the league came to represent all employees of all ranks<sup>85</sup>. "High-ranking employees gave us such a hard time," said Mahmoud Heidar, former head of the Civil Servants' League. "At times, they even sided with the government when a decision was made to stage a strike. However, they eventually discovered that the government is good for nothing"<sup>86</sup>. Heidar explains that the most influential players in the movement were the most harmed by the financial crisis such as lower-ranking and fixed-term employees, who are also not allied with any political factions<sup>87</sup>. Former deputy head of the Civil

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni, member of the Independent Trade Union Movement, Nov 26, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>81</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>82</sup> "How many civil servants are there?" *LBC Channel*, Sep 25, 2017: <https://bit.ly/3XLC3C4>

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Ellie Khalifa, former head of the Technical and Vocational Education League, Dec 12, 2022

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim, former member of the Public High School Teachers League, Dec 17, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Servants Leagues agrees: “The majority of high-ranking employees did not care about the trade union movement and rarely took part in activities. Some of those allied to political factions even tried to thwart us.”<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, the head of the Private School Teachers Union stated that they were open to working with all leagues if they held elections and shared a common cause<sup>89</sup>.

The committee’s diversity was not restricted to its leadership but also extended to its members who were university graduates (high school teachers and high-ranking employees), high school graduates (some elementary school teachers and lower-ranking employees), daily wagers, and fixed-term employees. The salaries of those members ranged from below the minimum wage to above one million liras. Members were also from all age ranges and started their jobs at different times (some before the war and some after)<sup>90</sup>. According to the head of the National Federation of Worker and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), “young generations were not excluded even though most of them took government jobs through nepotism and were more loyal to their political or sectarian affiliations.”<sup>91</sup>

### 3. Horizontal structure:

While the Trade Unions’ Coordination Committee was comprised of several unions and leagues, it had leading figures such as Hanna Gharib, then head of Public High School Teachers’ League, Nehme Mahfud, head of the Private School Teachers Union, and Mahmoud Heidar, then head of the Civil Servants League.<sup>92</sup> Many committee members argued that the committee has no leader and objected to the way some members posed or were treated as leaders, which led to the marginalization of other important members<sup>93</sup>. They also objected to some media outlets calling Hanna Gharib the leader of the committee and said that some activists within the committee were given more attention than others just because they make more public appearances even though this does not necessarily reflect a better role in the movement<sup>94</sup>.

On the structural level, the committee expanded horizontally so that each league was represented by its leader and two or three other members<sup>95</sup>. Meetings were held at members’ offices and each meeting would be presided over by the head of the league in whose office the meeting is held<sup>96</sup>. TV interviews and press conferences were rotational. Decisions were made by the coordination committee and all members had veto power. In case of objections within the committee to a particular decision, each league would refer the matter to its council and if most leagues agree, the issue subject of the discussion is approved.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with Walid Al Shaar. Op. Cit.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>90</sup> Raed Charaf. “The battle of the Trade Unions’ Coordination Committee in 2013: Intensified activism [Arabic].” *Legal Agenda*, Feb 24, 2014: <https://bit.ly/3zWnTjc>

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Alexi Touma. Op. Cit.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Ellie Khalifa. Op. Cit.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

One of the most distinctive features of the committee is that it had no leader since having one would have led to disputes especially regarding the affiliation of that leader and criteria for choosing him/her<sup>98</sup>. However, organizational challenges still existed. For example, each league head is also head within the coordination committee, which constituted an obstacle in the decision-making process, and problems happened upon making crucial decisions. It was argued that the coordination committee should have been an alliance rather than a confederation of leagues and syndicates<sup>99</sup>. This led to organizational loopholes when it came to certain activities such as protests and speeches. Decisions were made before meetings that preceded those activities, which necessitated the presence of a committee secretariat. Several leading activists made suggestions in relation to the organization of the committee and an administrative structure under a vertical leadership without an actual committee leader. These suggestions did not materialize owing to disagreements between leagues within the committee<sup>100</sup>. According to trade union activists who were members in the committee, had the committee had an organizational structure, it could have managed to continue working through taking stances on issues.<sup>101</sup>

#### **4. Alliances: The unified demand phase:**

The coordination committee was mostly made up of allied trade unions and leagues that had common goals. This is especially applied to civil servants and teachers at public and private schools, who formed the nucleus of the committee and the subsequent social movement. Other groups were part of the committee but did not participate as much such the Democratic Youth Union to cite one example<sup>102</sup>. Before taking steps on the ground, the committee created an expansive labour, professional, and trade union alliance to take part in the general strike that demanded ratifying the salary scale law in February 2013. At the time, the committee had one unified demand: the salary scale law. After the strike ended, leagues and unions in the committee tried to expand the scope of activism through inviting new players and working on other demands including the salary scale law.<sup>103</sup> This was part of the committee's attempt to include all groups that were harmed by state policies. As part of this attempt, the committee approached independent unions such as bakers, harbour staff, and others. Yet, this never developed into a proper alliance.<sup>104</sup> The committee also held meetings with the league of Lebanese University professors and the syndicates of engineers and free professions in addition to politicians and political parties.<sup>105</sup> Some leftist trade unions took part in the protests and strike yet trade unions whose members were also members of political parties did not.<sup>106</sup>

The committee held several meetings with trade union alliances to discuss possible common goals that could make them work together. It also held a meeting with the National Federation of Worker and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), and both called for joining forces to create a new independent trade union movement.<sup>107</sup> According to then head of FENASOL, the two entities tried to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>103</sup> Faten Al Haj. "The coordination committee towards trade union alliances: In preparation for the general strike [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, March 1, 2013: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/47076>

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>107</sup> Faten Al Haj. "The coordination committee towards trade union alliances: In preparation for the general strike." Op. Cit.



form an alliance and FENASOL wanted to share its expertise with the committee. However, this did not happen through public meetings because the committee could not appear to be taking instructions from FENASOL.<sup>108</sup>

Many, therefore, argue that the coordination committee did not form any alliances<sup>109</sup> and it had no particular allies for it included public sector employees who demanded their rights.<sup>110</sup> Others believe that the committee did form alliances that were not traditional since they were broad and flexible and were not done on the organizational level. This brings back the issue of the snowball effect, which always involves a spontaneous, multi-dimensional development that does not take rigid shapes. As for forming an alliance with civil society, some say that civil society organizations did not communicate with the committee<sup>111</sup> while others say that some of those organizations took part in protests organized by the committee yet on a small scale and that many of them called for protests without coordinating with the committee. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) played the most prominent role in protests organized by the coordination committee.<sup>112</sup>

## 5. From “private” to “public” demands:

The struggle for the salary scale law was part of a plan set by former labour minister Charbel Nahas. It started with increasing private sector salaries and the public sector was expected to follow, hence putting more pressure on the tax system, and culminated in fighting the government’s attempt at undermining social wages and excluding healthcare from it<sup>113</sup>. At the time, Nahas called for establishing a ministerial committee to investigate a comprehensive healthcare plan since more than half the Lebanese people do not have social security. Nahas proposed that healthcare be covered by the public budget through modifying the social security law so that everyone can benefit from it and wanted to have medical insurance subscriptions cancelled<sup>114</sup>. Charbel’s initiative constituted the start of the snowball.

Social wage is a set of laws that include measures to modify the salaries of workers and employees in the public sector. The project included adding transportation allowances to the basic salary and adding social security instalments to the end of service bonus<sup>115</sup>. The law called for increasing salaries by 20% with a maximum of 1,500,000 liras, increasing property transaction taxes, and reviving the role of trade unions<sup>116</sup>. According to the project, the Ministry Labour would bring back the Committee on the Cost-of-Living Index in which both business owners and trade unions are represented<sup>117</sup>. The committee had not convened since 1996 and there were no salary increases based on the consumer price index<sup>118</sup>. The minister’s plan was not, however, added to the cabinet’s agenda.

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<sup>108</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Ellie Khalifa. Op. Cit.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>113</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic].” Op. Cit.

<sup>114</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>117</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic].” Op. Cit.

<sup>118</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

The struggle for salary increases in the private sector did not yield the desired results since salary modifications were not proportionate with inflation rates, but it was still a partial victory. It was then time to launch the second phase of the salary scale movement, which is increasing public sector salaries, hence putting direct pressure on the tax system since civil servants get their salaries from the state<sup>119</sup>.

Although the movement's main demand was a flexible salary scale according to which salaries are adjusted based on inflation rates<sup>120</sup>, head of the Private School Teachers Union stated that the movement started with demands for a cost-of-living allowance while the salary scale was originally the state's idea: "At the time the government proposed a cost-of-living allowance for private sector employees but not teachers. When we inquired about that, we were told that the government is about to ratify a salary scale for us. We looked at the proposed law and found several loopholes. This is how the movement started: to correct the amounts offered by the state."<sup>121</sup> According to some union members, the objectives of the movement were much broader than the salary scale as it also gave priority to "improving public administration in light of the semi-absence of the state and improving the social and financial status of employees"<sup>122</sup> in addition to resisting state policies and exposing corruption<sup>123</sup>.

The movement relied to the way demands for salary increases were intertwined across sectors. For example, demands for salary increase in the private sector would lead to similar demands in the public sector. Also, the gap between the advantages employees from the private and public sector get was likely to lead to a series of demands that would bridge this gap. For example, public sector employees get pensions that include medical insurance while private sector employees get medical insurance during their working years, if employers make their appointment official, and only a pension after retirement. On the other hand, workers in the informal sector, the unemployed, the poor, and the underprivileged get neither medical insurance nor pension.

Different parties involved in the movement agreed to unify their demand: salary adjustments. The ratification of the new salary scale was linked to series of tax hikes to finance the increases. These include 25% on land sales and 25% on bank interests, with the possibility of exemption from the latter for those who choose to lift their accounts' confidentiality within a particular ceiling. Those two taxes generate amounts that are estimated at three times the cost of the new salary scale. Parties demanding salary increases were to give up a percentage of the increase they demand in return for a similar percentage to be given up by bank owners, land brokers, and people with large deposits in banks to cover the comprehensive healthcare plan and free elementary education<sup>124</sup>. Parties involved in the movement demanded over the following years that the parliament hold a session in which the ratification of the salary scale would be the first item on the agenda.

The salary scale movement brought back to the forefront the issue of fixed-term contracts. In response to calls for downsizing the public sector, the government replaced permanent contracts with fixed-term ones and then decided "to suspend appointments in the public sector based on a request by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and clientelism controlled the process of fixed-term

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<sup>119</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Walid Al Shaar. Op. Cit.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>124</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

contracts.”<sup>125</sup> Teachers with fixed-term contracts asked for permanent contracts to be able to benefit from the salary scale and called for a law that gives them the right to be treated like teachers in the public sector through establishing a school of education and allowing them to take training courses instead of open competitions<sup>126</sup>. This was seen as a sign of progress within the movement.

Fixed-term technical and vocational teachers asked to be exempted from several articles in the salary scale law that they saw as unfair. These included the suspension of appointments for five years, especially that there were likely to be given permanent jobs based on a law they proposed. They also called for exemption from the age condition and from the master’s degree requirement<sup>127</sup>. High school teachers with fixed contracts asked for unifying the raise percentage for each rank within the scale across sectors, promoting high school and retired teachers by six ranks, and giving fixed-term employees and daily wagers the same raise given to permanent employees and workers. They also demanded the payment of their April 2017 salaries and including them among the beneficiaries of the salary scale law.

### Salary scale movement demands.

Direct demands	Indirect demands
Ratifying the salary scale law	Improving public administration and the financial status of employees
New fees and royalties on maritime properties to fund the salary scale	Highlighting wasteful expenditure
Approving taxes on land sales and increasing taxes on interests from deposits, with the possibility of exemption from the latter for those who choose to lift their accounts’ confidentiality within a particular ceiling	Increasing private sector salaries to be followed by the public sector
Making the salary scale the first item on the agenda of parliamentary sessions	Providing permanent contracts for fixed-term teachers
	Fixed-term vocational and technical teachers to be exempted from several articles in the salary scale law
	Fixed-term teachers and employees and daily wagers to be paid February 2017 salaries

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>126</sup> “The Trade Union Coordination Committee escalates without a plan [Arabic].” *Al Nahar*: <https://bit.ly/3AkLtr6>

<sup>127</sup> “Fixed-term vocational teacher demand exemption from salary scale articles [Arabic].” *Al Nashra*, Sep 29, 2014: <https://bit.ly/3QIYuGD>

### **Third: Activities and strategies:**

#### **From negotiations to the “liberation” of public assets**

The movement’s activities and strategies could be categorized under two levels: the popular level and the political/trade union level.

On the popular level, the movement organized several strikes in public squares, such as Riad Al Solh Square, in front of ministries, such as the ministries of education and finance, the headquarters of financial institutions and the chambers of commerce and industry, Beirut airport, and Beirut harbour. Protestors also stormed several state buildings. Activities expanded outside Beirut even though most protests still took part there because this is where state institutions are located.

The political and trade union levels intersected. Several committees were formed to negotiate with relevant state entities, especially the Ministry of Finance. Teachers also refused to grade exams. The movement prepared studies about funding sources for the salary scale law, which included doing away with wasteful expenditure and eliminating corruption.<sup>128</sup> As part of the negotiating process, delegations headed by the head of the Public High School Teachers League met with then Minister of Education Elias Bou Saab to discuss proctoring and grading exams. The minister, however, asked private school teachers to grade exams, and public-school teachers went on strike in front of the ministry and prevented private school teachers from entering the building. The minister had to pass all students<sup>129</sup>. Negotiations were also held with the parliament speaker about discussing salaries in the sessions. The negotiations were at times tense, which led to more mobilization on the part of the coordination committee<sup>130</sup>. Several educational conferences were held to raise awareness of the movement and unify demands: discussing the salary scale law at the parliament and a 121% salary increase.<sup>131</sup>

The most important activities conducted by the movement are shown in the following table:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activity</b>
June 6, 2012	-Announcing the boycott of proctoring and grading public school exams, scheduled for June 12 -Staging a strike in all public sector divisions during exams <sup>132</sup>
June 25, 2012	Re-announcing the boycott of grading exams until the salary scale law is ratified after the limited ministerial committee created to investigate funding sources for salary raises failed to offer any solution <sup>133</sup> . The following section examines funding proposals submitted by the coordination committee

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>130</sup> Alexi Touma. Op. Cit.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>132</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

June- Aug 1, 2012	-A series of activities that included general strikes, sit-ins, and protests in which thousands of public sector employees from all over Lebanon took part -Activities on almost daily basis -Lasted till Aug 1 when the coordination committee met with the expanded ministerial committee <sup>134</sup>
Oct 18, 31, 2012 Nov 8, 27, 28, 2012	General strikes
Till the end of 2012 Feb 19, 2013	More activities that amounted to fourteen strikes, sixty sit-ins, and four protests in 2012 <sup>135</sup> -A general strike that lasted for 33 days -Holding the government accountable for the damages resulting from strikes because of lack of response to demands, giving in to financial institutions, and postponing the ratification of the salary scale law for six months
March 20, 2013	The prime minister promised to refer the salary scale law to the parliament if the strikes end, but the strikes continued.
March 21, 2013	A massive protest in front of the presidential palace to demand referring the salary scale draft law to the parliament before the cabinet meeting

The number and type of activities showed that the movement chose escalation. This was demonstrated in the general strike staged by public sector employees, public school teachers, and private school teachers from February 19 till March 4 then again on March 21 in addition to daily protests except on weekends. This escalation was not only on the level of activities but also on the level of discourse. For example, there were calls for the “liberation” of public maritime properties, which were listed among potential the funding sources for the salary scale law. This came in response to government claims that there were no funds for salary increases. The protest staged in front of Zaitunay Bay, which is linked to Solidere<sup>136</sup>, used this discourse. The protest started in front of the entrance to the harbour and included more protestors than usual. Protestors decided to storm the building, taking security by surprise. After a series of negotiations, employees and teachers were allowed to enter the building with their banners. There was also talk about staging a strike that includes all workers in coordination with representatives of trade unions and independent leagues on March 6, 2013<sup>137</sup>.

In addition to activities on the popular and political/trade union fronts that included strikes, protests, and sit-ins on one hand and negotiations and meetings on the other hand, the movement also adopted a democratic approach, in which decisions were made through general assemblies<sup>138</sup> and other forms of activities.

The strategies had many points of strength:

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Solidere or The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District is a real estate company established in 1994 by the Development and Reconstruction Council to plan and redevelop the central district of Beirut following the end of the civil war. The company plundered public assets and violated the rights of residents who were forced to evacuate and were compensated with meagre amounts.

<sup>137</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit,

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

### On the qualitative level:

- Activities were diverse and extended over many months. They were also conducted on regular basis, which was not the case with other movements in the post-war era.
- Protests and strikes were not confined to Beirut but spread all over the country. This gave the movement more leverage and made the Lebanese people feel it represented all of them.
- The rights-based discourse took precedence over the factional and sectarian discourse even though disputes took place at a later stage and impacted the effectiveness of the movement in addition to the control the state started exercising over independent trade unions.
- The movement included different segments of society including student bodies and municipalities<sup>139</sup> among others.
- The movement was empowered by an escalation of its discourse. This included talking about the “liberation” of maritime properties and resistance to government attempts at undermining the protests.

### On the quantitative level:

- The intensity of protests and strikes gave the movement more power since they took place on daily basis except on weekends, which made it clear that protestors are determined to get their rights. This positive spirit was not, however, prevalent all the time since there were times when activities became more improvised than organized and when compromise replaced confrontation. This development was due to several factors including the prioritization of individual agendas and the conflict of interests among different parties involved in addition to the government’s success in controlling several independent trade unions.

## **Fourth: Challenges**

The movement faced two types of challenges, internal and external. Those challenges took different shapes:

### **1. Diversity as a source of disagreement:**

The situation within the movement was like the general situation in Lebanon since there was a conflict between independent professionals and those who were loyal to the government and there were parties who tried to thwart the steps the movement took towards getting its rights<sup>140</sup>. It was, therefore, natural for disagreements to emerge among members of the movement. Those disagreements took different shapes including over means of protesting, mobilization, and cooperation. The ruling elite took advantage of those disagreements. Disputes resulting from different political affiliations started when political parties tried to impose their views through their members within the movement, yet independent members resisted that and insisted that trade union work cannot be effective without an independent leadership<sup>141</sup>. However, members of the movement who were affiliated to political parties argued that their respective parties played a major role in making protests and strikes effective and

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

mobilizing people to take part in them and that had it not been for the educational bureaus of those parties, none of the activities the movement organized would have worked<sup>142</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the development of this movement was partly a reaction to the countermovement that came because of political disagreements in Lebanon, yet those disagreements were confined to individuals rather than groups<sup>143</sup>. According to the head of Private School Teachers Union, disagreements were resolved because members of the movement shared a common cause and had a common enemy, which made each party compromise to have collective demands met<sup>144</sup>. There were disagreements within the movement about the demands. When the salary scale law was proposed, every group wanted a salary scale that suits it and there was a gap between the salaries of teachers and employees owing to the former's long history of struggle, hence employees saw the salary scale as unsuitable for them.<sup>145</sup> The disagreements over demands threatened the fragmentation of the movement. This was particularly the case between the leagues of public high school teachers and civil servants as the former asked for 60% more than the latter. According to the former head of the Civil Servants League, the league insisted on equal pay while the teachers were concerned that this demand will have a negative impact on their salaries. An agreement was finally reached to take into consideration the specificity of teachers' work while still doing employees justice. However, some groups were still not given their full rights<sup>146</sup>. Public and private school teachers disagreed over ways of protesting because private school teachers were more at risk of losing their jobs if they go on strikes<sup>147</sup>. The dispute over whether to allow the military to join the coordination committee or not caused a conflict within the movement<sup>148</sup>.

There were also disagreements over the structure of the movement. For example, the Public High School Teachers League wanted to be separated from the committee since previous experience demonstrated that they were more successful when working on their own. Members of the league, in fact, attributed the success of the movement to their efforts<sup>149</sup>. Many believed the Public High School Teachers League was the backbone of the coordination committee and that its performance within the movement was particularly distinctive<sup>150</sup>, yet this was not what everyone thought. According to the head of the Public High School Teachers League, the movement relied on public sector employees since they were the ones who could paralyze the entire government<sup>151</sup>. The former head of the Civil Servants League agreed and explained that public administration employees had the most courage to defy the government and were always committed to decisions the league made<sup>152</sup>. On the other hand, the head of the Private Teachers Union said that each of the groups involved in the movement did its job.<sup>153</sup> The head of the Public Elementary School Teachers League said that it was normal for the high school league to lead the way as it had historically and added that there was never a conflict between elementary and high school teachers since they were all united against the government that encroached upon their rights<sup>154</sup>.

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with Farouk Al Haraka, head of the vocational and technical teachers league in 2010-2011, Dec 16, 2022

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Walid Al Shaar. Op. Cit.

<sup>149</sup> Faten Al Haj. "Hanna Gharib: It's time for an attack [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, Nov 9, 2013, issue no.2148.

<sup>150</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

On the other hand, several trade union activists saw that the Public High School Teachers League was the most democratic while other leagues, except for the Civil Servants' League, were more loyal to political factions<sup>155</sup>.

The partisan element was always present within the movement, yet trade union activists always set their differences aside<sup>156</sup>. However, this was not always the case since there were times when factional disputes were too strong that they negatively affected the movement. Disputes were not confined to political reasons since there were also disagreements over demands and the way they can be expressed. This threatened to fragment the movement and increased the challenges members had to overcome.

## 2. The “ferocity” of capitalism:

As soon as the movement for salary increases started in 2011, a countermovement was created to undermine its efforts. This countermovement included all the powers that have for decades dominated the economic and political scene in Lebanon. The economic front was made up of groups that prioritized profit, generated through the banking and real estate sectors, while the political front was made up of political leaders who used their power to serve the interests of their allies in the economic front and they split the profit<sup>157</sup>. To be more specific, the countermovement at the time included prime minister Najib Mikati, parliament speaker Nabih Berri, members of parliament, financial institutions, and the General Labour Federation<sup>158</sup> that was at the time mostly loyal to the government in addition to the administrations of private schools and several religious figures. The countermovement mobilized and funded loyalist media outlets<sup>159</sup> and managed to drive a wedge between different groups within the already-fragile coordination committee<sup>160</sup>. It also used members of entities loyal to them within the committee such as the General Labour Federation<sup>161</sup>.

The countermovement started a legal battle against the committee when the government decided to dismiss its leaders from their jobs based on Article 15 of the Lebanese Employment Law. The committee intensified its protests in response to that decision, which eventually led the government to retract it<sup>162</sup>. Members of the countermovement also adopted a discourse that aimed at turning people against the salary scale law, especially through claiming that there are no funding sources and emphasizing the issue of tax increases<sup>163</sup>. This discourse aimed to turn the people against the movement's demands through arguing that salary increases will have a negative impact on their already volatile financial situation, which is what happened between 1995 and 1998. Claims about the salary scale's impact on the treasury were also used to undermine the movement's demands. This was done through arguing that the cost of the salary scale announced to the public was not realistic at all and that the real cost would have grave consequences on the public and private sectors, hence would be catastrophic for the economy<sup>164</sup>. This narrative, which is still adopted in the present time, is based on

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

<sup>156</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit.

<sup>157</sup> Alexi Touma. Op. Cit.

<sup>158</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>160</sup> Hani Massoud. Op. Cit.

<sup>161</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic].” Op. Cit.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic].” Op. Cit.



the claim that reducing budget deficits is only possible through downsizing the public sector and decreasing its budget. The same narrative involves allegations that the ratification of the salary scale law in 2017 was the main reason for the financial collapse, whose manifestations started in 2019, because it put a lot of pressure on the economy.<sup>165</sup> Based on this argument, the salary scale law increased inflation rates since the government had to pump large amounts of money to fund salary increases<sup>166</sup>. It is noteworthy that the movement had already proposed different ways of funding the salary scale law through tax adjustments and submitted proposals related to economic policies<sup>167</sup>. Proposing alternative solutions was, in fact, one of the most significant achievements of the movement. This was what many thought including fixed-term teachers who did not benefit from the salary scale law. “The movement made a radical change through proposing different sources from which the salary scale can be funded in response to government claims that salary increases cannot be funded,” said fixed-term teacher Farah Ghanawi. “We were impressed by the fact that there were alternatives to imposing more taxes on citizens in order to fund the salary scale”<sup>168</sup>.

The countermovement tried to turn parents against the salary scale movement when teachers decided to boycott proctoring and grading and the movement took this into consideration later since those parents were not the enemy<sup>169</sup> according to the former head of the Civil Servants League<sup>170</sup>. To curry favour with the people, the government decided to pass all public-school students following the teachers’ decision to boycott grading. Several members of the movement were discriminated against in the workspace because of their activism. This was the case with the former deputy head of the Civil Servants League who worked at the Ministry of Finance and was arbitrarily deprived of promotion and excluded from the ministry’s anti-corruption unit<sup>171</sup>.

The discourse against the salary scale movement was promoted through media outlets that were loyal to the ruling elites. In many cases, the movement was mocked and portrayed in a caricaturist manner to encourage people not to take them seriously. The movement’s efforts were also underestimated by several circles within civil society<sup>172</sup>. According to some commentators, civil society organizations that were loyal to the ruling elites supported the official argument that the demands of the movement and the strikes it staged were bound to destroy the Lebanese economy.<sup>173</sup> Others argue that several civil society organizations took part in preparing studies for the movement, yet their participation on the ground was minimal<sup>174</sup>. Several analysts attribute the rift between the movement and civil society organizations to disagreements within the coordination committee<sup>175</sup> since many of its members did not want to adopt the demands in the studies prepared by those organizations, arguing that they are too broad and could overshadow the actual demands upon which the movement was based. Political and sectarian affiliations also played a major role in the possibility of allying with those organizations. Similarly, there were disagreements over the relationship with financial institutions. “This was a point of contention,” said the head of the Private School Teachers Union. “Some were categorically against

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<sup>165</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>166</sup> Mohamed Zebib. “Classist attack on salaries [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar* (economic supplement), Dec 12, 2018: <https://al-akhbar.com/Capital/262529>

<sup>167</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Profit increases at the expense of salaries [Arabic].” Op. Cit.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Farah Ghanawi, a fixed-term teacher, Nov 17, 2022.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Walid Al Shaar. Op. Cit.

