

# Ten years since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution

**Johannes Stern****24 January 2021**

Ten years ago today, mass protests began in Egypt that led 18 days later to the fall of long-standing dictator Hosni Mubarak, electrifying workers and youth worldwide.

The Egyptian revolution was a powerful revolutionary uprising in which the working class played the central role. On January 25, 2011, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in cities across the country, including Suez, Port Said and Alexandria. On the so-called “Friday of rage” three days later, these growing masses of people defeated the regime’s notorious security forces in street fighting that came to resemble civil war.

Millions demonstrated across Egypt over subsequent days. Tahrir Square, occupied by hundreds of thousands of people who came to downtown Cairo, emerged as an international symbol of the uprising, but it was the intervention of the working class that ultimately delivered the decisive blow to Mubarak. On February 7–8, a wave of strikes and factory occupations erupted across the country, continuing to grow after Mubarak stepped down on February 11.

At the high point of the revolution, there were an estimated 40 to 60 strikes per day. As many strikes occurred in just the month of February 2011 as in the entire previous year. Hundreds of thousands of workers in Egypt’s key industrial centres were on strike, including Suez canal workers, steelworkers in Suez and Port Said, and the 27,000 textile workers at Ghazl al-Mahalla, Egypt’s largest industrial facility in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla al-Kubra.

The *World Socialist Web Site* assessed the developments in Egypt and Tunisia, where mass protests brought down the long-standing dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali days earlier, as the beginning of a new revolutionary epoch. In a perspective entitled “The Egyptian revolution,” David North, the chairman of the WSWS international editorial board, wrote:

The Egyptian revolution is dealing a devastating blow to the pro-capitalist triumphalism that followed the Soviet bureaucracy’s liquidation of the USSR in 1991. The class struggle, socialism and Marxism were declared irrelevant in the modern world. “History”—as in “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels)—had ended. Henceforth, the only revolutions conceivable to the media were those that were “color-coded” in advance, politically scripted by the US State Department, and then implemented by the affluent pro-capitalist sections of society.

This complacent and reactionary scenario has been exploded in Tunisia and Egypt. History has returned with a vengeance.

What is presently unfolding in Cairo and throughout Egypt is revolution, the real thing. “The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events,” wrote Leon Trotsky, the foremost specialist on the subject. This definition of revolution applies completely to what is now happening in Egypt.

Ten years later, however, it is not the working class that is in power in Egypt, but a blood-soaked military dictatorship backed by the imperialist powers that lives in terror of a renewed mass uprising and suppresses every sign of social opposition. On January 22, the Egyptian Parliament, at the request of Mubarak’s former general and current dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, extended the state of emergency another three years. Since his coup against elected President Mohammed Mursi in 2013, more than 60,000 political prisoners have disappeared into the regime’s torture chambers. Thousands have been condemned to death and executed.

Amid a renewed upsurge of class struggle around the world—fueled by the horrific consequences of the pandemic, and the bourgeoisie’s increasingly open resort to dictatorship and fascistic forms of rule, it is necessary to draw political lessons from these experiences. How could counter-revolution in Egypt be victorious, and what political tasks does this pose for the class battles to come? The key to answering these critical questions is a concrete study of the events and the role of political tendencies and programs. The chief problem of the Egyptian revolution was the lack of a revolutionary leadership.

One day prior to Mubarak’s overthrow, David North warned in another perspective:

The greatest danger confronting Egyptian workers is that, after providing the essential social force to wrest power from the hands of an aging dictator, nothing of political substance will change except the names and faces of some of the leading personnel. In other words, the capitalist state will remain intact. Political power and control over economic life will remain in the hands of the Egyptian capitalists, backed by the military, and their imperialist overlords in Europe and North America. Promises of democracy and social reform will be repudiated at the first opportunity, and a new regime of savage repression will be instituted.

These dangers are not exaggerated. The entire history of revolutionary struggle in the Twentieth Century proves that the struggle for democracy and for the liberation of countries

oppressed by imperialism can be achieved, as Leon Trotsky insisted in his theory of permanent revolution, only by the conquest of power by the working class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program.

Over the course of the Egyptian Revolution, this assessment was confirmed. All factions and parties of the bourgeoisie and their Stalinist and pseudo-leftist appendages showed their essentially counterrevolutionary character. They collaborated with the imperialists and defended Egyptian capitalism and its institutions. This is as true of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is now banned again as it was under Mubarak, as it is of Nasserist or “liberal” parties. As the ruling party before the coup, the Brotherhood conspired with the military, banned strikes and protests, and supported imperialist interventions in Libya and Syria.

