

By Harry Kelber

Egypt Is Experiencing the Biggest Strike Wave in 50 Years

The longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the end of World War II is rolling through Egypt. In March, the liberal daily al-Masri Al-Yawm estimated that no fewer than 222 sit-in strikes, work stoppages, hunger strikes and demonstrations had occurred in 2006. In the first five months of 2007, the paper has reported a new labor action nearly every day. The citizen group, Egyptian Workers and Trade Union Watch, documented 56 incidents during the month of April and another 15 during the first week of May alone.

Like almost all strikes in Egypt in the last 40 years, the latest work stoppages are “illegal” — unauthorized by the state-sponsored General Federation of Trade Unions and its subsidiary bodies in factories and other workplaces. But unlike upsurges of worker collective action in the 1980s and 1990s, which were confined to state-owned factories, the wave that began in 2004 has also pushed along employees in the private sector.

From their center of gravity, the strikes have spread to mobilize makers of building materials, Cairo subway workers, garbage collectors, bakers, food processing workers and many others. The largest private-sector strike to date has occurred in the coastal city of Alexandria at Arab Polvara Spinning and Weaving, where nearly half of the 12,000 employees struck in protest against the company’s failure to pay workers dividends on their shares and the elimination of paid sick leave and a paid weekend.

French Unions Prepare to Challenge New President

Nicolas Sarkozy, the newly-elected conservative French president, will face stiff opposition from trade unions, if he proceeds with his “economic revolution,” a plan for sweeping reforms to cut taxes, revise the 35-hour workweek, slash public services and curb labor’s strike powers. He is expected to take a hard-line towards growing protests from immigrants.

Unions have denounced his proposals and intend to take forceful actions to defeat them. France could face crippling strikes in the autumn, along the lines of those that plagued Jacques Chirac when he took office in 1995 and tried to impose conservative change. “All attempts to pass things by force would backfire,” said Claude Mailly, secretary general of Force Ouvrière.

Sarkozy will take office as president on May 16 and expects to have his new top appointees in place within a week. His choice of prime minister is probably his

closest adviser, François Fillon, a former social affairs and education minister. Sarkozy hopes that a majority in next month's parliamentary elections will allow him to immediately begin fulfilling his promises to reform France and jump start its stagnant economy.

British Activists Rally to Urge Amnesty for Illegal Immigrants

Religious and union leaders, actors and musicians joined the largest migrant rally in British history May 10, calling for an amnesty for 500,000 illegal immigrants, which would give them rights to stay and work in this country. Cardinal Comac Murphy-O'Connor led the calls for the government to allow "a pathway into citizenship" for workers who have been in this country for at least four years. But it sparked a fresh row between migrant aid groups and anti-immigration lobbyists.

The campaign, Strangers into Citizens, could prove an embarrassment to ministers who are imposing tougher penalties on employers of illegal immigrants and are reluctant to be seen as soft on immigration. The pressure group, MigrationWatch, which strongly opposes the campaign, said the Home Office estimates were out of date and a more conservative estimate of the numbers in this country who would benefit from an amnesty is more than one million.

"The government's policy is to strengthen measures against employers of illegal workers and to tighten access to health and education services," a spokesman for MigrationWatch said. "Extending access to welfare state aid could cost £1.5 billion (nearly \$3 billion) a year and add one million to the housing lists." Keith Best, chief executive of the immigration advisory service, accused MigrationWatch of being "confused and misrepresenting the facts." He said immigrants were not entitled to state benefits and added: "The only way in which migrant workers can undercut British workers in low-skilled jobs is by being paid less than the minimum wage, which is unlawful."

Liberian Government Negotiates New Deal with Firestone Tire

The government of Liberia is seeking a new agreement with Firestone Tire Co. to replace the one it signed in 2005. The country's new president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, wants changes in the contract that will provide greater benefits to her people. The government recently signed a new contract with Dutch-based steel conglomerate Arcelor Mittal, another key investor in the country.

Information Minister Laurence Korma Bropleh said: "We do not mind having Firestone here, but we want to make sure that Firestone's agreement, by which it operates, will conform to the norm and standards of what this government believes the country needs to go." Speaking, as workers continue on strike at the rubber plantation near Monrovia, he said that improved rights for workers must be central to a new agreement.

Some activists, like Robert Nyahn of the Liberian Forest and Human Rights Campaign, says big changes are needed. “Let them make holistic change and not put in cosmetic changes just to paint themselves white on the outside, while their inside is very black,” Nyahn said.

Italian Taxi Drivers Are Back on Strike

Almost a year after a wave of wildcat strikes, cab drivers in Italy struck again on May 9 to protest against government plans to deregulate the industry. Taxi union officials said some 25,000 cabbies were taking part in the one-day stoppage, which caused havoc as travelers were left stranded at airports and railroad stations.

Unions representing Italy’s 40,000-strong fleet of taxi drivers said a deregulation bill currently before parliament, would give rise to “ruthless competition” and “wipe out our sector.” Although the strike involved all major Italian cities, the main focus was on Rome. Cabbies from all over Italy converged on the capital to join a protest march through the city center.

The number of taxis operating in Rome is around 6,000, compared to more than 61,000 in London, almost 43,000 in New York and 17,000 in Paris. According to official statistics, there are 2.1 taxis per thousand inhabitants in Rome and 1.6 in Milan, compared to 8.3 in London and 9.9 in Barcelona.

ILO Report Warns of Widening Workplace Discrimination

Employers increasingly are discriminating against workers on the grounds of genetic conditions that could make them ill in the future or because they smoke or are overweight, according to a global report on equality at work. The influential study, published in Geneva by the International Labor Office, reveals that new forms of worker discrimination are emerging, while traditional forms, including gender, race and religion, also persist around the globe.

The report highlights how in Europe, in particular, genetic screening has been used by some employers to establish whether they have a disposition to a condition that could affect their capacity to work, such as Huntington’s disease, a rare condition that causes nerve cells in the brain to waste away.

The research also reveals that lifestyle is becoming an increasingly important factor in getting or keeping a job, with employers beginning to discriminate against people who lead “unhealthy lifestyles.”

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