The Iranian protests, imperialist aggression and the fight for workers' power

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The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the escalating tirade of threats of military action against Iran emanating from the White House. American imperialism's fascist, would-be dictator president is—according to his own words and the *New York Times*—preparing an imminent military strike on Iran.

This is to be garishly packaged in the most cynical and absurd of all pretexts: that the US is attacking Iran to "defend the Iranian people."

Just days after Trump ordered a criminal assault on Venezuela that killed at least 80 people, the kidnapping of its president, Nicolás Maduro, and the seizure of the country's vast oil wealth, he is, according to numerous reports, just days and possibly hours away from initiating war with Iran.

On Saturday, the *Times* reported that the Pentagon has presented President Trump "with a range of options, including strikes on nonmilitary sites in Tehran." Trump has himself repeatedly threatened to strike Iran. On the sidelines of a meeting Friday with top US oil executives convened to discuss Washington's seizure of Venezuela's oil, he declared, "We'll be hitting them very hard where it hurts."

When Trump held a war council with Israeli Prime Minister at his Mar-a-Lago estate on December 29, he and his aides cited Iran's nuclear program as reason for the US to again attack Iran. Now, with unbridled cynicism he is pointing to the Islamic Republic's mounting suppression of anti-government protests as justification for attacking Iran, casting himself in Hitler-like fashion as a "liberator."

Mass protests born of mounting economic distress have convulsed Iran since December 28 and in recent days have reportedly spread to all parts of the country.

Iran's Shia clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime has increasingly responded with repression. Since last Thursday evening it has shut down internet and cell phone access, made mass arrests and violently suppressed protests.

On Friday, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vowed the government "would not back down" in the face of "vandals" and "saboteurs." Iran's attorney general has warned that anyone taking part in protests will be considered an "enemy of God," making them liable, if convicted, to the death penalty.

Human rights groups based outside of Iran have made varying claims of the numbers of protesters killed, from dozens to over 100. The government, for its part, has highlighted the deaths of more than a dozen security forces and what it describes as armed attacks on police stations.

Because of the Islamic Republic's repression—itself an indication of the regime's ever narrowing social base—and the relentless hostility of the Western corporate media to an Iran not directly subservient to imperialism, it is difficult to get a precise picture of the protests in Iran.

But any progressive tendency in Iran would have to immediately repudiate Trump's "support," denounce the threat of imminent US military action and call for the immediate lifting of the punitive sanctions that are strangling Iran's economy.

There are undoubtedly deep social grievances among Iran's workers and rural toilers. The Islamic Republic is a repressive capitalist regime. It was consolidated through the violent suppression of all left-wing and independent working class organizations in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution that overthrew the tyrannical US-imposed monarchical dictatorship of the Shah.

In recent years, beginning with the mass protests that erupted against poverty and social inequality in December 2017, the Iranian working class has emerged as a combative force. Recent months have seen strikes and protests by miners, oil workers, and health and transport sector workers, among others.

However, the current wave of protests were not initiated by workers. Rather, as Ayatollah Khamenei himself acknowledged, they started among the *bazaari*, that is, shopkeepers and merchants drawn from sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie that have traditionally been, to use Khamenei's own words, a pillar of the regime.

While sections of workers and the unemployed have no doubt been swept up in the protests, the working class has not intervened en masse, and even more significantly as an independent force advancing its own demands and employing its own class struggle methods.

To the contrary, everything suggests that the protests are assuming an increasingly pronounced right-wing character, with reactionary, pro-imperialist forces inside Iran, and outside in the broader region, Washington and the other imperialist capitals seeking to leverage them.

Iran's workers and toilers must beware. In 2013, the mass opposition to Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, whose government had proven manifestly unable to meet any of the social grievances that had propelled the 2011 Revolution, was exploited by the most powerful sections of the bourgeoisie and the

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military to bring to power a savage dictatorship under General el-Sisi that continues to rule to this day.

The Western media is now highlighting protesters' support for the Shah's son, the "Crown Prince" Reza Pahlavi. Based in the US since 1978, he has called for opponents of the Islamic Republic to "seize control of city centres" and appealed to Trump to make good on his threats to attack Iran.

