

The working class in Iran: some background - class struggles from 1979-1989 - Mostafa Saber



Some excerpts from *A Brief Look at the Situation of the Working Class in Iran*, a short description of workers' history and conditions - and their struggles during and following the 1979 Revolution.

Of particular interest is the observation that "in practice the [workers'] councils, due to their complete accordance with workers' direct and immediate exercise of power, won an indisputable victory vis-a-vis the unions. The few attempts at creating unions remained irrelevant to the real workers' movement."

The long struggles over Mayday mentioned in the text still continue, as seen [here](#) in 2007.

From; *A Brief Look at the Situation of the Working Class in Iran*, Mostafa Saber, 1990 London & Stockholm. Published by Communist Party of Iran - Organisation Abroad. (Reproduction of these factually useful extracts does not imply any endorsement of the past or present politics of the CPI.)

THE WORKING CLASS IN IRAN: SOME BACKGROUND - class struggles from 1979 - 1989 (Mostafa Saber, 1990)

The history of the emergence of workers in Iran goes back to the early twentieth century. The first strikes were reported from around 70 to 80 years ago, and the first workers' organisations took form around 1920. In the 1920s the small number of workers were organised in a national union led by communists. This union, comprising several thousand workers, was significant enough for the monarchist government of the time, i.e. that of Reza Shah[1], to set the crushing of the incipient workers' movement as one of its prime tasks.

Later, with the relative development of capitalism, the establishment of railways and the growth of factories, the number of workers increased. During the development of the years

1941-53[2] the Iranian working class was organised in organisations with tens of thousands of members; the oil workers, in particular, had a tangible presence on the social stage.

The working class in its present sense, however, developed only after the Land Reforms of the 1960s. As a result of these Land Reforms capitalist relations were rapidly established. Millions of dispossessed peasants were driven into the labour market. With the capitalist boom in Iran in the early 70s industrial workers developed in their millions. Thus from the 1960s onwards the working class emerged as the main producing class. The working class in Iran is therefore a young class. Despite the early existence of workers in sectors such as oil, printing and textiles, most sections of the Iranian working class are not more than two generations old.

The first great social experience of this new working class was the 1979 revolution. In fact it should be said that the Iranian working class in its present political and social form is, more than anything else, the product of the developments of the last ten to fifteen years. In the 1979 revolution the working class was the backbone of the revolutionary movement and the workers' nationwide strikes were the most radical blows struck at the Shah's regime. The slogan "Our oilworkers are our staunch leaders" which then became the universal slogan of the revolutionary masses, reflected this vanguard and decisive role played by the workers. Although, in general, workers were not able to free themselves from the domination of the bourgeois-religious opposition, they put forward their own independent demands. For example, through the oilworkers they demanded to be present in the "Revolutionary Council" which was formed in the wake of the Shah's downfall.

With the accession of the Islamic Republic regime to power, workers' struggle against this new rule of the bourgeoisie began from the very first days. The first bullets fired by the new regime against the revolution hit the hearts of unemployed workers who had launched a widescale movement. Workers' economic struggle in the factories was a main stronghold for the continuation of the revolution. Workers step by step were voicing their demands with greater clarity. Workers' councils, having sprung up from the heart of the strike waves before the uprising, took the lead of an enthusiastic and profoundly revolutionary struggle to realise the demands of the working class and safeguard the gains of the uprising. The revolutionary period 78-81 was the period of the richest experiences for workers and their direct intervention - in their millions - in the fate of society, leaving its stamp on the consciousness of the whole working class. But this period ended in 1981 with the Islamic regime's massacring of the workers' councils, the crushing of the political organisations and the establishment of an unprecedented repression.

After 1981 and with the total domination of Islamic counter-revolution, a new period began in the life of the working class which is chiefly characterised by the workers' determined defence of their condition and rights against one of the darkest bourgeois dictatorships. In the recent period, poverty, unemployment, lack of rights, war and massacre, and the harshest religious suppressions have been the lot of the workers. But workers have also gained invaluable experiences in continuing the struggle under the most difficult conditions. What we shall consider here briefly is the situation of the working class at this period, i.e. from 1981 until now. We shall try to present the most essential information regarding the present situation of the working class, and only when necessary make fleeting references to the past.

THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

Iranian workers have almost always been deprived of a legal right to strike. The current Labour Law and that which is to be passed soon do not recognise the right to strike.

