The Architecture of Containment: A Political History of Labor and Syndicalism in Lebanon (1911–2025)

1. Introduction: The Paradox of Class and Sect in the Lebanese Polity

The historiography of the Lebanese Republic is frequently dominated by the narrative of sectarian conflict, a prism that often obscures the profound and persistent struggle of organized labor. Yet, the history of the Lebanese labor movement is not merely a footnote to the story of confessional power-sharing; it is the central arena where the contradictions of the consociational state have been most fiercely contested. From the proto-unions of the late Ottoman era to the politicized professional syndicates of the post-2019 collapse, the labor movement has oscillated between functioning as a vehicle for cross-sectarian class solidarity and serving as a clientelist instrument for the ruling elite.

This report posits that the relationship between unions and politics in Lebanon is defined by a trajectory of "cyclical containment." In this model, socio-economic grievances periodically generate genuine, cross-community mobilization that threatens the sectarian status quo. In response, the political establishment—comprising traditional *zuama* (leaders), militia warlords, and the financial elite—deploys a sophisticated arsenal of legal restrictions, co-optation strategies, and violent repression to dismantle independent structures. The result is a labor landscape characterized by a "hollowed-out" General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL), which acts as a junior partner to the state, and a highly contested sphere of liberal professional orders (engineers, lawyers, physicians), which have become the last bastions of political contestation in the 21st century.

This analysis traces the evolution of this dynamic across four distinct historical epochs: the foundational period of state-building and the 1946 Labor Code; the Golden Age of trade unionism and its disintegration during the Civil War (1975–1990); the era of Syrian tutelage and the institutional capture of the CGTL (1990–2005); and the contemporary struggle between the "October 17" opposition forces and the entrenched sectarian parties (2019–2025). By synthesizing historical data with recent electoral outcomes—including the critical 2024 Order of Engineers and 2025 Beirut Bar Association elections—this report elucidates the structural mechanisms used to neutralize class-based political threats in Lebanon.

2. Genesis of a Movement: From Ottoman Guilds to

the Mandate Economy (1911–1943)

2.1 The Pre-State Origins and the Communist Vanguard

The origins of Lebanese labor organization predate the modern state, emerging in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire. Following the establishment of the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate in 1887, the region witnessed a shift from a purely agrarian feudal economy toward services, silk production, and international trade.[1] Unlike the rigid guild structures of Europe, the Lebanese workforce developed in a laissez-faire environment devoid of protective regulation. The earliest manifestations of organized labor appeared in the transport and printing sectors, which were critical to the burgeoning intellectual life of Beirut.

The founding of the Association of Printing Press Workers in 1911 represents the genesis of this movement. Operating under the Ottoman Law of Associations of 1909, these early bodies were hybrids of mutual aid societies and nascent trade unions.[1] From the outset, labor demands were intertwined with political aspirations. The 1913 general strike organized by the Committee of Union and Progress, which demanded greater autonomy from Ottoman authorities, demonstrated the capacity of organized labor to serve as a lever for political change, setting a precedent that would recur throughout the century.[1]

The establishment of the French Mandate in 1920 accelerated the politicization of the workforce. The mandate period was characterized by a distinct privileging of the pro-French commercial bourgeoisie and foreign concessionary companies (such as the tramway and electricity companies), creating sharp class delineations. Into this breach stepped the Lebanese People's Party, established in 1924 and later evolving into the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). The LCP provided the nascent movement with organizational discipline and an ideological framework that transcended sectarian divides. Publications like *al-Yaqaza*, which styled itself the "voice of the working class," played a crucial role in cultivating a shared proletarian identity among workers of different confessions.[1]

2.2 The Struggle for the 1946 Labor Code

The defining struggle of the pre-independence era was the battle for legal recognition and protection. The 1930s were marked by deteriorating living conditions and high inflation, sparking a wave of industrial action. The 1931 strike by taxi drivers in Beirut and Tripoli against the French tramway company was a watershed moment; it successfully united workers across regional and sectarian lines against a foreign monopoly, achieving tangible concessions after months of agitation.[1]

This momentum carried into the independence era, culminating in the passage of the Labor Code on September 23, 1946. While hailed as a victory for the labor movement—precipitated by strikes from railway, port, and electricity workers—the Code was a double-edged sword. It was crafted by the post-independence elite not merely to protect workers, but to regulate and

contain them within the confines of the new state.

