

Mass protests to hit Algeria today against Bouteflika regime

Will Morrow
8 March 2019

Hundreds of thousands are set to march in protests in Algeria today, referred to as a “20 million-man march” on social media, to demand the removal of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s regime.

Smaller protests have taken place every day since February 22, particularly by university students and youth, with the largest demonstration last Friday, the traditional day of protest coinciding with weekly prayers. Protests have continued following the ruling National Liberation Front’s (FLN) announcement on Sunday night that the president will contest the upcoming April 18 elections, defying demands to step down.

The 82-year-old Bouteflika, who has been in power since 1999, is reported to be in a critical condition and receiving treatment in a hospital in Geneva, Switzerland. He is for all intents a political corpse, not having spoken in public since 2013, when he suffered a severe stroke, and is seen as a token figurehead for inner circles in the regime, which rests on the military and the security services. They are seeking to decide upon an appropriate successor, and have pledged that Bouteflika will step down within a year if elected.

The working class is beginning to intervene through strikes, over which the trade unions are seeking to maintain control. The national federation of teachers’ unions voted at a meeting on Wednesday to call a nationwide one-day general strike for one week away, March 13, under conditions where teachers are already joining students in protests. The day before, teachers at the University of Mouloud Mammeri in Tizi Ouzou held a meeting on campus and voted to march on the campus library with students who were protesting.

The Independent Union Confederation of the Productive Forces (COSYPOF) on Tuesday submitted an official notice for a five-day strike from March

10-14, to demand that the national electoral authority disqualify Bouteflika from standing in the elections. The union covers workers in the energy sector as well as some health workers. Algeria’s largest trade union federation, the General Union of Algerian Labor (UGTA), is directly allied with the FLN and has declared its support for the president.

On Tuesday, the military chief of staff, Lieutenant General Gaed Salah, issued a statement on Ennahar TV threatening that the military was prepared to intervene. He stated that the army would “remain the guarantor” of “security and stability,” and declared that the military’s actions “in eradicating terrorism... had displeased some parties who are upset to see Algeria stable and safe.” It would “erect a rampart against anything that could expose Algeria to unpredictable threats.”

Salah threatened that the military would not allow a return to the “painful years” of the 1992-2002 civil war between the military and Islamist forces, during which 200,000 people were killed.

The regime issued a new threat on Thursday, publishing a letter issued in Bouteflika’s name that warned against any social unrest: “Breaking this peaceful expression by any treacherous internal or foreign group may lead to sedition and chaos and resulting crises and woes.”

While the slogans of the organizations involved in the protests are centered entirely on the demand for Bouteflika’s removal, far broader social issues are animating workers and youth in the demonstrations. Social conditions in the country are explosive. More than two-thirds of the population is aged under 30 and the median age is 28—and more than a quarter of youth are unemployed.

However, the parties and organizations currently

supporting the anti-Bouteflika demonstrations are no less hostile than the Bouteflika regime itself to addressing or improving the social conditions of the workers and oppressed.

They speak for dissident factions of the regime and those in the Algerian capitalist and upper-middle classes who are dissatisfied with the monopoly of Bouteflika's inner circle, and want a redistribution of power and wealth within the ruling stratum.

Mouwatana, or "Citizenship," which has been active in organizing the demonstrations through Facebook and is cited in the international media as a leader of the "democratic movement," was founded as an umbrella organization in July 2018 by Ahmed Benbitour, a former prime minister under Bouteflika.

Mouwatana's national director is Sofiane Djilali, the president of Jil Jadid ("New Generation"), which is one of the leading parties of Mouwatana. Its program, published in 2017, is a call to open up the regime. It makes clear its hostility to the interests of workers, declaring that youth "work only with a minimum of effort to earn a lot. It is difficult to get them to stick to their job. Work little and earn a lot; this is the slogan of a large portion of the youth..."

Mouwatana issued a new statement calling for protests today to demand that Bouteflika and his prime minister resign.

Every faction of the capitalist class is terrified of any movement in the working class. A number of ministers in the ruling FLN have announced their resignations in recent days, calculating that Bouteflika will have to be removed in order to protect the regime.

The major imperialist powers are closely monitoring and no doubt directly intervening into the situation. The country is the third-largest gas supplier to Europe, after Norway and Russia, and supplies half of Spain's gas demand. It has the largest proven gas reserves in north Africa. The Bouteflika regime plays a critical role in French security operations and the European Union's efforts to prevent African migrants from fleeing to Europe to escape conditions of life caused by the wars and neo-colonial oppression by European and American imperialism.

In recent years, China has become the largest trading partner of Algeria, prompting concern in both France and the United States. On Tuesday, US State Department spokesman Robert Palladino told

journalists that "we're monitoring these protests that are happening in Algeria. We're going to continue to do that. And I would say that the United States supports the Algerian people and their right to peacefully assemble."

On Wednesday evening, French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated that "the stability, security and development of Algeria are completely essential" for France.

The Macron government is acutely aware that a movement in the Algerian working class could rapidly spread to France itself, under conditions of immense social anger, reflected in the "yellow vest" protests. There are between four and five million people in France of Algerian origin, including approximately half a million Algerian-born immigrants.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact