

Introduction

Thirty years after they rose up to topple the Shah's dictatorship, a regime that criminalised trade unionists and could not even provide for the most basic needs of workers and the poor, Iranian workers are now in a worse condition than at anytime in the past 50 years.

Beginning with the first strikes in 1906-07, the ebb and flow of the Iranian workers' movement has been inextricably linked with the general social, economic and political situation in Iran. Each revolutionary or progressive wave has had its gains and positive effects and each reactionary and regressive wave obviously had negative results. The repressive periods have always lasted much longer than the periods of freedom. The rulers and bosses have always punished the workers and the exploited masses for daring to hope for a better life for themselves and their families.

Through two revolutions (1906-11, 1978-79), three coups (1908, 1921 and 1953), a soviet republic (1920-21), a period of imperialist occupation (1941-45), an anti-imperialist nationalist movement (1951-53), a counter revolution (1980-82), and a ruinous war (1980-88), not counting the many smaller protests and clampdowns, there have been periods when a whole generation of activists have either been killed or made passive through incarceration and demoralisation. This has meant that there has been no continuity in the structures and experiences of the workers even at a regional level, let alone nationally. Within this context the gains that were the result of decades of struggle were lost within a few years!

Yet even as the current regime flogs workers in Kurdistan for daring to commemorate May Day, the development of industry and the ongoing urbanisation mean that every day ever larger sections of the population join the ranks of the working class. In turn, the rising levels of literacy and the spread of modern means of

communication mean that workers in one industry or region quickly become aware of the problems and protests of other workers.

As we have seen with the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane workers - who had no previous longstanding experience of struggle - the explosive mix of having no rights and daily repression, economic hardship and poverty, government incompetence and corruption, together with the desperate need for change can, within a matter of weeks or even days, transform a very modest struggle demanding unpaid wages into one where workers insist on the formation of an anti-capitalist bloc!

The fact that one of the biggest problems facing workers is unpaid wages is a testament to the failure of capitalist development in Iran. It is indeed a strange state of affairs, as it undermines the basic contract between the worker and the boss. What makes it even more alarming is that the culprit is not this or that owner of a small business. With more than 80 percent of the economy in state hands in most cases it is in fact the state that is responsible for unpaid wages!

This means that a basic and peaceful protest for backpay that is essentially against the employer (or government-appointed managers) is taken as action against the state and leads directly to intervention by the riot police, intelligence officers, plain-clothes agents and so on.

It must be emphasised that all the problems have become deeper and more wide-spread at a time of record oil prices. Despite Ahmadinejad's assertion that the Islamic Republic can cope with even \$5 a barrel, we have seen how the strains are already showing with the drop to \$50 on the international markets during the past few months (with Iranian crude always selling at less than the main benchmarks like Brent Blend). Any further drops in the oil revenue will inevitably intensify the regime's problems.

The weakening base of the regime will also make it harder for the regime to smash workers struggles. During the past few years we have seen how the repressive apparatus has become more official and professional. Gone are the days when hundreds of thousands of hezbollahi zealots pouring into the streets after a call by Khomeini. Now there is a uniformed, trained and *paid* riot police. There is even a special force made up of women for smashing women's struggles (as opposed to the devout 'Zeynab sisters' of the counter-revolution).

With the regime's inevitable rapprochement with the United States (especially with the incoming Obama government), and other international organisation and allies of the US, the regime will become even more susceptible to pressure by international public opinion in general, and the labour movement in particular. This will make the role of the labour movement in other countries, mainly in the advanced industrial countries, even more important than before.

International labour solidarity, whatever the general diplomatic climate, always boosts the morale and spirit of workers who may otherwise feel isolated and alone in a bitter struggle against the bosses and the security forces. It says in a loud voice that 'Iranian workers are not alone!'

In the run up to the inevitable third revolution in little over a century the apparatus and theoretical framework for solidarity work has to be built now, so that when the movement picks itself up from its knees and, within the space of a few months, makes up for decades of low consciousness and combativity, we would be ready to assist it in a much more consistent and effective way than before.