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Political and economic turmoil escalates in Lebanon

Lebanon's political and economic crisis has intensified as protests and strikes continue into their fifth week, encompassing wide layers of workers and poor farmers throughout the country, across the sectarian and national divide.

On Tuesday, the National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Trade Unions in Lebanon, called a general strike over the government's economic mismanagement and its failure to implement the protesters' demands, including the formation of a new government.

Demonstrators poured onto the street, setting up roadblocks and chanting "all of them means all of them", the rallying call of the protest movement against all the political parties, to demand the end of the entire sectarian political system.

Universities and schools, after briefly reopening last week, are again closed until further notice as students protest against government corruption, the lack of jobs and essential public services and the soaring cost of living.

Workers at Alfa and Touch, the state-owned mobile network providers, have gone on strike, demanding salary guarantees.

Bank workers have remained on strike over fears for their safety following the imposition of controls on transfers abroad and dollar withdrawals, credit restrictions that have led to some private sector employers cutting salaries. The falling value of the Lebanon pound on the black market has caused the price of imported goods to rise, leading to the stockpiling of food.

Gas stations have started to ration fuel or have closed, saying they will run out of fuel within a week.

According to data from Lebanon's central bank, cited in *Al-Akhbar*, consumer debt has risen to \$21 billion, in addition to mortgage debt of \$13 billion, meaning that householders are paying a massive \$1.5 billion in interest. But these loans have in turn fueled an escalation in housing prices with the result that housing costs eat up a vast proportion of wages. Now, many of the borrowers are unable to keep up with their payments or repay their loans.

According to one World Bank scenario, any further devaluation would lead to up to half Lebanon's six million population falling below the official poverty line. It says that the crisis may have already pushed Lebanon into recession.

The Syndicate of Private Hospitals announced that medical workers would go on strike from November 15 if no action was taken to remedy the government's failure to make payments to hospitals. The banking crisis is also making it impossible to buy the dialysis filters, heart stents and other medical equipment that had to be paid for in dollars.

On Tuesday, President Michel Aoun's remarks in a televised speech, characterized by insensitivity, only added to the anger. He said that Lebanon would descend into a "catastrophe" if protesters do not return home and allow Lebanon to work normally again. He added that if those demonstrating "see no decent people in this state, let them emigrate. They won't get into power."

Soon afterwards, protesters marched towards the Presidential Palace in Baabda, in a suburb outside Beirut, until they were blocked by soldiers with jeeps, barbed wire and riot police, three-men-deep, in full body armour. They daubed graffiti along the route. One slogan said, "How do you sleep at night, Mr. President?" Incensed by Aoun's remarks, they called for the politicians and their cronies to leave the country. Elsewhere across Lebanon, demonstrators burned tyres, hurled stones at soldiers and blocked roads.

Alaa Abou Fakher, a member of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, was killed after being shot in the head by a soldier in front of his wife and child while they were protesting in Khaldeh, south of Beirut. An army spokesman said that it was an accident, the result of a stray bullet amid firing to disperse protestors at a roadblock, and the soldier who fired the shot was under investigation. Fakher is the second person to be killed in protests that have generally been peaceful.

The protest movement had abated somewhat following the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a Saudi puppet, on October 29. He remains the head of a caretaker government until Aoun secures parliament's support for a new prime minister, which under the constitution must be a Sunni politician. He has refused to accept the premiership again unless he can form a "technocratic" or independent government. By this he means one with little or no members from Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, and the President's Free Patriotic Movement, led by Aoun's son-in-law and foreign minister Gebran Bassil.

Hariri's resignation, while an apparent concession to the protesters, allows him and his cronies to bolster their positions by adopting some of the popular demands, such as a non-sectarian based government, as their own.

Hariri, who was summoned to Saudi Arabia in September shortly before the protests erupted, ostensibly to discuss Lebanon's economic crisis and a possible loan, is under pressure from Riyadh to eliminate Hezbollah's—and Iran's —political influence in the country. This is an anathema to Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement, the largest single party in the parliament, and Hezbollah itself, which—with its Shia ally Amal—has by far the largest coalition bloc, having won the largest share of the popular vote.

Hezbollah, Amal and Hariri's Future Movement have nominated the 75-year-old Mohammad Safadi, a billionaire businessman from Tripoli, who made his fortune in Saudi Arabia, and a former finance minister, to become prime minister. If this is accepted, his government would be tasked with pushing through an economic "reform" package that would impose further austerity on Lebanon's already impoverished working class in return for \$11 billion in loans pledged at an international conference last year.

Safadi was involved in a controversial real estate development along the coast that sparked protests against the illegal privatisation of public property. Last month, he denied allegations that he had taken advantage of his government position to obtain the land at a bargain basement price. His wife, Violette, is a minister in Hariri's caretaker cabinet.

That Lebanon's political elite can even suggest such a man for the premiership testifies to the complete bankruptcy and isolation of the political elite. It flies in the face of the protests' key demand of a clean sweep of the entire existing corrupt political setup. Indeed, the indications are that his name has been put forward to test the waters and provide some support for Hariri's "technocratic" government. The announcement prompted protests in Safadi's home city of Tripoli, a Sunni stronghold.

Hezbollah and its ally Amal, for their part, have sought to shore up the existing setup, put in place in 2016 with their support for Aoun's presidency and Hariri's premiership, which has brought them political power and influence. Their promises to root out corruption and economic mismanagement came to nothing.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, warned his supporters that any change in government would only worsen the situation, since it could take a long time to form a new government and solve the crisis. Echoing his ally, Iran, he accused the United States and Israel of supporting the protests from behind the scenes, demonized the demonstrators, sent in Hezbollah operatives to clear roadblocks set up by protestors and attacked those opposing the government, provoking a number of violent incidents. But this provoked a backlash, with some journalists at the pro-Hezbollah daily *Al-Akhbar* reportedly resigning in protest against its blackguarding of the protestors.

More recently, Nasrallah has sought to adapt to the protesters' demands, praising them and calling on the judiciary to be "brave" in its pursuit of corrupt officials and even urging judges to begin with those affiliated to his party. He said, "If there is a case related to any person in Hezbollah, go ahead. Start with us, start with us."

The protest movement in Lebanon is made up of diverse social and political layers and lacks a clear political agenda. The various bourgeois, professional workers associations and petty-bourgeois ad-hoc groups within the movement, regardless of their opposition to the existing political setup, offer no way forward for the workers and poor in Lebanon.

Indeed, the political vacuum poses enormous political dangers with the very real threat of an intervention by the regional powers or their local proxies. It is significant that Washington, Tel Aviv, Paris and Riyadh have said very little about the protests other than empty calls to "heed the protesters' legitimate demands to end corruption and mismanagement" and "preserve democracy." In reality, they are determined to use the political crisis to eradicate Hezbollah as a significant political force in both Lebanon and Syria and thereby roll back Iran's influence in the region. Iran, for its part, is determined to prevent such an outcome, including by encouraging state repression.

Lebanon's struggle takes place amid a growing wave of working class militancy throughout the Middle East and North Africa, exemplified by the strikes and demonstrations in Algeria, Sudan, Egypt and most recently, Iraq. It is to these forces and workers internationally that Lebanese workers must turn in a struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism.