The Iranian Revolution—Forty Years On

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Forty years ago this week the Iranian Revolution felled the Shah's dictatorship—a tyrannical regime installed by a US-orchestrated military coup in 1953 that for a quarter-century served as a linchpin of US imperialist violence and intrigue in the Middle East and across Eurasia.

The popular uprising that swept the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, his courtiers, crony capitalists, and SAVAK torturers into the dustbin of history was the culmination of a year of escalating mass protests and strikes. Broad sections of the working class, urban poor and middle class participated in the struggle against the Shah's monarchical dictatorship. But it was the strike of Iran's oil workers that broke the back of his US-sponsored absolutist regime.

The parallels between the Iran of 1979 and the Russia of 1917 were striking and much commented on, even in the capitalist media, at the time. In the aftermath of the Shah's overthrow, the revolutionary upsurge widened and deepened. But while workers occupied factories and built new workplace organizations of struggle and villagers seized land from absentee landlords, power did not pass into the hands of a workers' government leaning on the urban poor and rural toilers.

Instead—albeit not without violent shocks and only through the savage repression of the left and all forms of independent working class organization—a new capitalist regime consolidated its hold on power during the next three years.

This regime would be rooted in the bazaar merchants and other traditional sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie who resented the monopolization of Iran's burgeoning oil wealth by the Shah, his cronies and imperialism. Politically, it was led by a heterodox section of the clergy that used Shia populist appeals to harness, then politically diffuse and suppress the anti-imperialist upsurge. As the guardians of bourgeois property, the Shia clergy were able to secure for themselves an exalted position within the political institutions of the Islamic Republic, as exemplified by the post of supreme leader held by Ayatollah Khomeini until his death in 1989 and Ayatollah Khamenei ever since.

The counter-revolutionary role of the Stalinist Tudeh Party

It is the Stalinist Tudeh Party and the politics of Stalinism that are principally responsible for the tragic derailing of the Iranian Revolution.

There is a long and profound connection between the Iranian working class and revolutionary socialism, stretching back to the first decade of the 20th century, when migrant Iranian workers employed in the oilfields and other industries of southern Russia were politicized by Bolshevik Party cadre.

At the end of World War II, the Tudeh Party emerged as Iran's first mass political party, the leader of a militant trade union movement embracing hundreds of thousands of workers, and a potential contender for power. However, subscribing to the Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, the Tudeh Party systematically subordinated the working class to the purportedly "progressive wing" of the bourgeoisie, and thereby helped create the political conditions for the 1953 CIA-engineered coup that established the Shah's absolutist regime.

In exile, the Tudeh Party leadership moved still further to the right, seeking to ally with defectors from the Shah's regime, including the general who had supervised the party's brutal suppression after the 1953 coup. Having abandoned any serious attempt to reach the Iranian working class, the Stalinists were taken unawares by the explosion of mass opposition to the Shah's regime in 1978.

Thereafter, they fell in behind Khomeini, hailing him as the leader of the "national democratic revolution" and otherwise placing the influence that the Tudeh Party retained, particularly among a section of industrial workers, at the service of the Iranian bourgeoisie. In December 1979, Tudeh Party General Secretary Nourredin Kianouri notoriously declared the Stalinists' cooperation with the Khomeini regime "strategic," because "Shiism is a revolutionary and progressive ideology which we shall never encounter blocking our path to socialism."

A significant supplementary role in confusing socialist-minded youth was played by various armed guerrilla groups that emerged in the early 1970s, in part as a reaction against the right-wing politics of the Tudeh Party. Based on an eclectic mélange of Stalinism, Maoism, Guevaraism, Third Worldism and in some cases "Islamic socialism," groups like the People's Fedayeen and People's Mujahedin served to wall socialist-minded youth off from the working class and foster illusions in the revolutionary capacities and anti-imperialism of the Shia clergy and Iranian bourgeoisie.

For US imperialism, the Iranian Revolution was a body-blow. Only 14 months before the Shah's overthrow, US President Jimmy Carter had feted his regime "as an island of stability."

However, Washington's overriding concern and fear in the wake of the toppling of the Peacock Throne was that the anti-imperialist upsurge would culminate in socialist revolution or, as seen through the prism of US Cold War ideology, that the Tudeh Party would come to power. The United States, along with Britain and France—where Khomeini, an exile since 1965, had spent the final months prior to the Revolution—signaled they were ready to work with the Ayatollah and the provisional government he appointed in February 1979.

If relations soon soured, it was because Washington demanded that Tehran entirely subordinate itself to US strategic aims. Not only did this cut across the interests of the dominant faction of the Iranian bourgeoisie for whom Khomeini spoke, but the Ayatollah recognized that any Iranian government seen to kowtow to Washington would come into headlong conflict with the insurgent masses.

Khomeini used the November 1979 American embassy takeover ("the hostage crisis") to sideline Mehdi Bazargan, his first choice as prime minister, and other sections of the traditional bourgeois opposition to the Shah, who were anxious to resume a close working relationship with Washington and otherwise demonstrably call the revolution to a halt.

This, however, was only preparatory to the Khomeini regime turning on those whom the ayatollah, his closest supporters now organized in the Islamic Republican Party, and the Iranian bourgeoisie viewed as the principal threat—the working class and the left. With the support of the

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Stalinists of the Tudeh Party—until they too were targeted—Iran's "revolutionary" government repressed with increasing violence and vehemence all forms of working class self-expression and left-wing criticism on the grounds that there were undermining "national unity" and strengthening imperialism.

