

# An unprecedented challenging situation!

Workers in heavy industry, sugar processing, teachers, and many others are all expressing discontent, tension and volatility

In the last nine months - and especially after the massive popular protests at the turn of 2017-2018 - a struggle has arisen across Iran's industry and workforce, one which has gained fierce impetus and which shows no sign of abating any time soon. In addition to their urgent demands for unpaid wages and salaries, working people have also targeted the policies of regime which have brought about the widespread privatisation and plunder of national resources; attempts to remove requirements for occupational safety and the right to form independent union organisations; continual efforts to raid the social security fund and the retirement schemes paid for by workers; and government schemes for the deregulation of labour markets and labour relations.

The growth and spread of the workers' protest movement has been one of the important features of the country's political scene in recent months. The implementation of anti-popular policies such as privatisation and economic liberalisation has imposed very tough conditions for the working class, who can no longer bear this situation. The strike of the workers at Hepco, the Haftappeh sugar cane complex workers and that of the truck drivers, as well as the onslaught by law enforcement and security forces on the workers of the Ahvaz National Steel Industrial Group - along with and dozens of other protests and strikes - reflect the growing grievances of Iran's working people.

In addition to the strikes and meetings in workshops and factories throughout the country, some significant protests took place at some of the most important industrial-manufacturing plants which employ a considerable number of industrial and technical workers. These include Hepco, Polyacryl, various parts of the national railways, parts of the operational phases of the South Pars gas field, Tabriz Machine Tools Manufacturing Company, Kerman copper mining and the refineries in Elam and Kermanshah. The atmosphere in these key manufacturing plants is filled with discontent, tension and volatility.

The growing number of protests by teachers, who form an integral part of the trade union movement in Iran, must also be mentioned. These have been violently crushed by the regime's security forces in recent weeks. Their main demands include job security, fair wages, abolition of temporary contracts, payment of unpaid and late wages and opposition to privatisation.

## Prospect of US economic sanctions

These protest movements are taking place in the wake of the political developments and challenges

affecting Iran which arise from the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) nuclear agreement. This is resulting in a realignment of the regime's political forces and factions and is therefore deemed to be very important. Poverty, unemployment and lack of job security are the main factors behind these protests. Continuous devaluation of the currency coupled with inflation has brought more poverty to an already struggling working class. Over the past 3 months Iranian currency has lost half its exchange value. Workers complain that their wages are in rials (Iranian currency) while their expenditures are in US dollars. According to official statistics, the accommodation price index in Tehran has increased some 33 percent in the last 12 months prior to last winter. Over the same period, the housing rental index has increased by 26.6 percent. Furthermore, prices of goods and services have increased by 35 percent resulting in an ever higher cost of living and more hardship.

Even Faramarz Toufighi, the workers' representative on the official 'Supreme Labour Council' acknowledges that the situation is catastrophic: It is anticipated that by the first of August the inflation for items in the basket of living consumer goods will be dazzling. A leap of 40 percent in poultry prices, a 30 percent jump in meat prices, a 18 percent jump in rice and oil prices, and a 28 percent jump in housing and ... indicates that government agencies have given up all attempts to control the spiralling inflation. He predicts that: 83 percent of workers live under the existence threshold.

Given the recent policies of the US administration in attempting to torpedo the 5+1 nuclear deal with Iran and renewed threats of economic sanctions - and even military intervention - the economy has been seriously affected. The flight of capital in recent months has accelerated and difficulties in obtaining spare parts from industrial countries in the West have caused a number of key industries to stop production. Banking and monetary sanctions have crippled any possibility of conducting international trade. All these consequently worsen the economic conditions in Iran and it is the workers who pay the price through mass lay-offs, not being paid for months and inflationary pressures.

Thus, the protest movement has been spreading and has resulted in an increase in class consciousness and awareness of trade unionism amongst workers on the shop floor. One of the most important consequences of the recent labour

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struggles of has been the fostering of such an atmosphere that has enabled the workers to revive their claim for trade union rights in parallel with their immediate demands. More importantly, these struggles have provided a more substantive foundation and link to the wider anti-tyranny movement in the country.

