

PROLOGUE

MARCH LIKE AN EGYPTIAN



WHY IN THE WORLD WERE PROTESTERS OCCUPYING THE WISCONSIN STATEHOUSE wearing King Tut headdresses? And why were orders for pizza coming into Madison, Wisconsin, from Cairo, Egypt?

The story begins around 1500 BC when Egyptian workers at Deir el-Medina hadn't been paid for three weeks by their notoriously corrupt supervisors. They stopped working and walked out. It may be history's first recorded strike.

Fast-forward thirty-five hundred or so years to the end of 2006 AD. Another group of Egyptian workers, angered at the denial of their promised year-end bonuses and the corruption of their managers, quit working and shut down their workplaces. This strike by Mahalla el-Kubra textile workers startled the Egyptian people and apparently the government and the government-owned employer as well.

The strike started with night-shift workers who were enraged at the company's decision not to pay bonuses that had been promised by Egypt's Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. The next day they were joined by the day-shift workers, who occupied the plant and a nearby street in protest. Government security forces surrounded the area and cut off electricity to the plant. Eventually twenty-seven thousand workers were involved, including four thousand women, who said they were "standing up for their children."

After five days, the government retreated and offered to restore the bonuses. An employee reported that upon returning to work, "The cashiers were sitting to greet the workers" with their back pay "the minute they walked into work."

In 2006 I was helping start a tiny NGO called Global Labor Strategies (GLS). We called it a "bridge building" organization; our purpose was to help workers and their allies connect across the borders of an ever-more globalizing world. While the Mahalla strike was virtually unreported in the US media, I discovered information about it on the web and wrote about it on the GLS blog.¹

A couple of years later there was another strike in Mahalla. This time a small organization of student and youth activists formed to support the strikers. They

set up a Facebook page and called a demonstration on April 6. Thereafter they began referring to themselves as the April 6 Youth Movement. After the strike was over they continued their social networking website with lively debates on freedom of speech, government nepotism, and economic stagnation. By 2010 they had seventy thousand Facebook friends.

On December 17, 2010, an impoverished Tunisian fruit seller named Mohamed Bouazizi, after repeated police harassment, doused himself with kerosene and set himself on fire in a city 190 miles south of Tunis to protest the economic and political conditions to which he and his country were subjected. Within a week, seven other Tunisians had done the same. What seemed like futile acts of despair inspired massive protests. With hundreds of thousands of protesters refusing to let business as usual go on, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia's ruler for a quarter of a century, was forced to flee and a transitional government made preparations to hold elections under a new, democratic constitution.

Egyptians watched the unfolding events in Tunisia with fascination. They too faced grinding poverty and a tyrannical government supported from abroad that used violence and torture to repress opposition while looting billions of dollars by means of corruption. A few small groups, including the April 6 Youth Movement, began calling for Egypt to undergo a democratization like that in Tunisia. They used Facebook and other new social media to get out the word. They started holding street meetings in Cairo neighborhoods. To their surprise, large numbers came out in the poor neighborhoods and supported the idea of an "Egyptian Tunisia." They began holding daily demonstrations in Cairo's central Tahrir Square (Arabic for "Liberation Square") calling for Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's autocratic president for thirty years, to go.

Over the course of two weeks the demonstrations swelled. Men and women—Sunni, Shia, and Christian—marched side by side. Initially the established opposition parties and organizations stayed aloof from the protests, but gradually they began to join in. Meanwhile the hated security police launched repeated attacks on the demonstrators. The army began to roll into Liberation Square with its troops and tanks while its airplanes flew overhead. Then suddenly the police withdrew and the army high command issued a statement that it would not fire on the protesters.

The United States, which had provided Mubarak's regime with more than sixty billion dollars over the previous thirty years and maintained a close relationship with Mubarak and the Egyptian military, expressed strong support for Mubarak. But as the number of demonstrators multiplied, the United States began to distance itself from the regime. Within a week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was declaring, "Mubarak must go."

Meanwhile, the protests continued to swell, not only in Cairo but throughout the country. The army troops fraternized with the demonstrators; a young woman told reporters that demonstrators in Liberation Square were arranging a football

match with the soldiers. As the police disappeared from the streets, people in Cairo neighborhoods began organizing their own neighborhood watches. Workers throughout the country began to conduct strikes, some seeking to establish unions and gain wage increases, others calling for the removal of the regime.

