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Iran

Popular Protest and Labor Insurgency in Iran

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Nearly a year after the mass mobilizations in response to the killing of Jina Amini by the Iranian morality police, there is now a relative lull. It is therefore of critical importance to take this opportunity to analyze the strengths and the weaknesses of Iran's movement cycle and to determine the lessons to be learned from its struggle. This needs to be done in preparation for the next wave of the revolt produced by the continuing accumulation of social, political and economic antagonisms.

At its peak, the uprising attracted global media coverage, which tended to reduce it to a liberal feminist struggle for legal rights already enjoyed by middle-class white women in the Western world. Although in its initial stages the movement was undoubtedly centered on women's rights—as one of its main slogans, “Women, Life, Freedom” indicates—the diverse and sometimes contradictory character of its development makes it irreducible to a homogenous set of demands expressed by a certain class or gender.

The Farsi-language media, owned and controlled by right-wing exiles, consistently represented the demands of the mass uprising as oriented to the concerns of what might be called “liberal, white feminism,” suppressing the very real heterogeneity of the movement by reducing it to the struggle against the forced hijab. This is not to say that the question of the forced hijab was not important or that it does not remain important in Iran today. We cannot, however, treat the question of the hijab as the only issue behind the mass movement. Instead, we must examine the other widespread demands that have received very little media attention and determine why they have gone largely unreported.

While it is true that relative quiet has returned to major cities like Tehran and Isfahan, media accounts generally ignore the fact that the movement is still ongoing in provinces like Sistan and Baluchestan in the southeast of Iran, Kurdistan in the northwest, and some cities of Khuzestan in the south.¹ Similarly, there has been little coverage of the activity of the Iranian workers' movement, either at the height of the mass uprising or since it subsided. This neglect is easy to explain: any demand that challenges the neoliberal economic reforms that have already been carried out and that have led to mass uprisings four times in the last five years must be marginalized. The loss of legitimacy of the present regime is due in large part to the relentless “economic restructuring” that began a decade after the 1979 revolution and led to the elimination of state subsidies and welfare services for education, healthcare, housing, basic foods, and fuel energies. The redistributive regime established immediately following the 1979 revolution was not simply granted to the people by the state but was attained through the self-organization of workers, peasants, local people, and minorities, and in schools, hospitals, offices, factories, and the military into hundreds of independent shuras (or councils) designed to institute workers' and peoples' control of workplaces and neighborhoods. These organs of popular power were soon brutally repressed and replaced by state-controlled shuras.

In fact, every time the state has removed a subsidy on necessities like food or fuel, allowing prices to rise to whatever level the market dictates, the result has been mass uprisings that are, in turn, repressed with increasing levels of violence. The delegitimization of the regime that followed each of these episodes helped create the conditions for the latest upsurge. That is why the right-wing opposition, from the monarchists to the republicans, do not intend to rebuild capitalism in Iran from scratch as they often claim. Instead, they aim to take advantage of the rich opportunities offered by the present regime to pursue even harsher neoliberal economic reforms. Despite the fact that over 90 percent of national industries have been sold to the private sector, the right-wing opposition continues to argue that there is no “real” privatization because some of the energy and oil products—in one of the world's most oil-rich countries—are not sold at the international market price.

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In reality, state subsidies devoted to keeping staple foods and petroleum affordable were gradually removed over the last five years. Access to higher education is almost exclusively restricted to students from the upper classes, and 80 percent of workers' employment contracts have become temporary. At this point, state intervention is limited to repression aimed at protecting the interests of the capitalists closely tied to the regime. The removal of state subsidies on petroleum in 2019 not only failed to improve the lives of the common people but provoked an uprising of the poor, in which 1500 people were reportedly killed.

As might be expected, the right-wing opposition makes every attempt to silence the demands of the working class by reformulating them in very vague and abstract terms. In its "Mahsa Charter," economic demands are translated into abstract and universal rights that cannot be realized in capitalist society. Even the most pressing concrete problems that women in Iran struggle with daily are ignored by the right. They have nothing to say about 80 percent unemployment among women, the feminization of poverty, or the sexual division of labor. They have reduced the notion of equality to the right not to wear the hijab.

The question remains, however, of whether the working class participated in the mass uprising and, if so, what its key demands were. On November 1, local news outlets in Sistan and Baluchistan reported that the Anjirak gold mine in Taftan was shut down by members of the tribes of northern Baluchistan after more than 80 protesters were killed and 300 people seriously injured by security forces in a single day. They closed off the road to the mines and sabotaged extractive equipment. The Taftan gold mine is one of the largest in Iran, and as the provincial governor of Sistan and Baluchistan remarked last year, it "has mineral deposits worth nearly 800 billion dollars," which he insisted meant "a bright future for the inhabitants." In fact, despite its mineral wealth, the province has the highest poverty rate in all of Iran, and its Baluchi population faces discrimination and neglect. The current revolt against a despotic state committed to defending the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and imposing its own unpopular version of Islam on the people has led not only to active solidarity with the protests, but also to a growing sense of outrage at how little of the province's great wealth goes to those who produce it. According to the news channel Rasad Baluchistan, mine workers and their supporters declared that "the wealth in this mine belongs to Baluchi people and we will never allow outsiders to extract and exploit this wealth." Reza Mohtashami-Pour, Deputy Minister for Mines and Minerals Processing, reported that a number of mining companies have shut down their operations in response to the protests.

Immediately after the beginning of the nationwide protests over the killing of Jina Amini, contract workers at Bushehr Petrochemical went on strike in solidarity with the mass movement and against the regime's violent repression, blocking the road and chanting slogans directly aimed at the overthrow of the regime. The strike soon spread to the refinery complex in Abadan, the largest in Iran, located in the country's oil-rich southwest. However, as expected, the state quickly moved to break the strike, with mass arrests (allegedly 200 project-based workers) and strict security measures, which succeeded in discouraging further solidarity actions by oil workers.

The regime's brutal repression, arrests, surveillance, and all-too-common association of the workers' strikes with the "external enemy" in attempt to divert attention from the harsh working conditions imposed by neoliberal reforms, discouraged the working class from taking explicit political positions aimed at overthrowing the regime and its dominant socio-economic relations. Moreover, the opportunistic attempts by the right wing to use the workers' strikes as a means for regaining power further dissuaded the working class from taking direct political positions. The right-wing opposition, comfortably established abroad thanks to the public wealth stolen just before the 1979 revolution, went so far as to denounce Iranian workers for not obeying their decrees for a general strike. However, as Meysam Al-e Mahdi, a worker and activist living in exile, explained in an interview with the leftist Slingers Collective: "the workers do not sell their strikes, they strike as required by their daily working conditions."

The workers very carefully considered how best to advance their struggle in the face of the restrictions imposed on them both by the present regime and by the right-wing opposition. The mass uprising has provided fertile ground for them to voice demands linked to their daily existence and lived experience. The workers immediately realized that

the explicit articulation of demands aimed at the collapse of the regime could only lead to repression, and could potentially be appropriated by the right wing for the advancement of its pro-capitalist interests. Workers from various industrial and service sectors therefore launched strikes protesting low wages, long working hours, overdue payments, lack of safety measures at the workplace, arbitrary dismissals, and the lack of independent workers' organizations.

The response to the strategy developed by the workers' organizations by the right-wing opposition and certain parts of the left has been that making demands concerning wages and working conditions is an expression of the particular interests of workers without underlying political demands, and that it legitimizes the regime simply by addressing demands to it. There is nothing surprising about the right-wing opposition's rejection of the workers' demands; they adhere to the most draconian form of neoliberalism. But the attitude of a segment of the left is more surprising. The workers' demands challenge the guiding principles of the neoliberal economy on which the IRGC depends. Because the regime has accelerated the pace of neoliberal reforms over the past decade, any obstacle placed by the workers can seriously challenge its functioning and should be seen as a loss for the regime. If the state is forced to agree to the workers' immediate demands, leading to an improvement in their material conditions, the struggle will serve as an example and encourage others throughout Iran. This gives workers confidence in their power to wage struggles and win, and to see the vulnerabilities of the state. If, however, the state rejects the workers' demands, and employs violent means to suppress the movement, the regime is further de-legitimized and its anti-worker policies exposed, revealing the regime's supposed anti-imperialism as a lie. More importantly, fighting to win immediate demands helps prepare the working class and the popular masses more broadly to fight against any attempt to impose market discipline which deprives them of the means of sustenance or reduces them to destitution.

The right-wing opposition has learned from the "traumatic" experience of the 1979 revolution that the oil industry is one of the most critical sectors in Iran; the strike waged by oil workers played a significant role in paralyzing the economy and hastening the fall of the Shah. It hopes to use the weapon of the oil workers' strike as a quick and easy means of bringing down the current regime, but to do so it must limit the workers' demands to the single issue of forcing the regime to step down. The experience of 1979 shows, however, that workers' mobilizations cannot be directed from above and will very likely go beyond merely political and legal demands. They know from experience that workers in Iran have without fail organized shuras in such circumstances to counter the authority of the state and the employers. Thankfully, the workers' movement today has charted an independent course that has disappointed the right-wing opposition and frightened the current regime.

As noted above, international media has consistently failed to report on the multi-sectoral mobilization of workers following the first days of the mass uprising in Iran. What follows is a brief account of the mobilization, emphasizing both its depth and breadth.

Workers in the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries went on strike several times during October and November, pushing for a set of shared demands, including pay raises and the right to form independent unions. The state-controlled unions determine and impose wage levels, which are far below the poverty level, often as little as 25 percent of what would be necessary for subsistence. The workers have also consistently fought to eliminate the contractors, who have mushroomed following the neoliberalization of the economy that delivered nationalized industries to the private sector. After the privatization of these industrial plants, temporary and individualized contracts were substituted for permanent ones, depriving workers of the protections provided by the Labor Code against arbitrary dismissal.

On November 22, the workers of the 11th refinery in Phase 19 of South Pars Gas Complex of the Masjed Soleiman Petrochemical industry and those in the repair section of the Asaluyeh Petrochemical industry launched a strike after their employers failed to respond to their repeated demand for wage increases. In the summer of 2021, oil workers launched a two-month strike known as the "10-20" campaign, demanding a reduction in working days to 20 per month—down from 24. Workers from more than 100 different petrochemical sites joined the strike and succeeded in

winning this key demand.

The steel industry was also another sector that witnessed work stoppages during the same period. Four thousand workers in Esfahan Steel Company, Iran's third largest steel producer, went on strike on November 15 and 16 demanded pay raises and the implementation of a "job classification scheme." As reported by the Free Union of Iranian Workers (FUJW), initially formed in December 2006 as the National Union of Expelled and Unemployed Workers, the manager of the company and the representative of the Labor Ministry attended the workers' assembly and promised to meet their demands. According to Radio Zamaneh, the sum of 10 million rials (USD\$20) was transferred to every worker's bank account to convince them to call off the strike. On November 25, it was clear that the company had no intention of keeping its promise and workers from every sector of the company stopped work, chanting, "No more empty promises, our tables are bare."

They then marched to another sector where they stopped the flow of molten and cast iron and turned off the furnaces. The loading lines were disrupted, and the cars were not unloaded. Crane operators shut off their machinery and joined the strike as well. The representative of the "Social Security Insurance Company" visited the workers and announced an increase of 30 to 50 million rials (USD\$60-100) in their wages by December 1, 2022. The workers warned that they had formally agreed to strike again if their wages did not increase as promised. In addition to the low wages, the working conditions at Esfahan Steel are particularly dangerous, both because of the use of outdated technologies and because of the miserable and unregulated working conditions. A recent tweet by a visitor to the facility posted to the Instagram account of Collective98 gives us a glimpse into the conditions workers face daily:

In 2015 we went on a research tour organized by the university to Esfahan Steel Company. On our arrival, we were angrily told that we can't take selfies. After a series of arguments, we were allowed in. I saw things that I will never forget. One of the workers was a friend of my friend. He held my hand and took me near the furnace. The intense heat was melting me. He said: 'I'm sorry for treating you badly on your arrival. This is a very dangerous place. If you become distracted by taking selfies, a disaster might occur. One of the workers was killed after an explosion last week. His body appeared healthy, but he had been cooked from inside.'

The welders' strike at the Foolad Technic Company of Bafgh Steel complex (Kerman province) over the death of their co-workers is another testimony to poor working conditions and low safety standards. On Friday, November 25, three welders suffered fatal burns as they were working on a compressor because of gas leakage and the explosion of an undischarged gas pipe. One of the workers died on the spot before the arrival of rescue teams, and two others died after arriving at the hospital with burns covering over 70 percent of their bodies. Workers at this complex have persistently challenged the granting of permits that allow management to compel them to labor under unsafe conditions. Iran ranks 102 in the world in workers' safety. According to the HRANA news agency, during the last year at least 811 workers were killed and 10,895 injured. This statistic is based on incidents actually reported by workers; the real figures are certainly significantly higher.

Also, on November 23, the workers at South Aluminum Corporation (SALCO), the largest aluminum production complex in Iran, located in the Lamerd Special Economic Zone in Fars province, went on strike after management refused to agree to their demands.

A study of the strikes launched in the automobile industry is also of high importance because this sector has been at the center of debates for several years over its privatization. The two major car manufacturers in Iran—Iran Khodroo and SAIPA, which have around 100,000 workers combined—are jointly owned by the state and several private sector auto parts companies. Crouse, the largest private manufacturer of auto parts in Iran, is owned by Hamid Keshavarz Toochai and Mohammad Alipoor Fetрати and employs 12,000 workers. Neoliberal advocates speak of this company

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as playing a critical role in the country's economic growth and development. This company has bought 62 percent of Bahman Group's stock share and a striking share of Iran Khodroo and SAIPA. According to the official news agencies, Crouse annually sells around 30,000 billion rials (USD\$85 million) to Iran Khordroo and SAIPA collectively. But the workers face low wages and extremely difficult working conditions in one of the largest and most profitable companies in Iran.

On November 19, many of the 12,000 workers at Crouse—again, Iran's largest auto parts manufacturer—went on strike for three days. According to the reports given by the FUIW, workers have complained about gender discrimination and working conditions over the past several years. Their demands included wage increases, an end to mandatory overtime work, and a ban on overtime shifts on Fridays, an official holiday in Iran. When management refused to respond to their demands, the workers again walked off the job, chanting, "The poverty level is 200 million Rial (USD\$400), our pay is only 60 million rial (USD\$120)," indicating that poverty level is around four times the average wage at Crouse. The owner of the company, Hamid Keshavarz, threatened to call the security forces if the workers continued the strike or their chants.

Part of the explanation for the extremely low wages lies in the fact that women make up 70 percent of the company's labor force. They must work on their feet for 10 hours per day, and the use of cell phones is prohibited—including in cases of emergency. The company employs only single women under 32; those who marry are subject to immediate dismissal. Reviewing some of the feedback by workers on the company's own website helps to clarify the hardships they suffer:

I had to leave the company after 6 years because my neck was seriously damaged. [M]y neck and hands were completely damaged because of the difficult working conditions. If you care a bit about your spiritual and physical health, do not go there for work.

During the same time, on November 22-23, the workers at Bahman Motor and Bahman Diesel companies staged a strike against low wages, chanting, "We don't want promises, we want our rights actualized," and "Dollar-paid experts, Rial-paid workers." Bahman Diesel Company produces light, heavy, semi-heavy and minibus trucks in Qazvin's Alborz Industrial City. Bahman Group was privatized in 2016, and Crouse is the main shareholder, employing over 4000 workers and personnel. Visiting the production line of Bahman Motor, Ahmad Naderi, a member of parliament, remarked, "I am pleased that the Bahman Group and Crouse automotive parts producers are operating as private firms. The result has been countless achievements in domestic production."

Many news agencies speak of Bahman Group as one of the most successful private auto manufacturers and advocates of neoliberalism are among its staunchest backers. As is evident, "business success" and high efficiency for state authorities and business owners signifies an increase in productivity and profit, gained through forced overtime work, low wages, physically damaging working conditions, an increase in the retirement age and the dismissal of workers' representatives. Further, one of the myths constantly repeated by the proponents of neoliberalism is that the "free market" provides an opportunity for "competition" between equal individuals without state interference. But the case of Crouse, which controls a large share of the auto industry in Iran (one of the largest and most profitable sectors of the economy) and which is owned by two individuals with no ties to the regime, is instructive. The company's freedom from state interference has resulted in the imposition of working conditions significantly worse than those faced by workers at Iran Khodroo and SAIPA.

Around the same time, in late November 2022, the workers at Morattab production company, an SUV manufacturer based in Tehran, organized a series of strikes, demanding the payment of nine months of overdue wages, chanting, "Bread, cheese, oregano: we are all hungry." That employers feel free to withhold workers' wages for a period of nine

months, thereby denying workers the ability to reproduce their own labor power and continue to work, shows the current regime's commitment to the most extreme forms of neoliberalism. Workers in such circumstances often take a second or third job to support themselves while working without pay in the hopes of one day receiving their wages back.

Also in late 2022, the workers at Iran Tractor Manufacturing Company—a manufacturer of tractors, trucks, auto-parts, and diesel engines in Tabriz—stopped working because none of their demands in the previous year's nine-day strike were satisfied. They asked for wage increases, the implementation of a "job classification scheme," and the right to organize an independent work council.

Strikes were also launched by the drivers in the transportation sector during the Jina Amini uprising. As reported by Collective98, the Union of Truck Drivers and Truck Owners called for a 10-day strike beginning from November 26th, both in solidarity with those who suffered the bloody repression in Baluchistan and Kurdistan, and to protest their working conditions.

According to the head of the truckers' guild societies, Seyyed Jalal Moosavi Nayeb, "The truckers demand the return of their basic share of subsidized fuel, which had been priced at 3000 rials (USD\$6) per 2000 liters." He added, "The truck drivers are not provided with a clear program regarding the time and place of the stations which provide subsidized fuel. A trucker must go from one fuel station to another in search for the subsidized fuel. The other problem is that the designated stations supply fuel at random times which leads to long queues." The removal of state subsidies on fuel was undertaken as part of the program of neoliberalization. However, this is only one source of concern; several other additional factors were additional sources of discontent. Not only are the costs of maintenance extremely high, but some of the regulations recently introduced increase freight tariffs solely to the benefit of private contractors. The truckers are demanding the extension of a freight rate system that guarantees basic wages.

It is necessary to recall that this is not the first trucker strike in recent years. The largest and most comprehensive truckers' strikes took place in 2018. Truck and bus drivers from over 100 cities organized one of the longest strikes in the summer and autumn of 2018, causing serious disruptions in the transportation and general economic cycle. However, none of their demands were met and after four years their working conditions have deteriorated rather than improved.

What can be called the fruit of the workers' intervention in the Jina Uprising occurred in February 2023, when 20 independent workers' organizations and unions inside Iran formulated a charter expressing their minimum demands. What is significant about this charter is that the existing organizations managed to unite around shared objectives in the absence of a left-wing party and assert their existence and power in a period of shifting relations. Further, it became more evident that there exist multiple antagonistic forces and positions in the ongoing struggle against the regime. What the right-wing opposition was constantly describing as the necessary unity of all against a common enemy was shattered when it became clear that the immiseration of the working class at the hands of the regime was deemed unworthy of mention. More importantly, the demands expressed in the Workers' Charter, as opposed to those of the right wing's "Mahsa Charter," derive from the concrete conditions inside the country and rely on the power of the existing organizations (including the independent workers' shuras) for its realization—as opposed to the right-wing opposition's focus on abstract and universal rights dependent on the authority of international declarations and conventions for their actualization.

In May 2023, around eight months after the Jina Uprising, two developments occurred that expressed certain shifts in the political conjuncture. First, there was the breakdown of the alliance between the different wings of the opposition in exile. This coalition was originally formed in February 2023 among Reza Pahlavi, Hamed Esmaelion, Nazanin Bonyadi, Shirin Ebadi, Mahsa Ali Nejad, and Abdollah Mohtadi at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. It broke

down over the monarchists' criticism of Reza Pahlavi for degrading his "royal majesty" through the alliance. Furthermore, because the protests were mainly led by the national minorities in Kurdistan, Sistan, Baluchistan, and Khuzestan, the alliance was forced to include rights such as the official recognition of their mother tongues and the decentralization of power, although in very vague and ambiguous terms. The monarchists, however, began to denounce the other members of the alliance for the inclusion of such rights which, they argued, threaten the nation's "territorial integrity" and give way to the "segregationist" demands of minorities. Hamed Esmaeilion also remarked that the alliance was broken because of the "undemocratic behavior" of Reza Pahlavi's supporters, whose only reaction to their fascistic attitude was silence.

The second major development occurred when thousands of the contract workers from over 100 companies—mostly from the oil, gas, petrochemical refineries, mining, and steel—launched a new wave of nationwide strikes under the name "Campaign 2023," protesting the 21 percent wage increase determined by the Ministry of Labor and the Supreme Shura of Labor, a state-controlled organization, for the new working year. This increase failed to accommodate the inflation rate of 50 percent. The oil strike expanded across the border into Iraq, where construction workers hired by Iranian contracting firms in charge of installing power plants on the outskirts of the city of Basra reportedly joined the strike. The demands expressed by the project's oil workers included a 79 percent wage rise, complete implementation of the "10-20" working scheme, payment of overdue wages and bonuses, compensation for extreme weather, the right to have independent workers' organizations, and improvement in accommodations. The project's workers were accommodated in extremely inadequate dormitories, where six individuals were cramped into 12m2 rooms. Moreover, the contracting companies provide very low-quality food to the workers.

The strikers were brutally repressed and many workers arrested by the regime, which smeared them as the "main leaders of the strikes." Instagram accounts such as "The Official News Media of the Central Oil and Gas Campaign," which played an important role in coordinating and publishing news on the nationwide strikes, were deactivated. At the same time, however, many workers saw a wage increase at the end of this period. The most important outcome of the recent nationwide strike was that the united power of the workers, in the complete absence of any organized left-wing organization, became clearly visible. It also contained a clear message: the workers will not be deceived by any power that promises to establish "democracy" and "freedom" but overlooks the demands of the workers. The demands expressed by the workers are diametrically opposed to the neoliberal economic reforms, which have already caused poverty and destitution for the majority of the people and which the right-wing opposition puts forward as the answer to Iran's problems.

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Source: [Spectre](#).

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