

Tens of thousands march in Egypt against Mubarak regime

By Johannes Stern and Stefan Steinberg
26 January 2011

The thirty-year-old US-backed dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak was shaken by an unprecedented wave of mass demonstrations Tuesday demanding an end to the regime. An estimated 20,000 protesters, largely youth and young workers, defied a huge deployment of riot police and paramilitary troops in the center of Cairo, and thousands more rallied in cities across the country.

The demonstrators hailed the mass protests that ousted long-time Tunisian strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14 and demanded that Mubarak follow Ben Ali's example and resign. Police attacked the rallies in Cairo and other cities, firing tear gas and water cannon and wielding clubs. Two protesters were reported killed in Suez, east of Cairo.

The day in Cairo began with a massive buildup of police and paramilitary units in the city center. Central Security Forces trucks were deployed in front of the High Court in downtown Cairo and police moved in to cordon off large sections of the city center.

Demonstrators in Cairo advanced in star formation from the city's suburbs to assemble in the centre. At midday, reports emerged of hundreds protesting in Dar El-Salam, south of Cairo, chanting "bread and freedom." The protest was quickly broken up by the police.

Marchers demonstrated in front of the ruling National Democratic Party headquarters in Cairo chanting, "We want a free government" and "Down with Mubarak." Later, crowds advanced to Tahrir Square and attempted to storm the Egyptian parliament. They were met by waves of police and security forces who used water cannon, tear gas and clubs to repulse them.

At times the clashes between demonstrators and police resembled civil war. Protesters clambered onto fire trucks and attempted to disrupt police water cannon. On occasion, the police were overwhelmed and forced to retreat down side streets. Dozens of arrests were made and many protesters were injured as police rushed the

crowds with batons.

At the same time, the state sought to close down media coverage of the protests. Journalists' IDs were reportedly confiscated by the police in a number of towns. Independent web sites covering the protests were shut down and the Twitter service in Egypt was disrupted.

The anti-government day of action in Egypt is part of a growing revolt by the working class and oppressed of Northern Africa and the Middle East against the Arab bourgeois regimes and their imperialist sponsors. In addition to the ongoing protests in Tunisia, mass demonstrations have occurred in Algeria, Yemen, Jordan and Sudan.

Egypt, the most populous and powerful of the Arab states and the recipient of billions of dollars in US military aid, is the main bulwark of imperialist domination in the Arab world. This immensely raises the stakes in the outcome of events in Egypt for the Arab ruling elites and imperialism on the one side, and the working class on the other.

The upsurge in Northern Africa and the Middle East is a powerful expression of the entry of the masses into revolutionary struggle and the immense social power of the working class. However, it confronts great dangers as US and European imperialism and their allies in the Arab bourgeoisie seek to regroup and enlist the support of nominal opposition forces—including the trade union bureaucracies, Islamist groups, Stalinists and bourgeois nationalists—to contain, derail and ultimately crush the movement.

The critical issue is the development of a revolutionary leadership throughout the region armed with an understanding of the historical experiences of the Middle Eastern and international working class to establish the political independence of the working class from all sections of the bourgeoisie and rally all of the oppressed on the basis of the socialist perspective of permanent

revolution.

The US government, which has sought to mask its hostility to the popular movement in Tunisia with empty talk of democratic reform, has responded to the mass protests in Egypt by reiterating its support for Mubarak. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters in Washington: “Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people.”

This indicates that Washington is determined to draw the line in Egypt and is prepared to back brutal repressive measures by Mubarak.

Demonstrators on Tuesday raised a series of social and democratic demands: for jobs, against poverty and for an end to the country’s emergency laws. The organisers of the protests, which were coordinated over Facebook and Internet web sites, had called for a “day of revolt against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment” to coincide with a national holiday honoring the police, but traditionally used by dissidents to protest against police brutality.

Fearing a social upheaval on a similar scale to that in Tunisia, Egypt’s leading opposition parties and political figures boycotted the demonstrations and issued declarations aimed at discouraging their supporters from taking part.

Immediately following the events in Tunisia, Mohamed ElBaradei, leader of the recently founded “Platform for Change” and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, expressed his intention to ensure that “change will come in an orderly way and not through the Tunisian model.” He announced that he would not take part in the January 25 protests, cynically declaring to *Der Spiegel* in an interview last week: “I don’t want to steal their thunder.”

The protests were also boycotted by the Muslim Brotherhood. Sobhi Saleh, a former member of the party’s parliamentary bloc, made absolutely clear that his organisation was opposed to a popular mass movement capable of unseating the government. Saleh stated, “Huge participation, with all of our power, will lead to chaos and we don’t want that. We’re trying to avoid it.”

Another leading member of the organisation, Essem el-Erian went even further and indicated that the Brotherhood was prepared to solidarise with the police against demonstrators on this day when “We should all be celebrating together.”

The national reformist El Tagammu (National

Progressive Unionist Party), which is misleadingly described as socialist, also declared that it would not support the protests.

Workers and youth all over the country rejected the position of these organizations and defied the security forces to demonstrate their determination to bring down the dictatorship. In addition to Cairo, demonstrations were held in numerous towns and cities, including Alexandria, Sinai Giza, Port Said and Suez. In Sinai, protesters shut down the road to the airport used by Multinational Force Observers. In Alexandria, protesters tore down posters of Mubarak and one of his sons, Gamal, who is being groomed for office when his father retires or dies.

Police checkpoints were set up in the Mahalla district west of Cairo. On April 6, 2008, tens of thousands of Mahalla residents staged a strike protesting rising prices and low salaries. On Tuesday, Mahalla was once again the scene of confrontations between workers and police, with factory workers from Ghazl el-Mahalla joining the protest.

In Tunisia, demonstrations against the interim government continued on Tuesday, and the military intervened to disperse protesters for the first time since the ousting of Ben Ali. Soldiers fired in the air to scatter hundreds of demonstrators in the central city of Gefsa, and a young man set himself on fire inside the regional trade union headquarters in protest.

Trotskyist parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East to unite the working masses under the banner of the United Socialist States of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as part of the world socialist revolution.

This struggle must be linked up with the mounting struggles of workers in the advanced capitalist countries, many of which have large populations of Arab workers from Northern Africa and the Middle East.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>