

Labour Internationalist

Monthly publication of the British supporters of the Organising Committee
for the Reconstitution of the Fourth International (OCRFI)

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Who we are, What we stand for

We believe that the working class needs to rely on its own efforts, both at home and around the world, to defend its interests against a capitalist system that is determined to extract maximum profit regardless of the human and environmental cost.

We believe that the capitalist system, based on private ownership of the means of production, cannot be reformed and has to be abolished by means of a proletarian revolution that will introduce socialism.

We stand on the founding programme of the Fourth International, the *Transitional Programme*, which says in particular: "It is necessary to help the masses, in the process of their daily struggles, to find the bridge between their current demands and the programme of the socialist revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands which stem from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class, and invariably lead to the same conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat."

The working class's struggle against the capitalist system – on its own account as well as on behalf of all of the oppressed – needs to be united and based on class independence from capital and its national and international institutions.

This means defending the organisations which the workers have built, and helping the workers themselves to build new forms of organisation to carry out their struggle in ways which they decide on freely and which they control.

Often, this also means opposing those in the labour movement who ignore the mandate of their membership and co-operate with capitalism's plans, at the workplace, institutional or State level. *Labour Internationalist* aims to be part of the fight against that process of integrating the working-class organisations into capitalism's plans.

Labour Internationalist therefore focuses on helping to advance the struggle by the working class in its own interests – locally, nationally and internationally.

Consistent with this view, *Labour Internationalist* defines itself as a forum of class struggle that is open to all individuals, groups and currents in the labour movement that are committed to political independence of the working class and to internationalism.

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EDITORIAL

Capital will always protect itself. The only way to defeat it is through working-class organisation, independence and unity

In this issue, we publish an appeal launched by 20 Belgian labour activists for a European Workers' and Youth meeting in defence of pension systems, jobs and public services. Following on from the internationalist rally against privatisation, deregulation and insecure work that took place in Strasbourg (France) last May, on the slogan "This Europe is not our Europe", they are proposing to meet in Liege (Belgium) on 2 May. In their invitation (see the "International" section), they say: "all the workers of Europe continue to follow intently the strike action and protest marches in France against the pensions reform which Macron wants to impose. In our country, Belgium, we have foiled the attempt to change to a points-based pension system, but we know that this project is still in preparation. We are fighting against the retirement age of 67 decided by the previous government, which was inspired by the German "example" which in turn was the result of recommendations by the European Commission."

For us in the UK, we must refer to the 50,000 university lecturers, technicians and library staff who, after 14 days of action, have planned to begin a week-long strike on 9 March to oppose the destruction of their pensions, pay, terms and conditions. In their appeal, our Belgian brothers and sisters add: "In Belgium, the auto sector has been badly affected by the closures of Opel Antwerp and Ford Genk, not forgetting Renault Vilvorde. On the sites that remain, the workers at Audi-Brussels are fighting against insecure work that is dependent on the uncertainties of production. At Volvo Car Gent, the right to strike has been called into question through the laying-off of trade union delegates." Here again, we can refer to the 2,000 jobs lost in Britain's manufacturing industry in January 2020, and the 1,400 UK companies that have

gone bust and are now going into administration. Same with the cuts in public services and the destruction of the NHS, not to mention the massive rise in zero-hours contracts, with almost a million people pushed onto them.

We OCRFI members publishing *Labour Internationalist* were among the political and trade union activists who – despite the opposition of those who claim to represent them in the labour movement – voted Leave in 2016 with the majority of the working class, and pushed constantly for democracy to be respected. It is precisely in order to break with the anti-working-class policies imposed by the EU and capital's international institutions that we campaigned for Leave in line with the interests of the working class.

As one of our correspondents puts it (see "Open Forum"), "Brexit in itself won't result in improvements in the living standards of the majority. For that to occur, the domestic ruling class must also be fought and defeated." We fully agree with the Belgian comrades when they say: "we consider it necessary to rally our forces in order to defend the gains of the working class and the independence of the working-class organisations, for a united fraternal Europe of the workers and democracy."

The labour movement cannot avoid taking on this task, because, as our correspondent concludes, "Capital will always protect itself, the only way to defeat it is through organisation and unity", to which we would also add "working-class independence". Helping the working class to overcome the obstacles in order to progress in that direction – this is what our bulletin is about. Our Belgian comrades' struggle is our struggle. *Labour Internationalist* fully supports their proposal.

OPEN FORUM OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Correspondence received

From London

Brexit in itself won't result in improvements in the living standards of the majority. For that to occur, the domestic ruling class must also be fought and defeated. In this regard, it is necessary for a critical mass of the working class to get politically active in its own interests. Remainers on the left would argue that there is no need to leave the EU for this to happen, but they are wrong about that for two reasons.

The first is that a radical socialist programme that included a different approach to state aid, state ownership, public procurement and managed trade

would be deemed illegal under European law. The EU is first and foremost about preventing socialism taking hold in Europe. The second is that without Brexit, the impetus for change would quickly dissipate.

The image of the EU as some great protector of workers is hard to reconcile when considering that, in keeping with its neo-liberal objectives, it promotes zero-hours contracts under flexible labour market rules and it deliberately weakened collective bargaining arrangements in the bailout countries. And let's not forget that the most fundamental workers' right of all – the right to work – has been denied to millions as a direct result of austerity-induced mass unemployment more associated with depression than growth in many

member countries. The trajectory of the EU is very clear. It represents the interests of big capital and stands against the majority working class, and that is why the entire neo-liberal establishment was behind Remain. It is structurally designed to prevent any meaningful political reform. Greece elected a nominally socialist government, and they were crushed for their temerity. The EU is an anti-democratic, deflationary Union which imposes neoliberalism via economic sanctions.

Over my years of campaigning to leave the EU, I have been horrified by the inability of the left to organise across borders. Trade union leaderships are possibly the worst offenders, displaying suspicion towards one another as the (national) forces of capital have made hay with EU institutions and law.

Our decision to leave has already changed the debate across Europe. Brexit was the best possible outcome of the referendum and the only one which would benefit the working class in the long term. The left in the UK would have been much wiser supporting the European leftists who oppose EU membership rather than arguing the merits of a deeply flawed European Union. Capital will always protect itself, the only way to defeat it is through organisation and unity.

John Sweeney

From Liverpool

I imagine the poverty levels in Liverpool are much the same for many working-class families throughout the UK. As a result of the Tories reducing the funding to local authorities, the cuts to services are severe, and getting worse.

Our Labour Party Mayor can justly claim that great efforts have been made to alleviate some of the worst-case suffering, but we've now reached a point where even the Mayor has stated that he'll make no further cuts, instead he'll ask the government to make next year's Council budget.

Our Mayor describes himself as a "sensible socialist" in making the necessary cuts to balance the Council budget year after year, slashing jobs and services. This presumably means that if people oppose the government's cuts, then we're not sensible. We know from history, especially in Liverpool, that for LP councillors, to stand by electoral promises finishes political careers, despite the historic improvements they made to the City.

We had our whole elected Labour council removed undemocratically from office by the government in the 1980s. The Labour council's banners read: "Better to break the law than break the poor". Voting to carry out cuts on the government's behalf usually ends up with a lucrative privileged position. The personnel who always follow orders are usually described by the media as "sensible".

I remember a large public meeting about four years ago where the Mayor rejected many calls for a campaign to oppose the draconian Tory cuts. Many people expressed the view that weakness invites aggression, and that the council, despite following orders from the central government in managing the cuts, would at some point be unable to do so.

We're now at this point. The council has massive debts, has virtually zero reserves and has already shed thousands of jobs and closed vital services. The Mayor now appears to be in a difficult position. To remain a "sensible socialist" while opposing the Tory government will be an interesting balancing act.

