

Building an Oil Empire: Labor and Gender Relations in American Company Towns in Libya, 1950s–1970s

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INTRODUCTION

In 1965, several Libyan men entered into the industrial area of Marsa el Brega, built by Esso in the early 1960s to refine and export the crude oil the company extracted in the desert, and blew up three storage tanks and a water pipeline. Their aim was to express their opposition to the Libyan monarchy, at a time of rising criticism of American oil companies operating in Libya. In the previous months, a growing number of articles published in Arab nationalist weekly newspapers had accused US firms of exploiting the country's wealth by employing foreigners rather than Libyans, and not allowing the Libyan government to control their activities, including their labor policies.¹ Esso Libya replied to such forms of opposition by increasing security measures in the industrial area and company town it had built for its American and British employees. Not only did it raise new fences and established three army checkpoints in Marsa el Brega, but it asked for support from the US State Department, which recommended the creation of a National Security Force to patrol pipelines, oil fields, and storage facilities.²

This story raises a series of questions about the ways in which American oil firms defined and reshaped their interests in Libya after the Suez crisis of 1956, when they expanded the country's oil production in an effort to

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avoid the Suez Canal. Most research on postcolonial Libya has examined the “transfer of power” from Italy, to the UN trusteeship, to independence, or the relationship between the US government, American oil companies, and the Libyan state.³ This chapter takes a different approach. It analyzes the labor relations American oil companies introduced in oil camps and company towns, as Libya became one of the main oil-producing countries of the Mediterranean. Through a study of government sources, corporate and trade union records, newspapers, memoirs, interviews, home videos and Facebook pages, it argues that between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s, debates and struggles over labor policies played a crucial role in shaping US–Libyan relations.

Clashes and tensions between Americans and Libyans were not limited to trade unions and organized forms of labor protest, but extended to living spaces. By examining the conflicts that emerged around the oil camps and company towns American firms established in Libya, this chapter sheds new light on the social history of labor in the oil industry. It argues that US oil companies reproduced the gender, class and racial hierarchies that characterized other American camps across the globe, based on racial and ethnic segregation, and the elevation of white women to symbols and agents of America’s corporate civilizing mission. It thus contributes to an understanding of the experience of a specific category of skilled workers, which has not received much scholarly attention, but was crucial in the history of the global oil industry during the twentieth century, namely the expatriate workforce.

The study of social relations in oil towns has recently been at the center of a growing scholarship.⁴ As Robert Vitalis has argued, American firms exported to Latin America, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia a model “rooted in Jim Crow,” with its ideas of “white supremacy, norms of discrimination, and segregation and, at its margins, of paternalistic racial uplift.”⁵ Such a model drew on and replicated the forms of segregation that had characterized mining industries on the American frontier, as well as US businesses in Latin America. As Myrna Santiago has pointed out in her work on early twentieth century Mexican oil fields, women “were an integral part of the local and transnational economy created by oil extraction.”⁶ White American women followed their husbands and established their homes in company towns, where they oversaw servants, formed ladies’ clubs, and attended social events.

While American oil companies operating in Libya drew on previous experiences, they also introduced significant changes. In particular, they

tried to limit the number of Libyans they trained and hired, and kept under control the size of the industrial area and company town. This decision was the result of a wider set of changes taking place in other producing regions at the time. After the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1951, oil firms were aware of the risks involved in employing a large number of local workers. The Abadan crisis in 1951–1954, in particular, showed the power large numbers of concentrated and organized workers in urban, industrial centers, could have over crucial nodes of the international oil market, and pushed oil companies to change their policies. After the crisis, oil companies decided to refine in Western Europe most of the crude oil they extracted in the Middle East. At the same time, they limited the number of local workers they employed in oil camps, in order to prevent the emergence of organized political conflict.

In Libya, American oil companies reproduced some of the features that characterized US suburbs in the post-World War II decades.⁷ They created segregated company towns for their white American and British engineers, technicians and secretaries, where workers could have access to the same forms of leisure and domesticity they enjoyed in the US. Women played a particularly important role in building the community, by organizing their families' everyday lives, along with the leisure activities of the town as a whole. By doing so, they maintained and reinforced the class and racial hierarchies needed for the expansion of American corporate capitalism. Like in American suburbs, US company towns in Libya were characterized by tensions: families did not always have access to the standard of living promised by the company, and many women felt isolated, especially single women who moved to Libya as secretaries.

