

Egyptian junta clamps down on strikes

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Egypt's military regime has threatened to illegalise strikes in the face of the ongoing social unrest following the removal of President Hosni Mubarak.

Beginning February 14, a wave of strikes erupted in Egypt. Industrial action closed down textile plants, chemical and pharmaceutical factories and Cairo airport. Transport workers put sleepers on the tracks to stop trains. Banks and government offices were also closed. At the strategic Suez Canal, around 1,500 workers staged protests in Ismailia, Suez and Port Said February 17, demanding better salaries and medical insurance. The protests included technicians and administrators.

One of the most important and largest disputes involved 15,000 workers at Misr Spinning and Weaving in Al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Egypt's largest factory, which employs 24,000 people in the Nile Delta city, was the site of a strike and sit in that began February 10 in support of the protests against Mubarak, helping precipitate his fall a day later. It resumed February 14, demanding wage increases, the resignation of the company head and three other executives and a free trade union. A tank was stationed outside the factory by the military.

The Egyptian textile industry employs 48 percent of the country's total workforce. In addition, 6,000 workers struck at Damietta Spinning and Weaving.

On Friday February 18, after two earlier warnings, Egypt's military threatened that the wave of strikes was now considered illegal. The Armed Forces Supreme Council "will not allow the continuation of these illegal acts which pose a danger to the nation, and they will confront them," it announced.

Some groups "organise protests that obstruct production and create critical economic conditions that can lead to a worsening of the country's economy," the military said. "The continuation of instability and its consequences will lead to harming national security."

The order banning strikes and industrial action came on the day of celebrations involving millions marking one week since Mubarak's ouster. Walid Abdel-Sattar, a power industry executive, commented, "Though this statement should have come way earlier, I think the army was just

allowing people to take their chance to voice their demands and enjoy the spirit of freedom."

No real "freedom" was ever intended by the junta.

In response to the threat, the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services reported that day that the Misr Spinning workers were holding a sit-in for a fourth day and had "refused to end their protest until their principal demand is met—the removal of the head of the company."

On Sunday, the Misr strike ended. Faisal Naousha, one of the strike leaders, told AFP, "We ended the strike, the factory is working. Our demands were met," including a 25 percent increase in wages and the dismissal of a manager involved in corruption.

Banks also reopened Sunday. The Central Bank of Egypt had closed all banks on February 14 following strikes and sit-ins at branches and offices the previous day. According to *Ahram Online*, employees still "made it clear they hadn't given up on their demands." Bank employees are "contesting the board of directors system and large disparities in wages... Protesters were requested to appoint committees of 10 to 20 members to communicate their demands to the Central Bank of Egypt. The committee meetings are scheduled to begin Monday. The employees of Banque Misr, Egypt's second largest bank, had already appointed their negotiators, refusing the demands of the Central Bank to appoint the administration's managers to represent them."

Also on Sunday, journalists at state-owned newspapers and magazines protested in front of the Journalists' Syndicate demanding that the junta replace the chief editors and managing editors they accused of corruption and hypocrisy. Military police surrounded the office of Osama Saraya, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram* daily, to shield him from planned protests.

Alongside direct repression of the working class, the junta is working hard to co-opt the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois "opposition movements" in order to lend credence to its claims of preparing a transition to democratic, civilian rule.

The most damning indictment of those vying to be part of

the putative democratic replacement for direct military rule is their readiness to discuss with the junta, even as it threatens mass repression of the working class. A close second must be the favoured status of Arab League chief Amr Moussa for the post of president.

Moussa is a close ally of Mubarak and his replacements, Vice President Omar Suleiman and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. During the uprising, Moussa was advanced as an oppositionist only in order for him to urge demonstrators to allow Mubarak to continue his 30 year dictatorship until the official end of his term in office. Even now, Moussa said of Mubarak in Spain's *El Pais*, "For the moment, he is retired, we must treat him as an ex-president, with all the respect he deserves."

In the same interview he endorsed the military's claims to be planning a democratic transition and its efforts to demobilise opposition. "The Supreme Council has taken several steps, such as constitutional reforms, the dissolution of parliament and calling for the public to go back to work and restore calm," he said.

The Muslim Brotherhood is also in discussions with the regime and intends to form a party called Freedom and Justice. It will not field a candidate for the presidency this year and will only compete for less than a quarter of the seats in the next parliament, as an indication of its loyalty to Egypt's military rulers.

On Saturday the courts approved a new party, the al-Wasat Party (Centre Party) led by former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Aboul Ela Mady and Essam Sultan.

Other parties are being formed that are directly championed and funded by business interests and representatives of the former regime.

Wael Ghonim, a Google executive who helped call the initial protests, is now in negotiations with elements of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), including former NDP chairman Hossam Badrawy, to form a new political party.

Abdel Moneim Imam heads a group that supports former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei, and is in negotiations with Naguib Sawiris, the chairman of Orascom Telecom holdings SAE, about forming a party.

These manoeuvres take place even as while the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces declares that "The current unstable political conditions do not permit a new constitution."

The imperialist powers are all playing their part in efforts to back rule by the junta.

Moussa spent the past few days in intensive discussions with US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs

William Burns and White House advisor David Lipton, in and around the Arab League summit in Cairo. Burns brought with him a gift of \$150 million for the Egyptian government to "support the transition there."

"I have just finished a very interesting and comprehensive conversation with Secretary General Amr Moussa about developments in Egypt and around the region. As always I learned a lot," he told the media.

European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, brought a bigger pot of financial assistance for the regime, telling journalists in Cairo, "We're already discussing the capacity to give an extra billion euros in extra support through their funding programmes." She reassured the junta that there would be no caveats placed on such aid with respect to democratic rights. Let me be absolutely clear," she said. "It is for Egypt to determine its future".

Despite such assistance, the situation facing the junta is explosive, made more so by the impact of the mass movement in Libya against Gaddafi's regime and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Cairo and Egypt's second city, Alexandria, have seen protests against Gaddafi and in front of the Algerian and Bahraini embassies. One banner read, "Mission: Free Arab Countries - Time: Now."

The crowd chanted, "The people want Arab nations united against military regimes."

Several Egyptian convoys of medical aid have been mounted, seeking access to Libya. A Libyan national, Abdul, who was involved in the movement against Mubarak, told ABC's *The World Today*, "I have spoken to a doctor over here yesterday or the day before yesterday and they have run out of thread to stitch up wounds... There is thousands and thousands of casualties and they don't have even space."

The junta is seeking to police and control such solidarity action and the political relations being forged between protesters in Egypt and Cairo. The army has said it is reinforcing the border with Libya, while opening the main Salum crossing to allow the sick and injured to enter and use two field hospitals.



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