

Iran: Solidarity with the mass uprising

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For several days now, the internet and social media have effectively been closed down in Iran. At the weekend, after a dramatic increase in petrol prices, mass protests and demonstrations spread across the country and mobile phones, mail and messenger services were cut off repeatedly. Since Tuesday, November 19, the country itself has been effectively sealed off; most internal communication and ?uncontrolled? reportage to the outside world has been stopped.

A partial reopening of the internet was promised for November 22. The ultra-reactionary Revolutionary Guards proclaimed their victory over the mass movement. Whether the government has really been successful in this we will see, the underlying causes of the unrest, which grew into a rebellious uprising, will certainly not go away.

The reason is clear and simple. The Iranian regime has rallied all its repressive forces to crack down on a mass movement that threatened to become an uprising against the forces of the regime, its guards, puppets, symbols and buildings. Unlike the Green Movement of 2009 and the mass protests in 2017/18, in which the urban middle classes, students and the intelligentsia were central, although they did have mass support from the working class, this time the movement rapidly brought the most exploited sectors of the working class and the hugely increased subproletariat to centre stage.

The movement spread rapidly across the whole country. By the weekend, not only schools and universities were closed, but also shops and factories. In the weeks before, there had already been an increase in protests and strike action. Issues such as non-payment of wages led to action by, for example, sugar cane workers in Haft-Tappeh, who have a long tradition of workers' struggles, and in the steel plants in Ahwas.

On the weekend of November 16/17, however, the protests took the form of a spontaneous uprising, an outburst of the downtrodden and impoverished. Petrol stations, town halls, sometimes also police stations and buildings of the ?Revolutionary Guard?, the semi-fascist militias of the regime, were stormed and torched. In Shiraz, a city in southern Iran, the protestors seem to have taken control of the city for a time. Given the desperate economic situation of the masses and the decline of the Iranian economy, the outburst posed a mortal threat to the regime.

Response

The regime is now using all means at its disposal to crack down on the movement and, if need be, to drown it in blood. According to Amnesty International, 106 people were killed in clashes with the police, the Revolutionary Guard or its subdivision, the Bas?dsch-militias by November 19, others even reported figures up to 200 before communication was largely cut off.

The threat of a mass movement that could overthrow the regime has, for the time being, united ?hard line? and ?moderate? wings of the Islamist regime. All of them denounce the uprising as ?vandalism? or the work of imperialist-sponsored ?terrorists?. Some of the arrested leaders of the protests have been shown

on TV 'confessing' that they acted on behalf of the US, Israel or Saudi Arabia. Clearly such 'confessions' are as trustworthy as any other show-trial in history or as Donald Trump's tweets.

Since Tuesday, Rohani and other representatives of the regime have claimed through the state-controlled media that the situation has been 'normalised'. Whatever the truth of that, it is clear that the regime has mobilised all its resources, not only the media and the whole state apparatus but also its auxiliary forces in the militias and the institutions of the Islamic Republic and the mosques to beat the masses into submission. Given the very real threats by US imperialism, with its economic sanctions and open calls for 'regime change', the government can present itself as 'anti-imperialist' and the mass movement as being led and directed by US, Zionist and Saudi forces.

Clearly, they, and the 'softer' European imperialists, do want to take advantage of the situation and do sponsor reactionary sections of the exile and internal 'opposition' ranging from monarchists, to liberals and even the former leftists of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq. Pompeo and other US-representatives have repeatedly come out for 'regime change' and would like to misuse the Iranian masses for their purpose.

Causes

However, it is simply a lie that the current movement of mass uprisings have been initiated, orchestrated or sponsored by the US or other imperialist or regional powers. They are an outburst of the poor, impoverished masses against a dictatorial, clerical capitalist regime.

The movement was obviously sparked by the removal of subsidies for petrol. The government announced this measure on Thursday, November 14, and imposed it the following day, giving people no time to prepare for the price rises; 50 percent for the first 60 litres, 300 percent for anything more!

Whilst the price of gasoline is indeed extremely low in Iran, about seven pence per litre until last Friday, it was one of the last means by which the regime and Iranian capitalism economically incorporated the mass of the population, the working class and the poor. It is exactly this part of the population that will be hit most by the price rise and the resulting inflation, which had already reached 35.7 percent in October 2019, according to the IMF. The Statistical Centre for Iran, SCI, issued an even more pessimistic assessment with an overall inflation rate of 47.2 percent, and as high as 63.5 percent for food and fuel and 82 percent for housing costs.

The cause of the inflation is perfectly clear; it is the crisis of the Iranian economy itself, which has been triggered by the US sanctions and embargo since mid 2018, and have been followed by Washington's European allies. Since then, the economy is estimated to have shrunk by about 8.7 percent, according to the World Bank. The IMF even calculates 9.5 percent. Exports of oil have decreased by 80 percent and state debts increased. Price subsidies, clearly a means to prevent social unrest and incorporate the mass of the population, are a price the Iranian regime does not want to pay anymore and possibly cannot afford to pay anymore. Subsidies for petrol and other goods (and the linked redistribution mechanisms) have already been reduced over the last decade, sometimes as a result of IMF demands for 'restructuring' the economy.

Trade embargoes, boycotts and sanctions have resulted in widespread obsolescence of fixed capital, machinery and the infrastructure of the country, in short, to a chronic economic crisis. It is the working class, the poor, the rural population and the nationally oppressed sections of society, who are paying the price in the form of a dramatic increase in poverty.

