A reply to a proponent of “Iranian Islamic socialism”

The struggle against imperialism and for workers’ power in Iran—Part 2

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This is the second of a three-part series in reply to Iran Press TV journalist Ramin Mazaheri’s criticisms of the WSWS’s coverage of, and support for, the recent explosion of working-class anger against Iran’s bourgeois-clerical regime. The first part can be accessed here.

The Tudeh Party and the Class Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution

As noted above, Mazaheri, in his second blog, makes no mention of the Stalinist Tudeh Party, although previously he had mocked our contention that Iran has a long, secular socialist tradition and that the Tudeh Party had deep roots in the working class.

Detailed examination of the history of the Tudeh Party and its predecessor organization, the Communist Party of Persia (i.e., Iran), is beyond the scope of this reply. But one cannot seriously discuss the history of 20th century Iran without examining its role and how the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 impacted Iran.

The first Iranian workers won to revolutionary socialism were migrant workers, who came into contact with the Bolsheviks while working in Russia, especially in Baku, the oil-producing center of the Tsarist Empire.

Both the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions had a major impact on the internal politics of Iran. Although the first ended in defeat, its defining feature, like that of 1917, was the revolutionary energy and initiative exhibited by the young working class.

The 1905 Revolution served as a major impetus for Iran’s own Democratic and Constitutional Revolution, in which the working class, figuratively still in its swaddling clothes, and Iran’s newly-founded Social Democratic Party, played a significant role. However, the tasks objectively posed before the revolution—liberating Iran from the yoke of British and Russian imperialism, overthrowing the monarchy, separating church from state, and uprooting feudal relations in the countryside—went far beyond the revolutionary capacities of the Iranian bourgeoisie. From 1906 to 1921, Iran went through a series of upheavals, as first the Tsar and then British imperialism deployed military forces to keep the tottering Qajar dynasty in power and uphold and expand the “unequal” treaties, through which they economically and politically dominated the country.

In 1919, the arch-imperialist Lord Curzon bullied Tehran into accepting a new Anglo-Persian Treaty, aimed at transforming Iran into a vassal state of the British Empire and making it a base for military operations against revolutionary Russia. The Bolsheviks, who had already renounced Russia’s 1907 “unequal treaty” with Persia, and joined Iranian revolutionary socialists, via Soviet-controlled Baku—to influence and rally support within the Iranian nationalist Jangli guerrilla uprising—responded by sending a small military force into northern Iran.

The British would long retain their stranglehold over Iran’s oil-wealth. But they soon concluded that the 1919 Anglo-Persian Treaty was a mistake and abandoned their demand that it be implemented. Not only had the treaty inflamed opposition to British domination among all but a tiny faction of the Iranian elite. Iranians were becoming increasingly sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, who, according to a top British imperial official, “they thought ... could not be worse and might, if their professions of securing justice for the down-trodden classes were sincere, be much better.” [5]

Founded in June 1920, Iran’s Communist Party was one of the first to be established in Asia. It soon created Iran’s first-ever trade union federation, with some 15,000 members. The debates at its founding congress revolved around the most critical questions of revolutionary perspective: what role should the working class aspire to play in the anti-imperialist struggle and the bourgeois-democratic revolution; what was the relationship of the democratic and socialist revolutions in the epoch of imperialism and Soviet power.

Tragically, before any clarity on these questions could be achieved, the Communist International would become Stalinized and declare “permanent revolution” the greatest heresy. It imposed on the Iranian CP, as those across Asia, Africa and Latin America, the Menshevik-Stalinist “two-stage theory,” which consigns the working class and revolutionary socialists to the role of “left” allies of the purported bourgeois leaders of the democratic revolution.

Little more than a half-year after the founding of the Iranian CP, General Reza Pahlavi carried out a coup, installing Sayyed Ziya Tabatabai as Iran’s new premier, someone the British embassy described as “notorious for his Anglophilia.” Reza Pahlavi won the support of the British and of Iran’s landlord and merchant elites for his 1921 coup and subsequent 1925 seizure of the Shah’s Peacock throne, by casting himself as the strongman needed to defeat the Bolshevik menace. He ruthlessly suppressed the fledgling Communist Party and outlawed all trade unions.

Founded in 1941, the *Hizb-i Tudeh-I Iran* (The Party of the Iranian Masses or Tudeh Party) was the successor to the Communist Party of Persia. It is generally recognized to have been Iran’s first mass political party. By 1945 it had tens of thousands of working-class members and led a trade union federation, the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions (CCFTU), with more than 275,000 members.

Undoubtedly, Tudeh’s initial growth was facilitated by the occupation of Iran by Allied armies. (The Red Army occupied the north and the British Army the south in a joint operation that ousted the pro-Nazi Reza Shah—replacing him with his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—so as to secure Allied supply lines to the USSR and continued British control over

Iran's petroleum.)

But the mass support for the Tudeh party, which was popularly identified with anti-imperialism, socialism, and the October Revolution, was genuine. Its influence quickly spread across the country, including in the British-occupied south and Abadan the center of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later renamed British Petroleum). Soon after the war's end, Tudeh found itself in the leadership of a strike wave. CCFTU affiliates mounted more than 160 strikes in the first nine months of 1946, including walkouts by textile workers, dockers, miners, and Tehran bus drivers. The largest of these was a 65,000-strong general strike in Khuzistan (the province where Abadan is located) —the largest industrial strike hitherto in the Middle East.

The Tudeh Party was a potential challenger for power during the extended period of political and social crisis that engulfed Iran from the end of the world war, through to the August 1953 coup, which established the Shah's and US imperialism's unbridled dominance over Iran. But from the very founding of the Tudeh Party, the Stalinists renounced any perspective of socialist revolution. Tudeh defined itself, not as a revolutionary working class party, but as a "patriotic democratic united front." In a 1944 editorial in its daily newspaper, it affirmed its support for the bourgeois constitution, promulgated as a result of the 1906 revolution, which provided for a constitutional monarchy: "Why? Because we believe that communism is an ideology suitable for social conditions that do not exist in Iran. A communist party will not find roots in our environment." [6]

In 1949, the Shah used a failed assassination attempt to ban the Tudeh Party and CCFTU, seize back political power, and reclaim title over royal estates he had been forced to cede to the state in 1941. However, he overplayed his hand. Mass opposition to the monarchy and imperialism re-emerged when he proposed to extend Britain's control of Iran's oil industry, in exchange for a tiny increase in royalties.

A mass movement for the nationalization of Iran's oil industry soon emerged under the leadership of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and his bourgeois nationalist National Front. In May 1951, Mossadegh was asked to become prime minister, after the Tudeh Party reemerged as a potent political force, shaking Iran's political elite by leading a general strike in Khuzistan and sympathy strikes in other cities.

In pressing for the nationalization of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and opposing British and American efforts to throttle Iran by staunching Iranian oil exports, Mossadegh repeatedly leaned on the working class. In July 1952, for example, he resigned as prime minister after clashing with the Shah, only to be called back to office after five days of strikes, demonstrations, and bloody clashes, in which the working class, mobilized by the Tudeh Party and Tudeh-led unions, played the principal role.

But even as he used Tudeh support to pressure the Shah and the British, Mossadegh was acutely aware of the potential threat from the left. Throughout his premiership, he refused to remove the official bans on the Tudeh Party and CCFTU, while maneuvering to win American backing. In October 1951, he publicly appealed for Washington to mediate Iran's dispute with Britain. And he would continue to argue behind the scenes that breaking Britain's monopoly over Iranian Persian Gulf oil would benefit US imperialism.

Although forced to challenge the power of the Shah, who was emerging as a focus of imperialist intrigue against his government, Mossadegh sought to limit the popular scope of the nationalization movement. A large landowner, he resisted demands for land reform and opposed calls for the abolition of the monarchy. Yet the Stalinists insisted that the working class had to remain in the political thrall of Mossadegh and the national bourgeoisie.

Iranian nationalists have long denounced the Tudeh Party for failing to promptly mobilize working-class opposition to the August 1953 CIA-engineered coup. Undoubtedly this was a blunder, for which the cadre of the Stalinist party would pay dearly. But what they gloss over is that Mossadegh, fearing the radical direction events were taking, himself called the army into the streets, and at Washington's behest. The Stalinists' passivity in the face of the coup arose out of their confusion and disarray at the sudden, sharp right turn of their national bourgeois ally.

