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Iran

# After the earthquake, the social quake

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**The Iranian working class, long suppressed and brutally exploited, burst onto the scene in early January of 2018, shaking Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime. Iran was shaken by protests against rising food prices, mass unemployment, growing social inequality, the brutal austerity agenda and political repression. The protests began on Thursday (December 28th) in the second largest city in Iran, Mashhad (a holy city, home to the shrine of Imam Reza), then spread to about forty towns and villages in the country, as well as to the capital Tehran.**

The scope and intensity of this movement, the rapid adoption of slogans against the government and the autocratic political system surprised the Iranian authorities and Western observers. Yet this eruption was preceded by months of protests by workers against job cuts, plant closures and unpaid wages and benefits. According to government sources, 21 people died and about 2,000 were arrested in clashes between protesters and police.

From the beginning of the movement, the government reduced, and even blocked, the applications of Telegram and Instagram to remove information on future events and the size of the movement.

The scale and intensity of the demonstrations shook the Iranian bourgeois-clerical regime and its rival factions were urged to come together to suppress the movement. During the weekend of December 30 and 31, 2017, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared that Iranians had the right to demonstrate peacefully and that his government would soon take steps to address the socio-economic demands of the protesters, adding: "We do not have a bigger challenge than unemployment". But government ministers and security agencies swore to eradicate the protest movement, with the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution declaring themselves ready to use an "iron fist".

The leaders of the regime - from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to General Sanayee, to the former "reformist" president and ally of the 2009 movement, Mohammad Khatami - "justified" their brutal repression with false allegations accusing protesters of being manipulated by Washington and its regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as part of an incendiary campaign to bring about regime change in Tehran.

But this wave of protests has a class character quite different from that of 2009 under the banner of the so-called "green movement". In 2009 the protest movement against the fraudulent re-election of former ultra-conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was violently repressed.

On the basis of the best available reports that have filtered through censorship by the Iranian regime or appeared in the Western media, it is obvious that this wave of protests is, basically, an incipient rebellion of the working class. Certainly, the demonstrations are socially heterogeneous and there is a lot of political confusion among the participants. Moreover, as might be expected, monarchists and other right-wing elements allied with imperialism seek to divert it to their advantage.

But the demonstrations, although not a mass movement, were mainly composed of workers, the poor, the unemployed, the young and poor women. They express deep-seated class anger in a country where 3.2 million people, or 12.7% of the workforce, are officially unemployed. The youth unemployment rate is around 40%, and over 50% live in poverty. However, according to the World Wealth and Income Database, 1% of the wealthiest Iranians own 16.3% of wealth, the equivalent of 50% of the population. The richest 10% hold 48.5% of the national wealth (based on 2013 data).

## Rise of the opposition of the working class

There is no smoke without fire. The wave of protest in early January broke out after months evidence of labour unrest and popular demonstrations, especially against job cuts, non-payment of salaries, and the indifference of the authorities to the millions of savers ruined by the fraudulent collapse of many unregulated financial institutions. The total abandonment of the victims of the recent deadly earthquakes as well as the astronomical corruption had an important role in triggering this movement. In September 2017, for example, in Arak, workers at two factories which were privatised in the 2000s clashed with police for two days, after security forces intervened to disperse protesters against non-payment of wages. According to a report by the Agence France-Presse, "minor protests began to stir in the weeks leading up to the current unrest", with "hundreds of oil workers and truckers protesting the late payment of wages, tractor manufacturers in Tabriz opposing the closure of their factory, and Tehran tire workers demanding payment of wages". These protests were treated with indifference by the Western media, while the Iranian authorities did their best to hide them.

In the days leading up to the January protests, an intense and widespread debate raged on social media about growing social inequities. The trigger for this wave of anger was the release of the government's latest austerity budget. It provided for a 50% increase in the price of gasoline, while further reducing energy price subsidies. Subsidies for basic food and essential services were abolished between 2010 and 2014, during the presidencies of Ahamadinejad and Rouhani.

The 2009 movement was centred almost exclusively in Tehran, particularly in its richest neighbourhoods in the north. On the other hand, the January protests were much wider geographically. Also affected were the smaller and poorer cities that formed the political base of Ahmadinejad and the so-called "hard" faction of the regime's political elite, which combines Shiite orthodoxy with populist calls to the plebeian elements of the regime.

Even more significantly, and unlike the 2009 movement, this mobilization was motivated by opposition to social inequalities. The "Greens", who overwhelmingly supported Rouhani's election in 2013 and his re-election last May, avoided these protests. Prominent representatives of the "Greens" expressed their deep concern about the "leaderless", "violent and undemocratic" demonstrations! For their part, the protesters did not appeal to the key Green leaders and the defeated presidential candidates in 2009, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, still under house arrest. Instead, they put forward slogans hostile to the clerical-capitalist regime as a whole.

## Rouhani's rapprochement with Washington and austerity

The acute social crisis in Iran is the product of economic and military-strategic pressure from the United States, as well as economic sanctions, the global economic crisis and, above all, the collapse of world oil prices, with the failure of neoliberal economic policies and especially the brutal austerity measures that Rouhani has put in place in order to woo Western investment. For years Rouhani, following his political mentor, the late President Hashemi Rafsanjani, has been the advocate of rapprochement with Western imperialist powers. In 2013, by highlighting the socially explosive consequences of US and European economic sanctions on Iran, they convinced Ayatollah Khamenei and other key elements of the regime of the need for a change of course. Hence a new attempt at compromise with Washington and the European Union.

As in the case of the leaders of the Green movement, four years earlier, this policy was linked to a new attempt to eliminate what was left of the social concessions made to the working class following the 1979 Revolution. Over the last four years, the Rouhani government has continued privatization and deregulation, as Ahamadinejad did earlier. It

has followed the IMF's prescriptions for austerity and also redesigned the rules governing oil concessions to seduce the European and American oil giants. In the end, in January 2016, the most severe US and European sanctions were lifted or suspended in exchange for the dismantling by Teheran of a large part of its nuclear programme. But to the extent that the lifting of sanctions has stimulated the economy, the advantages have almost exclusively benefited the most privileged layers of the population. The response from Rouhani, as witnessed by the last budget, has been to accentuate austerity for the masses, while increasing the budgets of the religious institutions and the clergy.

## A new stage of the struggle

The demonstrations of the first week of January herald a new stage in the class struggle in Iran. Across the Middle East, including Israel, there are signs of growing opposition from the working class. The critical question is the struggle to arm the nascent workers' opposition with an internationalist socialist strategy. Iranian workers and young people must fight for the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force, in opposition to imperialism and all the factions of the national bourgeoisie.

All right-wing forces advocating orientation towards Washington and/or the other imperialist powers within the anti-government movement must be combated and politically isolated. It is imperialism that has stifled the democratic and social aspirations of the peoples of the Middle East over the last century. It is the imperialist powers that have devastated the region for a quarter of a century of war, and which today threaten to plunge the Iranian people and the entire region into an even more bloody conflagration.

The Iranian bourgeoisie, as evidenced by more than a century of history since the constitutional revolution of 1906, is totally incapable of establishing a true democracy and freeing itself from imperialism. For this would require a revolutionary mobilization of the masses of a magnitude that would jeopardize the interests and class ambitions of the bourgeoisie.

Workers and young people should also reject those who say that the rise of the masses would solve everything, because in reality they denigrate the struggle for a revolutionary program and its leadership. Lessons must be learned from history, including the "Arab Spring" of 2011 and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The Iranian revolution of 1979, which 40 years ago overthrew the tyrannical regime of the US-sponsored Shah, was a massive, anti-imperialist social explosion. And it was the working class that had dealt the fatal blow. It was a growing wave of political strikes that broke the back of the Shah regime. And in the months that followed, the workers seized the factories, putting them under the control of the workers' councils. But the working class was without an independent class organization and was politically subordinated to the Stalinist Tudeh party, as well as to various petty-bourgeois left-wing forces. Unfortunately, most of these organizations rallied behind the so-called anti-imperialist wing of the national bourgeoisie led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shiite clergy. Having taken control of the state apparatus, they brutally repressed all independent forms of expression and class organization. They stabilized the capitalist order within the framework of a new theocratic system.

Today, in Iran, a rise of the working class can and must settle accounts with the Islamic political system, the Iranian bourgeoisie as a whole and imperialism, but on the condition of being part of the prospect of an international socialist revolution.

The task of revolutionary socialists is to turn towards this movement and to fight to arm the international working class with an understanding of the logic of its needs, aspirations and struggles. Capitalism is incompatible with the needs of society. The workers, the class that produces the wealth of the world, must unite their struggles across

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borders and continents to establish the political power of the workers, to undertake the socialist reorganization of society and to end the imperialist war.

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