

Egyptian workers face US-backed counter-revolution

Bill Van Auken
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The promulgation this week in Egypt of a decree banning strikes and protests has laid bare the real character of the military-controlled regime that succeeded the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak.

According to AhramOnline, the decree: “criminalizes strikes, protests, demonstrations and sit-ins that interrupt private or state-owned businesses or affect the economy in any way. The decree-law also assigns severe punishments to those who call for or incite action, with the maximum sentence one year in prison and fines of up to half a million pounds [US-\$84,000].”

In other words, the regime is attempting to outlaw and criminalize the very methods used by millions of Egyptians to oppose Mubarak and—after 18 days of mass demonstrations—drive him from power on February 11.

Moreover, the decree is meant above all to set the legal framework to violently suppress the heroic struggles of the Egyptian working class, whose mass strikes continued to escalate during the four years preceding last month’s protests in Tahrir Square.

In the wake of Mubarak’s downfall, workers throughout the country have sought to press their demands for increased wages, the right to employment, full democratic rights and the sacking of managers and union bureaucrats who served the dictatorship.

In recent weeks railway workers, pharmacists, doctors, store clerks, media workers, pensioners and even the police have staged strikes, protests and sit-ins that would be criminal offenses under the new law. Just days before the announcement of the decree, over 1,000 temporary contract workers at the Suez petroleum company, Petrojet, staged a mass sit-in to protest layoffs and demand their right to be treated as full-time employees.

The working class has interpreted the successful ouster of a dictator who had ruled the country for 30 years as a victory that should bring with it the satisfaction of their just demands.

“We really had hopes that the new government will support us and look into our demands,” Ali Fotouh, a driver

in the public transportation system told AhramOnline. “We expected them to say we have all of your legal demands on our desks and there is a timeline of a month or two within which they will be achieved...This is not fair, why don’t you solve our demands so we don’t go on strike. The tone reminds me of the old days of Mubarak, threats and oppression used by the regime.”

Mubarak’s successors, organized in the Supreme Armed Forces Council headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who served as the dictator’s defense minister for two decades, have drawn a diametrically opposite conclusion. The military command is bound inseparably to Egypt’s corrupt wealthy elite of which it is a part. It sees the fall of the dictator as a signal that the regime must be consolidated around the massive security apparatus that remains firmly in place, while utilizing the services of bourgeois “opposition” elements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to figures like Mohamed ElBaradei and Amr Mousa, to provide it with a democratic fig-leaf.

In the past few weeks, the counterrevolutionary aims and methods of the regime headed by Field Marshal Tantawi have become ever more open and increasingly directed at quelling the struggles of the working class.

On March 9, armed troops and plainclothes thugs wielding metal pipes, clubs and electric cables violently cleared Cairo’s Tahrir Square, beating up demonstrators who had been there since January 28. Hundreds were dragged to a make-shift detention camp where they were tortured with electric shocks, beaten and subjected to sexual abuse.

Similar violence was used to disperse Coptic Christians demonstrating outside the state television and radio building in Cairo over the burning of a church. There is mounting evidence that the regime is deliberately stoking sectarian divisions in a bid to divert social struggles.

And this week the regime imposed constitutional amendments drawn up by a commission appointed by the Supreme Armed Forces Command and approved in a hastily convened referendum. While the new interim rules leave open when and how elections will ultimately be organized,

they maintain firmly in place the state of emergency through which Egypt has been ruled ever since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 and continue the absolute powers granted to the presidency that formed the constitutional underpinning of the Mubarak regime.

The developments in Egypt, together with the bloody repression in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria and now the unleashing of an imperialist war in Libya, make it clear that the “Arab Spring” has drawn to a close. They have demolished any basis for illusions that peaceful protest and the toppling of one or another hated dictator can, in and of themselves, bring about genuine democratic and social transformation, or that the aspirations of the workers and the oppressed can be realized under the tutelage of bourgeois parties and politicians.

The ouster of Mubarak was an undoubted victory and a demonstration of the immense social power of the Egyptian working class. Mubarak, the military, the Egyptian ruling elite and the regime’s principal patrons in Washington were unable to impose their “orderly transition” that would have left the dictator in power to directly fashion the regime that would succeed him. They were forced to make a humiliating tactical retreat in the face of the mass movement of strikes and protests that gripped Egypt.

Yet the principal issues that gave rise to these mass struggles remain unresolved; the revolution that began on January 25 remains uncompleted. The removal of Mubarak was only its very first step.

The conditions of mass unemployment, particularly for younger Egyptians, remain unchanged, as do living standards that have fallen woefully behind rising costs of basic necessities. The chasm between the tens of millions living in poverty and a wealthy elite that, in alliance with foreign capital, has looted the country’s economy remains just as wide as ever. And the worsening of social conditions brought on by the world capitalist crisis continues.

And the military, which formed the bedrock of Mubarak’s regime, remains firmly in power, backed to the hilt by Washington. It was not merely a coincidence that the decree banning strikes and protests was announced on the same day that US Defense Secretary Robert Gates arrived in Cairo to praise the “constructive role” of the Egyptian military in maintaining “stability” and to promise to continue funneling billions of dollars in US aid to back its counterrevolutionary operations.

The gains won by the mass struggles of the Egyptian people against the Mubarak regime are threatened. They can be defended and carried forward only by means of a new political strategy based upon the mobilization of the working class in the struggle to overthrow the military regime that represents the interests of Egyptian and foreign capital and

replace it with a workers’ government.

The Egyptian events have verified once again Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that the struggle for basic demands of democratic rights and equality can be realized only on the basis of a socialist program and the struggle for power by the working class.

While the Egyptian events have demonstrated the immense power of the working class, they have also proven the indispensability of a conscious revolutionary socialist leadership.

The lack of such a leadership and of a clear revolutionary perspective has allowed the Egyptian bourgeoisie, backed by imperialism, to turn the situation to its advantage, exploiting the class divisions within the broad movement that coalesced around Tahrir Square and basing itself on more privileged layers that have no desire to see the revolution go beyond the removal of Mubarak.

The class character of the struggle unfolding in Egypt is emerging ever more clearly. A new leadership is needed to explain that the democratic and social demands of the Egyptian workers and oppressed can only be realized through the implementation of socialist policies, and that the victory of the revolution in Egypt requires an international strategy capable of uniting Egyptian workers with the international working class in a struggle to defeat the Arab bourgeoisie, the Zionist regime in Israel and US and European imperialism.

This requires the building of a new party in the working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to fight for this perspective and thereby arm the Egyptian working class politically for the intense class battles that are to come.

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