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KAZAKHSTAN: The democratic movement stands on the shoulders of the insurrectional movement of the proletariat

The state manages to put down the popular rebellion by exploiting the weaknesses of the inter-classist pacifism of the opposition which calls for liberal reform of institutions. But we have not heard the last from the working class.

1) The week of insurrection in Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2022 is excellent news for the world proletariat. It was the result of more than two decades of democratic struggles – including the insurrection of December 1986 in Almaty¹ – and defensive struggles by workers for wages, for shorter hours and against the command over the shopfloor. These struggles were accompanied by attempts to organise unions that are independent from the state. This revolt had been prepared by a series of workers' revolts which had broken out relatively frequently and which were supported by a large part of the population and by non-governmental democratic organisations, along with part of the institutional opposition. Beginning in the working class districts of the South-West and notably in Zhanaozen (a city of 150,000 inhabitants in the Mangystau region), already the site of an insurrectional episode in December 2011, the insurrectional process of 2022 quickly affected all the country's principal cities. Its initial peaceful dimension quickly gave way to a flood of proletarian violence, fed by a deeply-rooted hatred of despotic nepotism on the part of the dominant classes. This despotic nepotism has also nourished the aspirations of democratic fringes who fight for constitutional reform and who demand the formation of a Constituent Assembly and the recognition of institutional opposition movements and independent unions. The doubling of the price of LPG, the fuel most used by the population, was the last straw. The cost of living was already becoming higher and higher because of devaluations in the national currency, the *tenge*, at an average rate of 17% per year between 2014 and 2020, leading to inflation reaching 10% per year. The strength of the proletarian insurrectional movement is shown by its capacity, over just a few days, to seize the streets, to push back and sometimes dislocate the forces of repression, to destroy numerous state buildings and reappropriate commodities. The rebels armed themselves immediately. The disarming of soldiers and

police, the taking of the armoury at the headquarters of the interior secret police (the hated Committee of National Security – CNS), the occupation, however brief, of the airport in Almaty, the main city of the country, and the widespread use of home-made unconventional weapons² have shown the political maturity of this episode in the class struggle. So much so that the disinformation agencies of the ruling classes of the world immediately took up their variants of fake news, announcing the arrival of well-trained terrorists from abroad, mixing them up with imaginary actions of the faction of the former master, Nursultan Nazarbayev, distanced from the executive in March 2019, but still in charge with his acolytes of the CNS during the outbreak of the rebellion. In reality, the accusations unanimously addressed against the insurgents, by the democrats of the planet, reveal the immense fear that the working class creates when it takes the road of its own independence and expresses itself without compromise with its own means of combat.

2) But what arouses the fear of these gentlemen even more is the suspicion of the constitution of fighting workers' organisations, of proletarian groups capable of carrying the attack to the class enemy with energy and indispensable determination. Yes, the representatives of capital, whether liberal or despotic, fear above all “non-spontaneous” proletarian insurrectionary movements. Even if defeated, these movements trace the path of the constitution of the class for itself, of workers' autonomy prepared by and in the daily struggles against exploitation.

3) Commenting in the British weekly newspaper, *The Observer*, on 9 January 2022, Diana T. Kudaibergenova, a well-informed sociologist at Cambridge University, joined the camp of bourgeois democracy, by drawing a clear line of demarcation with the “violent”, stating that “*There is still very little independent information and a lot of uncertainty.*”

¹ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeltoqsan>

² Hunting is an extremely common pastime, involving rifles and pistols.

