

Egyptian doctors threaten to renew strike

Harvey Thompson
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Hundreds of doctors marched from the doctors' syndicate to the Egyptian Cabinet offices with their unmet demands May 29, threatening to go back on strike.

The doctors are demanding better wages and a higher health care budget, after the prime minister's assurances to address their grievances has seen no results.

Ahram Online reported that the doctors chanted, "A minimum wage and a maximum wage should be set", and, "The doctors and the workers are against the power of capital", as they marched in their white coats through the streets of Cairo.

Dr Imitiaz Khald Hassouna, an ophthalmologist from Alexandria, said, "If a relative of yours is ill, would you send him to a public hospital if you can afford sending him elsewhere? Would you not rather send him to be treated abroad? I came all the way from Alexandria at my own cost to make sure I attend this demonstration. The Egyptian citizen deserves better health care".

The demonstration was made up of doctors representing several governorates.

Doctors staged a one day strike on May 10 and started an open ended strike a week later, on May 17. The strike was suspended after assurances were made by the ministry.

The doctors want the health care budget raised from three percent of the state budget to 15 percent, increasing the wages of all health workers, securing hospital staff against attacks and subsidising medical higher education.

Dr Ayat Ahmed Sadiq said the government has sought to circumvent the doctors' main demands: "They said the health budget will be raised to 11-12 percent, but then we learned that this percentage is planned to cover all hospitals, including those that are already subsidised by monthly salaries such as health

insurance companies or military hospitals. Prime Minister Essam Sharaf also said that he is not in a position to change the minister of health as we demanded...how is that possible if he is the prime minister?"

Dr Hassouna said the demand to remove the current health minister is related to what he described as his "National Democratic Party policies towards health care".

"The policies which maintain low doctor's wages in public hospitals are intentionally set to serve the profit-making private sector. Public hospitals are now utilised for private patients.... The capitalist system does not work when it comes to health care. They removed cancer and delicate surgeries from the health insurance, so now if I get cancer I cannot receive the health care I will need".

Also addressed on the demonstration were doctors' concerns over safety at hospitals and the issue of corruption within the Ministry of Health.

Dr Ahmed Fathi said, "We have filed a corruption complaint against the ministry for providing the Fact Finding Committee with a false estimate of the number of deaths during the revolution. The number accurately estimated for the number of revolution martyrs was 846, but they declared that there were only 400. The corruption complaint also includes waste of public funds".

The demonstrating health workers held banners reading, "We demand trials, the gangs are still ruling" and "The enemies of the revolution are those behind the shortage of medical supplies".

According to a report by the Land Centre for Human Rights, Egypt witnessed a total of 90 workers' protests in April, including 26 sit-ins, 14 strikes, 26 demonstrations and 24 brief protests.

The report states that 1,360 workers were laid off throughout the month, with another 22 injured and two

killed as a result of the absence of industrial security inside the factories and a lack of health insurance for workers.

Common demands by workers have included an improvement in wages, permanent contracts and the removal of corrupt officials.



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