Khomeini had repeatedly declared that strike is a sin. Many strikes have been confronted and crushed by the Pasdaran[3] and the military. Both under the Shah's regime and under the

Islamic Republic many workers have been sacked, imprisoned and even murdered on charges of going on strike. Nevertheless, none of these measures has succeeded in preventing the widespread strikes during the past several years. Going on strike is illegal, but each year on average over a hundred "illegal" strikes take place. The strike action has truly proved to be the workers' weapon in their collective protest against the capitalists and the Islamic Republic to improve their conditions. Today the next step for the workers is to impose the right to strike as a legal right on a nationwide scale.

[....]

WORKERS ORGANISATIONS

With the repression in 1981 when workers' councils were broken up by the force of the bayonet, the brief 3-4 year period during which workers had their own real organisations ended. Since 1981 we have rarely witnessed durable and real labour organisations. Of course, this does not mean that all forms of organisation have been, or are, entirely lacking. The relatively widespread and consistent strikes and protests from 1981 onwards could not have taken place without some degree of unity and solidarity and, in many cases, without temporary mass organisations as a basis. Temporary general assemblies (and in some cases more or less durable ones), as well as protest gatherings have served as a basis for strikes. Furthermore, circles of vanguard and socialist workers which in strike periods take the role of secret strike committees, have played a key part in these protests. There also exist, here and there, trade unions in certain trades which have genuine working-class character. Cooperative funds which - though scattered and in small units - have sprung up in the past few years reflect other forms in which workers have tried to organise. We should also mention consumer and housing cooperatives which are the organisations of workers themselves.

All the same, the fact remains that the absence of public, mass and durable organisations, despite all the attempts of workers to create them, has been the most important weakness of the working class in Iran.

Alongside this lack of organisation and of the right to create workers' organisations, and as an extension of the regime's savage suppression of the slightest attempts to create genuine labour organisations, we have witnessed the Islamic Republic's wide-scale effort to set up state and Islamic organisations in the workplaces. After 1984, as a way of countering workers' attempts to organise, the Islamic Republic put great efforts into setting up Islamic Councils. These organs have now developed into a huge apparatus whose headquarters are called the "Workers' House". Besides the Islamic Councils, this body includes a network of Islamic Societies, as well as the Central Organisation of Consumer Cooperatives (Emkan) and Housing Cooperatives (Eskan).

The absence of permanent mass labour organisations in Iran has been an old problem. Except for brief and occasional periods, no long-term periods of the existence of mass organisations in Iran can be found. The continuous existence of repression and dictatorship and the banning of the right to organise is only one cause of this situation. For a complete understanding of the present situation we have to know the history of workers' organisation in Iran.

UNIONS

Despite their relatively long record of existence, trade unions in Iran have not left behind a lasting and dependable tradition. In two short periods in Iran's history, marked by social upheavals and openings in the field of workers' protests and struggle, we have witnessed the rapid growth of unions. The first period was in the years 1921 to 31 and the second from 1941 to 53.

In the first period when the working class was very small in number and non-industrial, it is believed that the unions, at the height of their activity, had organised about 30,000 workers in a national confederation in several cities in Iran. The main stronghold of the unions, led by the "League of Iranian Communists"[4] (or the Communist Party of Iran), was initially the printworkers and, later, the oilworkers. The unions were successful in winning certain demands and organising several strikes. At one point the printworkers' strike, supported by other workers in the confederation, gained a high political significance, turning workers into an effective force in defending the right of expression and free press.

Very few of the memories of those days are still alive in the minds of workers today (except perhaps, to some extent, in the case of the oilworkers). The 1931 repression by Reza Shah destroyed the remnants of the trade unions and the Communist League which by then were exhausted. The finest activists of the unions perished in prisons under torture; some gave up union activity, and a number of others only later returned to work in the unions.

By the second period (1941 to 1953) the number of workers had to some extent increased; railways had been established; more factories had been built, and the oil industry had grown. It is believed that in the national confederation, whose leadership in the end fell into the hands of the Tudeh Party[5], between 100,000 and 200,000 workers had organised.[6] In this period, relying on the unions, workers played a more significant and effective role in society. The first labour law in Iran was introduced in 1946 as a result of pressure by workers. In a number of notable strikes and political actions workers played a prominent role, the backbone of which was the oilworkers in the south. Nevertheless, workers and the unions were under the leadership of the Tudeh Party and their perspective did not go beyond the framework of bourgeois reforms. Indeed, in the end they fell victim to the conciliatory and collaborationist policies of the Tudeh Party. Workers' revolutionary and radical sentiments, now openly in ferment specially in the south, were stifled by the confederation leaders and the Tudeh Party. In the end, with the 1953 coup[7] and the renewal of repression, the unions and the workers' movement suffered a very heavy defeat. It was a defeat which inevitably resulted in a profound disillusionment in, and pessimism towards, the Tudeh Party and, to some extent, the trade unions.

From the 1960s onwards and following the land reforms and the expropriation of the peasants, capitalist relations became dominant in the Iranian society. The working class thus turned into the main producing class in its millions. This meant the surge of millions of peasants into the ranks of the relatively small industrial proletariat, resulting in great changes in the composition of the working class and, together with this, in its traditions and experiences. In the early 70s, with the rapid growth of the oil revenue and the thriving of industries, a new industrial working class rapidly developed. The economic boom and the near-full employment allowed workers, relying on the increasing demand for labour, to bring about relative improvements in wages and in their economic situation. It is from the mid-seventies and with the onset of the economic crisis that mass protests and strikes begin to break out with greater vigour and significance. In the whole of this period, i.e. from 1953 to 1976 (when the new period of protests began), workers on the whole lacked real and durable mass organisations and there was no visible trade-union tradition. The only organs allowed legal activity were the mandatory official unions which had been built by the Shah's regime itself. These were never recognised by workers and were in fact detested.

In view of the factors and conditions which we have glanced through, it is obvious that the Iranian working class has not enjoyed a strong trade-union tradition and sufficient experience to found a lasting trade-union movement. Other important factors which explain the absence of a strong and well-rooted trade-union tradition in Iran include the lack of continuity of reformist parties, the non-tolerance by the bourgeoisie in Iran of an independent trade-union

movement, the failure of unions in their last great experience, the existence of constant repression, the rapid change in the composition of the working class and its growth by millions in a short time, and, on the whole, the breaks which have occurred in the history of struggle and development of the working class in Iran. But another, undoubtedly very important, factor has been the incompatibility of the trade-union tradition with the revolutionary and political needs of the working class in Iran which has always had a revolutionary and political spirit. During 1977-81 when a great field of action opened for the creation of labour organisations, the great majority of the workers turned to building councils and council-type organisations. Although the question "councils or unions?" is still posed by a section of the left and also by some older workers, in practice the councils, due to their complete accord with workers' direct and immediate exercise of power, won an indisputable victory vis-a-vis the unions. The few attempts at creating unions remained irrelevant to the real workers' movement.

Today there exist trade-union traditions among certain sections of Iranian workers (including the oilworkers) and among some older workers. But even here the influence of the council movement is undeniable. In some trades (such as the bakers, tailors, etc.) we find trade unions which have often organised the workers and employers of small trades and which basically attend to problems specific to the trade (such as the receipt of raw material quotas from the authorities, etc.). These unions are in fact more of a worker-employer character; the struggle between the workers and the bosses is carried into these unions themselves. At times the worker feature of these unions becomes more prominent. Furthermore, in some other crafts, such as small metal workshops, some cases of real worker unions have been seen which, since they have not had much impact on the workers' movement, have been tolerated for some time and have managed to survive for a while within the tight grip of the existing laws.

THE COUNCIL MOVEMENT

The most extensive, most effective and liveliest tradition of organisation among Iranian workers and that which has come closest to a tradition of organisation, is that of the council movement. The councils emerged from the heart of the mass, nation-wide strikes of 1977-78. These were the strikes headed by the oilworkers and broke the last attempts of the Shah to stay in power. The strike committees which half-secretly led the strikes, were, after the 1979 uprising, either chosen to the leadership and executives of the councils, or themselves directly transformed into "councils" or "founding committees for the councils". The councils were, in one word, the direct organs of exercise of workers' revolutionary will. Through the oilworkers, workers had demanded to be included in the [provisional] government set up in the wake of the revolution, but had found no share in it. In the event, they credulously left the political power to Khomeini and co; they now wanted to use their direct revolutionary power to continue the revolution and bring it to victory in the confines of the factory and in their own sphere of influence. The council was essentially the means and the vehicle for this revolutionary tendency of the workers. A whole range of economic and political demands were placed on the agenda of the councils: from workers' control in factories, the sacking of the management, dissolution of the spying and surveillance organs, down to the introduction of democratic freedoms, freedom of speech, the determination of the internal regulation of factories, the enforcement of a 40 hour week, wage rises, the reinstatement of sacked workers of all the previous years, the supervision of the general assembly over matters relating to the firing and recruiting of employees, the payment of the debts owed to workers under the Shah's regime, equal rights for women and men, the abolition of the labour law dating to the Shah's regime and the drafting of a new labour law with the approval of workers' elected

representatives, and the publication of reports of workers' protests and demands in the official newspapers and the radio and TV. The fact that councils intervened and engaged in all matters, were free from bureaucratic strings and provided possibility for workers to voice and implement their wishes directly, was their remarkable point of strength compared to all other organisations experienced until then. Workers enthusiastically set to the work of building councils. In some cases councils went as far as taking full control over factories.

