

Iran, imperialism, and the “left”

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Recent developments have further confirmed the bourgeois and politically-reactionary character of the Iranian protest movement organized by supporters of defeated reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi.

As the political struggle between different factions of the Islamic Republic has intensified, the imperialist powers are exerting pressure to shift the political advantage to the “reform” tendencies who favor a sharp change in Iran’s foreign policy (toward accommodation with US and European objectives in the Middle East and Central Asia) and economic policy (in favor of a rapid introduction of pro-market policies).

The European powers have collectively threatened to pull their ambassadors from Iran, and have summoned Iran’s ambassadors to EU member states to protest Iran’s detention of British embassy employees.

In an even more provocative and threatening action, Vice President Joe Biden told the *New York Times* that the US would not veto an Israeli decision to launch a military strike against Iran. The timing of Biden’s statement is politically significant. In the midst of an acute power struggle within the Iranian political establishment, Biden’s message is a warning—especially to those power brokers in the Islamic Republic who are still sitting on the fence—that the United States and its clients will not wait forever for dissident forces to effect a regime change in Iran.

To drive home Biden’s point, the vice president’s speech was supplemented by a column by Roger Cohen—who has just returned from his Tehran exploits where he led the *New York Times* post-election propaganda campaign—in which he urges Ahmadinejad’s opponents in the Islamic Republic to carry out the president’s “defenestration.”

As developments expose the reactionary politics of the post-election demonstrations and their limited social base, various “left” groups are trying to justify their embrace of Mousavi. Groups from the US International Socialist Organization to France’s *Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste* (NPA) have published articles praising the protest movement’s supposed revolutionary credentials.

A supporter of one such group, Britain’s International Marxist Tendency (IMT), sent a letter that was posted on the IMT’s web

site denouncing the World Socialist Web Site’s coverage of the Iranian crisis. “I was horrified to discover,” he wrote, “that at this pivotal moment in world history, they have chosen to devote their energy to proving that this election was not a fraud and to attacking other leftists who say otherwise. In other words, they have come to the defense of the Islamic Republic.”

The issue raised by this criticism of the WSWS is the means by which the “left” allies of Mousavi hope to realize their political aims. The writer of this attack is furious that the WSWS refused to line up with those factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie, backed by US and European imperialism, in their struggle against Ahmadinejad. The standpoint adopted by this critic is the destruction of the Islamic Republic is to be welcomed, regardless of the class forces, within Iran and internationally, who are carrying out the operation. This is not only the position of the letter writer quoted approvingly by the IMT. The French NPA issued a public statement in which it declared that it supported all opponents of the Islamic Republic. This declaration came just as French President Sarkozy was taking the lead in mobilizing the EU against Iran!

The political and theoretical bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois left finds particularly glaring expression in an essay by IMT leader Alan Woods, published on June 26, on the Iranian crisis (“Iran regime steps up terror—a general strike is needed!”). It gives a more detailed exposition of the political misconceptions underlying the IMT reader’s attack on the WSWS.

Woods attempts to refute the fairly obvious fact that the Mousavi protest movement was a right-wing movement: “Some on the left are questioning whether the movement in Iran is a progressive one. They have been taken in by propaganda that states that the movement is all an ‘imperialist plot’ to overthrow the Islamic regime.”

What “propaganda” is Woods referring to? For several weeks, the mass media in the US and Europe waged an unrelenting campaign to disorient and manipulate public opinion. The flagship of “progressive” liberalism, the *Nation*, legitimized the media campaign with reports filed by a correspondent who had previously defended the Shah’s regime. In the face of this massive disinformation campaign, a small number of publications, including the WSWS, sought to analyze the social and political basis of the Mousavi-led protests. For Woods, anything that contradicted the official mass media-sanctioned story line is

illegitimate.

As for Woods' claim that critics of the official story line were presenting the opposition demonstrations as nothing more than an "imperialist plot," this is simply an attempt to set up a straw man. The analysis presented by the WSWS explained that the demonstrations reflected real divisions within the Iranian regime. We also noted that among the demonstrators were elements sincerely opposed to the Islamic regime. However, the demonstrations were politically led by sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie, drew its main forces from the privileged sections of the urban middle class, and based on a program deeply antagonistic to the interests of the working class. Moreover, the issue of an "imperialist plot" was not as insignificant as Woods would like his readers to believe. Woods can only justify the IMT's support for Mousavi's movement by glossing over the class program of its leadership and the related aims of the imperialist powers.

He writes: "There is not the slightest doubt that the US is covertly trying to effect regime-change in Iran, and has been doing so for the last three decades. We know that Washington has set up a special fund for this purpose." However, Woods writes as if these facts had not played a role in the situation and could safely be dropped from consideration: "*But the curious thing about the present situation is how circumspect the Americans have been.*" [Emphasis added]

This is an extraordinary statement. As in every other aspect of the IMT's line, it is simply adapting to the line of the mass media, which claimed that Obama was adopting a restrained attitude toward events in Iran. In reality, the US response to the Iranian crisis, including Biden's recent threats, has unfolded in the context of a basic US policy of encircling Iran (invading neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan, and keeping bases throughout the Persian Gulf) and subjecting it to constant threats of attack. This policy is not circumspect, but aggressive and criminal.

Woods has more work to do to fully evade the issue of imperialist intervention in Iran. He supports the Venezuelan regime of Hugo Chavez, a bourgeois populist whom Washington would also like to remove from power. Woods has to acknowledge "the reaction of many people in Venezuela (not just Chavez), who have drawn a parallel between the reactionary movements of the middle-class *escualidos* trying to destabilize the Bolivarian government [i.e. the Chavez regime] and the Iranian protests."

Woods reacts angrily: "What has this got to do with the situation in Iran? The government of Iran is not a progressive, pro-working class government but a reactionary theocratic dictatorship... The facts show there is nothing progressive about the rule of the mullahs in Iran, and there is no basis whatsoever for comparing it to Venezuela and Bolivia."

The basic issue at stake is Woods' unprincipled and cowardly attitude towards imperialism. He does not adopt a principled class

opposition to imperialist interference in all oppressed countries. Rather, he objects to imperialist intrigue in the Third World bourgeois regimes that he likes, and ignores it when it affects regimes he dislikes.

Woods then tries to explain his perspective for the Mousavi protest movement. He says that it "has a confused character," but hopefully notes that "the early stages of a Revolution are always characterized by an incoherent and confused situation." As an example of a confused and complex situation, he cites the February Revolution of 1917, the initial overthrow of the czar that set the stage for the Bolshevik Party to take power in the October Revolution several months later.

These analogies are untenable. The February Revolution was a mass working-class uprising that overthrew the czar; the Mousavi protest movement was a middle-class protest that lacked mass support.

Woods gets even further entangled when he describes how the Mousavi protest might evolve. Noting "democratic illusions" of pro-Mousavi protestors, he says that Iranians will receive a "harsh education" about the "big illusions in the 'democratic' leaders." He explains: "The 'reformers' only want a cosmetic change, which means no change at all. The bourgeois Liberals want a change that will place them at the helm of power and protect their privileges by more efficient means of control."

This is his view of the political leadership of the movement he defends against all charges of not being progressive!

Woods' reasoning is that of a reactionary petty-bourgeois politician who easily adapts himself to bourgeois public opinion. His essay is an example of the politics of the overwhelming majority of "left" groups that support the Mousavi movement—a support that speaks volumes on their own social and political orientation. These petty-bourgeois groups make no class analysis of the movements they support, passing over Iran's history as an oppressed, semi-colonial country in silence as they fall in line with the latest color-coded "democracy" campaign.

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