

The Egyptian workers movement joins the fight

Dave Stockton Thu, 10/02/2011 - 11:17

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The revolution in Egypt has entered a decisive new phase as thousands of workers across the country launch strikes against the regime and their bosses

On 8 February the largest and most widespread demonstrations yet occurred across the country. The vast demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria and Suez proved that those western commentators who said the movement had passed its peak and the revolution had failed were wrong. Robert Fisk in Cairo reports that so many were flocking to the square yesterday evening that the protest site overflowed onto the Nile river bridges and the other squares of central Cairo and that many had come for the first time.

To assess the demonstrations actual size is practically impossible ? probably several millions. The protesters actions escalated as hundreds of demonstrators besieged the Egyptian parliament building, a short distance from Tahrir Square, setting up barricades around it.

Now the Egyptian workers are beginning to throw their weight into the scales not only protesting against the regime but against their dictatorial employers and demanding increased wages to cover the rampant inflation, lay-offs due to the crisis and youth unemployment. The fact that the hated police have been driven off the street creates more space for workers to strike and protest against their bosses, without the fear of detention, torture or death at the hands of the regime.

Now two of Egypt's independent unions have initiated calls for an indefinite general strike, and a demonstration in front of the state-backed General Federation of State Unions. Al Ahram ? which has broken from the regime and now supports the opposition ? carries on its website reports a whole series of strikes breaking out in several cities. Perhaps this is because more than a hundred journalists packed the lobby of Al Ahram itself, denouncing corruption, calling for press freedom and demanding people be held to account for the killing of two of the paper's staff in the Tahrir Square protests. Protesters are chanting slogans against corruption and against the newspaper's editor and CEO. Their chants include: "Revolution everywhere in Egypt, revolution in Ahram", and "No to injustice."

In Suez, where fierce battles have been fought over the past two weeks, more than 2,000 textile workers and others demonstrated yesterday. Workers from five service companies owned by Suez Canal Authority in Suez, Port Said and Ismailia began an open-ended sit in today. Over 6000 protesters will continue their sit-in until their demands are met. They are protesting against poor wages and deteriorating health and working conditions and demanded that their salaries and benefits meet the standard of those working for the Suez Canal Authority. In National Steel's plant in the city 500 striking workers staged a sit-in after blocking the road. Workers stated that they receive the lowest wages despite the pollution they endure. In the textile town of Mahalla al-Kubra, more than 1,500 workers at one factory walked out and blocked roads. And more than 2,000 workers from the Sigma pharmaceutical company in the city of Quesna went on strike while some 5,000 unemployed youth stormed a government building in Aswan, demanding the

dismissal of the governor. In Cairo, sanitation workers demonstrated around their headquarters in Dokki and in Luxor thousands hurt by the collapse of the tourist industry marched to demand government benefits.

It is now plain that all the classic conditions for a revolution are being fulfilled- the masses are unwilling to go on living in the old way and the ruling class is unable to go on ruling in the old way.

The regime clings to power

Vice President Omar Suleiman ? for long Egypt's torturer-in-chief and doggedly loyal to the US and Israel, is sticking to the strategy of tension and threats to embroil the opposition in long and fruitless negotiations in the hope this will tire out the demonstrators. He has said on ABC News that Egypt currently lacks the necessary "culture of democracy" for the changes demanded by protesters. He threatens that the continued protests are ?very dangerous? and that ?the alternative to dialogue is a coup.?

On the other hand the newly appointed secretary general of the dictatorship?s National Democratic Party, Hossam Badrawi, has stated that Egypt and the whole Middle East is witnessing a historical change and that ?it is time when leaders respect their people and realize that the people have spoken up and are able to change their lives.? He even went on to say; ?January 25 is a unique and civilized revolution aiming for a better Egypt in all aspects.? Well if that is so it is no thanks to him or his party. Badrawi, a supposed liberal, has been drafted in to try and revamp the NDP's image. Too little too late is the phrase that springs to mind.

The NDP, its police force and elements within the military have serious blood on their hands. Human Rights Watch says that 302 people have been killed in the last 16 days. Based on visits to a number of hospitals in Egypt, the organisation said that records show the death toll has reached 232 in Cairo, 52 in Alexandria and 18 in Suez.

And things could have been bloodier by far if rank and file policemen and soldiers had not refused to obey orders. Blogs report that General Habib Ibrahim El Adly, then Interior Minister, ordered the police to fire live bullets at protesters. An officer reported on 25 January: ?I escaped from the service after El Adly asked us to fire live bullets randomly on protesters.? Tank drivers also refused to drive into the Tahrir over the bodies of protesters. The sheer scale of the protests is creating cracks in the state apparatus, another sure sign of the revolutionary situation Egypt finds itself in.

In another sign of the breakdown of the media wall of silence is the case of Wael Ghoneim. As in the Tunisian revolution specific cases of cruelty and injustice by the regime can have an enormous impact. Last June the case of Khaled Said, became a touchstone for youth using the web and the social media. Said, a 28-year a young man from Alexandria was dragged out of an internet café and beaten to death by two security officials. Several demonstrations were organized in Alexandria and in other cities and a Facebook group named ?We are all Khaled Said? soon had following of many thousands. Wael Ghoneim, Google?s regional marketing manager in the Middle East, launched this group and continued to agitate against the regime.

Unsurprisingly he was arrested on 25 January. When he was released on Monday he was interviewed on the popular TV talk programme, The 10 O?clock Show. He broke down as he recounted how many young people had been killed in the demonstrations, and called on people to continue to mobilise. Evidently this has an enormous impact in boosting the numbers on the street the next day and in turning large numbers hitherto uninvolved, strongly against the regime. Over 100 thousand Egyptians have used facebook to authorize him to represent the January 25 uprising.

The leadership of the movement

The question of leadership and representation of the mass of protesters has reached a critical point. The minor concessions, offered by Omar Suleiman to ?representatives? of political parties and other groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, has raised the issue of how the protesters themselves decide who should represent them. So far it is Suleiman who is ?choosing their representatives.?

A coalition of youth groups has been formed. It includes the 6 April Movement; the Campaign in Support of Baradei and Democracy; the Door-Knock Campaign, The Muslim Brotherhood Youth; and the Youth Movement of the Democratic Front Party. A spokesperson Ahmed Ezzat, stated "Although it started with only these groups we hope it expands to include all the other young activists, including young members from the Karama party, Labor party, Kifaya and all others including independent bloggers and Internet activists.?"

Assorted academic, legal and NGO figures have formed a Dialogue Committee (dubbed by the press ?the committee of wise men?) This is led by the former head of the Human Rights Council, Kamal Abul-Magd, and is made up of some 30 ?non-partisan? public figures, including most prominently, Ambassador Nabil Al-Araby, a former judge on the International Court of Justice, and member of the board of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Naguib Sawiris, a Copt and one of the country?s top businessmen, as well as Egypt?s top publisher, Ibrahim El-Moalem.

The youth movements who initiated the 25 January demonstration have held a meeting with this Committee. At the meeting it was revealed that Suleiman had invited the youth organization to participate in the ?dialogue?. However they declined, and said instead that they had delegated the ?wise men? to speak for them.

The Dialogue Committee and the Youth Coalition have agreed that a number of demands must be met immediately, if there are to be negotiations. They are: 1) eliminating the state of emergency, in force for the past 30 years; 2) immediate release of all political prisoners, and prisoners of conscience; 3) immediate arrest and prosecution of NDP oligarchs, officials and police officers and agents implicated in the criminal attacks on protesters. 4) Bring an immediate halt to all forms of incitement against the protesters, by state officials and the state owned media. And, finally 5) fire the minister of information, Anas El-Fiqi, and put Egyptian state TV under the oversight of an independent Board of Trustees.

If the strike wave continues to spread, developing into an all out Egypt-wide general strike then the Mubarak-Suleiman regime could collapse like a pack of cards. Then the vacuum created would rapidly be filled by the established political parties and the liberal bourgeois forces represented in the Dialogue Committee and ?if they remain loyal to it - the Youth Alliance too. They would probably constitute with the Army a provisional government.

For this reason it is vital for revolutionary socialists in Egypt to fight for the political independence of the working class from all these bourgeois forces, who have no interest in meeting the workers fundamental demands. The working class should give no confidence to this government whatsoever.

The vital question now is for the workers to elect strike committees as mass assemblies in every workplace. These can formulate the workers demands both economic and political. They can also form local councils of delegates drawn from the workplaces and popular districts, from the schools and universities, from the unemployed youth. In this way the working masses can ensure that not only is the regime ejected from power but also businessmen do not usurp that power, diplomats, academics or parties like the New Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The workers movement, the youth, the poor farmers from the country's small towns and villages need to elect their own representatives not self-appointed bourgeois figures who have the confidence of the Egyptian ruling class and the USA. Committee of lawyers and academics must not be allowed to revise the constitution behind the backs of the masses and against their interests. Elections to a sovereign Constituent Assembly must be called so that what kind of democracy, what should be the economic basis of the state can be debated and decided on by the millions not by a few millionaires.

Immediately the new unions, the revolutionary youth and socialist organizations need to get together to form a revolutionary party that can take the lead in building new mass organizations- workers, soldiers and farmers councils. Such a party could pose the question of the Egyptian revolution continuing uninterrupted until all democratic rights have been established beyond threat of reversal, until the masses burning economic needs have been met: the minimum wage raised, jobs found for the millions of unemployed youth, closed factories opened and the rich forced to pay the cost of etc.

It would also fight to make the democracy established workers democracy and the social justice won based on social ownership of the means of production. In short today's Egyptian democratic revolution can and must transform itself into an Egyptian socialist revolution and spread to the entire region and the world. If it does not then the experience of all previous great popular revolutions ? like the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 - shows that it will not even permanently win its democratic objectives.

This manifesto from an important section of workers in Egypt has been circulated online ? it represents some of the most advanced and revolutionary policies of the Egyptian working class.

Demands of the Iron and Steel Workers:

- 1- Immediate resignation of the president and all men and symbols of the regime
- 2- Confiscation of funds and property of all symbols of previous regime and everyone proved corrupt.
- 3- Iron and steel workers who have given martyrs and militants call upon all workers of Egypt to revolt from the regime's and ruling party workers federation, to dismantle it and announce their independent union now and to plan for their general assembly to freely establish their own independent union without prior permission or consent of the regime which has fallen and lost all legitimacy.
- 4- Confiscation of public sector companies that have been sold or closed down or privatized as well as the public sector which belongs to the people and its nationalization in the name of the people and formation of a new management by workers and technicians.
- 5- Formation of a workers' monitoring committee in all work places monitoring production, prices, distribution and wages
- 6- Call for a general assembly of all sectors and political trends of the people to develop a new constitution and elect real popular committees without waiting for the consent or negation with the regime.

A huge workers' demonstration will join the Tahrir square on Friday the 11th of February 2011 to join the revolution and announce the demands of the workers of Egypt

Long live the revolution - Long live Egypt's workers

Long live the intifada of Egyptian youth - People's revolution for the people

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