

Iran responds to economic crisis and US destabilisation with repression of working class

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Last month, authorities sentenced teacher Mohammad Habibi, a leader of the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association of Tehran (ITTA-Tehran), to a 10-and-a-half-year term in jail and 74 lashes.

According to the International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran (IASWI), Habibi was arrested on May 20, along with 13 others, after security forces and undercover agents attacked and broke up a peaceful ITTA demonstration in Tehran. It was one of several rallies organised in cities throughout the country by the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teacher Trade Associations to protest low wages, inadequate funding of education, privatisation of schools and the ending of free education. This follows repeated protests by teachers in recent years over the government's education policies.

Habibi's arrest occurred just days after being released from 44 days in detention after being violently arrested outside his school on March 3. While all the others were freed the following day, Habibi was put in solitary confinement in Tehran's largest prison, where he has suffered beatings and was denied hospital treatment for his injuries. Ill-treatment in Iran's prisons is widespread, with several reports earlier this year of prisoners' deaths the authorities claimed were suicide. The number of prison deaths is believed to be very much larger than officially reported.

Habibi's harsh sentence and beating are part of a broader campaign of intimidation aimed at suppressing opposition to the bourgeois-clerical regime's efforts to impose the full burden of Iran's economic crisis on the backs of the working class and young people—more than 60 percent of Iran's population are under 30 years of age.

Last May, Amnesty International appealed for the release of Esmail Abdi, a teacher and trade union activist serving a six-year prison sentence imposed in November 2016 for "spreading propaganda and committing national security crimes." Abdi had been on hunger strike since April 24

protesting Iran's suppression of trade unions and the harsh conditions inside Tehran's infamous Evin prison.

This year has witnessed increasing social and economic unrest among all layers of the Iranian working class over high unemployment and soaring inflation—Iran's currency has fallen by 70 percent against the US dollar in the last year—following demonstrations initially organised by hard-line forces in Mashhad in December that burst out of their control. Last month, there were strikes at the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Mill, Iran National Steel Industry Group (INSIG) in the south west city of Ahvaz and by rail workers throughout the country over unpaid wages, and rallies by hundreds of sacked workers at the Khorak Dam (Cattle Feed) factory in Mashhad demanding their reinstatement. There have also been protests against local and national officials, business chiefs and the religious establishment of Shi'a clerics.

Almost the entire country is suffering from water shortages after a decade-long drought, prompting protests that have been violently dispersed by the police, leading to at least one death. Reports of traders hoarding goods, including medicines, foodstuffs and diapers, along with rampant profiteering on the black market, have fuelled the anger.

The regime has responded with a brutal crackdown, with the various security forces killing more than 20 people and arresting hundreds more. Many are still awaiting trial, while others have received heavy sentences. The authorities have also moved swiftly to close newspapers and social media accounts that express even mild criticism of the regime's policies or circulate images and reports of political unrest, labour strikes, and protest rallies.

Earlier this month, Iran's top prosecutor ordered the closure of the *Sedayeh Eslahat* newspaper, aligned with the reformist faction of the political establishment, on charges of "insulting" Shi'a Islam. Last month, the courts jailed seven journalists and ordered their flogging in public because of coverage of protests by the Dervish minority. Also arrested

were four human rights lawyers.

The ongoing social unrest takes place amid increasing US imperialist pressure on Iran. Since coming to power in August 2013, the government of President Hassan Rouhani has accelerated privatisation and slashed social spending as part of an attempt to attract investment following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed with the US, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia, whereby Tehran agreed to drastic curbs on its nuclear programmes in return for a step-by-step easing of international sanctions. To this end, it rewrote the rules governing investment in the oil sector to satisfy Total, Shell, Eni and other European energy giants.

The promised benefits from the deal were slow to emerge, even before US President Donald Trump unilaterally scrapped it, re-imposing punitive sanctions and secondary sanctions on countries trading with Iran and prompting major multinationals to pull out of Iranian trade and investment. Washington's plans to re-impose curbs on Iran's ability to buy US dollars, along with any global trading in Iranian products including oil and gas, will have a calamitous impact on Iran's already stalling economy.

While Washington's ostensible purpose is to force Iran to accept a more stringent agreement that would curb not only Iran's nuclear programme but also its broader political activities across the Middle East, the US is "weaponising" economic sanctions to bring about regime change.

The US is also taking direct measures to stir up dissent, with similar methods used, as some commentators have noted, during the CIA destabilisation campaign aimed at Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953. In June, Rudy Giuliani, Trump's legal adviser, called for the overthrow of the Iranian regime and boasted that the protests that started last December were orchestrated from outside Iran. He said that they "are not happening spontaneously," but because of "our people" in Albania (where the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organisation, MEK, is headquartered) and Paris.

He was speaking at a rally in Paris, organised by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, a front organisation for the MEK, which Washington listed as a terrorist organisation until 2012 and which is believed to have support from Saudi Arabia and Israeli intelligence. Also attending the Paris conference were 33 senior US officials and military brass, Stephen Harper, the former prime minister of Canada, and three Conservative and one Labour legislator from Britain.

Washington's abrogation of the JCPOA treaty has provoked bitter factional infighting within the political establishment, with members of parliament even calling for Rouhani's impeachment. Last month, the government fired

the head of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and abandoned its efforts to limit trading in the rial to a fixed exchange rate while the labour minister has been impeached and dismissed.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed the Rouhani government for the economic crisis and banned any further negotiations with the US. He had previously blamed the economic crisis on foreign countries and was widely believed to have agreed to the JCPOA deal, so his change of tack indicates the extreme nervousness at the top of the Iranian hierarchy at the desperate economic and political situation confronting the leadership.

The central bank has already started to raise interest rates from their already high official rate of 15 percent—in reality, much higher—to shore up the currency that will in turn trigger massive debt defaults and fuel inflation, unemployment and poverty.

Rouhani's government has sought to introduce four separate pieces of legislation aimed at satisfying the requirements of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a Paris-based global intergovernmental organisation linked to the OECD that focuses on anti-money-laundering and countering the financing of terrorism. Failure to meet the FATF's demands by October would mean that Russia and China, as well as the imperialist powers, would stop dealing with Iran. But such are the divisions and reliance on money-laundering and opacity within the ruling elite, which fears that greater transparency in the banking system could sabotage efforts to circumvent US sanctions, that it is far from clear that Rouhani will be able to deliver the necessary legislation.

Factional infighting has also made it difficult for the government to secure agreement on short-term palliative measures, including subsidies and rationing, aimed at ameliorating the devastating impact of US sanctions on the poorest social layers, that would rapidly use up what remains of Iran's energy earnings.



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