The Left, the protests, a world on fire

Sue Sparks analyses the massive eruption of protest and resistance across the globe.  

Over the last six months or so, there have been a series of mass anti-government movements in many parts of the world, from Chile to Iran, from Lebanon to Hong Kong. It can be hard to discern commonalities among them. But we have seen popular eruptions like this before.

In the period 1968-75, a largely youthful/student movement kicked off opposition to governments – whether authoritarian or ‘democratic’ – on both sides of the Cold War divide. In some places, these movements found an echo in the organised working class. In others, they set off movements which challenged the existing relations between genders, between dominant and oppressed ethnic groups, and the prevailing ‘norms’ in terms of sexuality and gender identity.

The 1968-75 events followed a long period of economic growth and ‘welfare capitalism’ in both the First (Western) and Second (Eastern Bloc) Worlds. But this was just beginning to give way to crisis. On the other hand, a hot war was raging in South-East Asia, and this, the Vietnam War, radicalised a generation.

The fire this time

Today, the background to the popular revolts is very different. There has been a long period of low, unstable growth in the advanced economies, accompanied by rising inequality and poverty, resulting from both long-term privatisation and attacks on welfare and public services and more recent austerity in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-9. Working class activity and organisation have decayed in many countries over this period.

In much of the rest of the world, a commodity price boom fuelled economic growth, in some places accompanied by experiments in redistribution, in others by corruption and growing inequality. The end of that boom brought severe problems in some of the largest economies in South America especially, while countries in the Middle East are also still experiencing the impact of the War on Terror, the aftershocks of the Arab Spring, and the devastating responses by their rulers to previous popular revolts, especially in Syria and Egypt.

The massive displacement of people from Iraq and Syria, as well as migration from Africa, has affected the region in very different ways, and of course it has been the focus of reactionary movements in many European countries.

Broadly, we can see revolts against governments which have presided over growing inequality and where populations feel that their rulers have ignored their fundamental needs for a very long time. That applies to societies with very different histories and political systems, such as Chile, Lebanon, Iran, and Hong Kong.

At the same time, in much of Europe and the US, we see the same problems, but here they have generated political responses which deflect responsibility away from governments and onto
immigrants and ‘elites’ which are seen to have allegiances which are not national or patriotic. These far-right movements and parties serve to entrench the real elites and demobilise effective resistance. By and large, the anti-capitalist challenge to inequality and austerity in the advanced countries has been weaker and patchier than the reactionary response. The partial exception is the growing movement to demand real action to combat climate change.

**The failures of the left**

The international left’s reaction to these revolts reveals central weaknesses in its overall political analysis of the current epoch. A large proportion of the left views these movements through the lens of geopolitics, approving of revolts they identify as opposing neoliberal regimes or US allies, ignoring or denouncing those which they see as playing into the hands of US imperialism.

The clearest example has been Syria, where much of the left and prominent ‘left’ journalists have propagated the most astonishingly brazen lies and conspiracy theories against the anti-Assad forces, exhibiting repugnant levels of Islamophobia in the process. The better elements welcomed the initial revolt in Syria, recognising the Assad dictatorship for what it is, virulently repressive and neoliberal domestically and willing to collaborate with imperialism in the War on Terror.

But when the regime hit back with maximum violence and the opposition was forced into military organisation in order to survive, this part of the left fell silent, obsessed with not colluding with any kind of Western military intervention. They came to see Syria as a re-run of the Iraq War, an attempt by the US at regime change, which it never was. They protested only feebly against the slaughter wrought by Russian planes and Iranian-backed militias, crucial to saving Assad.

At the height of the Cold War, the internationalist left protested the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as well as the Vietnam War. But in the last few years, with few exceptions, the left has refused to stand outside Russian embassies to protest against Russian bombing of hospitals in opposition-held Syria – on the grounds that ‘the main enemy is at home’ and that they did not wish to encourage ‘Russophobia’.

While Israeli attacks on Gaza regularly (and rightly) bring out the left to protest at Israeli embassies, the siege of the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk by Assad’s forces and the brutal repression of Palestinians who fought with the Syrian opposition drew very little response.

More generally, we see a reluctance to back people protesting against regimes which have been criticised or sanctioned in the past by the US in particular or the West generally. If we take Nicaragua as a case in point, there has been very little left coverage of the protests against the Ortega regime and its unleashing of death squads in response.

**A parochial left?**

One additional reason for the lack of comment and analysis is the increasing parochialism of much of the left, with its focus on the local nation-state. It is, of course, the first duty of socialists
to oppose their own rulers, but the emphasis on ‘the main enemy is at home’, correct when directed against patriotism/nationalism, has mutated into a kind of isolationism – except where US imperialism is concerned.

