

Teachers protest Jordan government's closure of union and harsh crackdown

By Jean Shaoul
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Several thousand teachers took to the streets of Irbid, Jerash, and other cities on Saturday to protest the government's decision to shut down the Jordanian Teachers Syndicate union and demand the release of its board members.

The 13 detained union leaders are currently on hunger strike in Jordanian prisons.

The protests follow rallies last Wednesday, where the police were out in force in the capital, Amman, after the government warned people not to demonstrate, amid threats of arrests and detention. They come in the wake of the attorney general's decision on July 25 to close the teachers' union for two years, a raid on the union's headquarters and the arrest of acting chairman Nasser Nawasreh on charges of incitement.

The union's council was summoned for questioning on "criminal and corruption charges" after government officials accused the syndicate of having an "Islamist" agenda, meaning that it was allied with the Muslim Brotherhood. On July 15, the Court of Cassation officially dissolved the Brotherhood's Jordanian branch and closed its offices. King Abdullah's relationship with the Brotherhood, once one of the monarchy's strongest supporters, turned sour after the organization supported the 2011 Arab Spring protests.

While Hassan Abdallat, Amman's prosecutor-general, did not specify what the alleged crimes were, he said they included "financial violations" and issued a gagging order on the case, including social media.

The government's clampdown on the Jordanian Teachers' Syndicate, which has 140,000 members, came just days after the union organised a rally in Amman attended by hundreds of teachers demanding the government abide by its agreement to increase the teachers' abysmally low wages by 35–75 percent,

according to experience and seniority. The starting salary of a public-school teacher with a university degree is \$500 a month, barely over the "absolute poverty line" of \$479 for a family of five each month. After the first year, a teacher gets an automatic annual increment of \$5 to \$13, depending on qualifications and experience, rising to a maximum of \$635 a month. As a result, many teachers take a second job to support their families.

The teachers went on a nationwide strike for a month at the start of the school year in 2018, affecting 1.3 million students, in one of the longest public-sector strikes in the country's history. The agreement to end the strike included a pay increase for this year. But last April, the government cited the COVID-19 pandemic as the pretext for abandoning the agreement and freezing all public sector wage increases.

In mid-March, the government imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, closing its borders, banning flights and ordering people to stay indoors, and even closing grocery stores and pharmacies for three days, before organizing deliveries of basic commodities directly to neighbourhoods and later allowing food shops and pharmacies to open. The security forces vigorously enforced the curfew, fining thousands of people, and impounding cars.

While the two-month-long lockdown was largely successful in limiting the spread of the virus—to date there have been 1,208 confirmed cases and 11 deaths—it has had a devastating effect on people's livelihoods in a country already in the grip of a severe economic crisis with little or no social safety net.

Official unemployment in the first quarter of 2020, before the pandemic took effect, had reached 19.3 percent. Inflation has risen as a result of a 3.7 percent tax on basic commodities, one of a raft of austerity

measures including privatisations implemented to secure a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Jordan's tourism sector, which with its world-famous heritage sites such as Petra accounts for 10 percent of GDP, has evaporated.

According to Jordan Labour Watch, Jordan's formal market will lose about 140,000 jobs—10.5 percent of the 1.35 million jobs in both the private and public sectors.

The return of tens of thousands of the more than 1 million well-qualified Jordanians—Jordan has a population of 10 million—working in the Gulf is further impacting on unemployment as falling oil prices, lockdowns and the pandemic's economic fallout have led to massive job losses.

The Gulf countries are using the crisis to curtail the number of migrant workers, who make up a significant proportion of their workforce. This has had a major impact on remittances back to Jordan. Jordan's central bank reported a reduction of 5.4 percent for the first quarter of 2020 compared to last year.

Jordan has in turn ordered migrant workers—numbering around 800,000 mainly low-paid workers from Egypt and Yemen employed in agriculture, construction and catering—to leave the country. While the government announced that most businesses could reopen, it insisted that at least 75 percent of their employees would have to be Jordanians.

The lockdown has gutted state revenues and led to the sharpest economic contraction in two decades. With the economy expected to shrink by 3.5 percent this year, the government, whose debt already exceeds GDP, has again turned to the IMF to secure a \$1.75 billion loan.

The country hosts the second highest number of refugees per capita in the world, including more than 745,000 registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other countries—although the actual numbers are far higher than this—plus an estimated 2 million Palestinians.

Jordan has been badly hit by the US's termination of its \$300 million annual funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, representing about a quarter of the agency's budget. The cuts have had a devastating impact on schooling and essential services, such as medical clinics and trash collection, for

hundreds of thousands of refugees in the country.

Jordan is host to more than 1.4 million Syrian refugees, only half of whom are registered. According to the UNHCR, whose operations in Jordan were only 58 percent funded in 2019, one third of refugees who were working previously are now out of work. While around 160,000 refugees have returned to Syria. Many, unable to prove ownership of their property, have no homes or jobs to return to, while others fear retribution and military conscription.

As poverty and social unrest rise, the government has used the draconian emergency laws introduced in March to curtail democratic rights and crackdown on opposition, arresting activists over comments on social media. In April, the military arrested top executives of Roya TV after it screened a crowd of labourers complaining about their inability to work because of the lockdown.

These attacks on democratic rights—even criticizing the royal family is a crime—and living standards are being implemented in the interest of transnational corporations and Jordan's tiny financial elite, which rules the country with an iron fist.

King Abdullah has announced parliamentary elections in November, but this is just a sop to public opinion and a rubber stamp for his unelected government. Abdullah, who is closely aligned with US imperialism, uses his prime ministers as a fig leaf, sacking them with monotonous regularity as sacrificial lambs to save his own skin and his family's wealth.

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