

Revolution and counterrevolution in Egypt: The political lessons

Johannes Stern
7 September 2013

We are publishing here the speech given by Johannes Stern to the first international online meeting of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit's (PSG) election campaign in Berlin on August 25. Stern is a leading member of the PSG and writes regularly for the World Socialist Web Site on the development of the Egyptian revolution. The speech can also be heard together with a PowerPoint presentation on YouTube.

The release from prison of former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak a few days ago symbolizes the counterrevolutionary developments since the military coup of July 3. Mubarak was recently transferred from the Tora prison to a military hospital in the Cairo suburb of Maadi. There he will be supervised by police special forces and military personnel, who will protect him from the outraged population.

Over two and a half years after the beginning of the Egyptian revolution and the overthrow of Mubarak, the military is moving to rehabilitate their former leader. Many representatives of the old regime have regained their positions of power. The emergency powers that Mubarak used for over three decades to suppress the Egyptian population are back in force. In recent weeks, thousands of protesters have been killed, wounded, or arbitrarily arrested by military and security forces. The transitional government imposed by the military is discussing whether the Muslim Brotherhood should be officially banned, as was the case during the Mubarak dictatorship. Almost half of the Brotherhood's leading personnel, including deposed former President Mohammed Mursi, are currently in prison.

By suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood, the junta is trying to create a climate of terror and fear to achieve another objective: to bring an end to all strikes and protests and prepare new attacks on the working class. Last Sunday, police and military forces stormed a sit-in strike by steel workers in Suez and arrested the strike's leaders. The military-backed regime plans to remove subsidies for bread and petrol, which are relied upon by millions of impoverished Egyptians.

The coup was a pre-emptive strike against the Egyptian working class, which was the driving force of the revolution. Before the intervention of the military, millions of workers gathered in streets and squares across Egypt to demonstrate against Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood and for the aims of the revolution: better living conditions, jobs, higher wages, and more democratic and social rights.

Now, it seems that the clock has been turned back to the time before 25 January 2011. How is it possible for the counterrevolution to show its ugly face after two years of bitter struggle against Mubarak? Who bears political responsibility for this? In which stage of development is the Egyptian revolution and what are the lessons and tasks for the future? These are the decisive issues facing the Egyptian and international working class.

The international and historical significance of the Egyptian revolution

The events in Egypt are of international and historical significance. In spite of its political problems, the revolution, which began on 25 January

2011, heralded the opening of a new period of the world socialist revolution. Twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the triumphant cries from the capitalists of "the end of history", the working class responded by showing that it is the most powerful social force. The conception of Marx and Engels that "the history of all previous society is the history of class struggle" has been confirmed powerfully in Egypt.

The working class was from the beginning the driving force of the Egyptian revolution. The great Russian revolutionary and leader of the October revolution Leon Trotsky characterised a revolution in his famous *History of the Russian Revolution* as "the direct intervention of the masses in to historical events." This is precisely what we witnessed in Egypt. Mass strikes and protests of workers first forced Mubarak from power and have driven the course of events ever since.

Workers and youth around the globe intuitively understood from the outset that the mass struggles in Egypt were truly historic events. There was deeply-felt solidarity with the Egyptian revolution internationally. Workers were euphoric and inspired by the revolutionary developments. I still recall the pictures of American workers demonstrating in Wisconsin, carrying signs with the slogan "walk like an Egyptian," describing the hated governor Scott Walker as Hosni Walker and demanding his downfall with their shoes raised in the air.

Just like two years ago, workers around the world are following the dramatic events in Egypt. However the atmosphere is different. In contrast to the euphoria of 2011, workers are more serious and reflective. I spoke with a reader of the World Socialist Web Site on the phone yesterday, and he explained that he could no longer bear the dishonesty of the official politicians and media. He said, "In Egypt they support a military junta, which is massacring the population. The release of Mubarak, who has thousands on his conscience, is clearly acceptable. At the same time they are spreading propaganda about the supposed use of poison gas in Syria in order to prepare a military strike against the Assad regime, which is an obstacle to the Western governments."

