

The working-class unrest in Iran—the WSWS replies to an apologist of the Iranian regime

By Keith Jones
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An Iranian foreign correspondent for the government-backed PressTV, Ramin Mazaheri, has written a lengthy diatribe that accuses the *World Socialist Web Site* of betraying its “socialist principles” and aiding imperialism. This is because the WSWS has highlighted the significance of the current working-class unrest in Iran and opposed its suppression by the bourgeois state under the pretext of combatting US imperialist-sponsored subversion.

Mazaheri claims to be an avid reader of the WSWS, which he calls “a darn great site,” “exceptional in most every way,” “perhaps the most-widely visited truly leftist web site” and “adored in the Third World.” He clearly is deeply concerned about the impact of the WSWS’s analysis inside Iran and beyond.

Mazaheri takes exception to our characterization of the Iranian working class as “brutally exploited.” He also accuses the WSWS of “jumping on Iran at a time of crisis.” Objecting to the WSWS’s references to the history of the Iranian workers’ movement, Mazaheri claims that we exaggerate the influence of revolutionary socialism. He also rejects the emphasis placed by the WSWS on the dominant role of the Stalinist Tudeh Party in the decades that preceded the 1979 revolution. Mazaheri sneers at the WSWS and Trotskyism for seeking ideological purity and advocating “universal revolution” rather than supporting “a working socialist country.” (His full letter can be found [here](#).)

To be blunt, Mazaheri is an apologist for the Iranian government. Nevertheless, his blog merits rebuttal because it falsifies crucial issues of revolutionary perspective relating to the struggle against imperialism, misrepresents the character and outcome of the 1979 revolution, and slanders the WSWS and the Iranian working class.

The Islamic republic is a bourgeois nationalist regime. It maneuvers on the world stage to advance the interests of Iran’s capitalist ruling elite, while balancing between different social forces within Iran, including the direct and indirect influence of foreign capital and the working class. The WSWS’s attitude toward the Islamic Republic is based on two fundamental factors: Iran’s character as an historically oppressed country that must be defended against the predations of imperialism, and the antagonistic relationship between the Iranian bourgeoisie and working class.

It is now admitted by all but unabashed defenders of the Iranian government and bourgeoisie that the protests that rocked Iran for five days beginning December 28 were an elemental expression of working-class anger against mass joblessness, poverty, ever-widening social inequality, and the Rouhani government’s brutal austerity measures. Unemployed youth in provincial towns and other especially oppressed layers predominated. The sudden flare-up of antigovernment protests had been preceded by months of growing working-class unrest, including numerous protests and strikes over unpaid wages and job cuts.

The social character of the emerging opposition in Iran is fundamentally different from that of the 2009 Green Movement, which, as Mazaheri concedes, the WSWS steadfastly opposed and polemicized against. The

Greens’ challenge to the 2009 presidential election result was a long-planned operation that closely followed the script of previous US-orchestrated “color revolutions.” It was aimed at bringing to power the faction of the clerical political establishment and Iranian bourgeoisie most eager for a rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers. It drew its popular support almost exclusively from the upper-middle class in Tehran, which was mobilized on the basis of selfish, Thatcherite denunciations of President Ahmadinejad’s “wasteful” social spending and grievances over the Islamic regime’s reactionary social mores.

The current movement in Iran is directed against austerity and social inequality. That in its initial stages it is politically confused, with monarchist and other ultra-right-wing elements seeking to latch onto and pervert it, is not the fault of the working class. The Islamic Republic has for decades ruthlessly suppressed all forms of working-class self-organization.

Yet Mazaheri would have us believe Iran is a haven for democracy. He lectures the WSWS that Rouhani must be supported and his neoliberal policies accepted because he was elected in a pseudo-democratic system that gives the Shia *ulema* (clergy) vast political privileges, prohibits all “un-Islamic” candidates, and is capped by an autocratic Supreme Leader.

The Tudeh Party, the working class and the 1979 Revolution

In typical nationalist vein, Mazaheri “wonder(s) how much the WSWS knows about Iranian society.” But it is he who reveals his ignorance, when he sneers at our assertion that the Stalinist Tudeh Party had deep roots in the working class and argues that “Islam had ‘super, mega-deep, core-embedding roots in the working class’.”

Mazaheri appears to know nothing of the events in Iran between 1946 and 1953.

In the years following World War II, the Tudeh Party galvanized mass popular support and wielded decisive political influence over the working class. However, in a tragic foreshadowing of the role it would play in the revolutionary storm of 1978-81, it held fast to the Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, claiming that the national bourgeoisie would lead the struggle against imperialism. It was the turn of the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh to repress the Tudeh Party, under pressure from the US, that opened the door for the August 1953 CIA coup that returned the Shah to power.

In these events, the Islamic clergy played a marginal and reactionary role, openly aligning with the Shah, the landlords and imperialism.

The Ayatollah Khomeini was himself keenly aware and afraid of socialism’s powerful appeal among the masses. That is why in the early 1970s, drawing on the writings of the Paris-educated sociologist Ali Shariati, he sought to recast traditional Shia theology by incorporating pseudo-socialist phrases and iconography.

Exploiting the longstanding connections between the clergy and the bazaar, the stronghold of the traditional Iranian bourgeoisie, and the

network of Shia religious institutions, Khomeini and his supporters were able to gain mass support from Iran's urban and rural poor as the Shah's regime plunged into mounting crisis after 1975. The mullahs benefited from the fact that the Shah's massive, CIA-trained security apparatus was principally directed against the left and the working class.

