

Iran and public opinion

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The *World Socialist Web Site* receives scores of letters each week which reflect a broad range of views—from the warmly supportive to the ferociously hostile. They all are read with interest. Occasionally we receive letters—whether supportive or hostile—that strike us as particularly significant because they express with exceptional clarity a definite and broadly-based political and social outlook.

Following the publication of the Perspective column of June 25, entitled “International issues in the Iranian crisis,” we received two such letters from one correspondent which angrily denounced our coverage of Iranian developments. The Perspective to which he objected examined the power struggle in Iran within the context of the long and bloody involvement of the United States in the affairs of that oppressed country. We explained the critical interests that underlay the massive propaganda campaign unleashed in the American media following the election.

The first letter declared:

You dishonor the brave people of Iran who are dying in the streets for the right of free expression. You don’t need to look to the *New York Times* for indications about the corrupt nature of the Iranian election, look to the people on the streets who are standing up against fascism. Nobody in their right mind believes that Ahmadinejad won 2/3 of the vote.

I once looked to your web site to offer a beacon of light, but now your support of the fascist dictators in Iran has shown me what a false and lying bunch you truly are, no better than the extreme right-wingers who are so ready to distort the truth for their own ideological advantage.

Somewhat later in the day, the writer sent a second letter:

Your ‘perspective’ is outrageous. There is no condemnation of the disgraceful and inhumane mowing down of peaceful demonstrators by the fascists in power in Iran. All we hear is the same tired blather about US imperialism. This is not Mossadeq. This is not the Shah or Saddam Hussein.

The world has moved to the point where people are fighting and dying on the streets for democracy and you are stuck in a time warp, mouthing the same old slogans. Shameful!

The political, intellectual and social essence of these letters is revealed in its contemptuous reference to the *World Socialist Web Site*’s “tired blather about US imperialism.” For our angry critic, the role of American imperialism is an insignificant

factor in developments in Iran, of interest only to those “stuck in a time warp.”

In other words, “imperialism” belongs to the past. There is no reason to talk about it when examining contemporary events. Our critic does not tell us why this is so. The fact that the United States is presently waging war in three countries (Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan) that border Iran is dismissed as of no importance. Nor does it matter that Iran bestrides the strategically critical Persian Gulf and possesses immense reserves of oil and natural gas. We must also assume that the WSWs’s references to the CIA-sponsored 1953 coup against the Mossadeq regime and the subsequent quarter century of military dictatorship is also irrelevant “blather”—though we suspect that it remains very much on the minds of millions of Iranians who have not forgotten the Shah’s reign.

The letters reflect the response within broad sections of the liberal and middle-class “left” milieu to the propaganda campaign being waged by the US and Western media in support of the “democratic” oppositional movement in Iran. Of course, our critic does not care to examine the political credentials of the US-backed heroes of the hour, let alone the program they advance and the social forces to which they direct their appeal. That, too, would be “blather.”

Our critic refers to “fascism.” But he fails to offer any analysis whatsoever of the social forces upon which this is based. This is not an insignificant omission. Fascism, at least in the Marxist tradition, has been understood as a movement of the middle class. Even the most fervent opponents of the Ahmadinejad regime in the bourgeois (dare we use this term?) press concede that the anti-government forces draw their mass support from the urban middle class, particularly among those layers who are hostile to the populist economic policies of the government.

This does not mean that the protests against Ahmadinejad are “fascist.” One should be cautious in applying facile labels to heterogeneous social movements. It is apparent that the protests include elements who are sincerely opposed to the anti-democratic Islamic regime. But they are politically confused and are not oriented toward the working class. Their sincerity is no substitute for a socialist program. And, moreover, such elements are not calling the shots in the protest demonstrations.