As the historian Ervand Abrahamian has explained, on August 16, 1953, Mossadegh survived a coup attempt, spearheaded by Royalist officers and sponsored by the CIA and Britain's MI-6, thanks to intelligence provided by the Tudeh Party. The following day, the Shah fled the country, the "National Front set up a committee to decide the fate of the monarchy and Tudeh crowds poured onto the streets," taking over municipal buildings in some provincial towns. "The next morning, Mossadegh, after a fateful interview with the American ambassador, who promised aid if law and order was reestablished, instructed the army to clear the streets of all demonstrators. Ironically, Mossadegh was trying to use the military, his past enemy, to crush the crowd, his main bulwark.

"Not surprisingly, the military used this opportunity to strike back against Mossadegh. On August 19, while the Tudeh was taken aback by Mossadegh's blow against them, [General] Zahedi, commanding thirty-five Sherman tanks, surrounded the premier's residence, and after a nine-hour battle captured Mossadegh." [7]

And what of the Shia clergy or *ulama* that Mazaheri promotes as a leading force in the struggle against imperialism? What role did it play in these events? It sided with London, Washington and the Shah. The most powerful cleric in Iran, Ayatollah Borujedi—who, not incidentally, was Khomeini's principal mentor for close to two decades—supported the Shah and Iran's semi-feudal social structure with a pose of apolitical quietism, which he sought to enforce on the *ulama* as a whole.

The most important cleric in Tehran, Ayatollah Behbehani assisted the coup, and in so open a manner that the influx of CIA money into the bazaar, in the run-up to the coup, came to be known as "Behbehani dollars." The mullah most prominently associated with the National Front, Ayatollah Kashani, publicly broke with Mossadegh in the months leading up to the coup, and his closest supporters in parliament denounced the Iranian prime minster as a socialist who threatened private property.

In the aftermath of the coup, the Stalinists lurched further right, orientating ever-more explicitly to the timid bourgeois-liberal opposition to the Shah, particularly the National Front. By the late 1960s, they were even seeking to ally with disgruntled elements of the Shah's dictatorial regime, including, infamously, a former SAVAK head, who had overseen the repression in Tehran following the 1953 coup.

In 1976, Tudeh Central Committee Secretary Nourredin Kianuri wrote that the party should extend its proposed "democratic front" to the "big bourgeoisie," and that in the revolution's "anti-imperialist and democratic stage" it must be ready to ally with "social forces … far removed from the left, even from anything democratic." [8]

The Shah's regime was upheld by a massive and brutal security apparatus. However, the central reason the Tudeh party proved incapable of carrying out effective clandestine work was its political orientation, which was not to the working class, but to the Iranian petty-bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie.

Meanwhile, both the Soviet and Chinese Stalinist bureaucracies sought to develop close economic and diplomatic ties with the Shah's monarchical-dictatorial regime.

So discredited was the Tudeh party that, beginning in the mid-1960s, radical-minded students rebelled against it and turned to "armed struggle"—that is, to acts of individual terror that would supposedly galvanize the masses. In reality, they only provided the regime with new pretexts for repression, and turned those involved away from the struggle to politically educate and mobilize the working class.

For all their criticisms of the Tudeh Party, organizations such as the People's Fedayeen remained heavily influenced by Stalinism (including its Maoist variant), particularly in regards to the supposed progressive potential of the national bourgeoisie. Like the Tudeh Party, they were taken unawares by the explosion of mass opposition to the Shah's rule in 1978, and encouraged illusions in Khomeini.

It was the vacuum of working class political leadership created by the decades of betrayals by the Stalinist Tudeh party that enabled Khomeini to cast himself as the Shah's most indefatigable opponent, and for he and his clerical followers to develop a mass following, extending from the bazaar to the urban and rural poor, between 1975 and 1979.

