



Iran, Violation of Workers' Rights

May 2013

**In solidarity with workers in
Iran and against war threats**



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CUPE Ontario's resolution in solidarity with workers in Iran and against war threats

Delegates at the 49th Annual CUPE Ontario Convention, May 23-26, 2012 adopted resolution 21 in solidarity with workers in Iran and against economic sanctions and threats of war. This is an important resolution that will help strengthen worker-to-worker solidarity between the Canadian and Iranian labour movements.

Resolution No. 21 states:

CUPE Ontario will:

- * Condemn the persecution of labour activists in Iran by the Iranian government and support the right of Iranian workers to freely establish independent workers' organizations.
- * Work with independent labour organizations in Iran to strengthen worker-to-worker solidarity, as part of the world-wide struggle against the capitalist and neoliberal agenda.
- * Take a clear stand against economic sanctions and any attempts by the U.S. and its allies, including Canada, to pursue military interventions against Iran.

Because:

- * The government's anti-worker and repressive policies have consistently been violently imposed on workers in Iran.
- * Iranian workers have no right to organize or strike and often face persecution, arrests and imprisonment.
- * Economic sanctions and military intervention against Iran will be disastrous and unacceptable under any pretext and its main victims are surely the working and ordinary people of Iran.
- * The US and its allies' drive to wage war against Iran has been a pretext for increased attacks on workers' and human rights by both sides of the current dispute.

Why a resolution in solidarity with workers in Iran and against war is important?

CUPE has a proud history of solidarity; in fact the national constitution of CUPE mandates us to do international solidarity work. CUPE Ontario and its International Solidarity Committee stand for worker-to-worker solidarity across borders in our common struggles against the capitalist and neoliberal agenda, war, poverty, racism and privatization, and for equality and economic and social justice. Our International Solidarity Committee has campaigned on many issues to support struggles for justice and workers' rights around the world from Columbia and Guatemala to Palestine, Philippines and South Arica.

The last thirty years has seen an unprecedented attack on workers and their families around the world. Wages and working conditions have been systematically slashed. Poverty, especially in the Global South, has reached record levels. Public institutions and services are privatized and sold-off to the highest bidder. Casualization and union-busting agreements undermine our fundamental rights and ability to organize. Neo-liberal governments everywhere in the world, like successive Canadian governments, have been aggressively implementing these attacks and actively supporting militarization of the Global South as well. War and militarization have killed and displaced millions. We have witnessed increasing militarization of the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, which has been sponsored among others by the Canadian government.

We, as workers and union activists, must respond with our own common struggles and our own unity across borders. International solidarity is fundamental to a progressive and fighting labour movement. It is not an optional part of labour activism or a form of charity. International solidarity goes to the heart of what it means to be a labour activist. It means seeing the struggle of our sisters and brothers in other countries as our own struggle; their injuries as our injuries and their victories as our victories. Please see below for more information.

Economic sanctions and threats of war and worker to worker solidarity

The economic sanctions against Iran have been imposed by the US government and its Canadian and European counterparts over power disputes with the Iranian government and have nothing to do with workers' and human rights. The economic sanctions have resulted in further expansion of poverty, destitution and unemployment throughout the country. Economic sanctions have contributed to the drastic rise in the prices of food, goods, scarcity of basic food and medical items and a sharp rise in unemployment and inflation. The economic sanctions are primarily a further burden for the working class and poor in Iran, rather than the regime of Islamic Republic of Iran. The economic sanctions and threats of war have also contributed to increasing repression of workers and other progressive movements in Iran. It is important to emphasize that the US Administration's drive to wage war and military aggressions in the Middle East, including Iran, beside their imperialistic economic and political interests, have been a pretext for attacks on labour, civil, immigrant, and human rights in the US and other parts of the world. In Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries in the region these policies have brought absolute disaster for the ordinary people particularly the working class. The threats of war and policy of economic sanctions are strongly opposed by the independent Iranian labour movement and its allies around the world. The CUPE Ontario's Resolution 21 calls for an end to the economic sanctions and threats of war against Iran, opposes the militarization of the region and promotes real worker to worker solidarity with the independent Iranian labour movement.