It is easy to forget that Iran is not only a theocratic dictatorship, but also a capitalist country, which has imposed severe deregulation of the labour market and labour laws over recent decades, reforms which

clearly benefited the capitalist class, but also important parts of the middle class and the petit-bourgeoisie as well as of the state apparatus.

According to the SCI, official unemployment was at 10.5 percent in September. However, this figure obscures the real scale of unemployment and underemployment since, according to a recent redefinition of employment, every person who is contracted for one hour a week is considered to be employed! Nevertheless, youth unemployment stays as high as 26 percent. Given that half of Iran's 80 million population is under 25, it shows that the current system offers no future for the youth in the most immediate sense.

Furthermore, over the last 15 years, the government has entitled entrepreneurs to fire workers after a three month testing period without pay, a practice widely used with young or newly employed workers. All in all, about 93 percent of workers in industry and trade are estimated to have only temporary contracts. In short, the majority of the working class has been impoverished, with a huge sub-proletariat.

Workers in the rural regions, or from the nationally oppressed, are hit even more severely. No wonder this latest uprising has been reported to be particularly strong in regions like Khuzestan, Kermanshah and Fars, all 'underdeveloped' regions with large Arab and Kurdish minorities.

Where now?

Given the effective sealing off of the country, it is difficult to assess the further development of the movement. Clearly, the scale, and the speed with which it spread, reflect a tremendous degree of desperation, anger and alienation among the working class, the peasantry and even large sections of the 'middle classes'.

Because of the dictatorial character of Islamist rule and its penetration into every sphere of social, economic and private life, it is also clear that this movement, triggered by misery and social impoverishment, has rapidly assumed a political character.

This has been evidenced by many reports of protestors demanding the overthrow of the regime, linking the misery to the Islamic and capitalist dictatorship, but also by the objects of the violent actions of the protestors. They did not loot small shops or just 'vandalise', but targeted petrol stations, banks and buildings of the state and repressive forces. In other words, they targeted the ruling class and its institutions.

The rapid spread of the movement was no doubt helped by use of social media but it clearly points to a widespread, spontaneous anger, which just needed to be inflamed by rising prices. It may also reflect some, even if weak, form of coordination both between sections of students and amongst trade unionists working under illegal or semi-legal conditions.

Any such links are no doubt very weak and lacking in political and strategic direction and this plays into the hands of the regime, which has a centralised apparatus, national media, control over the economy and a clear objective; to crush the movement. In addition, the movement, whilst it clearly has strong roots amongst the poor and the working class and has even been able to resist the state forces in some regions, has not been able to link up with ordinary soldiers to bring them to its side.

The combination of its lack of national organisation and direction, and the armed might of the regime, pose the immediate threat of it being drowned in blood. Therefore, the working class movement, the left internationally, need to solidarise now with the workers and youth of Iran! They must refute every claim that they are stooges of Western powers, Israel or Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, they must also warn against these false, hypocritical 'friends' of the people. They need to expose their hypocrisy, their own oppression, for example, of women in Saudi Arabia, the crushing of the people in Yemen, the oppression of the Palestinians or the US and European powers' plundering of the entire globe. They need to point out that the US sanctions against Iran are a direct cause of their misery and that, whilst Western bourgeois politicians condemn the oppression of the movement, they keep silent on the economic and social misery. No wonder, since the IMF actually justified the rises in fuel prices in order to meet Iran's debts and 'restructure' the country. Clearly, we also need to warn against the liberal, monarchist or pro-imperialist fake-left forms of the 'opposition' within Iran itself.

However, the Iranian working class will only be able to defeat the regime and at the same time avoid falling into the hands of such false 'friends?', if it constitutes itself as a political force, if it gives political leadership.

This requires the creation of mass fighting organisations, not only of trade unions, but also councils of action, militias to defend themselves and soldiers' councils that side with the workers and youth. History has shown that the regime cannot be reformed, that it will take a revolution to overthrow it. But it needs to be a revolution that does not only overthrow a clerical dictatorship but also expropriates the capitalist class and the large scale landowners, which breaks up the Islamist state machine, replaces it by a workers' and peasant government and reorganises the economy based on a democratic plan to serve the needs of the many, not the few.

As the impact of imperialist sanctions has shown, even such a working class regime, would not be able to turn things around just in one country. It would need to link the Iranian revolution with the mass movements in Iraq, in Lebanon, with the Palestinian and Kurdish liberation struggles, to spread it throughout the entire region to create a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

We cannot be sure whether the forces of counterrevolution and the Iranian state will be able to crush the uprising before it can politically mature. We have to do what we can to prevent this but, even if it succeeded, the recent movement has already demonstrated that the Iranian regime will be unable to generate the economic and social basis for lasting stability. Further eruptions would be likely, indeed unavoidable.

The Iranian movements and uprisings of the last 10 years demonstrated one key problem that faces all the movements of the Middle East, indeed all movements globally; the crisis of working class leadership, the lack of a clear programme and strategy to link democratic, social and economic demands with the struggle for working class power.

No spontaneous movement, no purely trade unionist organisation, can create the leadership necessary for this by itself. The politically most conscious and determined working class fighters, and intellectuals who want to take up their cause, need to form a revolutionary, communist party. Such a party needs to be based on a programme of transitional demands, it needs to be able to act under conditions of extreme repression, under illegality, as well as being able to penetrate into mass movements which erupt and can quickly assume a revolutionary character. The creation of such a party, clarifying its programme and linking it the struggle for a new revolutionary, Fifth International, is an indispensable task, in Iran and beyond.

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