

Some lessons from the history of the Iranian workers movement

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The following is a contribution given by Justus Leicht during a recent public meeting in Frankfurt/Main. He put forward programmatic theses arising from a Marxist analysis of Iranian history.

The crisis of the Islamic regime in Iran has intensified dramatically over the last months. Although the parliamentary elections which took place in February this year were carefully limited to candidates loyal to the system, the result was a clear vote against the existing regime. The faction of the so-called “reformers” associated with President Khatami didn't win the vast majority of the vote because of its political programme, but because of widespread discontent with a system identified with oppression, poverty and corruption. At the same time the election was accompanied by continuous strikes, small and large, protest marches and student demonstrations.

The faction of so-called “hard-liners” or “conservatives” has little popular support, but it controls the state-apparatus, the judiciary system and state television and following the election result it has initiated an aggressive campaign. This consists of banning dozens of newspapers, arrests, the mobilisation of paramilitary militia units, fostering of anti-Semitism by use of show trials against Jews accused of allegedly spying for Israel, and also by fanning anti-Afghani xenophobia, depicting them as drug dealers and illegal workers.

The reaction of the “reformers” is to systematically shrink back under the pressure of the right wing: The investigation of the “mysterious series of murders” carried out towards the end of 1998, was abandoned without results of any kind. In this period numerous intellectuals, among them the prominent figure of Darioush Foruhar, were killed.

While newspapers were being banned, and student protesters beaten up, President Khatami continuously appealed to the people calling for “calm and order”. Once in office the newly elected parliament made its first priority a pilgrimage to the grave of Ayatollah Khomeini, where the “reformers” honoured the memory of the deceased father of the Islamic republic.

Lately student leaders have also increasingly criticised Khatami. In order to retain some credibility, the newly elected parliament plans to slacken press laws and to restrict the security forces' right to enter university campuses. In all probability the appropriate bills will be blocked by the council of guardians which is dominated by the conservatives. New conflicts and protests are inevitable.

All the questions and problems which Iranian workers, peasants

and intellectuals faced during the entire twentieth century are posed once again today in all their severity. This makes it necessary to draw fundamental lessons from the tragic history of the Iranian workers movement. A successful struggle for a better future is possible only on this basis.

Even a very superficial look back at Iranian history in the twentieth century makes clear that the Iranian bourgeoisie is incapable of solving the country's problems—poverty, oppression, backwardness and the domination of imperialism—regardless of whether the rulers present themselves in made-to-measure suits, military uniforms or long beards and clerical gowns.

This doesn't mean to say that the national bourgeoisie had never shown any interest in developing the country or establishing its independence from imperialism. Quite the opposite is the case. The first bourgeois publications from the beginning of the twentieth century were regularly very contemptuous of religion and intensively discussed ways of overcoming the feudal fragmentation and backwardness of the country.

But already during the “constitutional revolution” in 1906—which took place at nearly the same time as the Russian Revolution of 1905—the revolutionary initiative on the part of the bourgeoisie was limited to seeking refuge in the British embassy. There the leaders threatened to refuse to leave its gardens until the Shah carried through constitutional reforms. When the Shah's regime was once again severely shaken by the Russian Revolution in October 1917, the political leaders of the bourgeoisie backed general Reza Khan Pahlevi, who carried out a coup d'état in 1921 with the help of British imperialism and awarded himself the “peacock throne” in 1925.

There are some remarkable parallels between Reza Khan's policies and those of the founder of modern day Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In the beginning both made use of “left” and “anti-imperialist” sounding demagoguery. Both were eventually proclaimed to be “revolutionary leaders” by the Stalinists, who had been able to take over the Soviet government by the middle of the twenties. They both attempted to overcome the feudal and religious backwardness of their countries and inaugurate a capitalist development of economy under the protection of the state.

In their endeavours they soon were confronted with the problem that the building of the economy not only increased the social weight of the working class, but also the social differences between the propertied classes and those without possessions, in both the cities and rural areas. Faced with such an explosive social

situation the rulers went back to the traditional pillars of social oppression. It was only in this way that they were able to maintain their rule against the masses from the lower classes.

Instead of breaking the power of the clergy and the landowners and liberating the religious and national minorities, they relied on oppression and chauvinism. It was no coincidence that Reza Khan—and Kemal—adopted the ban of all independent organisations of workers and peasants from the model of Mussolini's fascist Italy. It was also no coincidence that Khan gave Persia the name “Iran” to emphasise the superior “Aryan race”. He also awarded himself an immodest nickname, calling himself the “sun of the Aryan race”.

