

The Egyptian revolution at a crossroads

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Repressive measures taken by the US-backed military junta in Egypt and its political supporters in the official “opposition” are a stark warning to Egyptian workers and youth. The forces of counterrevolution are mobilizing for an attempt to smash the movement unleashed by the working class’s overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak last February.

On August 1, the junta sent tanks against a peaceful sit-in in Tahrir square, expelling hundreds of families of martyrs killed by the regime in the early days of the revolution. Only three days earlier, reactionary Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya had organized a “pro-stability” protest in support of junta leader Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.

These measures have the support of Western imperialism and its local stooges. Only recently the Obama administration established an “open dialogue” with the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, a bastion of reaction in the Middle East, is pouring money into Egypt.

The junta has been able to take deeply unpopular measures because no party fights to rally the working class against Tantawi and his backers. The junta’s most open supporters are right-wing Islamist groups which explicitly support all of its anti-democratic measures, such as its March 23 ban on strikes and protests. In fact, however, all of the establishment parties—liberal, Islamist and pseudo-left—back the junta.

The Egyptian working class is at a crossroads. The only way forward is renewed revolutionary struggle. Workers sense that they need a more thorough settling of accounts with the regime and that deeper changes are needed than simply the removal of the head of state. The central question facing the working class is: on what perspective must this struggle be based?

The Egyptian workers entered into political struggle on January 25, inspired by the Tunisian workers’ struggle that forced the resignation of US-backed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. As strikes grew and brought Egypt to a standstill—despite Mubarak’s repression, approved by the US government, which cost the lives of over 1,000

protestors—Washington was forced to make a deal with the Egyptian army to replace Mubarak with a military council led by Tantawi.

The imperialists and the Egyptian political establishment scrambled to contain the working class and subordinate it to the state. In this they relied in particular on Egypt’s middle-class pseudo-left parties, which worked to politically disarm the workers, promoting the junta as a legitimate government and spreading illusions about its plans to carry out a “democratic transition.”

Thus, Hossam al-Hamalawy, a leading member of the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), claimed in a February 14 comment published by the British *Guardian* that the junta “will eventually engineer the transition to a ‘civilian’ government.” The other pseudo-left groups in Egypt shared this opinion, founding parties like the Workers Democratic Party (WDP) and the Socialist Alliance Party (SAP) to integrate themselves into the new political establishment. They accepted the political framework created by the military, giving legitimacy to elections organized by the junta.

A few weeks later, the US and NATO declared war on the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, ostensibly to protect pro-democracy protesters. This imperialist aggression against a small, defenseless country was supported by the entire political establishment in Egypt, including groups posing as “left” or even “socialist.”

After only a few months, however, masses of workers and youth in Egypt—disillusioned with the repression, austerity measures, and pro-imperialist policies of the junta—protested and demanded a “second revolution.” This slogan reflected a critical insight—that the claims the junta would carry out a “democratic transition” were false. The military regime had to be overthrown. On July 8, amid a renewed wave of militant strikes, millions took to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and cities all over Egypt to demand the downfall of the military junta.

All of the bourgeois parties, including the pseudo-left forces, were terrified and hostile to the working class’s demand for a “second revolution.” They joined the sit-ins in Tahrir Square to control and strangle the movement.

The most critical role was played by forces of the so-called Socialist Front—the Revolutionary Socialists, the Workers Democratic Party, the Socialist Alliance Party and the Egyptian Socialist Party. On July 27, these groups formed a “United Popular Front” with the liberal and Islamist groups which was reportedly based on a ban on all political discussion of differences on the future character of the Egyptian state.

Having thereby helped the Islamists win a hearing in Tahrir Square, the pseudo-left forces claimed to be surprised and offended when the Islamists transported thousands of their rural followers to Cairo and chanted reactionary slogans. They then decided to withdraw from Tahrir Square, leaving the martyrs’ families to face the army’s tanks alone.

The counterrevolutionary role played by the pseudo-left groups must be a warning to the working class. These groups have nothing to do with revolutionary politics or socialism. They cynically use left phrases and Marxist terms for the purpose of preventing an independent movement of the working class.

On July 9, the Revolutionary Socialists issued a statement entitled “Not a Second Revolution but a Permanent Revolution Until the Fall of the Regime.” It declared: “What is now happening on the squares and streets in Egypt is not a second revolution but an extension of the revolution of January 25.” The clear meaning was that the junta could be pressured into carrying out a “democratic transition” by means of “sit-ins and strikes.”

This statement sums up the reactionary and duplicitous role of the Revolutionary Socialists. By counterposing permanent revolution to a “second revolution”—that is, to the workers’ demand for a revolutionary struggle to overthrow the junta—they falsify in the crudest manner the political content of the perspective of permanent revolution. In the history of the Marxist movement, the term “permanent revolution” has always been bound up with the political independence of the working class and its struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie and take power on the basis of a socialist program.

First advanced by Marx and Engels, subsequently developed by Marxists of the European social democracy, and given its clearest and most far-sighted formulation by Leon Trotsky, the theory of permanent revolution was realized in the October Revolution of 1917, which brought the working class to power in Russia. Permanent revolution holds that the bourgeoisie can no longer lead a democratic revolution. Instead, the social and democratic tasks of the revolution can be carried out only by the working class, having won the support of the peasantry and the rural poor, taking power, establishing a workers’ state and fighting to extend the socialist revolution throughout the region and the

world.

Despite the attempt by the Revolutionary Socialists to associate permanent revolution with a political line of class collaboration—the direct opposite of its true meaning—this theory has been thoroughly vindicated by the events that have unfolded this year in North Africa and the Middle East. First, the working class has emerged as the main revolutionary force. Second, the liberal bourgeoisie in Egypt and Tunisia, along with its petty-bourgeois “left” hangers-on, has rushed to support the military mainstays of the old regimes, lining up with them against the insurgent working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which alone is based on the perspective and program of Trotskyism, is the only political force calling for the political independence of the Egyptian working class and a socialist revolution to overthrow the Egyptian junta to replace the bourgeois state with a workers’ state. In contrast, the pseudo-left groups articulate the interests of affluent middle-class layers hostile to the workers and desperate to defend the junta.

The Egyptian workers and youth have already shown their strength and inspired millions of workers all over the world—from strikers opposing austerity measures in Wisconsin to workers and youth mobilizing against poverty and social inequality in Israel. In order to bring the Egyptian Revolution forward, it is necessary to build a section of the ICFI in Egypt, as well as sections in Tunisia, Israel and throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Only such a party, based on an international socialist perspective, can defeat the counterrevolutionary offensive, break the stranglehold of imperialism, and carry through the fight for genuine democracy and socialism.

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