It could be argued that 'if' we'd had a new Labour government in office, then we would be granted better funding in future, that the crisis was over and the sacrifices made would have been worthwhile. Maybe if we were playing a chess game, then that logic could apply.

There is no evidence that the Labour councillors have any understanding of the misery and hardship caused by the budget cuts that they voted for year after year. There is nothing produced by the LP to show their anger and dismay at having to vote for such measures, and how a socialist Labour government could change everything for the better. Some people point to the fact that many of our leading councillors are extremely wealthy, so never feel the bite of the cuts themselves.

Many believe that the LP should be campaigning on political issues, explaining how the current system works, and how, through democratically controlled public ownership, the economic security of working people could be guaranteed. This is, generally speaking, is what the left of the LP is campaigning for in Liverpool.

Our Liverpool correspondent

From Rochdale (Greater Manchester)

The Labour Party has undertaken **no** post-general election analysis. The TUC has conducted such an analysis, but refuses to draw the lessons of the disaster on 12 December 2019. The TUC now propose to call on the TORY Government to enforce Brexit in the interests of the working class!! Everyone knows what their response will be.

What also stands out is the fact that there is a consensus among the Labour Party leadership candidates to ignore the fundamental reason for the Labour Party's disastrous election result: the party's position on Brexit. The stand taken today by the TUC and Labour Party leaderships – refusing to honestly assess the reasons for the election defeat – prepares the ground for new blows against the working class.

Stefan Cholewka

DEBATE

A thorough discussion is needed

The aim of this bulletin published by the British supporters of the Organising Committee for the Reconstitution of the Fourth International (OCRFI) is, of course, to present its views on the struggle of the British working class. As

stated in our first issue, it also aims to be a forum for a free and democratic exchange between those who agree on the need for an independent policy of the working class in defence of its class interests.

The focus of such a discussion today is necessarily on the lessons of recent events, the significance of the last general election and the problems faced by the labour movement confronted with the Johnson government. In this issue, we are publishing first contributions from various comrades. It is therefore appropriate at this point to briefly restate our basic position.

The fundamental problems within the British labour movement did not start with Brexit and the recent election; rather, these developments have made those problems more acute. For instance, what is the meaning today of a “left wing” in the Labour Party (LP) after the experience we have just gone through? it is the official “left” that brought about a full-scale disaster by carrying out a “right-wing” policy (a policy coinciding with the needs of the ruling class) on the question of Brexit.

This means that the question now being raised and discussed by many working-class activists is: what situation is the labour movement in now?

Some will say that today’s LP no longer exists as a party that represents the working class and will insist that the LP’s policies are not socialist in any sense of the word. Others, on the other hand, will argue that we must try to save the LP whatever happens, and will be prepared to provide cover for a “lesser evil” leadership. We share neither of these positions.

Of course, we understand that many comrades feel that they have been fooled and they therefore reject the LP as a whole. But they should not forget that what is at stake is also the trade union movement, and that the very existence of the LP – despite the policies of its leadership – is a constituent element of the existence of the trade unions.

And of course, we also understand those inside the LP who will seek to defend it through the process of choosing a new leader. But the fact is that no solution to the present challenges will be reached through the leadership contest, as no serious balance-sheet of recent events is being drawn by any of the contenders. In our opinion, in order to grasp the present situation, we must return to the origins of the LP and its history. By that, we do not mean in any sense that the solution to today’s problems would be to mechanically apply recipes from the past. We insist that the present problems can only be dealt with through the Marxist method; therefore, by integrating the experience of both past struggles and new developments.

Our political current expresses the continuity of the communist tradition as it was forged through the Russian Revolution and the experiences of the Bolshevik Party; the continuity that was the very basis of the struggle against Stalinism and Trotsky’s fight to build the Fourth International.

The Russian Revolution and the setting-up of the Third International – therefore the break with the social-democratic leaderships all over the world after their capitulation to imperialism – are the expression of the struggle for a revolutionary leadership in all countries, including Britain.

At the same time, revolutionary activists in Britain had to take into account the specificity of the Labour Party springing from its very origins: the fact that the Labour Party was created as the political arm of the trade unions. This is why, in Britain’s case, Lenin advocated that the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) should enter the Labour Party – while preserving its political independence – and fight against being expelled from that organisation.

This meant that although the Labour Party had a specific nature because of the kind of link it had with the trade unions, there was nothing specific that differentiated the LP leadership from the leadership of other social-democratic parties. Lenin and Trotsky devoted a lot of time and writings to this question. For example, in his book *Where Is Britain Going?* (1925), Trotsky wrote that “the trade unions have lifted the Labour Party directly upon their own shoulders”. This was possible through pressure “from below, from the plants and the factories, from the docks and the mines” and was opposed “by a counter-pressure from above, from the sphere of official British politics”.

Today, this contradiction is being expressed once again, in a sharper form than ever. In his writings on Britain, Trotsky emphasised the fact that in British history, there were two traditions: the tradition of conformism and gradualism, and the tradition of rebellion and revolution, expressed in the formative years of the British labour movement by the Chartists.

This tradition has permanently been expressed by the attempts of the working class to ensure its control over its own struggles, especially in the rank-and-file organisations that concretely express the link between the trade unions and the LP. These bodies have always been targeted by the leadership. Today, it is through the struggle to reassert its control over its struggles within the trade unions and within the LP that the working class can forge its unity against the ruling class’s onslaught against trade union rights and against the very existence of the political organisations of the working class. All organisations which are organically linked to the working class are the unavoidable battlefield where this struggle will be waged in the coming period.

Labour Internationalist

WORKPLACE NEWS

Industry collapses in UK

It was announced that 1,400 UK companies have gone bust and are going into administration, with the building and construction industry being hard hit along with a huge number of service sector companies.

Unite union revealed that over 2,000 unionised jobs in the manufacturing industries were lost in January 2020 alone,

and that the total number of redundancies in this sector will turn out to be much higher. The fact is that the trade union leaders have refused to fight a single factory or plant closure. Instead they confine themselves to worthless appeals for the Tories to help them out, and offer to collaborate with them to manage the inevitable collapse and mass unemployment that will follow.

Massive rise in zero hours contracts!

"Enough is enough, it's time to ban these zero-hour contracts once and for all", GMB's Tim Roache said responding to new figures showing a massive rise in zero hours contracts, pushing al-most a million people onto them.

New Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures show 974,000 people were employed on zero hours contracts at the end of 2019. The highest figure on record. Young workers are much more likely to be employed on zero hours contracts:



9.1 per cent of those aged under 25, compared to 3 per cent of all other workers.

Roache continued: *"On a zero-hours contract you don't know what wage you'll have coming in from week to week, you don't know if you can pay the bills or*

buy the shopping. People shouldn't have to live like this – zero hours means zero security and zero rights."

Postal workers are preparing for a second ballot on national strike action

Postal workers are preparing for a second ballot on national strike action between 3 and 17 March, over management moves to steamroller through plans to break up the mail service and destroy thousands of jobs.

In October last year, postal members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted by 97.1 per cent on a 76 per cent turnout for strike action over plans by the newly installed Royal Mail management to tear up past binding agreements on reducing the working week, which the union believed would safeguard jobs from automation of the service.

Cuts are killing people

- Babies that die as a direct result of cuts and closures of maternity departments; victims of heart attacks, strokes and serious traffic accidents that die in the ambulance because their local A&E has been shut. This government must be kicked out now before more patients die!
- Cuts have meant that poorer areas of the country have been left completely at the mercy of floods, to the extent that villages in Yorkshire have been forced to buy their own flood defences to protect their homes. UK flood defences have been cut to the bone with poorer areas "sacrificed" to protect wealthier towns and cities.
- Flood response services have been crippled by cuts, at



the same time as firefighters and other frontline emergency response services have seen their numbers slashed by more than one-fifth. This threat to homes, jobs and lives has been well known for years, but despite this, flood defences have been run down, with government spending reduced by 10 per cent since 2015. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has warned that cuts to the tune of £140 million mean that fire and rescue services are "fighting with one hand tied behind their back" and that lives are in greater risk.

- More than 100,000 A&E patients waited for hours to be treated in hospitals in January, the highest number since records began, NHS figures show. There were 100,578 patients who faced delays of more than four hours, of whom 2,846 waited more than 12 hours from the decision to admit to admission, according to performance statistics released by NHS England.

For both de-lays, this is the highest number of "trolley waits" since records began. It is an increase of 20.4 per cent and 353.9 per cent respectively from the same month a year ago, when there were 83,554 four-hour waits and just 627 12-hour waits. The British Medical Association (BMA) has said the figures show that the strain on the NHS was "relentless, deepening and showing no sign of recovery".

Commenting on the new crisis, the BMA doctors' union warned: *"The strain on the health service is relentless and staff are run into the ground."*

Destruction of the pension systems

Up to 50,000 lecturers, technicians and library staff will begin a week-long strike on 9 March after 14 days of rolling actions and strikes. University workers are opposing increased workloads, casualization and pay restrictions. They are resisting demands from employers that they increase their pension contributions. The strike was called after the



University and College Union (UCU) failed to reach agreement following months of talks with the employers' organisations.

This movement – the second this academic year, following an eight-day stop-

page by staff at 63 institutions last November/December – shows the determination of university workers to oppose the destruction of their pensions, pay, terms and conditions. University workers want the institutions to cover the cost of pension contribution rises that have been imposed on academic and other staff over the past year.

The long series of rolling actions and strikes shows the determination of university workers, but who could believe that fragmented action could ever be successful?

The UCU has never called all of its 120,000 members out in a unified all-out stoppage and refuses to unite higher education staff with its substantial membership in the further education sector, who face the same onslaught on their pay, terms and conditions.

Lessons should be drawn from the long struggle of the French workers to defend their pension system.

INTERNATIONAL

Invitation for a European Workers' and Youth Conference in defence of pension systems, jobs and public services

Dear Comrades,

Almost one year ago, an internationalist rally against privatisation, deregulation and insecure work took place in Strasbourg (France), on 11 May 2019. The rally ended with a call to prepare in each country an indictment of the policy of privatisation, to circulate information and news on the resistance by the workers and youth in each country, and on this basis, to convene another European Conference of workers, labour activists and youth in 2020.

In the last year, we have noted that anti-working-class policies have increased and expanded in each of our countries. At the same time, we have seen mobilisations that express the mass resistance of the working class to those policies.

In this respect, all the workers of Europe continue to follow intently the strike action and protest marches in France against the pensions reform which Macron wants to impose. In our country, Belgium, we have foiled the attempt to change to a points-based pension system, but we know that this project is still in preparation. We are fighting against the retirement age of 67 decided by the previous government, which was inspired by the German "example" which in turn was the result of recommendations by the European Commission.

In the area of industrial employment, the European Union is continuing to organise its collapse. In Germany for example, the workers of the former state-owned auto enterprise AWE in Eisenach, which was privatised in 1990 and acquired by Opel, then sold recently to the PSA Group, are fighting back against exploitation and threats of closing down a site where 2,500 workers are still employed (compared to 10,000 workers before privatisation). In Belgium, the auto sector has been badly affected by the closures of Opel Antwerp and Ford Genk, not forgetting Renault Vilvorde. On the sites that remain,

the workers at Audi-Brussels are fighting against insecure work that is dependent on the uncertainties of production. At Volvo Car Gent, the right to strike has been called into question through the laying-off of trade union delegates. As one trade unionist at Opel Eisenach put it, "*we all have a common future, the same difficulties and the same willingness to fight back. We will not allow ourselves to be divided or have some of us set against the others*".

