**Iran: the rebellion and revolt at the heart of the republic**

**Shiva Tabari and Darren Roso**

*Shiva Tabari (pseudonym) is a Tehran based Marxist who has been politically active since the Green Movement of 2009.*

Last November’s heroic uprising of the Iranian working class and the poor was the biggest rebellion since the downfall of the Shah in 1979. Yet the Islamic Republic is far more powerful and stronger than the Shah ever was, meaning a much deeper revolution than the last Iranian Revolution is necessary if genuine social and political democracy is to be won.

The November uprising witnessed well over 7,000 activists arrested and over a thousand murdered. Family members of protesters were kidnapped and forcibly disappeared. The uprising faced severe tests owing to the brutal repression of the regime. Political tests will continue, because any contingent factor, like a rise in the price of eggs, fuel or bread, the suicide of a poor unemployed person, or a political crisis for the regime, could trigger a new wave of mass protests.

Almost half of Iran’s population live at or below the poverty line, which underscores the further possibility of revolt and social explosions. But the resistance needs to get more organised and more developed in order to confront two enemies: the ruling Iranian political regime, and the United States’ imperialist aggressions. A renewed wave of mass struggle needs to weaken the repressive power of the Iranian state or it will suffer another defeat.

Socialists across the world, especially in Australia, need to fight against their own imperialist aggressors who are fanning the furies of renewed war behind Trump’s banner. But socialists in the West also need to pay close attention to the dynamics in Iran and the political questions the rebellion raises. They need to stand with a firm commitment to the liberation of workers and the poor of Iran. Unfortunately, many on the Anglophone left who signed the [*Letter Against US Imperialism*](https://imhojournal.org/articles/letter-against-us-imperialism-damages-left-by-supporting-iranian-regime-against-a-popular-uprising/) (Angela Davis, Doug Henwood and Vijay Prashad among others) gave critical support to the Iranian autocracy in fact by calling for “political stability” and their reduction of protesters to “native informants and cheerleaders” of US-imperialism. These signatures debase the very meaning of socialism.

***Saturday 16 November***

History is bearing a new phase of world rebellion and revolution in its womb.

This new phase is an uneven war with, on the one side, billions of poor and angry people, in the wasteland of agony, on the verge of oblivion, crying for a normal life. On the other side are well-equipped, heartless soldiers using complex, brutal methods of repression in order to send us, we miserable creatures, into nothingness.

The fiercest day of fighting in Iran last year took place on 16 November. The protests hit over a hundred cities in 29 out of 31 provinces. Anger exploded at the 300 percent fuel price hike proposed by President Rouhani.

The government lost its legitimacy, the people on the streets had now given up hope of any effective interaction with the state. They began the chants: “Clerics must get lost!”, “Death to Dictatorship!” and “Death to the Islamic Republic!”.

Masses of Iranian working and middle class poor entered the political arena as active combatants. Demonstrations, civil disobedience, strikes and occupations swept the country. Ordinary people were making heroic efforts to rise to the occasion and cope with the enormous tasks their dire situation placed before them.

It is impossible to fully grasp, understand and talk about all the complex stories of 16 November. In each city people blockaded the main entrance of roads, built barricades in neighbourhoods and began to attack police stations, municipal offices, banks, television stations, big supermarkets, gas stations, the barracks of the Basij paramilitary forces and the Islamic colleges.

The Iranian regime responded with a massacre by mobilising every repressive institution it had at hand. The police were called out. The paramilitary Basij units were called out. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was called out. The ordinary army was called out. The secret police were called out. They were prepared for cold blooded murder. All of them were allowed to shoot people.

In Shiraz, protestors who took control of a neighbourhood were shot dead from a helicopter. There are many reports, photos and videos of the government’s use of heavy machine guns, tanks, and other military equipment, in addition to tear gas, electroshock, plastic bullets and other anti-revolt instruments. People in Mahshar, a port city in the south-west of Iran, report that many of the protestors who blocked the main entrance road got trapped in canebrakes in margins of the road after being assaulted by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and then were burnt in fire lit by soldiers. The same story goes for dozens of poor, crowded cities in other provinces. In many cities, injured people were arrested in hospitals. Security agents ambushed protesters in their homes at midnight to arrest them. Thousands of people have also been text by intelligence services about the consequences of joining demonstrations.

The government was able to quell the revolt. But it is important to see that the heroic fighting and struggle was not in vain.

Defeats are unfortunately too frequent for our side, and they will inevitably feature in this new phase of rebellion and revolution. Defeats do not negate the experiences learned throughout the course of struggle. As Lenin wrote, “however great individual defeats may be, however shattering to us the rivers of blood and the thousands of victims, nothing will ever compare in importance with this direct training that the masses and the classes receive in revolutionary struggle itself”.

This direct training with flesh and blood is part of the revolutionary history of the Iranian working class. It’s very hard to understand the development of class consciousness, the tactics used, the behaviours and internal divisions of the working class, without understanding its bloody struggle with the Islamic Republic of Iran; the workers’ *Bildungsroman*.

Politics and organisation determine whether yesterday’s defeats have a slight chance of becoming tomorrow’s victories.

***The Marxism of Socialist Circles***

No political group or party organised the recent struggle against dictatorship and neoliberalism. It was a spontaneous rising. Socialists had little influence on the uprising, and it is difficult to keep a struggle alive.

Socialist traditions are not absent, however. The Haft-Tapeh sugar-cane workers, with a workforce 7,000 strong, may have set a trend (though they were defeated) when they tried to occupy their factory with the slogan “Bread, Work, Freedom, and Council Democracy” (2018-2019).

This slogan became widespread among Marxist circles, but also among workers and a small part of the radicalized poor middle class. Strategies for rebuilding socialist politics have to be adjusted to dictatorial conditions, because it is not easy to create a socialist circle; however, it is even more difficult to create a socialist council and maintain it without a support of bigger organisations like a party.

Socialist circles, often made up of students, are nonetheless are very important and can play different roles. In relation to the Haft-Tapeh sugar cane factory occupation, socialists in their circles gathered and translated many articles on the history of workers’ occupations from different places across the world.

Theoretical work, drawing upon the wealth of Marx’s conception of history, philosophy and working class experience of struggle, is necessary to clarify the correctness of Marxist theory in Iranian conditions. Marxism is the only correct revolutionary theory – anarchism, populism and reformism do not provide the granite foundation that is required to overturn Iranian capitalism. Marxism is a theory of freedom through which human beings can flourish in ability and talent in a post-capitalist society; freedom is an overcoming of the alienation of capitalist production relations.

The intense oppression of the police state means that some Iranian socialists are trying to create and develop different circles and make contact with other circles, for example, a circle to read *Capital* with young students, or a circle to understand Marx’s conception of the alternative to capitalism, reading the history of Iran and understanding women’s oppression. These circles face lethal threats if uncovered. For the moment they remain weak and disintegrated. But no matter how small the forces of revolutionary socialism are, they cannot go forward without a clear theoretical grasp of the system with which they are confronted.

Students play a key role in the circles but have also been active for many years against the Iranian state. Students led the Green Movement demonstrations in 2009. The usual way people joined demonstrations was by joining the university students protesting in front of their universities.

Students took up radical slogans from 2017 onwards. Students shouted the slogans, at the beginning of the mass protests in over 150 cities, “Reformists, Conservatives, You Are Finished!” “Khamenei is a Murderer; his Leadership is Not Legitimate!” “Workers, Students, Unite! Unite!” These slogans were very popular among different parts of society.

The slogan for workers and students to unite came to fruition in the city of Ahvaz. There, the Haft-Tapeh sugarcane workers joined Ahvaz students in a number of demonstrations.

Student activists throughout the 2019 mass protest cycle raised revolutionary slogans, beyond any idea that the hopes and aspirations could be won through reforms. Two key slogans were: “Workers, Teachers, Nurses, Students, Unite, Unite!” and “No Referendum, No Reform, Strike and Revolution!”

The shooting down of the Ukrainian plane with many Iranian students aboard set off a wave of student struggle. The day has become a symbolic day in the history of the Iranian student movement, where they shouted their key slogan: “No Referendum, No Reform, Strike and Revolution!”

