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### Current issues and perspectives

Following the defeat of the mass movements in the summer of 1981, particularly the workers' movement, all the gains of the revolutionary years were quickly lost. On top of that the revamped capitalist state, using the Iraq war as an excuse to attack all opposition (or even the slightest dissent), mobilised its own reactionary *hezbollahi* base to smash the gains of workers, women, national minorities, the youth and all other sections of society. In nearly every case not only the recent gains but those of nearly a century were wiped out.

Today the workers have fewer rights, freedoms and a lower standard of living than in the mid-1970s. It is therefore not possible to include every problem that the workers face or to cover them in great detail.

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On 15 July 2001 workers from the Jamco clothing and Shadanpoor shoe factories organised a joint demonstration outside the *majles* (parliament) to demand payment of their unpaid wages. Not only did the workers not have their problem resolved by the deputies inside the chamber but a number of them were shot dead by the security forces. (It is important to note that this was when Mohammad Khatami was 'president' and the 'reformers' had a majority inside the *majles*. Already in July 1999 the 'reformers' had shown how useless they were when they did nothing to protect their own supporters among the students!)

Today, despite the ratings and ravings of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, the balance of forces has changed so much that such atrocities

cannot take place without provoking a huge reaction from the working class in general.

So the regime limits itself to attacking workers and activists from the national minorities. In August 2008 Yaghoub Mehrnahad, a journalist and NGO activist in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, was executed. And at present Farzad Kamangar, a teacher, journalist and civil society activist, is on death row for alleged membership of the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). The regime has even resorted to flogging some labour activists in Kurdistan.

These executions and severe forms of punishment are calculated to scare the whole working class, especially where the oppression of national minorities is a further source of grievances - like in Baluchestan, Kurdistan and Khuzestan. The harsh treatment is meant as a lesson to all workers and oppressed layers.

*No right to form trade unions*

*No right to strike*

The most important issue facing the Iranian working class is that it does not have the right to organise itself separately and independently from the regime and the bosses. Every time it acts as a distinct and separate class in society it is criminalised and the activity considered as hostile towards the state.

The pro-business, and increasingly neo-liberal, Islamic regime does not legally recognise that the workers are a class with opposing and conflicting interests to the bosses, whether they are the owners or government-appointed managers of the factories.

Over the past 10 or 12 years the issue of independent organisations or trade unions has been posed by workers countless times and even featured in the first tentative activities of the movement, like writing a letter to Khatami to bring to his attention the workers' plight. The Independent Trade Union of Iranian Workers (ITUIW),

its successor Independent Workers' Association of Iran (IWAI), and the various independent labour committees formed during this period, including 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, have all called for the right to form independent organisations or trade unions.

With the rise of workplace-based struggles like Vahed and Haft Tapeh the workers have re-launched trade unions that were suppressed by the regime in the 1980s. General assemblies of workers have elected leaders and taken steps to defend their members' rights like all other democratic unions throughout the world. Yet, in Iran, these leaders are arrested, beaten, their families harassed and so on.

The working class also does not have legal recognition for a long list of associated rights like collective bargaining, electing its genuine representatives, involving workers' representatives in health and safety inspections, and so on. Every year attempts to commemorate May Day independently of the regime's Labour House and Islamic Societies also produce many clashes and arrests.

Last, but not least, the workers have no right to withdraw their labour. Whenever they go on strike the riot police and various types of security and repressive forces are used against them.

The absence of all these basic rights will certainly continue to be the source of many strikes and protests in the coming years.

#### *Unpaid wages*

Jamco clothing, Shadanpoor shoe, Behshahr textiles, Alborz tyre, Ashkan china, Haft Tapeh sugar, Sadra shipbuilding, and many others, all have one thing in common: the workers have gone on strike, or protested in some other way, against unpaid wages.

During the past few years there has been a massive growth in the sheer number of workers going unpaid - sometimes for as much as 32 months. The problem of unpaid wages obviously has serious consequence for hundreds of thousands working class families. Yet when workers protest against this situation they are beaten, arrested and even shot!

