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A brief history of the working class

In 1900 Iran was still a pre-industrial country and its small urban workforce mostly worked in the traditional workshops of the various craft industries. The wage-earning workers were just a small section of society.

Mozzafar al-Din Shah was an absolute monarch who dealt ruthlessly with any protests from merchants, peasants and so on. All that constrained his power were his large debts to the British and Russian governments, built up because of mounting deficits and an extravagant personal lifestyle. In return for loans, which were highly unpopular with the people, he was forced to sign many political and trade concessions. These gave monopolistic control of various Iranian industries and markets, the most infamous being the 1901 D'Arcy Oil Concession.

The first strikes in Iran took place, and the first trade unions were formed, within the context of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11.

The beginnings, 1906-11

In December 1905 the governor of Tehran had the feet of some sugar merchants beaten, after they did not reduce the price of sugar as ordered. The merchants argued that the price rise was due to higher import prices. Their beating resulted in protests by bazaari merchants and mollahs and eventually set off a chain of events that led to the first *majles* (representative assembly) being opened in October 1906. In late December 1906 Mozzafar al-Din Shah finally signed the constitution, modelled primarily on the Belgian Constitution, a few days before he died.

In June 1908 his son, Mohammad Ali Shah, staged a successful coup d'état with the help of the Russian-led Cossack Brigade. Colonel Vladimir Liakhoff was appointed as the military governor of Tehran. He banned all newspapers and public meetings, including religious processions, and issued arrest warrants for leading deputies. His Cossacks occupied the telegraph office and even bombarded the majles building. After the majles was closed many nationalist leaders, especially the more radical ones, were arrested and executed. (These events followed the August 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention which divided Iran into three zones: the north to the Russians, the south to the British and a narrow and mostly barren "neutral zone" in between for Iranians.)

In Tabriz, capital of Azerbaijan province, a popular resistance to the royalist forces was organised by Sattar Khan and Bagher Khan. After a siege of several months Russian troops entered Tabriz, forcing the revolutionaries to flee to Gilan province (on the Caspian).

Joining local Gilani revolutionaries they marched on Tehran while the Bakhtiari tribe, who opposed the Qajar dynasty, were advancing from the south. The northern revolutionary forces and the Bakhtiaris converged on Tehran in July 1909. Mohammad Ali Shah then took refuge with the Russians and Ahmad, his 11-year-old son, was put on the throne (to become the last Qajar king).

The second majles was elected under an improved electoral law. To solve the government's revenue problem Morgan Shuster, an American expert, was appointed to organise tax-collection. In November 1911 the Russians issued an ultimatum demanding Shuster's dismissal and that Iran must not appoint any foreigners without Russian and British consent.

After the majles refused to accept the ultimatum Russian troops advanced on Tehran. Naser al-Molk, the regent, and the cabinet

forcibly dissolved the majles, accepted the ultimatum and sacked Shuster in December 1911.

Although the constitution was not revoked or replaced until the Islamic Republic was formed, no future monarch took much notice of it.

During the revolutionary period two types of *anjoman* were formed. One was a revolutionary society based on a guild or fraternal group that now became active in politics. These were formed throughout Iran. The other, a town council, which was usually elected, appeared in many towns and cities.

This was also when the first strike appears to have taken place. On 21 November 1906 the fisherman of Anzali, on the Caspian coast, protested against Liazonov, the Russian fisheries concessionaire. Since Liazonov only paid them a pittance for each fish, the fishermen said that from then on they would keep all the fish that they caught for themselves.

The government sent troops to suppress the strikers. Although one fisherman was killed the strike went on as it was very popular with the local population. The people of Rasht, the regional capital, wanted to boycott Russian goods to show their support for the fishermen.

In 1907 there were more strikes. In January 1907 the Tabriz telegraphists went on strike demanding unpaid wages, followed by the Tehran telegraphists in April, who demanded higher pay and better conditions. Then the dockers and sailors of the Anzali-Baku shipping line demanded a pay rise.

The first trade union was probably set up among the printers in the spring of 1907 when they struck in solidarity with one of their workmates who had been beaten by the head of the government printing office. They did not go back until the head had been

dismissed. In the summer the printers in Tehran again went on strike demanding shorter working days. They won a reduction from 14 to nine hours.

On 28 October 1908 the workers of three tanneries in Tabriz went on strike demanding better working conditions and more rights. Their demands included a pay rise, supervision over hiring and firing of workers, health and safety improvements, payments of medical bills by the employer, payment of 50% of wages as sick pay, less overtime, overtime at double time rates, no dismissal of strikers, payment of full pay during the strike and no exclusion of strikers. They returned to work after they won a pay rise and no dismissal of strikers.

When on 25 May 1910 opposition newspapers that had been ridiculing the Prime Minister were suppressed, and their editors were to be tried, the Tehran printers' union, the best organised section of the labour movement in Iran, organised a strike against the cabinet's decision and in solidarity with the editors. After the police intervened the strike leaders took refuge in the *majles* building, demanding the release of arrested strikers and the acceptance of 14 demands, including a working day of nine hours, increase in the minimum wage, severance pay, time and a half for night shift workers, an extra week of paid leave, a number of health and safety issues and the involvement of their representatives in drawing up regulations for printing offices and sick pay and so on.

Following the coup there was a big drop in strikes and trade union activity.

Rapid growth, 1918-25

During the winter of 1917-18 the bakery workers in Tehran formed a union and forced the government to recognise them by organising a strike and cutting off the supply of bread.

At the same time the printers formed a trade union as well. During the 'hunger demonstrations' of 1917-18 they organised a strike and, while waving red banners in support of the Russian revolution, attacked hoarders and bakers with the other demonstrators.

Another printers' strike in 1918 lasted two weeks and forced the government to recognise them as an official trade union. The 2000 strong union forced the employers and government to accept their demands, including an eight-hour working day for all printers, time and a half for overtime, sick pay for two months and payment of medical bills, one month's severance pay and one month's notice and a package of leave measures including 10 days paid holiday a year for each year worked. Both the government and the employers also accepted the principle of collective bargaining and agreements when dealing with the printers' union.

The Telegraphists and Postal Workers' Union also became active again with almost 2000 members. Although this union was not recognised by the government it kept going despite attempts to dissolve it.

In the 1918-19 period many other workers formed their unions and many were opposed to the government on the Anglo-Iranian Treaty; demanding the expulsion of British troops, the eight-hour day and the right to form trade unions. In an anti-British rally in autumn 1919, the demonstrators demanded the release of Soleiman Eskandari, the Socialist leader (interned by the British in India during the war). Anti-British sentiments were a helpful factor in mobilising many people at this time.

Although many trade unions were short-lived, the movement went from two unions in 1918 to ten in 1920.

In June 1920 the *Edalat* (Justice) and *Hemmat* (Ambition) parties merged with other organisations and formed the Communist Party

of Iran. The CPI would play an important role in the next phase of the proletariat's history.

Trade unions were strong in Tehran, Gilan province (Rasht & Anzali) and Tabriz. By the end of 1921 there were 8000 trade unionists in Tehran and 20,000 in the country as a whole. It is estimated that they represented 10% of the urban industrial labour force of 100,000.

In November 1921 the Central Union of All Tehran Workers was formed. It joined the Profintern, the Red International Labour Unions. In 1922-23 the Central Union represented 16 unions and it led existing unions as well as organised 21 new ones. Each union had three representatives at the Central Union's weekly meetings.

After the collapse of the Gilan Soviet Republic the Communist Party concentrated its activities on the trade unions. Members like Mohammad Dehghan - the president of the Printers' Union and the editor of *Haghighat* (Truth) - played an important role in reviving the party.

Dehghan, for example, helped the leader of the textile workers to organise a strike for higher pay. A successful one day strike in April 1921 made all 700 weavers join the union. During the second half of 1921 there were successful strikes by the Bakers' Union, the Printers' Union, the Postal Officials' Union, Dockers' Union and so on.

On 24 December 1921 the teachers of Tehran went on strike to demand six months' unpaid wages. Their other objective was to protest against the ban on government employees joining trade unions. The government resigned after three weeks and on 24 June 1922, Ghavam became Prime Minister and banned seven opposition newspapers and had their editors arrested.

In response the Central Union threatened to call a general strike if the government did not release the arrested printers and lift the ban on the papers. Ghavam gave in to the demands on 9 September 1922.

This victory was followed by another printers' strike in 1923, this time at the *majles* printing office. Again the government met all the demands: a pay rise, 10 days' annual leave and scrapping the rule that required the *majles* printers (who were military personnel) to carry out other duties.

The Central Union also organised many events that improved the workers' social life and raised their cultural level. These included a reading room, publishing various journals and a theatrical group.

Great progress was also made in Gilan, Tabriz, Mashhad and other parts of the country. In the south-western province of Khuzestan, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC)* had started its operations in 1908. Management and skilled labour had been brought from Britain and India. The middle ranks were filled by Indians and Armenians, with local tribes providing the unskilled labour.

The first industrial action against APOC took place in 1914 after two workers died in an accident. The company was asked to support the families of the deceased and to improve health and safety. APOC refused to deal with the workers' demands. The workers then began stoning the living quarters of the British employees. After all work was stopped the ruler of Khuzestan was called in to suppress the strike. This strike made the company set up its own police force, which was commanded by British officers.

On 9 December 1920 the 3000-strong Indian workforce went on strike and a day later the Iranian workers joined them. They demanded a pay increase, a shorter working day, overtime pay and

* The company was called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company 1908-1935, then the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1935-1954 and finally British Petroleum, 1954-present.

improvements in health and safety and treatment of workers by staff members.

APOC was forced to grant an 80% pay rise. There were also some small improvements in conditions.

The APOC area saw more activity in 1922. The living conditions of the Indian workers were still bad, so 2000, about half the Indians, took action. They were repatriated due to breach of contract.

Reza Shah's repression, 1925-41

Once Reza Khan had become the new shah (and established the Pahlavi dynasty) he arrested most cadres of the trade unions and Communist Party. All trade unions, labour related newspapers, meetings and activities were banned. So the activists who remained out of jail had to continue their work underground.

The number of organised workers shrank to a very small group, which despite the suffocating repression, managed to celebrate May Day in 1927. In addition to the printers, some textile, construction, bakery and leather workers, plus tailors and some others maintained some cohesion.

1929 oil strike at Abadan

The oil industry in Khuzestan province started operations in 1908 and Communist Party cadres were instrumental in forming a trade union among the workers of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC). This was, however, mostly inactive until re-launched in 1927, the year it organised the first Congress of Oil Workers.

In January 1929 APOC and the Iranian authorities learnt about a cell system among the Abadan refinery workers. By May there were thought to be 30 cells in just Abadan, with about 20 members in each. There were also cells in Masjed-e Soleiman, Ahvaz and Mohammareh. Elkington, the APOC manager, was informed that the strikers would be occupying the site of the refinery and had 11

demands - including workers representation in the Labour Office and at medical examinations in relation to hiring and firing, a pay increase, paid leave, a six-hour day, the use of company quarters or rent in lieu, equal treatment of Iranians in various grades with Indian workers, pensions, and that grievances should be dealt with by Iranian courts and police.