The struggle of Iran’s student activists acts as a small engine, instigating the large engine of masses. They have developed a vision of change that has great importance for the further struggle against the Islamic Republic.

Conditions are analogous to the Marxist circles of the 1880s and 1890s of Tsarist Russia, when students and labour activists were searching for ways to organise, theorise and fight against the dictatorship before, while and after the upsurge of working class struggle broke out in the lead up to the 1905 revolution. Iran’s autocratic-theocratic regime suppresses socialist circles. But from these scattered and humble beginnings mass, revolutionary workers’ parties can grow if conditions are right.

Many of the Communist Parties throughout the Middle East shared these humble beginnings but went on to become mass organisations, if albeit with Stalinist deformations that limited their politics and eventually atrophied their strength and mutilated the revolutionary opportunities before them.

The history of Marxism in Iran is a long history full of ups and downs. The main problem of the young generation of Marxists in Iran is that, due to heavy elimination of Marxists and their publishers in 1980s, there is no clear vision of past experiences of Marxist activists in Iran. Since there is no active Marxist party in Iran, it is very hard for young Marxists to learn from past failures. It seems as if we are detached from our historical background. Certainly, in such a situation, any socialist movement is weak and will fail. However, there is hope that the rising Marxist subculture, among the poor middle class and some sections of industrial workers will revive, and the socialist movement will recover from 1980s mass murder.

The rising Marxist subculture will have many political issues to grapple with if its participants are to build a viable revolutionary organisation. But building a revolutionary organisation able to topple the strengthened Iranian state will also take great sacrifice and willpower. A revolutionary party is necessary to confront the mass scale repression and answer the immense power of the Iranian capitalist state. It must perfect “the art of combating the political police” – as Lenin wrote in *What is to Be Done?* a book that argued for building an organization that could withstand Tsarist police repression.

Lenin polemicized against praise of spontaneity, and discussed the limitations of student-workers’ circles that were constantly broken up by the political police. He pointed to an organization of professional revolutionaries trained in the art of combating the political police as a way out of the recurrent shakedowns suffered by the socialist circles. He assumed that the masses would display enormous energy and self-sacrifice in strikes and street battles with the police and the army, and this movement would determine the fate of the struggle as a whole. It would produce its own heroic leaders. But the “fact that the masses are spontaneously being drawn into the movement does not make the organisation of this struggle *less necessary*. On the contrary, it makes it *more necessary*”.

Lenin made a universal breakthrough for Marxism. As George Lukacs wrote, Lenin “was the first and for a long time the only important leader and theoretician who tackled this problem at its theoretical roots and therefore at its decisive, practical point: *that of organization*”*.*

Lenin made five assertions that retain their validity for the new Iranian Revolution.

Lenin’s first assertion: a revolutionary movement cannot remain alive without a stable organization of leaders maintaining continuity. Lenin’s second assertion: the deeper the spontaneous struggle, the more urgent is the need to have the organization built on solid foundations. Lenin’s third assertion: that organization must be built by professional revolutionaries. Lenin’s fourth assertion: in a despotic and autocratic state, the more membership is confined to people trained in combatting the political police, “the more difficult will it be to unearth the organization”. Lenin’s fifth assertion: if no political police in the world could unearth the organization, the more boundless will be the confidence the widest layers of workers would have in the organization and the *greater* the number of people will be able to join the movement and perform active work within it.

Lenin matters today. All the assertions above come down to combining exclusiveness of purpose and universality - the full solidarity with and support for all the oppressed and exploited within capitalist society, both national and international.

**Which Class Will Lead the Coming Iranian Revolution?**

It is now clear for Iranians that the government has lost its connection with the working class and the poor, and it is clear that struggle between protestors and the government is getting more and more intense and after a major physical battle, the struggle is now going on in the ideological field.

The ideological battle expressed itself in the fight over the term *Mustazafin*, which was known in traditional Islam as a reference to those who were poor and oppressed. The Mullahs and their loyal servants became a new exploitative capitalist class in their own right – they expropriated factories, land and corporations – after the Iranian Revolution. Yet the ruling ideology held that the government was a government of the poor and oppressed.

