

Protests shake Algerian regime

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A national strike by health workers continued yesterday against the military regime of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, as protests by unemployed youth and workers spread throughout the country.

The Bouteflika regime has been shaken by the wave of revolutionary workers' struggles taking place across North Africa and the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. According to a February 5 communiqué of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), Bouteflika announced that the conditions of emergency rule imposed 19 years ago—at the beginning of the Algerian civil war—would soon be suspended.

The Algerian regime was hit last month by a series of youth riots against high food costs linked to government subsidy cuts and rising world food prices.

Yesterday, nurses and paramedics continued an indefinite national strike begun the day before. The striking health care workers are providing only a minimum level of basic and emergency services. The regime has declined to negotiate with the smaller Algerian Paramedics Union (SAP), preferring to deal with the official UGTA (General Union of Algerian Workers).

The paramedics have little confidence in negotiations with state authorities, however. One sign at a demonstration outside the Burn Clinic in Algiers read, "Stop hemorrhaging promises."

According to media reports, the overwhelming majority of the 100,000 workers in the health care sector are participating in the strike. They are demanding pay increases, the integration of their training program into the university system, and the

reinstatement of union delegates who have been fired.

SAP spokesman Lounes Ghachi explained: "Hospital directors have been told to stop the strike with threats and intimidation, but they have not managed to dent the determination of the paramedics."

Yesterday, laid off temp workers at the state-run ENAD chemical plant in Sour-El-Ghozlane protested outside company headquarters, demanding their jobs back. The layoffs took place beginning last March. According to interviews in *Liberté*, the workers are threatening to commit suicide if their demands are not met.

The plant manager told *Liberté* that he refused to rehire the workers. "I never promised to take them back," he said.

Unemployed youth are also blockading the National Route (RN) highways that connect a number of Algeria's cities. Youth in Naciria and Bordj-Menaïel (Boumerdès) blockaded RN 12 yesterday demanding jobs and payment of a monthly unemployment allowance of 12,000 DA, or roughly €120.

In previous days, there have been reports of violent police clashes with unemployed youth demanding jobs on RN12 near Naciria, on the RN3 between Skikda and Constantine, and with 200 youth on the Algiers-Tizi Ouzou road.

Workers at the "la Vallée" milk plant in Tazmalt have also closed the Bejaïa-Algiers road, demanding the reinstatement of 40 workers sacked when orders for powdered milk fell.

The entire political establishment is preparing for an

upsurge of social struggle in Algeria. There are reports of large-scale shipments of tear gas and riot gear arriving in the port of Algiers. Meanwhile, seeking to channel the anger among workers and youth along the lines most harmless to the Algerian elite, the official “opposition” has belatedly called a protest rally.

The National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD)—a coalition of human-rights, unions, and official “opposition” parties tolerated by the Bouteflika regime, like the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)—has announced plans for a one-day march on February 12 in Algiers. Algiers district authorities have formally refused a permit for the march, but the CNCD said it will march anyway.

It appears that the authorities are using the march to help identify discontented youth and gauge opposition to the regime. According to *Radio Kalima*, local officials around Algiers are organizing meetings with youth and “associations or youth groups” that may participate in the rally, asking them not to attend.

“Reports on these discussions will be presented to the mayors of the Algiers district, who will transmit them immediately to the Interior Ministry who is coordinating the anti-rally operation on February 12,” the radio station explained.

The main fear of both the regime and the official opposition is the mass entry of the working class into revolutionary struggle against the regime, as has occurred in Egypt.

In an interview with the leading daily *El Watan*, lawyer and human rights activist Mokrane Aït Larbi wrote: “One does not have to be a great specialist to observe that the regime has no popular legitimacy and that the opposition is weak and compromised, that is to say nonexistent.”

Larbi added that “the change of the system by an insurrectional movement cannot be excluded,” warning that he wanted any change to be “peaceful.”

These comments, reflecting fears in privileged middle-class layers of an independent movement by the

working class, were echoed more explicitly in a pessimistic article by RCD leader Saïd Saïdi in *Causeur*.

“In 2010 there were 9700 riots of various sizes in Algeria,” Saïdi wrote. “If one adds that the middle classes that accompanied and channeled the revolution in Tunisia virtually do not exist in Algeria, the conclusion is clear. The stubbornness of the regime together with long-suppressed popular exasperation can produce an explosion that will have unprecedented national and regional consequences.”

His article, titled “Algeria: the historic impasse,” ended with a remarkable summation of the dead end of Algerian petty-bourgeois nationalism—the political philosophy of the FLN in its war against French imperialism, and of Saïdi as well.

“Algerian national consciousness, young and fragile, was born from the resistance to colonization [i.e. by the French] that pulverized social norms and communitarian values,” he explained. “The even more massive predation by the [current] regime—made possible by the greater available resources—has generated a fury that the exodus of managers and youth does not manage to dissolve. In truth, we are in a historic impasse.”

This is indeed the historic situation confronting the military regimes of North Africa, their official “opposition” parties, and their “human-rights” adjuncts, as the working class moves into revolutionary struggle across the region.



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