

Notes on the Egyptian Revolution

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This report by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, was delivered to a meeting of party members in Sydney on February 22, 2011.

1. It is hard to believe that only two months have passed since the self-immolation of an unemployed Tunisian worker, protesting against his treatment by the state, sparked the upsurge of the working class and youth now sweeping through the Middle East. As developments in Wisconsin show, this movement is spreading across the globe.

2. These events—the eruption of the class struggle on an international scale—are a striking confirmation of the perspectives of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). On January 23, we concluded our summer school in Sydney, insisting that amid mounting geo-political tensions, our focus was directed to the map of the class struggle. Against the proponents of the “end of history” thesis, we pointed to the most decisive process of the past 30 years—the unprecedented growth of the international working class. We made clear that the perspectives of our movement were directed to providing leadership to those forces whose demands and aspirations can find no outlet within the existing political set-up. Two days later, on January 25, the Egyptian Revolution began.

3. Since then, the upsurge has spread across the Middle East—to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya—as every regime in the region, including the Israeli government, looks anxiously at the course of events. And now the movement has spread to the United States as mass demonstrations take place in Madison, Wisconsin. The significance of the demonstrations in America is not simply that they emerge from the same global economic processes that have produced revolution in Egypt—the world economic breakdown that began in 2007-2008. There is now a conscious recognition that workers in the US and Egypt are part of the same global struggle. It is reflected in some of the slogans ... “Walk like an Egyptian” and “Hosni Walker”. It will not be long before we see similar developments in Europe as the economic crisis intensifies and governments step up their attacks on the working class. Meanwhile, we see a picture published on the Internet of a young man in Egypt holding up a sign reading “Egypt supports Wisconsin workers. One world, one pain.” In our perspectives resolution of 1988, we explained that: “It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character.” That perspective is certainly being realised.

4. The most significant feature of the events in Egypt is the emergence of the working class as the most powerful social force in society. There are two aspects to this development—the longer term and the immediate. Firstly, while accounts of the origin of the Egyptian uprising tend to focus on the activities of various protest and radical groups in organising the demonstration of January 25, and their use of social media networks, the success of their campaign can only be understood when it is viewed within the broad social and historical context within which it unfolded. The past period, especially the period since 2004 has seen a growing

movement of the Egyptian working class. As David North noted in the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective of February 10: “This movement of the Egyptian working class began long before the mass protests that erupted in Cairo during the last week of January. As documented in a study by Professor Joel Beinin, a specialist in the history of the Egyptian labor movement, the developing strike wave ‘is erupting from the largest social movement Egypt has witnessed in more than half a century. Over 1.7 million workers engaged in more than 1,900 strikes and other forms of protest from 2004 to 2008.’”

5. This movement began in response to the more aggressive turn to neo-liberal free market policies pursued by the Mubarak regime after 2004, an agenda dictated by the International Monetary Fund and its overseer, the United States. Under the direction of the president’s son, Gamal Mubarak, this program involved two interconnected processes: the acceleration of privatisation and the destruction of jobs in formerly state-owned industries; and a further impoverishment of the working class combined with a redistribution of wealth to the upper echelons of society. That the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor sparked such anger was no accident. His plight was seen as universal. Many street vendors are workers, forced to supplement their meagre income to make ends meet. The scale of this impoverishment is indicated by a study from the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies published in June 2009. It found that when the minimum wage rate was related to per capita gross national product, it had declined from nearly 60 percent in 1984 to 19.4 percent in 1991-92; and then to 13 percent in 2007. This rate is among the lowest in the world. In the last period, national growth has risen, but the increased wealth is appropriated by the upper layers. In 2007-2008, the situation for the working class worsened with a sharp rise in food prices. While prices stabilised somewhat after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, they are now surging again, not least because of the so-called quantitative easing policy of the US Federal Reserve which is pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into the financial system in order to push up stock market prices. One of the consequences of this policy is the return of speculation in food and other raw materials.

6. The movement of the working class not only shaped the broad context in which the revolution began, it was decisive in the days leading up to Mubarak’s removal. The first response of the regime, after its surprise at the size of the protests on January 25 and the larger demonstration of January 28, was to try to crush the movement with force. Thugs, criminals and security forces were unleashed on February 2-3, but the demonstrators fought back and defeated them. Then, newly appointed vice president Omar Suleiman tried another tack. Representatives of opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed ElBaradei’s National Alliance for Change were invited for discussions on February 6. The plan was that talks would lead to the dispersal of the movement. But such was the opposition to talks among the masses, that representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood said they would have to reconsider their decision to participate.