There is a centuries-old symbiotic relationship between the bazaar merchants and the Shia clergy in Iran. With the 1973-74 oil price rises swelling the Shah's coffers, while, at the same time, fueling inflation and economic dislocation, the bazaar financed the faction of the clergy led by Khomeini. This faction was using a new, heterodox Shia populism to rally opposition to the monarchical dictatorship. The bazaar's hostility to the Shah further intensified when, in an attempt to deflect mounting popular anger over rampant inflation, his regime imposed price controls and launched a high-profile campaign against "profiteers, cheaters, and hoarders." Tens of thousands of bazaaris, from small shopkeepers to large merchants, were subjected to fines and/or imprisonment.

The Shia populist clerics had ready access to Iran's extensive network of mosques and other religious institutions. They also benefited from the focus of the secret police on the threat emanating from the left.

Mass anti-government protests began in early 1978, and as the year progressed, galvanized increasingly broad sections of the population, from university students and other middle-class layers to the urban poor. But, as we noted earlier, it was the wave of strikes, especially the political strikes mounted by the oil workers, that ultimately sealed the Shah's fate.

Mazaheri equates the Islamic Republic with the "democratic popular" upsurge of 1978 and 1979. But, in reality, this upsurge involved antagonistic class forces, with very different class aims and aspirations.

Iran's workers and toilers fought the Shah's regime with the aim of winning elementary democratic rights and securing social justice—jobs, housing, education, health-care, worker rights and land-to-the-tiller. These demands objectively required the socialist reorganization of society.

The bourgeoisie, by contrast, came into conflict with the monarchical-dictatorship because the Shah's subordination of Iran to US imperialism, promotion of a thin layer of crony capitalists and plundering of the country's oil wealth, limited its own possibilities for exploitation and enrichment.

Caught unawares by the revolutionary upsurge of 1978-79, the Tudeh Party emerged, in the aftermath of the February 1979 overthrow of the Shah's regime, as the staunchest supporters of Khomeini, anointing him the leader of the "national-democratic revolution." Kianuri, now the Tudeh General Secretary, hailed Shiism as "a revolutionary and progressive ideology which we shall never encounter blocking our road to socialism … Consequently, the cooperation of our party does not have a tactical nature but a strategic one." [9]

The People's Fedayeen, or at least the majority of its leadership, would adopt the same line and move for fusion with the Tudeh Party. The People's Mujahedin, an "Islamic socialist" group with a mass petty bourgeois following, which in June 1980 would launch "armed struggle" against the new regime, hailed Khomeini's "leadership" of the revolution during the course of 1979. In October, for example, it pledged to "always support the progressive clergy and especially His Highness the Grand Ayatollah Imam Khomeini." [10]

The working class did strive to assert it independent interests, mounting strikes to press its demands, forming workplace workers' councils, and occupying factories. These developments, coupled with peasant land-seizures, and coming in the wake of the political strikes and the armed uprising that had toppled the Shah, suggested, as many contemporary commentators noted, the Russia of 1917.

However, the working class had no access to a Marxist party, armed with the program of Permanent Revolution. The political domination of the Shia populists, and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, was not pre-ordained. It was the tragic consequence of the betrayals of Stalinism.

Even so, the bourgeoisie was able to contain, divert and suppress the social aspirations of Iran's workers and toilers only with difficulty. The Islamist regime only stabilized bourgeois rule after passing through a period of intense political crisis and mobilizing a reorganized state apparatus to crush all independent workers' organizations and leftist parties.

Initially, Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bazargan, the very moderate leader of the traditional bourgeois opposition to the Shah, to head a provisional government filled with members of Bazargan's Liberation Movement and the National Front. Nine months later, in November 1979, he shunted aside Bazargan and his government, which was eager to renew relations with the US, and otherwise anxious to bring the revolution to a halt. Khomeini was angered by Bazargan's opposition to the exalted political status the proposed Islamic constitution was to give the Shia clergy. But he also recognized Bazargan's government lacked popular support and would be unable to deflect the plebian push for sweeping social change.

The bazaar merchants, meanwhile, clutched ever more tenaciously to Khomeini and his Shia clerical supporters as those best-positioned to ensure that the new political order would serve their class interests.

