

The Tragedy of the Iranian Revolution

11 February 2009

Thirty years ago today, the Shah of Iran's despotic, US-sponsored regime crumbled in the face of a mass uprising.

The overthrow of the Shah, who had fled Iran in mid-January 1979, was a colossal blow to US imperialism. For a quarter-century, dating back to the 1953 CIA coup that had restored Shah Reza Pahlavi to the Peacock Throne, Washington sponsored and armed his dictatorship, making Iran the US's gendarme in the oil-rich Middle East.

In late 1977, US President Jimmy Carter proclaimed the Shah's blood-soaked regime an "oasis of stability." But Iran was soon convulsed by mass protests. As 1978 progressed, millions of Iranians streamed onto the streets of Teheran and other major cities to protest soaring unemployment and inflation, the squandering and outright theft of the country's oil wealth by the royal court and its hangers-on, and, above all, the monarchical dictatorship. For the Iranian people, the Shah was the personification not simply of tyrannical and corrupt rule, but of all the indignities and violence to which imperialism had subjected their nation for a century.

Savage repression—some 1,600 demonstrators were gunned down on a single day (September 8, 1978)—failed to quell the unrest. Increasingly, the working class, employing the methods of proletarian class struggle, strikes and workplace occupations, emerged as the principal social force behind the impending revolution. Ultimately, it was the oil workers' strike that broke the back of the Shah's regime.

In the wake of the Shah's overthrow, the revolution widened. Workers seized factories and peasants land. The parallels with Russia in 1917 were unmistakable.

But unlike 1917, state power did not pass into the hands of the Iranian workers, for there was no revolutionary proletarian party, no Bolshevik party, to rally the peasantry and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie behind the leadership of the working class and to advance the program of socialist revolution as the only means to achieve genuine national liberation and meet the needs of Iran's toilers.

Instead, what emerged from the revolution was a clerical-led bourgeois nationalist regime, an Islamic Republic, that ruthlessly suppressed the working class, restored bourgeois order, and defended capitalist property. By 1983, and in most cases well before, all unions

independent of the regime and all left-wing organizations were banned and physically broken up.

Backed by the bazaar merchants with whom they have long enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, the Shiite clergy successfully laid claim to an exalted political status, with senior clerics empowered to strike down "un-Islamic" laws, exclude "impious" parliamentary candidates, and choose from amongst themselves the country's "Supreme Leader." The rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities were curtailed, when not trampled upon.

The very limited social reforms granted in the revolution's immediate aftermath were almost entirely ratcheted back. By the early 1990s, the mullahs were slashing subsidies for essential goods, privatizing companies seized from the Shah and his cronies, and wooing foreign investment with special economic zones and other concessions.

Contemporary Iran is marked by social inequality, poverty and economic insecurity no less pronounced than under the Shah. While the regime routinely characterizes the US as the "Great Satan," it has collaborated with the US invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The tragedy of the Iranian revolution is that the working class proved incapable of assuming a political role commensurate with its social weight in the struggle against the Shah's dictatorship.

For this, Stalinism is entirely responsible.

The Communist Party of Iran or Tudeh Party had deep roots within the Iranian working class. In the 1940s, it emerged at the head of a mass movement, and in 1944-1947 and again in 1953, it could have challenged for power. But the Tudeh Party had been schooled by the Soviet bureaucracy in the Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, which held that in countries of belated capitalist development, the working class must not aspire to any independent role, but only assist the national bourgeoisie in carrying out "its" revolution.

The Stalinists were thrown into utter confusion when in August 1953 their main bourgeois ally, the Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq, bent to US pressure and called out the army to suppress mass anti-royalist demonstrations. They thus offered no resistance when the CIA engineered Mossadeq's overthrow two days later.

Over the next 25 years, the Stalinists moved even further to the right, flirting with any general or politician who had a falling out with the Shah and reconciling themselves to the perpetuation of the Shah's regime if only he would become a constitutional monarch.

The Soviet and Chinese Stalinist bureaucracies, meanwhile, developed extensive diplomatic and commercial relations with the Pahlavi dynasty.

If Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—who had been associated with the opposition of conservative and traditional elements to the Shah—was able to successfully recast himself in the 1970s as the foremost and most resolute opponent of the Shah's imperialist-sponsored dictatorship, it was only due to the Stalinists' decades-long subordination of the working class to the discredited bourgeois politicians, who regularly implored the Shah to become an enlightened despot.

The Tudeh Party was taken completely unawares by the mass eruption against the Shah's regime in 1978-1979. Its response was to adapt to Khomeini and the mullahs. The Tudeh Party supported the creation of an Islamic Republic, continued to support the Khomeini regime even as it systematically stamped out independent working class activity, and often echoed the regime's pseudo-leftist Islamic rhetoric.

The populist version of Shia Islam developed and propagated by Khomeini served multiple functions. It helped to obscure the radically opposed interests of Iran's workers and peasants, who fought the Shah's regime because it was the bulwark of their class oppression, and those of the bazaar merchants and other propertied layers, who resented imperialist domination and the Shah's crony capitalism because it restricted their possibilities for exploitation. It was the cutting edge for an increasingly violent attack on "godless" Marxism. And last but not least, it served as a guarantor to the bourgeoisie that the new regime would uphold their property. Declared Khomeini, "As long as there is Islam there will be free enterprise."

Khomeini invoked anti-imperialist and Third Worldist rhetoric as a means of harnessing the popular upsurge against the Shah and using it to pressure imperialism. The takeover of the US embassy, a response to the Carter's administration's provocative decision to allow the Shah to come to New York, was used to brandish the regime's revolutionary credentials and denounce anyone who deigned to criticize the Khomeini regime as weakening Iran in its confrontation with the US. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the Iranian authorities were maneuvering with the US establishment, striking a secret deal with emissaries of Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan not to release the hostages prior to the 1980 US election. Three years later, when the Khomeini regime turned on the Tudeh

Party, it did so using intelligence supplied by the CIA.

From September 1980 through August 1988, the Khomeini regime was embroiled in a horrific war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The war, which was actively encouraged by US imperialism as a means of weakening the rival nationalist regimes, had catastrophic consequences for the peoples of both countries. The mullahs waged this reactionary war with a double purpose: to channel against an external enemy the social anger and frustration that emerged in Iran as the emancipatory aspirations of the masses were dashed, and to realize the Iranian bourgeoisie's longstanding ambitions to establish itself as the regional power.

While the rulers of the Islamic Republic have often found it in their interests to snub and even challenge Washington, they have developed lucrative relations with Germany, Japan and a host of other imperialist powers. And important elements within the Iranian regime have repeatedly signaled their readiness to make a deal with Washington, if only it would stop its bullying and threats.

Without making any concession to rapacious US and European imperialism, Iranian workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals must implacably oppose the reactionary regime born of the abortion of Iran's 1979 anti-imperialist revolution.

A new party of the working class, an Iranian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, must be built on the basis of the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution. In countries of belated capitalist development, independence from imperialism and the completion of the basic tasks of the democratic revolution including the liquidation of all vestiges of feudalism and the separation of church from state, can only be accomplished through a socialist revolution led by the working class.

Keith Jones

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>