

Hamas and PLO suppress solidarity action for Egypt

Peter Schwarz
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For years the Islamist Hamas and the Palestine Liberation Organization have been bitterly hostile to one another. Nevertheless, both organizations have responded in almost identical fashion to the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. Demonstrations of solidarity with the Egyptian people have been ruthlessly suppressed in both the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the PLO-governed West Bank.

Some days ago Hamas physically broke up a solidarity demonstration for Egypt. According to Human Rights Watch and *Spiegel Online*, six women and ten men were singled out for arrest and beaten.

Even though Hamas has links to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is half-heartedly supporting the Egyptian demonstrations, the organization obviously fears that the mass movement could spread to Gaza and threaten its own rule.

The social conditions in Gaza are catastrophic. More than half of the 1.5 million population are under 18 years old and “to be young in the Gaza Strip means, in most cases, having no work and no means to make the money necessary for a wedding,” according to *Spiegel* correspondent Ulrike Putz. “The young people have no way to use their leisure time in a meaningful way, and certainly no way to change their personal circumstances. If you want to travel, you need a permit. These are only given to people under 16 or over 35 years of age.”

A “Manifesto for Change”, posted on Facebook by Palestinian youth, acquired 19,000 friends within a short time. The Manifesto complains bitterly about the prevailing intolerable social conditions in Gaza: “We want to be free. We want to be able to live a normal life. We want peace. Is that too much to ask?”

It continues: “There is a revolution growing inside of us, an immense dissatisfaction and frustration that will

destroy us unless we find a way of canalizing this energy into something that can challenge the status quo and give us some kind of hope.”

The manifesto was drawn up in response to the closure of a youth center by the ruling Hamas administration in November of last year. When young people were protesting against the closure their demonstration was violently dispersed by Hamas security forces who arrested 16 participants.

On the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, has imposed a complete ban on solidarity demonstrations with Egypt. Underlying the ban is the close relationship between Abbas and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, whose overthrow would place the regime in Ramallah in considerable difficulty, as well as the fear of an uprising against the PLO’s own rule, which combines a similar corruption and despotism.

A spokesman for the Palestinian security forces justified the ban on demonstrations, saying that stability in the West Bank must be preserved. Protests could “create chaos.”

Nevertheless, several hundred people took to the streets of Ramallah February 5 to demonstrate their solidarity with the Egyptian protests. As they began to chant: “From Ramallah to Tahrir Square, the people want change,” hired thugs of the regime quickly infiltrated the crowd, intimidating the demonstrators and shouting: “Abbas is our president, we do not want another.”

The reaction of Hamas and the PLO to the protests in Egypt speaks volumes about the class nature of these organizations. Despite the antagonism between them, both organizations represent the interests of rival wings of the Palestinian bourgeoisie and both are profoundly shocked by the uprising in Egypt, which has the

support of broad layers of the working class and has raised elementary social issues.

The PLO was founded in 1964 as a bourgeois nationalist movement on the initiative of the then-Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Like all national movements, it maintained that the unresolved questions of the democratic revolution—national self-determination, democracy and the agrarian question—can be solved within the framework of capitalism under the leadership of bourgeois forces. This has proved to be illusory. Today, the PLO and its largest faction, the Fatah group headed by Abbas, have been reduced to the status of willing tools of American imperialism and the Israeli regime, and are extremely hostile to the Palestinian masses.

Hamas was founded in 1986 as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The organization was able to gain some credibility due to the decline of the PLO, and because of its own social welfare activities and a more militant stance toward Israel. Nevertheless Hamas remains a politically and socially conservative movement based on sections of the Palestinian bourgeoisie and middle class. It is deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class.

The emergence of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt has brought a breath of fresh air into the encrusted political relations in the Middle East. It has revealed the real colors of all the political organizations. The hostility of the PLO and Hamas towards the revolt in Egypt reveals their true class position. This in turn paves the way for the building of a genuine proletarian party, based on a socialist program and the perspective of the Fourth International, capable of uniting the working class throughout the Middle East.



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