

Hundreds of thousands march in Algeria to demand fall of Bouteflika regime

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9 March 2019

Hundreds of thousands of people joined demonstrations across Algeria on Friday to demand an end to the regime of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the military-backed president who has ruled the country since 1999.

Videos on social media show waves of demonstrators, predominantly youth, filling the streets of the capital, Algiers, the port city of Bejaia, and other towns, chanting “Killer regime,” “The people want the downfall of the regime,” and “Thieves, you have eaten the country!” In the north-eastern port city of Annaba, workers protested for their family members who drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to reach Europe.

Yesterday was the third successive Friday protest since the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) announced on February 10 that it would run Bouteflika in elections this April. The protests have grown larger each week and escalated after Bouteflika’s aides submitted his election nomination forms on Sunday, promising at the same time that he would step down within a year if elected.

The protests are part of a growing radicalization in the working class and escalation of working-class struggles throughout the Maghreb and internationally against social inequality since the beginning of 2019, eight years after the revolutionary upheavals which overthrew the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes.

The 82-year-old president is a political corpse who has been incapable of speaking publicly since 2013, when he suffered a severe stroke. He has been in a hospital in Geneva, Switzerland for nearly two weeks receiving what spokespeople have called “routine” check-ups. The inner circles of his regime are seeking to gain time to select a suitable successor.

An unbridgeable class gulf separates the official “opposition” parties involved in the protests, who see Bouteflika’s removal solely as a means to improve their positions within the existing regime, from the opposition to poverty, unemployment and social inequality that is

driving masses of workers and youth into struggle.

Somewhere between a quarter and a third of Algerian youth are unemployed, under conditions where approximately two-thirds of the population is aged under 30. A report by the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights last year stated that 400,000 Algerian children drop out of school every year, especially in the countryside, where “classrooms are not equipped with electricity, water or heating, or lack toilets and school medical healthcare.” Meanwhile, over the past 20 years, a tiny layer of billionaires and multi-millionaires has flourished.

This year has seen escalating strikes throughout the country, including by port workers, a two-day nationwide teachers strike at the end of February, and strikes by transport workers in the Kabylie region.

Workers at the massive Tayal textile factory in Sidi Khettab, Relizane, which exports to Europe, launched an indefinite strike on February 27 against grueling conditions and pay that is below the legal minimum. “We are paid 600 dinars (US\$5) a day, or 18,000 a month, and if we are absent, they take 1,000 dinars from us,” one striker told the French-language *Reflexion* last week. Autoworkers at Hyundai’s joint assembly plant in Tiaret launched a strike on Monday against their conditions.

The Algerian trade unions are doing everything in their power to contain the movement in the working class. The French-language daily *El Watan* published a report Thursday, “And what if there was a general strike?” It quoted Lyes Merabet, the president of the SNPSP national health union, declaring that while the union supported protests demanding Bouteflika’s removal, it would be “premature” to respond to what she nervously referred to as “anonymous calls on social media” for a general strike.

The national teachers’ federation, which covers university lecturers, has called a nationwide strike on March 13, under conditions where teachers have already

been calling meetings to join their students in protests. Algeria's largest trade union federation, the General Union of Algerian Labor (UGTA), is a creation of the FLN and openly supports Bouteflika.

The political parties and organizations now calling for Bouteflika's removal are no less hostile than those in the regime's leading circles to any measures to address the social concerns of the workers and youth. A massive political operation is underway to ensure that, if and when Bouteflika is removed, an orderly "transition" is carried through that will involve no fundamental change to the regime besides a reshuffling in personnel.

Al Jazeera provided an account of the sordid maneuvering of these figures yesterday. It reported that thirty opposition parties gathered together on March 7 in Algiers, at the headquarters of the Talaie El Hourriyet party founded by Ali Benflis. Al Jazeera diplomatically refers to Benflis, a former prime minister under Bouteflika, only as Bouteflika's "top challenger in 2015."

Those present at the meeting included Louisa Hanoune, the head of the Workers Party (PT), Mohcine Belabbas, the president of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), and Abderrakaz Makri, the head of the Islamist Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), as well as other public figures. The RCD's Belabbas told the newspaper that "we need to question the nature of the regime we would like to establish after the implosion of this long-lasting system."

Al Jazeera noted that only Mouwatana and Jil Jadid, organizations which have been actively involved in the protests, did not attend the meeting, declaring that other parties should first withdraw from the parliament. Mouwatana and Jil Jadid are also dissident factions of the regime; Mouwatana was created by another former prime minister under Bouteflika.

The article referred to proposals for a "constituent assembly" or a "temporary government" to "handle the transition process." Workers and youth should beware that any such political formation would be nothing more than a pseudo-democratic façade to maintain the existing regime resting on the generals, who are the real decision-makers in power.

This was made clear by Benflis, who implicitly called for a military intervention in an interview with the *Financial Times* yesterday, declaring: "The people have gone out in their millions, and I don't expect and don't imagine that the National Popular Army would fail to listen to them."

All the imperialist powers are actively monitoring and

intervening in the political situation in Algeria, a major gas producer and geo-strategic center in northern Africa, to protect their interests.

The *Economist* published a statement yesterday, "Out with the old: How to revive Algeria," which called for Bouteflika to step down. It warned nervously that "Far from preventing another civil war, the regime risks stoking one." Similar calls for a fraudulent "transition," preserving the regime minus its figurehead, have been made by the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*.

The *Financial Times* headlined its article: "Algeria army pressed to defuse growing anti-Bouteflika protests: Speculation mounts that military will intervene as ailing president seeks fifth term."

In another article the previous day, the *Times* stated that "Algeria protests revive memories of final days of Hosni Mubarak." It declared: "Few believe the elections can now proceed. Much could depend on another liberation veteran—General Ahmed Gaid Salah, the army chief of staff. As in Egypt, the military is a key power behind the politicians. The unknown is whether the armed forces have a contingency plan."

The *Times*' reference to the Egyptian military, which, under General al-Sisi, carried out a coup and murdered thousands of political opponents to drown the revolution in blood, is a stark warning.

It also points to the political lessons that must be drawn by workers and young people from the experience of the 2011 workers uprising in Egypt. Because they did not have a revolutionary, socialist and internationalist perspective and leadership, powerful struggles of the working class were channeled behind bourgeois parties, enabling the Egyptian military to carry out its coup and re-impose a brutal dictatorship.

The turn must now be toward the international working class, the fight for workers' governments across the Maghreb and Europe and the socialist reorganization of the economy according to social need, rather than private profit. The critical task is to build sections of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, to arm the developing struggles of the working class internationally with a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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