

# Strikes and protests in Bahrain defy regime crackdown

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Workers in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain have responded to the repression of the US-backed regime with a wave of strikes in almost every area of the economy.

Though the trade union leaderships have not officially called a general strike, an estimated 70 percent of Bahrain's workers are out on strike, with hundreds of thousands joining protests on the streets of the capital.

The regime of King Hamad al-Khalifa has faced mass protests against its autocratic rule since February. In an attempt to maintain the regime through force, the king issued an emergency decree last week establishing marshal law, giving police and armed forces sanction to take any actions to secure the regime. A dusk-till-dawn curfew is in place across Bahrain.

Aided by an estimated 1500 soldiers and police sent from the neighboring monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahraini security forces unleashed a vicious wave of repression against protesters on Wednesday.

Using live ammunition, and backed by armored personnel carriers and tanks, the police and military cleared thousands of protesters from Pearl Square, the center of the weeks-long demonstrations in the capital, Manama. At least six people were killed in the assault and hundreds were wounded.

Local media have confirmed that pro-monarchy forces killed two more people since then, while Bahraini human rights groups have reported that scores of protesters have disappeared, presumed to have been abducted or murdered by the regime.

Government forces also attacked ambulances and hospitals attempting to treat the injured. One television station aired footage of police dragging wounded people out of ambulances. Pro-government forces invaded Salmaniya hospital and detained 100 doctors, preventing them from attending to patients coming in from Pearl Square.

Security forces have attacked other protests across Manama and the surrounding neighborhoods, with reports of police and pro-regime thugs attacking people and entering homes in majority-Shiite working class suburbs. The al-Khalifa monarchy and its security forces are Sunni Muslim, while the vast majority of the population is Shiite. Sectarian discrimination by the regime compounds the high level of social inequality in Bahrain, where the royal family and a small elite around it have vastly enriched themselves from the country's oil resources.

The presence of forces from the Sunni monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, combined with inflammatory rhetoric from

the government warning of "Shiite gangs" targeting Sunni businesses, has inflamed sectarian tensions in the country. However, the demonstrations and strikes have spanned the religious divide, with workers and youth calling for the unity of all Bahrainis opposed to the royal regime.

In a gesture aimed at subduing the protesters, government forces bulldozed the large Pearl Monument in the center of the square on Friday. The square remains occupied by the regime's forces, though demonstrations are continuing in other parts of the city.

The crackdown continued on Sunday, when 20 people were arrested for breaching the curfew, including doctors treating injured protesters.

The mass industrial struggle against the government and for better living standards has spread to virtually every sector of the economy. Workers in the construction sector, national air carrier Gulf Air, the energy industry, and the public sector are on strike.

In a move that will be met with consternation by the imperialist powers and global financial markets, striking oil refinery workers at the state-owned Bahrain Petroleum Company partially shut down production on Sunday. The refinery, which can process up to 250,000 barrels of crude oil each day, is operating at just 10 percent capacity, according to a union spokesperson.

Bahrain is a major financial center for the Gulf region, and the protests have severely disrupted the sector. Thousands of demonstrators have occupied large parts Manama's financial district, erecting barricades and facing down police attacks. The Bahrain stock exchange has not opened since March 16.

The General Federation for Bahrain Trade Unions (GFWTUB) said the strikes would continue until Saudi and UAE forces withdrew from the country. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, GFWTUB General Secretary Sayed Salman said the organization did not want to cause permanent damage to the national economy, but admitted that the strike movement could not be brought to a halt while security forces were killing demonstrators.

"We cannot call our people back to duty," Salman told the *Journal*. "We hope that it won't be a long time as our workers are also suffering, but we want all the militias and foreign forces to be taken off the streets."

The trade union federation represents over 60 unions in the country, and has been a loyal backer of the al-Khalifa monarchy. Like the union officials, the main bourgeois opposition party, al-Wefaq, is looking to draw down the protests as soon as possible. The party, which had representation in Bahrain's rubber-stamp

parliament until its deputies were compelled to resign a few weeks ago because of police attacks on peaceful protesters, has indicated that it wishes to renew talks with the monarchy.

Al-Wefaq had initially supported talks with the king's son, Crown Prince Salman, but withdrew fearing popular hostility to any negotiations with the hated regime. However, following last week's crackdown and the arrest of several opposition leaders, al-Wefaq has renewed its backing for talks.

"We think dialogue is the only solution, but with the presence of foreign troops this is not a possibility," advised Jawad Fairouz, a senior spokesman for the party. "We are asking for a pullout of the foreign troops, and the militia who are directed by the government and the interior ministry, and the Bahraini troops should go back to their base."

In exchange, Fairouz offered to bring the mass demonstrations under control. "Sometimes you have to change your tactics but still we will find a way to demonstrate."

It is uncertain, however, whether al-Wefaq or the trade union bureaucracy are in control of the protests and strikes. Rather, these leaderships, which have been closely associated with the monarchy for decades, have struggled to keep up with the escalating demands of the working class. Though the demonstrations started last month calling for reform of the political system, the mood on the streets has taken an increasingly militant turn as more workers have entered into the struggle. Slogans calling for the abolition of the monarchy and the equitable distribution of the country's oil wealth have become more prevalent.

The United States government, while launching a war against the Libyan regime of Colonel Gaddafi on the pretext of "human rights," continues to back the al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Bahrain a week ago for talks with King Hamad, during which he praised the al-Khalifas as allies. Stoking sectarian prejudices and giving the Bahraini regime an excuse to attack the protesters, Gates told the king that the Shiite clerical regime in Iran would take advantage of unrest in Bahrain to advance its influence.

Washington is counting on the Bahraini and Saudi regimes to put down the protests and strikes before they threaten US interests in the country and the entire region. Bahrain is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, a vital base that supports the US-led occupation of Iraq and allows Washington to maintain pressure on Iran. Like the Saudi monarchy, the US elite also is terrified that the mass uprising in Bahrain will spread to Saudi Arabia—Washington's main ally in the Persian Gulf and the world's largest oil exporter—especially to its eastern oil-producing region, whose population is majority-Shiite.

Protests took place in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq in solidarity with the uprising in Bahrain. There was also a demonstration of over 600 in London, England on Sunday to condemn the violence against protesters in Manama.

Seven hundred people gathered in the Saudi city of Mashhad on Saturday, defying of a general ban on all demonstrations, to oppose the violence against protesters carried out by Saudi and Bahraini forces.

A smaller protest took place in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on Sunday to demand the release of political prisoners. The BBC

reported that Saudi riot police broke up the gathering and arrested 12 protesters. In response to the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, the Saudi monarchy has created another 60,000 posts in its already bloated security forces, while attempting to buy support with an increase in benefits and the monthly minimum wage.

Mass demonstrations are continuing in Yemen, where thousands of tribesmen have joined crowds of workers and youth in the capital, Sanaa, to demand the fall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Saleh's security forces and pro-regime thugs killed fifty-two people during protests last week. The crackdown, which targeted a large sit-in near Sanaa University, failed to quell the protests. Crowds estimated at over 100,000 gathered near the university from Friday through to Sunday, continuing to demand the resignation of Saleh and an improvement in living standards.

Faced with civil war, and with little authority left beyond the capital, Saleh attempted to make concessions to the opposition. The president, who has been in power for 32 years, dismissed his entire cabinet on Sunday. However, all the "fired" ministers are to remain in their posts until a new cabinet can be formed, according to presidential spokesman Tareq al-Shami. Yemen's chief prosecutor also announced that a full investigation into the killing of protesters would be launched.

These efforts will fool nobody. The Yemeni workers know that Saleh's modus operandi is brutal repression of dissent, and no reshuffling of the regime will appease their anger.

Yemen is the poorest Arab country, with over 40 percent of the population surviving on less than \$2 per day. Unemployment is estimated at 35 percent of the workforce. The figure is even higher among young workers and college graduates, with over half of those aged 18-28 believed to be without work.



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