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Tehran Bus Drivers Strike Marks Revival of Iranian Labor Movement

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In the early hours of Dec. 25 (not a holiday in Iran), Tehran bus drivers went on strike. Five out of 10 bus districts were affected. Thousands of bus drivers rallied in three locations in the city.

The municipal United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs (UBCTS) has 17,000 employees, including some 10,000 bus drivers. The strike was organized by the Syndicate of Workers of UBCTS, which has been functioning openly but without authorization since May. The labor law does not provide for the right to strike.

The management and government authorities were clearly taken off guard. Only three days earlier, security forces staged a simultaneous raid on the homes of the leaders of the UBCTS Syndicate at 6 a.m. on Dec. 22.° They arrested 12 leaders of the Syndicate, including Mansour Osanloo, its executive committee secretary, and took them to the notorious Evin prison.

This action infuriated the UBCTS workers and set off the strike action. The authorities attempted to break the strike by using bus services for the Pasdaran (Revolution Guards) and the police to transport passengers. The security forces threatened strikers' assemblies and took some of them into custody.

However, the workers stood their ground and passengers did not go over to the side of the authorities. In fact, some including student groups supported the strikers. Workers ended their strike after Tehran's Mayor Ghallibaaf announced their demands would receive serious consideration. Ghallibaaf is a former general with particularly anti-labor views, including speaking out against Afghan refugees in Iran.

The Syndicate has been pressing economic demands as well as asking to be recognized as the sole representative of UBCTS workers. All detained UBCTS workers and Syndicate leaders were released later, except for Osanloo. Seven of the Syndicate leaders were charged with "public disturbance." While no charges are filed against Osanloo, the Syndicate website reports that the authorities have questioned him about "links to exiled opposition groups" and "inciting armed struggle."

After the strike, Noorian, the director of UBCTS, resigned. Noorian and the Tehran Islamic City Shora (City Council) chairman, Chamrun, had taken a hard line towards the Syndicate. Chamrun called the strike "political." Chamrun is a close associate of President Ahmadinejad.

Mayor Ghallibaaf, on the other hand, expressed sympathy with the workers' demands and was the main speaker in the gathering of 10,000 UBCTS workers in Tehran's Azadi Stadium that was organized after the strike. He asked for workers' patience. But workers booed Noorian, who tried to also address the crowd.

Although the Syndicate's demands were originally about conditions of work and pay, the two main demands of the gathering, as reflected in banners and posters workers carried, were the immediate release of Osanloo and recognition of the Syndicate as the sole independent organization of UBCTS workers. Bus drivers continued to drive in the city with their headlights on, and a poster of Osanloo on their windshield.° Students are reported to have stopped buses to install Osanloo posters and to urge the driver to put his headlights on.

The Syndicate and its opponents

Of course, the Syndicate has faced resistance from the management and the municipal and national authorities.° But its most ardent opponent has been the Islamic Shora of Labor (ISL) at UBCTS. To understand this anomaly some historical background is necessary.

The UBCTS began operations in 1956 from consolidation of four different private bus companies. It took labor activists, who had suffered a severe blow with the 1953 CIA coup, until 1969 to organize their Syndicate.° Like the handful of other trade unions under the Shah's dictatorship, UBCTS existed under the condition of semi-legality and constant harassment.

The 1979 revolution that overthrew the monarchy gave the Syndicate a boost. However, mass upsurge bypassed trade-union formations while factory committees (shoras) flourished. Workers shoras originated as the extension of strike committees formed in the struggle against monarchy in strategic industries and large plants between fall of 1978 and February 1979. Workers shoras were formed to take over production as capitalists, management, and high-level government functionaries fled the country.

The destruction of the workers' shoras and other independent workers' organizations, such as the UBCTS Syndicate, was central to the consolidation of the Islamic Republic as the new capitalist state. To do this, Khomeini spearheaded an effort to turn all existing institutions into "Islamic" ones. In the case of the grassroots organizations that had been the bedrock of the revolution, this meant to devoid them of all revolutionary content and rank-and-file control.

This attempt to divide the ranks of the revolution between the Muslims and others succeeded because of the lack of an adequate revolutionary socialist leadership. In workplaces, pro-Khomeini Muslim workers (known as Hezbollahi) worked with management and the state to purge non-Muslim and socialist activists.° This division in the labor movement enabled the capitalist regime to use force to consolidate its rule in workplaces and in the society at large. Thousands of militant workers were purged and imprisoned, and hundreds were executed.

By 1983, the Islamic Shoras of Labor (ISL) was installed in many workplaces. The Workers House, which had been instituted as the national labor center during the Shah's regime and temporarily led by some centrist and Maoist groups after February 1979, was also taken over by supporters of the Islamic Republic.° The labor law codified the corporatist function of the ISL.

The capitalist "neoliberal" offensive

While conditions of workers improved in the period immediately after February 1979 (even as the economy suffered), their standard of living gradually but steadily declined after the consolidation of the Islamic Republic and demise of independent workers' organizations. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, Rafsanjani's two-term presidency pursued an economic "liberalization" policy that translated into a broad attack on the working class to secure the position of private and state capital.

Khatami's two-term presidency continued this policy while it focused attention on some modest social and political reforms. While Khatami's half-measure reforms did not last, his deepening of the economic liberalization sustained a 16-year assault on the conditions of labor in Iran.

As a result, according to Parviz Ahmadi Panjeki, the director of the Supreme Islamic Shura of Labor, the proposed minimum wage for the coming Iranian calendar year, calculated as monthly income, is 163,000 tomans (\$185), while the poverty threshold stands at 300,000 tomans (\$341). Moreover, even this starving minimum-wage law does not apply to establishments with 10 or fewer workers and 96 percent of establishments fall into this category!

Sixteen years of economic liberalization policies have destroyed a system of subsidies and social programs that protected vulnerable sections of the working class in the early years after the 1979 revolution. Privatization has destroyed or degraded jobs and increased workers' insecurity.

Sometimes, capitalists or well-connected government officials purchase state-owned factories and businesses only to close them down and sell the land to developers for a quick and hefty profit. Employers are also known to close down factories in order to re-open them with new contract workers. In this scheme, regular employees that benefit from certain protections of the labor law are rehired as temporary workers for a period of 89 days. These contracts are renewed for "good" workers, and troublemakers are sent home.

More recently, employers have demanded "blank contracts"; signing them is required to get jobs in some establishments. The employer can later fill in the conditions of work, as seen to be appropriate at that time.

Both "reformist" and "fundamentalist" legislators have passed laws to facilitate these draconian anti-labor practices. For instance, workers in establishments with fewer than 10 employees and workers in the rug industry were removed from the protection of the labor law to make these enterprises "competitive."

Ahmadi Panjeki, in his comments on the low level of the minimum wage, also warned that legislation is currently in the works to remove from the protection of labor law workers in establishments with up to 50 employees. Still, some employers even refuse to pay these starvation wages. Struggle for back pay has been widespread.

As a result, social ills have multiplied in Iran. Unemployment, prostitution, child labor, homelessness, hunger, heroin addiction, and corruptions and crime of all kinds have spread. The labor movement has been weakened by competition for the scarce jobs and de-politicization associated with workers participating in the informal economy to make ends meet.

Labor begins to organize a fightback

To be sure, there has been resistance to these assaults. But the most affected workers have been those in vulnerable industries and smaller enterprises, where job turnover is high and workers have little experience in organized fightback.

A low point occurred on Jan. 23, 2004, at the copper smelter factory in Khatoon Abad, a village near the small town of Babak Shahre in Kerman. Young workers who were recently laid off staged a march. As they reached the factory gates, government security forces opened fire, including from helicopters, killing four workers and wounding others. Despite widespread press coverage and protest and a promise by the Khatami government to investigate the crime, nothing has come of it. The employers and the government literally got away with murder.

