

Our democracy and theirs: reflections on the Egyptian revolution¹

Ann Alexander

“To develop democracy to the utmost, to find the forms for this development, to test them by practice, and so forth—all this is one of the component tasks of the struggle for the social revolution. Taken separately, no kind of democracy will bring socialism. But in actual life democracy will never be “taken separately”; it will be “taken together” with other things, it will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development, and so on. This is the dialectics of living history.” Lenin, *State and Revolution*².

More than a year after the fall of Mubarak, the Egyptian revolution has faded from the front pages and TV screens in Europe. Periodic upsurges of protest or spectacular examples of brutality by the security forces may force the issue back into onto the agenda of mainstream journalists and politicians, but the consensus for the most part is that the revolution - if there ever was one - is long over.

This article is an attempt, therefore, to bring out some of the hidden dynamics of the revolutionary process in Egypt, and explore them a little in the light of ideas and practice of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in early 20th century Russia. It is primarily a reflection on Lenin’s assertion that in real life, democracy must be “taken together” with other things, and that this process is part of “the struggle for the social revolution”. I will propose here that Egyptian workers, in the course of their struggles over the past six years have already begun to take democracy into many places it was previously denied them, and these extend far beyond the debating chamber of the newly-elected parliament. The waves of strikes since 2006 have made it possible for workers to experiment with mass democratic organisation in the workplaces and in some places extend a large degree of control over the workplace itself, although often both the organisation and control have proved to be only temporary fractures in capitalist ‘normality’.

The problem is that, as Lenin realised all too well, the stability of capitalist societies rests precisely on “taking democracy separately” (if they take democracy at all)³. Bosses generally insist on their right to decide what workers produce, how they produce it, and who receives the goods or services they provide. The domination of the unelected, unaccountable boss within an individual workplace mirrors the domination of an unelected, unaccountable class of capitalists within society as a whole. Democracy is also “taken separately” at the level of the capitalist state. The democratically-elected parts of these states, such as parliaments, are in reality subordinate to the unelected parts, such as the bureaucracy and the military, which serve the interests of the capitalist class.

The separation of legislature from executive is intimately connected with the separation of legislators from electorate. One of the main ways we encounter the ideology which sustains “taking democracy separately” is through the idea that democracy is something you put in a ballot box once every few years and forget about it. Therefore this article begins to discuss how the Egyptian ruling class has used the institutions and ideology of parliament in order to try and contain the explosion of unruly, mass democracy from below, with a view to re-establishing the proper separation of democracy from “real life” at a later date. (And there is no guarantee that Mubarak’s old generals will allow Egyptians any sort of democracy at all, if they are able to embark on a full-scale counter-revolution). There is not space here to discuss the interaction between the democracy from below which has emerged in the workplaces and the democracy of the streets, although clearly this is a hugely important question for the future of the Egyptian revolution⁴.

¹I am grateful to John Molyneux, Colin Barker, David Renton, Mark Thomas and Charlie Kimber for comments on the draft of this article. By far the greatest debt of thanks is of course owed to friends in Egypt, with whom and from whom I have learnt so much, in particular Mostafa Bassiouny, Sameh Naguib, Haitham Muhammadain, Hisham Fouad, Hossam el-Hamalawy, Gigi Ibrahim and Mohammed Shafiq.

²Lenin, *State and Revolution* 1970, p93

³See John Molyneux’s recent discussion of whether capitalism needs democracy (2012) for more on this question.

⁴The theme of that the ultimate source of democratic legitimacy in the revolution is to be found in the massive occupations of public squares, particularly Tahrir Square in Cairo, has resurfaced time and again since the fall of Mubarak. Since the

The final section of the article argues that although the future course of the Egyptian revolution remains open, with both the ideas and central institutions of capitalist society working against “taking democracy together”, Egyptian workers need a weapon of their own which can help them in the struggle to force on the state the democratic lessons they have learnt in their own workplaces (which means in the end building a new state of their own). This means building a revolutionary party, which brings together a minority of workers who “think like a state”, and thus see beyond the immediate battles of the class struggle to the possibility of winning the war against capitalism itself

However, it is only once workers develop the capacity to act as a class, in other words to join up their struggles between workplaces and across different sectors of the economy, that they will be able to test themselves in combat with the state.

By using Lenin’s ideas I do not mean to suggest that either the revolutionary process itself or the development of the revolutionary left in Egypt today are anywhere close to the situation the Bolsheviks found themselves in by 1917. They are not, and there is no space here to give a proper account of the balance of forces in the revolution to explain why. In particular, revolutionary socialists in Egypt today are far smaller in number than the revolutionary left was in Russia in 1905, let alone in 1917, even though they have grown dramatically in size and influence during the first year of the revolution⁵. Despite this, the debate about what kind of organisation today’s revolutionaries should try and build is suddenly an urgent question for a far, far wider audience than it was before 2011. From Luxor to Athens and even in London and New York a new generation has experienced mass protests, strikes and revolution on scale not seen for decades. The answer to the question of revolutionary organisation cannot be decided in the abstract, or only with reference to yesterday’s victories and defeats. If it is going to be built at all, a revolutionary socialist party has to root itself in the “living dialectics of history”, that is to say in the experience of ordinary men and women as they fight to re-make the world.

