

**Street protests amid the barbarity of capitalism**

**The only alternative is class struggle**



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“Proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, constantly criticize themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals – until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

[Here is the rose, here dance!]” [1]

## Introduction

In Jordan, in early June 2018, a wave of protests took to the streets in protest at high levels of inflation and unemployment along with the austerity policy of the Jordanian government. Against this backdrop, not only the rulers of Jordan, but also the rulers of the region were obliged to come up with a solution and stop the spread of these protests before they arrived on their doorstep. The regional powers did not sense that the conditions were appropriate to help Jordan; meanwhile, the austerity policies temporarily failed and the protests subsided.

Following this, in protest at the excessive water and electricity costs and unemployment levels, street protests started in Basra and rapidly extended to the southern and central provinces of Iraq. The Iraqi capital, Baghdad, was also the scene of street protests. The protests temporarily subsided when three billion US dollars were allocated to the province of Basra to start construction projects. These Iraqi protests have not yet subsided, while a new round of street protests sprung up in the cities of Iran in response to price increases and inflation. Protests have spread to major cities including Tehran and are ongoing.

The rebellion of the hungry, atomized and oppressed in society and collective protests against this upside-down world are magnificent. The basic question to be asked is, what is the context of these street protests? What has been the role of the working class as a social class in them? Has the revolution started in the Middle East? What role is played by the right and left tendencies of capital? Should the working class, as the “masses”, join the street protests? What should internationalists do with regard to the street protests?

As a scholar of the proletariat has pointed out, contrary to the bourgeois movements, the working class and the internationalists, in the process of constantly criticizing and interrupting themselves, as well as assessing their weaknesses, are preparing themselves for future battles, more forcefully than ever. The examination of these street protests is a step towards the transparency of the proletarian and internationalist positions, as well as the advancement of internationalist positions. [2]

## Protests in Jordan

Unlike other countries in the region, Jordan's peripheral capitalism does not involve oil revenues. Nor does the country have any advanced industry or a strong economy. Jordan's debt is more than 35 billion US dollars and the government experiences a shortage of funds each year and needs foreign aid. Jordan's peripheral capitalism has been in an extremely critical state, and in response the International Monetary Fund (IMF) called for a series of structural and financial reforms to address its growing public debt. In return, the IMF promised Jordan 723 million US dollars in aid. The stated goal of these structural reforms was to increase the price of goods to reflect their production cost, in other words, to eliminate subsidies. Such a policy has led to price increases for the basic commodities of bread, electricity, fuel, cigarettes and so on. Increasing commodity prices has also led to an increase in income and corporate taxes. Bread has symbolically appeared on the banners of those protesting this policy, emphasizing corruption of the elites means hunger for the masses (look at the picture).



Unlike those who try to falsely, and at all costs, assess the street protests in an anarchist way in order to intensify the class struggle in Jordan and turn the working class into a (supernumerary) black army of street protesters, it has to be realistic. The working class in Jordan, as a social class, is one of the weakest in the Middle East, both in terms of numbers, in terms of industrial concentration and in terms of battles that have been fought and inscribed on its historical memory.

There are speculations that Saudi Arabia has suspended its aid to Jordan. Meanwhile, Jordan recently failed to support Saudi policies in some areas and, in particular, criticized Trump's policy regarding the Jerusalem issue, while showing no hostility towards Iran. Saudi Arabia's suspension of aid was accompanied by a spark of protests, criticizing the economic policies of Jordan's surrounding capitalist states.

Jordan's unemployment rate is about 19%, while 20% of Jordanians live below the poverty line. The austerity policy of the government has plagued the people and dissatisfaction has risen sharply. On 30 May 2018, around 30 trade unions organized a general strike after the government submitted a new austerity policy to parliament [3]. The unions' goal was to channel the protests to prevent the radicalization of the protests. Following the implementation of the austerity policy, on 31 May 2018, many protesters came to the streets

and gathered in front of the Prime Minister's office. While the protests were peaceful, the protesters blocked some roads with burning tyres.