No longer. Ayatollah Khamenei shifted the meaning of the term towards the new “vanguard” of the Iranian state, by saying “it is often misunderstood that a mustazaf is a person who is poor or subaltern. It is wrong. A mustazaf is a leader of society, one who is a pioneer in fighting the corrupt powers of the world”.

The word’s change of meaning can be placed within the broader development of Iran’s class configuration and its associated political struggles. Five different stages of Iranian capitalist development their cycles of protest can be outlined: the development of a technocratic middle-class in the 1990s, which led in turn to the development of a middle-class reformist movement (1998), then the radicalization of the poor middle class in the Green Movement fighting for democracy (2009) and finally, from 28 December, 2017 onwards the Mustazafin working poor began to move and fight.

Declining living standards are the immediate background to the Mustazafin struggle that began in December 2017. Energy subsidies were slashed in 2010. The percentage of Iranian families living under the poverty line rose from 20 to 40 percent from 2005 to 2013. Workers’ wages have fallen drastically, and inflation has skyrocketed. Even after the government raised the minimum wage by 25 percent per month (2013) it was one-third of what is deemed to be a living wage in Tehran. The decline of the rial’s value has hit purchasing power for import goods. Lastly, as Medea Benjamin wrote, a “2016 report by the Iranian parliament said the minimum monthly wage for workers was about US$214, while the national poverty line was about US$600 a month”.

People first began to protest in Mashhad. The news about this protest quickly spread and people in other cities began to protest about the economic situation. However, they were different people from the poor middle class who were involved in the Green Movement. More than 150 small cities all around the country rose up. This experience of struggle taught the Mustazafin that they are not the few but the many.

With this movement, the project of the Mustazafin, the project of autonomous subaltern people to overthrow the Islamic Republic, had been launched. This beginning was of historic significance. It was a great dress rehearsal for the November 2019 events. In the intervening period of early 2018 to late 2019, there were thousands of small protests, workers’ strikes and smaller incidents.

These developments raise many basic Marxist questions about class leadership. Who points a way forward for society as a whole? After some hesitation, the radicalized poor middle class joined the protests in the big cities and showed their support for the workers and poor people.

But *who* leads the battle for democracy and social liberation? And what kind of democracy, in the country of the *Shoras*? Who will be capable of resolving the contradictions that are stifling Iranian society, capable of imposing an alternative logic to that of the accumulation of capital, capable of transcending the existing relations of production and opening up a new field of possibilities for the region as a whole?

The middle-class reformists have an answer, but it is a dead-end. A section of the poor middle class started to colonize Mustazafin protests to promote constitutional monarchy and the return of Reza Pahlavi as the political alternative. For a section of the poor middle class, the Mustazafin are an appendage to their own political demands and concerns.

This inevitably raises the political independence of the working class and poor for whatever renewed revolutionary struggles emerge in Iran. Who wins hegemonyand the capacity to lead? History has shown it is possible for workers to lead the impoverished middle classes, as well as other poorer sections of society. The Paris Commune is the earliest example of that possibility taking shape, at a time when the average Parisian workplace had only ten workers in it.

The revolutionary potential of the Iranian working class is not in doubt. But Marxist politics matter, shaping how the revolutionary potential of the working class is directed and learnt from or stifled by conservative labor representatives, religious figures and middle class reformists. A set of socialist politics capable of exploring the full potential and experimental power of the working class would have great lessons to teach the left everywhere. It would inspire hope throughout a whole region from Damascus to Beirut, from Cairo to Algiers, from Baghdad to Manama and beyond.

Class politics would require settling accounts with Stalinism and reformist Popular Front inspired politics. It means winning a high degree of organized theoretical clarity. Many arguments are tied to this political task.

Iran is not exceptional, but part of the global capitalism system of states and its associated crises. The current crisis of the Iranian state arises from the crisis of the capitalist mode of production on a national and international scale.

Modern capitalist development is uneven and combined; this creates an ‘explosive amalgam’ of contradictory social and political relations that favor working class politics.