The populist version of Shia Islam, developed and propagated by Khomeini, served multiple functions. By incorporating pseudo-socialist phrases and iconography, he could appeal to the anti-imperialist sentiments and socio-economic grievances of the masses, while cloaking the class cleavages in the anti-Shah movement. Post-revolution, it was the cutting edge for an increasingly violent attack on "godless" Marxism. Last but not least, it served as a guarantor to the bourgeoisie that the new regime would uphold its property. Declared Khomeini, "As long as there is Islam there will be free enterprise." [11]

Initially Khomeini and his Shia clerical supporters, organized from mid-1979 in the Islamic Republican Party, combined mounting repression of the left with concessions to popular demands for social reform. But many of the "radical" measures of the revolution's first two years would soon be watered down or repealed. In enforcing this shift to the right, the governmental "supervisory" institutions, specifically restricted to the Shia clergy and designed to serve as a brake on the popularly-elected Majlis, played a leading role. Between 1981 and 1987, the Guardian Council struck down some 100 legislative initiatives, including a land reform law that set a ceiling on landholdings, an expansion of worker rights, and progressive taxation, declaring them to be anti-Islamic because they violated private property rights.

Khomeini, for his part, blunted his Shia populism. Whereas previously he had celebrated the *mostazafin* (oppressed masses) and declared one day in a worker's life "more valuable than the lives of all the capitalists and feudalists put together," he now emphasized the ties between the bazaar, the *ulema*, and the Islamic Republic. The loss of bazaar support would, he warned, "inevitably lead to the overthrow of the Islamic Republic." [12]

Using intelligence supplied by the CIA and Britain's MI-6, Iranian authorities arrested Tudeh cadres en masse beginning in the summer of 1982, then broadcast torture-induced confessions from senior Tudeh leaders. Kianuri and others were forced not only to confess to spying on behalf of the Soviet Union. They were compelled to condemn Marxism as a foreign doctrine, incapable of illuminating Iranian reality, and to acknowledge the superiority of Islam. This public spectacle spoke to the mullahs' enduring hatred and fear of Marxism, whose specter they vainly hoped to exorcise by debasing the shattered Tudeh leadership.

In his last will and testament (*Vasiyat-nameh-e Elahi va Siyasi*),

Khomeini insisted that private property and the market were at the root of Islamic "social justice." "Whereas Islam protects private property," communism, "advocates the sharing of all things—including wives and homosexuals." [13]

With the conclusion in August 1988 of the Iran-Iraq War—a horrific eight-year conflict about which we will have more to say—and Khomeini's death ten months later, the Islamic Republic, now led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Hashemi Rafsanjani, initiated an IMF-style "structural adjustment program." This included privatization, deregulation, and a massive devaluation of the rial.

These policies were continued and expanded under Rafsanjani's successor, Mohammad Khatami. In 2004, in an attempt to speed up the privatization process, the government "relaunched" the Tehran stock exchange, allowed the opening of private banks, and amended Article 44 of the constitution, eliminating the stipulation that core infrastructure remain government-owned.

Ahmadinejad won the presidency the following year by appealing to mass opposition to mounting social inequality and pervasive poverty. But it would be his government that ultimately realized the bourgeoisie's longstanding demand for the elimination of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and services, including bread, fuel, electricity, medicines, and public transport.

Today, social inequality in Iran parallels that under the Shah; millions are unemployed—including some 40 percent of youth. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, half of all Iranian workers are employed on insecure temporary contracts. (Others put the total closer to 80 percent.) A report recently published in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's *Sobhe Sadeq* found half of the population lives in poverty. Meanwhile, the World Wealth and Income Database calculates (based on 2013 data) that the top 1 percent of Iranians monopolize 16.3 percent of the country's income, slightly less than the entire bottom 50 percent. The top 10 percent garner 48.5 percent, almost triple the income share of the poorest half of Iranians.

To be continued

Footnotes

[5] As cited in Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 62.

[6] As cited in Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982) p. 285.

[7] Ibid., p. 280.

[8] As cited in Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979) p. 230.

[9] "Interview with Tudeh's Kianuri," Middle East Research and Information Project.

[10] As cited in Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989) p.196.

[11] As cited in Reza Molavi, *Oil and Gas Privatization in Iran* (Reading, UK: Ithica Press, 2009) p. 80.

[12] As cited in *Radical Islam*, p. 75.

[13] As cited in Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p. 42.