

The political tasks arising from the Egyptian Revolution

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On September 17, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party—PSG) held a European workers rally against racism, war and social cutbacks at the conclusion of the party's election campaign in Berlin. Representatives of the PSG and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) spoke on the crisis of capitalism, the programme of the PSG and the significance of the PSG election campaign.

We are publishing the most important contributions at the rally. This contribution dealing with the Egyptian revolution was delivered by Johannes Stern, a member of the PSG Editorial Board.

The revolution in Egypt that began on January 25 of this year undoubtedly represents a turning point in world history. Twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the capitalist triumphalism of the “end of history”, the working class has re-emerged as a powerful social force. The recognition by Marx and Engels—that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”—has been vividly confirmed.

The significance of the Egyptian revolution has been reflected in the consciousness of workers and youth all over the world. Workers everywhere have supported the struggle of the masses against the US-backed Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak and intuitively identified their own struggles with those of Egyptian workers. Worldwide, workers in their protests draw a parallel to Egypt: at mass protests in the US state of Wisconsin, workers bore signs reading “Strike Like an Egyptian” and raised their shoes against the hated governor, Scott Walker. And the mass protests in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Israel were also influenced by Egypt and Tahrir Square.

In the course of the Berlin election campaign, we also conducted many interviews dealing with the situation on the streets of Egypt. After the initial euphoria, one detected a growing thoughtfulness about the prospects for the ongoing struggle with many concluding that little had changed. The question was posed: What has happened? And what must happen in order for the revolution to be successful? This is the theme of my contribution.

The working class was without doubt from the very beginning the driving force of the Egyptian revolution. The great Russian revolutionary and leader of the October Revolution, Leon Trotsky, once characterised a revolution as “the direct intervention of the masses in historical events”, and that is what happened in Egypt. It was the mass strikes conducted by workers that drove the hated dictator Mubarak out of office.

The major imperialist powers and the Egyptian bourgeoisie are deeply concerned about this development. In order to suppress the mass movement of workers, the US in close collaboration with the Egyptian military established a brutal military junta. The junta is led by Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who was defence minister under Mubarak for 20 years. The junta was supported from the outset by all the bourgeois

parties—Islamists, liberals and alleged leftists—which all declared in unison that the military would ensure a so-called “democratic transition”.

The most vocal defenders of the junta were and remain pseudo-leftist forces such as the Revolutionary Socialists, a state-capitalist group in Egypt attached to the British Socialist Workers Party. Prior to the overthrow of Mubarak, this group had worked closely together with representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed ElBaradei's National Alliance for Change in order to save bourgeois rule. They released joint statements with the bourgeois parties, and also worked actively to bring independent neighbourhood committees under the control of the mainstream political parties and then dissolve them. The committees were founded by workers to defend themselves against Mubarak's thugs from the police and intelligence agencies. The intervention of revolutionaries could have empowered these committees in the development of the political struggle of the workers organisations—something the petty-bourgeois groups wanted to prevent under all circumstances.

Groups like the Revolutionary Socialists, or their newly founded party, the Democratic Labour Party, have nothing to do with a revolutionary perspective or socialist politics. They support the military rule on the basis of deep-going social and material interests. They regard the military as the backbone of Egyptian capitalism, which defends the privileges of the ruling class and the upper middle class.

To understand why these groups are so hostile to the working class, one must examine their social status. They do not represent the social interests of workers but rather a small section of the affluent middle class. Its members, including journalists and academics, are the biggest beneficiaries under the junta. While nothing has changed for workers, these layers are in the process of integrating themselves into the establishment.

Their leaders are working with the international press, have good relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and other civic organisations, take part regularly in talk shows, and publish books and give lectures on the Revolution.

To put it in a nutshell: they are making money out of the revolution and are at the same time the greatest defenders of the status quo. To maintain this situation and keep the working class under control, they are now busy building so-called “independent trade unions”. They receive the necessary funds for such a project from western governments and NGOs, and international trade union bodies such as the ILO and the ITUC.

Despite the concerted efforts of the pseudo-left, it is difficult for the bourgeoisie to keep the offensive of the working class under control. The struggle of the workers is driven by deep objective causes. After more than 30 years of neo-liberal economic policy, social inequality in Egypt has reached untenable proportions. About 40 percent of Egypt's population live on less than US\$2 per day. The revolutionary movement did not come out of the blue, but was prepared for years by the working class. Strikes and protests increased dramatically, especially in the past 10

years. What began on January 25 was in many respects the culmination of a long period of development.

