

A Strike

Kawkab al-Sharq, 20 May 1933

People had barely finished thinking about the matter of the civil servants who are complaining and protesting, and demanding that the government look into their grievances — not with a look of sympathy and kindness, but with a look of justice and equity, for they want nothing but justice and equity; they want the doors of promotions and increments to be opened for them as they were opened for senior officials, or those doors to be firmly, honestly, and sincerely closed to senior officials as they were closed to them.

It is a monstrous injustice to differentiate between people to this degree — to favour with promotion and increments one who can afford to do without them, and to deprive of promotion and increments one who needs them in order to live.

People had barely finished with this grievance pressed by the junior civil servants so insistently, when another grievance appeared before them no less moving to the soul, no less wounding to the heart, and no less arousing of the sentiment of justice and equity — the grievance that the workers of Thornycroft have been pressing for a long time. Days and weeks have passed since these workers came to the company with their complaints, asking it to change something of its treatment of them to lighten the burdens of life upon them and enable them to turn to their work with love and dedication. The company turned away from them and continued turning away. The workers turned to the government, hoping it might mediate between them and the company and compel the company to fulfil the terms of the concession agreement. The government turned away from them and continued turning away. These workers endured and persevered, bearing the pain and hardship they bore, until patience exceeded its limit — and they stopped work and declared a strike yesterday. No sooner had a full day passed on this declaration of strike than the newspapers published a company announcement demanding that the workers return to work, threatening them with dismissal if they dallied in returning, and giving them two days to think it over, choosing between submission to the company's ruling and surrender to unemployment with all the pain, hunger, and deprivation that follow in its wake.

God knows we do not like strikes and have no inclination toward them; God knows we do not desire them for the workers nor advise them to persist in one. But these workers are people like us — it is their duty to bear pain, to be patient in the face of adversity, and to struggle in the path of life. But it is equally their right to be looked upon as people who feel and sense and aspire to good and hope for some improvement in their condition. If pain has been decreed for all people, then the desire to alleviate pain has been permitted to all people. If life cannot be set right without hardship and toil, it also cannot be set right without striving

to lighten the hardship and ease the toil. If it is the duty of the workers not to harm the public interest by going on strike, then it is equally the duty of the company not to harm the public interest by burdening the workers beyond what they can bear. If the public has the right to expect the company to enable these workers to carry out their task with willing souls, tranquil hearts, open doors of hope before them, their health preserved, and their lives not exposed to danger — and if the government was established precisely in order to establish justice among people, to redress the wronged against the wrongdoer, to protect the weak from the strong, and to realise the public interest — then for all these reasons it was, and remains, the government's duty to mediate in the dispute that has arisen between the workers and the company in order to set the matter on its proper course. We have no doubt that had it done so with resolution, the workers would not have been compelled to strike, and the public would not have faced the hardship and difficulty of transport these past two days.

There is something that makes the government's duty in a situation like this of greater gravity and more deserving of attention: the disputes that arise between workers and companies in Egypt are not like the disputes that arise between workers and capitalists in European countries — they are more complex. In Europe these disputes occur between people whose classes differ, but who are united in race, homeland, and interest. Whichever of the two parties wrongs or excessively harms the other, the wrong is reprehensible — but both the good and the ill of labour, both its benefit and its loss, all revert to a single nation.

In Egypt the matter is different. The companies that exploit the workers are foreign, and the workers subjected to this exploitation are Egyptian. The good and profit of labour revert to the foreigner more than they revert to the Egyptian. This is why the Egyptian worker is in twofold need of the government's protection, kindness, and sympathy. And this is why the government is right to look upon disputes of this kind from the standpoint of economic interest and from the standpoint of national dignity as well.

These workers are demanding a reduction in working hours, and the company acknowledges that they work nine and a half hours. The government may well have the right to ask how many hours workers work in England or in other European countries. The government may well have the right to observe that there is no difference between the European worker and the Egyptian worker — both are obliged to work in order to live, and both have the right to aspire to improving their condition and advancing their economic and health situation. Indeed the climate in which the Egyptian worker labours may well provide all the more reason to attend to this worker with care and compassion and to lighten the burdens upon him. These workers are demanding that their wages be raised somewhat, and the government may well have the right to ask about workers' wages in Europe, and to strive — not, I say, to equalise the Egyptian worker with the foreign worker, for that is a right but

may prove difficult, but rather to bring the Egyptian worker closer to the foreign worker to some degree. And if the European worker has asserted his existence, and has sometimes been excessive in this assertion, and has demanded his rights and sometimes been insistent in this demand, then the companies and the government may well have the right to recognise that the Egyptian worker remains to this day modest — he has not fallen into excess or extravagance. And if the European worker's assertion of his existence, his excess in this assertion, and his demands for his rights and insistence in these demands have given rise to doctrines in economics and politics that we dislike to see spread in Egypt and wish to see delayed in spreading to the furthest possible limit — then the companies and the government may well have the right to be kind to the workers, to single them out for some benevolence and compassion for their condition, and to stand between them and the discontent that is the clearest and most direct path to the disruption of order and the propagation of these dangerous doctrines.

The issue is not in reality a partial dispute between workers and one company, but a fundamental and essential difference in the nature of relations between companies and workers. The time has passed when companies looked upon workers as they look upon tools of work and believed they had the right to press and exploit workers as they press and exploit tools of work. That time is over and it has become an established fact that the worker is one thing and the tool is another — and that the workers are in reality partners of the capitalists in the exploitation of tools of work. If this understanding of the relationship between workers and companies has not yet appeared in Egypt in its proper form, then it has become the right of the companies and the government to acknowledge it, to have faith in it, and to adopt it as the basis for whatever relations exist between them and the workers.

It is truly remarkable that the government believes, or professes to believe, that democracy is the basis of the relationship between ruler and ruled, and that the people have the right to oversee the government's conduct of public affairs — indeed to install and topple ministries — and yet does not believe, or does not profess to believe, that equity requires recognising the worker's right before that of the capitalists.

All of these are matters we wish the companies to think about, the government to appreciate, and the companies to precede the government in accepting and acting upon — before it is too late, and before dangerous opinions and ideas spread among these classes, for whom we fear nothing so much as discontent and resentment.

We hope and press insistently in our hope that the government will look at all of this with seriousness, and mediate between the workers and the company — between all workers and all companies — with a mediation that protects these workers from discontent, grievance, and being driven to strike.