

In the wake of the Gaza war

Widespread anger in Egypt at Mubarak regime

By Johannes Stern reports from Cairo
24 January 2009

Muhammad lights up a cigarette and quietly utters an oath directed at Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. The 25-year-old expresses what many Egyptians think at present: "Mubarak is a swine who has worked together with Israel to turn Gaza into a prison and is responsible for the suffering of the Palestinians."

The student from downtown Cairo continues to speak harshly about the government. Today, three days after Israeli troops began to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, he remains angry and criticizes the role played by Egypt in the Gaza conflict. "Probably Mubarak gave [Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi] Livni permission to attack Hamas, which he regards as a thorn in his side."

In fact, Livni met Mubarak two days prior to the Israeli attack and, according to a report in the Israeli daily *Haa'retz*, Egyptian government officials were informed in advance of the planned offensive.

Many other Cairo residents share Muhammad's anger and revulsion. They are shocked by the crimes committed by Israel during its three-week offensive in the Gaza Strip and furious with the Egyptian government, which—in the midst of the Hamas-Fatah fighting in June 2007—blocked its own border with the enclave and effectively turned the densely-populated region into a prison camp.

The fact that Mubarak refused to open the Rafah border crossing during the latest continuous bombardment by Israel, thereby leaving Palestinians to their fate, has left many Egyptians feeling just as much hatred for their own government as for American and Israeli militarism.

When asked about the role of other Arab governments, Muhammad declares: "The most treacherous, of course, are the regimes that cooperate

more or less openly with the US, i.e., Jordan and Saudi Arabia, alongside Egypt. The fact that Venezuela expelled the Israeli ambassador in protest, but not Egypt, is a disgrace."

The largest demonstration in Egypt took place on 9 January in Alexandria, with over 50,000 protestors taking part. Police anti-riot units, who originally intended to suppress and disperse the demonstration, were forced by the sheer number of those participating to withdraw and allow the rally to proceed.

Another large demonstration, with more than 15,000 participants, occurred one week later in Mahalla Al-Kubra. Last April that city experienced some of the most extensive riots in Egypt in 30 years against rising food prices and declining wages. This time demonstrators protested the war crimes in the Gaza Strip, but they also directed slogans against the complicity of Arab governments and particularly the Egyptian regime.

Since the start of the Israeli withdrawal the streets of Cairo have been dominated by large numbers of police and units of heavily armed anti-riot squad units, ready to suppress violently any form of spontaneous protest.

Last Saturday thousands of demonstrators responded to an appeal by the country's largest, but officially banned opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood, to participate in an anti-war demonstration in the city's Ramses Square.

In the event, the demonstration was blocked by a large force of police. In order to prevent the demonstration the police and city administration went so far as to close down the nearest subway station to Ramses Square (ironically, the station is named after Mubarak) and subway trains bypassed it. Following

clashes with demonstrators, the police made many arrests, including a journalist from the independent daily paper, al-Masry al-Youm.

The protests against the war in Gaza revealed the huge gulf between the Arab masses and the despotic and corrupt governments in the region. In Egypt these tensions are so pronounced that every major protest causes the Mubarak regime to fear for its existence. It responds in turn with ever increasing brutality to suppress popular opposition.

Resistance is growing particularly among workers and students, who have organized a series of protest actions beyond the control of the established parties or trade unions.

On 10 January the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People organized a solidarity convoy involving hundreds of activists, which headed towards Gaza and demanded the opening of the Rafah border crossing. After passing three checkpoints the convoy was stopped shortly before el-Arish, in the middle of the desert, by heavily armed security forces and forced to turn around.

Another aid convoy was organized by strike leaders in Mahalla Al-Kubra. On 11 January approximately 1,000 textile workers employed at Masr Spinning and Weaving organized a sit-in-strike in front of the local office of the state-run trade union. The workers protested against the arbitrary punishment of co-workers who had taken part in a protest against the privatization of the factory on 30 October last year. The sit-in continues and is directed primarily against the union, which the workers accuse of cooperating with management.

Despite the radicalization of workers and students during the weeks of protests, it is clear that most large demonstrations were organized and dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamic fundamentalists are only able to retain the leadership of such protests in a period of rapidly growing poverty because of the absence of a progressive political alternative. The Brotherhood, a bourgeois party with backing from some wealthy businessmen, offers no solution to the unbearable economic conditions in Egypt or to the suppression of the Palestinians.

For its part, the "left" Tagammu—a party consisting of diverse Nasserists, Stalinists and self-proclaimed "progressive" nationalists, founded by Anwar Sadat in

1976 as a union of leftist currents in the old Nasserist Unity Party ASU (Arab Socialist Union)—has shifted far to the right and is unable to offer any sort of alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood and provide the protests with a progressive perspective.

Such a perspective is necessary, however, to resolve the suffering of the Palestinians and the suppression of the Arab masses. The aim must be the building of a political movement that consciously seeks to unite the Palestinian, Jewish and Arab working class in the fight for a socialist federation in the Middle East. This would eliminate the artificial borders with which the imperialist powers divide and control the region. This is the only way to halt the Israeli war machine and provide a lasting solution for the social, economic and political needs of all those in the region.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>