Winning the workplace

Ever since the week-long factory occupation by 24,000 textile workers in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006 triggered a huge upsurge in strikes⁶, hundreds of thousands of Egyptian workers have had to face the question of how to “take democracy together” with the struggle for better wages and conditions. The organisation of these strikes concretely posed the problem of how a minority of activists could win their co-workers. Before the revolution, strike organisation was necessarily underground, but its first action in the open was generally to bring workers together in some kind of mass meeting often held in the occupied workplace itself, or in the street. In order to be successful the strike leaders had to firstly persuade enough of their fellow workers to join in the action to make it ‘bite’ by shutting down the workplace, or disrupting work to an extent it hurt management. In practice this frequently meant trying to win as many as possible to join the sit-in in order to physically seize control of the workplace itself and turn it into an organising centre for the strike. If not enough people joined the sit-in then the strike itself would be in real danger of collapse. Strikes were essentially illegal, the option of the union branch secretary and half-a-dozen stalwarts of the committee mounting a token picket line for a couple of hours did not exist. If the minority of activists did not expand their ranks to include dozens, hundreds or even thousands of their fellow workers to actively participate in the strike in some way then they faced the danger that the police would storm the factory.

Thus the imperative to involve wide layers of workers actively in the strike was written into strike organisation from the start. This imperative was a fundamentally democratic one because the mass meetings at the heart of the sit-in were the place where the tactics and decisions proposed by activists would have to be tested if they were to be communicated to and accepted by the majority of strikers. There was simply

completion of the parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood has attempted to undermine this connection with slogans such as ‘Parliament is the Square’.

⁵See Cliff, 1975, pp352-4 for figures on the membership of the Bolshevik and Menshevik parties before and after the 1905 Revolution in Russia. On the revolutionary left in Egypt today, the Revolutionary Socialists’ perspective on what kind of organisation to build is closest to the ideas sketched out here. See *Egypt on the road of revolution*, Revolutionary Socialists, 2011, for a recent exposition of their perspectives on the current phase of the revolution.

⁶Alexander, 2008; Bassiouny and Said, 2008

no other way of doing this - no mechanisms for a postal ballot, for an electronic consultation, in most cases no union structures at all which could be used by activists for the purpose of strike organising. The existing unions were dominated by the ruling party and actively worked to stop strikes.

This does not mean that every decision would have to be discussed at a mass meeting, strike organisation immediately demanded a division of labour among the strikers, which was generally solved by electing a strike committee or sit-in committee. The question of who should negotiate on the strikers' behalf was in many strikes something to be decided at the mass meeting, and there was a general expectation that negotiators would report back immediately to the meeting the results of their discussions. In cases where the workplace was occupied, these meetings carried great potential for rich and varied democratic discussion, all the more important in the context of Mubarak's Egypt where freedom of speech and association was very limited, particularly for workers.

The basic pattern of strike organising has remained the same for most workers during the revolution. Successful strikes generally involve large groups of workers engaged in active, democratic decision-making at mass meetings. The revolution has additionally made it possible to test the call for strike action in open meetings beforehand, as was the case with the national doctors' strikes in May 2011. The strikes were called after activists won the majority in two mass meetings of the Doctors' Union General Assembly which brought together 3-4000 doctors in the street outside the union headquarters. However, the revolution has also made it possible for strikes to be called 'from above' by the leadership of the new independent unions for example. These kind of strike calls have so far had little track record of success. This is a criticism which Ashraf Omar makes of the call for the February 11 general strike against the ruling military council. Although the strike call was supported strongly by the leaders of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, there was little response from workers, precisely because the argument was not won in the workplaces⁷.

Delegates not representatives

The democratic mandate of the strike committee and of the negotiators is bound up very deeply with their relationship to the mass meeting. Their role as direct delegates, given only a temporary authority to represent workers and one subject to much stricter conditions and control from the mass of the strikers than is the case with even elected trade union officials, was confirmed in cases where negotiators returned to the mass meeting with a proposed deal, only to find it rejected. Hossam el-Hamalawy recounts two important occasions when this happened at Misr Spinning in Mahalla al-Kubra in 2007. In February 2007, an elected delegation which included activists who had lead the December 2006 travelled to Cairo to present a mass petition of resignations from the government-run Textile Workers' Federation and came back with a series of proposed concessions from the official union leadership. News of the deal travelled ahead of them by SMS and mobile phone and they returned to find an angry mass meeting denouncing their 'sell-out'. In the September 2007 strike negotiators' proposals to end the strike in return for concessions were rejected at a mass meeting to cries of 'We're staying put'⁸.

The strike by Public Transport Authority (PTA) workers in Cairo in September 2011 saw a similar dynamic at work, this time to assert the authority of the mass meeting over the new independent union leadership. Negotiations with the Minister of Labour produced a proposed deal, but when the negotiators, led by the president of the PTA independent union Ali Fattouh, returned to mass meetings at the garages they got a hostile reception and were told to continue the strike. Not only did the strike continue for several further days, but new elections for the union leadership were held at which Fattouh lost his position. Other members of the union committee who had publicly argued in favour of rejecting the deal were re-elected, however.

Control over negotiators from below is important to strikers in both a negative and positive sense. After long years of experience with an exceptionally bureaucratic trade union apparatus which was run by state, strikers had good reasons to fear the autonomy of their representatives and to try and find mechanisms to

⁷Omar, 2012. Moreover the February 11 strike call was for a political general strike essentially against not only the ruling military council but also the majority parties in the parliament, and was initiated by revolutionary activists outside the workers' movement.

