

The Egyptian working class moves to the forefront

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During the past few days a steady stream of reports has confirmed the increasingly decisive role of the Egyptian working class in the struggle against the Mubarak regime. While the mass assemblies and clashes in Tahrir Square in Cairo have been the focal point of media coverage, the growing wave of working class militancy—in the form of protest demonstrations and strikes—will have a greater impact on the course of events.

In the industrial community of Kafr al-Dawwar—a historic center of working class militancy—hundreds of silk and textile workers participated in protests over inadequate pay and bad conditions. In Helwan, a Nile city south of Cairo, 4,000 workers from the Coke Coal and Basic Chemical Company announced a strike. While demanding higher pay, permanent contracts for temporary workers, and an end to corruption, the workers also declared their solidarity with protestors in the capital. In another significant protest action in Helwan, 2,000 silk workers participated in a demonstration that demanded the removal of their company's board of directors.

In the city of Mahalla, located in the Nile Delta, 1,500 workers protested the late payment of wages and bonuses. In another struggle in that city, hundreds of workers at a spinning company participated in a sit-in demanding action on over-due promotions. In Quesna, also located in the Delta, 2,000 pharmaceutical workers went on strike.

More than 6,000 workers employed by the Suez Canal Authority in Port Said, Ismailia and Suez staged sit-ins to demand adjustments in their pay. Also in Suez, 400 workers employed by the Misr National Steel Company initiated industrial action.

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.”

Ironically, the growth of labor militancy has been, for the sclerotic Egyptian regime, an unwelcome consequence of economic growth during the last decade. This growth has been fueled by the massive inflow of international capital into Egypt during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Foreign Direct Investment increased from \$400 million in 2000 to \$13.2 billion in 2007-08. Egypt is now the largest recipient of FDI on the African continent. Between 2004 and 2007, the annual rate of GDP growth increased from 4 percent to 7.2 percent. But the benefits of economic growth have been confined to a small section of society. Despite strikes that have occasionally wrested concessions, the overwhelming mass of the working population is mired in poverty. Moreover, the regime has responded to the rising

challenge from the working class with escalating brutality and repression.

Now, in the context of a nation-wide mass movement against the Mubarak regime, the central question is the role of the working class in deciding not only the fate of Mubarak, but the nature of the regime that arises from the ongoing revolutionary convulsions.

The greatest danger confronting Egyptian workers is that, after providing the essential social force to wrest power from the hands of an aging dictator, nothing of political substance will change except the names and faces of some of the leading personnel. In other words, the capitalist state will remain intact. Political power and control over economic life will remain in the hands of the Egyptian capitalists, backed by the military, and their imperialist overlords in Europe and North America. Promises of democracy and social reform will be repudiated at the first opportunity, and a new regime of savage repression will be instituted.

These dangers are not exaggerated. The entire history of revolutionary struggle in the Twentieth Century proves that the struggle for democracy and for the liberation of countries oppressed by imperialism can be achieved, as Leon Trotsky insisted in his theory of permanent revolution, only by the conquest of power by the working class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program.

The history of Egypt provides ample proof for this strategic principle.

The Egyptian working class has a long history of struggle. In the early national movement against British colonialism, the working class engaged in major struggles. However, setting a pattern that was to be repeated again and again, the corrupt Egyptian bourgeoisie—after taking advantage of the pressure exerted by the working class to extract limited concessions from the British—reneged on all its commitments to the workers. In the aftermath of the fake independence proclaimed by the British in 1922—in which London continued to rule through the mechanism of a thoroughly venal constitutional monarchy—the working class remained subject to relentless state repression.

In the decades that followed, the Egyptian bourgeoisie bitterly opposed the efforts of workers to establish trade unions. Only under the pressure of World War II, when the British-backed regime made concessions to obtain broader support, were trade unions legalized. But once the war-time emergency passed, the regime moved to roll back this limited gain. In the aftermath of the war, in response to a renewed upsurge of the working class, the bourgeoisie made concessions which, invariably, were followed by repression.

