

# Egypt: Wave of Strikes Challenges Military

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CAIRO, Feb 17, 2011 (IPS) - The iron fist that has kept a tight grip on Egypt's labour movements for nearly six decades relaxed this week, unleashing a wave of wildcat strikes that is testing the resolve of the country's new military rulers.

The fall of President Hosni Mubarak, whose ruling party banned strikes unless approved by the state-controlled labour federation, has reinvigorated Egypt's labour movement. Workers dissatisfied with low pay, poor working conditions and corrupt management have taken to the streets to demand their economic rights.

"Our revolution is not complete," says Kareem El-Beheiry, a labour activist and blogger. "We are still under the control of the same army and government as before, and they still refuse to give us our rights....If they can't fix things now, then they should tell us when, but instead they are trying to force us to stop demonstrating."

Dozens of strikes and sit-ins have been reported across Egypt since Feb. 9, two days before Mubarak relinquished power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. An estimated 50,000 workers are involved, including employees in the banking, transport, oil, medical and textile sectors, and various government bodies.

"The labour unrest has actually been brewing for quite a while - at least as far back as 2006," says Alia El-Mahdi, dean of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. "The January 25 Revolution has made people more involved and emboldened them to demand their rights."

Striking workers are demanding payment of overdue benefits, equal opportunity for advancement, and some have called for prosecution of corrupt bosses and factory owners. But the heart of the issue, according to El-Mahdi, is the glaring disparity between privileged managers and their overworked, underpaid employees - some earning less than 30 dollars per month.

"There is a deep wage gap in many institutions," El-Mahdi told IPS. "The differences in pay are staggering."

After years of lethargy, the state-run National Council for Wages last October announced its poorly enforced decision to raise the minimum wage from the equivalent of 20 dollars per month to about 70 dollars. The wage, below the UN recognised two dollars per day poverty line, fell far short of the 200 dollars per month demanded by most labour representatives.

"Nobody was representing the workers in these negotiations," says El-Beheiry.

The latest wave of labour unrest clearly worried Vice-President Omar Suleiman, who issued dire warnings of an imminent heavy crackdown in an attempt to discourage civil disobedience. He was swept from office on Feb. 11, along with Mubarak, before he could carry out his threats.

Now it is the generals' turn.

Still in its first week of rule, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces urged Egyptian workers to return to work and appealed to their sense of national duty. But it stopped short of banning strikes, as many had expected it would.

"The Armed Forces calls on honourable Egyptians to recognise that ongoing protests at this critical time will have negative consequences and damage the country's economy," the military said in a communiqué read on state television.

"The military is faced with a dilemma," explains 28-year-old Mohamed Ezzat, who was among protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square a week ago. "Allow workers to strike and risk further economic deterioration; crush the demonstrations and risk another popular uprising."

Many Egyptians argue that the transitional administration cannot be held accountable for the policies and problems stemming from 30 years of Mubarak rule. Strikers should return to work and give the interim government a chance to address the flagging economy - provided the government agrees to continue labour negotiations.

Others disagree, charging that while the military is the de facto ruler, the cabinet hastily appointed by Mubarak before his ouster is still responsible for resolving economic issues. Solutions are known, but the government is attempting to maintain the status quo.

So far, Egypt's military-run government has responded selectively to striking workers, bowing to demands in some sectors, while refusing to address others.

"Labour unrest is a challenge, not just to the army, but to the government, which is trying to deal with the strikes on a piecemeal basis," says El-Mahdi. "They need to have a strategy or agenda to restructure wages or else the demonstrations will only spread."

The strike wave has already engulfed the Nile Delta city of Mahalla El-Kubra, where over 20,000 textile workers are demanding better pay and an investigation into alleged corruption at the factory.

The northern industrial city's involvement is significant. It was in Mahalla El-Kubra three years ago that underpaid textile workers first explicitly equated their dire economic conditions with Mubarak's repressive regime - and garnered solidarity from the general populace.

The two-day uprising in Mahalla El-Kubra in April 2008 was extinguished by riot police, thugs and tear gas - and finally, concessions to the workers. But it spawned the April 6 Youth Movement, which was one of the main organisers of the protests that toppled Mubarak last week.

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