

Green protests fall flat

Lessons of Iran's May Day

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Iranian workers and teachers have further demoralized the bourgeois opposition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government by spurning the call of Green movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi for massive demonstrations on May Day and "Teachers' Day," May 2.

The Green leaders had hoped to relaunch their antigovernment agitation by tapping into growing working class discontent over rising prices and unemployment, the government's privatization program, and its newly adopted scheme to eliminate price subsidies on energy, food, and other essential goods and services.

But they manifestly failed. Despite a concerted campaign, openly patronized by foreign-based websites and television stations, including the Persian-language division of Voice of America, to promote the May Day protests no more than a hundred reputed pro-Green workers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Labor. They were quickly dispersed by the police.

The Islamic Republic officially acknowledges May 1st as "Workers' Day" in Iran. But since the clerical-nationalist regime suppressed all independent workers' councils and leftist organizations in the early 1980s, it has never permitted any form of working class self-activity on May Day. Instead, under the auspices of the regime-sponsored Islamic labor councils and Worker House it has organized tightly controlled, state-run celebrations.

This year the government did not even permit the Worker House—whose leader Alireza Mahjoub supported Mousavi in last year's presidential election and is reportedly close to Green patron, multimillionaire businessman and ex-president Hashemi Rafsanjani—to organize a May Day demonstration. Instead, President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, separately addressed gatherings of carefully selected workers and propounded on the need for cooperation between workers and employees.

In his speech, Khamenei had to acknowledge the rapidly deteriorating conditions facing workers. These conditions are directly attributable to the pro-market reforms that those now spearheading the Green movement implemented when they held the reins of government in the 1990s and the first half of the last decade and to the pro-investor policies of the current Ahmadinejad-led government.

Khamenei blamed the rise in joblessness on the misapplication of the government's privatization program by unscrupulous individuals who instead of operating their newly acquired factories have chosen to liquidate them, selling off the factories and the land on which they sit piecemeal.

Later Khamenei contrasted the attitude of the Islamic Republic toward labor and capital with that of socialism and capitalism. As the regime has done since it arose through the hijacking and suppression

of the anti-imperialist revolution that overthrew the US-backed Shah in 1979, Khamenei claimed that the Islamic Republic represents a "third way" between capitalism and godless socialism. "We do not," proclaimed Khamenei, "dismiss the employer as in socialism. Nor do we consider the employer as having absolute authority as in capitalism. But we believe there must be a humane relation between the employer and the employee and the cooperation between these two elements of production will lead to the progress of the country."

Contrary to the portrayal of Iran in the western media, the country has a long socialist secular tradition dating back to the beginning of the last century. May Day celebrations were initiated in the early 1920s in response to the October 1917 Russia Revolution. In May 1979, less than three months after the Shah's overthrow, hundreds of thousands joined the largest ever May Day demonstration in the Middle East. However, with the consolidation of the regime through the violent suppression of the left and working class, May Day lost political significance.

If this year was different, it is because Iran's ruling elite has fractured under conditions of unrelenting US imperialist pressure, world economic crisis, and the mounting social contradictions within the Islamic Republic.

Both major bourgeois factions—the Greens and the government faction led by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad—are fearful of the potential social power of the working class, while simultaneously hoping to politically manipulate it with a view to prevailing in the elite power struggle.

In the run-up to May Day, Khamenei issued a stern warning against using "labor issues" as political leverage against the government.

Both factions recognize that the government is increasingly vulnerable because of the global economic crisis. The sharp decline in oil prices triggered by the world recession has undercut Ahmadinejad's attempts to mollify social discontent with increased social spending. While the president has tried to dress up the government's subsidy elimination plan as a measure for social justice, arguing that better-off Iranian's benefit disproportionately from the gasoline subsidy, there is no question that their phasing out and the consequent price surge will have a major adverse impact on the most impoverished sections of the population, the working class, rural toilers and urban poor. (See: "Ahmadinejad retreats in clash over Iran's budget")

The Greens represent a section of the Iranian bourgeoisie and clerical-political establishment that wants the pace of pro-market reforms quickened and most keenly favors a rapprochement with US imperialism.

They have long advocated the phasing out of the price subsidies, attacked Ahmadinejad for "excessive" social spending, and have

increasingly pressed for a substantial currency devaluation, which would further squeeze the living standards of working people.

Popular support for the Greens has been overwhelmingly concentrated among more privileged sections of the urban population. But in recent months, the Green leaders, especially Mousavi, have argued that they need to broaden their base by listening to the grievances of the working class and the rural masses.

