

# Which way forward for the struggle against Algeria's military dictatorship?

By Alex Lantier  
12 April 2019

Last week, after nearly six weeks of protests by millions of workers and youth, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's office issued a resignation letter ending his 20-year rule. The National Liberation Front (FLN) dictatorship chopped off its own figurehead—a president paralyzed by a 2013 stroke, who had overseen the FLN's plundering of Algeria's oil wealth and the carnage of the final years of Algeria's 1992–2002 civil war—in a desperate bid to avert revolution.

A new upsurge of the international class struggle is underway, eight years after revolutionary uprisings of the working class toppled imperialist-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. Africa is seeing mass protests to overthrow the Sudanese regime and teachers strikes in Tunisia, Morocco and across the continent. Internationally, strikes by US teachers, Mexican *maquiladora* workers and European workers opposing EU austerity have proceeded amid “yellow vest” protests demanding the ouster of President Emmanuel Macron in France, Algeria's former colonial overlord.

The revolutionary struggles of 2019 are not unfolding, however, as a repetition of those of 2011, but on a higher level. Workers have seen the bloody example of Egypt, where three years of heroic struggle ended in a 2013 coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This is a bitter and unforgettable lesson, paid for with thousands of lives, that mass militant protests alone are not enough to triumph over an entrenched ruling class.

The army's ouster of Bouteflika has only intensified the conflict between the working class and the dictatorship. This week, as Algerian workers protested to demand the ouster of officials named by military strongman General Ahmed Gaïd Salah, they chanted the Egyptian slogan “The people want the fall of the regime,” and carried signs saying “Gaïd Salah, the people are not fooled” and “No repeat of the Egyptian scenario.”

The only viable perspective is for the working class to

take power in a struggle to overthrow capitalism, in Algeria and internationally. The key questions facing workers are organization and, above all, revolutionary perspective and leadership. Workers need committees of action, independent of bourgeois governments and their allied trade unions, to coordinate opposition to military-police repression and austerity. Ultimately, only the transfer of state power to these bodies, functioning in workplaces and working class neighborhoods as organs of workers power, can eliminate the danger of bloody counterrevolution.

Such committees will not be forged, however, let alone carry out the revolutionary tasks they face, without a struggle for revolutionary perspective in the working class by a Marxist vanguard party, like the Bolshevik Party that led the October 1917 revolution in Russia.

False promises that the Algerian dictatorship will simply grant democratic reforms are now on every bourgeois politician's lips. “Questions about how to navigate this transition in Algeria, that is for the Algerian people to decide,” declared US State Department spokesman Robert Palladino, while French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian hailed “the capacity of all Algerians to pursue this democratic transition.”

The entire Algerian ruling elite, from the generals down to their lackeys in the union bureaucracies and the universities, is trying to lull workers to sleep with promises of a democratic capitalist future, to keep workers from fighting for power. Gaïd Salah is, for now, sending into retirement the most notorious torturers, like intelligence chief General Athmane Tartag.

The Socialist Workers Party (PST), affiliated to France's Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), bluntly declared: “Despite appearances, we are not in a revolutionary situation.” Instead, it hailed the army, “whose role is to defend the people, its social rights and welfare, its national sovereignty, its borders and its

political sovereignty,” and the Algerian regime’s General Union of Algerian Labor (UGTA) as a “strategic tool to defend workers’ interests.” On this basis, it calls for convening a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution of the Algerian capitalist dictatorship.

This is a fraud, echoing petty-bourgeois groups like Egypt’s Revolutionary Socialists (RS) that strangled the Egyptian revolution. Workers in Egypt rose up time and again, defeating the security forces in the streets. But they could not improvise a leadership and perspective to oppose the RS, which worked to disband popular committees formed in battles with riot police. Above all, the RS claimed that whatever faction of the ruling class was ascendant—the army, then the Muslim Brotherhood, finally the Tamarod movement backing Sisi before his coup—would grant democracy. This blocked a workers seizure of power in Egypt and allowed the Sisi dictatorship to take power via a bloody massacre of protesters in the streets and mass resort to torture.

The PST reprises the role of the RS in Egypt, playing on protesters’ chants appealing to soldiers not to shoot—“The people and the army are brothers”—to try to paint the dictatorship in bright colors. Of course, many soldiers oppose the prospect of being ordered to shoot workers. The task that flows from this is not to prop up the army and the unions, but to mobilize the working class to take power before the officers find a way, as Sisi did, to turn a critical mass of troops against the workers.

The revolutionary leadership that must be built in the working class against parties like the RS and the PST is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). It alone opposed the role of the RS, based on its decades-long struggle for Trotskyism against Stalinist and Pabloite descendants of petty-bourgeois renegades from Trotskyism. These forces claimed that the coming to power of bourgeois nationalist regimes like the FLN in Algeria in 1962 showed the revolutionary nature of “democratic” sections of the capitalist class in colonial countries.

Experience confirmed Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, which states that in countries of belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie, tied to imperialism, is incapable of establishing a democratic regime. The struggle for democratic demands can proceed only if it grows into a socialist revolution led by the working class, unfolding on the international arena, that can place in the hands of workers of the ex-colonial countries the resources in the world economy that are needed to build a truly socialist and democratic society.

The 1954–1962 Algerian war was a mighty struggle of workers and peasants that ended French colonial rule. But the FLN, to which the French handed power, was a capitalist regime that became an overt military dictatorship after Houari Boumediène’s 1965 coup.

Algeria’s 1992–2002 Civil War emerged from the last failed attempt to democratize the regime in the face of mass protests, the 1988 transition to a multiparty system. The regime suspended the Islamic Salvation Front’s (FIS) 1991 electoral victory, triggering a war costing 200,000 lives. Working in coordination with Paris, the FLN used torture and murder against both workers and Islamist groups—as French imperialism had against independence fighters in 1954–1962 war. Today, officers guilty of these atrocities, such as Tartag, are desperate to escape the wrath of their victims’ families. They will prove determined opponents of democracy.

There will be no democratic reform in Algeria above all because capitalism internationally is rotting on its feet. After a decade of economic crisis and mounting social anger, the bourgeoisie is scrapping democratic forms of rule in the face of the threat from below—even in countries with long bourgeois-democratic traditions. Macron, whose foreign minister promises a “democratic transition” in Algeria, is furiously arming Sisi’s bloody dictatorship with billions of euros in weapons while authorizing the French army to shoot “yellow vest” protesters in Paris.

The way forward against the Algerian dictatorship is the struggle to give revolutionary leadership to the developing international movement of the working class. This means the fight to build sections of the ICFI in Algeria and in countries around the world.

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