

Mahalla textile workers strike amid rising opposition to Egyptian junta

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Workers at the state-run Mahalla Weaving and Textile Company mounted a three-day strike to force Egypt's military junta to pay a promised profit-sharing bonus.

The 22,000-strong work force reportedly returned to work yesterday after receiving assurances they would be paid the bonus and also for the three days they were on strike.

Management yielded after workers stormed the CEO Fouad Abdel-Alim's offices and threatened to increase their demands. Workers also demanded Abdel-Alim's dismissal—a key demand of the Mahalla workers after the initial revolutionary uprising of the working class in Egypt in January 2011 that led to the toppling of US-backed dictator President Hosni Mubarak.

The Egyptian finance ministry had agreed earlier this year to make four equal profit-sharing payments, but delayed the second in August until workers mounted a sit-in to compel payment of the bonus. In this month's action, workers demanded that the bonus, worth 45 days' wages, be paid before the Eid holiday, on Wednesday.

Workers rejected the Egyptian Trade Union Federation's (ETUF) attempts to delay payment of the bonus and allow the management to pay only workers' regular monthly salary. The ETUF—which opposed the 2011 uprising, helping organize squads of thugs to attack protesters on Tahrir Square—has historically been controlled by the Egyptian military regime.

On Saturday, ETUF President Abdel Fatah Ibrahim called for the profit sharing to only be paid to workers “immediately after the Eid holiday.” He tried to confuse the issue by calling on management to “contact the bank in order to return the money and pay the workers' salaries.”

Workers bluntly dismissed Ibrahim's statement.

Daily News Egypt cited a statement issued by representatives of workers at the plant, which declared: “The ETUF statement is wrong ... We are expecting the profit share pay tomorrow, not the monthly salary, and if the share is not paid, we will continue our strike.”

The Mahalla plant is a historic center of working class militancy. Workers there mounted strikes against the Mubarak regime in 2006 and 2008 and were also a key force in the uprising against Mubarak. Amid rising working class opposition to right-wing Islamist President Mohamed Mursi last year, workers and students in the city of Mahalla declared themselves “autonomous” from what they called Mursi's “Muslim Brotherhood State.”

The current Mahalla strike is the sharpest expression of rising working class opposition to Egypt's military junta, which came to power in a July 3 coup amid mass protests against Mursi. The junta ousted and jailed Mursi, carrying out bloody massacres of thousands of protesters and Mursi supporters who opposed the coup.

The junta has tried to block the emergence of broader opposition to its rule by a combination of bloody terror and limited social concessions, like a promise to increase the public sector minimum wage. One purpose is to mollify rising anger over inflation, as the Egyptian pound (EGP) has lost 17 percent of its value since the 2011 uprising, according to official statistics.

This year, urban inflation stood at 9.7 percent already in August, with economists projecting that consumer price inflation will reach double-digit percentages in 2014.

Last month, Prime Minister Hazem El-Beblawi had proposed raising the monthly minimum wage in the public sector from EGP 700 to 1200 (US\$102 to 174), starting in January 2014.

Workers and retirees are escalating wage demands

against the junta. Five million Egyptian retirees receive monthly pensions of less than EGP 500 (US\$73), and pensioners' organizations called for a minimum pension of EGP 960. The Ministry of Social Solidarity has responded with a proposal to add a meager 5 percent bonus to pensions.

Workers are also calling for wage increases in the private sector, where weekly wages average only EGP 397, compared to EGP 657 in the public sector.

State officials and businessmen have denounced demands for higher wages and are pressing for the junta to reverse its proposed wage increases. Former Finance Minister Samir Radwan told the state-owned *Ahram Weekly*, "This move will burden the state budget and will lead to higher inflation."

The escalating protests of the Egyptian working class are bringing them into direct collision with the bourgeois opposition and pseudo-left forces that effectively supported the junta, by backing the Tamarod ("Rebel") coalition that prepared and offered political support to the July 3 coup. While they postured as a nationalist or even progressive alternative to Mursi, these forces are bitterly hostile to the working class and to a struggle for socialism.

The protests have exposed "independent" trade union official Kamal Abu Eita—a leader of the US-backed Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), where he worked with the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists (RS), and a member of the Nasserite Karama Party. Having joined the junta as its Manpower Minister, Eita is now coordinating the repression of the working class.

Two weeks ago, a sit-in outside the Manpower Ministry by laid-off public sector workers demanding unemployment benefits was violently attacked and dispersed by security forces.

One worker who was present at the dispersal told *Daily News Egypt*, "A complaint has been filed to the prosecutor against the prime minister, the minister of manpower Kamal Abu Eita, and the warden of the Nasr City police station for the use of violence by security forces at the dispersal."

In a television appearance, Abu Eita defended the state's handling of the sit-in, falsely claiming it was ended as part of a mutual agreement with the workers. He also denounced the workers for mounting the sit-in, saying: "A sit-in implies that a person has had some

right withheld from him. This is not the case with the individuals outside the ministry."

Elements of the pseudo-left RS organization, which also backed Tamarod in the lead-up to the July 3 coup, are coordinating their policy with the junta, seeking to tie the workers to the regime and block the emergence of a politically independent movement of the working class. Inside the Mahalla plant, Kamal El-Fayoumi—a member of the RS-affiliated Workers Democratic Party—is working to submit alternate plans to the junta on how best to manage the plant.

"After the Eid holiday, we will present ideas to the ministers of investments and manpower about how to improve the company's revenues and thus get paid on time," El-Fayoumi told *Al Ahram*.



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