

LABOR LINKS

A Newsletter to Promote International Labor Solidarity
with the Iranian Workers Movement

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Inaugural issue: This is the inaugural issue of Labor Links; a newsletter published to provide unionists and labor activists around the world with information about struggle of workers of Iran and to promote solidarity with them. Currently, Labor Links appears as an Internet quarterly in English, and soon, in Spanish. It is published in response to an interest on the part of trade unionists in Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean with whom we have come in contact. Labor Links is published through a collective and volunteer effort of Iranian labor organizers who live in Europe and North America because of anti-labor policies of the Islamic Republic in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, and a layer of current labor leaders in Iran. It is difficult to obtain accurate news about the labor movement in Iran because the government suppresses independent labor organization and action, and because mass media in Iran and abroad choose not to report on workers' struggles. We use whatever reflection of actual workers struggles that appear in the Iranian media and independent reports from rank-and-file labor leaders with whom we are in contact, using our collective historical experience and

Through brief and informative articles about the history of the Iranian labor movement and consistent reports about its current struggles and dynamics, Labor Links will contribute to the emergence of a growing bond between workers movements in Iran and across the world to lay the basis for a much needed ongoing international labor solidarity.

In this issue, you will read a brief overview of the Iranian labor movement since 1979 and where it stands today. The second feature reports on the ongoing struggle of the textile workers today. The last essay addresses the condition of Afghani workers in Iran.

Iranian Workers Movement Today¹

Iranian workers face many of the same problems workers face in the periphery of world capitalism: ongoing economic,

¹ Labor Links editors, Yadullah Khosroshahi and Kamran Nayeri, presented this overview of the current state of the Iranian workers movement to the U.S. trade union delegation to the 18th Congress of Central de Trabajadores de Cuba in Havana, April 28-30, 2001. It was also distributed in English and Spanish to trade union delegations from 58 countries that attended the International Labor Solidarity with Cuba and Against Neoliberal Globalization in Havana, Cuba, May 2, 2001.

social and political crises, capitalist attack on wages and working conditions and standard of living, and the challenge to combine struggle for dignity with struggle for survival. Capitalists their governments (international and domestic), and their allies stand against the workers movement. However, Iranian workers today stand on the shoulder of the previous generations and their rich history of struggle.

The Struggle against Monarchy

Iranian workers were central in the 1978-1979 revolution that toppled the U.S. backed regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Workers participated in mass protests from the beginning. In the summer of 1978, they formed strike committees to combine struggles in workplaces with the fight against dictatorship in the streets. The most significant workers action was the four-month general strike by the workers in the strategically important oil industry that was decisive in the downfall of the Iranian monarchy.

The Shora Movement

The movement to organize *shoras* (factory committees) swept the entire country after the downfall of the Shah's dictatorship on February 1979. *Shoras* dealt very effectively with trade union issues such as wages, benefits, working conditions, and housing. However, they also were involved in decisions regarding hiring and firing, purchase of materials and sales of products, and finance. *Shoras* tipped the scale in favor of workers in the workplace. They began to organize along industry lines and geographically. Oil workers demanded the right to directly run the oil and petrochemical industries. Many capitalists who could not face the

upsurge by the workers fled the country and their factories were nationalized. Peasants also organized their own *shoras* (peasant committee) and took on the landowners. These together with organization of soldiers, youth, oppressed nationalities, women, and neighborhood defense committees provided the basis for a government of workers and toilers.

Islamic Republic Attacks Workers

Iranian workers movement lacked its own revolutionary leadership to take the political power. Instead, the Shi'it hierarchy to set up the Islamic Republic in 1979 to maintain the capitalist and landlord class rule. It immediately began a course to undermine the self-active and self-organized movement of workers and toilers, beginning with a broad attack on democratic rights. It sent state appointed managers to factories to suppress and dissolve *Shoras*. At the same time, it began to set up competing organizations called Islamic Associations in workplaces to undermine *shoras*. Islamic Associations worked with management by preparing lists of militant workers who were then fired, arrested and in some cases executed by the government. At the same time, a broad attempt was made to set up *Islamic Shoras* to support anti-working class government's policies.

After 1981, when there was an atmosphere of war and terror in the country—including mass imprisonment, torture, and execution of opponents of the government, a final offensive against *shoras* took place. The Workers House, a government sponsored organization, led the assault aided by semi-fascist armed gangs called *Hezbollah*. They systematically planed and arrested *shora*

leaders. By winter of 1981, all independent *shoras* were dissolved and their leaders arrested.

Revival of the Workers Movement

As the Islamic Republic regime increasingly lost its legitimacy, the workers movement revived outside of the pro-government Islamic associations and shoras. Militant workers began to organize clandestinely and semi-publicly to wage struggles.