The Iranian authorities arrested 93 active union members on 29 April. Even though further arrests were made on 6 May the Iranian morning shift did not turn up. At about 5.30 p.m. about 40 pickets, mostly ex-employees, armed with sticks and knives tried to prevent workers entering the refinery. After scuffles troops arrived and took up positions inside and surrounding the refinery. Finally, after the night shift had worked 32 hours, it was relieved.

Although the strike was short-lived it proved a rallying point for nationalists and was good for workers' morale.

1931 strike at Vatan textiles

A committee affiliated with the Communist Part of Iran (CPI) organised the strike at Vatan textiles in Esfahan. On May Day 1931 workers numbering 60-70 arrived in a garden in the city and a red 'Proletarians of the World Unite' banner was fixed to the wall. After speeches by the party leaders and discussions, it was decided to go on strike on 7 May.

The main reason the workers were going on strike was to protest against the new contract which contained the following: "if a worker does not give one month's notice before quitting work in the factory, one month's wages will be charged to him and appropriated for ... the factory fund". The management then declared that 7 May was to be an extra holiday but that workers had to work the next day, a Friday (day of prayers). The workers were incensed even further by this and matters came to a head when a worker was victimised on 15 May, being told that either he signed the new contract or he would be sacked.

The strike was near solid - with even the eight-year old children in the factory stopping work! All production came to a halt and the workers demanded the following 13 points from the owners: freedom to organise a union; a monthly wage (rather than piece-work); an eight-hour day; half a day paid leave a week; abolition of controls, beatings and fines; setting up an accident and illness insurance scheme; double pay for overtime; payment of medical expenses; time off for Fridays and public holidays; a maximum of two hours overtime per working day; improvements in health and safety and an end to insults when getting paid.

The police then arrested the leaders and threatened to arrest the other workers unless they returned to work. On the second day the strike committee finalised the written demands and prepared for a general meeting. The meeting was held the next day in the road, and despite the efforts of the police and management, the demands were adopted and eight men elected as representatives.

The representatives met the director at his home. He claimed to accept all demands except the eight-hour day, saying that nine hours was the minimum acceptable. At a general meeting on 17 May the workers believed that the director was genuinely accepting their demands and returned to work.

On the afternoon of that day all workers returned to work for just eight hours. The next day armed police were present at the factory and, once the workers had calmed down, arrested their leaders. Between 25 and 39 workers were taken away, with six remaining under arrest. Five of these were released after 50 days and the sixth, who was to be banished to central Iran, escaped.

The strike's main gains were:

- 1- The working day was reduced from 12 to nine hours;
- 2- The searches at the factory gate were stopped;

- 3- A separate area was set aside exclusively for drinking tea and for eating breakfast;
- 4- A 20% pay rise was promised;
- 5- The insults and fines were reduced;
- 6- Iced water containers were put in all departments;
- 7- The lunch break was raised from half an hour to one hour;
- 8- Finally, the main demand, the new labour contract was withdrawn.

A month after the Vatan strike, in June 1931, *majles* passed an anti-communist law which included a ban on trade unions. As a result over 2000 CPI members (and suspected members) were arrested. The repression, the Soviet Union's interest in improving relations with Reza Shah and the industrialisation drive dampened trade union activity for a decade.

There was no further significant union activity in Iran during the 1930s. Under Reza Shah's dictatorship all trade unions and socialist (or even liberal) political organisations and parties were smashed.

Growth, betrayal and repression, 1941-53

Reza Shah's openly pro-Nazi sympathies and refusal to allow transit of war materiel through Iran to supply the Soviet Union led to the Anglo-Soviet invasion of August 1941. With the Shah packed off to a life of exile in Mauritius and South Africa, his politically clueless son, Mohammad Reza, became king.

After decades of military-style dictatorship now there was political instability at top lasting until the CIA coup in 1953 - with 12 premiers in 13 years! As the repressive apparatus of the state fell apart, and the pent-up social problems of the past 16 years were unleashed, all sort of activities, movements and organisations were formed.

This revolutionary upsurge was strongest among the workers. A new wave of struggles and strikes were organised and, on May

Day 1944, four union federations merged to form the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions of Iranian Workers and Toilers, with a membership of 100,000 workers.

The leadership of this confederation was, however, in the hands of the recently formed Tudeh Party. In September 1941 the Soviet Union had set up *Hezb-e Tudeh* (the mass party) to further its interests in Iran. This included carrying out the Soviet policy of alliance with Britain as a counter-measure to the growing American influence in the region.

Time and time again the Tudeh used its influence within the workers' movement to put down the wave of strikes, particularly the mid-July 1946 strike at the British-owned Abadan refinery. On 1 August 1946 the Tudeh entered a pro-British coalition government under Ghavam and was given three ministries - Health, Education, and Trade and Industry. The cabinet posts were Tudeh's reward for its role in the labour movement.

After organising strikes among the railwaymen and others in February 1951, the CCFTU organised a series of strikes in the oil industry. On 20 March, New Year's eve, AIOC (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) announced immediate cuts in wages, housing subsidies and so on, under the pretext of a drop in prices. The next day workers at Bandar Mashur, the port 105 kilometres east of Abadan, went on strike. Three days later they were joined by the pipeline, machine shop and oilfield workers. By 1 April nearly all of the company's 45,000 workers were on strike, martial law had been declared, and the British fleet in the Gulf was being strengthened.

On 10 April the company cancelled the cuts and let workers return to work. The next day, however, AIOC announced that workers will not be paid for their three weeks' absence. The CCFTU called a general strike throughout Khuzestan, demanding the backpay *and* nationalisation of the oil industry.

In addition to the 45,000 AIOC workers over 65,000 lorry drivers, railwaymen, road sweepers, shopkeepers, bazaar craftsmen and even secondary school students took part in the peaceful strike. Violent riots broke out when the police tried to arrest the leaders, fired into demonstrators and killed five people. The British sent gunboats to the Gulf to “protect British lives and property”.

The workers drifted back over the next two weeks as the company said that some of their wages would be paid; the government promised that their grievances would be investigated and the union funds dwindled. The National Front leaders also tried to calm things by saying that escalating the situation could lead to a British invasion.

By 25 April the Khuzestan general strike was over. During it the CCFTU organised solidarity strikes in nine large textile mills in Esfahan - involving 30,000 workers supporting the oil workers, demanding nationalisation and job creation industrial projects. The military placed tanks, armoured cars and machine guns around the textile mills and in Esfahan’s southern working-class quarter. There were also solidarity strikes and demonstrations in Tehran and the northern cities.

The CCFTU then organised a conference of its Tehran affiliates. Attended by 350 delegates, new leaders were elected (to replace those who had fled abroad) and the Executive Committee was enlarged to include most industries. Following the conference the CCFTU would go on to launch a campaign for wage rises and government recognition.

As the situation continued to escalate Prime Minister Hossein Ala declared martial law for a period of two months, so that the strikes and demonstrations would not help the “external enemy”. The crisis, however, continued as the masses pushed for the nationalisation. Mass meetings were organised against the

government's procrastination in implementing the oil nationalisation law passed by the majles and the Senate. In May 1951 Mohammad Mosaddegh, the leader of the National Front, became Prime Minister and in June sent a committee to Khuzestan to take over the oil installations.

In July 1951 the CCFTU organised massive parades commemorating the 1946 strike and then in October a large demonstration outside the *majles* demanding the nationalisation of the AIOC, removal of the military from the factories and an end to restrictions on trade union activity.

The Tudeh's interventions were primarily aimed at holding on to the leadership of the workers' movement as a bargaining chip for the Soviet Union. This policy - helping to put down strikes, going into Ghavam's government and so on - not only totally disoriented the newly born workers' movement but also allowed Mosaddegh and a group of nationalist politicians around him to take over the leadership of a rapidly developing mass movement against British domination.

Mohammad Reza Shah's repression, 1953-77

The CIA coup on 19 August 1953 was the beginning of the end for the working class movement - and of the Kurdish, Azeri and students' movements - that began in 1941. The workers' movement entered a long period of stagnation as the CCFTU and all trade unions were smashed, many Tudeh organisers were executed, and any sorts of trade union and political activity of the working class was banned. The National Front and all other opposition forces were also outlawed.

The massive wave of repression helped build one of the world's most feared police states. This, together with the combined effect of the following factors, drastically reduced the level of workers' activity to a very low point - with no major struggles taking place for over two decades.

The factors were:

a- Demoralisation

With many of the leaders and most experienced activists dead or in prison, a mood of demoralisation and caution took over the remaining activists and rank-and-file workers.

b- Urban unemployment

Following the land reform programme (as part of the “White Revolution” of 1963) there was a wave of peasants migrating to the cities. Between 1967 and 1976 every year around 330,000 people migrated into the cities. The resulting high urban unemployment obviously limited the bargaining power of the working class.

c- Lack of experience/consciousness

The majority of workers in many factories and economic units set up in the mid- to late 1960s were villagers who had been newly absorbed into the working class. In many cases they went straight from working in their village to working in a factory! Not only did they not have any experience of strikes or trade unions but had to make painful adjustments to life in the city and as a worker.

d- State-run unions

The state-run unions were an important policy of the dictatorship in curbing the development of the workers’ movement. These grew from 16 in 1964 to 519 in 1972, covering many industries and the service sector. SAVAK, the secret police built with CIA and Mossad help in 1957, either controlled them or had informants in them. Although, where possible, the workers tried to use these ‘unions’ to advance their demands, and did in some cases get improvements, these were primarily set up to neutralise the genuine aspirations of the working class.

e- Press censorship

The sophisticated censorship and restrictions taught to SAVAK by the CIA and Mossad meant that when any labour disputes did take place, then news of them did not spread or get into the press.

Strike and shop-floor activity did, however, continue - as many were documented *after* the revolution. From just a handful in 1971-73, by 1975 the number of strikes grew to as many as 20 or 30 a year. For example, there was a strike in Tabriz's Mashin Sazi in 1972. The factory stayed closed for ten days when workers struck for better conditions, benefits and more holidays. Similar strikes happened in plants such as Iran Transformer, Arj, Philips, Azmayesh, Saipa, and Zamyad. In 1976, at the Arj factory in Tehran, protests over the low quality of meals at lunchtime grew into a riot, with workers smashing chairs and tables.

Last, but not lest, where there were more experienced and more conscious workers, e.g., Caterpillar and Zamyad plants in Tehran, secret cells were set up to organise the struggles and also to carry out political activity.

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Once the students' movement was also subdued after the killing of three students on 7 December 1953 - when Tehran University students demonstrated against Richard Nixon's trip to Iran - the scene was set for other layers and movements to take centre stage (although in May 1961 there was a teachers' strike that posed economic as well as political demands).

After Students' Day the next big public demonstrations were in 1963, organised by the Shia clergy (including Khomeini) in opposition to the reforms of the "White Revolution". The clerics were against land reform (which meant losing their extensive estates) and votes for women.

Then it was the turn of the guerrilla organisations: the *Mojahedin* (full name: *sazman-e mojahedin-e khalgh-e iran*), a radical Islamic group, was founded in 1965. Following the 1971 attack on the Siahkal gendarmerie post the left-wing *Fadaii* (full name: *sazman-e cherikha-ye fadaii-e khalgh-e iran*) organisation was founded. For eight years they carried out an intense guerrilla campaign, including assassinating SAVAK torturers, US military personnel, industrialists and anyone deemed to be helping the Pahlavi state in its reign of terror.

In 1967 the national oppression meted out against the Kurds unleashed an armed rebellion in Kurdistan that lasted until 1969.

In 1975 there was a split in the *Mojahedin* and a left-wing group called *sazman-e mojahedin-e khalgh-e iran (marksist-leninist)*, or the *Mojahedin-e Marksist* for short, was founded.

The significance of this group[†] was that it turned towards working within the working class and built the best left-wing base within the proletariat.

The legacy of repression

As a result of the long years of repression the working class lost any continuity in building its own independent organisations and developing on the experiences of 1941-53.

In parallel with the repression there was significant industrialisation, so that by the mid-1970s, the Iranian working class had grown to around three times its size at the end of the 1940s. It stood at over 3 million strong.[‡] Of this, at least a third was concentrated in the largest plants, of which the vast majority

[†] After the revolution it was renamed *sazman-e peykar dar rah-e azdi-ye tabagheh-ye kargar*, or *peykar* for short.

[‡] The coverage of the 1975-85 history has been taken verbatim from CARI's *The Iranian Workers' Movement*, pp 4-28.

were situated in a few major cities (especially the capital Tehran which accounted for over a half).

On the other hand, the largest single contingent of the work force consisted of building workers without stable employment. A politically active layer but one with little economic power, industrial discipline or cohesion. They blended in with the urban poor. Both their strength and weakness strongly marked the coming rise of the workers' movement. Many sections of the working class were easily drawn to important struggles but were also relatively easily dispersed and demoralised, especially within the context of an economic crisis and in the absence of a strong and united workers' organisation.

The combination of a rapid economic growth and a strong repressive regime blocked the revival of independent workers' organisation. The so-called workers' syndicates that were allowed to exist were simply corporative structures totally controlled by the Ministry of Labour. The daily life of workers in each plant was closely monitored by the so-called "Workers' Protection Committees" run by the secret police, SAVAK. Workers' organisations were, therefore, few and far between. *The centre of activities against the regime had definitely shifted to outside the workers' movement.*

The rise of the new workers' movement

The political situation in Iran began to change fundamentally in 1975-76 when the Shah's system of growth based on heavy state backing for the rich, and massive injection of the oil money, ground to a halt because of its own inherent contradictions. The Shah's industrialisation could not absorb the growing number of dispossessed independent producers and the rural migrants forced *out* of their lands precisely because of the so-called "White Revolution" which had paved the way for this growth, grew to over 3 millions. The even greater injection of money into the economy made possible because of the rising oil prices only increased the problems. Enormous bottlenecks developed because of the lack of the necessary social infrastructures whilst an even greater gulf

began to appear between those who had and those who had not. The destruction of the traditional rural economy led to the concentration of huge masses of unemployed and semi-employed in the urban areas.

The impact of economic stagnation and the general breakdown was compounded by the austerity measures taken in 1977-78 which meant a real reduction in wages for most sections of the wage earners. To disable skilled workers from seeking better employment a system of “workers’ identity cards” was introduced which kept records of previous employments. To carry these measures *out*, repression was stepped up.

Even the small producers were forced to carry their share. To solve the crisis of the big industrialists many smaller businesses were forced *out* of the market by the Shah’s Chamber of Commerce.

With the perspective of continued growth dimming, social and hence political conflicts began to rapidly sharpen once again. At least three major social groups were being pushed into a position of united opposition to the Shah’s dictatorship: workers (and wage earners in general), the urban poor (and their rural counterpart: the poor peasantry) and the impoverished independent producers.

Moreover, the Shah’s dictatorship was no longer able to contain the discontent created among the better-off layers by a distorted economic growth in which the top layers of the state bureaucracy and a small clique of rich families closely associated with the Royal Court (and hence the state) got the lion’s share of the wealth. Many groups of traditional merchants and producers were pushed *out* of all positions of access to the main channels of state-backed profits. Sections of the ruling class itself were being transformed into “second class citizens”.

This conflict at the base of the regime was further sharpened when the political regime was officially changed into a one-party state by the direct intervention of the Shah himself (Hezb-e Rastakhiz-e Melli: The National Resurgence Party). By the middle of the 70’s

open political groupings had already taken shape within the traditionally monarchist layers calling for constitutional reforms. The creation of the Rastakhiz Party only helped to harden these oppositions.

The massive Shiite clergy, traditionally an important instrument of the state, was in effect replaced by the new bureaucracy. Khomeini and his supporters who had opposed the Shah's White Revolution precisely because of its effects on the Shiite hierarchy were now in a position to claim that they had foreseen its results many years earlier. This put them in a more favourable position vis-à-vis the masses relative to other bourgeois oppositionists. The clergy had retained its roots among the people on the one hand and the marginalised merchants and proprietors on the other. Not many people remembered that Khomeini's opposition to the Shah was, among other things, because of the proposed *land reform, votes for women and the creation of local government*. All of which were considered by the most reactionary wing of the Shiite hierarchy as an attack on its position.

The clergy was, therefore, able to use this opportunity to the fullest by utilizing its influence within the masses as leverage for negotiations with the bureaucracy. The fact that the people's Mojahedin Organisation was at that time inseparable from the Shiite hierarchy and groups like the Tudeh Party were calling them "militant muslims" further disarmed the masses. Khomeini was to use his ability in controlling the masses as a passport to respectability within the ruling clique. Gradually, thus, a leadership began to take shape based on a coalition of various bourgeois groups, headed by the clergy and backed by sections of the Army and SAVAK. It also had a sizeable support among the masses and a growing influence over the widespread protests. This was an advantage that even the American government was soon to recognise.

It was within such a context that a new workers' movement developed. By the early 1977, sporadic economic strikes began breaking out and before the year had ended there were already signs that the strike wave was spreading and tending to become

increasingly political. The working class was becoming involved in a nation-wide political struggle against the Shah's dictatorship and beginning to throw the repressive forces off balance. The regime was in no position to crush this movement.

An interesting feature of this period was the way in which the working class was testing the balance of forces. Despite the absence of any national leadership, the workers' actions were to become increasingly coordinated. As soon as any individual strike would break out, solidarity actions would be organised by the neighbouring factories. The demands of these strikes were initially purely economic and elementary at that. Any victory, however, would encourage those workers in touch with the strikers to go on strike too and often to raise the stakes.

In many instances, workers who had already been on strike and realised their demands would make fresh demands and revive the strike. Gradually, political demands began to dominate most industrial actions. From the repeal of the Labour Laws and the expulsion of SAVAK agents on the shop floor to freedom of all political prisoners and even the overthrow of the Shah's regime were being raised. The economic demands were also becoming increasingly radical. From simple wage demands, the movement grew to raise sliding scale of wages and hours and workers control of production.

Furthermore, the movement was spreading rapidly and involving sections who had never before embarked on any industrial action. By the late 1978 (September and October to be exact), what could be called a creeping general political strike began to emerge. It grew to involve over 1.5 million industrial, agricultural and white-collar workers. This general strike continued to widen, with ups and downs but in a more or less continuous way, up to the February 1979 insurrection. This was what eventually broke the back of the Shah's dictatorship. For almost two months prior to the insurrection the entire apparatus of the repressive state was completely paralysed.

The impact of the strike grew, in particular, after the mass street

demonstrations led by the clergy had reached an impasse. In the wake of September 1978 massacres, it was becoming clear that such mobilisations on their own could not actually bring down the Shah's regime. Indeed it was also clear by then that the clerical leadership is preparing for a compromise. The militancy of the workers revived the mass movement and gave it new strength and effectiveness. Such that the clergy and its coalition partners could not entertain any plans for keeping the Shah.

Thus, after being absent from the political scene for almost three decades and despite its lack of class struggle traditions and organisation, the Iranian working class demonstrated that it is *the leading revolutionary force* in the country. It could not offer an independent leadership for the mass movement but the very fact of its intervention had a profound effect on the course of events.

This fact alone, regardless of later setbacks, has had, and will continue to have a decisive importance for the political future of Iran. *For the first time in the modern history of Iran an important social force has effectively shown its willingness to fight for democracy and progress.*

The process of workers' self-organisation begins

Unlike the mass demonstrations, which depended on a centralised organisation that at that time could only be provided by the mollahs, the strikes favoured the self-organisation of the working class.

Workers began to build strike committees (totally bypassing the corporative union structures) as soon as the strike wave began to rise. It did not take a lot before they found out that extending and maintaining the strikes requires the building of coordinating bodies. Gradually, a myriad of strike committees and coordinating bodies developed in every major town.

The strongest of these was in Khuzestan, the oil producing region. It was a joint co-ordinating committee of the Oil and Steel

industries in the South. This committee was to play a major role in bringing down the Shah's regime.

These strike committees represented a major new force within the mass movement. A force which was recognised by all, even the clerical leadership. Despite this, these committees did not really try to assume any leading role within the mass movement.

Many of them were already (either at a local level or nationally) coming into conflict with the clerical or bourgeois politicians who did not approve of some of the strikes or the radicalism shown by the striking workers. The strikers, however, did not challenge this leadership.

The oil-workers strike committee was, for example, under pressure from Khomeini's representatives inside Iran to end their strike and to simply stop oil shipments for exports. Mr Bazargan (who was later to become the appointed Prime Minister by Khomeini) even declared his disapproval publicly. Workers refused to accept these proposals and insisted that the strike should continue until the Shah is overthrown.

Despite all the threats made against them by the Shah's regime and the politicians claiming the leadership of the opposition to the Shah, the oil workers kept on reducing production until it was cut off altogether. They were only allowing the distribution of previously produced oil for heating purposes. This was probably the first strike committee which imposed workers control of production and distribution. Moreover, they began to throw out of the oil-industry those that they considered to be reactionary managers.

Many such strike committees were active at the time.

The demands raised most broadly were for *(a) rehiring those workers sacked for their participation in struggles against the Shah, (b) payments of unpaid wages due to strikes or stoppages, (c) expulsion of pro-Shah & SAVAK elements from the plants & (d) changing the much hated Labour Laws which had provided many arbitrary powers for the management.* Such demands, given the

political situation at the time and the militant mood within the working class, gave the struggles at every plant a strong dynamic for workers control.

The rail workers' strike committee blacked all transport of military material and personnel. This paralysed the state while assuring the transport of foodstuff and fuel for the public. Governmental threats and open sabotage did nothing in dampening the workers resolve.

