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Oil, labour and revolution in Iran: a social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry, 1973-83

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6 | Fuelling the revolution: the mass strikes in the oil industry

The final two years of the 1970s are marked by the Iranian Revolution, in which, as I argue in this and the following two chapters, oil workers played a pivotal role. While the Shah had managed to hold onto power in the face of mass demonstrations that started in January 1978, the oil strikes (September 1978 – February 1979) paralyzed and fractured the state, paving the way for the insurrection of 10-11 February 1979. Labour activism among oil workers has shaped national events in other places and times, as well. The Russian Revolution of 1905 is perhaps the closest case in this regard. Oil workers in Batumi (Georgia) had already played a leading role in the labour protests that swept the Caucasus in 1901-1902, culminating in the strike in the city's Rothschild refinery. This was followed by a general strike of Baku oil workers in July 1903 and a second one in December 1904, "from which the 1905 Revolution was launched."⁹⁶⁵ The Baku oil workers, however, were not able to lead the revolution to a victory. In the 1917 revolution, the Baku oil workers once again played an active role and turned the city into the only bastion of support for the Soviets in the Caucasus, but their role was far from decisive.⁹⁶⁶ Although oil workers contributed to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 and pressured the post-revolutionary government to nationalise the oil industry in 1938-39, their role was limited. In Iraq, the oil strikes of 1946 and 1948 (in the Kirkuk oil fields and the K3 pumping station near Hadithah) radicalized a rising labour movement that played a significant role in the July 1958 revolution.⁹⁶⁷ Compared to these events, however, the oil strikes in Iran had a much more decisive impact on the for the dynamics and the outcome of the revolution.

In Iran, the oil workers' strikes developed in the context of a revolutionary movement and had an influential contribution to its outcome. While the next chapter focuses on the role of the oil strikes in shaping the outcome of the revolution, this chapter provides a detailed history of the oil

⁹⁶⁵ Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy : Political Power in the Age of Oil*, 33.

⁹⁶⁶ Michael Dumper and Bruce E. Stanley, *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa : A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 66.

⁹⁶⁷ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq : A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, 622-27.

strikes. Surprisingly enough, given their significance, no detailed study of the oil strikes has appeared until now.⁹⁶⁸ Filling this gap, the current chapter provides the first historical account of the actors, organisations, demands and processes of mobilisation involved in the oil strikes, using an extensive range of sources: reports of SAVAK, archival material containing publications and statements of oil workers and political organisations, and reports in newspapers and political periodicals (Persian and English). I have also used the memoirs of a number of oil workers and interviewed 20 oil workers about their experience in the 1970s and during the revolution. While some of the interviewees did not play an active role during the oil strikes, most of those quoted in this chapter did. Given my focus on the revolution here, this is a justified method, because as Bourdieu and Wacquant note, random sampling can "mutilate the very object you have set out to construct," which is particularly relevant when studying contending groups and organisations where there may very well be "positions in a field that admit only one occupant but command the whole structure."⁹⁶⁹

There are at least two reasons for looking at the oil strikes during the revolution. First, they shed light on a number of important aspects of oil workers' lives, including their workplace activism, politics and religious affiliation. In the words of David Montgomery: "Collective work stoppages tear the tissue of 'normal life,' and in doing so they provide historians with revealing glimpses of class relations and attitudes, which arise from but are disguised by the daily production and distribution of commodities."⁹⁷⁰ Secondly, as explained in the Introduction, the literature on the Iranian Revolution has focused more on general processes, rather than concrete and localised mobilisations, networks, conflicts, ideas, etc. Looking at the oil strikes is one important way to contribute to the writing of the micro-histories of the Iranian Revolution, so we can arrive at a better understanding of the role of workers during the revolution, their solidarities and struggles, and their relations with other classes (including the clergy and the intelligentsia).

⁹⁶⁸ The only monograph on the oil strikes has appeared in Persian, but its use of archival material is very limited and its content is distorted by its political-institutional aim. Saeed Taeb, *Az E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Ta Piruziye Enqelab-e Islami [from the Oil Workers' Strike until the Victory of the Islamic Revolution]* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Islami, 1382/2003). The oil strikes are also discussed, without details, however in a number of studies on the Iranian Revolution, particularly in Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. The best, although short account of the oil strikes is Terisa Turner, "Iranian Oil Workers in the 1978-79 Revolution," in *Oil and Class Struggle*, ed. Petter Nore and Terisa Turner (London: Zed Press, 1980). A number of short articles by and interviews with some of the oil workers who played an active role in the oil strikes have appeared in Persian and have been used here as well.

⁹⁶⁹ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 243.

⁹⁷⁰ David Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Science History* 4, no. 1 (1980): 81.

Before looking at the oil strikes in more detail, it is important to situate them within the larger revolutionary process. In periodizing the Iranian Revolution, I partly follow Ashraf and Banuazizi, who identify five stages of the revolution between June 1977 and February 1979. The first stage between June and December 1977 is marked by nonviolent mobilisation that followed the relative relaxation of repression in Iran due to international pressure exerted by the American Carter administration. The protests in this stage took the form of letters, manifestos, gatherings and some demonstrations by initially nationalist and liberal politicians, leftist authors and students, lawyers and other professionals. The role of the urban poor and workers at this stage is often ignored. However, the first physical clashes with the Shah's regime occurred when the authorities, with assistance of SAVAK, tried to bulldoze illegally built hovels in the summer of 1977 in Tehran and were resisted by some 50,000 people. Hundreds of houses were demolished, inciting 13 bloody clashes in the autumn.⁹⁷¹ There were also incidents of sabotage and some strikes. In July 1977, workers set the General Motors plant on fire, and there were an estimated 130 similar incidents in the following three months.⁹⁷² At this stage, the struggles of the urban poor and the working class were not directly linked to the emerging revolutionary mobilisation; however, the events of the summer and autumn 1977 predated the important role that they were to play in 1978. In October 1977, the death of Khomeini's son, Haj Seyyed Mostafa, became a rallying point for the religious opposition as ceremonies were organised in various cities.

The second stage of the revolutionary mobilisation is marked by the cycle of urban demonstration from early January to July 1978. The Shah had made some conciliatory moves in order to curb the emerging protests, but after President Carter visited Tehran on New Year's Eve and Day of 1978 and referred to Iran as "an island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world," the Shah gained the confidence to start a counterattack. On his initiative, the daily paper *Ettela'at* published an article that defamed Ayatollah Khomeini on 7 January 1978. In the following two days, seminary students in Qom organised protests and were joined by bazaaris who shut down their shops, exerting enough pressure on the ayatollahs to end their classes. The clashes with the police left five people dead and broadened "the revolutionary coalition from the intelligentsia to include a large segment of the ulama and the bazaar."⁹⁷³

⁹⁷¹ Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran*, 47. See also an extensive report of the social conditions and struggles of the urban poor in the peripheries of Tehran: *Mobarezat-e Zahmatkeshan-e Kharej Az Mahdudeh, 1356 [the Struggle of the Toilers in the Urban Periphery, 1977]*, (Tehran: Peykar Organisation, 1977).

⁹⁷² Nima, *The Wrath of Allah: Islamic Revolution and Reaction in Iran*, 57.