⁸El-Hamalawy, 2008a; 2008b

discipline them. It was also a positive protection for the negotiators themselves as they were frequently in talks not with the employers themselves but with the state security apparatus in circumstances rather different from trade union negotiations in Europe. Talks to settle strikes there are not usually conducted by the police essentially kidnapping the union branch secretary in order to negotiate a deal on behalf of the boss. In such circumstances the negotiators' position as a direct delegate of the majority of the strikers both disciplined and strengthened them. It disciplined them in the sense that whatever they might agree in private with State Security would have to be discussed and agreed in public at the mass meeting. It strengthened them in the knowledge that simply making them 'disappear' into jail would not, from the point of view of the state, necessarily solve the problem of the strike, and would potentially result in the election of new, more radical leaders.

Before the revolution, the democratic principles and practice of strike organising by and large did not generally find an expression in permanent organisation. However, the activists who built the first independent union to emerge in Egypt for over fifty years, the Property Tax Collectors' Union RETAU (Real Estate Tax Authority Union) tried to apply them directly to the structures of the new union. RETAU was built out of mass meetings, by the democratically elected strike committees, and brought together 4,000 delegates from across Egypt for its founding congress. The new union's constitution attempted as far as possible to distil the democratic lessons which workers had learnt collectively from the strikes by asserting the sovereignty of the union membership over the leadership through the decisions of delegates at the union's general assembly. The constitution of the Public Transport Authority Workers' Union, formed in March 2011 after the overthrow of Mubarak contains similar guarantees and provides simple democratic mechanisms for the union committees based in the garages to exercise control over the central union leadership⁹.

The problem of course, is that writing these things into the constitutions of unions does not guarantee their respect in practice. Inevitably, as the tax collectors' union consolidated and developed its new structures, and the strike leaders of yesterday were drawn into full-time or largely full-time roles as organisers and negotiators divorced from the pressures of the workplace, the beginnings of a union bureaucracy appeared. There is not space here to discuss this question fully, but the reasons why it happened are essentially those outlined by Cliff and Gluckstein in their classic analysis of the trade union bureaucracy¹⁰. The central issue was not, in the case of RETAU's leadership, the emergence of a large layer of salaried officials, but the question of their autonomy from the struggles in the workplace. Sections of the Egyptian state were prepared to negotiate with them directly (although other sections, particularly the leadership of the official trade union federation, fought a vicious battle against the new union), so they were able to continue to build the union without needing to organise further mass strike action which would have both revived their own democratic mandate and reasserted the authority of the base of the union over the elected officials¹¹.

Workers' democratic control

Taking democracy together with the struggle and building basic principles of control from below into workplace organisations became, in the context of revolution, a means for some groups of workers to exercise increasing control over the workplace itself. When this situation arises, it is always an uneven process, and exactly what 'workers' control' means in practice and how it arises varies a great deal from workplace to workplace¹². In Egypt two sorts of struggles have posed the question of workers' control very directly: the fight to 'cleanse' the workplace of 'corrupt elements' associated with the old ruling party and the struggle against

⁹Interviews with Haitham Muhammadain, Mohammed Abd-al-Sattar, and Ali Fattouh, Cairo, 30 April and 1 May 2011.

¹⁰Cliff and Gluckstein, 1986, pp21-35

¹¹This why the democratic principles of strike organising must also be maintained and consolidated at the bottom of the unions. Regular democratic debate and decision-making at mass meetings, even through the routine of everyday union organising, builds stronger and more effective union organisation than passive consultations with the membership by ballots or email surveys. It is not enough to attempt to do this using the union's own internal machinery, however. What is actually required is the building of organisation rooted in the workplaces which is capable of moving independently of the union leadership where necessary. See Cliff and Gluckstein, 1986, for a more detailed discussion of this question.

¹²See for example, Bayat (1987) on the development of factory councils during the Iranian Revolution, and Ness and Azzellini (2011) for a collection of articles drawing together experiences of workers' control across a wide range of countries since the Paris Commune.

privatisation. In both these cases the exercise of workers' 'control' has been connected with workers' assertion of their own right to take decisions normally reserved for management and to force the state to accept the consequences. In some workplaces workers have forced a dramatic change in the character of management, by forcing the state to accept the removal of members of the Armed Forces and their replacement by civilian officials. The de-militarisation of even small parts of the state apparatus from below holds immense political significance in the context of growing anger at the continuation of military rule at the top of the state, in the form of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces which took power from Mubarak.

There is only space to discuss a small handful of examples here, and there is as yet little information about how far this process has gone in other workplaces. It is certain however, that the question of extending workers' control has been raised in hundreds of strikes, as it is expressed in demands for the removal of corrupt managers, the return of privatised companies to the public sector and the sacking of overpaid consultants. Radical tactics are common: workers at Telecom Egypt which runs a large part of the public phone network, locked their Chief Executive in his office and five were arrested and charged with his attempted murder. In response their colleagues organised a nationwide strike which ended with the release of the arrested protesters and the payment of a combined bonus of 51 million Egyptian pounds (6.4 million) to the 50,000-strong workforce¹³.

