

# Algeria: Demonstrations and Strikes Rock the Regime

Hundreds of thousands of people, predominantly youth came on to the streets of capital Algiers, port city of Bejaia and other towns shouting slogans like “Killer regime”, “Downfall of the regime” and “Thieves, you have eaten the country”. March 8<sup>th</sup> is the third consecutive Friday protest since the ruling National Liberation Front announced that it will field Bouteflika as the candidate for presidential election for fifth term which are to be held in April this year.

The first three months of this has seen growing strike actions in Algeria, including by port workers, two-day country wide strike by teachers in February and transport workers strike in Kabilya region. Workers at the massive Tayal textile factory which exports to Europe, launched an indefinite strike on February 27 against gruelling working conditions and wage that is below the legal minimum. Autoworkers at the Hyundai assembly plant Tiaret launched a strike against their working conditions. National Teachers Federation, which includes university lecturers has called a nationwide strike on March 13 and already teachers are joining the protests by students.

Sensing the peoples anger the NLF government announced that Bouteflika would resign as president in a year after his re-election and appointed another cabinet minister as the Prime minister. Yet the people are determined and large parts of Algeria were brought to a standstill.

The national train network came to a screeching halt. In the capital Algiers, metros, buses and trams did not run. Intercity private bus services were stopped. Teachers joined the strike and closed most of the middle and high schools. Students organised demonstrations in various cities and towns. All universities have been closed. In an attempt to pre-empt the strike, the government announced that holidays would be started 10 days earlier.

Workers shut down the port of Bejaia as well as Cevital plant, which is the largest private company in Algeria, that produces sugar, oil and agriproducts. Workers struck in HassiMessaoud oil field in eastern Algeria owned by state owned mining company as well as oil fields at HassiR'mel, HassiBerkine and Ininenas. Workers of state-run electricity and gas distribution company, Sonelgaz also struck work.

What is driving the workers and people of Algeria into struggle? A report by the Algerian Human Rights League in 2015 found that 35 percent of the population, or some 14 million people, live on a poverty wage of less than US\$1.25 per day. Over 90 percent of households reported that their living standards have fallen since the decline of oil prices in 2014, and the average purchasing power of a family fell by 60 percent over that period. The unemployment rate for youth is almost a third, and more than two thirds of the population is below the age of 30. Meanwhile, wealth has been concentrated in the hands of a tiny class of billionaires and multimillionaires that controls the regime and the opposition parties. The report stated that 10 percent of the Algerian population owned 80 percent of the country's wealth.

The deteriorating conditions of life is driving the people into struggles against the corrupt regime of Bouteflika - who has not spoken publicly since a 2013 stroke and is widely seen as a figurehead for the ruling cabal in the military, security services and his family.

The opposition parties are supporting the movement against Bouteflika, but they are no less hostile towards workers and people. They are pronouncing the same policies that had thrown the people of Algeria in poverty and misery. Their only aim to reshuffle of personnel wielding the power. Thus, a political game to subdue the peoples anger and to gain power had begun.

As mass strikes spread across Algeria for the second day, the regime issued a statement in the name of figurehead president Abdelaziz Bouteflika on March 11th, postponing elections indefinitely and pledging that Bouteflika will not seek a fifth term.

The regime's announcement is meeting none of the demands of the workers and youth. While it claims Bouteflika will not stand again for re-election, by extending his current term indefinitely he is being continued in his post. Elections previously scheduled for April 18 are to be postponed to at least after 2019.

The regime will appoint what it calls an “inclusive and independent national conference,” which is to draft a new constitution and set the date for new elections. An un-specified “government of national

unity is to be formed.” Bouteflika is to oversee the new “constitutional institutions to ensure they adhere scrupulously to the accomplishment of their mission.”

The letter, when said “the way to generalised peace, quiet and public security”, has implicit threats that the strikes and demonstrations will be met with fierce repression.

Yet the demonstrations continued reflecting the repudiation of the regime's announcement of a supposed political transition that in fact preserving both the regime and its figurehead. Protesters chanted slogans or held up signs saying “We wanted elections without Bouteflika now we have Bouteflika without elections”, “They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds.” Some slogans also directly addressed French President Emmanuel Macron, who has supported Bouteflika, saying “Take care of the yellow vests, Macron, that's enough for you” or “Get the wood ready, Macron, there will be no Algerian gas for you this year”.

Similar waves of strikes and demonstrations are going on in the other North African countries. In Morocco, thousands of teachers held demonstrations on February 20 demanding review of precarious status of contract teachers. Several thousands of municipal employees struck work for 24 hours protesting dangerous working conditions.

In Tunisia, secondary school teachers have been on strike since October 2018 demanding their integration into civil service. The teachers of primary schools are demanding the same and protesting deteriorated working conditions. Fearing the mass upheaval of workers, the establishment trade unions cancelled a general strike call scheduled to February 8<sup>th</sup>. The regimes in Nigeria and Sudan are also facing the same protest demonstrations from various sections of the people.

It is the need of the hour that the people has to raise their political struggle against the present regimes with the perspective of building a socialist society.

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