Background information on workers' situation in Iran*

Workers played a central role in the 1979 revolution against the U.S. backed regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran. Mass street protests and strike committees combined struggles in workplaces with the fight against dictatorship in the streets. The four month general strike by workers in oil industry was decisive in the final collapse of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Workers formed councils (Shora) in many workplaces as well as trade unions (Sandika). Workers councils addressed workplace issues such as wages, benefits, working conditions, and housing. They also were involved in decisions regarding hiring and firing, purchase of materials and sales of products and financial matters. However, the new regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), immediately after establishing its power base, brutally attacked and suppressed independent workers' and other progressive organisations and left and democratic political parties. Tens of thousands of people were executed, imprisoned and persecuted. IRI violently destroyed all the workers' councils that had emerged through the course of 1979's popular revolution.

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the harshest working conditions were imposed on workers and any kind of protests or dissenting voices were brutally repressed. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war, IRI adopted neo-liberal policies and a structural adjustment program of the World Bank and IMF. Massive privatization took place. The IRI implemented policies of labour market deregulation and the selling off of factories and state-owned enterprises. Many state-owned factories were sold to influential families and state officials, their relatives or other capitalists. 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. In the process of implementing aggressive privatization and contracting out policies, workers were stripped of crucial legal rights, including type of work contract, job security, work place health and safety, wage and benefit protection, working hours, etc. Since the mid 1990s, secure positions have rarely been offered to workers; instead, workers are forced to sign contracts for less than 3 months or "blank contracts". Currently, according to various reports, about 80% of workers who are employed by public and private companies are on temporary contracts.

* Source: <http://www.workers-iran.org>

Freedom of association and the right to organize

All principles of freedom of association are violated in Iran by the IRI and employers. Workers are denied of the right of association; workers' organizations are attacked and crushed and interfered with, and labour activists are sacked, arrested, tortured and prosecuted. One main demand of the Iranian labour activists is the freedom of association and the establishment of democratic and independent labour organizations, including unions, councils and so on, without any state or employers' interferences. Workers in Iran do not have genuine representation at any of the international forums including ILO's conferences.

Repression of labour activists

Thousands of labour activists have been persecuted and imprisoned since the IRI took power in Iran in 1979. Many were executed in the early 1980s when the new regime crushed all independent workers' organizations. Repression of independent labour organizations continues in Iran. Hundreds of activists of the labour movement have been arrested in recent years and were subjected to harassment and prosecution and arbitrary dismissals. Many labour activists have been sacked by employers only because they had undertaken the trade-union activities. Any activity to create an independent labour organization is repressed. Security forces are monitoring all manufacturing and large workplaces. They persecute workers and threaten them with redundancy and arrest.

Lack of job security

Up until the end of the Iran-Iraq war, a large majority of workforces were hired on an ongoing basis, or with permanent contracts. This process changed so dramatically that instead of about 6 percent in 1988 we now have more than 80 percent on temporary contracts. In 2000, Iranian Parliament exempted workshops employing five or less than five workers from the Labour legislation depriving about two million workers at the time. Later, parliament approved the 'Reorganization and Restructuring of the Textile Industries', leaving tens of thousands of workers out of work. Parliament also exempted workers in carpet weaving workshops, "The Persian Carpet", from the provisions of the labour law. In January 2003, the "Iranian Supreme Council of Labour", composed of representatives of Islamic labour councils, employers and the government, approved the exemption of workshops of 10 employees or less from the Labour Legislation. Workers are forced to sign "blank contracts" which is an equivalent to workers' giving up all their rights and

any future dispute and the acceptance of any wages and working conditions. In large manufacturing units, workshops have been transformed into small units entrusted to the contractors and subcontractors who impose insecure working conditions on workers. This policy makes it possible for the owners of the manufacturing units to deny assuming any responsibility towards the workers thus forcing workers to accept unbearable working conditions set by subcontractors.