While most studies of oil towns have focused on the decades preceding the rise of oil nationalism, this chapter investigates the ways in which the nationalization of oil resources in the early 1970s transformed labor relations and everyday life in American company towns in Libya. Once Muammar Qaddafi's regime came to power in 1969, it emphasized the need to create a class of skilled Libyan oil workers, capable of operating the plants US oil companies had built in the 1960s. During the 1970s, Libyan workers increasingly challenged American oil companies' labor policies, by demanding the right to live in company towns and have access to the same services as their American and British colleagues. As this chapter shows, relations between American and Libyan engineers, managers and

technicians—and their families—were characterized by strong gender tensions. While some Libyan men who moved into the company town considered American women as sexual objects, Esso Libya replaced families with male bachelors working on a temporary basis. In this context, the company town as it had been built in the early 1960s became unsustainable, until in the early 1980s American oil companies left Libya, in the context of growing tensions between the American and the Libyan governments.

BUILDING AND MANAGING AN INFORMAL EMPIRE

At the end of the Second World War, Libya was one of the poorest countries in the world. Italian colonial rule had been characterized by extreme violence and exploitation, particularly after the rise of the Fascist regime in 1922. Whereas the previous Italian government, which ruled over Libya between 1911 and 1922, had established numerous forms of exchange and collaboration with merchants and the Jewish middle-class in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the Fascist regime pursued a form of control based on racial segregation and subordination. Since Libya was to serve as Italy's "fourth shore," reviving imperial prestige and providing an outlet for Italy's overpopulation, the regime seized much of the land used by Libyans and established settlement farms through the *Ente per la colonizzazione della Libia* [Agency for the Colonization of Libya]. In Cyrenaica, where the Sanusi tribe resisted Italian colonial rule, the Fascist regime deported over 100,000 people to concentration camps built in the desert, killing most of the region's inhabitants.⁸

When Libya became independent in 1951, its population had been reduced to 1 million. Most people lived in the desert as seminomadic pastoralists and farmers, or in Benghazi and Tripoli. Despite the fact that during the Second World War and after independence tens of thousands of Italians left Libya, about 20,000 stayed behind. They continued to live in the farms they had acquired during the colonial period, and many of them worked as merchants and businessmen in Tripoli. In the early 1950s, Libyans and Italians interacted with a growing number of American and British citizens working in military bases, or for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).⁹

Following the discovery of oil resources in the first half of the 1950s, Libyan society experienced a deep transformation. In 1955, the government passed a new Petroleum Law, which increased the presence of international oil companies in Libya. The Law encouraged competition among firms, by limiting the size and number of their concessions, and forced companies to develop their oil fields within a specific time period. With the introduction of this new Law, which included the possibility of paying lower royalties than in other oil-producing countries, dozens of firms started operating in Libya, including independent ones from West Germany, Japan, and Italy. The development of Libya's oil resources was also closely related to the decision on the part of the US and Great Britain to differentiate the sources of oil coming from the Middle East, in order to avoid being entirely dependent on the Suez Canal. Libya's geographic position west of the Canal and close to Western European markets and refineries made it an ideal place where to invest public and corporate resources.¹⁰

As dozens of international oil companies applied for concessions, thousands of Libyan men left the desert, while hundreds of expats arrived to work in the oil industry. Many Libyans found employment in the growing construction and service industries catering to oil companies. They became night watchmen or domestic workers for wealthy oil company employees and military personnel, or contractors in a range of sectors including water-well drilling, air transport, and trucking. Tripoli and Benghazi changed accordingly. As their population increased, the two cities introduced a clear-cut separation between luxurious neighborhoods inhabited by a wealthy class of foreign businessmen on the one hand, and slums for the Libyan population on the other. As the American Embassy in Tripoli put it, whereas foreign workers moved into "new, white, gleaming, 'Mediterranean' style buildings," most Libyans occupied "the rapid burgeoning of 'bidonvillas'...jammed with thousands of country people—mostly semi-nomadis [*sic*]." ¹¹

Given that most Libyans were rural and unskilled, oil companies imported skilled workers from abroad. At the Zelten oil field, for instance, Esso employed drilling and derrick technicians from California. In other cases, firms hired Egyptians who had acquired experience in their country's oil industry and moved to Libya in search of a better job. Or else Italians who stayed after the end of colonialism or migrated to Libya to find employment in the growing transportation, construction and oil sector,

and who were not only more qualified, but often less hostile to the American and British business world.¹² Libyans, on the other hand, were hired on a weekly or monthly basis and did not receive any benefits or allowances. Most of them were young, unmarried and unskilled migrants, who considered working in the oil fields a temporary and transient job.¹³

By the mid-1960s, international oil companies in Libya employed about 9000 people. Of these, 6400 were Libyan, 1290 American, 600 British and 210 Italian, while the rest were divided between Canadians, French, Germans, Dutch, Maltese, and Greeks. The divisions between different nationalities reflected and reinforced divisions and hierarchies between skills and salaries: whereas Libyans worked as laborers, drivers and servicemen, American and British employees occupied the higher ranks as managers and technicians. Italians, on the other hand, were hired as clerical, professional, or technical workers.¹⁴ A typical crew was composed of approximately ten people and included, for example, a Libyan cook, a Danish tool pusher, a Berber driver, a British derrickman, an Italian driller, and several Arab laborers recruited from the tribes around the wells.¹⁵

In this context, labor relations became the object of increased tension between Libyans and Americans. In the second half of the 1950s, the Libyan government and oil workers' trade unions started challenging American labor policies. In 1957, the government passed a Labor Law aimed at "Libyanizing" the oil workforce and securing social rights for Libyan workers. The decision to regulate labor was in many ways tied to international oil companies' behavior. In order to quickly set up their businesses and carry out their activities, firms often hired people who worked for the Libyan government and were politically influential. Faced with the threat that they would draw on the more educated employees, the government made sure that all workers were registered and employed through provincial and federal Labor Offices. The Law also introduced a series of social rights, such as the right to a minimum wage, and the right to proper working and living conditions. Furthermore, it challenged the forms of discrimination between Libyan and foreign workers, particularly between Libyans and Italians. While the Labor Law concerned all categories of workers, the Libyan government applied it primarily to oil workers employed by foreign oil companies. By doing so, it established a clear separation and hierarchy between a class of skilled oil workers that could serve as the backbone of the country's economy on the one hand, and unskilled workers on the other. US oil companies reacted immediately to the Labor Law and argued that it constituted a "harassment of American

oil companies.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, they approved the final draft and accepted the introduction of fixed pay scales, and the need to hire workers through the Labor Office.¹⁷

While the Libyan government used the Law to further its control over the Libyan workforce and the country’s oil resources, other groups advanced more radical requests. In 1958, Abd al-Latif Kekhya, a trade unionist previously employed by Mobil Oil Canada, founded the Petroleum Workers Union (PWU), which aimed at representing all employees of the oil companies operating in Tripolitania. With a membership of 600 people, it soon joined the International Federation of Petroleum Workers (IFPW), based in Denver, Colorado. The PWU denounced employers for not respecting Libya’s Labor Law, and attacked firms for establishing hierarchies between Libyan, Italian and other foreign workers.¹⁸

In the late 1950s, the US administration, along with the companies, became increasingly worried about Kekhya’s activities. While the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) described him as “a rabid opportunist with strong grievances against the Western companies,”¹⁹ the State Department feared that “Kikhya [*sic*]...could well become a matter of serious concern to Western petroleum and political interests for years to come.”²⁰ In order to undermine his growing power, the American government, with the support of US oil companies, offered Kekhya a fellowship to study at the “Centro Studi CISL” in Florence. Funded by the anti-Communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the Center was run by the Italian trade union Confederazione Italiana Sindacato Lavoratori [Italian Confederation of Trades’ Union] (CISL) and played an important role in training pro-Western trade unionists from Italy and, increasingly, from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.²¹ However, when he returned to Libya, Kekhya organized a major labor federation, which received support from the Soviet Union, the Tunisian Communist Party, the Port Workers’ Union, and Arab Communists.²² Like in other contexts, the US administration reacted by offering its support to a pro-Western trade unionist, Salim Shita, and mobilized the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to establish a strong relationship between Shita and the ICFTU. In 1959, with the support of the American government and the AFL-CIO, Shita expelled Kekhya from the PWU, and placed Libyan trade unions under the Libyan General Federation of Trade Unions (LGFTU), directed by him.²³

“THE HOUSES THAT OIL BUILT”

In a context characterized by limited social and political rights, American oil companies proceeded to establish a firm presence in Libya. In 1959, Esso made one of its most important discoveries at the Zelten oil field, located in Cyrenaica about 100 km south of the Mediterranean coast. The amount of crude extracted was such that it supplied most of the company's share of the European market. With its 30 wells, in 1963 the field produced up to 300,000 barrels of crude per day. Esso thus became the largest and most important company in Libya, and contributed significantly to transforming the country into the main African oil producer, with an extraction of 58.5 million tons of oil by 1965.²⁴

The firm quickly expanded its activities, and introduced a series of changes that had profound social and political consequences. In 1959, it started building an industrial area along the coast, near the village of Marsa el Brega, to process the oil it extracted in the desert. This included a pipeline connecting its oil field to the sea, a power station to provide electricity to Zelten, a terminal to ship petroleum to Western Europe and the US, and several storage tanks. In the early 1960s, the company decided to build a refinery, needed to transform the increased amount of oil coming from its concessions. It was prefabricated in Belgium by the Chemical Construction Company of New York and sent to Libya in 1962, and was supposed to refine 8000 barrels of crude per day, for its own needs and those of Libyan consumers. In 1965, Esso added a plant to produce liquefied natural gas (LNG) for its Western European markets.²⁵

In order to operate its various plants, Esso imported skilled workers from the US, Canada, and Great Britain. As long as it limited its activities to extraction, Esso relied on a pool of geologists and technicians that moved monthly between the company's domestic and international affiliates. After it built the refinery, it needed a more stable workforce, willing to work and live in Marsa el Brega. The first group of workers, which was particularly crucial in getting the refinery started, came from several plants Esso owned in Great Britain, at Milford Haven (Wales), Fawley (Hampshire), and Whitegate (Ireland). Most employees, though, were part of an American group of expats who moved from one oil town to another, and many had previously worked and lived in Venezuela, Texas, and California. One of them, for instance, after graduating from Ohio State

University in the late 1940s was hired in Aruba as a refinery plant safety engineer. He stayed there until 1965, with his wife, the daughter of an Esso employee from Louisiana, with whom he had seven children. They eventually moved back to the US so that their children could attend school, and then to other oil towns across the world, from England, to Singapore, to the Philippines, before going to Marsa el Brega, where they stayed for 2 years, after which they moved to yet another oil town, in Baytown, Texas.²⁶

With the construction of the refinery, Esso also built a company town for the growing number of foreign employees operating the plant. One resident described it as, “a large fenced enclave, about five miles across, surrounded by the Great Sahara Desert to the south and the Gulf of Sirte, the southern reach of the Mediterranean Sea, on the north.”²⁷ The company aimed at creating what it called a “settler community,” based on a clear-cut separation between white American, British and Canadian employees and the Libyan population. Like other oil towns Esso (and other companies) built in oil-producing countries, Marsa el Brega was a gated community. As the *Residents’ Guidebook* Esso distributed to its employees and their families put it,

To assure Esso exclusive use of the area as set forth in the agreement [between Esso and the Libyan government], the entire Esso development is isolated and separated from the surrounding area by a fence 17 km long, and like other oil installations, is guarded by security police.²⁸

Marsa el Brega had been the site of an Italian concentration camp for those Cyrenaican tribes that had tried to resist Italian colonial rule. The town was abandoned after being destroyed during the Second World War. At first, Esso Libya preserved the memory of colonial violence, by having “concrete fences constructed around four of the Brega cemeteries.”²⁹ Americans, however, quickly forgot about the past, and proceeded to build a new town based on new forms of segregation and violence. As Richard H. Tallman, Community Development Advisor for Esso Libya, stated during a lecture held at the University of Tripoli in 1968, before the oil boom Marsa el Brega had been “little more than a point on the map marking the location of a police post, a few shallow water wells and a very small community.”³⁰ Yet, Libyans continued to draw parallels between the two camps. In an article published in the Cyrenaican newspaper *Al Zaman* in 1963, a

journalist defined Marsa el Brega as an “empire,” and Libyan workers’ living conditions as “concentration camp conditions.”³¹

In 1965, the residential area had three streets, which housed about sixty families. The “houses that oil built,” as one Esso publication called them, were standard concrete houses made of two, three or four bedrooms. The company encouraged male employees to bring their wives and children, and provided bachelors with small trailers or houses that could accommodate approximately ten workers. Unlike other American oil towns, the residential area was not characterized by spatial hierarchies between employees, although office workers—mostly female—lived in a separate area called “Secretary Street,” along with teachers. In order to attract employees, a pamphlet emphasized how,

In the fashion of other towns that in the mid-twentieth century have been planned and engineered into sudden existence by private investment, almost every conceivable material need has been anticipated and met. The neat rows of bungalow-style houses are equipped with both central heating and central air conditioning.³²

