

Egypt - Revolutionary history relived: The Mahalla strike of 6 April 2008

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Textile workers, activists and citizens of the Nile Delta city of Mahalla share their memories of the 6 April 2008 strike, regarded now as a stepping stone to Egypt's 2011 revolution

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Five years have passed since the event many in Egypt coin as a rehearsal for the January 2011 revolution. In 2008, the Nile Delta city of Mahalla became home to the largest anti-regime protest of the 30-year Mubarak era.

A workers strike planned morphed into popular struggle following clashes with the police who used — according to eyewitnesses — rubber bullets, birdshot and live ammunition to disperse crowds. While such unrest is now common in post-2011 Egypt, it was unprecedented at the time, the open defiance of a city to the regime sending shockwaves across the country.

For the first time, images of a tarnished, trampled upon poster of Mubarak circulated on the internet, signalling the beginning of the fall of Egypt's then-feared dictator.

The leadup

Worker Kamal El-Fayoumi was one of the leaders of the strike at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, the state-owned firm boasting the largest textiles complex in the country.

El-Fayoumi told Ahram Online that the story started a few years before the fateful day of the strike in April 2008, when he and a group of other workers decided to strike in 2006, demanding better worker benefits and pay increases.

"Textile workers are the lowest paid workers in Egypt. I've been working at the company for over 20 years and only got paid LE700 (around \$125 at the time) a month," he said.

Following weekly workers' meetings, they decided to strike, demanding two months incentive pay promised by then Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif but subsequently held back by management, El

Fayoumi said.

The official state-controlled workers' union and State Security officials tried to foil the strike but failed due to the determination of the workers. Over 27,000 workers went on strike, said El-Fayoumi, and management were forced to comply, paying workers the incentive.

"The 2006 Mahalla strike was the candle that lit the way for workers all over the country, showing them that a peaceful strike is possible, that we can stand in the face of injustice and against corruption," El-Fayoumi said.

The 2006 strike paved the road for 6 April 2008. In 2007 another strike was staged to gain demands articulated in 2006, including restructuring wages, channeling more investment into the company, increasing incentives and bonuses, increasing meal allowances and similar worker benefits.

Management stalled on those again, said El-Fayoumi, while the National Council on Wages was being held to decide a new minimum wage, mentioning that international organisations put the minimum wage at LE1200. At the same time prices were increasing on basic goods.

Those factors combined, said El-Fayoumi, made workers decide to hold a strike on 6 April 2008, to press on with their demands and for the first time demand a national minimum wage.

The 6 April 2008 strike

Political movements such as anti-government group Kefaya (Enough) and others decided to join the strike and widen the scope of the protest, hoping to make it a day of civil disobedience.

"Calls to join the campaign spread quickly in workers' unions, factories, institutions, the postal service, schools and many others," El-Fayoumi said, adding that the day started to become a real threat to the regime.

A week prior to the strike, El-Fayoumi found out through some journalists that a meeting was being held in Cairo between the head of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation and a few workers from the company.

Hussein Mugawer, the Federation's head, tried to talk El-Fayoumi out of the strike, he said, saying that workers should double production on the day instead of halting it.

"He told us that you [the workers] won't fall prey to political groups; we have already raised your wages before, so you shouldn't be asking for this," El-Fayoumi recalled, adding that he responded by saying that the only gains workers saw followed strikes in 2006 and 2007.

"He then presented us with a statement saying we won't participate in a planned strike, which I and another worker refused to sign but that was signed by the other workers in the meeting," he recounted. This stoked differences between workers and weakened the planned labour action.

State Security — Mubarak's feared security apparatus used to deal with any opposition to the regime — called El-Fayoumi a few days later and tried to talk him out of taking part in the strike. He refused.

The state moves in

On the day of the strike, El-Fayumi said State Security agents in plain clothes filled the premises of the company that spans over almost 600 feddans.

“They stood at the gates of the company and escorted whoever finished their shifts to a vehicle that drove them home, as well as escorting any worker standing outside the gates inside,” El-Fayoumi said, preventing workers from assembling outside where they were supposed to demonstrate.

Karim El-Beheiry, an employee at the company in 2008 and a labour activist, was also working with others towards the strike three months before.

“As soon as I showed up at the premises a group of plainclothed police accompanied me to my office and made sure I stayed inside,” he told Ahram Online.