Table 1: Structural Analysis of the 1946 Labor Code

Legal Provision	Description	Strategic Implication for State Control
Article 86 (Licensing)	Required "due authorization" from the Ministry of Labor to establish a union.	Granted the Minister of Labor discretionary power to deny licenses to independent unions or authorize pro-regime "counter-unions," facilitating political infiltration.[2]
Public Sector Exclusion	Civil servants were barred from unionizing; Decree 112 (1959) reinforced this ban.	Fragmented the national workforce by legally separating the bureaucracy from the private sector, preventing a unified general strike.[2]
Article 50	Originally allowed employers to dismiss workers without cause (amended in 1975).	Institutionalized job insecurity, discouraging union activism among vulnerable workers in the private sector.[1]
Fragmentation by Trade	Encouraged unions based on narrow professions rather than broad industries.	Promoted a proliferation of small, weak unions rather than powerful industrial federations, diluting bargaining power.[3]

The refusal of the Lebanese state to ratify International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association was a deliberate policy decision.[2] By retaining the requirement for prior authorization, the political elite ensured that the growth of the labor movement would remain dependent on administrative patronage, laying the groundwork for the co-optation strategies of the 1990s.

3. The Golden Age and the Descent into Civil War (1958–1990)

3.1 The Rise of the CGTL and the Chehabist Moment

The period between 1958 and 1975 is frequently romanticized as the "Golden Age" of Lebanese trade unionism. The founding of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) in 1958 created a unified national center for labor. Although initially dominated by right-wing federations, the Confederation expanded in the 1960s to include left-wing unions, reflecting the broader rise of Arab nationalist and leftist currents in the region.[2]

This era coincided with the presidency of Fouad Chehab (1958–1964), whose developmentalist approach sought to address social inequalities to prevent future conflict. The labor movement's most significant achievement during this period was the establishment of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) in 1963.[3] The NSSF represented a tangible social contract, linking the welfare of the citizen to their status as a worker rather than a client of a *za'im* (sectarian leader). The ability of the CGTL to mobilize diverse sectors—from teachers to Gandalou factory workers—demonstrated a high degree of autonomy and bargaining power.

3.2 The Civil War: Fragmentation and the Rise of Militia Economics

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1975 fundamentally reordered the relationship between labor and power. As the central state collapsed, the labor movement was physically and politically fragmented. The "Green Line" in Beirut did not just separate Christian East Beirut from Muslim West Beirut; it severed the economic arteries of the working class, forcing workers to seek employment and security within their own sectarian "cantons".[4]

The war gave rise to a "militia economy" where armed groups usurped the functions of both the state and the unions. Key militias established specialized labor bureaus to manage the workforce and distribute patronage, effectively co-opting the concept of labor representation:

- **The Lebanese Forces (LF):** In the Christian-dominated areas (often referred to as "Marounistan"), the LF established a comprehensive civil administration. They levied taxes, managed ports, and provided social services, rendering independent unions obsolete or subservient to the militia's "Public Services" departments.[5]
- **The Amal Movement:** In the Shiite-majority suburbs and the South, Amal filled the vacuum left by the state. The movement heavily penetrated the **Regie** (the state tobacco monopoly), transforming the tobacco farmers' and workers' unions into reservoirs of political loyalty. The Regie became a key node in Amal's clientelist network, providing jobs and subsidies in exchange for political allegiance.[7]
- **The Progressive Socialist Party (PSP):** Under Kamal and later Walid Jumblatt, the PSP established the "Civil Administration of the Mountain," which managed the economic life of the Druze community, further localizing labor governance.[5]