One can mention a few prominent examples. Mohamed El Baradei, the former leader of the National Association for Change, became the first vice president in Sisi’s military junta. “Independent” trade union leader Kamal Abu Eita became Labor Minister. Hamdeen Sabahi, the leader of the Nasserist Egyptian Popular Current, publicly defended the junta’s massacres. When the army murdered at least 900 coup opponents, including women and children, while breaking up protests by Mursi supporters in Rabaa El-Adaweya Square in Cairo, Sabahi declared on television: “We will stay hand in hand, the people, the army and the police.”

A particularly corrupt tendency that paved the way for the counterrevolution, however, was the so-called Revolutionary Socialists (RS), a pseudo-left group in Egypt with close ties to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain and the Left Party in Germany, among others. At every stage of the revolution, they insisted that workers could not play an independent role but had to subordinate themselves to one faction or another of the bourgeoisie to struggle for their democratic and social rights.

After Mubarak’s fall, the RS fueled illusions in the military, which had taken power under the leadership of Mubarak’s former defense minister, Muhammed Tantawi. Writing in Britain’s *Guardian*, RS activist Hossam el-Hamalawy said, “young officers and soldiers” are “our allies,” declaring that the army “will eventually engineer the transition to a ‘civilian’ government.”

As the army cracked down on protests and strikes and calls for a “second revolution” emerged, the RS revived their earlier support for the Muslim Brotherhood. In party statements, they called the Islamists the “right wing of the revolution,” advocating a vote for Mursi in the 2012 presidential election. They then celebrated Mursi’s victory as a “victory for the revolution” and a “great achievement in pushing back the counterrevolution.”

When new strikes and protests erupted against Mursi’s anti-worker and pro-imperialist policies, the RS reoriented themselves once again toward the military. They supported the Tamarod Alliance, backed and funded by El Baradei, Egyptian multibillionaire Naguib Sawiris and former officials of the Mubarak regime, among others, and which called for the military to overthrow Mursi. In a statement, published on May 19, 2013, the RS hailed Tamarod as “a way to complete the revolution” and declared their “intention to fully participate in this campaign.”

The RS response to the July 3 military coup fully confirmed its counterrevolutionary nature. They celebrated the coup as a “second revolution,” calling on protesters to “protect their revolution.” While

the military restored the Mubarak regime’s repressive apparatus, the RS once again spread the fairy tale that the military government could be pressured to obtain democratic and social reforms. In their July 11 statement, they called for pressure on the new government “to take measures immediately for achieving social justice for the benefit of the millions of poor Egyptians.”

Since then, the RS have been primarily concerned with covering their tracks. In his own article on the anniversary of the revolution published in the SWP paper *Socialist Worker*, Hamalawy writes of the counterrevolutionary conspiracy: “The military in secret reached out to the secular opposition (leftists, Arab nationalists, liberals), and secured its backing for a coup in July 2013. What followed were the biggest massacres in Egypt’s modern history, amid the cheering of the Egyptian leftists.”

Hamalawy studiously conceals the fact that among these “Egyptian leftists” who cheered on Sisi’s massacres were his own organization.

The crucial lesson of the Egyptian Revolution is the necessity to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class before mass struggles break out. Only in this way can the political independence of the working class be established from the bourgeoisie and its petty-bourgeois stooges, and the masses be armed with a socialist program and the perspective of permanent revolution to overthrow capitalism.

The ICFI and its sections are guided by the conception that also guided the Bolshevik Party and its leaders Lenin and Trotsky before the October Revolution in Russia. In the resolution adopted at the Second National Congress of the SEP (US) in 2012, one year after the Egyptian revolution, we wrote:

It is not enough to predict the inevitability of revolutionary struggles and then await their unfolding. Such passivity has nothing in common with Marxism, which insists upon the unity of theoretically guided cognition and revolutionary practice. Moreover, as the aftermath of Mubarak’s downfall demonstrates all too clearly, the victory of the socialist revolution requires the presence of a revolutionary party. The Socialist Equality Party must do everything it can to develop, prior to the outbreak of mass struggles, a significant political presence within the working class—above all, among its most advanced elements.

Amid a renewed upsurge of the class struggle worldwide, this work must now be pursued with renewed energy. This is the task of the ICFI and its sections and sympathizing groups.



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