



Solidarity with the workers and youth of Kazakhstan!

Martin Suchanek Fri, 07/01/2022 - 16:43

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Mass protests have been rocking Kazakhstan since the beginning of the year. They began on Sunday, January 2, in Zhanaozen in the western region of Mangystau, the centre of the oil and gas industry that is crucial to the country's economy. It was the workers of these industries, plus tens of thousands of unemployed, who mobilised in this movement.

By January 3, the entire Mangystau region was gripped by a general strike, which then spread to the neighbouring region of Atyrau. Within days, they inspired spontaneous mass protests in Almaty, the country's largest city, and even in the new capital Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana).

Like the revolutions of the Arab Spring, demonstrations quickly developed into an incipient popular uprising, as a direct result of an increase in gas prices at the turn of the year, when a price cap was lifted. Almost overnight, the price of gas, which is used by the majority of the population for cars, heating and cooking, doubled.

The movement rapidly developed from strikes and protests against these drastic price rises into a movement against the authoritarian capitalist government. From the beginning, the workers of the central industries played a key role in the struggle, forming the social and economic backbone of the movement.

The Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan not only reports in great detail on the expansion of the strike movement in a statement on the situation in the country (<http://socialismkz.info/?p=26802> [1]), but also on a mass meeting of the workers, where the demand for the resignation of the president was raised for the first time:

"In Zhanaozen itself, the workers formulated new demands at their open-ended rally: the resignation of the current president and all Nazarbayev officials, the restoration of the 1993 constitution and the freedom it gives to form parties and trade unions, the release of political prisoners and an end to repression. The Council of Aksakals was established as an informal body of power." (<http://socialismkz.info/?p=26802> [1])

Carrot and stick

The state leadership under President Tokayev, who has been in office for two years, responded to the protest movement with carrots and sticks, concessions and brutal repression.

To appease the population, the increase in gas prices was withdrawn. In addition, the government resigned and, soon after, the chairman of the Security Council, former President Nazarbayev. However, these changes are purely cosmetic. After the head of government, Askar Mamim, resigned, his former deputy, Alichan Smailov, took over.

Nazarbayev, who ruled the country autocratically for some 30 years and continues to be chairman of the ruling Nur Otan (Light of the Fatherland) party, which has 76 of 98 seats in parliament, did step down as chairman of the Security Council, a kind of secondary president. His place was taken by his successor Tokayev.

Above all, however, the president reacted to the mass protests, the occupation of public buildings and the threat of an uprising against the ruling elite with massive repression. The more riotous street protests in cities such as Almaty were brutally suppressed, with several dozen people killed. Even the government speaks of 26 "armed criminals" having been liquidated by 6 January. More than 3000 were arrested, thousands injured.

With this, the regime itself admits that it is walking over dead bodies to restore its power, its "law and order". It is only doing what all capitalist governments, all repressive regimes, do when their power is threatened. They defame the mass movement as "criminals", as "terrorists" to justify a "state of emergency", until January 19 initially, the use of firearms against protesters and the shutdown of media like Signal and WhatsApp and of the internet.

According to President Tokayev, the so-called anti-terrorist operations are to last until the "complete extermination of the militants". To carry out this brutal operation, they call in their great imperialist protector, Russia. Putin's soldiers immediately pour in, supposedly to help restore "constitutional order" within the framework of the "Collective Security Treaty Organisation" (CSTO). Their "mission" is to protect government buildings and critical infrastructure and they have the right to use their weapons.

Causes of the political crisis

In view of this concentration of forces of the regime and its allies, there is clearly a threat of a brutal suppression of the mass movement. This would not be the first time in the country's history. For decades, Nazarbayev ruled with an iron fist. Political power was effectively concentrated in a small oligarchy that controlled the country's economy, including the rich oil and gas fields, large strategic deposits of other raw materials and the financial sector.

The regime based its power on its control of the state apparatus, the state party Nur Otan, the de facto elimination of independent media and any significant opposition. Even the so-called Communist Party was banned by the courts in 2015.

In addition to repression, however, Kazakhstan's pseudo-democracy also relied for years on economic growth. Oil and gas exports are still the backbone of the economy. Added to this is mining. Kazakhstan is now the world's largest producer of uranium and has other important raw material deposits, such as manganese, iron, chrome and coal.

For years, the Kazakh economy expanded and was considered an economic miracle among the former Soviet republics, albeit an authoritarian one. This not only led to the expansion of economic, political and military relations with Russia and China, but also attracted large Western investors, especially in the oil and gas industry, for example, Exxon and ENI. Ultimately, however, the country represents an important semi-colonial ally of Russia, which cannot under any circumstances allow this regime to fall.

Kazakhstan also produced a financial centre in Almaty that is weighty compared to other semi-colonial countries, but this was hit hard in 2014/15 as oil and gas prices fell on the world market. GDP growth rates plummeted, and the country has basically been going through a phase of economic stagnation since then.

As in many rentier countries whose revenues come largely from raw material and energy exports, the development of Kazakh capitalism has been accompanied by an extreme form of social inequality. The new layer of capitalists from the former state bureaucracy effectively monopolised the country's wealth. For years, however, this enrichment went hand in hand with investments in other sectors such as expansion of infrastructure and transport routes and essentials for the masses, whose cost of living was kept relatively low by capping gas prices.

This has become increasingly difficult for Kazakh capitalism to maintain. The rulers do not willingly give a cent to the poor. On the contrary, they are pushing, in chorus with Western economic experts, to abolish their "privileges" (!) and to further liberalise the economy. In return, they promise investments in the oil and gas industry, or in mining, to renew outdated facilities or to open up new sites.

Social inequality is therefore particularly blatant in the very places where wealth is created and produced. While the bosses of Kazakhstan's energy and mining companies and the state leadership have built themselves veritable palaces, the workers in the oil and gas fields slave away, often in life-threatening conditions. Many wait months for their wages, and now tens of thousands of workers in the oil and gas industry are unemployed.

It is no coincidence that the movement began as a gigantic strike wave in Western Kazakhstan. In 2011, there was a

huge wave of strikes by oil workers, which was bloodily put down. According to human rights organisations, 70 strikers lost their lives and 500 were injured, some of them seriously. Despite this extreme repression, however, independent, illegal or semi-legal, working class organisations survived in these regions. Faced with the threat of dismissals and non-payment of wages, strikes and industrial action in the oil and gas industry continued to increase in the last months of 2021.

This also explains the differences between the movement in the industrial centres in Western Kazakhstan, which is organised by workers and uses the strike, that is, collective working class action, as the main means of struggle. Crucially, their demands have long since gone beyond company and trade union issues and have taken on a political character: resignation of the president, release of political prisoners.

Some of these are spilling over into other regions where, initially, the movement was more of a revolt of the urban poor, of young people, but also of migrant workers from rural regions. Their anger and indignation, precisely because these layers are less organised, took on a politically less clear, diffuse character. Nevertheless, this movement is no less a genuine expression of mass indignation against a despotic, authoritarian capitalist regime.

That such movements include vandalism and the involvement of declassed, apolitical elements or even state provocateurs, is not surprising. That has always been the case with apparently spontaneous, but in reality long suppressed, eruptions of popular anger. What is crucial is whether this anger can become an organised force and that depends on whether the working class, above all the oil and gas workers, can give it political leadership.

A bloody reckoning looms

The real "criminals", however, are not to be found on the streets of Astana or other towns. They are in the palaces of the rich and the bureaucrats and among the general staffs of the army and repressive forces who are preparing a bloody reckoning with the insurgents and above all with the striking and militant workers.

People like Nazarbayev and Tokayev have long since decided how they intend to solve the crisis. They want to drown the movement in blood; not only the turmoil in the cities, but also, and above all, the strikes and organisations of the working class in the industrial regions. After all, they know only too well that a social force, a class movement, is forming there that can threaten their whole regime.

The workers of the big industrial regions and other layers such as transport workers, can paralyse the country. In this way, they can obstruct the repressive machinery, possibly paralysing the lower ranks of the repressive apparatus and winning over the rank and file troops.

This danger is pushing the regime to act and explains why it has requested Russian troops, whose mere presence is supposed to ensure the discipline of potentially "unsafe" Kazakh police or soldiers.

The next few days will be of the utmost importance for the movement. To stop the repressive machinery, a nationwide general strike is needed. For this, as in the regions of the oil and gas industry, general workers' assemblies must be organised, in both workplaces and residential areas. Workers' committees must be elected to organise the struggle, linking together to form action councils at the municipal, regional and national levels.

In the face of repression, these must form self-defence organisations subordinate to these councils and capable of replacing the unorganised rioters in cities like Astana with organisations rooted in workplaces and neighbourhoods.

At the same time, they need to agitate among rank and file soldiers and the lower ranks of the police, to refuse to be used against the population, to elect their own committees and to renounce allegiance to the murderous regime. The Kazakh and repressive forces must be withdrawn from the cities and workers' districts, the CSTO troops should leave the country, the prisoners of recent days must be freed.

Such a general strike and a movement supporting it would necessarily raise the question of power. The organisations of

the mass strike movement must themselves become an alternative centre of power that can overthrow the oligarchic regime and replace it with a workers' government. Such a government would not only abolish despotic pseudo-democracy but also expropriate the capitalist class in whose interests this regime rules. This means the expropriation of big industry, the oil and gas fields, the mines and the financial institutions, under workers' control, and the establishment of a democratic emergency plan to reorganise the economy and secure the basic needs of the masses.

No to all imperialist interference! International solidarity now!

The mass movement also brought Kazakhstan to the attention of a world public from whom the crimes of the Nazarbayev regime and his successor, Tokayev, had been hidden for decades. What does the repression and murder of strikers matter if profits flow abundantly into the pockets of Kazakh, Russian, Chinese, but also US, Italian, German and British corporations?

The Kazakh regime may have violated democratic rights and suppressed journalists and the opposition, but it advanced the most important "human" right, the right to free trade and economic reforms, very much to the liking of all foreign powers.

Of course, Kazakhstan was and is, above all, a semi-colony of Russia. It was not only closely linked politically for decades, but the economically weak Russian imperialism could even profit from its market and its resources. In addition, there is the membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the CSTO and the importance of Baikonur for Russian space travel. Moreover, the country's geo-strategic position provides an important shield for Russia from further destabilisation in Central Asia. No wonder, then, that Russia is fully joining in the chorus of "fighting terror" and standing by its ally.

Ironically, however, not only China but also most Western imperialist countries have an interest in the stability of Kazakhstan, whether to secure their economic interests, their investments, or to stabilise the country against "Islamist terror". The former British head of government, Tony Blair, even acted for years as Nazarbayev's advisor in dealing with Western media, especially in the face of counter-insurgency. Moreover, Kazakhstan cooperated for years in the US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Therefore, Western statements on the situation in Kazakhstan have so far been comparatively restrained. For example, in a conversation with his Kazakh counterpart, Mukhtar Tleuberdi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared "the full support of the United States for Kazakhstan's constitutional institutions and media freedom".

From the EU, as so often, comes the noncommittal call for "moderation" on all sides. Clearer here is the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations and its chairman, Oliver Hermes, who told the press: "A rapid calming of the situation is indispensable to avert further bloodshed, a destabilisation of the country and thus also damage to Kazakhstan as a business and investment location." (<https://www.fr.de/politik/kasachstan-unruhen-tote-demonstration-gas-prei...> [2])

The West's relative restraint is not only to be explained in economic terms, a geo-strategic calculation also plays a role. Russian support for the bloody suppression of the insurgents in Kazakhstan can be tolerated but, in return, there are demands for a "concession" in Ukraine or at least silence on its further armament.

It is all the more urgent that the international working class and the left take their solidarity with the mass movement in Kazakhstan to the streets.

No to the suppression of the mass movement!

Immediate end to the state of emergency and all restrictions on democratic rights!

Release all political prisoners!

No to Russian intervention!

Immediate withdrawal of all CSTO troops!

International solidarity with the working class and protest movement!

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/solidarity-workers-and-youth-kazakhstan>

Links:

[1] <http://socialismkz.info/?p=26802>

[2] <https://www.fr.de/politik/kasachstan-unruhen-tote-demonstration-gas-preise-proteste-flughafen-putin-russland-news-aktuell-zr-91219297.html>