Often they themselves implemented demands such as a 40-hour week, the dismissal of the management, the dissolution of spying and surveillance organs, the trial of the managers and informants in the workplaces, the drawing up of internal regulations and the election of factory officials. In many cases the council resorted to the sale of products and the checking of the company books to provide for increased wages for the workers.

In its best and fully developed examples, the council organisation was based on the general assembly as the pillar and basis of the council. But it was not so in all cases, where by council was understood the executive board and the elected representatives and officials of the council. Nevertheless, even in such cases the final decision was the prerogative of the general assembly. The success of the council depended on to what extent it truly was the organ for the direct exercise of workers' will. Councils developed essentially as factory and district organisations. There are scarcely any factories in these years in which councils were not formed or where an intense battle for their formation was not fought out. The councils did not live long enough to give rise to council federations and national unions of councils. A number of attempts in this direction only reached the half-way stage. But they proved the existence of the potential and capacity for building nation-wide council organisations. As examples we can mention the Union of Gilan Councils, an association of the councils of 20 to 30 councils in Gilan, the most industrial northern province of Iran; the Union of Councils of East Tehran, which had joined together a number of councils in the factories in East Tehran; and the Union of Councils of the Organisation of Development Industries, which made efforts to coordinate the councils of over 100 factories, with tens of thousands of workers.

From the very beginning the councils came into conflict with the new regime. The Islamic Republic tried to destroy the councils by different methods: by trying to conquer them from within with the help of Hezbollah workers or those who still had illusions in the regime; by setting up and consolidating "Islamic Councils"[8]; by exerting economic pressures, especially in the case of councils which had taken control of the factory. But its main resort was the suppression, intimidation, arrest and even murder of council activists. Every wave of onslaught by the regime across society (including the offensive against the revolutionary movement in Kurdistan - in Western Iran - the raid on the universities and massacre of left-wing students, etc.) was simultaneously a direct attack on the councils and the socialist and communist workers who normally were at the head of these councils. In the first days of the Iran-Iraq war, in September 1980, Bani Sadr the President at the time, appeared on television, saying to the workers: "It is now war; councils and the like are over; you have to produce, my dear." In the end, on 20th June 1981 when the regime embarked on its horrific massacres, the councils were smashed and many of their activists were fired, imprisoned, executed or forced to flee.

The fate of the councils was in fact the fate of a revolutionary working class which was not as yet ready to fully differentiate its ranks and draw a clearer picture of its perspectives for the future and for taking over the control of society. Nevertheless, the council is a permanent element of the period 1978 to 81, the days when workers were directly putting their demands and wishes into practice.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The general assembly, i.e. the regular assembly of the workers of every factory in which workers discuss their issues, make decisions and themselves carry out these decisions, was in fact the core of the councils. After the 1981 suppressions, the council tradition continued in the form of the effort to hold general assemblies and even, in some cases, by the actual formation of councils. Most of the important strikes since 1981 have practically been based on general assemblies held temporarily during the period of protest. The steelworkers' strike in November 1984 which lasted for one month, in which 10,000 workers of the construction section of the steel complex took part and 12,000 of another section gave active backing, could not have been staged without relying on the general assembly. In some factories (for instance, the Indamin factory with 700 workers) the holding of regular general assemblies became institutionalized. Workers normally call their protest gatherings, the meetings in which they question the management and discuss and make decisions about their issues, as "general assemblies". The strikes in the brickyards in the West of Iran which break out every year over wages and involve several thousand workers, would be unimaginable without the general assembly. The desirability of general assemblies is such that even the advocates of unions who regard the councils as legitimate and possible only for the revolutionary period, have often had to accept them and include them somewhere in their schemes for unions. The government, too, has called its own puppet organisations in the workplaces "councils" (the "Islamic Councils"), and tries to give the impression that they are based on the "general assemblies of the employees of the unit".

The influence of the council tradition, the desirability and efficacy of the general assembly in meeting the needs of workers' current struggles, and the ease with which it can be held, even under the repression established by the Islamic Republic, are the most important points of strength of the general assembly. These are merits which have made the general assembly the only available means of the Iranian workers at present for building their own organisations. But all this does not yet mean that we are faced with a mass general-assembly movement; something which is possible and now seems to be the only practical and, at the same time, feasible way for the mass organising of Iranian workers.

STATE ORGANISATIONS:

ISLAMIC COUNCILS

The "Islamic Councils of Labour" were formed from 1984 onwards as mandatory, state[9] organisations, on the basis of the law on Islamic Councils. According to this law, the Islamic Council is the legal representative of workers. Furthermore, only those can be elected to the Islamic Councils who believe in the Islamic Republic and the Velayat-eFaghih (the rule of the clergy), and whose eligibility has been approved by the "Screening Board" which is appointed by the Labour Ministry and police authorities. This law openly assigns the Islamic Council to report every unrest and disturbance to the concerned authorities. Its duties have been defined as cooperation with the management, the raising of productivity, and the maintenance of order and discipline and Islamic ethics in the workplace. The Islamic Councils were thus formed as tools for controlling workers' protests and demands and as the government's alternative and barrier to the workers' efforts to organise. They should in fact be called anti-organisations.

The main reason that the Islamic Republic was hopeful of the Islamic Councils was that it expected them to be able to take advantage of the spirit of "pragmatism" among the workers and win a base among them. But this expectation has definitely proved to be false. The Islamic Councils have met the same end as that experienced by the state unions under the

Shah. From their very inception they earned the hatred and revulsion of a large section of workers. In the past several years workers have confronted the Islamic Councils by widespread resistance and protests against their establishment, by boycotting their election sessions, and even in some cases by fighting for their dissolution. There have been few instances of labour disputes which have not developed into open confrontation with the Islamic Councils. The demand for the dissolution of the Islamic Councils, just like the call for the abolition of the Islamic Societies, is now a demand of large sections of workers. and is gaining wider dimensions.

THE ORGANISATION OF THE ISLAMIC COUNCILS

The Islamic Councils have a national coordinating and leading centre called the "Workers' House". The "Workers' House" has branches in every province and region. The annual congress of the all-Iran Islamic Councils elects some persons as "Iranian workers' representatives" to appear in official and international meetings. The Workers' House authorities claim that over 1,000 Islamic Councils have been established throughout the country. Regardless of how true this figure is, the Islamic councils are often formed by threats and pressure, by promising to realise some demands, by forced elections (the withdrawal or stamping of the time-cards of those who refuse to vote), or by openly rigging the "elections".

ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

Alongside the Islamic Councils there are Islamic Societies. They were formed in 1979 and organise the Hezbollah in the factories. They agitate for Islam and for the interests of the Islamic government. They are the Islamic regime's ideological-police organs in the factories with the task of "Hera'sat" (safeguarding) and "Ettela'at" (intelligence), i.e. the same organs of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, in the factories. Their main duty is to combat the "counter-revolution" in the factories (i.e., militant and communist workers). They are intensely detested by workers. The Islamic Councils and Societies cooperate closely in factories (often several active members of the Islamic Society are "elected" to the Islamic Council); and at regional, provincial and national levels, they are coordinated through the Workers' House organisation. The "Supreme Coordination Council of Islamic Societies and Councils" is at the same time the highest organ of the "Workers' House Organisation".

[....]

WORKERS' STRUGGLES AFTER 1981

After 1981, the whole savagery and crime of the Islamic Republic, which was aimed above all at the workers and their councils, was not able to stop the continuation of workers' struggles. Intoxicated by the massacre in 1981 and the unprecedented repression that it had established, the Islamic Republic now fantasized even to deny the very social existence of the working class. Khomeini had said before: "There is no need for a [special] day for workers. All creatures of the world are workers. The ant, too, is a worker. Even the God Almighty is a worker." They imagined the time was ripe to materialize their dreams. They said, strike is a sin; a sin punishable, according to Islamic principles, by death. In 1982 the Islamic Republic published the draft of a labour law which had been written on the model of the Islamic "rent laws", the laws of trade and slavery in the Middle Ages. According to this law, the worker was actually rented and there was no limitation on working hours and the minimum wages. Everything was left to the signing of a contract between the individual worker and the employer and to the "balance of the parties". Simultaneously a largescale campaign was launched against wage levels, fringe benefits and the most important rights workers had won

earlier. The Iran-Iraq war, which had been raging since 1980, was the most effective weapon of the bourgeois government in this savage offensive.

Workers stood up against these attacks which were accompanied by repression, gunning down strikers, imprisonment and the most vicious measures. Since 1981, the most important fields of struggle of workers have been: the struggle against the Islamic Labour Law, struggle for enforcing the First of May as the Workers' Day, struggle against the war, defence of wages and living conditions, struggle against redundancies and resistance against increasing the working hours. These have taken the form of continuous strikes. Below, we shall briefly and separately consider each of these.

AGAINST THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S LABOUR LAW

The first draft of the Labour Law is perhaps one of the rarities of our times. It was a law which did not even recognise the name of worker. "Worker" was replaced with "work-taker". There was no mention of a limited working day, a minimum wage, restrictions on firing of workers and, in short, of any rights for workers, since the imposition of any legal restriction on the working day or the specification of a minimum wage is against Islam and the private property of the employer, and since no power, even the state, can lay conditions on the employer. As a workers' leader in Iran put it, this was a law which if put to the slaves at the time of Spartacus, would make them rebel. Nevertheless, this law had been written from Khomeini's "Tozih-ol-Masael" (a collection of religious guidelines, the writing of which is the condition for becoming an ayatollah - the highest rank in the clergy) and had the open approval of Khomeini and most of the state authorities and ayatollahs. This draft was published in early 1983.

All through the winter and spring of 83 there were widespread protests by workers against the Islamic Labour Law. They wrote petitions, which were submitted to the authorities and the press, held meetings in which state officials and management were made to answer to workers, went on goslows, carried out stoppages and held numerous discussions in the workplaces against the Labour Law. The workers' show of outrage and protest and the prospect of its escalation was so strong that even the Islamic Societies and the Workers' House were forced to voice opposition to the first draft. In the end, the regime had no alternative but to back down in disgrace: Khomeini and the other ayatollahs retracted their earlier backing, and the first draft was withdrawn along with the Labour Minister who had proposed it. This was a victory for the workers; a victory not limited to a mere defence of workers' basic rights, but with far wider social implications. Workers had made the Islamic Republic, at the height of its power, to back down on its Islam.

But things did not end with the driving back of the first draft. In the space of a few years up to 4 different drafts were written; each one was taken back and altered, having tested the militancy of the workers, and also as a result of disputes in the ranks of the regime itself. As far as the demands of workers were concerned, the later drafts tried to appear more radical and workingclass, as well as to give in to a few of these demands (such as a 30-day annual holiday, etc.). It was also tried to dilute its Islamic blend, as far as this was not a loss of face for the Islamic government. The exponents of the later drafts have been mainly the Workers' House and the Islamic Councils. The Workers' House hopes that with the final approval of the latest draft of the Labour Law (which was approved by the Islamic Assembly in September 1989)[10] a compromise is reached between the bourgeoisie and its government, on the one hand, and the workers, on the other, in the long struggle over the Labour Law. But the Islamic Labour Law is an entirely anti-working class law. It is an Islamic and totally discriminatory law in which neither the right to strike, nor the right to organise, nor, many of workers' other demands have been recognised. For workers, this law has no significant

preference to the previous drafts. Even the undeclared Labour Law practically applied by the workers' councils ten years ago is miles more advanced than the Labour Law of the Islamic Republic. The vanguard workers in Iran now include in their demands not only their revolutionary demands of ten years ago but also the real advances in the workers' movement internationally during the past ten years. The struggle over the labour law, a fight to achieve the workers' particular economic and political rights, will no doubt continue.

THE STRUGGLE FOR MAY DAY

In the first May Day in Iran after the 1979 uprising about half a million people marched in Tehran, and tens of thousands in other cities. From then on the Islamic regime was taken over by the fear of May Day. It tried to replace May Day with the birth-day of Ali (the first Imam of the Shi'a Moslems), calling it the "day of the oppressed". In this way it was trying to bring upon May Day what it has been trying to bring upon the Women's Day.[11] But it very soon found out that this would only stoke the fire of the struggle over the recognition of May Day. The regime also attempted to give prominence, against May Day, to the day of assassination of an Islamic leader (May 2, designated the "Teachers' Day"). After 1981, the opportunity had arrived for the government to realise its wishes. But workers' enthusiasm for holding May Day showed that no force, even the repression established by the regime, is able to take away the First of May. In 1983 the Islamic regime tried to pass May Day quietly. But in the end the Labour Minister had to come to the radio and send greetings to workers. This was the beginning of the regime's submission on May Day. In one draft of the Labour Law, May 1st was included as a workers' holiday, which meant an implicit recognition. They had come to the conclusion that instead of refusing to recognise May 1st - thus boosting workers' protests - they ought to organise the event themselves. This would give them the chance to restrain workers' actions.

