

Iranian Workers must make the revolution permanent!

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The prolonged revolutionary situation in Iran holds enormous potential for destabilising Western imperialism economically and politically. Carter and Owen, those sermonisers on 'human' rights and Christian values, know that there are serious interests at stake in hand. Serious enough for them to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Shah as he sheds rivers of blood to preserve the most savage tyranny on the planet. For this reason, the Shah's 4,000-strong army has 1,200 military and 7,500 civilian American 'advisors'. The notorious Savak, set up in 1957 and reconstructed after the 1963 upheavals, has between thirty and sixty thousand men. It was 'advised' at all stages by the FBI and the CIA who have 50 top agents in Savak.

This enormous apparatus of repression was built up by the US and Britain to serve their economic and strategic interests. Iran yields massive super profits. One British businessman is reported as saying that he 'makes 40% more profit there than in Britain'. At the heart of these interests is the oil industry. It supplies 13% of American and 17% of UK imports. Although formally nationalised, the consortium which controls it is 40% British and 40% UK in composition. These are the 'British and Western interests' that Dr David Owen talks about defending.

Even more important than the oil wealth and investments of Iran is its strategic position. Groomed by the United States and Britain to play the role of policeman of the Gulf area in the 'indirect' or 'neo colonial' system which replaced the direct British military presence after 1968, the Shah's forces have seen service against the liberation forces in Oman.

The overthrow of this regime holds incalculable consequences for imperialism, hence the flood of telegrams of support for the Shah from the White House and Whitehall.

Much of the Iranian Left refers to the Shah's regime as 'fascist'. This is incorrect. The restoration of the Shah in 1953, by a military coup assisted by the CIA, initiated a military Bonapartist tyranny of unusual severity. This regime represented the political expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the feudal landowning class in the interests of preserving capitalism in the interests of imperialism and against the working class. The Shah's regime rests upon imperialism externally, and internally upon an artificially induced impasse in the class struggle.

Roots of crisis

The Shah has given, in a deformed way, certain social concessions to the various classes, land reform to the peasants, industrial development to the bourgeoisie. Political rights and expressions were, however, totally forbidden. The massive apparatus of repression is a testimony to the lack of a solid social base for the Shah's regime. It is this social basis which real fascism possesses in the enraged reactionary petit

bourgeoisie and Lumpen-proletariat. Both these classes are, however, in the forefront of the opposition movement. They figure amongst those most bitterly opposed to the present regime.

Since the sixties there has been a considerable growth of industry, petrochemicals, steel, car, truck and bus production and assembly, electronics and machine tools. As a result the Iranian industrial proletariat has grown in size (2.5 million in 1977).

Yet despite all this the Iranian economy found itself in deep crisis by 1977. Partly this was the effect of the world capitalist crisis, partly the accumulation of contradictions engendered in Iran's mode of industrialisation.

Firstly the Agrarian Reform the Shah had imposed after 1962 was typical of a 'revolution from above' of Bonapartist land reforms which whilst it weakens the old landowning class and opens agriculture to capitalism, in fact swindles the vast majority of the peasantry leaving them landless (50%) or with tiny plots (30%). The reform was designed to strengthen those peasants who already owned land, implements and draught animals.

The net result has been the creation of two 'new' classes in the countryside, capitalist landowners and landless labourers. However the result has not been a rapid capitalisation and modernisation of agriculture. Land has been abandoned, villages deserted and the result has been rocketing imports of foodstuffs plus a flooding into the cities of the rural unemployed.

Secondly, there has been a tendency for the effects of the political regime to siphon off an increasing proportion of the oil revenue towards arms and military spending and corruption. The failure to develop a skilled labour force also places severe limits on Iran's development.

The crisis of 1977 took the form of escalating inflation, food prices and rents in particular soaring. This affected the whole urban population.

The Bazaar

The bazaar was, until the 1950s and 60s, the centre of urban economic life. Dominated by very wealthy merchants but consisting of its overwhelming bulk of one and a half million shopkeepers, money lenders, traders, craftsmen and artisans, it had in the past funded trade and been the centre of much production and nearly all exchange.