Esso provided its employees with a supermarket, a clinic, a cinema which mostly showed Western movies, a bowling alley, tennis courts, and several recreation facilities, including a golf course made “by rolling a mixture of oil, sand and sea weed.” Children could attend school up to eighth grade, after which they would go—with Esso’s financial support—to boarding schools in Europe and the US, or to international schools in Rome. In order to provide high learning standards, Esso made sure to hire American and British teachers. Employees, therefore, had access to the standard of living they were used to in the US or in other American company towns across the world, with the supermarket providing “a wide selection of canned, packaged and frozen food products imported from Europe and the United States.”³³ As Muriel Arnold, who worked in Marsa el Brega as a secretary, put it, the supermarket “could be anywhere in the world. Shelves are filled up when a ship comes in with supplies mainly from America. It then takes on an atmosphere like Christmas. Goodies everywhere.”³⁴

Esso aimed at building an informal community of employees and their families. In order to attract workers, the company highlighted the forms of

leisure workers could have access to in Marsa el Brega. As one publication put it,

A recreation center with swimming pool, restaurant, lounge and sailing facilities provides an atmosphere, a view of the Mediterranean and—most of the time—a climate that most people have to buy with vacation money.³⁵

Marsa el Brega relied on a strict gender segregation. Wives were not only in charge of planning their families' everyday lives, but also of building a sense of community by organizing social events for the town as a whole, thus preventing the emergence of social conflict. They took care of their children, volunteered in schools, socialized through the Ladies Ghibli Golf Club, "cook[ed], paint[ed], [and played] bridge."³⁶ The company provided them with *Information Packages*, which included a Ladies Group Directory, as well as recipes to be used in the Libyan desert, such as a recipe for stuffed camel. One resident offered the following description,

There is a very active social life here. In addition to the Golf Club, we have a Dramatic Group...the Scuba Club...There is a Go-Kart Club, a Ladies Bowling League and a Children's Bowling League. A Sailing Group, the Brega Lawn Tennis Association. Ladies Duplicate Bridge and Mixed Duplicate Bridge, a Gourmet Group, a Garden Club, a Square Dance Club, the Caledoniam Society and Brownies.³⁷

In the middle of the desert, wives had the difficult task of maintaining "sophisticated and civilised standards." Esso encouraged them to reproduce the forms of middle-class identity that characterized other company towns in Latin America and Asia, setting a "dinner table equal to any Manhattan apartment with crisp table linen, dinner services of the finest bone china and Waterford crystal glass for the fruit juice," and engaging in stimulating conversations, so that it would be "difficult to believe that we are several hundred miles from anywhere."³⁸

Despite Esso Libya's efforts to describe Marsa el Brega as a tourist resort, many residents felt isolated. The town was located hundreds of miles away from Benghazi and Tripoli and "seem[ed] to come up out of nowhere almost mirage-like."³⁹ While Esso's official publication depicted "the houses that oil built" as colorful and surrounded by trees and grass,

the residential area was “built on the grid system...[and] segregated by... long, bare, empty streets with not a hint of colour or lick of paint, not a bush or tree or plant.”⁴⁰ Yards were filled with sand “that proved hostile to most vegetation,” while sandstorms (*ghiblis*) forced residents inside their homes for days at a time.⁴¹ As Arnold put it,

In the Esso brochure Marsa el-Brega is described as a ‘modern port community’. In fact, Marsa el-Brega is a camp with top security, enclosed by that high mesh fence with armed guards at check points. I have described it in my diary as a B.G.D (bloody great dump) smell of dead rats, smell of sewers and oh! The smell of gas!⁴²

Furthermore, despite the fact that for some families living an international corporate life meant social mobility and access to higher living standards than those possible in the US, the forms of status described in Esso’s official publications rarely translated into reality. According to one handbook, employees could employ domestic servants and each house even had a small room for a maid, but in fact “no one hired servants because there were none to be had.”⁴³

Nonetheless, for many women (and their families), Marsa el Brega offered a good quality of life and provided them with a close-knit community. The experience of living in the desert struck many residents as unique, and many enjoyed encountering Bedouins on the outskirts of the company town. An engineer’s wife, for instance, pointed out that “probably [she] would not move there and live there, it would not be her choice to live there if she had the choice to live anywhere in the world, but it was beautiful in the Spring, with the Spring rains and the desert in bloom.”⁴⁴

