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“If I deserve it, it should be paid to me”: a social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry 1951-1973

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CHAPTER FOUR

TWO FACES OF LABOUR ACTIVISM:

MEDIATION AND MILITANCY IN THE OIL INDUSTRY

Oil nationalisation in Iran epitomized the victorious culmination of integrated action by the elites in the political decision-making process and workers' protests in the fields and refineries. When this blissful moment was crushed by the military coup of 1953, the Iranian labour movement faced a radical change in the political climate. The years after the 1953 military coup in Iran constitute the consolidation of the monarchy. During this process labour unions were outlawed, political opposition was suppressed, and, in 1957, SAVAK, the State Intelligence and Security Agency, which would establish itself as a main actor in this repression in the following years, was founded by cadres of the military coup. The labour issue was approached as a matter of internal security, and was regulated by a new law in 1959 that permitted the registration of labour unions on the condition that they underwent surveillance by SAVAK.

Marked by these legal barriers to trade unionism, the suppression of political opposition by an increasingly authoritarian regime, and the lack of large-scale transformative collective action by workers (in comparison to the periods immediately preceding the 1953 coup and the 1979 revolution), these years, the long 1960s, have been described in the historiography of Iran as the 'dark years of Iranian labour movement'.

This chapter has two aims. First, based on archival resources, types

of labour activism in the oil industry of the South in the period under study (1951-1973) are documented. Second, the history of workers' activism in this period is contextualized in its historical continuity and by a description of the contemporary social and political developments in Iran. For the latter aim, I interrupt the chronological narrative and give a brief history of labour activism in the oil industry going back to its founding years, focusing on the cornerstones of this history, and present major national political and social developments in parallel with the developments in the oil industry. I argue that oil workers' activism in this period involved a wide spectrum of fronts, and various mechanisms and stages were employed to pursue class interests. This is despite a dominant narrative of labour activism of the period that focuses on state repression and the structural inabilities of the working class to engage in collective action, which takes this period as an "interlude before an inevitable storm"⁵⁹² or "a long night"⁵⁹³ for the working class.

Repression and reform, which shaped the social and political climate of these long 1960s, necessitated the use of mediation and militancy interchangeably. This was reflected in the tactics and discourses of worker activists, who on the one hand appropriated the regime's discourse for their own ends, and on the other hand continued to organize undercover.

Early Years of Trade Unionism in Iran and the Particularity of the Oil Industry

Organized labour activism and the rise of parliamentary left wing politics share a parallel and linked trajectory in Iran. For communists, the working class and its organisations were seen as the main actor of the systemic change that they struggled for, and so have occupied a primary position

592 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 450.

593 Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 202.

on their political agenda. Therefore, when communists could organize, they took priority in organizing workers, forming unions, and managing or leading them. It was similar for social democrats, who carried the issue of the welfare of workers to parliament. This linked trajectory was not only a product of the active engagement of left wing parties in forming labour organisations, but also of the precautionary activities of the Iranian state in the form of conciliating with labour to avoid their recruitment by radical leftist forces. Apart from the changes in the political system in Iran, which had short periods of experiment with representative politics and parliamentarism in 1906-25, 1941-48, and 1951-53, international factors were also effective in shaping the opportunities for the workers to organize and speak up. The international balance of power during WWII, particularly during the Allied occupation of Iran, and the context of the Cold War, brought international support for the precautionary measures taken by the Iranian state, and weakened the position of militant workers. The fact that AIOC, a British company, the biggest shareholder of which was the British state itself, was the largest employer of industrial workers in Iran made these international factors even more relevant.

Largely due to this latter factor, trade unionism in the oil producing South was very much a latecomer in comparison to other cities and sectors in Iran, where the first attempts started in the beginning of the 20th c. following the transition to the constitutional regime in 1906. After the first initiatives of printers in 1906, 1910 and 1918, and consecutively the bakery and textile workers in Tehran, the General Trade Union (GTU) of Workers of Tehran, *Ettihadieh-e Omoumieh Kargaran-e Tebran*, was founded in 1921.⁵⁹⁴ Later on, unions from other cities would join GTU and the General Trade Union would be called as Central Council of Federated Trade Unions, CCFTU. Both the 1918 trade union of the printers and the Central Council were initiatives led by the same communist activist Mohammad

594 Habib Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 8.

Dehgan, who later on published the socialist newspaper *Haghighat*, with the well-known slogan from the *Communist Manifesto*, “Workers of the World, Unite!” on its top right-hand corner.⁵⁹⁵ It was the same political context and the same network that gave rise to the formation of a communist party in Iran, the Persian Communist Party (PCP) in 1921.⁵⁹⁶

Apart from Tehran, early forms of trade unionism took place in northern cities like Tabriz and Rasht identified with their geographical proximity to the USSR, and thus involving shared experiences across borders.⁵⁹⁷ As one of the most important centers for textile production and trade in Iran, Esfahan was home to forerunners of trade unionism in these early years as well.⁵⁹⁸ By the mid-1920s, unions of dockers and fisheries workers in Anzali, carpet weavers and tailors from Mashad, and textile workers in Esfahan were affiliated with CCFTU.⁵⁹⁹ With the consolidation of the authoritarian rule of Reza Shah in 1925, the Communist Party and all initiatives affiliated with it were banned and went underground.

Paradoxically, it was in the beginning of this persecution that trade unionism started in the oil producing South. As we have seen in Chapter One, until the mid-1920s, the central state did not have much presence in the oil producing South. The Company not only undertook the responsibilities of the state in providing health and education facilities, but also maintained a police force, and even an intelligence service, which

595 Ibid., 9.

596 For studies on the links between PCP and the Central Council, see Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *The Left in Iran, 1941-1957 Revolutionary History, Volume 10, No. 3* (Merlin Press Limited, 2011) and Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law & Conditions in Iran 1900-41*.

597 Habib Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 8. For example, Iranian migrant workers returning from Baku were among the pioneers of trade union activism in Iran. See: Touraj Atabaki, “Disgruntled Guests: Iranian Subaltern on the Margins of the Tsarist Empire,” *International Review of Social History* 43, no. 3 (2003).

598 See Serhan Afacan, “State, Society and Labour in Iran, 1906-1941 : A Social History of Iranian Industrialization and Labour with Reference to the Textile Industry” (Leiden University, 2015).

599 Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1993), 62.

was influential in suppressing any form of resistance among the workers.⁶⁰⁰ Moreover, the composition of the workforce made the possibility of organized resistance among the Iranian workers less likely, as they made up the unskilled labour force without stable job contracts and employment security. There had been at least three strikes (in 1920, 1922, and 1924) led by Indian workers with demands for pay increases. The attempted solution for this was the repatriation of the rebellious Indian labour force in 1922.⁶⁰¹ Accordingly, Willem Floor names the Indian mechanic Mohammad Khan, who succeeded in organizing workers in Masjed Soleyman prior to the 1924 strike, as the first labour organiser in the oil producing South.⁶⁰² A gradual decrease in the number of Indian workers is salient after 1925.⁶⁰³

The 1929 Oil Strike

Although outlawed, Communist Party activists were engaged in organising workers in the mid to late 1920s in various cities of Iran, involving the aforementioned Tehran, Tabriz and Rasht, but also the oil producing South. After the first attempt at unionising in 1925, the Communist Party organized two secret congresses of oil workers, the first in 1927 and the second in 1929 before the first general strike in Abadan in May 1929.⁶⁰⁴ Starting from 1927, the Communist Party had sent a few of its members led by Yousef Eftekhari, who had studied in Moscow, to Abadan

600 See Cronin, 715.

601 Ronald Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 1: The Developing Years, 1901–1932*, 432–433. For a detailed study of Indian workers' strikes see Atabaki, "Far from Home, But at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry."

602 Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law, and Conditions in Iran 1900–41*, Occasional Papers Series 26, (Durham, 1985), 32.

603 See Table 10.1 in Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 1: The Developing Years, 1901–1932*, 401.

604 Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law, and Conditions in Iran 1900–41*, Occasional Papers Series 26, (Durham, 1985), 42–43.

to organize workers.⁶⁰⁵ According to Stephanie Cronin, this communist organisational agenda involved recruitment to a secret trade union and formation of workers' clubs, which the party viewed as centers for raising political consciousness in addition to their being hubs for social and cultural activities.⁶⁰⁶ Thus before the Company founded clubs for workers, oil workers had organized clubs for themselves in oil production centers like Abadan and Ahwaz. However, the Company saw these clubs as nests for labour radicalisation, and tried to appropriate them by forming its own, formal, workers' clubs. This opened a new front of struggle for workers occupying these clubs to have real control over the spaces.⁶⁰⁷ It was this quest for power over the clubs that initiated the 1929 strike.⁶⁰⁸

Before the strike took place, the Company and the state had already identified the labour activists' system of organisation (forming secret cells) and the leading activists (ninety-three of them).⁶⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the refinery workers of Abadan managed to stage a protest on May Day 1929, with demands for shorter working hours and higher wages. However, this triggered anxiety about the formation of communist labour cells in the Company, which called on the state to crash the emerging labour movement. Arrests peaked just after the May Day protest, but were not enough to prevent the mass strike, which started on 4th of May and continued with the organized wives of the arrested oil workers.⁶¹⁰ The protesting women, blocking refinery gates "accused the workers of not being men, of having

605 See Touraj Atabaki, "The Comintern and Labour Militancy in Iran," in *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

606 Stephanie Cronin, "Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (September 2010), 714-715.

607 Willem Floor, *Labour Unions, Law, and Conditions in Iran 1900-41*, 44.

608 Ibid., and Stephanie Cronin, "Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike."

609 Floor, 46.

610 Ladjevardi, 21 and Cronin, "Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class," 716.

no honor and no respect, of being indifferent to the fate of their brothers who had been imprisoned for their sake.”⁶¹¹ No workers of the day-shift entered the refinery on May 6th. Arrests followed and consecutively, two hundred workers, including nearly all labour leaders, were apprehended and deported from Abadan.⁶¹²

Cronin points to an interesting *shabnameh*, literally the ‘night-letters’, which she explains as “anonymous broadsheets, leaflets or posters stuck on city walls or other public places, or circulated by hand,” circulated during the 1929 protests. She argues that although designed as anonymous, and therefore meant to escape from legal scrutiny, these posters employed a language similar to the language of subaltern petitioning, which avoids conflict, appropriates the rulers’ discourse and appeals to the existing order while making a complaint and demanding justice.⁶¹³ This document left from 1929 strike is of great significance as it reveals that various repertoires of action were being employed by the workers in this very first organized mass strike in the oil industry. As we will see in the following pages, this conciliatory language or the language of subaltern petitioning as Cronin calls it, will also be employed in the workers’ collective actions in the post-coup years, which bears resemblance to the post-1925 authoritarian regime of Reza Shah. Moreover, Cronin points to the racist language in this *Shabnameh*, in which the Indian clerical staff are defined as “half-burnt people from the equator” and the Iranian workers as “the noble sons of Darius.”⁶¹⁴ This point sheds light on the variety of discourses present in workers’ repertoires of actions.

611 Cronin, “Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class,” 717.

612 Ibid., 719.

613 Ibid., 720.

614 Ibid.

Labour Activism During the Interwar Years

The time of the constitutional monarchy from 1905-08, the first solid trade union activities between 1921- 25, the occupation years of 1941-46, and nationalisation and pre-coup years of 1951-1953; periods of relative diversity and political activism and lack of authoritarian rule, besides the obvious years of revolution 1977-79, are significant periods of labour activism in the historiography of Iran.⁶¹⁵ However, as the 1929 strike shows, collective actions, and workers' efforts at self-organisation, persisted in the "gaps" between these years. The oil producing South was not an exception. During Reza Shah's authoritarian rule, there were strikes in other parts of the country, such as the 1931 strike in the Vatan textile factory in Esfahan.⁶¹⁶ These "gaps" are in fact the focus of this study.

In 1931, a "national security" law (a.k.a. anti-communism bill) was introduced in the parliament, and subsequently two thousand Communist Party members were arrested. The bill averred that being affiliated with any group with a program against the monarchy or supporting a collectivist ideology would be subject to three to ten years of imprisonment. Abrahamian argues that "the vague and archaic" Arabic term *ishtiraki*, meaning collectivism, was used in the document to indirectly include socialism, communism and anarchism, altogether, in the blacklist.⁶¹⁷ This legal step increased the severity of the repression over the anti-regime activists and their political engagements. However, harshening the conditions did not necessarily mean that the bill achieved its target

615 For the interwar labour movement in Iran see Touraj Atabaki, "The Comintern and Labour Militancy in Iran," in *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800*, 304- 309.

616 Serhan Afacan, "Revisiting Labour Activism in Iran: Some Notes on the Vatan Factory Strike in 1931," *International Labour and Working Class History ILWCH*. (Forthcoming).

617 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 154.

absolutely. Ladjevardi argues that the widespread conclusion that this bill put an end to all workers' protests until 1941 was not correct. There had been strikes in Mazandaran and Nowshahr, and workers had tried to reorganize their unions in Tabriz and Mashad, albeit unsuccessfully.⁶¹⁸ Abrahamian points to university students' strikes at the College of Medicine in 1934, the Teachers' College in 1936, and the College of Law in 1937.⁶¹⁹

Reza Shah's authoritarian state building efforts in the 1930s involved crushing the opposition and active engagement in the social and economic development of the country at the same time. Kaveh Ehsani divides the history of industrialisation in the interwar years into two periods: 1919-1931 and 1931-1941.⁶²⁰ While the first period points to state encouragement and facilitation of private investments, the second period marks the state's direct interventionist policy, which was the road also taken by many other countries after the great depression of 1929. The 1930s were marked by a rapid industrialisation process with state investment. Ehsani states that the annual rate of the state budget allocation to industrial investment had grown twenty-five per cent on average in that period.⁶²¹

This rapid industrialisation gave rise to the formation of an industrial working class, with necessities that could not be ignored.⁶²² The first initiative for regulating this development took place in 1923 as a result of ILO influence, in the shape of a labour directive addressed to the Kerman governor. This directive regulated the working hours, workplace hygiene, and prohibited child labour among other measures in the carpet

618 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 22.

619 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 155.

620 Kaveh Ehsani, "The Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry: The Built Environment and the Making of the Industrial Working Class (1908-1941)" (Leiden University, 2014).

621 Kaveh Ehsani, "The Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry," 384-385.

622 See also Serhan Afacan, "State, Society and Labour in Iran, 1906-1941: A Social History of Iranian Industrialisation and Labour with Reference to the Textile Industry" (Leiden University, 2015).

industry. However, despite the fact that the police were put in charge of implementing the decree, the directive was not put in force.⁶²³ The 1930s were fruitful years in terms labour regulations. The first comprehensive one, “Regulations for factories and Industrial Establishments,” which dealt with workplace safety and hygiene, maternity leave, and work clothing among other issues, was accepted in the parliament in 1936.⁶²⁴ The 1937 Act regarding the employment of prisoners in industrial and agricultural sectors, and the 1939 Act regarding the working conditions of medical personnel in government service followed suit.⁶²⁵ As Ehsani argues, the issuing of these laws and regulations does not necessarily mean that the living and working conditions of the workers improved as a result, or that they were put in force, but it does mean that the workers gained a collective voice to pose demands that had to be incorporated by the state. We observe the same in the oil workers-Company relations in the 1930’s, when the first systematic attempts at providing housing and social amenities were initiated.⁶²⁶

Therefore, while political repression was one of the reasons for the labour movement’s sporadic nature in the 1930s, the recognition and incorporation of some of the workers’ rights into the system should also be taken into account in explaining it. As we will see in the post-1953 coup years of authoritarian rule, the repression of the labour movement and the incorporation of workers’ demands into the system at the same time is far from exceptional to the 1930s. Moreover, as Ehsani argues for the interwar years, workers’ “collective influence on shaping events” cannot be measured with respect only to the moments of their open militancy.⁶²⁷

623 Floor, *Labour Unions, Law, and Conditions in Iran 1900-41*, 88-89.

624 Ladjevardi, 24.

625 Kaveh Ehsani, “The Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry,” 386.

626 See Chapter 3.

627 Kaveh Ehsani, “The Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry,” 382.

Labour Activism under Occupation

When the Allied forces occupied Iran in 1941, another chapter in workers' activism was opened. Firstly, it literally brought a change in the rule of the country by replacing Reza Shah with his son Mohammad Reza, and reinstating the constitutional regime. This reintroduced the possibility of representational democracy, and workers' intervening in political decisions openly and in parliamentary ways, albeit with restrictions. Following the institution of the new monarch, an amnesty for political prisoners was issued, and new political channels were opened. Shortly afterwards, the released communists formed the "party of masses", *Tudeh*. The other parties that were formed after the 1941 regime change were the Comrades' Party (*Hezbe Hamrahan*), the Iran Party (*Hezb-e Iran*), which campaigned for Mosaddegh at the Fourteenth Majles elections, the Justice Party (*Hezb-e Adalat*), which later changed its name to the Peoples' Party in 1944 (*Hezb-e Mardom*), the National Unity Party (*Hezb-e Ettihad-e Melli*), and the Fatherland party (*Hezb-e Vatan*). Among these, the *Hamrahan* Party stands out as relevant to our subject of study, as the party was formed by Mostafa Fateh, the highest ranking Iranian employee at the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, in 1942. Fateh had cooperated with Tudeh leaders in the paper *Mardom* (the People) and in an anti-fascist society, before founding his own newspaper and the *Hamrahan* Party.⁶²⁸

The elections for the Fourteenth Majles (November 1943- February 1944), described as "the most competitive, and hence the most meaningful of all elections in modern Iran" by Abrahamian⁶²⁹, became one of the sites of struggle for workers as well. In these elections, the workers of Esfahan and Tabriz sent their representatives to the parliament. However, despite the fact that they constituted the majority of the population of Abadan, the workers of Abadan did not get the opportunity to send a representative

628 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 188.

629 Ibid., 186.

from among them, but instead were represented by Ziyaeddin Neghabet, described as “a man of wealth and a supporter of the status quo” by Habib Ladjevardi.⁶³⁰ However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Neghabet would not restrain himself in carrying the oil workers’ grievances to parliament either.⁶³¹ The *Tudeh* candidates won seventy per cent of the votes cast in their constituencies, and over thirteen per cent nation-wide.⁶³² However, none of their twenty-three candidates ran in the oil producing South.

Just after its first provisional conference in Tehran in 1942, *Tudeh* engaged in labour organizing activities beyond the capital. The party was organized among the former migrants to the USSR, the *muhajarin* community in Mashad, the teachers, rice cleaners, and tobacco workers in Rasht, and textile workers in Esfahan.⁶³³ By the time of the 1943 elections, *Tudeh* was a nationwide organisation.⁶³⁴ Subsequently, *Tudeh* members founded the Trade Union of the Workers in Iran (*Ettehadieh-e Kargaran-e Iran*), which later merged with the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions of Iranian Workers and Toilers (CCFTU).⁶³⁵ Despite the official discourse of the Party to keep the Party and the Union separate, such as keeping the membership of the Union only to workers, and opening membership to workers affiliated with any political party, this was hardly achieved. Non-worker members of *Tudeh* did take part in the CCFTU, officially as advisers. *Tudeh* shaped the leadership of the CCFTU.⁶³⁶ The CCFTU was initiated with sixty affiliated unions and more than one hundred thousand members. However, *Tudeh* did not engage in institutional and

630 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 121.

631 See the Chapter 3.

632 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 291-292.

633 Ibid., 291.

634 Ibid.

635 The former initiative of the CCFTU founded by the Persian Communist Party was outlawed in 1927, to be revived in 1944. See Ibid., 139.

636 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 30-31.

open labour organizing in the oil industry, in line with its non-engagement in the elections in the oil producing South, until after the end of Allied occupation, due to the importance of oil exports to the Soviet Union and Allied powers.⁶³⁷ At the time of the Allied occupation of Iran, this organic tie between *Tudeh* and the CCFTU brought forth the discouragement of labour activism in the oil industry. As quoted by Ladjevardi, *Tudeh's* paper *Rahbar* stated in 1943:

“International fascism and international reaction do not allow us to utilize certain methods of struggle at this time. Our government is fighting against fascism. Our factories are operating for war and for the joint victory of our allies. Any action, at this time, that may interrupt production is wrong.”⁶³⁸

It was not only the oil industry, but also railways, in which *Tudeh* remained cautious in voicing labour's demands. Abrahamian records that *Tudeh's* discouragement of strikes in industries vital to the war effort was pursued to such an extent that the Party denounced the wildcat strikes in 1943 at AIOC installations in Kermanshah, in the coal mines in Shamshak, and the cement factory and state owned ammunition plant near Tehran, as “pro-fascist sabotage.”⁶³⁹ In fact, Atabaki argues that the strike in Kermanshah was led by Youssef Eftekhari's union, *Ettelahiyeh Kargaran Iran* (Trade Union of Iran - TUI), which was less concerned with complying to the interests of the Allied powers, particularly the Soviet Union.⁶⁴⁰

Tudeh engaged in organizing the non-oil workers of Khuzestan, such as road sweepers, irrigation cleaners, taxi drivers, cotton spinners, and bakery assistants. As a reaction to *Tudeh's* reluctance to organize oil workers, Abrahamian argues, two hundred employees, led by intellectuals

637 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 292.

638 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 36.

639 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 350.

640 Touraj Atabaki, “Chronicles of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946,” 11.

residing in Abadan, formed an independent union for Iranian workers of the oil industry, and organized a wildcat strike of 1200 labourers at the Kermanshah refinery in 1945.⁶⁴¹ As the first mass strike in the oil industry after 1919, this was seen as a product of *Tudeh* influence by British consulate diplomats,⁶⁴² even though the party had condemned the strike and the CCFTU had intervened to end it.⁶⁴³

Following the end of the war, *Tudeh* opened party branches in the oil producing South and formed the Union of Khuzestan Workers, KUC, (affiliated with the CCFTU), incorporating the independent trade union mentioned above.⁶⁴⁴ By 1946, the CCFTU claimed 186 unions and a total membership of more than three hundred thousand workers, white and blue collar. The Union claimed to have organized forty-five thousand oil workers and the same number of non-oil workers in Khuzestan.⁶⁴⁵

The party had approximately one thousand members in the region in 1946. The membership was composed of employed and unemployed AIOC workers, and the leaders of the party were the drivers, fitters, and plant attendants employed by the AIOC.⁶⁴⁶ By mid-1946, *Tudeh* had an exceptionally strong presence in Khuzestan, to the point of overshadowing the provincial administration by determining food prices and controlling communications among other activities.⁶⁴⁷ Communist activists took over the company buses, ending racially segregated public transport, and warned

641 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolution*, 350, 359-360.

642 Ladjevardi, 119.

643 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 359-60. Based on the British ambassador's assessment, Abrahamian points to the possibility of *Tudeh* engagement in this strike despite the open condemnation of it by the party.

644 Ibid., 360.

645 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 353.

646 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 123-124.

647 See Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 361-362 and Rasmus Christian Elling, "War of Clubs: Struggle for Space and the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan," n.d..

hoarding local merchants to reduce their prices.⁶⁴⁸ Rasmus Christian Elling demonstrates how workers' clubs founded by the Company were used by *Tudeh* activists to organize and hold public political meetings.⁶⁴⁹

The 1946 Oil Workers' Strike

In this milieu of strong communist presence, KUC organized the Mayday parade in 1946 as its first public appearance. The Mayday parade was followed by a number of strikes involving the Abadan distillation plant and Agha Jari oil fields.⁶⁵⁰ The main grievances were the lack of basic labour amenities and long working hours. Strikers asked for a wage increase, improvement in medical services, and sufficient access to drinking water and ice, among other issues.⁶⁵¹ Threatening the Company with the possibility of a general strike, the Agha Jari workers succeeded in achieving some of their demands, namely a rise in wages. Other demands, such as Friday pay and an annual vacation, were left to further discussion.⁶⁵² The Company's further unwillingness to come to an agreement with respect to workers' demands, implement the ones that were promised, and the spread of "Agha Jari fever" to other parts of the oil industry and even to Tehran, increased the tension, and at the same time revealed the vulnerability of the trade union connection in the strikes.⁶⁵³ It has been argued that the control of the CCFTU over oil workers became much weaker with the unfolding of the following strikes in June and July.⁶⁵⁴ This should be linked to increasing persecution of *Tudeh* activists after the initial strikes. Ladjevardi claims that the Agha Jari strikers were not part of a union, but

648 Rasmus Christian Elling, "War of Clubs: Struggle for Space and the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan,"

649 Ibid.

650 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 360-361.

651 Atabaki, "Chronicles of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946," 13.

652 Ibid., 15.

653 Ibid., 16.

654 Ibid., 19-20.

the strike may have been promoted by the KUC, as the *Tudeh* press in Tehran supported the workers.⁶⁵⁵

The strike in Agha Jari revived again on July 10th, and martial law was declared in Khuzestan. Atabaki argues that the call for a general strike was a defensive move by the CCFTU against the approaching threat of attack by armed Arab activists of the Arab Union, mobilized by the British.⁶⁵⁶ The Company reports reject the claim of supporting Arab Union activists, and argue that the Company's relationship with Arabs, meaning the Arab contractors and the merchants, was "of a purely commercial character."⁶⁵⁷ Elling, demonstrating the conflicting narratives of the *Tudeh* and the British officials, challenges the argument that the Arab Union was a mere instrument in British hands, manipulated to suppress the Communist influence on Company workers, by pointing to the political struggle over hegemony between the Arab Sheiks and the *Tudeh* Party, and the concrete example of their struggle over the physical spaces of political representation, namely the clubs.⁶⁵⁸ Both Atabaki's and Elling's recent studies on the 1946 oil strike offer details and new perspectives to the accounts of one of the most significant and bloody strikes in Iran and the Middle East in history.

The strike, which lasted for sixty hours, involved seventy thousand workers, and ended with partial gains such as the right to Friday pay, and the increase in minimum wages retrospectively from the day that the new labour law was put into force (May 18th).⁶⁵⁹ In these sixty hours, forty-seven people were killed and some one hundred and seventy people were recorded as casualties.⁶⁶⁰ After the strike, the Company dismissed more

655 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 127.

656 Touraj Atabaki, "Chronicles of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946," 20.

657 "The Khuzestan General Strike in Perspective: A Review of the Recent Events in the South," 13 September 1946, BP Archive, ArcRef:129263.

658 Elling, "War of Clubs: Struggle for Space and the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan."

659 Atabaki, "Chronicles of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946," 23.

660 *Ibid.*, 1.

than a thousand workers, and the persecution of *Tudeh* activists became more severe, leading to the deportation of many of them.⁶⁶¹ The Party would still function as a legal body until the assassination attempt on the Shah in February 1949, of which *Tudeh* was accused and thus outlawed.⁶⁶²

Since it was organically linked to *Tudeh*, this meant the end of the official CCFTU story for the time being. Not only the party and the trade union were outlawed, but their leaders were also prosecuted in a military court, and were sentenced to a variety of penalties from five years imprisonment to the death penalty.⁶⁶³ However, the official banning of *Tudeh* in 1949 did not lead to the extinction of communist activities, particularly of their anti-British focus, with the emergence of the oil nationalisation movement. In fact, as Abrahamian argues, the rise of the nationalist movement can be seen as linked with the fall of *Tudeh*, as it became the former that lifted the banner of anti-colonial, anti-monarchy sensitivities after the ban on *Tudeh*.⁶⁶⁴

Post-1946 Dispute Solving Mechanisms

Just after the 1946 oil strikes which brought about the end of the CCFTU, its state-sponsored substitute, the Union of Syndicates of Iranian Workers, *Ettehadieh-e Sandika-ha-ye Kargarane Iran* (ESKI), was formed. ESKI was a direct invention of the governing Democratic Party of Iran, and was founded by the initiative of the Ministry of Labour and Propaganda. With measures like state employees' obligatory enrollment into the union,

661 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 305.

662 Cosroe Chaqueri, despite being a vehement opponent of the *Tudeh* Party, nevertheless argued that this assassination attempt was "stage-managed" and was a "royal plot against the *Tudeh* Party." Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *The Left in Iran, 1941-1957 Revolutionary History, Volume 10, No. 3* (Merlin Press Limited, 2011), 75-76. Abbas Milani argues that *Tudeh* leader Kianuri gave the assassination pistol to the assassin Fakhrarai, but that the assassination was the plan and idea of Fakhrarai himself. Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 131-134.

663 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 92.

664 Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 113-114.

and a monopoly on trade unionism given the ban on communist labour movement, ESKI achieved high numbers of members.⁶⁶⁵ However, Abrahamian argues that ESKI remained an institution of managers and engineers, as became visible in its first national congress, at which twenty-one of thirty-six delegates were engineers and two were blue-collar workers.⁶⁶⁶

Following the formation of ESKI, another trade union, *Ettehadieh-e Markazi-e Kargaran va Kashavarzan-e Iran* (EMKA), was formed from a nucleus of a split from an anti-*Tudeh* union of workers, artisans and peasants of Esfahan, which would be led by Amir Keyvan.⁶⁶⁷ Both ESKI and EMKA did not have a long shelf life, and were merged into another trade union confederation, Iran Trade Union Congress (ITUC), in 1951.⁶⁶⁸ However, the splits among the non-*Tudeh* or even anti-*Tudeh* trade unions, and workers' support for trade unions in any form they have available, reveals recognition of the function of the unions and labour activism in the society. Presence of strikes during this time of "government controlled unions"⁶⁶⁹ and employers' inconvenience even with the yellow unions, reveals that the picture is far from black and white.

Parallel developments took place in the oil producing South. Following the labour conflicts of great consequence in 1946 and the resulting pressures from London, the AIOC engaged in forming a trade union that would substitute for the communist one in 1947. The first one, the Oil Workers' Union,⁶⁷⁰ was initiated by one of the leaders of 1929 strike, Yousef Eftekhari, whose opposition to the Stalinist purge of 1935-1938 in prison had exposed him to a backlash from his fellow *Tudeh*

665 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 174-175.

666 Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 238.

667 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 168.

668 Ibid., 187-188.

669 Ibid., 172-192.

670 This union is also referred to as Petroleum Workers' Union in the literature.

inmates.⁶⁷¹ This Company-supported initiative did not result in success, and Eftekhari left the oil producing South once again, going to Tehran to work at the Ministry of Labour.⁶⁷² With no basis in the oil industry, ESKI would try to revitalize this Oil Workers' Union by accrediting the few remaining members of the union under the umbrella of ESKI in 1949. However, AIOC workers had founded their alternative union, the Central Union of Workers of Khuzestan, already.⁶⁷³ Formed in 1948 and led by Amir Quli Mohammadi, the union had branches in Abadan, Masjed Soleyman, Haft Kel and Lali.⁶⁷⁴

Ladjevardi argues that its lack of political stance had made it into an unpopular union, and the Company thus resorted to the factory councils that had emerged as a result of the 1946 labour law as a means of responding to labour disputes.⁶⁷⁵ However, as we will see in the following pages, this union led by Mohammadi was far from a failure; it had a political stance and significant support from AIOC workers. Factory councils were not independent of trade union fractions, either. By 1949, these two unions, the Central Union of (Oil) Workers of Khuzestan and the Oil Workers' Union, were the officially registered unions in Abadan and the Company recognized both.⁶⁷⁶ The other unions in Abadan were the union for contract workers, a union for contractors, and a union for bakers. By 1949, there was only one trade union in the fields area, in Masjed Soleyman: the Union of Workers in the Petroleum Area.⁶⁷⁷

671 Atabaki, "Chronicles of a Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946," 10.

672 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 146 and "Persia, The Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.: Labour Attache's Report," 23 June 1950, W. E. Thomas, Labour Attache, Tehran, in National Archives, LAB 13/519.

673 "Persia Labour Notes: September-October 1949" in National Archives, LAB 13/517. This union is also referred to as the Central Union of Oil Workers of Khuzestan in the literature.

674 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 147.

675 Ibid.

676 I.L.O., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office* (London: Staples Press Limited, 1950), 50.

677 I.L.O., I.L.O., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran*, 50.

The national and international trade union conferences, and the joint councils and committees formed according to the Labour Law, such as the factory councils, the boards for settlement of disputes and the High Labour Council, were the sites where differences and similarities between different currents in the labour movement would come to the fore.⁶⁷⁸

The first dispute-solving mechanisms in the relevant legislation were the joint departmental committees, where a case was discussed between the representatives of the workers and the employer without the intervention of a representative of the state.⁶⁷⁹ By 1949, there were thirty-six joint departmental committees active in Abadan, meeting once a month, which was intended to solve day-to-day problems.⁶⁸⁰

According to the 1946 Labour Regulation, the second level to solving disputes in industrial relations were factory councils, which were composed of one representative of the workers, one representative of the employer, and one representative of the Ministry of Labour. The union active in the industry nominated the representative of the workers to the factory council if the majority of the workers in the industry were unionized; if not it would be a majority vote by the workers themselves which would nominate the workers' representative. In early 1951, regulations concerning the factory council elections were set at a High Labour Council meeting. In that meeting, the right to vote was given to every worker above sixteen years of age and of Iranian nationality. To be elected, workers needed to be at least twenty-five years old, of Iranian nationality, literate and not connected with any illegal [read *Tudeh*] organisation. Two years of employment in the relevant factory was also required. Considering the high percentage of illiteracy among workers, it was designed that a large

678 Ibid., 51.

679 See Table 9 for the industrial dispute solving mechanism.

680 "Persia, The Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.: Labour Attache's Report," 23 June 1950, W. E. Thomas, Labour Attache, Tehran and Report for the Quarter January- March 1949 on the affairs of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in LAB 13/519.

picture of the candidate would be placed on top of each ballot box so that the voting worker would not need any assistance. In this meeting, the right to vote and be elected in the factory councils was extended to women workers. The reporter Robert M. Carr, US counselor for economic affairs, saw this latter move as a “psychological move” due to the lack of women labour activists or representatives in the preceding workers’ meetings.⁶⁸¹

The main tasks of the factory councils were to investigate individual disputes between the worker and the employer, and the administration of the Aid Funds.⁶⁸² The Aid Funds involved marriage allowances, sickness, maternity, accident, and death benefits.⁶⁸³ While individual disputes were to be solved at the factory councils, collective disputes, if not solved at the factory councils, would be carried to an arbitration board composed of one representative of employees and one representative of the employer, to be chaired by an umpire or a representative of the Ministry of Labour. If the dispute was not solved at the arbitration board, then it would be the local board of settlement of disputes that was entitled to deal with the issue.⁶⁸⁴ The board of settlement of disputes was not only involved in the settlement of disputes, but also in assessing the minimum living requirements of workers, and accordingly making recommendations to the High Labour Council in defining the minimum wage in a district.⁶⁸⁵

681 Labour developments- Recent decisions concerning factory elections. Robert M. Carr, Counselor for Economic Affairs in NARA, 888.02/1-/1350.

682 I.L.O., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office* (London: Staples Press Limited, 1950), 56-57.

683 “Persia, The Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.: Labour Attache’s Report,” 23 June 1950, W. E. Thomas, Labour Attache, Tehran, in

684 I.L.O., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office* (London: Staples Press Limited, 1950), 58.

685 Ibid.,

Table 9
Post-1946 Industrial Dispute Solving Mechanism

Joint Departmental Committee

(Voluntary, plant level, bi-partite, with representatives of the workers and employer, managed by the employer)



Factory Council

(Compulsory for workplaces with more than 20 employees according to the 1946 Labour law, tri-partite, equal representation of workers and employers with the presence of a representative of the Ministry of Labour)



Arbitration board/ Reconciliation committee

(Compulsory, tri-partite, a representative of workers, a representative of employer and an umpire or representative of Ministry of Labour)



Board of Settlement of Disputes

(Compulsory, local, tri-partite, the Governor or his representative, local representative of the Department of Justice and Ministry of Labour, two representatives of the workers and two of the employers)

The leaders of the trade unions in the oil industry were members of the factory councils as well.⁶⁸⁶ However, the formation of labour-management cooperation/dispute solving mechanisms worked in conflicting ways with the independent trade unions and their labour-centered strategies. On the one hand, they provided a formal space for the trade union leaders to represent workers and take part in decision-making mechanisms, while on the other hand it ruled out the possibility of strikes in practice. According to the 1946 labour law, the stages before a strike could be legally possible were the factory council, the arbitration board, the umpire, and the board of settlement of disputes, in consecutive order. The latter board was composed of two representatives of labour, two representatives of the employer and one representative of the government. This bureaucratic bottleneck was made more severe by the lapse of time it involved. Both the arbitration board and the board of settlement and disputes had twenty days respectively to solve the issue before a strike action could be taken by the workers.⁶⁸⁷

Despite the bureaucratic obstacles the legal dispute solving mechanism created, it also opened a new channel for the labour movement. Representing the workers in these, mostly, tripartite committees and councils became a front of struggle for workers of various political backgrounds.⁶⁸⁸ Accordingly, new amendments were introduced to curb this new channel of subversive activism. In 1951, a procedure for factory elections was coded by the government. According to this new procedure, all factory elections were to be supervised by a committee composed of the local governor (or the representative of), a Ministry of Labour official, two employers' representatives, and two workers' representatives approved by the Ministry of Labour. It was reported that the then undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour had stated that the employers' representatives were

686 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 147.

687 Ibid., 63.

688 W.E. Thomas, British Embassy, Tehran, December 1951. LAB 13/518.

involved in this supervisory committee to prevent communist candidates from being elected, as “they knew the workers better than anybody else.” However, in the very first factory council election after this amendment, which took place in a government owned grain silo to the south of Tehran, this procedure failed to produce the result it was designed for, and the communist candidate led the ballot box.⁶⁸⁹

According to the list of tasks sketched for the High Labour Council, the Council was designed both as an advisory and supervisory bureau for the Ministry of Labour, and also a think-tank institution in service of the Ministry. Preparing bills and regulations, drawing schemes for the implementation of them, approving minimum wage rates, studying unemployment and devising plans to deal with it were among the tasks envisioned for the Council, which involved three representatives of the workers, three representatives of the employers and several members of the concerned Ministries.⁶⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the presentation of workers’ delegates had to go through another bureaucratic filter, at which each registered union with more than 100 members was eligible to vote. As became obvious at the first conference, this procedure led to the monopoly of ESKI affiliated unions in determining the workers’ representatives.⁶⁹¹ In fact, it was in this conference where the right to represent oil workers was denied to Mohammadi, the leader of the Central Union of Workers of Khuzestan. As the leader of the most influential labour union in the oil producing South after the suppression of the *Tudeh* affiliated trade union movement, Mohammadi deserves a greater spotlight than he has ever received in the labour history of Iran.

689 Ibid.

690 ILO., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office* (London: Staples Press Limited, 1950), 59.

691 Ibid., 59-60

Amir Quli Mohammadi of the Central Union of Oil Workers of Khuzestan

Starting work as an electrical worker at the AIOC in the 1920's, Amir Quli Mohammadi was an active trade unionist in the "government controlled"⁶⁹² years of trade unionism. The Company dismissed him in March 1950 on the charge that he had made "threats of strike action and unauthorized absence from work"⁶⁹³ together with some five hundred workers deemed to be redundant.⁶⁹⁴

The Company saw Mohammadi as a capable trade unionist, who would fill the vacuum left by the unionists affiliated with *Tudeh* and other socialist unionists such as Yousef Eftekhari. Mohammadi was a member of junior staff, but also known to be popular among workers.⁶⁹⁵ The rising labour grievances voiced by workers both at collective and individual levels in the aftermath of the war, together with the new Labour Party government and its pro-trade union attitude on the home front of Britain, moved the Company to change its attitude towards trade unionism.⁶⁹⁶ The Company preferred to have a partner in negotiation to preempt labour disputes that would harm its interests. The British bureaucrats were well aware of the labour grievances involving lack of housing and amenities, the quality of the goods available and subsidized by the Company at the workers' stores, and the inadequacy of wages in coping with the rise in market prices. Reviewing the labour attaché reports after the WWII, it is clear that the British bureaucrats were in favour of improvements in the working and living conditions of the workers of the AIOC, as for

692 For this periodization, see Ladjevardi, "Rise and Fall of Government-Controlled Unions:1946-1953," in *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*.

693 F.M. Shepherd, "Monthly Report for March 1950," 14/4/1950, Tehran, LAB 13/518.

694 W.E.Thomas, Labour Attache, "The Anglo Iranian Oil Co Ltd.: The Labour Attache's Report," 23/6/1950, Tehran, in LAB 13/519.

695 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, "Labour Conditions: Anglo Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.," 22/3/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

696 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 122.

them, these problems were the cause of *Tudeh's* strength in the South. With the profile of an independent trade unionist, opting not for conflict but exhaustion of the given dispute solving mechanisms and keeping good relations with the Company's industrial relations advisors Tucker and Lindon, Mohammadi seemed to be a proper labour representative for the Company.⁶⁹⁷

However, after attending the ILO Petroleum Committee meeting in Geneva in November 1948, he is reported to have established a leftist, pro-*Tudeh* image in the eyes of oil workers. British labour attaché Hird stated: "He was reported to have toured AIOC areas making inflammatory speeches, and his manner and methods were said to be indistinguishable from those formerly adopted by *Tudeh* leaders."⁶⁹⁸ In his speeches Mohammadi emphasized his effort in pushing the AIOC to meet the demands of the workers, such as an increase in the minimum wage, setting a forty-hour working week, and free transport. He stated that the failure of the Company to answer these demands should be met with strike. He is reported to have said:

Strikes in individual departments are of little avail, strikes should be arranged systematically and constitutionally, they should be kept within the law lest the leaders be arrested; and arrangements should be made for workers in all other departments to come out in sympathy so that it would assume the proportions of a general strike which is the only thing likely to gain anything for [us].⁶⁹⁹

697 V. W. D. Willougriby, Council General in Ahwaz, "Report for the Quarter January- March 1949 on the Affairs of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," 12/4/1949, Khorramshahr, LAB 13/519.

698 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, "Labour Conditions: Anglo Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.," 22/3/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

699 V. W. D. Willougriby, Council General in Ahwaz, "Report for the Quarter October-December, 1948, on the affairs of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company" 17/1/1949, Khorramshahr, LAB 13/519.

Two months after his arrival from Geneva, he took a week of absence without pay and went to Tehran as a delegate sent by the worker representatives of the Abadan factory councils to present the labour grievances to the Ministry of Labour.⁷⁰⁰ Arguing that the Abadan workers' councils had appealed to the board of settlement of disputes but could not get any response, Mohammadi demanded the Ministry of Labour intervene. The issues he mentioned involved the inadequacy of housing, wages, clothing, and the readjustment of prices of the wage basket. He drew attention to the casualisation of labour due to Company's delegating parts of the work, which was previously done by the Company workers, to subcontractors. He claimed that suspensions from work for disciplinary reasons were employed arbitrarily and without much consideration. He demanded transparency about offences attributed to workers and on punishments. However, he was advised to discuss the issues with the Company's then industrial relations advisor, Lindon, back in Abadan.⁷⁰¹

Mohammadi's impact went beyond oil workers. In his speeches, he would address workers working in others sectors in Khuzestan, as well and his contribution to the strike among Khuzestan bus service workers was not a secret.⁷⁰² On 27th September 1949, a workers' congress was convened in Tehran to elect the representatives that would occupy the three workers' seats at the High Labour Council. Although the ESKI leadership was promised the seats informally by the Ministry of Labour, EMKA and the AIOC workers demanded their share of representation. The AIOC workers' representative was Mohammadi, who no longer had a positive image in the Ministry of Labour and the Company. His

700 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, "Labour Developments: Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," 2/2/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

701 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, "Labour Conditions: Anglo Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.," 22/3/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

702 V. W. D. Willougriby, Council General in Ahwaz, "Report for the Quarter October-December, 1948, on the affairs of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company" 17/1/1949, Khorramshahr, LAB 13/519.

presence as the AIOC labour delegate was not welcomed by the Ministry of Labour, which dismissed their own Khuzestan representative, Bakhtiar, upon his accreditation of Mohammadi's attendance as an AIOC labour representative. However, the demands of Mohammadi and the EMKA representative could not be ignored, and the Ministry became involved, assuring one seat each to EMKA and AIOC workers at the High Labour Council. Nevertheless, the AIOC seat was not given to Mohammadi but to another worker, which Mohammadi himself did not dispute.⁷⁰³

While the British labour attaché, Thomas, argued that Mohammadi's cooperation with the state ended with Dr. Bakhtiar's departure from Abadan;⁷⁰⁴ the Consul General in Ahwaz, Willoughby, claimed that the initial conflict between the *Tudeh* and Mohammadi might well have been staged by the two parties to strengthen Mohammadi's "independent trade unionist" position and provide an opportunity for *Tudeh* to gather strength in its underground organisation.⁷⁰⁵ With its one thousand active members organized in cells, *Tudeh* was still an influential organisation among oil workers in 1949.⁷⁰⁶

Mohammadi was dismissed after his arrest by military authorities upon efforts to organize a strike in the Abadan refinery for the reengagement of the dismissed workers. Not only efforts to strike, but also open meetings for trade union activities were banned under military rule. The Company believed that unless he was dismissed and deported from Abadan, a general strike was very much likely to take place. Mostafa Fatch of the AIOC, stating that his dismissal "had improved the relations

703 K.J. Hird, "Persia Labour Notes, September- October 1949," 10/11/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/517.

704 W.E.Thomas, Labour Attache, "The Anglo Iranian Oil Co Ltd.: The Labour Attache's Report," 23/6/1950, Tehran, in LAB 13/519.

705 V. W. D. Willoughby, Council General in Ahwaz, "Report for the Quarter October-December, 1948, on the affairs of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company" 17/1/1949, Khorramshahr, LAB 13/519.

706 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, "Labour Conditions: Anglo Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.," 22/3/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

between the Company and the workers,” narrated the dismissal in the 1950 ILO Petroleum Committee meeting in Geneva as such:

[W]hen the Company had occasion to dismiss about 800 workers who had become redundant and had paid them their leaving gratuities or offered the re-training for other duty, Moham[m]adi stated that he could get them re-instated with the consequence that they refused and remained in the Abadan area, spending their gratuity. When Moham[m]adi failed to carry out his promise, the Company, at the request of the Government gave special ex gratis payment to these workers to make up the money they had lost when awaiting the result of Moham[m]adi’s efforts. Moham[m]adi thereupon collected together about 1,000 unemployed who had no connection at all with the dismissals and told them they could claim a similar payment. As there was danger of this leading to a riot, the authorities ordered Moham[m]adi to leave Abadan and the Company therefore had no alternative but to dismiss him.⁷⁰⁷

Mohammadi had himself sent a letter to this ILO Petroleum Committee meeting in Geneva complaining about the cooperation of the Company and the military authorities in persecuting labour activists and instituting fake labour representatives chosen by the Company.⁷⁰⁸

According to the British labour attaché, Hird, the Central Union of Oil Workers had around three thousand members in 1949.⁷⁰⁹ When strikes that flamed the oil nationalisation movement erupted in 1951, British bureaucrats were still suspicious that Mohammadi might have been in touch with leftist activists at the forefront, despite his deportation from Abadan and working as a taxi driver in Ahwaz.⁷¹⁰

707 Quoted in J. W. Farrell, “Debate on the Report of the ILO Mission to Iran,” in FO 371/82402.

708 See Appendix III for Mohammadi’s full letter.

709 K.J. Hird, Labour Attache, “Labour Conditions: Anglo Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.,” 22/3/1949, Tehran, LAB 13/519.

710 W.E.Thomas, Labour Attache, “Persia: Labour Attache’s Report, March 1951,” LAB 13/518.

Years of “Real” Nationalisation (1951-1954)

When the heat of nationalisation was at its peak in mid-1951, the trade union presence in the oil producing South had already weakened. The dismissal of Mohammadi deactivated the Central Union of Workers of Khuzestan, and the new merger union, the ITUC, which was formed just before the nationalisation, did not have an active connection with the labour movement in the oil industry. A product of the joint trade union committee initiative facilitated by the government and the non-communist ESKI, EMKA and the independent union, the ITUC took over ESKI's membership at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) upon its formation in 1951. Formed after a ten-day long congress in February 1951, the constitution of the ITUC envisioned a General Council consisting of representatives from twelve sectors, including oil production and refining.⁷¹¹ As oil workers were not represented in the congress, two seats in this council were reserved for them. However, due to various reasons, such as the distance between the oil producing South and Tehran where the ITUC meetings took place, and the failed experience of “independent” trade unions such as Central Union of Oil Workers in the South and the fate of its leading cadres, for a long period the ITUC's connection with the South did not go beyond the delegates of the workers of the oil industry, who would seldom participate in the meetings in the capital city of Tehran. These delegates, who were representatives of the oil workers at existing, legal industrial relations dispute solving mechanisms, were de facto trade union leaders, albeit of a smaller scale and not having much effect over the whole industry. Moreover, given the ITUC's refusal to affiliate itself with the campaign for nationalisation of oil, these factory

711 Robert M. Carr, Counselor for Economic Affairs, “The Workers Congress of Iran, February 9-19, 1951,” 888.02/1-/1350, NARA. There were more than 200 delegates in this congress. Carr notes no female presence in the congress. The banners on the wall read: “Our union is a good guarantee for the rights of the farmers,” “Our objective is to secure a good fortune for all classes of the nation,” and “We are gathered here under the Iranian flag of the Lion and the Sun.”

representatives generally had adverse feelings about the ITUC.⁷¹²

Representing AIOC workers at the High Labour Council meetings at Tehran, Ismaelzadeh was one of those prominent labours' spokesmen during nationalisation. During the pro-nationalisation strikes of March-April 1951, Ismaelzadeh called on the High Labour Council to send a representative to the oil producing South, and to take part in the negotiations between the workers and the Company. He was reported to be openly associated with the *Tudeh*-organized National Society Against the Imperial Oil Company.⁷¹³ The National Society was formed by *Tudeh* as one of its legal front organisations such as the Society for Democratic Youth, Society for Democratic Women, Society to Help Peasants, and many others in late 1950 and early 1951.⁷¹⁴

Spring 1951 Strikes of Nationalisation

The strikes in March 1951 started when the "outstation allowances" given to compensate for the lack of amenities in the new fields of operation were cut in the fields at Norouz, the Iranian New Year. These were followed by apprentices' strikes in Abadan and by workers in Masjed Soleyman, and other centers in the fields area. An increase in wages, in annual leave, and free accommodation were the main demands, and this wave of strikes that built up to the nationalisation movement was repressed harshly. Martial law was implemented, tanks and troops were stationed around the protestors, and gas bombs (handed by the British consul to the Iranian authorities) and volleys were fired.⁷¹⁵

At its peak, at the end of March, twelve thousand workers

712 W. E. Thomas, "Labour Attache's Report, January and February 1951," Tehran, LAB 13/519.

713 W. E. Thomas's letter to A. Greenhough at Ministry of Labour and National Service, 16/4/1951, LAB 13/519.

714 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 319.

715 FO 248/1524.

participated in the strike by not showing up at the factory and many others by engaging in short, consecutive work stoppages. Twenty thousand *Tudeh* led workers and supporters were reported to have marched on the streets of Abadan. In Bandar Mashur, military troops fired on the marching group including women and children, killing a number of them. On 12th April, a “battle” took place between the protestors and Iranian security forces around a movie theater in Abadan, where twenty-five British were also present, lasting for five hours. “Brigades” from Ahwaz, Esfahan and support from Tehran were sent.⁷¹⁶ On this day, three British employees of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and 6 Iranians were reported as killed during clashes.⁷¹⁷ This was reported as the first instance of violence after the overturning of two company buses during the first days of the strike.⁷¹⁸ More than a hundred kilograms of TNT was stolen from company stores during the strikes.⁷¹⁹ Solidarity meetings and strikes with oil workers were organised in other cities, i.e., Esfahan.⁷²⁰

During strikes in mid-April, workers were reported to put welding wire and other pieces of metal in the machinery in Abadan to slow down operations. Picketing continued after the 12th of April. It is reported that on 15th of April “the refinery was almost completely closed.” The AIOC reported that this was the first time after 1918 that the refinery was closed. During the strike, Abadan Refinery’s production was reduced by half.⁷²¹

716 US Ambassador Grady reporting almost daily from Tehran to the Secretary of State, 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

717 G.W. Furlonge, 25/4/1951 and “Current unrest in Khuzestan,” 21/4/1951 in FO 248/1524. Furlonge claims that nine British citizens, including two children, are also killed while the US Ambassador Grady names them as, not seriously, wounded, 13/4/1951 in 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

718 Robert M. Carr, Counselor for Economic Affairs, “The Strike in the AIOC oil concession area,” 17/5/1951. 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

719 Grady, Telegram no 2426, 15/4/1951 in 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

720 Grady, Telegram no 2427, 15/4/1951 in 59/250/41/11/1 NARA and Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 369.

721 “The Strike in the AIOC oil concession area,” Robert M. Carr, Counselor for economic affairs, 17/5/1951, 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

While the strikes in the fields were seen as industrial strikes by Robert M. Carr, the US Counselor for Economic Affairs, strikes in Abadan were seen as “political strikes.” This is not without any ground. The strikes in the fields had started as a protest against the reduction in real wages with the cutting off of outstation allowances, while the latter were initiated by Abadan Technical Institute students for lower passing marks and improvement in the status of the technical students in comparison with the staff.⁷²²

In a report issued just after the strikes were over in May 1951, the British consul in Ahwaz, after visiting Masjed Soleyman, Bandar Mashur, Lali and Agha Jari, recorded that the British Staff were trying to cope with the uncertainty by sending their families and personal belongings back home. The consul noted that:

The British staff and Persian graded and most Persian junior or non-graded staff are working normally, but the labourers are working at half speed; this is particularly noticeable in Agha Jari and Bandar Mashur. I am told they are marking time to see what will happen to the Company and in the meantime do not want to show too much enthusiasm in front of the many agitators who are in the area, nor do they want a complete rupture with the British in charge, in case these remain on as their bosses. This is one of the difficulties facing the British staff and is most frustrating.⁷²³

Moreover, the consul points out that Iranian officials play “a new Persian game,” namely “annoying the British staff and hampering their work” by employing security measures meticulously when it comes to the British. The Consul exemplifies this “Persian game” as such:

The Fields Manager Southern district has to pass the same check point on an average of four times a day. He always has the same car and driver, and the same corporal is nearly

⁷²² Ibid.

⁷²³ Letter of the British Consul General in Ahwaz to the British Embassy in Tehran, 15/5/1951, FO 248/1524.

always on duty. He is, however, stopped on each occasion while he is asked his name, where he is going to and why, and where he has come from- with the corporal looking as if he had never seen the [fields manager] in his life before.⁷²⁴

Aware of the fact that Iranians riding in buses were not stopped, the reporting consul argued:

“great restraint and self-control is necessary and it is a credit to all concerned that so far no tempers have been lost and thereby a more serious incident provoked.”⁷²⁵

There were no trade unions behind the strikes or concerted mobilisation. However, the leaflets distributed during strikes in the fields had the signature of the National Society Against the Imperial Oil Company.⁷²⁶ Moreover, the National Society organized a rally in Tehran’s Parliament Square in the midst of the March-April protests on April 13, attended by more than four thousand people. The four speakers from the oil fields were reported to state:

the imposition of martial law in the oil fields not justified, that national front had betrayed workers by not protesting against it, that US-UK discussions [in] Washington on oil situation is unjustified interference in Iran internal affairs and that “British pirates should be thrown into sea.” One minute silence “for those who fell at Abadan” was observed at close.⁷²⁷

Two activists associated with the National Society and a similar “Association for Iran’s Freedom,” Ghaffari and Lankarani were arrested. The reinstatement of these two activists would persist as an ongoing issue between the labour representatives and the Company after oil

724 Ibid.

725 Ibid.

726 British Consul in Khorramshahr, “Review of Industrial Dispute in the AIOC, Southern Areas,” 21/5/1951, FO 248/1524.

727 US Ambassador Grady reporting almost daily from Tehran to the Secretary of State, 59/250/41/11/1 NARA.

nationalisation.⁷²⁸

The negotiations between the Mosaddeq government representatives and the Oil Company gained momentum upon the formers' declaration of the Nine-point Oil Nationalisation Law on 1 May 1951, and reached a dead end in June, after which the AIOC central office was taken over by Iranian officials.⁷²⁹ An anti-sabotage bill was introduced right after nationalisation of the oil industry to pre-empt the British employees' potential lack of cooperation with the National Iranian Oil Company, which was to replace the AIOC. However, this bill was soon withdrawn.⁷³⁰

Meanwhile, the ITUC's relation with the government became complicated. While it was supported if not founded by the Ministry of Labour to circumvent the labour movement with a view to preventing affiliation with the communist movement, the trade union confederation was not a simple instrument of state. The ITUC leaders claimed that upon nationalisation, they were not able to hold meetings, collect dues or determine how many members they had because of government pressure. This claim was supported by the observation that every government owned or supervised factory had a military security officer in charge of controlling the workers.⁷³¹ Apart from the obstacles to organizing, the ITUC leaders Qezelbash and Mohiman also campaigned for the reinstatement of the *Tudeh* related labour leaders, who had been dismissed and deported from Khuzestan upon their involvement in the protests of April 1951.

However, the ITUC leaders also claimed that the government

728 British Consul in Khorramshahr, "Review of Industrial Dispute in the AIOC, Southern Areas," 21/5/1951, FO 248/1524.

729 See Chapter One.

730 Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 118.

731 William Koren Jr, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, "Typical non-Communist labour groups in Iran, Their Status and Prospects," 6/12/1954, US Embassy of Tehran. Dispatch no 265 in *A Guide to confidential U.S. State Department central files, Iran, 1950-1954 : Internal affairs, decimal numbers 788, 888, and 988, and foreign affairs, decimal numbers 688 and 611.88*, Harvard University.

was not seriously engaging in an anti-communism policy, and proposed their own “positive anti-communist program.” The ITUC demanded a monopoly on union organisation, supported by military organisation, and also governmental subsidy. In this period, independent trade union activity took place in Esfahan and Tehran.⁷³²

US consular reports argued that “communist agitation” was effective among refinery workers, particularly at the refinery workshops, composed mostly of skilled workers, and the Apprentice Training School, after nationalisation. Contract workers, particularly bus and truck drivers were also seen as “infiltrated by communists.” Junior staff were active in the strikes of 1946 and 1951 and the Company’s major junior-staff training institute, the Abadan Technical Institute, was seen as the motor of the 1951 uprisings.⁷³³

Despite the anti-communist sentiments of the institutionalized trade union movement and the government, *Tudeh* had gained a basis among workers in Khuzestan, particularly during the oil nationalisation movement, when the interests of the National Front and *Tudeh* had converged for a short period, which gave the latter the space to organize its political activities. The *Tudeh* linked labour movement not only regained its voice in Khuzestan, but also in Esfahan, mostly in solidarity with the oil nationalisation movement. These movements gave rise to the undercover reunification of the CCFTU, banned following the 1946 strike and the assassination attempt on the Shah. Abrahamian records thirty-two *Tudeh* related strikes in 1951 after the March-April strikes, fifty-five in 1952, and seventy-one in 1953 before the August 1953 coup.⁷³⁴ However, this space made available for *Tudeh* was fragile, as the 1931 anti-communist bill was still in force, albeit not enforced.⁷³⁵

732 Ibid.

733 Dispatch no 192 op.cit., Enclosure no 22.

734 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 369.

735 Ibid., 319.

One of the rare strikes recorded in that post-nationalisation, pre-coup era is a three-week strike in Abadan refinery between 7-21 March, 1952. It is reported that 30 workers engaged in strike action in solidarity with two workers whose promotion was denied. The strike took place in one of the repair shops at the Abadan refinery, and ended as a result of negotiations between the temporary administrative board of the National Iranian Oil Company and the workers.⁷³⁶

Workers' right to organize freely was not observed by the National Front government led by Mosaddeq (1949-1953), either. While there was a somewhat more liberal environment for workers and political activists in this period,⁷³⁷ not only were legal obstacles against workers' organisations continued and even fortified, but also direct persecution, as was seen with the arrest of labour activists leading the April-March 1951 strikes. In 1952, the government introduced the "law for social stability," which restricted labour unions, opted to control wage increases and criminalized strike organisation.⁷³⁸ Nevertheless, labour clubs continued to be centers for organizing labour activism.⁷³⁹

After Nationalisation

Nationalisation brought some changes in workers' behavior. The 1954 Oil Report written by William Koren Jr., the First Secretary of the US Embassy, sheds light on an interesting change in the workers' attitude vis-à-vis the Company after nationalisation. Koren noted a reduction in reported cases of theft on Company premises. According to the reports of the Company, incidences of theft were reduced drastically after nationalisation. The total loss brought about by theft amounted to 4.6 million Rials in the last full

736 1923-2014, The National Library and Archives Organisation of Iran (NLAI).

737 The 1954 Oil Report states that Communists worked openly during Mosaddeq's time. Their open activities involved petitioning the Company to enforce the rule of law and making speeches during work hours, among others. 1954 Oil Report op.cit.

738 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 370.

739 1954 Oil Report.

year under the AIOC. This was reduced to 1.7 million in the first year under NIOC management, and to less than half a million in the second and third full year. It has been argued that this might be due to increased discipline, or that the premises were not in use at full capacity due to the blockade. However it should also be mentioned that after nationalisation, the idea that the industry then belongs to the nation and not to the foreign company, the AIOC, could have an effect on these figures. While gas theft for domestic usage was widespread before nationalisation, it is reported that legal gasoline sales in the domestic market increased five-fold (from 4000 liters to 21,000 liters) after nationalisation. Moreover, the quality of thefts had changed. While number of incidents reported had increased, the value of the stolen items was much smaller. In Masjed Soleyman it was stated that theft had decreased due to the policy of discharging any employee involved in pilfering. Moreover, it was claimed that thefts increased seasonally as “tribes carry off company property, particularly electric and telephone wire, during their migrations.” Another solution to the theft issue was found by closing down a local salvage company to reduce the theft of scrap iron.⁷⁴⁰

Two nation-wide demonstrations, the July 1952 uprisings (*30 Tir*) and 1953 Mayday rally, stood out in this pre-coup era.⁷⁴¹ In July 1952, upon the royal refusal to approve the cabinet and particularly Mosaddegh's retention of the Minister of War position, the Prime Minister resigned and a five-day demonstration took place in major cities in his support. The main demonstration in Tehran on the 21st of July, or 30th of *Tir* in the Iranian calendar, was marked with bloodshed as the army used live ammunition against the protestors. However, protests ended up with the Shah's retreat and acceptance of the proposed cabinet, including Mosaddeq as the Minister of War, on the 22nd of July.⁷⁴²

740 William Koren, Jr. First Secretary of Embassy, 1954 Oil Report op.cit.

741 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 320.

742 Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath*, 242-243.

During the protests in Abadan, fourteen people were killed.⁷⁴³ The events were covered in the local newspaper *Bakhtar-e Emrooz*. In its 19th -20th of July (28th -29th Tir) issues, the newspaper wrote about pro-Mosaddegh protests in Abadan. Workers and shopkeepers were reported to chant “*Mossaddegh or death*”. After the news of strikes in Masjed Soleyman and Agha Jari spread among protestors in Abadan, all remaining shops were closed, and the march was claimed to grow to twelve thousand. A leaflet by protestors was distributed the night before, condemning the monarchy and asking the residents of Khuzestan to keep protesting until the demands were accepted. The telegraph office was the center of the gatherings. Meanwhile, the refinery workers went on strike, to be joined by workers of plants producing the city’s water, electricity, and ice. Some *Iran Party* officials were arrested under charges of cooperating with *Tudeh*.⁷⁴⁴

The day after the massacre in Tehran, twenty thousand people, including women and children, gathered in front of the telegraph office. Following the statements of the National Front read by representatives of the protestors, the general in charge of the region’s security announced the resignation of Ahmad Ghavam and thus, the victory of the protestors. The 30 Tir protests in Abadan were reported to end in a mixed feeling of celebration and mourning, chanting pro-Mosaddegh slogans and reading the Qur’an all night for the fallen protestors.⁷⁴⁵

Having hampered nationalisation with the blockade, the US and Britain engineered a coup against the Mosaddegh government on August 19, 1953. While the coup instated a military regime in all parts of Iran, it fortified the already existing martial law, which ruled the oil producing South. The US diplomat Koren observed that since the Coup, the Labour

743 Ettelaat July 23, 1952 cited in Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 135.

744 Bakhtar-e Emrooz, No 865-866, 28-29 Tir 1331 [1952], Abadan, cited in Hussain Makki, *Vaqay’-I 30 Tir 1331* (Tehran: Nashr-e Kitab, 1360 [1981]), 260-262.

745 Ibid., Bakhtar-e Emrooz, 1 Mordad 1331 [1952], Abadan.

Ministry representatives would frequently side with the Company rather than the workers.⁷⁴⁶

The legal dispute solving mechanism at the oil industry worked partially. The first step in this mechanism required workers bringing the issue to the attention of the immediate supervisor. If the supervisor could not solve the problem, personnel officers were involved. If it was not solved in this bipartite mechanism, the dispute was to be referred to the adjustment (arbitration) board, where a representative of the Khuzestan Labour Office would also be present. This mechanism worked to a large extent up until this level, however, after nationalisation, the further step, involving the meeting of the Board of Settlement of Disputes, composed of the governor or his representative, the chief of the Justice Department of Khuzestan, the Labour Ministry Representative, workers' representatives, and NIOC representatives, was defunct. Since 1951, the Board of Settlement of Disputes had not convened in Khuzestan. Koren claimed that since the oil industry was run by the NIOC as a state company after nationalisation, workers had "no option but resignation if they objected to the fact that there was no operating appeal apparatus."⁷⁴⁷ Therefore the mechanism was blocked, yet strikes undertaken without exhausting this mechanism continued to be illegal. However, strikes still took place, and most of them were not deemed illegal by the authorities. In some cases, striking workers even received their pay.⁷⁴⁸

The election of labour representatives exposed the vulnerability of the highly-fortified security measures of the post-nationalisation enmeshment of the state-Company. While elections for labour representatives were taking place in each division of the refinery, it was possible for the Company to prevent the election of the "undesirable candidate" by referring them to the police and army intelligence, which

746 William Koren, Jr. First Secretary of Embassy, 1954 Oil Report op.cit.

747 Ibid.

748 Ibid.

would in turn declare them ineligible for election. Koren pointed to the Company's elaborate system of security-checks for workers involving taking their fingerprints to avoid reengagement of workers who were linked to "political agitation" or theft. Giving low grades in oral examinations to Abadan Technical Institute trainees suspected of political engagement was also a tactic to prevent dissemination of leftist ideology and labour activism in the oil industry. However, as Koren states, this elaborate system could not prevent the presence of communist activity, mainly at the refinery and its related workshops.

Although no labour demonstrations were reported after the August 1953 coup, strikes continued to take place. In the year following the coup, in total 469 refinery workers were reported to have been involved in strikes, which lasted up to four hours and took two hours on average.⁷⁴⁹ However, these figures are not exhaustive, as the presence of strikes in other parts of the industry had also been reported. Work stoppages took place in the shipping, storage and export, tin and drum plant, restaurant, marine workshop, cargo, and garden sectors of the Company as well. 7-65 workers were reported to have been involved in these work stoppages per time.⁷⁵⁰ One of these strikes was on the demand for "dirty work pay" among labourers who handled wheat. The workers based their claim on the fact that workers who moved flour received a bonus of five Rials per day, so why should they not? A committee composed of two managers, the manager of the workshop and the manager of the refineries personnel, decided that handling of wheat did not qualify as "dirty work", and thus workers were not entitled for a bonus according to "custom". As they did not exhaust the dispute solving mechanism stated above, their strike was taken as illegal and their pay was reduced. However, they were not arrested.⁷⁵¹

749 Ibid. "Work stoppages and disturbances."

750 Ibid. Dispatch no 192, Enclosure 21.

751 Ibid.

Strikes took place in the fields as well. In 1953, a seven-day strike is reported in Masjed Soleyman, which Koren argues was broken due to the threats that “any worker from the hospital, power, or ice plants who stopped work would be shot, withholding the pay of striking workers, and warning others that they could legally be dismissed after seven days’ unexcused absence.”⁷⁵²

The post-coup labour management approached workers through a security-focused lens. This approach was epitomized by resorting to the Army Intelligence Service in filtering potential workers, and employing an army colonel as the Company’s security officer, who had made a list of six hundred communist workers employed in the Company. Informing on workers’ political affiliation was not only a job for the security officer, either. An Armenian graded staff employee had informed Koren that more than a hundred of the Armenian and Assyrian non-graded staff employees at the refinery were communists. After the coup, hundreds of workers were arrested with the charge of being communist. The ones suspected to be communist, but not arrested due to lack of evidence were transferred to other cities, where there were Company operations.⁷⁵³

Consortium Years (1954-1973)

The coup was a strong blow to the communist activists and the labour movement they were pioneers of. The years after the 1953 military coup in Iran constitute the reestablishment of the monarchy and has been narrated as the “long night”⁷⁵⁴ of the working class, which was marked by state surveillance and suppression. Studying the oil workers in Iran necessitates a revision of this argument. It is correct that the coup landed a strong blow on social and political activism in Iran. However, the story is more complex

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁴ Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 202.

than that. First, as there had already been martial law in the oil producing South, military rule brought severance of the conditions, but did not open a new page. Second, this attempt to choke social and political activism did not go unchallenged. Workers in Khuzestan and other major industrial centers made use of various channels; from exhausting all available legal routes to open or discreet ways of protest and disturbance of production to voice their demands. Thus, workers did not have a “long night” of sleep to get up on the eve of revolution. It is correct that there were not numerous strikes and large scale clashes between workers and the security forces. However, strikes did take place and quite a number of them were successful. Collective actions were on a smaller scale, employing different tactics and avoiding conflict. Moreover, the authoritarian regime that settled in after the 1953 coup had its paternalistic side as well. As we have seen in the previous chapter, particularly after 1963, the state engaged in a centralized reform program called the White Revolution, to curb social grievances.

The trade union structure in Khuzestan, in its legal and open form, had already died out before the nationalisation of oil. The only organisation that was involved with the labour activism of the nationalisation movement in the oil producing South was the *Tudeh* linked National Society Against the Imperial Oil Company. This period of “workers without unions”⁷⁵⁵ in Khuzestan did not change until the mid-1960s. The workers continued to use the legal industrial dispute solving mechanisms introduced by the 1946 law, which was based on highly monitored elections for workers’ factory representation. In this mechanism, the Provincial Labour Directors, representing the Ministry of Labour, were very influential in effecting the outcome of the elections.⁷⁵⁶

The Iranian Trade Union Congress, ITUC, was active from its

755 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 193.

756 Labour Affairs 1955, Dispatch no 166 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

foundation in 1951 until 1957. Its project of establishing a monopoly in organizing the workers with support of the government did not work. Despite the meticulous process necessary to form a legal union, which required “clean records” of each founding member, there were initiatives of independent unions and alternative federations. Such federations existed in Tehran, Meshed, and Esfahan.⁷⁵⁷ The consular reports cited here assert the existence of clandestine cells of the former *Tudeh* affiliated CCFU in Khuzestan in this period.⁷⁵⁸

Moreover, Peyman Vahabzadeh’s study on workers’ clandestine red cells in Iran illustrated that examples of leftist workers’ autonomous movements and independent self-organisation had persisted the years of authoritarian rule. Workers’ red cells (from Krouzhoks to the Revolutionary Organisation of Iranian Workers, SAKA) were organized and survived for at least thirty years between the mid-1940s and a 1971 SAVAK raid following a bank hold up in Esfahan. These cells’ main aim was to educate and organize workers. However, their “peaceful activism” in authoritarian years was not appreciated by the organized communist groups, either. Vahabzadeh argues that Bizhan Jazani, one of the founding figures of the People’s Fada’i Guerillas, claimed that these red cells were organized by police agents to be able to prove that non-militant networks would end up either serving the police or being manipulated by them.⁷⁵⁹

The main workers’ problem after 1954 was the newly defined “surplus labour” issue and the solutions designed to overcome that, namely a planned reduction in the number of workers, freezing the promotion mechanism, a no-recruitment policy, and the transfer of workers from one part of the industry to another, which brought in its own particular

757 Ibid.

758 Ibid.

759 Peyman Vahabzadeh, “SAKA: Iran’s Grassroots Revolutionary Workers’ Organisation,” in *The Left in Iran 1941-1957*, ed. Cosroe Chaqueri (London: Socialist Platform/Merlin Press, 2011), 355-356.

grievances.⁷⁶⁰ Moreover, there had been no official increase in minimum wages between the nationalisation and 1955, which was contrary to the expectations of the workers.⁷⁶¹ The official increase in the minimum wages did not mean more than recording the practice, as workers in Khuzestan, and in most of the industrial centers, were being paid more than the out-dated official figures. Nevertheless, the rise in market prices and the reduction in the number of wage earners in Company related families rendered wage-increase as a sustained workers' demand.⁷⁶²

1955 Work-Stoppages⁷⁶³ -

US diplomat Roland H. Bushner gave an account of the work stoppages that took place in the oil industry in 1955. The main reason for all these actions was dissatisfaction with payments and benefits. Bushner reported that workers with various statuses (employees on the payroll of the Company, contract workers, and "twilight zone workers," who were direct workers of the Company but do not have the same status with regards to tenure and benefits) engaged in work stoppages in 1955.

The action of direct employees of the Company started in the oil packing plant due to complaints over the operation of the shift and inconsistencies in the pay scale. The Company took the complaints into consideration and the actions stopped. Drivers of the company vehicles engaged in work stoppage as well. They considered the system of overtime

760 See "The Right to Hire and Fire": Who is the surplus worker?" in Chapter 2.

761 See "Linking Pay to the Needs: Workers' Minimum Wage Basket" in Chapter 2.

762 It was reported that in 1956, of 282,000 inhabitants of Abadan, 160,000 were directly dependent on the Company for their livelihood. However, there were only slightly more than 30,000 wage earners among them. See Labour Affairs in Iran, September 1955-January 1957. Dispatch no 651 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

763 This part is based on Rolland H. Bushner, "Work Stoppages at the Iranian Oil Refining Company during the past Six months and Their Implications," 13/10/1955, Khorramshahr, Dispatch no 17 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

pay established by the Minimum Wage Board unfair. Bushner reports that their action lasted for “an hour or so,” after which they were convinced to continue working by the Company Transport Manager.

Sailors employed on river and harbor craft refused to sail and demanded a “sea-going bonus” in July. Their action ended with arrest threats from the Military Governor. However, the latter convinced the Company not to cut the striking workers’ payment, as they had been “working around their ships during the dispute.” This latter work-stoppage took one and a half days.

The “twilight zone workers” were Company workers engaged in service work, such as watchmen, cleaners, waiters, bus company workers, and municipal labour service. Although they were on Company payrolls, they were not eligible for the regulations and protections encoded in the 1949 Labour Law. Of 230 service workers in the “twilight zone”, 120 stopped working for a couple of days, as they were working longer hours for the same wage paid to other workers of the Company and had no prospect of better conditions. Upon their work stoppage on 15th of July⁷⁶⁴, the Company agreed to evaluate their case and bridge the disparity between them and other workers of the Company, rendering them the status of direct employees.

Abadan Bus Company workers, who were employed by the National Iranian Oil Company following nationalisation, had complaints, as they had not benefited from the last pay increase. Upon being given some compensation, the grievances did not result in a strike. However, their demand to receive equal benefits to the direct employees did not cease, and they wrote petitions to the Consortium, the Company and the Governor “asking politely to be informed of their status and to whom they should direct their complaints.” The reporting officer, Bushner argued that their call was a “preface for new demands,” their non-conflictual approach

764 Bushner states “on or about” July 15.

was a tactic for that means, and that the Company was right in taking them as potential strike leaders in the industry.⁷⁶⁵

The contract workers at the Kharkeh Dam Project near Ahwaz were employed temporarily but remained on the NIOC payrolls, which were transferred to the Consortium. The workers engaged in a work stoppage at the dam on May 7, 1955⁷⁶⁶ and demanded a permanent position, wage increase and relevant benefits that direct workers of the Company were entitled to. Their strike lasted for several days and their demands were not recognized. They were transferred back to the NIOC registers. Construction workers employed by contractors working for the Consortium had similar demands, particularly after the local representative of the Labour Ministry announced that the minimum wage in the oil industry should apply to all workers in the industry, including the contract workers. “One to two hundred contract workers” employed at the Abadan Refinery area housing construction stopped working, demanding equal pay to that of direct employees, who resumed their work upon a promise that their contracts would be revised, which resulted in higher wages (albeit not equal to direct employees). Bushner argued that these work stoppages were neither recognized as strikes nor as work stoppages by the Company or the state.

As a means of building constructive relations with the employees, the Company placed bulletin boards that contain local photographs, news and notes about the plant, and also official Company statements posted by bicycle messengers. It is argued that literacy classes were also seen as a means to improve these “employee communications.”

765 Rolland H. Bushner, “Work Stoppages at the Iranian Oil Refining Company during the past Six months and Their Implications,” 13/10/1955, Khorramshahr, Dispatch no 17 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

766 Bushner states “on or about” May 7, 1955.

1957 Strikes

When the NIOC and the Consortium engaged in planning a wage increase, they faced the Ministry of Labour's objection. The First Secretary of the US embassy in Tehran, Philip Clock, reported that the Labour Minister, Nasr, who was elected president of the 39th International Labour Conference of the ILO in June 1956, objected to the planned wage increase in late 1956, on the basis that such an increase would raise the same demand in other sectors. This ended up in the NIOC and the Consortium incorporating a discreet increase in wages and salaries, mostly by increased subsidies of staples and merit increases.⁷⁶⁷

However, the workers were not satisfied. In 1957 several strikes took place in the oil producing South, which ended with workers' winning a wage increase. Of eight reported strikes in Iran in the last six months of 1957, four took place in the oil industry.⁷⁶⁸ In addition to these eight strikes, a slow-down strike in one of Abadan machine shops was reported. The other strikes, also organized around the question of low wages, took place in the Tehran brick industry, lead mining in Khorasan, and textile mills in Shahi and Esfahan.⁷⁶⁹ At Shahi, more than one thousand workers were reported to have marched.⁷⁷⁰ However, in general, discreet methods such as sabotage were among the most popular forms of protest for these workers under the state's surveillance.⁷⁷¹

Charles C. Stelle noted:

It is significant, however, that organization or agitation was not a primary factor in these strikes (although at Pashmbaf

767 Philip Clock, "Labour Affairs in Iran, September 1955-January 1957," 31/1/1957, Dispatch no 651 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

768 Charles C. Stelle, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, Labour Affairs 1957, Dispatch no 821 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University and also in Ladjevardi, 206.

769 Stelle, Labour Affairs 1957 and also in Ladjevardi, 207.

770 Stelle, Labour Affairs 1957 and also Ladjevardi 207.

771 Stelle, Labour Affairs 1957.

an Esfahan trade union leader did play a role); in most cases a strike leader was unidentifiable. The walkouts had an appearance of spontaneity- the strikers had, apparently, simply taken all they were going to take without protest.⁷⁷²

The Strike in Agha Jari

On the 24th of June 1957, a hundred workers employed at the Agha Jari workshop convened in front of its main office and refused to leave with company buses before voicing their demands to the manager. The workers were told to come the next day, which they did. This time the number of protestors had reached more than five hundred, and they were reported to chant slogans such as: “we want more money,” “increase in the minimum wage,” “the cost of living is high,” and “all the prices are high and the wages are low.”⁷⁷³ Apart from a wage increase, the workers demanded a job evaluation scheme for their positions, which they thought was linked with a wage increase.⁷⁷⁴

Not only the Fields Manager J. J. O'Brien, but also the Regional Labour Director Farbood, the head of the intelligence service of the region Colonel Arabi, and a high-ranked security officer from Tehran were involved in solving the dispute. The workers were asked to choose a representative to negotiate with the Company. This demand was not accepted by workers, who chose to speak directly to the management and the labour director without any intermediary body, who they thought might “sell them down the river.” It was reported that striking workers “shouted down three self-appointed spokesmen who volunteered to act on behalf of [them].” At the end of the first day, the strength of the strikers had reached to more than one thousand, which was reported to be the

772 Ibid.

773 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “IOE & PC Labourers Strike at Agha Jari,” Dispatch no 26, June 27, 1957. US Consulate Khorramshahr in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

774 For Job evaluation schemes, see Chapter 2 “Job Classification.”

maximum figure reached during the strike.⁷⁷⁵

The Regional Labour Director was the main actor in the negotiations. He informed the strikers that the strike was illegal and the government might take measures. However, the Company, in this case, saw low wages and the high cost of living as genuine reasons for the strike. *Tudeh* interference was suspected. Some kind of organisational support was thought to be behind the first hundred workers who started the strike. Apart from *Tudeh*, the other “suspected supporters” were seen as the Egyptian agents known to be working in the region, nationalist groups, and some staff members who were discontent with the effects of the job evaluation scheme, which had frozen their promotion status, and had not contributed to their livelihood as was expected. US diplomat Stanley Prisbeck reported:

Among the suspected instigators are the *Tudeh*, the Egyptians, an undetermined nationalist group, and, lastly, ringleaders among some of the discontented staff employees. As usual, a number of Iranians, some of them in high-ranking positions, see the hidden British hand in this affair.⁷⁷⁶

To “see the British hand in the [disruptive] affairs” in the post-nationalisation period had been a general inclination among high-ranking officials, who wanted to prove that they, and the Consortium, were in charge of the industry, even better than the times of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

Although the demand for higher minimum wages was seen reasonable, the Company’s only plan was to increase the wages through subsidized items, which amounted to twelve per cent of the minimum wage at the time of the strike. The Company was afraid that the strike would spread to other parts of the oil industry, although high security

775 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “Labour unrest in oil agreement area,” July 9, 1957. Dispatch no 2 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

776 Ibid.

measures at the Abadan Refinery Area reduced the risks they faced. In Abadan, the Consortium, the NIOC and government security offices were reported to be well coordinated against social and political disputes. In the fields however, security measures were limited.⁷⁷⁷

The strike ended after two and a half days by agreement between the workers and the Regional Labour Director Farbood, who promised the evaluation of their demands by a joint Company- Government Committee, which would let the workers know about the results in a month.⁷⁷⁸ As was expected by the Company, a similar strike with the same demands took place in Masjed Soleyman following the Agha Jari strike.⁷⁷⁹ Misagh Parsa argued that this strike in Agha Jari was “the last reported oil workers’ strike until the revolutionary struggles of fall 1978.”⁷⁸⁰ However, as listed below, that was not the case.