The foreign banks, the industrial production of consumer goods, the large stores have all undermined and threatened the traditional way of life and culture of the bazaar. This traditional culture is deeply Moslem. Its ideologists and leaders are the mullahs, its cultural and political centre the mosque. Shia Islam represents a unifying ideology, one that in 1963 and 1978 has spearheaded mass resistance to the Shah's regime. Shia Islam has its origins in resistance to the constituted state authority, founded as it is on allegiance to the deposed and martyred son-in-law of the Prophet, Ali . Its most sacred figure after the prophet is the Imam Hossein murdered by the tyrannical Caliph Yazid - an event commemorated by the 'days of mourning' of early December (Moharram). It also has a pronounced millenarian aspect. Believers expect the 'return' of the twelfth Imam who will institute a pure Islamic order. Shia is much less attuned in the state than Sunni Islam indeed it is headed by a powerful and independent caste of mullahs (180,000 of them) with a hierarchy of Ayatollahs the leader of whom Khomeini, was elected in 1962.

The reality of the Religious Opposition leaders is at variance with the Carter/Owen picture of them as reactionary fanatics who want to take Iran back to the seventh century. Khomeini insists that 'I have always called strongly for economic and social development in my country' and espouses what he calls

?the principles of democracy and freedom?. By this he appears to mean a republic based on universal suffrage and with freedom for political parties. The Marxists will be free to express themselves because we are convinced that Islam contains the answer to the peoples? needs. Our faith is capable of standing up against their ideology.? (Le Monde, Paris, May 6th 1978). Khomeini can sum up his aim thus: ?As soon as the Shah goes we want the creation of an Islamic republic based on the popular vote.? (Le Monde, November 8th, 1978). It is precisely the ?Islamic? nature of this state that holds the greatest dangers.

Shiite veto

Whilst Khomeini has made it clear that he is not thinking of a regime like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan he obviously intends to install in a future constitution provisions which give the Shia hierarchy a veto on legislation similar to that embodied in the 1906 Constitution. The non Persian nationalities, the non Shia religious minorities and women could expect little that is ?liberal? or ?democratic? in such a regime.

What Khomeini does loudly and vociferously attack is American Imperialism. He declares his support for the Palestinians. All these factors suggest that a Khomeini influenced regime would be of a populist Islamic nationalist type. To draw parallels with Pakistan or Indonesia is a mistake. Both these dictatorships were established in the defeat of a popular upsurge where the working class were unable to seize power.

Islamic ideology is Janus Faced. It can justify anti-imperialism, resistance to the foreign powers seeking to exploit or dismember the states of the Middle East. It can also justify black reaction the suppression of the working class and poor peasantry. The inner connection is that like all religions it defends private property. As long as the possessing classes of the imperialised nation feel the major threat to their property to lie with imperialism then they can play a vigorous role in the struggle against it. Islamic ideology will then have a ?progressive? populist colouration and orientation. When the working class or small peasants become a serious threat not only to imperialism but to the native larger property owners it can become a cloak for a Bonapartist military dictatorship or even fascist reaction (as in Turkey).

Khomeini?s movement can therefore not be defined by adding up progressive democratic points as against reactionary points. The USFI and the International Spartacist Tendency both use this method but get different answers to the sum. The USFI gets the answer that Khomeini is a ?progressive force?, a democrat. The Spartacists find that he is a ?black reactionary?. One plays into the hands of the mullahs, the other into the hands of the Carter and Owen propoganda for the Shah. Neither is of use to Iranian revolutionary communists who have to win the masses now under religious leadership or influence, to the perspective of proletarian revolution. For those who see all evil as lying in the religious ideology of the opposition, the secular ?Union of National Front Forces? led by Karim Sanjabi might seem to be a ?democratic? force of the sort Marxists could fight alongside of. This party of the large bazaar merchants, some industrialists and the professional middle class cloaks itself in the bourgeois nationalist mantle of Mossadeq, the prime minister overthrown by the CIA in 1953. But it is the most compromised and half hearted force in the opposition. It remains irresolute and torn between Khomeini and the Shah. Its leader?s names figure largely on the ?list of 80 names? the Shah has been pondering over as candidates to a government of ?national reconciliation?. Sanjabi is one of the three politicians most frequently closeted with the Shah. The religious oppositionists know their measure. The Ayatollah of Abadan commented ?Sanjabi and Bazargan at heart want to negotiate with the Shah. These men are bourgeois. We only have confidence in Khomeini for only he really wants the Shah to go.? (Le Monde, November 6th, 1978)

The aspirations and mentality of the Iranian bourgeoisie is well expressed in the statement of a business man to the Le Monde correspondent, ?But where is the intransigence of the Ayatollah Khomeini going to lead? The Shah is on his knees. The Ayatollah should take advantage of it to impose on him respect for, and consolidation of, the constitution we obtained from Sharif Emani?s government and which General

Azhari's cabinet is in the process of taking back. It is obvious that the 'democratic rights' these gentlemen desperately want are the posts of imperial ministers for themselves.

