

Egypt's military regime prepares clampdown on strike wave

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The upsurge of industrial struggle by Egyptian workers that preceded the January revolution shows no sign of diminishing.

Workers are now in a mounting conflict with the post-Mubarak military regime in Cairo.

With workers pressing their demands on pay, conditions and official corruption—demands that accompanied the toppling of former President Hosni Mubarak and remain unmet—the military regime is employing ever more repressive measures.

On June 8, the government confirmed that the law it approved in April criminalising protests, strikes, public gatherings and street assemblies, is now to be enforced.

Al Masry Al-Youm notes, “The law stipulates that protesters or strikers disrupting work at state institutions, public authorities, and public or private institutions will be arrested, fined and/or imprisoned, with fines ranging from LE30,000 to LE500,000 (from US\$5,000 to US\$83,000), and prison sentences of one year or more. Even those promoting strikes or protests but not participating in them are subject to imprisonment and fines reaching up to LE50,000 (around US\$8,300)”.

The new legislation was issued March 24 by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf's cabinet and ratified by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) a month later. It was never fully enforced, as the military regime feared the response of the working class.

A statement issued by the SCAF June 8, said, “In order to achieve stability, the cabinet declares the activation of the law that criminalises strikes and the disruption of production”.

It stressed that the government “will not hesitate to respond to any attempts by any party or group to disrupt the law or harm the national economy, especially during this critical stage the country is going through”.

On June 8, the military police arrested five workers at Petrojet (Petroleum Projects and Technical Consultations

Company) for staging a two-week sit-in outside the headquarters of the Petroleum Ministry to protest the dismissal of 1,200 workers. A statement issued by the Centre for Trade Union & Workers' Services (CTUWS), said the arrests represented the first efforts to enforce the law criminalising protests and strikes.

The proclamation was made in the face of continuing industrial militancy, with sections of workers compelled to challenge the anti-protest measures.

On the same day as the issuing of the SCAF statement, workers, professionals, farmers and young people protested, demanding better wages and working conditions throughout Cairo and other governorates.

Demonstrators included, according to *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, graduates of Al-Azhar University who demanded their appointment as assistant professors, while graduates of the Agricultural Research Institute protested before the parliament building to demand wage increases.

EgyptAir cabin crew staged protests, demanding that the airline be purged of corrupt management.

Temporary workers of the Mansoura Petroleum Company took part in protests and demanded permanent contracts, while train drivers of the Damietta-Sherbin line staged a sit-in demanding better wages.

Tenant farmers protested against the government for depriving them of land. The farmers called on all other dispossessed farmers to join their movement.

On Kasr El-Eini Street, there was a demonstration of employees of the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA)—demanding permanent contracts and improved working conditions. The MSA workers also sought the removal of Zahi Hawass, the head of the ministry, and of Safwat El-Nahas, president of the Central Agency for Organisation and Management and chairperson of the Complaints Committee for the High Council of Wages.

The MSA announced that from June 8 employees would begin an open-ended national strike and a sit-in from June

15 in front of the Egyptian Museum.

Students of Mansoura Faculty of Veterinary Medicine continued their sit-in for the 58th consecutive day, demanding the dismissal of their faculty dean. Students in Alexandria demanded the resignation of the director of the city's Veterinary Directory.

Pensioners also staged demonstrations demanding the disbursement of their retirement bonuses.

Lawyers have been staging a sit-in at the Lawyers Syndicate since the beginning of the month. They have since threatened a hunger strike if their demands are not met. They are demanding that the syndicate's general assembly be dissolved, new elections be conducted, and an amendment of the law governing their profession. They accuse Hamdi Khalifa, their syndicate head, of colluding with the Muslim Brotherhood to allow it to control the syndicate and use it for political gains.

Over 4,000 workers in Mahalla—the Nile Delta city that has been the site of repeated textile workers struggles—marched on the city council to announce a walkout involving 1,300 factories and fabric workshops squeezed by cotton prices, which have quadrupled in the past six months.

On June 6, over 500 metro employees, including conductors, operators and ticket collectors, staged a sit-in at the Anwar Sadat Metro Station in Tahrir Square, calling for the dismissal of Mohamed Al-Shemy, head of the Egyptian Company for Metro Management and Operation, who they say wants to privatise the subway train company.

Temporary workers stormed the Ministry of Transport offices June 12, to demand that the minister appoint them on a permanent basis, according to a report by *Al Masry Al-Youm*. Ministry officials called the military police.

Cairo International Airport air traffic controllers threatened to go on strike for several hours on June 9, closing the air space to incoming flights, except for air ambulances and presidential planes. The strike threat was prompted by the intention of the Ministry of Civil Aviation to cut wages after a new batch of traffic control officers were employed. The airport also witnessed protests in the past week by air hostesses and security personnel demanding better working conditions.

In a June 6 press statement, Egypt's minister of Civil Aviation, Ibrahim Manna, threatened, "There is a decision preventing strikes in public facilities, and the air traffic control officers have no right to organise such a strike".

On June 7, a worker was run over and killed during a

protest in the long-running industrial dispute at Mansoura-España Garments Company, Talkha, over unpaid wages.

Over 100 workers had gathered outside the United Bank, which owns the company, demanding they be paid their wages for May. Workers had blocked the road. A truck ploughed into Mariam Abdel Ghaffar, a mother of three, and two other women. Abdel Ghaffar later died of her injuries.

"Another woman, Samah Abdel Aziz was dragged along for around 300 metres until protestors were able to make the driver stop", reports *Al Masry Al-Youm*. She was in critical condition in intensive care after undergoing a five-hour operation.

The Mansoura-España workers have refused a redundancy package offered last month. Mohsen al-Shaer, who was dismissed for his involvement in past strikes and protests, told *Al Masry Al-Youm*, "Nothing has changed since the revolution. It's the same system. Nothing has changed".

On June 12, workers at electric power stations continued protests to demand increased pay and the dismissal of Mohamed Awad, head of the holding company for electricity. The workers have said they will escalate their strike.

On June 13 a sit-in by more than 1,000 workers at Upper Egypt industrial complex in Naga Hammadi, the country's largest aluminium factory, entered its third day. According to *Ahram Online* the workers have several demands, including a wage rise, an increase in bonus payments, a restructuring of financial allowances, jobs for their sons and the resignation of administrative managerial director, Abdel-Razak Morsy. Last year, around 6,000 of Egypt Aluminium's 8,000 work force held a sit-in for the same demands.

The *Egyptian Gazette* reported that the Doctors' Association held a general assembly meeting last week to discuss "escalatory moves against the government, which they accuse of ignoring pay rise and better work condition demands".



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