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Mass demonstrations spread worldwide as food, gas costs spiral

The intolerable increases to the cost of living triggered by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine are producing a massive wave of working-class protests throughout the world. Two years into a pandemic that has killed 20 million people and still rages on, social anger that has been building up around kitchen tables and on shopfloors is now boiling over into the streets. Masses of people of all racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are reaching the same conclusion: life cannot continue in the old way.

Fifty days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, protests are now taking place on every continent. Demonstrators defy states of emergency and respond to police repression with mobilizations of growing size and intensity. Initial protests in Peru, Sudan and Sri Lanka are not only continuing, but are now spreading to heavily populated and more urban countries. In the major imperialist powers, the same governments that plotted the present war crisis now confront growing strike movements that the trade union bureaucracies are desperately trying to hold back.



A Sri Lankan undergraduate shouts slogans demanding president Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation during an anti-government protest near parliament in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Friday, April 8, 2022. (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

In recent days, municipal workers, government employees, oil workers, telecommunication workers and teachers in Iran have walked off the job to demand massive increases to wages and pensions. Economist Ibrahim Razzaqi told *Shara* newspaper that “every day society is becoming less tolerant of all its problems” and that Iran was witnessing “a popular outburst over critical living conditions.”

In Indonesia, the world’s fourth largest country by population, large student demonstrations erupted last week over the rising price of cooking oil and the recent announcement by President Joko Widodo that he intends to stay in office for another term. Demonstrators in Jakarta, South Sulawesi, West Java and other areas confronted brutal police repression, with one protester suffering life threatening injuries.

In Pakistan, concerns within the ruling class over protests against rising prices are at the heart of the recent parliamentary removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan. *The Diplomat* wrote Thursday that food prices have increased 15 percent over the last year, and that, like Sri Lanka and Peru, “Pakistan is the latest victim of political instability. The existence of panic in the commodity and financial markets; a global inflationary spiral, rising food prices, and a surge in protests especially in emerging markets, shows that this process will not be confined to Pakistan or Sri Lanka only.”

In Latin America, a region once thought relatively shielded from declines of Russian and Ukrainian exports, mass demonstration took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina last week as a truckers' strike has choked the country's grain exports. *El País* noted Thursday that "the conflict in the street is growing together with the loss of purchasing power of the local currency" as inflation soared in April to 6.7 percent from March, with year-to-year inflation increasing to 55 percent.

A strike of truckers, taxi drivers and bus drivers shut down Honduras last week, to which the government of Xiomara Castro responded by raising fees for working class passengers.

Social discontent is also growing in the centers of world imperialism. In the United States, where inflation has surged to an annual rate of 8 percent, 30,000 doormen at luxury apartments in New York City authorized a strike Thursday. This powerful sign of opposition comes as contracts for hundreds of thousands of workers in critical industries are set to expire in the coming weeks.

In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* warned in an editorial last week that the UK "is sliding into a social and economic crisis, the likes of which its people have not seen for decades. Household fuel bills are on course to top £2,400 by this autumn, while the price of a grocery shop is rocketing." Inflation in the UK hit 7 percent last month, the highest rate since 1992.

The *Guardian* noted, "On one projection, one in three Britons – 23.5 million people – will be unable to afford the cost of living this year."

In every country, strikers and protesters are fighting over matters of life and death. Global food prices have risen 34 percent since last year. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is brutal and reckless, but who can believe the crocodile tears from NATO governments and their corporate media propagandists when it is their prolongation of the war that is forcing billions to confront hunger at varying degrees of immediacy?

In impoverished West and East Africa, tens of millions face starvation. In the Middle East and North Africa, already-low food reserves will run dry in a matter of weeks. All of these are regions devastated by the impact of US wars of the past 30 years. And as the war in Ukraine drags on into the spring harvest, crops that would have fed billions of people will

now lie fallow. In the months ahead, cuts to fertilizer exports from Russia and Belorussia will reduce global staple crop yields by up to half.

Last week, the United Nations published a stark warning of the emerging upsurge of the global working class. The document, titled “Global impact of war in Ukraine on food, energy and finance system,” states that “the war in Ukraine, in all its dimensions, is producing alarming cascading effects to a world economy already battered by COVID-19 and climate change, with particularly dramatic impacts on developing countries.”

The UN warned that 60 percent of governments in developing countries are so heavily indebted to the world’s banks and corporations that they will be unable to provide subsidies to those affected by rising prices. Another key factor in the explosiveness of recent protests, the UN acknowledged, is the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the working class, which has produced “great social and economic scarring.”

What is now emerging, the UN wrote, is a “perfect storm” of social discontent: “In an environment of already high levels of socioeconomic stress due to the impacts of COVID-19, the rise in food prices threatens knock-on effects of social unrest.”

These nervous statements from the major institutions of capitalist rule show that the imperialist governments have failed in their effort to use war to deflect from growing domestic tensions. On the contrary, the escalating drive to world war is producing social explosions.

The spontaneous eruption of protests throughout the world is an objective process, produced by the enormous crisis of the world capitalist system. The transformation of this objective process into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of the building of the revolutionary leadership, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The ICFI, its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees are holding an online rally May 1, May Day, the day of international working-class solidarity.

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