After the end of the 8-year war with Iraq, Islamic Republic began a program of rebuilding the economy by inducing capitalist investment. They adopted structural adjustment program of the World Bank and IMF. Privatization got underway. Many state-owned factories were sold to influential families or capitalists who had run away from the revolution and workers power.

Laws were passed to encourage capitalists and suppress workers. An example is Ministry of Labor's decision of February 6, 1994 that sanctioned replacement of a permanent workforce with a temporary one. Using this law, capitalists began to layoff workers en masse just to hire them as temporary workers with lower wages, no benefits and no rights. According to official statistics 400,000 workers lost their jobs in this wave of attacks. Meager unemployment benefit covers only a small section of workers. In recent year, with government tacit support capitalists refuse to pay even meager wages they owe their workers with some receiving no pay for as long as a year. Over a year ago, the Iranian parliament passed a law that removed 1,800,000 workers in small units of 5 or fewer from protection of the labor law. These workers and their

family will no longer receive social security and health benefit, making their miserable living conditions even worse. Today's official minimum wage stand at \$1.70 per day while minimum daily cost of living for the working class family is estimated at over \$5.

Iranian workers have waged strikes (not legal in Iran) and factory occupations sometimes keeping managers and capitalists with them, and even faced armed government forces. Increasingly, they have taken their struggle to the streets.

In 1979, Iranian workers movement was part of a wider revolutionary wave that included working people in Nicaragua and Granada. Today, they are part of a worldwide resistance to a brutal international capitalist offensive. They deserve and need the solidarity and support of workers and our unions and parties everywhere in the world.

Textile Workers Fight Back

On October 4, 10,000 textile workers in the city of Esfahan staged a peaceful demonstration that was attacked by government security forces using tear gas. Many workers were wounded and arrested. Most government controlled press reported on this demonstration and its suppression.

The textile workers were protesting the passage of a law by the Islamic Republic Majles (parliament) on September 25 entitled "Reconstruction and Renovation of the Textile Industry Act" (hereon, the Textile Act). Article "D" of the Textile Act states that "human resources in

textile units covered by this Law deemed expendable by the factory director and affirmed by a committee consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Industry and Mines, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and Management and Planning Organization of Iran will be 'bought back' after payment of their due wages as defined in the Labor Law." The term "buyback" refers to common practice in established industries of compensation of workers who are laid off.

The textile industry is among the oldest in Iran. According to the Ministry of Industries, there are 4,795 textile companies with 483,000 employees. This is about 30% of the workforce employed in the 10 designated industrial groups in Iran. The highest number of textile factories, 1,164, reside in Esfahan province, followed by 722 in East Azarbijan province, 656 in Tehran province, and 351 Yazd province (see map).

The textile industry was highly profitable during the 8-year war with Iraq (1981-1988), when textiles imports were regulated. However, much of these profits found their way into speculative and mercantile activities instead of expansion and modernization of the industry. After the war unregulated importation of textiles and smuggling reduced prices while aging machinery and equipments reduced productivity. In the 1990s, the textile industry went into crisis with many factories going bankrupt.

The Textile Act represents an attempt by factory owners, the government of President Khatami and the sixth Majles to restructure the industry through

downsizing and super exploitation of workers. The Reformist faction that dominates the Majles and other capitalist factions such as the Constructionists, who rally around Akbar Rafsanjani, and forces allied with the Chamber of Commerce are pushing for a neoliberal economic restructuring of the Iranian economy.

During the past three years, textile workers have waged a persistent fight through rallies in front of government offices across the country and in front of the Majles in Tehran, street demonstrations, and the blockage of roads (a popular form of labor protest in Iran). A central demand has been payment of their unpaid wages.

The Textile Act goes beyond an attack on textile workers alone. It undermines articles 157 and 158 of the Labor Law of the Islamic Republic that stipulates that the lay off of workers should be governed by a representative body of *workers*, managers, and the state. So far, *Islamic Shoras of Labor* governed by the Worker House, have been asked to represent workers in such labor, management and state committees. The Worker House became the official voice of the Iranian workers after the Islamic Republic regime, with its active support, suppressed any independent workers movement in the opening years of the 1980s. As the Islamic Republic regime increasingly and openly allies itself with the capitalists inside and outside of Iran, the Workers House itself has come under attack. Indeed, by bypassing the *Islamic Shora of Labor*, the Textile Act represents an attempt to undermine the Worker House and its affiliates across the country. The Act also aims to do away with the common practice of

obtaining a “buyback” agreement from workers being laid off. It merely requires management to pay laid off workers 2 to 6 months of their wages per year of service. The Textile Act also violates articles 78 and 98 of the Labor Code of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The Workers House stipulates that if the Council of Guardians, an un-elected body of Islamic experts, does not reject the Textile Act, its implementation will result in an estimated 100,000 textile workers losing their jobs. As has happened in recent years, the management will proceed to hire the same workers back as temporary help with lower wages and without benefits as required by the Labor Law.

