

Egypt hit by wave of social and industrial unrest

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On July 16 thousands of quarry workers in Egypt went on strike in the central province of Al-Minya, in opposition to a decision by the authorities to impose a tax of E£40 on each ton of quarried rock. The tax had led some quarries to close and lay off their workers.

Striking quarry workers and their families marched into Al-Minya, 210 kilometres south of Cairo, and blocked the bridge crossing the Nile to protest against the imposition of the new quarry tax. The police used tear gas to disperse the thousands of protestors. Fighting erupted, and the protestors stoned the police, injuring at least 17 officers. Demonstrators were injured, and more than 20 were suffering from the effects of inhaling tear gas. So great were their injuries that more than 20 police and demonstrators were kept in hospital. One policeman died, although it is unclear whether he died as a result of the stoning or exposure to tear gas.

The police arrested dozens of demonstrators. Of these, 53 have been charged with rioting, murder, blocking the main road, and disrupting traffic, and 43 have been kept in jail. Intense security measures are still in place in Al-Minya, and many of the roads remain blocked.

Some 1,000 Tanta Linen Company workers have been occupying their factory for nearly two months to get bonuses on the basis of the 2008 wage rate, instead of the 2003 rate, and other benefits unpaid since privatisation, and to seek the reinstatement of their colleagues fired after three earlier strikes. Bonuses and other benefits typically make up the majority of an Egyptian worker's wage. According to Arabist.net, the strikers tried to retake their trade union building, confiscated by the company over a year ago, but were stopped by the police.

The dispute is only one of several ongoing textile workers' strikes since privatisation, despite the brutality with which last year's strike at Mahalla al-Kubra was put down. Government security forces violently suppressed a mass demonstration, killing three people. The Indorama Shebeen el-Kom spinning factory has seen 95 strikes since it was privatised in 2006, after its new owners refused to pay agreed bonuses.

It is impossible to get more than the most rudimentary details of the strikes, as journalists are denied access to the strikers, and police and troops are routinely called in to break up strikes

and prevent strikers from talking to the media.

Strikes are illegal in Egypt without authorisation from a recognised union and are punishable by up to a year in jail. The trade unions play an important role in stifling industrial unrest and are bitterly resented by workers for their compliance with the state. The 2009 International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) report said, "Throughout the year [2008], leaders of strike committees, former union leaders or simply activists, as well as several civil society organisations criticised the total lack of support by the official trade unions affiliated to the ETUF [Egyptian Trade Union Federation] and even hostility shown towards them. The Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) has repeatedly denounced manoeuvres by ETUF leaders to block any legislative reform on the operation of trade unions and NGOs, supposedly to defend 'the uniqueness of the trade union structure'.

"Union activists in the textile industry sent a letter to the ILO [International Labour Organisation] during the International Labour Conference to denounce the ETUF's growing hostility towards their mobilising activities. Another workers' collective, the Egyptian Workers' Assembly for Trade Union Reform (Tagammu), also sent a protest letter to Geneva concerning the contempt shown by the ETUF and its affiliated organisations for workers' legitimate demands, their authoritarianism and the sanctions taken against overly strident activists".

The report cited the Iron and Steel Company, "where Adel Haleem Atta Alla was punished (allowances cut by half and transfer to a different department) by management at the request of a representative of the official union, for leading a staff protest against the employers' decision to remove their right to health care. The Land Centre for Human Rights also reported that union activists working at the Labour Ministry were removed from office by their own leaders".

Egypt is a country where daily life has long been a struggle for the overwhelming majority of its 78 million people due to rocketing inflation, rising rents and food prices, overcrowded public transport, dilapidated hospitals and an official unemployment rate of more than 9.4 percent (about 2.35 million), expected to rise by 4 to 5 percent in the coming

months. This is widely recognised as bearing no relationship to the actual level of unemployment and underemployment in a country where 650,000 young people are leaving school every year and looking for work.

Schools are underfunded, crumbling and massively over crowded. Many Cairo schools are forced to operate a two shift system and charge user fees. Stress and violence is becoming increasingly common as low paid teachers struggle to control classes where 60 to 100 pupils are the norm. Last year, a teacher kicked an 11-year-old boy, who died from internal injuries, for not finishing his homework.

A staggering 40 percent of people live below or around the poverty line, half of whom live in Upper Egypt, to the south of the country, which is the most economically deprived part of the country. With little transport infrastructure, the region's farmers are unable to get their produce to the international markets. A recent World Bank report described the population of Upper Egypt, with the exception of the tourist regions of Luxor and Aswan, as "intensely poor" and at the bottom of the scale on nearly all human development indicators.

The global economic crisis has led to a fall in the demand for Egypt's engineering, textiles and food industries, a reduction in traffic through the Suez Canal and 6 percent drop in tourism in the first three months of the year. This has sent Egypt's trade deficit soaring. Foreign direct investment has fallen to one third of that in the previous year, including the postponement of the Qatari project to build a 5.5 million square metre industrial zone in Burg el Arab. The government's budget deficit shot up from E£11.8 billion to E£20.2 billion between January and March 2009.

A report in May from the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) expects half a million people to lose their jobs this year. The threat of layoffs is being used to drive down wages and conditions. CTUWS lists companies that have altered contracts, forced workers to sign resignation notices as a condition for their continued employment, slashed salaries and bonuses, withdrawn benefits, or transferred workers to lower-paying positions.

The government has responded to the rising tide of industrial militancy and social dissent with increased repression and brutality. The courts have handed down an unprecedented number of death sentences—230 in the six months to June and 50 in just one week in June. Ninety different crimes can lead to execution, including premeditated murder, rape, drug related offences and also "political offences," such as "attempting to overthrow the regime by force".

On June 13, 24 men were sentenced to death after clashes in a land dispute in the Nile Delta last year left 11 people dead. Azza Quraim, social science professor at the Cairo-based National Centre for Social and Criminal Research, told the Inter Press News Agency that "Eleven people died in the initial land dispute, but a full 24 people were subsequently sentenced to death for their roles in the incident".

Other repressive actions on the part of the Hosni Mubarak regime include:

- The arrest and imprisonment of dozens of bloggers between 2006 and 2009. Earlier this year, Eddin Gad was arrested for using his blog to criticise the government for its refusal to open the Rafah crossing to allow Palestinians to escape the fighting during Israel's military operations.

- Last August, a court sentenced Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a prominent self-exiled dissident resident in the US, to two years in prison for harming Egypt's reputation through his writings in the foreign press.

- In May last year, President Mubarak extended a two-year extension of the emergency laws under which he has ruled with an iron fist ever since President Sadat's assassination in 1981, renegeing on his promise in 2005 to get rid of the emergency laws.

- In April last year, after a two year delay, national municipal elections were held. The government placed all sorts of bureaucratic restrictions on the eligibility of opposition candidates, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Since any future presidential candidate must get the approval from, among others, 140 local councillors, this serves to ensure that only candidates from Mubarak's National Democratic Party will be eligible.

- In September 2007, the authorities closed down the association for Human Rights and Legal Aid after it helped to bring a case against the government over a political activist who died in police custody. In the same month, a judge sent four newspaper editors to prison, including *Al Dustour* editor, Ibrahim Issa, on charges of defaming Mubarak and his son Gamal, widely seen as Mubarak's heir to the presidency.

- In March 2007, a stage-managed referendum agreed 34 amendments to the Egyptian constitution. Amendment 179 allows the president to have civilians tried in military courts and eliminates protections against arbitrary search and arrest in offences related to terrorism. Article 88 curtails the judicial supervision of elections.



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