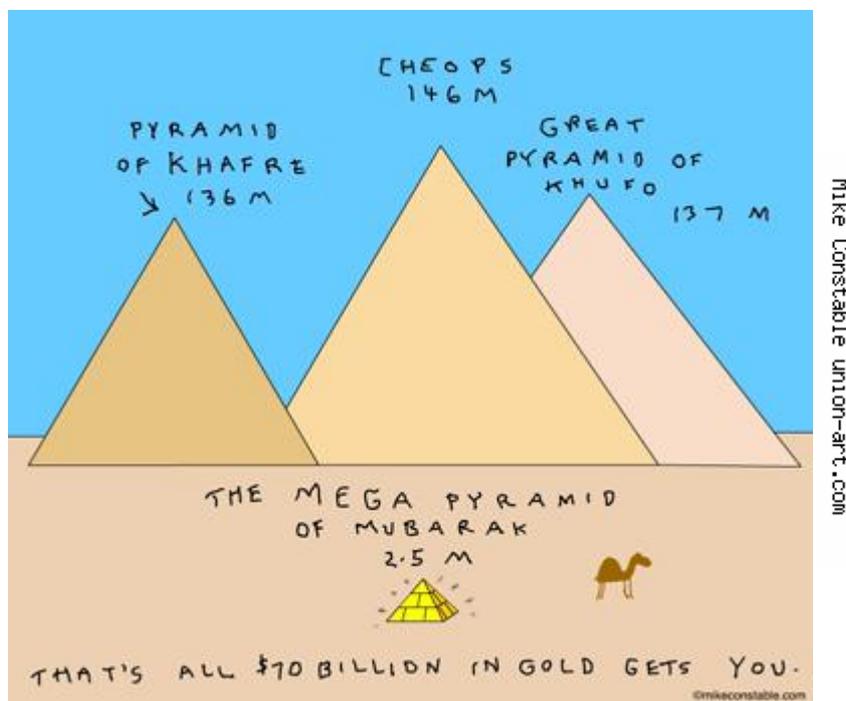


Mubarak's Folly: The Rising of Egypt's Workers

David McNally

Rarely do our rulers look more absurd than when faced with a popular upheaval. As fear and apathy are broken, ordinary people – housewives, students, sanitation workers, the unemployed – remake themselves. Having been objects of history, they become its agents. Marching in their millions, reclaiming public space, attending meetings and debating their society's future, they discover in themselves capacities for organization and action they had never imagined. They arrest secret police, defend their communities and their rallies, organize the distribution of food, water and medical supplies. Exhilarated by new solidarities and empowered by the understanding that they are making history, they shed old habits of deference and passivity.

It is this – the self-transformation of oppressed people – that elites can never grasp. That is what explains the truly delusional character of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's speech on Thursday, February 10, where he prattled on in surreal disconnection from events. But while the aging dictator may be uniquely out of touch, he merely reflects the biases of his class. For it is a general characteristic of our rulers that they imagine those below them to be inherently stupid and deferential. They treat the downtrodden as labouring drones and cannon fodder for military adventures. They feed them lies and empty promises and send in the riot police when the subjugated get unruly. And most of the time they get away with it.



That is why popular revolutions are inexplicable to them. As ordinary people cast off resignation and obedience, as they take control of their communities and reclaim the streets, they become unrecognizable to their rulers. This is the real “intelligence failure” of the ruling class. Contrary to the terms of debate in security circles, it is not that they missed some

indicators of institutional change; it is rather that all their models are based on the presumption of popular passivity. “Ordinary Egyptians have a reputation as fatalists,” pronounced a former Canadian diplomat to Egypt in the early days of the revolution, explaining that Egypt would not go the way of Tunisia, where dictator Ben Ali was toppled only weeks earlier.^[1] In so doing, the diplomat revealed not only his own foolishness, but also the tone deaf incapacity of elites to comprehend people's power.

People's Creative Energies

After all, revolutions are not just about changing institutions. Most profoundly, they are about the dramatic remaking of the downtrodden. Revolutions are schools of profound self-education. They destroy submission and resignation, and they release long-repressed creative energies – intelligence, solidarity, invention, self-activity. In so doing, they reweave the fabric of everyday life. The horizons of possibility expand. The unthinkable – that ordinary people might control their lives – becomes both thinkable and practical.

All of this eludes bosses, bureaucrats, generals, politicians, and the vast majority of journalists because they do not understand the inner heart of a genuinely revolutionary process – that having taken to the stage of history, oppressed people are never again the same.

