

Nationwide protests break out in Lebanon amid mounting economic, social and political crisis

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In the past week, Lebanon has seen mass protests against the discredited and dysfunctional government that has failed to address mounting poverty and hardship, amid a surge in COVID-19 cases.

On Thursday, transport workers, many of whom are self-employed, took to the streets in a “day of rage” at the start of a nationwide strike protesting the terrible social and economic conditions.

Workers blocked major highways as well as towns and cities across the country with their trucks and buses. Many public offices, universities, schools and banks were closed as people were unable to get to work. One driver in Beirut said, “We can barely afford hospitalization or medicine. We are begging healthcare associations for our rights that the state is supposed to secure for us.”

Bassam Tleis, the leader of the land transport unions, called on the government to honour its pledge to compensate them. He said the strike could continue if the government did not meet their demands for fuel subsidies and money to help them cope with rising expenses.

The cost of fuel has soared as the Central Bank cut subsidies in a bid to hold onto the country’s dwindling foreign currency reserves. It costs more to fill a tank than the monthly minimum wage, currently worth just \$20. Bechara al-Asmar, the leader of the General Labor Union, said the strikers were calling for the government to reinstate the subsidies on bread, fuel and other basic items.

But with the union leaders reportedly close to Hezbollah and Amal, the Shia parties, some drivers from other parties refused to join the strike.

Meanwhile, the Nabatiyeh region in southern Lebanon was rocked by a huge explosion when a fire broke out at private generating plant that reached old, unexploded ordnance left over from the 2006 war with Israel.

On Wednesday, there were demonstrations in Beirut, the northern port city of Tripoli, Lebanon’s poorest city, and the eastern province of Baalbeck, denouncing the collapse in the

value of the lira, the national currency that is pegged to the US dollar. Later in the evening, angry protesters clashed with security forces outside the headquarters of Lebanon’s Central Bank as they tried to enter the building.

While the official price is 1,500 liras to the dollar, dollars on the black market were selling at almost 33,000 liras on Monday. The lira has lost more than 95 percent of its value in the last two years, leading to soaring inflation, including a massive rise in the cost of food, fuel and medicine and the complete devastation of workers’ living standards.

Food inflation, more than 550 percent last autumn, is among the highest in the world according to the UN’s World Food Programme, while ever more frequent and lengthy power cuts have forced people to turn to private suppliers, often paying out more than the cost of their rent. On Thursday, fuel distributors refused to unload their diesel until they were paid in the dollar equivalent.

On Monday, such was the anger over power outages—electricity is typically available for just one hour during the day and one hour in the evening—that protesters stormed the main power plant in Aramoun, 22 kilometres from Beirut, damaging the electrical equipment and shutting down the power system across the entire country for hours. They charged that while areas under the control of the Free Patriot Movement (FPM), the Christian party led by Gebran Bassil, President Michel Aoun’s son-in-law, were generally free of power cuts, areas allied with the FPM’s opponents were not.

The fuel crisis has caused terrible hardship and wreaked havoc across the economy, affecting water purification and sanitation. Drinking water has become ever scarcer as the companies producing bottled water cut production, forcing people to turn to dangerous coping mechanisms.

On Saturday, there were anti-vaccination protests in Beirut against the government’s requirement for public sector workers to get vaccinated or take frequent PCR tests at their own expense to go to work. Various religious sects

promoted the protest. There is no question, however, that the financial crisis and the government's arbitrary and contradictory response to the pandemic that led to tens of thousands of people losing their livelihoods while unable to access adequate health care are fuelling widespread anger. Popular contempt for the politicians and plutocrats who have hoarded medicines to sell at a higher price have also played a major role in vaccine hesitancy and the spread of misinformation.

According to official figures that grossly underestimate the reality, the coronavirus pandemic has cost the lives of more than 9,330 people in a country of just six million. Only 37 percent of the population have received two jabs, leaving the rest cruelly exposed as the number of cases surge.

The World Bank has described Lebanon's economic crisis as one of the world's worst since the 1850s. GDP plummeted from \$55 billion in 2018 to a projected \$20.5 billion in 2021, with real GDP per capita falling by 37.1 percent, a rate usually associated with armed conflicts or wars. At least 80 percent of the population, including one million Syrian refugees, live in terrible poverty.

The government of Najib Mikati, Lebanon's richest businessman and banker, barely functions. It took more than a year to cobble together a government acceptable to President Michel Aoun and his faction after the resignation of Hassan Diab, a non-aligned Sunni politician who became prime minister following the mass protests of October 2019 against Lebanon's sectarian political system.

Diab resigned in the aftermath of the August 2020 port of Beirut explosion that killed more than 200 people, when it became clear that his government, in power for just a few months, was being forced to take the blame. He remained in a caretaker role. The blast was caused by ammonium nitrate, a key component of fertilizers, mine explosives and bombs, stored at the port since 2014 due to the negligence, inaction and corruption of the kleptocrats who run the country as their own private fiefdom.

In the event, Mikati's cabinet has not met since October amid bitter divisions within the major sectarian blocs. Hezbollah, the Iran-backed bourgeois-clerical party and its ally, the Shia Amal movement of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, which together form the largest political bloc, have demanded that the judge leading the investigation into the port explosion be removed.

Mikati has therefore been unable to push through a budget or implement the financial and free-market economic reforms that are the precondition for an International Monetary Fund loan and aid pledged by the European and regional powers. Moreover, any such loan would also require Lebanon to align politically with the Sunni oil states and against Iran and Syria, a condition to which Hezbollah

refuses to accede.

The tiny country has long been ensnared in the wider regional power struggles, including the bitter armed conflict of 1975 to 1990 between shifting alliances backed by rival powers. It has more recently faced pressure from US imperialism, Saudi Arabia and France, as part of their broader efforts to isolate Iran and Syria, with ever wider sanctions on Hezbollah and Syria, with whose economy Lebanon is closely connected. Their de facto economic blockade is aimed at isolating Hezbollah and bolstering the power of its Sunni and Christian allies after they were ousted by the mass social protests that erupted in October 2019 against economic hardship, government corruption and the country's sectarian political setup.

The financial elite, through its political parties and the Central Bank, has carried out the financial looting and mismanagement of the economy. Lebanon's Central Bank governor is now under investigation for embezzlement and money laundering by Lebanon and at least four European countries. These criminal operations by the ruling elite led to the government's default on its overseas debt, a currency collapse that wiped out foreign reserves, soaring inflation, the doubling of food prices, and widespread poverty.

This week, in the face of the widespread protests, Washington was forced to concede that Lebanon's efforts to secure natural gas imports from Egypt, via Jordan and Syria, in a deal arranged last August just hours after Hezbollah had arranged multiple deliveries of Iranian fuel, would not be subject to sanctions.

While the protests undoubtedly reflect widespread social discontent, under the leadership of trade unions or political groups allied to one or another of Lebanon's financial oligarchs, the working masses of Lebanon face the prospect of betrayal or brutal suppression at the hands of the army, which despite sanctions Washington has continued to fund.

The demands of the masses of Lebanese workers and youth, like those of workers who have risen up in revolt elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, cannot be resolved outside of the struggle led by the working class, independently of all the rotten political forces, for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism on a world scale.



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