The Khomeini regime would similarly use the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, in which an estimated 1 million Iranians and up to half a million Iraqis died, as the pretext for sweeping repression and as a mechanism to expend in a reactionary war the revolutionary aspirations and energy galvanized by the anti-imperialist upsurge that overthrew the Shah.

Rapprochement with imperialism and pro-market "reform"

Shortly before his death and under conditions where Washington was threatening to use the Iran-Iraq War as a pretext to attack the Islamic Republic, Khomeini ordered an abrupt change of course. The Islamic Republic abandoned its demand for predatory war reparations from Iraq and reoriented toward seeking a rapprochement with imperialism. Under Khomeini's designated successors, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Rafsanjani, Iran moved quickly to impose IMF "structural adjustment" policies, including privatization, deregulation and social spending cuts, with the express aim of renewing close economic ties with European, and if possible, US capital.

Since 1989 and under presidents supported by all the main factions of the political elite of the Islamic Republic, from "conservative" and "Principlist" to "reformist," Iran's government has, in the name of "pro-market reform," systematically dismantled the social concessions made to the working class and rural and urban poor at the revolution's height. This is true of the governments led by the populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad no less than those of Rafsanjani, the "reformer" Khatami and Hasan Rouhani, the avid neoliberal who has been Iran's president since 2013.

Today, Iran is marked by rampant and growing social inequality, mass joblessness and precarious contract jobs.

Similarly, on the world stage, the Islamic Republic's clerical-bourgeois regime has for the past three decades pursued an accommodation with the imperialist powers. This very much includes American imperialism, notwithstanding Washington's repeated rejection of Tehran's overtures and near-relentless hostility, including war threats from every president dating back to Jimmy Carter.

In 2001, Iran provided logistical and political support to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Washington's installation of Hamid Karzai as the country's puppet president. As the US prepared to invade Iraq in 2003, Iran initiated secret talks with the Bush administration. Soon after American troops occupied Baghdad, Tehran offered to subordinate itself to US strategic interests across the board, including by recognizing Israel, cutting off all aid to Hamas and pressing Hezbollah to disarm if the US would only pledge to forego regime-change.

Obama imposed brutal economic sanctions on Iran and repeatedly threatened it with attack. Then in 2015-2016 he opted to strike the first significant US-Iranian diplomatic deal since the 1979 revolution, agreeing to curb US sanctions on Tehran in exchange for its dismantling of much of its civil nuclear program.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, two predatory calculations lay behind Obama's shift: an all-out confrontation with Tehran would cut across Washington's military-strategic offensives against its more substantial adversaries, Russia and China; and the reopening of Iran to European and US investment would provide new opportunities to leverage the fissures within Iran's clerical-bourgeois elite, including the sizable faction eager for a partnership with Washington, so as to "turn" or "flip" Iran into becoming a subordinate US ally.

The WSWS also warned that the Iran nuclear accord was not worth the paper it was printed on: Washington would break it as soon as it felt doing so to be advantageous.

Trump has, of course, done precisely that, imposing—in an act of aggression tantamount to war—a unilateral global embargo on trade with Iran with the express aim of crashing its economy.

Meanwhile, the Iranian working class has served notice that it is determined to put an end to years of austerity. Nor will it accept the ruling elite's never-ending efforts to make it bear, and bear alone, the full burden of Washington's predations against Iran.

Recent years have seen a wave of worker protests and strikes against privatization, low and unpaid wages, job cuts and dilapidated public services. 2018 began with mass protests against poverty and social inequality, some violent, led by unemployed youth in regional towns and cities that had long provided the regime with an important part of its popular base. Tehran's response was brutal repression and a torrent of slanders aimed at blackguarding the protests as a foreign-instigated regime-change operation.

Nevertheless, social opposition has continued to mount, with teachers, truck drivers, miners, steelworkers and other sections of the working class mounting strikes over the past year in the face of arrests and police violence. In an indication of the regime's fear of the mounting protests, last month Iran's state television broadcast the violence-coerced confessions of activists involved in the longstanding strike of 4,000 workers at the Haft Tapeh sugarcane complex, in which they were induced to say that they have been working at the behest of foreign "communists."

Manifestly, under conditions of capitalist breakdown and the consequent surge in imperialist aggression, the room for the Iranian bourgeoisie to balance and maneuver between imperialism and the working class is rapidly diminishing, raising the crisis of the Islamic Republic to a qualitatively new level.

Workers in the United States and around the world must vigorously oppose Washington's economic war and preparations for a military assault on Iran. Opposition to imperialist aggression against Iran does not require, however, lending an iota of political support to the Iranian bourgeoisie and its Islamic republic, let alone apologizing for them. On the contrary, the only viable foundation for opposition to imperialism in Iran and around the world is the working class.

The critical question is to arm the growing movement of the Iranian working class with the Trotskyist strategy of permanent revolution: to orientate toward and politically prepare the mobilization of the working class in the fight for workers' power and to unite the workers and oppressed toilers of the Middle East—Iranian, Arab, Kurdish, Turkish and Jewish—with the growing movement of the working class in Europe and North America against imperialism and war.

The Iranian working class must draw the bitter lessons of the 1979 Revolution. In countries historically oppressed by imperialism, none of the burning social problems of the masses—from genuine independence to the separation of church from state, the establishment of genuine equality among all nationalities and freedom from communal discrimination, to the securing of social rights and social equality for all—can be resolved apart from the working class constituting itself as an independent political force, in opposition to imperialism and all factions of the bourgeoisie, and rallying the toilers behind it in the fight for a socialist workers' republic.

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