7. The demonstration of Tuesday, February 8 was the largest to that point. But outside Tahrir Square even more significant events were unfolding. Workers in a number of industries began taking industrial

action in support of wage and other demands and bringing forward demands of an increasingly political character. The industries involved included: textiles, the banks, iron and steel, the Suez Canal, oil and gas. The growing politicisation was expressed in a statement issued by iron and steel workers. Their demands read as follows:

1. Immediate resignation of the president and all men and symbols of the regime.

2. Confiscation of funds and property of all symbols of previous regime and everyone proved corrupt.

3. Iron and steel workers, who have given martyrs and militants, call upon all workers of Egypt to revolt from the regime's and ruling party workers' federation, to dismantle it and announce their independent union now, and to plan for their general assembly to freely establish their own independent union without prior permission or consent of the regime, which has fallen and lost all legitimacy.

4. Confiscation of public-sector companies that have been sold or closed down or privatized, as well as the public sector which belongs to the people and its nationalization in the name of the people and formation of a new management by workers and technicians.

5. Formation of a workers' monitoring committee in all workplaces, monitoring production, prices, distribution and wages.

6. Call for a general assembly of all sectors and political trends of the people to develop a new constitution and elect real popular committees without waiting for the consent or negotiation with the regime.

A huge workers' demonstration will join the Tahrir Square on Friday, the 11th of February 2011 to join the revolution and announce the demands of the workers of Egypt.

Long live the revolution!

Long live Egypt's workers!

Long live the intifada of Egyptian youth—People's revolution for the people!

On February 22 a statement in the name of Independent Trade Unionists was posted. Headed "Revolution—Freedom—Social Justice and Demands of the Workers in the Revolution", it reads:

O heroes of the 25 January revolution! We, workers and trade unionists from different workplaces which have seen strikes, occupations, and demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of workers across Egypt during the current period, feel it is right to unite the demands of striking workers so that they may become an integral part of the goals of our revolution, which the people of Egypt made, and for which the martyrs shed their blood. We present to you a workers' program which brings together our just demands, in order to reaffirm the social aspect of this revolution and to prevent the revolution being taken away from those at its base who should be its beneficiaries.

The workers' demands which we raised before the 25 January revolution and were part of the prelude to this glorious revolution are:

Raising the national minimum wage and pension, and narrowing the gap between minimum and maximum wages so that the maximum is no more than 15 times the minimum, in order to achieve the principle of social justice which the revolution gave birth to; payment of unemployment benefits, as well as regular increases commensurate with rising prices.

The freedom to organize independent trade unions without conditions or restrictions, and the protection of trade unions and their leaders.

The right of manual workers and clerical workers, peasant farmers and professionals, to job security and protection from dismissal. Temporary workers must be made permanent and dismissed workers be returned to their jobs. We must do away with all excuses for employing workers on temporary contracts.

Renationalization of all privatized enterprises and a complete stop to the infamous privatization program which wrecked our national economy under the defunct regime.

Complete removal of corrupt managers who were imposed on companies in order to run them down and sell them off.

Curbing the employment of consultants who are past the age of retirement and who eat up 3 billion of the national income, in order to open up employment opportunities for the young.

Return to the enforcement of price controls on goods and services in order to keep prices down and not to burden the poor.

The right of Egyptian workers to strike, organize sit-ins, and demonstrate peacefully, including those striking now against the remnants of the failed regime, those who were imposed on their companies in order to run them down prior to a sell-off. It is our opinion that if this revolution does not lead to the fair distribution of wealth it is not worth anything. Freedoms are not complete without social freedoms. The right to vote is naturally dependent on the right to a loaf of bread.

Health care is a necessary condition for increasing production.

Dissolution of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which was one of the most important symbols of corruption under the defunct regime. Execution of the legal judgments issued against it and seizure of its financial assets and documents. Seizure of the assets of the leaders of the ETUF and its member unions and their investigation.

8. There are two points to be made about these statements. They certainly underscore the power of the movement of the working class which was the chief factor in the ousting of Mubarak. However, they are also characterised by the absence of political demands. No doubt this arises from the fact that workers are only beginning to come into the political arena. But the absence of an independent political perspective is a weakness and may also reflect the direct influence of political tendencies which consider that the workers should focus solely on militant economic struggles and the construction of independent unions while politics is left to the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties and organisations.