By 2001 it was already 'normal' to have workers who had not been paid for as long as 32 months. In 2003 over a 100,000 workers had gone without pay for between three to 36 months. There have also been cases of factories closing while still owing workers their wages (e.g., Tabas Shimi, a chemical plant in Tabas, closed down owing workers two years' wages.)

It is important to note that in many cases where workers have not been paid for months, as in Haft Tapeh, it is the state that owns the factory! It is not the owners of small businesses who are doing this. The stark truth is that with more than 80% of the economy in state hands in most cases it is in fact the state that is responsible for not paying workers' wages.

But this is not a penniless state: it has been earning billions of dollars because of the high oil price (until July 2008). The record oil price meant that the oil revenue in one month in early 2008 was more than for a whole year a decade ago! Then oil was \$12 a barrel and for the first half of 2008 Iranian crude was selling for over \$100. Consequently foreign reserves have grown to over \$81 billion.

The most significant struggle for wage arrears during the past few months has been at Haft Tapeh. Around 5000 workers went on strike at the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Development Commercial Company in early May 2008. They were demanding two months' backpay. Even though the workers had no previous longstanding

experience of struggles by late May they were proposing the need to form a “general anti-capitalist united action”!

### *Unemployment*

The Iranian regime does not like statistics that make it look bad. The rate of unemployment is thought to be between 20% and 30% and set to rise with the current wave of layoffs, planned privatisations and other measures. Graduate unemployment shot up by 250% during 1996-2006 and now stands at 15.6%! With 400,000 university graduates joining the labour market every year the crisis is bound to affect many people other than just industrial workers.

Even the regime’s own officials admit that they need to create a million jobs every year - just to stop the situation from becoming worse! The reality is that the system cannot manage to create any more than around 300,000 jobs! This means that youth unemployment will have huge implications for the development of a movement for jobs and help unite the unemployed with young people and students, therefore affecting many layers and sections of society.

The huge drop in the price of oil has made the economic situation even worse than before. As a consequence many factories and workshops are laying off their contract workers, reducing their workforce generally or are even shutting down.

### *Low pay and inflation*

When running for President, Ahmadinejad promised to bring the proceeds of the oil bonanza to the “people’s dining table”. Yet what people have seen is that the price of many staple foods like bread, rice, milk, eggs, meat, chicken, and other items has soared. There are shortages in the supply of petrol (hence riots), gas, washing powder and so on.

The regime has followed economic policies that have led to an official inflation rate of nearly 26%. Unofficially though, workers

have seen that the price of bread and meat can double in a matter of weeks. The living costs of rural families have tripled during 2000-06, with food now taking up 37.9% of their income. To cap it all, the regime tried to bring in a five-year VAT trial scheme from September 2008 (this was defeated through a bazaar shut-down protest by merchants in various cities).

Even many workers who have jobs have to find a second or third job so that they can make ends meet. There are at least 15 million people below the poverty line in Iran.

### *Privatisation*

Not satisfied with the terrible economic burden and lack of rights that it has imposed on Iranian workers for three decades, Iran's pro-business regime has been attempting to implement the first part of a major privatisation wave.

With over 80% of industry in state hands there are going to be rich pickings for many a mollah's son. All that the ad hoc privatisation of the past few years achieved was that the families of the elite ended up with bargains undreamt of by the Shah's entourage! Whether it is this or that family that makes a fortune this time, one thing is certain: the workers will definitely pay for it. Already there have been complaints in the press about at least one case where a factory has been priced below the value of the land it is built on!

A 2004 amendment to Article 44 of the Constitution removed all obstacles to privatising the major sectors of the economy (except for the upstream oil industry). To spur things on, in 2007 Ayatollah Khamenei said that ownership rights should be protected in courts set up by the Justice Ministry and that he hoped that this new protection would encourage private investment.

In 2008 the Expediency Council made an intervention aimed at resolving a number of differences between the *majles* and the Guardian Council on some details of the privatisation plan.

The first tranche of shares that were “turned over” - as the regime calls it - were 5.2% of the Islamic Republic Shipping Company on 15 May 2008. These will be followed by the selling of 5% of the following: Esfahan’s refinery, Iran Communications, Bank-e Mellat, Bank-e Saderat and Iran Copper National. Shares in Khorasan Steel and Khuzestan Steel will also be sold.

