

Algerian regime pledges fraudulent political “transition” as strikes spread

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As mass strikes spread across Algeria for the second day, the regime issued a statement in the name of figurehead president Abdelaziz Bouteflika yesterday evening, postponing elections indefinitely and pledging that Bouteflika will not seek a fifth term.

The regime’s announcement is a fraud, meeting none of the demands of the workers and youth. While it claims Bouteflika will not stand again for re-election, this is to be achieved by extending his current term indefinitely. Elections previously scheduled for April 18 are to be postponed to at least after 2019.

The regime will appoint what it calls an “inclusive and independent national conference,” which is to draft a new constitution and set the date for new elections. An unspecified “government of national unity is to be formed.” Bouteflika—a political corpse who has not spoken publicly since a 2013 stroke and is widely seen as a figurehead for the ruling cabal in the military, security services and his family—is to oversee the new “constitutional institutions to ensure they adhere scrupulously to the accomplishment of their mission.”

The letter states that the postponement of elections is aimed at “appeasing tensions that have been revealed in order to open the way to generalised peace, quiet and public security.” It adds that the reshuffling of Bouteflika’s cabinet and a change in prime minister “constitute an adequate response to the expectations you have placed upon me.” These are implicit threats that an escalation of the strikes and demonstrations will be met with fierce repression.

Gen. Gael Salah was reported to be in the discussions prior to last night’s announcement. Last week, he threatened that the army stood ready to defend “security and stability” against “anything that could expose Algeria to unpredictable threats.”

The announcement was immediately hailed by the French government, the former colonial power, which

maintains close ties with the regime and its security forces. The minister of foreign affairs, Yves Le Drian, said he “salutes the declaration of president Bouteflika, in which he announces he will not seek a fifth mandate and will take measures to renovate the Algerian political system.”

The ruling class in Algeria and internationally has been terrified by the direct entrance of the working class into the movement against the Bouteflika regime with the eruption of a general strike on Sunday, which deepened yesterday. The strikes have developed largely independently and outside the control of the trade unions, spread by workers online via social media.

Of particular significance is yesterday’s expansion of strikes in the oil and gas industry, which accounts for over 90 percent of Algeria’s export revenues. On Sunday, employees of GTP, a subsidiary of the state gas company Sonatrach, walked off the job in the Hassi Messaoud oil fields. A video on Facebook of the strike was viewed more than 100,000 times.

Yesterday, they were joined by workers at ENGAGEO, another Sonatrach subsidiary in the same region. One picture of ENGAGEO workers marching off the job shows a striker’s sign stating, “Un grand merci à Facebook!” Hundreds of workers at the Oued Ezzine gas complex in Adrar, central Algeria, entered the strike on Monday. Sonelgaz workers in Guelma carried out a sit-in outside their offices.

The port city of Bejaia remained completely paralysed yesterday, with strikes closing the ports and every state administrative building and private company, excepting some medical facilities. The city of Tizi-Ouzou in the Kabylie region was also reportedly completely closed.

At the industrial complex in Rouiba, autoworkers at both Mercedes and the car and bus maker SNVI remained on strike. A report published yesterday by *L’Expression* revealed that the strike was initiated on Sunday when

workers began picketing inside the plant and organised a vote to walk out. It reported that a march by the workers at both plants was tear-gassed by police.

Much of the capital Algiers remained shut down. The industrial complex at Baba Ali was closed. The metro was partially reopened, but trains to and from outside the city remained paralysed. Yesterday, a group of 15 major agri-food companies in the heavy industrial zone of Taharacht issued a joint statement demanding workers return to their posts at 5 a.m. today in order to avoid “a dangerous disruption to the” food market.

The trade unions responded to the eruption of strikes on Sunday by scrambling to regain control in order to suppress the movement. In Rouiba, the union covering workers at SNVI announced that it was calling a “four-day” strike beginning Monday, after workers independently initiated a five-day strike beginning Sunday.

In Tizi Ouzou, more than 20 trade unions gathered late Sunday night to pass a resolution declaring, the day after a general strike, that they “supported the movement.” They announced they were now “retracting their confidence” in Sidi Said, the long-time president of the General Union of Algerian Labour (UGTA), the main national trade union federation that has openly supported Bouteflika.

The ruling class is particularly terrified at the emergence of working class strikes because it knows that such actions can rapidly spread throughout the entire Maghreb region and internationally, after a decade of escalating assaults on living standards, and under conditions of a resurgence of workers’ struggles around the world.

Benin Web TV reported yesterday that “on social media networks” in neighboring Morocco, “the support for the protest is visible.” Tunisia, to Algeria’s east, was shaken by a general strike of 700,000 workers last month. The protests in Algeria have been met by demonstrations of tens of thousands in Algerian communities around the world, including in Montreal, Canada, and in multiple cities in France.

The trade unions and the capitalist class that they defend know that the workers are entering into struggle not only against Bouteflika and his immediate gang of cronies. They are fighting against the social inequality, poverty and unemployment that they preside over, and are driven by the determination that their lives should actually materially improve.

That is why the trade unions are issuing nervous warnings that the workers should not raise “sectional” and “divisive” demands—i.e., for wage rises, social

services, and jobs. Amar Hadjout, the president of the National Federation of Workers in Textiles, Leather and Clothing, told *El Watan* yesterday that “the demands must remain within the limits that are respectful of others, to have the capacity to overcome and defeat any divisions. We cannot lose sight of what has been achieved in the economic sphere.”

What is driving the working class into struggle? A report by the Algerian Human Rights League in 2015, based on a survey of 4,500 households, found that 35 percent of the population, or some 14 million people, live on a poverty wage of less than US\$1.25 per day. Over 90 percent of households reported that their living standards have fallen since the decline of oil prices in 2014, and the average purchasing power of a family fell by 60 percent over that period. The unemployment rate for youth is almost a third, and more than two thirds of the population is below the age of 30.

Meanwhile, wealth has been concentrated in the hands of a tiny class of billionaires and multimillionaires that controls the regime and the opposition parties. The report stated that 10 percent of the Algerian population owned 80 percent of the country’s wealth.

Every faction of the political establishment, including the fraudulent “opposition” parties claiming to support the movement against Bouteflika, such as Louisa Hanoune’s Workers’ Party, is opposed to any struggle by the working class for its own interests. They all want to maintain the domination over society by the super-rich and seek only to secure a greater position for themselves in the regime and the distribution of the money taken from the working class.

The struggle developing in Algeria has an objective logic that is bringing the working class into conflict with the profit system itself and all of its political defenders. The only progressive solution to this situation lies in the seizure of political power by the working class in Algeria and internationally, and the overthrow of the capitalist system, and its replacement with socialism.



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