⁹⁷³ Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," 7.

Within a week, major demonstrations had emerged in at least eight cities, and in three others, general strikes were organised with partial success.⁹⁷⁴ In Abadan, demonstrations took place on 13 January and 17 February, which started in the Behbahaniha mosque and resulted in clashes with the police.⁹⁷⁵ At the end of a 40-day mourning period, the “martyrs” of the Qom demonstration were commemorated on 18 February 1978 during public ceremonies in various cities. Those who then died during these protests were commemorated 40 days later, creating a cycle of mass demonstrations that only ebbed away in June, as many participants became wary of violence, and the leading activists chose a pragmatic stance towards the counter-offensive of the regime. There were some protests and violent attacks between 17 June and early August, but these were local as national mobilisation seemed to have lost its momentum.

August to September 1978 marks the third stage of the revolution as the protest movement was revived when Islamist activists turned to the religious occasions during Ramadan, the month of fasting that started on 5 August 1978, in order to stage a series of protests. In August, several cinemas were set on fire. Three people died on 18 August when a cinema in Mashhad burned down. Two days later, the same happened in Reza‘iyeh and Shiraz, with no casualties.⁹⁷⁶ The same day, however, hundreds of people burnt to death in Cinema Rex in Abadan.⁹⁷⁷ The regime of the Shah was blamed for this tragedy, and the ensuing outrage escalated the protests.⁹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the regime started to follow a disordered and inchoate strategy of repression and concession, showing signs of panic as the political crisis deepened. On 27 August, Prime Minister Jamshid Amuzegar was dismissed in an attempt to diffuse the popular anger. The Shah appointed Ja‘far Sharif-emami, who came from a clerical family, to head a government of “national reconciliation” that made a number of conciliatory gestures. The protests continued, however, most importantly on 4, 7 and 8 September. The latter became known as the “Black Friday” after the military opened fire on the demonstrators who had gathered in Zhaleh Square in the east of Tehran, killing 79 people.⁹⁷⁹ After this bloody crackdown, the American ambassador in Tehran and the Carter administration reiterated their support for the Shah, boosting his confidence to carry on. Nevertheless, in the following months, the Shah felt “increasingly isolated”

⁹⁷⁴ Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, 37.

⁹⁷⁵ Habib Payam, *Roozshomar‘e Enqelab-e Islami Dar Khuzestan* (Ahwaz: Entesharat-e Khuzestan, 1390/2011), 22.

⁹⁷⁶ Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, “A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution,” *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1-4 (1980): 332.

⁹⁷⁷ Most reliable reports put the number of casualties somewhere between 410 and 450.

⁹⁷⁸ In reality, evidence points to the involvement of fanatic Islamists as the perpetrators.

⁹⁷⁹ Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, 73.

from his “Western friends” and found the messages from US officials “confusing and contradictory,” as he later recounted in his memoir.⁹⁸⁰

Demonstrations continued albeit with less intensity, but the locus of the protests shifted from the streets and into the workplaces in September, triggering the fourth stage of the revolution which was demarcated by general strikes in October and November. The general strikes continued in December 1978 – February 1979, provoking the emergence of the fifth’s stage defining feature: dual power. The oil strikes that are the focus of this chapter started in the third stage of the revolution, in September, and developed into a general strike in the fourth stage. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the oil strikes were essential to the emergence of the fifth stage, i.e., dual power. I apply a broader definition of the revolutionary period, however, which in most accounts ends in February 1979. After the insurrection, the revolutionary mobilisation among significant parts of the subaltern classes continued, as expressed in the continuation of protests and strikes, and the emergence of workers’ *showras* (councils). Moreover, the power contestation among different forces that had participated in the overthrow of the monarchy continued until late 1981, when the forces around Ayatollah Khomeini monopolized state power and repressed all potential claim makers. I will discuss this period between February 1979 and 1982 in Chapter 8.

6.1 Strikes in history

Strikes are only one of the methods workers employ in an attempt to improve their living conditions within and outside the workplace, and at times to achieve political and social transformations. These methods can be individual or collective, clandestine or overt, and can take various forms such as symbolic protests and sabotage: “pretending to misunderstand assignments, delivering substandard work, shirking, or collective theft.”⁹⁸¹ Hidden forms of resistance can be found in what James C. Scott refers to as “hidden transcripts” and “weapons of the weak,” including gossiping about and ridiculing of managers.⁹⁸² Although all of these forms can be part of workers’ action repertoire, occurring simultaneously and developing at times into each other,

⁹⁸⁰ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 161 and 64–65.

⁹⁸¹ van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, 174.

⁹⁸² Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Scott, Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

forms of resistance differ in their direct coercive impact.⁹⁸³ Methods that disrupt the production process, of both products and services, have a more coercive impact on the employer. Moreover, strikes, particularly when they have acquired a mass dimension, are associated with crises and transformative social upheavals like revolutions. Strikes, therefore, have acquired a crucial place in the action repertoire of workers in the last two centuries.

It is worth remembering, however, that this has not been the case throughout history. The first recorded strike occurred during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses III around 1170 BC, but while there are many more instances, strikes were not the dominant form of protest in the pre-industrial era.⁹⁸⁴ As Joshua Clover points out, riots were much more prevalent in this period as the principal form of protest. It was only with the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 1830s that strikes became more prevalent and turned into workers' main form of collective resistance.

In Iran, one of the first recorded strikes by workers occurred in late 1906 and early 1907 among the fishers in Anzali, amidst the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1909) against the tyranny of the Qajar monarchy and the imperialist intrusion of Russia and Britain.⁹⁸⁵ Iran's first trade union was established in early 1907 in the Kuchaki print shop in Tehran. In June 1910, print shop workers in Tehran founded the first sectorial trade union in a city, which published its own journal, *Ettefaq-e Kargaran (Workers Alliance)*.⁹⁸⁶ In the following decades, strikes and trade unions were organised, often by Social-Democrat activists like Heydar Khan 'Amuoghlu, and they took place in the post and telegraph company and among the workers of Tehran's tram and electrical company. The strikes that emerged in this period were informed by a reservoir of action repertoires, which included demonstrations, sit-ins (*bast*), gatherings (*anjomans*) and guilds. The first reported strike in the oil industry occurred in 1914, when two workers died in an industrial accident, and workers in Abadan laid down their tools.⁹⁸⁷

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the first large-scale strike in the oil industry emerged in 1929, and other major strikes were organised in

⁹⁸³ For a critical discussion of Scott's inclination to present "everyday forms of resistance" as the most important ones to study, see M. C. Gutmann, "Rituals of Resistance - a Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (1993).

⁹⁸⁴ William F. Edgerton, "The Strikes in Ramses Iii's Twenty-Ninth Year," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 10, no. 3 (1951). A number of other interesting early strikes are discussed in van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, 174-78.

⁹⁸⁵ Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Houchang E. Chehabi and Vanessa Martin, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations and Transnational Connections*, International Library of Iranian Studies (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁹⁸⁶ Chaquëri, *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left: Social Democracy in Modern Iran*, 90.

⁹⁸⁷ Floor, *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran (1900-1941)*, 28.

1946 and between 1951 and 1953. In the following two decades, the strike activity among oil workers subsided, only to increase in the 1970s. Thus, when the mass strikes emerged in the oil industry in September 1978, only a very small section of oil workers had first-hand experience of organizing or participating in strikes. A much smaller section had experienced the strikes of the 1940s and 1950s, or had learnt about them through the older generation. Nevertheless, there was a collective memory among oil workers about the strikes of the past and their historical importance. This memory, however, remained embedded in the stories that fathers told their sons and in the books of novelists such as Ahmad Mahmoud; this memory was barely revived or articulated in the dominant oppositional political discourse of the 1970s, including the discourse of the new revolutionary left (the guerrillas).

Since the 19th century, strike action stood at the centre of leftist debates in Europe and the US, and many labour militants had become schooled in these debates. In 1873, for instance, Friedrich Engels opposed the “general strike” in his polemics against Bakuninists in Spain:

In the Bakunist programme a general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started. One fine morning all the workers in all the industries of a country, or even of the whole world, stop work, thus forcing the propertied classes either humbly to submit within four weeks at the most, or to attack the workers, who would then have the right to defend themselves and use this opportunity to pull down the entire old society.⁹⁸⁸

Engels argued that workers didn’t have the resources and the power to organise a general strike, and that if they did, they then could take over the state directly instead of organizing a general strike. This view became the doctrine observed in the socialist movement centered around the Second International, in which the patient building of political power by the working class was increasingly interpreted in electoral terms. This idea was challenged, however, by Rosa Luxemburg, who was influenced by a wave of general strikes, particularly those of 1904-5 in Russia: “If, therefore, the Russian Revolution teaches us anything, it teaches above all that the mass strike is not artificially ‘made,’ not ‘decided’ at random, not ‘propagated,’ but that it is a historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social

⁹⁸⁸ First published in English in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Revolution in Spain* (New York,: International publishers, 1939). Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/bakunin/> (3 July 2016).

conditions with historical inevitability.”⁹⁸⁹ Instead of opposing spontaneity and coordinated activity, Luxemburg argued the latter can flow out of the former.

George Sorel is another important contributor to the discussion of the general strike. Unlike Luxemburg, he believed that the power of the general strike did not reside mainly in the harm it did to capital, but in its function as a “myth” that was “an expression of the will to act.”⁹⁹⁰ After these debates, the (general) strike remained an essential part of the debates in the socialist and labour movements, which focused on its practical and political aspects. The strike was also debated among the Iranian left until the 1950s. These debates were influenced by the general strikes in the oil industry in 1929, 1946 and 1951. In the following three decades, however, the discussion on strikes and the general strike by and large became less visible in the publications of the Left. From the late 1960s, a very different form of struggle attained mythical proportions, not so much among workers, but certainly among young leftist activists. This was, of course, the idea of the guerrilla war that absorbed most of the time and energy of the Left and marginalized the strike in its writings and activities, with the exception of the Tudeh Party.

6.2 Strikes in theory

Although each strike is a singular event shaped by numerous processes coalescing at particular times and places, a theoretical approach is useful to conceptualize their commonalities and their relations to social structures, political systems and to other forms of collective action, e.g. social movements and revolutions.

Marcel van der Linden makes a distinction between four coercive methods workers employ. Some methods aim to make the production process less productive through, for instance, “go-slow” actions. A second set of methods aims to mutilate or destruct the workplace environment through “sabotage.” Third, products or services can be provided free of charge, thus destroying the exchange value of the labour product. Fourth, workers can resort to strikes, which “can be defined as forms of struggle, coercion and power in which a group of workers collectively stops working to enforce economic, social and/or political demands that matter to those directly concerned and/or

⁹⁸⁹ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (London: Bookmarks, 1986[1906]), 20.

⁹⁹⁰ Georges Sorel and Jeremy Jennings, *Reflections on Violence*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1908]), 38.

others.”⁹⁹¹ The demands can be addressed to the employers of the strikers, the employers of other strikers or workers and to state officials.

Strikes come in many shapes. Van der Linden distinguishes strikes that involve workers leaving their place of work (rolling strikes, boycott strikes, go-slow strikes and the general strike), and those in which workers remain in the workplace (temporary slow-down action, sit-down and work-in). “Rolling strikes involve a consecutive series of brief work stoppages at many firms.” Boycott strikes target particular products or services. In go-slow strikes, “only workers in key positions go on strike, while the rest of the labor force pretends to work.” General strikes target the economic activity in a city, branch of industry, a region or an entire country. In a temporary slow-down action, workers remain but work at a slow rate of production while demanding a full-day’s pay. In a sit-down or stay-in, workers occupy the workplace without working. When they do continue producing at their own discretion while simultaneously occupying the workplace, we speak of a work-in.⁹⁹² As we will see below, the strikes in the oil industry started as both go-slow and temporary slow-down actions in September-October 1978, and developed into a general strike from November 1978 to January 1979. In the refineries, however, the workers often continued showing up, first working slowly and later stopping to work.

Moving beyond the typology of strikes, it is important to look at the course of their development, in which four stages can be distinguished: preparation or emergence of strikes, the beginning of strikes, the maintenance of strikes and the termination and outcome of strikes. As Van der Linden succinctly observes, for strikes to take place, there must be a “subjective willingness of the potential strikers,” which has three aspects: the issues, the triggers and the demands.⁹⁹³ The issues are defined as the longstanding sources of discontent, in other words the grievances. Grievances can develop out of the antagonistic labour-management relations that define the capitalist production process, but because this process always takes place within a broader social, political and economic context, grievances can emerge from factors such as ethnic and cultural exclusion, political repression, social inequality, labour market relations and religious and ideological affiliations.⁹⁹⁴ Triggers “are the

⁹⁹¹ van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, 182-83.

⁹⁹² *Ibid.*, 184-86.

⁹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁹⁹⁴ The interconnection of these issues are discussed in Thompson and Smith, *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*. Klandermans distinguishes between three main forms of grievances. Illegitimate inequality is when individuals or groups compare their own conditions with that of other individuals or groups, with their own in the past, or with their expectation, and regard the gap to be unjust. Suddenly imposed grievances refer to an unexpected threat or inroad upon people’s rights or circumstances. The third type of grievances refers to moral outrage because it is felt that important

specific incidents that crystallize feelings of discontent.” The demands are “the articulated desires with which the dissatisfied staff members then confront their opponent or opponents.”

As Van der Linden notes, the way in which strikers stop working partly depends on the nature of their work, or more precisely, the labour process. In some production processes, work is abruptly discontinued, but in the continuous process industries such as refineries and the petrochemical industries, “sudden interruption of factory operations may cause serious material damage, and shutting down production safely is a lengthy process. Complete strikes are rare in this branch of industry.”⁹⁹⁵ As we will see later, this was indeed the case in the refineries, where the strikes took a long time to develop, with the workers in the “Process Departments” being the last to join the strikes.

The maintenance of strikes is determined by the following factors. The *gender composition of the strikers* has an impact on strikes because female workers, for instance, often have to take into account their context dependent role in the family. The *loss of wages* has in impact, as well, and has to be compensated through union or informal solidarity funds. The *democracy dilemma* has to be addressed in order to find a balance between the need to create a strong discipline, unity and leadership and the need to involve the strikers who might have various disagreements. *Auxiliary groups* such as family members and students can also contribute to strikes. *Strike-breakers* (scabs) have to be controlled. And finally, the *relationship between the strikers and their opponents* naturally determines the course of strikes.⁹⁹⁶

Strikes can end either because the strikers do so voluntarily or because they are forced to. Strikes can end without achieving any of their demands, or the outcome can be a compromise or full consent to the demands. In the next chapter, I will return to the discussion on the outcome of strikes, and on the factors that determined their success.

6.3 Reasons to revolt: subjectivity

The oil strikes were so remarkable that when Michel Foucault visited Iran in November 1978, he went to the south to talk to Abadan Refinery workers and reported: “Like the pilots of Iran Air who cannot complain about their salaries,

values or principles are violated. Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 39-41.

⁹⁹⁵ van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, 192-93.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., 193-98.

what they want is the abolition of martial law, the liberation of all political prisoners, the dissolution – some say – of the SAVAK [the secret service], and the punishment of thieves and torturers.”⁹⁹⁷ To Foucault, the revolutionary movement represented “a perfect collective will,” and he identified “political spirituality” as the main factor that propelled oil workers and other groups into action.⁹⁹⁸ Other accounts of the oil strikes have emphasized the role of political agitation and leadership by either Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his supporters⁹⁹⁹ or communist workers and activists,¹⁰⁰⁰ downplaying oil workers’ own initiatives and motivations.

Such accounts lose sight of what Foucault himself might have called the “singularity” of oil workers in the revolution, and they overlook the oil workers’ concrete working and living experiences and informal networks prior to the revolution. It is, therefore, paramount to give proper attention to the “subjective willingness of the potential strikers” that includes, as discussed above, the issues, i.e., the longstanding sources of discontent, which I refer to as grievances. The advantage of looking at grievances is that they allow us to link workers’ material conditions and their subjectivity. It is difficult to imagine people participating in collective action without being aggravated about certain issues and without having emotions about them (dissatisfaction, fear, indignation, resentment, etc.). By providing primary motivational impetus, they make protests possible.¹⁰⁰¹

The oil workers’ “subjective willingness” to strike during the revolution, not only for their own cause but in support of the revolution, cannot be simply reduced to their longstanding grievances. This “subjective willingness” develops within a collective process in which longstanding grievances are reinterpreted in light of the revolutionary context, when new political opportunities open up, new organisations take form and new solutions are imagined. Longstanding grievances denote a good place to start exploring oil workers’ subjectivity, but they remain, however, no more than that – a starting point. By narrating the development of the oil strikes in the rest of this chapter

⁹⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes,” *Corriere della sera*, 19 November 1978 19 November 1978. In: Janet Afary, Kevin Anderson, and Michel Foucault, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 216-20.

⁹⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt,” *Corriere della sera* 26 November 1978. In: Afary, Anderson, and Foucault, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 220-23. Foucault’s stance on the Iranian Revolution has caused various controversies. For a counter-narrative to Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁹⁹⁹ Taeb, *Az E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Ta Piruziye Enqelab-e Islami [from the Oil Workers' Strike until the Victory of the Islamic Revolution]*.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ashraf, “Kalbodshekafi-ye Enqelab: Naqsh-e Kargaran-e San'ati Dar Enqelab-e Iran [Anatomy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution].”

¹⁰⁰¹ Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest*, 39-41.

through their triggers, demands, organisations, interaction with the revolutionary movement's political actors, ideologies and frames, I hope to show how the oil workers' consciousness was shaped – an issue to which I return explicitly in the following chapter.

The oil workers' longstanding grievances can be distilled from the recurrent demands they were raising in their collective actions during the 1970s, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Many of these grievances were furthermore repeated in a majority of my interviews with oil workers. Although oil workers were relatively well paid compared to other workers, there were considerable differences in payment. Blue-collar workers regularly demanded higher wages, particularly when the inflation rose rapidly after 1973. Oil workers in the north demanded food rations, which were given to their colleagues in the south. Unskilled workers received the minimum wage, and contract workers did not have the job security and the additional benefits of regular workers. Moreover, one has to take into account the harsh conditions under which most oil workers toiled. Other grievances were related to job classification, the 48-hours working week, collective bargaining and the lack of freedom in choosing workers' representatives and organising unions.

Housing became an increasingly important problem for oil workers when the oil company was confronted with a shortage of houses due to the increase in the number of its employees,¹⁰⁰² while rents rose exponentially in price in the 1970s. While on average an urban household of a worker in production or transport spent 19 percent of its budget on housing in 1971, this share increased to nearly 30 percent in 1976.¹⁰⁰³ It was no coincidence that the oil workers' protests in Tehran started with the demand for cheap housing in September 1978.

Many oil workers with low wages and those not regularly employed by NIOC were not only experiencing "illegitimate inequality" when comparing their respective situations with those of their colleagues who were better off. They also made a comparison between their income and the wealth produced by the oil industry. For workers with some political awareness, this even more so triggered animosity towards the oil company leadership, as Re'isi explains: "We would read about surplus value and then look at the income of the oil industry and then try to calculate the discrepancy between what we received and how much we produced."¹⁰⁰⁴ Workers' expectations were further raised by the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973-74, and the official discourse centred on

¹⁰⁰² NIOC, "Letter to the chair of the Senate Complaints Commission, Farvardin 29, 1355/April 18, 1976," 1309, LMD CIR archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁰³ Hakimian, "Industrialization and the Standard of Living of the Working Class in Iran, 1960-79,"

16.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Interview by Ahmadi with Heshmat Re'isi, 4 May 1995 (Tape 4), Berlin.

the rapid economic progress of Iran. This was, for instance, reflected in their complaint letters to the parliament or the Shah, which typically began with phrases like this: "Thanks to the initiative and leadership of our great king, every day a new industrial establishment is erected in every corner of our nation. . . . This [progress] makes our hearts that are filled with love for our king and our nation hopeful of the future. . . ." ¹⁰⁰⁵

Inequality was a major source of discontent, as we saw in the earlier chapters. The most important inequality related to the division between white- and blue-collar workers. Another important inequality reflected differences in employment relations; those workers who were employed as contract workers or by the Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry resented their unequal position. In 1977, a number of the workers from this organisation complained in a letter to the chair of the Senate that while they were recruited by the oil industry, they had lower wages and fewer holidays than their colleagues, thus demanding inclusion. ¹⁰⁰⁶

Another longstanding grievance was the presence of foreign managers and technicians in the oil industry and oil workers' communities. As I showed in Chapter 2, this presence became more noticeable after 1971, particularly in the oil fields where foreign subcontractors were active (Figure 70). Re'isi, who was released from prison in early 1977 and was sent to work in the oil industry in the south, remembers being shocked by the huge number of foreigners: "I saw a huge change in Ahwaz; the number of foreigners had increased dramatically. . . . So the anti-foreigner sentiment during the revolution was not a coincidence. When I started working again, I saw this [anti-foreigner] sentiment was very strong among the workers." ¹⁰⁰⁷

The resentment against the presence of foreigners in and around the oil industry was partly material, as they were responsible for pushing up the housing prices and rents. Another reason was career-related, as Iranian employees, particularly those white-collar workers, engineers and managers felt they were inhibited from advancing to higher positions now occupied by the Americans and Europeans, and in addition, they resented the lower salaries they received. "Moral outrage" about Iran's domination by foreign powers was another form of grievance. It was rooted in the "resource nationalism" that was present among most Iranians, and was particularly strong among oil workers. For them, the export of oil and the presence of foreign managers was a constant reminder of the foreign control over Iranian oil industry – an instance of "moral

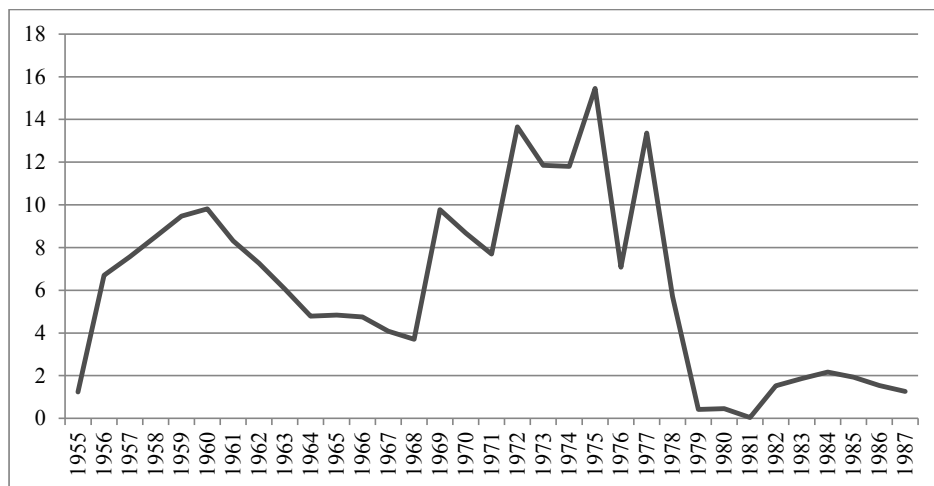
¹⁰⁰⁵ A number of graduated workers of Abadan Refinery, "Letter tot the Senate, 7 Farvardin 1347/27 March 27 1968," 1284, LMDCIR archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Number of workers of the Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry, "Letter to Sharif-emami, Shahrivar 27, 1356/September 28, 1977), 1286 and 1287, LMDCIR archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Interview by Ahmadi with Heshmat Re'isi, 19 June 1995 (Tape 10), Berlin.

outrage.” This tradition was rooted in oil workers’ ideological and cultural heritage in which the 1953 coup d’état against Prime Minister Mosaddeq and the oil nationalisation movement featured prominently. Furthermore, this heritage was passed on from older oil workers to the younger generation through the telling and retelling of a particular story about oil. In this story, which many of the older workers I interviewed recounted, the grabbing of Iran’s oil by foreign powers and the discrimination of Iranian oil workers by the British, as well as the struggles of Iranian oil workers against these injustices, played a big role.¹⁰⁰⁸ These stories were also part of Khuzestan’s extensive literature, represented by authors such as Ahmad Mahmud (*Hamsaye-ha*, 1966) and Mohammad Baharlu (*Salha-ye ‘Aqrqb*, 1970). A large part of this literature is centred around what Amitav Ghosh calls the “oil encounter,” which in a number of novels is depicted as a destructive modernizing force in a semi-colonial setting.¹⁰⁰⁹ Excluding these cultural sources of nationalism, Islamist and leftist ideologies had an influence, too, as we saw in the previous chapter, mainly through the discourse of Ali Shari‘ati and leftist organisations.

Figure 70 Number of foreign employees per 100 Iranian regular white-collar employees.¹⁰¹⁰



¹⁰⁰⁸ On the importance of stories, see Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (London; New York: Zed 2010).

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel; Ghanoonparvar, "Oil and Persian Fiction: Literary Depictions of Coping with Modernity and Change."

¹⁰¹⁰ Calculated from the figures in the *Statistical Yearbook of Iran* (online), 1955-88.

Finally, many oil workers resented the political conditions in and outside of the workplace. The presence of SAVAK in the oil industry and its control over oil workers' unions was on par with its repressive reputation in society at large. This situation was increasingly in conflict with two values disseminated as the official state discourse, especially in the oil industry. The first was the discourse of "meritocracy," which was a dominant logic in the oil industry where individual skills and ability drastically influenced the career perspectives of the employees (see Chapter 3). "The oil industry essentially functioned according to meritocracy, not 'favouritism,' which was marginal if it existed at all. There was no obstacle for those who wanted to develop. One could say that rationalism ruled in this part of the industry."¹⁰¹¹ This was one of the attractive aspects of the oil industry many interviewees pointed out to me, although the picture they depicted might be somewhat rosy as they were contrasting the pre- and post-revolution period. What is important, however, is the fact that the culture of meritocracy in the oil industry contrasted with its absence in the public sphere, where political loyalty to the Shah and Western cultural norms determined one's status.

Even inside the oil industry, there were instances of favouritism, as discussed in Chapter 3, and advancement to the higher echelons of the oil industry bureaucracy was limited by the practice of cultural exclusion and political loyalty to the monarchy in the form of membership in the official Rastakhiz Party. Informal, cultural exclusion played an important role in the reproduction of the oil industry's elite. The Abadan Refinery's Lions Society and its clubs, for instance, were the main venues for the upper-level staff, providing channels for upward mobility. The dominant cultural norms in these social milieus, such as drinking alcohol and dancing, formed an obstacle for pious staff members who stayed away. 'Abdolhassan Moqtada'i, for instance, remembers that for religious reasons he and few of his colleagues refused to go to a gathering that the Abadan Refinery's director had organised for married and bachelor white-collar workers.¹⁰¹² The absence of alternative social milieus at the top of the oil industry and the presence of a normative hierarchy that privileged Western lifestyles and marginalized Islamic lifestyles prevented the incorporation of religious staff members into the oil industry's elite.

The second value that was contradicted by the political conditions of the oil industry was modernity. Modern values were actively promoted by the oil company, mainly in the form of economic progress, while both the oil company and the country were run by archaic politics that denied modern values, such as political liberties. A SAVAK report on a meeting of the oil company branch of

¹⁰¹¹ Talashonline, "Goftogu Ba Heshmat Re'isi [Interview with Heshmat Re'isi]".

¹⁰¹² Moqtada'i, *Az Kudak-e Kar Ta Ostandar [from a Child Worker to Governer]* 74.

the Rastakhiz Party illustrates that this contradiction was noted even by loyalists: “Today [workers] enjoy benefits they couldn’t have dreamt of, but it is not right for the directors to decide the workers’ fates behind closed doors and not to be accountable to them.”¹⁰¹³ This sentiment points to the contradictory nature of the subject-citizen subjectivity that the monarchy was promoting as I put forth in Chapter 3. It also illustrates that the Shah was mobilizing Iranians socially and politically through his discourse of revolution and progress, and through political and social vehicles like Rastakhiz and unions, without allowing meaningful participation in decision-making.

We can thus conclude that when the revolutionary movement erupted in 1978, oil workers had a number of reasons to strike in order to improve their own conditions. Their grievances, however, are not sufficient to explain why these frustrations were further translated into strikes, and how the demands of the strikes developed from economic to political ones. I argue that the oil strikes were based on longstanding sources of discontent rooted in the oil workers’ experiences in and outside of the workplace, but that both the oil strikes and their demands transformed through their incessant interactions with the revolutionary movement. This transformative experience was expressed by one of the oil workers I interviewed: “Suddenly I wasn’t anymore just an employee; I saw the hardship of my father, the troubles of my sister, and a brother who has a diploma but can’t find a job. These issues became large.”¹⁰¹⁴ Participation in protests is not fixated by an individual’s singular rational decision at a given point of time, but it emerges from a collective interactive process that can only be grasped historically, at the level of events.

6.4 Tehran Refinery takes the lead (September 1978)

The first strike of oil workers in the context of the emerging revolutionary movement occurred on 16 March 1978, when around 100 workers of the Tehran Jonub company (a subcontractor of Tehran Refinery) went on strike in protest against non-payment of New Year’s bonus. At this stage, however, there was no sign of a revolutionary mood in the workplace, and the strike developed no connections with the revolutionary movement. The Tehran Jonub workers resumed their work the same day after the officials promised to solve their problem. The rapid concession of the authorities perhaps had something to do with the Shah’s planned visit to the Shahpur (Bandar-e Imam)

¹⁰¹³ SAVAK, document 00074253, IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹⁰¹⁴ Interview with Foroozandeh, 13 February 2013, Abadan.

petrochemical complex and Abadan in the following two days, and the authorities also wanted to prevent a drawn-out strike amidst political instability. This was a small strike which left the Shah convinced, as he told reporters in the Abadan Airport, that the protests in the country had the support of “two or three people in every thousand Iranians.”¹⁰¹⁵

A few days after this first strike in 1978, on 21 March, Yadollah Khosrowshahi, one of the oil workers’ leaders in Tehran Refinery, was released together with other political prisoners as the Shah was attempting to appease the opposition. Soon after, he joined the activities of the Tehran Refinery Syndicate and a recently established secret strike committee with seven members. The membership of this committee and the board of the Tehran Refinery Syndicate overlapped only partially. The Tehran Refinery Syndicate had been dissolved after 50 workers were arrested following the 1974 strike, but it was re-established in 1976.¹⁰¹⁶ The Tehran Refinery was a part of the oil installations in Rey, near Tehran, which also included a distribution and pipelines centre, depots and a general office. All of these departments had a union in which leftist-oriented workers played an important role.

On 8 July 1978, the secret strike committee wrote a letter to the oil company officials, giving them an ultimatum of two months to resolve the workers’ housing problems. Their main demand was a housing allowance as compensation for the rent increases, which they claimed had quadrupled in that year.¹⁰¹⁷ After the workers’ ultimatum ended, around 200 workers and their families, a total of about 700 people, erected tents on the parking space in front of the refinery on 8 September. Incidentally, this protest coincided with the massacre of demonstrators in Zhaleh Square in Tehran (Black Friday). At 6.00 a.m. on 8 September, the regime announced martial law in 12 cities, including Tehran, Qom, Tabriz, Mashhad, Shiraz, Isfahan, Abadan and Ahwaz. A large number of people in Tehran had either not heard this announcement in time or defied it, instead gathering in the Zhaleh Square, where the troops opened fired on them. Rather than deterring the oil workers, Black Friday (Figure 71) played an important role in triggering a strike in the Tehran Refinery according to various participants, including Ali Pichgah.¹⁰¹⁸

In the final hours of 9 September, two tanks and dozens of soldiers arrived to disband the tents. In response, 500 blue-collar workers of Tehran

¹⁰¹⁵ Payam, *Roozshomar'e Enqelab-e Islami Dar Khuzestan*, 31.

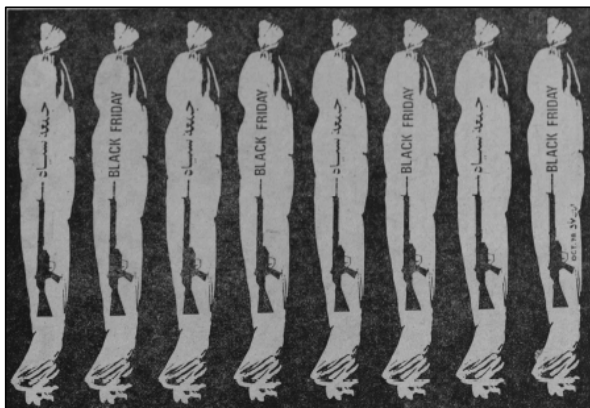
¹⁰¹⁶ Fattahi, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-ye Showra-ye Kargar-e Naft. Goftogu-ye Mohammad Fattahi Ba Yadollah Khosrowshahi [Oral History of the Oil Workers' Council. Interview with Yadollah Khosrowshahi by Mohammad Fattahi]*, 28.

¹⁰¹⁷ Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 157-58.

¹⁰¹⁸ Hazhir Pelaschi, "Dar Khorushkan-e Khun Tabaram Mikhanam - Goftogu Ba Ali Pichgah [Interview with Ali Pichgah]," *Manjaniq*, no. 2 (Dey 1390 [December 2011-January 2012]), <http://docs.manjanigh.com/manjanigh2.pdf>.

Refinery's 1,500 employees (blue- and white-collar workers) went on strike from 8.30 in the following morning. However, production did not stop, as the white-collar workers continued working in the control rooms.¹⁰¹⁹ Protests and strikes by the blue-collar workers of Tehran Refinery continued intermittently in September and early October.

Figure 71 Black Friday drawing in *Ayandegan* (26 Dey 1357/16 January 1979).



From the third week of September, protests started to spread among oil workers in the south, as well. The emergence of a political opportunity can explain the timing of the strikes. First, the renegotiation of the agreement between NIOC and OSCO that was to expire in the fall of 1978 created an opportunity for the workers in the oil fields to raise their demands.¹⁰²⁰ Influenced by the revolutionary movement, they had become more confident and blamed the Iranian authorities for not pushing hard enough to enhance their conditions in the new agreement.¹⁰²¹ Second, Black Friday and the arson of Cinema Rex on 19 August, in which more than 400 people were killed, led to

¹⁰¹⁹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 11 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1388/2009), 169.

¹⁰²⁰ Several rounds of negotiations between Iran and the Consortium in the first half of 1978 had ended unsuccessfully. The main obstacle was Iran's demand that the Consortium should commit itself to buying an agreed amount of b/d. The Consortium agreed in principle, but proposed that in case it was not able to buy the agreed amount, it should pay a fine for each barrel, instead of buying the total agreed amount of oil. Iran, however, was weary that the Consortium would use this clause not only in cases of "force majeure" but also as an excuse whenever they could buy cheaper oil from Saudi Arabia or other countries. *Ettela'at*, 2 Mehr 1357/24 September 1978, 6. On 8 September 1979, coinciding with Black Friday, the negotiation team of the Consortium companies entered Tehran, only to leave it soon without success. *Ayandegan*, 4 Ordibehesht 1358/24 April 1979.

¹⁰²¹ Taeb, *Az E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Ta Piruziye Enqelab-e Islami [from the Oil Workers' Strike until the Victory of the Islamic Revolution]*, 76.

public outrage and enabled labour activists in the south to mobilize and politicize their colleagues more easily (Figure 72). The public opinion blamed the arson on the SAVAK, which was accused of having started the fire in order to discredit the revolutionary movement, although much of the evidence points in the direction of Islamist activists in Abadan.

Figure 72 Victims of the Cinema Rex arson in Abadan.¹⁰²²



The Cinema Rex tragedy was a crucial turning point in the events of Abadan, engulfing the population in sorrow and anger. It helped oil worker activists to transform the collective action frame through which they tried to mobilize their colleagues.¹⁰²³ They could now claim that their grievances, even if they appeared small, were caused by a state that was prepared to kill

¹⁰²² Uncategorised document, 24 Khordad 1357/14 June 1974, IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹⁰²³ Collective action frames are the interpretative tools that are produced by an active process of framing by social movement activists. They provide a particular understanding of a situation as unjust, provide the sources of the grievances and the targets of collective action (diagnostic function), formulate ways to address the grievances (prognostic function), and motivate movement participation (motivational function). Collective action frames are, in Bakhtinian terms, “dialogical” as their meaning resides “not within us, but between us.” Framing is not only a cognitive process, but also cultural. Frames vary in the degree of their “resonance.” This resonance is an outcome of cognitive processes (frame consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the frame articulators), but also depends on the extend to which they resonate with the targeted audience’s cultural narrations. Framing is related to ideologies, which can be defined as a fairly broad, coherent, and relatively durable set of beliefs that effect one’s orientation to politics and to life more in general. They function as both a constraint and source in relation to framing and collective action frames. For more on framing, see David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Clarifying the Relationship between Framing and Ideology,” in *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective*, ed. Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005). Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000).

hundreds of its own citizens. Around 10,000 people turned up at the Abadan cemetery to bury the victims of the Cinema Rex arson on 22 August. A number of oil workers who had previously organised among contract and seasonal workers in the Abadan oil industry played an important role in the organisation of the demonstration.¹⁰²⁴ For the first time since the 1950s, red flags were waved in Abadan, recounts one communist oil worker: "We took the red sheets of my mother and cut them into pieces. The cemetery of Abadan became a gathering place where we distributed leaflets."¹⁰²⁵ In the evening, a demonstration that had started when two thousand people left the *hosseiniyeh-ye* Esfahaniha turned into a riot, prompting the regime to send in troops and tanks to take control of the events on the following day.¹⁰²⁶ In another dramatic turn of events, around 300 shops in the Jamshidabad bazaar of Abadan were destroyed in a fire, and the military troops occupied the main streets in order to prevent further protests. However, protests continued in the following weeks and provided an opportunity for militant oil workers to meet and make strategic plans.

According to Khosrowshahi, two members of the Tehran Refinery strike committee travelled to Abadan and had a discussion with a number of "activists" during a demonstration to commemorate the Cinema Rex victims. In the cemetery, these two workers from Tehran, two activists from Abadan and two family members of the Cinema Rex arson victims held speeches, after which the demonstration moved towards the city centre. But as it was entering the Bawardeh neighbourhood, the troops opened fire, injuring a number of demonstrators.¹⁰²⁷ The small, informal networks among oil workers that had existed prior to revolution, particularly in Tehran, in Abadan and in the oil fields, provided the mobilizing structures for the oil strikes that started in September. The connections between the oil workers were not only established through their workplace networks. In Abadan, for instance, the corners of the streets were popular places where oil workers used to gather with other residents, discussing everyday issues. During the revolution, politics became the talk of the day in these gatherings, and militant workers and sympathisers of political organisations exchanged the latest news and leaflets.¹⁰²⁸

The Cinema Rex arson and the subsequent public outrage caused some political turbulence as the Shah dismissed Prime Minister Jamshid Amuzagar

¹⁰²⁴ Mohammad Safavi, "The Voice of the Workers: Iran's Labour Movement and Reflections on the Project-Seasonal Workers' Union of Abadan, 1979–1980," in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, ed. Peyman Vahabzadeh (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 227.

¹⁰²⁵ Interview with Iraj Jafari, 8 June 2013, Delft.

¹⁰²⁶ *The Washington Post* 24 August 1978.

¹⁰²⁷ Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]," 428–29.

¹⁰²⁸ Interview with Hooshang Mohammadpour, 10 February 2013, Isfahan.p

and appointed Ja'far Sharif-emami on 27 August because of his ties with the clergy. In an attempt to defuse the protests, Sharif-emami called his cabinet "the government of reconciliation," but in fact he followed a strategy that combined repression and concession. This brings us to the third element of the window of political opportunity that opened up in August-September 1978: a vacillating government under the Shah, which was perceived as a weakness across society.

Thus in September 1978, the oil strikes started to spread, raising mainly economic demands. As the SAVAK reported in early September, the white-collar workers of Abadan Refinery had been voicing their demands for more wages, shift work allowance during holidays, a better pay scale and lunch/dinner during working hours for almost a year, and rumours were simultaneously spreading of a looming strike. Following their example, the blue-collar workers of the refinery were also threatening to stop work.¹⁰²⁹ On 17 September, 80 of RemainCo's 280 workers whom had not received their August wages went on strike.¹⁰³⁰ The next day, the cleaners of the Abadan Refinery followed suit by demanding pay rise and the right to attain company houses, and on 23 September, workers of the Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry in Abadan started a strike that lasted for a month, demanding pay rise, the provision of company houses, and technical, bad weather and food allowances.¹⁰³¹ Their protest was aimed against the fact that they did not have the same rights and benefits as other workers of the oil company, and they demanded the Cooperative Organisation to be integrated into the oil company.¹⁰³² On the same day, a few hundred white-collar office workers of OSCO in Ahwaz stopped working, as well.¹⁰³³ They remained on strike the following day and restated their demands: higher wages, housing allowance, the provision of more houses, bonuses for technical work and weather conditions and payments for lunch during work.¹⁰³⁴ According to SAVAK, the strike was triggered by the fact that the workers of the subcontractors of the steel company in Ahwaz had received a pay rise, and a number of agitators had distributed the call for the strike.¹⁰³⁵

¹⁰²⁹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 11, 331.

¹⁰³⁰ As a subcontractor, RemainCo was conducting the refinery's expansion. *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁰³¹ *Ettela'at*, 12 Mehr 1357/4 October 1978.

¹⁰³² *Ettela'at*, 4 Aban 1357/26 October 1978.

¹⁰³³ *Ettela'at*, 1 Mehr 1357/23 September 1978.

¹⁰³⁴ *Ettela'at*, 2 Mehr 1357/24 September 1978.

¹⁰³⁵ SAVAK reported five oil workers as the key agitators: Teymour Khalili and Musavi from the Ahwaz Production Unit nr. 5, Amir Jafari from the AC shop, and 'Abbas Mohammadi from the maintenance department. Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 11, 408.