The key point here is the living relationship between workers' own democratically-organised mass action and workers' control. The clearest example of this process in action is the establishment of the independent union in Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital in Cairo. In the early days of the revolution, Mohammed Shafiq, one of the doctors at the hospital, and a revolutionary socialist activist, took the initiative to start the process of creating an independent union for all grades of hospital staff¹⁴. He did this largely because of pressure from nurses and other staff to join in a simple petition campaign he had started demanding better conditions for the doctors. The union quickly attracted hundreds of staff, and moved into confrontation with the existing management. The heart of the process was the democratic 'levelling' across professional boundaries within the union, which served as the mechanism for imposing democratic control from below over the running of the hospital itself. In other words, because the majority of workers in the workplace were won to the union, and because the union's own internal structures emphasized the equality of all grades and professions, this meant in reality that nurses, porters and admin staff suddenly gained a democratic stake in deciding how the hospital was run. This included the democratic election of a new manager and the imposition of that choice on the Ministry of Health through the threat of a strike. The speed and depth of this process was conditional on the revolutionary situation. The state apparatus had been dealt a huge blow by the popular uprising against Mubarak, the senior levels in the Ministry of Health were in a state of panic and confusion, and the sudden and dramatic rise in the confidence of the hospital staff to see themselves as having the power to change their lives at work was deeply connected with the general change in Egyptian workers' consciousness as they took part in the revolution.

All the staff I met at the hospital in October 2011, including the deputy director, emphasized that the extension of democracy to the workplace had fundamentally changed the service they delivered for the better, as well as transforming their own experience of work. Fatma Zahra'a Abd-al-Hamid is rep for temporary admin staff on the union's council.

"After the revolution, we found that the issue of democracy and the legitimacy of the majority opinion became an 'open area' for everyone. The independent union knits everyone together. In the meetings of the union council, for example, the manual worker rep sits next to the doctors. There is equality. I've only been here a year, but the union gave me my rights, it made my voice louder, and raised the democratic will. That's why I joined the union¹⁵."

Adel 'Abd-al-Fattah Ali, director of the administration at the hospital, and representative for the permanent admin staff on the union council added,

¹³*Ahram Online* (2011b); Hussein, (2011)

¹⁴Interviews with Mohammed Shafiq, in Cairo, 30 April and 27 October 2011.

¹⁵Interview in Arabic with Fatma Zahra'a Abd-al-Hamid, Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital, Cairo, 27 October 2011

”The union is really democratic, and it has given us the chance to extend democracy within the hospital, because all the staff at every level are involved. Democracy has helped us make improvements in services. Why? Because everyone is free to express their opinion, and so collectively we come to the right decisions.”

“Do you think people feel that they are participants in the administration of the hospital?”

“Yes, and this is the best way to run an administration. We’re talking about directing human beings, and so the majority have to agree with us. We have to respect their opinions, or we’re not going to get anywhere¹⁶.”

Even the deputy director of the hospital, Dr Usama Prins agreed.

“Our experience here is unique, as we were the first people to try this experiment. When the revolution happened, and people wanted democracy, and for political life to be organised, we had an election here, the first election, people stood as candidates for a union committee to defend the staff in the hospital from the doctors to the manual workers and the nurses and in order to gain our rights, which we were denied previously. In order to improve service in the hospital there has to be democracy. If there is democracy, it exposes things that are going wrong more clearly. If there is democracy, everyone will speak up and say what’s wrong in the hospital, and they won’t be afraid¹⁷.”

Council workers in Alexandria’s West Quarter in July 2011 attempted to extend workers’ control over part of local government in a similarly audacious fashion. On 5 July the Governor of Alexandria tried to transfer the elected secretary of the local council in the city’s Western Quarter, Farag Sha’aban and a colleague to new jobs, in a bid to stop them speaking out against plans to reinstate members of the old ruling party. Local government workers in Western Quarter declared a strike and locked the head of the council, an unelected general, out the building and chased him away when he attempted to break his way in with a gang of thugs. A few days later, with huge protests and occupations flooding the streets across Egypt, the same local government workers announced another strike and joined the sit-in in Alexandria’s Sa’ad Zaghlul Square in their hundreds. In addition to the resignation of the governor of Alexandria, they now added their voices to the hundreds of thousands calling for the downfall of the government. However, they also took another step, by democratically electing Farag Sha’aban as a replacement for their old boss as head of the council. A strike in defence of a whistle-blowing colleague suddenly became something much bigger: a means to remake a small part of the Egyptian state from below. “We have to get things done” explained Sha’aban in a video interview¹⁸, “so we decided that the head of the quarter should be elected by the council workers to lead a campaign of reform and change in the neighbourhood.”

The struggle for the de-militarisation of management from below can also be seen at work in the Civil Aviation sector. Overnight on 20 July 2011 thousands of airport workers launched a lightning strike and blocked the main road to the airport in protest at the proposed appointment of a former chief-of-staff of the Egyptian Airforce as minister of civil aviation. Other demands included an end to the appointment of former military officers to head departments at the Civil Aviation Ministry and wage parity with EgyptAir workers. As Al-Ahram noted the following morning, workers agreed to suspend their action only “after a long meeting with Air Marshal Reda Hafez, the current commander of the Egyptian Airforce, who promised to meet all protesters’ demands in 72 hours¹⁹.” Promises have not always been kept, but this has so far only sparked more strikes and protests. Workers in the Egyptian Airports Company blockaded the newly-appointed director, an Air Force Officer, from entering his office and threatened strike action in January 2012 demanding the de-militarisation of management appointments²⁰.

The occupation of workers at the Egyptian Soap and Oils Company in December 2011 provides an example of how different demands have propelled workers to the same conclusion: that they need to exercise control over the management of the workplace. The company is a large one, employing several thousand

¹⁶Interview in Arabic with Adel ’Abd-al-Fattah Ali, Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital, Cairo, 27 October 2011

¹⁷Interview in Arabic with Dr Usama Prins, Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital, Cairo, 27 October 2011.

¹⁸Interview with Farag Sha’aban by Mayoonyat, uploaded 13 July 2011, available online on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/user/MENAsolidarity?feature=mhee#p/a/u/0/X0d5X7rR_X8

¹⁹Ahram Online, 2011a

²⁰Fouad, 2012

workers across five branches. Workers' action was prompted by fears that the company was being run down in preparation for being sold off to a private investor, and their central demand was that the company should be returned to the public sector. On 15 December thousands of workers occupied the Sandub and Zaqaiziq branches of the company and stayed in occupation for 22 days, successfully enforcing the dissolution of the pro-privatisation management. One of the strikers explained:

“This was our fourth protest. The fourth sit-in in a single year. Our first started on 10 February [2011] just one day before the end of Mubarak. We hope this will be the last. We've put the issue to the powers that be. They now know all about it. It was a surprise to us as workers that the local governor wanted to sell us off. The governor of Dahaqiliyya province sent a complaint to the public prosecutor saying there were corrupt elements in the company which caused the sit-in and asked the prosecutor to act against those corrupt elements. The military council has known about the issue since the beginning of the sit-in. A counsellor from the military came to us and said 'It isn't our responsibility. It is no-one's responsibility to dissolve the management board: not the Field Marshal, or the local governor, not the prime minister. He asked me one question: 'who can dissolve the management board?' I replied 'the workers'. And thanks be to God we succeeded in doing exactly that²¹.”

The significance of what the soap workers have achieved lies not only in the achievement itself, but in the process of learning which went with it. They learnt not to trust management promises, they learnt the media was un-interested in their struggle, and that the local governor wanted to sell them out. They learnt that only their own, self-organised mass action would bring the results they wanted. They learnt that their democratic control of the workplace could achieve something that Field Marshal Tantawi and the military council were unwilling or unable to do.

Taking democracy separately

The problem is that simply attacking the roots of the regime from below and remaking the Egyptian state and Egyptian capitalism piece by piece and strike by strike is not going to gain these workers anything more than a brief respite. The health workers in Manshiyet al-Bakri found this out quite quickly. They discovered that their new democratically elected manager rapidly reasserted management's 'right to manage' and called on the Ministry of Health to back him up. He started boycotting meetings with staff, and worked to undermine the democratic staff forums they had set up. Because the space within which their democratic experiment has been unfolding is a space created by the revolution, it can only be temporary unless the state itself is changed radically from below.

The 'first principles' of workers' democracy - in other words the need to win the workplace in mass democratic debate and assert workers' control over their elected delegates - can be deduced directly from the imperatives of effective strike organising from below. They can, and have been, distilled and applied directly to building independent union organisation out of the strike, although as the examples above show this does not, on its own, stop the appearance of a union bureaucracy and the eventual decay of direct democratic control from below.

The same 'first principles' can also, in the circumstances of mass strikes and particularly when there is a crisis in the state, accelerate and deepen moves towards workers' control of the workplace. But the assertion of workers' control within individual workplaces, even within many individual workplaces, will only ever be temporary so long as capitalists as a class retain their control of the state. The soap workers in Sandub and Zaqaiziq will need more than further sit-ins and strikes to save their jobs and their company.

Neither the huge street protests nor the waves of mass strikes for social demands which we have seen so far during the Egyptian Revolution have been able to break down the core institutions of the old regime, and in particular the army. That is precisely why we have to go beyond first principles, and why Lenin points out in *State and Revolution*, revolutionary socialism is not merely the theory of the class struggle, but the recognition that workers must break the existing state and replace it with one of their own making. The reason for this is because the state in capitalist society is an expression of the fact that in order for the

²¹Contribution by Soap and Oils Company worker at a meeting in the Centre for Socialist Studies 12 January 2012, filmed by Gigi Ibrahim and uploaded 14 January 2012. Available online here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPp4s20C0qU&list=UUd6A5QLrVIQ0YI6TpfU10_g&index=24&feature=plcp

capitalist ruling class to maintain the exploitation of workers as a class, it needs a “centralized organization of force, an organization of violence²².”

However, the political rule of the capitalist class does not depend only on coercion. It depends also on workers accepting both that their economic exploitation is natural and inevitable, and that the state which enforces and facilitates that exploitation is not an instrument in the hands of their exploiters, but a natural and inevitable expression of the needs of society as a whole. Thus the capitalist state is at one and the same time an expression of the fusion of the 'economic' and the 'political' aspects of capitalist domination (without it, the exploiters cannot maintain their exploitation) and the central institution which maintains the idea of their separation.

The kinds of democratic practices which Egyptian workers have discovered through the course of their own struggles directly contradict the many ways in which normal capitalist society separates democracy from 'real life'. The election of delegates subject to recall and the imposition of democracy from below on the management of the workplace give us a glimpse of the power that workers have to drive democracy into every aspect of social and political life. But even when they are engaged in this process, workers do not inevitably draw the conclusion that therefore they must use their collective power to destroy the old state and build a new one. On the contrary, the 'common sense' of capitalist society suggests that there are better and easier ways of making the changes they are fighting for. In Egypt today, the institution of parliament is the principal political weapon in the hands of both the ruling generals of the military council, and the mainstream political parties of the former opposition to Mubarak, in their battle to contain and limit the revolution. The Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist parties have worked ceaselessly over the past year to promote the message that democracy is not in the streets, nor in the workplaces. That is it not something which ordinary people use themselves in their everyday lives, but it is something that happens on polling day and once trusted representatives have been elected they must be allowed to get on with the business of running the country. They have campaigned hard against strikes in general, and particularly against political strikes. The mobilisation which the Brotherhood led against the call for a general strike on February 11 for the immediate handover of power by the military council showed that the political battle within the workplaces is intensifying.

