

Mass protests erupt in Algeria against Bouteflika's bid for fifth term

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Yesterday, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in cities across Algeria against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in April 18 elections. It comes following protests by students and journalists against Bouteflika after the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) announced his candidacy on February 9, and a wave of strikes across the Maghreb.

Since suffering a major stroke in 2013, Bouteflika has been incapacitated. He is receiving treatment at the University Hospital of Geneva (HUG) in Switzerland, with his brother Saïd the unofficial head of state. The FLN's decision to run Bouteflika testifies to the bankrupt and sclerotic character of the Algerian capitalist regime, which after winning independence from French imperialism in a bloody 1954-1962 war emerged in recent decades as a mainstay of imperialist war strategy.

Mass protests took place in Algiers, Oran, Constantine, Annaba, Tizi Ouzou, Béjaïa, Sétif, Sidi Bel Abbès and other cities. Though the regime banned TV coverage of the marches and restricted Internet access, closing 3G and 4G networks, what predominated in the marches was anger against unemployment, low wages and austerity and calls for bringing down the regime.

The Algerian protests are part of an ongoing, international upsurge of class struggle: bread riots in Sudan, strikes in Tunisia, the "yellow vest" protests in France, and teachers' strikes erupting independently of the trade unions across the United States. Having suppressed political opposition for decades, the Algerian regime now faces a challenge from below. Protesters are harking back to slogans of the 2011 uprisings in which workers brought down the pro-imperialist dictatorships of Zine El Abedine Bin Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

In Oran, tens of thousands cried "Down with Bouteflika" and "Down with the system." One told *Le Monde* he opposed a "government that unfortunately is rotten," while another said, "You cannot imagine the misery we live in." A third attacked the European Union (EU) for leaving thousands of immigrants to drown in the Mediterranean:

"What do we do next? Take a ship and leave for France? No, I don't want to drown at sea. And I am also marching to say I am thinking about the thousands of youth who died at sea."

Protests also shook the ethnically-Berber region of Kabylie. Tens of thousands marched in Béjaïa, while an estimated 10,000 marched in Tizi Ouzou shouting the slogan of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, "The people want the fall of the regime."

In Algiers, the capital's main avenues were filled with protesters numbering 800,000 according to police estimates, or in the millions according to press reports. After Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia denounced the protests, warning that protests in Syria led to a decade of war, protesters chanted "Algeria is not Syria," as well as "The people want the fall of the regime."

Chourouk, a young hydraulic technician, told *El Watan*: "With President Bouteflika in power for 20 years now, with each passing year we've seen a growing separating between the social classes. The middle class is disappearing, leaving a vast gulf between the class of the rich and the class of the poor. Since the new budget, it is ever harder to maintain our living standards. The education system is in decline, educational achievement at all levels is drifting."

Dozens were wounded in Algiers, including 53 police, after marchers tried to reach the presidential palace and ran into a large police detachment firing volleys of tear gas and stun grenades. Videos online also show Algerian infantry traveling on trucks towards the capital to secure key government buildings during the protests.

At this stage in the struggle against the regime, the forces that are mobilized are socially and politically heterogeneous. Called on social media, the protests involve sections of workers and youth, as well as managers and business owners, and factions of the political establishment.

Several leaders of official opposition parties—all closely tied to the regime, and some of which are simply FLN split-offs—called on their supporters to join the marches. They aim to block a revolutionary challenge to the regime from the working class, and to increase the share of the power and

privileges accruing to them inside the existing regime.

The Front of Socialist Forces (FFS), a Berber-nationalist party affiliated to the so-called Socialist International of European imperialist social-democratic parties like France's unpopular Socialist Party (PS), wrote that "the end of the regime is approaching." It pledged to "work for a convergence of the forces of peaceful change to mobilize the Algerian women and men capable of creating the conditions for an organized, pluralist political dynamic."

Workers Party (PT) leader Louisa Hanoune attended the march but reportedly was booed and did not deploy her party's banners. The PT advised the regime not to repress the protests, which could provoke an uncontrollable eruption of working class anger and bring down the FLN. "The national authorities," Hanoune said, "cannot ignore or seek to limit the profound desire for change of the overwhelming majority of society expressed by the youth and broad masses, without taking the risk of provoking something irreparable."

The PT is linked to France's Independent Democratic Workers Party (POID), an offshoot of Pierre Lambert's *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI), which broke with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1971 to ally with the PS. The PT is a longstanding supporter of the FLN. Hanoune attracted ridicule last week by saying, amid the initial protests against Bouteflika's fifth term bid, that "The slogans are not against Bouteflika."

This only echoes calls from imperialist foreign policy circles in the European Union (EU) for regime change in Algeria, backed by the army, to strangle the protests. Professor Jonathan Hill of King's College London predicted: "The EU will take its lead from France, which in turn will support the regime to stage-manage the transfer of power."

With his polls at record lows amid "yellow vest" protests, President Emmanuel Macron ordered French Ambassador to Algeria Xavier Driencourt to make an extraordinary covert, one-day trip to Paris on Tuesday for talks.

Elysée presidential palace sources also indicated they are desperate to prop up the FLN—because of intelligence and logistical aid it offers to French wars in Mali and the broader Sahel, and to limit opposition in France's three million-strong Algerian community. They intend to make no concessions to popular opposition to Bouteflika.

One source told *Nouvel Obs*: "France and the president cannot be indifferent to anything occurring in Algeria. The stakes for us are considerable. With Algeria, our historical, economic, and security ties are very deep. France has interests there, it also has a large Algerian and Franco-Algerian population. So for us the stability of Algeria is a

major issue, especially given the geographic proximity and human ties between the two states. And then there is the security issue, including on the regional level. We need cooperation with Algeria to struggle against terror groups in the Sahel."

The way forward for workers entering into struggle with the FLN regime is to orient to the upsurge of the international working class. The social and democratic demands of workers across the Maghreb cannot be met without an expropriation of the ruling class, including the Algerian regime's vast oil and gas wealth, on an international scale. This requires a conscious struggle for socialism against capitalism, imperialism and war, and a ruthless break with all the forces that have worked for decades to tie workers and youth in Algeria to the FLN.

The best allies of Algerian workers in struggle against the FLN regime are the workers in Europe and around the world entering into struggle. The key element in this struggle is the fight to draw a balance sheet of past revolutionary upsurges and the fresh experiences of struggle today. The events in Algeria raise directly the response of the ICFI to the initial upsurge of the working class in Tunisia in 2011.

In its 17 January 2011 statement, "The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution," it warned:

The Tunisian masses, however, are at only the initial stages of their struggle. As is already clear from the continuation of military violence under the new interim president, the working class faces immense dangers. The crucial question of revolutionary program and leadership remains unresolved. Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.

The turn now is to building sections of the ICFI in Algeria and across the Mediterranean and the world to offer political leadership to the growing international movement of the working class.



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