There is evidence that some of the video clips that purport to show protesters voicing support for the return of a pro-US monarchy have been doctored. Be that as it may, there is no reason to discount that sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie long for the return of a tyrannical monarchy, serving as a client of Washington, as under the Shah.

Meanwhile, Kurdish nationalists allied with US imperialism and, in some cases, openly with Israel are launching armed attacks.

If these forces prevail, they will bring to power a neo-colonial regime. Such a regime would turn over Iran's oil to the very imperialist powers, led by the US, that for decades have waged an unrelenting campaign of aggression and economic warfare against the Iranian people; allow Iran to be used as a staging ground for Washington's military-strategic offensive against China and Russia; and ruthlessly exploit and suppress the working class.

The Iranian working class cannot endure imperialist subjugation, nor the economic deprivation and political repression of the Islamic Republic. It must intervene as an independent political force in opposition to imperialism, all the institutions of the Islamic Republic and all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie.

Workers in North America and Europe, for their part, must indefatigably oppose the continuing imperialist aggression against Iran—whether in the form of a direct military attack, covert action and the leveraging of the pro-imperialist factions of the bourgeoisie and clerical-political establishment or the continuing campaign of economic warfare.

All are elements in American imperialism's drive, in concert with its Israeli Zionist attack dog, to establish through war, state terror and regime-change a "new Middle East" under unbridled US hegemony. This predatory objective, like Trump's attack on Venezuela and seizure of its oil, is inseparable from Washington's preparations for war with China and other strategic rivals.

It is the task of the Iranian working class to settle accounts with the Islamic Republic; Trump, his ostensible Democratic Party opponents, and their crowned lackey, Reza Pahlavi, want their enslavement.

Khamenei and the Islamic Republic's clerical-led establishment point to Trump's aggression and threats to justify their repression and misrule. But the internally divided Iranian regime has proven itself utterly incapable of providing any progressive response to the ever escalating campaign of US imperialist-led bullying and aggression. This is because, in the final analysis, it is itself an instrument of imperialism. Its opposition to imperialism, such as it is, is only from the standpoint of expanding the Iranian bourgeoisie's own possibilities for exploitation.

For decades, the Islamic Republic's political establishment has been bitterly divided between a faction, led by the late former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, his protégé ex-President Hassan Rouhani, and now the current President Masoud Pezeshkian, eager for a rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers; and an opposed faction, led by the so-called Principlists and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, that favour closer ties with China and Russia to strike a harder bargain with imperialism. Khamenei has acted as a Bonapartist ruler, favouring one faction then the other, while trying to maneuver between the imperialist and greater powers and Iran's workers and toilers.

Both factions have systematically dismantled the social concessions that were made to the working class and rural masses in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, implementing neo-liberal, pro-investor policies, further entrenching poverty and economic insecurity amid ever-widening social inequality. And both factions have sought to place the full burden of Iran's confrontation with imperialism on the backs of working people.

Even after last June's US-Israeli attack, Tehran redoubled its efforts to reach an accommodation with Trump, only to be spurned at every turn. This fecklessness is rooted in class dynamics: The regime's greatest fear is the threat from the working class.

To defeat imperialism in the Middle East requires the united mobilization of the working class and oppressed masses—Muslim, Jewish and Christian, Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Israeli and Iranian—in the fight for social equality and democratic rights for all, against all the capitalist regimes and all the communal and sectarian divides they foster. To say that this cannot be done on the basis of the Islamic Republic regime's reactionary Islamist appeals and Shia populist ideology is to state the obvious.

The entire history of modern Iran—from the failure of the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century and the overthrow of Mossadegh's nationalist regime in 1953 through the hijacking and suppression of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 47 years of the Islamic Republic—demonstrates that the only viable strategy for the Iranian working class is the strategy of Permanent Revolution.

First formulated by Leon Trotsky, the strategy of Permanent Revolution animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and the struggle against the nationalist Stalinist bureaucracy, which usurped power from the working class under conditions of the revolution's isolation, and ultimately restored capitalism. It establishes that in the imperialist epoch the democratic tasks associated with the historic bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries—including national independence and unity and the separation of church from state—can be realized only through the establishment of workers' power and as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.

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