The Strike in Masjed Soleyman

While the strike in Agha Jari was going on, some petitions were being circulated among workers in Masjed Soleyman. It was reported that there were six petitions with approximately 550 signatures in circulation. Five of the petitions contained the two main demands of increased minimum wage and lower bazaar prices. The sixth petition demanded, “a thirty day paid vacation, as provided by the labour law,” which was reported to be based on false information. Moreover, a leaflet with “well-known communist

777 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “IOE & PC Labourers Strike at Agha Jari,” Dispatch no 26, 27/6/1957. US Consulate Khorramshahr in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

778 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “Labour unrest in oil agreement area,” 9/7/1957. Dispatch no 2, US Consulate Khorramshahr in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

779 For these strikes in Agha Jari and Masjed Soleyman, also see A.G. Read, First Secretary, Labour and Social Affairs, “Review of Labour Affairs in Iran, for the period July-December 1957,” in LAB 13/1092.

780 Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 136.

slogans” was distributed in Masjed Soleyman during the Agha Jari Strike.⁷⁸¹

The strike in Masjed Soleyman took place on Saturday, July the 6th. Around 1200 workers engaged in a work-stoppage, while around 800 reported for work but engaged in a sit-in inside the premises. The workers demanded higher minimum wages and control over the bazaar prices. In addition to the Regional Labour Director and officials of the NIOC and the Consortium, the newly appointed Governor General of Khuzestan, Jahanshah Samsam Bakhtiari, were involved in the negotiations. The Governor first issued a circular from Abadan warning the workers of the consequences of their action, and then came to Masjed Soleyman. Hammed Bakhtiar, an MP from Ahwaz, joined the delegation, assuming the main state negotiator role that had formerly been played by the Regional Labour Director Farbod, who was reported to have “commit[ed] a serious error in making promises of cash increases ranging from ten to twenty Rials.”⁷⁸² This time it was not *Tudeh*, but some dissatisfied junior staff employees were seen as the “agitators” of the strike. During the last two days of the strike, which took a total of four and half days, five “agitators” were arrested.⁷⁸³

The strikers were persuaded to resume their work by the MP Bakhtiar, and the Company decided to cut the strike days off from the annual leave of the workers rather than reducing it from their pay. The strikes in Agha Jari and Masjed Soleyman, although not recognized legally, were accepted as industrial strikes by the Company and the Government, and negotiations continued to take place between the Government, the Company, and workers’ representatives, who were defined as “employer stooges” by the reporting consul, Prisbeck. The NIOC Board Director

781 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “Labour unrest in oil agreement area,” 9/7/1957. See Appendix V for the Persian and English copy of the leaflet.

782 Stanley J. Prisbeck, “MIS Strike and Possible Settlement Terms,” Dispatch no 4. 30/7/1957 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

783 Ibid.

Fallah is reported to have said that “It was not until the strike at Agha Jari was in full sway that ‘hooligans jumped on the band wagon’ and continued to fan the movement.”⁷⁸⁴

The Company and the Government agreed on not introducing a cash increase, as they believed it would result in a higher inflation rate. Instead, they discussed a revision of the minimum wage basket, and a housing allowance to be paid to workers not housed by the Company. Given that 75 per cent of workers in Abadan and 60 per cent of workers in the fields were not living in company houses, housing allowance and a revision of the Company’s housing plans, including the construction of new houses, was seen as crucial. The Company selected workers’ representatives of Masjed Soleyman left the decision to the Abadan Refinery workers, who would discuss the revision in minimum wages later in the week. Given the higher cost of living in Abadan, Masjed Soleyman workers’ representatives believed that an increase that Abadan workers agreed on would benefit them.⁷⁸⁵

The results of the promised Company-government committee came in August. The outcome was a decision to reassess the minimum wage that was set in March 1955. The Consortium accepted that the unsatisfactory working conditions and low wages were the main causes of the strikes in Agha Jari and Masjed Soleyman. The other reasons were listed as the transfer of workers due to the surplus labour problem in Khuzestan, and the mismatch between the wages of the workers engaged in the same job due to transfer.⁷⁸⁶

As the situation lingered for the following couple of months, workers at Masjed Soleyman engaged in a similar strike on 11 September

784 Ibid.

785 Ibid.

786 John W. Bowling, First Secretary of Embassy, “Progress in the Settlement of Oil Industry Labor Troubles” 27/8/1957 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

1957. Around 800 workers (out of 4200) were reported to engage in a walk out, to be followed by workers in the construction and garage departments. Four workers were arrested and one staff employee was sent to Ahwaz.⁷⁸⁷

The 1958 Kharg Strike of Transferred Workers

The Consortium had started to construct a deep-water tanker loading station on Kharg Island, where workers transferred mostly from the Abadan refinery due to the “Surplus Labour” issue were employed in the late 1950’s. The workers engaged in operations in Kharg were known not to be in good spirit due to their obligatory transfer from Abadan, where their families and friends resided, and the inconsistencies in the work schedule, involving many delays leading idleness among workers on the island. US Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, Charles C. Stelle, argued that this dissatisfaction might gain more importance as the workers could spread it to the Abadan area. The first labour disputes started in the beginning of 1958, when approximately one hundred workers engaged in a three-day strike claiming their overtime pay. There were around four hundred workers employed on Kharg Island, which was planned to expand four-fold in a year. Being aware of the mood of the workers on the island, the Company agreed with most of the demands.⁷⁸⁸

The following strike on Kharg Island began on April 21st. This time, the majority of the workers participated in the strike. The workers had three demands. Their first demand was the payment of wages during their four-day leave per month in Abadan. The second demand involved the hardship bonus that they were entitled to due to their obligatory transfer

787 Chapin, 12/9/1957 and Crawford, 15/9/1957, Telegrams from Tehran to Secretary of State in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

788 Charles C. Stelle, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, “Labour Section of the Quarterly Economic Summary,” 8/5/1958, Dispatch no 979 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

to Kharg Island. They asked for a hundred per cent pay differential rather than the sixty per cent that they were receiving. The third demand was about the improvement of food, particularly provision of some items that were not available on the island.⁷⁸⁹ These strikes were not considered to be formal strikes by the Regional Labour Director, but were described as “well-organized” by the reporting US diplomat, Chapin.⁷⁹⁰ The Kharg Island strikes exposed the inefficiency of one of the solutions designed for dealing with the “surplus labour” issue. Transferring workers had led to new grievances.

Short strikes for better pay continued to take place in other parts of Iran. The contract workers and dockworkers at Bandar Mashur joined the striking workers of the oil industry in 1958, for four days, demanding higher wages, which won them an approximate thirty per cent increase, still below the unskilled wage rate of the workers on payrolls of the Company. Transport workers of the Consortium staged a one-day strike to protest being delivered to a contractor. The oil industry was not the only industry in which strikes took place. Workers in other industrial centers, such as Tehran, Shahi and Esfahan, which had previously engaged in strikes, staged them again. In Esfahan, Pashmbaf textile mill protests took the form of sabotage. The strike of taxi drivers in Tehran was more organized. This strike was reported to involve ten thousand drivers, lasted for four days and was one hundred per cent efficient.⁷⁹¹

789 Chapin, 24/4/1958 and 26/4/1958 from Tehran to Secretary of State in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

790 Ibid.

791 Charles C. Stelle, “Labour Section of the Quarterly Economic Summary,” 8/5/1958. Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, Dispatch no 979 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

The 1959 New Year Strikes

The numbers of strikes for a living wage after the Consortium settled in and the production resumed fluctuated with respect to the status of ongoing tripartite negotiations between workers' official representatives, the representatives of employers, and the government. When workers' expectations were not met in those negotiations, the flame of strikes was lit again. New Year, in the Iranian calendar, Norouz (20/21 March) was one of those moments that would symbolize the end of one period and the start of a new one. Accordingly, A. G. Read reported, "*The advent of the Iranian [N]ew [Y]ear is traditionally a time of financial adjustment, the payment of bonuses and the settlement of debts – and thus the time to seek wage increases.*"⁷⁹² At times, Norouz came with its disappointments. Studies of the seasonal frequency of labour activism in Iran are not known, however the high frequency of labour activism following Norouz was remarkable, and had caught the attention of reporting US Consuls.⁷⁹³

Accordingly, following the end of negotiations between representatives of the Consortium workers and the Ministry of labour, strikes were flamed in the oil fields in April 1959. First, on April 4, 141 workers, who protested against the insufficiency of the wage increase brought in by the new wage agreement, struck. The same day workers in Gachsaran oil field struck, demanding safety boots, and resumed their work the same day upon being told that their demand would be taken into consideration. On April 5, eighty-five workers in Bandar Mashur struck against the new wage agreement and resumed their work in less than a day. However, after two days they walked out and almost all workers,

792 Annual Labour Report, 1959. USNA 888.06/6-460 cited in Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *The Condition of the Working Class in Iran, A Documentary History 1911-1979, Volume IV* (Antidote Publications, 1991), 155.

793 John. M. Bowie, American Consul, "Series of Brief Strikes Follow Allegedly Inadequate Grant of Cost of Living Allowance to Consortium Labour." 25/4/1959, Dispatch no 65 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

amounting to two thousand, staged a sit-down. Anxious of interruption in the work of loading tankers, the Consortium employed its staff to replace the striking workers.⁷⁹⁴ The strikers were reported to engage in “jeering and heckling those who did their work.”⁷⁹⁵ The strikers demanded the revision of the minimum wage, including proportionate raises for all labour, better housing, improved medical service, female medical officers for workers’ wives and families, government control over bazaar prices, and improved water supply. The strikers in Bandar Mashur were told that, according to the Labour Law, their strike was illegal, and they would face prosecution if they did not go back to work. However, it was not only legal threats but also military measures that were used to deter the strikers. On 7th and 8th April, an Iranian Navy gunboat, three hundred army troops and SAVAK members arrived in Bandar Mashur, whose presence “restored the order.”⁷⁹⁶ These strikes in the oil fields and Bandar Mashur were recorded in US Consular reports as wildcat strikes, “*not part of a campaign against the Consortium to force a more favorable settlement but more a token of protest against the [w]orkers’ [r]epresentatives and the Government for the alleged paucity of the settlement. These strikes, then were hardly part of a bargaining procedure.*”⁷⁹⁷

The Labour Law of 1959 subjected trade union activity to registration with the Ministry of Labour, which required a security check of its members from the intelligence service, SAVAK. Since its formation, SAVAK had assumed an integral role in Ministry of Labour’s domains of

794 John. M. Bowie, Telegram no 33, 8/4/1959, Khorramshahr in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

795 John. M. Bowie, American Consul, “Series of Brief Strikes Follow Allegedly Inadequate Grant of Cost of Living Allowance to Consortium Labour.”

796 Ibid.

797 Annual Labour Report, 1959. USNA 888.06/6-460 cited in Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *The Condition of the Working Class in Iran, A Documentary History 1911-1979, Volume IV* (Antidote Publications, 1991), 158.

responsibility.⁷⁹⁸ Given the ambiguity on how to complete that registration, it took one more year for trade unions to register. Fifty unions in Tehran, and eighteen in the provinces, were registered after the settlement of the regulation. The US consulate's annual report of 1961 would state that the unions of the bakery workers, glass workers, government employees, and oil workers were the best organized. Named as the most effective trade union in Tehran, the Government Employees' Union involved a wide variety of workers ranging from street sweepers to nurses, and university professors. It published a weekly newspaper, *Ettihadieh* (Union) and had 120,000 members. The baker's union in Tehran employed two full time and one part time staff for administration of its two thousand dues paying members. The union was known to have ties with bakers in Ahwaz, Mashad, Esfahan, and Hamadan. The oil workers mentioned were the workers of the National Iranian Oil Company based in Tehran. This union had established ties with the International Federation of Petroleum Workers (IFPW) and became affiliated with it in 1961.⁷⁹⁹ There were no registered unions at the heart of oil production in Abadan and the oil fields of the South until the late 1960s.

Labour Activism in the “long sixties”⁸⁰⁰

The Shah's pro-labour discourse and centralized reform program, the White Revolution, set the scene for labour activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁸⁰¹ The Shah was arguing that his reforms had abolished

798 See “Officially Endorsed Majlis Candidates- ‘The Labour Interest,’” 12/9/1963, A-170, Central Foreign Policy File 1963, Elections Iran, Political and Defense Box 3942 E1613A. NARA. Also, see Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 213-215.

799 Annual Labour Report 1961, USNA 888.06/9-2662, cited in Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *The Condition of the Working Class in Iran, A Documentary History 1911-1979, Volume IV* (Antidote Publications, 1991), 176-178.

800 This part is based on previously published article: Maral Jefroudi, “Revisiting ‘the Long Night’ of Iranian Workers: Labour Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s,” *International Labour and Working Class History* 84 (2003).

801 See Chapter 3 for more on White Revolution.

‘feudalism’ and freed the workers, peasants and women.⁸⁰² Although this claim can hardly be seen as valid, this period is remarkable in that the state’s discourse contributed to the recognition of the “working class” as an agent in social change. Given the workers’ uprisings in the late 1950s and student’s protests in early 1960s, it is important to see this development not as one directional but as dialectical.

In 1963, an amendment providing immunity to workers’ representatives in negotiation with the employers was added to the 1959 Labour Law. According to this amendment, the dismissal of representative workers was subjected to the Ministry of Labour’s approval.⁸⁰³ In 1964, a new Union Registration Regulation, “permitting” the registered unions to affiliate with a political party (the governing, *Iran Novin Party*) was announced.⁸⁰⁴ Following the new wage agreement of 1964, the government engaged actively in forming unions in the oil industry.⁸⁰⁵ The Consortium, accordingly, engaged in organizing training seminars for its supervisors and managers who were in charge of guiding union formation. These seminars involved theoretical and practical information on collective bargaining and trade union history. ILO officials were involved in trade union preparatory seminars as well. They gave seminars on techniques and procedures in grievance handling.⁸⁰⁶

802 Afshin Matin-Asgari, “Marxism, Historiography and Historical Consciousness in Modern Iran: A Preliminary Study” in *Iran in the 20th Century - Historiography and Political Culture*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London, 2009), 220-221.

803 “Biweekly economic review September 21- October 4, 1963,” 7/10/1963. A-226 from Tehran. Central Foreign Policy File, 1963. India- Economic review Iran Box 3382 E1613A, NARA.

804 “Cerp Labour Report for Iran-1964,” 17/5/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA. Iran Novin Party, was founded in 1963 as a product of the two-party system envisaged by the Shah. The general secretary of the party, Hasan Ali Mansour was also the Minister of Labour.

805 Robert H. Harlan, Counselor of Embassy for Economic Affairs, “Labor Developments in Iran’s Oil Industry,” 30/9/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

806 “Cerp Labour Report for Iran-1964,” 17/5/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

Picture 51



Workers carry banners and pictures of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in support of the White Revolution at a rally on its anniversary in 1967.⁸⁰⁷

By the 1960s, the government had developed a more positive attitude towards labour organisation in Iran, as was going to be more visible in the Shah's pro-labour discourse in future years. Both the early 1960s amendments to the 1959 Labour Law, and this relatively positive attitude towards labour, were an outcome of the interaction of internal and external factors, involving workers and students' activism and pressure from international labour groups. The state of affairs was not different in the oil industry. The dissatisfaction with wages had caused a number of

⁸⁰⁷ Source: *Yaddashtha-ye Rooz*, no.614, 14/2/1967, NIOC, The library of the Ministry of Oil, Tehran, Iran, in Maral Jefroudi, "Revisiting 'the Long Night' of Iranian Workers: Labour Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s," *International Labour and Working Class History* 84 (2003).

short-lived strikes in the late 1950s, and international groups such as the ILO, ICFTU, and IFPCW were observing the oil workers' situation.⁸⁰⁸

The government's involvement in trade union formation brought forth a new mechanism regulating labour-management-state relations, which was aimed to control labour disputes and prevent them from gaining a confrontational character. The new unions would help form a formal collective bargaining committee to formulate demands and proposals submitted by workers at bargaining sessions. It was argued by Robert H. Harlan, the US Counselor of Embassy for Economic Affairs, that this mechanism would result in emphasizing the popular demands of workers, at the expense of "frivolous demands."⁸⁰⁹ The Counselor argued that:

The key problem is how to assure that the unions will have responsible, mature leaders who will support the regime and not hinder the operations of the oil industry. To achieve positive security, two full field checks on every proposed union official are being made, one by the State Intelligence and Security Agency (SAVAK) and one by the Ministry of Justice. To diffuse the power of any individual union, the Government plans to create 15 separate unions in the oil industry including five in the Abadan refinery alone. To assure greater discipline among the unions, the Government intends to superimpose a more highly selected Federation structure over the oil unions. To establish loyalty to the regime, Minister of Labour Khosrovani in his capacity as Secretary General of the ruling Iran Novin Party intends to incorporate all union members into the Party.⁸¹⁰

By 1965 five unions were in the process of registration in the Abadan refinery. Ten others, two in Masjed Soleyman, two at Ahwaz, two

808 Robert H. Harlan, Counselor of Embassy for Economic Affairs, "Labor Developments in Iran's Oil Industry," 30/9/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

809 "Cerp Labour Report for Iran-1964," 17/5/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

810 Robert H. Harlan, "Labor Developments in Iran's Oil Industry," 30/9/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

at Agha Jari, and one each at Gachsaran, Kharg, Haft Kel, and Bandar Mashur, were in the process of registration, and at least two of them had already settled in an office in 1965.⁸¹¹ The collective bargaining process in the legally recognized industrial relations mechanism involved profit-sharing (though the oil industry was not included in the profit-sharing scheme), regulation of minimum wages according to new job evaluation schemes, and dispute resolution.⁸¹² Livernash and Argheyd argued that except for the oil industry, conditions of employment were not included in the collective agreements the unions engaged in.⁸¹³ However, the collective agreements in the oil industry involved wages, housing and travel allowances, health benefits, annual leave, and pension and retirement plans. These agreements would take place on a regional basis and last for two to three years.⁸¹⁴ Between 1964, when the new Union Registration Regulation was put in force, and 1972, 519 unions were formed in Iran (See Table 10).⁸¹⁵ Twenty-eight of these unions were in the oil industry.⁸¹⁶

By the end of the 1970s, the character of collective bargaining in other industries went through a change as well. Livernash and Argheyd claimed that informal collective bargaining, which involved negotiations not only on wages and job rates but also on workloads, production standards, hours, schedules, and technological change among others, had already ceased to be an exception before that.⁸¹⁷ By 1972, there were more than five hundred factory-based labour unions in Iran.⁸¹⁸ However, SAVAK agents had a prominent presence among the leaders of these trade

811 Robert H. Harlan, "Labor Developments in Iran's Oil Industry." For the estimated strength of the unions in Abadan see Appendix IV.

