



CUPE Internationalist

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Workers' Struggles in Iran! What is going on?

Many things. Iran is a highly politicized country. It is also a country, given the militarization of the region by the United States and its allies, facing a very delicate situation. As workers and labour activists, we need to pay particular attention to all this; however, understanding the circumstances facing our fellow workers in Iran, I would argue, help us, as labour activists, adopt a position based on the needs and struggles of the working class internationally.

A very brief look into the past:

As we may know, the Iranian working class and labour movement is not a new entity. This movement has been around for over 100 years, and during all this time a subject of ongoing and systematic oppression. Despite being one of the most articulated and left-leaning movements in the Middle East, we still don't have an organized labour movement in Iran with city, provincial and national councils and federations. The existing official organizations called "Workers' House" and "Islamic Labour Councils" are instruments of the government for controlling and repressing workers and are not at all recognized by the independent labour movement. Nevertheless, Iranian workers have played significant roles throughout these years. In particular, workers' protests and national strikes which had shut down the whole country were absolutely instrumental in the struggles against the former pro-US regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. During that time, an oil embargo against South African Apartheid regime, and against the government of Israel in support of Palestinian people's rights, were in fact initiatives of Iran's oil workers' councils and labour activists prior to these independent labour organizations being outlawed and crushed by the newly formed Islamic Republic (IRI).

What's going on today?

What has been taking place in Iran, in the past 20 to 25 years, particularly following the crush of genuine unions and workers' councils by the IRI in early 1980s, as far as the interests of the working class and the growing poor populations are considered, has been in line with the global attacks on workers' rights and their working and living conditions under the capitalist globalization and neo-liberal agenda. The Iranian government has been responding absolutely favourably to the needs of global and local corporations and businesses to create even more favourable conditions for capital investment and its multi-faceted needs in Iran. For the past fifteen years or more, we have witnessed the implementation of policies of labour market deregulation and the selling off of factories and state-owned enterprises. Most employers, including the state as the largest employer in the country, have been laying off thousands of workers while refraining from hiring workers on a permanent basis; they have been contracting out big segments of the production units in such huge industrial complexes as the Iran Khodro, National Oil Industry, Mino Industrial Group, and in textile industry and many others. In the process of implementing

aggressive privatization and contracting out policies and programs, companies have transferred responsibilities toward workers to sub-contractors, through which workers were stripped off of crucial legal rights, including type of work contract, job security, work place health and safety, wage and benefit protection, working hours, etc. It has been over a decade that permanent positions have rarely been offered to workers. Currently, according to various reports, about 80% of the workers who are employed by public and private companies are on temporary contracts. In many of the industrial workplaces, the expansion of the contracting companies has resulted in considerable increase in the health and safety accidents, injuries and deaths.

At the same time, the government has passed a number of bills in parliament, exempting workshops of 5 and, soon after, 10 employees or less from the minimal rights stipulated in the labour law. Over three million workers, particularly women workers, have been hit the hardest by this. Presently, about 70 percent of people in Iran live under the poverty line, and the current monthly minimum wage of \$183,000 (less than US\$200.00) is more than 50 percent below the official poverty line, and it's less than one third of the real poverty line. At the same time, more than 500 manufacturing plants, with the workforce of about 400,000, have not been paying wages to their employees in the last 3 to 24 months or even more.

Looking at all this, I would argue that what happening to workers in Iran, from the working class's perspective, is a part and parcel of "economic structural adjustment" and other anti-worker and neo-liberal policies of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and multi-national corporations, implemented fully by the Iranian government.

Workers' Struggles:

Last year alone, despite the lack of the legal rights to organize and strike, we witnessed hundreds (at least one thousand) of strikes and job actions in the country. Workers' protests against non-payment of their wages and bonuses and for their rights to organize and strike have been escalating throughout past year. There have been a series of recent job actions and demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of teachers and education workers in the country for pay parity and other demands. Organizing workers is one of the hardest and riskiest endeavours as the security and intelligent forces and employers are extremely aggressive in their reactions to organizing drives. For instance, organizing in the public sector and amongst the state's millions of employees is absolutely prohibited.