9. Further events will serve to clarify this question. Nevertheless the statements do make clear why leading sections of the military considered it necessary to intervene from above. It was obvious that the previous manoeuvres, including talks with the opposition, handing over power to Suleiman, combined with outright repression, were not going to work. The movement was shifting to the left and looking to attack the foundations of the regime itself—there were moves to take over the television outlets; plans for a march on the presidential palace. The military leadership was confronted with the following question: how to defuse and break up this movement? Clearly the military leadership considered the option of trying to drown the movement in a bloodbath. But that carried enormous risks, namely that, given the conscript character of the army and the support for the demands of the protests in lower ranks of the officers, that in a confrontation between the army and the people, sections of the army would go over to the people. It was these considerations that led to the ousting of Mubarak. He was lined up to go on Thursday, February 10, but after intense discussions with his family, and no doubt with sections of the military, he did not step down. His refusal to quit further inflamed the movement, whereupon, that faction of the military which was pressing for him to go intervened and carried out his removal from above.

10. There is no question that this action met with the approval of leaders of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois opposition groups. Their position was summed up by the leader of the National Alliance for Change, Mohamed ElBaradei, after Mubarak had refused to go and the movement was taking on an insurrectionary character. "Egypt is about to explode," he declared. "The army must intervene to save the country." What they feared was the deepening movement of the working class which was a threat not just to the regime but the private property it protected. The military intervened to head off the developing insurrection and save the regime as a whole by dispensing with Mubarak.

11. Having taken control, the military has set out its position. The mass movement should disperse, strikes should end and the military should be

allowed to get on with the task of preparing a new constitution and elections. Its perspective is clear: it aims to utilise the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois opposition groups to head off the mass movement, and disperse it, thereby creating the conditions where a crackdown can be carried out.

12. The course of events so far has led to the conclusion being drawn in some quarters that there was not really a revolution at all. This is the view advanced by George Friedman of the Stratfor intelligence web site. According to Friedman, sections of the military wanted to get rid of Mubarak and the movement against him provided them with the crisis needed to organise this. In a piece entitled “The Distance Between Enthusiasm and Reality” he writes: “What we see is that while Mubarak is gone, the military regime in which he served has dramatically increased its power.... At this point, we simply don’t know what will happen. We do know what has happened. Mubarak is out of office, the military regime remains intact and it is stronger than ever.... [T]he reality of what has happened in the last 72 hours and the interpretation that much of the world has placed on it are startlingly different. Power rests with the regime, not with the crowds. In our view, the crowds never had as much power as many have claimed.... In a genuine revolution the police and the military cannot contain the crowds. In Egypt the military chose not to confront the demonstrators, not because the military itself was split, but because it agreed with the demonstrators’ core demand: getting rid of Mubarak. And since the military was the essence of the Egyptian regime, it is odd to consider this as a revolution.”

13. According to Friedman, the military started to oppose Mubarak when he moved to make his son Gamal his successor. There were certainly differences and even conflicts within the ruling apparatus, flowing from developments in the economy and the military’s crucial economic role. But this analysis is completely one-sided. In terms of the dynamics of the mass movement it merely focuses on the crowds in Tahrir Square. But much more significant was the movement of the working class that had been developing over the previous five or six years and its eruption in a series of struggles as the movement against Mubarak intensified. Egypt was rapidly coming to a standstill. A general strike had not developed but the situation was moving in that direction. The military moved in to pre-empt an insurrection and save the regime.

14. How was it able to do this? The crucial factor was the absence of a revolutionary leadership. What we have seen in Egypt is a revolutionary eruption, without a revolutionary leadership and perspective. Marx insisted that the task of the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. All manner of spontaneists interpret this to mean that there is no need for a revolutionary party and that so-called “vanguardism” is a thing of the past. The experiences in Egypt prove the exact opposite—at a certain point in a revolutionary upsurge the decisive factor is the revolutionary party. The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. But it is only through the work of the revolutionary party that the working class can clarify the political issues, define its tasks and develop the necessary organisations to carry them out. Without such a party, no matter how powerful its movement, the fate of the working class is decided over its head, by other forces. This is the central lesson to emerge so far from the events in Egypt.

15. The situation in Cairo brings to mind Russia after the February Revolution of 1917. Mutatis mutandis, changing what has to be changed, it is valuable to recall Lenin’s analysis of April 1917: “For the Marxist, who must reckon with objective facts, with the masses and classes, and not with individuals and so on, the peculiar nature of the actual situation ... must determine the peculiar nature of the tactics for the present moment. This peculiarity of the situation calls, in the first place, for the ‘pouring of vinegar and bile into the sweet water of revolutionary-democratic phraseology’ ... Our work must be one of criticism, of explaining the mistakes of the petty-bourgeois Socialist-Revolutionary and Social-Democratic parties, of preparing and welding the elements of a

consciously proletarian, Communist Party, and of curing the proletariat of the ‘general’ petty-bourgeois intoxication. This seems to be ‘nothing more’ than propaganda work, but in reality it is most practical revolutionary work; for there is no advancing a revolution that has come to a standstill, that has choked itself with phrases, and that keeps ‘marking time’, not because of external obstacles, not because of the violence of the bourgeoisie (Guchkov is still only threatening to employ violence against the soldier mass), but because of the unreasoning trust of the people.”

16. The situation in Egypt is, of course, different. But the general point remains ... the movement has come to something of a standstill because of the hope among broad masses—and it is not more than that because there is broad distrust—that the military will be forced to make concessions and a more democratic regime will emerge. But the revolution cannot be ended by a few cosmetic changes in the regime because its fundamental driving forces are rooted in irresolvable class contradictions arising from economic processes. Democracy for sections of the petty-bourgeoisie and the middle classes means a place within the new order. But for the working class democracy has a very different content. What good is the right to vote without the right to bread? Democracy for the working class means the ability to advance its own demands, to secure a liveable wage, to end the privatisations that have siphoned wealth up the income scale, to secure decent jobs and social conditions. These demands cannot be met within the framework of capitalist property relations. This means that major class conflicts are in front, struggles that, as we have already seen, will assume international dimensions.

17. One of the most essential preparations for these struggles is to clarify the role of the various “left” political tendencies because, in the next stage of the Egyptian revolution, they will play the critical role of seeking to subordinate the working class to the bourgeois order, thereby paving the way for counter-revolution.

18. One of the most prominent of these groups in Egypt has been the Revolutionary Socialists. They are aligned internationally with the so-called International Socialist Tendency, the most significant party of which is the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of Britain, established by Tony Cliff, whose “state capitalist” tendency renounced the perspective and program of the Fourth International at the end of the 1940s. The International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the United States is also aligned politically with the International Socialist Tendency, though no longer a formal affiliate.

19. The Revolutionary Socialists issued a statement on the Egyptian Revolution on February 1, which has been widely circulated since being translated into English on February 6. It features prominently on the web sites of both the SWP in Britain and the ISO in the US as well as in many other places. The statement characterises the revolution as a “popular revolution” which it calls on the workers to join. “Egypt’s youth, students, workers and the poor,” it declares, “are the owners of this revolution. In recent days a lot of elites, parties and so-called symbols have begun trying to ride the revolution and hijack it from their rightful owners.” But on the question of precisely who these would-be usurpers might be, the statement retains a diplomatic silence. Do they include Mohamed ElBaradei and his National Alliance for Change and the Muslim Brotherhood? The reason for the silence will become clearer when we examine the relationship of the Revolutionary Socialists to both these organisations.

20. One of the most politically significant parts of the statement is that which deals with the all-important question of the military. Under the heading “A people’s army is the army that protects the revolution” they write: “Everyone asks: ‘Is the army with the people or against them?’ The army is not a single block. The interests of the soldiers and junior officers are the same as the interests of the masses. But the senior officers are Mubarak’s men, chosen carefully to protect his regime of corruption, wealth and tyranny. It is an integral part of the system. The army is no

longer the people's army. This army is not the one which defeated the Zionist enemy in October 1973." The statement goes on to warn that "we should not be fooled by slogans the army is on our side." But the clear implication of the statement is that the army could again be the people's army if there were a change in leadership, and if only it returned to the role it performed prior to 1973. That army, under the leadership of Nasser's Free Officers Movement, overthrew the monarchy of King Farouk in 1952 and then suppressed the movement of the working class.