However, one thing is clear: the peaceful protest was genuine and spontaneous,” adding that “People went to the streets to voice their grievances and we saw some self-organisation, especially in western Kazakhstan”. The self-organisation that she mentions is that of the workers in big mining centres and raw materials processing in the South-West of the country who had tried many times, unsuccessfully, to set up independent unions. But we can, without disagreement, base ourselves on the composition, proposed by this sociologist, of the demonstrations which have ravaged Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan in the Soviet era, located in the South-East of the country. Her Twitter feed (on 6 January) took up the same refrain: “structure of protestors in Almaty (roughly): Peaceful protestors demanding reforms, end of violence; most of these are spontaneous; Rioters, marauders, some organized, violent, where they come from – unclear; Political activists (de-institutionalised movements); Random looters”. Beyond her value judgements inspired by her political positions, Diana Kudaibergenova recognises that at least two of these four components have chosen the terrain of organised and planned confrontation, to the great displeasure of the nice peaceful and “spontaneous” democrats. Professional criminals perhaps? A testimony published on the site of a comrade replies: “I’ll say straight away that if you think these guys [who attacked the palace] were trained paramilitaries, you couldn’t be more wrong. These were ordinary blokes, proper brave lads with balls, not armchair experts. They went there to say “no” to the Nazarbayev regime, but it was the authorities themselves that had angered these people, having opened fire. There was a feeling that these guys would stick it out to the end. They were not hired provocateurs, because provocateurs NEVER risk getting shot at. Nobody there knew each other, the folk were united by their will for freedom and their hatred of the regime.” Taken from *People and Nature*: “Kazakhstan: an eyewitness to the uprising in Almaty”³. Expressing a certain contempt for the insurgents, the Carnegie Foundation, which promotes American interests in the world, described the actions of the “violent” elements like this: “The large number of frustrated young men with nothing to lose is the most likely explanation for how quickly the protests became radicalized and turned violent. Protesters clashed with law enforcement, and the looting began, fueled by cheap booze consumed during the New Year celebrations and apparently carried out mainly by angry and impoverished young men from the city, as well as local villages and small towns in southern Kazakhstan. Crowds in Almaty robbed weapons stores and supermarkets, raided ATMs, torched cars, and seized armored military vehicles. They also stormed

the local administration building, the prosecutor’s office, the National Security Committee building, TV studios, and other sites, with many left gutted or burned down. Almaty’s airport was also occupied for several hours. The evidence available so far suggests that the armed protesters had no strategic objectives beyond chaos and looting: the administrative buildings were burned and ransacked, but no one attempted to hold them afterwards. Nor were any political demands put forward by the rioters. The lack of centralized leadership of multiple gangs and absence of a political agenda other than mayhem is key here, but decades of the Kazakh government stifling real opposition also played a role.”⁴ By identifying the impoverished youth as the authors of the “violence”, Carnegie thus contradicts the idea of a foreign plot and armed Islamists who seized the occasion to take power.

4) The blooming of proletarian violence rapidly polarised the movement between peaceful democrats and rebel workers, and achieved a political objective that the repeated defeats of the long cycle of democratic struggles had not been capable of. From now on, it will be necessary to rise to the level of open class confrontation to have a chance of reversing the long, too long, political cycle of the proletariat marked by the supremacy of the counter-revolution and, since the global financial and fiscal crisis of 2007-2008, by the advance of the proponents of plebiscitary democracy, antechamber to openly fascist movements and regimes. For the first time in decades of democratic struggles interspersed with real fights for freedom and sometimes accompanied by a certain revival of defensive struggles of the exploited class – as during the “Arab Spring”, as presently in Chile, in Hong Kong in the recent past as well as in Algeria – it has been the workers who have got the ball rolling, and chosen the terrain and the forms of combat. Obviously, this loud and clear message, sent to their class brothers and sisters of the whole world, is not sufficient to reverse the tendency set out earlier and to begin a rising dynamic of the proletarian political cycle. However, the Kazakh insurrectionary episode remains a good omen at a time when the exogenous crisis of the pandemic and inter-capitalist competition increasing in parallel with the proliferation of possible theatres of armed conflict, take centre stage. The main limit of the proletarian insurrectional moment in Kazakhstan is the absence of a diffuse web of centralised class organs in a military and political command capable of planning the acts of the insurgents, of preparing the response to the counter-offensive of the reaction and, above all,

³ Account originally published in Russian, translated into English: <https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2022/01/09/kazakhstan-an-eyewitness-to-the-uprising-in-almaty>