The Crown Prince of Jordan was present at the protest rally in front of the Prime Minister's office and demagogically asked the security forces to allow the voices of the protesters to be heard. Although the security forces used tear gas and other methods to disperse the protesters, as well as closed the roads, they prevented the protesters from gathering in the centre of the city; however, they tried to avoid perpetrating violence as much as possible.

Following the escalation of the Jordanian social crisis, which could have spread to other countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia called for a meeting in the presence of UAE, Kuwait and Jordan in Mecca. In a final statement, the quartet, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait pledged 2.5 billion US dollars in economic aid to Jordan. That said, Jordan will only receive economic aid if it commits to following the policies of Saudi Arabia.

The King of Jordan dismissed the Prime Minister after securing aid from the regional states to calm the protests and ordered the cessation of rising prices because of the help he had received. The King also demagogically stated that the heavy burden of economic reforms would not only be borne Jordan's citizen. This begs the question about whom is going to pay the considerable price of the capitalist crisis!

Unlike those who want to portray street protests as a class struggle, the Jordanian working class did not appear as a social class in the protests; rather, working men appeared as individuals, along with other strata of society, to protest against austerity policies. Although nationalism cast a shadow over the protests, the horror of the rulers was influenced by the radicalization of protests. If the protests had been fully radical and moves to places of work, with the working class as a social class taking charge of social events, it certainly would have had an impact on the intensification of the class struggle in the region.

## **Protests in Iraq**

On 11 February 2017, a contract was signed for the sale of electricity to Iraq between Iran and Iraq, according to which Iran shipped 1,200 megawatts of electricity to Iraq through three transit routes in Basra, Diyala and Al-Amara. On 6 July 2018, Iran suspended electricity exports to Iraq. On the one hand, there is urgent internal need for electricity and to deal with power outage problems in Iran; on the other hand, Iraq has not been able to pay for its electricity due to crises in the country. Iraq has debt arrears; indeed, it owes Iran about one billion US dollars for electricity purchases, and Iran needs foreign currency because of international sanctions and to prevent the collapse of the rial. Iran announced that the cutbacks in electricity exports were inevitable, but temporary, and hoped to re-export electricity to Iraq, given that cutting back on electricity exports is in contravention of Iran's strategic policy in Iraq. Iran is the most influential country in Iraq.

The cutbacks in electricity exports from Iran have caused serious dilemmas in the Iraqi electricity grid, resulting in power outages in extremely hot weather. To this end, a delegation from Iraq headed to Iran to reach an agreement on the resumption of electricity exports. On 16 July 2018, the Iraqi Minister of Electricity announced that the Iraqi delegation was unable to reach a consensus with the authorities in Tehran, meaning that Iran could not resume electricity exports. In turn, the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity has proposed an alternative energy supply for the country to the Prime Minister.

It was in this context that Al Arabiya referred to Iran as one of the factors underlying the Iraqi protests, because, at a time when Iraq was facing the worst of circumstances, Iran suspended electricity exports to Iraq.

Another serious problem in Iraq is the dehydration problem, which has become a serious crisis for Iraq in recent years following the opening of numerous Turkish dams on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The water crisis in its own way has led to a haze crisis, even in Iraq. The protests began in Basra in mid-July against power outages, water shortages, a lack of government services and high rates of unemployment, especially youth unemployment. The security forces, by imposing restrictions on night traffic and disrupting Internet services, tried to prevent the spread of the protests. However, they quickly extended to the southern provinces and central Iraq, which are mostly Shiite areas. Protesters closed the roads with burning tires and attacked government buildings.

During the attacks and stone-throwing by protesters on the building of the Badr Corps, the pro-Iranian militia, one demonstrator was killed and several people were injured. Demonstrators also attacked the Al-Dawa, Hezbollah and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which are backed by Iran. This has been a problem for Iranian gangsters, especially the Quds Force and its commander Qassem Suleimani. There is speculation that the Iraqi army has resorted to using Iran-backed militia to suppress street protests.



Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the popular Shiite Moqtada al-Sadr declared their support for the street protests in order to influence them. The Iraqi police state also spied on the protesters and stressed that the authorities would use their best efforts to protect the lives of demonstrators, which was just a lie used to calm down the protesters. At the same time, the state claimed that saboteurs had infiltrated the protests to cause violence at the gatherings. The Prime Minister of Iraq ordered the formation of a committee to examine the demands of the protesters.

Basra is a strategic port in Iraq. Despite this, the city is one of the few cities in the Middle East where the drinking water system is in serious trouble and the water supply network is practically ineffective. The main volume of exports of Iraqi oil, the most important source of income in Iraq, comes from the port, which accounts for about 90% of the country's oil revenues. Protesters have argued that, despite the massive volumes of oil exports, oil revenue has not had any impact on their lives. The Iraqi Oil Minister Jabbar Al-Otiabi, in reaction to the demonstrations by the people of Basra, announced that, despite the mass protests, oil exports have not been affected by them and are still taking place. The occurrence of any disruption to Iraqi oilfields has a devastating effect on the Iraqi economy.

The Iraqi population is very young; about 60% are under the age of 20, while youth unemployment rate is twice the official unemployment rate. Reflecting their demands, one young person among the protestors declared:

“We want work, electricity and clean drinking water. We want to be treated with us as human beings and not animals.” [4]

Finally, the state, with its allocation of 3.5 trillion dinars, invested about three billion US dollars in Basra province to launch widespread development projects in order to bring calm among the people. The street protests temporarily collapsed in due course.

Unlike Jordan, the Iraqi working class is in a better position both in terms of industrial concentration and in terms of battles recorded throughout its history and in its historical memory. Although the gangsters' war has had a devastating effect on the Iraqi working class in the past 40 years, it is, nevertheless, one of the important battalions of the international working class. The Iraqi working class did not join the street protests as a social class. Atomized workers participated in street protests. Oil exports were not affected by the protests, as the Iraqi Minister of Oil said. Contrary to the anarchist view, the power of labour is not on the street but in the workplace, where it disturbs the process of capital accumulation. Saddam, through his brutal massacres, managed to keep his strength. But, if the Iraqi working class stops oil exports, the regime will collapse and the workers will assert their power as a social class.

### **New round of protests in Iran**

Following the fall in the value of the rial and the consequential inflation rise and overall economic turmoil, a new round of street protests in Iran began in late July 2018. The protests began in Isfahan and quickly spread to other major cities such as Shiraz, Ahvaz, Mashhad, Karaj and Tehran. The slogans against inflation quickly took on a political form.

In some of the protests, participants were confronted by police and, due to burning rubber, struggled to deal with the tear gas used to disperse them. At least one fatality and several wounded protesters have been reported. No detailed report on arrests has been announced. The police have tried to play a controlling role, using fewer arms in order to reduce the

number of victims and prevent the protests from escalating. As the Islamic bourgeoisie has great experience of suppressing protests, it has now tried to use non-repressive methods in addition to direct repression.

As in Jordan and Iraq, the bourgeoisie of Iran is aware of the dissatisfaction of the people, which it seeks to dismiss, if possible, by engineering lawful protests ‘for show’. Authorities refer to article 27 of the Iranian constitution, which relates to public meetings and peaceful protests, lying and shamelessly declaring that people can legitimately protest. Ahmad Alamolhoda, the Friday prayer leader in Mashhad, along with the demagogues tried to express sympathy, accused the government and the parliament of not responding enough to the unfolding crises and provided grounds for the protests. Like his other criminal congregation in Iraq, he emphasized that American spies should not put people in opposition to the system through protests.