On February 1, 2011, a “Million Man March” indeed produced something like a million protesters in Liberation Square calling on Mubarak to leave. It was widely reported that he was about to do so. Instead, he went on television and gave a speech making a few concessions but pledging that he would fill out his term and that he would “die on Egyptian soil.” Commentators observed that he should be careful what he said.

The protestors felt betrayed; a wave of rage pervaded the entire country. Within six hours the senior officers of the army announced that Mubarak had “resigned” and that an officer’s council had taken power. They also announced that they would establish a transitional government that would put into place a new democratic constitution and hold democratic elections. Large demonstrations continued in Liberation Square and throughout the country insisting that they follow through.

Early on in the Egyptian demonstrations, I saw a young woman being pressured by a television journalist to name those she considered leaders of the protests. After repeatedly trying to explain that people were acting on their own, she finally, in exasperation, pointed around at the crowd and said, “Right now it looks like we have half-a-million leaders.” Her words reminded me of those from the group of Wobblies—members of the Industrial Workers of the World union—nearly a century before. Asked who their leaders were, they replied, “We’ve got no leaders—we’re all leaders.”

To many people the events in Egypt revealed a courage, a solidarity, an activism, and an intelligence that seemed to violate their very sense of what is possible. Many commentators on the scene said things such as “These are not the Egyptians I know” and “This is a new Egypt.” At Graterford prison outside Philadelphia, where many of the inmates were glued to the television watching scenes of rebellion in Egypt, a life prisoner named Charles Coley came up to a friend of mine in the hall and summed up a response shared by many around the world: “I just didn’t know that people had it in them.”

The Egyptian upheaval electrified the entire Middle East. Popular upheavals rocked Bahrain, Morocco, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Demonstrations in Jordan and Yemen led to the firing and replacement of entire cabinets. Demonstrations in Libya turned into civil war followed by NATO and Arab League military intervention. Comparing them to the upheavals that brought the overthrow of Communist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe two decades earlier, commentators began referring to these events as the “Arab Spring.”

But the impact of events in the Middle East didn't stop at the boundaries of the region. Students planning anti-government actions in London called for turning Trafalgar Square into a British Tahrir Square; nearly half a million people turned out for the demonstration protesting public spending cuts.² As faculty, staff, and fifteen thousand demonstrators backed Puerto Rican students protesting the military occupation of their campus and the repression of freedom of speech and assembly, newscasters compared them to the protestors in Tahrir Square; US Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez said it reflected "a lesson the people of Egypt taught the world last week: Brutal laws and secret meetings and armed enforcers don't extinguish the flame of justice—they are the spark that makes it burn brighter."³ At a demonstration in Mexico City, Martin Esparza, secretary general of the Mexican Electrical Workers Union, called for a peaceful civilian insurgency, taking its example from the events in Egypt.⁴

The ripples even reached the United States. At the same time as the Egyptian upheaval, a string of right-wing state governors were taking office with the backing of the Tea Party and wealthy energy company executives. In Ohio, Indiana, and many other states they seized on budget crises to pass laws restricting or completely eliminating the right of public employees to be represented by unions.

The epicenter of the struggle was Wisconsin, where newly elected governor Scott Walker introduced legislation to abolish collective bargaining for teachers, social workers, and most other government employees. Students and workers began holding demonstrations in the state capitol rotunda in Madison to protest the new anti-labor laws. First there were hundreds of protesters, then thousands. Eventually more than one hundred thousand people occupied the building, making it the largest demonstration in Wisconsin at least since the Vietnam War.

Wisconsin Republican Congressman Paul Ryan said, "It's like Cairo's moved to Madison."⁵ According to a news report, "Many protestors appeared to be taking inspiration from the recent democratic uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, with some even wearing King Tut hats."⁶ Orders for pizza for the demonstrators poured in from around the world—including some from Cairo. And, parodying a famous pop song titled "Walk Like an Egyptian," bumper stickers appeared reading "March Like an Egyptian."

The events in Wisconsin were as unanticipated as those in Egypt. Yet from 1500 BC to today, history shows that nothing is as predictable as unpredictable popular upheavals. How do they happen? What do they mean? Can they help solve the problems people face? Will they instead end badly, leading to domination or disorder? How can we forestall such bad results and instead realize their potential for good?

I've spent a lifetime trying to find answers to these questions. This book tells what I've learned.