

The Strike Wave and the Crisis of the Egyptian State

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The explosion of huge protests across Egypt in the final week before the first round of the parliamentary elections on 28th and 29th November, demanding the rapid transfer of power from the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), brought into the open millions of Egyptians' growing anger with the military leaders who have governed the country since February. The uprising followed weeks of rising tensions between revolutionary activists and the military. The massacre of demonstrators demanding an end to the oppression of the Copts at Maspero was followed by the murder of Essam Ali Atta in Tora prison. On 31 October, well-known blogger and activist Alaa Abdelfattah joined approximately twelve thousand others who have been imprisoned by the military courts since the fall of Mubarak. These brutalities were all the more alarming given the military's concerted efforts to redefine its own political role. "We will keep the power until we have a president," Major General Mahmoud Hegazy of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) said in mid-October. With the timetable for the presidential elections pushed back after parliamentary polls, and the military saying it would oversee the process of writing the constitution, it appeared that little remained of the transition to civilian rule.

These developments threatened not only secular revolutionary activists like Abdelfattah, but also touched a raw nerve with the major Islamist currents, pushing the Muslim Brotherhood to announce its support for mass protests on 18 November. Then, the security forces' attempt on 19 November to clear Tahrir Square of a relatively small number of protesters, who had stayed overnight in order to re-establish a sit-in, triggered a series of huge demonstrations. These demonstrations quickly developed into an intense confrontation between a revived mass movement in the streets and the military. The Brotherhood's leaders' failure to support the protesters as they faced an onslaught from the security forces exposed contradictions between the Islamists' desire to use the mass movement to force concessions from SCAF, and their fear that a renewed popular uprising would derail the electoral process. Yet voters did flock to the ballot boxes. The Islamist parties did well, with the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party taking 40 percent of the vote in the first round.

This complex series of events cannot be understood without taking into account the profound shift in the character and scope of Egyptian workers' collective action since late August 2011. A wave of coordinated nationwide strikes and protests, such as those organized by postal workers and teachers, coupled with industry and sector-wide coordinated action of sugar workers and workers in the Cairo Public Transport Authority, were the principal cause of a paralysis which gripped the military regime in September, and thus paved the way for the uprising of November.

The continuing social and political struggles, which further deepen Egypt's revolution, are still at an early stage of development. Yet several features of the September wave of labour strikes indicate that the scale at which the workers' movement is organizing itself has reintroduced the working class as a significant factor in national politics to an extent that Egypt has not seen in more than sixty years.

What makes the upturn in the wave of strikes from late August so significant? The first reason is the scale of workers' protests. Rough estimates of the number of workers involved in collective action of

all kinds (strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations) show an enormous spike in September, compared to the March-August period. It is difficult to find accurate statistics on those participating in strikes and protests. The wide range of figures for September relates to differing estimations of the numbers involved in the national teachers' strike. Nevertheless, when compared to the peaks of the pre-revolutionary strike wave, September 2011 shows a marked increase from 2008, when only 540,000 workers took part in collective action over the course of the year.

Estimated number of workers involved in collective action	Month
400,000	March-August 2011
Between 500,000 and 750,000	September 2011

(Based on data compiled by the author from reports by Awlad al-Ard NGO and press reports)

February 2011 undoubtedly saw even larger numbers of workers participating in collective action. Awlad al-Ard reported 489 separate episodes of collective action by workers that month, but has not released detailed data on the number of people reported to have taken part. The September strike wave marks a qualitative shift towards coordinated strike action, compared to the explosion of workers' protests in February. The consolidation of the strike wave into fewer, larger disputes can be seen in the number of strikes and protests involving more than ten thousand workers. There were seven strikes in September, including the teachers' strike which involved between 250,000 and 500,000 teachers, and around six other strikes and protests involving approximately 160,000 workers. The teachers' strike was coordinated by two independent unions: the Independent School Teachers' Syndicate and the Egyptian Teachers' Federation. The postal workers' strike was coordinated by the Independent Postal Workers' Union, while the leading force in the Cairo bus workers' strike was the Independent Public Transport Authority Workers' Union. The sector-wide sugar refinery workers' strike was organized by the Sugar Factories' Front for Change, a coordinating committee which has since begun the process of building an independent union. National and sectoral coordination in many sectors is based on an extremely high level of local coordination. Teachers in Al-Arish in Northern Sinai, for example, organized a Conference of the Strike Committees, which coordinated actions during the national strike.