Eventually, the Interior Minister of the Islamic bourgeoisie approached the street protesters and accused Iran’s enemies of trying to create social tension in the country. At the same time, he spoke, in humiliation, to a crowd of 50 to 200 people, insisting that the country would not collapse:

“The enemies are thinking that, if 50 to 200 people are gathered in one place, the situation in the interior will collapse, but they should know that nothing is going on.” [5]

The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist replied in response to those who were concerned about the future of the Islamic bourgeoisie in light of recent protests:

“We are not at all worried about our situation. No one can do a damn thing against us. To be sure, there is no doubt about this, so tell this to everyone.” [6]

### **The material context of the protests**

All these countries, Jordan, Iraq and Iran, have a young population; in other words, the percentage of young people is very high, while unemployment among the young population has become a nightmare. The younger generation in all of these countries aspires to realize political and social developments in society. The younger generation can imagine no horizon nor future for themselves. In fact, the downfall of the illusion of youth in Iraq and Iran in a social and political sense, along with the continuation of their hellish life, has provided the necessary social force for street protests.

The street protests are the result of a crisis in capitalism, in which metropolitan capitalism is trying to transfer the burden resulting from this crisis to peripheral capitalism. The policy of austerity, the freezing of real wages, widespread unemployment, temporary contracts, the collapse of living standards etc., are the destructive consequences of this crisis. The working class of Iran, as a battalion of the international working class, is the most concentrated and experienced in the Middle East, which has recorded its epic battles in its historical memory,

especially from the period 1978-1979. Despite the crisis of capitalism, the total added value produced in Iran in 2014 [7] was only about 11,438,919 billion rials [8].

### **Street protests and the labour movement**

The street protests of the poor against poverty, unemployment and inflation are also the protests of youth who are tired of their existing hellish life and have no hope for the future. These people have nothing to lose by protesting. Apart from the class composition of the participating forces, the demands and objectives of the protests determine the nature of that movement. It is in such a context that slogans are important and determine the orientation of the protests. The fact is that, along with slogans against inflation or dictatorships or calling for greater democracy, nationalist slogans overshadow the protests.

The unclear goals of the street protesters, whether in Jordan, in Iraq or in Iran, are among the most important signs of weakness. Moving away from the anti-dictatorship and nationalist slogans, and promoting proletarian class demands, are steps towards refining the class struggle. We should not become a black army in the democracy movement. In the street protests, from Jordan to Iraq and Iran, the working class has only been observed as a social class. Workers have not participated in the protests as a social class but as atomized individuals, and in particular as unemployed groups. As it is not clear if the protests have led to rebellion in Iraq and Iran, this suggests that protesters do not have a clear horizon or class outlook to their aims. Otherwise, it would appear in the form of an escalation of the class struggle. One of the most important properties of the current situation, especially in Iran (not in Jordan or Iraq), is the persistence of workers' strikes. In short, the working class is striking to defend livelihoods without having to join street protesters as a social class. Indeed, in Iraq, workers' strikes were held to protect livelihoods before the street protests.

### **Right wing of capital and street protests**

Capital is always looking for a good alternative to capital accumulation. Westerners, especially the US, have expressed their support for the Iranian protests out of their own imperialist interests. The main question is, why did the US not support the protests in Jordan and Iraq? After all, the protests in these countries were also in response to the austerity of the capitalist state! The irrefutable fact is that the West, with the US at its head, is worried about the radicalization of social protests, how to control and disperse them, and the loss of initiative for future alternatives. Therefore, it keeps the reactionary hordes in line with their imperialist interests. In the current situation, there is serious danger from the right wing of capital, which is threatening social protests. The advent and the radicalization of such protests have only been possible in the shadow of this right wing. The disclosure of a bourgeois, reactionary and subservient attitude among the right wing of capital is one of the most important priorities. This right wing is embodied in the PMOI (the mujahideen), the monarchists and the nationalists in Iran, and the populists, the nationalists and the reactionary religious gangs in Iraq, all of whom have many possibilities for engineering the public



opinion due to their vast financial resources and the support of Western and regional Arab countries.

One of the issues that arises is this: in the event of a weakening Islamic Republic, will Iran end up being fought over by big and small gangsters? Will Iran's destiny resemble that of Syria and Iraq? In particular, the areas of ethnocentrism in Iran are no smaller than in other countries in the region and have grown in recent years.