“Mahalla became a police base. Central Security Forces and trucks could be seen everywhere, cordoning off many areas,” he said.

El-Fayoumi said they were trying to make it appear that no strike was taking place.

“I went out of the company and told media outlets that the strike is ongoing. The workers who are working belong to the state-controlled union and State Security. I am a worker and the demands of the Mahalla textile workers aren’t being met,” El-Fayoumi continued.

In the afternoon, El-Fayumi was detained by security along with a co-worker. He wasn’t witness to events that unfolded outside later in the day.

Meanwhile, El-Beheiry argued with security officers and was able to get out of his office.

Clashes begin

“I saw officials in the company escort journalists around and show them that there was no strike, which wasn’t true. I even met a journalist friend, we exchanged glances and he nodded in a way implying that he knows what they were trying to do,” El-Beheiry said.

“I made my way to the city’s main square, Shoun Square, where large security formations were in place and saw the beginning of the clashes.”

El-Beheiry said residents were gathered on the sidelines of the square in anticipation of what might unfold. A demonstration against the regime had started where citizens and workers (Mahalla has a large working population due to the presence of the industrial complex) were already chanting against the regime.

“People came to the protest with bread in their hands,” said Mohamed Asaad, a textile worker at a private company who joined the protesters that day. “This was because the cost of living had become unbearable,” he said.

Mahalla’s families were all disaffected by the meager wages workers made, which is why they came out on that day.

A banner bearing the photo of Mubarak was attacked by protesters who brought it down, an action that took courage amid a feared security apparatus in which torture was endemic.

"This was the first time for us to see people destroy Mubarak's posters. This happened all over the city," Asaad said.

El-Beheiry recalled that a small quarrel between a woman and a police officer ended with the officer slapping her on the face. This led to the ensuing clashes between protesters and police.

Magdi El-Hawwan, who owned a shop selling mobile phones off Shoun Square in 2008, told Ahram Online that the slap led bystanders to attack the police.

"The police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and live fire, all mandated by their supervising officers, while protesters threw stones," El-Hawwan said. "Some of the police's thugs attacked a nearby school in an effort to show that protesters were vandals."

El-Beheiry claimed he took video footage of the thugs attacking the school, but his memory card was later confiscated by police.

He said the clashes continued until midnight before the streets calmed down. Tens were arrested and El-Beheiri was detained by State Security officers and police, joining El-Fayoumi later in Tanta to appear before the prosecution. El-Beheiri said he was tortured in Mahalla's State Security headquarters before being transferred to Tanta.

The aftermath

El-Fayumi and El-Beheiri were both released three months after the events. Three were killed during the clashes, including a 15-year-old boy (shot on the balcony of his home that overlooked the square), while over a hundred were injured.

Nazif gave workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company a 15-day bonus to placate them.

While the strike wasn't successful in terms of realising its stated aims, within the company or across the nation (protesters were few in Cairo, partly due to the huge police presence downtown), protests in the city that day showed the country that facing the regime was possible.

Two years after Mubarak fell, workers are still struggling for improved pay and other rights.

"It's the same regime. The Muslim Brotherhood (from which Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi hails) are the same as the National Democratic Party of Mubarak. Only they use the cloak of religion," Asaad said, saying that as long as social equality isn't achieved, change has not been realised.

"The plan to destroy the company is the same," El-Fayoumi told Ahram Online. "Before the revolution the company was working with half of its capacity. Now its working with 30 percent of its capacity. They want to make losses to be able to privatise and sell the company."

"The National Democratic Party and the Brotherhood are two faces of the same coin; they are following the same policies," El-Fayoumi said, stating that the Brotherhood was never in favour of strikes and didn't have any role in the 2008 strike, which he calls a revolution.

"6 April 2008 was a revolution by all means. All Mahalla's residents came out against Mubarak. If a few more major cities like Suez or Alexandria rose up with us, the Mubarak regime would've fell then and there," El-Fayoumi believes.

El-Beheiry shares this belief. "6 April 2008 wasn't an uprising, it was the real revolution," he asserted.

"People refer to the events of 2008 as a rehearsal, and say 25 January 2011 was the first wave of the revolution. This isn't true, 6 April was a genuine revolution against the regime and it wasn't hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood, as was 25 January. 25 January was the second wave of the revolution," El-Beheiry insisted.

Osman El Sharnoubi, Saturday 6 Apr 2013

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