Working class opposition erupts in Iran: A harbinger for the world in 2018

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The long-suppressed and brutally exploited Iranian working class has burst onto the scene, shaking Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime.

Since Dec. 28, tens of thousands have defied the Islamic Republic's repressive apparatus and taken to the streets in cities and towns across the country. They have done so to voice their anger over food price rises, mass unemployment, gaping social inequality, years of sweeping social spending cuts and a pseudo-democratic political system that is rigged on behalf of the ruling elite and utterly impervious to the needs of working people.

The scope and intensity of this movement and its rapid embrace of slogans challenging the government and the entire autocratic political system have stunned Iranian authorities and Western observers alike. Yet, it was preceded by months of worker protests against job cuts and plant closures and unpaid wages and benefits.

In the days immediately prior to the eruption of the antigovernment protests, discussion of the ever-deepening divide between Iran's top 1 and 10 percent and the vast majority who live in poverty and economic insecurity raged on social media. The trigger for this explosion of popular discontent was the government's latest austerity budget. It will further slash income support for ordinary Iranians, raise gas prices by as much as 50 percent, and curtail development spending, while increasing the already huge sums under the control of the Shia clergy.

Yesterday, after days of an ever-widening mobilization of security forces, mass arrests, and bloody clashes that left at least 21 dead, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, declared the unrest over: "Today we can announce the end of the sedition."

The rulers of the Islamic Republic are trying to justify their brutal crackdown with spurious claims that the protests are being manipulated by Washington and its principal regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as part of their incendiary drive for regime-change in Tehran.

The claim that the current protests are akin to those mounted by the Green Movement in 2009 is a base slander meant to justify a bigger crime. The Green challenge to the results of the 2009 Iranian presidential election was a long-prepared political operation that followed the script of similar US-orchestrated "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia, Lebanon and elsewhere. It was aimed at bringing to power those elements of the Iranian elite most eager to reach a quick rapprochement with US and European imperialism. It drew its popular support almost exclusively from the most privileged layers of the upper-middle class, who were mobilized on the basis of neoliberal denunciations of the populist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for "squandering" money on the poor.

The current challenge to the Iranian regime is of an entirely different character. It is rooted in the working class, including in smaller industrial cities and district towns; draws its greatest support from young people, who face an unemployment rate of 40 percent or more; and is driven by opposition to social inequality and capitalist austerity.

Whatever the immediate fate of the current wave of protests, a new stage in the class struggle has opened in Iran that will unfold over the coming weeks and months. What is certain is that the working class, having thrust itself onto center stage, will not be quickly or easily silenced.

The working class unrest in Iran has already upset the calculations not just of the Iranian elite, but of governments around the world. Trump, whose anti-Muslim travel ban targets Iranians, has hypocritically and fatuously claimed his "support" for the protests, with the hope that he can use them to demonize Tehran and thereby provide grist for US war preparations against Iran. The European powers have been more circumspect, and not only because the protests cut across their plans to cash in on the Iranian government's offers of oil concessions and cheap labor. They fear the destabilizing impact of mounting class struggle in Iran on the entire Middle East.

To understand the significance of the resurgence of the Iranian working class for Middle East and world politics, it is necessary to examine it in historical context.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the

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tyrannical US-sponsored regime of the Shah four decades ago, was a massive, working class-led, anti-imperialist social explosion. It was a growing wave of political strikes that broke the back of the Shah's regime, and in the months that followed, workers seized factories, placing them under the control of workers' councils.

But a social revolution expropriating the Iranian bourgeoisie and establishing a workers' republic in alliance with the rural toilers was blocked by the nominally socialist organizations, above all the Stalinist Tudeh Party. The Tudeh party had deep roots in the working class, which had a long history of secularism and revolutionary socialism. But for decades it orientated to the impotent liberal wing of the national bourgeoisie and then in 1979 swung round to giving uncritical support to the Ayatollah Khomeini, on the grounds that he was the political leader of the "progressive" wing of the bourgeoisie and leading a "national democratic" (i.e., capitalist) revolution.

This aged Shia cleric had long been a politically marginal figure. But he was able to gain a mass following among the urban and rural poor by exploiting the political vacuum created by the Stalinists, and by drawing on the longstanding connections between the Shia clergy and the bazaar, the bastion of the traditional wing of the Iranian bourgeoisie.

With the working class politically neutralized by the Stalinists, Khomeini was able to reorganize the state machine following the Shah's overthrow, while manipulating and diverting the mass movement, and then restabilize bourgeois rule through savage repression of the political left, including the Tudeh party, and the destruction of all independent workers' organizations.

These developments fed into and were part of a broader process in which, due to the betrayals of the Stalinists, Islamist forces were able to politically profit from the mounting crisis of the postcolonial bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, and their inability to realize their bourgeois-democratic programs.

Before his death in 1989, Khomeini oversaw a further lurch to the right of the Islamic Republic, with a turn to the IMF and overtures to the "Great Satan," US imperialism. This had been prepared the previous year in a further ferocious assault on the left, in which thousands of political prisoners were killed.

Over the course of the past three decades, Iran's government has been led by different factions of the political elite, including so-called "reformists" and Shia populists like Ahmadinejad. All have further rolled back the social concessions made to working people in the wake of the 1979 revolution and savagely suppressed the working class.

The Western press has long sought to vilify Iranian politics and social life. But at its core, the experience of the working class in Iran mirrors that of workers around the world, who for decades have faced an unrelenting assault on their social rights and politically have been utterly disenfranchised.

In response to the 2008 financial crisis, the universal response of the bourgeoisie has been to drastically intensify this class war. Precarious employment, crumbling public services, unprecedented social inequality, exclusion from political life and the threat of imperialist war—this is the lot of workers the world over.

But the period in which the class struggle could be suppressed is coming to an end.

In country after country around the world, the parties, organizations and political mechanisms, including the establishment left parties and pro-capitalist unions, through which the bourgeoisie has managed its affairs and, above all, suppressed the class struggle are breaking down.

The events in Iran will resonate across the Middle East, where the working class has passed through decades of bitter experiences, not only with the secular bourgeois nationalist movements, but also with various forms of Islamist politics, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Erdogan's Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

And while the ignoramus Trump tweets about injustice in Iran, how different will American workers deem their circumstances from those of Iranian workers? Last month, as the Iranian government was presenting a budget that slashes social spending while funneling additional money to the mullahs, the US Congress rewarded the rich and super-rich with trillions in additional tax cuts. These tax cuts are now to be paid for through a massive assault on Social Security, health care and other core social rights.

The events in Iran must be recognized as a harbinger of a vast eruption of working class struggle around the world.

The task of revolutionary socialists is to turn into this movement and fight to arm the international working class with an understanding of the logic of its needs, aspirations and struggles. Capitalism is incompatible with the needs of society. Working people, the class that produces the world's wealth, must unite their struggles across state borders and continents to establish workers' political power, so as to undertake the socialist reorganization of society and put an end to want and imperialist war.

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