Despite this fragmentation, the CGTL maintained a tenuous symbolic unity. Its most notable wartime intervention was the massive general strike of 1987. Triggered by the collapse of the Lebanese pound and hyperinflation, the strike saw workers from both sides of the divide rally against the "militia rule" and economic destitution.[3] While this moment highlighted the latent potential of class solidarity, it was ultimately unable to dislodge the entrenched power of the militias, who controlled the guns and the supply lines.[5]

4. The Era of Syrian Tutelage: Institutional Capture and "Hatching" (1990–2005)

4.1 The Mechanism of Control: "Hatching" Unions

The Taif Agreement of 1989 ended the military conflict but entrenched the sectarian system. The post-war period, dominated by Syrian military and intelligence presence ("Pax Syriana"), witnessed the systematic dismantling of the CGTL's independence. The regime recognized that a unified, cross-sectarian labor movement posed a threat to the neoliberal reconstruction project led by Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the sectarian status quo enforced by the "Troika" (President, PM, Speaker).[2]

To neutralize this threat, the Ministry of Labor, often under the influence of pro-Syrian figures like Nabih Berri's Amal Movement, employed a tactic known as "hatching" (*tafrikh*). This involved licensing dozens of small, fictive unions loyal to the ruling parties to dilute the voting power of independent federations within the CGTL.[2]

The CGTL's internal bylaws, which granted equal voting rights (two delegates) to every federation regardless of membership size, made it fatally vulnerable to this strategy. A federation representing 500 workers in a pro-regime sector had the same voting power as a federation representing 10,000 independent industrial workers. Between 1993 and 2015, the number of federations in the CGTL exploded from 22 to 59, with the vast majority being "empty shells" created solely to control the Confederation's Executive Council.[2]

4.2 The 1997 Coup Against Elias Abu Rizk

The conflict between the independent labor leadership and the state reached its zenith in 1997. The CGTL was led by Elias Abu Rizk, a charismatic Christian trade unionist who fiercely opposed the Hariri government's economic policies and maintained a degree of autonomy from Syrian dictates. Abu Rizk's ability to mobilize general strikes made him a primary target for the authorities.[2]

In a coordinated operation, the government orchestrated a coup to remove Abu Rizk. Days before the scheduled CGTL elections, the Ministry of Labor authorized five new pro-government federations to tip the electoral balance. On election day, security forces besieged the CGTL headquarters. Two parallel elections were held: one re-electing Abu Rizk

by the legitimate federations, and another, supervised by the Ministry and protected by police, electing **Ghanim Zoghbi**, a pro-government figure affiliated with the Amal Movement.[10]

The state immediately recognized Zoghbi's leadership, seized the CGTL's headquarters, and arrested Abu Rizk on charges of "usurping authority" and "disseminating false information".[10] This event marked the death knell of the CGTL as an independent actor. Under Zoghbi and his successor Ghassan Ghosn, the Confederation was transformed into a co-opted entity that frequently cancelled strikes at the behest of political patrons and acted as a rubber stamp for government policy.[3]

5. The "Cedar Revolution" and the Anomaly of the UCC (2005–2015)

5.1 Political Polarization and Labor Paralysis

The assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005 and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops reconfigured the political landscape into two polarized camps: the March 14 Alliance (Future Movement, LF, Kataeb, PSP) and the March 8 Alliance (Hezbollah, Amal, FPM). This polarization paralyzed civil society, as labor unions were increasingly viewed through the lens of this binary conflict.[12]

The CGTL, firmly under the control of the Amal Movement and its March 8 allies, was used as a political wedge against the March 14-led governments (such as that of Fouad Siniora). Strikes called by the CGTL during this period were widely perceived as partisan maneuvers rather than genuine labor actions, further eroding public trust in the Confederation.[12]

