

Inside the Kazakhstan revolt

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Last month's uprising in Kazakhstan began with oilworkers and spread countrywide, as workers created new councils to coordinate the movement. In response, the government shed some of its top officials and killed hundreds of protesters. After a week of action, and in the face of foreign intervention, workers suspended strikes and rallies without being defeated. Aynur Kurmanov of the Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan explains.

Tempest: What are the roots and causes of the mass uprising against the regime? What is the class character of the regime and the nature of the economy?

Aynur Kurmanov: The roots of the uprising lie in the socio-economic system of capitalism, namely in the model that was built in Kazakhstan after the destruction of the Soviet Union. The new Republic was integrated into the global division of labor as a raw material appendage of developed capitalist countries, a kind of colony in which American, European and British companies operated jointly, which still control two-thirds of the country's oil and gas production. According to unequal and binding subsurface use contracts and production sharing agreements, more than 70 percent of the extracted minerals do not belong to the people of the country.

The former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and the former party nomenklatura themselves carried out the restoration of capitalism—so effectively that Margaret Thatcher called him her best student among the presidents of the former Soviet republics. The former Soviet and party bureaucracy turned into a new comprador bourgeoisie, which traded in natural resources and gave Western capital an opening while plundering the resulting national income.

As a result, Kazakhstan has built a raw material model in which multinational corporations need only 3-5 million people to maintain the work of mining enterprises, and ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy; the remaining 12-13 million residents of the country turned out to be redundant—that is, unnecessary.

As a result of the destruction of the planned economy and social welfare system, millions of people found themselves below the poverty line, lost their jobs overnight due to the liquidation of manufacturing enterprises and the forced liquidation of collective farms and state farms in the mid-1990s.

Unemployed people from agricultural areas began to move en masse to large cities, including the largest metropolis and financial and shopping center—Almaty. Ghettos began to appear around such cities, entire areas where the new poor lived. Young residents from these areas who work on construction sites, in markets, in the service sector in low-paid and low-skilled jobs became the social base of the uprising in the southern cities of the country and in Almaty.

The role of the labor movement in these events was decisive, since it was labor collectives that became the backbone of protest actions in industrial regions and gave impetus to mass rallies in all cities of Kazakhstan.

The class core of the protests were the oilmen of western Kazakhstan, as well as metallurgists and miners of central Kazakhstan, who work at enterprises co-owned by multinational corporations. All the social contradictions and discontent were most concentrated there and became the causes of strikes and mass popular demonstrations. I will try to tell you about this background next.

First, these are regions of mass unemployment, where there is practically no other work except for oil and gas sector enterprises.

Second, the inflation of the summer and autumn of last year and the increase in high prices led to the depreciation of the national currency and to a decrease in the purchasing power of wages. Naturally, the doubling of the price of liquified natural gas on January 1 simply became the trigger for an explosion of discontent, and not only among motorists, since this increase in cost also meant a sharp rise in the price of products transported by motor transport.

Third, do not believe when they say that these protests were a complete surprise and an accident, because throughout 2021, all regions of western Kazakhstan were feverish with constant rallies and strikes of oil workers and workers of service companies, largely at enterprises with the participation of foreign capital. These were largely seizure strikes, when tents and yurts were set up on the territory of enterprises or in front of the gates in order to prevent the removal of equipment and the entrance of strikebreakers. As a result of the strikes, it was possible to achieve an increase in wages. The most important demands, however, such as reversing the results of the “optimization” policy and the return of outsourced service work back into the main production process—as well as ensuring freedom of trade union activity and legalization and recognition of independent trade unions created by the workers themselves—were ignored. It should be noted that as a result of the optimization carried out by Western managers, hundreds of thousands of oil workers lost their salaries and social benefit packages.

Fourth, in December 2021, at the Tengiz field at the Tengizchevroil joint venture in Atyrau region, where 75 percent of the shares belong to the American companies Chevron and ExxonMobil, 40,000 workers from among service and construction enterprises were immediately dismissed without providing any alternative jobs. The same threat of cuts hung over the workers of service companies in the Mangystau region.

Tempest: What was the composition of the uprising, and what were the main economic and political demands? How did the state react to this?

AK: As I said in my first response, the core of the protest movement was the industrial working class, with strikes and rallies, out of which the uprising began throughout the country. It was not by chance that the protests began on January 2 in the city of oil workers Zhanaozen in the west of the country, where ten years ago in December 2011, participants of an eight-month strike were shot by the police. Then, from January 3 to January 4, the strikes spread to other regions of the country, and a general strike actually began at mining enterprises jointly owned with foreign capital.