21. Every revolution has to confront the question of the army, the "bodies of armed men" that comprise the foundation of the capitalist state. The army can only be broken up provided the conscripted ranks and the lower officers see in the working class a social force capable of taking charge of society. The formation of independent popular committees, factory committees and broader organisations of the working class which, in the course of the revolutionary struggle itself, begin to take charge of the running of society, play a decisive role in the realisation of this perspective. But this is not the orientation of the Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt. They are looking for some kind of repeat of the Nasser movement of junior officers that would overthrow the old guard and return the army to the people. Don't trust the army ... that is, the army as it is presently constituted. But a people's army, that is a different question! Here we see the class logic of petty-bourgeois politics, for the role of such a "people's army" would be to crush the workers' movement; and in a manner far more brutal than the suppression organised under Nasser, above all because the economic factors that made possible Nasser's concessions to the masses and the international relationship of forces which allowed him to balance between US imperialism and the Soviet Union no longer exist.

22. As we noted, the statement of the Revolutionary Socialists is silent on the role of forces such as ElBaradei and the Muslim Brotherhood. The history of their relationship to these organisations makes clear why. In June last year, the ISO published a series of reports by Mostafa Omar on the political situation in Egypt and the decision by ElBaradei to challenge Mubarak. According to Omar, "ElBaradei's campaign has electrified a country ravaged by poverty and political repression for so long" and after three decades of repressive laws and deteriorating living conditions "millions of Egyptians are excited by Mohamed ElBaradei's decision to challenge the regime." The excitement felt about ElBaradei's return was the result of "many years of disappointments and suffering" and on it went. As for ElBaradei's campaign, Omar noted that it took place under conditions where a majority of the population was thirsty for any semblance of social and economic justice and political freedoms and that he seemed to have grasped these economic and political realities. He had been "reaching out to poor peasants and workers" meeting with independent unionists and "listening to their grievances" and had also taken on "controversial social issues".

23. While he noted ElBaradei's "quite moderate positions" [favouring a social democratic system similar to that in Scandinavian countries], Omar wrote that his decision to return to Egypt "has stirred up the country's political debate—and given confidence to democracy activists and a rejuvenated working class movement to push their own demands in a more militant way." Far from ElBaradei stirring up the situation, he returned to Egypt in response to a growing movement of the working class and youth. His motivation was not to create a movement, but to ensure that the movement underway was directed along the safe channels advocated by the National Alliance for Change. At the conclusion of his three-part report, Omar made an obligatory reference to the danger of the "left" tailing behind forces to its right and insisted that theoretical clarity and political independence from both the liberals and the Islamic fundamentalist organisations was vital. But another danger was an "ultra-left" and abstentionist attitude towards Elbaradei's likely presidential campaign: "While Egyptian socialists are correct to criticise Elbaradei's

campaign as a liberal capitalist attempt to salvage a bankrupt system, it is not yet a foregone conclusion that ElBaradei would not be forced under mass pressure to take, at least formally, radical positions—for example, on the question of Israel and imperialism. This could bolster the confidence of ordinary people in struggle." The test of events has already confirmed the long-established analysis of Marxism. How did ElBaradei react under the intense mass pressure of the days of February 9-11 as the movement in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and elsewhere grew in size and began to take an insurrectionary turn. Acutely aware of the mass pressure developing after Mubarak's refusal to quit on February 10 ElBaradei warned that Egypt was about to explode and the army had to intervene to "save the country".

24. The attitude of the Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt towards the Muslim Brotherhood—an organisation that forms a significant part of the bourgeois opposition in Egypt—likewise raises vital questions of political perspective. During the 1980s the position of the main "left" organisations in Egypt was to support state repression of the Islamic organisations on the grounds that they were fascists. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, was established not least to oppose the influence of Marxism after the Russian Revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood has deep roots in the upper echelons of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. It has been estimated that economic enterprises linked to the Brotherhood may constitute as much as 40 percent of the private sector of the economy. During the 1980s, the Brotherhood began to draw into its ranks university graduates and other qualified young people who could not find economic and social advancement, not least because of cuts to state budgets. The era of national-based economic development that had characterised the Nasser regime was over. The 1980s saw the imposition of economic restructuring dictated by the IMF as part of the program of "free market" neo-liberalism. The decay and disintegration of the Stalinist movement and the collapse of the entire perspective of the bourgeois national movement meant that disaffected layers of youth, which in earlier times would have moved to the left, now turned to the Muslim Brotherhood and to Islamic ideologies and politics. In other words, far from some unexplained urge to return to the seventh century arising suddenly in the minds of young people, the growth of Islamic political groups is an expression of the social and political tensions generated by the deepening crisis of late twentieth and early twenty-first century capitalism.

