

Workers' Liberty



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The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself ISSN 1446-0165

Egypt: new workers movement born

On 8 February, workers at the centre of Egypt's economy, in the Suez Canal Company at the cities of Suez, Port Said, and Ismailia began an open-ended sit-in strike.

Over 6000 agreed that they would not go home at the end of their shift, but hold the workplace until their demands against poor wages and deteriorating health and working conditions met.

The strike will stop one of the world's biggest shipping routes, and cause huge losses to business if it continues long.

Such battles are inseparable from the democratic revolt on Cairo's streets. Denial of political freedoms, and economic corruption and denial to workers of the right to organise and to civilise conditions at work, are two faces of the same stifling dictatorship that has ruled Egypt for decades.

The sharp food price rises of the last six months, hitting much harder in Egypt than they do in relatively well-off Britain, will have been central in sparking the revolt. They come on top of a process since the 1980s of scrapping the food price subsidies which the poor depended on, trashing social provision, and "opening" up the economy to privatisation which has enriched a wealthy elite at the top and a relatively small middle class.

In the last two weeks Egypt's workers, who have never before in

history had a large independent trade union movement, have formed a new trade union federation.

The street revolt's ability to break the spell of the fear on which the dictatorship relied opens the way for workers to organise and fight to improve their conditions. With workers organising and fighting comes the possibility of a new labour movement which will combine answers to economic exploitation with answers to political unfreedom.

The same in Tunisia. It is out of the headlines now. But underneath the attempts of the transitional government to restore quiet, workers there are striking, organising, and agitating to throw out old-regime authorities at local level.

We do not know how far and how fast the upheavals in the Arab world will spread. A demonstration had been called in Syria for 5 February, but that country's political police, even more rigid and ruthless than those of Egypt and Tunisia, forestalled it. A rally has been called in Algeria for 12 February, and banned by the government. The organisers say they will go ahead.

All these regimes — Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, and others — have sat on their countries since the 1950s or 60s, allowing no room for democratic change, altering faces at

the top only to install a chosen successor when the previous leader dies or becomes incapable.

Now politics is thrown open for the first time in many decades. The outcome will be shaped not only by the raw force of the people's revolt, but also by the political battles between the different political forces now emerging.

There is the new workers' movement. There are small groups of socialists, especially in Algeria.

There is the army. There are the old-regime figures trying to recycle themselves as democrats, like Suleiman in Egypt and Ghannouchi in Tunisia.

There are people like al-Baradei in Egypt, dissenters from the old regime but of a mild sort, tied in to international capitalist networks and interests.

And — the chief rival to the socialists and the labour movements at grassroots level — there are the Islamist movements, the movements whose fundamental political programme is to give (their interpretation) of ancient religious law force of compulsion over their societies, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Harking back to a mythical Islamic past, before capitalism, these Islamist movements have no answers to the social questions, but can win support. There is a danger that they will confiscate the

revolutions and turn them into counter-revolutions on the model of Iran in 1978-9.

The Islamists, the old-regime figures, the upper-class dissenters, will all get help from rich and powerful people on an international

level. The socialists and the labour movements will have to rely on our support. Let's organise!

Direct appeal for solidarity from Egyptian union

An appeal from kamal Abu Aita. President of the Independent Property Tax Collectors' Union, Retau.

Email messages of solidarity to reta.union.reta@gmail.com

"We want trade union solidarity, not solidarity from international governments....International workers' solidarity is an alternative to capitalist globalisation and militarisation.

The British and US governments make a lot of noise about 'democracy' and 'stopping the violence', but the bullets killing us are made in the US.

This message must get out, the regime cut off our communications.

We founded a new independent union federation in Tahrir Square on 25 January-the Egyptian Federation of Independent Unions.

It includes four unions: RETAU, the Pensioners' Union, the independent teachers' union and the health workers' union, bringing the membership to around two million.

The independent unions have been here from the beginning.

We formed committees to defend the revolution while the government-controlled Egyptian

Trade Union Federation was organising committees to smash it.

We are organising civil disobedience and encouraging people to stay in the streets and not to go to work. The revolution has opened new horizons for workers' freedoms.

It is also characterised by unity between Muslims and Christians. Reactionary forces are trying to stir up sectarian hatreds because they are afraid of this unity.

We reject any negotiations with the regime before Mubarak goes. You can help us. Your pressure on the government will help us."

Support democratic revolution & workers' freedom

Hosni Mubarak, had been dictator of Egypt since 1981.

His rule was fatally damaged when the Egyptian army, on 31 January, declared that it would not use force against the demonstrators on Egypt's streets, and even that it recognised the demonstrators' demands as "legitimate". The main demand of the demonstrators had been that Mubarak should go.

The blows of the world economic crisis, and especially of the big food price rises of 2008 and the recent months, cracked the established order first at a point where it looked most solid and congealed, but in fact was most worn and discredited.

Mubarak was the third chief of a regime in office since 1952. In Tunisia, Ben Ali was the second chief of a regime ruling since 1956.

Other Arab regimes are mostly of the same stripe: outright hereditary monarchies, in Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia; dictatorships which owed their initial impetus to Arab-nationalist claims of decades ago, such as the Ba'athists in Syria (since 1963), the FLN/army regime in Algeria (since 1962), or Qaddafi in Libya (since 1969). They are the "oldest" regimes in the world.

In their day they consolidated national independence from European colonial rule, nationalised much industry, and pushed through land reforms. But all have been stifflingly unfree.

Despite the afflux of oil incomes to the region — some of which spreads out to countries with little or no oil, through workers' remittances home — economic growth has been poor. Rapid urbanisation and expansion of the education systems in these

countries has produced a generation of urban young people often highly educated, taunted by the processes of capitalist enrichment and corruption around them, but without jobs or prospects. In Egypt, over 30% of young people are unemployed.

The new market-oriented economic policies of governments like Egypt in recent decades have stripped protections from the poor like food subsidies, but produced no flowering of private capital.

In Tunisia and in Egypt, the working class has been central to the upheavals. In Tunisia, the trade-union confederation UGTT, despite a long history of political accommodation to power, is the axis of the opposition. In Egypt, the movement on the streets follows a rise of workers' strikes since 2004, and has given birth to a new independent trade-union federation.

With independent political organisation and a chance to educate itself and discuss — things which will take much effort and probably much time — the workers' movement in these countries can take the lead in fighting for full democracy, link that fight to its battles on wages and conditions, and lead society forward to a workers' government.

For now the UGTT is committed to political coalition, and the initial step of the working class separating itself out as an autonomous political force is yet to be completed.

The upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt will reverberate throughout the Arab world. A clear independent voice from the workers' movements in those countries — where it is stronger than in many other Arab countries — can shape the outcome across the whole region.

Other forces

Other forces than the working class will also strive to shape the outcome.

In Egypt, the international diplomat Mohamed El Baradei has put himself forward. He appears to want a development like that in Indonesia after the fall of the

Suharto dictatorship in 1998, or the Philippines after the overthrow of the Marcos regime in 1986: a regime politically more liberal, but economically neo-liberal.

That would at least allow the working class space to organise.

The army chiefs are also contenders for power. In both Egypt and Tunisia the army stood aside, effectively licensing the street demonstrations, and is seen by many as a friend rather than an enemy.

Direct military rule is perhaps less likely than the installation of coalition civilian governments buttressed by and close to the army.

A big difference from the Philippines, and from Indonesia, although in terms of religious belief Indonesia is mostly Muslim, is the strong presence in Egypt and Tunisia, and across the Arab world, of political-Islamist groups as the longstanding legally-banned but visibly active opposition to the dictatorships. This is true even in Tunisia, by many standards a very secularised society.

Though the Islamist movements have played little part in the upheavals, the fact that they have political cadres and organisation

already in place gives them scope to shape outcomes.

Iran since 1979 shows that political Islam is a deadly threat to democratic, workers', and women's rights. Iran in 1978-9 shows that democratic promises by the Islamists before taking power are worth nothing once they gain power.

It may be that the young people of the Arab countries know enough about Iran that they will strongly resist political Islam. It may be that the Islamist movements in Egypt and Tunisia, lacking Iranian Islamism's structure of a clerical hierarchy, prove less solid than they seem. We hope so.

Much of the international left has ignored the threat of political Islam to the revolutions in the Arab world, or positively endorsed political Islam, thinking that its demagogic hostility to the US and European governments makes it progressive. This is a betrayal of the workers' and women's movements in the Arab world.

Our solidarity should be with the workers' movements, and with a fight for full and broad democracy in the Arab world.

Egyptian workers start to move

by Clive Bradley

In Egypt, Tahrir Square has become a symbol for grass-roots democratic organisation, with mass movements holding daily plebiscites on strategy and programme, with an unquenchable thirst for political discussion, and a vibrant sense of the power of ordinary people when they lose their fear. Local communities, in the absence of the police, have organised their own defence.