But even here the regime ran up against great difficulties. The workers' boycott and ridiculing of the official ceremonies turned into an element of the struggle over May Day. In 1985 the official ceremonies were held in Tehran's largest stadium. But the seats remained empty, and the 3-4 thousand who had been brought there by force and by threatening to confiscate their cards, booed the speech by the President (Khamenei, who has now succeeded Khomeini). The following year the official events were held in a smaller stadium. But once again the result was only more disgrace for the government. In 1987 the official ceremonies were reduced to small events in five places in Tehran, but even these were openly boycotted and scorned by the workers. Official May Day events have now become a problem in which the regime has got bogged down.

In contrast, since 1981 - and in particular from 1983 onwards - workers have strived to celebrate May Day, as the day of their class and international unity, in whatever way possible. The different forms in which workers have held the May Day events in the past few years have included: refusing to work on May Day, celebrating in the factory, holding small gatherings of worker families and circles outside cities, out of reach of the police, and staging events inside the unions of certain trades. For several consecutive years workers in Sanandaj (in Western Iran) have been organising several-thousand strong May Day rallies - in spite of the presence of the military - in which they pass resolutions containing their demands. Workers' efforts have been so pronounced that every year the authorities have had to somehow react to them. For example, Khomeini who once had said that "even the ant is a worker", expressed his fear and apprehension of May Day 1985 (the year begun by widespread antiwar protests) in his own special language, in this way:

"... If four people somewhere go on strike, they say ... for ever that there is strike in Iran. What's happened? How many were they? They don't say. They say the factory has come to a

standstill! They were banking all their hopes on the Workers' Day. ... They imagined that on this day workers would rally behind them. Workers' Day came and passed and the dear workers were more than ever on the scene, shouting that we want to give our services"!!
(May 6, 1985)

But the battle over May Day, despite visible victories by workers, is still continuing. The focus of this struggle is more than ever becoming the issue of the holding of independent ceremonies, workers' manifestation as a class, and the putting forward of their demands and solutions before the whole society.

WORKERS & THE WAR

The Iran-Iraq war was a great disaster for all the people and particularly the workers. At the same time, as Khomeini used to say, it was a "God's blessing" for the Islamic Republic and the bourgeoisie. The war mobilised the whole of Iranian nationalism in the service of the Islamic Republic and the suppression of workers' demands. The war dislocated the greatest section of people in the west' and south of the country and the most important sections of the working class - the workers of the oil industry and of other factories and centres in the south. The war slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed tens of thousands of homes of mostly working people over their heads. It provided the bourgeoisie with the most potent tool for lowering the living conditions of the working class, of taking away workers' rights, and imposing the worst kind of poverty and destitution.

In the beginning of the war the wave of nationalism swept even some sections of workers. But soon, in March 1981, i.e. six months after the outbreak of the war, protests against the whole situation and naturally the war began and continued in various forms. The widespread struggles of the war-stricken and war refugees demanding to be provided with living amenities, which continued for several years after the start of the war in particular in the cities of Shiraz, Esfahan and Tehran, were essentially the protest of workers of the south and specifically the Abadan oil refinery workers. The forms of this struggle in the workplaces included resistance against wage cuts to finance the war, refusal to go to the fronts, refraining from producing war products, refusal to do overtime because of the war, and the waging of direct protests against the war. In street protests against the war, too, workers were in the front line. In 1985 when mass actions against the war increased, the working-class quarters were more active than the rest. The most important demonstration of that year was held in the 13th Aban district, the working class area of south Tehran. In mid 1988 when protests against the war once again flared up, workers directly and openly protested against the war in the workplaces. The protest to being sent to the fronts was particularly notable. No doubt an important and decisive factor in the sudden and unexpected acceptance of ceasefire by the Iranian regime, which for eight years had tied its whole existence to the war, was the continuous protest and resistance of the people and particularly workers.