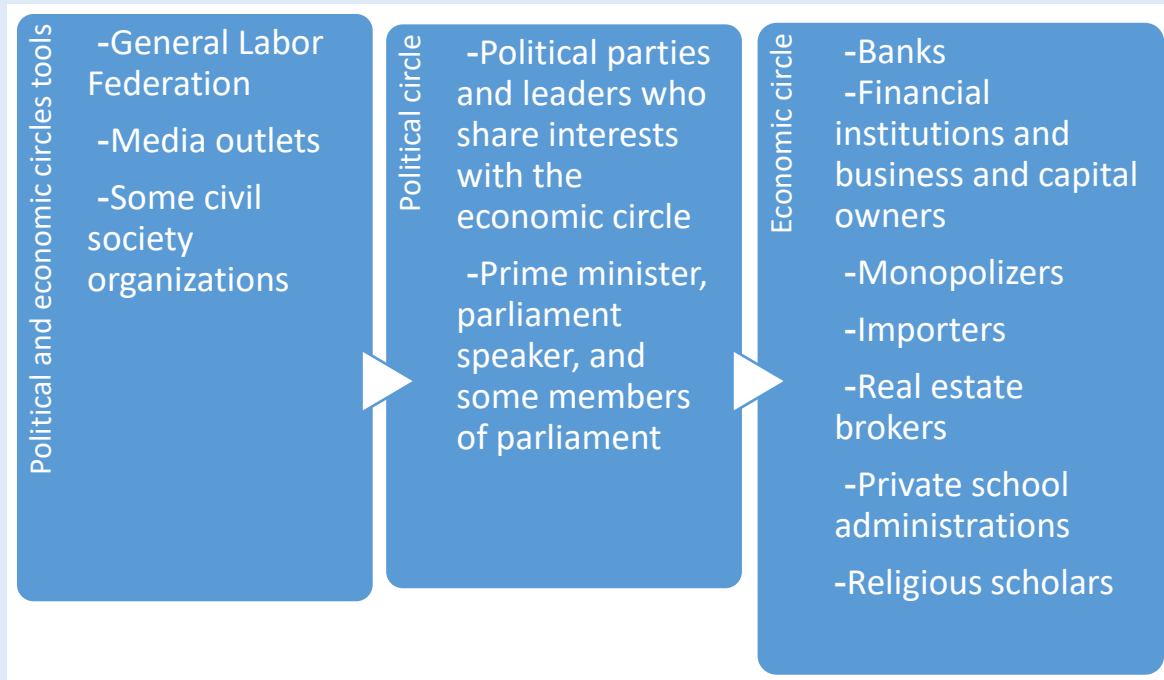
<sup>172</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>175</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit.

any alliance with financial institutions. I for one thought it was not a good idea to deal with financial institutions as one single entity since some of them actually supported us such as the directors of the Businessmen Association and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the North.”<sup>176</sup> He added that it was, however, hard to separate between financial institutions and the ruling elite.



### What are financial institutions?

In his book *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*, Fawwaz Traboulsi defines financial institutions in Lebanon as “the bourgeois party” that emerged in the 1960s at the hands of Boutros Khouri, a businessperson from the north and the head of the Association of Industrialists that included traders, industrialists, and bankers. One of the main components of financial institutions is the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Beirut, which was established in 1887 and includes different business branches such as industry, construction, banking, and insurance. The majority, however, were industrialists and traders. The association had 10,000 members in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and representatives of different economic activities from Mount Lebanon were added.

Financial institutions always have a unified stance on issues pertaining to workers and low-income citizens for they object to increasing minimum wages and oppose social allowances, which was demonstrated in their stance on social movements in 2011-2012. However, uniting against social movements does not eliminate disagreements within the oligarchy itself, especially between industrialists and traders. For example, traders have their own demands that revolve around custom protection, reducing interest on loans to the industrial sector, long-term loans that contradict bank policies based on short and medium-term loans, subsidized electricity for factories, and reducing or

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

removing custom tariffs on imported raw materials. However, solidarity among different groups within the Lebanese bourgeoisie remains intact. This was particularly demonstrated in the agreement over the modification of sectarian quotas within political and administrative institutions so that positions in those institutions are divided equally between Muslims and Christians.

The ferocity with which financial institutions fight for their interests was clearly illustrated with the emergence of social movements in 2011-2013. This time also showed the leverage those institutions have on the decision-making process in political circles<sup>177</sup>. Financial institutions worked on crushing initiatives by the coordination committee because of its role in highlighting the shortcomings of neoliberal policies and the way it gained momentum on the ground. The institutions were empowered by the fact that they managed earlier to infiltrate the General Labour Federation and undermine its role in calling for the rights of workers and employees<sup>178</sup>.

Counterarguments supported by financial institutions and the movement’s response to them can be summarized through the following table:

<b>Movement demands</b>	<b>Counterarguments</b>	<b>Response to counterarguments</b>
Salary adjustments	Funding the salary scale would mean imposing taxes on the people and will put a lot of pressure on the treasury.	The salary scale can be funded through reclaiming public maritime properties, eliminating waste expenditure, and fighting corruption.
Offering fixed-term employee’s permanent contracts so they can benefit from the salary scale law, social security, and end of service bonus	The public sector has many redundant employees and cannot appoint more.	Highlighting exaggerated figures about the size of the public sector and proposing the dismissal of inefficient employees where were appointed through nepotism
Responding the demands for work to resume in the public sector (including grading exams)	Turning public opinion against movement activities such as using teachers’ boycott of grading exams to claim they do not care about students	Teachers’ willingness to show flexibility in order not to put pressure on students and parents

The counter-movement discourse succeeded in turning a considerable number of people against the movement as many started believing that approving the salary scale law would mean imposing more taxes on people. The exam boycott also resulted in resentment on the part of students and their families. On the other hand, awareness of the importance of demands put forward by the movement started growing even among groups who would not benefit from the salary scale law. Fixed-term teacher Farah Ghanawi supports this opinion: “I did not benefit from the movement since it did not include fixed-term teachers. In fact, strikes had a negative impact on us since we are paid per class. However, I am fully aware that teachers and employees have the right to stand up to an oppressive regime that has always fragmented this movement.”<sup>179</sup>

<sup>177</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Farah Ghanawi. Op. Cit.

### 3. Details of the “battle”:

The “battle” started when then minister of labour Charbel Nahas sought preliminary approval for his proposal in 2011, but the proposal was neither distributed among ministers nor added to the agenda of parliamentary sessions. The minister of public health at the time claimed that the proposal encroached upon the ministry’s work<sup>180</sup> since it included articles about healthcare coverage. Later, several ministers decided to separate the salary adjustment proposal from the healthcare proposal. Meanwhile, the General Labour Federation, then affiliated to the Amal Movement, whose leader was also the parliament speaker, announced together with financial institutions categorically rejecting the healthcare proposal.<sup>181</sup> At the time, the government was negotiating with the federation as the official representative of workers and employees.<sup>182</sup>

When the proposal was referred to the cabinet, all ministers voted against setting the minimum wage at 868,000 Lebanese liras (USD 578) and including transportation allowance in the basic salary. They agreed, on the other hand, to the proposal submitted by the General Labour Federation and financial institutions that sets minimum wage at 675,000 Lebanese liras (USD 450).<sup>183</sup> When the minister of labour refused to sign, he was subjected to a lot of pressure and the federation and financial institutions submitted a joint complaint against the minister to the International Labour Organization, an unpresented measure in the organization’s history. The complaint called upon the organization to pressure the minister into agreeing to the minimum wage proposed by the federation and financial institutions.<sup>184</sup> The minister of labour resigned on February 22, 2012.<sup>185</sup> In the same month, salary adjustments for the private sector were approved and teachers and employees from the public sector awaited their turn.<sup>186</sup> After the movement approved a draft law prepared by the Ministry of Finance, the ministries of finance and education retracted and announced drafting another law. Therefore, salaries were not adjusted in February 2012 as promised.<sup>187</sup>

The government kept renegeing on its promises and postponed salary increases several times. The government had promised to ratify the salary scale law if teachers put an end to their strike yet when they did, the government did not keep its part of the deal. On April 6, the government ratified the salary scale and means of funding it, including public maritime property fines, more taxes on interests from deposits, extra construction permits fees... etc. The minister of public works and transport was tasked with restudying the prime minister’s proposal to increase the investment factor, to be discussed in the September 12 session. This meant that while the salary scale law was approved it cannot still be referred to the parliament. The coordination committee considered this a flagrant violation of all agreements it had with the government.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>183</sup> Dollar equivalents are based on the official exchange rate of 1 USD=1,500 Lebanese liras. Currently, the Lebanese lira has lost more than 90% of its value.