In a very telling paragraph – in an otherwise welcome appraisal of the Hong Kong protests in *Jacobin* magazine – academic Eli Friedman had this to say:

*We know at an intuitive level what to feel when there’s a military coup in Latin America. There is no question how the left will respond to Israeli atrocities the next time they bomb Gaza. But former British colonial subjects who are on average quite privileged by global standards hurling Molotovs at the representatives of a (nominally) socialist regime? It’s confusing. Throw in some videos of black-clad protestors singing the Star-Spangled Banner, and it is understandable why it would lead to a mix of emotions.*

Why should it be any less intuitive to support those fighting the local puppets of the authoritarian regime in Beijing, a regime which slaughtered workers and students in Tiananmen Square in 1989, which relies on the labour of migrant workers with limited rights to reside in its cities, which has recently incarcerated between one and three million Uighurs in an attempt to eradicate their religion and culture? Why is it less intuitive to support those fighting back against the clerical fascists in Iran? Or trying to control the streets in Lebanon against a corrupt and sectarian elite? Come to that, why should support be based on intuition or emotions at all, rather than socialist theory and a close analysis of the actual forces in play?

As well as distorting the overall understanding of each particular movement, taking a geopolitical approach essentially robs those fighting on the streets of real independent agency. They become either a stage army of a ruler such as Maduro or Morales (usually with some disclaimer about their flaws or mistakes) or pawns in the hands of imperialist forces.

Class, or the perception of class, is also used to determine whether or not a movement is worthy of the international left’s support, or even its notice. Movements are dismissed as ‘middle class’ without any significant evidence in relation to the social structure of a particular society. The notion of what constitutes the working class has become frozen in an idealised past. The very worst manifestation of that is the notion of the ‘white working class’, invoked in the context of reactionary instances like the election of Trump or the Brexit referendum.

The excitement around the *gilets jaunes* was also an example of emotion or intuition triumphing over analysis: because the movement was directed against the hated neoliberal government of Macron, and because many of the participants appeared to be working class, or at least plebeian, the left was for a time entranced by it.

Of course, it did constitute a popular response to greater inequality, geographical as well as in terms of income and wealth, and it was viciously attacked by state forces. But the context was a rise in the far right and in xenophobia. It was never likely that the movement could be

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hegemonised by the left. That is not an argument for ignoring it, but it is an argument for using your brains and not running uncritically after it, donning your yellow jacket as you go. Some British leftists were disconcerted to find themselves in the company of far-right thugs similarly attired.

For or against the people of Iran?

We are fortunate to have a case study of how we should and should not approach contemporary struggles. A recent online article about the Iranian protests and the response of American ‘anti-imperialists’ put the issues clearly:

The petition, ‘Letter Against US Imperialism’, on the recent protests in Iran, currently in circulation, is illustrative of this problem. It’s important to examine its foundational concerns, as they sound superficially similar to anti-imperialist progressive ideas. The petition completely disregards the particularities of the economic and political circumstances Iranians have been struggling against for many decades. Despite the petition’s old-fashioned claims of standing with the oppressed of the world, with whom they would like to unite, it ends up exonerating the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] from its corruption and politics of killing and impoverishment, and supporting the status quo until further notice. According to the petition, under current global circumstances, the downfall of the IRI would lead to ‘catastrophic losses’ for the Iranian people, and the regime replacing the current one would be ‘far more violent and destructive’. Who are these Iranian people that the petition is saving from catastrophic losses by protecting their status quo from any meaningful transformation? ... Neoliberalism has turned into a magical term that is supposed to explain the sources of political discontent from Latin America to Asia and Africa without any attention paid to the political structures and socio-historical specificities of each of these contexts.2

Thankfully, an alternative petition in support of the Iranian protesters is being circulated, which states:

‘Enough is enough’ is the message of the people in the Global South and beyond. As students have chanted in one of Tehran’s universities, ‘The people are fed up. Enough with slavery.’ Like our sisters and brothers in Iraq and Lebanon, the Iranian people are absolutely fed up with the authoritarian capitalism reducing their lives to a mere vegetable existence, the systematic corruption intrinsic to mafia capitalism, and the sub-imperialism of the Islamic Republic in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and the region as a whole.

Always with the oppressed

In order to support the movements of revolt across the world, we need to adopt a basic presumption of solidarity with the mass of the population against all manner of corrupt and authoritarian regimes regardless of some notion that they belong in a ‘progressive’ camp. That does not mean automatically declaring the class character of the movement to be ‘working class’.

2 http://tripleamperand.org/anti-imperialism-intellectual-trap/
The left was clear in the 1960s that the National Liberation Front in Vietnam was worthy of our support against US imperialism. But part of the left was equally clear that the movement was not a working class in motion towards socialism, but a peasant movement led by the urban intelligentsia, in which the latter would take power and try to use the state machine to develop the economy, subordinating working class interests to that end.

Nor should its Islamism be a barrier to offering solidarity to a movement, something broadly understood in relation to Egypt, but not in the case of Syria. Equally, showing solidarity does not mean abandoning our mental faculties and abstaining from criticism when it is due.

As socialist internationalists, we stand with those fighting to control their streets and their lives, wherever in the world they may be, while recognising the political limitations of different movements, and arguing for independent working-class organisation and action within them.

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