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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

3 January 2018

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04.01.2018

Mass protests against austerity and social inequality shake Iranian regime

Iran has been rocked for the past six days by protests against food price rises, mass joblessness, ever-widening social inequality and the Islamic Republic's brutal austerity program and political repression.

The protests began last Thursday in Iran's second largest city, Mashhad, and the neighboring centers of Neyshabur and Kashmar, then spread to the capital Tehran and more than three dozen other cities and towns spread across the country.

According to government sources, 21 people, including several members of the security forces, have died in clashes between protesters and the authorities. There is no national tally of arrests, but a Tehran official has admitted that 450 people have been detained in that city since Saturday and 70 people were reportedly arrested just on Sunday night in Arak, an industrial city some 300 kilometers southwest of the capital.

The government has curtailed, when not outright blocking, the social media apps Telegram and Instagram so as to suppress information about future protests and the scope of the movement.

The scale and intensity of the protests have shaken Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime and are now prompting its rival factions to draw together to suppress the challenge from below. Over the weekend, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared Iranians had the right to peacefully protest and claimed his government would soon take steps to address the protesters' socioeconomic grievances, adding, "We have no bigger challenge than unemployment."

But his ministers and spokesmen for the security agencies are now vowing to stamp out the protest movement, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) saying it is ready to use an “iron fist.”

In justifying state repression, numerous Iranian leaders—from the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and IRGC Deputy Commander General Rasoul Sanayee to former “reformist” president and Green ally Mohammad Khatami—have accused Iran’s strategic rivals of inciting and providing logistical support for mob violence. In doing so, many have highlighted the demagogic claims of “support” for the protests made by US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the threats of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to “take the war inside Iran.” All three are open advocates of regime-change in Tehran and have repeatedly threatened to wage war on Iran.

But the current wave of protests has a quite different class character than those that unfolded in 2009 under the banner of the so-called Green Revolution. Egged on by Washington, the *New York Times*, French President Sarkozy and other European leaders, and drawing their support from the most privileged sections of Iranian society, the Greens sought to overturn the reelection of populist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, based on unsubstantiated and contrived charges of electoral fraud and with the aim of installing a regime determined to reach a rapid rapprochement with US imperialism.

Based on the best available reports to have filtered through the censorship of the Iranian regime or appeared in the Western media, it is apparent that the current wave of protests is, at its core, an incipient rebellion of the working class.

To be sure, the protests are socially heterogeneous and there is much political confusion among the participants. Moreover, as would be expected, monarchists and other rightwing elements allied with imperialism are seeking to latch onto and misdirect them. But the protests, although not yet a mass movement, have been comprised principally of workers, poor people and youth. They are being fueled by deep-rooted class anger in a country where 3.2 million, or 12.7 percent, of the workforce are officially unemployed, the real unemployment rate for youth is in the order of 40 percent, and, according to a recent IRGC report, 50 percent live in poverty. Meanwhile, the World Wealth and Income Database calculates (based on 2013 data) that the top 1 percent of Iranians monopolize 16.3 percent of the country’s income, just 0.5 of a percentage point less than the entire bottom 50 percent, while the top 10 percent garner 48.5 percent.

Mounting working class opposition

The current wave of protests erupted after months of mounting worker unrest and popular demonstrations, including over job cuts, the failure to pay back wages, and the authorities' indifference to the millions whose savings have been wiped out by the collapse of numerous unregulated financial institutions.

Last September, for example, in Arak, workers at two industrial plants that were privatized in the 2000s clashed with police for two days after the security forces intervened to break up their protests against their employers' failure to pay back wages and medical insurance premiums. According to an Agence France-Presse report, "Minor protests have been bubbling away in the weeks leading up to the current unrest," with "hundreds of oil workers and truck drivers protesting the late payment of wages; tractor makers in Tabriz against their factory's closure; and Tehran tire workers at bonuses being delayed."

These protests have been treated with indifference by the Western media, while Iranian authorities have done their best to black them out.

In the days immediately preceding the current wave of protests, an intense and widespread discussion raged on social media about mounting social inequality. The trigger for this outpouring of anger was the tabling of the government's latest austerity budget. It will boost gasoline prices by as much as 50 percent, while further slashing the small cash payments given Iranians in lieu of the price subsidies for energy, basic foodstuffs and essential services that were phased out between 2010 and 2014.

The Green movement was centered almost exclusively in Tehran, in particular, its wealthier northern districts. By contrast, the current wave of protests has been much broader geographically, including smaller and poorer cities and towns that have constituted the political base of Ahmadinejad and the so-called "hardline" faction of the Islamic Republic's political elite, which combines Shia orthodoxy with populist appeals to the plebian elements of Iranian society.

Even more significantly, while the Greens spoke for that wing of the Iranian bourgeoisie most eager to reach an accommodation with the imperialist powers and mobilized their selfish upper-middle class supporters by denouncing Ahmadinejad for "squandering" money on the poor, the current antigovernment movement is driven by opposition to social inequality.

The Greens, who overwhelmingly supported Rouhani's election in 2013 and his reelection last May, have shunned the current protests, with prominent Green representatives expressing grave concern about the "leaderless" character of the protests.

For their part, the demonstrators have reportedly made no specific call for the principal Green leaders, defeated 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, to be released from house arrest. Instead, they have taken up slogans that challenge the bourgeois clerical regime as a whole.

Rouhani's program of rapprochement with Washington and austerity

Iran's acute social crisis is a product of unrelenting US economic and military-strategic pressure, including biting economic sanctions; the world economic crisis and especially the collapse of world oil prices; the failure of the independent Iranian bourgeois national project; and, last but not least, the brutal austerity measures Rouhani has implemented with the aim of wooing Western investment.

Pointing to the socially explosive consequences of the US and European economic sanctions on Iran, Rouhani and his political mentor, the late president and longtime advocate of a strategic orientation to the Western imperialist powers Hashemi Rafsanjani, won over the Ayatollah Khamenei and the other key components of the Islamic regime to a change of course in 2013—a fresh attempt to seek an accommodation with Washington and the European Union.

As in the case of the Greens four years before, this policy was bound up with a renewed push to eliminate what remained of the social concessions made to the working class in the wake of the 1979 Revolution. During the past four-and-a-half years, the Rouhani regime has pressed forward with privatization and deregulation, while following IMF pro-market and austerity prescriptions and redrafting the rules governing oil concessions to woo the European and US oil giants.

Ultimately, in January 2016, the most punishing US and European sanctions were either removed or suspended in exchange for Tehran dismantling large parts of its civil nuclear program. But insofar as the removal of sanctions has provided a boost to the economy, the benefits have accrued almost entirely to the most privileged sections of the population.

Rouhani's response, as demonstrated by the latest budget, is to double down on austerity for the masses, while increasing the budgets of religious and clergy-led institutions.

As is often the case, the opening for the sudden emergence of social opposition was provided by fissures within the ruling elite. The initial antigovernment protests, which were organized under the banner “No to High Prices,” were backed at least tacitly by Rouhani's religious conservative opponents.

This of course is utterly hypocritical. The Principalists and other conservative factions of the ruling elite have supported similar pro-market and pro-big business policies and joined

with their “reformist” rivals in prevailing on Ahmadinejad to dismantle, in his final years in office, many of the populist policies that had propelled him to power against Rafsanjani in 2005.

A new stage of the class struggle

The past week’s protests herald a new stage in the class struggle in Iran and internationally. Across the Middle East, including in Israel, there are signs of mounting working class opposition. The same is true in Europe and North America, where the ruling elites have dramatically intensified the assault on the working class in the decade since the 2008 global financial crisis.

The critical question is the fight to arm the emerging global working class opposition with a socialist internationalist strategy.

Iranian workers and youth must fight for the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in opposition to imperialism and all factions of the national bourgeoisie.

Any right-wing forces advocating an orientation to Washington and/or the other imperialist powers within the antigovernment movement must be exposed and politically isolated. It is imperialism that over the past century has suffocated the democratic and social aspirations of the peoples of the Middle East, laid waste to the region through a quarter-century of predatory wars, and today threatens to embroil the people of Iran and the entire region in an even bloodier conflagration.

The Iranian bourgeoisie, as demonstrated by more than a century stretching back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, is utterly incapable of establishing genuine democracy and freedom from imperialism, because to do so would require a revolutionary mobilization of the masses of such dimensions that it would imperil its own selfish class interests and ambitions.

Workers and youth should also spurn those who denigrate the struggle for revolutionary program and leadership on the claim that the upsurge of the masses solves everything. Learn the lessons of history, including Egypt’s 2011 “Arab Spring” and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Thirty-nine years ago, the Shah’s blood-soaked US-backed regime was swept into the dustbin of history by a powerful mass movement spearheaded by the working class. But the working class was politically subordinated by the Stalinist Tudeh Party and various petty-bourgeois left forces to the so-called progressive wing of the national bourgeoisie led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shia clergy, which, having gained control of the state

apparatus, quickly used it to savagely suppress all expressions of independent working class organization and restabilize capitalist rule.

Today a new upsurge of the working class must settle accounts with the Islamic political establishment, the Iranian bourgeoisie as a whole and imperialism as part of an international socialist revolution.