There is a common class interest between the old regime and the leadership of the Brotherhood in preserving the Egyptian state's role as a machine for their enrichment. However, this is not the message that they present to workers who vote for them. Instead they talk about workers' rights and social justice: Abd-al-Hamid Isa, an MP from the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party told the parliament on 19 February 2012 that fixed-term workers should be given permanent contracts and the policy of privatisation should be 'reviewed'²³. Brotherhood MPs have been kept busy mediating between striking workers and their bosses, gaining promises from management in exchange for the suspension of the action, and telling workers they will also raise the matter in parliament. In the space of a single week in late February 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's main website carried news of at least four separate strikes where the intervention of the Brotherhood's MPs apparently persuaded workers to suspend their protests including a sit-in by petroleum workers in Alexandria²⁴, a strike by 500 workers in a fertiliser factory in Aswan²⁵, a road blockade by workers in a chemical factory in Fayyum²⁶, and a sit-in by workers in the Kom Ombo Valley company in Aswan²⁷.

Learning to act as a class

There remain numerous reasons why the Islamists will have difficulties stabilising a democratic facade for the old regime. The first of these is that in a context of global economic crisis and increasing pressures towards austerity, promises made to strikers are going to be ever harder to keep. The second is the relative instability of the state apparatus itself. The repeated episodes of demonstrative violence by parts of the security forces

²²Lenin, 1970, p30

²³Ikhwan Online website, 2012a

²⁴Al-Tuhami, 2012

²⁵Ikhwan Online website 2012b

²⁶Sayf al-Nasr, 2012

²⁷Taha, 2012

against revolutionary activists have actually caused severe problems for the Islamists as they have triggered large popular counter-mobilisations which have often threatened to spiral into out-of-control confrontations with the army and police. The third is the high degree of workers' self-confidence and self-organisation within the workplaces.

Nevertheless, over time, the old patterns of life will reassert themselves, unless workers begin to make a qualitative shift towards consciously using their collective social power beyond the workplaces. In other words, they need to learn to act as a class. 'Acting as a class' means here going beyond raising demands which meet the needs of workers in an individual workplace or industry to fighting for things which benefit all workers²⁸. This may be expressed in generalised demands, such as the demand for a raise in the national minimum wage, or the extension of the vote to workers. However, it may be that the struggle of specific groups of workers becomes a battle where the outcome has such an impact on the wider balance of class forces that even though workers' demands are not general, they are still class demands.

Building organisation which is capable of leading workers' struggles beyond the individual workplace is obviously a key part of learning to act as a class. However, this kind of organisation cannot be equated with trade unions in a simple or mechanical fashion. In some circumstances trade unions unite workers and in others they divide them by industry or trade. In some circumstances they can build workers' self-confidence and self-organisation, in others they facilitate the domination of paid officials to and encourage workers' passivity²⁹.

Egyptian workers have already begun to take steps towards being able to act as a class. Even before the revolution, important groups of workers, such as the Mahalla textile workers were leading action for general demands such as an increase in the minimum wage. The mass strikes of September 2011 showed that another step had been taken: towards the ability to organise sector-wide strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers³⁰. These strikes have already profoundly shaped the revolutionary process, by subjecting the state to further pressure from without, by holding open a space in the streets for further huge mobilisations against the military council, and above all by giving workers a taste of their own power at the very moment when the generals and the Islamist reformist politicians have been trying to persuade them to put their faith in parliament.

Thinking like a state: building the revolutionary party

For the reasons outlined above, the more that workers' action over their general social demands is co-ordinated beyond the workplace, the more likely it is they will come into direct confrontation with the state. If this happens in the highly charged atmosphere of the revolution there is a good chance that at least a minority of workers will draw the conclusion that they also need to use their class power for directly political goals, and join forces with the wider revolutionary movement. However, this outcome is not inevitable. Workers' aspirations for general social change may be trapped in all kinds of different vessels: reformist political parties, bureaucratic trade unions, movements for personal religious salvation.

That is why the intervention of an organised minority of workers plays such a crucial role in the process of building up the ability of workers to use their power as a class, just as it does in attempts to overcome the gap between the streets and the workplaces. This organised minority can transmit the news of victories and share lessons from defeats. It can, and must, fight to counteract attempts to set workers from different trades, religions or nationalities against each other.

In early twentieth century Russia, a revolutionary minority of workers took a leap of imagination beyond the possibilities of acting as a class and began to think like a state. Their leaders saw that 'democracy taken together' was more than an instrument in the struggle against autocracy: it could provide the founding principles for a new social order. Lenin's simple and compelling argument in *State and Revolution* was that workers had already discovered, and built into the functioning of the councils (soviets) of workers, soldiers

²⁸There is not space here to connect the rather truncated and simplified discussion which follows here with the rich debates stimulated by Karl Marx's about the relationship between the working class as a "class in itself" with the realisation of workers' potential to transform society by becoming a "class for itself", Marx, 1999. See also Molyneux, 1978, pp11-36.