But, who are the leading labour activists in Iran? And what are they struggling for? I assume many of us have heard a lot these days about Mahmoud Salehi and the Saez 7, who were arrested and persecuted for organizing a May Day rally, and we might have heard about Mansour Osanloo and the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (employees of a city-owned company with about 17,000 employees). We have seen considerable international solidarity actions by unions in different countries, including by CUPE, CUPW, CAW, CLC and other unions in Canada, in support of these activists. The LabourStart launched a very effective campaign for the freedom of Mansour Osanloo and presently for the release of Mahmoud Salehi who has been re-imprisoned since April 9, 2007. One main demand of the Iranian labour activists is the freedom of association and the establishment of free, democratic and independent labour organizations, including unions, councils and so on, without any state or employers' interferences. Mahmoud Salehi is in jail for the fourth or fifth times and Osanloo is facing trials after his second release from jail precisely for such efforts and leaderships in making this goal a reality.

Some labour activists in other countries including Canada, however, are cautious about supporting Iranian labour movement. Some are worried that the Bush administration could take the advantage of the struggles inside Iran. I saw an article at TomPaine.com about the American Right standing up for the Iranian labour movement, in which the author asks whether labour activists like Osanloo would be happy to receive American right-wing support. Firstly, it's important to emphasize that the Iranian labour movement is a genuine class movement of diverse groups and tendencies of workers who are predominantly anti-capitalists. This is a movement that has experienced one of the most influential revolutions in the 20th century and has learnt a lot from it, including the fact that workers should never let governments and ruling classes influencing them. This movement principally opposes war and militarization in the region and around the world. In the context of the current confrontation between the US and its European allies and the Iranian government, the labour movement is holding an independent position, in which it strongly opposes all arms races as well as military intervention or sanctions against Iran, because it's not only unacceptable under any pretext, its main victims are always working people and their families. The Iranian labour movement will never become an instrument of the foreign policies of the United State and its allies nor an ally of the government of Iran. A genuine defence of the independent interests of the working class demands the united, coordinated and organized efforts of workers themselves, both locally and internationally. In Iran, this requires an organized, progressive and independent labour movement that fights powerfully for workers' rights and freedoms against employers and the government at the same time as standing up strongly, in solidarity with workers of other countries, against the capitalist globalization, war and the militarization of the region by the Western powers and their allies.

Farid Chaharlangi,
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For more information about workers' struggles in Iran, refer to www.workers-iran.org
To Support the campaign to Free Mahmoud Salehi Now: Click:
http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show_campaign.cgi?c=231

CUPE Ontario on the Frontlines of the May 5th Status for All March

On Saturday May 5, 2007 over two thousand immigrants, refugees and supporters took to the streets of Toronto's west end to demand a national *regularization* (i.e., granting of full immigration status) program and a moratorium on detentions and deportations as well as access to city services regardless of status. The animated march which included entire families began at Christie Park on Bloor and Christie in little Korea walking past several immigrant neighbourhoods including little Ethiopia and little Portugal to end at Dufferin Grove Park for a lively community concert and fair.

The march was part of a week of actions for immigrant/refugee rights in Canada and the United States which began on May 1 in several US cities as well as Vancouver. This was the third year that No One is Illegal Toronto rallied in response to this National Day of Action which began in 2005 after the Solidarity Across Borders walk for dignity from Montreal to Ottawa.

The march was led by a large contingent of trade unionists from the Canadian Auto Workers, under the banner "Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to Stay," followed by several other unions including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE ON) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) to name a few, as well as immigrant workers groups such as the Filipino Live-in Care- Givers Campaign.

Perhaps the loudest group in the march was the Access Without Fear: Don't Ask, Don't Tell contingent which included several groups of students from various Toronto schools including Oakwood Collegiate, Western Tech, and the Bickford Centre, marching under the Education not Deportation banner.

"Stop the War at Home, Stop the War Abroad" was another rallying call in the march, uniting refugees fleeing from war and occupation, war-resisters, anti-war anti-occupation activists and victims of the CSIS secret trials Security Certificates, Canada's version of Guantanamo.

A major theme addressed by speakers at the rally were the successes of the Don't Ask Don't Tell campaign on both a political as well as a grass-roots level, winning major gains at the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Police Services board as well as local victories at schools, community centres, health centres and agencies.

The demonstration highlighted the case of a Mexican family facing deportation in the end of June. Angelica and her two children Edgar and Vanessa embraced each other as they spoke to a large rally of supporters, stating that they wanted to stay in Canada where they had build their home. The family of four came to Canada as refugees to flee persecution by Mexican police. Although their claim of fear was supported by a strong letter from Amnesty International speaking about the lack of state protection in Mexico, the family fell through the cracks of Canada's faulty refugee determination system. After years in refugee and federal courts, the family has exhausted its life savings on legal fees and on applications, and now lacks the funds needed to apply for asylum on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Despite the fact that both parents are working, as well as volunteering, and that the children attend school, the family is still facing deportation. This is a clear sign that Canada's immigration system is not working for working families and that a national regularization program is needed more then ever.

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The Duke Of Edinburgh Xth Commonwealth Study Conference - New Delhi, India March 16 – 30, 2007

In August of 2006 CUPE nominated me to participate in the Xth Commonwealth Study Conference hosted by India and Malaysia. After an application process, I was officially selected in late December of 2006. This conference brought together young leaders from Unions, Government, Private Sector and NGOs to examine and discuss human aspects of Industrialization.

I arrived in New Delhi, India on March 14, 2007 joined by close to 200 other participants representing 30 different countries. We were all split up into groups and assigned a specific topic. My group, consisting of folks from Australia, Africa, Bermuda, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan and the UK, from bank managers to NGOs, was assigned the topic "Tourism as a Sustainable Growth Option" covering the states of West Bengal and Orissa.

The 2 weeks I have spent on this study tour provided an opportunity to see just a tiny proportion of the diversity of people and places that are behind those perceptions and it also provided an opportunity for me to learn about many other issues affecting the country. I have witnessed the great extremes of wealth and poverty, peace and conflict, the presence and lack of democracy.

I realized very early in the journey that India is shining – but only at the top!!

What good is this booming economic growth when hundreds of millions of people live in poverty, children malnourished and living on the streets, a lack of access to clean drinking water, health care and

education? Or when several families participate in the informal economy which doesn't offer them adequate social protection or a reliable income?

The government in India is currently pursuing a policy of compulsorily land acquisition for "Special Economic Zones". These zones are being developed by the government and are available to industry for business opportunities. Industries within these zones are considered 'essential services' and workers do not have the right to strike.

No – they are not hospitals or schools – but diamond cutting factories and other multi million dollar industries. Incentives within these zones are offered to industry, like, the no right to strike policy – they are also very low to no tax zones. One corporation I had interaction with has been exempt from paying any kinds of taxes.

The day that I arrived in India, farmers were killed, women and children injured in clashes with police as they resisted the take over of their land as the government was trying to take 10,000 acres of the most fertile land in the region for a chemical Special Economic Zone.

While I don't claim to be an expert of the issue of land reclamation in India – this issue does raise a very fundamental question for me. Why would the government be attempting to take over some of the most fertile land in the region in a country that relies so heavily on agriculture?

This for me clearly highlighted the difficulties India faces in reconciling its development objective of industrialization with the reality of an agriculture based society.

This situation also showcased for me the robust nature of India's democracy and free press as the government was forced to retract its plans and rethink its consultation process. This came after thousands of organized workers went on strike over the killing of these farmers and nation wide outrage to this crisis. Before I left India, announcements by the government were made outlining that all Special Economic Zones would be put on hold until a plan of social balance and transparent consultation was in place.

During visits to worksites – I tried to hang back and talk to workers but it was clear to me very early on that workers did not feel comfortable speaking to me.

At one location I realized that a man was listening to everything the local union president and I were saying, I felt the need to look around based on the answers I was getting from the local union president. He was clearly being watched. Before the visit at that site ended, the man appeared again as I was speaking to a dietary worker, so I asked him "and what do you do here?" his reply, "the HR Director." That was disappointing.

Also extremely disappointing was the blatant lack of women within groups we heard from and met with. At the opening plenary of the conference – the balance of speakers between men and women was by no means equal. This was challenged from the floor and we were assured the tours we were on would be the real representative picture.

But on our tour, we met with several groups and there was very few women present. On one morning – we met with Trade Unions, NGOs and the Orissa State Council CII, and out of about 25 people over the morning – there was one woman present. I was very disappointed that gender balance and diversity was not part of the criteria when organizers were selecting our tour stops.

I am very thankful to CUPE for nominating me to participate in this conference but more importantly, I am extremely grateful to the people of India who welcomed me with open arms and warm hospitality and allowed me to learn about their culture, history, potential and very evident challenges.

This journey has inspired me to learn more about colonial rule and the impacts and legacy that this rule has even long after independence. It is hard to understand that level of poverty without fully understanding the roots. During British rule, Indian society was not democratized, the caste system was supported and it was business as usual for the rich. India was robbed of their resources and capacity to grow. I have been motivated to learn more about the impact Colonial rule on India and how that legacy still lives on today.

I wish for India growth that is inclusive and truly sustainable. Economic growth and sustainable development must necessarily include social justice!

Submitted in Solidarity,
Candace Rennick
CUPE Regional Vice President

*This report is only a very small snapshot of my experience.
For a more detailed report visit www.CUPE.on.ca
For my complete report – I will have to write a book*

Canada-Haiti Labour and Women's Solidarity Tour

A delegation of trade union and women's rights leaders will travel to 11 cities across Canada in late May/early June as part of the Canada Haiti Action Network's Canada-Haiti Labour and Women's Solidarity Tour. Ginette Apollon and Paul Chéry of the Confédération des travailleurs haitiens (CTH) and women's rights leader Euvonie Georges-Auguste will make up the delegation: They will speak about the conditions of life and work for Haitians and the challenges that trade unions and women's rights organizations face in attempting to organize. The goal of the tour is to learn more about the current situation in Haiti, to build solidarity links between trade unions and women's organizations in our two countries, and to raise funds for the important and difficult work undertaken by the organizations the delegation represents.

The CTH is the biggest union federation in Haiti. It is a pluralist and progressive organization representing workers in 11 sectors of the economy, including health, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, artisans, teachers, transport and commerce, tourism, and government service. This includes workers from the formal and informal sectors of the economy. The federation's membership in 1996 was 110,000. The current figure is difficult to estimate because of the economic chaos and political repression that followed the February 29, 2004 foreign invasion and forced removal from office of the elected government of Jean Bertrand Aristide. Five hundred Canadian troops were part of that invasion force.

Haiti's unemployment rate is estimated at 70% to 80%. CTH participates in organizing economic development projects, educational programs, health programs, and worker advocacy. While workers struggles have always been difficult in Haiti, the situation during the two years of illegal government after the 2004 coup was one of the worst in Haiti's recent history. It was a period of huge setback to all social movements. Thousands of workers were fired as government and other services were disrupted or shut down, extreme violence was directed against supporters of the Aristide government and against the population in general, and hundreds of union and other activists were illegally imprisoned.

