

Egyptian elites demand end to strikes

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Over the last several days, the US-backed military junta in Egypt and its supporters in the official parties and the trade unions have expressed increasing anxiety about renewed mass strikes and protests sparked by the deepening economic and financial crisis. Bourgeois politicians, trade union leaders and journalists are demanding an end to the strikes and warning of the threat of “another revolution”.

Since the end of Ramadan, a wave of strikes has swept over Egypt—reportedly involving hundreds of thousands of workers, including teachers, doctors, textile workers and other sectors of the industrial working class. In recent days, 4,000 workers shut down Egypt’s only privately owned Suez Canal port in Ain Sukhna. Thousands of public bus drivers, mechanics and ticket collectors also walked out in Cairo demanding increased pay, improved working conditions and the sacking of corrupt Public Transport Authority leaders.

Last Saturday, thousands of teachers demonstrated in front of the Cabinet headquarters and demanded the immediate removal of Ahmed Gamal Eddin Moussa, the current minister of education. The teachers have been on strike since the beginning of the school year on September 17 demanding higher wages and better working conditions. They also want the payment of a promised 200 percent incentive, greater spending on education, secure contracts and a guaranteed minimum wage. Currently a teacher’s net salary does not exceed EGP 287 (US\$48). According to media sources, up to 80 percent of Egypt’s 1.5 million teachers participated in the strike.

The teachers are striking for the first time since 1951, and the junta is now working hand in hand with the interim government of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and “independent” trade unions to shut down their action. According to a report by the Egyptian daily *Al Ahrām*, Hassan Ahmad, the chairman of the Independent Teachers Syndicate (ITS), announced the suspension of the sit-in by teachers on Saturday after mass protests in front of the cabinet. Reportedly Hassan took the decision to suspend the action without consulting union members who wanted to continue the sit-in.

Later, the ITS declared its intention to suspend the whole strike for one week until the education ministry presents a

timeline for meeting the demands of teachers. In reality, the military junta and the Sharaf government have already made clear they are not willing to make any concessions, with Moussa telling the *Daily News Egypt*, “the current budget limitations stand in the way of meeting” the instructors’ demands.

On Tuesday, the Independent Union of Public Transport Workers also suspended the transportation strike in the capital city after claiming the manpower minister had agreed to look into workers’ demands.

The cancellation of these strikes underscores the hostility of the so-called independent trade unions to the interests of workers and their counter-revolutionary role. By sabotaging these struggles, the independent unions—which have been promoted by the American AFL-CIO trade unions and the US State Department—are pursuing the same goal as the military junta: the stabilisation of capitalist rule in Egypt through the suppression of the working class.

During the teachers strike, the junta made clear it was ready to enforce the anti-strike and protest law decreed in March. Government officials have repeatedly threatened teachers, in particular, with dismissal and imprisonment under the law. On Saturday, military forces beat up protesting teachers in front of the cabinet. Despite the combined attempts of the unions and the junta to stop the strike, teachers in a number of schools in Beni Suef, Sharkiya, Suez and parts of Cairo are continuing their struggle.

The junta and the independent trade unions are increasingly worried the situation is getting out of their control. On Sunday, the secretary general of the Independent Union of Public Transport Workers, Muhammad Abd al-Sattar Ali, warned in the independent daily *Al Masry Al Youm* that the government should comply with the demands of the transport workers and “find solutions [so] this does not turn into a disaster, with all of Egypt’s workers deciding to take to the streets.” Two days later, he ordered the shutdown of the strike by public transport workers in Cairo.

Eight months after the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution

on January 25, which led to the ouster of the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak, conditions are once again throwing the working class into mass struggles. For workers, little has changed for the good since January 25. An editorial in an Egyptian newspaper recently admitted, “In many ways, Egypt on September 24, 2011, is not much different from the Egypt of January 24, 2011”. This is completely true: the military junta headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi—minister of defence under Mubarak for 20 years—is conducting the same policies as the Mubarak regime. It remains a subservient stooge of US imperialism in the region and is just as hostile to democratic and social rights as the former dictator.

In fact, the situation for workers and youth is worsening. According to a report of the state-owned daily *Al Dostour*, food prices have risen up to 80 percent since January and the economic crisis is hitting Egypt hard. On Sunday, the main index of the Egyptian stock exchange fell to a 30-month low, with analysts pointing to the deepening international financial crisis and its impact on Egypt.

A report by *Al Ahram* stressed the fact that “bubbling political tensions and widespread strikes combined with global market turmoil have prompted a retreat of local investors.” According to Minister of Finance Hazem El-Beblawi, “foreign investments amounted to zero” this year.

Against this background, the Egyptian ruling elite is becoming increasingly nervous.

On September 25, a column in the *Daily News Egypt*, entitled “It’s the economy first,” warned, “If strikes continue, the growth will be negative much sooner than expected.” The article attacked the revolutionary workers and youth calling for the overthrow of all the corrupt institutions of the state and declared that this attitude “is no different than a plan aiming to actually destroy the country.” The author, Rahim ElKishky, a computer and technology executive educated at Boston University and the American University in Cairo, warned of the hostility of the Egyptian people to the country’s notorious police forces. He said the dissolution of the security forces—a popular demand of the revolution—would lead to “chaos” and “completely destroy the economy”.

ElKishky acknowledged that “a large proportion of the 90 percent of Egyptians belonging to the middle and lower classes are starting to suffer” and “40 percent of Egyptians are already living below the poverty line”. He then asks, “[H]ow long can the 40 percent wait? Will they have their own hunger revolution, especially now that Jan. 25 has shown them the way to do it and the fear of security forces has been destroyed? Will they be joined by the newly deprived and unemployed?”

The fear of second revolution is widespread amongst representatives of the Egyptian bourgeoisie.

Karim Helal, board member of CI Capital in Cairo, also warned that “the biggest challenge this government has is creating productive jobs, otherwise we’re going to have a massive explosion.

We have 700,000 graduates every year. If we don’t find jobs for them, we will have another revolt. When you have a growing youth population in an emerging economy coupled with unemployment and inflation, you have a ticking time bomb.”

According to *Al Masry Al Youm*, on Sunday the Freedom of Justice Party, the political arm of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, warned the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces “that postponing the parliamentary elections would lead to another revolution.”

Faced with this threat, the military junta is stepping up preparations for a violent crackdown on striking workers. Egypt’s military rulers have recently announced an expansion of the emergency laws and are moving to enforce the anti-strike law. The junta has also sent to military courts another 40 protesters who were arrested during the protests in front of the Israeli embassy on September 9. According to their families and lawyers, most of them were randomly arrested and tortured by military and police forces.

The US regards the junta as a critical force in the region to protect its imperialist interests in the region and capitalist rule in Egypt. The Obama administration fully supports the brutal measures the regime is using to suppress workers and youth. Only last week, the head of the US Central Command, General James Mattis, met with Egypt’s new dictator, Field Marshall Tantawi, and the chief of staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Sami Annan. According to media reports, Mattis stressed the importance of a strong military relationship between Egypt and the US and thanked the Egyptian military for its efforts “to maintain law and order.”



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