Uneven and combined development have important consequences for the possibility of socialist revolution and the formation of a revolutionary labor movement in autocratic capitalist states like Iran: economic and political issues lose their separation before the autocratic state and can more easily flow into one another. Repressive political power and economic concentration go hand in hand in the Iranian autocratic state. The Revolutionary Guard Corps is simultaneously a repressive force and the most powerful economic actor in the country. The Supreme Leader also controls the *bonyads* – large, state-religious foundations that are exempt from taxes, corrupt and account for 20 to 40 percent of the Iranian economy. The overlap of the Iranian state and capital means the contradiction between the Islamic Republic’s proclamations of justice, and the complete injustice of the prevailing system are for all eyes to see.

Opposition to the regime combines old and new reasons, with parts of the middle class looking backward to the secular era of the Shah, while others are looking forward towards something genuinely new.

Industrialization and urbanization have reduced the fragmentation of the working class. They have led to more radical attitudes because the formation of a stable conservative-reformist labor bureaucracy has been prevented. The Islamic Labor Councils are repressive bodies that must be approved by employers and the security services. They most often rule in favor of employers. Labor leaders who dissent are imprisoned; working class leaders are constantly leading struggles, going in and out of prison for their actions. There is also a degree of interdependence between the broad layers of the working class, class conscious workers and revolutionary intellectuals that does not exist in the so-called West.

Cities have grown massively since the Islamic Revolution, in number and population. This has led to pressures on housing, water supply, traffic jams, social welfare, health and environmental concerns – in 1996, 61 percent of the population were in cities, but by 2017 that rose to over 74 percent. Cities are geographically divided along class lines. In the wealthy neighborhoods of North Tehran fancy cars line the streets, passing the luxury apartments. In poorer South Tehran families are crammed into small rented rooms. The cities are hothouses of contradiction. For instance, sanctions on the import of refined gasoline have destroyed Tehran’s air quality for years on end – the air quality was hazardous for nearly half of 2011. Polluted air sat stagnant in Tehran because it was hemmed in by the Alborz mountain range. Many died from respiratory diseases.

The theory of Iran’s dependence – which originated on the Latin American left and was taken over by some on the Iranian left – which puts *all* the blame on foreign exploitation and imperialist domination, misunderstands the role of the Iranian bourgeoisie and Iranian capitalism within the world system.

No wing of Iranian capital and the state – whether the moderates-reformist wing or not – is progressive. They are absolutely hostile to the working class and the poor. There is no section of the Iranian bourgeoisie that Marxists should accommodate themselves to. The “stages” theory of social change is a dead-end capitulation to the Iranian bourgeoisie and would end only in defeat. This theory wrongly believes that there is an intermediate and bourgeois democratic stage between the current political form of the regime (the Islamic Republic) and socialist revolution. But when the Islamic Republic took hold it reorganized ownership and control of capital in the country while leaving capitalism intact. One wing of the bourgeoisie won out over another with a different strategy for accumulation, yet the Iranian working class showed that it was in a position to challenge for power (’79) based on its own self-activity.

 The socialist alternative leads back to the politics Marx spoke of in the *Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League* while reflecting on the failures of the 1848 revolutions.

Marx argued that working class independence had to be restored, with the greatest degree of organization, unity and independence so that “it is not exploited and taken in tow by the bourgeoisie,” and other reformist politicians, however good their intentions.

Marx spoke of the working class’s task:

“[T]o make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one”.

Iranian workers can shorten and smooth the road to their struggle for complete emancipation if they rely on their own strength, provided they do not sacrifice their hard-won power to the deceptive mirages of bourgeois middle class politics, but continue to assert their power to accelerate revolutionary development. The Iranian working class can prove what many considered impossible is indeed possible – disgracing the fainthearted along the way.

One obstacle is the non-existence of real solidarity between the poor middle class and the working class, even though the further impoverishment of the middle class can create openings for solidarity. This is one political reason for the deadlock now in Iran. The day of national mourning of 26 December demonstrated the severe limitations of the middle class circumscribing the struggle to political freedom alone. The poor middle class spread the voice of some families whose main concern was political freedom and who had a clear affinity with some royalist opposition groups outside Iran. But they neglected the social and political needs of the workers and the poor.

