

# ALGERIA - ON A KNIFE EDGE

Continuing at a breakneck speed, the terminal crisis of Stalinism is claiming another victim, this time in Algeria.

In a series of events similar to the recent coup in the former Soviet Union, the Algerian military who took power on January 11, excused their actions in the name of preserving national security in the face of imminent election victory by the Islamic Fundamentalist Movement (FIS).

FIS's recent successes builds on its good showing in the regional and municipal elections that were held June 1990, Then they won over 55 per cent of the vote, as compared to the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), which scored only 30 per cent.

The FLN's support had dropped even lower in the period since then, fuelling widespread speculation of a FIS landslide in the national elections. Before the coup, the FIS had won 188 seats in parliament and needed only 28 more in the second round of voting to take office in their own right.

## Uninterrupted rule

The FLN has ruled uninterrupted in Algeria ever since 1962, when it took power at the head of a national liberation struggle against French imperialism after eight years of war. At one point more than 500,000 French troops were deployed in the colony, backed by 40 per cent of US military aid to the NATO alliance.

The FLN lost the military conflict, but the scale of resistance and the sympathy it stirred among much of the French public forced a crisis in French politics. In 1958, the French military and ruling class brought in General De Gaulle in a bloodless coup to strengthen the war effort.

However soon De Gaulle came to see the war as an obstacle to modernising French capitalism, and granted Algeria independence.

The FLN set about constructing a

classic Stalinist regime. Its leader, Ben Bella, committed the FLN to capitalist national development along the lines of Sukarno's Indonesia and Nassar in Egypt.

Although overthrown by the army, his successor, Boumedienne, continued to expand the nationalised sector of the economy. In the eighties, Algeria's rulers embarked upon a programme of economic restructuring and privatisation in a bid to attract foreign capital and pay off the nation's massive debt.

## An unclear situation

In one respect, the present situation is the result of the tension affecting nearly all the Stalinist states; how to balance the demands of international capital with the deteriorating living standards of the masses.

The growth of Islamic fundamentalism is in many ways the direct product of this situation.

Certainly no support can be given to the FIS and its anti-working class, nationalist, reactionary program. This is particularly in regard to social issues such as the status of women in Algerian society, although the FLN's track record in this and other areas has been little better.

At the sametime it is important to analyse carefully the origins of fundamentalism and the FIS's growing success. At first primarily a movement among the petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals of lower class origin and small traders, with support among the traditionalist sectors of the middle class, fundamentalism achieved a mass base with the decreasing economic situation in Algeria.

In 1985, there was a fall in the price of oil, cutting Algeria's foreign earnings by 40 per cent. When strikes and food riots broke out in protest at these conditions in 1988, the FLN sent in the military, killing hundreds of demonstrators.

The FIS benefitted from the widespread public dissatisfaction caused by actions such as these. It is very much a movement rooted among the economically disinherited urban masses, who in the absence of any mass worker's party, believe they have found a party willing to take on the abuses of the FLN regime.

The growth of the FIS has been directly fostered by the FLN through its opposition to the development of any political and public activity independent of its own organisation. In 1988, the FLN banned all street meetings and demonstrations, allowing the FIS, with its network of mosques, to be the only opposition organisation in the country.

The FLN has also used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism on numerous occasions to purge its ranks of leftwing dissidents and to clamp down on the activities of militant trade unionists.

## On the knife edge

The situation in Algiers is similar to the situation across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union six months ago.

On the one hand, the FLN and military administration remains paralysed by internal crisis between those who control the nationalised industries and oppose any further opening to the world economy, and a faction of "reformers" who are pushing to introduce a fullscale market economy.

It is the "reformers" who, with the support of the military, are gaining the upper hand. But theirs is a temporary victory only. The coup won't increase the FLN's support base, nor solve the enormous social crisis in Algiers.

Neither does the FIS hold any solution to Algeria's situation.

This can only come from the strong Algerian working class, who although active since the coup, have yet to make their presence felt in any coherent, class conscious way.

# Compass: The cool winds of deregulation

The cool winds of deregulation have seen Compass Airlines come and go, and with it, the promise of cheap air fares, competition and free markets.

The 85% of Australian people who have been polled to be in favour of returning Compass to the air are quite understandable. For years they have been ripped off by the two airline policy perpetrated by this and other previous governments.

The fate of Compass is also interesting from the point of view of the battle previously undertaken with the Airlines Pilots Federation.

Quite clearly the Labour Government, in its attempt to serve its mates, in particular, Sir Peter Abels and Rupert Murdoch's Ansett Company, deliberately ran down Australian Airlines by refusing to provide additional capital and encouraging the deregulation.

Compass could not be tolerated by either Ansett or Australian Airlines as it posed an ongoing significant threat to their profitability.

The difficulties which Compass faced are also understandable from that point of view. The poor, and in some places, complete absence of facilities, was a very clear expression of the intention of Government in relation to deregulation, as a 'free-for-all' in which there is clearly no level flying field.

A question of leadership?

It is interesting that a number of apparently, contradictory elements emerged from the manoeuvres surrounding Keating's Ascension to power.

The final ballot was only successful because of manoeuvres within the Victorian Left of the Labour Party led by Wally Curren, the Secretary of the Meatworkers Union.

Curren arranged for a significant number of left wing Victorian MPs to switch their allegiance, probably in exchange for some material support for the discredited Kirner Government.

It is also significant that Keating in the period between the first and second ballots, appeared to be moving closer

to and seeking an accommodation with the Trade Union movement which traditionally has been Bob Hawke's major support base.

It is hardly appropriate to define Keating as being to the left of Hawke since they are both extraordinarily right wing in their views on most questions, but the adaption that Keating made now clearly places him closer to the trade union bureaucracy than Hawke was able to maintain.

The manoeuvres present the trade union movement with an opportunity to make demands for the restoration of full employment, for major public projects to be undertaken and to be placed in demands for restoration of wages losses that have occurred since 1983.

The current discussions between Kelty and Keating over the question of wage tax trade off should be registered at all costs.

Tax trades offs inevitably lead to further cuts in Government expenditure and in particular, cuts in the public sector.