Lebanese protesters keep up demands for the government's resignation

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Workers and students throughout Lebanon have kept up their protests—despite torrential rain—against Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government. The protests now span eight days, rejecting his so-called economic reforms and demanding the resignation of his entire government.

The protests erupted last week, bringing a quarter of the country's six million people out onto the streets after the government sought to impose yet another tax aimed at making the country's deeply impoverished working class pay for a deepening economic crisis—a $6-a-month tax on WhatsApp messages. Attempts to use the army and the police to break up protests only served to inflame popular anger and were largely abandoned.

The mass protests were fuelled by deep-seated anger over social inequality that has soared since the end of the civil war in 1990. The richest one percent monopolize 58 percent of the nation's wealth, while the poorest 50 percent own less than one percent, in a country that functions as a tax haven and playground for the region's kleptocrats.

The protests have united workers and youth across the sectarian and national divide, with Palestinian and Syrian refugees, against whom the Lebanese ruling elite have long stirred up xenophobic tensions as a means of deflecting united class action, taking part. There are some 1.5 million Syrians who have fled the vicious US-driven proxy war engulfing their country, to whom Lebanon has refused to grant refugee or asylum status, as well as hundreds of thousands of longstanding Palestinian refugees who have very limited rights in the country.

Hariri, taken aback by the scale of the protests, backtracked. He abandoned the tax and, threatening to resign if they did not, forced his fractious coalition partners to agree a budget for 2020 that imposed no additional taxes on the working class.

While the budget makes token gestures such as halving current and former politicians' salaries and benefits and requires the central bank and private banks to contribute $3.3 billion to a "near-zero deficit" for the 2020 budget, it opens up Lebanon's economy to private investors, more privatisations and debt, all impacting adversely on living standards. With a national debt of $86 billion, recently reduced to junk-bond status by the credit ratings agencies, the government must satisfy onerous economic and fiscal conditions for accessing the $11 billion in loans pledged at last year's international conference in support of Lebanon development and reforms (CEDRE) in Paris.

But Hariri's budget only served to infuriate the masses on the streets, who dismissed his cynical measures against the politicians and the banks with contempt. Why, they asked, had such measures—and more—not been taken years ago?

Protesters demanded an end to the corruption that pervades every pore of economic and social life in the country, the resignation of the entire government and free and fair elections not based on the divisive sectarian framework of previous elections. They shouted slogans such as, "We are one people united against the state. We want it to fall" and "Revolution, revolution!"

Not one political party has been spared their wrath. In southern Lebanon, a predominantly Shi'ite region, protesters denounce both Nabil Berri, speaker of Lebanon's parliament and head of the Hezbollah-allied Amal Movement, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. While Hezbollah's earlier support was based largely on its social welfare organisations that provided

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education and healthcare services, US sanctions on the group have limited its resources.

Despite the government's call for schools and universities to re-open, they—along with the banks—have remained closed, bringing much of economic life to a standstill, with roads blocked by protesters and long lines of vehicles at the gas stations as fuel runs out. There are fears that when the banks do reopen, they will limit withdrawals.

On Thursday, television stations broadcast a poorly edited and pre-recorded statement by President Michel Aoun, who had remained silent throughout the crisis. He appealed to the masses with a pledge of support for the lifting of bank secrecy and politicians' legal immunity from prosecution, declaring that those who had stolen public money would be held to account.

The public prosecutor announced that he has begun legal proceedings against the former billionaire prime minister Najib Mikati, his brother and son and Bank Audi on corruption charges. Aoun said, "I am ready to meet your representatives who carry your concerns, to listen to your specific demands."

While he added that there was "a need to review the current government," hinting at a reshuffle, he warned protesters that he would not tolerate continuing unrest. He said, "We will discuss what we can do together to achieve your objectives without causing collapse and chaos, open a constructive dialogue that can lead to a constructive result, and define options that will lead to the best results."

Hariri's coalition partners are the warlords and beneficiaries of the sectarian power-sharing system ushered in by the 1990 Taif Accords that ended the 15-year civil war and incorporated into the Lebanese Constitution the same year. He said that any reshuffle would be in line with the "constitutional mechanisms"—aka Lebanon's sectarian political order from which the political dynasties, including the billionaire Hariri, benefit.

The major imperialist powers—the US, France and Britain—remained silent for days, before nervously urging Lebanon to heed the protesters' "legitimate frustrations" and rein in corruption.

But President Aoun failed to impress the masses. "We have heard it all before," and "We are here till the government falls," they said.

Like its counterparts in Sudan and elsewhere, the protest has something of a carnival and nationalistic atmosphere. The overwhelmingly young and predominantly working-class demonstrators lack a clear and worked-out political perspective, articulating opposition to imperialism and all factions of the Lebanese bourgeoisie, leaving them at the mercy of those bourgeois forces that are organized.

The right-wing forces of the Christian parties, including the Lebanese Forces Party, whose four cabinet members resigned from Hariri's cabinet last weekend, the Free Patriotic Movement and the fascistic Kata'ib party, have taken part in the protests, calling for the cabinet's resignation and early elections in the hope of better positioning themselves later. They will no doubt also encourage protesters to make precipitous attacks on government property and security forces.

At the same time, numerous other groups, including professionals, are forming their own organisations to pursue their own agendas. There have been calls for a technocratic government to take over, while others have called for the army to take control if the protests and unrest continue.

The bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers, regardless of their opposition to the Hariri government, offer no way forward for the workers and poor in Lebanon.

Lebanon's struggle takes place amid a growing wave of working-class militancy throughout the Middle East and North Africa, exemplified by the strikes and demonstrations in Algeria, Sudan, Egypt and most recently, Iraq. It is to these forces and workers internationally that Lebanese workers must turn.

The only way to establish a democratic regime in Lebanon that satisfies the basic economic and social aspirations of the masses is through a struggle led by the working class, independently of and in opposition to the liberal and pseudo-left forces in the middle class, to take power, expropriating the regime's ill-gotten wealth in the context of a broad international struggle of the working class, uniting Arab, Jewish, Kurdish, Turkish and Iranian workers against capitalism and for the building of socialism.

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