The policy of privatising public services is in reality a policy of destroying public services. For example, in Italy the current budget cuts are due to be facilitated by the regionalisation of school education, healthcare, public services, national contracts and job status, and infrastructure... to the point of allowing the regions to maintain direct relations with the European Union. In Belgium, we know that the same things are at stake, and we note that the public schools system has been attacked to such a point that currently, school students are up in arms and fighting for things like clean toilets and equipment for learning new skills.

Starting from this overview of the policies laid down by the European Union for the benefit of the capitalist class, we consider it necessary to rally our forces in order to defend the gains of the working class and the independence of the working-class organisations, for a united fraternal Europe of the workers and democracy.

We are issuing an invitation to a European Conference where workers and youth can exchange information and views on the following topics: safeguarding existing pension systems, jobs and public services.

We propose to meet in Liège (Belgium) on Saturday 2 May 2020, from 10.30am to 5.00pm.

In anticipation of the conference, we send you our fraternal greetings.

France

French workers are fighting back against Macron's counter-reform of the public pension schemes

A MOVEMENT OF HISTORIC LENGTH AND SCOPE

On Friday 24 January, after more than seven weeks of strike action by the French working class, notably in public transport and education, the Council of Ministers approved Macron's draft bill against the existing public pension schemes, a reform that is rejected by a huge majority of workers.

This bill provides for:

- putting an end to the current system of solidarity and to the existing 42 specific pension systems, the result of past class struggle, replacing them with a single, universal points-based system.

No-one knows what amount of pension these points will give a right to. The government will set the value of a point on a rolling basis, so the value of pensions will therefore be reduced in real terms;

- the elimination of particular systems that allowed for more favourable retirement, with workers being compensated for professional constraints linked to particular job grades and working conditions;
- ensuring that in order to receive a full pension, people would have to work beyond the legal retirement age (62) to a "selected age", currently 64 or 65, which may increase over time to 67 or more;

- a reduction in the bonuses for children which benefitted working women, and a sharp limitation of the right to transfer a widow's or widower's pension.

In short, it will be necessary to work longer – to have a much lower retirement pension. The teachers' unions foresee losses of between 500 and 900 euros per month! This is about “abiding by EU standards”, which recommend that these reactionary measures be taken everywhere, against the gains of the working class, in the name of the “golden rule” of restricting budget deficits. In France, the amount of GDP dedicated to pensions must not exceed 14 per cent, whatever the number of retired pensioners. This bill is targeted at the whole of the working class, against its gains won through struggle.



Along with this comes the wish to co-opt the unions, which have been invited by the government to a conference aimed at setting the rules for funding this counter-reform. The trade unions, including those that are demanding the withdrawal of this reform, will thus become co-drafters of a law that is rejected by the workers. It is a step towards corporatism!

The strike action, which has now lasted more than weeks, is very powerful, and all of the polls indicate massive support from the population – despite the difficulties caused by the transport strike and despite the media campaign against the “die-hard” strikers. The demonstrations have brought together hundreds of thousands of workers, notably in the transport sectors, education, lawyers, opera workers and dockworkers. Yet, despite everything, Macron is sticking with his bill. How is this possible? What are the problems that the workers are facing? First of all, some unions – particularly those affiliated to the Christian-inspired CFTD union confederation – have called for a pension reform and the establishing of this kind of points-based system, and are therefore acting as scabs.

The other union confederations (CGT, CGT-FO, CFE-CGC, FSU, Solidaires) have maintained the demand for withdrawal of the reform bill, but are refusing to issue a clear call for a general strike to bring the country to a complete stop, which would force Macron to retreat. The

leaderships of these confederations are saying “gather and meet in your rank and file, and decide”, but

without giving instructions in favour of a general strike, thus allowing the situation to deteriorate, so that the strikers, despite showing historic determination, are suffering the strain of this refusal. A call from the National Liaison Committee of the Committees for Unity, “Hands Off our Retirement Pensions”, in favour of a general strike, gathered more than 2,000 signatures in a single day of demonstrations.

So, combativeness is not lacking at the grassroots (once again, there were hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on 24 January and 6 February), and for this to grow, all it takes is a clear call from the union confederations for general strike... but this call is not coming. Instead, more days of “a show of strength” are being announced, enabling Macron and the capitalists who give him his orders to hold out. Remember that shortly after his election, Macron met with the CEO of Blackrock, the biggest private investment fund in the world, which obviously wants to get its hands on our 300 billion euros in pensions.

How will this situation evolve? No-one can say. The strike action has not ended, but the ferry transport workers have gone back to work after seven weeks and are now only doing “shows of strength”. Dockworkers, refinery workers and workers at some state-owned companies have taken up the baton, but the union slogans only apply to a few days. More and more union members are deciding in favour of the leaders calling for a general strike. The outcome is still uncertain. Note that the Council of State – albeit an institution of the Fifth Republic, acting as the government's legal advisor – has just issued a very unfavourable report on the bill, further shaking the moth-eaten institutions of the Fifth Republic.

For their part, the workers are ready for a general strike. Hundreds have signed an appeal to the trade union confederations that notably says: *“The workers have demonstrated their firm determination. Everything is still to play for. But in order to win, we need to move to another level. We are therefore addressing the leaders of the CGT, CGT-Force Ouvrière, FSU and Solidaires trade union confederations and organisations: since 5 December 2019, you have rightly taken on the responsibility of calling for strike action and protest marches for the withdrawal of the pensions reform. Faced with this anti-working-class government's obstinacy, it falls to you to call on the workers to come out on a united basis in a general strike, in other words to bring the country and the economy to a halt, before the final vote on the pensions bill, in order to impose its withdrawal. Macron will have to concede!”*

A correspondent in France

ALGERIA

Kherrata, one year later...

On 16 February 2020, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in Kherrata. It was one year ago in that city, martyred by French colonialism (1), that everything started. On 16 February 2019, the growing nationwide rejection of a fifth term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was expressed in the streets for the

first time. Then, on 22 February 2019, young people, workers and broad layers of the population had the audacity to defy the military regime throughout the country. Taking up the chants and songs condemning corruption that had rung out for months in the football stadiums, the Algerian people burst onto the political

stage, seeking to take their future into their own hands and claiming kinship of their *hirak* (popular movement) with the Algerian Revolution of November 1954. Terrified, the military regime and its supporters had – as early as the eve of 22 February 2019 – warned against the “foreign hands” which they claimed were behind the calls to demonstrate. But the masses brushed off this slander: “*This isn’t Syria, this isn’t Libya, this is Algeria*”. The same regime that was in the habit of making “patriotic” speeches would be caught red-handed a few months later, as it pushed through a law that delivered Algeria’s mineral resources into the “foreign hands” of the multinationals. At each stage, the Algerian people responded to the government’s manoeuvres. “*No to a fifth term!*” became “*No to four and a half terms!*” when those around Bouteflika tried to delay the presidential election. “*We will drive all of you from power*”, the demonstrators said week after week on the regular Friday demonstrations (Tuesdays for students), throwing out of the protest marches those representatives of the old regime who were trying to “rehabilitate” themselves by marching.

