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Global protest movement grows on every continent amid worsening commodity shortages

The US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has triggered a wave of social protests against the rising cost of living, tapping into deep working class anger over social inequality and the devastating impact of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Day by day, this wave of protest grows, as the working class responds to the social impact of the war and US and EU sanctions, which have crippled supply chains and closed the Black Sea to exports of Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian cooking oil, grain and fertilizer.



A worker restocks shelves at Heinen's Fine Foods store, Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022, in Pepper Pike, Ohio. (AP Photo/Tony Dejak)

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On Friday, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced that the March global Food Price Index increased 12.6 percent from February, which was already the highest since 1990. FAO Deputy Director Josef Schmidhuber told reporters that food shortages threaten to spark protests on a global scale. “This is really remarkable,” Schmidhuber said. “There is a massive supply disruption.”

Imperialist concerns over growing wave of social protests

Concerns are growing in the imperialist capitals that the war drive is triggering social discontent that threatens to derail the plans to subjugate Russia, even at the risk of triggering World War III.

An April 6 article in *Politico*, titled “US struggles to contain a deepening global food crisis,” cited a senior US Senate staffer as saying, “We see the storm coming and we feel unprepared to deal with it.” The *Politico* report noted that “US diplomatic posts are in close contact with countries where people are at risk of increased food insecurity,” out of concern over the growing protest movement.

However, Washington’s efforts to stem the movement have been rendered ineffective. This is because many Republicans oppose any aid funding and because none of the major US allies has been willing to contribute from its own food reserves, out of concern that rising prices are triggering strikes and protests in the imperialist metropolises.

An April 5 letter sent to Joe Biden by a bipartisan group of senators warned of the political implications of “a grave global food security crisis that threatens to push millions of people into hunger and destabilize regions of strategic importance to the United States.”

On April 6, the US House Subcommittee on Agriculture held a hearing on the emerging food crisis. Sarah Charles, a leading official with CIA-linked United States Agency for International Development (USAID), testified.

She said: “The impacts of the current crisis on poverty, hunger, and malnutrition could be even more significant than those seen in the global food crisis of 2007-08 and the subsequent civil unrest, as the last crisis followed a period of strong global economic growth, whereas the years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have been characterized by an increasingly worse global economic downturn.”

Appearing at the same hearing, UN World Food Program Chief Economist Arif Husain stated: “Steep rises in international prices for basic staples—notably wheat and maize—in recent weeks have resulted in a food price environment that resembles the 2008 or 2011 crises.”

Husain warned that if the war lasts another two months, “Ukraine’s grain and wheat harvests as well as Russia’s fertilizer export ban will further constrain food production and throw hundreds of millions into starvation.”

Nor are the concerns limited to Washington. French President Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have issued similar warnings about the growing global food shortage, while a report from the German government-linked Friedrich Ebert Institute put the matter more bluntly, calling the emerging protests “a new phase of massive destabilization that would ultimately affect governments as well as the socially weaker population.” It continued, “As was said in the days of the French Revolution, if the population has no bread, those in power are threatened with disaster.”

As the war drags on, protests and strikes continue to grow on every inhabited continent.

Latin America

Protests continued across Peru as broader sections of workers, poor farmers and urban youth joined the ongoing strike by truckers over the rising cost of living. Protests continued despite President Pedro Castillo’s imposition of a curfew, a move he then revoked, only to announce a national state of emergency later in the week. Social anger reached a crescendo Thursday when Castillo’s Prime Minister Aníbal Torres praised Adolf Hitler at a speech in Huancayo, the center of protests.

“On one occasion,” he said, “Hitler visited the north of Italy, and Mussolini showed him a highway built from Milan to Brescia. Hitler saw this and went to his country and filled it with highways and airports and turned Germany into the first economic power in the world. We have to make an effort, make sacrifices to improve our roads.”

This week, protesters also began gathering outside of Argentina’s Department of Social Development in Buenos Aires, demanding the Peronist government address the rising cost of living. Peronist Federal Deputy Natalia Zaracho told *El País* Thursday that non-profits

and associated pseudo-left organizations were working to prevent a social explosion. “If everything doesn’t explode, it’s because the social organizations are present in the working class neighborhoods,” she said.

In an interview with the BBC, the director of the corporate Eurasia Group think tank warned:

With this inflation, there is a high risk that the protests in Peru will repeat themselves in other Latin American countries. And the governments don’t have the money to provide subsidies. The risk is that these protests surge across the entire region and also outside of Latin America, where the increase in prices of food and gas is also generating protests, like in the Middle East and Asia.

Citing the mass protests of 2018 and 2019, he said, “The pandemic put a pause to the problem, but at the same time it was just a pause, and now the situation is far more explosive.”

Adding to regional concerns, the Bank of Mexico yesterday announced that the country hit its highest inflation rate in 21 years. It warned of the “high social cost of rising food prices” in the country.

A strike wave has also begun to develop in Brazil and is now spreading into heavy industries, including steel production.

Middle East and North Africa

Food and gas shortages have had the most immediate effect on the population of the Middle East and North Africa. Middle East Eye reported yesterday, “In Tunisia, supermarket shelves have been empty for several weeks. Flour, rice, semolina, sugar and eggs are almost impossible to find.”

The Carnegie Center for the Middle East warned recently that “this situation has the potential to become explosive.”

In Lebanon, where the explosion of a Beirut grain storage depot means the country can store only one month of food reserves, the price of the basic food basket has risen 351

percent in the last year. Yesterday, the country announced it was bankrupt and had agreed to a ruthless IMF austerity regimen that would include mass privatizations and cuts to social programs.

In Egypt, the country's food reserves are beginning to run low, and the country has turned to short-term influxes of cash from the EU and Gulf sheikdoms to stave off the imminent prospect of mass strikes and protests.

Asia

The most politically advanced breakdown has taken place in Sri Lanka, where shortages are acute and demonstrations against the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse are consistent and growing.

The resignation of the president's cabinet failed to stem the protests, as the ruling class struggled to negotiate for an IMF bailout, even though the country lacks a finance minister. Strikes have spread among nurses and doctors, teachers, electricity workers and students.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) issued a statement Thursday titled "Bring down Sri Lanka's Rajapakse government! Abolish the executive presidency! No to austerity and starvation! Form action committees to fight for a socialist program of action to secure food, fuel and medicine for all!"

There are also growing warnings of social discontent in Indonesia, the world's fourth largest country, with a population of 274 million. According to NHK Japan, a massive increase in the cost of cooking oil coinciding with Ramadan has raised the specter of protests in the largely Islamic country.

"A spike in the price of cooking oil has hit Indonesia, where the Islamic fasting month started on Sunday. Behind the price hike is an increasing global demand for palm oil produced in Asia amid concerns of a shortage in the supply of sunflower oil, which is made mainly in Ukraine and Russia," NHK Japan noted.

Sub-Maghreb Africa

The region with the fastest growing industrial working class is also hardest hit by food and gas shortages. Mass demonstrations have continued across Sudan over inflation and shortages, while protests have begun to develop among Kenyan motorcycle taxi drivers over the cost of gas and food. One worker told Africanews, “If I don’t get fuel, I won’t return home because my children won’t have anything for food.” Another worker said, “Some are repaying loans, some are feeding families with this job. We have been here for three days [waiting for gas], and we cannot bring anything home.”

In Madagascar, the government has frozen the price of sugar, flour, rice, gas and cement for fear of social protests. Zimbabwe’s central bank raised its interest rate from 60 percent to 80 percent in a desperate attempt to stop inflation. A corporate think tank warned that South Africa is on the verge of a social explosion for which the state is not prepared.

“South Africa is likely to have entered a phase of ongoing, violent instability,” read the report from the Institute for Security Studies. The report noted that the ANC “has fewer resources for patronage politics” and warned that “the number of protests staged annually in the country has doubled to more than 1,000 since [President Cyril] Ramaphosa took office in early 2018.”

North America and Europe

Strikes and protests continue to develop across North America and Europe, engendered by the spiraling rate of inflation. Substantial demonstrations against the rising cost of living took place across the United Kingdom last week, where the number of strikes grew to the highest level in five years.

The Guardian noted that “workers are increasingly prepared to challenge inadequate pay offers and take strike action to ensure wages keep up with the sharply rising cost of living, amid signs that workplace militancy is growing in parts of the economy.”

In Germany, the cost of basic food staples has increased dramatically over last year, including eggs (16 percent), butter (20 percent), vegetables (15-30 percent) and cheese (5 percent). In the US, the rising cost of living has produced a new wave of strikes and strike

votes among teachers, oil workers, shipyard workers, nurses, public employees and hotel workers, largely on the country's West Coast, where the cost of living is highest.

Spontaneous protests are insufficient to change social conditions. A working class strategy of socialist revolution must be fought for as the basis to stop mass starvation and hardship and to prevent nuclear war.

Attend the *World Socialist Web Site* Online May Day Rally on Sunday, May 1, and take part in the fight to mobilize the working class against imperialist war, the pandemic and the capitalist system.

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