Bank workers joined in by exposing all the financial dealings of the rich and provided constantly up-to-date figures on the flight of capital from the country. In addition, with the help of sections of the Civil Service (especially the employees at the Ministry of Finance) they managed to totally paralyse the State's financial operations.

Print workers and journalists went on strike to prevent government propaganda from getting published. Those still working were vetoing any derogatory articles against the opposition.

The Iranian working class thus began opening the books and exercising workers control. This was, however, confined to the level of *individual* factories. Workers assumed the power to stop production or to regulate it, but they did not move on towards an alternative method of orienting and organizing production as a whole. They were leading the fight against the Shah, but they were not putting forward *a political alternative of their own*. On the political level, they were simply placing their power behind the manoeuvres of the bourgeois-merchant-mollah coalition in the leadership of the mass movement.

Thus, a peculiar situation arose. The mosques and the bazaar merchants were partially financing some of the major strike committees (including the one in the Oil Industry). This helped in furthering the illusion that this leadership was on the side of the masses. Whilst in fact the bourgeois opposition to the Shah was simply using the strikes to weaken the faction around the Court and to force a transfer of power to the bourgeois-clerical and bourgeois-liberal factions. It was after all no skin off their nose. The strikes

were hitting the pockets of their rivals.

The most far reaching result of this situation was that many of the actually independent workers organisations were to come very much under the influence of the bourgeois leadership. The most militant layers of the Iranian working class did not, therefore, rally around the left but remained under the political leadership of the bourgeois-clerical coalition which ensured a subordinate role for the workers, despite their heroic and effective struggles. This had a profound effect on the subsequent course of the Iranian revolution.

The general strike could have only given rise to a new power if it had gone beyond the limits of the individual workplaces and created a nation-wide organisation capable of drawing the rest of the masses behind it. The February 1979 insurrection, which took place despite the efforts of Khomeini and Bazargan, could have opened up the way for such a development. It did not, however, lead to a situation of dual power.

To the contrary, immediately following the insurrection, the leading elements within the working class accepted the demands of the bourgeois-mollah leadership to disarm and to disband the strike committees.

A bourgeois government was established over the heads of the masses, and was able to present itself as the culmination of the mass upsurge: "Thank God! The revolution has been victorious, what we have to do now is to end it and to rebuild the economy. It is no longer necessary to engage in destructive measures. Now is the time to reconstruct", the appointed Prime Minister declared.

Khomeini also revealed his true colours almost immediately following the insurrection. He called on workers to end their strikes and to increase production: "Everything is ours now!" And indeed that is exactly what he meant! (His mollahs took over most of the lucrative industries and set up the so-called "Mostazafin [the humble] Foundation"). Those who refused to accept this, he threatened, "would be considered as counter-revolutionary

saboteurs and would be dealt with as such”.

To replace the strike committees, the clerical leaders offered “Islamic Shoras” (councils) which were said to be the means for assuring “the participation of the mostazafin in building a new Islamic society.”

The *political counter-revolution* had thus begun. The ruling class was, through Khomeini, trying to roll back the democratic gains of the masses. At the beginning, in fact, little actual force was needed. The new bourgeois regime was able to take advantage of the illusions of the masses to push them into a position of total submission. It only took a few days for all the strikes to end and for the strike committees to be liquidated.

There were, of course, those who resisted, but since most sections had not as yet a clear political understanding of what was in fact taking place - and no other alternative existed anyway - they became intimidated and soon gave up.

The only voice of opposition raised by any major section was that of the leaders of the Oil Industry’s strike committee. They demanded that workers organisations be “represented” on the Council of Islamic Revolution set up by Khomeini as the ruling body. They did not, however, continue with this demand and at no time did they raise the demand for the abolition of this self - appointed “council” or the election of the promised constituent assembly.

The political role of the working class was thus reduced back to what it was before the insurrection. Furthermore, the class struggle was now even more confined within the limits of the individual plant or concern. There was no longer the mass political movement against the Shah for the workers to relate to national political issues and as yet no serious opposition to the new regime had taken shape.

The most important feature of this period was, however, the fact that within the working class an open split was becoming increasingly obvious. There were those that either had illusions in

the new regime or actively supported it and those that continued on a class struggle course trying to consolidate and extend the gains of the revolution. This divide which proved later to be fatal for the outcome of the struggles, whilst obvious for the active section of the pro-regime wing, was not all that clear for the class struggle wing. The former sought to prevent the latter from continuing the struggle which was branded as “counter revolutionary” by Khomeini, whilst the latter still tried to unite with the former with whom it was, after all, united in opposing the Shah only a few months ago.

The open betrayal of groups like the Tudeh Party in praising the new reactionary regime or groups which tried to discourage the militants from fighting against a regime which they considered to be “the leadership of the revolution”, of course, further confused the masses. Indeed, the split was also affecting the vanguard layers of the working class.

The workers' movement after the insurrection

The insurrection of February 79 and the resulting weakening of the old apparatus of the state, despite the machinations of the new regime, opened up the road for class struggle and political and social advancement for the working class. The capitalists themselves were in no position to block this road (many of them had in fact fled the country). Also, within the plants themselves a favourable situation had developed. Almost everywhere the old instruments of the bosses had crumbled. Most reactionary managers or foremen followed their masters and did not dare to show their face at the plant. Known SAVAK agents went into hiding and in most plants anybody who had collaborated with them followed suit. And wherever the above was not the case, it only took a few days for the workers to make it so!

The new instruments of repression were not as yet strong enough to prevent workers from achieving many of their demands. The only things which prevented workers to advance further were in fact their own illusions in Khomeini and the confusing advice they were getting from the assorted leaderships of the not-so-much-left-but-claiming-to-be-left groups such as the Tudeh Party or Mojahedin

organisation who were advocating collaboration with what they were claiming to be a “revolutionary government”.

It must be emphasised, however, that the objective logic of the situation which had opened up after the revolution was stronger than both. This, combined with the deep economic crisis, gave a certain dynamic to workers struggles which nobody could easily block. At least, not yet.

For example, the new regime did insist on the necessity of stopping the strikes and reviving the economy. But who other than the workers themselves could actually organise production? Even the reactionary mollah- bourgeois political leaders had to accept the fact that without a certain degree of workers participation in management there is going to be no possibility of reviving production. Workers, despite their illusions, were thus entering a period of activities involving control of production and distribution which could only put them on a course of confrontation with the bourgeois regime.

Workers gave up their strike committees and heeded the advice of the clerical leaders in setting up Islamic shoras. But the same shoras were now forced to exercise control and even manage the plant. Furthermore, in most cases, the individuals forming these shoras were exactly the same as those involved in leading the strike committees. These shoras could not, even if they wanted to, be simply *Islamic*. Many of them organised elections to elect worker-managers. The mollahs, however, meant by the term “Islamic”, a total submission to the will of the managers appointed by them. Many shoras set up their own distribution network to cut the bazaari middle men and hence cut prices for the consumers. The mollahs were certainly not in favour of such definitions of Islam! They expected the fruits of this revolution for their own bazaari friends and not the consumers. Some shoras even began to directly contact foreign suppliers of spare parts and raw materials with the aim of obtaining better terms and increasing production with less cost. This also angered the merchant friends of the mollahs who had paid up so much to the mollahs proving their “support” for the revolution so that they could once again get at the lucrative

channels of foreign trade.

As for hirings and firings, everything was now under workers control which made the entire machinery of the Ministry of Labour and its Industrial Tribunals redundant. Moreover, by opening the books, workers had discovered much of the truth about the role of this and other Ministries under the Shah in providing cover for the capitalists and in helping them to escape whilst owing at times three times their entire assets to the state banks. Workers had also discovered that many of the bureaucrats associated with these dealings were retained by the new regime and were in fact even promoted. When the various Ministries tried, for example, to appoint their own people to run the plants whose owners had escaped, workers not only resisted but also published their names and backgrounds so that the government cannot send them to other plants.

All this gave a powerful dynamic for the independence of the Shoras despite the fact that many workers had not yet broken from the clerical leadership. It was not long before the leaders of the regime began to openly attack the Shoras. Not one month had passed when Mr Bazargan declared on the national TV: “They [the shoras] think they own the factories. They want to be the bosses. They want to decide issues of management. They are even not cooperating with the government. So, what is supposed to be the role of the government?” His Labour Minister, Mr. Foroohar, went further: “We cannot accept shoras. We do not believe any good can come out of these shoras. At most we might accept some form of trade unions” (meaning some form similar to what existed under the Shah!) By April, an entire campaign of anti-working class measures was under way.

Mollahs were sent to the major plants to preach on the virtues of “constructiveness” and “respect for law and order”. They called on workers to subordinate their activities to the interests of the Islamic Revolution and to cooperate with “the government approved and chosen by the Imam himself [the new title for Khomeini!]”. They played on the religious feelings of the majority of workers to whip up anti-communist hysteria and to purge the shoras from militant

workers. In some cases the armed pasdars accompanying these mollahs would beat up a few “communists” in front of the work force “to teach a lesson to the counter-revolution”.

Government began, with the help of the newly set up “Office of Revolutionary Islamic Public Prosecutor” to impose its appointed managers for the state-owned industries. A group of armed Pasdars would be sent to the plant alongside the Prosecutor’s representative, the appointed manager and the representatives of the concerned governmental department to “persuade” workers to accept the intervention of the state. They were also threatened with a total shut down unless they complied. Given the structure of Iranian Industry and its complete dependence on imported machinery and raw materials, this was a threat workers had to take seriously. Unless the government approved foreign exchange credits or provided the plant with the necessary raw materials, there was not much the workers could do at that time.

During these visits, the regime also did its best to change the composition of the shoras and appoint pro-regime elements to posts of responsibility. They could not yet close down the shoras, so they also set up their own “shora movement”. With the help of a group of Islamic student activists from the Tehran Polytechnic (which at that time had the strongest Islamic Society) they set up a committee calling itself “the Coordinating Committee of the Islamic Shoras”. This committee, with the backing of the repressive forces took up the question of “proper election of the Islamic shoras” and their “proper conduct according to the decisions of the Council of the Islamic Revolution (CIR)”. It also drew up a model constitution for Islamic Shoras for which it obtained official sanctions. What all this meant was that unless it approved of the Islamic credentials of a shora not only would it not receive any help from the authorities, but also open itself to attacks from the repressive forces. It must be said here that many groups which claimed to know better cooperated with this committee and indeed were part of it (including the Mojahedin Organisation).

By May, the authorities went further and the CIR passed a new decree creating” a Special Force for the Regulation of Labour and

Social Affairs” enabling the repressive forces to arrest and imprison workers suspected of “allowing or making it possible for unauthorised individuals or groups to interfere in workplaces in a manner detrimental to the interests of the Islamic Revolution”. Thus, any worker could be arrested under the pretext of supporting or belonging to political tendencies other than those approved by the authorities. The regime was not yet in a position to use this power everywhere and in every instance, but it did use it to manipulate and alter the composition of many shoras and to make their democratic functioning impossible.

Given the political situation, however, all these attacks on the working class only helped to radicalise their struggles and helped to facilitate and speed up the inevitable process of shedding all their illusions in Khomeini, his appointed government and their “Islamic Revolution”. Moreover, the first few months of the post-revolutionary struggles proved to a large section of the class that the dividing line in the Iranian Revolution is not around the question of “*Monarchy or the Islamic Republic?*”, but the question of “*workers or capitalists?*”. Many of the shoras thus began to denounce the government as “a capitalist government” and to openly question the support it enjoyed from the “Imam himself”. What was even more important, workers began to understand the close links that had always existed between the bazaari capitalists and the mollahs.

The demonstrations on the 1st of May 79 clearly indicated how far this process had actually developed. This was the first May Day after the revolution and only about three months after the insurrection. Governmental figures had all declared their support for this day and tried to organise a pro-regime demonstration. The opportunists of all sorts (including, of course, the Tudeh Party and its assorted hangers on) had also done their best to draw workers to the “official” demonstrations. But on the day it turned out that in most major industrial centres the independent demonstrations supported by many independent shoras and backed by a united front of the Left had succeeded in drawing the vast majority of the workers. It should be remembered that the Mojahedin had also tried to sabotage the independent demonstrations by organizing their own “independent” celebrations. By this time they could no longer

give unconditional support to the regime, but on the other hand they could not also be seen to be associating themselves with the left! In Tehran alone, the size of the independent demonstration was three times the numbers that the combined force of the mollahs, the opportunists, and the Mojahedin could bring out.

The “official” shora movement was not having a better fortune either. Not only did it not attract a great proportion of the existing shoras under its umbrella, but even those that had actually joined it were not at all what the regime had expected. It is difficult to judge exactly what percentage the pro-regime coordinating committee represented, because no total figure is available. But one thing is certain; it did not add up to much. It is known, for example, that at its height of “popularity” it had a national membership of no more than 400 shoras. In Tehran alone there were over one thousand known shoras. Furthermore, none of the biggest industries had bothered to join it. None of the above was, however, as hard to take for the regime than the fact that even these “tamed” shoras gradually began to break away and make demands that were not acceptable to the regime.

Independent shoras, on the other hand, were thriving. “The Workers House” set up in Tehran by independent forces enjoyed a widespread support (it was this centre which had organised the independent May Day demonstrations) among the rank and file workers. In fact, even some of those shoras supposedly supporting the regime were in contact with this centre. It was becoming increasingly obvious to the capitalist regime that a more drastic policy was necessary if it was to have any hope of controlling the working class.

The manoeuvres of the counter revolution

The ruling bourgeois-clerical coalition adopted a number of policies for dealing with the radicalisation of the workers’ movement.

The first of these was a major programme of nationalisations. The basic aim of the regime was to make it easier for the state to intervene in those plants whose owners had fled and where production was almost totally controlled by the shoras. The

government had already achieved a degree of success in the state-owned industries. Using the powers decreed by the CIR it could now begin to impose its will on other shoras.

So, with much fanfare and display of public rejoicing, the government announced early in the Summer of 79 that it was nationalizing all the companies belonging to fifty or so top capitalists (with more than generous compensations for the foreign capitalists and the ambiguous category of “other” share holders).

That this was a phoney nationalisation was obvious because of two simple facts. *Firstly, the nationalised industries were already “nationalised” by the workers who were in fact controlling and running them.* This was simply an exercise in deceit by means of which the government was trying to remove these plants from under workers control. *Secondly, almost without exception, these companies had debts to the state amounting to many times their declared assets.* Through this “nationalisation” not only did the government write-off the capitalists’ debts but also gave more money in the form of compensation to those share holders who had not fled but who nevertheless should have shared part of the burden of the debts.

After these nationalisations which affected almost 70% of the private sector, the government greatly tightened its control of capital investments, wage levels, production levels and the sale of the products. Workers were now called upon to make every effort to rebuild the Iranian Industry “which henceforward belongs to the Islamic flock”. Managers began to be imposed wholesale, with the backing of the preachers and the shock troops of the Pasdaran Army. What is interesting is that most managers appointed by the state refused after a few weeks to continue in their posts, because of the very strong resistance of the work force which refused to cooperate. Here again the Tudeh Party came to the rescue. It proved that it can provide the counter revolution also with technocrats well versed in the “art” of how to get rid of the working class! For a period, this group had the largest share of the top cadres of the nationalised industries!

The second policy was to try gradually to set up Islamic Societies (anjomans) in every plant in opposition to the shoras. These societies, being ideological constructs, could be controlled completely by the regime and in fact linked to other “revolutionary institutions” such as the Pasdaran Army or the Imam Committees outside the plants. There was no question of elections involved, so they could also be easily manipulated to serve the interests of the regime.

The authorities thus organised their own forces in every plant around these Islamic anjomans and began the process of gradually strengthening and preparing them for when they would be called upon to openly disrupt the shoras. After a few months, the main Party of the bourgeois-clerical coalition, the Party of the Islamic Republic (PIR), organised a split in their own “Coordinating Committee of the Islamic Shoras” and created a new body more directly linked to them called “the Coordinating Committee of the Islamic Anjomans and shoras”.

The previous Committee had served its purpose and it was no longer of any use to the regime. In any case, as it was previously said, it was not as successful as the regime had hoped. It was not easy for that committee to manipulate shoras in larger plants, because, however hard they would try there would always be few individuals within the shoras, popular with the workforce and not easily controllable by the regime. Islamic anjomans, however, would simply not let them in!

Using the extensive powers of the state a whole series of inducements were created to encourage workers to join or support these anjomans. If you wanted a loan you had to see them. If you wanted to persuade the management around any issues you had to see them. If you had any problems with the Imam committees or the Pasdars you had to see them ... Gradually, the shoras were reduced in importance to such an extent that without the cooperation of the anjomans they simply could not function. Indeed, if you were not approved by the anjoman, you would better think twice before standing for elections to the shoras. Most certainly the anjoman would create some trumped up charge against you and then invite

the Pasdars to arrest and imprison or at least sack you from the plant.

The government also gave all its mass media over to this new Committee and well publicised all its activities and conferences up and down the country. As always, the opportunists also hailed this new Committee as the last word in the revolutionary achievements of the regime and provided it with the left cover that at the time was still necessary for all the instruments of the state.

The third policy was to try to isolate the militant shoras and the Left groups and prepare for a final show down. It was obvious by then that the Left is growing rapidly and without smashing it the regime cannot effectively control the situation. The masses were enjoying the democratic rights gained by the revolution to the fullest. Many political organisations defending the working class had open headquarters and these were places of great interest and activities as judged by the numbers always gathered around them. Everywhere you could find people openly discussing and exchanging views on all the important issues of the revolution. The free press, mostly run by the journalists who had taken over control after their owners had fled, enjoyed enormous circulations. The left press was also very successful. It is estimated that the various papers of the Left had a total circulation of around a million.

The governmental strategy in defeating the revolution had always relied heavily on curtailing these democratic rights. Now that the regime was preparing for a major offensive, it became obvious that a lot more than simply curtailing them is necessary. In August, the Islamic Public Prosecutor gave an order banning over 40 newspapers including all of the left press. The authorities also closed down all the headquarters of the left groups. This was followed by widespread arrests of militants of the left and well known leaders of some of the most militant shoras. A little later, armed gangs of the Hezbollah attacked the “Workers’ House” and took it over in the name of the new “Coordinating Committee of the Islamic Anjomans and Shoras”.

Few days later, Khomeini declared a “Holy War” against the Kurds. Under almost total press censorship and a hysterical mobilisation of the Hezbollahi thugs a military campaign of terror was launched against the Kurds. This also provided the pretext to attack and suppress all those shoras or opposition groups who did not support this “Holy War”.

The reaction of the shoras and the progressive groups to these attacks left a lot to be desired. It was disjointed and disorganised to say the least. What became obvious was the fact that the workers’ movement was not prepared for these attacks which were long in the making. In addition to the shortcomings already mentioned, the most fundamental reason behind its weak resistance was the fact that *the workers’ movement had not managed to utilise the opportunities provided by the post-revolutionary balance of forces to build a nation-wide independent organisation.*

Workers had exercised control of production and distribution right across the entire Iranian Industry. For this to lead to real workers’ control, however, they should have gone beyond the confines of individual factories. The abolition of business secrets could only be achieved on a national scale. The only way the shora movement could have neutralised the manoeuvres of the government around the question of raw materials or spare parts was by drawing a national plan and by confronting the regime as a united nation-wide organisation. The political illusions of the vanguard, however, prevented the working class from taking up this fight on a national level. In the first few *decisive* months, workers were not politically prepared to take on the government and its various Ministries. Not simply because of lack of effective organisation but also due to their unwillingness to confront a regime which appeared to have the backing of a large section of the population.

This was, with hindsight, obviously a mistake. They would not necessarily have succeeded in winning the battle, but they would have certainly been in a better position to resist the attacks of the Summer of 79 which were inevitable. The fact that many groups also encouraged them to give support to the new regime or even actively collaborate, of course, did not help.

Secondly, despite all the heroic fights to defend the independence of their shoras, a fight in which a considerable degree of success was actually achieved, no effort was made to link up these shoras and unite them on a national level. The only way the working class could have confronted the capitalist regime was by setting itself up as a national force capable of taking up the challenge on a national scale.

Furthermore, the only way the working class could have competed with the clerical leaders in winning over the mass of the urban poor to its side was by creating a powerful national organisation capable of fighting for the demands of all the oppressed. As it turned out, the failure of the shora movement to involve itself with issues such as housing and employment for all allowed the clerical demagogues to win over important sections of the poor and even to mobilise them against the working class.

Thus, the fight for a united shora movement would have been the only correct course of action. Unfortunately, only a small section of the left raised this issue and within the shora movement itself the fight for uniting the shoras did not go further than the efforts to unite various branches of the same industry or shoras in the same neighbourhood. This shortcoming left the bourgeois regime with a free hand in the field of national representation of the working class with its phoney made-to-order “united” shoras and anjomans.

The US Embassy occupation & the Iran-Iraq War

The regime’s first major repressive drive had a profound effect on the mass consciousness. Opposition to the regime grew rapidly into a powerful material force. The wave of repression, therefore, soon ran into material limits and began to run out of steam. Moreover, the central government’s military drive into Kurdistan suffered a major defeat in the hands of the Kurdish Pishmargehs who had by now achieved tremendous popularity.

The debates in the “Assembly of Experts in Islamic Law”, which

had under the cover of repression replaced the promised Constituent Assembly, had opened many eyes. It was by now official, black on white, the mollahs were aiming for a regime of *Velayat-e Faghih* (the clerical dictatorship of the chief mollah).

Moreover, the start of the new academic year in September brought with it a new wave of political activities independent of the regime on the campuses. In fact most universities were by then transformed into centres of solidarity with the struggles against the regime. Almost everywhere, the Islamic Student Societies were in a small minority compared to the Left.

All this had its effects on the workers' movement too. Not only had the bourgeois government failed to destroy the shora movement, but a new upsurge was in the making. All the machinations of the previous period had failed to impose the will of the government on most independent shoras.

In the Oil Industry, a united shora had developed representing the refineries, the white-collar workers in the offices, and the drilling operators and pumping stations. "The United Shoras of West Tehran" included more than 30 shoras mostly dominated by the Left. Similarly, "The Centre for the Shoras of the East of Tehran" could speak in the name of over 20 shoras. In the south of Tehran, "The Centre of the Islamic Shoras of Rey" brought together shoras from more than 60 smaller factories. The Steel Industry was united under "The Central Shora of the National Industrial Group of Iranian Steel". All the shoras belonging to the factories under the governmental "Organisation for the Development and Modernisation of Iranian Industries" had united in "The National Union of Revolutionary Islamic Shoras".

In Tabriz, workers in the large machine-tool plants had organised a powerful shora which was playing an important role in this city and drawing to itself representatives of many smaller factories. In Gilan Province, over 40 militant shoras had united to form "The Union of Workers' Shoras in Gilan". This confederation was developing an independent network of workers' cooperatives in the rural areas to sell directly to consumers all the factory products and to buy the

available raw materials and foodstuffs. In Arak and Ghazvin, regional shoras had been formed which were constantly organizing activities and sending delegations to Tehran to present the government with workers' grievances.

Everywhere, there was much evidence to show a new rise in workers' militancy and activity. In one form or another, most shoras were involved in struggles directly opposed to the plans and wishes of the regime. Demands for the abolition of the old Labour Laws and its replacement by one drawn up by the workers themselves was probably the most widespread issue. But, many other demands were also being raised. For example, removal of various Ministers, the right of workers' veto on issues dealing with production, access to National TV for workers' shoras, etc., were amongst the most popular. *The revolution was, once again, on the rise.*

The crisis at the top was also intensifying. The bourgeois politicians were gradually losing their hold on power. The rift between them and the clergy was also widening. They were now openly expressing their worry about the proposed Constitution giving all power to the Shiite hierarchy. They were also pressuring the mollahs to take a more active role in heading off the mass movement.

The mollahs, on the other hand, were more and more openly showing their true intention of taking complete control of the financial and political institutions of the state. Moreover, in order to try to stem their loss of credibility among larger and larger sections of the masses, the mollahs began to gradually put all the blame for the crisis on the shoulders of the bourgeois politicians.

It was in this context that the occupation of US Embassy took place. It was designed and organised by the ruling Party (PIR) and its main objective was to divert the mass movement.

In the first place, *empty anti-imperialist demagogy was a good course to take to divert attention from the very real anti-capitalist dynamic that was rapidly developing.*

Workers and peasants who were striking daily at the bases of the ruling class were now called upon to abandon that fight and concentrate all their efforts on carrying out what Khomeini called “the second and the more important revolution against the Great Satan”.

What this meant in practice was to participate in daily mobilisations around the US Embassy to hear various pro-regime figures hail “Imam’s anti-imperialist line” and pass resolutions condemning the previous regime and supporting the CIR. The “Imam” himself called on everybody to stop “all strikes and other disturbances” whilst this “great second revolution” is going on.

Secondly, this event provided the opportunity to dump the by then extremely unpopular government and to give all powers to the CIR which was dominated by the mollahs. *In this way, not only did Khomeini’s leadership remove the blame for all the unpopular policies from itself, but also covered up its own drive for power under the pretext of getting rid of an unpopular regime.* Thus, the political defeat of the first attempt to rebuild the bourgeois state could now be recouped by winning new popular support for an “anti-imperialist” bourgeois state.

Any group or individual who stood in the way of the PIR was promptly exposed by “the Students Following Imam’s Line” (who were, officially, some “independent Islamic students” in charge of the occupation) who would publish documents “proving their collaboration” with US Embassy. In this way it was also “proved” that leaders of many shoras or the peasants fighting the regime were really all prompted into action by the US Embassy! Links were also “discovered” to exist between the “infidel Left” and the Great Satan.

Even the Tudeh Party which had exposed its collaborationist line could now blow this event out of all proportions and hence claim that it was right in uniting with “the militant anti-imperialist clergy”. It even managed to organise a split in the largest left group, the Organisation of Iranian People Fedaii Guerrillas, and enlist among the collaborators a much larger group than itself (the

Aksariyat: the so-called “Fedaiin Majority”) and with a considerable base within the working class. This was the group which in fact gave the betrayals of the Tudeh Party some material substance. Prior to this, the Tudeh Party did not really have a credible voice within the working class.

Thirdly, *under the cover of “mobilising the army of 20 millions” supposedly to fight the Great Satan, the armed instruments of the clerical rule were enormously strengthened.* This reinforcement greatly helped the regime in crushing many movements of protests. The most important of which was the Turkoman peasant shoras and the popular anti-hezbollah uprising in Tabriz.

Under such conditions, the mobilisations around the US Embassy themselves were gradually turned into a new instrument of repression utilised against the workers and their organisations. Centres of shoras were occupied by hezbollahi gangs organised around the Embassy and hailing the “Great Revolution” and “the Students Following the Imam’s Line”. Using this method, most centres of independent shoras were destroyed one by one. In all this, the Tudeh Party and Aksariyat backed the regime and attacked the Left. The weight of these “anti-imperialist” mobilisations gradually took its toll on the workers’ movement.

The relative strengthening of the class collaborationist groups who found Khomeini’s anti-American demagogy a godsend had a detrimental effect on the workers’ movement. The split in the Fedaii Organisation and the creation of Aksariyat meant that a large section of the vanguard was now drawn into direct collaboration with the Islamic Regime. With the help of these elements, the Islamic Anjomans were gaining a new credibility within the factories and the Coordinating Committee of the Islamic Anjomans and Shoras was growing rapidly.

After a few months of “the anti-imperialist revolution”, the repressive forces had gathered enough steam for the regime to launch a new wave of terror. First of all, university campuses which were now dominated by the left were occupied by the regime to carry out “an Islamic Cultural Revolution against the pro-Western

academics". Many militant students were brutally murdered and thousands arrested. Secondly, a new offensive was launched against the Kurds. This was much more ruthless than before and relied mostly on the new hezbollahi armed groups than the regular army. Thirdly, open moves to shut down independent shoras and arrest their leaders began.

The leaders of the oil workers were arrested and their shora was liquidated. The Union of Revolutionary Islamic Shoras was declared illegal and many of its leaders arrested. The National Railways' Shora was made to suffer the same fate. Centres of independent Shoras in Arak, Ghazvin, Shiraz and Tehran were all occupied and closed down.

The right of workers to a share of profits was abolished. Wage increases were declared illegal and any manager found guilty of disobeying this new decree was to face imprisonment. A new code of conduct for the Islamic Shoras was also passed by the CIR which in effect put a legal end to any possibility of forming an openly independent shora.

This was the context in which, in late September 1980, the Iraqi invasion took place. This posed a new decisive test for the workers' movement.

The most immediate response to the invasion resulted in a hysteric chauvinistic wave which rapidly engulfed the entire country, including the working class and most of the Left. Workers were sending volunteers to the Fronts, increasing production to help the war effort and donating part of their wages. Those groups which opposed this war were overwhelmed by the new mood. This situation greatly reduced the political opposition to the regime and allowed it to really begin the task of reconstructing the machinery of the state.

The other most important effect was the unprecedented rise in the number of those who were armed and supported the regime. The regular army itself, which had absolutely no credibility with the masses, was revived and rebuilt under the cover of the war and

sanctified by the mollahs into an Islamic Army. The strength of Pasdaran Army was trebled and a new organisation was set up to recruit fresh blood (the Basij Corps). Even the Islamic Anjomans were now armed.

The socio-economic effects of the war itself greatly reduced expectations. A large section of the working class was no longer prepared to confront the regime on economic and social demands for fear of reprisals. The government had gained massive popular sympathy and took full advantage of this by constantly pointing to the shortages caused by the war and demanding more sacrifices.

At the top it was becoming increasingly clear that the mollahs were preparing for a final coup. Both in the sense of getting rid of all bourgeois rivals in so far as the question of power was concerned and in the sense of finally putting an end to the remnants of the 1979 revolution. A section of the regime opposed to a completely theocratic rule gathered around the President, Mr. Bani Sadr, who being also the Chief of the Armed Forces had utilised the war to his own advantage to gain in popularity. The Mojahedin Organisation which had grown by then to be larger than the largest of the left groups put all its bets behind Mr. Bani Sadr hoping for a quick and painless kill at the top.

What they, and many others besides, did not notice was the extensive preparations on the part of the PIR for a new and more horrendous wave of terror and the ever worsening balance of forces in favour of the Mollahs. It only took a few months of war for the clergy to launch its final offensive against the revolution.

The repression of summer 1981

The wave of terror unleashed by the Islamic Regime in June and July of 1981 led rapidly to a severe setback for the revolutionary mass movement and a total takeover of all the post-revolutionary institutions by the reactionary bourgeois-clerical faction which had been preparing for this ever since the insurrection. The main forces

of the left were not prepared for this counter-revolutionary onslaught.

The collaborators - led by the Tudeh Party and their Aksariyat fellow travellers continued to support the regime of “militant Muslims”, claiming that it was “anti-imperialist”. They denounced the opposition to this terror as “an imperialist plot”. In fact, they collaborated with the repressive apparatus in providing information about the left which led to the arrest and execution of thousands of militants. Under these circumstances, it was clear that *their continued support for the regime could only mean active collaboration with the repressive forces of the state*. It did not take a long time before they became *inseparable* from instruments such as the Pasdaran Army, the Islamic Anjomans, the Basij Corps, the Hezbollahi thugs, the Imam’s Committees, etc. Their members were leading interrogation teams in Evin Jail and training hezbollahi torturers on how to extract information from left activists.

Large sections of the left made the costly mistake of tail-ending the Mojahedin Organisation. The Mojahedin, contrary to all their later claims, had always been aiming for a share in power with what they now call “the reaction”. Their main tactic for achieving this had been to appease the regime as a whole on the one hand (only one month before this wave of terror their leader had begged “the father of the revolution”, meaning Khomeini, to grant him an audience) and to try to gain a foothold within the regime by gaining the support of a section of the clergy and the army on the other hand. Taken aback with the terror, the Mojahedin’s reaction was now to change course and to push for a rapid takeover of power from above through the combined action of their own “militia” and the promised support from a faction within the regime who had aligned itself with the “President” and the “Chief of the Armed Forces”, Mr. Bani Sadr.

The consequence of this policy *is* now history. The most important sections of the so-called “liberal” faction within the apparatus of power joined in the terror campaign and the Mojahedin leadership’s desperate attempt at “armed resistance” led to the loss of over 10

thousands of their own rank and file and provided the justification for the clergy to intensify the terror even further.

The larger part of the left went down with the Mojahedin without having enough time to realise what was happening and to reorganise itself. The forces of counter revolution were greatly strengthened. Having tested the balance of forces, the reactionary regime pushed for a final, decisive blow against all the remaining manifestations of the revolutionary movement.

Less than a year later the Tudeh and Aksariyat collaborators themselves came under the gun. They were no longer needed. They had served their masters well in suppressing the revolutionary movement. It was now their turn to have a taste of their own medicine. It was only then that they decided to go into "opposition"! Even then, it must be said, it took them another year to actually denounce the regime!

The salient result of this period was the almost total destruction of all the independent organisations of the masses, including the workers Shoras. Arrests en masse and the summary executions of thousands of known militants followed suit. The situation deteriorated so rapidly that *before the third anniversary of the February 1979 insurrection, none of the major gains of the revolution had remained intact.*

In the face of this setback, opportunists of all colours - who had in fact either deliberately covered up or constantly underestimated the counter-revolutionary potential of the clerical regime and its petty-bourgeois shock troops and who were responsible for the unpreparedness of the revolutionary movement - claimed that their main error was to "*overestimate the capacities*" of the Iranian working class!

The events of the last five years have, however, shown that they were just as mistaken about the working class as they were about the "militant Muslim leaders". The working class remains, despite the ever increasing repression, the only major social force of opposition to the counter revolution.

The workers' movement has outlasted the capitalist offensive, gradually reconstructing its defences, and it is even beginning to prepare for a general confrontation. It has already forced the Islamic Regime to retreat on a number of important issues.

The recovery of the workers movement has to be looked at in its various phases, and the changes that have come about have to be understood, in order to see the possibilities that exist within the present situation for a future revival of the mass movement.

In the same way that the workers' movement helped to radicalise the mass movement against the Shah from September to February 1979, today it can give a powerful impetus to the popular discontent against Khomeini. This time, however, the rise in workers struggles may have to act as the catalyst for the mass movement, and not vice versa, as was the case before.

The new role of the workers movement was demonstrated in 1985 in relation to the anti-war movement and the protests of the urban poor. Following a wave of workers protests (strikes, go-slows, sit-ins etc) in that year, there was a definite rise in all forms of resistance by other sections of the oppressed against the reactionary policies of the Khomeini regime.

It should not be forgotten that the upsurge that led to the Iranian Revolution began in fact in the summer of 1976, with a sharp rise in activity amongst the urban poor of major cities, such as Tehran, Esfahan, Tabriz and Ahvaz. At that time, for example, Tehran had something over half a million unemployed or underemployed poor. Today, this figure has gone well over the 3 millions mark, and is still growing. Any major victory for the working class could immediately create an explosive social situation.

Under such conditions, it is no accident that the regime of the mollahs is staking everything on keeping the repressive forces constantly mobilised and on suppressing any movement before it can spread. The terror of the summer of 1981 marked only the beginning of this period.

The capitalist offensive was launched after a considerable period of decline in the workers movement caused by the Iran-Iraq war. Under the cover of this war, the Islamic anjomans were successfully utilised (with the help of the collaborators such as the Tudeh Party and Aksariyat) by the regime to oppose and disrupt the activities of the independent shoras.

In almost every major factory, there were, before the wave of terror was launched, powerful pro-regime anjomans, which were armed and linked to the Pasdaran units outside the factory. The military drills they conducted (daily in most places) were supposed to be for training volunteers for the war front. In fact, they were designed to create an atmosphere of fear and apprehension inside the factories.

These anjomans were the main instruments of the clerical regime in their attacks against the independent shoras. It is not difficult to imagine how effective these attacks became when their instruments became armed and could impose their will on the shop floor under the cover of the “holy war”.

The capitalist regime had also succeeded in most places in forcing through a drastic cut in wages (either by simply not allowing any increases and letting inflation do the job, or by imposing direct cuts in incomes) and longer working weeks, except in the most powerful sectors of the working class. The 40 hour week gave way to 44 and then to the 48 hour week. The level of real average wages had by this time reached almost half their levels under the Shah. Furthermore, to help the war efforts of the regime, productivity deals were imposed in many factories.

In none of these attacks the Islamic Regime could have succeeded without the active support of the collaborators of the Tudeh Party and Aksariyat (and also to a certain degree, the Mojahedin). For all their later protests (when their own necks were threatened), they provided the regime with the necessary political justifications for every reactionary measure.

All these measures were not, however, sufficient to prompt capital investments and a return of the capitalists who had fled the

revolution. The summer 1981 offensive was primarily designed to remedy this failing.

The fact that this onslaught was indeed a capitalist offensive is clearly indicated by its immediate aim of crushing the workers resistance. In almost every workplace, militant workers were arrested en masse and extensive lay-offs were carried out.

At every factory gate, the armed thugs of the Islamic anjomans and/or Pasdaran would carry out body searches to prevent any political propaganda reaching the workers. Distribution of any kind of literature not approved by the anjomans was prohibited. In many factories, political discussions could be punished with immediate expulsions.

A tactic more or less universally used by the anjomans in the first days of the terror was to create some disturbance in the factory directed against well-known militant leaders, then bring in the Pasdars to arrest these militants for being “responsible” for the conflict and to “restore order”.

In addition, the anjomans would provide a list of the activists and demand that the management sack them or face the consequences. The management would then sack those workers or even hand them over to the Pasdars. In most places, the lists published by the anjomans were actually invitations to the repressive forces to come to the factory and arrest the named workers.

These attacks on the working class were raised to a terrible intensity whenever any member of the regime was killed. The day after the explosions in the IRP headquarters, for example, in Tehran alone a convoy of forty buses went to the gates of most of the factories on the Tehran-Karaj Road arresting militant workers fingered by the anjomans. Many of those arrested at that time have yet to be released. Over one thousand of those arrested were executed. Those who were eventually released lost their jobs. The few who were allowed back to work had to pass an “ideological test” administered by the anjomans.

By means of such vicious attacks, eventually the workers resistance was broken. Gradually, all over the country, all the remaining shoras were crushed. Once this was accomplished a new offensive was launched.

The workers' share of the annual profits (set at 20% under the Shah), which was in fact a part of their very low wages, had already been cancelled in 1980. This aroused many protests which had forced the regime to retreat. The government had promised that for the coming year, a new plan would be introduced. After the destruction of the shoras, the "new" plan was made public in August. It had nothing to do with profit sharing, which was labelled a "taghooti" (that is a "pagan") idea. Rather, workers were promised a one percent increase in wages for everyone percent increase in output, calculated on the basis of a "standard level" fixed by the Ministry of Labour (which were based on production levels under the Shah). Those workers in factories producing below 65% of this level would receive nothing, and those producing between 65% to 100% of the norm only 0.2%. Given the fact that, on average, Iranian industry was producing at about 60% of its capacity as compared to the pre-1979 period, the regime was expecting not to pay anything at all or very little in most cases. Under the circumstances, the authorities knew that they could expect no serious protests.

On August 30 the Minister of Labour announced another "plan". Thursday closings were to be ended (the Islamic sabbath is on Fridays, Thursdays thus correspond to Saturdays in the West). A 44-hour week was to be applied throughout the Industry. There were protests, but none succeeded in changing the mind of the Minister.

In most factories a "code of discipline" was imposed, laying down a whole list of offences for which a worker could be sacked. Among them were: "any form of insult against the Islamic Republic and its leaders".

Despite everything, there were a number of important strikes in this period (we know of 14). Most of them, however, were bloodily

suppressed. There was only one successful strike and that was because the authorities were themselves cheated by the management.

In this period the regime of the mollahs was preparing the ground to normalise the economy and bring back the capitalists. This was to be capped by new and more anti-working class Labour Laws, around which a fight had been going on ever since the February 1979 insurrection.

The fight back: 1982-83

By May 1982 there were a number of indications of growing resistance by the workers to the regime's offensive. For example, a substantial increase in the number of industrial actions could be noted between May 1982 and May 1983 (over 35 strikes and many more go-slows and sit-ins).

The forms of protests were also more militant compared to the previous year, when the dominant methods were writing letters to the authorities or collecting signatures on petitions. Moreover, in this period, many new layers were brought into the struggle.

The effects of the workers' protests can be measured by the fact that in September 1982, in a Seminar of managers to study the problems of Iranian Industry, it was acknowledged that 50% of cuts in production were due to industrial actions, as opposed to the general problems of the economic crisis, shortages of raw materials and the war.

Despite the fact that in this period, the repression indeed increased and that the armed forces of the regime intervened in almost every industrial dispute, the workers won victories in a number of important disputes.

At the same time, there was a sharp decline in the fortunes of the Islamic anjomans. They became very isolated and lost a lot of their members. A boycott of all Islamic Institutions within the factories became widespread.

Most protests in this period were against attempts to lower wages in all sorts of ways, to increase working hours, and to lay-off workers. There were also many protests against the Islamic anjomans or their members.

The first major strike in this period began on May 17 within the steel industry in Esfahan against a plan to lay-off thousands of construction workers. After two days when the constant attacks by hezbollahi thugs could not succeed in breaking the resolve of the workers, the management agreed to a mass assembly. Workers passed a resolution in that meeting demanding, among others, the reorganisation of the management, the resignation of the Minister of Labour and the Governor of the province. On May 21 the regional TV had to devote two hours to explain the government's plan and attempted to intimidate workers to end the strike. Next day, however, a huge demonstration supported by many sections of the working class in Esfahan was organised. The demonstration was brutally attacked by armed Pasdars and many arrests were made. The protests, however, continued until the government was forced to back down and withdraw its plans.

This dispute had a major impact on the working class as a whole. Because of the scale of the conflict and the inability of the regime to enforce a blackout, this strike got wide publicity and aroused the solidarity within the working class that had long been suppressed. After this strike, there was a definite increase in the number of industrial actions.

Strikes in Chit-e Momtaz (textile), Renault, Railways, Pars Metal, General Motors, Gherghereh Ziba (textile), Pars Electric (electrical goods), Tehran's Bus Company, Tehran's Taxi drivers, National Airlines' Technical Depots, Shisheh Ghazvin (glass factory), Bridgestone, were amongst the most important ones.

The most significant struggle in this period, however, was the one against the proposed Labour Laws. The so-called Maktabi (fundamentalist) Minister of Labour announced on May day 1982 that the long promised new Islamic Labour Laws had already been drafted and sent to the faghihs (mollahs) for approval.

Khomeini, Montazeri, and a whole series of mollahs (including Qom's theological school) kept on approving the main principles involved. The bill was then discussed by the cabinet and by the end of 1982 it was announced that the final draft is ready and has already been presented to parliament. The government refused, however, to publish the text.

When eventually the contents of the bill became public, the reasons for this reticence became clear. It is hard to imagine how they could have made it any more reactionary. The sole purpose of this bill was to encourage and legalise super-exploitation and to entice the rich merchants of the bazaar away from hoarding and speculation towards making lucrative investments.