<sup>184</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>185</sup> “Lebanese minister of labor resigns [Arabic].” *Sky News Arabia*, Feb 23, 2012: <https://bit.ly/3dlGLQG>

<sup>186</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

On the day, the salary scale was approved, financial institutions officially<sup>189</sup> joined the battle and expressed their surprise that the government gave in and accused it of committing a grave mistake through putting such financial pressure on an already deficient budget.<sup>190</sup> Several ministers agreed with financial institutions. The Christian-Muslim Spiritual Summit also supported the financial institutions and invited them to take part in the following spiritual summit. Those institutions then submitted a memo to relevant ministers explaining the “consequences of the salary scale on the Lebanese economy.”<sup>191</sup> On March 21, 2013, six months after the approval of the salary scale, the government announced referring the law and proposals of funding it to the parliament. This was seen as a step towards pacifying the movement, which would not have been possible without starting to respond to demands.<sup>192</sup> However, ministers turned out to have added several articles to the funding sources proposal that thwarted the plan altogether and removed all taxes financial institutions disapproved of. On the following day, the government resigned for reasons that were unrelated to the salary scale. Postponing the referral of the salary scale law to the parliament continued for another 77 days and when it was finally referred, several articles, especially pertaining to taxes, had been added and the coordination committee still objected to it.<sup>193</sup> Another battle ensued when the salary scale law was referred to the parliament. Parties involved in this battle included the subcommittee composed of members from joint parliamentary committees that also became part of the battle in addition to the parliament’s general assembly that failed to endorse the proposal in its session held on April 15, 2014, under the pretext of securing imports.<sup>194</sup>

At the end of 2014, the salary scale proposal had been suspended by the parliament following objections by the military.<sup>195</sup> In May 2015, elections were held at the Public High School Teachers League, and they dealt a blow to the salary scale movement since March 8 and March 14 alliances joined forces<sup>196</sup> to crush leftists and independents that led the movement in the league under the leadership of Hanna Gharib. The National Reconciliation list won sixteen out of eighteen seats while Gharib kept his position in the administrative assembly. The new leadership held the old leadership accountable for failure to respond to the league’s demands. In the fall of 2015, the salary scale proposal had not been discussed in parliament.<sup>197</sup> Less than a year later, Mahmoud Heidar lost the election in the Civil Servants League to a list supported by the authorities and which included regime loyalists.<sup>198</sup> As a result of that development, different parties that are loyal to the ruling elite allied together, including traditional enemies amongst them, to form a unified front against the salary scale movement.<sup>199</sup> This was not in any way surprising since parties loyal to the authorities managed to infiltrate the movement owing to

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> “Financial institutions: What are the government’s alternatives to fund the ‘catastrophic’ salary scale law? [Arabic]” *Lebanon Knowledge Development Gateway*, Sep 18, 2012.

<sup>191</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>192</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit.

<sup>193</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>194</sup> Najib Farahat. “The salary scale project in Lebanon [Arabic].” *Legal Agenda*, May 2, 2014: <https://bit.ly/3pbWswA>

<sup>195</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>196</sup> March 8 is a political alliance created after the assassination Rafik Al Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. It is named after the massive rally staged on March 8, 2005, by pro-Syrian factions that wanted to thank Syria for its role in ending the Lebanese Civil War. March 14 is a political alliance established after Rafik Al Hariri’s assassination. The alliance launched the Cedar Revolution against Syrian presence in Lebanon and was named after its most massive protest on March 14, 2005.

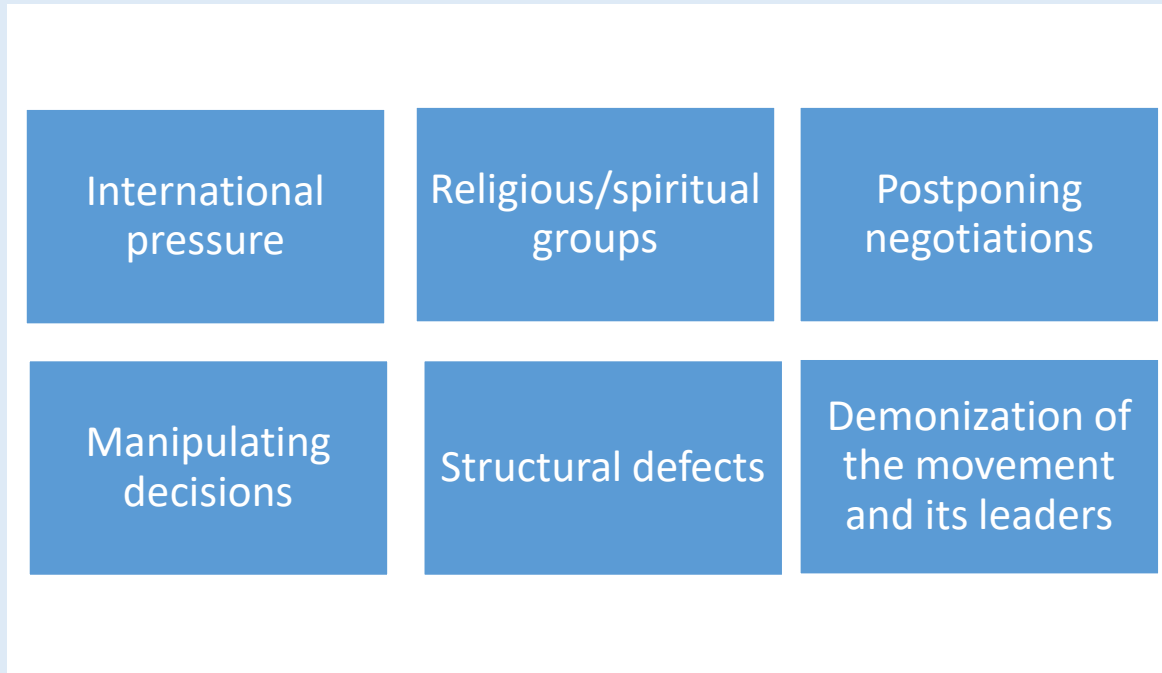
<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Arbitrary public strike: The public sector disintegrates and 30% of employees could quit [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, July 21, 2022: <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/341627>

<sup>199</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh, Op. Cit.

a structural defectiveness within the movement that was partly caused by the number of employees and teachers that got their jobs through nepotism and remained loyal to the regime.

### Counterstrategies:



## Fifth: Breaking the pattern

### 1.The salary scale... finally:

On July 18, 2017, the parliament ratified the salary scale law after five years of delay. Despite meeting the demands of the movement, the animosity did stop; it intensified. This was the result of debates over taxes to be imposed on banks and financial and real estate companies. This debate was rather a continuation of an earlier one that aimed at demonizing the plan, especially taxes, and making the salary scale proposal seem like it is directed against low-incomers and the middle class even though many of the taxes were to be imposed on banks and corporates.<sup>200</sup> Two months after the salary scale was approved, banks did triumph when the Constitutional Council agreed unanimously to invalidate law number 45/2017 that imposed new taxes and modified old ones, which was rejected by financial institutions and the banking and real estate lobbies for cutting down on their profits.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Hassan Eleik. "Yes, to taxing banks [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, March 18, 2017: <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/228009>

<sup>201</sup> Vivian Akiki. "Banks triumph once again: The story behind revoking the tax law [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, Sep 23, 2017: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/238082>

The coordination committee takes credit for having the salary scale law ratified despite all reservations, especially by high school teachers who argued they were deprived of several rights they earned during their strikes and protests before 2012.<sup>202</sup> In fact, teachers were the least to benefit from the salary scale law since they got a 78% raise instead of the 121% they asked for after calculating the raises they got earlier.<sup>203</sup> The same applied to lower ranking employees in the public sector.<sup>204</sup> Fixed-term elementary and high school teachers did not also get any of their rights. As for retired elementary school teachers, they were not equated with other teachers who were promoted six ranks up and got a salary raise even though Article 18 of the law gives them this right and the raises they got were to be divided into three instalments to be paid over three years. Head of Retired Elementary School Teachers League said that they only got the first instalment in 2017 in accordance with law number 46/17, but when the second instalment was due, the minister of finance violated the law and cancelled it. “Ever since, we have started a series of protests to demand our rights,” he added<sup>205</sup>. Even fixed-term teachers who got permanent contracts one year before the salary scale was ratified did not benefit.<sup>206</sup> Despite all those drawbacks, the ratification of the salary scale was still an achievement in light of the economic and political situation and attempts to control trade unions on the part of the ruling elite.<sup>207</sup>