25. In an article published in the Spring 2007 edition of *Middle East Report*, Hossam El-Hamalawy, one of the most prominent members of the Revolutionary Socialists, explained the position of his organisation: "Starting in the late 1980s, small circles of Egyptian students, influenced by Trotskyism, gathered to study, eventually evolving in April 1995 into an organisation named the Revolutionary Socialists' Tendency. In contradistinction to the Stalinist left, these activists put forward the slogan 'Sometimes with the Islamists, never with the state' in the literature they distributed on university campuses and elsewhere. In practice, this slogan [which was first advanced by Chris Harman, one of the leading ideologues of the British SWP, NB] translated into taking up the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood students on campus when it came to 'democratic' issues, as when state security banned Islamic candidates from running in student union elections or expelled Islamist students from school." And from these beginnings, collaboration developed: "From campus fistfights in the 1990s to joint demonstrations in 2005-2006, relations between the Muslim Brothers and the radical left in Egypt have come a long way. In settings where the two tendencies operate side by side, like student unions and professional syndicates, overt hostility has vanished, and there is even a small amount of coordination around tactics." The article is accompanied by a photograph of a joint Muslim Brotherhood and Revolutionary Socialist protest against the Egyptian regime held on August 14, 2005.

26. The critical role played by the Revolutionary Socialists in bringing together different oppositional tendencies is highlighted in an article posted by the ISO on February 17, analysing the manoeuvres of the

military. According to the author: “The army’s manoeuvring now is ... aimed at breaking up the remarkably broad coalition that was first assembled in 2006. This has included, of course, the Muslim Brothers, the Nasserite ‘Kamara’ party, the Labour Party (which is Islamist), the Tagammu Party (leftist), the Revolutionary Socialists ... Kefaya ... the Ghad Party [a liberal party] ... and Mohammed ElBaradei’s National Alliance for Change. It has to be said that the alliance might have been quite difficult to maintain if the left had taken the sectarian attitude of some of the older layers of Marxists, who basically maintained that the Muslim Brothers were a tool of the capitalist class, simply an ally of neo-liberalism and so on. The Revolutionary Socialists played a key role in overcoming that.” In other words this supposedly revolutionary grouping, supported by two of the leading pseudo left groups in Britain and the United States, has played the key role in maintaining what amounts to the embryo of a bourgeois popular front. The significance of this formation becomes clear when we recognise that none of the so-called opposition parties—the liberal Wafd, the “left” Tagammu, and the Nasserites—has any political credibility. They are regarded as being corrupt and of having personal and business ties with the old regime.

27. The basic argument advanced by Hossam El-Hamalawy is that support for the Muslim Brotherhood somehow flowed from the correct decision to break with the policy of the Stalinists and the liberal parties who backed state suppression against the Islamists. There is no such logic. The history of our own movement in Sri Lanka illustrates this very clearly. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), Keerthi Balasuriya, analysed the class basis and political role of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which attracted to its ranks disaffected youth both in the rural areas and among students. The growth of the JVP was a direct product of the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) when it entered the bourgeois coalition government of Madame Bandaranaike. This led wide layers of youth who had previously turned to the workers’ movement to look in another direction—to Maoism and other petty-bourgeois radical ideologies. Analysing the politics and class foundations of the JVP, Comrade Keerthi concluded that it could, under certain conditions, turn in a fascist direction and directly attack the workers’ movement. But when the JVP came under state attack in 1971, after an attempted insurrection against the second coalition government of Bandaranaike, the RCL was intransigent in its defence of the organisation and demanded the release of its leader Rohana Wijeweera. Likewise when Wijeweera was murdered by the Sri Lankan regime in November 1989, after it had used its services in attacking the workers’ movement in a campaign of murder and intimidation, the RCL denounced the killing and warned that it was the start of an offensive against the social base of the JVP, especially the rural youth. However throughout its history, the Sri Lankan Trotskyists have carried forward an intransigent political struggle against the JVP, seeking to break the youth trapped in its ranks by advancing an independent revolutionary socialist program for the working class. It is the organic class-based hostility of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists to this revolutionary perspective, based on the fight to develop the political independence of the working class, that leads them into an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, ElBaradei and the other bourgeois opposition forces.