5.2 The Rise of the Union Coordination Committee (UCC)

In this vacuum of legitimacy, a new actor emerged: the Union Coordination Committee (UCC) or *Hay'at al-Tansiq al-Naqabiyya*. Formed as a coalition of public sector employees, public school teachers, and private school teachers, the UCC was structurally distinct from the CGTL. It was led by independent figures like **Hanna Gharib** (Head of the Secondary Teachers League) and **Nehme Mahfoud** (Head of the Private School Teachers Union), who operated on a consensus basis and maintained distance from the political alignments of the day.[13]

Between 2011 and 2014, the UCC led the most significant labor mobilization in post-war Lebanon, demanding a new salary scale (*salsala*) to adjust wages for inflation. The movement was remarkable for its:

- **Scale:** It organized massive demonstrations, some exceeding 100,000 participants, and successfully shut down the public administration and schools for weeks.[13]
- **Cross-Sectarian Nature:** The demand for a living wage united teachers and civil servants from all regions and sects, challenging the narrative that Lebanese can only mobilize on confessional lines.

- **Independence:** The UCC repeatedly rejected "compromise" offers from the government that were endorsed by the co-opted CGTL leadership.[13]

5.3 The Empire Strikes Back: The 2015 Containment

The political establishment viewed the UCC's independence as an existential threat. In 2015, the ruling parties—rivals in parliament—joined forces to crush the independent leadership of the UCC. In the elections for the Secondary Teachers League, a "grand coalition" comprising the Future Movement, Amal, Hezbollah, FPM, LF, and PSP formed a unified list to run against Hanna Gharib.[13]

Despite Gharib winning 60% of the individual votes, the majoritarian electoral system and the combined machinery of the sectarian parties ensured the victory of the partisan list. Gharib was ousted, and the Teachers League was brought back under the control of the party bureaus. This episode illustrated a fundamental rule of Lebanese politics: **sectarian elites will suspend their geopolitical rivalries to suppress any genuine class-based movement that threatens their clientelist monopoly**.[13]

6. The October 17 Uprising and the Battle for the Syndicates (2019–2023)

6.1 The Collapse and the "Order Revolts"

The financial collapse of 2019 and the subsequent October 17 Uprising (*Thawra*) exposed the total delegitimization of the ruling class. The slogan *Kellon Ya'ne Kellon* ("All of them means all of them") targeted both the politicians and the banking elite. Notably, the CGTL was completely absent from the uprising, confirming its status as a zombie institution.[3]

With trade unions neutralized, the opposition shifted its focus to the "Liberal Professions" (Orders/Syndicates) of lawyers, engineers, and doctors. These bodies possess significant financial resources (pension funds), regulatory power, and social prestige, making them strategic prizes. A coalition known as "The Order Revolts" (*Naqaba Tantafid*) emerged to contest these strongholds.[18]

6.2 The Breakthrough Victories (2019–2021)

The opposition achieved stunning initial successes:

- **Beirut Bar Association (2019): Melhem Khalaf**, an independent candidate supported by the uprising, was elected Bâtonnier (President). His victory was celebrated as the first tangible institutional win for the revolution, displacing the candidates of the traditional parties.[19]
- **Order of Engineers and Architects (2021):** The "Order Revolts" coalition achieved a landslide victory, electing **Aref Yassine** as President and securing a majority in the

council. This win, securing over 65% of the vote, suggested a profound shift in the mood of the professional middle class.[18]

These victories created a sense of momentum, suggesting that the syndicates could serve as a beachhead for a broader political transformation in the 2022 parliamentary elections. However, the internal fragmentation of the opposition groups and the sheer resilience of the sectarian parties would soon check this advance.

7. The Restoration of Sectarian Order: Analysis of Recent Elections (2024–2025)

The period from 2024 to 2025 marked a concerted counter-offensive by the traditional parties to reclaim the syndicates. The data indicates a return to traditional sectarian alignments, albeit with shifting tactical alliances tailored to specific electoral battles.