Although the poor middle-class families, who had lost one of their members, called for demonstration against *Dictatorship, Censorship, Islamic laws*and*Corruption,*nobody talked about the horrible fact that more than 50 percent (40 million) of our compatriots are under the poverty line and more than 4 million are under the starvation level. The concerns of these people have been systematically ignored.

The National Day of Mourning of 26 December failed, it was a day that people in Iran not only watched an eclipse of the sun, but also the eclipse of their hope for emancipation. There is a deadlock. Of course, the savage state repression is a reason for the defeat, but it is not the only reason. The other political reason leads back to the limitations of different class projects: the lack of solidarity or any kind of effective collaboration between the project of the poor middle class and the project of the autonomous subaltern people. In fact, all the class projects lost their hope in reaching their goals: the poor middle class faced its inability to form a powerful alliance against the ruling class, the subaltern people faced their loneliness in their life crisis and struggle to take control of means of subsistence, and the ruling class faced this reality that they have no connection with the people.

If the poor middle class’s political demands excluded the economic aspirations of workers and the poor, and the economic demands of workers and the poor could not pull the middle class (who cared only for political demands) behind their struggles, then only working class struggle can bring social grievance into harmony with genuine democracy. Rosa Luxemburg identified how mass strikes produce the dynamic interplay between strikes and the political struggle, where each stimulates the other as the movement gathers confidence, leading to the rapid politicization of large numbers of workers. Once set in motion, mass strikes have a profound impact on the rest of society.

Before the November uprising, it was clear that workers’ struggle was proceeding at a galloping pace, flowing from the increase of working class itself and the class struggle in the textile, petrochemical, tractor, coal, sugar-cane, pipe-making industries as well as the industrial cities of Alborz, Qazvin, Saveh, Arak and Ahwaz. Bus drivers and truck drivers have struck on and off in Tehran since 2004, and teachers have been striking in national wide demonstrations for the right to set up independent trade unions and release their jailed colleagues.

The Iranian group *First Step* reported that there have been 7,200 strikes and protests since 2017 alone, “reflecting the severity of the Iranian workers’ situation and the magnitude of the militancy of this class at the present time”.

***Dynamics of Imperialism***

There are two enemies facing workers in Iran: the capital-centric Iranian state, and US imperialism. It is necessary to look at the major inter-imperialist rivalry between the United States and China to understand the place of Iran within the world system of state competition.

China’s rise as a central capitalist economy and the relative decline of the United States’ hegemony greatly threatens the latter. The tectonic shift is manifest in the ongoing trade war between the two countries. But the trade war is not the only front of inter-imperialist rivalry.

There are many wars and aggressive operations in different geopolitical sites between them. One of them is energy war. If we have a look at Middle East, in relation to energy production, one can see that significant amount of oil, necessary for Chinese factories, should pass through the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and Laccadive Sea. These three strategic points would create a vital triangle that we can call the “oil triangle”. One of the most intense wars between China and US is happening here. By clarifying the inter-imperialist rivalry of US and China in relation to energy supply, specifically their major conflict in the oil triangle, we can understand the reason for Trump’s recent imperialist aggression and the importance of joint naval drill of Iran-Russia-China in the middle of the oil triangle.

Australian prime minister Scott Morrison shamefully committed Australia to the US side of this conflict, giving troops, a surveillance plane and a frigate to the missions. The International Maritime Security Construct (Australia, America, Britain, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Albania – yes, Albania) station two warships in the Strait of Hormuz, and smaller Arab vessels in the Persian Gulf. More recently, Australia’s HMAS Toowoomba set sail for a six-month deployment in the Hormuz Strait, with almost two-hundred sailors “bracing for confrontation with Iranian vessels,” the ABC reported.

The rivalry is a necessary outcome of the imperialist structure of world capitalism today.

