

Jordanian teachers continue strike into second week

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21 September 2018

Some 146,000 public school teachers are in their second week of an open-ended, nationwide strike in Jordan over their poverty level wages.

The strike, which is uniting teachers in both the traditional East Bank and the Palestinian communities, is part of a broader upsurge in the class struggle that is taking place all over the world and testifies to the primacy of class over ethnicity, nationality and religion.

The starting salary of a public-school teacher with a university degree is \$500 a month, barely over the “absolute poverty line” of \$479 for a family of five each month. After the first year, a teacher gets an automatic annual increment of \$5 to \$13, depending on their qualifications and experience, rising to a maximum of \$635 a month. As a result, teachers have to take a second job in order to support their families.

On September 5, tens of thousands of teachers protested outside the government offices in the capital Amman and in other towns and cities to demand Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz intervene directly to resolve the teachers’ complaints and honour the pledge the government made five years ago to increase their salaries by 50 percent to compensate for the soaring cost of living and deteriorating living conditions.

The government denies it ever agreed to such a raise and has moved swiftly to prevent the protests spreading to other groups of workers as happened last year. According to a trade union official who spoke to *Al Jazeera*, the police and paramilitary forces used tear gas to disperse the protestors and verbally abused and physically assaulted some of the teachers during the September 5 demonstration. They arrested more than 50 teachers who were later released. Some complained that they had been strip-searched while in detention.

This infuriated the teachers who immediately brought forward their planned strike, set for the end of

September, to the start of the school year on September 8, affecting some 1.3 million school students.

The teachers’ union, the Jordanian Teachers’ Syndicate, is demanding the government formally apologise for the physical abuse of teachers at last week’s protest, recognise their right to the 50 percent raise and hold a meaningful dialogue. Teachers are calling for the security forces to be held accountable for their actions and their chief, Minister of Interior Salameh Hamad, to be fired.

The government has rejected the union’s demands, saying that a 50 percent salary increase would cost JD 116 million (\$163m) and is unaffordable. Instead, it has offered only a performance-related pay increase. It has called for the union to end the strike and return to negotiations without any pre-conditions. Minister of State for Legal Affairs Mubarak Abu Yamin even insinuated that the government would resort to the courts to disband the union.

The government has taken a particularly belligerent attitude towards the teachers as it fears that that any concessions will trigger struggles by other workers. Earlier this month, Ali Abbous, who heads the doctors’ union, demanded the government carry out its promise to increase its incentive scheme from \$49 to \$119 for doctors conducting medical examinations on foreign workers in Jordan. Ahmad al-Zoubi, the head of the engineers’ union, called for a 10 percent pay rise for its public sector members.

The teachers’ strike comes at a time of mounting anger over the soaring cost of living and the detention of activists calling for political reform. The official unemployment rate is 20 percent, and particularly acute among Jordan’s predominantly youthful population. Inflation has risen due to a 3.7 percent tax on basic commodities, including fuel, and an increase in sales

tax and the price of basic commodities.

Jordan faces a severe economic crisis, which led in June last year to days of anti-government protests in Amman and other major cities against planned International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed measures that included a new law lowering the income tax threshold, a hike in the sales tax, and increases in the cost of fuel, electricity and water. King Abdullah, the country's real ruler, cancelled his planned overseas trip and appointed al-Razzaz, a former World Bank economist, to replace Prime Minister Hani Mulki in a bid to defuse the protests.

The country has been badly hit by the US's termination last year of its \$300 million annual funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), representing about a quarter of the agency's budget. UNRWA provides aid and vital social services to five million Palestinians and their descendants who were driven out of or fled their homes in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in the 1948-9 and 1967 wars and are now living in camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon. The cuts are having a devastating impact on schooling and essential services, such as medical clinics and trash collection, for hundreds of thousands of refugees.

At the same time, Jordan is host to more than 1.4 million Syrian refugees, less than half of whom are registered as refugees. A recent government plan estimated that it needs at least \$2.4 billion this year to supply only their most basic needs. While around 153,000 refugees have now returned to Syria since the border reopened, most are reluctant to do so. Many, unable to prove ownership of their property, have nothing to return to, while others fear retribution and military conscription.

The government has introduced a raft of new measures this year, including the imposition of customs fees on products bought for personal use online outside the kingdom and a reduction on the number of tax-free cigarette cartons an individual can bring into the country to just one carton. This led to riots on August 23 and 24 in the northern city of Ramtha, which is dependent upon cross-border trade with Syria.

Other measures have been counter-productive, leading to a fall in government revenues. The increase in import duties on hybrid cars led to a \$318 million fall in related customs and sales tax revenues in the first

six months of this year compared to last year, while the hike in sales tax on consumer goods to 16 percent, in some cases from 0 percent, led to a fall of some \$33 million, compared to the same period of last year, as the real value of wages has fallen.

Similarly, last year's decision to end the subsidizing of bread has backfired. The government is now paying out \$380 million in welfare payments to impoverished families, compared to the \$239 million cost of the subsidies.

IMF officials have been visiting the country this last week to review Jordan's economic performance and its fiscal and economic reforms, demanded by the IMF in 2016 in return for a loan of \$723 million, or 150 per cent of Jordan's quota. Earlier this year, Jordan asked the IMF to extend the current programme for six more months until a decision is reached regarding a new programme with the Fund.

With Jordan's sovereign debt standing at \$39 billion or 96.4 percent of GDP, the Finance Ministry has suspended the implementation of capital projects that have not yet started in the run up to next year's budget. Last May, the government decided to cut public expenditure by \$240 million.

These attacks on living standards and democratic rights are being implemented by the Jordanian monarchy in the interest of transnational corporations and Jordan's tiny financial elite, which rules the country with an iron fist. The government is an unelected fig leaf for King Abdullah who sacks prime ministers as the sacrificial scapegoat to save his own skin and his family's wealth.

The teachers' strike in Jordan unfolded just as teachers in neighbouring Israel also voted to go on strike on September 1, the start of the school year. They were forced to abandon the strike when the courts banned the secondary school teachers' strike and the Israel Teachers Union called off the primary school teachers' strike after a sell-out deal with the government, in the run up to this week's election called by the crisis-ridden Netanyahu government.



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