It is this error that explains the frantic tacking and turning of rulers confronted with mass insurgency. One moment they make concessions, the next moment they send in the goons – all in the belief that ordinary people can be beaten back into submission, or bribed with crumbs from the tables of the rich. But the longer they do this, the more they force the mass movement to broaden its base and deepen its struggles. President Ben Ali made this mistake in Tunisia; Mubarak keeps making it in Egypt. And by clinging to power in the face of mass opposition, they give the lowest layers of society the time and space to enter the political sphere. The result is that popular revolutions open the doors to great upsurges of working class struggle.

That has been Mubarak's greatest folly. It is why Egyptian capitalists, parts of the Egyptian regime and the U.S. state have concluded that he has to go. But the genie of the Egyptian workers having now been awakened, it will be very hard to put it back in the bottle.

The Birth of Popular Power

Philosopher Peter Hallward is among those few commentators who have grasped the inner workings of the Egyptian Revolution. Writing in the *Guardian* of London, he observes:

“Every step of the way, the basic fact of the uprising has become more obvious and more explicit: with each new confrontation, the protestors have realised, and demonstrated, that they are more powerful than their oppressors. When they are prepared to act in sufficient numbers with sufficient determination, the people have proved that there’s no stopping them. Again and again, elated protestors have marvelled at the sudden discovery of their own power.”^[2]

Participants repeatedly describe how their fear has lifted. “When we stopped being afraid we knew we would win,” Ahmad Mahmoud told a reporter. “What we have achieved,” proclaimed another, “is the revolution in our minds.” The significance of such a revolution in attitudes is inestimable. But such shifts do not happen at the level of consciousness alone;

they are inextricably connected to a revolution in the relations of everyday life – by way of the birth of popular power. And these new forms of people's power and radical democracy from below have emerged as steps necessary to preserve the Revolution and keep it moving it forward.

So, when violently attacked, as they were on February 2, 2011, by undercover police and goons of the ruling party wielding guns, knives, Molotov cocktails and more, the insurgents held their ground and fought back, holding Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. In the process, they extended their grassroots self-organization. As reporters for the *Washington Post* noted, the rebels of Tahrir Square created popular prisons to hold undercover security forces, and people's clinics to care for the wounded:

“Refusing to end their 10-day old demonstration, protesters set up makeshift hospitals in alleyways off the square to treat their wounded, and fashioned a holding cell in a nearby travel office to detain those they suspected of inciting the violence. Organizers said they had captured more than 350 ‘thugs of the government’ among the pro-government demonstrators, some carrying police identification cards, and turned them over to the Egyptian army.”[\[3\]](#)

In the same spirit, the movement has formed People's Protection forces, staffed by both women and men, to provide safety and security in neighbourhoods and in the mass marches and assemblies. In some towns, like El Arish, the biggest city in the northern Sinai, official police and security forces have melted away only to be replaced by armed Popular Committees, which have maintained the peace.[\[4\]](#)

Developing alongside these forms of popular self-organization are new practices of radical democracy. In Tahrir Square, the nerve center of the Revolution, the crowd engages in direct decision-making, sometimes in its hundreds of thousands. Organized into smaller groups, people discuss and debate, and then send elected delegates to consultations about the movement's demands. As one journalist explains, “delegates from these mini-gatherings then come together to discuss the prevailing mood, before potential demands are read out over the square's makeshift speaker system. The adoption of each proposal is based on the proportion of boos or cheers it receives from the crowd at large.”[\[5\]](#)

Tahrir Square and public spaces in Alexandria, Suez and dozens of smaller cities, are now sites of ongoing festivals of the oppressed. Describing the popular security services and people's “food supply chains,” demonstrator Karim Medhat Ennarah proclaims, “We have already created a liberated republic within the heart of Egypt.”[\[6\]](#)

Enter the Workers

Years of courageous struggle by Egypt's workers were decisive in creating the conditions for the popular uprising. And now, mere weeks into the upsurge, tens of thousands of workers are mobilizing, raising both economic and political demands as part of a rising wave of strikes. The consequences could be momentous.

Social movements generally have been on the move recently in Egypt. The years 2002-03 saw important stirrings of political protest in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada and in opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Shortly after this, the Kefaya (Enough) movement organized for democratic reform and the feminist group, We Are Watching You (*Shayfenkom*) came out in defence of women's rights.

But by 2004 it was strike action, sit-ins and demonstrations by workers that comprised the most determined and persistent oppositional activity – most of it illegal under the emergency edicts and laws that deny workers the right to form independent unions. Over the past six years or so, more than two million workers engaged in thousands of direct actions. Most importantly, they regularly won significant concessions on wages and working conditions. The result was a growing confidence among workers – so much so that genuinely independent unions began to emerge in a society where the official unions are effectively extensions of the state.