China imports oil from the region – though Chinese oil imports from Iran fell last year. The United States puts pressure on China by destabilising the region and showing who rules the Middle Eastern oilfields and the sea routes. The Iranian state stands in the way of Trump’s imperialist ambitions because it is aligned with China (and Russia), is vying for control of the Strait of Hormuz and Yemen’s Bab-el-Mandeb and has attacked Saudi Arabia’s oilfields.

China is Iran’s primary investor and trade partner. It is vital for international trade and the financing of water, production and transport projects. China also sees in Iran a strategic transport and logistics hub, ploughing billions of dollars for loans and investment into building railways joining cities like Tehran to Mashhad (926 km), or renovating existing railways. This is part of the Belt and Road Initiative. There already exists direct freight between China and Iran along the New Silk Road. Iran has slashed transit tariffs for Chinese goods as part of these deals. Beijing is also a major weapons supplier for Tehran.

Trump’s strategy of applying “maximum pressure” on Iran in a “regime change” bid is also about colonising Iranian labour market, raw materials and energy. This is another battle ground between China and the United States.

American rulers know very well that they can make lot of money if they economically capture Iran and use workers which their daily wage is less than $5USD. Iran with its cheap labour, from America’s standpoint, is a fertile land ready to be harvested by American Companies.

Iran is a sub-imperialist power within the world capitalist system. It has undergone great transformation since 1979 when much of its population was confined to agricultural labour and a small fraction of it being set to work in the industrial zones of the oil, car and textile factories. Since the Islamic Republic became the ruling class, there have been two contending sections of Iranian capital that have been in conflict. Each has a different answer to Iranian capital’s place within the global economy.

There is an ongoing conflict between merchant capitalist section and rentier capital. The merchant capitalist section has the aim of creating a normalized, Westernized middle class, providing the political conditions which provide for European investment in Iran. The rentier section’s aim was/is to geopolitically spread the Islamic revolution and by spending money on militias and Islamic revolutionary organizations in the Middle East they wish to expand their power and capture more markets. Thirty years of this clash between pro-Eastern *revolutionary-rentier* ruling class project and pro-Western *normalizing-merchant* ruling class project of Islamic republic has shaped class structure of Iran.

Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader) represents the rentier section of the ruling class. They own between 20 to 40 percent of Iran’s economy, most of their companies and corporations do not pay tax to the state and their financial activity is not transparent.

Joined to Khamenei are the generals of the Revolutionary Guard Corps who control the most important repressive apparatuses of the state. They are aggressive in their regional imperialist ventures. Their perspective is to build an Islamic Middle East with Iran as the hegemonic actor and with the dominant geopolitical influence in the region. It is their dream to capture the markets of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in future and the strategic straits of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, maintaining a mini-silk road from Tehran to Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut and having access to Mediterranean Sea (this certainly clashes with US imperialist interest and their allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia).

The other weaker section of Iranian capital is the normalising-merchant section led by President Rouhani. This section wants to open up Iranian finance to the rest of the world economy and negotiations with the United States. They want to see the Iranian state transition to a post-Soviet regime of a special kind: they have a middle-class dream for Iran’s future, a non-Islamic, sentimental, apolitical, hedonistic life which the middle class can easily buy alcoholic liquors, have parties and have no concern about the Hijab. But putting the middle class aside, it is clear that they have no dream for the poor subaltern people. Four years ago, the daily wage of an unskilled worker was almost $15USD. Right now, it is less than $5USD.

Both sections of capital are committed to managing Iran’s place within the world imperialist system. There is a relationship of domestic politics and the inter-imperialist rivalry between the United States and Iran, which could prove volatile. Trump’s belligerence was a message to his followers that he will do something that President Jimmy Carter, or other Democrats, couldn’t do, while the Iranian leaders tried to exploit Soleimani’s murder with mass mourning in the major cities, but this has seriously backfired after the shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger jet. The demonstrations against the regime show how little legitimacy it has.

The direct confrontation between Iran and the United States is a new phase of international relations, in which international affairs is coming to be dominated by authoritarian and populist internal affairs.

This is a dangerous shift in international relations. Fortunately, the masses throughout the Middle East and North Africa have demonstrated their collective power, the only force in the region that can limit the causalities of a renewed war.