Children, in particular, had access to a range of facilities and forms of entertainment, and still remember growing up in Marsa el Brega as “the greatest part of [their] childhood & teenage years!”⁴⁵ The company encouraged boys and girls to become members of scout organizations, and most of them spent their time on the beach, at the swimming pool or on the go-kart racetrack. Children would also be taken on trips to the desert, where they searched for fossils, or visited plane wreckages from the Second World War. Especially for boys, Marsa el Brega provided a safe haven where to build their identities as frontiersmen. Journalist Neil MacFarquhar, who moved to the company town in 1965 with his father, a chemical engineer, described Marsa el Brega as “the perfect little beach

town..., a little Texas oil town inadvertently planted along the Mediterranean coast.”⁴⁶

Libyan employees, on the other hand, lived a segregated life. In order to comply with the Labor Law, which stipulated that after a period of 10 years Libyan nationals should make up 75% of the labor force, in 1963 Esso opened a training center for its Libyan workers. Directed by Leverett Guess, who had previously worked as a training supervisor for Esso in Venezuela, the center provided courses in accounting, mechanics, oil field operations, and clerical work. Libyans, however, were often discriminated for their trade union activities and were usually employed on a temporary basis. Furthermore, they were not allowed to bring their families with them and were assigned small segregated bungalows. Other Libyans worked in Marsa el Brega, at the town’s restaurant, the grocery store, or the bowling alley. They usually lived in what was called the “crossroads,” just outside the compound, “a collection of shacks of corrugated iron, open bazaar type shops, filth and litter everywhere,” located in an area between the industrial plant, the desert and the few existing paved roads. While Libyan women were not allowed on the compounds, men entered every day and left after their workshift. Americans, therefore, rarely interacted with them. The only encounters took place at the stores, or when Bedouins lent their donkeys, camels or sheep for the school’s Christmas pageant. As MacFarquhar put it, “Libyans were mostly strangers viewed from afar.”⁴⁷

CHALLENGING AMERICAN FORMS OF SEGREGATION

Starting in the mid-1960s, Libyan oil workers began challenging American oil companies’ labor policies. In 1963, they rioted against Bechtel Brothers, which was building a pipeline for the Oasis Oil Company. They challenged the forms of working and living segregation the firm had established in its oil camp, where 120 American and British employees lived in a trailer camp, whereas almost 600 Libyans were lodged in a tent camp. As the American Embassy reported,

a crowd of approximately 100 Libyans descended upon the non-Libyan camp. Under a barrage of stones and bottles, the foreign employees ran to the trailers and barricaded themselves inside. For the next 2 h the Libyan mob battered the trailers with rocks, boards, and bottles, breaking most of the windows and damaging the air conditioners.⁴⁸

Two years later, Libyans placed bombs in the homes of two Esso employees, as well as at the British Embassy, the American and the German Consulates in Benghazi. Furthermore, they sabotaged and blew up three storage tanks and a water pipeline in Marsa el Brega.⁴⁹

In response, American oil companies increased their security measures and asked support from the State Department. During a meeting held in Washington, DC with representatives of Standard Oil (N.J.), the State Department recommended the creation of a National Security Force, which could patrol pipelines, oil fields and storage facilities. It pointed out that, "Libya needs to have a new, elite 'National Resources Security Force', somewhat analogous to the National Guard which was formed in Venezuela at oil company request."⁵⁰ Esso built more fences and assured its employees' security by establishing three army checkpoints in Marsa el Brega. It also increased the forms of discrimination carried out against Libyan oil workers, by requiring them to leave the compounds after working hours. In MacFarquhar words, "after the fence went up, the volatile Middle East seemed even more distant from inside our oil company cocoon. Brega felt more Texan than Libyan."⁵¹

Despite the introduction of more security measures, Libyans continued to oppose the forms of segregation and discrimination carried out by Esso. In 1966, over 100 Libyan employees signed a petition asking the company to increase their wages, provide married quarters for all married men, and allow Libyans to access positions that had been vacated by expats. An article published in the newspaper *Al Hakika* pressured the Ministries of Petroleum and Labor to inquire into the differences between Libyan and American workers' living conditions. In order to respond to these growing tensions, Esso proposed to transform Marsa el Brega into an "open community," a city that, as Esso's President put it, "could become one of the proudest examples of development in modern Libya." The plan included the "establishment of municipal utilities system, construction of housing under a home purchase plan... government schools, medical facilities and the necessary public buildings." Unless these problems were addressed, Esso's President pointed out, "ugly settlements will spring up around the area and social problems will develop."⁵²

These discussions about Libyans' working and living conditions became part and parcel of the political changes that characterized Libya in the second half of the 1960s. During the Six Day War of 1967, oil workers and their trade unions played a crucial role in redefining international oil politics. Along with dock workers and students, they organized a strike in July

1967, which began with a 3-day general strike in Tripoli, involving the boycott of American goods, and continued with a 3-week work stoppage in various oil industry installations in Tripoli and the Gulf of Sirte. Oil companies reacted accordingly. Whereas Esso used an alternative pipeline to transport crude oil from Zelten to Marsa el Brega, American firms replaced Libyan workers with expats, and evacuated the wives and children of their American and British employees.⁵³

Oil workers' activism in the Six Day War set the stage for Qaddafi's military coup in 1969. In the weeks preceding and following the coup, oil workers offered their support to the new regime, by organizing meetings and demonstrations. They asked for better working and living conditions in oil fields, and the expulsion of unskilled foreign workers. Once he came to power, Qaddafi assigned oil workers a particularly important role in carrying forward the ideals of the revolution. He nominated Mahmud Sulaiman al-Maghribi, one of the leaders of the 1967 embargo, Prime Minister, and placed him at the "head of a team to renegotiate the terms of the country's contracts with foreign oil companies."⁵⁴ Born to a Palestinian mother and a Libyan-Sirian father, al-Maghreibi had studied petroleum engineering and geology at George Washington University and law at Johns Hopkins University, before being employed by Esso Libya as a lawyer. He advocated the need for the Libyan educated class of advancing oil workers' rights through forms of oil nationalism.⁵⁵

With the rise of Qaddafi, labor relations changed profoundly. The new regime declared trade unions illegal, thus excluding the possibility of redefining international oil politics through forms of social justice. Inside oil facilities, the Libyan Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) organized workers around popular committees, which supervised the election of boards and union officials, forbade "direct contact with foreign labor unions, require[d] Cabinet approval for all union decisions," and outlawed strikes.⁵⁶ The RCC expelled or transferred many American and British workers, encouraged the employment and training of Libyans, and critiqued Americans' high salaries and allowances.⁵⁷

These policies went hand in hand with the nationalization of Libya's oil industry. Following the example of the Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach, in 1971 Libya nationalized British Petroleum's assets and, between 1973 and 1974, those of nine other international companies operating in Libya. One of its main aims was to make sure that skilled Libyan workers would operate the oil fields and plants previously managed by American and British firms. In order to do so, it required foreign oil

companies to provide training services, in exchange for concession rights. While Occidental set up a training program for Libyans, the Italian company Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi [National Hydrocarbon Agency] (ENI) provided courses in drilling, mechanics, refining, and pipeline operations. The regime also established relations with other Arab countries, such as Algeria, in order to exchange technical information, equipment and training, and founded the Tobruk Higher Petroleum Institute.⁵⁸

As a result, expats' everyday lives underwent several important transformations, and many decided to leave. Under the new regime, US, British and Canadian citizens were allowed to enter into Libya with a 3-month visa, and they could be deported if they did not comply with the rules of the new government. Qaddafi banned the consumption of alcohol and the selling of pork, restricted access to Coca Cola (because of the presence of a Coca Cola plant in Israel), and censored newspapers and magazines. During the 1970s Esso's *Residents' Guidebook* advised employees that "if you arrive at the airport drunk...you will be deported and blacklisted thereby forfeiting any chance of return to Libya."⁵⁹

The town of Marsa el Brega changed accordingly. In 1971, the plant was partly nationalized (with the National Oil Corporation gaining control over 51% of the company). While it continued to be operated by Esso personnel, the firm also trained Libyans as engineers, technicians and managers.⁶⁰ In the company town, the population increased to 3000. Most foreign workers continued to be British and American (with a small number of Norwegians, French, and Germans), but the community was made less of families and more of bachelors. Their contracts did not require them to move to Libya permanently, but rather to work for 55 days in a row and then return to their home countries for 18 days of paid leave.

During the 1970s, Marsa el Brega's communal life was deeply transformed. Inside the company town, all signs in English were replaced by Arabic ones, the movie theater started showing Egyptian films rather than Westerns, while most consumer goods were imported from Eastern Europe rather than the US. Single men brought with them a strong sense of male camaraderie and homosociality, as they lived together in big houses, which became the center of the company town's social life. With the limitations placed on alcohol consumption, most residents tended to organize private parties, where they served homemade alcoholic beverages, prepared according to a semi-official instruction manual handed out to every new resident.⁶¹

The Brega Social Club continued to organize dinners and balls regularly, so that American, British, and Canadian employees would feel at home, “anywhere but at the edge of the Sahara desert.”⁶² Since Esso recognized that under Qaddafi’s regime living conditions in Marsa el Brega had become worse, it allowed its employees to have one extra week of vacation per year, which gave them “a chance to dash out to nearby civilized locations for a needed break from homemade booze and boredom.” They often spent their vacation time in Beirut, Lebanon, which MacFarquhar described as “the ‘Paris of the Middle East,’ a great place to vacation away from the restrictions of living in a country where citizens could be flogged for having a beer.”⁶³ In the 1970s, though, Esso was less willing to provide its employees with all the benefits and privileges that characterized American corporate culture in the previous decades. As one interviewee put it, “in Aruba [in the 1940s] the company would ship Christmas trees, because we couldn’t get Christmas trees... in Brega... the quality of support from Esso [went] down as years went on...The employees at first were treated as kings and then as time went on...you were just a normal employee.”⁶⁴

With the new regime, restrictions previously placed on Libyans living in Marsa el Brega were removed. As a result, a growing number of Libyans working at the plant as engineers and technicians moved to the company town, although still in a segregated area, with a separate school for their children. Most of them had studied in the US, with funding provided by Esso. For instance, Ali Gabriel el Kubti, the son of a merchant from Benghazi, had earned a degree in chemical engineering at UCLA. Many of them, though, complained about their living quarters, pointing out “that they’d been assigned inferior housing, stables unfit for animals, apparently imagining all those years that the foreigners were living in absolute luxury.”⁶⁵ Contacts between American, British, Canadian, and Libyan workers were polite, but distant, as Libyans “would come home for coffee or tea, but they never came home for dinner.” This led to tensions, as “little Libyan kids would hang over the wall and throw rocks at the people walking by and spit at them.”⁶⁶

Relations between Libyans and Americans were gendered in several important ways, as Libyan men sometimes perceived American women as being sexually available.⁶⁷ American teenage girls tended to spend time with young male Libyan employees living in the company town, and there

were instances when relations turned sexually violent.⁶⁸ Arnold, for instance, reported,

recently a new secretary was settling into her bungalow on the day she arrived when there was a knock at her door. There stood a handsome young Libyan clutching a fistful of dinar (Libyan currency). When you realise just what the Western television stations are churning out—naked white men and naked white women performing acrobatics on a bed before millions of viewers—who can blame these frustrated young men for believing that we are all prostitutes and available.⁶⁹

At the end of the 1970s, with the expansion of Libya's oil and gas industry, the government planned a new city, New Brega, which was intended to serve what had become the country's most important industrial area. Its aim was to "stabilize the workforce by encouraging permanent settlements and socio-productive interactions that could create open communities."⁷⁰ The town, as well as the oil and gas plants, were directly managed by the state and were built according to a series of principles laid out in the Green Book. New Brega, which included large residential areas and public parks overlooking the sea, aimed at promoting a specific brand of socialism through forms of autocracy and centralization, areas, and "was designed with the goal to remove social discrimination and to encourage achievement on an equal basis."⁷¹ Families were, once again, the main social unit, and received the bigger and nicer apartments, while bachelors lived in bungalows or in the old houses built by Esso in Marsa el Brega. When it was built it had a population of 45,000 people.

By the time the Libyan state started transforming the industrial and urban area of Marsa el Brega, American oil companies were facing growing opposition. In 1979, demonstrators attacked and burned the American Embassy in Tripoli, along with the French Embassies in Tripoli and Benghazi, leading to the temporary evacuation of most of Exxon's employees. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, relations between the US and Libya deteriorated, and in 1981 the American government decided to close the US Embassy in Tripoli. Tensions rose when the US Sixth Fleet shot down two Libyan planes off the country's coast. Following the increased harassment of its employees and "occupation of company housing at Marsa el-Brega by security forces," Esso (which in 1972 changed its name to Exxon) withdrew its workers from Libya and closed its operations. By the end of 1981, the Libyan government had completed the

nationalization of the company's assets and passed them into the hands of the Libyan national oil company.⁷²

NOTES

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