

# LABOR LINKS

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

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**Editors' Note:** This is the second issue of Labor Links, a newsletter published to provide unionists and labor activists around the world with information about struggles of workers of Iran and to promote solidarity with them. Currently, Labor Links appears as an Internet quarterly in English and Spanish. The inaugural issue was delivered to some 1000 unions, workers' organizations and labor activists in North America, Cuba, Mexico, and Western Europe. Labor Links is published through a collective and volunteer effort of labor activists and organizers in a number of countries in North America, Europe and Iran.

This issue focuses on a central issue in labor struggles in Iran: the formation of independent, class struggle unions. The first article describes recent teachers' protests that swept the Iranian cities to demand a living wage and an independent union. The second article briefly reviews the existing organizations that are imposed on Iranian workers. The third article examines a recent attempt to deliver a blow to the Iranian labor movement under the guise of a "collective agreement." The final article reports on the solidarity of Iranian workers with the

Palestinian people in the face the US-backed brutal Israeli colonial occupation.

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## Teachers' Demands for a Living Wage and an Independent Union Win Broad Support

By Bahram Teymurian<sup>1</sup>

In the past few months, tens of thousands of teachers across Iran have shut down schools, rallied and marched to demand a living wage and the right to form their own independent union, and have won broad support especially from other workers and from students. Government statistics show that there are about 1,100,000 public school teachers in Iran.

Like many other workers, teachers have sunken into poverty after mass organizations were suppressed by the Islamic Republic regime in the early 1980s. Last autumn, Mohammad Taghi Hassanzadeh, CEO for the Physical Education Division of the Ministry of Education and Development (MED), admitted that more than 50% of teachers

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live below the official poverty line. In fact, the average monthly salary of a teacher is barely enough to pay for housing alone. Teachers, like many other workers in Iran, have to work a second and even a third job to make ends meet because their teaching jobs do not pay a living wage.

### **Teachers take direct action**

On Monday, December 31, 2001, several hundred teachers gathered at the central office of the Ministry of Education and Development to demand a living wage. Security forces attacked this gathering, arresting many teachers. In response, a group calling itself “The Society of Educators and Protestors against Teachers' Living Conditions” announced a day of nationwide protest on January 16, 2002.

To pre-empt this rank-and-file action, “The Organization of Teachers,” a pro-government organization, called for a rally on Tuesday, January 15, 2002 at the Shaheed Bahonar Teachers' College in Tehran. The organizers called for parity of teachers' salaries with those of other government employees. Many teachers participated but refused the organizers, appeal not to march to the Ministry of Education and Development offices. The security forces were called in to disperse the marchers, who called for a march on Friday January 18.

On Friday, thousands of teachers assembled in front of the Hall of Educators and began to march toward Tehran University. Some of the teachers waved their pay stubs to reporters, protesting their miserable earnings. A resolution was read at this rally that included demands for income security, against interference with teachers'

evaluation of students, for exemption of teachers from university entrance exams to facilitate their continuing education, for income-tax exemption for teachers' salaries and for rehiring of retired teachers. At the end of this gathering, a spontaneous call went out for a rally in front of the Islamic Majeles on the following Tuesday.

### **Demonstrators blast the regime**

On Tuesday, January 22, some 22,000 people, including some factory workers and students, gathered in front of the Majeles. The slogans and the tone of this demonstration were clearly more critical of the entire regime. Through their own experience, many workers in Iran have become increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with the parliamentarians who promised reforms but continued and in fact accelerated an anti-labor offensive. According to Ali Ashraf Darvishian, a well-respected Iranian writer who participated in this protest, the rally's slogans included the following: “The Minister betrays us, the Majeles supports him,” “22 years have gone by, where is the justice?” (a reference to the demand for social justice in the fight against the monarchy in 1978-1979), “We do not have guns nor cannons, strike, strike!” “Iranian teachers, unite, unite!” “Teachers are alert, they hate the right and the left!” (a reference to the Islamic Republic factions), “You who claim to be just, shame on you!” (a reference to a speech by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei); and they appealed to other working people: “Our pain is your pain, people join us!” (a slogan of the mass demonstrations against the Shah in 1978-1979). The teachers then marched to Tehran University and were later dispersed by security forces.