Wages

The minimum wage was announced in March 2012 by the Ministry of Labour to be 389,000 toman, which is about \$110.00 a month as the Iranian currency is rapidly depreciating. This wage is about one quarter of the poverty line in Iran. The majority of the unemployed workers do not receive any unemployment benefits or any Social Security coverage. The price of necessary items such as meat, eggs, cooking oil, rice, bread and sugar has experienced up to a 400 percent increase since last year. The cancelation of subsidies to the basic necessities last year and the lack of timely payment of wages as well as indecent contracts and massive unemployment have joined hands to put added pressure on working people. In addition to the IRI's neo-liberal and devastating economic policies, the economic sanctions imposed by the US government and its Canadian and European allies have further contributed to the expansion of extreme poverty, hunger, destitution and ever-increasing levels of unemployment throughout the country. The majority of people in Iran live in poverty. Official claims indicate 40 percent of the population although there are other research and reports estimating up to 70 percent live below the poverty line.

Non-payment of wages

Delay of payment of the wages at times ranges from one to even more than two years and affects hundreds of thousands of workers in different sectors across Iran. The IRI and the employers regularly violate the international convention on wage protection. IRI goes even further by repressing the protests of workers against non-payment of their wages. Workers are repressed by the security forces whereas no employer has been brought to justice for "wage theft" or "non-payment of wages". A great number of workers' protests each year are for the payment of the delayed wages.

Women's conditions

The situation of women is considerably worse than that of the men in almost all aspects of employment and societal standards. According to official statistics female workers gain 59% of the wages of a man for equal work. Moreover, women constantly undergo sexual harassment especially by the employers. As a result of many years of systematic gender discrimination and religious repression, women constitute about 12 percent of the “active” labour force, and all together 95 percent of women workers across Iran are employed in workshops of 10 employees or less which are not protected by the labour law. Many women are forced to work for wages less than the minimum wage.

Afghan Workers

The situation of the Afghan workers in Iran is particularly alarming. They are stripped of any rights and almost certainly are the most exploited workers of Iran. No labour standard protects them. The majority of children of Afghan migrant workers are not entitled to the public education. A racial discrimination, propagated by the government, weighs on them; because of the irregularity of their stay in Iran, employers frequently refuse to pay their wages. They are subject to police brutality and persecution. They are forced to accept work in sub-standard conditions for ridiculous remuneration. The exercise of a great number of professions is interdict to the Afghan workers in Iran. Even with those which have the work and residence permit the most arduous and badly paid work is proposed.

Child Labour

In 2006, out of 13,253,000 children between 10 to 18 years old, 3.6 million were outside school systems. Out of these 3.6 million children, about 1.66 million were involved in some sorts of paid or unpaid employment. There are other reports showing children younger than 10 also involved in child labour. These children are involved in many industries, including carpet waving and brick making as well as small workshops and agriculture and farming. Many work with their parents and in domestic work and others work in streets, selling cigarettes, flowers, washing cars, shining shoes or are involved in illegal activities such as stealing, drug selling, prostitution, and so on. Ever-increasing poverty and growing income and wealth inequality in Iran are considered the main causes of the increase in the numbers of street children and child labourers.

IRI and ILO

The entire delegates from Iran to the International Labour Organization (ILO) are made of the representatives of the IRI. The so-called “worker’s representatives” among Iranian delegates are representatives of government-sponsored organizations, like "Workers' House" which have had a direct role in the suppression of the labour activists and workers' rights in Iran. In the past number of years, independent workers' organizations in Iran have been sending numerous protest letters to the ILO regarding this lack of representation and the violation of workers' rights without receiving a favourable response.

What can we do?

Worker-to-worker solidarity: work towards real exchanges of experiences between the Canadian Iranian labour movements. Contact CUPE Ontario International Solidarity Committee to arrange for education workshops in your regions/locals.

Support workers' struggles against repressive and anti-worker policies of the Iranian regime and campaign for the freedom of imprisoned workers and for formation of independent workers' organizations in Iran and for social and economic justice.

Actively oppose the war threats and military intervention against Iran by the US government and its Canadian and European counterparts. Call for an end to economic sanctions. The economic sanctions have been disastrous for ordinary Iranians and resulted in further expansion of poverty, destitution, unemployment and repression throughout the country.