

Revolutionary spirit spreads to Egyptian industry

Wednesday 20 April 2011, by [BARTHE Benjamin](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2011).

Workers at an Indonesian-owned mill win fight for better conditions after being inspired by Tahrir Square protests.

The shockwave from the Egyptian revolution has reached a skyscraper in Singapore. Encouraged by the victory of the shabab (youths) in Tahrir Square and Hosni Mubarak's resignation on 11 February, thousands of Egyptian workers went on strike to demand better working conditions. Among them was the workforce at the mill at Shibin el-Kom, the main town in Menoufia province, on the Nile delta, 60km north of Cairo.

A throwback to the days of Nasserite socialism, the firm was privatised in 2007 and sold to Indorama, an Indonesian multinational based in Singapore. The emphasis on flexible working imposed by the new management soon upset the workers, used to tough but regular work. They made a timid strike attempt in 2009, followed by a massive turnout this year.

After a month's conflict they are going back to work having achieved unexpectedly favourable terms.

Graffiti on the mill wall bear witness to the recent struggle: "Indonesians, go home!". A sign marked "Indorama Shibin" has been replaced with one saying "Misr Shibin" (Misr being the Arabic word for Egypt). The firm is well known all over the province as the largest employer, with 3,200 jobs.

"Misr Shibin is like a monument," says import manager Yasser Shendy. "Our fathers worked here. We are deeply attached to it. But the monument is in danger. The state had more consideration for us than these foreigners who don't understand our culture. It must return to public ownership."

The trouble started on 5 March with the dismissal of 95 workers. Ever since it took over, Indorama has been drastically cutting costs. With operations in 13 countries on four continents, it reports \$4bn annual revenue. Serving customers such as Nike, Esprit and Adidas, it has little concern for the remains of Egypt's welfare state.

In the old days the workforce enjoyed almost complete job security, including health insurance and a pension, but new recruits were offered one-year contracts, with no welfare entitlement. Their renewal was dependent on the economic climate. "The management even forced us to sign a letter of resignation, so if need be they could give us the sack without paying any compensation," says Mahmoud Abu Adel, hired four years ago.

In the 1960s and 70s the state instituted various benefits in an attempt to compensate for hard working hours and low wages. Indorama set about dismantling these gains. "I've been working here for 38 years and I earn [\$250] a month," says Muhammad Abdul Sattar, an old man who shows us round a huge shed full of bales of acrylic fabric and spinning machines. "I have a liver condition because of the stink in the factory. The works doctor is a GP and doesn't know a thing about such ailments."

Before the revolution, the protests by workers were low-key. But in March the wind changed. “We reckoned the political balance had tipped and, with Mubarak out of the way and Amn al-Dawla [Mubarak’s secret police] disbanded, we could at last say: ‘No’,” Shendy recalls. So the workforce downed tools, organising marches and sit-ins outside the provincial governor’s offices. Their action paid off. The deal negotiated with Indorama provides for half of the 95 redundancies to be reinstated, a rise in monthly bonuses, five-year contracts, yearly scope for promotion and payment by the state for part of the lost hours.

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P.S.

* Guardian Weekly, Tuesday 12 April 2011 14.06 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/12/egypt-industry-workers-protest-barthe>

* This story originally appeared in Le Monde.