The following is a representative sample of protest against the Textile Act across Iran. The unions referred in these items are recently constituted by supporters of the Workers House but the issues they raise are very much concerns of the rank-and-file workers who do not identify with this leadership.

- Alireza Mahjoob, General Secretary of the Workers House, has voiced his criticism of the Act. “If this Act is implemented 100,000 workers will lose their job... The government will have to shoulder a cost of 100 to 500 billion tomans (\$100 to \$500 million) costs” of creation of new jobs to re-employ these workers.
- Union of Textile Workers issued a statement denouncing the Textile Act on the grounds that it will lead to mass unemployment of textile workers and cautioned of the reaction by affected

workers: “if this Act is implemented there can be no guarantee of its consequences.”

- Water and Electricity Workers Union of Tehran province denounced article “D” of the Textile Act because it will lead to mass unemployment of textile workers. They asked President Khatami and the Council of Guardians to revise the law by striking down the “buyback” provision.
- Employees of Pars Carpet in town of Alborz signed a petition that protests the undermining of article 27 of the labor law that requires participation of Islamic Shoras in layoff decisions. They also protested the unregulated import of textiles that undermines domestic production.
- Parviz Ahmadi, president of the executive board of Tehran Islamic Shoras of Labor, argued that the Textile Act undermines the role of these organizations in decisions about lay off and firing of workers, and is “a threat to job security.”
- Representatives of Islamic Shoras of Mazandaran province and workers of textile factories of Ghazvin in a petition signed by 2235 workers protested the passage of the Textile Act.
- Taherzadeh, Executive Secretary of Workers House of Semnan Province, denounced the passage of the Textile Act. He said this action of the Sixth Majles dominated by the Reformists was similar to the action of the fifth parliament dominated by the Conservatives that stripped employees of firms with 5 or

- fewer workers of Social Security and Labor Law protection. Taherzadeh argued that as long as “workers vote for individuals with various titles they should expect nothing better.”
- After a confrontation of Esfahan textile workers with security forces, workers of Simin textile factory issued a statement that denounced “intellectuals and researchers” of the Sixth Majles that push through the Textile Act. They contrasted workers’ self-sacrifice and the capitalist greed of the capitalists during the 8-year war with Iraq and decried how the parliament of Reformists is rushing to help the capitalists while laying the groundwork to lay off workers.
 - In a letters to the Council of Guardians workers in Kerman province and Eastern Azarbijan province asked them not to ratify the Textile Act.

Full and Equal Rights for all Afghan Refugees

The U.S. led war against Afghanistan is the latest assault on the workers and peasants of this country that has been subject to civil wars and foreign intervention during the past 20 years. An estimated 2 ½ to 3 million Afghans have taken refuge in Iran during these years. Another 3 million live in Pakistan.

Currently only about 50,000 Afghans in Iran have residency papers and are somewhat integrated into the country’s social life. The big majority of Afghans

live in camps created by the Iranian government and the United Nations. They do not have residency papers and are effectively segregated from Iranians. However, Afghans play an increasing role in low paid, menial, difficult and dangerous jobs. They are systematically super-exploited by employers who take advantage of their vulnerability.

In recent years, the Iranian government has begun a campaign to send unwilling Afghans back to Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban. Afghans are not allowed to open up saving accounts in banks or send their children to schools. Even Afghani-only schools in camps are lacking. Illiteracy, disease and malnutrition are rampant among their population.

The self-proclaimed leaders of the Iranian workers have supported the anti-Afghan policies of the Islamic Republic. In his May Day 1999 speech, Minister of Labor, Hossein Kamali, who has been the nominee by the Worker House for this office since the mid-1980s, echoed the chauvinistic and anti-labor charge that high unemployment in Iran is due to the presence of the Afghan refugees.

Through their own experience, Iranian workers increasingly understand that unemployment is another weapon in the hands of the capitalists to increase their profitability. The fight for full and equal rights for Afghani refugees is essential to unite workers in Iran against the assault by the employers and the government.

Labor Links is published four times a year. While the editors are responsible for accuracy of the information provided, only unsigned articles reflecting policy are the expressed views of the editors. Send questions, comments, news and articles to labor_links@hotmail.com

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