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Iran

Protests in Iran need solidarity

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During the past two weeks, the ongoing wave of protests and strikes in Iran have gained a new intensity.

On the one hand, the impact of the second and more cruel wave of the U.S. Trump administration's sanctions on Iran is truly breaking the backs of the masses. Although the sanctions which are aimed at stopping Iran's oil exports, technically do not include food and medicine imports, the way in which they prevent banking transactions between Iran and the rest of the world, practically prevents payment for food and medicine. Thus the majority of Iran's 82 million people are suffering from the shortage of food, medicine and basic services. In addition they face the sharp decline in the value of the currency, rial, astronomical inflation, more lay offs and non-payment of wages, which are also related to the problems of Iran's economy prior to the re-imposition of the sanctions. Given the massive decline in the value of the rial, the minimum wage is now down to the equivalent of \$100 per month for a family of four, which is lower than the World Bank's definition of absolute poverty (\$2 per day for each person).

On the other hand, Iranian regime leaders, not only Ayatollah Khamenei, but also President Rouhani, the "reformist", have been even more shameless in their public speeches about how "well" the Iranian economy is still doing and how the masses of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen are supporting the Iranian masses in their "valiant struggle" against U.S. imperialism. At the same time, the corruption of government authorities which is acknowledged by some government leaders is creating even more anger among the people.

The oil-producing and industrial province of Khuzestan in southern Iran continues to be the most active site of labor, environmental and human rights struggles. Continuing strikes of the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Workers (4500 employees) in Shush and the National Steel of Ahvaz (4000 workers) throughout this year have involved the participation of their family members (women and children) and have led to marches in the cities of Ahvaz and Shush and protests in front of provincial government buildings in both cities. On November 18, 18 Haft Tapeh workers as well as a woman reporter were arrested. Other workers, family members, concerned attorneys and residents of Shush have gathered in front of the Shush justice department to protest these arrests and demand to know where the arrested workers and reporter are being held. So far 12 have been released. Below, see a report and videos of striking steel workers in solidarity with sugar cane workers where workers chant: "Death to this demagogic government" and "Neither the ruler, nor the government are thinking about the people.". [1]

Truck drivers nationwide have had three strikes during the past six months. There have also been other labor protests in the oil and petrochemical industry in Khuzestan, protests of farmers demanding water for their crops, protests of municipal workers as well as starving retiree who have formed their own organization.

While labor protests demand back pay, benefits, job security and safety, the Iranian government continues to "privatize" companies that it has previously owned directly. It hands them to contractors which are really extensions of the state and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and only provide short-term employment contracts or no employment contract with no benefits and no enforcement of Iran's meager labor regulations. In response, Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane workers have demanded the right to fully or partially manage the company themselves

Khuzestan is also the site of important human rights and environmental struggles. Environmental problems caused by the building of dams for electricity, the pollution generated by the petrochemical industry, the overuse of underground water reservoirs by rapacious capitalist development, and global climate change itself, have led to the destruction of marshes, massive water shortage and severe air pollution.

Last Spring, large protests against water shortage, intense air pollution and lack of respect for the cultural and language rights of Iran's ethnic Arab population took place in Khuzestan. Later, when the Iranian government stopped diverting water from the Karun river to the Iraqi city of Basra, in order to pacify the Khuzestan protests, its actions in turn created power outages in Iraq by disrupting hydroelectric power there. In late August and early September, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets of Basra to call on the Iraqi government to deliver crucial services including power and clear water. Protesters also opposed Iran's presence and influence in Iraq. Some stormed the Iranian consulate and set it on fire.

The Iranian regime is deeply afraid of any solidarity between Iraqi and Iranian struggles that oppose extremist and religious fundamentalist groups. Human rights activists in Khuzestan point out that the Iranian regime has facilitated the operation of Sunni fundamentalist groups in Khuzestan but has clamped down further on secular human rights and labor activists. [2]

After the September 22 attack on an Iranian military parade in Ahvaz, for which an Iranian Arab separatist group, Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz [ASMLA], took responsibility, over 1000 Iranian Arab intellectuals, human rights, political, civic and media activists as well as some of their spouses and children were arrested by the regime. On November 10, 22 of those arrested, none of whom had any connection to ASMLA were executed without any trial and buried in unmarked graves. [3]

The Iranian regime is also afraid of the struggles for self-determination in Iranian Kurdistan which has a strong labor dimension. On September 14, a mass strike in Iranian Kurdistan was declared against the executions of four Kurdish political prisoners, Ramin Hossein Panahi, Zanyar Moradi and Loghman Moradi, Kamal Ahmadinejad, and against Iran's missile attacks on Kurdish dissidents in Northern Iraq. (See the following article on the connection between these executions, attacks and the September 7 Tehran Summit of Rouhani, Putin, Erdogan as well as the later September 13 Sochi meeting of Putin-Erdogan on Syria, Idlib and the Kurds. [4]