However, this instance of capitalist brutality motivated the incipient labor movement. The relative expansion of political space that coincided with the first Khatami presidency saw a flourishing of labor publications such as Karmozd (Wages), Avaaye Kar (Voice of Labor), and Andishe Jamehe (Social Thought). Books and articles appeared that related the history of the labor movement and some of its leaders. Marxist literature was translated and published and found a new audience.

Labor activists began to network and hold private gatherings to discuss strategy and tactics for a fightback. After two decades, May Day was once again celebrated by small gatherings of workers in semi-private or even public places.

At the same time, Iranian labor activists in Europe, Canada, and the U.S. began to consider new strategies and tactics to oppose anti-labor practices of the Islamic Republic. A number of websites have been established for this purpose. Some, like Bonyade Kar (The Labor Foundation, www.bonyadecar.org), are in Farsi and directed to the Iranian labor activists.

Others, like the International Alliance in Support of the Workers of Iran (IASWI: www.workers-iran.org), are in English and aim at building international solidarity with the Iranian labor movement.

The road to independent workers organizations°

A central theme that has emerged from this process and activities is the need for workers independent organizations to confront the capitalist offensive and to chart a way forward.

In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, there has been a mistrust of the existing socialist parties.° Correctly, labor activists have concluded that virtually all left parties in the past used the labor movement as an instrument of their policies. At the same time, these parties either politically backed the Khomeini regime (the pro-Moscow Tudeh party and the Fedeeyan Majority actually collaborated with it to suppress other socialist groups) or waged a struggle against it regardless of the objective needs of the working class.

The Mujahedin, an anti-imperialist Islamic group with mass support, initiated an "armed insurrection" in the summer of 1982 that led it to work for the interests of the imperialists and the Saddam Hussein regime. Centrist parties retreated from the industrial centers to Kurdistan, where the Islamic Republic had less of a presence.

Today, many worker activists search for a road to socialism that is forged by an independent, fighting labor movement. While there is ongoing debate about what this means, a critical review of the entire labor and socialist experience in Iran and the world is part of this effort.

After the Khatoon Abad massacre, two nationwide groups were set up in Iran to work for the establishment of independent workers organizations. The Committee to Pursue the Establishment of Workers Organizations in Iran (CPEWOI) and The Committee to Coordinate

Establishment of Workers Organizations in Iran (CCEWOI) each collected several thousand signatures from workers to announce their existence and goals.^o Their names suggest that they pursue similar goals.

But they differ in strategy and perspectives, although it is not always clear what these differences are. An issue of contention is the use of legal means of activism a thorny issue for the labor movement under a theocracy. Among the CPEWOI leaders are those who favor a legalist approach, although others have publicly distanced themselves from that approach. These and other issues have resulted in organizational in-fighting among its leaders.

The CCEWOI is more homogeneous. It stresses direct action, but some of its leaders tend to favor an ultraleft, workerist perspective. Some have downplayed the struggle for the formation of a union at UBCTS, labeling it as syndicalism.

While these coalitions enjoy support from some individual workers, they are not based on workplace labor organizations. Rather, their leaderships perceive their mission as the facilitator for the establishment of such organizations in workplaces.

The case of the Saqez Five

A significant base of support for the CCEWOI is in Kurdistan. A key leader of CCEWOI is Mahmoud Salehi, a militant leader of Saqez bakery workers who has been blacklisted by employers. Saqez is a Kurdish town and has a history of resistance to the Islamic Republic's rule.

In April 2004, Salehi met with a representative of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) who had come to Iran on a fact-finding mission. Two days later, Salehi and other labor activists in Saqez were arrested just before they set out to celebrate the May Day international workers' holiday. They had asked for a permit for the May Day march but the authorities had not responded.

Salehi and five other Kurdish labor activists and Mohsen Hakimi, a labor activist from Tehran and Salehi's translator in his meeting with ICFTU representatives, were detained for 12 days and tortured. They were released after protests from Iran and abroad, including from ICFTU.