However as with the religious leaders it is not merely their class or caste interest or personal inclination which has determined actions. The mass mobilisations have kept Sanjabi out of office just as they have radicalised the mullahs.

If the first wave of the Iran revolution was spearheaded by intellectuals, writers and students and centred on the universities, the second wave, starting with the demonstrations and massacre in Qom on January 9th 1978, marked the passage of the movement to the phase of religious leaders, then October and November of 1978 showed the emergence of the Iranian proletariat as the key force capable of toppling the Shah.

The proletariat

The Iranian proletariat has a history of militant trade union and socialist organisation. The first unions in Iran were set up by workers returning from the Baku oilfields in Russia after the defeat of the 1905 revolution. The new labour movement participated in the 1907-09 revolution in Iran. After the war a communist party was formed and some of the trade unions affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions in 1921. The Pahlavi dictatorship crushed all independent workers organisations in 1928.

In 1944 an Iranian TUC was formed under communist influence. By 1946 it had a membership of 400,000; fifty thousand workers celebrated May Day in Teheran in 1946. But the slavishly pro-Soviet politics of the Communist Party (Tudeh), which had 25,000 members, ruined this movement. They held back the strike wave while the Soviet Union was haggling with the British and Americans over the Kurdistan and Azerbaijan republics which had been set up in the North. Stalin traded these republics for oil and gas concessions in Iran.

The Tudeh was initially hostile to Mossadeq (from the right, because his policies threatened to upset the Soviet Imperialist status quo), but it moved to a full popular frontist tailing of his bourgeois nationalism. It missed the crucial opportunity of mounting resistance to the coup of August 1953 and witnessed the immediate smashing of the trade unions and in 1955 the uncovering of its illegal and military organisations. The Tudeh was almost completely obliterated by Savak.

Only in September of 1978 did a section of the party decide to reconstitute a 'party of the interior'. According to Le Monde (December 6th 1978), 'they admit that the reconstruction of the apparatus and the setting up of a serious organisation will take several years.' Though this statement speaks volumes for Stalinist bureaucratism and inertia it also bears witness to the decay into which Tudeh has fallen. An added reason for such modest perspectives is that Moscow has by no means given the go ahead for full-blooded participation in the overthrow of the Shah. Brezhnev's non-aggression pact with the Shah and his imperialist backers cripples the Tudeh as a party of the insurgent proletariat.

Yet despite the bankruptcy and destruction of the historic leaders, the Iranian proletariat has started to play an ever more decisive role. The atrocity of the cinema fire in Abadan revealed the depths of savagery of the Shah's regime to the oil workers and started their self-organisation.

The strike movement in the oil fields bears all the marks of the spontaneous revolutionising of the workers. On October 23rd the 12,000 workers at the Oil Refinery in Abadan came out on strike for economic demands. These were conceded in 3 days. After the return to work, mass meetings ensued, students being present at the discussion of political questions. On the 29th, mass meetings formulated political demands;

?Abolition of Martial law, freeing of political prisoners, the disbandment of Savak, the departure of American advisors, a fight against corruption, the conviction of all those who have committed crimes against the people.?

The strike has ebbed and flowed since then with thousands of troops driving workers at gun point into the refineries. Those inside have slowed production to a snail's pace. BBC correspondents in late December report the formation of factory or plant committees. In Teheran the bank workers have not only struck but begun to exercise elements of inspection. They have revealed for example a list of 180 named persons prominent to the regime who had transferred 4.2 billion dollars out of Iran. The newspaper workers have fought bitter battles for the freedom to report the events of the autumn.

Mutinies

The working class is participating wholeheartedly in the struggle to bring down the Shah. Indeed, it alone has the economic strength and social cohesion to do this. The mass strike wave has put the noose around the Shah's neck and is tightening it. Strike committees are springing up in the struggle. They must, at the earliest opportunity, be generalised into city wide workers' councils. The morale of the army is already weakened. In Tabriz on 18th December, a unit downed arms and joined demonstrators with their armoured cars. The formation, and arming of a workers' militia as army discipline breaks down is crucial, as is the creation of barrack committees and soldiers' councils.

Iranian revolutionary communists must develop the strategy and tactics which the working class must employ to overthrow the Shah and smash the monstrous machinery of repression. This means marching alongside the 'religious opposition'. It's central and most deeply felt immediate demands, the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, the smashing of Savak, the release of all political prisoners, free elections and freedom of political parties and the nationalisation of British and American monopolies are national revolutionary and bourgeois democratic demands that the proletariat must support. To this extent an anti-imperialist united front is possible. However, the religious leaders are, and will prove themselves to be, uncertain and treacherous allies. Khomeini has declared himself against any co-operation with communists, 'even to bring down the Shah.' His 'democratic' programme would enshrine a religious obscurantism in a new constitution. Should the working class appear to threaten Iranian, Moslem private property (including the massive riches of the mosques) but prove unable to draw the non proletarian masses behind it and seize power, then Khomeini or another religious leader could use the petty bourgeoisie and lumpen-proletariat as fascist terror squads against the workers. Alternatively the Ulema could sanctify a new military dictatorship. At the moment, however, these masses, with all their religious prejudices, have democratic aspirations, that is, they believe that democratic rights will alleviate their social needs. If Khomeini reconciled himself to an 'Islamic' military dictatorship immediately the Shah fell, he would undoubtedly lose his mass following rapidly.

It is illusions in the anti-imperialist and democratic credentials of Khomeini and the mullahs that revolutionaries must challenge. To do this means participation by Iranian Trotskyists in the struggles launched by those leaders, under clear, independent slogans with full warnings about the religious leaders. Democratic demands have enormous importance. Correctly and fully posed they can win first the proletariat and then other oppressed strata away from the religious and bourgeois leadership. The working class is, and can be, the only consistently democratic force. The demands that they fight for must include freedom of speech, assembly and the press, legality for trade unions and political parties and the right to strike. The question of Iran's national minorities must not be forgotten, the Shah's empire is a 'prison house of nationalities'. Only 50% of Iran's population speak Farsi (Persian) though another two related languages make up another 11%. The rest belong to distinct national ethnic groups, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs. The right to self determination, up to and including separation, must be defended by

the Iranian proletariat. They must support any national uprising of these peoples.

Likewise Iranian revolutionaries must fight for the full democratic rights of women and their emancipation from the age-old restrictions imposed by religion as well as the State. The right to own and dispose of property, entry to all occupations, equal rights in the family, in real, full legal equality in all spheres. Women have been active participants in the movement against the Shah. The religious leaders have tried to limit them to propagating the idea of a full return to the veil and the full rigours of Islamic law. Women must be won to the side of the only class capable of gaining not only their equal rights but, via the destruction of capitalism, achieving their full social emancipation. A clear majority of Iran's population is rural, consisting of landless or small land owning peasants. The proletariat must raise the slogan 'the land to those who till it'. Part of the reason for the stability of the Pahlavi dynasty and for the effectiveness of the army as an instrument of repression, is the quiescence of the peasantry. In early December, the Shah is reported to have anxiously asked a visitor, 'But are the peasants also against me?' (Le Monde 6.12.78). The workers must encourage peasant seizure of large estates belonging to the old aristocracy, the Imperial family, the court clique and the foreign agricultural enterprises. Whether an individual or a collective form of land ownership prevails will depend on the time scale of the proletarian seizure of power.

There are numerous religious minorities in Iran; Sunni Moslems, Armenians, Jews, Baha'is etc. A Shi'ite republic would be oppressive to them as well as to women and the working class. Therefore, the demand for complete secularisation, the separation of Mosque and State is vital. The proletariat does not seek to trample on the religious scruples of any grouping where these affect only believers and do not violate the democratic rights of others.

All these democratic demands culminate in the demand for a constituent assembly, elected by full suffrage and with full powers, that is with no committee of Ulema's to veto its actions. These demands, consistently and vigorously fought for, would enable the vanguard of the proletariat to rally behind it the social forces to ensure that the revolutionary process which has opened up in Iran is not aborted in the form of an Islamic military Bonapartism or of an inherently unstable bourgeois democracy with enormous concessions to Shi'ite theocracy. The Iranian revolution, if it is to accomplish even its anti-imperialist and democratic tasks, must become proletarian. However, the 'revolution in permanence' of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky is not an unconscious or automatic process. It necessitates a Bolshevik vanguard party which has won the leadership of an armed working class organised in Soviets. To this task Iranian revolutionaries must devote themselves. British communists must render them every possible assistance.

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