

# Class struggle emerges in Saudi Arabia

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Over 600 construction workers employed by a major company on a project expanding the northern courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia are on strike.

Their employer, King Abdul Aziz Endowment Project, failed to pay their wages for two months and has not paid overtime. They also called for wage increases and better accommodation.

On Monday, police were used to disperse the strikers protesting close to the site.

The Saudi construction industry is notoriously low paid and dangerous for the workers, both native born and migrant. Last month, three workers were killed and 11 injured after scaffolding collapsed at a construction site at Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman women's University, in the capital, Riyadh.

On February 16, hundreds of workers at the King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD) and extension projects at the King Saud University (KSU), in the capital, stopped work due to non payment of their regular wages and overtime pay.

A technician from Uttar Pradesh, India, said, "We get our salaries, which is sometimes delayed. However, we don't get payment for overtime services rendered."

The eruption of industrial action in the US-backed absolute monarchy is an expression of deeper social tensions in the country ruled by the House of Saud. The wave of revolution sweeping North Africa and the Middle East is beginning to find reverberations in the one nation in the region that—based on brutal imperialist patronage, ruthless exploitation of millions of migrant laborers and the resources of the largest reserves of oil on the planet—seemed to have suppressed the class struggle for several decades.

Despite the fostered image of stability, tensions have been rising beneath the surface of the oil kingdom. On January 21, an unidentified 65-year-old man died after setting himself on fire in the town of Samtah, Jizan. This was the first known case of self-immolation in the country.

On January 29, hundreds of protesters gathered in the

city of Jeddah in a protest against the city's poor infrastructure after deadly floods killed eleven people. Mass messages were sent over smart-phones, calling for popular action in response to the flood.

Police stopped the demonstration about 15 minutes after it started and up to 50 people were arrested.

On February 5, around 40 women wearing black clothes demonstrated in the capital calling for the release of prisoners held without trial.

On February 10, a Reuters report claimed that 10 human rights activists and lawyers came together to create the Umma Islamic Party, said to be the first political party in Saudi Arabia since the 1990s, to demand the end of absolute monarchy. On February 18, all ten founding members of the party were arrested and ordered to withdraw demands for political reform in exchange for their release.

A "Day of Rage" is planned in the capital for March 11.

As the country's 87-year-old monarch returned home from the US and Morocco where he underwent back surgery last week, his government attempted to anticipate potential unrest across Saudi Arabia by announcing an unprecedented economic package that included interest-free home loans, unemployment assistance and tranches of debt write-offs.

*Bloomberg* February 23, commented, "The total cost was estimated at 135 billion Saudi riyals (\$36 billion), but this was not largesse. Saudi Arabia clearly wants no part of the revolts and bloodshed sweeping the already unsettled Arab world."

Saudi officials were desperately "pumping in huge amounts of money into areas where it will have an obvious trickle-down by addressing issues like housing shortages," according to John Sfakianakis, chief economist for the Riyadh, Saudi Arabia-based Banque Saudi Fransi.

The most significant element of the cash injection—prominently aired across state-controlled television—was the 40 billion riyals (\$10.7 billion) fund to provide interest-free loans for Saudis to buy or build

homes. There is currently an 18-year waiting list to qualify for a loan.

Another 15 billion riyals (\$4 billion) was proposed to be put into the General Housing Authority's budget, while the Saudi Credit & Savings Bank was to get 30 billion riyals (\$8 billion) in capital. The bank provides loans for marriage and setting up a business, among other things, and is supported by the Saudi government.

The online *Sharq* Arabic language newspaper "has learned from sources close to the Royal Court that government employees will get a 30 percent increase in their wages along with a three-month salary to mark the return of His Majesty the Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines."

Other measures included a 15 percent cost of living adjustment for government workers, a year of unemployment assistance for youth and nearly doubling to 15 individuals the size of families that are eligible for state aid. The economic proposals also moot the write-off of the debts of people who had borrowed from the development fund and subsequently died.

There are no available government figures in Saudi Arabia that provide a national income breakdown, but some analysts estimate that there are over 450,000 jobless in the country—a figure believed by others to be deceptive when unstable employment is factored in. Among the 15 to 24 age group, unemployment in Saudi Arabia is reported to be almost 40 percent.

The country's population is almost 26 million, of which 5.5 million are non-Saudis, mainly low paid migrant workers.

The low cost of living adjustment and high inflation, which stood at about 5.3 per cent in January, and the spiraling cost of housing are exacerbating social tensions.

Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak also offered "economic sweeteners" in the first days of the protests in Egypt, but was ousted shortly thereafter. Other neighbouring nations, such as Jordan and Yemen, have looked to boost subsidies. Jordan is reviving a government body that ensures the prices of basic commodities are brought down artificially, but to little avail in terms of damping down protests.

A Facebook page calling for a "March 11 Revolution of Longing" in Saudi Arabia has attracted hundreds of viewers. A message posted on the page calls for "the ousting of the regime" and lists demands including allowing the election of a ruler and members of the advisory assembly known as the Shura Council.

The unrest in Bahrain, a Gulf Cooperation Council

member state, and now Libya raises deep concerns for the global oil market since those nations are key OPEC members. Saudi Arabia sits atop the world's largest proven reserves of conventional crude.

A disruption in crude supplies from the Gulf would make the current, two-year-high levels of over \$100 per barrel, appear cheap. Oil prices have already spiked way in excess of this figure because of Libya's unrest.

Investment bank Goldman Sachs said in a research report that the Bahrain protests spotlight how the Gulf States are also vulnerable, noting that the unrest in the island nation and in Libya "increase the risks of major supply disruptions."

The House of Saud is already beset with problems. The health of King Abdullah, who is 87, has been the subject of intense speculation, especially since the men tipped to succeed him are also elderly. He spent three months in the US and Morocco receiving treatment. Abdullah's half-brother Crown Prince Sultan, who is in his 80s and has been in poor health, was in charge in his absence.

The monarch's return was welcomed by the Saudi media, but in decidedly nervous tones. The editorial in the English-language daily *Arab News* said, "The king is the only pillar of stability in the region now... He is the assurance of orderly progress... in the Arab world as a whole."

Soon after arriving, Abdullah went into talks with King Hamad of Bahrain, which is on Saudi Arabia's eastern border.

Saudi Arabia's regional and strategic significance for imperialism is paramount. It is bordered by Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Yemen, as well as being connected to Bahrain by a causeway. Other than the state of Israel and possibly Egypt, no other nation has played such an important linchpin role for imperialism in the region.



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