

Siege

Kawkab al-Sharq, 17 June 1933

The dispute between the workers and the Automobile Company continues unabated, and the public's interests remain suspended for no clear reason and no intelligible cause. The days pass and pass; the people endure whatever they endure of the hardship of getting about; and the government looks on at the one side and the other, affecting a show of activity for a moment, then quickly settling back into a long silence and a deep stillness, as though nothing were happening in Cairo, as though hundreds of thousands of this city's people were not being subjected to every manner of toil and hardship, to every kind of harm and injury, through no fault they have committed and no sin they have perpetrated.

Very strange indeed is the government's attitude toward the public's interests. It was established to look after those interests, to protect them and to guard them from the trespasses of trespassers; it was equipped for this purpose and supplied with every kind of power that would enable it to discharge its duty in the best and most complete manner — and yet, for all that, it looks upon these suspended interests, these squandered benefits, these forfeited rights, with the disdain of one who pays no heed and takes no notice, as though these events were not taking place in Egypt but in some foreign country with which the government must adopt a posture of strict neutrality. Between the Company and the government there is a contract which obliges the Company to attend to the public's interests; if the Company has fallen short in this or proven unable to fulfil it, then the government has every right to revoke its franchise and to take whatever measures it deems fit to enable the public to travel with ease and convenience, as their various complex interests demand in a great city like Cairo. Dispute has flared between the Company and its workers, ending in a workers' strike; the government has proven unable — or has shown itself unwilling — to remove this dispute and bring the workers back to work; and so it was the government's duty, having been prevented from bringing about a settlement, not to allow the interests of people who bear no responsibility for the ill relations between the disputing parties to go to waste. Had the government displayed genuine firmness and been intent on enforcing this contract — without softness and without affecting softness, without weakness and without affecting weakness — the matter would have ended in one of two ways, either of which would serve the public interest, preserve dignity, and spare the

people from being burned by the fire of a strike they neither kindled nor fed with their own wood. Either the franchise would be revoked and the business of transport returned to those who had once engaged in it and managed it — Egyptians, who would profit their own countrymen, who are Egyptians, greatly, and an Egyptian affair would in any case be restored to Egyptian hands. Or the Company, alarmed at the revocation of its franchise, would soften its conduct toward the workers, make some genuine effort to satisfy them and bring them back to work, so that the public would find relief and their interests would be secured, and the workers would find rest and feel settled about their lives, their futures, and their hopes. Both sides are Egyptians in any case, and the government was established to protect and look after them — if we are not to say what ought always to be said, and what the government ought to accustom itself to hearing and believing: that it was established to serve them, and nothing else.

But the government does not appear to have taken any of this into account, nor to have considered it as it ought to have been considered. It is said that it warned the Company of its intention to enforce this contract, and gave it ten days to restore the movement of vehicles in the city to what it had been; but when those ten days elapsed, the government carried out nothing at all, and instead extended the deadline and lengthened the grace period to the beginning of next month, as they say. The meaning of this is that it has acquiesced in two things: the first of which it has no right to acquiesce in, nor ought to be lax about — namely, the suspension of the public's interests for days on end, and the binding of that public to bear hardship and endure trouble for no reason except that the Company and the workers cannot reach agreement, and because the government either will not or cannot bring itself to hold the Company to the terms of the franchise contract. The second is a matter which, whatever the government's view of it, and whatever its excuse for tolerating it, is heavy and grievous — one that Egyptians cannot contemplate without a sharp sorrow and a deep pain — and that is that these workers have now found themselves in a condition resembling a state of siege, at their wits' end, given the choice between submitting to whatever the Company demands or exposing themselves to hunger and destitution.

What ought to have been done, if the government was unable or unwilling to support the workers in what they sought, was for it to take the stance of firm impartiality — to press hard on the strikers, and to

press hard on the owners of capital, accepting from neither side any trifling with the public's interests nor any suspension of them. Had it done so, the Company would have had no choice but to make things easy rather than difficult, and to adopt gentleness and goodwill in place of the hardness it has been insisting upon and pressing. More than that: the government, according to what the press also reports, went further and ordered the police to prevent what some workers had been engaged in — collecting relief funds for these unemployed men — and arrested those who were collecting these contributions as though they were committing some abomination and some sin; but when these people's case was referred to the Public Prosecutor, the Prosecutor found nothing with which to charge or punish them, and so released them and restored them as free men to what they had been. This conduct from the government is painful, for it casts into people's minds the impression that it is not maintaining a posture of strict neutrality, but is siding with one party against the other — siding with the stronger party to help it against the weaker. It is most probable that the government did not issue this order out of any bias toward the Company or any wish to encourage it, but rather because it considered the collecting of relief funds for these workers an encouragement of the strike, and wished to prevent this encouragement since the laws do not permit it. But feeding the hungry and the destitute is one thing, and encouraging a strike is quite another: this striker has the right to live, and the right to eat, until he finds work from which to seek his livelihood and his bread; and there is no law on earth that forbids people from feeding the hungry, and relieving the destitute, until God opens for him one of the doors of relief and smooths for him one of the paths of life.

Whatever else may be said, the continuation of the strike is a heavy evil that must be lifted as quickly as possible. It is an evil, first of all, upon the people whose interests are suspended without any fault of their own; it is an evil upon the workers who are forced into idleness and exposed to its burdens and its ruinous effects; and it is an evil upon the Company itself, which suffers material losses every day and in which people's confidence grows worse the longer this condition persists. There is only one way out of this predicament that achieves justice, fairness, and the public benefit all at once, and that is for the government to take a genuinely firm stand and to enforce the law without lenience or softness toward either of the two contending parties.

We are confident that if the government takes this path, adopts the policy of firmness, and protects the public interest without hesitation or weakness, the strike cannot but come to an end — and come to an end in short order.