The rapid developments over the past two years have had a deep impact on the consciousness of the masses. Under the fire of events, they have had important political experiences. All governments and political tendencies were compelled to show their true colours and adopt a position on the events in Egypt and across the Arab world—including the imperialist governments, but above all the "liberal" and "left" forces in Egypt and internationally.

In the discussion, however, there was also an indication of a certain political soberness or uncertainty. How could it be otherwise? The working class is in the process of working through its experiences and drawing the necessary political conclusions. It is important to understand that the Egyptian revolution is not a one-off event. Like all great revolutions, above all those which are rooted in complex national and international processes—the French Revolution, the European revolutions of 1848–49, and the Russian Revolution—they develop not over weeks and months, but over years.

The Egyptian revolution was driven by deep objective causes—the explosive social contradictions inside Egypt and across the whole Middle East. I want to cite one figure that illustrates the extent of the social catastrophe in Egypt: according to official statistics, 40 per cent of the Egyptian population lives on US\$2 per day or less. The social inequality and political contradictions are inseparable from the crisis of capitalism, which intensifies them.

A revolution is a battlefield, where different political forces step in to the foreground one after the other and show whose class interests they represent. Considered from this standpoint, the counterrevolutionary developments are a defeat for the masses. However this does not mean the end of the revolution, but rather the end of an initial stage.

The various phases of the revolution

In the first phase of the revolution, different social and political forces took up the demand for Mubarak's removal, especially after it became clear that the dictator could not hold on due to the strikes of the working class. All claimed to be standing on the side of the masses and democracy. This included liberal-minded businessmen like the manager of Google's Middle East operations, Wael Ghoneim, bourgeois politicians like former UN official Mohammed ElBaradei, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was the largest opposition under Mubarak although it was officially banned, various representatives of the better-off layers of the petty bourgeoisie, and even the military itself.

The workers were not yet aware at this point of the social chasm separating them from these forces. However in the course of the revolution, the various factions of the Egyptian ruling class were tested and forced to show where they stand in the class struggle.

Engels aptly described this process in *Revolution and counterrevolution in Germany*, referring to the German revolution of 1848: "But it is the fate of all revolutions that the various alliances of classes, which are a necessary precondition for every revolution up to a certain point, cannot persist for long. Hardly has the victory over the common enemy been achieved before the victors separate in to different camps and turn their weapons against each other."

In Egypt, the military junta that took power after the overthrow of Mubarak turned its weapons first against the revolution. It soon became clear that Mubarak's old generals intended to maintain as much of the old order as possible. They implemented a law against protests and strikes in March 2011, and repeatedly attacked demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo. The military continued the practice of torture from the Mubarak era and convicted thousands of civilians in military courts.

The exposure of the military was followed by that of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organised political opposition under Mubarak. They won the first parliamentary and presidential elections after Mubarak's overthrow. Due to the many years of illegality that the Brotherhood endured and to its social welfare programs, there were hopes early on among the masses that the Islamists represented an alternative to the Mubarak regime. These illusions were quickly dispelled. The Muslim Brotherhood sought to put their own members in positions of power. They demanded alterations to Egypt's legal and political institutions, to secure a greater share of power for themselves and the section of the bourgeoisie for which they spoke. However, they defended the same fundamental class interests as the military.

Mursi continued the anti-worker and pro-imperialist policies of his predecessor. Shortly after his election victory, he began talks with the International Monetary Fund to secure a new credit line. He aimed to liberalise the Egyptian economy further and eliminate subsidies. In addition, he defended US imperialism's interests in the region. As opposition to Mursi grew in the working class, he relied even more on US imperialism. He was rewarded for his role in last November's Israeli attacks on the Gaza strip with an appearance on the front cover of *Time* magazine, which declared him "the most important man in the Middle

East."