Islamic capitalism in Iran meant simply increasing the working day as much as possible, cutting wages to the minimum, and spending as little as possible on machinery, etc. In any case, investments in new machinery were impossible because of the shortage of foreign exchange and the lack of interest on the part of capitalists in making any long term investments.

In order, therefore, to promote an increase in profits and thus encourage the capitalists to invest, the new proposals were to allow the boss (called "the owner of work") to "hire out" the workers (called "the acceptors of work") on the basis of an "Islamic contract" between the individual worker and the individual capitalist (all forms of collective bargaining being considered "un-Islamic"!).

Hours of work, wages, benefits, retirement age, pensions, ,etc, were all to be set by this contract and absolutely no legal safeguards (even those accepted in the Shah's Labour Laws) were provided because these were deemed to be against Islam. It was proudly proclaimed that "in Islam there is no contradiction between wealth and poverty but only between Islam and Paganism".

The protests against the new Law, however, were so widespread that all the mollahs and their retainers had to eat their words a few months later. Even many of the Islamic anjomans were forced to

denounce the Islamic Labour Laws.

Many petitions were signed and sent to the authorities. In many factories workers set up commissions to study the proposed bill and prepare a list of criticisms. In many instances, leading figures in the regime were forced to go to the factories and to try to explain the “virtues” of the new bill. The protests continued, nonetheless, to mount.

The esteemed ayatollahs, such as Montazeri, who had all certified the Islamic orthodoxy of the bill were now obliged, one by one, to say that they had nothing to do with it. Some went even as far as to say that it might not, after all, be all that Islamic. On March 19, 1983 the government eventually announced that the bill was being withdrawn.

Once again the mollahs and their capitalist friends had underestimated the strength of the working class. A year and a half of constant butchery had not cowed the workers to such an extent that they could be forced to accept such draconian Labour Laws.

The defeat of the Islamic Regime over this bill had important results. Not only did the regime lose its last vestiges of popular support among the working class but the workers themselves became more confident of their ability to resist the regime despite the repression.

The upsurge of 1983-85

The upshot of the government’s defeat over the labour code became evident during the weeks prior to May Day 1983. Despite all its preaching that “the All-Mighty himself is a worker”, the clerical regime had refused to make May the 1st a workers’ holiday. This year, however, workers had gone through the experience of organizing “commissions” to discuss the Labour Laws. Now, they went on openly to set up May Day committees. In response to its defeat over the Labour Laws and faced with this new open defiance, the government once again stepped up its repression. By

the latter part of the month, a new wave of terror was rolling against the worker activists.

As severe as the repression was, it could not achieve the same results as before. By this time, not only did workers no longer entertain any illusions about the bourgeois reactionary nature of the Islamic Regime and its so-called “Revolutionary Institutions” such as the Pasdaran army or the anjomans, but after two years of intense and unrelenting repression, they were more certain than ever about the importance of having their own independent organisation. Militant workers came out of this period having set up clandestine organisations in many factories and having learned more sophisticated methods of struggle under conditions of intense repression.

To avert reprisals against their representatives, for example, workers tended to avoid putting forward their demands through any individual. As soon as any dispute arose concerning the majority of the workers, the normal course was to organise assemblies, which are more difficult to repress. Workers were also more sensitive to the problems of reprisals against their comrades. They organised financial aid for the families of the victims, and whenever the opportunity presented itself, they raised again and again the demand for the reinstatement of victimised workers.

In a number of strikes in this period, it is obvious that there was a secret committee of militant workers behind the action, leading and organizing the work force. In some instances, such committees even made public statements and pronouncements. They have more or less replaced the independent shoras of the previous period. Like the former, they do not restrict themselves to any particular demand or form of action.

When, and if, necessary they could act like a trade-union cell or a strike committee.

In this period, thus, we had many more strikes than in the previous one (more than 140 over a 2 year period), and a lot more successes as well. The protests against the Islamic Anjomans were more wide-spread. In most factories members of the anjomans (including their Tudeh Party and Aksariyat fellow travellers) were totally

boycotted. Protests against the Iran-Iraq war and its effects on the workers also became an important factor in this period. Furthermore, a rebellious mood began developing that could open up the way for a general strike. We also saw strikes or other forms of industrial action developing in factories that had previously been strongholds of pro-regime forces and hence in the rearguard of the struggle.

Some of the most significant struggles of the earlier parts of this period took place in Kontor Sazy-e Ghazvin (producing gas and electricity meters) (June 1983), Razi (chemical complex) (June-July 1983), Klaj (automobile parts) (July 1983), Chimiko Farma (chemical) (August 1983), Pars Metal (Sep-Nov 1983), Fiat (Dec 1983), Tobacco industry (Dec 1983), Indamin (metallic shafts and springs) (Jan 1984), Madar (textiles) (Jan 1984), General Plastics (Feb 1984), Luleh Sazy-e Ahwaz (steel pipes) (Feb 1984), Azmayesh (household appliances) (Feb 1984), etc.

During February and March 1984 there was a sharp rise in the number of disputes. In addition to the continuing protests against the “job classification scheme”, there were many strikes over the question of productivity deals and new year bonuses. For example, at Mazda (automobiles), Shinva (petro-chemicals), Naset (razor blades), Sepehr Electric, Iran Yasa, Chit-e Ray (textiles), Karoon (agro-industry), Luleh va Mashin Sazy-e Iran, Abyek (cement), etc.

On May Day 1984, there took place the most widespread go-slow seen for many years. As before, May Day committee were set up to celebrate workers’ day. In many factories statements were made a few days before May, attacking the regime for not recognizing this day as a national holiday.

One of the most important strikes of this period took place in Sasan factory (soft drinks) in July 1984. The management had announced that because of the war no productivity bonuses will be paid for the previous months. On July 15, workers went on strike. By July 18 the Pasdaran Army had occupied the factory arresting many workers. Workers retaliated by taking the representative of the Public Prosecutor as hostage. The next day, Pasdars attacked the

factory firing on workers - killing 2 workers and arresting a further 50. The strikes, nevertheless, continued. On July 24 the chief Islamic Public Prosecutor came to the factory to lecture the striking workers. Workers attacked him and took his four body guards hostage and demanded the release of their comrades. 500 pasdars attacked the workers killing 11 and arresting over 300 workers. The factory was closed down the next day. A month later it was reopened, but the Islamic Prosecutor's Office had set up a committee inside the factory to determine who was responsible for the incidents. Beatings and torture were practiced daily inside the factory and many of the workers are still in jail.

The news of the strike in Sasan and the extent of repression spread to many factories and in some plants (for example General Steel and Shisheh va Gaz) there was some solidarity action. The more significant effect of this strike was, however, to bring into focus the growing opposition inside the working class to the continuing War. There were in 1984 many strikes directly linked to the war. In Ghovveh-e Pars (batteries), Farsh-e Pars (carpets), Saipa, Jam (shoes), Barf Kar (textile), Vagon Sazy-e Pars (wagons), Mina (glass), etc, there were strikes and go-slows in opposition to forced contribution for the war (one to three days pay every month).

In this period there were also more extensive and more open clashes with the Islamic anjomans. For example, the strikes in Soviran (chemicals), Tolidaru (chemicals), Benz-e Khavar (trucks), Melli shoes, Mashin Sazy-e Arak (machine tools), Gherghereh-e Ziba (textiles), involved clashes between the anjomans and the work force.

The most significant victory of this period was, however, won by the strike of over two thousand construction workers of the Esfahan Steel Plant. The management having been defeated over its plans to lay-off workers in 1982, thought the time is now ripe to force its plans once again.

On November 11 workers held an assembly and set a two-weeks deadline for the management to change its mind. On 28th of November the strike began. It had a major impact on Esfahan, a

stronghold of the Hezbollah. The authorities mobilised the “Families of the Martyrs” (war dead), Basiji and other pro-regime forces against the striking workers. None had any effect. On December 6 the Governor of Esfahan appeared on TV threatening workers with a general mobilisation of the Hezbollahis unless they ended the strike. But the strike continued and every day there were signs of growing sympathy within the rest of the working class in Esfahan for the strike. The growing solidarity and the determination of the striking workers eventually forced the management to retreat on December 10.

The victory of the steel workers had a major effect on the combativity of the working class. In the following few months up until May 1985, there were over 35 strikes. On the 1st of May itself, there were so many stoppages that the government gave in midway through the morning. In most places workers took a day off. What is most significant was the fact that for the first time since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war there were a number of political protests (in the form of short strikes or sit-in) against the continuation of the War.

The fourth workers' movement, 1997-2008

During Rafsanjani's presidency diplomatic relations with many countries in Asia were improved. There was also an attempt to privatise many industries and 'liberalise' the economy. Under Khatami diplomatic and trade relations were re-established and continued to improve with most countries.

The ending of the war and improving diplomatic relations helped re-build many industries. The car industry in particular, benefited from many joint ventures: with Peugeot (Iran Khodro in 1990), Mazda, Nissan, Toyota, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Fiat and Kia.

With the growth of industry and the relative easing of repression, particularly under Khatami, the clandestine committees that endured the severe conditions of the war were able to increase their activity. Things started very modestly: by writing letters to the

president to bring the workers' plight to his attention. The next step was issuing statements on various struggles and supporting them.

One of the first was the Independent Trade Union of Iranian Workers (ITUIW). After it was set up on May Day 1997, the ITUIW issued statements on a number of struggles. For example, on 22 January 1998 it issued a statement about the struggle of the workers of Kafsh-e Melli [National Shoe] industrial group when the main shareholder had claimed that he could not run the company profitably. The ITUIW said that the manager's calculations were wrong and that "the militant workers of the different companies ... of the national industrial group ... are ready and can, without any difficulty, manage the factory and organise production for the benefit of the workers themselves."

The ITUIW also said that "if Mr Iravani is unable to manage the factory, then workers will do this themselves. The workers are themselves better and more able at running the national industrial group than the unworthy managers ... And this production conglomerate can easily, without any problems and without overseers, be managed by the workers themselves and at a higher production level." The statement concluded with: "Mr Iravani and partners! Either give in to workers' demands or turn the factory over to them!" The ITUIW issued similar statement about a number of struggles and disputes.

The ITUIW then went through a period of reviewing its activities and was joined by other activists. This led to the launch of Independent Workers' Association of Iran (IWAI) which continued to issue statements on struggles and also began publishing a journal called *Tashakol* (organisation). Since then many clandestine or semi-clandestine organisations have been set up: Committee for the Pursuit of the Creation of Free Labour Organisations, Co-ordination Committee for the Creation of Labour Organisations, Workers' Cultural and Support Organisation, the Union of Labour Committees and the Co-operation Council of Labour Organisations and Activists.

There has also been a parallel development of workplace trade unions being re-launched or founded, like Vahed and Haft Tapeh. In most places, however, there has been no public statement or declaration about a trade union being founded and the struggle is organised by a strike committee. IWSN has been covering many of these struggles on its website.

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This section was merely a brief sketch of the history of the Iranian working class. We intend to expand this in future editions of the handbook.