At the beginning of the 1950s things failed to improve under Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadeg, who became well known for nationalising the Anglo American Oil company. The nationalisation of the hated oil company understandably aroused a wave of enthusiasm within the people. But Mossadeg wasn't looking for support among the people, but from Washington against Great Britain. He hoped to play one imperialist power off against the other.

London, however, was able to convince the US to bring down Mossadeg. It was not so much fear of Mossadeg himself as fear of a mass movement under the influence of the Tudeh, the Moscow-orientated Stalinist party of Iran, which was capable of mobilising many more people than Mossadeg's “National Front”. After the first coup attempt failed, the Shah left the country and masses of Tudeh party supporters took to the streets overthrowing statues of the king. Mossadeg's reaction was to consult the US and follow American “advice” to brutally suppress the people—who constituted his own base—with the use of military force. It was then easy for the military and the Shah to deal with Mossadeg himself in the aftermath. This was possible because the Tudeh, after the National Front had rejected its offer of a “broad front”, abstained from mobilising independent resistance against the Shah. The eventual success of its coup in bringing back the Shah was a pleasant surprise for the CIA.

It must be noted that the clergy supported the Shah during the coup in 1953 and in the following years. This only began to change when, under the Shah, the opening and modernisation of the national economy to international companies began to threaten the economic basis of the clergy itself. This base was the so-called bazaar, traditional traders and merchants incapable of competing internationally, as well as the peasantry who increasingly had to turn to the cities to make a living.

Only a small clique around the Shah, national and foreign capitalists, and landowners benefited from the so called “white revolution” in the early sixties, which consisted of the modernisation and industrialisation of the country. But this process also integrated Iran into the world economy and produced the force with the potential to overthrow their rule—an urban proletariat, which increased tremendously until the middle of the 1970s.

The reason that the Shah was brought down by mullahs and bazaar merchants was not a result of Khomeini's political strength and farsightedness, but of the nationalist policies of the Stalinists, which held back the working class and impoverished peasants. In

this context one must recall that the Tudeh party and the “Peoples Mujahedin” supported Khomeini as well as Bani-Sadr, the first president of the “Islamic Republic of Iran” in the name of “Islamic socialism” and “anti-imperialism”.

Khomeini was a representative of the national bourgeoisie. While he massacred thousands of lefts, choked every independent movement of the working class and brutally suppressed any attempt by the Kurds to win national autonomy, he also nationalised the banks and key industries including the oil industry. The economy was cut off from the world market and to some extent an infrastructure was established, beginning with an education system, from which large layers benefited.

But any development of the national economy increased Iranian dependence on technologies and the world market. This is why already in the early years of the Islamic republic there were violent disagreements within the ruling elite on economic policies, the role of the state in the economy and the opening up of the country to foreign investment. The war against Iraq temporarily covered these problems, but then only bled the country white and posed intensified problems afterwards.

The weakness of the Iranian bourgeoisie—resulting from the impossibility of a national development within the framework of an increasing globalisation of capitalist world economy—contributed to the brutal war of conquest beginning in 1982 carried out by Iran after successfully defending itself. It also explains the undercover collaboration with the United States and Israel in spite of Iran's demagoguery “against US-imperialism and Zionism” (uncovered during the “Iran-Contra affair”) and finally the zigzag course of Iranian foreign policies following Khomeini's death up to this day.

The impossibility of a successful national development is the core of the dilemma for the regime today: because it is still strongly isolated from the world economy the country is nearly bankrupt. To escape this isolation on a capitalist basis, as Khatami attempts to do and which even his opponents basically approve of, would require the complete subjugation of the country to imperialism and opening up Iran to the predators of international capitalism.

Such a turn would not only mean drastic attacks on the living standards of workers, which are low as it is, but would also threaten the benefits and privileges of parts of the clergy and the bazaar merchants, the so-called “ruling Mafia”. The leaders of the “reformers” and “hard-liners” know that this is the reason for their conflicts as well as their demonstrative unity against any threat from below. The workers and students of Iran must also understand this and draw the political conclusions: a progressive solution is only possible based on a socialist perspective, aimed at abolishing capitalism and uniting the oppressed of all nationalities and religions in the Near East.



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