In the weeks before the outbreak of the mass movement, Mursi increased his support for the imperialist intervention in Syria, aimed at overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad and preparing war against Iran. At a rally organized in Cairo under the slogan "support for Syria" at the beginning of June, Mursi called on thousands of Islamists to lead a "holy war" against Assad. He pledged to support a no-fly zone over Syria and support the western-backed Islamist opposition "materially and morally."

Mursi's open alliance with US imperialism fuelled opposition among workers and the Muslim Brotherhood; the mass protests of June 30 followed. Estimates suggest that up to 14 million people were on the streets across the whole of Egypt on that day. This social explosion had deep objective roots.

The working class as the driving force of the revolution

The working class emerged ever more powerfully as the decisive revolutionary force in the wake of Mubarak's fall. I want to mention a few figures which demonstrate this.

Strikes constantly increased in the years prior to the revolution, particularly after 2004-05. In 2003 there were 80 strikes and protests, and by 2005 there were already 222. The number of strikes more than doubled once again in 2007 to 580. They spread throughout the state sector and increasingly took on political undertones. In April 2008, tens of thousands of textile workers revolted in Mahalla al-Kubra, one of the largest cities in the Nile Delta, and destroyed pictures of Mubarak. The number of strikes rose above 1,000 in 2009.

The strike wave has continued to explode since the overthrow of Mubarak. According to the Egyptian Centre for International Development, there were 3,800 strikes in 2012, and in the first half of 2013 5,500 strikes and social protests were counted. This culminated in the mass demonstrations against the hated Mursi regime.

In the introduction, I raised the question of who bears political responsibility for the counterrevolutionary events in Egypt. In order to understand how it was possible for the representatives of the old regime and imperialism to "turn the clock back" despite the mass movement of the working class, it is necessary to investigate and understand the class character of the so-called liberal and "left" organisations.

The decisive role of the working class in the revolution shocked the privileged layers of the middle class and their political organisations. They drew back in horror as they realised that the aims of the working class went far beyond their own. Although they supported the protests against Mubarak, their dissatisfaction with the dictator had much more to do with envy of the super-rich than solidarity with the working class.

Behind the "democratic" demands of the upper middle class layers were questions of lifestyle and above all the desire to get a "bigger piece of the pie." They opposed any fundamental social change and the demand for more social equality. Their goal was not to overthrow capitalism and destroy private property, but to obtain a larger portion of the surplus value which is squeezed out of the working class.

The fear of the middle class for its own social position increased as the working class came ever more clearly into the foreground in the course of the revolution. After two years of massive protests and strikes, they were prepared to support a return to military rule in order to defend their wealth and privilege against the danger of a socialist revolution. They ended their "revolutionary games" and became willing accomplices of counterrevolution. In order to block the radicalisation of the working class, they concluded an alliance with the military and elements of the old Mubarak regime. Thus began the "Tamarod" ("Rebel") campaign.

It is necessary at this point to say something about Tamarod. Tamarod was the decisive mechanism through which the military and the old regime channeled the mass movement behind their own reactionary aims.

Countless articles in the press confirm how Tamarod was financed and supported by elements from the Mubarak regime. In interviews with

Bloomberg and the *New York Times*, Egyptian billionaire and long-time Mubarak ally Naguib Sawiris stated that he had given US\$28 million to Tamarod. Tamarod's other supporters included General Ahmed Shafiq, the last Prime Minister under Mubarak, and allies of Omar Suleiman, who headed Egypt's notorious Mukhabarat intelligence agency.

The liberal and "left" groups, who had sought until then to present themselves as the spearhead of a revolutionary struggle for democratic rights, took on the task of giving this right-wing conspiracy a "left" face. While they claimed that Tamarod was a movement for the continuation of the revolution and the struggle of the masses for social and democratic rights, Tamarod's real program was the return to military dictatorship.

Tamarod leaders Mahmoud Badr and Mohammed Abdel Aziz stood next to coup leader General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as he announced the takeover of power on July 3 on state television.

After the latest massacre, Badr emphasised his unconditional support for the military: "I did not see anything bad from the army. They did not interfere in politics, and I am witness to that. I back its decisions on my own and without any instructions as I think they are right and getting us where we want," he stated.

The counterrevolutionary role of the liberals and pseudo left

The Egyptian Socialist Party and the National Salvation Front, a broad coalition of liberal and "left" forces, organised the coup and aggressively support the repression which has followed. Shortly before the violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-in where hundreds of protesters, including women and children, were killed by the military and security forces, Karima al-Hefnawy, a leading member of the Egyptian Socialist Party, declared: "This is a violent and armed sit-in, and it is the right of every government to disperse it by law, and the people are saying that if the government does not disperse it, we will do it ourselves."

Other leaders of the National Salvation Front—the new Prime Minister Hasem al-Beblawi, a founding member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, and Labour Minister Kamal Abu Aita, the head of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU)—joined the transitional government established by the military and helped organize repression. The cynical liberal and lackey of international finance capital, Mohammed ElBaradei, was at first part of the military government. He left, however, fearing that the violence could provoke a new explosion of the masses.

The most corrupt and degenerate group which backed the military was the Revolutionary Socialists (RS). They supported Tamarod, describing the alliance as "a road to complete the revolution." They organised joint meetings with Tamarod, where they praised Mahmoud Badr, al-Sisi's new right hand man. Later, they celebrated the coup as a "second revolution."

We have written extensively about these groups on the World Socialist Web Site, and it is not possible here to go in to detail on all of the twists and turns in their political line.

In each stage of the revolution, they have sought to subordinate the working class to one or another faction of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. Firstly they claimed that the military would ensure that the political and economic system was reformed to make it more democratic. As mass opposition increased to the military, they supported the Muslim Brotherhood. They promoted the Islamists as "the right wing of the revolution," and called for a vote for Mursi in the presidential election. When Mursi won, they hailed this as "a victory for the revolution," and "a great success against the counterrevolution." When mass protests subsequently broke out again, they swung behind the military and backed Tamarod.

There are only two constants in the line of the Revolutionary Socialists. Firstly, they intimately reflect the interests of US imperialism, supporting at every point in the revolution the faction of the bourgeoisie favoured by Washington. Secondly, they oppose an independent movement of the working class. They reflect thereby the interests of a corrupt middle class

layer, whose privileges are bound up with the suppression of the working class and the predominance of US imperialism in the region.

Many members of the Revolutionary Socialists such as Samih Naguib or Hossam El-Hamalawy teach and studied at the American University in Cairo. Others work for western-funded NGOs, the bourgeois media or are part of the trade union bureaucracy.

The deeper reason for the political bankruptcy of these forces is the fact that none of them have a programme to solve the problems which the Egyptian masses confront: the dominance of imperialism in the Middle East, mass poverty and the absence of democracy. All of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces defend capitalist property relations and are bound by a thousand threads to imperialism and international finance capital. They are organically hostile to the interests of the working class and prefer a military dictatorship to a social revolution led by the working class.

The rightward shift of the privileged middle class as an international phenomenon

The sharp turn to the right by liberal and "left" groups, who have openly supported a military dictatorship and the suppression of protests, is a result of the rapidity and depth of revolutionary developments in Egypt. It is an international phenomenon. In the last two years an increasingly sharp differentiation between the working class and all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies has taken place. It is important to clearly comprehend the consequences of this development.

The international crisis has continued to deteriorate since 2011, and we are now entering a new epoch of mass struggles. In recent years strikes and protests have taken place globally: in Greece, Spain and Portugal, after these countries were devastated by social cuts, in industrial regions of Asia like China and Bangladesh, in Israel and most recently in Turkey and Brazil.