The deterioration of the economic situation in Iran (and the world) has meant that the privatisation schedule has stalled. Attracting big multinationals is also an aim of the regime but will have to wait until better relations with the United States.

### *Health & safety*

In 2006 there were over 14000 industrial accidents in Iran - many of them fatal. Most of these do not grab the headlines as the deaths of construction workers and other accidents in factories and workshops are all too common. Occasionally, when many workers die in a single disaster, accidents make the headlines. Here is one case from May 2008:

A fire at two adjacent factories on 24 May killed 26 workers and injured 50 others. Many of the workers were burned alive on the spot and others suffered 70 to 100 per cent burns. On 9 June, with the death of more workers in the hospitals of Esfahan and Arak, the death toll reached 34.

The fire at Kimiagostaran-e Sepehr and Kimiagaran-e Emrooz chemical plants, in Shazand near Arak in Markazi (Central) province, about 320 kilometres south of Tehran, started following an explosion during welding work in a 60,000-litre reservoir. In the ensuing fire in the cosmetics and detergents plants all the equipment in the factories was destroyed.

On 29 May 2008 relatives of the dead workers gathered in Shazand's central square to mourn and to demand compensation. Here are a few of the comments they made to reporters:

“My daughter became a widow so early”, said the mother of 23-year-old Maryam. Her husband, Abolfazl Esfandari, was 26 and had been working at Kimiagostaran-e Sepehr for just 10 days. He had been unemployed for months and was overjoyed to find a job. Now Maryam and her one-year-old son face an uncertain future.

“... Mohammad Jafari was only 26 years old and his body was so badly burnt and charred that ... nothing was left of him. He could only be identified from his wrist watch.” “My late brother was two meters (6’ 8”) tall, but when we got his body just half a meter was left of him.” “My poor brother had not been paid for three months. He would take his lunch from home and had had to buy his own work clothes.” “His father’s corpse was as black as this veil.”

Sadly, so long as trade unions and labour organisations are banned, so long as the workers have no right to strike, these types of accidents are bound to be happen and thousands of injuries and deaths will occur every year.

### *Severe punishment*

Insulting behaviour and threats towards workers from foremen, managers, owners, government and security officials have a long history in Iran - going back to the beginnings of the workers’ movement.

There are also more severe forms of punishments that are meant to damp down workers’ morale and reduce their militancy. Here we highlight one recent shocking case.

According to a report by the National Union of Sacked and Unemployed Workers in Iran three labour activists who were

arrested and tried following 2007's May Day celebrations in Sanandaj have each been lashed 10 times.

The appeal court in Sanandaj, in Iranian Kurdistan, sentenced 11 workers who took part in a May Day event in 2007 to receive 10 lashes and pay a 2 million rials (\$214) fine.

Sedigh Amjadi, Fars Goilian and Habibollah Kalkani received 10 lashes each and were made to pay the extortionate fine before they were released. A further eight workers and labour activists from Sanandaj have also been sentenced to be treated in this medieval and barbaric way for trying to commemorate May Day. They are: Khaled Savari, Eghbal Latifi, Yadollah Moradi, Tayeb Mollae, Mohiuddin Rajabi, Tayeb Chatani, Sedigh Sobhani and Abbas Anadyari. These men, most of whom are members of the Unemployed Union, have been found guilty of "disturbing public order" and "taking part in an illegal gathering".

Sedigh Amjadi's sentence was carried out on 16 February and those of Fars Goilian and Habibollah Kalkani on 18 February. Sheys Amani and Sedigh Karimi, two other members of the Unemployed Union, are awaiting the outcome of their appeals against sentences of two and half years in jail.

Although the whipping of women's right activists stretches back to 1981 and the consolidation of the Islamic regime, this is the first time that labour activists have been sentenced to be flogged. The sentences of the other eight workers and labour activists are expected to be carried out soon.

#### *Labour code amendments*

Labour Code amendments (i. e., dilutions) being discussed openly, and the constant negative comments on subsidies in the media, mean that the Iranian workers' movement is heading for a defining year.

The Labour Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran was adopted on 20 November 1990, and although it is riddled with flaws and shortcomings, it has provided workers with a small measure of protection against bosses and government officials (as the state controls over 80% of the economy) trying to maximise profits at workers' expense.

Until now the most significant amendments to the Labour Code have involved watering down the provisions protecting workers in workshops (where 90% of workers are women). First the exemption limit was raised from three to five workers and then revised up to 10. So for the past few years workers in workshops with 10 or less workers have had no legal protection at all.

Now, in line with the government's privatisation and deregulation policies, two key sections of the Labour Code are to be amended. From the new year, which begins on 21 March 2009, it will be easier to sack workers and to pay them starvation wages. Section 21, which covers the conditions for sacking workers, and Section 41, which describes how the minimum wage is to be set, are to be amended in a way that makes them completely useless to workers.

#### Section 21: firing at will

Section 21 details the conditions under which the boss can terminate a worker's employment, with articles (a)-(f) mentioning obvious things like "the worker's death" and so on. Now the newly proposed article (g) is going to make it much easier to sack workers.

Reza Shahabi, a member of the Vahed Bus Company Trade Union's Steering Committee, said in a recent interview that there will be no barrier to bosses sacking workers and it will cost them nothing. He added: "Of course, before this amendment the bosses didn't pay any attention to the Labour Code and used any method to sack workers." But "by adding article (g) to Section 21 of the

Labour Code, the employers will be more confident in destroying workers' wages."

In case of a social or economic crisis, the bosses can, with the approval of a five-man tripartite committee, take steps towards the "adjustment of human resources". In the rush to adopt the amendment even the due process of the regime's own laws is being flouted. According to existing laws, any amendment to the sections or articles of the Labour Code must first be passed by parliament and then ratified by the Guardian Council (with no role for the Expediency Council). Although the amendment on "human resources adjustment in special circumstances" was discussed by parliament two years ago, it was part of a package that included measures on calculating bonus entitlements. Now it has reappeared as an Expediency Council objective and the other amendments have been dropped.

#### Section 41: starvation wages

The regime is also trying to do away with the minimum wage. Even though the official minimum wage never had anything to do with the real cost of living for working class families, it was a reference point for workers demanding pay rises. However, the "targeted subsidies" proposed in a draft bill by the regime basically point to doing away with Section 41.

Section 41 sets out that: "The minimum wage of workers shall be fixed ... [according to] the rate of inflation announced by the Central Bank" and, this is supposed to be "Regardless of the physical and intellectual abilities of workers and the characteristics of the work assigned, the minimum wage shall be sufficient to meet the living expenses of a family, whose average number of members shall be specified by the appropriate authorities."

However, as the inflation rate used is that of the previous year the minimum wage has never been enough to live on. On top of that many workers know that Section 41 was never implemented fully

and thousands of workers are owed money dating back to the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88.

So in the new year the workers will face renewed attacks on their jobs and pay - and it will all be legal! Considering the general international situation, and the Iranian economy's deepening crisis, it is clear that a year of decisive battles awaits the Iranian working class on these two vital issues.

### *Child labour*

There are nearly 1.5 million children under 18-years-old working in Iran.

According to the official figures for 2006-07 around a million and a half (1,454,000) workers in Iran were between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Of these children 185,000 were 10-14 and 1,270,000 were 15-19-years-old.

The official figures do not include the following groups:

- those working in domestic workshops and farms,
- hawkers selling cigarettes or flowers,
- and Afghans.

There are also three million children of school age who do not go to school.

Even though the regime's Labour Code bans the employment of any children under 15, and sets many conditions for those between 15 and 18 years, there are many cases where the bosses are willing to pay the low fines and go on exploiting this very easy source of profit. Article 79 of Labour Code specifically bans under 15s and says that anyone employing them will be fined.

*Women*

In addition to all the problems that male workers face women workers have to abide by Islamic dress regulations which can make certain jobs impossible for them. They are also constantly at the mercy of unscrupulous managers demanding sexual favours, harassment by some male workmates and the authorities at every level. Then there is the lack of childcare facilities and so on, which not only put women workers at a disadvantage, but also prevent their fuller integration within the workforce.

Until 2009 the most significant amendments to the Labour Code involved watering down the provisions protecting workers in workshops (where 90% of workers are women). Although officially things do not look too bad for women workers, like much else in Iran, statutes and official pronouncements and statistics bear no relation to reality. Here we quote the relevant sections of legislation in full:

“Article 38. Equal wages shall be paid to men and women performing work of equal value in a workplace under the same conditions. Any discrimination in wage determination on the basis of age, gender, race, ethnic origin and political and religious convictions shall be prohibited.”

“Article 75. Women shall not be employed to perform dangerous, arduous or harmful work or to carry, manually and without mechanical means, loads heavier than the authorised maximum. Instructions regarding types of such prohibited work and degrees of prohibition shall be approved by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs on recommendation by the Supreme Labour Council.!

“Article 76. Women workers shall be entitled to 90 days of maternity leave of which 45 days shall, if possible, be taken after delivery. The said maternity leave entitlement shall be extended by 14 days for women giving birth to twins.

Note 1. On termination of maternity leave, a woman worker shall return to her former work, the duration of such leave being considered part of her effective service, subject to confirmation by the Social Security Organisation.

Note 2. During maternity leave, wages shall be paid in accordance with the provisions of the Social Security Organisations Act.”

“Article 77. Where, on the advice of a physician of the Social Security Organisation, a type of work is deemed dangerous or arduous for a pregnant worker, the employer shall, without reducing her remuneration, provide her with more suitable and easier work until the end of her pregnancy.”

“Article 78. In workplaces employing women workers, nursing mothers shall be granted a half-hour break every three hours to enable them to nurse their children until they reach two years of age; such breaks shall be regarded as part of the hours of work. Furthermore, the employer shall set up children’s care centres (such as day nurseries, kindergartens, and the like) according to the number of children, with due regard to their age.

Note: Implementing rules and standards for the establishment and management of day nurseries and kindergartens shall be drawn up by the State Welfare Organisation and put into effect after approval by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs.”

Obviously the way the women workers can turn these empty words into reality, and to go on to win real concessions and equal rights from the bosses and the government is through the common fight with their class brothers.

### *Afghan workers*

In early 2008 the Iranian regime’s authorities announced that thousands of Afghan workers who needed work permits to work in Iran, because they do not have passports, will not be allowed to work from the beginning of the Iranian month of Shahrivar (22 August 2008).

In early November 2008 Mohammad-Hossein Salehi Maram, the General Secretary of the Foreign Citizens' Employment [Office] of the Labour and Social Affairs Ministry, said that 310,000 Afghan workers, whose passports have expired, need to renew their passports at the Afghan embassy before they can get work permits. He added that if the Afghan workers cannot resolve their passport problems then it will be difficult for them to get work permits.

The authorities claim that Afghan workers had been given the opportunity to get their documents and identity papers in order during the first six months of the current Iranian year (20 March-21 September 2008). Now that this period has come to an end the regime is putting yet more pressure on Afghan workers.

In mid-October the regime published a list of areas that Afghans and Iraqis are barred from entering. This list, which was tagged on to a notice on registering children's names at schools, includes most border regions and all large towns and cities except Tehran.

On 19 November 2008 Mr Salehi Maram was ratcheting up the pressure on Afghan workers even more, saying that: "The presence of over two million illegal Afghan citizens in Iran's labour market is a crime." He also complained that: "The expulsion of illegal foreign labour power is not our responsibility and the Interior Ministry together and the police have to carry out this duty." The foreign (i.e., Afghan) workers' deportation programme was due to begin on 22 September.

Although with the toppling of the Taleban regime by the United States a large number of Afghans did return to their country, however, with the continuing lack of security and high unemployment, many are now back in Iran.

Afghans already face systematic discrimination at every step in their dealings with the authorities and bosses. In victimising

Afghans for the failures of the historically unbalanced and stunted economy, and the endemic corruption and mismanagement of the past thirty years, the current regime is continuing a long tradition of Iranian governments going back to the Shah and beyond.

It is the duty of the Iranian working class to defend its Afghan brothers and sisters, especially as the regime's shrinking oil revenue will make it search for more scapegoats to let it off the hook.

## Perspectives

Now that the oil price has more than halved since breaking records in July 2008 - less than seven months ago! - the regime's economic crisis will become deeper. Together with all the structural defects it has inherited from the Shah (and made worse), the new social problems it has created, and the political crisis among its own leaders, and its shrinking and crumbling social base, the perspectives for the working class in Iran are very promising.

