

Mass protests in Egypt against US-backed military junta

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Egyptian workers and youth mounted mass protests in cities across Egypt yesterday, after a new wave of strikes that swept the country in recent days. In Cairo tens of thousands of protesters gathered in iconic Tahrir Square, one of the epicenters of the Egyptian revolution.

Egyptian army and police withdrew from Tahrir Square before the protests began but threatened to return at midnight to disperse remaining crowds. The military has occupied the central island of the square since August 1, when the junta violently broke up the last sit-in.

Different marches were organized to head towards Tahrir Square throughout the day. One demonstration started on the campus of Cairo University in Giza and passed by the Israeli embassy, where protesters chanted slogans against Israel and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). After the Israeli state's most recent aggression against the Palestinians in Gaza and the killing of five Egyptian soldiers by the Israeli army last month, there have been continuing protests in front of the embassy.

The SCAF junta, which remains an open ally of Israel, had built a concrete wall around the embassy to cordon off protesters.

Later during the day, thousands of protesters returned to the embassy, tore down the wall, stormed the embassy and removed the Israeli flag on the top of the building. The protesters were attacked by security forces with tear gas and rubber bullets. According to the Egyptian ministry of health, 88 people were injured.

Another demonstration started in Shubra, a working class neighborhood in northern Cairo. As the march passed the offices of the state-owned daily *Al-Gomhoreya*, protesters raised their shoes to indicate contempt and chanted "liars". They carried banners

reading "A minimum wage for those who live in cemeteries" and "A maximum wage for those who live in palaces."

The mass protests on Tahrir Square were also joined by farmers, who organized a march from outside the ministry of agriculture in Dokki, and by "Ultras" (fans) of the two largest football clubs in Cairo, al-Ahly and Zamalek. Fans of al-Ahly had been brutally attacked by police forces after a match on Tuesday because they shouted slogans against ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak. More than 5,000 Ultras met in the square and chanted against police brutality and the ministry of interior. Protesters also denounced military trials for civilians and called for "purging the judiciary of all of Mubarak's supporters."

Other slogans were directed against the de facto ruler of Egypt, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mubarak's minister of defense for 20 years: "A word in your ear, marshal, the revolution continues in Tahrir" and "Tantawi is Mubarak."

In the coastal city of Alexandria thousands of protesters gathered in front of El-Qaed Ibrahim Mosque. They chanted slogans against the military council and demanded to "put all the murderous officers on trial". They also chanted, "Everything is the same even after the revolution."

In Suez protesters attempted to head towards the governorate's offices but were attacked by military police, who used sticks and batons to disperse the crowds.

The violent reaction by the military and the police in Cairo and Suez is a sign of the deep concern amongst the Egyptian ruling elite in the face of renewed protests and strikes. Mass strikes have spread over Egypt since the end of Ramadan, with workers demanding higher wages and bonuses and the purging of corrupt Mubarak-

era officials in factories and institutions.

Thousands of postal workers are on strike, demanding a 7 percent pay increase to keep up with inflation and a 200 percent bonus for meeting annual production goals. The strike is also directed against corrupt managers and over-paid consultants inside the publicly owned Postal Services.

On September 6, the state-owned daily *Al-Ahram* commented that the strike “reflects wider disillusionment of many public-sector employees with the lack of progress under Sharaf’s government.” The article reported that “SCAF has tried to break the strike and open post offices in Ismailia by force, but the army failed because strikers managed to hold their ground.”

Since the beginning of the week, Egyptian media have reported on mass protests and strikes. On Monday, workers from the High Dam Electrical and Industrial Company met in front of the Council of Ministers building to stage a protest for better wages. At the same time law school graduates protested in front of the Supreme Court against nepotism within the judicial system. In the coastal governorate of Beheira residents of Edku blocked a highway to protest against the collaboration between the Egyptian government with the British oil giant BP.

Other news sources reported further industrial action and protests by auto workers, chemical workers, fishermen and textile workers.

On September 322,000 textile workers in the city of Mahalla, home to the largest public sector textile factory in Egypt, announced their plans to begin an open-ended strike on September 10. They issued a statement declaring their grievances, demanding a higher minimum wage and outstanding merit pay checks. The statement also declared that their aim was not only to improve their own situation, but also to struggle for a decent standard of living for all Egyptian workers.

The Mahalla workers have a long history of militant struggles and strikes. Their protests in 2006 and 2008 helped galvanize the wave of mass strikes that culminated in the January 25 revolution and the protests that ousted Mubarak.

Deeply worried about rising class struggles, the SCAF junta met with a delegation from the Mahalla factory to stop the strike. The delegation agreed to cancel the strike after negotiations with Minister of

Labor Ahmed Borai. The delegation reportedly agreed that monthly meal incentives will be increased to 210 EGP from 120 EGP and that monthly incentives will be raised by 200 percent. The delegation also agreed to delay discussions over profit-sharing until the general assembly of the Holding Company for Cotton, Spinning and Textiles meets.

In the meantime, the junta is clearly trying to prepare for a confrontation with the working class. On Wednesday night the SCAF met for three hours with Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and his cabinet to discuss what a cabinet spokesperson described as a “deteriorating security situation”. The council issued six directives for the Sharaf government to follow immediately.

Amongst them are the demands to suspend “issuing new licenses to Satellite television stations” and the beginning of “legal procedures to review licenses issued to any Satellite television network that incites violence and protests.” Two other directives say that “the cabinet will intervene to halt all strike actions, and it will enforce a law it passed last spring, which criminalizes certain strikes that disrupt public life.” It added that Sharaf will not “negotiate with strikers over any demands until workers halt their workplace actions.”

It appears unlikely that limited concessions will prevent workers in Mahalla and throughout Egypt from continuing struggles against the regime. Already, textile workers in Kafr Al-Dawar and other places have threatened to go to strike if they do not get the same incentives as the Mahalla workers.

There have also been reports in the media that other sections of the working class announced plans to stage protests in the middle of September. *Al-Ahram* reported that teachers and university professors are preparing for nationwide actions in the middle of the month, and that doctors are planning to go on strike again over unmet demands.



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