September also marked an important shift in the primary terrain of struggle from individual workplaces to the state. Most of the workers engaged in collective action in September were involved in a battle with state institutions at a much higher level than was the case in previous months. This was most apparent with the constant presence of cabinet ministers in direct negotiations with strikers' representatives. In March, around thirty-six percent of all workers involved in collective action took part in strikes or protests limited to a single workplace. The numbers involved in nationally coordinated strikes or protests was around fifteen percent of the total. By contrast, in September, the number of workers involved in nationally coordinated actions was around seventy-five percent of the estimated total number of workers involved in collective action. Disputes focused on a single workplace accounted for around eight percent of the total number of workers engaged in collective action [1].

The evolution of workers' demands over the course of the last eight months also marks a significant change. Generalised social demands have been adopted in most of the major strikes, including those of teachers, doctors, and public transport workers. Collectively, they articulate one of the organized working class' most significant ideological challenges to neo-liberalism in the current economic crisis. The strikes in Egypt differ from the defensive strikes against austerity measures in Greece and strikes in Britain. The Egyptian strikes, by and large, represent the workers' movement's direct offensive against the "successes" of neo-liberalism, rather than its failure and crisis, with relentless rises in the cost of living actually driving the movement.

Within the wave of strikes, teachers' demands include the sacking of the minister of education, investment in public education, a minimum wage for teachers of at least 1,200 Egyptian pounds per month, a school-building programme, and permanent contracts for fixed-term and supply teachers. Dozens of rank and file teachers who I spoke to at the national demonstration on 10 September 2011 emphasized that the strike was about rebuilding the public education system. They aim to make the public education system a suitable place for teachers to work and for all Egypt's children to learn, rather than a dumping ground for those who are too poor to afford private schools. Doctors have raised similar demands related to the public health system, while public transport workers demanded investment in the bus fleet. A strike by textile workers at Misr Spinning in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, which included demands for state investment in the public sector textile mills, was narrowly averted when the government promised to meet the majority of workers' demands.

The centrality of the battle against temporary contracts to the strike wave illustrates that in general, the workers' movement is on the offensive, demanding better conditions at work, rather than on the defensive against job cuts. Strikes and protests at every level, from the workplace to national strikes, have demanded an end to fixed-term contracts, as well as the immediate mass transfer of workers already on fixed-term contracts to permanent employment. Although strikes over delayed payment of wages have regularly occurred since February, a much larger proportion of industrial action over pay indicates an offensive nature, generally focused on the demand for a 1,200-EGP minimum wage and the implementation of promised increases in bonuses across the public sector. Strikes and protests against privatization have been central to the campaign to reverse the sale of a number of companies, which recently celebrated court decisions annulling the privatization of the Omar Effendi department store, the Shibin al-Kom textile factory, and a small number of other former state assets. Although these are small-scale victories against privatization, they hold considerable political significance. These victories have revived hundreds of thousands of workers' hopes that the looting of the public sector over the past two decades might be reversible.

The demand for tathir (cleansing) of the state institutions remains one of the core demands of the strike movement at every level. A favourite slogan of the teachers' demonstration on 24 September 2011 was "the teachers demand the downfall of the minister." This chant echoed a famous slogan that was chanted during the uprisings against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. Tathir has been one of the most frequent strike demands during the past eight months.

There is no doubt that workers' consciousness and organization remain uneven. Almost none of the approximately seven hundred separate episodes of workers' collective action I have studied since March have raised classic "political" demands, related to issues such as freedom of expression, the release of detainees, or the right of workers to organize and strike. Despite the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions' support for the Tahrir sit-in on 19 November, and its rejection of the Al-Ganzoury government, there was no wave of strikes to support a call for the military to hand over power. In addition, it is likely that strike organizers will have to take further leaps in terms of greater coordination between sectors on a national scale in order to force further concessions from the state. However, that may not materialize. The worsening economic climate may weaken workers' struggles. Additionally, a wave of company failures and job cuts could prompt further radicalisation. The attack on protesters at Maspero demonstrates that the SCAF could potentially foster a climate of sectarianism. Such actions could fatally undermine efforts to bring together the most radical elements, who are leading street protests, with the workers' movement in a common struggle against military rule.

Nevertheless, the recent strike wave marks a turning point in the Egyptian revolution that is highly significant on a global scale. It provides a concrete example of the ways in which workers' collective action on a massive scale can not only transform the struggle for political change, but can also move the battle against neo-liberalism from the defensive to the offensive. Egyptians' expectations that the

revolution should bring about social change, which would benefit the millions for whom decades of neo-liberalism delivered continued poverty, likewise pose a serious challenge to the Islamists in the wake of their electoral victory. Hundreds of thousands of workers have already mobilised themselves to organise strikes for social justice, rather than waiting until the day of elections.

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P.S.

* From Jadaliyya:

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3464/the-strike-wave-and-the-crisis-of-the-egyptian-sta>

Footnotes

[1] Calculations based on the author's compilation of data from Awlad al-Ard's monthly strike reports and news media sources.