²⁹Cliff and Gluckstein, 1986

³⁰Alexander, 2012

and peasants' deputies, a far deeper kind of democracy than that promised to them by any parliament. This democracy was based on overcoming several different kinds of separation: between legislators and electors, by insisting on making delegates subject to recall from below; between legislature and executive by abolishing the division between those who made decisions and those who carried them out; and ultimately between political and economic democracy, by implementing workers' democratic control over the process of production and the state³¹.

Can 'thinking like a state' help Egyptian workers advance their struggles today? I believe there are good reasons to think so. The workers' movement is stronger in the workplaces than anywhere else. This article has tried to show how that strength rests in large part on the power of 'democracy taken together' with the struggle in the workplaces. 'Thinking like a state' in relation to the kind of workplace organisation which has developed in Egypt over the past six years would mean seeing what it could become and therefore fighting to transform it. It would mean working to generalise its democratic principles, and fighting to preserve and consolidate them beyond the moment of strike organisation. It would mean trying to use the huge leaps workers have made in self-confidence and self-organisation in the workplace to build organisation beyond the workplaces which can carry the revolutionary, democratic energy of the mass strikes outwards and upwards to win victories for the working class as a whole³².

This might call for building up organisations of workplace delegates at the base of existing unions, it might mean trying to bring them together across a local area to plan joint action, it might involve setting up new unions from scratch, but fighting as far as possible to preserve control from below over their elected officials by developing strategies for action which reinforce the self-activity of the membership.

In a sense, this could be seen as 'thinking like a workers' state.' It is one way in which the revolutionary minority works constantly to overcome the separation between economic and political struggles. However, taking the leap of imagination from workplace organisation to a workers' state is not in itself enough. The revolutionary minority also needs to think against the state it is trying to defeat, and fight to overcome the separation between the political and the economic from the other direction. This means understanding the limits of what can be achieved in the workplaces, and setting its sights on winning the majority of workers to sharing its analysis that their hopes of social justice can only be realised by imposing their collective political will on the ruling class. It means raising directly political issues within the same mass democratic forums where wage demands are agreed. Often this will mean putting uncomfortable or unpopular points: in defence of religious minorities when the state media is whipping up hatred against them for example.

Doing this is not just about winning the battle against divisions within the working class because these weaken workers' ability to fight effectively today (although this is important), it is also about preparing the ground for winning workers to the idea that they are fighting not only on for themselves, but for all the poor and oppressed. Revolutionary socialists should be "tribunes of the people", Lenin argued in *What is to be done?*³³. But this is only a premonition of his vision of the working class as "revolutionary leaders of the people against the bourgeoisie" in *State and Revolution* Lenin, 1970, p31.

Winning workers away from reformism likewise involves thinking against the existing state. It involves convincing them that despite everything politicians and trade union leaders say, the state as it is will never

³¹A large part of *State and Revolution* deals with the consequences of another separation: between 'the people' and a standing army. Evidently, given the role of the Egyptian military in the current revolution there are many important ideas in *State and Revolution* which could be discussed in relation to Egypt, however, as the question of ordinary people taking up arms themselves had not, at the time of writing, been debated widely within the workers' movement, this discussion would necessarily be rather abstract.

³²One of the sources of inspiration for this article is Gramsci's writings on the factory councils in Turin, such as his article "Workers' Democracy" which appeared in *L'Ordine Nuovo* in June 1919 (Gramsci, 1919). Faced with a massive upsurge in workers' struggles in Italy and having seen the example of the Russian Revolution two years before, Gramsci looked at the forms of organisation that workers were building in the course of these battles and saw how they could be transformed into the basis for a workers' state. What I have taken from Gramsci is principally the idea that relating revolutionary socialist ideas to a new revolutionary context does not mean "the cold application of an intellectual schema" but winning workers to the perspective that revolutionary socialism is an interpretation of their own "felt needs". (quoted in Molyneux, 1978, p146), and that they can, through the struggles they are already engaged in, start "working usefully to create and "anticipate" the future" (Gramsci, 1919). What Gramsci says about the revolutionary party in "Workers Democracy" is very different to the arguments presented here, however, as at the time he wrote the article, he had not yet seen the need to break with the Socialist Party.

³³Lenin, 1902, p49

be theirs, and that they have the capacity to build a new one. Thinking against the existing state does not mean rejecting using parliament or other reformist institutions as a platform for revolutionary ideas as a matter of principle, however.

Finally, to a certain extent the revolutionary minority has to think like the state it wants to defeat. It has to centralise its small forces, deploy its resources carefully, generalise lessons learnt across space and time. It has to consider how to use the balance of class forces to its advantage, make and break tactical alliances beyond the ranks of the working class. Above all it means building organisation which knits together people who are able to make the right arguments in enough places to shift the balance of forces in the wider class struggle.

While it is Egyptian workers themselves who will decide in which direction their movement develops over the coming phase of the revolution, there are several reasons why thinking through what 'taking democracy together' with the social struggle might mean for a wider audience may be important.

The first of these is to demonstrate that just as the struggle for the extension of 'political democracy' in Egypt has a large 'social soul', so the struggle for social justice has a 'democratic soul'³⁴. This is particularly important in the face of the dominant narratives in the Western media about the Egyptian revolution. Recently the celebratory tone of media coverage of Tahrir Square has given way to complaints about the Islamist victory in the parliamentary elections. Much of this coverage assumes that because most Egyptians are Muslims, that Islamist parties have some magical hold over their minds, and that at every opportunity their obscurantist, backward and anti-democratic tendencies will re-assert themselves. One of the reasons for writing this article has been to try and break down ideas like this. It is an attempt to spell out that the profoundly democratic character of the revival of the Egyptian working class means that potential for building revolutionary socialist organisation in Egypt is greater than it has been for decades.

