

For workers' power and a socialist Iran

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The political crisis unfolding in Iran raises fundamental issues for the working class. The outcome of last Friday's presidential election has exposed a sharp rift within the country's clerical regime between the backers of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and those of his chief rival, Mirhossein Mousavi.

No one should be hoodwinked by the "colour revolution" being carefully orchestrated by the Mousavi camp to overturn the election result and demand a fresh poll. While there are tactical differences between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, both are tested defenders of the existing regime and the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie.

Mousavi was backed by those layers of the clerical and political establishment, such as former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, who have been bitterly critical of Ahmadinejad's anti-US posturing, which has only brought further economic sanctions, and of his "wasteful" handouts to the poor. The large opposition protests in the streets of Tehran and other cities have been dominated by the better-off layers of the urban middle classes to whom Mousavi's election campaign was directed.

To the extent that students, young people and any workers opposed to the regime have been swept up in the opposition movement, they are being exploited as pawns in what can only be described as an attempted palace coup. While electoral rigging may have taken place, more sober commentators point out that Ahmadinejad retained strong support among the urban and rural poor—the overwhelming majority of the population. Ahmadinejad's margin of 63 percent over his three rivals was virtually identical to the outcome of the 2005 election, when he won an upset victory by exploiting the widespread hostility to his opponent Rafsanjani. The latter is one of the country's wealthiest men, notorious for corruption.

Those who paint Mousavi in bright, democratic colours conveniently ignore his record as a hard-line defender of the

theocratic regime. As prime minister between 1981 and 1989, he was instrumental in suppressing political opposition, including the jailing and murder of thousands of leftists. In the midst of the Iran-Iraq war, Mousavi also played a central role in marshalling young men, overwhelmingly drawn from the poorer strata of society, into the bloodbath, and imposing savage austerity measures on the working class.

Mousavi has been rebadged as a liberal democrat by an alliance of conservatives such as Rafsanjani and "reformers" like Khatami to press ahead with an agenda of easing tensions with the US and imposing a free market agenda that will heavily impact working people. Having failed to secure a first-round victory or force a second-round runoff, Mousavi and his allies are attempting to leverage the frustrations of their largely middle-class supporters into a share in, if not outright control of, state power.

These efforts are being supported by a blatantly partisan campaign in the US and international media, tacitly supported by the Obama administration and its European allies. No one should be under any illusion that this effort is aimed at abolishing the clerical regime or defending democratic rights for the masses in Iran.

As it has in the past, US imperialism is seeking to exploit the political turmoil in Iran to bring about a modification of the regime more favourable to its economic and strategic interests—in the first place, to secure greater Iranian support for its neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

If Mousavi were to pull off his "colour revolution," the first to bear the brunt would be the working class and the poor, as the new regime sought to rein in public spending, privatise state-owned enterprises and guarantee the profits of local businesses and foreign investors. The barely concealed class hostility of Mousavi and his well-heeled supporters to working people is summed in their open contempt towards Ahmadinejad's meagre handouts to the poor.

Mousavi would be just as ruthless as Ahmadinejad in trampling on democratic rights and suppressing any opposition to his program. All of those in the international media and Western capitals now bemoaning the lack of democracy in Iran would be supportive of repressive measures directed against the working class.

Opposition to Mousavi's cynical campaign in no way implies political support for the right-wing demagogue Ahmadinejad, who is being backed by the dominant factions of the Iranian political establishment, including the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Ahmadinejad's anti-American posturing has nothing to do with any genuine anti-imperialist struggle, but is aimed at pressuring Washington for a more advantageous accommodation to the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie. His denunciations of corruption and pretentious stance as "a man of the people" sympathetic to the poor cannot obscure the fact that the social divide has only deepened under his administration.

Unemployment, inflation, housing shortages and the overall living standards of the majority of the population have only worsened. Ahmadinejad is able to pose as a defender of the poor only in the absence of any genuine socialist alternative in the working class.

In the current crisis, a politically criminal role is once again being played by the Stalinist Tudeh Party along with various student groups that are opposed to any independent mobilisation of the working class and are seeking to channel hostility to the regime behind Mousavi. Well aware of Mousavi's anti-working class record, they nevertheless argue that anything is better than Ahmadinejad. As history has repeatedly demonstrated in Iran and around the world, this is the road to disaster.

Anyone who is swayed by such arguments should recall the outcome of the 1979 revolution. The social motor force of the huge movement that finally overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the working class.

Determined strikes by oil workers, in particular, paralysed the economy and brought the repressive US-backed regime to its knees. The Tudeh Party played the crucial role in shackling the widespread hatred of the Shah to a dissident faction of the clerical establishment by promoting the illusion that Ayatollah Khomeini represented a progressive alternative.

The Iranian working class has a long history of revolutionary struggle. However, the bitter lessons of this history confirm a fundamental tenet of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: the organic incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development to meet the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards.

As Trotsky explained, only the working class, through the struggle to take power at the head of the oppressed masses, is capable of carrying out a consistent struggle for democratic rights. A workers' and peasants' government would break the grip of the clerics and the bourgeois interests they defend and begin the socialist transformation of society in the interests of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

The present political turmoil in Iran has opened up deep fissures in the political establishment. There are undoubtedly young people, students and workers who are seriously discussing how to put an end to the oppressive regime. But to the extent that they remain trapped behind one or other faction of the ruling elite, the result will inevitably be the consolidation of bourgeois rule and another round of political repression. The only road out of this political trap is the turn to the independent political mobilisation of workers and the oppressed masses in the struggle to seize power and establish a socialist Iran.

Such a perspective is conceivable only as part of a broader struggle of the working class for a United Socialist States of the Middle East and internationally. The urgent task facing workers and youth is the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Iran and throughout the region. That requires a careful study of all the strategic experiences of the Trotskyist movement throughout the course of the twentieth century. The lessons of those struggles provide an indispensable guide to political action.

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