Definitely, the answer to these questions is both yes and no; in other words, it depends on the orientation and growth of social protests. But, if such protests do not take on a radical orientation and become a black army under the influence of reactionary currents, while it is not certain, there is a danger of the collapse of society. However, if social protests are complementary to the class struggle of the workers and the working class becomes the predominant social class in the social struggle, not only will the cause of any collapse of society disappear, but also the danger of war and the possibility of foreign interference. Meanwhile, the movement itself will expand the class struggle in the region because of its anti-capitalist nature. The expansion of the workers' struggle in the region will strengthen the class struggle in other countries, which in turn will fire the social struggle of workers in the region.

### **Working class or black army**

In the pseudo-anarchist view, protesting by the people in the streets manifests the class struggle. The frontier of the working-class struggle is damaged by people's protests. Any protest will be sacred. Everything is up for grabs; it would even be fake news to pretend that this struggle is the class struggle of the working class. The role and function of reactionary barbarous sects and gangs are dimmed, while there is an illusion where such political forces pose no real danger to the street protesters, let alone the class struggle. They criticize, their critics, do not have the insight of seeing the class struggle. In the pseudo-anarchist view, the street will take priority over the workplace, and the movement will be sacred rather than pursue the goals of the struggle.

The depiction of the working class is that of an atomized human, black army of the anti-dictatorship movement in peripheral capitalism, as well as such an army comprising the various protest movements in metropolitan capitalism. The working class no longer acts as a social class, nor as the gravedigger of the capitalist system, but as the "masses" of a (supernumerary) black army in opposition to the ruling class. Any view that does not contribute to the transparency of proletarian positions only creates confusion within those positions.

### **Intensifying the class struggle**

Against the tendencies of the right and left of capital, we emphasize and insist on an independent struggle of the working class and on the need to intensify the class struggle.

Without any illusion about the right and left tendencies of capital, the emphasis on an independent proletarian struggle and the expansion of cooperation and relations with other industries and sectors will raise the issue of the class identity of workers, which, in turn, will transform the working class from a class in itself into a class for itself.

### **The chained workers!**

The future of our movement depends exclusively on the independent struggle of our class. We should never lose our class identity, nor lose our revolutionary abilities in forming ourselves as an independent social force in the transformation of society through the class struggle. We must expand our struggle from the streets to the workplaces in all sectors. We must fight for our own class interests. Social protests can only break the back of the bourgeoisie when they are brought to the workplace, where the working class has its real power. Street protests can complement workplace protests. In any case, these connections are as close as they can be, while the likelihood of success will be greater. We can only repel the bourgeois attacks from our own class terrain. The working class should not be drawn into the democracy movement; worse still, if the working class is transformed into a black army in the democracy movement, it will become weaker and weaker.

**In the case of people's protests and movements, if the working class dissolves itself into democratic and libertarian movements, it will only weaken the proletariat itself, not the bourgeoisie.**

Only the working class as a social class can end the misery and worthlessness of the capitalist world. The creation of independent workplaces and neighbourhood committees is the most effective means to continue the class struggle. These institutions can play a vital role in the class struggle and its intensification.

Our interest is not in; to change rolling class as it happened 1979 without in class struggle. Class struggle will spread to other countries due to its anti-capitalist nature, in turn challenging the state of capital. Our aim must be directed to destroying whole capitalist system.

Firoz Akbari

13 August 2018

## Notes:

[1] Marx - The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon

[2] For further analysis of street protests, the role of the currents of the right and the left of capital, and the position of the working class, refer to the pamphlet *Social Protests, Working Class, and Internationalist Tasks* from Internationalist Voice.

[3] It is necessary to note that the nature of unions, as a part of the capitalist state throughout the capitalist world, is the same. Certainly, in peripheral capitalism, they will adopt a different form to that in metropolitan capitalism, especially Western Europe.

[4] <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/world/a-44649423>

[5] <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3781881>

[6] <https://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/795530/Politics/leader>

[7] The Iranian year 1393 corresponds to 11 January 2014 to 11 January 2015.

[8] See the pamphlet *Social Protests, Working Class, and Internationalist Tasks* from Internationalist Voice.