### **Actions spread to other cities**

Teachers went out in protest in other cities in Iran, including Kermanshah, Boyer-Ahmad, Malayer, Isfahan, Tabriz and Shiraz. Teachers have fought under the monarchy and the Islamic Republic regime for their own independent union. This demand was also raised during these actions, including by teachers in Kermanshah.

Despite government warnings, thousands of teachers, other workers and students attempted to rally in front of President Khatami's office in Tehran on Saturday, January 26. Security forces and semi-fascist groups occasionally employed by the regime to attack labor and other forms of protests attacked them. Many were injured and hundreds were arrested. Other demonstrators regrouped in different parts of the city and pressed their demands. They chanted: "teachers, students, unity, unity," "you (referring to Islamic Republic leaders) live in luxury and wealth, yet preach to us about humility." There were similar demonstrations in the cities of Khoram-Abad, Ahvaz, Babol, Isfahan, and Khomeini-Shahr.

On Tuesday, January 29, Khatami ordered the formation of a presidential committee to examine the teachers' demands. On the same day, thousands of teachers gathered in the city of Shiraz to press for more demonstrations across the country to demand the right to form an independent teachers' union and pay increases. Other demonstrations occurred in Tehran, Shiarz, Yasoj, Isfahan, Yazd, Zanjan, and provinces of Kurdistan and Khuzestan on January 31.

While Iranian teachers have not won their core demands of a living wage and

the right to form their own independent union, they have won broad support among the population, especially among factory workers and students. The teachers will return to the streets to press for their demands, and they need solidarity from trade unionists and working people everywhere.

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## **Workers Organizations in Iran Today**

**By Yadullah Khosroshahi**

The fundamental problem facing the Iranian labor movement at this conjuncture is the obstacles to organization of independent labor organizations on the factory, industry and national levels.

The Labor Law explicitly bans any labor organizations in key industries such as oil, gas, and petrochemicals, and metallic industries like steel and copper. Articles 2, 14, and 15 of the Labor Law recognize only Moslems who follow the Supreme Leader and are sanctioned by religious authorities as qualified to be elected to the Islamic Shoras of Labor. Article 128 allows the Supreme Leader (currently, Ayatollah Khamenei) to assign his representatives to all workers' organizations with veto power over their decisions.

The Labor Law recognizes four types of organizations in workplaces: Islamic Associations, Islamic Shoras of Labor, Trade Associations, and workers' representatives. But before dealing with each of these, a few words about the organization called the Workers' House is necessary.

**Workers' House (Khaneh Kargar)** was founded under the old monarchical regime. In the early 1970s, Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hovayda organized the only legal political party in Iran, called the Rasstakhiz (Resurgence) Party. Connected to this instrument of monarchical dictatorship was the Workers Organization of Iran headed by the chief of SAVAK (the secret police agency) general Parnianfar, Minister of Labor, one senator and two representatives of Majeles (the lower house of the monarchical parliament). After the February 1979 revolution, workers took over the offices of the Workers' Organization of Iran and renamed it Workers' House. This was a center for activities of independent workers shoras and syndicates (trade unions). In September 1979, after the Friday prayer in Tehran a group armed with clubs attacked the Workers' House and took it over. Ali Rabbiei, Assistant Director of the Organization for Information and Security of the Islamic Republic, Hossein Kamali, an engineer and a representative in the Majles (Parliament), Sarhadizadeh, Minister of Labor, and Alireza Mahjoob, member of the pro-capitalist Islamic Republic Party, formed the central leadership of the Workers' House. They registered the Workers' House based on a political constitution supporting the pro-capitalist Islamic Republic regime.

**Islamic Associations** originated as instruments of the Islamic Republic regime to undermine and destroy factory committees called *workers' shoras* in the aftermath of the February 1979 revolution that overthrow the US-backed dictatorship of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The pro-capitalist Islamic Republic Party (that was later dissolved

into several contending factions within the Islamic regime) originated and organized these Islamic Associations. After the formation of the special Islamic courts in factories and industries in 1980-1981 (Iranian calendar year 1360), leading members of the Islamic Associations were assigned as judges and played a central role in identifying labor activists and leaders who were then called before the Islamic Revolution Courts. As a result, thousands of militant workers were fired from their jobs, some imprisoned and others executed. The Ministry of Labor finished up this wave of attacks on factory councils by outlawing them all together.