Readers of *IUR* are aware that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not tolerate the operation of trade unions. The country's labour law has been interpreted by the clerical regime in such a way as to only permit regime-controlled 'Islamic Labour Councils' to operate openly in workplaces. The structures of these bodies are designed so that the workers representatives are always outnumbered two to one by their government and employer counterparts. To make matters worse, the workers representatives must also must satisfy ideological, religious and political criteria in order to stand for election to the ILC. The 'Workers House' that operates as the country's confederation of ILCs is fully controlled by the government and totally ineffective.

Experienced trade unionists work hard - under very difficult conditions - to revive the independent trade unions that existed before they were attacked and disbanded by the government in the early 1980s (on the basis they were incompatible with the designs and outlook of the nascent Islamic Republic). Some of these trade unions go back to the 1930s and 40s. The regime responds by arresting and charging their leaders and activists with trumped up charges of violating national security. The leader of the Iranian Teacher Trade Association, Esmail Abdi, is currently serving a six year prison sentence for daring to organise national industrial action in the teaching sector for better salaries and an effective education system.

### Demanding respect for ILO Conventions

Central to the current struggle of the trade union movement in Iran is the intensification of its focus on trade union rights and the revival of independent unions - based on ILO Conventions 87 and 98 and the Universal Charter of the Rights of Trade Unions - and its assumption of an integral role in the ongoing wider struggle against the theocratic dictatorship.

In such an atmosphere it is only natural for there to exist a spectrum of different viewpoints and opinions. For instance, some advocates of the recent revival in trade union activity would deem it unnecessary to separate true independent unions and syndicates from the 'yellow' government-run unions ('Workers House', the 'Islamic Labour Councils' and 'Centre for Trade Associations' etc) and their corrupt leadership. They see the protest movement of the unions and workers solely within the confines of the currently imposed state laws and regulations of the respective government departments. They promote understanding and compliance with the stipulations of the regime. Such an approach has been directly and indirectly endorsed by the Ministry of Labour which, despite its occasional 'radical' slogans, is aligned with

the general economic and social policies of the regime and remains one of the barriers to the unimpeded growth of the trade union movement. Some government factions and leaders of those government-backed organisations that support this viewpoint are ultimately intent on the containment of the labour struggles within the framework set by the regime.

However, the trade union movement in Iran will continue in its struggle, despite the manoeuvrings of those from a biased and conflicted position that try to reconcile with the interests of the theocratic regime. The trade union movement, by its very nature, has one the largest parts to play in the wider labour movement, one whose struggles are focused on the economic and welfare demands of the working class and which does not ignore the necessity of their political class struggle. This movement, due to its interaction with the masses of the working people, is their largest organisation - prime placed to organise them regardless of their political, ideological, religious, racial or other differences. Therefore, the salient principle in the Trade Union movement is the presence and organising of the working people - to raise their awareness and to organise them to achieve their rights. The workers strike in the Hepco factory is a clear example of the importance and success of this approach.

History has shown us that the hostility from a reactionary government towards the organised unionising and enfranchisement of the working people is not for the sole reason of weakening and suppressing the working class, but to prevent the anti-tyrannical movement from realising one of its main goals. One of the most important and vital aspects of the trade union movement, in addition to meeting the demands of workers welfare, is the vessel it provides to the working class in the struggle for their aspirations and democratic rights - namely freedom of association, unions, political parties and organisations, as well as the freedom of thought. This is a key point when considering this steadfast struggle - and one not lost on dictatorships like that currently at the helm in Iran.

Those campaigning for the strengthening and securing of independent trade unions in Iran believe that only through organised united action, with the working class at the forefront, can the realisation of social justice, democratic rights, freedom, sovereignty and independence be guaranteed. The challenges that lay ahead in the struggle of the working class are not impassable. They can be overcome by reaching a correct appraisal of the strengths of the movement and those of its opponents - the theocratic dictatorship and advocate of uncontrolled neoliberal policies -; proper planning, effective mobilisation and the utilising of slogans; the clear identification of priorities; and the uniting of forces at each critical stage of the struggle. At this very sensitive time, unity of action, preserving the independence of the trade union movement and intensifying the struggle to push back the regime are the imperative tasks and priorities that face the labour and trade union movement.