

LABOR LINKS

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

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Editors' Note: This issue of Labor Links is published with a delay, partly to report on a visit by an ILO delegation to Iran last fall and its repercussions. The first article by Kamran Nayeri offers a summary of the ILO report, places it in its conjunctural context and provides a critical analysis of it with a view to the task of building an independent labor movement in Iran. The second article by Mohammad Safavi introduces the reader to the current state of workplace health and safety in Iran.

The International Labor Organization and the Task of Building an Independent Labor Movement in Iran¹

By Kamran Nayeri

A visit by Mr. Bernard Gernigon and Ms. Karen Curtis, respectively the Chief and the Deputy of the Freedom of Association Branch of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to Iran from September 27 to October 3, 2002 has attracted a lot of attention, including among labor activists. The visit and its

¹ Special thanks to Yadullah Khosroshahi for providing me with information, facts and constructive comments.

consequences reveal much about the current problems and prospects of the Iranian labor movement.

Crisis of the Government-Sponsored "Labor Organizations"

The visit was initiated by the Islamic Republic government. At the June 2002 International Labor Conference in Geneva, the Iranian delegation invited the ILO's Freedom of Association Branch to send its representatives to Iran to examine the current labor law in relation to the ILO standards. All delegations to ILO conference are composed of two government representatives, one employers' representative and one workers' representative. In the case of Islamic Republic, where the government itself is the main employer and there are no independent workers' organizations, the delegation certainly represented the government and employers alone.

While the ILO has not published a public report of this visit, in late December the Tehran-based Iranian Students New Agency (ISNA) published a 10-page Farsi translation of what it says is the ILO report submitted to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security of

the Islamic Republic in November. The ILO has not repudiated the report.

The highlights of the ILO report underscore the crisis of legitimacy of the government-sponsored “labor organizations” in Iran and attempts by employers, the government, and labor bureaucracy to overcome it:

- All organizations that claimed to represent workers and were interviewed by the ILO delegation ironically complained that the current conditions do not allow for genuine workers’ representation.
- The government-sponsored Workers House and their affiliated Islamic Shoras (Councils) of Labor demanded some independence from the government and employers. They complained about the government’s authority to certify workers’ candidates to the Islamic Shoras of Labor and management’s codified right to be included in these councils with voice and vote. They also objected to the power of the three-person labor mediation boards that are dominated by the government and the employers. In recent years, the mediation boards have voted to dissolve Islamic Shoars of Labor.
- Spokespersons for the Higher Office of Trade Associations, Iran’s employer association, complained that existing organizations that claim to represent workers are not “free” and “independent” enough. They expressed a desire for “genuine

representatives of workers” with whom they could bargain.

- The newly formed “guild associations” claiming to represent an industry or a trade are singled out by the ILO for praise. Two issues need clarification. First, the Islamic Participation Front, a coalition of political forces allied with the Khatami presidency initiated organizing “guild associations” to compete with the Workers House and Islamic Shoras. In particular, they have organized the Association of Journalists and the National Truck Drivers’ Association. The ILO report praises these organizations. Second, under the existing labor law, “guild associations” can actually represent all employees in an establishment regardless of the type of job they hold—that is, they are more like industrial unions than craft union or guilds. The report also notes that seven such associations have been formed by the rival Workers House, including in services and textiles.
- The ILO report reflects the intense rivalry among the three sets of organizations claiming to represent Iranian workers. In particular, all parties tend to distance themselves from the Workers House—which is the most discredited among workers. Thus, representatives of the newly pro-Khatami “guild associations” and the Islamic Shoras of Labor representatives interviewed by the ILO delegation declared that the Workers House is not the true

representative of Iranian workers. They pointed out that the General Secretary of the Workers House is a leader of the Islamic Party of Labor which is allied with forces within the Islamic Republic regime who are opposed to the “reformists” allied with Khatami presidency. They complained that the Workers House has spoken for the Iranian workers for many years, including at the ILO meetings.

- The government representatives also disassociated themselves from the Workers House. This represents a new change in the position of the Islamic Republic government since the Workers House was actually formed under its auspices in the early 1980s and the government has always presented the Workers House as the true representative of the Iranian workers.

The ILO Recommendations

Thus, the ILO delegation admits “the current conditions in workplaces negate the real meaning of freedom of association as stipulated in Article 87 on labor organizing.... There is no example of a real collective agreement either in a workplace or for an industry.”

However, the ILO’s recommendations to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security are entirely legalistic and strikingly supportive of the Iranian government and the employer class:

- Change the language of the fourth point of Article 131 of the labor law to disallow

monopolizing of labor organizations.

- Maintain Islamic Shoras of Labor as consultive bodies for management alongside the “guild associations” as the real representatives of workers.
- Register all workers’ organizations with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security.
- Ban leaders of guild associations from holding leadership positions in political parties or factions or to seek political appointments.
- Educate workers and management on the collective bargaining agreement process.
- Grant the right to strike within the framework of collective bargaining agreements.

Characteristically, the authors conclude: “The delegation fully understands that such important changes can succeed only when they are implemented gradually. It is our view that the highest priority should be given to guarantees for an appropriate framework for the establishment and activity of independent and free workers’ organizations.”

The Working Class under Attack

The ILO report is notable more for what it does not address than what it actually says. The ILO delegation was invited to Iran to assess the labor law in relation to international standards. However, the report is completely silent on the ongoing attack on labor rights granted under this very same labor law:

- In February 2000, the fifth Islamic Majles (parliament) passed a law removing workers

- in workshops with 5 or fewer employees from the protection of the labor law. It is estimated that over 3 million workers are affected by this law.
- The sixth (current) Islamic Majles dominated by the “reformists” has passed the “Rebuilding and Renovating the Textile Industry” law that has enhanced employers’ privileges versus labor in many ways. The Workers House and a number of Islamic Shoras of Labor in the textile industry have estimated that this law will result in mass layoffs in this industry which employs more than 400,000 workers. A second bill has removed rug weavers from the protection of the labor law.
 - It was estimated in 2002 that over 1 million workers had not received their wages and benefits for three to thirty-six months.

Continuing these attacks after the ILO delegation issued its supportive report, on January 18, 2003 the Supreme Council of Labor consisting of representatives from the government, employers and the Islamic Shoras of Labor voted to remove the protection of the labor law from all workers in workshops with fewer than 10 employees. According to the Minister of Labor and Social Security, 402,000 workplaces are affected.

The workers most affected by these attacks are the most vulnerable ones, including women, who constitute only 8% of the workforce but 96% of whom work in workshops with 10 or fewer workers, and young workers and unskilled skill workers.

These anti-labor governmental measures support a vicious wave of employers’ assault that has picked up steam in recent years. The outcome has been devastating for working class families: According to official estimates the number of street children—who are mostly children of the working poor---has increased from 20,000 in 1996 to over 1 million in 2002.

Structural Adjustment Program and the Labor Law

In its November 2001 “Country Brief,” the World Bank credits the Khatami government with re-orienting the Iranian economy from its alleged “distribution-before-growth” development model to a “distribution-with-growth” approach. This approach in nothing less than the well-known Structural Adjustment Program: allowing for domestic markets to reflect world market prices for commodities and services, building institutional support for private domestic and international capital, and financial liberalization. In their national and international context, these policies are meant to enhance the position of capital against labor and to increase capitalist stability and profitability.

Since 1989, when the Islamic Republic government first set course to implement such measures, but especially since 1997, when Mr. Khatami was first elected president, these policies have lowered real wages, made it easier for employers to lay off or fire workers or to replace those with seniority and relatively higher wages and benefits with temporary workers with minimal wages and no benefits and no rights. They have also undermined the labor law that was adopted in October 1990.

The general character of this law reflects the circumstances of the Iranian labor movement at that time. In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, the workers' movement fought hard for legal recognition its newly won advances against the capitalists, managers and the government. However, by 1983 a combination of internal weakness of the workers' movement and an outright anti-labor campaign by employers and the Islamic Republic regime destroyed all independent labor organizations including the militant workers' shoras (factory councils) movement. What replaced this genuine labor movement was a network of corporatist Islamic Shoras of Labor promoted by the Islamic Republic Party and organized through the Workers House. These organizations originally found a base of support among workers who placed their allegiance to the Islamic Republic above the interest of the working class.

In 1985, the constitution of the Islamic Shoras of Labor was adopted; it envisaged these organizations as the arms of the government and management in the workplace. However, even these organizations had to air some of the workers' grievances and demands. Thus, the 1990 labor law included some of the demands of the workers, as it was deemed necessary at the time, to appease a declining sector of the working class that continued to form part of the social basis of support for the Islamic Republic and its corporatist labor organizations.

However, the 1990 labor law and the corporatist structures that were organized in the 1980s came increasingly into conflict with the

requirements of capitalist accumulation and the re-orientation of the Islamic Republic regime from a populist to a capitalist posturing. The Khatami presidency used "reform," "democracy" and "civil society" metaphors to implement a clearly pro-capitalist program supported by much of the international and national capitalist classes. Restructuring labor relations became a high priority. While in his first term in office, President Khatami had to accept the continued appointment of Mr. Kamali—a close ally of the Workers House and the Islamic Shoras of Labor—to the post of Minister of Labor and Social Security, in his second term he chose Mr. Safdar Hosseini, from his Islamic Participation Front for this post. Thus, for the first time both the employers and the government simultaneously confronted these corporatist organizations that had outlived their usefulness to them. At the same time, the Islamic Participation Front initiated "guild associations" such as the Journalists' Association and the National Truck Drivers' Association to compete with the Workers House and the Islamic Shoras of Labor. While the ILO has praised these organizations as a model for the true form of labor organization in Iran, others including some exiled Iranian labor leaders have cited evidence that these are indeed paper organizations initiated by owners, managers and/or political figures associated with the Islamic Participation Front.

