

Wave of strikes by Egyptian textile workers

Johannes Stern
22 February 2014

Tens of thousands of textile workers are on strike for higher wages and better working conditions in Egypt in defiance of the US-backed military junta.

On Thursday, *Ahram Online* reported that 20,000 workers at Egypt's largest textile mill in the Nile Delta City of Mahalla refused to end their strike after Investment Minister Osama Saleh announced the demands of the striking workers had been met and the strike was over.

"Does this look like a working day?" one of the striking workers is quoted as saying. Another worker denounces Saleh's statement, declaring, "This paper does not respond to our demands, nor does it grant us any of our rights."

The workers have been on strike since February 10 to demand that the military junta pay a promised minimum wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds (US\$172) and outstanding profit-sharing bonuses for two months. They are also demanding the removal of Fouad Abdel Alim, the head of the Holding Company for Weaving and Spinning, which oversees all public-sector textile firms in Egypt, and the dismissal of Abdel Fattah Al-Zoghba, the commissioner of the company.

Abdel Alim and Al-Zoghba personify the corruption and criminality of the Egyptian ruling elite. In a TV appearance last Friday, Al-Zoghba claimed that workers in Mahalla earned 30,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$4,300) yearly. In reality, thousands of workers earn only 500 pounds a month (US\$72), and have not received the increased minimum wage for public-sector workers, although it was promised from January on.

Media reports on the strike give an impression of the mood amongst the workers. One Mohamed Fathy is quoted by *Daily News Egypt* as saying, "We are agitated with the media statements of the commissioner and chairman about our strike. They accused us of sabotage and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which cannot be further from the truth."

The accusations by the junta and its supporters that striking workers are supporters of the Muslim

Brotherhood (MB) reveal that the ultimate target of the July 3 military coup against Islamist President Mohamed Mursi and the subsequent repression of the MB was the working class, the driving force behind the Egyptian revolution.

The liberal and "left" organizations of Egypt's affluent middle class, which helped channel mass working class protests against Mursi behind the military coup, now play an active role in the repression of the working class.

Kamal Abu Eita, an "independent" trade union leader and long-time hero of the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists (RS), has joined the military junta as minister of manpower. He has repeatedly attacked striking workers as MB supporters and sanctioned their violent dispersal.

Now Eita is working closely with the union local in the factory to end the strike. The local is controlled by the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which is notorious for working hand in glove with the government against the workers. During the mass working class struggles in 2011 that led to the ouster of long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak, the ETUF helped mobilize paid thugs to attack mass protests on Tahrir Square in the infamous "Battle of the Camel."

This past Tuesday, minor scuffles broke out between striking workers and a group of people connected to Mohamed Sannad, the head of the Mahalla Workers Union, as they sought to convince workers to end the strike. Reportedly, Sannad has drawn up a list of striking workers.

Despite the concerted campaign of intimidation by the government, the media and the trade unions, the workers are determined to continue the strike. A press release from workers in Mahalla stressed that they "demand justice not only for themselves, but for all workers in Egypt."

In recent days, textile workers at 16 affiliated companies have gone on strike in solidarity with the Mahalla workers, according to reports in the Egyptian media. Amongst them are several thousand textile workers from the Kafr Al-Dawwar Spinning and Weaving Company, the Tanta Delta Textile Company, the Zaqaziq

Spinning and Weaving Company, and the Misr Helwan Textiles Company. These workers have advanced the same demands as the workers in Mahalla.

The current strikes reflect growing working class opposition to the military junta that has killed and jailed thousands and imposed an anti-protest law. The junta is seeking to revive the forms of rule of the old Mubarak regime.

It has sought to prevent renewed working class struggles by a combination of terror, nationalistic propaganda and empty promises of social concessions, such as the public sector minimum wage. However, just seven months after the coup it is becoming increasingly difficult for the junta and its political supporters to appease rising social anger. The explosive social contradictions in Egypt, which in the final analysis sparked the Egyptian revolution, are sharper than ever.

A recent report by CAPMAS, the official statistical agency of Egypt, reveals that unemployment increased sharply over the past three years. While unemployment was high before the revolution, the number of unemployed increased by 1.3 million, hitting 3.65 million people in the last quarter of 2013. Unemployment among young people is pervasive. Some 69 percent of all unemployed are between 15 and 29 years old.

Last Sunday, the main news program of the German television network ARD carried a report on social conditions in Egypt, warning that the impoverished Egyptian masses might launch another revolution. ARD reporters filmed a family of five living on 10 Egyptian pounds (US\$1.40) a day in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Cairo. The father, who is currently unemployed, predicted: "There will soon be another revolution, but a bigger one. We were not doing well before 2011, but now the situation is even worse. No one is caring about us... Those up there are only thinking about power."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact