

Iran: the hidden power

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The war in Iran has already begun. Its first victims are not laid to rest in the mournful martyrs' cemeteries that dot the country, but are locked up behind the concrete walls, barbed-wire and steel gates of Tehran's Evin prison: the latest contingent of striking workers, imprisoned in their hundreds for serving the foreign enemy.

It is difficult not to feel a sense of *déjà vu*. The entire history of the Islamic Republic of Iran since its foundation in 1979 has been characterised by the attempt of its rulers to stigmatise dissent and opposition with the taint of treasonable collusion with Iran's external adversaries. The early post-revolution stand-offs with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the contested Shatt al-Arab waterway, the long hostage crisis with the United States (1979-80), the epic war with Iraq (1980-88), the repression of dissident students, intellectuals and human-rights campaigners, the *nowruz* (new year) row with Britain over the detention of fifteen service personnel - all these crises and trends have been accompanied with accusations from the theocratic state that its internal critics were in league with foreigners. Throughout, the most enduring and dangerous of these oppositional forces - albeit very often the most ignored by those outside Iran ostensibly committed to the country's democratic advance - has been the organised working class of Iran.

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A new labour movement

The workers of Iran were at the heart of the 1979 revolution. After their general strike was instrumental in bringing down the Shah's regime, jubilant workers seized factories, mines, oil refineries and workplaces in most other sectors of the economy, installing their own direct rule in place of the old management. The *shora* councils, based on general assemblies of all employees, assumed control over the Iranian economy. They ensured continued production amidst the revolutionary chaos, initiated radical reforms in work organisation and (in the course of 1979) developed into the focal point of a democratic restructuring of Iranian society from the bottom up. The *shora* movement, arguably the most comprehensive experiment of workers' control in a developing-world country to date, was also a major threat to the power of Ayatollah Khomeini and the sort of society he and his fellow Islamists were striving to establish.

Thus, as soon as they felt strong enough, the *mullahs* in charge of the nascent Islamist state turned against the *shora* councils. The councils proved intransigent and difficult to subdue, however - for their members took the promises of the revolution for empowerment and

betterment all the more seriously. A decisive weapon for the regime in crushing them and regaining control over the economy was the war with Iraq: when Iraqi troops crossed the border in September 1980, all internal dissent could instantly be branded as unpatriotic.

The *pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards) followed the outbreak of war by marching through factories, arresting thousands of unyielding workers and instituting "Islamic management" at the point of a gun. That was the beginning of the end of working-class organisations in Iran. As the war escalated, a generation of labour activists was executed in Evin and buried anonymously.

It took a generation for a new labour movement to emerge in Iran. The movement that started to appear in 2004 is, however, very different from that of 1979. It does not partake of a more general phenomenon of protest. The autocratic state apparatus in Iran is not crumbling - on the contrary, it is perhaps stronger than ever; there is no revolutionary fervour in society at large; no bold agitation, socialist, Islamist or otherwise, is pouring out from the universities. This time, the labour unrest is a desperate outcry. The economic hardships, under the reign of ever more affluent millionaire *mullahs*, have simply become unliveable. If the chains of fear and apprehension have been broken, it is not for ideological reasons, but because workers have found trade-union organisation and strikes to be the only vehicles to improve their conditions.

The iron fist

The most dramatic battle of this new movement to date was sparked in January 2006, when up to 17,000 bus drivers at the Vahed company in Tehran went on strike. Their demands were modest: collective bargaining, a small wage increase, two pairs of shoes for driving, recognition of the bus-drivers' union, and (most importantly) the release from Evin prison of their leader Mansour Ossanlou.

In the early morning of the day the strike was due to start, *pasdaran* swarmed into workers' districts throughout the capital, seizing as many as 1,200 bus drivers and their family members and throwing them into Evin. This was followed by a massive military operation to break picket-lines and keep the traffic flowing. The state media condemned the workers as traitors who were acting out the United States's recently announced plan to sponsor trade unions to foment regime change in Iran. Even as the majority of the prisoners trickled out of Evin, Mansour Ossanlou remained under charge for "maintaining relations with and receiving financial support from a foreign power".

Schoolteachers (of whom 80% are women) have also been at the heart of the post-2004 labour protest. They have shared the hardships of other groups of workers: their salaries have fallen far below the public-sector average, and hourly payment and temporary contracts have become routine. As a result, 70% of teachers now find themselves living below the poverty-line, and many are forced to seek a second or even a third job to secure an income that covers the most basic expenses.

In March 2004, some 300,000 of them (a third of the total) participated in a nationwide strike, the first female-dominated labour protest on this scale in the history of the Islamic Republic. The strike was defeated and its leaders arrested, but teachers continued to organise; there is now an independent *shora-ye hamahangi* (coordinating council) of thirty union branches across Iran.

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In February 2007, it was again the teachers' turn to taste the iron fist of the Islamic Republic. An initial strike on 19 February was followed by four nationwide stoppages demanding equal salaries to those of other public-sector employees. A series of mass demonstrations were grudgingly tolerated by the police and armed forces, until 13 March when union leaders were summoned to the ministry of education for what they expected would be a round of negotiations. Instead, security and intelligence officers warned them that in the current climate of sanctions, military siege and threats of foreign invasion, all further action would be considered "security threats". When 10,000 teachers again gathered in front of the *majlis* (parliament) in Tehran the next day, riot police and military forces cordoned off the demonstration, attacked the crowd with batons, and arrested at least 1,000 protesters.

This is the method of choice for the Islamic regime in general and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in particular: use confrontation with the west to crush any alternative centres of power. The new labour movement has developed into the most serious such centre. It is different from the reform movement of the 1990s in that it is not a current within the state apparatus and cannot therefore be as easily controlled; and from the student movement in that it has the potential to reach out to the wider population of working Iranians. It is decentred, spread throughout the country, and exists in many forms and shapes. The labour movement is all the more dangerous to Ahmadinejad, as every independent trade union and strike that arises is yet another reminder of his inability to deliver on the promise of "social justice" that won him election in June 2005.

The Tehran trap

Iran under Ahmadinejad's presidency has undergone a process of profound militarisation. The *pasdaran*, the organisation in which Ahmadinejad himself made his career, has assumed more and more direct control over both the state and the economy (including, for example, the Vahed bus company that employed the striking bus-drivers). At the universities, *pasdaran* ensure that free-thinking professors and student activists are expelled; in the provinces, it conducts massive military exercises on the land of Kurdish, Arab, and Baluchi minorities. All these mobilisations

take place in a frenetic, intimidating atmosphere of impending conflict with Iran's enemies in the west.

The west's own confrontational policy is a crucial instrument in the Tehran regime's armoury. Only because the *mullahs'* claims of encirclement and threat can be made to appear plausible is it possible for them to present themselves as the righteous guardians of the nation. It is precisely this logic that is crippling the labour movement and the other democratic forces of Iran. For every new agent that trespasses on Iranian territory, for every new restriction that is slapped on the country, for every thinly veiled threat of an American or Israeli air blitz another unionist is being apprehended, another strike suppressed, another demonstrator beaten to a pulp. The sense of national danger, primarily of western making, serves the Islamic Republic with the ultimate pretext for persecution. The interests of power-elites in the west and those in Tehran are alike opposed to peaceful, democratic change in Iran. The casualties are the people of Iran themselves, who need the chance to breathe freely in order to remake their country.

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