In Almaty and the southern cities of the country, the main part of the protesters were young unemployed or young low-skilled workers living in suburban ghettos where their parents had moved as “internal migrants” after the destruction of agriculture in rural areas. There, the rallies on January 4 and 5 acquired the most radical character, and young people who had hated the new bourgeoisie and officials for many years entered into a fierce confrontation with the police.

At first, the demands were socio-economic, namely, a halving of the price of liquified natural gas and a 100 percent increase in wages. In addition to them, the following social demands were put forward: lower prices for certain types of goods, an increase in wages, improved working conditions,

termination of layoffs, freedom of trade union activity and the construction of new factories—the creation of a modern manufacturing industry to ensure the future of the region.

Also on January 4, the first deputy prime minister flew by plane from the capital to the city of Aktau—the center of the Mangystau region, where he announced that the cost of liquified gas would be reduced by half for this region. But this was already a belated concession, since the protest movement itself had outgrown the previous demands, and many others had arisen, as rallies and strikes began to be politicized. The protesters were now shouting “Old man—get out!” all over the country. It was about the demand that Nursultan Nazarbayev and his family leave the government and give up the businesses they control.

The decision of President Tokayev to dismiss the prime minister and cabinet on the morning of January 5 did not help to contain further protests. By that time, all cities of Kazakhstan were covered by rallies and strikes. As a result, by the evening of January 5, President Tokayev had to announce the removal of Nursultan Nazarbayev from the post of Chairman of the Security Council. But even this did not help in the end, as the participants of the rallies and strikes demanded the departure of Tokayev himself.

On January 5, political demands were also put forward in Zhanaozen, which became the real political headquarters of the entire labor movement: the resignation of President Tokayev and all officials from Nazarbayev’s entourage, the release of political prisoners and detainees, a return to the 1993 Constitution guaranteeing freedom to form trade unions, strikes and the formation of parties. There, the so-called Council of Elders was elected from representatives of all industries, which became the coordinating body of the movement in the region and gave a model for the creation of similar committees and councils in other regions affected by strikes.

Therefore, the role of the labor movement in these events was decisive, since it was labor collectives that became the backbone of protest actions in industrial regions and gave impetus to mass rallies in all cities of Kazakhstan.

Tempest: Much has been said about the disagreements at the top, and there are all sorts of assumptions that the uprising was organized from above. What role did these units play?

AK: The ruling Nazarbayev family, which has a major interest in all the major banks, leading industrial and commercial enterprises, has gone through long internal struggles for the redistribution of assets and positions. For example, the dictator’s middle son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, opposed his eldest daughter and supported the incumbent President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in a conflict with her in May 2020.

That is, we must admit that the split in the ruling class was growing and the leaders of the national Security Committee (former KGB) from among Nazarbayev’s nephews played a special role in the conspiratorial infighting. They had their own terrorist gangs, which were used to create a “zone of chaos” in the form of pogroms and looting in order to demonize the protesters in Almaty and in the southern cities of Kazakhstan and impose martial law in the country.

This technique was also used in Zhanaozen before the shooting of a meeting of striking oil workers in December 2011, when such gangs were brought to the city, who staged pogroms and attacks on banks, government agencies, shops. This was done by the National Security Committee in order to justify the execution of participants in an eight-month strike that demanded the nationalization of the entire country’s mining industry. So in Almaty, these gangs were used to accuse all the protesters in the country of “terrorism.”

Yes, there were indeed conspiracies within the ruling class, but the groups at the top only took advantage of mass rallies and strikes to reshuffle certain figures in the state apparatus, and did not organize the mass actions from above. On the contrary, the split in the ruling class speaks of the emerging revolutionary situation; no faction of the bourgeoisie wanted a general popular uprising, and all had an interest in its suppression.

Tempest: Russia fully supported the regime and sent troops to assist in the repression. Why did Putin do this? Why did he also withdraw the troops so quickly? How did those who joined the uprising view Putin's state?

AK: In this case, Putin supported Tokayev as the most convenient figure for Moscow. At the same time, the troops of the Russian-led bloc did not participate in military operations and punitive operations, but secured strategic facilities in the country's capital, that is, the presidential administration building, the government and other institutions, as well as military bases and infrastructure.

Thus, military forces loyal to Tokayev were freed up to suppress demonstrations in Almaty and other cities of the country. In addition, he received moral and political support from Moscow in the fight against Nazarbayev's nephews, who were the heads of the National Security Committee. The fact is that the army, police and special services were paralyzed by mass rallies and strikes and did not want to listen to the orders of the president. But then, after the entry of Russian troops, of which there were no more than three thousand, Tokayev was able to restore control over the state apparatus and law enforcement agencies.

