

Sixth Friday mass protest in Algeria demands fall of the regime

By Alex Lantier
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Millions poured into the streets of Algeria's major cities yesterday, for a sixth Friday protest demanding the fall of the military-backed National Liberation Front (FLN) regime.

It came after General Ahmed Gaïd Salah, the head of the Algerian armed forces, called on March 26 to apply Article 102 of Algeria's constitution to remove the regime's hated figurehead, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, on health grounds. Protesters rejected Salah's sudden intervention to remove Bouteflika, who has been incapacitated since suffering a stroke in 2013. Instead, they demanded the bringing down of both the FLN and the army.

Banners carried at the protests read "Rest in Peace Gaïd Salah, leave power for the love of God," "Gaïd Salah the people want democracy not a military regime," and "Shame on you Gaïd Salah." Another popular slogan was to demand the application of Article 7 of the constitution, which stipulates that power should come from the people.

Over a million people marched in Algiers, according to police reports, and thousands or tens of thousands marched in other major Algerian cities including Oran, Constantine, Annaba, Béjaïa, Tizi Ouzou, Sétif, Tlemcen and Sidi Bel Abbès. In Oran, protesters chanted "The transition must be led by the sovereign people and not the regime." In Tlemcen, protesters chanted "Out, Out Saïd," referring to Abdelmajid Sidi Saïd, the leader of the corrupt, FLN-linked General Union of Algerian Labor (UGTA) union.

In Algiers, huge throngs of people marched through the city's major centers including Maurice Audin Square and outside the Main Post Office. Protesters also clashed during the afternoon with riot police, who fired tear gas and water cannon to block off major avenues and keep marchers from reaching the

presidential palace. Protesters chanted slogans including "You are the past we are the future" and "The people orders the army to arrest the gang."

Algeria's public oil and gas companies have earned over \$1 trillion in revenue, and broad layers of Algerian workers and youth despise the FLN leadership and their cronies as little more than a criminal gang that has plundered the country's energy wealth.

The way forward for the movement against the FLN is the building of independent organizations of the working class, against the UGTA and its allies, and a fight to unify the movement with growing political opposition internationally among workers in Africa as well as in Europe and France.

Significant strike movements and protests at key industrial facilities have already taken place in Algeria. Port workers are on strike at Oran and Béjaïa, there have been strikes and sit-ins in protest by workers at subsidiaries of the Sonatrach natural gas monopoly, as well as by teachers and public sector workers. Many small businessmen and shopkeepers in Algerian cities have closed their businesses as a sign of support.

This comes amid an upsurge of protests by workers and youth internationally. Nearby Algeria in Africa, bread riots are demanding the ouster of the Sudanese government, while neighboring Morocco is threatening to dismiss striking teachers, who have organized a four-week strike that is exposing the unpopularity of the Moroccan monarchy. And across Europe, there is a rising wave of strikes against European Union (EU) austerity and growing political opposition, like the "yellow vest" movement against French President Emmanuel Macron.

As a revolutionary movement against the FLN and the Algerian army develops, it is critical to draw the political lessons of the revolutionary struggles of 2011

against Egypt's military dictatorship.

The key role in ensuring the victory of the counterrevolution and the coming to power of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's bloody junta was played by petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left parties. At each step in the struggle, they promoted illusions that the army, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, or Sisi's supporters themselves would carry out a democratic revolution. They thus blocked a struggle of the working class to take state power, and handed over the initiative to the ruling class.

The way forward is to link up the struggles of the Algerian working class with growing workers' struggles internationally, and to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in Algeria to fight for a revolutionary and socialist perspective against the forces trying to tie the workers to the old regime and its imperialist backers.

From the foreign ministry in Paris to the UGTA bureaucracy and the headquarters of various "opposition" parties with decades-long records of working with the FLN, a common line is emerging. Whether by Salah's initiative or by the convening of constituent assemblies representing the entire political establishment, Algerian capitalism is to undergo a nationally-based democratic reform. This is a political mirage, designed to block a struggle of the working class for power.

Yesterday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian hailed the "remarkable civic spirit" of the Algerian protesters, effectively endorsing Salah's initiative: "Now it is critical for the process that will now get underway, the transition that is now necessary, be able to unfold in the best possible conditions."

Earlier this week, the UGTA issued a similar statement endorsing Salah and Algeria's army brass: "The UGTA salutes and takes note of the call made by Mr Ahmed Gaïd Salah ... Change has become necessary, it must manifestly be constructed through dialog that is marked by wisdom that allows the edification of a new Republic to emerge, alongside the aspirations of our people and youth, and to firmly ground the future and preserve our country, Algeria."

There were no fundamental differences with this line in the statements made by the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) and the Workers Party (PT). Both of them are terrified by the rebellion of the working class against

the FLN regime and so abstained from calling for participation in yesterday's protest.

The FFS, affiliated to France's discredited, big-business Socialist Party (PS), issued a statement criticizing Salah's initiative and warning of the danger of revolutionary upheavals in Algeria. "To frustrate the people means provoking very serious uncertainty, inevitable chaos," it said, adding: "Change must be an emanation of the popular will via the election of a sovereign constituent assembly and the building of a Second Republic, that is the consecration of a democratic and social alternative."

As for Louisa Hanoune's Workers Party (PT), it echoed the FFS's position, calling for a "sovereign constituent assembly" while criticizing Salah's maneuver as a "forcible coup."

At the same time, terrified by growing popular opposition to the FLN, the PT withdrew its legislators from the national parliament, issuing a statement calling for "the departure of the parliamentary majority because they do not enjoy any popular legitimacy." In fact, the PT itself, with its longstanding ties to the FLN and the UGTA, has no more legitimacy than they do.

None of these forces have either the ability or the intention of building a democratic regime that satisfies the mounting social demands of Algerian workers and youth.

Even in the countries where it was long ago established, capitalist democracy is rotting on its feet. Across the Mediterranean, the Macron government—terrified that the revolutionary movement against Bouteflika could spark a broader movement of the working class than the "yellow vest" protest—has issued an authorization to the army to gun down the "yellow vests."

The problems facing workers in Algeria, France and beyond are rooted in the capitalist system. These can only be solved through the construction of sections of the ICFI to provide revolutionary leadership to the working class now in struggle against the profit system.

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