⁴ Carnegie Moscow Center - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Turmoil in Kazakhstan Heralds the End of the Nazarbayev Era”: <https://carnegie-moscow.org/commentary/86163>

able to elaborate a revolutionary policy distinct and opposed to the democratic and “patriotic” fraction of the movement. This type of organisation is certainly absent but the various attempts at self-organisation which have punctuated the recent history of the proletariat in that part of the planet is a precious heritage which deserves to be developed and consolidated beyond any illusion of institutional reform, in the adoption of an internationalist political project in rupture with the capitalist system and its state. A political project founded exclusively on the autonomy and the power of workers in alliance with movements of women against patriarchy, and of poor peasants trying to escape destitution. A political project that at last makes its own the aspirations for freedom that the proletarian youth so energetically expressed in the course of the insurrection at the start of 2022.

5) The message of proletarians in Kazakhstan is all the more important and audible because it comes from a developed capitalist country. Its GDP per inhabitant is comparable to that of countries like Greece, Russia or Malaysia. Manufacturing and extractive industry represents more than a third of GDP while agriculture is less than 5% of it. The 60% or so that’s left is made up of services. Here as well, the weight of productive activities of industry and services is largely preponderant. Contrary to a widely held false idea, Kazakhstan is not a country living on extractive rents. The mining sector and oil and gas extraction certainly counts for 16% of GDP but manufacturing industry and refining represent 13% of GDP (11% being manufacturing industry). Transport⁵, which the country has plenty of, makes up 11% of GDP while construction almost reaches 6%. Finally, with 12 %, financial services coupled with property development have a significant weight. The banking sector is concentrated in about 30 institutions, half of which are locally owned. Because of the strong internationalisation of its capital, the productive structure of Kazakhstan is in no way archaic. In 2020 alone, Astana received nearly \$4 billion in foreign direct investment, 35% more than the previous year. All productive sectors, with the exclusion of construction, have benefited from this windfall: mining, oil and gas extraction and refining, transport, financial services, telecommunications and energy. But it is still natural resources that attract half of the foreign direct investment. However, the state still has a firm grip on Kazatomprom, by far the world's largest uranium ore producer, KazMunayGas, the na-

tional oil and gas extraction and refining giant, and KEGOC, the country's electricity producer and distributor. Since so-called “independence” in 1991, Kazakhstan has received more than \$370 billion in foreign direct investment. All the world's major powers are present, including the Netherlands and Switzerland, while the top five equipment suppliers are Russia, China, Germany, Italy and the United States, all leading countries in industrial equipment and transport. Russia, on the other hand, is in sharp decline with only 7% of total foreign direct investment recorded in 2020. The US injected almost \$35 billion into the country between 2005 et 2018. As for China, making the most of the “Belt and Road” initiative, it has dispensed direct investments of more than \$19 billion, between 2005 and 2020, with an additional \$ 5.5 billion envisaged before the end of 2023. Big global companies are falling over themselves to get into Kazakhstan, led by the mining and extraction companies. The working class is numerous⁶, multi-ethnic like the population in general⁷, multi-religious (Islam, mostly Sunni, represents 70% of believers and Christianity 25%) and concentrated in the cities. Out of 20 million inhabitants, more than one million work in industry and the mines, 800,000 in transport and 500,000 in health. Agriculture and fishing employ 1.2 million people⁸. In 2020, almost 60% of the population lived in cities or semi-urban areas. The state has abundantly financed capitalist development and its own recurring expenses through foreign debt, which represents some 25% of GDP. Total external debt (state and private) reaches almost 100% of GDP. The lenders come from the Netherlands, the UK, the US, France, China and Russia, in that order of importance. All this shows the strong dependence of Kazakhstan on the mature capital markets. Here capital accumulation is entirely tributary towards the main imperial powers and makes this country into a crucial element in the restructuring of inter-imperialist relations presently underway. Its raw materials, including uranium and rare metals for the “green transition”, its place in the political

⁶ The net average wage of a worker is around 500 euros per month. The rate of unemployment is around 6%.