Even after the ratification of the salary scale, the law was demonized, and increases were presented as detrimental to the Lebanese economy and the treasury. In 2014, the head of the Beirut Traders Association submitted a document of twenty-six articles to object to the salary scale on behalf of businessowners’ associations. The document admitted that the salary scale was legitimate but that proposed sources of funding were disastrous for citizens and the economy.<sup>208</sup> One of the objections in the document was that the parliament’s term expired, and it was extended temporarily, hence it cannot discuss the law. The document argued that other draft laws pending discussion are more pressing than the salary scale, especially that the public budget had not yet been approved.<sup>209</sup> While the economy was cited as the reason for these objections, the real reason was that proposed taxes would harm their profits.<sup>210</sup>

At that time, manifestations of the financial crisis had started. The governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon Riad Salameh had started in mid-2016 what he called “financial engineering operations” that allowed banks to make huge profits and their cost amounted to two billion US dollars by October 2018. Those engineering operations, which have not stopped till the present time, are seen as the main reason for the financial collapse.<sup>211</sup> Even after the collapse, in order to cover up those operations and the entire defective system and to stop any discussions into reducing public debts as a means of solving the crisis, the ruling elites started forecasting an economic crisis, which was bound to happen regardless of the salary scale law even though they tried to promote a different argument about the collapse being the

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Ghattas Medawar, head of retired elementary school teachers league, Dec 15, 2022.

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Samia Sorour, high school teacher who was on a fixed-term contract since 2013 then got a permanent contract in 2016, Nov 30, 2022.

<sup>207</sup> Ghassan Salibi. “Why not celebrate the ratification of the salary scale? [Arabic]” *Al Nahar*, July 27, 2017: <https://bit.ly/3HLc1V9>

<sup>208</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Financial institutions and the salary scale law [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, April 1, 2012: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/29329>

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Riad Salameh’s engineering operations have not stopped [Arabic].” *Al Akhbar*, May 9, 2022: [https://al-akhbar.com/In\\_numbers/336310](https://al-akhbar.com/In_numbers/336310)

direct result of salary raises.<sup>212</sup> They were all aware of the actual reasons of the collapse yet decided to blame it on the most fragile segments of society.

When the financial collapse took place, the salary scale was held accountable by the ruling elites who used loyalist media outlets to that end. There was special focus on the new taxes that would affect businessowners and capitalists. People behind the campaign claimed that the salary scale caused the state a billion dollars and accused members of the movement of insisting on ratifying the salary scale without real reforms while knowing it would be detrimental to the treasury.<sup>213</sup> These arguments were also a way of distraction from the accountability of bankers, the central bank governor, traders, importers, and their allies among politicians. It is easy, however, to refute those arguments through numbers posted by the Ministry of Finance and which show that the cost of the salary scale was not the same claimed by the media and the ruling elites.<sup>214</sup> On the other hand, losses of the Bank of Lebanon between 2016 and 2021 reached 82,610 billion liras. The gap between both losses is huge and there is no way they can be linked based on the arguments blaming the salary scale law.<sup>215</sup> In addition, the reason for warning people of the salary scale law is attributed to the fact that the financial collapse imposed a different agenda on all parties so that their priority became protecting their incomes, which had already shrunk remarkably.<sup>216</sup> In this regard, the head of Private School Teachers Union stated that the costs of the new salary scale were known from the very beginning, but the government exaggerated them and made additional groups benefit from the scale without looking at the extra numbers. Also, one of the articles in the salary scale law ratified by the parliament was the suspension of appointments for three years, yet one year after the ratification, 12,000 employees that are loyal to regime were appointed. This also explains why the cost of the salary scale became higher than the original number.<sup>217</sup>

## **2. Successes: Democracy, independence, and alternative tax policies:**

The salary scale movement was different from previous movements because it succeeded in mobilizing the largest number of people since the end of the civil war and because the momentum was kept for several months, and activities took place on regular basis. In addition, it was the only movement through which the people saw real change on the ground<sup>218</sup> since it eventually managed to have the salary scale law ratified. It is true that the financial lobby managed to undermine the activities of the coordination committee and almost turn it into another version of the General Labour Federation<sup>219</sup> and the ruling elite came up with a proposal that played upon disagreements between different parties within the committee and weakened unified demands.<sup>220</sup> However, those attempts did not succeed in stopping the salary scale law and the ruling elites had to procrastinate in order and look into giving up some of their

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<sup>212</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Warnings of financial collapse: the poor paying for the rich [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

<sup>213</sup> "The salary scale cost the state a billion dollars and they all knew the outcome [Arabic]." *LBC*, Nov 18, 2020: <https://bit.ly/3dqKnko>

<sup>214</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Profit increases at the expense of salaries [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>218</sup> Raed Charaf. Op. Cit.

<sup>219</sup> Mohamed Wahba. "Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

<sup>220</sup> Faten Al Haj. "Discrimination in the salary scale: A divide and rule policy [Arabic]." *Al Akhbar*, March 14, 2017: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/227715>



privileges to respond to the demands put forth by the movement. In fact, the alliance of political and financial lobbies did have to compromise to deal with the demands.<sup>221</sup>

The ratification of the salary scale was described by members of the movement as a “partial victory” since the movement might not have broken the pattern, but at least they shook it.<sup>222</sup> Despite the defects in the movement, decentralized initiatives were launched across Lebanon through strikes, sit-ins, and protests that paralyzed the public administration and put pressure on the government. Even though the government procrastinated for years, it was unable to crush the movement as the salary scale was presented as a topmost priority. The movement forced political and economic lobbies to reconsider their policies and draft proposals to deal with the salary scale. For example, the ministers of finance and education had to prepare a new proposal after the first the coordination committee rejected one. This confirms that the butterfly effect cannot be overlooked.

One of the most important achievements of the movement is that it unified trade unions and professional leagues over common demands, which demonstrated that the labour movement in Lebanon is still capable of making changes on the ground.<sup>223</sup> The movement managed to surpass religious, sectarian, and regional boundaries, create awareness among different segments of society, and guide trade unions to the right path.<sup>224</sup> People from different affiliations were unified over common demands that allowed them to rise above their disagreements.<sup>225</sup> The movement also introduced new ideas that raised awareness among the Lebanese.<sup>226</sup> “For the first time, all those demands were voiced together,” said Farah Ghanawi. “Even people who did not benefit from the salary scale saw the positive impact the movement had especially as far as reviving trade union activism is concerned.”<sup>227</sup> According to Samia Srour, “the movement played a major role in shedding light on rights that we have forgotten about for a long time”<sup>228</sup> even though she was not included in the demands since she was a fixed-term teacher at the time.

There was agreement over three main issues in the movement:

- First, the independence of the movement leaders was extremely important for it to be able to reach its goals. According to trade unionists, what distinguished the coordination committee from similar entities is the independence of its leaders, which encouraged many people to join and trust it.<sup>229</sup> The leadership of the committee was also noticeably clear about the movement’s goals.<sup>230</sup>
- Second, public sector employees managed to conquer their fears, which led to an actual change in the public administration.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Mohamed Wahba. “Charbel Nahas: A crack in the economic pattern [Arabic].” Op. Cit.

<sup>223</sup> Lea Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

<sup>224</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Farah Ghanawi. Op. Cit.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Samia Sorour. Op. Cit.

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>230</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

- Third, democratic practices adopted by the movement had an impact on a considerable number of people including non-members or people who would not benefit from the demands.<sup>232</sup> This contributed to the revival of trade unions and increased the number of people mobilized for the protests. The democratic nature of the movement was also demonstrated in how no decisions were made or retracted without going back to the general assembly, which is quite rare in the Lebanese trade union movement.<sup>233</sup> This gave the movement leverage both in the trade union scene and amongst the people,<sup>234</sup> which led many people to vote against what political parties they are loyal to want such as for example whether the strike should end.<sup>235</sup> On the other hand, some argued that the movement was not democratic throughout since at times leaders monopolized the decision-making process and while this could have been necessitated by the goals of the movement, the absence of democracy would affect the legacy of trade union activism.<sup>236</sup> One of the most important achievements of the movement was proposing new tax policies, hence making taxes a public opinion issue<sup>237</sup>.