The CTH opposed the 2004 coup, and as a result it, too, came under attack. Thirteen of its activists were arrested shortly after the coup and held for 2 years without charge. Paul Chéry and Ginette Apollon spent 2 months in hiding after receiving death threats. According to a delegation of labour and religious

people that went to Haiti in May, 2004, public sector employees and other trade unionists across Haiti were targeted with death threats and were placed on police “wanted” lists.

The CTH estimates that 80,000 workers lost their jobs in the year following the coup. Many were thus forced into the already-crowded informal sector of the economy. This sector is itself devastated by the coup due to heightened insecurity, sharp rises in prices, and the coup government’s decision to raise import tariffs while granting a three-year grace period on taxes to the largest business owners. The consequence has been increased bargaining power for businesses over workers and their unions.

Haitians elected a new president and legislative assembly in early 2006. But the country is occupied by a 9,000-strong United Nations military force, the appointees in the government apparatus from the coup period are solidly entrenched, and the economy of Haiti has been damaged by privatization schemes. More than a billion dollars in aid has gone into Haiti since the coup, but this has done little to lift the standard of living for the Haitian poor. Progress in labour reform made during the Aristide government--such as a rise in the minimum wage, expansion of trade union organizing rights, protections for child domestic workers, subsidies for the poor, and protection of private sector industries--has been dismantled.

Haiti’s grassroots popular movements are struggling to rebuild under ongoing hardships. The aim of the Canada-Haiti Labour and Women’s Solidarity Tour is to support these struggles in Haiti. Please attend tour events and donate generously to the work of the courageous fighters who will speak.

For more information on the tour, including information on events in your city please go to www.canadahaitiaction.ca

kabir joshi-vijayan

We are the Voice of the Fallen

The face of the war on terror in the Philippines today is a masked motorcycle-riding man who shoots an unarmed civilian, often in broad daylight. The man is never tried or convicted, indeed he is never found or arrested. Military and police complicity are evident. A climate of total impunity reigns. A group of local citizens will hold a vigil this Sunday, April 29, at 3pm at the St. James United Church in downtown Montreal to draw attention to this wave of politically motivated assassinations and abductions and to honour the victims.

The victims are trade unionists, peasant farmers, teachers, priests and students advocating for the rights of their communities. Their names are:

Diosdado «Ka Fort» Fortunato, leader of the union at Nestle Philippines, gunned down in 2005, leaving a widow with six children;

Bishop Alberto Ramento, one of the highest officials of the Philippine Independent Church, a priest of the poor, stabbed as he slept in his church;

Professor Jose Ma. Cui, gunned down in front of his students as he supervised an exam;

Ma. Luisa Posa-Dominado and Nilo Arado, abducted by the military 12 days ago and still missing;

Gracila Buya, a nine-year old girl in Grade 2, found shot by a stream near her home. The military said she was a child guerilla, claiming they found a 16 mm rifle beside her, a weapon the size of the girl.

Over 840 such killings have taken place in the Philippines since 2001, when President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo came to power. The military strategy guiding this climate of impunity is called Oplan Bantay Laya, which considers civilians legitimate military targets, claiming they are members of « communist fronts ». It is the Philippine version of the Bush administration's « War on Terror ».

With the recent national and local elections in the Philippines, it is important for Canadians to be vigilant against further attacks against journalists and others in the Philippines. It is equally important to expose to Canadians the Arroyo regime's campaign of political killings. Filipino organizations in Canada along with progressive organizations and unions work to mobilize support to bear pressure on the Canadian government to redirect our taxpayer dollars in the form of the \$22 million in Canadian foreign aid away from the repressive and militarist Arroyo regime and towards progressive community-based groups like Karapatan (Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights) that advocate genuine development and uphold human rights and the dignity of life.

End the attacks against progressive people in the Philippines! Expose and oppose state terror and repression!

Stop Canadian aid to the repressive, militarist Arroyo regime!

Long live international solidarity!

Marco Luciano

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