When reviewing the new workers' movement that began in 1997-98 six important points must be highlighted:

First, there is the absence of any significant struggle among the oil industry workers for over a decade. Because of the crucial importance of the industry to the survival of the regime, and the way the oil workers' strike was one of the decisive factor in the Shah's overthrow, there is a highly militarised situation at all oil industry sites. Coupled with the slightly better pay of the oil workers in relation to other workers, this has meant that we have not seen much activity from the sector.

One of the rare occasions when the workers took action was in October 2000. Plans to privatise the National Iranian Drilling Company (NIDC), a subsidiary of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), had to be abandoned following a strike and other protests by NIDC workers. The workers knew that the company was being sold for less than its true value and that the managers were going to make large windfall profits from the sale. As a result of the strike, in January 2001 the majles blocked the sale of NIDC and opened an inquiry into the valuation of more than 20 other NIOC subsidiaries that were scheduled to be privatised by 2005.

The oil industry is the regime's Achilles heel and it will eventually break. Once the oil workers enter the battlefield of the class

struggle then the Iranian proletariat will toss this regime to one side. The economic weight of this industry and its long traditions and accumulated experiences will not only cripple the regime quickly, shutting off its main source of revenue, but will boost the whole class. The balance of forces will turn decidedly in favour of the proletariat.

Second, the workers' organisational methods have changed significantly during these years. To begin with the clandestine or semi-clandestine committees that are made up of older, more experienced and 'vanguard' workers were at the head of the movement.

The development and progress of struggles that have tried to set up trade unions, or tried to revive old ones that were shut down by the regime (like the Vahed bus drivers and Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane workers) have largely superseded these committees.

Even when a number of the activists of several committees (i.e., Pursuit Committee for the Formation of Free Labour Organisations, Workers' Cultural-Support Organisation, Co-ordination Committee for the Formation of Labour Organisations, Mahmoud Salehi Defence Committee, the Union of Labour Committees, a group of Labour Activists, a group of Iranian University Students Demanding Freedom and Equality) joined forces to launch the Co-operation Council of Labour Organisations and Activists, there has not been any significant development when it comes to activities. In fact, the committees that are still active seem to achieve more on their own than within the Co-ordination Council.

Once bigger numbers of workers entered the struggle then the movement took on a new dynamic and methods of organisation. That is why some of these small committees have become ever more isolated and have adopted ever more bizarre policies. Like calling for "abolition of waged labour" in a society where unpaid wages is one of the most pressing issues facing the working class!

Third, the new struggles have mostly been by workers in one company (or industrial group). They have some way to go before linking with other workers in other industries and in other towns and cities. They have, however, been able to publicise their struggles, using emails, weblogs and other modern communication means. Although this will help the class to be more prepared for the coming revolutionary storm than last time, linking and co-ordinating struggles will be a problem until there is a significant shift in the balance of forces.

Fourth, the struggles are primarily defensive, with a great many demanding payment of wages from several months ago. Once the workers take action, however, then the way the bosses and the riot police behave can easily propel the struggle forward. Radical slogans about taking over the factory, workers' control and anti-capitalist action are becoming increasingly common. This aspect of the struggles has been a very positive development.

Fifth, women make up some of the most exploited sections of the working class who, on top of this exploitation and problems with maternity leave, childcare provisions and so on, are constantly discriminated against by the bosses, managers and all government officials.

Already in many struggles the women workers have fought shoulder-to-shoulder with their brothers and have played a crucial part in the organisation of activities. Once there is a decisive shift in the balance of forces then women workers will play a much more active role in the struggles and pose many more radical demands than their male workmates.

Sixth, with over 80% of industries in state hands slogans against the President, ministers, local officials, appointed managers and so on are common. Struggles over unpaid wages, pay rises and improved working conditions can easily develop an anti-regime dimension -

mainly from the way the authorities react to the most peaceful struggles for the most basic demands.

This fact can play an important role in the next revolutionary wave. Such a level of concentration and centralisation of capital can also, once the repressive apparatus begins to fall apart, help workers to bring much more of the industry under their control quickly.