

Mass protests and strikes escalate as Egyptians reject "orderly transition"

By Bill Van Auken

Cairo's Tahrir square was filled with the largest demonstration yet Tuesday, as masses of Egyptians rejected the "orderly transition" through which the Obama administration and its principal ally, former military intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, are attempting to salvage Egypt's dictatorial military regime.

The mass demonstration in Cairo, staged as the uprising shaking the US-backed dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak enters its third week, was accompanied by similar outpourings in Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city, and in smaller towns and cities across the country.

Even more significantly, the mass popular demonstrations demanding the ouster of Mubarak were joined by a growing wave of strikes by Egyptian workers and angry demonstrations by youth demanding jobs.

International financial markets suffered jitters Tuesday over reports of a growing strike wave in Suez, including by workers employed by the Suez Canal Authority, which is responsible for the waterway through which some two million barrels of oil and petroleum pass daily.

Some 6,000 workers employed by five service companies owned by the Suez Canal Authority in the cities of Suez, Port-Said and Ismailia began an indefinite strike on Tuesday. The workers vowed that they would maintain a sit-in outside the company's headquarters until their demands for increased wages and an improvement in abysmal health and working conditions are met. They are likewise demanding that they receive parity in terms of compensation with that awarded to employees directly employed by the Authority.

Senior officials for the Canal Authority claimed that the strike action has not affected the operations of the canal itself, reporting that 46 ships had crossed through it on Tuesday.

Another 1,300 workers at a steel manufacturer in Suez also went on strike demanding increased wages.

Thousands of Telecom Egypt workers employed by the state-owned landline company walked out in Cairo, Suez and elsewhere in Egypt. Workers chanted "we will not go," a familiar battle cry of the demonstrators in Tahrir Square, and carried signs reading "Where is the company's profit?" and "We want our money."

Al-Ahram Online, the English Internet outlet of Egypt's largest daily newspaper, reported that textile workers, who have conducted a three-day factory sit-down strike, joined in a



protest involving some 2,000 younger workers demanding jobs Tuesday. Local council workers tried to meet with protesters in a desperate bid to defuse the growing unrest.

In the Nile Delta textile mill town of Mahalla, more than 1,500 workers from the Abu El-Subaa company struck, blockading the main road, to press their demands for increased wages. The workers have conducted repeated protests and sit-ins since the mass strikes which rocked the city in 2008.

In the southern Nile city of Aswan, some 5,000 unemployed youth demonstrated outside the Aswan governorate, attempting to storm the building. The protesters demanded jobs and the ouster of the Aswan governor.

In Cairo, some 1,500 street cleaning workers demonstrated outside the public authority that employs them. They demanded an increase in their monthly wages to 1,200 Egyptian pounds, roughly the equivalent of \$200, along with permanent contracts and the sacking of the authority's president.

Also in Cairo, hundreds of journalists demonstrated outside Egypt's two state-owned dailies, *Al-Ahram* and *Rose Al-Youssef*, Tuesday. The *Al-Ahram* workers demanded the sacking of the paper's chairman, Abdel-Moneim Saeed, and its chief editor, Ossama Saraya, holding them both responsible for "continuing corruption" at Egypt's oldest newspaper.

Similarly, *Rose Al-Youssef* journalists demanded the resignation of its chairman, Karam Gabar, and chief editor, Abdallah Kamal, accusing them of mismanagement and a sharp deterioration of professionalism. They charged that workers were paid not according to their ability or seniority, but rather their loyalty to the top management.

The journalists called for the

newspapers to be taken over by committees of respected journalists. They also denounced their trade union, charging that its officials were paid full salaries and granted privileges in exchange for suppressing workers' demands.

This eruption of strikes and working class protests shows the deep social roots of the Egyptian revolution. The demands for jobs, decent living standards and social rights will not be resolved by the ouster of Mubarak, followed by a shuffling of officials at the top. They can only be realized through a transformation of social relations, bringing the productive forces of the country under control of working people, throwing off imperialist domination and recovering the multi-billion-dollar fortunes accumulated by Mubarak and his cronies at the expense the masses of workers and oppressed.

The inflation rate in Egypt climbed to 13.6 percent last month, severely eroding the real wages of Egyptian workers. And, while the official unemployment rate is pegged at around 9 percent, the reality is that more than half of those listed as employed outside of agriculture eke out a living in the so-called "informal sector", without regular work. Youth make up more than 90 percent of the jobless. And, as a recent International Labor Organization report made clear, hundreds of thousands of Egyptian construction workers, who found jobs in the Persian Gulf states, have been thrown out of work by the economic crisis and forced to return home to unemployment.