In this maneuver they have been openly encouraged by the strategists of imperialism. In February, Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA operative and fellow of the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies think tank, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece in which he argued that Ahmadinejad's increasingly right-wing economic policy may enable the Green opposition to "draw into the streets larger numbers of the mostazafan, 'the oppressed poor,' who have been the popular bedrock of the regime since the 1979 revolution."

In the run-up to May Day, Voice of America's Persian Television devoted a series of programs to the problems of Iran's workers. Commentators and invitees distorted the conditions facing workers in the Arab Gulf States, many of who are foreign workers without any rights, to argue that Iran's confrontation with Washington is responsible for Iranian workers' low wages. In one broadcast, members of the People's Fedaian (Fedayeen), a Stalinist organization that initially supported the Khomeini regime, were given a platform to contrast the programs advanced by "modern socialist parties" in Europe, i.e. pro-imperialist parties like the British Labour Party and the French Socialist Party, with "totalitarian" Iran.

Mousavi and Karroubi made video messages to urge workers to take to the streets in support of the Greens on May Day and Teachers' Day.

While both Green leaders decried the plight of the Iranian worker, neither condemned the US and US-led sanctions that have had a devastating impact on Iran's economy, particularly investment in its vital oil and natural gas sectors.

At the beginning of his video, Mousavi sought to evoke anti-foreign nationalist sentiment by blaming the economic crisis and the low level of production at factories on an influx of foreign goods and capital. Said Mousavi, "we have surrendered our domestic market in terms of commodities, services and capital to the aliens and we all know to what extent this will affect the future of our nation, its independence and freedom and also the future of our workers." This complaint was directed at Iran's substantial and ever-growing economic ties with China.

In another part of his message he made a thinly veiled call for Iran to accommodate itself to US demands, saying, "it is in the interest of the workers and teachers that we maintain a balanced foreign policy and not embark on adventures and jeopardize the national interest."

Mehdi Karroubi used his message to attack what he called the militarization of the economy and an economy based on "charity." The first was a reference to the growing economic role of the Revolutionary Guards and the second an attack on Ahmadinejad's social spending.

While hypocritically invoking worker rights, Karroubi voiced the frustration of those capitalists who were allied with the pre-Ahmadinejad administrations and now resent that businessmen tied to the Guards are increasingly the ones reaping the benefits from privatization. "The widely accepted principles of free-trade and competition have been replaced," declared Karroubi, "by monopoly. Is it possible to talk about the rights of the workers while the military

is in control of the economy? This trend would threaten the living standards of the workers."

These claims need to be scrutinized in the context of the economic history of post-revolutionary Iran. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, under conditions where workers had seized factories and many of the richest bourgeoisie had fled the country and as part of a national economic strategy aimed at lessening Iran's dependence on the US, the Islamic Republic brought much of the economy under state control. In combating socialist ideas, some ideologues of the regime advanced the utopian project of building an Islamic classless society. But beginning in 1988, immediately following the conclusion of a disastrous eight-year war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic, led by President Rafsanjani, began implementing IMF-sponsored market reforms. These quickly resulted in growing social inequality and class conflict, including open clashes with the poor over the lack of proper housing in 1993.

Many of the prominent figures in the Green movement were in key economic, political and even security positions during the eight years of Rafsanjani's administration and as such presided over the intimidation, abduction and disappearance of worker activists and discontented citizens. Under Mohammad Khatami—"the reformer" who succeeded Rafsanjani in 1997, served as Iran's president till 2005, and is today the acknowledged third member of the triumvirate of Green leaders—the pro-market reforms were continued and widened.

If Ahmadinejad, a relative outsider who has carefully fashioned a plebian image, was able to capture the presidency in 2005, it was largely by appealing to popular anger over the economic insecurity, poverty and social inequality produced by a decade and a half of pro-big business policies. He has, to be sure, continued along the same course, but in the view of much of the Iranian bourgeoisie not with the requisite speed and determination.

Under conditions of an impending confrontation with US imperialism and an economic crisis whose burden the Iranian bourgeoisie is determined to place on the backs of working people, it is imperative that the working class develop its own challenge to the Islamic Republic.

The democratic rights of the Iranian people will not be won by aligning with any faction of the Iranian bourgeoisie and clerical-bourgeois establishment and especially not with the Greens who spout democratic phrases while pressing for an acceleration of neoliberal restructuring and a "grand bargain" with US imperialism.

Genuine democracy will only be established through the mobilization of the working class and oppressed masses to secure their basic social needs, that is, in an anti-capitalist struggle.

Only a movement directed to the working class, guided by Marxism and the theory of permanent revolution, irreconcilably opposed to imperialism and its pseudo-democratic bourgeois fraudsters, and fighting openly for socialist internationalism will prove able to rally the masses against the Iranian regime and secure its overthrow in the interests of the vast majority.



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