

Egyptian Labor Erupting

Saturday 29 August 2009, by [SAID Atef](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2009).

Contents

- [Labor Struggles Reborn](#)
- [Example 1: An Unexpected Spark](#)
- [Example 2: The State Employees](#)
- [Example 3: A Failed National](#)
- [Patterns of Strikes](#)

IN APRIL 2009, a familiar scenario was repeated, as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's police apparatus assaulted planned demonstrations and a Mahalla textile workers' strike. A year earlier, many activists and ordinary people from Mahalla received sentences in politically charged criminal trials for "planning the April 6th strike in 2008."

Despite the involvement of police personnel and government-led thugs in the destruction of the city in 2008, the emergency court sentenced 22 ordinary people from Mahalla to two- to three-year prison terms. This factor, along with the police occupation of Mahalla and downtown Cairo, led to another strike defeat in April 2009.

This article will discuss the background and recent examples of a growing labor revolt in Egypt. It is not a well-covered story: American readers are confronted by daily news of a bloody Middle East, the Iraq war and constant conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For them the Middle East is wars, violence and Islamic terrorism.

Many American friends admit all they know about Egypt can be summarized in the fact that Egypt has a "moderate" president, a radical Islamist opposition (Muslim Brotherhood) and is a land of mummies and pyramids. It is good to know that Americans realize Egypt has one of the oldest civilizations in the planet, but otherwise this simplistic picture does not reflect the reality.

To summarize Egypt from the point of view of Egyptians: Mubarak is a dictator who has run the country through the use of emergency laws and a repressive police apparatus since 1981. The regime has been supported by different U.S. administrations because it has helped protect American "interests" in the region, particularly with respect to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

Mubarak is also preferred over his opposition, which is portrayed as anti-western and radical Islamic. The average American does not know that Egyptian opposition groups go far beyond Islamic groups, encompassing a spectrum from those with socialist ideals to liberal groups. If the Islamists seem the strongest oppositional force it is because all the secular groups have been flattened by Mubarak's repressive machine.

While the Western corporate media rarely covers news of workers' struggle, over the past year militant strikes have been able to break through that invisibility. In fact the Egyptian workers' struggle has a long militant history, important beyond the country's borders because Egypt has played a leading political and a cultural role within the Arab-speaking Middle East since the 1950s and '60s.

While it is true that Nasser's regime lacked democracy and instituted a top-down state socialism, his discourse of Arab nationalism opened some space to strengthen and crystallize opposition to Western imperialism and offered at least the vision of social justice. Once again the outbreak of Egyptian workers' strikes against injustices and ruthless neoliberal policies can be of inspiration to the workers in the Arab world who struggle against dictatorships and free market policies.

Labor Struggles Reborn

The Egyptian leftist newspaper *al-ishteraki* (The Socialist), described 2007 as the year of labor strikes, and predicted the continuation of the strike wave. A flavor of those first events was summarized in an on-line article in *Middle East Report*:

"The longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the end of World War II is rolling through Egypt. In March, the liberal daily al-Masri al-Yawm estimated that no fewer than 222 sit-in strikes, work stoppages, hunger strikes and demonstrations had occurred during 2006. In the first five months of 2007, the paper has reported a new labor action nearly every day. The citizen group Egyptian Workers and Trade Union Watch documented 56 incidents during the month of April, and another 15 during the first week of May alone."

The number of strikes and sit-ins totaled 850, an unprecedented number considering the blows the working class took throughout the 1990s, which saw the imposition of a harsh neoliberal agenda, particularly with massive government privatizations. The bureaucratic unions had no answer to the attacks, and consequently many sectors of the working class succumbed to a mood of defeat. Contributing to this lethargy was the fragmentation of the Egyptian left and a repressive regime.

Joel Beinin, currently head of the Middle East Studies department at the American University in Cairo and a long-time observer of Egypt's labor scene, described the recent wave in an interview as "the biggest, longest strike wave at least since the fall of 1951." He added that "Just in terms of the size of what we are talking about, it is substantially different from what we've had before." Beinin described the strikes as "the most substantial and broad-based kind of resistance to the regime."

In a Socialist Studies Center booklet Omar Said and Mustafa Bassiouni described the new wave as the birth of a new labor movement in Egypt.

Despite defeats and repression, the recent strikes bring some hope to all Egyptians aspiring to social justice and democracy. As a union organizer once told me, workers always bring many surprises. They are more progressive than the country's socialist theoreticians or organizers.

I will highlight three of the 2007 protests. Two of these were successful, one was not.

Example 1: An Unexpected Spark

In December 2006, around 27,000 workers at Egypt's largest state-owned factory, Al-Mahala Al-Kobra Misr Spinning and Weaving, struck after learning that their annual bonus had been cut. The workers organized a massive rally in the center of al-Mahalla, a city located in the Delta. After five days the company administration backed down and offered the workers the bonus.

Kamal al-Fayoumi, one of the strike leaders, described the reason for the strike in an interview published by *al-ishteraki* newspaper (March 27, 2008):

"In 2006, our union promised us a two-month salary as a bonus. Then they started to backtrack on their promise. The workers have not forgotten and could not forget this promise. We started to mobilize everybody in the factory, and we used the resolution of the union. Leaders emerged everywhere in the factory, and everybody started to call for their right of the two-month bonus. Everybody was convinced that we do not have anything but the strike to force them to listen to us."

This strike was followed by another one, in September 2007 lasting six days. These successful actions sparked a wave of workers' protest. It is estimated that 104,000 textile workers took action; then strikes spread to the Helwan and Tura cement factories, to railroad workers and other industrial sectors. Faced with such unprecedented action, the government by and large complied with the workers' demands.

What happened to cause this unexpected strike in a traditional sector, and in a state-owned company? The story began in March 2006, when Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif promised that public sector worker annual bonuses would be increased from LE100 (\$17) to the equivalent of two months' salary by the end of the year. But the pledge was never honored and, as a result, the Al-Mahala workers started their December sit-in.

Joel Benin pointed out in an interview in *al-Ahram*: "Textiles comprise Egypt's largest industrial sector and its employees are among the world's worst paid. They make 85 per cent of the wages paid to comparable workers in Pakistan and 60 per cent of those paid in India."

Al-Mahala's workers felt empowered after obtaining their two-month bonus and decided to strike around other issues. Their demands included meeting another promised bonus of 25% of the basic salary and meals, instead of a money subsidy (which was currently 32 Egyptian pounds or less than \$6 a month).

The two Al-Mahala strikes showed it was possible to strike and avoid being crushed by police repression. The fact that these strikers were not immediately repressed allowed them to establish committees and organize to provide workers with an opportunity to expose the lies of the mainstream media and the government.

The public could see that the strikers were peacefully protesting and not damaging the factory. This self-organization was creating a space in which strikers were learning and leadership was forged. They were becoming confident and involved in making decisions. In this process they collected signatures and campaigned to force their union leadership to resign. Many explained to the media that they needed to establish unions free of government control.

Example 2: The State Employees

In December 2007, Egyptians were surprised to find around 3,000 state workers organizing a sit-in at the headquarters of the ministerial cabinet in downtown Cairo. The demand was to bring the working conditions up to the level of other civil service sectors.

The sit-in began right after the Eid holiday sit-in and lasted 11 days, effecting a 90% drop in tax collection. It was successful because it was backed by a parallel strike of 55,000 real estate tax officers throughout the country and culminated in the launching of a free union.

Under the neoliberal policies adopted, real estate tax collectors were no longer affiliated with the Ministry of Finance. Except for 500 high officers the collectors suddenly became subordinated to local councils, decreasing their salary and blocking possible promotion. This meant ruining the lives

of the workers and their families.

Yet in the beginning the workers resisted striking. In September 2007, however, 1,000 workers organized a one-day sit-in at the real estate tax collection office in the Giza province. Another 4,000 workers demonstrated. Kamal Abu Aita, one of the strike leaders, describes the buildup to the December action:

“On 21 October, we headed to the Ministry of Finance in Nasr City and called out to the Minister, ‘Come down from your ivory tower!’ but of course he didn’t because he was busy in America. We then walked in a huge procession to the Cabinet building, but security prevented us from entering to negotiate. On 13 and 14 November, we held our sit-in at the Egyptian Trade Union Federation on Gala’ Street; they locked all the bathrooms and meeting rooms, leaving us only the pavement of the entrance. Then and there we decided to hold another sit-in but didn’t publicize the location until the last minute, and that was the Hussein Higazy sit-in that started on 3 December.”

During the strike the workers elected a supreme council that included representatives from all over Egypt. This guaranteed representation from all of the tax collectors and contributed a higher level of organization to the action. The strikers’ supreme council included many committees that organized the tasks at hand. It also allowed for unprecedented solidarity to develop between men and women workers.

Although this solidarity developed in the al-Mahala strike as well as others, in the tax collectors’ sit-in, women workers answered the conservative media and police intimidation, insisting on their full participation.

Striker Ranya Anwar, who worked in the tax collection office in Giza Province, explained how her parents let her protest and sleep in the street: “My parents know that that I am calling and struggling for my rights. Indeed, they were concerned in the beginning, but later they accepted it. This happened when they knew how much respect we gained due to our persistence and solidity in our struggle.”

She also told the *al-ishteraki* reporter,

“We do not sleep well. We only have three tents in the sit-in site. Men and women take turns in these tents. We go to wash in the bathrooms of nearby mosques. In many times, random people who live in the neighborhood offered us to come to sleep for some hours in their homes. We had a great sense of solidarity. In the sit-in, we have many sick people, and also many children came to support their parents.”

One of the attractive slogans of the sit-in that reflects the workers’ sense of solidarity was “We are Here! We are not going anywhere!”

Reflecting the confidence of the strikers, the council led to the establishment of the country’s first independent trade union. On the first anniversary of their sit-in, leaders of the strike and thousands of the real state tax collectors gathered in the Egyptian Press Syndicate and announced the creation of their union, which included 29 members, seven of whom were women, democratically elected as representatives for the Egyptian provinces.

Example 3: A Failed National Strike

Mubarak’s police apparatus hit back in 2008 announcing an end to strikes. Originally the Mahalla

textile workers called for a one-day strike on April 6, 2008. The strike was turned into a call for a one-day general strike by political activists, and widely circulated on the internet. A Facebook site was set up and 73,000 signed, and the action was further spread through text messaging. The government inadvertently publicized the strike by broadcasting and publishing legal warning against participation.

The police attacked the Mahalla workers' on the night of April 5 and arrested many leaders. The following is a long quote from an international call for class solidarity by the Socialist Studies Center of Egypt, released on April 7th 2008.

In light of recent events in Egypt, the Centre for Socialist Studies calls on supporters of freedom and justice everywhere in the world to show their support for victims of repression at the hands of Hosni Mubarak's regime.

Supporters should mount pressure on the Egyptian dictatorship to release more than 800 people who were detained yesterday. These include more than 150 political activists (socialists, liberals, and Islamists), more than 600 protestors from Mahalla (mainly women and children) and Mahalla strike committee leaders Kamal El-Faioumy and Tarek Amin — who are facing serious allegations of agitation which can lead to long prison sentences.

On the background of a workers' call for strike action on 6 April in Mahalla textile complex, various political forces decided to support the strike through parallel symbolic work stoppage and peaceful protests.

However, the Mubarak regime retaliated by occupying the Mahalla complex with security forces, abducting strike committee leaders Kamal El-Faioumy and Tarek Amin and arresting political activists of every political tendency in Cairo and other cities. Not able to suppress the protests that followed, Mubarak's security forces used rubber bullets, tear gas and live ammunition against the people of Mahalla, leaving at least four dead, including a nine year old boy, and hundreds injured.

On April 7, Egypt News also reported on the police crackdown:

"They have blocked Tahrir Square, the Bar Association downtown and all the streets and key areas in the provinces, especially in Cairo, Alexandria, and Gharbia. They have also arrested dozens of workers, activists and bloggers to curtail the strike called for by the opposition in protest against price rises. Among the detainees were Mohamed Abdel Kodous, Freedom Commission Rapporteur of the frozen Labor Party, Mohamed el-Ashqar, 'Kefaya' Movement Coordinator in Giza, Magdy Qarqar, member of the movement and Malek Mustafa of the 'Malcolm X' blog."

Just one month later one of the bloggers and the creator of the Facebook group was kidnapped on the street, arrested and then tortured in the state security intelligence headquarters. One day later he was left in a desert around Cairo.

There are several reasons why the April 6, 2008 strike failed. One is external: Washington stopped pressuring the Mubarak regime so he felt able to repress. But the intelligence apparatus gained experience in dealing with internet activism: by arresting the activists, the regime can warn all those who sympathize to drop their plans.

As one of the activists told me, when the street is closed, pro-democracy and labor organizers find new ways to organize. One of the best new ways was the cyberspace. But the government established an intelligence unit to trace bloggers and activists.

Despite the police harassment, bloggers and labor organizers continued. One of the labor organizers

and a leader in al-Mahalla strikes, for example, was Kareem al-Beheery. The name of his blog was "Egyptian Workers." Kareem was arrested and tortured on April 5th. Arrested several times, he continued to blog and lobby workers in Al-Mahalla. To punish him, company administrators have forcibly transferred him to another branch in Cairo.

Patterns of Strikes

Can Egyptian workers' struggle continue to the point of ending Mubarak's dictatorship?

This article does not include many more labor strikes that have been taking place in Egypt since the end of 2006. In an email communication with labor journalist and activist Mustafa Bassiouni (between July 10th and 17th, 2009), Bassiouni described the patterns of recent waves of labor strikes in the following way:

- 1) While the highest points of most of the 1980s labor unrest were sit-ins, the recent ones were strikes. This reflects more anger and bravery among the workers,
- 2) Most strikes lasted for days or even weeks, unlike labor actions in previous years.
- 3) The number of women strikers was much higher in these strikes than previous years. Anger and bitterness over neoliberal policies encouraged more women to take leading roles in these strikes.
- 4) In the beginning the strikes did not end with police attacks. Due to the mass number of labor protests and the involvement of the workers' families, government officials and company CEOs were forced to negotiate with the workers.

These four features created a space for workers' self-organizing away from the state-controlled unions. These developments led to the creation of the first independent trade union in Egypt in half a century.

Bassiouni and others agree that labor's revolt will rise as the outcome of neoliberal policies becomes clearer to ordinary Egyptians, where every home tastes the bitterness of these policies. Some workers told me that they have not tasted the flavor of meat for months. Some say, we celebrate holidays without protein at home.

In a recent analysis by Reuters, published on July 13, 2009, Alastair Sharp concludes that workers in Egypt fight for pay, not against the state. This writer agrees with leftist journalist Hossam al-Hamalawy that Sharp's analysis is not completely accurate.

While most of Egyptian workers' recent strikes are seemingly economic, this does not mean that their actions are apolitical. As al-Hamalawy suggests:

"Workers are refraining from the existing 'political parties,' but that doesn't mean their fight is not 'political' or is not a direct 'political' challenge to the state. On the contrary, I see the strikes to be increasingly getting politicized -- a politicization, that is not necessarily manifested in the conventional political manner: parliamentary voting behavior, membership in political parties, or adopting the Kefaya (Egyptian Movement for Change —ed.) agenda, etc."

To summarize, while there are many factors that may bring pessimism after these waves of strikes, others bring inspiration and optimism to Egyptian workers. Among the reasons for pessimism is the failures of some strikes, and ruthless police apparatus and the continued attacks on poor Egyptians and the working class.

However, there are countervailing factors to be taken into account, notably the organizing experiences that Egyptian workers gained in recent years, and the national attention these strikes drew. In recent public meetings, such as conferences organized by what is called the National Coordinating Committees for Workers' Organizing Rights and Freedoms, many of the workers' leaders started to affirm the following statement: "It has become obvious more than any time before that struggles against dictatorship and corruption are not disconnected from struggles against neoliberalism."

The establishment of the first independent trade union in more than half a century in Egypt is a great inspiration to many Egyptian workers. One significant ramification of this development is the rise of labor protests among state employees, a sector that was least likely to protest. One example is a recent strike by social and economic experts at the Ministry of Justice, protesting new and severe working conditions suggested by the Minister of Justice.

Many independent groups and labor organizers established a national campaign to pressure the government to raise the minimum wage in Egypt to around \$240 a month. While this campaign is still in the economic realm, the campaigners work on the national level, reflecting a higher degree of coordination and coalition building among labor organizers and workers in Egypt.

Despite the fact that the Egyptian left is exhausted from the attacks of Mubarak's police apparatus, Egyptian labor proved to be more courageous. In fact some analysts suggested that a key factor that weakened the pro-democracy activism in Egypt in recent years was its disconnection from Egyptian workers' struggles.

Recently many attempts have been made to bridge the gap between the anti-neoliberal and the anti-dictatorship protests. Examples of these attempts are the meetings organized by the Socialist Studies Center, the newly established independent union for tax workers, and the Coordinating Committees for Workers' Organizing Rights and Freedoms.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 142, September-October 2009:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2365>