These conditions are driving the revolt of the Egyptian workers, who have been emboldened by the mass movement against Mubarak and the crisis of the US-backed regime.

The huge demonstration in Tahrir Square Tuesday represented a popular repudiation of the attempt by both the Mubarak regime and the Obama administration in Washington to quell the Egyptian uprising and

reestablish the military-controlled dictatorship.

Contributing to the outpouring was an emotional interview given on Egypt's most popular evening talk show by Wael Ghonim, Google's young Middle East marketing executive, who was freed Monday after being abducted by plainclothes secret police and disappearing into the regime's prison system. Ghonim recounted that he was kept blindfolded for 12 days, while his wife and parents knew nothing of his whereabouts.

When told on live TV of estimates that at least 300 people had been killed in the demonstrations, Ghonim wept and offered his condolences.

The interview undoubtedly struck a chord with Egyptians who are outraged over the regime's brutality, the killings, detentions and routine torture that have gone on for decades and have only intensified in response to the popular upheavals. There was also no doubt a sense that if this can happen to someone like Ghonim, who was accused of organizing Facebook and YouTube activity that spurred the initial protests, the secret police are free to do the same and worse to anyone.

Reports from Tahrir Square indicated that Tuesday's mass demonstration saw the participation of new layers who had not previously joined the protests. Among them were off-duty soldiers, the staff of Cairo University, large numbers of women and children, and many people who had come into Cairo from outlying areas.

The cosmetic measures announced on national television by Omar Suleiman, the former intelligence chief tapped by Mubarak to be his vice president, will do nothing to quell the revolutionary fervor gripping the Egyptian people.

Attributing all of the steps to decisions made by Mubarak, Suleiman an-

nounced the formation of three committees. One would consider amendments to the country's dictatorial constitution; a second would pursue "national reconciliation" and a third would conduct "fact finding" on the orchestrated violence unleashed by plainclothes police and thugs of the ruling party which killed hundreds and wounded thousands of demonstrators.

Suleiman claimed that the moves would create a "set timetable to realize the peaceful and organized transfer of power." He gave no indication, however, as to who would be on these committees or how they would be selected, with the assumption being that they will be hand-picked by the regime itself.

The group of political parties, ostensibly of the opposition, that agreed to negotiate with the regime have received no support from the masses demanding Mubarak's ouster. The most prominent among them, the Muslim Brotherhood, felt compelled to distance itself somewhat from the process. Previously demonized by both the Mubarak dictatorship and Washington, the Islamist party has emerged as a reliable defender of bourgeois order. In the face of continuing mass opposition, however, a spokesman for the Brotherhood declared that it would give Mubarak another week to resign and would then reconsider its participation in the talks with Suleiman.

The *New York Times* Tuesday provided a fairly accurate and concise summation of the alliance between Suleiman and the Obama administration: "Vice President Omar Suleiman of Egypt says he does not think it is time to lift the 30-year-old emergency law that has been used to suppress and imprison opposition leaders. He does not think President Hosni Mubarak needs to resign before his term ends in September. And he does not think his country is yet ready for democracy. But, lacking better options, the United States is encouraging him in negotiations in a still uncertain transition process in Egypt."

During a meeting with newspaper publishers Tuesday, Suleiman said that there would be "no ending of the regime" and that it "can't put up with" the mass protests much longer. The professional torturer added darkly, "We don't want to deal with Egyptian society with police tools."

The White House termed "unacceptable" Suleiman's description of Egypt as not ready for democracy, but gave no indication that it opposed the former intelligence chief's actions or would cease supporting him as he prepares a crackdown against the revolutionary challenge to the regime.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Tuesday reiterated Washington's support for the Egyptian military, the real power behind Mubarak's regime. He claimed that it had behaved in "an exemplary fashion," despite ample evidence that the military was fully complicit in the goon squad violence unleashed against the demonstrators. "I would say that they have made a contribution to the evolution of democracy and what we're seeing in Egypt."

Behind the hypocritical rhetoric about "democracy," the Obama administration is working to maintain the rule of Egyptian military, which it bankrolls to the tune of \$1.3 billion annually. In the end, it is prepared to support a bloodbath in Egypt to maintain US interests in the region.

The crisis in Egypt is increasingly balanced on the knife's edge between revolution and counterrevolution.

The critical necessity is the building of a new revolutionary leadership to mobilize the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. The demands of the masses in Tahrir Square and those who are striking and demonstrating throughout the country for democratic rights, social equality and jobs can be realized only through a revolutionary struggle for a workers' government and socialism. WSWS