The ILO and Independent Workers' Organization and Action

It was in this context that the Islamic Republic delegation invited the ILO to

Iran. Through this visit and its report, the ILO has endorsed the Islamic Republic government's course to re-arrange labor relations in Iran more consistent with the demands of the Structural Adjustment Program to enhance the position of Iranian and International capital. It has also given an opportunity for the "reformist" faction within the Islamic Republic to promote its own "guild associations" at the expense of the discredited Workers House and the Islamic Shoras of Labor.

In the words of the well-known Iranian economist Fariborz Reeisdana, who initially welcomed the election of president Khatami, his policies "...should be characterized as right-wing, and sometimes even extremely right-wing...as these policies have promised increased investment, employment and economic prosperity but in reality have only taken away from the working class."

Since the leaking of the ILO report, a number of exiled leaders of the Iranian labor movement during 1978-1983 have written to Mr. Gernigon and Ms. Curtis to indicate actual errors in the ILO report and bring to their attention grave aspects of governmental attacks on the working class.

At the same time, some labor activists have asked for the ILO's aid in promoting the independent workers' movement in Iran. Dominated by the employers and their government, the ILO is committed to mediate between what it calls the "social partners," that is, employers, their government and the labor movement, to ensure smoother operation of the capitalist system. This mission clearly excludes the idea of an

independent labor movement because any working class organization that is committed to the perpetuation of the capitalist system cannot be considered independent. The labor movement is only independent if it holds and fights for a perspective that will do away with social conditions that have created and perpetuate the working class—a class of producers that exist based the existence and dominance of capital. The strategy and tactics of any genuine labor movement flows from this perspective.

The future of the Iranian labor movement is clearly tied to the development of independent labor organizations. These can only emerge from the actual workers' struggles in Iran and the solidarity they receive from their brothers and sisters from ranks of international labor movement.

Occupational Health and Safety in Iran²

By Mohammad Safavi

Since the inception of industrial activity in Iran, workplace occupational safety and health has been relegated to the sidelines. Yet, working in a safe environment is a basic labor right. Under the Islamic Republic, the health and safety of workers has been given low priority.

² Mohammad Safavi is a member of United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 1518, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. He has been a shop steward and member of the Health and Safety Committee for the past nine years.

According to the daily *Kar va Kargar* (Work and the Worker, May 8, 2002), published by the Worker's House in Iran, about 12,000 workers died of workplace hazards and an additional 150,000 were injured in 2001. According to another report published by the daily *Neshat* (April 20, 1999), 50% of workplace "accidents" take place in small workplaces with fewer than 10 employees. Just last month (January 2003), the Supreme Council of Labor, consisting of representatives from the government, employers and the Islamic Shoras of Labor, voted to remove the protection of labor law from all workers in workshops with fewer than 10 employees as a "cost-cutting measure!" According to the Minister of Labor and Social Security, 402,000 workplaces are affected. These changes will make work much more dangerous. Additionally, the vast majority of those who suffer work-related injuries (about 90%) are not covered by the Social Security Organization of Iran. The Occupational Health and Security Department of the Social Security Organization reports receiving only 14,000 occupational accident claims for all of 2001.

About 95% of all women workers work in small workshops and are therefore at a higher risk for workplace hazards. In some sectors, such as the carpet weaving industry, almost 90% of the workers are women. In these industries, where workers' educational attainments and sense of power are low, the rate of injuries is very high.

In research conducted in 1999-2000 by Dr. E. Habibi of the University of Esfahan, 283 hand woven rug workshops with 750 workers were surveyed. Of these, some 89% were female and 9.8%

were pregnant. Some 38% of workers were 13-18 years of age and another 45.7% were 19-29 years old. Almost all workers (98%) reported that they lacked any form of exercise. Some 7.4% complained of headaches, 9.2% had respiratory problems, 29.8% had musculoskeletal symptoms, 6.7% showed evidence of eye and skin disease. Some 67.8% of tools and 49.9% of work benches were sub-standard. Some 88% of workers expressed dissatisfaction with their work.

The International Labor Organization recognizes sexual harassment as an occupational health and safety issue (Convention 111). According to the daily *Iran*, 68% of private sector female employees have been victims of sexual harassment." There is no clear governmental or employer policy to prevent sexual harassment.

A fundamental reason for this bleak situation is the absence of a strong independent labor movement in Iran and a broad labor solidarity movement abroad. Such a movement would educate workers about all aspects of health and safety in the workplace and would combat workplace hazards including sexual harassment.

USUN Hands off Iraq!

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