There have also been some instances of workers taking over

their workplaces and beginning self-management. Left-wing Egyptian blogger Hossam el Hamalawy (who is close to the British SWP) told an interviewer: "I received a report about a textile mill owned by a company called Ghazl Meit Ghamr in Daqahliya, which is a province in the Nile Delta. The workers there have kicked out the CEO, they have occupied the factory and are self-managing it. This type of action has also been repeated in a printing house south of Cairo called Dar El-Ta'awon. There as well the workers have kicked out

the CEO and are self managing the company.

"There are two other cases in Suez, where the clashes were the worst with the security forces during the uprising. The death toll is very high in Suez, we don't actually know the real death toll until now.

"In two factories there, the Suez Steel Mill and the Suez Fertilizer Factory, workers have declared an open-ended strike until the regime falls. Other than that we have not seen, at least to my knowledge, independent working

class action.”
(<http://www.occupiedlondon.org/cairo/?p=300>)

Workers have taken action against representatives of the state-run trade union federation — calling for its leader to be prosecuted on charges of corruption. A new, independent union federation was on 30 January declared after a meeting in Tahrir Square which involved representatives of workers across Egypt, including the three already-existing independent unions (tax collectors, health technicians and pensioners). The new union federation has already won wide support from the international labour movement.

Shift

As of 8 February, the uprising in Egypt is entering its fifteenth day. Thousands of people continue to occupy Tahrir Square; every day there are demonstrations across the country.

Although there are reports of some return to normality, Egypt remains paralysed, and in particular paralysed politically. Breakdown has come in attempts by the regime — now in effect run by Vice-President Omar Suleiman, although Hosni Mubarak still refuses to step down — to establish formal negotiations with the opposition, including the still-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

Even the attempt is a huge shift in the dictatorship's policy. Less than a week ago it attempted to break the protest movement's will by sending its thugs — some of them, surreally, on camels — into Tahrir Square. Goons caught by protestors had police ID on them. There were two days of fighting. In the end the pro-regime forces had to withdraw, and something of the previous

carnavalesque air returned to downtown Cairo.

The pro-government thugs had to be permitted access to the Square by the army. The army's alleged sympathy for “the people” was in danger of being discredited. It moved quickly to recapture its previous image as the nation's “most respected institution”.

The army has essentially run Egypt since the “Revolution” — in fact a coup — of 1952, and continues to do so. Now, under increased pressure from the Obama administration (Egypt gets more military aid from the USA than any other country bar Israel, and the Egyptian army has close links with the US military), the army and the regime know they must try to negotiate an “orderly transition” and string along the uprising so that it runs out of steam.

None of the principal leaders of the revolt — the various youth movements which have mainly co-ordinated action, or high-profile liberal figures such as Mohamed al-Baradei — participated in the talks this week. On the contrary, they criticised the negotiations both for not representing the protestors, and for falling short of the basic demand that the President must step down immediately.

Suleiman has given no indication, yet, that he will improve on Mubarak's current promise not to stand for re-election, and guarantee that his unpopular son will not be a candidate. Talks were intended to “discuss” elections, which is not the same as holding them.

USA moves

The Muslim Brotherhood says it agreed to meet the government only to hear what it had to say, not to negotiate anything. It quickly withdrew.

That the talks with representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood were plainly sanctioned by the United States is significant: Washington has moved from a policy of supporting the dictatorship in order to keep Islamism at bay to one of trying to draw in and tame the Brotherhood.

For the moment, there is stalemate. Suleiman, the former head of the security services (who led the near-destruction of the most extremist Islamist movements in the 1990s), is very unlikely to turn towards wholesale repression. Al-Jazeera calls him “the CIA's man in Cairo”; and at least for now such a policy would be unacceptable in Washington. If Suleiman can't find a way to manage the transition Obama wants, presumably there will be pressure for a further shift at the top of the regime.

Underlying everything that has happened in Egypt and across the Middle East in recent weeks is the economic crisis and deepening, and highly visible, social inequality. Mubarak is hated also for the “crony capitalism” which is endemic and blatant. “Experts estimate the net worth of Mr. Mubarak and his family at between \$40 billion and \$70 billion,” according to the Voice of America. “They say the Egyptian president has much of his wealth in Swiss banks or tied up in real estate in New York, Los Angeles and London... Mubarak's wife, Susan, and their two sons, Gamal and Alaa, are also reported to be billionaires.”

The Brotherhood has no answers to the social inequality. The workers' movement has the power to create answers. We must lend it every support we can.

"Workers must form committees"

Tamer Fathy, International Relations Secretary of the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services, spoke to *Solidarity* (British paper of Workers' Liberty) about the new union federation in Egypt.

On 30 January, union leaders and worker activists met to form a new federation. It adopted the broader demands of the revolutionary movement, but its main focus is the creation of new independent unions that are responsive to the workers.

To give you a taste of the official unions — the leaders of these unions were quoted in the newspapers saying that no workers would go on these demos, but also calling for union officials to monitor workers and report if they did demonstrate! We also received reports that the official unions were trying to mobilise people to take part in the pro-Mubarak gangs that attacked demonstrators. They even offered people money... So the need for an alternative union federation was obvious.

The new federation involves tax collectors, health technicians and many others from the public sector, as well as the most important sections of private industry — textiles, metals, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, iron and steel, auto workers... I'd say the main issues facing us, beyond the broader political demands of the revolutionary movement, are the minimum wage and unemployment benefits. But beyond specific demands, the key thing is for workers to form democratic committees in the factories and enterprises, to get organised, to get more power. They can cooperate with the neighbourhood committees which people have organised

since the police withdrew. The most important thing is for workers to get organised.

What is CTUWS?

We are an NGO, established in 1990. Our aim is to defend the right of workers to strike and form independent unions. The official union federation [which is controlled by the state] was not representing workers, and the law stated that all unions must come under the umbrella of this federation. Plus, with changes in the labour market and moves towards a more neo-liberal economic model, workers had no rights. There was no right to strike; even when permitted, it was limited by all sorts of conditions. So we were responding to an obvious need.

The Centre was founded by workers' leaders, mostly from a leftist background. One of them was our General Coordinator, Kamal Abbas, who led the famous strike of iron and steel workers in 1989. He was arrested and fined because of his activities, and formed this association as the next step.

What have been the most important struggles in recent years?

Strike movements at the end of the 1980s were violently suppressed. A new wave of struggles began in 2006, when workers at the Mahalla textile company organised an uprising over working conditions. This was a huge strike, with huge protests, and inspired workers in many other sectors. Since then the movement has grown and grown. In the last four years, every day we've seen new struggles, strikes, all forms of protest.

In 2008, the struggle spread into the public sector, when real estate tax collectors went on strike. They protested in front of the cabinet, and stayed in the street for fifteen days. Their main demand was for parity with their colleagues in the income tax collection department.

In 1973 the real estate tax department came under the control of local councils, and since then they have lost out a lot. Their demand was therefore to rejoin the Ministry of Finance. In the end, they won all their demands. In addition, the general committee created to run their strike developed into an independent union — the first to be recognised by this regime. This inspired other, similar struggles, for instance by the health technicians, who won in December last year. These struggles were the sparks that eventually lit the fire of a mass movement this year.

Now, people are getting more determined and their demands stronger every day. At first people just wanted Mubarak to go. Now they demand the dissolution of the current parliament, and the removal of the whole regime.

I honestly don't know what will happen next. No one imagined before 25 January that the revolution would begin, or imagined after that we would succeed in continuing the protests against attacks by Mubarak's thugs, or that the police would simply collapse. Victory against Mubarak is still possible. But, whatever happens, the most important thing is that ordinary people on the streets now feel they have the power to change their lives and their society. It's quite amazing.

What international links do you have?

We have links with unions across the region — in Tunisia, yes, but also Algeria, Jordan, Palestine,

Iraq — and with unions in many European countries too. During the Mahallah struggle we had some support from [the British] TUC, but otherwise our links in

Britain are very limited. It would be great to change that.

Brotherhood is a threat

By Martin Thomas

Workers' Liberty has warned against the Muslim Brotherhood as a force which could confiscate the revolution in Egypt and turn it into an Islamist counter-revolution. In the *Financial Times* of 1 February Ed Husain presented a reasoned argument against our assessment.

Husain is not a “cultural relativist” who thinks that the Muslim Brotherhood is fine for Egypt because “it’s their culture” and that secularism, democracy, and women’s rights are only for “the West”. He is not a flabby liberal who responds to any powerful force, like political Islam, by advocating soft deals.

He is a former Islamist militant who broke from Islamism, wrote a book about it, and has been sharp against “soft-sell” Islamism — against, for example, the Islam Channel, run by the former leader of the Tunisian Islamic Front (who nevertheless has got himself invited to speak at a number of British left events).

Husain is not a “kitsch anti-imperialist”, who thinks that the Muslim Brotherhood should automatically be supported because it is anti-Israel and anti-American. Far from it. He is now a member of the US foreign policy establishment, working for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in Washington.

In fact Husain is mostly talking to boneheaded “hawks” in the US ruling class, trying to convince them that the Muslim Brotherhood is not Al Qaeda (it isn’t) and that the US

government can do deals with it (it probably can: the Muslim Brotherhood’s offshoot in Iraq, the Iraq Islamic Party, has been almost the only Sunni-Arab-based group to collaborate consistently with the US since 2003).

