

The new phase in the Egyptian Revolution

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The mass movement unleashed during the uprising against Mubarak has buffeted Egypt's ruling generals for nine months. And a new phase in the revolutionary process—a shift in the character of the movement from below, has taken place since the end of August.

This is the emergence of a new workers' movement.

It can be difficult to make sense of the ebb and flow of protest since February. Each week has brought new challenges and crises.

The workers' movement is developing organisation on scale that is already shaking the state.

The generals have, in response, lashed out with increasing brutality. This has not been aimed directly at the rising workers' movement, but at protesters marching for the rights of Coptic Christians on 9 October.

Now activists who exposed the army's massacre that day, in which 23 people died, are being targeted—including blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah who was detained on 30 October.

The mass strikes of the past two months are the cause of the current crisis in the state.

These struggles have included hugely important national strikes. Hundreds of thousands of teachers walked out. 30,000 sugar workers struck for three weeks and 40,000 bus workers in Cairo struck for twelve days.

This saw strikers turn their buses into barricades blockading the road outside parliament.

All this was alongside the re-emergence of mass protests in Tahrir and other city centres demanding an end to military rule.

These strikes are not simply important due to the numbers involved, but because of the degree of coordination—at a regional, sectional and national level—combined with the demands workers are raising.

The sheer audacity of the demands being raised in the course of these strikes is an inspiration.

In Egypt workers are beginning to think of a world without short-term contracts, with a maximum wage to redistribute wealth and one where privatisation is not only resisted, but reversed.

These battles are producing mass democratic organisations from below. History shows us that such organisations can develop into alternative organs of political and social power—like those in Russia in October 1905 or Poland in the summer of 1980.

It is common for Egyptian strike committees and negotiators to be elected directly by the striking workforce. There is also a strong tradition of reporting back directly the results of negotiations to mass meetings. These can then make an immediate decision on whether to accept or reject.

In the current context, this direct democracy from below is itself a fusion of the social and democratic aspects of the revolution.

Despite these developments, several of the important strikes over the past weeks essentially ended in a temporary stalemate.

The teachers' strike was suspended having made partial gains, but without an outright victory. The Cairo bus workers' strike was also suspended. It won significant wage rises and a promise from the government to release funds in order to meet workers' other demands.

Both of these cases demonstrate the need for co-ordinated action between key groups of workers to break the government's resistance. This will mean a direct confrontation with the generals' military council.

This need for a second revolution to break the old structures of the state can be supported from many different perspectives.

Want freedom for Palestine—or even freedom to protest in solidarity with the Palestinians? Want a minimum wage and the right to strike? Want to end the emergency laws and military trials for civilians? Want an end to sectarian incitement and attacks on Christians?

Currently the road to all of these runs through the military council's headquarters in Abbasiya.

But the political forces that can give expression to this fusion of the different aspects of the revolution, and help to lead the movement to victory, are very small.

The mainstream Islamist and liberal parties are resolutely opposed to the strike movement and are consistently craven in the face of the military council.

Muslim Brotherhood leaders and liberal politicians alike know that the revolution offers an opportunity for a re-division of the political spoils at the top.

Bourgeois political forces were previously excluded from power. But they are equally terrified of strikes and protests as the old regime.

Such struggles raise demands that cannot be satisfied without dismantling the neo-liberal policies that have benefited their class for decades.

The elections, which will begin at the end of November, represent the generals' best hope of creating a façade of democratic legitimacy.

They hope that the sense of celebration which many Egyptians will feel as they cast their votes will transfer some popular authority to an elected government.

This could potentially give the new regime room to control or even crush the strikes and protests.

This underlines the importance that revolutionary socialist organisation plays in moments like these. The current organisations in Egypt are still far too small to be able to lead the movement from below.

Yet they are shaping its politics and play a leading role in many important struggles in the workplaces and on the campuses.

They have a historic opportunity to build an organisation of revolutionary socialists that could make

a crucial difference to the future of the Egyptian revolution.

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P.S.

* From Socialist Worker & UNion Book:

<http://www.unionbook.org/profiles/blogs/anne-alexander-new-phase-in-egyptian-revolution-socialist-worker>

<http://www.swp.ie/editorial/new-phase-egyptian-revolution/4997>