

Strikes spread in Algeria as anti-government protests grow

By Will Morrow
26 March 2019

As protests by millions of workers and youth demanding the removal of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika have continued and escalated this past week, strikes against social inequality, layoffs and exploitative working conditions are spreading rapidly.

The French-language daily *El Watan* reported yesterday that a new call for a three-day general strike beginning today to demand the removal of Bouteflika has spread on social media, independently of the trade unions. A similar call earlier this month led to a nationwide strike on March 11-12, hitting some ports and oil fields, most public transport networks, and the entire education system. “Although the [strike] call is anonymous we must expect that it will be followed like the previous appeals for marches and the previous strike,” the newspaper stated.

Yesterday, a wildcat strike erupted at the Tosyali Algeria steel plant in Béthouia, Oran, Algeria’s second-largest city, employing 4,800 workers. The morning shift walked out in protest at an attempted suicide by a worker at the plant.

Le Journal de l’Oranais reported that a worker mounted a platform inside the complex and threatened to jump, after receiving a note from management informing him that his latest and fourth successive short-term contract would be of six months’ duration, instead of a year. Thousands of other workers labor under similar short-term contracts at the plant.

The article reported that the workers staged a sit-in outside the plant and circulated a petition on the premises for an immediate withdrawal of confidence in the local union, “considered to be in cahoots with the factory management,” and the election of a new representation. The workers are also demanding a 100 percent base wage increase, an increase in individual and collective performance bonuses, and an end to

abusive layoffs against workers.

The workers’ rejection of the trade union is part of a widespread hatred of the official union bureaucracies, which function as corrupt agents of the employers and the government. The head of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) is backing Bouteflika against the mass protests demanding his removal.

More than 1,000 workers at the Turkish-Algerian construction company Ozgun-Nurol-Engoa (ONE), who are involved in building the Tizi Ouzou-Bouira roadway, began a strike on Sunday to oppose the sackings of dozens of workers. They are also demanding payment of bonuses tied to the construction of tunnels and the road.

The strikes and demonstrations by Algerian workers are part of an international upsurge of working-class struggle. In neighboring Morocco, 15,000 teachers demonstrated on Saturday night outside parliament to demand an increase in pensions and payment of bonuses and to demand permanent jobs. Since 2016, more than 55,000 of Morocco’s 240,000 teachers have been hired under a new system of temporary contracts.

The teachers also reportedly chanted slogans including “This is a corrupt country” and “We are ruled by a mafia,” demanding the resignation of the prime minister and education minister. The government responded by ordering police to fire water cannons on the protesting teachers and threatening that they will be sacked if they do not return to class.

The protests demanding the removal of the military-backed regime headed by figurehead president Bouteflika have continued to grow over the past two weeks. On March 12, the regime announced that Bouteflika would not contest upcoming elections, but extended his rule indefinitely, postponing elections until after 2019. The announcement included cosmetic

changes, including a cabinet reshuffle, the announcement of a “government of national competencies” and a “national conference” picked by the regime.

On Friday, workers and youth protested across the country demanding Bouteflika’s removal. The protests were reportedly as large as the previous two Fridays, which involved more than 1 million people across the country, but likely far more.

The working class opposition to Bouteflika is driven not only by the demand for the removal of the regime, but for an improvement in the conditions of life for the broad mass of the working class and an end to intense social inequality over which the regime presides. Yesterday, *El Watan* acknowledged that the protests against Bouteflika have “apparently ‘liberated’ anger buried for years among many Algerians. In addition to demands tied to freedom (the media, justice...) and democracy, certain groups are also advancing socio-economic grievances.”

All of the bourgeois opposition parties, from former members of the government to the pseudo-left Workers Party of Louisa Hanoune and the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party, are working under these conditions to suppress any independent struggle by the working class and tie workers to one or another faction of the National Liberation Front (FLN) regime. These organizations represent sections of the regime and are hostile to any demands for social equality, seeking only greater positions of power for themselves in the present set-up.

Last Monday, a collection of establishment opposition groups using the banner of a “National Coordination for Change” released a “Platform for Change” calling for Bouteflika’s removal and claiming to support the protest movement.

The platform is fundamentally the same as the roadmap outlined by Bouteflika’s own March 11 letter, which has already been rejected by protesters. It calls upon the regime to dissolve parliament and introduce a “Transition period,” in which a “collegial presidency” made up of “trusted national personalities” will rule, “who pledge not to remain in power at the end of the transition period.”

It calls for a “government of national salvation,” which Bouteflika’s entourage has already set up this month, and an “inclusive national consultation.” The

only difference between this proposal and that of the clique around Bouteflika is that Bouteflika himself—an 82-year-old man widely known to be physically and mentally incapacitated—is to be removed as figurehead. The platform is explicitly directed as an appeal to the military.

The document was signed by Samir Bouakir, the head of the Socialist Forces Front, as well as Mourad Dhina and Kamel Guemazi, two high-level members of the Islamic Salvation Front, which fought a decade-long civil war with the military in the 1990s that claimed the lives of 200,000 people.

The Workers Party’s Louisa Hanoune is seeking to channel workers behind equally bankrupt appeals for reforms from the regime under the banner of a national capitalist “constituent assembly.” Hanoune spoke on Monday, calling for workers and young people to create “notebooks” [*cahiers*] of grievances that would be “transferred to a city and then to a state and finally a national level.”

This is the same proposal made by French President Emmanuel Macron as part of efforts to suppress “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, and makes clear that these supposedly “opposition” parties are in reality totally integrated into the state machine.

Against both the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions, the *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to establish their own workplace and neighborhood committees to take the struggle against Bouteflika into their own hands. Key to this struggle is to establish unity in struggle with workers not only across the Maghreb, but also in France and Europe. Such a struggle must be tied to a revolutionary perspective for the transfer of power to the working class, the expropriation of the major corporations, and the reorganization of the economy on the basis of socialism and equality.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>