The seven were charged with affiliation with Komoleh an armed Kurdish socialist group. A closed-door trial was held for the seven. After 18 months, five of them were convicted of lesser charges and sentenced: Mahmoud Salehi to five years imprisonment and three years internal exile; Jallal Hosseini three years; Mohsen Hakimi, Mohammad Abdipour, and Borhan Divargar two years each. So far, the sentences have not been carried out.

The need for international labor solidarity

On May 7, 2005, a group of Tehran bus company workers met at the Bakers Guild headquarters to revive the UBCTS Syndicate. The meeting was prepared after months of consultation. The Workers' House and the Islamic Shoras of Labor (ISL) mobilized a mob of 300 to disrupt the gathering. Some UBCTS leaders were beaten, including Mansour Osanloo, whose tongue, neck, and arms sustained cuts.

In a recent interview, Alireza Mahjoob, who heads the Workers' House, declared that "if they want to live in Iran, they are not allowed to use the word syndicate. We will not allow it." As Mansour Hayatghibi, member of the Executive Committee of the Syndicate, pointed out, "for the past 14 years the ISL [at the UBCTS] has done nothing to advance workers' interests. Our workers call

it Employers Shora. " In fact, the Syndicate has gathered thousands of signatures from UBCTS workers to demand the dissolution of the ISL and recognition of the Syndicate.

The Iranian labor activists have also asked international labor organizations or forums not to recognize or invite the Workers House and ISL as Iranian workers organizations.

A recent advance was registered in Havana, Cuba, where the 15th Congress of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was hosted by the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC) on Dec. 1-4, 2005. WFTU was founded in Paris in 1945 and has included trade unions from the Soviet bloc and others in sympathy with it.° Alireza Mahjoob, head of the Workers House, arrived in Havana claiming to represent the Iranian workers.

According to www.iran-chabar.de, Assadollah Sadeqi, who represented the Founding Committee of the Iranian Syndicates (an organization set up by the Tudeh party), argued successfully that Mahjoob and the Workers House do not represent the Iranian workers and he should not be admitted to the Congress.

The Syrian and Lebanese delegations as well as the Iranian Embassy in Havana had lobbied for the Congress to admit Mahjoob. Significantly, the UBCTS Syndicate also sent a greeting to the Congress asking it to admit it as an Iranian trade union.

On Jan. 27, after waiting for a month for authorities to act on their promise of addressing workers demands, the Syndicate issued a public statement address to "UBCTS workers, the people of Tehran, and all freedom loving people" that it intended to strike the next day "to secure the freedom of Osanloo, recognition of the Syndicate, and negotiations leading to a collective agreement."

This time, the authorities were prepared. Beginning at 9 p.m., they started detaining bus drivers. Those who distanced themselves from the Syndicate were given sweets and sent to back to work. Those who expressed sympathy with the Syndicate were threatened.

Over 1200 bus drivers were taken to jail. Those who were released could return to work only after signing a document pledging not to participate in trade-union activities or in protests of any kind. At last report, some 700 remained in jail.

Some Syndicate leaders managed to avoid arrest in order to issue statements clarifying the situation for UBCTS workers and the public, but their wives and children were detained. Within a few days, all Syndicate leaders had turned themselves in. According to reports, the Syndicate leaders and members have staged a hunger strike in prison.

There has been an outpouring of support for the Syndicate activists. Prominent writers and intellectuals, student groups, and other workers have condemned the government s action. In Sabzevar, a city northeast of Tehran, students issued a statement to transit workers asking them to emulate their fellow workers in Tehran.

Unprecedented international support has arisen for the Syndicate. Two dozen national and transportation unions from Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Canada have written to President Ahmadinejad asking for the immediate release of Syndicate activists and recognition of the union.

As every labor activist knows, the difficult situation faced by Iranian workers is not entirely unique. The Syndicate and other labor organizations in Iran are in the front lines of the labor fightback that needs to be waged internationally. They deserve and need the support of the working class and socialist forces around the world.*****

Release the jailed strikers now! How can you help?° Take 30 seconds and add your voice to the protest against the Iranian government's actions:

www.LabourStart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show_campaign.cgi?c=68