

# Hundreds of sit-in strikes shake Egypt

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Around 300 mainly female workers at the Mansoura Spanish Garment Factory in the Nile delta have occupied the plant since April 21. The workers are staging a sit-in on the firm's shop floor after a dispute with management over missed pay and the contested sale of the company.

Workers say they are too poorly paid to meet many of their basic needs, a problem made worse by the failure of the company to pay them their last 17 bonuses since 1999. The workers are also concerned that the factory may close after a recent announcement that it was sold through a process that they condemn as lacking transparency.

On average 200 people sleep there each night on sheets of cardboard arranged on the floor between the sewing machines. Many women have brought their children, some as young as four months old, inside the plant to spend the night with them. They say they will not go home until the factory management meets their demands.

The strikers say they remain committed to the factory occupation despite a deal offered by Aisha Abdel Hady, the minister of manpower and labour, on May 8. According to sources on the factory union committee, which negotiated the offer, Hady agreed to pay the workers one month's salary out of the ministry budget in exchange for an immediate end to the protest.

The local union committee, which supposedly represents the employees of Mansoura Spanish, accepted the deal without consulting them.

Upon learning the details of the offer, workers rejected it. Initial media reports claimed that 70 percent of the protestors had accepted the offer and ended the sit-in.

"The union is not there for us," said Gamal Ramadan, a production worker who has been employed by Mansoura Spanish for 19 years. "The union is not effective. Ideally it should work for both the employer

and the workers, but in reality it doesn't take our side in anything. We don't know anyone on the local committee who is on our side, they all side with the management."

According to the *Middle East Report Online*, Egypt is involved in "the longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the end of World War II."

In March, the Egyptian daily *al-Masri al-Yawm* estimated that around 222 sit-in strikes, work stoppages, hunger strikes and demonstrations had occurred during 2006. In the first five months of 2007, the paper reported a new labour action nearly every day. The citizen group Egyptian Workers and Trade Union Watch documented 56 incidents during the month of April and another 15 during the first week of May.

Although the strike wave first hit the textile industry, industrial unrest has spread to workers in the construction industry, garbage collectors, bakers, food processing workers and Cairo subway workers, among others.

As with the vast majority of strikes in Egypt in the past 40 years, the latest strikes are officially "illegal" (unauthorized by the state-controlled General Federation of Trade Unions and its subsidiary bodies in factories and other workplaces). But unlike upsurges of working-class collective action in the 1980s and 1990s, which were confined to state-owned industries, the recent wave has also affected employees in the private sector.

The biggest labour action was in December, when around 25,000 workers went on strike at the state-owned Egypt Company for Spinning and Weaving in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla. After three days of industrial action—which reportedly cost the company around \$12 million—workers' demands for the promised bonuses were met.



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