In 2006-07 mass working class protest erupted in the Nile Delta, spearheaded by the militant action of 50,000 workers in textiles and the cement and poultry industries. This was followed by strikes of train drivers, journalists, truckers, miners and engineers. Then 2007-08 saw another labour explosion, with riots at the state-owned weaving factory in Al-Mahla Al-Kobra. The youth-based April 6th Movement emerged at this point in support of workers' strikes. Meanwhile, workers began to address the general interests of all working people, particularly the poorest, by pressing the demand for a substantial increase in the minimum wage.

Now, workers are again throwing their collective power onto the scales of the political struggle in Egypt. And Mubarak and his cronies will live to regret it.

In the course of a few days during the week of February 7, tens of thousands of them stormed into action. Thousands of railworkers took strike action, blockading railway lines in the process. Six thousand workers at the Suez Canal Authority walked off the job, staging sit-ins at Suez and two other cities. In Mahalla, 1,500 workers at Abul Sebae Textiles struck and blockaded the highway. At the Kafr al-Zayyat hospital hundreds of nurses staged a sit-in and were joined by hundreds of other hospital employees.

Across Egypt, thousands of others – bus workers in Cairo, employees at Telecom Egypt, journalists at a number of newspapers, workers at pharmaceutical plants and steel mills – joined the strike wave. They demanded improved wages, the firing of ruthless managers, back pay, better working conditions and independent unions. In many cases they also called for the resignation of President Mubarak. And in some cases, like that of the 2,000 workers at Helwan Silk Factory, they demanded the removal of their company's Board of Directors. Then there were the thousands of faculty members at Cairo University who joined the protests, confronted security forces, and prevented Prime Minister Ahmed Shariq from getting to his government office.[\[7\]](#)

What we are seeing, in other words, is the rising of the Egyptian working class. Having been at the heart of the popular upsurge in the streets, tens of thousands of workers are now taking the revolutionary struggle back to their workplaces, extending and deepening the movement in the process. In so doing, they are proving the continuing relevance of the analysis developed by the great Polish-German socialist, Rosa Luxemburg. In her book, [The Mass Strike](#), based on the experience of mass strikes of 1905 against the Tsarist dictatorship in Russia, Luxemburg argued that truly revolutionary movements develop by way of interacting waves of political and economic struggle, each enriching the other. In a passage that could have been inspired by the upheaval in Egypt, [she explains](#),

“Every new onset and every fresh victory of the political struggle is transformed into a powerful impetus for the economic struggle... After every foaming wave of political action a

fructifying deposit remains behind from which a thousand stalks of economic struggle burst forth. And conversely. The workers condition of ceaseless economic struggle with the capitalists keeps their fighting spirit alive in every political interval ...”

And so it is in the Egyptian Revolution. Tens of millions of workers – in transportation, healthcare, textiles, education, heavy industry, the service sector – are being awakened and mobilized. They are fusing demands for economic justice to those for democracy, and they are among the hundreds of thousands building popular power and self-organization. Moreover, should the rising of the workers move toward mass strikes that paralyze the economy, the Egyptian Revolution would move to a new and more powerful level.

What the coming weeks will bring is still uncertain. But Mubarak's folly has triggered an upsurge of workers' struggle whose effects will endure. “The most precious, because lasting, thing in this ebb and flow of the [revolutionary] wave is . . . the intellectual, cultural growth of the working class,” [wrote Rosa Luxemburg](#).

In Tahrir Square and elsewhere thousands of signs depict Mubarak accompanied by the words “Game Over.” For the workers of Egypt it is now, “Game On.” •

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Endnotes:

[1.](#) Michael Bell, “[Will Egypt go the way of Tunisia?](#)” *Globe and Mail*, January 27, 2011.

[2.](#) Peter Hallward, “Egypt's popular revolution will change the world,” *Guardian*, February 9, 2011. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk.

[3.](#) Leila Fadel, Will Englund and Debbi Wilgoren, “[5 shot in 2nd day of bloody clashes; amid outcry Egyptian PM apologizes](#),” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2011.

[4.](#) Tobias Buck, “Palestinians hope for change and resumption of border trade,” *Financial Times*, February 8, 2011.

[5.](#) Jack Shenker, “[Cairo's biggest protest yet demands Mubarak's immediate departure](#),” *Guardian*, February 5, 2011.

[6.](#) Quoted in Hallward.

[7.](#) My sources on workers' protests include Aljazeera, Al-Masry Al-Youm, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services, newsocialist.org, and socialistworker.org. Special thanks to Jack Hicks for documents and reports.