Reconstruction projects that followed the end of the civil war undermined the achievements made by temporary workers, rare as they were. For example, collective contracts constituted a major achievement for the labour movement during the time of president Fouad Shehab.<sup>238</sup> The only contracts left were those banks signed with their employees and the Banks Association tried to cancel them but failed after the union interfered.<sup>239</sup> The ruling elite's infiltration of the General Labour Union was also one of the setbacks that followed the civil war. The 2013 movement, however, gave people hope even if for a short time that the federation could regain its independence, hence paving the way for a better future for trade union and labour activism.<sup>240</sup> The size of the movement played a major role in how seriously people took it and how capable it was of resisting attempts at undermining its demands. However, the movement did not have enough power to resist interventions by the ruling elites and its members had at times to compromise in a way that suited the needs of financial institutions and businessowners. Also, the very structure of the movement did not enable it to deal with disagreements between different parties involved in it.

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<sup>232</sup> Interview with Hanna Gharib. Op. Cit.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh. Op. Cit.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>238</sup> Fouad Chehab was Lebanon's president from 1958 till 1964. Shehab witnessed the social and political effects of the gap between different regions, and he understood why residents of disenfranchised areas, mostly Muslims, rebelled against the government. Chehab focused in his term on comprehensive social reform and creating a new society. In order for this to happen, Chehab encouraged citizens who benefited from the reconstruction to share the benefits with the underprivileged, asking the former to sacrifice and the latter to be patient. Chehab's created a social security fund, inspired by the French model and disputes between workers and employers were to a great extent resolved. This led to a remarkable decrease in frequency of strikes. There was one by textile workers in 1963 and another by post employees in 1964. Despite those reforms, several factors acted against Chehab: the oligarchy that refused any deduction from its profits, political feudalist leaders who resented the competition by the new class nurtured by Chehab's government, and the Maronite community which objected to the state's interference in its affairs and accused the government of siding with Muslims. (See Fawwaz Trabulsi's *History of Modern Lebanon*)

<sup>239</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. *Modern History of Lebanon*. Op. Cit.

<sup>240</sup> Leo Bou Khater. Op. Cit.

### 3. Institutional failure:

As is the case with movements that work under a system in which the ruling class tries to control trade unions or restrict their scope of work, the salary scale movement in Lebanon did have its failures. Some argue that the mistakes the movement made were not grave<sup>241</sup> and that the movement did not fail at all<sup>242</sup> despite the intervention of the ruling class. The scope of the movement's demands is mentioned when talking about failures since some argue that the battle should not have just focused on salaries since public schools were no longer affiliated to the state but rather controlled by different factions and sectarian powers became in charge of appointments. Several teachers argued that demands should focus on values, which are extremely important in the educational process, rather than only negotiating about money because they believed a teacher is a freedom fighter and not a follower.<sup>243</sup> Some groups argued that since the movement included a lot of people, it could have created broad social alliances that would demand comprehensive healthcare and social justice. The movement disappointed those groups in a way since for them it stopped working as soon as the salary scale law was ratified, which is because this was its only demand from the start.<sup>244</sup>

Others argued that the movement needed to take steps towards institutionalizing itself so that it would replace the General Labour Federation because then it would act more strategically rather than dealing with single demands. The movement's inability to do that was arguably because members could not deal with political conflicts.<sup>245</sup> According to a different argument, the movement could not achieve this because it was restricted since the General Labour Federation was the legal representative of trade unions and it is controlled by the authorities.<sup>246</sup> "We encouraged the coordination committee to declare itself a general union since the authorities are already controlling the General Labour Federation," said the head of the National Federation of Worker and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon. "However, this suggestion was not welcome. We also offered our office for the committee's meetings." He added that this step should have been taken when the committee's activities were at their peak because only then would it guarantee that the movement would continue and that it would protect employees and workers from the oppressive measures of the government."<sup>247</sup> On the other hand, the head of the Civil Servants League criticized the movement for not turning itself into a general union and accused its members of short-sightedness since they assumed the movement would continue in its current structure. He criticized all trade unions that claim they are the opposite of the General Labour Federation then do become themselves undemocratic and lose their independence.<sup>248</sup>

There were also failures related to administration. Some argue that the movement failed to administer the demands since it set difficult goals that were hard to achieve such as asking for 121% raise. This, they add, led people to believe that the movement is not founded on realistic expectations and did not adopt a scientific methodology.<sup>249</sup> Others argue that administration could have been better through

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<sup>241</sup> Interview with Georges Saadeh. Op. Cit.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>243</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Maron Al Kholi. Op. Cit.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>248</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

developing the members' negotiation skills.<sup>250</sup> In this regard, a public administration employee who spoke on condition of anonymity said she hoped the movement would achieve “a real administrative reform that would eliminate corruption and dismiss employees appointed through nepotism.” She added that apart from politics or legislative reforms, the movement failed in making its views prevail on the ground even though it always called for proposing alternative ways to funding the salary scale.<sup>251</sup>

On the level of alliances, strategic visions, and negotiations, some believe that several leaders in the movement made a mistake when they mixed ideologies with the demands of teachers and employees. They added that Hanna Gharib made a mistake when he called the prime minister and the parliament speaker “thieves” then apologized and when he said that the movement must negotiate with the authorities even if they are corrupt. Gharib also said that members of the movement have demands yet “are not revolutionaries” and argued against antagonizing the General Labour Federation in favour of the initiative launched by then labour minister Charbel Nahas.<sup>252</sup> On the level of alliances, many argued that the movement failed in not forging strong alliances with other groups such as fixed-term employees and workers.<sup>253</sup>

In conclusion, the movement was mostly blamed for not institutionalizing and not broadening the scope of its demands. The movement's choice of alliances and its negotiation strategies were also put into question. The same applied to the movement's ability to get over factional differences between its members. Had those steps taken place, the movement would have been able to stand up to attempts at undermining it by the ruling elite and it would have continued to defend the rights of worker, employees, and the disenfranchised.

#### **4. Between the “movement” and the “uprising”:**

On October 17, 2019, a popular uprising started in Lebanon. Protestors came from different sects, regions, and classes. Dozens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest unemployment, price hikes, the cost of living, and gaps between regions and classes, The uprising also included people of special needs, the military, and students who objected to high tuition fees and rejected “obsolete” textbooks especially the ones on the history of Lebanon in addition to women who called for their right to giving their children the citizenship and asked for ending discrimination against women in social status laws.<sup>254</sup>

The October 17 uprising cannot be seen as a phase in a social movement that reached its peak at times then was extinguished at others, hence linking it to the 2011 salary scale movement and the 2015 garbage crisis. Looking at the resume of activists who took part in the protests could link the October 17 uprising to the 2011 salary scale movement and the garbage crisis which was followed by municipal elections in 2016 and which some considered a rehearsal for the 2018 parliamentary elections. This, in fact, is a valid narrative, yet it is only linked to the profile of activists who took part in one or more of

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<sup>250</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>251</sup> Interview with a public administration employee, dec 11, 2022.

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Fouad Ibrahim. Op. Cit.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with Castro Abdullah. Op. Cit.

<sup>254</sup> Fawwaz Trabulsi. “What can the movement do? The dialectics of the imagined and the necessary [Arabic].” *Bidayat Magazine*, issue 16: <https://bidayatmag.com/node/1110>

the phases.<sup>255</sup> However, it is a narrative that divides the struggle into stops yet does not give a full picture of the broad social movement that snowballed over time. On the other hand, the October 17 uprising is much bigger than that; it is a reaction to the political crisis that started with the beginning of the war and culminated with the total erosion of the public scene.<sup>256</sup> This, however, does not mean that the changes brought about by the coordination committee did not impact the uprising, which revived the debate about economic conditions, social rights, and the financial collapse.

Although the coordination committee did not take part in a campaign to topple the sectarian system and was not part of the October 17 protests<sup>257</sup>, the committee's struggle was in a way, even of unconsciously, the reason for the 2019 protests.<sup>258</sup> On the political level, the salary scale movement was the main source of the 2015 and 2019 movements<sup>259</sup> and the developments that took place starting 2011 played a major role in shaping the political and social awareness that initiated the two later movements and in giving people hope once more in trade union activism that they thought ended with the coordination committee.<sup>260</sup> The link between the three protests show that social movements hardly continue in the same form and have to undergo several changes such as splitting into smaller groups, each taking a different path, or giving rise to new leaderships that play different roles than the one they played earlier.