“*Regime, clear out!*”, “*System, clear out!*”, “*Civil state not a military state*”: this is what the *hirak* shouted at those who, hiding behind cosmetic changes, want to preserve the military hierarchy and with it, the country’s subordination to the International Monetary Fund and the financial institutions (including the European Union, to which Algeria is tied through an Association Agreement that has had disastrous economic and social consequences). And when the regime tried division,



throwing people who were carrying the Amazigh flag (the flag of Berber democratic demands, waved alongside the national flag and the Palestinian flag) into prison, both Arabic-speakers and Berber-speakers responded by calling for unity of the Algerian nation. In the fightback against repression,

democratic and labour activists of all political tendencies have learned to work together in order to win the of political detainees. Despite the strength of the movement, the regime still remains in place. Because the wish to establish democracy and popular sovereignty as expressed by the *hirak* can only find a positive outcome in the convening of a sovereign Constituent Assembly, which will officially end the old regime. At this point, the people have not been able to impose this. However, the past year has shown that a social force is capable of seeing the fight for democracy and sovereignty through to the end. It is the Algerian working class that brought about the departure of the Bouteflika clan on 10 March 2019, through strike action and bringing the economy to a halt.

It was also the working class that was at the forefront of the attempt to organise a boycott of the illegitimate presidential election on 12 December 2019. The working

class is still the core of the mobilisation: currently, it is the primary school teachers who are rallying in Algiers during repeated strike action, despite police repression. “*We just want to walk on land that belongs to us all and make our voices heard by these deaf and dumb officials*”, one teacher shouted. Democratic demands and social demands are inextricably linked. Both of them pose the question of making the break: breaking with the regime, breaking with subordination to imperialism. Undoubtedly, the manoeuvres by the illegitimate President Teboune around “constitutional change” will resonate with all those who oppose a real break and will call for “dialogue” or a “constituent process”. But, as pointed out by an activist of the Organising Committee of International Socialists of Algeria (COSI): “*One year later, determination remains intact. Imposing a sovereign Constituent Assembly (which in our view will open up the perspective of a workers’ government that will end privatisation) requires waging the fight for trade union independence and a genuine workers’ party.*”

(1) On 8 May 1945, while the armistice was being signed in Europe to mark the end of imperialism’s wholesale slaughter and the collapse of Nazism, colonial troops of a “democratic” French government comprising De Gaulle, the Socialist Party and Communist Party were involved in brutal mass repression in Setif, Guelma and Kherrata, attacking Algerians who were demonstrating peacefully for their sovereign rights and freedom from the colonial yoke. Thousands of Algerians were butchered in the space of a few hours, and further reprisals over the next five days by troops, police and vigilantes (naval bombardment, summary executions, lynchings and other atrocities) resulted in a death toll estimated at 30,000 to 45,000. For years, official French sources insisted that the victims of what is now known as the Sétif Massacre numbered just 1,500, but in later years France revised its official estimate to 20,000 dead.

**Statement by the Co-ordinators of the IWC
11 February 2020**

We have been informed that on the evening of 10 February, the Court of Appeals of the Military Court of Blida (Algeria) decided to release Louisa Hanoune, the General Secretary of the Algerian Workers Party, who had been imprisoned since 9 May 2019 after spending nine months in prison. Among many others in Algeria and throughout the world, the International Workers Committee Against War and Exploitation, For a Workers’ International (IWC) took a clear position since May 2019 to demand the immediate release from prison of the general secretary of the Workers Party. In June 2019, the IWC circulated broadly an initiative of 51 labour activists of the United States “for the immediate release of Louisa Hanoune and all political prisoners in Algeria”.

The International Workers Committee Against War and Exploitation, For a Workers’ International, launched in Mumbai (India) in November 2016, stands for the best traditions and principles of international workers’ solidarity: An injury to one is an injury to all. Any activist of the labour movement who is a victim of state repression must be defended by the entire labour movement.

The IWC calls upon all labour activists around the world to continue to express their solidarity with the Algerian people, and for the liberation of all political prisoners in Algeria.

Daniel Gluckstein and Nambiath Vasudevan,
Coordinators of the IWC