812 E. Robert Livernash and Kamal Argheyd, "IRAN," in *International Handbook of Industrial Relations*, ed. Albert A. Blum (London: Aldwych Press, 1981), 267.

813 Ibid., 269.

814 Ibid.

815 Ibid., Table reproduced from 267.

816 Ibid., 268.

817 Ibid., 267-268.

818 Ibid., 267.

unions.⁸¹⁹

Table 10

Year	Number of unions organized per year in Iran
1964	16
1965	84
1966	46
1967	58
1968	32
1969	34
1970	62
1971	92
1972	95

The new dispute solving mechanisms and state-Company supported formation of trade unions did not eliminate militant labour activism. Strikes in the 1960s are recorded in US State Department documents. For example, transport workers in Tehran engaged in two reported strikes in 1964 and 1965. In 1964, taxi drivers struck against the doubling of gasoline prices⁸²⁰, and in 1965, bus drivers struck against wage differentiations and the arbitrary allocation of government-constructed houses.⁸²¹ While the former ended in the government's reduction of the price of gasoline, police suppressed the latter. However, it was reported that after the strike some "salutary changes" were implemented in the Tehran United Bus

819 Assef Bayat, "Workers' Control after the Revolution," *Merip Reports*, no. 113 (1983), 21.

820 "Cerp Labour Report for Iran-1964," 17/5/1965 in Central foreign policy files 1964-66 Labour box 1303 Entry 1132A. NARA.

821 "Annual Labour Report 1965," Airgram to the Department of State, 1/2/1966, in *Conditions of the Working class in Iran*, ed. Chaqueri, 210.

Company.⁸²² Livernash and Argheyd argue that in this period strikes related to job classification schemes took place frequently in large companies of Tehran.⁸²³

Picture 52



White Collar workers of Abadan Refinery march in the rally on the anniversary of the coronation of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi on 27 October 1967, showing their support for the Shah.⁸²⁴

822 Ibid.

823 E. Robert Livernash and Kamal Argheyd, "IRAN," in *International Handbook of Industrial Relations*, ed. Albert A. Blum (London: Aldwych Press, 1981), 267. For Job Classification, see Chapter 2.

824 Source: *Yaddashtha-ye Rouz*, no.730, 31 October 1967, published by the NIOC. From the library of the Ministry of Oil, Tehran, Iran. Previously published in Jefroudi, "Revisiting 'the Long Night' of Iranian Workers: Labour Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s."

The oil industry was not immune to strikes. In 1965, workers struck in the Oil Consortium's metal drum plant in Abadan. This slow-down action in October culminated in the Consortium's agreement to pay a "difficult work allowance."⁸²⁵ The other strike on record dates to 1969 and was one week long. It was due to the cancellation of New Year bonus of the construction workers at the Abadan Petrochemical Plant. The workers walked off their job, stayed away from work for a week until the limitation was withdrawn.⁸²⁶

The pro-worker discourse of the Shah and the government in this period of "White Revolution", together with the direct measures of persecution, had an effect of "industrial peace" in the mid- to late 1960s. The 1970 US Annual Labour Report argued that this (four to five year) period of "industrial peace," free from major strikes and work stoppages, was unusual. The difficulty of organizing legal strikes was given as an explanation. Individual grievances were solved by "forced arbitration" if necessary. However, it was also mentioned that most of the work stoppages, which were quickly settled, were organized without exhausting legal mechanisms anyway.⁸²⁷ This was the case in the pre-White Revolution years as well. The relative decrease in the number of strikes in this period can instead be explained due to the ambiguity of the Company's solutions for the "surplus labour" problem, and the anxiety it created among oil workers until the late 1960s.

The 1970 strike

On 21st March 1970, the Iranian New Year, the new labour job classification scheme became active. Labour unrest in the Abadan Refinery had started

825 "Annual Labour Report 1965," Airgram to the Department of State, February 1, 1966, in *Conditions of the Working class in Iran*, ed. Chaqueri, 210.

826 "Labour Affairs Iran," Airgram to the Department of State, 1/7/1970, in Chaqueri, 225.

827 "Iran February-1969-May 1970." Airgram to the Department of State, 1/7/1970 cited in Chaqueri, 224.

one week before the new scheme's activation, on the 15th of March, when 125 workers engaged in a slow-down which had reduced the production rate by half. The work stoppage was reported to reach its peak on 30th March, involving more than four thousand workers. However, the strike did not expand to the fields.⁸²⁸ The Tehran US Embassy report reads:

“The strike started apparently spontaneously and the workers remained without identifiable leadership. Nevertheless the strikers soon developed an effective informal organisation. At key points at the various oil installations in Abadan, the strikers set up “strike centers” manned by workers from which they elicited support for the strike. Many strikers and members of their families went from door to door trying to sell pictures of [the] Shah, presumably to earn money to support their cause. (...)Not only there was no anti-state political content but the workers carefully tried to sanctify their effort by identification with the Shah. Pictures of the Shah garlanded with flowers were set up at the strike centers and workers read aloud from the Shah's book: *White Revolution*.”⁸²⁹

It was alleged that the terms of the labour classification scheme, which limited promotion and opportunities for pay increases for some employees, was agreed on in the collective agreement discussions between the National Iranian Oil Company, the Consortium's Operating Companies and the union representatives of oil industry employees in 1969. However, the scheme was reported to be “complicated and not well understood by workers' representatives” and accepted “on the assurance that no workers would be disadvantaged.” According to this scheme, no worker would be put on a level entailing earning less than what they used to earn, but some workers would be “unslotted,” thus classified as surplus. Moreover, it also reduced the possibilities for pay rises and promotion for some workers.⁸³⁰

828 BP Archive, ArcRef:193653_002/1971 BP Archives. See Chapter 2 for Job Classification.

829 MacArthur, “Strike Settled at Abadan Refinery,” A-122, Tehran US Embassy. RG 59 Box 1406 Subject numeric files, 1970-73. NARA.

830 Ibid.

In the Abadan Refinery, the scheme resulted in fifteen per cent of the workers' receiving substantial raises, forty per cent of the workers receiving very small increases, and about forty-five per cent of the workers receiving no increase. The most disfavored workers were the unskilled workers who worked in the "non-basic" jobs of the industry that involved supporting services, and the workers in maintenance, workshop and transport services. When the scheme was activated on March 21, the workers who were disfavored refused to work. On March 24, seven hundred workers at the refinery engaged in a strike involving not reporting for work or a slow-down, and their number increased five-fold in a couple of days, to include a large number of non-basic staff, transportation, maintenance, and workshop workers of the refinery.⁸³¹ British Petroleum's company report on its industrial relations defined the main reasons for these work stoppages as workers' high expectations from the new job classification scheme, feelings of injustice, discontent about restrictions on possible career developments, and "overall suspicion" due to miscommunication.⁸³²

The report from the US Embassy in Tehran mentions that the Shah wanted the strike to come to an end, while the government, SAVAK and the management behaved more cautiously so as not to create direct confrontation. Workers returned to their work on April 4th, and despite the fact that all strikes were declared illegal, they were paid fully for all the strike period. The workers gained promises from the management to take the classification scheme as provisional for 6 months and consider the individual complaints as a result of the strike. The report acknowledges that the strikers knew what kind of activities would not be tolerated and refrained from them, in other words, they were aware of the "limits of permissible actions."⁸³³

831 Ibid.

832 BP Archive, ArcRef: 193653_002/1971.

833 MacArthur, "Strike Settled at Abadan Refinery," A-122, Tehran US Embassy. RG 59 Box 1406 Subject numeric files, 1970-73. NARA.

Using the Shah's pictures and the discourse of the White Revolution during the strikes was not a rare phenomenon. The *Intercontinental Press* of May 24, 1971 would report that the workers of Jahan textile mills in Karaj, forty kilometers west of Tehran, carried banners in support of the Shah while demonstrating for an increase in the wages, in the context of demanding a larger share in profits according to the Profit Sharing Scheme principle of the White Revolution. Workers would use the Shah's pictures in more strategic ways as well. The same journal reports that in a strike action, the workers who wanted to hold a closed meeting had pasted a huge portrait of the Shah over the door of the meeting place to ensure that they would not be interrupted by SAVAK. When the SAVAK agents arrived, they had to wait for permission from their superiors before tearing down the Shah's portrait, breaking down the door and entering the meeting place.⁸³⁴

Habib Ladjevardi mentions the same tactic employed in Abadan around the same time. In this case, "the oil workers at Abadan had prevented their managers from leaving the refinery by pasting pictures of the Shah on the doors of their automobiles as they chanted "Javid Shah" (long live the King). In order to open their car doors, the managers would have to tear His Majesty's photograph."⁸³⁵

Iran experienced high growth in inflation rates in the 1970s. The cost of living index rose from 100 in 1970 to 126 in 1974, and over 190 in 1976. The effect of inflation was grave, particularly on food and housing prices.⁸³⁶ The rise in oil prices after the 1973 intervention of the Iranian state and five other OPEC countries and the funds that were channeled to development projects together with increased government expenditures on social welfare and subsidy programs, were seen as the main reasons for

834 "Troops fire on demonstrating workers." *Intercontinental Press*, May 24, 1971 vol 9 no 20. IISG Archives.

835 Ladjevardi, *Labour Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (New York, 1985), 240.

836 Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 497.

the growth of inflation.⁸³⁷ This had created grievances among workers who found the increase in their salaries not enough to cope with the market prices.⁸³⁸ The October 1973 strike in Abadan, which lasted for four days, was one of the biggest strikes in this period, organizing around workers' complaint that their wages did not cope with the inflation in market prices.⁸³⁹

Most of these strikes were short, seemed to be spontaneous, focused on one, economic, demand and not violent, at times appropriating the state's discourse and benefiting from its patronizing attitude. Besides, they were mostly successful. The 1965, 1969, 1970, and 1973 strikes in Abadan were quickly settled, the longest one taking two weeks, but in most of them the demands were to a large extent met. Furthermore, despite the "illegality" of strikes in the post-coup regime, none of the strikes, except the one of bus drivers, were recorded as illegal, and in most of the cases participants were paid in full for the time they were striking. The US labour affairs report alleged that most of the work stoppages would be settled quickly and informally by the intervention of the Ministry of Labour, and mostly in more favorable terms than the labour law would entail.⁸⁴⁰

Labour activism at away-games: Relations with the ILO, ICFTU and WFTU

For the actors in the relations of production in the Iranian oil industry, interaction with international labour organisations was not an exceptional measure. Since its foundation in 1919 Iran has been a member of the ILO. The communist oriented CCFTU of Iran had been present at the first

837 See also Robert E. Looney, "The Inflationary Process in Prerevolutionary Iran," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 19 (1985).

838 "1975 Annual Labour Report," 11/9/1975, cited in Chaqueri, *The Condition of the Working Class in Iran, A Documentary History 1911-1979, Volume IV*, 234.

839 "Inflation in Iran," A-166, 7/11/1973. RG 59 Box 754. NARA.

840 Iran February-1969-May 1970. Airgram to Department of State, 1/7/1970 cited in Chaqueri, 224.

congress of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1945 and became affiliated with it,⁸⁴¹ and, later on, the Iran Trade Union Congress, ITUC, had shown interest in the International Federation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU), formed by organisations withdrawing from WFTU in 1949.⁸⁴²

One of the well-known missions to Iran was the pre-nationalisation delegation of ILO, the report of which was published as *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office* raising much criticism from the Iranian side, which culminated in the alternative report, *Some Documents on the Conditions of the Iranian Workers under the Ex-Anglo Iranian Oil Co.* published by National Iranian Oil Company. Objection to the former report brought opposing parties in the Iranian labour movement scene together at the following ILO session in Geneva in 1950. This time, the representative of the Iranian workers, Zamani, who was accused by the previous representative Mohammadi of having been chosen by the Company, was reported to make a “strong attack” on the report and the Company. Zamani was reported to state that ESKI was a “bogus institution” and drew attention to the absence of workers’ delegates from Venezuela, saying that their absence might be due to their murder in their home country. He added that the same might happen to him, and that the ILO should pay special attention to their safety. In addition, he criticized the Iranian government for maintaining martial law in Abadan, and for their measures against freedom of association. His comments were responded to by the Iranian government representative Naghavi, who was present at the meeting. Naghavi assured delegates that the workers’ representative “was in no danger for his life and hoped that he would live for many more years and become a more responsible workers’ leader.” He

841 I.L.O., *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran: Report of a Mission of the International Labour Office*, 1950, 46.

842 “Persia Labour Notes: September-October 1949” in LAB 13/517, UK National Archives.

claimed that the government supported trade union development.⁸⁴³

Iranian governments have recognized the ILO's delegates in Iran, and cooperated with them not only in their missions focused on reporting and education, but also sought the organisation's active assistance in preparing labour legislation (i.e., 1959 Labour Law⁸⁴⁴). For trade unions, which were either seen as anti-establishment communists or pro-government stooges in the post-coup authoritarian years, interaction with international labour organisations was complementary to their struggle in Iran, and served many purposes. First, being present at an international labour meeting representing Iranian workers had the performative effect of attaining a formal status of representing Iranian workers, which they often lacked in reality. Accordingly, representing Iran in ILO or ICFTU meetings had turned into a realm of contestation for labour activists and Ministry of Labour officials. At times, foreign bureaucrats would intervene in this struggle as well. For example, in 1951, when the deputy leader of the National Front Baghai was "chosen" by the ITUC, on the Ministry of Labour's recommendation, to represent Iran at an ILO meeting in Geneva, the British diplomat W. E. Thomas intervened and persuaded the ITUC to nominate another candidate, Mushaver, from the advisory board of the ITUC, who was thought not to be as anti-AIOC and British as Baghai. Mushaver got the approval of the Ministry of Labour and was briefed to "get the right ideas" while speaking on behalf of Iranian workers, both from the ITUC and the Ministry of Labour.⁸⁴⁵ In 1956, the same year that Labour Minister Nasr was elected ILO Conference president in Geneva, Amir Keyvan of the ITUC represented Iranian workers at the conference, where he objected to the presence of the other Iranian representative,

843 "Debate on the Report of ILO Mission to Iran" in FO 371/82402.

844 Charles C. Stelle, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, Labour Affairs 1957, Dispatch no 821 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

845 Letter from British Embassy, W. E. Thomas to Greenhough, Ministry of Labour and National Service. 4/6/1951. LAB 13/518.