The Free Officer coup of July 23, 1952 ended the monarchy. The months leading up to the coup had witnessed a rising tide of working

class struggle that weakened the monarchy. However, the class character of the new regime—of which Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser soon emerged as leader—was revealed within weeks. The workers welcomed the coup. Their illusions in the revolutionary rhetoric of the army leaders were encouraged by the Stalinist Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), which had very close ties with the Free Officers (and had even been informed in advance of the plans for the coup). In keeping with the Stalinist theory of a “two-stage” revolution (first democracy, and later, at some unspecified point in the future, socialism), the DMNL attributed a progressive role to Naguib and Nasser. This had, almost immediately, tragic consequences. At the Misr Fine Spinning and Weaving Company in the industrial community of Kafr al-Dawwar, thousands of workers went on strike in August 1952 to protest long-standing grievances. As one of the leaders of the movement later recalled:

It was very natural that the workers should start a movement in Kafr al-Dawwar because they heard the communiqués of the revolution which announced that the kingdom was abolished, that the regime was against injustice, that the rights of the people would be restored. It was natural that workers who had been oppressed for a very long time would put forward their demands... [Cited in “Egyptian Communists and the Free Officers: 1950-54,” by Selma Botman, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 1986), p. 355]

The movement was savagely repressed by the army. The new Revolutionary Command Council hastily convened a court martial of workers in the leadership of the strike. Two of the leaders, Muhammad Khamis and Ahmad al-Bakri, were sentenced to death on August 18, 1952 and hanged three weeks later on the grounds of the factory. It should be noted that the member of the Revolutionary Command Council who presided over the court martial, Abd al-Mun'im Amin, had links with the American Embassy in Cairo.

Subsequently, the Nasser regime did carry out a series of reforms that offered marginal improvements in the conditions of the Egyptian peasantry and the working class. The nationalization of the Suez Canal won broad support for the regime among the Egyptian masses. Later, the nationalization of foreign-owned companies and a substantial segment of Egyptian companies led to a rise in living standards. However, the unchallengeable rule of the Nasserist regime was that no independent social or political initiative of the working class was permissible. In the words of Nasser, “The workers don’t demand, we give.” When workers defied this rule and demanded, they were imprisoned, tortured and even executed.

Though Nasser called his combination of nationalist paternalism and repression “Arab socialism,” the Egyptian bourgeoisie remained firmly in power. Upon Nasser’s sudden death in 1970, only three years after the catastrophic defeat of Egypt in the Six Day War with Israel, Anwar Sadat became president. The new regime moved to repudiate both the pseudo-socialist policies of Nasser as well as those elements of Nasser’s foreign policy that had incurred the wrath of the United States. On the economic front, Sadat moved to adapt his policies to the demands of the International Monetary Fund.

It was in the sphere of foreign policy that Sadat took his most dramatic step. He visited Jerusalem in November 1977 and signed the Camp David peace treaty with Israel in 1978, an action which guaranteed the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organization and amounted to a total betrayal of the national aspirations of the Palestinian people. Sadat suffered retribution from assassins in October 1981. His successor, Hosni Mubarak, continued, albeit in a more ruthless form, the policies of Sadat.

On the economic front, neo-liberalism was entrenched. Large segments of the economy that had been nationalized by Nasser were returned to private ownership. In the countryside, much of the land redistribution that had been carried out by Nasser was reversed.

In its foreign policy, Sadat and Mubarak placed Egypt unreservedly at the disposal of US imperialism.

In no sense have the policies of the Sadat-Mubarak regime been substantially different from those that have been implemented by capitalist governments during the past 30 years in any other former colonial country with a belated capitalist development.

Today, in the midst of a global crisis of the capitalist system, profoundly impacting all capitalist countries, a world-wide offensive is underway against the working class. The direction of capitalist policy is not toward reform, but toward reaction. No bourgeois government in Egypt will contradict this global tendency.

The struggle that is now unfolding in Egypt will be of a protracted character. The responsibility of revolutionary Marxists is to develop among workers, as they pass through colossal political experiences, an understanding of the necessity for an independent struggle for power. The revolutionary Marxists must counsel workers against all illusions that their democratic aspirations can be achieved under the aegis of bourgeois parties. They must expose ruthlessly the false promises of the political representatives of the capitalist class. They must encourage the creation of independent organs of workers’ power which can become, as the political struggle intensifies, the basis for the transfer of power to the working class. They must explain that the realization of the workers’ essential democratic demands is inseparable from the implementation of socialist policies.

Above all, revolutionary Marxists must raise the political horizons of Egyptian workers beyond the borders of their own country. They must explain that the struggles that are now unfolding in Egypt are inextricably linked to an emerging global process of world socialist revolution, and that the victory of the revolution in Egypt requires not a national, but an international strategy. After all, the fight against the Mubarak-Suleiman regime and the Egyptian ruling class is, in the final analysis, a struggle against the entire Arab bourgeoisie, the Zionist regime in Israel and American and European imperialism. In this global struggle, the greatest and indispensable ally of the Egyptian masses is the international working class.

What has been outlined above is the perspective and strategy of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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