That is, there was a kind of displacement of Nazarbayev and some members of his family with the help of such outside interference, while President Tokayev stayed in power and unleashed mass repression in the country.

Tempest: Some leftists assumed that the uprising was just another "color revolution" organized by American and European imperialism. Why is this not true? What are the interests of these Western capitalist powers in Kazakhstan? How does this explain the fact that they have done little to resist Putin's repression and interference?

AK: We have repeatedly stated that the January events in Kazakhstan have nothing to do with the "color revolutions." In Kazakhstan, the entire liberal and bourgeois opposition was destroyed. This includes the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, which was shut down by the court in 2015, after which a policy of mass decommunization has been carried out. And the participants in the protests were not the petty bourgeoisie or the "middle class" as in Ukraine or Belarus, but the working class and unemployed youth, who did not initially have their own leaders or unified demands.

In addition, modern Kazakhstan strives to build a mono-national state, and nationalism is its official ideology. All reports about "pro-Soviet" Kazakhstan are a myth. In 2017, a monument to Mustafa Shokai, the mastermind of the Turkestan Legion of the Wehrmacht and Muslim SS units, was erected in Kyzylorda. Today, the state is radically revising history. This process has especially intensified after the visit of Nursultan Nazarbayev to the United States a few years ago. The pan-Turkist movement is also becoming more active. Most recently, on the initiative of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Union of Turkic States was founded in Istanbul on November 12, 2021. The Kazakh elite retains its main assets in the U.S. and the countries of the European Union. That is why the imperialist states are absolutely not interested in the fall of the current regime—it is already absolutely on their side.

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The U.S. State Department has come out in support of the existing regime in Kazakhstan, as have as the authorities of the European Union, as well as the leadership of Russia, Turkey, and China. That is, it was a real manifestation of bourgeois class solidarity in the struggle against the mass movement of workers and popular strata. Therefore, there was no interference from Western countries in internal events.

Moreover, representatives of European and American companies were the first to address President Tokayev, asking to restore order in the industrial regions of Kazakhstan and to protect their property and profits from the workers. And on January 6, at the time of the clashes between the army and the people in Almaty, the president officially declared that the state guarantees the ownership of foreign companies in the country. He kept his word by bringing troops to the Tengiz field on January 8, where oil workers in the Tengizchevroil company, owned by 75 percent of American capital, had been on strike since January 4.

Tempest: Following the uprising and repression, where is Kazakhstan heading? What are the Socialists trying to do in this situation?

AK: Although we consider the current events to be a social explosion and a mass popular movement, a real revolutionary situation is developing in the country. Rallies and strikes only launched this revolutionary process. Yes, through martial law, Tokayev and the ruling class managed to stop mass demonstrations for a while, but social contradictions did not go away, and the only concession to the strikers' demands was a 180-day reduction in gas prices.

The most important thing is that the labor movement in the country was not defeated, since in the industrial areas, oil workers, miners and metallurgists themselves decided to suspend strikes and rallies on January 8 in order to prevent further bloodshed. So far, mass repression has not affected worker activists, as the local authorities are still afraid to make arrests in Zhanaozen and at mining enterprises, fearing new strikes and rallies.

It turns out that for the first time in the history of Kazakhstan, in the absence of independent trade unions, industrial workers were able to hold a general strike in the extractive industry and in ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy. In addition, they gained invaluable experience in class battles, the creation of their coordination committees, as well as a limited political program of demands put forward in Zhanaozen on January 5. To them has now been added the previous ten-year-old demand for the nationalization of all large-scale industry.

Therefore, new strikes against American, European, British and Chinese companies will definitely be repeated. Our task is to help the workers create their own class organizations and propagandize among them the socialist program of the need to break the capitalist system itself and the need to take power. And for this, a mass workers' party, standing on principled revolutionary positions, is necessary. Therefore, the goal of creating such a party is now the most important for us in the medium term.

Tempest: What role can the international left play in strengthening solidarity with the movement and its forces?

AK: It is important to expose fabrications and false bourgeois propaganda about "color revolutions," the allegation that the uprising was organized by twenty thousand Islamic terrorists, or that strikes and rallies were controlled from above. After all, those "leftists" who spread such propaganda

actually reject class analysis and look to and support bourgeois governments and imperialist interventions.

It is also important to support the demands for an end to repression, the release of all political prisoners, freedom of trade union activity and the lifting of the ban on the activities of the Communist Party and our Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan, as well as other leftist organizations. The legalization of trade unions and leftists in the country will give a new impetus to the unification of workers and to the creation of their own class organizations.

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