But it was the politics of Stalinism, not the "super, mega-deep" roots of Islam in the working class, that above all opened the door for the rise of the Shia populist clerics and the ultimate derailing of the massive, working class-led social explosion that toppled the Shah.

The Tudeh Party, which continued to have widespread influence within the industrial working class, oriented to the impotent traditional bourgeois-democratic opposition to the Shah for decades. Then, as the masses erupted onto the scene in 1978-79, it swung round to providing uncritical support to Khomeini and his project of creating an Islamic Republic, anointing him the leader of the "national" revolution that would supposedly clear the path for Iran's independent bourgeois-democratic development.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Shah's overthrow in February 1979, the working class did strive to assert its independent interests, seizing factories and forming workers' councils to run them.

But with the working class politically neutralized by the Stalinists, Khomeini, not without crisis and upheavals, was able to divert the mass movement and ever more boldly mobilize the capitalist state apparatus to bloodily suppress the working class and snuff out all forms of working-class self-organization.

The bazaar merchants, for their part, clung tenaciously to Khomeini as the guarantor of their property. But it was not only the Iranian bourgeoisie that turned to Khomeini to forestall social revolution. The French government had given him exile and allowed him to mount his oppositional activities largely unimpeded. With the Shah's regime disintegrating, Washington supported his return to Iran in early February 1979.

Ultimately, when the Khomeini regime, having used the Stalinists' support to politically confuse the working class, turned on the Tudeh Party in 1983, arresting and later executing many of its leaders and cadres, it did so using lists supplied by the CIA.

Mazaheri spells out his own supports for the Islamic Republic's consolidation through the ruthless suppression of the working class, declaring, "Socialism ran second fiddle in the Islamic Revolution, and thankfully so, when the alternative is to be influenced by imperialist capitalism."

The Islamic Republic and Imperialism

The Iranian regime is not anti-imperialist. Rather, from the beginning its aim has been to establish greater freedom of action for the Iranian bourgeoisie within world capitalism, including by seeking closer economic ties to European and Japanese imperialism.

To be sure, over the past four decades American imperialism has mounted a virtually relentless drive against Iran, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, imposing punishing economic sanctions and exerting massive military pressure.

But the leaders of the Islamic Republic have made repeated overtures to Washington—far too many to document here. As early as the fall of 1980, Tehran made a secret deal with the Reagan-led US Republican Party not to release the US embassy hostages until the American presidential election had been held. In 2001, Tehran provided support for the US invasion of Afghanistan and shortly after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq made a secret "grand bargain" offer to Washington, in which it would recognize Israel and cut off all military aid to Hamas and Hezbollah in exchange for a pledge that the US would forgo regime change.

The WSWs recognizes the essentially defensive character of the Iranian regime's intervention in Syria and Lebanon. But the Islamic Republic,

like the Shah's regime before it, seeks to realize the regional great power ambitions of the Iranian bourgeoisie and denies full equality to the Kurds and other minorities within Iran.

A key element in the dissipation of the revolutionary energy that erupted in 1978-79 was the eight-year 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Undoubtedly, the Baathist regime in Iraq played a foul role, seeking to win Washington's support by attacking Iran. That said, a major factor in precipitating the war was the Khomeini regime's determination to uphold the reactionary settlement of the Shatt-al-Arab dispute that the Shah, with Washington's backing, had imposed on Iraq. And while Iran was initially thrown on the defensive, after gaining the initiative, the Islamic Republic perpetuated the war for years. This was because it hoped to extract reparations and other mercenary concessions from Iraq, but also because of the war's value in justifying, in the name of "national unity," the suppression of all political opposition.

If nationalist slogans, akin to those raised during the Green Movement, like "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I give my life for Iran," can find any resonance in the current working-class protests in Iran, it is because the burdens of countering the imperialist drive against Iran are distributed according to the class dynamics of Iran—meaning they fall overwhelming on the working class and toilers. Meanwhile, cronies of the regime have made vast fortunes from sanctions busting.

It should come as no surprise that Mazaheri supports the Iran-US nuclear deal. This deal is itself intimately bound up with the assault on the working class. To woo foreign investment, the Rouhani administration has intensified the neoliberal policies of privatization and social spending pursued by Tehran since 1989, and rewritten the laws governing oil concessions.

The past century has demonstrated conclusively that the Iranian and Arab bourgeoisie are incapable of freeing the region from the grip of imperialism. Fearful for their own property, they suppress the working class and rely on nationalist, sectarian and communal appeals that divide the masses and strengthen imperialist reaction.

The only force that can mobilize the revolutionary energy needed to defeat imperialism is the working class mobilizing the region's toilers on a socialist program to secure social rights and social equality for all.

It is an elementary duty of the WSWs, one it fulfills daily, to oppose the aggression, war plans and wars of imperialism. Workers across the world must demand "hands off Iran" as part of the fight to develop a global movement against war and imperialism.

But we will not allow the Iranian bourgeoisie and political flunkies like Mazaheri to intimidate the working class, and those wide sections of the middle class who would be inclined to support it, by labeling the emergence of working-class opposition to the Islamic Republic as "sedition."

We will instead fight to arm this movement with an understanding of its political tasks: the working class must oppose imperialism, forge its independence from all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie, and rally the toilers behind it in the fight for a Workers' Republic and, in unity with Arab, Jewish, Kurdish and Turkish workers, a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>