In order to crush the revolution and save the interests of the capitalists and imperialists in the region, the junta and its backers in the US are resorting to increasingly brutal methods. On March 19, the junta passed an anti-protest and anti-strike law that threatens workers with draconian sanctions. The fact that NATO began to bomb Libya on the same day is no coincidence.

From the start, one of the central aims of the war against Libya was to re-establish control over the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. The imperialist war of conquest in Libya is the main anchor of the counterrevolution. The Egyptian junta has supported the war for precisely this reason and supplied weapons to the Libyan “rebels”. Even the bourgeois parties and the petty-bourgeois left more-or-less openly supported the war.

The real character of the junta quickly became clear, and Egyptian workers have lost many of their illusions in the military. They identify the junta as an extension of Mubarak’s rule with all of its main characteristics: unconditional submission to the United States, the suppression of democratic rights and huge, intolerable levels of social inequality. Against this background, the strikes and protests reached a new peak in late May with workers and youth raising the popular demand for a second revolution. This second revolutionary wave reached its peak on July 8, with renewed mass protests across Egypt.

At this point, the junta was once again dependent on the support of the petty-bourgeois ex-leftists. On July 9—i.e., only one day after the start of the mass movement—the Revolutionary Socialists published a statement that spoke out directly against a second revolution. On July 10, it then entered into an alliance with Nasserite and liberal parties.

Then, at the end of July, as the mass protests continued, it formed a so-called United People’s Front together with ultra-right-wing Islamists, such as the Salafists and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, and thus prepared for a mass offensive of the Islamists, who took to the streets on behalf of Tantawi. The junta utilised this mobilisation to clear Tahrir Square on August 1 and occupy it by military force.

Just a few weeks later, while we are holding this meeting, thousands of workers are again on strike and conducting protests—including industrial workers, doctors, teachers, professors and students. The junta is preparing to move again to crush these strikes—this time with even greater brutality.

Two days ago, protesters were brutally attacked in front of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, leaving three dead and more than 1,000 injured. Earlier, US President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Tantawi had spoken together by telephone. There are many indications that they were preparing to drown the Egyptian revolution in blood.

After the mass protests last weekend, the junta decided to extend the emergency laws and urged the Interim Government to proceed with the implementation of the anti-strike law. Interior Minister General Mansour al-Essawi declared that the police and military could now shoot on sight in order to prevent attacks on government buildings and police stations.

The Egyptian working class is in grave danger! This brings me to my final point. What is needed to repel the counterrevolution and lead the revolution to success?

The experience of the revolution shows that workers’ demands for social equality and genuine democratic rights can only be won through a conscious revolutionary struggle against the junta and its defenders. The only realistic prospect for the developing strike movement is to extend the strike into a general strike aimed at toppling the junta and bringing a workers’ government to power.

To conduct this struggle, however, Egyptian workers need two things: an international socialist strategy and their own independent fighting organisations.

Workers must take heed of the lessons arising in the year 1917. When

the workers in Russia undertook the October Revolution, they founded “Soviets” as revolutionary organs of the working class in order to take state power. Under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, the organised working class overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government and established a workers’ government.

For Lenin and Trotsky, the October Revolution was the prelude to world revolution. Then, as now, the problems and tasks confronting workers cannot be solved within the context of capitalism nor in one country alone.

The conditions for the struggle for international socialism are favourable. The deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s is intensifying daily, and the organisation of such a struggle becomes more and more a practical task.

At the beginning of my contribution, I referred briefly to the international struggles we have experienced since the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution—in the US, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Great Britain. Even in Israel, a mass movement has emerged against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This is of great importance. While bourgeois governments are fomenting nationalism, Israeli workers have begun to unite with their Arab brothers and sisters in a common struggle for democratic and social rights.

The main problem of the Egyptian revolution is the absence of independent working class organisations and a revolutionary party. This is why the bourgeoisie is able to maintain state power and accelerate its plans for counterrevolution.

The most important task that arises now is the building of a new, revolutionary leadership of the working class—with the aim leading their struggles based on an international socialist perspective.

The only tendency that puts forward such a perspective is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Only the ICFI defends the legacy of Leon Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution against the betrayal of Marxism by Stalinism and social democracy.

The fact that we are gathered here today in such numbers to discuss this perspective on such a high level is a ground for optimism. Objective conditions are on our side, and our programme is in line with these conditions. We are the only tendency with a common vision for Egyptian workers, and I am firmly convinced that our programme will win influence amongst workers in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, in the building of sections of the Fourth International to lead the Egyptian Revolution to victory as part of the world revolution.



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