

Iran—The Working Class Raises Its Head

An analysis of the situation in Iran from an anarchist communist perspective.

Anarchist Communist Group

7th January 2018

After the “moderate” cleric Hassan Rouhani was re-elected in the Iranian presidential elections of 2017 his regime which had been pushing neo-liberal ideas continued on the same course. The public health service has been slashed so much it hardly exists, and job and workplace security have gone. Many jobs are now precarious (short-term contracts etc.) whilst the professionals—doctors, technicians, etc. have seen their living standards pushed down drastically. Whilst the capital Tehran has been allowed to grow, many regional cities and towns have seen conditions deteriorate, and the same goes for provision to the various ethnic groups within Iran.

Many people have been forced to cut back drastically on foodstuffs they had previously considered as essential (dairy and meat products). Unemployment is rampant. There is a whole swathe of young people born in the 1980s, many of whom are college and university graduates who have not been able to get jobs, or if they have are earning very low wages. Unemployment runs at 40% or more among young people.

The past year has seen a number of low-key and little reported demonstrations, rallies and sit-ins. These include bus drivers supporting their independent organisations, pensioners protesting against increasing attacks on their allowances, teachers and nurses protesting against their conditions, and students opposing the privatisation of education.

Rouhani pushed a new plan for unpaid internships which was strongly opposed by students. A leading activist among the bus drivers was imprisoned and treated appallingly.

This situation was aggravated by the earthquake of November 12th. Those who survived were treated contemptuously by officials which brought a wave of widespread disgust amongst the Iranian population. This was further aggravated by the annual budget announcement of the Rouhani regime. Damage from the earthquakes ran at \$600 million but the government failed to provide a reconstruction programme, leaving this up to donations from individuals! On the other hand various propaganda bodies of the regime received a budget of \$15. Fuel prices were increased by 50%. No funds were provided for state construction programmes.

In addition to this there was a growing awareness of widespread corruption and embezzlement among officials of the regime.

Matters came to a head with the first protest in Iran’s second city Mashdad on December 28th. This city is a stronghold of the mullahs and has been a tax haven for the regime’s functionaries. At the same time has seen a huge growth of slum areas.

It seems that the initial Mashdad protest was set off by fundamentalists of the political establishment opposed to Rouhani's "reformist" line- that is in opposition to his opening up Iran to foreign investment and a comparatively softer line to the West. However the protests quickly spread from Mashdad to other towns and cities and took on a different character. Heavily involved in the protests were many young people, those between the ages of fifteen and thirty, with no jobs and no job prospects or in precarious work situations. The protests centred on economic conditions, the corruption of the elite and the budget. Initial slogans of "Down with high prices!" were soon supplemented by "Down with the dictator" and "Death to Khamenei"- Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. In addition many were concerned about the regime's involvement in armed intervention in Syria and Iraq. This attempt by the regime to increase its influence in the region has resulted in growing anger about not just lives expended in these ventures but vast amounts spent on wars whilst poverty and unemployment increase dramatically at home. This resulted in another slogan chanted on the streets:" Forget about Syria- think about us!"

Another factor at play has been the threat of climate change with drought severely affecting crops. Two summers ago, the oil town of Bandar-e Mahshahr experienced a temperature of 163 degrees Fahrenheit. It is predicted that if worldwide emissions are not reduced drastically then by 2070 the Persian Gulf could experience temperatures impossible or humans to survive.

But the protests have been riddled with contradictions with politicians pushing bourgeois democracy attempting to hijack the protests, as well as supporters of the overthrown Shah and various reactionary religious currents. This was countered by many among the youth taking part in the protests. Reactionary slogans that appeared like "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I will die only for Iran" and "We are Aryans, we don't worship Arabs" were countered with "From Gaza to Iran, down with the exploiters". Other slogans referred to the setting up of people's councils and against the false division between reformist and fundamentalist tendencies of the regime.

Tens of thousands have taken part in protests and at least twenty one have been killed by the brutal security forces, and many arrested. The regime claimed victory, with General Mohammad Ali Jafari, leader of the Revolutionary Guards, a paramilitary force that has kept the regime in power for decades, saying "Today we announce the end of the sedition". However, since then protests have continued to break out.

The regime has attempted to blame the protests are being managed by the USA and its regional allies Israel and Saudi Arabia. Indeed Trump has tweeted his "support" for the protestors. The emergence of the Iranian working class in these protests contradicts all of this. Trump has overseen the rich in the United States being rewarded with huge tax cuts. To pay for this means huge attacks on health care, social security and other welfare benefits. And of course there are the many allegations of corruption against the Trump regime. How different is the situation for American workers from that of Iranian workers?

Similarly Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has praised the protestors. Again, how different is the situation of workers within the Israeli state when thousands have protested there against the corruption of the Netanyahu administration at the same time as the protests in Iran?

We also have "anti-imperialist" leftists chiming in, especially in the USA, implying the protests are manipulated by the CIA and tacitly supporting the theocratic regime in Iran.

For ourselves, as anarchist communists, we support the developing protests of the working class in Iran. Repression may temporarily stop this movement but it is a sign of the working class re-asserting itself as crises continue in all the political institutions around the world, includ-

ing within the left parties. The 2008 financial crisis resulted in massive attacks on the working class around the world, attacks on pensions and social benefits, the slashing of public services, increasing divisions between rich and poor and a constant threat of war. Now these pressures are resulting in re-emerging revolts.

Finally, the 1979 revolution in Iran which overthrew the Shah saw huge demonstrations, the occupation of factories and the development of workers' councils. It was thought impossible that such a heavily armed regime as that of the Shah could be overthrown, yet it happened. This was betrayed by the Stalinist Tudeh party, which had great influence among the working class. Tudeh's decision to ally with the Shia cleric the Ayatollah Khomeini because he was seen as a progressive leader of a democratic revolution, enabled him to come to power. As a result Tudeh was silenced as were all left and progressive groups. The strong secular traditions in Iran were smothered. Khomeini recuperated some of the demands of the 1979 Revolution with pseudo-socialist rhetoric whilst at the same time calling for national unity and creating illusions in the common interests of the rich and poor.

Ayatollah Khomeini was a misogynist of the first order. The Family Protection Law enacted under the Shah's regime was suspended and women once more were at the mercy of men within the family. The Islamic dress code was imposed on women including girls from the first grade in school. At first pushing for population growth, the regime later reversed this policy and brought in a highly successful family planning programme, which resulted in Iran having the lowest population growth in the region. The regime reversed this again when it cut off funding to the programme in 2012.

The marriage age for girls was reduced to puberty, the age of nine under Islamic law. Punishments of flogging, stoning and payment of blood money were introduced in 1981 for crimes like adultery and violation of the Islamic dress code. Government funded day centres were closed down, making it difficult to stay in work.

Women had played an important role in the 1979 Revolution. Khomeini used co-option to tame this development. Women's right to vote was retained as was right to run in elections and women served in government positions at a national and local level. However they were often demoted or dismissed or given early retirement from these positions.

During the first ten years of the theocratic regime, women in work fell from 13% of the population to 8.6%. The Iran -Iraq war meant that women came forward as nurses, doctors and in other support roles. Rafsanjani, one of the founders of the regime was able to mobilise women's votes and portrayed himself as a comparative liberal as regards women's rights. It was he who installed the family planning programme. These policies were continued under the next president Mohammad Khatami. With the coming to power of Ahmadinejad these trends were reversed. The family planning programme was closed down.

Under Rouhani a loosening of attitudes as regards dress code was allowed, but this was against the move by security forces to clamp down on any development of feminism. But now women are involving themselves in the protests. One brave woman removed her hijab during a recent protest and waved it around on a stick to protest the dress code. We hope this is a sign of things to come. A successful revolution in Iran depends utterly on the role of women within it. The liberation of women must be a major motif of that revolution.

The rule by mullahs has lasted almost four decades. It rests primarily on the subjection of women and of the working class. Next time the working class moves into action in Iran it has to sweep away the mullahs, be they "fundamentalist" or "reformist".

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