

Strikes, workers' protests spread throughout Egypt

Patrick O'Connor
15 February 2011

Large numbers of workers in Egypt's main cities staged strikes and street demonstrations yesterday for higher wages, better working conditions, and the removal of corrupt managers of state-owned enterprise promoted under former President Hosni Mubarak. The movement of the working class is developing in defiance of the ruling military command, which has stridently demanded an end to all industrial action.

The junta, headed by Mubarak's henchmen Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, declared an unscheduled public holiday yesterday, apparently in an attempt to defuse the strike wave. The military also declared today a public holiday.

Workers across many industries nevertheless mobilised yesterday, in both the public and private sectors. One BBC journalist commented, "There appears to be a whole series of mini-revolutions going on in the wake of the removal of Mr. Mubarak".

The Central Bank of Egypt ordered that banks throughout the country be closed because of a strike by workers in the National Bank of Egypt (NBE), the largest state bank. Hundreds of workers demonstrated outside NBE's headquarters, reportedly demanding that temporary workers be granted permanent positions. "It's part of the revolution," the bank's chairman, Tarek Amer, told the Associated Press. "They believe that it's an opportunity—if they had any complaints and demands—and that there's a higher probability of getting them answered."

Thousands of oil and gas workers employed by several companies are on strike and staged a protest yesterday in the Nasr City district of Cairo, outside the Ministry of Petroleum. According to blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy: "The workers have several economic and political demands, including putting an end to abusive management practices such as sacking workers who speak up for their rights, reinstating the sacked workers, raising salaries that roughly average LE400 [\$68], establishing an independent union, impeaching the corrupt oil minister Sameh Fahmy, and stopping gas exports to Israel."

Also in Cairo, hundreds of public transport workers demanded higher wages outside the state television and radio building. One of the workers, Ahmed Said, who has worked as a driver for 18

years, told the *Guardian* that more than half of his wages goes toward paying rent and he is forced to feed his family of five on the rest. "There is just enough money for food... If a child goes to the hospital and we have to pay for that, then me and my wife do not have a meal. This is wrong. How can Mubarak be worth so much and we have so little? Before, we had to be careful. We would be arrested. But now we can talk. We need food. We have been on strike four days. The army cannot stop us."

Hundreds of ambulance paramedics demanding better pay parked about 70 vehicles in a row on a roadside along the Nile River in Giza district. Employees at a key Cairo traffic tunnel threatened to shut down the route if their wages weren't raised. Several hundred people employed by the state Youth and Sports Organisation also demonstrated in Tahrir Square for improved working conditions.

Among other reported struggles, workers with state airline EgyptAir went on strike at Cairo International Airport and successfully demanded that the company's head, Alaa Ashour, be removed. About 500 employees of the Opera House have similarly accused the organisation's chairman of corruption and demanded his removal. Workers with the education ministry in Cairo's satellite 6th of October City also protested yesterday, demanding higher wages, permanent contracts for temporary workers, and the removal of the ministry director.

The action was supported by several students. Kholoud Abdallah, from a secondary vocational school, told *Al Ahram*, "We have no books, no computers and we require these for study."

There were also reports of continued strikes by textile, steel, and post office state workers.

Several hundred people also staged a demonstration outside the Mubarak regime's official trade union body, the Trade and Workers Federation, demanding that the federation's board be dissolved. Union bureaucrats inside the building reportedly exchanged volleys of bricks and bottles with demonstrators outside, before they were separated by soldiers.

Outside of Cairo, workers went on strike at the enormous Sukari gold mine, near the southern town of Marsa Alam. Near the Great

Pyramids, about 150 tourism industry employees protested for higher wages.

The Associated Press also reported that in Beni Sweif, an impoverished city south of Cairo, “thousands demanded the distribution of promised state-built, low-cost apartments that are often awarded on the basis of nepotism”. Police admitted that local people have occupied 60,000 empty units of such housing in the provinces of Cairo, Beni Sweif and Qalioubiya.

Police officers demanding higher wages staged a provocative demonstration in Tahrir Square yesterday morning. About 2,000 anti-Mubarak protestors held a counter-demonstration against the widely hated police, but Al Jazeera and other media outlets were forbidden from broadcasting any footage from the square. This censorship appears to be part of the military’s effort to remove all the protestors from Tahrir Square and project an image of a return to “normality”.

Another mass rally, however, dubbed a “victory march” has been called for Friday.

The military council issued a statement yesterday demanding an end to the strikes. “Noble Egyptians sees that these strikes, at this delicate time, lead to negative effects such as harming the security of the country which causes disruption in all institutions and facilities of the state,” a military spokesman declared. “[Strikes] negatively affect the ability to provide for the needs of citizens and disrupt the process of production and work in state sectors ... and they negatively affect the national economy.”

This statement comes after an army official told Reuters that the military leadership intended to ban union meetings, effectively forbidding strikes. It stands as a sharp warning to the working class as to the policies the army hopes to ultimately carry out.

The military has been the central pillar of the Egyptian capitalist state ever since the 1952 Free Officers Coup. Under Mubarak’s IMF-approved “free market” measures, the senior command amassed enormous personal fortunes as the military appropriated vast swathes of privatised state industry and landed property. The workers’ movement for higher wages, jobs, improved living conditions, and democratic rights represents a direct threat to the army hierarchy’s lucrative interests, as well as an implicit challenge to the rule of the entire Egyptian bourgeoisie.

The latest developments underscore the military’s concern over the emerging movement of the working class in the final days of Mubarak’s rule. Mass strikes erupted February 8 and 9, continuing up until Mubarak made his televised speech on February 10 in which it had been expected he would announce his resignation, but instead strove to cling to power.

According to a detailed account published by *Al Ahram*, the dictator had intended to step down but was persuaded by his wife and son Gamal not to. When this threatened to provoke a further

upsurge in the revolutionary movement, the military stepped in and seized power to try to maintain control over the situation.

Notably, none of the official middle class “opposition” parties—including the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed ElBaradei’s National Association for Change—has condemned the military’s threats against the working class. Striving to maintain illusions in the role of the army, these forces have urged an end to the demonstrations and strikes. ElBaradei and his colleagues are now preparing to enter the military regime.

Britain’s Foreign Minister William Hague said yesterday that Egypt’s Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq told him that the current government would be reshuffled to include opposition figures by next week. While the successful elevation of these “opposition” forces would open up opportunities for the individuals involved, for the Egyptian working class it would signify no more than providing a civilian fig-leaf for the military government.

Prominent anti-Mubarak activists, Google executive Wael Ghonim and blogger Amr Salamahey, met with representatives of the military council. They were reportedly told that the army plans to rewrite the constitution within ten days—entirely behind the backs of the Egyptian people—and put it to a referendum for ratification within two months.

The military has yet to announce when it will deliver on its pledge to rescind Mubarak’s draconian emergency legislation. It has also remained silent on whether it will release the many political prisoners who remain in detention.

The *Independent*’s Robert Fisk asked: “Is this because there are prisoners who know too much about the army’s involvement in the previous regime? Or because escaped and newly liberated prisoners are returning to Cairo and Alexandria from desert camps with terrible stories of torture and executions by—so they say—military personnel.”



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact