As strikes and protests escalate, Algeria's army chief demands Bouteflika's ouster

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27 March 2019

In a desperate bid to defend Algeria's military-backed National Liberation Front (FLN) regime, the chief of staff of the armed forces, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Gaid Salah, demanded on Tuesday that the country's figurehead president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, be declared "unfit to rule."

In a televised address delivered against the backdrop of a continuing escalation of the more than month-long wave of popular protests and strikes, General Salah declared: "In this context, it becomes necessary, even imperative, to adopt a solution to get out of the crisis, which responds to the legitimate demands of the Algerian people, and which guarantees the respect of the provisions of the Constitution and the maintenance of the sovereignty of the State."

Salah called for the invocation of Article 102 of the Algerian Constitution, which empowers the Constitutional Council, the upper chamber of the country's legislature, to declare Bouteflika "unfit to rule," which would set the stage for his removal from office by a two-thirds vote of the parliament.

Bouteflika, a veteran of the war for liberation from French colonialism, has been in power since 1999. The 82-year-old president suffered a stroke in 2013 and has been confined to a wheelchair and not spoken publicly since then.

The mass demonstrations, which have brought millions of workers and youth into the streets across Algeria, erupted after it was announced that Bouteflika intended to seek a fifth term. In the face of the mass protests, the government shifted its tactics, declaring on March 11 that the president would not seek a fifth term, but that elections would be postponed until a new constitution was drafted, extending his rule indefinitely. His current term is set to expire on April 29.

The move was answered by demonstrators who chanted the slogan, "We wanted elections without Bouteflika, now we have Bouteflika without elections."

The speech by the 79-year-old General Salah marks a humiliating climbdown by the regime and was greeted with cheers and the honking of horns in Algiers on Tuesday. At the beginning of the mass protests, the military's chief of staff had denounced demonstrators as "adventurers." Subsequently he, like much of the country's corrupt ruling elite, changed his tune, feigning sympathy for the protesters, while continuing to back Bouteflika remaining in power.

Salah's action is entirely unconstitutional. It is up to the Constitutional Council to invoke Article 102, not the head of the military. His intervention, however, expresses the reality of the bourgeois state structure in Algeria, in which the military serves as the backbone of the regime, repeatedly intervening in and mediating conflicts within the state.

The Constitutional Council obediently responded to the general's demand, announcing that it would convene an extraordinary session to consider ousting Bouteflika on the grounds of his unfitness to rule.

The general's televised speech came as the mass protests continued in the center of Algiers, and as workers' strikes swept the country.

In Arzew, a major Algerian port and industrial area that includes a refinery exporting LNG (liquified natural gas), workers walked out Tuesday morning in response to a call made on social media, independent of and opposed to the country's trade unions, for a three-day strike. In addition to demanding the end of the regime and profound changes in the country's social system, strikers carried a banner that read "The union of shame," and demanded the ouster of Abdelmadjid Sidi-Saïd, the secretary-general of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) for the past 20 years, who has backed Bouteflika against the mass protests.

Post offices and public services were also shut down in many parts of the country.

On Monday, thousands of workers, joined by family members and retirees, marched in Tizi Ouzou, one of Algeria's largest cities in the north central part of the country. The march was called to protest both the regime and the support given to it by UGTA chief Sidi-Saïd. Banners read, "For the immediate departure of the system and Sidi-Saïd." Others denounced the union leader as Bouteflika's "court jester."

While sections of the UGTA bureaucracy have aped the

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regime, attempting to present the ouster of Sidi-Saïd—like that of Bouteflika—as the solution to the grievances of the workers, the hostility of the working class is directed against an entire system of official unions that function as corporatist partners of the government and the employers, serving to suppress the class struggle.

In Algiers, meanwhile, Tuesday saw what has become a weekly demonstration by thousands of students, as well as protests by architects, court magistrates and other public sector workers.

And in the Mediterranean port city of Béjaïa, several hundred students demonstrated, joined by farmers who drove their tractors into the center of town and employees of the state-run forestry department.

While the sudden about-face on the status of Bouteflika has been forced upon the regime by the rising tide of working class opposition, General Salah's pseudo-constitutional solution will answer none of the political, much less social, demands that have brought millions of Algerians into the streets.

If the Constitutional Council follows the military commander's orders, as it likely will, Bouteflika will be replaced by the legislative body's chairman Abdelkader Bensalah, who would serve as caretaker president for at least 45 and up to 90 days. Bensalah, 76, is one of the founders of the Democratic National Rally (DNR), a coalition partner of Bouteflika's National Liberation Front (FLN) and a close ally of the ailing president.

Under the terms of the constitution, elections would be held under the supervision of Bensalah's caretaker government within 90 days, ensuring continued control and domination by the ruling parties and the ruling class of wealthy businessmen, corrupt officials and military commanders that they represent.

Sections of the opposition have denounced Salah's maneuver. Mustapha Bouchachi, a lawyer and leading figure in the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS), stated on Tuesday that "The Algerian people don't accept that the government, or a symbol of power of this system, manages the transition period."

These elements, which include all of the bourgeois opposition parties as well as pseudo-left groups like the Workers Party and the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party, allied with the French New Anti-Capitalist Party, are demanding only that they be included in this "transition" and are offering themselves to give the military-dominated regime a political facelift.

What has brought masses of workers and youth into the streets, however, is not the desire for such a political reshuffling at the top, but rather the demand for a fundamental transformation of a social order in which 80 percent of the wealth is controlled by the top 10 percent, while the official youth unemployment rate stands at 30 percent and some 14 million people are condemned to live in abject poverty on less than $1.50 a day.

As significant as the apparent abandonment of Bouteflika by the regime is in terms of the impact of the mass struggles that have shaken Algeria, it marks only the beginning of the struggle of the Algerian working class to transform these conditions. Whatever the fate of the aging president, power will remain in the hands of the military brass that has served as the linchpin of the capitalist setup in Algeria for decades.

Until now, the security forces have been overwhelmed by the massive character of the demonstrations demanding Bouteflika's ouster, responding for the most part with tear gas and the arrest of protesters who are released the next day. The military command's commitment to a shift within the state apparatus may be accompanied by a turn to far more repressive measures that emulate the methods employed by its counterparts in Egypt.

While Bouteflika's ouster will no doubt be met with jubilation across Algeria, the critical question is the development of an independent political strategy and the formation of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

The central task facing Algerian workers is the formation of popular organs of power, based on the working class, to fight to overthrow and replace the remnants of Bouteflika's regime with a workers' government. The victory of this revolution depends on its extension beyond Algeria, uniting Algerian workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East and in the advanced capitalist countries.

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