A second reason for writing is to assert the common ground between the struggles of Egyptian workers and the global history of workers' discoveries of the power of 'democracy taken together'. Situating Egypt's mass strikes and revolution in this history is profoundly disturbing to those who want to promote myths of Arab or Muslim exceptionalism.

The final motivation for sharing these reflections is to extend an invitation to continue and deepen debate about the theory and organisation we need for the turbulent years to come. If we understand Marxism as a theory of working class *self*-emancipation, it is clearly not enough to simply repeat Marxist theory in the appropriate dialect. Rather, the challenge is to win workers in every country to see Marxist ideas as the theory of *their own* class struggles and act on them accordingly. A new era of revolutionary crisis calls for proving anew both the possibility and necessity of revolutionary socialist organisation from the struggle as it unfolds.

References

Ahram Online, (2011a) *Cairo airport workers suspend protests until Monday*, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/16983.aspx>

Ahram Online, (2011b), *Telecom Egypt to pay employees LE51 million in bonuses, strikes continue*, Ahram Online website, 24 October 2011; <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/25020.aspx>

Alexander, Anne, (2008), *Inside Egypt's mass strikes*, International Socialism 118, <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=428>

Alexander, Anne, (2011), *The growing social soul of Egypt's democratic revolution*, International Socialism 131, June 2011, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=741&issue=131>

Alexander, Anne (2012), *The Egyptian workers' movement and the 25 January Revolution*, International Socialism 133, January 2012, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=778&issue=133>

³⁴Hal Draper discusses Marx's idea of political revolutions with social souls in depth elsewhere (Draper, 1978, volume 2). See Choonara, 2011; Alexander, 2011.

Al-Tuhami, Muhammad (2012), *Abu-al-Futuh yungah fi ta'liq 'istisam 'ummal "Akba"*, Ikhwan Online website, 23 February 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=102009&SecID=0>

Bassiouny, Mustafa, and Said, Omar, 2008, *A new workers' movement: the strike wave of 2007*, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=429&issue=118>

Bayat, Assef, (1987), *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (Zed)

Choonara, Joseph, 2011, *The relevance of permanent revolution: A reply to Neil Davidson*, International Socialism 131, June 2011, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=745&issue=131>

Cliff, Tony and Gluckstein, Donny (1986), *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle* (Bookmarks)

Cliff, Tony, (1975), *Lenin: Building the Party* (Pluto)

Draper, Hal, 1978, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, volume 2: The Politics of Social Classes* (Monthly Review).

El-Hamalawy, H. (2008a), *Mahalla testimony 1*, www.arabawy.org, 15 June, <http://arabist.net/arabawy/2008/06/15/mahalla-testimony/>, page accessed 20 June 2008.

El-Hamalawy, H. (2008b), *Mahalla testimony 2*, www.arabawy.org, 17 June, <http://arabist.net/arabawy/2008/06/17/mahalla-testimony-2/>, page accessed 20 June 2008.

Fouad, Hisham (2012), *Al-amilum bil matarat yumna'un al-ra'is al-askari al-gadid min dakhul al-sharika*, e-socialists.net website, 5 January 2012, <http://www.e-socialists.net/node/8086>

Gramsci, Antonio (1919), *Workers' Democracy*, L'Ordine Nuovo, 21 June 1919, translated by Michael Carley, Marxists.org website, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1919/06/workers-democracy.htm>

Hussein, Marwa (2011), *Telecom Egypt employees escalate their protest, demanding release of 5 colleagues*, Ahram Online website, 18 October 2011; <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/24500/Business/Economy/Telecom-Egypt-employees-escalate-their-protest,-de.aspx>

Ikhwan Online website (2012a), *Al-na'ib 'Abd-al-Hamid 'Isa yutalib bi tathbit al-'amila al-mu'aqita wal-mawsimiyya*, 19 February 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=101679&SecID=0>

Ikhwan Online website (2012b), *Al-Hurriya wa'l Adala bi Aswan yungah fi fakk idrab 'ummal kima*, 23 February 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=102013&SecID=0>

Lenin, Vladimir, (1902), *What is to be done?* Marxists.org website, downloadable version, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf>

Lenin, Vladimir, 1970, *The State and Revolution* (Foreign Languages Press), internet version available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

Marx, Karl, and Engels, Frederick (1999), Selected Works, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Abstracts from Chapter 2, Marxists.org, 1999 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/hist-mat/pov-phil/ch02.html>

Molyneux, John, 2012, *Capitalism versus democracy*, Socialist Review, January 2012, <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=11871>

Ness, Immanuel and Azzellini, Dario (2011), *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Haymarket).

Omar, Ashraf, (2012), *Musharika umaliyya mahduda fh 11 fibrayir limadha?* e-socialists.net website, <http://www.e-socialists.net/node/8310>

Revolutionary Socialists, 2011, *Egypt on the road of revolution*, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/76534261/Revolutionary-Socialists-Egypt-on-the-Road-of-Revolution>

Sayf al-Nasr, Ahmad (2012), *Na'ib al-hurriya wa'l adala bil fayyum yunsif 'ummal al-kimawiyat'*, Ikhwan Online website, 24 February 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=102068&SecID=0>

Taha, Hamdy (2012), *Salah Musa yufadd 'itisam 'ummal "wadi kom ombo" bi aswan*, Ikhwan Online website, 26 February 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=102150&SecID=0>