7.1 The Order of Engineers and Architects (April 2024)

The April 2024 elections for the Order of Engineers in Beirut were a decisive restoration of the *ancien régime*. The opposition coalition, "Musammimoon" (Designers), failed to retain the leadership.

- **The Victor: Fadi Hanna**, a candidate of the **Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)**.
- **The Alliance:** Hanna's victory was secured through a strategic alliance between the FPM and the **"Shia Duo" (Amal Movement and Hezbollah)**, along with the support of **Al-Ahbash**. This coalition won 4,634 votes.[21]
- **The Defeated:** Pierre Geara, supported by the **Lebanese Forces (LF)**, **Kataeb**, and **Future Movement**, received 4,129 votes.[21]
- **Analysis:** This election highlighted the durability of the FPM-Hezbollah alliance (Mar Mikhael) despite political tensions. Gebran Bassil, leader of the FPM, explicitly framed the victory as the defeat of the "conspiracy" of 2019, signalling a reassertion of partisan identity over professional independence.[22] The result demonstrated that when the sectarian parties mobilize their bases (particularly the disciplined voting blocs of Amal and Hezbollah), they can overwhelm independent movements.

7.2 The Beirut Bar Association (November 2025)

The November 16, 2025 elections for the Beirut Bar Association provided a more complex picture of inter-sectarian competition, yet confirmed the marginalization of genuine independents.

- **The Victor: Imad Martinos**, officially backed by the **Lebanese Forces (LF)**.[23]
- **The Rival: Elie Bazerli**, an independent candidate supported by a massive "Grand Coalition" including the **Kataeb**, **Amal Movement**, **Hezbollah**, **FPM**, and **PSP**.[23]
- **The Results:** In a high-turnout election (over 5,000 voters), Martinos defeated Bazerli in

the second round (2,416 to 2,042 votes).[23]

- **Analysis:** This result is highly significant for several reasons:
  1. **Fluidity of Alliances:** The LF and Kataeb, typically allies in the "sovereignist" camp, found themselves on opposing sides. The FPM and LF also competed, despite occasional convergence on Christian rights.
  2. **LF Dominance:** The victory of Martinos against a coalition of almost every other major party demonstrates the formidable organizational strength of the Lebanese Forces within the Christian middle class and legal profession.
  3. **Marginalization of "Thawra":** Unlike in 2019, no candidate representing the "October 17" movement reached the final runoff. The contest was strictly between different configurations of the establishment.[23]

Table 2: Comparative Syndicate Election Dynamics (2019–2025)

Year	Syndicate	Winner	Political Configuration	Implications
2019	Beirut Bar Assoc.	**Melhem Khalaf**	Independent / Civil Society	Breakthrough for the Uprising; rejection of parties.
2021	Order of Engineers	**Aref Yassine**	"The Order Revolts"	Peak opposition influence; cross-sectarian voting.
2021	Beirut Bar Assoc.	**Nader Gaspard**	Future + Amal + FPM	Traditional parties regroup to defeat opposition.
2023	Beirut Bar Assoc.	**Fadi Masri**	Kataeb	Continued party dominance.
2024	Order of	**Fadi Hanna**	FPM + Amal +	"Axis of Resistance"

	Engineers		Hezbollah	alliance secures victory.
2025	Beirut Bar Assoc.	**Imad Martinos**	Lebanese Forces	LF asserts hegemony over Christian professionals; splintering of alliances.

8. Mechanisms of Control: How the System Reproduces Itself

The ability of the sectarian elite to survive the collapse of the economy and the uprising of 2019 relies on four structural mechanisms of control within the labor sector.