⁷ The population is made up of 69% Kazakhs – growing – 20% Russians – diminishing – and the rest having various origins (including populations deported by Stalin from 1941 to 1944 – Germans from the Volga, Meskhetian Turks from Georgia, Poles from Ukraine, Tatars from Crimea – and people from the neighbouring countries, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Uyghurs etc.). For a complete list of the numerous ethnicities of Kazakhstan, see: <https://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/asia/kazakhstan-1General.htm>

⁸ Note that anger in the countryside erupted in April 2016 after the adoption of a law that allowed foreign investors to lease land for up to 25 years. Kazakh farmers feared that “the Chinese” would install themselves permanently in the country's agriculture. This fear had already been expressed in 2010 following the transfer of one million hectares around Almaty to Chinese interests. The target of the farmers' protest was KazAgro, the state structure in charge of leasing the land, considered to be very corrupt.

⁵ Only Almaty has a metro, that of Astana, the capital, is under construction, two other cities have tram networks, which explains how important the car is as a means of individual transport.

geography of the region and its strong presence on the capital markets makes Kazakhstan a “sensitive” country.

The insurrectional episode at the start of 2022 has laid bare the long and bitter competition between the various imperial powers for supremacy in Kazakhstan. A former Republic of the USSR, Astana has, since its independence, undertaken a largely completed process of detachment from Moscow. Its former constitutional dictator, Nursultan Nazarbayev, opted for a foreign and commercial policy described as a multi-vector approach. The organ of the regime explains the concept: *“Kazakhstan is a landlocked country and one of its strategic tasks for gaining access to world markets and increasing export opportunities is to overcome its geographical isolation, which is possible only through the development of close ties with all the closest neighbours and building good-neighbourly relations with them. Secondly, Central Asia is a region where the interests of three great powers, Russia, China, and the United States, converge. Regional powers are also showing a keen interest: Turkey, India, Pakistan, Japan, European Union countries, each has their interests there. The multi-vector approach is also important because, as the history of the independent development of the post-Soviet states demonstrates, an exclusive foreign policy orientation towards only one country ultimately does not meet Kazakhstan’s national interests, critically limiting the freedom for strategic manoeuvring.”*⁹ The proletarian movement has blown this foreign policy apart. Astana has had to call on the help of troops from the countries of the old Soviet Union, grouped in the “Collective Security Treaty Organisation”¹⁰ to put down the rebellion. Moscow thus re-installs itself in Kazakhstan by sending the formidable 45th Brigade of its special forces (Spetsnaz), sadly celebrated for its atrocities in Abkhazia (1992-1993), in Chechnya (1999-2001) and more recently in the Ukrainian Donbas. In this way, the new strongman of the regime, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, former Kazakhstan ambassador to Beijing and big friend of China, has been obliged to give his allegiance to Putin’s Russia by accepting its military presence. China immediately took the side of its friend by calling for the most determined repression, but *de facto* delegated it to Moscow. Caught in this vice, Kazakhstan is unlikely to return to a multi-vector foreign policy any time soon. In this regard, it is not impossible that the weakening of Nursultan Nazarbayev is due more to the insurrection and its repression than to an open conflict

within the executive. The former president, in fact, quickly called for great firmness towards the rioters while not sparing support for his successor, chosen and appointed by him. As for the dismissal of the top layer of the CNS, it is more attributable to its lack of effectiveness in the work of preventing and crushing the insurgency than to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s desire to break off all relations with the former team in command of the country. “Sacrificing” Nursultan Nazarbayev, by taking away Nazarbayev’s presidency of the CNS and taking it for himself, removing Samat Abish, the nephew of the former president, who was the CNS’s number two, and arresting Karim Massimov, the head of the internal secret services, who is accused of treason, are not really a “palace revolution”. It is rather an operation of slapping some fresh paint on the façade, necessary to restore order in a country where the insurgents have repeatedly targeted Nursultan Nazarbayev as the main person responsible for their condition and for building a state that was a model for repressive capabilities.

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⁹The *Astana Times*, 09/03/2021: <https://astanatimes.com/2021/03/peace-through-engagement-the-multi-vector-direction-of-kazakhstans-foreign-policy/>

¹⁰ A small-scale – and totally Moscow-controlled – version of NATO or the old Warsaw Pact, which encompasses Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.