CONTINUOUS STRIKES FROM 1982 TO 1989

Shortly after the June 1981 suppression, workers' protests and strikes, under the totally repressive climate, steadily gained momentum, marking a new period of workers' strike battles. From 1983 to 89, on average at least one hundred strikes and a greater number of protests took place. The main issue of these actions was resisting the regime's assault against the rights and living conditions of workers. Defence of wages and calls for their increase was more common than any other issue (Approximately 50% of the actions were over wages). In the next place were resistance to redundancies and expulsions, opposing the attempts to increase the working hours, welfare demands, struggling against the Islamic Councils, and so on. During 1984 to 86, due to a relative improvement in the financial situation of the Islamic Republic and the relative boom in industries (compared to 1980 and 81), workers' protests greatly increased. In 1984 there were over 200 strikes and protest actions; this is only the

number of those which were registered. In this period the labour protests at times assumed an offensive character and did not remain confined to a defensive framework. But from the early 1986, with the fall in the oil prices and the aggravation of the regime's financial situation, redundancies were begun. In the debates of the Islamic Assembly mention was made of figures between 200,000 and 500,000 as the victims of the redundancies. But the actual number of workers made unemployed must certainly have been at least over 100,000. In undertaking the redundancies, the regime was very frightened of the likely reaction of workers, and had made elaborate plans in advance. In particular the redundancies of between 7 to 8 thousand in the Iran National car plant (the largest automobile production plant) could have sparked off a nationwide movement, were it not for the cunning way in which the management, the Islamic Council and the Labour Ministry implemented the plan. Their main design went as offering considerable redundancy payments which led many workers into believing that with this money they could find a better way of living than the life as workers. This design was later completed with the unemployment insurance plan, mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, much resistance and protest was made against the redundancies and the issue of redundancy compensations. But these were taking place at a time when the Islamic Republic had broken the back of a developing movement of protest.

The redundancies left destructive effects on the life of the working class. Apart from making a large number of industrial workers unemployed, they channelled the attention of large sections of the working class merely to putting up a defence against the redundancies, while drawing the rest into caution and conservatism in the face of the uninterrupted attacks of the employers and the state. This was because the threat of factory shutdowns and mass unemployment was a real one. In 1986 and 87 we witness a relative decline in worker actions. Nevertheless, there was also, for example, the strike in the Melli Shoe in 1987 in which 12,000 workers protested against the lengthening of the working hours.

From mid 87 there was a revitalization in worker actions. Especially in the first months, there was, as noted earlier, a marked increase in protests against the war. These continued to grow, up until when the Islamic Republic accepted ceasefire. The submission to ceasefire and the ending of the war, however, was a very important development which immediately influenced the various aspects of the life of workers. It was accompanied by extensive propaganda by the Islamic Republic that the situation after the war would be better. The regime was trying to install a spirit of wait-and-see. This situation limited the scale of workers' protests for some time. But from early 1989 the protests began once again, expanding later on in the year.

In 1989 the demand for wage increases - which were frozen in that year - was the main issue. The call by the people and especially workers for the rapid improvement of the situation after the war has put the Islamic Republic under great pressure. Now, eleven years on after the conflict between the people and the regime, the regime finds itself in the grips of the workers' demands and expectations; something which is becoming more and more threatening to the government each day.

NOTES

1 The father of the Shah of Iran who ruled from 1925 to 1941.

2 I.e. the period when after the abdication of Reza Shah and the weakening of the authority of the central government, Iran was swept by a wave of turbulence and upheavals; conditions which led to the open formation of parties and organisations and their intense activities - Tr.

3 A para-military force created, under the Islamic Republic, alongside the armed forces - Tr.

4 As a successor to the Edalat Party, this party, with the help of the Bolsheviks, was active among emigrant Iranian workers in Baku. It was formed in 1920, was a member of the Comintern and with the suppression by Reza Shah ended completely in 1932.

5 The national-reformist pro-Soviet party which re-started activity in the 1979 revolution. Until 1983, when it was banned, it was cooperating with the Islamic Republic.

6 We also come across figures of 300-400 thousand in some cases. It should be taken into account that in addition to workers, this confederation organised the owners of small production occupations.

7 The U.S.-engineered coup by which the Prime Minister of the time, Nosaddegh, was ousted and the Shah brought back to power - Tr.

8 These are not the same Islamic Councils which were established after 1984. See the footnote [below] in the later section on state organisations and the Islamic Councils - Tr.

9 Before 1981 we find some examples of Islamic councils of another kind, completely different from the present ones. Those councils were often formed with the support of certain sections of workers (who had put hopes on the Islamic regime and its promises), They came to an end very quickly, as soon as the illusion of those workers in Islam and Islamic government disappeared.

10 At the time of writing, Radio Iran announced that the draft of the labour law passed by the Islamic Assembly was now under approval in the 'Council for Determining the System's Interest' (the highest legislative instance in times of dispute), and that it is expected to come into force next year.

11 The Iranian regime has designated the birth-day of Prophet Nohaanaad's daughter, Fatemeh, as the women's day. But this is recognized by no one in Iran but the government itself and its bands of women watchdogs (so-called "Zeinab Sisters").