Jailed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi on hunger strike

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Internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi began a hunger strike protest last week over his more than two-month detention in Tehran's Evin Prison and recent threats against members of his family. Panahi, 49, was jailed, along with his wife, daughter and 15 friends, following a raid on his home by plain clothes police on March 1. According to some media reports, the director was filming in his home when the raid occurred.

A supporter of the bourgeois opposition Green Movement, Panahi is a leading figure in Iranian contemporary cinema and the director of several international prize-winning features exploring social life in Iran. Most of the director's movies are banned in Iran and those that can be shown have only had limited releases.

Panahi's works include, *The White Balloon* (1995), *The Circle* (2000), *Crimson Gold* (2003) and *Offside* (2006). *Offside*, which won the 2006 Berlin Film Festival's Silver Bear prize, is about a group of female football fans who try to sneak into Iran's World Cup qualifying match against Bahrain but are arrested. Women are banned from attending men's sporting events in Iran (see WSWS review).

While Panahi's wife Tahereh Saidi, his daughter Solmaz Panahi and most of the others arrested during the raid were released from prison within 48 hours, the filmmaker was barred access to a lawyer and his family until March 18 and has been subjected to lengthy interrogations.

It is not clear whether any formal charges have been laid against Panahi, but on April 14 Iranian authorities accused him of making an "anti-state film" about Iran's 2009 presidential elections. The unsubstantiated allegations have been denied by Panahi's wife and his son Panah who have pointed out that the film being shot inside their home "had nothing to do with the regime."

Panah Panahi, moreover, told the Kaleme website his father's new film had all the necessary government permits. "My father has not made an anti-state film and he has not made any films about the recent events, either. How can some of the people who are spreading these rumors make such statements before the film is even made or edited?"

Last year Iranian authorities imposed a travel ban on Panahi after he appeared at last year's Montreal Film Festival wearing the Green Movement colours. He was also arrested after attending a memorial to Neda Agha Soltan, a student killed at an opposition rally last June. Panahi was released soon after, but his passport was revoked. Early this year Panahi was denied permission to participate in the Berlin Film Festival and, before he was incarcerated, told that he could not travel to this month's Cannes Film Festival where he had been appointed to serve on the festival's Palme d'Or jury.

According to Tahereh Saidi, her husband's health has deteriorated over the past two months, and he has complained of serious chest pains on two occasions. Iranian prison doctors have dismissed the pains as "psychological."

In a letter released by his family early this week, Panahi said he had decided to begin a hunger strike to demand his immediate and unconditional release and for unrestricted access to his family and a lawyer. His letter read in part: "On Saturday night [15 May 2010] agents attacked Evin's Cell 56, forcing me and my cellmates to go outdoors without any clothing and kept us in the cold weather for one and half hours."

"On Sunday morning, they took me to an

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interrogation room and accused me of filming the inside of my cell, which is absolutely false. They then threatened to arrest my entire family and transfer them to Evin Prison, and to send my daughter to an unsafe detention center in Rajaie Shahr."

Panahi's letter concluded, "I swear upon what I believe in, the cinema: I will not cease my hunger strike until my wishes are satisfied. My final wish is that my remains be returned to my family, so that they may bury me in the place they choose."

While Iranian filmmakers have been arrested before by the Iranian government, Panahi's detention is the longest of such a prominent and internationally well-known director. He is one of scores of Iranian students, intellectuals, journalists and artists who have been detained in the past year by the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Facing deepening class tensions produced by the global financial crisis and ongoing economic pressures by US and European imperialist powers, the Ahmadinejad regime is attempting to intimidate and silence all voices of dissent.

The Iranian government recently imposed new restrictions on expatriate Iranian filmmakers who must now obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for foreign productions. Alireza Sajjadpur, director of the culture ministry's Supervision and Evaluation Office, told the Iranian media last week that unless filmmakers received this approval it would have "a negative impact on the future of their career."

Last week Iranian Deputy Culture Minister for Cinematic Affairs Javad Shamaqdarii denounced the Cannes Film Festival for opposing the ongoing detention of Panahi. Shamaqdarii made the comments during a meeting with Festival President Gilles Jacob. According to the *Tehran Times*, Shamaqdarii told Jacob that Cannes' "involvement in political issues damages the reputation of the festival."

Abbas Kiarostami, famed Iranian film director, began a Cannes press conference May 18 after a screening of his film *Certified Copy* by protesting against Panahi's detention. Kiarostami has written or co-written two of Panahi's films. He commented at Cannes, "When a filmmaker is imprisoned, it is the art which is attacked. I believe we can't remain indifferent to the situation. One can't give up hope."

Kiarostami published an open letter in March calling for Panahi's release, which he distributed in Cannes. He told reporters, "I can't understand how a film can be described as a crime when it is yet to be shown to anyone. He added that the Iranian government has been making things very difficult for filmmakers, "notably independent filmmakers."

According to the latest Iranian news reports, on Saturday Tehran's prosecutor general asked the Islamic revolutionary court to "reconsider" Panahi's ongoing detention. While no details have been provided the report may indicate that Panahi could be freed in the near future. Whether that is the case or not, the Islamic regime will continue its efforts to intimidate Iranian filmmakers.

The WSWS, like the growing number of filmmakers, critics and film festival organisers around the world, strongly opposes Panahi's arrest and demands his immediate and unconditional release. A word of caution, however, is necessary.

While Panahi and many other artists and intellectuals are sincere in their opposition to the Islamic regime, the Green Movement offers no way forward for the working class and is deeply antagonistic to its social interests. Headed by Mir Hossein Mousavi, a big business politician, this movement represents a section of the Iranian bourgeoisie who are hostile to genuine democratic rights and are seeking a new deal with the US and other imperialist powers.

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