He is telling the US establishment that Egyptians are in the streets for “universal values of freedom, of dignity, of human equality”, and that most of those on the streets are not Brotherhood supporters.

But an element of Ed Husain’s argument cuts against what we say. He asserts that the Brotherhood has changed so that it no longer seeks an Islamic state.

Scoffed

He thinks it possible that US diplomats could get the Brotherhood to sign up for a “secular, liberal, democratic” constitution, and recognition of “Israel’s Jewish democratic status as a neighbour”, and it would not be dissimulation.

“Mohammed Badie, the Brotherhood’s leader, comes from its conservative wing. But he recently scoffed at the idea of an Islamic state, saying his aim was to be part of a civilian administration.

“Another relative hardliner (and my former teacher) Kamal ElHelbawi said... ‘Islamists would not be able to rule Egypt alone’. He argued for cooperation with secularists...

“To its credit, the Brotherhood also often calls for improved

human rights... [And] even Mr ElHelbawi, often an apologist for suicide bombers, does not dismiss existing agreements between Israel and Egypt”.

In any case, “in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and even Pakistan, Islamist parties do badly at the polls”.

Backstop argument: even if the Brotherhood does gain a majority, Israel’s military strength means it has “little to fear from Egypt’s shabby military”.

But what about the Palestinians? Israel would survive a Brotherhood government in Egypt which supported Hamas, but the Palestinians would be ground to pieces in the clash between rival chauvinisms. And what about the Egyptian people under Islamist rule?

The Brotherhood is canny. Of course it doesn’t propose an Islamic state now in Egypt, or the breaking of Egypt’s treaties with Israel. It doesn’t want to throw itself into a showdown with secular forces in Egypt (including, probably, important or decisive elements of the army) and with the USA, at a time when it would lose that clash.

But has the Brotherhood really “bio-degraded” into a sort of Muslim-Democratic party, as hegemonised by secularism and liberalism as European Christian Democracy?

Or is its caution more like that of Stalinist parties, in the heyday of Stalinism, who would spend long periods pretending to be just

good democrats and patriots, with no aspirations for the foreseeable future beyond an “advanced” or “people’s” democracy, but were ready to impose Stalinist rule when they had the chance?

The Stalinist parties eventually “bio-degraded” in Western Europe, but only after decades of everyday absorption in running local authorities and parliamentary contests within stable and prosperous parliamentary democracies where the Stalinist “model” became more and more unattractive even to Communist Party activists.

It is not like that with the Brotherhood. Its “final goal”, a state in which religion is law against all workers’, women’s, and democratic rights, still enjoys prestige and a huge emotional charge given to it by religious conviction. Secularism, in Egypt, is not an exciting new model not yet tried, but something tainted by association with decades of stifling bureaucratic demagoguery.

Although very many Egyptians are secular, the trend for decades now has been to more “Islamisation” of society rather than less.

The Brotherhood’s activists have had to operate in illegality and

often in prison. That makes them cautious: but does not encourage them to think they should forget their final goal and stop at tokens and sops.

If the Egyptian workers’ movement can organise itself politically, it can quickly win over great slabs of the Brotherhood’s base and shatter its confidence.

But if not... Husain himself sees dark possibilities, though his hope of avoiding them rests on deft US diplomacy rather than working-class action: “Egypt could all too easily go the way of Iran, or Gaza”.

That can happen without the majority ever wanting it, or doing more than becoming reconciled to it once the new tyranny is in place. It can be avoided only by the construction of strong-enough political alternatives to the Brotherhood.

The opposition “14 January Front” in Tunisia has a 14 point programme, mostly centred round demands for democracy, a constituent assembly, freedom of speech and association, and social welfare.

One of the 14 points jars. It is the only substantive point about international issues, and it calls

for: “Resistance to normalisation with the Zionist entity, its penalisation, and the support for the national liberation movements in the Arab world and the whole world”.

Whether it was the (small, so we understand) Nasserist or Ba’thist groups in the Front who pushed this, or the (larger) Hoxha-Stalinist group, we don’t know.

But it is particularly diversionary and demagogic in Tunisia to try to define “national liberation” as the desire to pitch the Palestinians (who mostly support “two states”) into a “no compromise” attempt to wipe out “the Zionist entity” (codename for Israel among people who refuse to recognise that the Israeli Jews are a nation).

Israel does not oppress distant Tunisia. On the other hand, the shrinking of the Jewish population in Tunisia from 110,000 in 1948 to 1,700 in 2011 reflects anti-Jewish pressure within Tunisia.

The main enemy for Tunisian workers is at home. The main external enemy is the world capitalist market, not Israel.

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Egypt

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