Afkhami of the Central Council of Unions of Workers and Farmers of Esfahan, acting as labour advisor to the delegation. It is reported that Keyvan, with support from his British contacts, got Afkhami's credentials rejected by the conference and had him sent back to Iran.⁸⁴⁶

A second purpose for Iranian trade unionists in engaging in interaction with international labour groups was gaining access to trade union educational resources they lacked in Iran. Unionists engaged in cooperation with the ICFTU and ILO to organize nationwide workers' congresses and educationals, which were designed to facilitate labour organisation in Iran. International interaction further provided the engaged labour activists with some kind of protection in their relations with the government, due to the visibility they gained through international contacts. Archives testify that the contested trade union activists under authoritarian rule were very much aware of these effects, and used the opportunities as much as possible.⁸⁴⁷

The ICFTU carried out a number of missions to Iran. The invitation of the ICFTU to Iran by ITUC members in late 1956 provided a temporary protection to ITUC. It is argued that the government awaited the mission in 1957, and held back actions against the ITUC until after the visit of the ICFTU.⁸⁴⁸ When the mission arrived in 1957, they called for the planning of a union congress in Tehran for educational purposes, to teach union leaders trade union organisation principles.⁸⁴⁹ Just after the ICFTU mission left, the government called for the annulment of the ITUC. Later

846 "International Labour activities" in "Labour Affairs in Iran September 1955-January 1957," Dispatch no 651 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

847 See Appendix III for Mohammadi's letter.

848 Charles C. Stelle, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, Labour Affairs 1957, Dispatch no 821 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

849 Philip Clock, "Labour Affairs in Iran, September 1955-January 1957," 31/1/1957, Dispatch no 651 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

on, the former president of the ITUC, Qezelbash, would complain to the president of the ICFTU about this mission, which he argued, had not paid attention to their problems.⁸⁵⁰

Interaction with international labour groups was not only reserved for government representatives or either the self-acclaimed or legitimate nationwide trade union representatives. Workers representing various trade unions frequently visited the US for labour training in the 1960s. These small groups of workers would reflect the discussions on the home front to the away game. One particular example, dated 1960, was when M.A. Schlaff of the ICFTU New York office reported meeting ten Iranian trade unionists. Schlaff wrote to J.H. Oldenbroek, the president of the ICFTU, that the group was split into three divisions. “An Esfahan clique, a Tehran clique and a pro-shah, informer clique.” While the Tehran group was claimed to speak in favor of the works done by the *Tudeh*-affiliated ICFTU in the past, the Esfahani group was argued to state “the need to get rid of the movement of Communists” and the clandestine organisation of the ITUC. The Esfahanis, he claimed, “speak highly” of Amir Keyvan. Schlaff added:

“The Tehranis informed me that Khevan [Keyvan] is a crook and a traitor, the Isfahanis that Saber is a tool of the Communists and too dumb to realize it. Luckily at this point three Indonesians arrived, and we were able to break off the conversation.”⁸⁵¹

The US trade unionist accompanying the Iranian group had told the reporting ICFTU official:

“[O]n several previous occasions discussions of the sort I had started had led to near-riots and - early in the trip - to violent criticism of the Shah. The group and the Department of Labour had then been informed by a representative of

850 Letter from Qezelbash to ICFTU. 1959. ICFTU archives at IISG, folder 3490.

851 “Meeting with Iranian Trade Union Team,” 17/6/60, in ICFTU Archives, 3490. IISG, Amsterdam.

the Iranian embassy that the next member of the team who 'slandered' the Shah or his government would be returned to Iran within 24 hours."⁸⁵²

The variety in the positions of workers' representatives abroad, and the shifting alliances around the issue at stake, pushed the actors into revealing that the away game of labour activism was not played in a unilateral way, either. It involved diverse positions, and was seen as an arena to reflect and strengthen the struggles inside the national borders. Despite the Iranian government's official discourse that the only international connection of the Iranian workers was with the ILO and the ICFTU, archives disclose that connections with the World Federation of Trade Unions, WFTU, were also present. This connection exposes that the communist trade union movement in Iran was not extinct following its persecution. The clandestine CCFTU, which was outlawed in the process of *Tudeh's* illegalisation, was affiliated to the WFTU, and was represented at its third congress in Vienna in October 1953 by Yaghubzadeh. The same year, the CCFTU would be present at the Afro-Asian trade union congress in Beijing as well. It was alleged that Iranian labour activists gained aid and instructions from their international contacts.⁸⁵³

When in the early 1960s US diplomats were informed that two newly founded and not yet registered trade unions in Abadan had gotten in touch with the WFTU, the Ministry of Labour's Director General for international affairs was alleged to deny having any knowledge about it. Responding to the US diplomats, the Director General argued that their vision of international connections only involved the ICFTU and its affiliated International Federation of Petroleum Workers, and "any such

852 Ibid.

853 Philip Clock, First Secretary of Embassy, Dispatch no 166 from Tehran 1955 in *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files. Iran, 1955-1959 Internal and Foreign Affairs*, Harvard University.

effort would have to pass through their office.”⁸⁵⁴ However, this link was not secret, and the Company officers had also informed the government officials. The approach to the WFTU was claimed to have been made by an Abadan petroleum worker, who was an ex-*Tudeh* Party member.⁸⁵⁵ The Abadan Unions’ attempt to build international ties from the time of their inception demonstrates the need for international solidarity on the part of Iranian labour activists of the time.

Despite the presence of these high security checks and government agents in the trade union movement of the 1960s, it would be an oversimplification to ignore the existence of alternative voices in the trade union movement, or to assume that these activists had not developed means to deal with the persecution of the state. Playing the messenger role for trade unionist Amir Keyvan to avoid state surveillance, Bernard Rifkin of the USAID’s operations mission to Iran, wrote a letter addressed to the general secretary of the ICFTU, Omar Becu and recounted that he had scheduled a meeting of twenty five trade unionists from five cities and fifteen different industries in his house on 14 October 1965. He argued, “Although some will undoubtedly be SAVAK agents I do not expect any interference from the authorities. All participants are sophisticated enough to know that SAVAK people will be present.”⁸⁵⁶

ICFTU archives include a number of documents that shed light on the internal dynamics of the trade union situation in Iran in the post-coup years, despite the general assumption that the movement was extinct in 1960s, or that it was under full state control. A short review of documents reveals that for people engaged in the Iranian labour movement,

854 Robert. H. Harlan, Counselor of Embassy for economic affairs, 22/8/1965 RG 59, Box 1303, NARA and “Formation of Labor Unions in the Agreement Area of Iran.” Department of State CA-1359, 5/8/1965; Jones-Dunn Conversation of 14/9 and 16/9/1965 at the American Embassy in Tehran; Khorramshar’s A-6, 21/7/1965, NARA

855 Annual Labour Report 1965, Airgram to the Department of State, 1/2/1966, in Chaqueri, 210.

856 Letter from Bernard Rifkin to Omar Becu. 18/9/1962, ICFTU Archives, 3490, IISG, Amsterdam.

connections with international groups were important to strengthen their position, and they used the arena provided as an additional realm to pursue their political struggle.

The page of the Consortium was closed in 1973. Following the Tehran agreement in 1971, where a five year agreement on oil prices was reached between OPEC members of the Persian Gulf countries (Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar) and oil companies operating in these areas, the Shah announced the necessity of signing a partnership agreement with the Consortium. The proposed agreement would secure the Consortium companies' oil supply until 1994, in exchange for the Consortium's capital investment to increase Iran's production capacity over seventy-five per cent,⁸⁵⁷ transferring the control of the Abadan Refinery to Iranians, and constructing another, export, refinery on Kharg Island. However, while these demands were put on the table, there were other developments in the region. Upon the Shah's assessment that Saudi Arabia had received a better deal from the oil companies operating in the region, he suggested a long sales contract system to replace the 1954 Consortium Agreement, which would make the NIOC responsible of all operations in Iran immediately.⁸⁵⁸ Negotiations ended with an agreement on 31 July 1973, which transferred the ownership and control of the oil industry in the Consortium area to the NIOC and instated a new operating company, the Oil Service Co of Iran (OSCO), owned by the Consortium companies, to work as a contractor for the NIOC.⁸⁵⁹

857 Increase in the rate of production was a continuous demand from the Iranian side to the Consortium in the post nationalisation era. See Benjamin Shwadran, *The Middle East, Oil and the Great Powers* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), 171-172.

858 J. P. Burnett, "History of the oil industry in Iran," 15/2/1973, in POWE 63/710, National Archives, UK.

859 Fereidun Fesharaki, "Iran's Petroleum Policy: How Does the Oil Industry Function in Revolutionary Iran?," in *Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1985), 103.

Conceptualizing Labour Activism: Dualistic or Inclusive?

As demonstrated in this chapter, labour activism in the Iranian oil industry had its own dynamics, which at times, but not always, coincided with nationwide political and social developments. The particularity of the main employer being a foreign power, linked with a foreign state, characterized the shifting alliances in the organisation of relations of production.

In “Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organisation in Iran 1965-75,” Assef Bayat argued against the “political reductionist” explanations of the lack of organized labour between 1965-1975. In line with the argument in this chapter, Bayat argued that political reductionists linked the organisation of labour directly with the presence of state repression.⁸⁶⁰ Comparing labour activism in the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic with labour activism during the Shah’s authoritarian years, Bayat stated that there is no one-to-one direct relation between state repression and labour activism. Focusing on the experience of the workers themselves, he claimed that land reform and rapid industrialisation in the 1960s gave birth to a new working class that lacked the experience of industrial work.⁸⁶¹ He argued that this lack of experience, and the relatively better off positions of the new working class as industrial workers (as opposed to landless peasants), taken with the non-negligible state pressure against organized collective action, explains the lack of independent, organized labour activism.⁸⁶²

I agree with Bayat’s critique of political reductionists who take labour activism as a derivative of political freedom. However, his explanation for weak labour organisation in late 1960s cannot be used for the experience in the oil industry. Neither did land reform lead to a great transformation in Khuzestan, nor the oil industry became a labour recipient industry in the

860 Assef Bayat, “Capital Accumulation, Political Control and Labour Organisation in Iran, 1965–75,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 1989), 205.

861 *Ibid.*, 201-202.

862 *Ibid.*, 199.

1960's.⁸⁶³ The oil industry of Iran had more than sixty thousand workers in the Abadan refinery and oil fields of the South in 1950, one year before the nationalisation of oil.⁸⁶⁴ Despite the post-nationalisation blockade, there was no systematic layoff of workers, with the exception of the temporary contract workers. However, the biggest challenge of the Oil Industry in the late 1950s and 1960s was the problem of "surplus labour" that was introduced after 1954. Accordingly, the Consortium was trying to reduce the number of workers by pursuing a no recruitment policy and motivating early retirement in the late 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁶⁵ Migration was not a new phenomenon for the oil towns, either. The population of Abadan, where the workers were mostly concentrated, had grown from 120,000 to 226,000 between 1943 and 1956.⁸⁶⁶ Val Moghadam demonstrated that half of the population of Ahwaz and Abadan, the two oil centers, was composed of immigrants by 1956.⁸⁶⁷ Therefore, the rise in the unemployed population of the oil towns, taken together with the no recruitment policy and the Consortium's discourse of surplus labour, rendered the costs of engaging in overt, militant collective action higher than its benefits.

One of the results of the surplus labour problem and no recruitment policy of the oil company was formalising the traditional generational continuity of the oil workers by reserving the apprenticeship schools exclusively for the sons of the oil workers.⁸⁶⁸ Accordingly, Fred Halliday argued that the oil industry might be the only sector where the working class was predominantly second generation in this period, being the children of

863 See Jefroudi, "Revisiting 'the Long Night' of Iranian Workers: Labour Activism in the Iranian Oil Industry in the 1960s."

864 ILO report, "Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran," (1950), 29.

865 FO 416/109 and FO 371/140892, The National Archives, Kew Gardens.

866 The company survey in 1943 and 1956 National census, in LAB 13/1318, The National Archives, Kew Gardens.

867 Valentine M. Moghadam, "Accumulation Strategy and Class Formation: The Making of the Industrial Labour Force in Iran: 1962-1977," (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1985), 122.

868 FO 371/114871, The National Archives, Kew Gardens.

the working class formed in Khuzestan in 1930s and 1940s.⁸⁶⁹ Therefore, Bayat's argument of the lack of "industrial consciousness," in the new working class of 1960s, which he describes as "a consciousness, which derived its elements from an industrial setting, an urban life and industrial work", does not help us understand the "lack of labour activism" that is seen from the workers of the post-coup era in the oil industry, who do not constitute a "new working class" and did not go through a transformative change in their conditions in the 1960s.

However, the industrialisation wave in Iran had another type of impact on the labour situation of the oil industry. The British Petroleum reports of 1968 and 1971 point to a loss of senior and middle level staff, and resignations of the able and trained graduates of the Abadan Technical Institute due to the upsurge in Iran's economy and the need for more skilled employees in other parts of the country.⁸⁷⁰ The 1971 report stated that 38 members of staff resigned in 1970, and exit interviews with them listed more attractive offers outside, the unfavourable living and working conditions in the South, and other personal reasons among the reasons for their resignation.⁸⁷¹ Prior to the rise of industrialisation in other parts of Iran, pull factors such as more attractive offers would not have existed.

Taking labour activism as equal to an ideal type of transformative, revolutionary labour militancy renders the struggles that took place in the Consortium period invisible. James C. Scott argued that "everyday resistance" could be ambiguous and have double meaning under repressive conditions. He stated that in such circumstances "open declarations of defiance are replaced by euphemisms and metaphors; clear speech by muttering and grumbling; open confrontation by concealed noncompliance or defiance."⁸⁷² However, he was criticized for juxtaposing covert or overt

869 Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 185.

870 BP Archive, ArcRef: 127030 (1968) and BP Archive, ArcRef:193653 (1971).

871 BP Archive, ArcRef: 193653 (1971).

872 James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance" in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forest D. Colburn and M.E. Sharpe (New York, 1989), 26

forms of resistance to each other and a bias for the study of the former as opposed to the latter.⁸⁷³

Bayat argued that the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” is a useful conceptualisation to understand a recurring current in urban activism in the Middle East, which differs from “everyday resistance” not necessarily in terms of its repertoires of action, but that it is aimed against the state, the rich and the general public.⁸⁷⁴ The quiet encroachment of the ordinary involves acts such as engaging in informal jobs, using illegal electricity, and squatting houses, without any clear ideology or leadership. Bayat argued that this type of activism corresponded with the decline in traditional class based activism.⁸⁷⁵ These two approaches are very illuminating, yet assume a zero-sum between a transformative, organized, militant activism, and a survival based/economic/mediatory activism: where one of them exists, the other does not, or is useless.

As was demonstrated in this chapter, militant, communist-affiliated labour activism was not extinct despite the state’s suppression and surveillance, and at times survived by making use of the available legal realms, such as workers’ clubs or state initiated labour unions. Charles Tilly employed the inclusive term “collective action” instead of labour activism, rebellion, or protest to get over this dualistic narration of labour activism. He argued that the border between illegal and acceptable changes with respect to geography, time and most importantly the approach of the authorities. He stated:

Why let the boundary of our subject matter depend on the attitude of the authorities? Collective action, for our purposes, consists of all occasions on which sets of people commit

873 Matthew C. Gutmann, “Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance,” *Latin American Perspectives* 77 (1993), 74-92.

874 Assef Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002), 20.

875 Ibid., 23.

pooled resources, including their own efforts, to common ends.⁸⁷⁶

Tilly argued that different forms of collective actions, or repertoires of collective action, are experienced and learned by the workers in action, interpreted by others and responded to by the authorities, which leads to a continuous evaluation of them by working people. The history of labour activism in the oil producing South, which swung between mediation and militancy, and used every means and field available to pursue workers' demands, constitutes a good case for the validity of Tilly's argument.

Concluding Remarks

The literature on the contemporary history of Iran until now concludes that the years between the 1953 military coup and the 1979 revolution were dark ones for the working class, marked by a paucity of labour activism due to suppression. In the process of reestablishing an authoritarian monarchy, workers' ability to freely organise was prohibited, and the working class was subjected to surveillance through intelligence organisation checks and state-run trade unions. An alternative to this approach, emphasising the structure rather than the agency of the working class, constructs a narrative that explains the lack of labour activism in the 1960s. It argues that the rapid industrialisation wave in the urban centers and the push factors of migration, such as land reform, gave birth to a new working class, which did not engage in labour activism due to its subjective conditions. By stressing the State's suppression or the subjective conditions of the workers, both narratives aim to explain a *lack* of or a gap in labour activism during the long 1960s.

⁸⁷⁶ Charles Tilly, "Introduction," in *Class Conflict and Collective Action*, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Charles Tilly (London, 1981), 17.

In this chapter, by drawing on examples from the social and political context of the period under study, it is argued that workers frequently made a cost-benefit analysis of their potential activism, and determined that improving their condition did not necessitate entering into an overt conflictive struggle with the state. In other words, the social and political climate of the long 1960s, shaped by both repression and an extensive reform program built around a rhetoric of change and agency of the working class, enriched workers' repertoires of action, resulting in the reversion of the patronising discourse of the state, and workers' appropriation of the regime's discourse for their own means. Thus, it is suggested that a study of the repertoires of action that were utilized in the 1960s would tell us more about the social and political changes the workers experienced and became a part of, than a search for an ideal type of labour activism that might or might not be present would do.