**Islamic Shoras of Labor** were organized in some factories after the Islamic Majles passed a law with the same name. The Workers' House collaborated with the Islamic Associations to eventually organize Islamic Shoars of Labor in 2,000 out of 7,000 factories in Iran. These organizations, headed by individuals loyal to the Workers House and Islamic Associations, were organized to support state-appointed management. Article 1 of the Islamic Shoras of Labor states that they are to include all employees and the representatives of management and that they are "powerful arms of management." The law stipulates that only Moslems who in practice are loyal to the Supreme Leader can run for the leadership of the Islamic Shoras of Labor. The Islamic Association, the Committee of the Islamic Revolution, the Workers' House and the local Friday prayer imam must approve the candidacy for a leadership position in the Islamic Shora of Labor. The Ministry of Labor makes the final decision, which

will be based on such certifications and letters of support.

**Trade Associations** have been formed in recent years because the Islamic Shoras of Labor have lost their usefulness for the Workers' House. After privatization of the factories, nationalized in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, new owners and managers began a campaign to get rid of any organization that, however slightly, interfered with their decisions. At the same times, the Islamic Shoras of Labor have lost all credibility among workers. In order to continue their control over the workers' movement and undermine independent currents within the labor movement, the Workers' House has established "The Supreme Center of Trade Associations of Iran."

At the same time, political forces allied with Iranian president Khatami who are organized in the Cooperation Front, a pro-capitalist grouping of forces that are known as Reformists, have tried to organize a similar organization in workplaces to wield influence among workers. As a result of a clash between these two currents of the Islamic regime to establish their dominance over the labor movement, their plan to form Trade Associations has not met with much success.

Currently, the Workers' House is working to reorganize its forces aligned with the Islamic Shoras of Labor into what they call Trade Unions. However, this attempt is limited to the textile and power industries, and even there, these are paper trade unions with no real membership among workers.

Still, in several trades such as among bakers, cobblers and bus drivers, there are trade associations dating back to before the 1979 revolution.

**Workers' Representatives** are individuals selected by the Islamic Associations in some factories who are then introduced to the Ministry of Labor.

In the midst of their worst economic circumstances in over 50 years, the Iranian workers' movement is engaged in daily battles with factory management, capitalists and the government. In these struggles, they require, and continually attempt to build their own forms of organization that are effective. Independent organizations of workers will emerge out of these daily struggles. They will be independent of the Islamic Republic regime and all government parties, and the organizations that they built since 1979, such as the Workers' House, to undermine the workers' movement. These struggles require and deserve support from workers and their organizations everywhere.

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## **On Collective Agreements**

**By Farid Partovi<sup>2</sup>**

A report in the December 24, 2001 issue of the Workers' House daily "Kar-o-Kargar" (Work and Worker) claimed that a collective agreement was signed between the president of Iran's High Society of the Islamic Shoras of Labor

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<sup>2</sup> Farid C. Partovi is the Coordinator of the International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran and a member of Ontario Public Service Employees Union in Canada.

and the Secretary of the High Society of Employers' Associations of Iran. The report also claimed that the agreement was signed in the presence of representatives from the International Labour Organization (ILO). According to the Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Mr. Mohsen Khajeh-Noori, this agreement would only cover small workshops with five or fewer employees that have been established since March 2000. This collective agreement is expected to cover issues such as workers' health insurance, conflicts among workers and employers and issues related to workers' health and safety.

In Iran, workers lack many essential internationally recognized rights. For example, the 1991 labor law does not allow for the right to organize free and independent workers' organizations, the right to strike, prohibition of child labor and a comprehensive social security system for workers and the unemployed. Because collective agreements presuppose free and independent workers' organizations and the right to labor actions, including the right to strike, it has been a source of bloody conflict between the labor movement and the Islamic Republic regime.

### **The 1997 Oil Workers' Battle for a Collective Agreement**

The last major labor battle for a collective agreement was fought by the oil workers, especially those in the Tehran refinery in 1997. The struggle began when the Tehran refinery workers decided to take action around job classifications just proposed by management. In the previous year, workers did not receive any of the monies allocated by the job

classification scheme. This time, workers wanted to organize to collectively confront management to ensure they would receive what was due to them. The workers proceeded to hold an election and constituted the Oil Refinery Workers' Shora and democratically elected their representatives to enter into negotiations with management. Soon, management, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and Workers' House leadership began to undermine the workers' effort. On the other hand, workers in other sections of the oil industry in Tehran such as oil lines, distribution, and plant and equipment divisions, as well as oil workers from other parts of the country, began to join this campaign. The conflict came to a head on February 19, 1997 when thousands of oil workers assembled in front of the central offices of the Iran Oil Company in Tehran. That day, hundreds of security forces encircled the workers, beat them and arrested about 2000. Those arrested were taken to the notorious Evin prison and held for anywhere between a few hours to several days. Mass public protest by the families of those arrested was essential in their release. As a result of this labor action by the most powerful sector of the Iranian labor movement, some wage and bonus concessions were granted to the oil workers. But the Oil Refinery Workers' Shora was not tolerated and was dismantled.

### **A genuine labor agreement or a new boss' attack?**

Against this background, do we need to ask if the newly announced collective agreement is genuine and why does it cover only small workshops with 5 or fewer workers established since February 2000?

On February 27, 2000, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iranian Parliament) passed a bill that removed some 2.8 million workers in small workshops with 5 or fewer employees from protection offered under the labor law for a period of six years. This new law allows employers to easily lay off workers, downsize workplaces, reduce wages, increase child labor and violate all workplace health and safety standards. On February 28, just one day after the passage of the new law, thousands of angry workers protested in front of the Parliament in Tehran and in other major cities in Iran. Workers have continued their protests of this assault on their rights on many occasions.

This law was so anti-labor that even the Ministry of Labor and Workers' House found themselves forced to oppose it. They have been negotiating with employers and the Parliament to find a "solution" and offer concessions to workers. The newly announced "collective bargaining" actually formalizes a new attempt by the employers and the government to place workers in *newly formed small workshops outside of the protection of the labor law permanently*. The agreement also signals a decision by the Workers' House to press the Parliament to revoke the February 1999 anti-labor law.

The Ministry of Labor, Workers' House and employers' associations claim that the recent "collective agreement" offers adequate protection for workers and that, therefore, they do not need to be covered by the existing labor law. However, this agreement does not offer any specific protections to workers, nor do workers

have any specific mechanism to press for their demands.

Participation of the New Delhi office of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in this attack on the most vulnerable workers only confirms that the labor movement in Iran will achieve its goals only by relying on its own independent organizations and action. Solidarity with the Iranian labor movement internationally will require opposition to the government organizations such as the Workers' House or the High Society of the Islamic Shoras of Labor. It is also necessary to protest recognition given to such organizations by the ILO.

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## **Solidarity with the Palestinian Resistance to Israeli Occupation**

**By Kamran Nayeri**

On April 17, thousands of workers assembled in front of the Palestine Embassy in Tehran to condemn the US-backed Israeli assault on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Workers from textile factories, who have been under government and employer attack (see, issue number 1), as well as metal workers and nurses, were among those participating. The Workers' House organized this protest and reported on it in its paper *Labor and the Worker*.

Many workers have participated in other demonstrations in support the Palestinian people in recent months. The significance of the April 17 action was it was organized specifically to express solidarity of Iranian workers with the Palestinian people. International solidarity was a key component of the workers' movement that toppled the Shah. Iranian oil workers shut off the flow of oil to the South African apartheid regime and the Zionist rulers

of Israel in 1978 as a part of their struggle against the Shah, who maintained good relations with both those two states. The building housing the Israeli mission in Tehran was taken over during the February 1979 revolution and renamed the Palestine Embassy. Soon afterwards, the Islamic Republic regime began to oppose the nationalist, secular leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), promoting resistance forces who embraced the Islamic ideology. Despite this, many Iranian workers have continued to support the struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination.

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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. Questions, comments, news, articles or requests to get on Labor Links' mailing list should be sent to:

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