Germany is now the most unequal country in Europe, and after the elections the next round of deep social attacks are to come. In practically every country, a mass movement could emerge overnight as in Egypt. All the major parties in Germany are responding by moving ever closer together and supporting the construction of a police state. Can there be any doubt of the role that the Left Party will play when millions of workers go on the streets? Their positions and those of their sister party in Egypt underscore how they will respond: with a call for dictatorship and violence.

The Left Party supports the counterrevolutionary developments in Egypt more openly than any other bourgeois party in Germany. One could cite numerous articles from the Left Party's press or statements from leading members. Here I will limit myself to a strategy paper from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which is closely associated with the Left Party. The paper was published in July in the Left Party's newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. It speaks out clearly against democracy and in support of the Egyptian military.

It states, "Regarding the argument that democracy in Egypt is not necessary, this is also true, at least if democracy is defined as transparent elections, strong parliaments, and legal and institutional possibilities to replace the government. Democracy has never existed in this form in Egypt before. The elections of 2011-2012 were organized under the rule of the military leadership. They have proven they are able to organise such a poll according to internationally approved rules, and they can do it again."

The authors then ask, "What sense would new elections as soon as possible make when no political force is able to provide a realistic and strategic way out of the crisis? It is easy to call for social justice, when you do not have to provide concrete information and calculations with regard to its implementation." According to the conclusion, "The debate about whether what happened in Egypt was a military coup or not, is therefore futile. The issue at this point seems rather: finding a way to

implement social justice, while at the same time accommodating the army.”

Let us turn to Turkey. I am aware that comrades are following this meeting from Turkey. What would be the role of the pseudo left organisations there if the military launched a coup due to mass protests against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan? They would play the same role as their co-thinkers in Egypt, supporting a Turkish version of Tamarod to direct the protests behind bourgeois forces and the military and prepare a defeat.

The Egyptian revolution and the necessity of an independent revolutionary leadership

The course of the Egyptian revolution and the international development of class relations have confirmed the basic conceptions of Marxism and the theory of permanent revolution, and also the work of the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International, which alone stands in this tradition. We are the only political tendency which has fought at every stage of the Egyptian revolution to build an independent leadership in the working class.

The problem of the Egyptian revolution is not a lack of willingness in the working class to fight; the workers repeatedly went on the offensive. But without its own revolutionary party, the working class remained disoriented and unprepared, and were not in a position to see through the latest reactionary manoeuvres of the pseudo left. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has explained since the first resistance over two years ago, that the Egyptian working class could not achieve their interests and demands without taking state power and reorganising the economy along socialist lines. This perspective has been vindicated.

The decisive task is to draw the lessons from the experience of the revolution, not only in Egypt but internationally in order to prepare for the coming class battles. In the perspective article on the release of Mubarak, published on the WSWS on August 23, we wrote:

“Once again, a great revolutionary experience has underscored the significance of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. This theory holds that in countries of belated capitalist development, the struggle for democracy can only be victorious as a politically independent struggle of the working class for socialism, led by a mass revolutionary party; and that the victory of revolution in any country is only possible on the basis of an international strategy to unify the world working class.

“The working class has unquestionably suffered a significant setback. The military will seek to impose order. However, the Egyptian revolution has not yet run its course, nor has the working class said its last word. Raising Mubarak from the grave will not breathe new life into the sclerotic veins of Egyptian capitalism, let alone resolve the conflicts in the Middle East provoked by imperialist wars and the deepening crisis of global capitalism. The bourgeoisie, which cannot hold power save when protected by the tanks of the Egyptian army, stands discredited as a force for democracy.

“The decisive question remains the building of a political leadership in the working class to prepare for the struggles to come. This means the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Egypt, throughout the Middle East, and internationally.”

The brutality of the counterrevolution in Egypt and the advanced preparations for war against Syria underscore the pressing urgency of this perspective. I appeal to everyone here in this room and those listening online to participate in this struggle.

wsws.org/contact



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: