

Resistance in Egypt

Friday 28 January 2011, by [EL-HAMALAWY Hossam](#) (Date first published: 6 July 2008).

On the seventh of December 2006, 3,000 female garment workers went on strike in the Nile Delta town of Mahalla, which is home to 27,000 workers working in a textile mill, shoulder to shoulder. It's the biggest textile mill in the region. These women workers went on strike and started marching in the factory compound, demanding the two-month bonuses that the government had promised earlier. The government of Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif is committed to neoliberalism in Egypt.

These female workers, after marching in the compound, stormed the sectors of the company that have their male colleagues working in the spinning and weaving, chanting, "Where are the men? Here we are, the women!" — which is originally a football chant that they have changed — and they shamed the male colleagues into action. That's when their male colleagues laid down their tools, and the entire textile mill went on strike. They occupied the factory for three days despite security intimidation and they won. But from the moment when they won, they triggered the so-called winter of labor discontent in Egypt, where virtually all the textile mills in the Nile Delta went on strike, demanding the same gains as those of Ghazl el-Mahalla.

But the industrial militancy was not gonna stop there. It started spilling over to all other sectors of the working class virtually. So the train drivers, in the following month, went on strike, and they slept on the rails, blocking the so-called Torbini [express] trains that carry businessmen and middle-class professionals from Cairo to Alexandria. They slept on the rails, blocking it for an entire day, and they won all their demands related to their work conditions. Cement workers went on strike, and they won.

Basically the media have dubbed the strike as a plague that has infected Egypt and started spilling over even to civil servants and middle-class professionals. Doctors were scheduled to go on their first national strike since 1951 last March, but it was aborted at the last moment, so they replaced it by national protests. University professors also went on their first national strike since 1977. Students on the campuses started mobilizing. Social struggle went through an unprecedented upturn that we had not witnessed since the end of the Second World War.

The militancy, as I said, even spilled over to civil servants, so we had even our tax collectors going on strike for the first time since 1919. They struck for three months, they didn't collect the taxes for three months — that's collection dropped by 90%. Not only that, they mobilized. There were 55,000 of them. They called their meeting nationally. They sent delegations of at least 5,000 of them — men, women, and they brought even their children — to occupy downtown Cairo in front of the ministerial cabinet, with their own drums, and they were singing the whole day, annoying the living hell out of the ministers who were inside, and they won, in January, raising their salaries by 300%.

The Egyptian workers are currently going through a very strong fight, and they are going through this fight without labor unions, since the government since 1957 had established the so-called General Federation of Trade Unions, which is so similar to the trade union structures that existed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, of government bureaucrats and appointed officials that do not represent the workplace. But now the virtual demand across all the strikes, basically, is to impeach those state-sponsored officials, and some have started even raising the slogan of "we need an independent, parallel labor union," which, if this happens, is gonna open the Pandora's Box for the

regime.

You may also be pleased to know that our first labor association, our first independent labor union, was just born two months ago, in May, by the tax collectors whose strike committee did not disbanded itself in January after they won their strike, and they just announced themselves now as a new, independent labor association representing civil servants.

But in all the strikes that have been going on in Egypt, one thing, one word, has always been resonating all throughout these strikes, which is Mahalla. The textile workers in Mahalla have been a major source of inspiration for everyone. I even attended a meeting in the spring of last year by the air hosts of Egypt Airlines, and they were slamming their own union officials, denouncing them for not doing enough in order to represent them. And in the middle of the meeting, someone stood up and shouted, "Do we have to do it like the textile workers to get our rights in this country?"

So, as we can see, the domino effect is working, and it's spreading. Some of you may have heard or read the news about what went on in Egypt in April, also in Mahalla, when the whole town erupted in a two-day uprising by the workers in the city and by the urban poor, to denounce and protest the increasing prices of food and the shortage of bread. In Egypt we call bread aish, which is Arabic for living, because bread constitutes a major component of the food basket of every Egyptian family. But bread is disappearing as well as other basic commodities that Egyptian families live on. We have had so-called bread queues — like breadlines, long breadlines — in front of bakeries all over Egypt since February. And sixteen people have been killed up to now in these bread queues of people basically fighting one another in order to try to get bread. I mean these are scenes from the French Revolution if you read anything about it.

But at the same time there is hope. Mahalla has shown us the hope. After the Mahalla uprising, two months later, at the beginning of June, the city of Al Burullus, which is a community of fishermen in the north of the Nile Delta, also erupted in similar events to those in Mahalla. And what's interesting is that all those who were present or took part in the uprising could see and hear that the people in the streets were chanting the same chants that the Palestinians were chanting on our eastern borders during the intifada, like:

ثورة ثورة هتتا النصر

[thawra thawra hatta al-nasr]

revolution until victory.

They were confronting Mubarak's police and Mubarak's tanks and Mubarak's troops, using rocks. And all throughout, people can always draw parallels between what's going in Egypt and what's going on in Palestine. If Egypt falls, the entire Middle East is gonna fall. We have the biggest working class in the region with a long, militant history of industrial struggle. And we're very optimistic about the developments in the future.

Hossam el-Hamalawy

P.S.

* From MRZine:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2008/hamalawy180808.html>

* Hossam el-Hamalawy is a Cairo-based Egyptian journalist. He is the author of "Comrades and Brothers" (Middle East Report 242, Spring 2007) and the co-author, with Joel Beinin, of "Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order" (Middle East Report Online, 25 March 2007) and "Strikes in Egypt Spread from Center of Gravity" (Middle East Report Online, 9 May 2007). Visit his blog 3arabawy. He delivered this talk (on 6 July 2008) at "Marxism 2008," a five-day political festival in London hosted by the SWP. The text above is a partial transcript of the talk.