

Egyptian workers step up strike offensive

Patrick Martin
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Tens of thousands of Egyptian workers ignored appeals by military high command and spread their strike actions across the country Wednesday, demanding higher pay, better working conditions, and the purging of corrupt officials linked to ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak.

In Egypt's largest industrial center, the textile manufacturing capital Mahalla al-Kubra, some 12,000 workers resumed a strike at the Misr Spinning and Weaving factory that had been suspended for three days after the resignation of President Mubarak. In addition to demands for higher wages, the workers want two top managers to resign, a strike organizer said.

Another 6,000 textile workers went on strike in the coastal city of Damietta. Thousands more continued a walkout at the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving company, south of Cairo, also for wage demands.

Strikes and protests were reported across Cairo, in Egypt's second largest city, Alexandria, in the Nile Delta province of Qaliubiya, and in the heavily industrialized area along the Suez Canal.

In Port Said, at the northern terminus of the Suez Canal, one thousand people demonstrated to demand closure of a chemical factory that is polluting a local lake. At Ismailiya, halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Suez, workers at the irrigation, education and health ministries protested for wage demands outside the headquarters of the provincial government.

Airport workers walked out at Cairo International Airport, forcing the cancellation of 11 flights. Hundreds of workers protested at the arrival terminal in support of demands for higher wages and better health coverage, as well as better transport and other benefits.

Pay strikes are under way in banking, transport, oil, tourism, and a wide array of government agencies. One activist told the press, "It's difficult to say exactly how many people are striking and where. Who isn't striking?"

In one of the few incidents reported where the military intervened directly, soldiers dispersed 200 workers striking a welding factory outside Cairo after they staged a demonstration at the factory headquarters on the Cairo-

Alexandria road and blocked traffic there for 30 minutes. The workers were demanding higher pay, overtime rates for longer hours and better treatment by management overall.

The workers complained that company officials demanded each worker sign a letter of resignation before beginning work, so they could be dismissed at will. And they also compelled workers to sign blank checks, so their wages could be seized in the event of further stoppages.

One of the most strategically significant strikes is going on against the major Egyptian banks in Cairo, which has forced many businesses and factories to close down because their customers cannot get money to buy the goods being produced.

Officials of Egypt's central bank issued an appeal for the end of the bank workers' strikes "to ensure the stability of the national economy." Banks have been closed since Monday, and are not expected to reopen until at least the start of the next work week, on Sunday, February 20.

The central bank published a statement in state-run newspapers calling on workers to elect representatives in each bank and discuss demands with senior management in the presence of the governor of the central bank.

In many cases factories have closed when even a fraction of the work force has gone on strike, in order to prevent the walkouts from gathering even greater strength. Textile, chemicals, cement and ceramics industries are all affected.

Employees of national government agencies in Cairo have joined the strike wave. According to an account in the newspaper *Al-Masri Al-Youm*, "In the wake of the 25 January uprising, employees in many sectors—including state-owned publishing houses and the supply directorate (rations)—took to the streets for the first time. While their demands were primarily economic, they also included pleas against corruption and nepotism."

The newspaper noted that social injustice was a major concern: "Although protesters have clear economic grievances, they primarily lament what they perceive as

unfair procedures, either in regard to unequal pay among employees of various government institutions or the arbitrary dismissal of workers.”

The Armed Forces Supreme Council, which assumed power on Mubarak’s resignation, has issued a series of appeals to end the strike wave, to no effect. After Tuesday’s national holiday for the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, there was no general return to work, and the authorities dropped plans to reopen schools, universities, banks and the stock exchange, all of which will remain closed until February 20.

“The careful wording of the army’s plea on Monday marked a change of tone from the more autocratic style of the past, provoking concern among some industry executives,” Reuters news agency reported. It cited the comments of one boss, Chamber of Metallurgical Industries General Manager Mohamed Said Hanfy, who declared, “The army must use stronger language to the people. A lot of them don’t have a problem but want to seize the opportunity presented by the political situation.”

This arrogance is typical of the ruling elite that has profited enormously from decades of brutal suppression of the Egyptian working masses, as well as lucrative payoffs from foreign capital and the government of the United States, the principal financial and military backer of the Mubarak dictatorship.

The workers are rebelling against all the corrupt representatives of the old dictatorship, not only in government and business, but in the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation. Thousands of workers demonstrated this week outside the ETUF headquarters, demanding the resignation of its chief, Hussein Megawer, and members of its governing board. All are stooges of the Mubarak regime.

News reports from Egypt have all taken note of the mood of protest sweeping the country. Associated Press wrote, “Since the military took power from longtime leader Hosni Mubarak on Friday, Egyptians have been airing grievances everywhere over just about everything, from meager wages to police brutality and corruption.” Reuters added, “Workers cite a series of grievances. What unites them is a new sense of being able to speak out in the post-Mubarak era.”

The US news magazine *Time* commented on the growth of class antagonisms in Egypt: “The opposition coalition that brought down Mubarak is not only divided on political lines: there’s also a cleavage of social class. Strikes continue to paralyze much of the Egyptian economy despite appeals from the military—and even from

opposition figures like Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who personifies the Facebook aspect of the youth rebellion—to return to work.”

The magazine continued: “Many of the hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who took to the streets to oust Mubarak were driven by economic despair. Even those lucky enough to have jobs face the growing squeeze of wages not keeping pace with inflation. Their circumstances and interests are very different from those of the middle-class Facebook generation...”

In an ominous signal, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed away from previous suggestions that the emergency law imposed by Mubarak 30 years ago should be lifted immediately. “I am not going to substitute my judgment,” she said, “for what is going on in Egypt right now.”

Asked by Al-Jazeera whether she was calling on the new military regime to lift the ban on public demonstrations and protests imposed under this law, she replied, “I am not. It’s not for me to counsel them. This is an Egyptian process that must be directed and defined by the Egyptian people.”

This pretense of deferring to the “Egyptian people” is completely cynical, since Mubarak devised the emergency law for the specific purpose of suppressing the democratic rights of the Egyptian people and blocking any opposition to the regime.

An indication of the growing nervousness in Washington came in a column by conservative pundit Anne Applebaum in the *Washington Post* Tuesday. She wrote, “Disappointment in the slow pace of post-revolutionary change cannot be avoided. Historically, the months following a revolution can therefore be more dangerous than the revolution itself. The dissatisfaction with the February Russian revolution of 1917 led to the Bolshevik coup d’état in October.”

Applebaum slurs the October Revolution as a mere “coup d’état,” but her meaning is clear: the upsurge in Egypt threatens not only the downfall of US stooges like Mubarak, but the overthrow of the capitalist system itself.



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