Nationwide, Iranian teachers continue to be in the forefront of the struggle both for economic and human rights. They have struck twice since the beginning of the new school year and demand better pay/benefits than their current poverty wages, the right to organize, the right to a free education for all, and no discrimination against religious and national minorities for whom they recognize the right to public education in their own language (Kurdish, Azari or Arabic). They demand the immediate release of imprisoned leaders of the teacher's union such as Esmail Abdi, Mohammad Beheshti Langeroodi, Mohammad Habibi who are serving long prison sentences for the "crime" of organizing a union. Others have received shorter prison sentences, or lashes, or have been exiled. Striking teachers continue to be threatened with expulsion or exile. [5]

Most determined have been imprisoned feminists. The most notable ones are Nasrin Sotudeh, human rights attorney for Girls of Revolution Avenue (women arrested for removing their hijab in public), Narges Mohammadi, activist against the death penalty, Zeynab Jalalian, Kurdish political activist, Golrokh Iraee, writer, Atena Daemi, children's rights activist. Other feminists have been imprisoned for organizing workshops on women's rights. Feminist men like Arash Sadeghi and Farhad Meysami are also in prison. Some have tried to call attention to their plight through hunger strikes. All are suffering from various prison-related health problems. Sotudeh has been denied family visits because she refuses to wear the full hijab during visits. Mohammadi has not seen her children for several years. Jalalian has gone blind. [6]

On October 22, Farshid Hakki, human rights, children's rights and environmental activist, was stabbed to death outside his home, and was then burned by the agents of the Iranian government. Five other environmental activists, women and men, have been accused of espionage and charged with the crime of "spreading corruption on earth" which is a capital crime. In February, Kavous Seyed Emami, a sociology professor and environmental activist was murdered in prison.

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University students have also had a presence in some of the above protests and have had their own protests at Tehran and Alameh Tabatabai universities as well as other provinces to oppose the imposition of government fees for services/ courses that were previously free, and to challenge the banning of “starred” students (political activists). University students arrested for supporting the December 2017/January 2018 popular protests against the Islamic Republic are still fighting prison sentences handed down by courts. On November 20, students at Tehran and Alameh Tabatabai Universities held a gathering to express their solidarity with the striking Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane workers, other striking workers and teachers. [7]

Last but not least, a group of political prisoners from the notorious Gohardasht prison near Tehran have just issued a statement to express their support for the striking workers at Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Factory and Ahvaz Steel. In this statement, they state: “The resistance of the honorable and hardworking workers of Haft Tapeh and Ahvaz Steel is another angry scream of the oppressed and workers of a people who can no longer tolerate the plunder and repression of a corrupt government. A people who daily see the plunder of the results of their hard work, and who are subjected to poverty, hunger and catastrophic misery so that their wealth can be used to stoke the fire of terrorism and war or repress their protests, have finally correctly identified their enemy. We the political prisoners of Gohardasht . . . believe that the only legitimate and just solution to oppression and plunder can be reached through an uprising and an insurrection. Such a pathway, based on the nationwide unity of all unions and oppressed sectors of society, will uproot the plunderers and oppressors.” [8]

Clearly, the diversity of popular forces protesting and striking in Iran is impressive. The objective economic situation given the internal economic crises of Iranian capitalism, the effects of its militarist interventions abroad, and the severe effects of the cruel U.S. sanctions are also making a meager existence impossible for the majority of Iran’s population of 82 million.

What still remains to be seen is the presence of a socialist vision and organizing that would build on the above-mentioned struggles as well as the December 2017-January 2018 protests’ call for ending Iran’s military interventions in the region and ending the Islamic Republic. We need new efforts by the younger generation of Iranian socialists to oppose Iranian nationalism, expose Iran’s militarized state capitalism, defend women’s rights, LGBT rights, the rights of Iran’s oppressed minorities, and address the connections between militarism and the assaults on the standard of living at home.

Without such a vision and organizing, the ideological and organizational campaign of the Iranian monarchists who call for a return to the “good old days of the Shah” remains appealing.

Socialists around the world who want to express their solidarity with the Iranian struggles cannot simply limit themselves to opposing the brutal and cruel sanctions of the U.S. government. They need to also express their opposition to the Iranian regime, publicize the plight of the striking Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane workers and other labor activists, including teachers, defend the imprisoned feminists and the imprisoned Arab and Kurdish activists. Most importantly, we need a dialogue on how socialism can truly mean human emancipation and not another form of capitalist oppression/exploitation.

Nov 22, 2018

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