28. This orientation is not the result of some accidental confusion or misconceptions. It is the product of the sustained attack waged against revolutionary Marxism, and above all the theory of permanent revolution developed by Leon Trotsky, by all those forces that broke from the Fourth International in the aftermath of World War II. The theoretical underpinnings of the politics of the Revolutionary Socialists can be seen in a posting by Hossam El-Hamalawy immediately following the removal of Mubarak entitled “Middle Class for Military Junta, Workers for Permanent Revolution”. It was subsequently published in Britain’s

Guardian newspaper on February 14 under the title “Egypt protests continue in the factories”. The article concludes as follows: “At this point, the Tahrir Square occupation is likely to be suspended. But we have to take Tahrir to the factories now. As the revolution proceeds, an inevitable class polarisation will happen. We have to be vigilant. We shouldn’t stop here. We hold the keys to the liberation of the entire region, not just Egypt. Onwards with a permanent revolution that will empower the people of this country with direct democracy from below.” But nowhere is it explained that “direct democracy from below” can only be achieved if the working class actually takes political power. Without this, the call for “permanent revolution” is emptied of its real content and simply means that workers should press ahead with their economic demands in the factories while the bourgeois parties and organisations refashion the state.

29. In the original posting the words “permanent revolution” linked to a lengthy article by former leading SWP member John Rees on the socialist revolution and the democratic revolution. Rees cites approvingly the 1963 article by SWP founder Tony Cliff entitled “Deflected Permanent Revolution” in which he insisted that while Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution was his “greatest and most original contribution to Marxism”, it was now necessary, largely on the basis of the experience of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, “to reject a large part of it.”

30. Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, first developed out of the experiences of the 1905 revolution in Russia, explained that in countries of belated capitalist development the bourgeoisie, tied to the old propertied classes and subservient to the imperialist powers, while at the same time confronted with its own gravedigger in the form of the emerging working class, could not carry out the democratic tasks which its predecessors had accomplished in an earlier historical epoch. The realisation of democracy, therefore, could be achieved only through the taking of power by the working class at the head of a movement of the oppressed peasant and petty-bourgeois masses. In order to realise its own independent demands, the working class would have to overthrow the bourgeoisie and begin the implementation of socialist measures. Moreover, the interconnected character of the capitalist economy meant that the revolution would have to develop on an international scale.

31. According to Cliff, while Trotsky’s theory was verified in the Russian Revolution of 1917, Mao’s coming to power in the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 meant that it now had to be rejected. In both cases the bourgeoisie did not play a revolutionary role, as Trotsky had explained, but neither did the working class, enabling other forces, sections of the radicalised intelligentsia, to step into the breach. Summing up the lessons of these experiences, Cliff wrote: “Once the constantly revolutionary nature of the working class, the central pillar of Trotsky’s theory, becomes suspect, the whole structure fall to pieces.”

32. Cliff and all those who have followed him down the years have deliberately confused two distinct questions: the objective historical revolutionary role of the working class and the development of the workers’ movement at any given moment. As Marx explained in *The Holy Family*, the historic role of the working class derives from its position in capitalist society. “The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is irrevocably and obviously demonstrated in its own life situation as well as in the whole organisation of bourgeois society today.”

33. That the essentially revolutionary role of the working class is not continually apparent, gives rise to all manner of attacks on the perspective of Marxism. Writing in the period of reaction that followed the defeat of the 1905 revolution, Trotsky pointed out how opportunism, confronted with a standstill in the workers’ movement, disavowed the methods of socialist revolution and rushed about looking for new ways to put into

effect what history was not yet ready for in practice. Again, changing what has to be changed, these insights are applicable to the situation that developed in the aftermath of World War II. The restabilisation of world capitalism and the domination of the workers' movement by the Stalinist apparatuses saw the opportunists rushing to find new allies—sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the forces of Maoism, the peasantry, the radicalised intelligentsia, Castroism and so on. Trotsky's theory had collapsed, the opportunists claimed, because it was premised on the revolutionary role of the working class and that was now in the past. History, of course, has had the last word. Far from refuting the theory of permanent revolution, as maintained by Cliff and his followers, the development of both China and Cuba verified Trotsky's analysis. The working class did not come to power. But that is precisely why democracy was not realised either in China or Cuba. China has now become the chief source of surplus value for world capital, and the Cuban regime is looking to reintegrate itself into the circuits of global capitalism.

34. The essentially revolutionary role of the working class only comes to the surface when, as Trotsky explained in his preface to the *History of the Russian Revolution* "entirely exceptional conditions, independent of the will of persons or parties ... tear off from discontent the fetters of conservatism, and bring the masses to insurrection." For entire periods, the length of which is determined by objective conditions, the work of the revolutionary party consists in the political preparation of the most advanced layers of the working class. As David North explained so well in *The Heritage We Defend*, the essential characteristic of all the opportunist tendencies that attacked the Fourth International in the post-war period—Pablo, Mandel, Cliff and all their various offshoots—was the rejection of the Lenin-Trotsky conception of the building of the revolutionary party: "For Lenin and Trotsky, no matter how severe the isolation, the political line of the party had to be based on the objective class interests of the proletariat and had to uphold and defend its political independence. They were supremely confident that the historical trajectory of a principled class line would inevitably intersect with the living movement of the working class under conditions of great revolutionary upheavals. Moreover, this intersection was prepared over a long period through the development of the cadre assembled on the basis of the Marxist program." That period has now opened up, placing new tasks before the ICFI. Those parties and organisations that repudiated the Lenin-Trotsky perspective in the earlier period will now be used to fashion new mechanisms required by the bourgeoisie to maintain its rule under conditions of revolutionary upheaval. This is not a matter of their intentions, for no matter how much they may proclaim to uphold the interests of the workers and insist on the need for "permanent revolution" there is an objective logic to their politics.

35. As the events in Wisconsin so clearly demonstrate—and further verifications will follow—the Egyptian Revolution has arisen from processes originating in the contradictions of global capitalism. These processes find their social expression in the rise and rise of social inequality or, as Marx put it in *Capital*, accumulation of wealth at one pole accompanied by the accumulation of poverty at the opposite pole. Two weeks ago in an article entitled "Inequality, the new dynamic of history", published in the *Guardian* [February 6, 2011] the former IMF chief economist Kenneth Rogoff warned that high food prices, unemployment and glaring inequality were not confined to Egypt or the Middle East. "Within countries, inequality of income, wealth and opportunity is arguably higher than at any time in the last century. Across Europe, Asia and North America, corporations are bulging with cash as their relentless drive for efficiency continues to yield huge profits. Yet workers' share of the pie is falling, thanks to high unemployment, shortened working hours and stagnant wages." Rogoff noted that Marx had pointed to rising social inequality as a driving force of revolution but then hurriedly consoled himself with the thought that no one took Marx

very seriously any more.

36. Notwithstanding Mr Rogoff, any examination of the historical process reveals that objective conditions are being created for the return of genuine Marxism, that is the program fought for and developed by the ICFI today, as the guiding perspective of the international workers' movement. We have drawn attention in the past to the similarities between the present epoch and that which led up to World War I. History does not repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain noted, it does rhyme. The period 1870 to 1914 can be characterised as the first wave of globalisation. It led to far-reaching economic and political changes. In that period, Marxism sunk its deepest roots in the Russian and German working classes. This was not accidental because both these two countries experienced substantial economic transformations, while the resulting social tensions could find no outlet in an ossified political structure. We have been passing through the second phase of globalisation, characterised by shifts even more profound than those of the earlier period. But what was true of Russia and Germany at that time now applies on a global scale—the social tensions generated by vast economic changes can find no outlet within the existing political structures, be they dictatorships, in the case of Mubarak and the other regimes in the Middle East, or the decrepit, corrupt, worm-eaten parliamentary democracies in the advanced capitalist countries. In every country, whether ruled by dictatorship or a parliamentary regime, the government functions as the enforcer of the demands of global capital for the impoverishment of broad masses of the people.

37. The global contradictions of the world capitalist system find their own particular expression in each country but what is clear is that the forms of political struggle everywhere will increasingly assume a mass character. This is the situation for which our movement has been preparing in the long struggle to defend the program of Trotskyism against all those forces that sought to destroy it. We now confront the task of developing a new revolutionary leadership of the working class in this country and internationally. And, as the events in Egypt so clearly reveal, that is the decisive task which will play the central role in determining the outcome of the mass struggles now erupting.



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