Strike by Egyptian textile workers: A turning point for the Middle East

Jean Shaoul
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Hundreds of workers at Misr El Amria Spinning and Weaving Company, Egypt's largest textile conglomerate company, were locked-out by management on August 9. Rejecting management claims of a shutdown for "routine maintenance, inventory, and reviews," workers have denounced a move to break their strike, ongoing since July 28, over a refusal to honour a promised pay increase.

They are demanding that the 12 percent special allowance introduced under Law No. 75 of 2026 be calculated on their insured wage rather than their basic salary, which is a third lower.

Workers are demanding written guarantees from the company specifying how the allowance will be calculated and paid, as well as an increase in the monthly cost-of-living allowance from 600 Egyptian pounds to 1,300 pounds, matching payments at other textile companies.

Since 2025, the workers have staged a series of strikes over wages, risk allowances and deductions from their pay. On each occasion, the trade unions suspended the action after management made pledges that were subsequently not implemented.

Management responded by suspending operations, halting company transport and locking workers out of the factory. Police and Central Security Forces were deployed around the plant. Workers have begun filing complaints with the labour authorities over the lockout.

The dispute is part of a wider pattern of labour unrest in Egypt's textile industry. Workers at the Samannoud Textile and Rugs Company in Gharbia Governorate went on strike over the suspension of health insurance services. In January, the Samannoud Health Insurance Authority suspended its medical services for its workforce because the company had failed to remit its own contributions and had also withheld, rather than remitted, the workers' contributions deducted from wages.

This latest Samannoud dispute followed strikes earlier this year over delayed salary payments, a strike last year over the non-payment of the annual bonus, and a strike two years ago over non-implementation of the minimum wage.

In 2024, 3,700 women workers at Mahalla al Kubra (Misr Spinning & Weaving) went on strike after being excluded from a national minimum wage increase, triggering strikes at other textile companies. The authorities eventually forced the strike to end. Thirteen workers were arrested and two are believed still to be in custody.

Textiles and the Egyptian working class

Cotton and textiles occupy a unique position in the Egyptian economy, spanning the entire value chain from cultivation and ginning through spinning and weaving to garment, home and technical textiles. The sector is a major exporter to Europe and the United States. Cotton cultivation alone is estimated to involve about 1.2 million of Egypt's approximately 7 million agricultural workers, while textiles are the largest manufacturing employer—about 1.5 million workers in 7,000 enterprises, accounting for 27 percent of Egypt's manufacturing output and 3 percent of its GDP.

The most profitable sectors are concentrated in the downstream, capital-intensive, privately owned and export-oriented segments—particularly finishing, garments, home textiles and technical textiles—while cotton-growers and workers in the labour-intensive state-owned spinning and weaving companies capture a much smaller share. The latter are often saddled with outdated machinery and chronic losses, even as they underpin the supply chains upon which the more profitable downstream businesses depend. Much of the value is captured even further down the chain, including by the international brands that benefit from Egypt's high-quality cotton and low-cost labour.

The textile industry has been the epicentre of Egyptian labour militancy and political activism. In the period 1945-52, textile workers were at the centre of the largest wave of strikes and protests in modern Egyptian history. The upheaval contributed to the crisis of the pro-British monarchy and culminated in the intervention of the Free Officers Coup under Colonel Abdul Nasser in 1952. The new regime moved to rescue and reorganise Egyptian capitalism, while suppressing the independent working-class movement.

Nasser arrested socialist and communist leaders, while nationalising and expanding the textile mills.

Mahalla became the largest industrial complex in the Arab world. Independent trade unions were abolished and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) established as the sole legal union, with a state-appointed and vetted leadership. A corporatist labour regime was created in which organised labour was incorporated into, rather than allowed to challenge, the political order. The union apparatus became a political shock absorber and police force for the regime—even when this necessitated concessions to the workers.

In the 1980s, under President Hosni Mubarak, the turn to neoliberal policies, international competition from East Asia and integration into globalised production transformed the sector. Parts of downstream manufacturing were privatised, while private garment factories and informal workshops proliferated. By the late 1980s, employment in the large state-owned mills and factories had fallen from more than 2 million to around 1.8 million. Yet textiles remained Egypt's largest industrial employer and continued to occupy a central place in working-class politics. Strikes at Mahalla, Samanoud, or Alexandria were repeatedly met with repression by the security forces.

In 2006 textile workers in the massive Misr Spinning and Weaving Company mill in El-Mahalla El-Kubra launched a wave of industrial action that escalated over the following two years. Wider layers of workers demanded wage rises to compensate for the skyrocketing cost of living. These struggles, initially concentrated in state-owned industries and the public sector, spread into the private sector and developed into the biggest wave of industrial militancy since the late 1940s and early 1950s.

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Workers raised national and political demands and acted independently of the reviled trade union leaders. Despite heavy security crackdowns, the deployment of riot police and troops and the arrest and trial of strike leaders, they won an increased national minimum wage. The strike committees helped lay the groundwork for grassroots labour organisation and independent trade unions outside state control.

Textile and other industrial workers played a key role in the 2011 uprising that toppled the hated dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. The experience of the 2006-08 Mahalla strikes helped establish militant workplace networks, demonstrating the capacity of industrial workers to challenge employers and the state. Although concentrated in North Africa and Egypt, the strikes spread internationally.

But the political gains made by the working class in 2006-08 were not consolidated. The 2011 uprising brought the question of political power to the fore. Without a perspective of struggle based upon the overthrow of the capitalist system and the socialist reorganisation of society by the working class under a revolutionary leadership, workers were instead channelled behind various bourgeois forces competing to succeed Mubarak—military officers, bourgeois "liberal" parties and the Muslim Brotherhood—and betrayed. The military, under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, defence minister and commander of the armed forces, seized power in July 2013 and established a dictatorship that has ruthlessly suppressed the working class and rural poor.

Economic crisis drives a new wave of strikes and protests

Since 2022, Egypt has faced its most severe economic crisis in decades. Following multiple devaluations and IMF-backed economic programmes since 2016, the Egyptian pound lost 82 percent of its value against the dollar, pushing up inflation to unprecedented levels, with the prices of basic commodities rising three- to fourfold. Employers, private and public, almost universally ignore the minimum wage, leading to the severe erosion of real wages and leaving the working and middle classes unable to meet their basic needs.

The economic crisis is bound up with the severe regional unrest. The Ukraine war involving two of the world's major grain exporters has had a massive impact on the price of wheat on which Egypt depends to feed its 120 million population.

Israel's ongoing war of annihilation in Gaza has also impacted Egypt's economy. Threats to shipping levelled by the Houthis, who control much of Yemen and its Red Sea coast, in support of the Palestinians have affected Red Sea traffic. Shipping is rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope, reducing Suez Canal revenues from $10.25 billion, a record, in 2023 to $3.99 billion in 2024 and only slightly more in 2025.

Since 2013, when el-Sisi seized power, poverty has increased from around 25 percent of the population to about 30 percent in 2025 because of rising prices, stagnant wages, high unemployment and underemployment, cuts to subsidies and little in the way of a social safety net.

Official statistics fail to capture the scale of the crisis. While unemployment has supposedly fallen from 13 percent in 2013 to 7 percent in 2024, this is because so many people, particularly women and young people, have stopped looking for work. Surveys by the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) show that underemployment, particularly in agriculture, has risen sharply; informal, part-time and casual work have absorbed people into low?productivity, low?wage jobs; and nearly 50 percent of young people are unemployed. Work-permit data shows a steady increase in the number of Egyptians leaving the country to seek work abroad.

These developments led to an unprecedented wave of protests in 2025, with The Open Data Tank (ODT) 2025 Egypt Protest Dataset recording 1,849 protests, compared to just 420 in 2024. *Al Manassa* documented 100 labour protests in 2025, although it believed the real number to be much higher.

Al Manassa's report notes that as the unrest intensified throughout 2025, the state relied on its security apparatus "to contain it through arrests, detentions and intimidation aimed at curbing worker mobilisation", citing numerous examples. Most labour protests had failed to secure the workers' demands, due to "weak workplace-level union organisation".

This too fails to capture the reality that the trade union leaders worked systematically to delay action, isolate the strikes and their militant leaders, block cross-factory coordination, redirect demands into bureaucratic channels, promise negotiations and negotiate minor concessions—rarely implemented. In this way, the union apparatus atomises the workforce and prevents strikes spreading to other workplaces.

Egypt: a pillar of US imperialism in the Middle East

Egypt's importance as a country with one of the region's largest concentrations of industrial workers, public-sector workers and urban poor, and with a history of militancy and anti-imperialist struggle, is immense. For Washington, preventing a repeat of 2011 is a priority: a politically mobilised Egyptian working class would threaten US interests from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.

Since the Camp David Accords in 1979 marking the end of Egypt's military confrontation with Israel, Washington has provided $1.3 billion annually in military assistance. In return, Egypt has become a key pillar of US regional security architecture. Washington relies on Egypt to contain conflicts on multiple fronts: Libya, Sudan, Gaza and nuclear diplomacy with Iran.

El-Sisi has played a key role in the Gaza genocide: enabling and containing it on behalf of his paymasters. While Egypt publicly condemned Israeli actions and delivered humanitarian aid to Gaza, its intelligence agencies work closely with the US and Israel to block weapons flows and monitor Islamist groups in Sinai. El-Sisi views Hamas as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood he overthrew in 2013. His control of the Rafah crossing, the only Gaza exit not controlled by Israel, is crucial. He largely kept the border shut to prevent Palestinians from fleeing Israel's bombardment and maintain Israel's siege of the enclave.

Even after Israeli provocations on its border, Cairo prevented the Gaza war from expanding into a regional conflict, isolating the Palestinians and preventing multi-front pressure on Israel. El-Sisi played an active role in negotiations for ceasefires and the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement which he hosted. He thus enabled Israel to secure the release of the remaining hostages while continuing its assault on Gaza at a lower level of intensity.

His repression of Egypt's own working-class strikes, unions and political opposition also serves to stabilise the regional order by preventing the emergence of a mass, anti-imperialist political force in the Arab world's largest country. At least 65,000 political activists are held in Egyptian jails, including more than 1,000 women.

Lessons of 2011-13 Egyptian Revolution

The question posed by the new protest movement of Egypt's powerful working class is how to overcome the political mechanisms that have repeatedly fragmented and contained workers' struggles. The key challenge posed by the revolutionary upheavals in 2011-13 was to secure the political independence of the working class from all the various bourgeois forces competing to succeed Mubarak.

All the 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, now banned under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi 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.

The misnamed Revolutionary Socialists (RS), part of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left milieu in Egypt reflecting the interests of affluent sections of the upper-middle class, played a key role in betraying the working class. It initially claimed in 2011 that the military junta that replaced Mubarak would grant reforms. It then tried to channel the continuing opposition of the working class behind the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that its electoral victory in 2012 represented a "victory for the revolution." As working-class opposition to President Mohammed Mursi's government grew in 2013, the RS embraced the newly formed Tamarod ("Rebellion") campaign, which was funded and promoted by the military-intelligence apparatus, as "a road to complete the revolution."

This paved the way for the military, under the leadership of el-Sisi, then the Minister of Defence in Mursi's government, head of the armed forces, and deputy prime minister, to overthrow Mursi in July 2013. The RS welcomed el-Sisi's coup, which inaugurated a reign of terror as a "second revolution."

Days after seizing power, the military junta massacred more than 900 coup opponents, including women and children, while breaking up protests by Mursi's supporters in Rabaa El-Adaweya Square in Cairo. Hamdeen Sabahi, leader of the Nasserist Egyptian Popular Current, publicly defended the massacre. He declared on television: "We will stay hand in hand, the people, the army and the police."

One of the founders of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) Kamal Abu Eita became Labour Minister and served as Egypt's Minister of Manpower and Immigration from July 16, 2013, to March 1, 2014, in the post-Mursi interim cabinet under Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi.

The crucial lesson of the 2011-13 Egyptian Revolution is the necessity of building an independent revolutionary leadership before mass struggles break out. Only in this way can the working class secure its political independence from the bourgeoisie and its petty-bourgeois allies, arm the mass movement with a socialist programme and develop the perspective of permanent revolution necessary to overthrow capitalism.

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