

Egyptian junta delays threatened crackdown on Islamist protests

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Tensions remained high in Egypt yesterday as the army junta continued to threaten a crackdown on supporters of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, who was deposed in a July 3 coup carried out amid mass working class protests.

The military's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood is a prelude to a crackdown against working class opposition. The junta on Monday arrested two Suez steel workers amid strikes over unpaid wages.

Yesterday, Egyptian officials repeatedly threatened to break up pro-Mursi sit-ins, which the junta has repeatedly attacked since July 3, killing hundreds of protesters.

Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy said, "Law and order has to be in place, and people need to have access to their homes and work and so on. Ultimately, this situation has to be resolved very soon." He said action by the security forces to end the sit-ins would be "consistent with the law."

This came after repeated reports on Sunday by anonymous Egyptian officials that an attack on pro-Mursi protesters was planned for daybreak Monday.

The junta's interim president, Adly Mansour, convened an emergency National Security Council meeting to discuss security questions, including clashes with Islamist forces in the Sinai Peninsula near the border with Israel. Interim Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawy attended, together with top army and security officials.

Like the Mubarak dictatorship before it, the junta is launching a "war against terrorism" to cover for a crackdown against all opposition. Since the coup, army and police forces have intensified operations in the Sinai Peninsula.

A military source told the Egyptian daily *Al Masry Al Youm* that the army is destroying underground

tunnels in Rafah, the border crossing to the Gaza Strip in North Sinai. It claimed that all tunnels are under Egyptian military control, including the ones that have not yet been destroyed.

The Egyptian military plans to further escalate its crackdown in the Sinai. The army has reportedly called upon citizens to drive out militants from residential areas so that troops can arrest or kill them, and ordered soldiers to shoot anyone carrying weapons in the streets.

On Saturday, in what appears to have been a coordinated Egyptian-Israeli offensive, the army struck targets in the Sinai, killing and wounding at least 25. Last week the military said in a statement that it had killed 60 and arrested 103 "terrorists" since the coup.

Amid these escalating threats, officials of Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood called on supporters to join sit-ins in Cairo and Giza. They also called for army and security officials not to attack Islamist protesters, declaring, "We remind our sons and brothers from the great Egyptian army and the men of the Interior Ministry to not attack their peaceful brothers or besiege them or shed their blood."

The Egyptian judiciary announced yesterday that the army would extend Mursi's detention by 15 days. The deposed president was charged with conspiring with the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas to break out of jail during the January-February 2011 working class uprising that toppled US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak. The junta has since slapped further charges on Mursi, including attacking police stations, intentionally killing and abducting police officers and prisoners, spying, and attacking public buildings.

Islamist protesters began a sit-in outside the High Constitutional Court in Cairo yesterday, provoking clashes with bystanders hostile to Mursi.

The Egyptian junta is under pressure from its backers in Washington and the European capitals to reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood and avert further conflict within the political elite. Last week, US Secretary of State John Kerry and European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton issued a joint statement calling for negotiations between the junta and the Brotherhood.

Brookings Institution fellow H.A. Hellyer told AFP, “If it was just up to them, the Interior Ministry would go in and dismantle the protests, but there are some within the cabinet and even within the military who are more torn.”

Last night, *Al Jazeera* correspondents cited anonymous Egyptian security sources reporting that the security forces had decided to postpone a crackdown. The correspondents reported: “A security source said that with the number of protesters swelling, the armed forces decided not to move in the direction of these camps.

“This dispersal arguably did not happen because of international pressure. Now what the security forces are doing is essentially measuring every step.”

These developments highlight the reactionary character of the July 3 coup, by means of which the army sought to preempt the development of a revolutionary struggle to overthrow the Mursi regime. The junta took power and, coordinating with the imperialist West, is preparing huge attacks on the working class.

The regime is pressing for deep cuts on fuel and food subsidies on which millions of Egyptian workers depend. On Sunday, Egyptian officials announced they would move forward with a “smart card” system to monitor and “rationalize” energy subsidies. They announced that monitoring alone might cut subsidy spending by one third.

Yesterday, the Petroleum Ministry announced that it had run out of funds to buy imported fuel, as it is owed \$21.6 billion by other state institutions. Fuel shortages would return, it said, after refusals by Iraq and Libya to provide fuel without more financial guarantees.

On Monday, army and police forces arrested two steel workers in the Al-Ataqa industrial zone in Suez. The workers were reportedly accused of leading a three-week strike at Suez Steel for unpaid wages and higher bonuses.

Suez Steel is a private sector company employing

2,200 contract workers and another 2,000 day laborers. Following the arrest of their colleagues, the striking workers tried to stage a sit-in on a key highway from Suez to Ain Al-Sokhna. The military tried to disperse the workers and troops surrounded the factory.

The army’s crackdown on the steel workers exposes the reactionary role of the pseudo-left groups in Egypt, most prominently the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), who played a key role in the installation of the junta. As part of the Tamarod (“Rebel”) campaign, the RS worked alongside liberal and Nasserite forces and former elements of the Mubarak regime to channel mass discontent against Mursi behind the military, which is now moving against the working class.

The RS is cynically trying to cover up its counterrevolutionary positions. After the attack by the army, they issued a statement calling for the release of the arrested workers and the removal of the army from the factory. They also called upon the junta’s new minister of manpower, Kamal Abu Eita, to “deal quickly with the situation.”

This is an empty gesture. Eita is a longstanding union bureaucrat who is close to the RS. He has taken a leading position in the military-backed government to help suppress the working class. He is now calling for an end to strikes. Immediately after the coup, he wrote that “workers who were champions of the strike under the previous regime should now become champions of production.”



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