When the October 17 uprising started, some groups supported it while others argued that it does not represent the Lebanese people. Those disagreements existed within the same group. For example, the head of the Elementary School Teachers League said that some members of the league wanted to take part in the protests while others argued that they had no interest in the protests and believed it would eventually turn into a political squabble: "We gave members the freedom to join if they want but we preferred to stay neutral. We also told members not to criticize anyone taking part in the protests and this was what other leagues did too."<sup>261</sup> The link between the salary scale movement and the 2019 protests is related to an erratic history of trade union activism that started before the war and which came as an expression of the people's determination to change the social, economic, and political reality in Lebanon. Trade union activism dwindled during and after the war as it no longer defended people's rights and was more of a tool for the ruling class. With the start of the salary scale movement, this kind of activism was revived once more, and the movement's achievements became a reference for the 2019 uprising. In fact, the movement inspired participants in the uprising to investigate the importance of reviving street activism and the possibility of having past demands met even if previous movements failed in doing so.

Following several attempts at undermining the salary scale movement, many of which worked, it was not a surprise that the coordination committee did not take part in the October 17 protests. The committee's withdrawal from the public scene for three whole years following the ratification of the salary scale made its calls for staging a strike to protest lifting subsidies a laughing matter on social media.<sup>262</sup> Many argued that calls for a strike were based on instructions from political factions and/or

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<sup>255</sup> "The October 17 uprising anniversary: Is there hope?" *Arab Reform Initiative*, Oct 26, 2020: <https://bit.ly/3PmLGy9>

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>258</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. Cit.

<sup>259</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>261</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>262</sup> Faten Al Haj. "The coordination committee strike: Another tool for political struggle? [Arabic]" *Al Akhbar*, Dec 17, 2020: <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/297774>

loyalist trade unions. Added to that is the fact that many trade unions oppose the performance of the coordination committee such as the High School Teachers League and the Independent Trade Union Movement. Both found calls for a strike “suspicious” and questioned the timing, legitimacy, and real motives of the strike, especially considering the absence of an actual plan to reform the trade union scene, rectify past mistakes, create new balances of power, and win people over through new strategies.<sup>263</sup>

A study conducted during the 2019 uprising showed that 95% of protestors did not belong to trade unions while the remaining 5% were members of independent professional unions (doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, and teachers).<sup>264</sup> The independence of almost all protestors in the uprising drove many people to believe that it is only through liberating trade unions from political affiliations that they could they restore their original role and be able to defy the government, mobilize protestors,<sup>265</sup> and offer constant support to workers. This, however, has till now failed to materialize.

## 5. What is next?

Since the ratification of the salary scale law, the coordination committee has not had any presence on the ground except for a few scattered protests. In fact, “the committee is disbanded, and its name is never mentioned.”<sup>266</sup> In fact, “the conditions of the public sector have never been worse”<sup>267</sup> and the problems facing its employees (teachers, the military, civil administrators) are remarkably growing. These are the most vulnerable groups that bore the brunt of the financial crisis, the collapse of service, healthcare, and educational sectors, and the devaluation of the local currency. They also suffer the most because they are still part of the system, and they get their salaries in the local currency.<sup>268</sup> Even private sector teachers are going through a crisis especially that they were not included in the meagre salary increases the public sector got last year following a long battle that concluded with doubling basic salaries upon ratifying the defective budget. The minister of education promised paying incentives to teachers in US dollars through donor agencies, but these promises did not materialize, so when the academic year started, teachers in the public sector (elementary, high school, and vocational) staged an open strike. A battle started over incentives between the ministry of education and trade unions on one hand and donor agencies on the other hand. This happened at the time when the exchange rate changed from 1,500 to 15,000 Lebanese liras to the dollar while not adjusting public sector salaries till the time of writing this study. In addition, the value of salary increases approved earlier collapsed with the devaluation of the local currency, fixed-term teachers have not gotten their salaries for several months now, and retired employees were not given their full rights when the salary scale law was ratified.

Reality is, therefore, at its worst now<sup>269</sup> especially considering the rift between the people and trade unions/leagues. This was demonstrated in the case of public school teachers who are dissatisfied with the performance of unions that do not represent them since they are now more loyal to political factions

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Jamil Mouawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Faten Al Haj. Op. Cit.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with Hassan Zeitouni. Op. Cit.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

than to the people.<sup>270</sup> In fact, the 2019 uprising was staged against both the government and the unions, hence looking into the possibility of forming new alliances that can succeed where traditional ones failed, especially with the failure of alternative trade union experience that emerged from the October 17 protests.

### **The possibility of reviving the coordination committee:**

The debate about the mechanism to be used to adjust salaries while avoiding more inflation is still ongoing especially with the approval of the 2022 defective budget three months before the end of the year. This debate revolves around protecting the basic rights of a big percentage of the Lebanese people who have been suffering because of the crisis while politicians and business owners and their allies in the media and religious circles keep holding the underprivileged accountable for the financial crisis. Against this backdrop, a question needs to be asked: Is it possible to revive the demand-based 2012 movement? Or create a similar independent entity? In its first phase, the movement succeeded in defying the regime and becoming a major player yet later failed to maintain its impact and continue working. Trade unions also failed in unifying their ranks on the long term to give full support to the public sector and every group within the coordination committee started speaking for itself only. Till this day, there are attempts to revive previous entities or create new independent ones such as the Independent Trade Union Movement that was established in 2015 after political factions infiltrated the coordination committee. However, according to trade union activist Ghassan Salibi, “The Independent Trade Union Movement was full of contradictions since its founders were lost between creating an independent trade union and staying in their original trade unions, which impacted the independence of the movement.”<sup>271</sup> There is also the Social Alliance for the Citizenship State and Social Justice that was established in 2021. The alliance consists of trade union associations, municipalities, students, and youths and aims at creating an independent trade union movement, yet it did not take part in any effective activities.

The majority of trade union activists interviewed for this study do not seem optimistic about reviving the coordination committee especially that most committee leaders are now loyal to the authorities.<sup>272</sup> However, they admit that there is dire need for an independent committee that would address the deteriorating conditions of employees<sup>273</sup>, teachers, and the entire public sector. Some say that there are studies looking into the possibility of reviving the coordination committee or a similar entity. “In 2020, we met with several entities with the aim of reviving the committee yet were unable to continue because of the pandemic,” said the head of the Public Elementary School Teachers League. “We also wanted to include the Lebanese University. In the meetings, we discussed the possible common goals, and I drafted a proposal and sent it to relevant parties for approval.”<sup>274</sup> He explained that they started with the main components: public education leagues (elementary, secondary, and vocational). He also added that they are currently working on expanding the committee and plan to communicate with the head of the Private School Teachers Union, public administrators, and retired employees.<sup>275</sup> According to Nehme Mahfud, groups attempting to revive the commission have to break away from their parties,<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Interview with Ellie Khalifa. Op. Cit.

<sup>271</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

<sup>272</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Heidar. Op. Cit.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Interview with Hussein Jawad. Op. Cit.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Interview with Nehme Mahfud. Op. cit.

and new working frameworks need to be devised. “It is also important to start cooperating with free professions union,” he added. “This does not mean we should not communicate with former members, but it needs to be done within certain limits.”<sup>277</sup>

Regardless of the structure of the future committee and whether it would be an expansion of the old one or a different entity, there are several challenges that need to be taken into consideration:

- The factional and sectarian nature of trade unions created after the end of the war and the dominance of clientelism.
- Deteriorating economic conditions that impact popular reactions to trade union movements.
- A general sentiment of helplessness following several movements (2011, 2015, 2019) that did not achieve the desired outcomes.
- Conflict of interest between different groups with each group focusing on its own demands while overlooking the fact that the crisis is overwhelmingly wide-ranging<sup>278</sup>

Considering those challenges and while it now seems harder to revive the 2011 movement<sup>279</sup>, any future entity, whether new or based on previous ones, should make sure that the following points are addressed:

- Focusing on common goals around which all the people can gather.
- Coordinating between independent entities and creating organizational structures and alliances that can address pressing issues, employ new strategies, and elect independent leaderships with clear platforms.
- Reviving debates that can bring different relevant parties together and looking into both the strengths and weaknesses of previous experiences to determine the shape of the new entity.
- Taking into consideration that the enemy is a bankrupt government and that demands pertaining to specific groups are no longer useful since the crisis is affecting all sectors and will only be resolved through reconsidering public policies.
- Knowing that the conditions of social movements and trade unions are in constant change.
- Trade unions identifying themselves as opposing the General Labour Federation are to apply mechanisms that prove they are democratic and independent entities that represent workers and defend their rights.<sup>280</sup>

It is a long struggle that requires awareness of the people’s needs and an understanding of the constant changes through which social movements go. This, in turn, necessitates a realistic approach that can address the current situation and learn from past mistakes that made previous movements unable to create a sustainable platform with the power resists attempts at undermining its objectives while making the demands of the people it represents the topmost priority.

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Zainab Sorour. “Trade unions and political activism: Conditions and steps [Arabic].” Arab Forum for Alternatives.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Ghassan Salibi. Op. Cit.

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