8.1 Legal Gatekeeping and Discretionary Power

The Ministry of Labor serves as the primary gatekeeper. Utilizing Article 86 of the Labor Code, the Ministry has historically flooded the trade union landscape with "ghost unions." A "political" union with 50 members often has the same voting rights in the CGTL as a productive union with 5,000 members. This gerrymandering ensures that the CGTL executive council is always populated by loyalists.[2]

8.2 The "Labor Bureau" Infrastructure

Major political parties have internalized labor representation through specialized internal departments that parallel—and often supersede—actual unions.

- **Amal Movement (Central Labor Bureau):** This body effectively manages the representation of Shiite workers in the public sector and the **Regie** (Tobacco Monopoly). The Regie union is a classic example of a "captured" institution where employment and benefits are distributed through the party apparatus rather than collective bargaining.[7]
- **Hezbollah (Workers Unit):** Operates a parallel welfare state. Its mobilization is often distinct from the national labor movement, focusing on its own "Resistance Society" institutions. It coordinates closely with Amal in national elections to secure the "Shiite vote".[25]
- **Lebanese Forces (Labor Department):** Focuses heavily on white-collar professionals and private sector employees in Christian areas. Its recent victory in the Bar Association (2025) highlights its strategy of controlling prestigious, high-capital syndicates rather

than traditional blue-collar unions.[23]

8.3 Weaponized Clientelism

In the absence of a functional state, parties provide the social safety net. Unions cannot offer healthcare or education; parties can. This creates a dependency trap. Even workers who ideologically support the opposition often vote for party lists in union elections because their job security or their children's school fees depend on a *wasta* (connection) from the party.[28] The economic crisis has paradoxically strengthened this mechanism for the poorest, who are now totally dependent on party aid, while alienating the middle class who have emigrated.

8.4 Co-optation via "National Unity"

When threatened, the elite forms cartels. The 2015 defeat of the UCC and the 2021 defeat of the opposition in the Bar Association (by Nader Gaspard) were achieved by "Grand Coalitions" where supposed enemies (e.g., Future and Hezbollah, or FPM and Amal) coordinated their votes to block independent candidates. This "negative unity" is the ultimate firewall of the sectarian system.[13]

9. Future Outlook: Retrenchment and the Proxy Battleground

The trajectory of labor politics in Lebanon points toward a deepening **retrenchment**. The window of opportunity opened by the 2019 uprising appears to be closing in the syndicalist arena. The 2024 and 2025 elections suggest that the professional middle class—battered by the crisis and emigration—is retreating to the perceived safety of sectarian strongholds.

The syndicates have effectively returned to their pre-2019 function: they are proxy battlegrounds for national political struggles. The 2025 Bar Association election was not fought over the rights of lawyers or judicial independence, but was a test of strength for the Lebanese Forces against its Christian and national rivals.[23]

Furthermore, the "Labor Bureaus" of the parties are likely to become even more central as the state continues to wither. With the public sector in ruins, the parties' private welfare networks (health, education, food aid) will become the primary employers and providers, further eroding the possibility of independent, class-based unionism.

10. Conclusion

The modern history of unions and politics in Lebanon is a testament to the remarkable adaptability of the sectarian system. From the colonial-era suppression of the LCP to the militia-run cantons of the Civil War, and finally to the "hatching" of unions under Syrian tutelage, the Lebanese labor movement has been relentlessly besieged.

While the 2019 uprising and the brief success of the "Order Revolts" offered a glimpse of an alternative, the structural realities of the post-2023 landscape indicate a restoration of elite control. The victories of Fadi Hanna (2024) and Imad Martinos (2025) confirm that the "sectarian containment" of labor remains effective.

For the Lebanese labor movement to reclaim its agency, electoral victories in syndicates are insufficient. A fundamental restructuring of the legal framework—specifically the abolition of the licensing regime and the liberation of the public sector unions—is the prerequisite for dismantling the clientelist networks that hold the working class hostage. Until such structural changes occur, Lebanon's unions will remain stages for the political theater of the elite, rather than instruments of the workers they claim to represent.

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