Our critic declares that the demonstrators “are fighting and dying on the streets for democracy...” He fails to consider what

these forces—or, more precisely, the factions of the ruling Islamic establishment that have organized the demonstrations—would do if they managed to gain the upper hand. He does not explain why the outcome of a transfer of power to Mousavi's faction would be fundamentally different from what occurred in other “color” revolutions backed by the CIA and promoted by the American media. In Georgia, for example, the Saakashvili regime that came to power invoking democracy was recently involved in a US-financed proxy war against Russia and is presently suppressing mass protests.

While our reader insists that imperialist interests play no role in events unfolding in Iran, he might learn something if he took a look at an article that appeared in Friday's *New York Times*. Under the headline, “Warily Moving Ahead on Oil Contracts,” a *Times* correspondent reports from Baghdad: “When Iraq puts development rights to some of its largest oilfields up for auction to foreign companies on Monday, the bidding will be a watershed moment, representing the first chance for petroleum giants like ExxonMobil to tap the resources of a country they were kicked out of almost 40 years ago.”

The report quotes a former ExxonMobil executive, Daniel Nelson, who told the *Times*: “My guess is that every international oil company in the world, knowing Iraq is blessed with terrific God-given natural resources, is interested in Iraq.”

Is it so difficult to imagine similar reports a year or two after the victory of CIA-backed factions in Iran?

We call attention to our critic's letter because it reflects a significant political response to the Iranian crisis. It has frequently been the case that a crisis serves as the occasion for what appears to be a sudden shift in public opinion. However, it soon becomes clear that the “sudden” shift is the product of social and political processes that have been developing over a protracted period.

One of the most striking features of the Iranian crisis is, precisely, the unabashed solidarity of so many “progressive” and “left” publications and organizations with the media campaign in the United States and Europe. In the US, the self-styled progressives of the *Nation* magazine along with virtually all of the opportunist “left” groups have lined up behind the Obama administration and the American media in support of the “color revolution” in Iran. In Britain, the Socialist Workers Party has done the same. The New Anti-Capitalist Party of Olivier Besancenot in France has declared its support for “all those” who want to bring down the clerical regime in Iran, and is preparing to participate in a demonstration alongside supporters of the Sarkozy government.

In Germany, the Green Party has embraced the Iranian opposition headed by Mousavi and Rafsanjani, even as it prepares to enter into coalition with the right-wing Christian Democratic Union of Angela Merkel.

Of course, it is possible, and we certainly hope, that our critic, when he takes time to reflect on developments, will reconsider his position. But, quite independently of this individual, there is

no question that substantial sections of the former liberal-left have moved sharply to the right, and the Iranian crisis is providing the occasion for a vociferous repudiation of old political commitments. The roots of this phenomenon lie in real social processes, related to the extreme polarization of class relations in all the major capitalist countries. This polarization is being further exacerbated by the global economic crisis.

Over a period of decades, the middle-class layers that dominated reformist, liberal and even “radical” organizations have seen their economic position and social status improve. They have grown complacent and satisfied, to the extent that their own complaints have been taken care of.

Their political outlook has become dominated by identity and what might be called “life-style” politics. This is one of the reasons why middle-class public opinion is so easily drawn to the protests of well-attired men and women in Tehran, whose social attitudes seem, at least on the surface, to be so close to its own. The growth of a significant level of social egotism within wealthier sections of the middle class has occurred at the same time that the living standards and social position of the working class have undergone a drastic decline.

Over time, these layers have grown increasingly remote and alienated from the working class, to the point of overt hostility. This has been reflected in numerous commentaries in the “left” press disparagingly comparing the “backward” and “devout” workers in Iran with the educated and economically better-off sections of professionals, businessmen and students who form the social base of the opposition.

What does this signify? The opposition to imperialism now shifts more directly and openly to the only consistently revolutionary force on the planet—the international working class. In Iran and internationally, the fundamental political task is the building of the independent revolutionary socialist movement of the working class.

The collapse of the liberal and ex-radical “left” is an unmistakable harbinger of the reemergence of the working class and the advent of a new period of class convulsions on a world scale.

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