At this point, the majority of the blue-collar workers in the fields were on strike concerning economic demands, while only a small portion of the white-collar workers was on strike. The strike in the oil fields was partly organised by an informal network that had emerged in the previous years around, amongst others, Heshmat Re'isi and his two brothers. After his release from prison in early 1977, the Tehran Refinery refused to re-employ him, so his brothers helped him to find a job in Sedco in Aghajari, where they also worked. From here, he renewed his contacts with oil workers in the Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz and Abadan refineries, and in the Ahwaz pipeline factory. After three months working in the field, he became a trainer in the oil industry's training centre in Aghajari, which proved to be a key position.

Every three months, I had around 30 internees from the different oil wells. After their training they returned to their own wells, and so I could maintain contact with around 30 wells. They were young kids with a high school diploma, and we developed an intellectual and personal relationship. . . . After five or six months, I had created an extensive network in the drilling companies. My position was enhanced because of my brother's long experience of working there, and his influence. . . . Here, I saw the contradictions that the regime was creating. It had brought workers from South Korea to work as truck drivers, but they were being paid in dollars and used the white-collar staff facilities. For instance, the white-collar staff caravans had gas air-conditioners, while the blue-collar workers' caravans had water air-conditioners that created a humid climate in which they couldn't sleep well after having worked for 12 hours. The Korean drivers and the white-collar staff were getting steak, while the blue-collar workers were served soup (*ash*). There had been several strikes against this discrimination. . . . Many were frustrated that the local, Arab people of the south were not trained as drivers or welders, but that foreign workers were imported, and they blamed the Americans [who staffed the foreign subcontractor companies].¹⁰³⁶

Moreover, due to his activities, Re'isi's brother was exiled to Kharg Island, which allowed him to create a network among the oil workers there, as well.¹⁰³⁷ On 24 September, a small group of white-collar workers of Abadan Refinery declared a number of economic demands and gave an ultimatum to the officials for accepting them. By that day, an estimated 30,000 oil workers were on strike in Tehran, Abadan, Ahwaz and the oil fields of Gachsaran and Aghajari.¹⁰³⁸ On 26 September, workers at the Bid-e Boland Gas Refinery held a meeting with the head of the National Iranian Gas Company (Taqi Mosaddeqi) and discussed their grievances.¹⁰³⁹ Around the same time, workers

¹⁰³⁶ Interview by Ahmadi with Heshmat Re'isi, 19 June 1995 (Tape 10), Berlin.

¹⁰³⁷ Hazhir Pelaschi, "Showra-ye Naft Ra Estehale Kardand [They Transmuted the Oil Workers Council]," *Manjaniq* 2, no. 2 (Dey 1390/December-January 2011): 139.

¹⁰³⁸ H. Movahed, *Do Sal-e Akhar: Reform Ta Enqelab [the Last Two Years: From Reform to Revolution]* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1363/1984), 185.

¹⁰³⁹ *Ettela'at*, 4 Mehr 1357/26 September 1979.

of various subcontractors on Kharg Island went on strike for at least three weeks.¹⁰⁴⁰ It is important to note that the oil strikes developed within the context of on-going demonstrations, which provided oil workers the opportunity to meet and create contacts with other groups. Forty days after the Cinema Rex arson, on 28 September, around 20,000 people from Abadan and Khorramshahr took part in the commemoration ceremony of the victims.¹⁰⁴¹

The speed at which the oil strikes spread surprised even SAVAK, despite its infiltration of the oil industry. In a report, the head of SAVAK wrote that the oil strikes in the oil industry in Tehran and Khuzestan “have no precedent in recent years; the strikes must have developed among workers in the national oil company very quickly.”¹⁰⁴² In an addendum, SAVAK registered 21 strikes in the oil industry, involving around 11,000 oil workers between 17 September and 26 September 1978 (Table 26). According to a US embassy report, the blue-collar workers in the oilfields of Khuzestan presented a list of 48 demands, topped with a 50 percent wage increase.¹⁰⁴³

It was not only the oil industry that SAVAK had to worry about; protests were simultaneously emerging in other sectors. In the Dimche neighbourhood of Shustar, around seven thousand workers of an agriculture firm went on strike for a number of weeks starting from 20 September. They demanded the sacking of the director, the formation of unions, an increase by 40 percent of the minimum wage, a new job classification, etc. More than 100 post workers and dozens of Jandishahpur University employees in Ahwaz went on strike on 4 October for higher wages and affordable housing. On the morning of 5 October, the taxi drivers in Abadan went on strike and gathered in front of the stadium. They protested against the lack of job security, the absence of a cooperative company, the lack of insurance and the high prices of Peykan spare parts.¹⁰⁴⁴ In late September and early October, public sector workers, most importantly teachers and the workers of the water and electricity companies, the railways, the ports and customs, post and telecommunications, were on strike.

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Ettela'at*, 2 Mehr 1357/4 October 1978.

¹⁰⁴¹ *Ettela'at*, 8 Mehr 1357/30 September 1978.

¹⁰⁴² SAVAK, “Report on workers’ strikes,” 3562-پ, ICHS archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁴³ US Embassy in Tehran to Secretary of State, Washington D.C., 27 September 1978; Document Number 1978STATE246376; Electronic Telegrams, 1978; Central Foreign Policy Files; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Ettela'at*, 13 Mehr 1357/5 October 1978.

Table 26 SAVAK list of oil strikes, 17-26 September 1978. ¹⁰⁴⁵

Company	Place	Date	Number of strikers
Foreign contractor	Abadan	17 September 1978	80
Foreign contractor (drilling)	Ahwaz	18 September 1978	200
Shahpur Chemical Company	Bandar-e Mahshahr	18 September 1978	800
Interdrill contractor	Ahwaz	18 September 1978	65
Iran South Coast drilling contractor	Ahwaz	17 September 1978	320
Iran South Coast drilling contractor	Ahwaz	19 September 1978	500
Gazbid-e Boland refinery	Aghajari	18 September 1978	420
Nasrin transport contractor	Ahwaz	19 September 1978	200
SantaFe drilling contractor	Ahwaz	19 September 1978	50
Oil Services Company of Iran	Aghajari	20 September 1978	1400
Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry	Abadan	24 September 1978	55
National Iranian Oil Company in Ahwaz	Ahwaz	24 September 1978	5050
Oil Services Company of Iran	Ahwaz	23 September 1978	
Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry	Masjed-e Soleiman	24 September 1978	21
National Iranian Gas Company in Ahwaz	Ahwaz	24 September 1978	80
Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Industry	Ahwaz	23 September 1978	40
National Iranian Oil Company in Aghajari	Aghajari	23 September 1978	850
Shell	Abadan	25 September 1978	100
Oil Services Company of Iran	Kharg	25 September 1978	150
National Iranian Oil Company in Kharg	Kharg	26 September 1978	90
Contractor	Kharg	26 September 1978	160

The oil strikes continued into October. On 1 October, workers of the central workshop and barrel-making unit of the Abadan Refinery went on strike for two days. ¹⁰⁴⁶ The strike ended after the company officials agreed to raise the housing allowance by 300 Rial for married blue-collar workers, and by 200 Rial for unmarried blue-collar workers. The food stipend for blue-collar workers was increased from 50 Rial to 100 Rial per day. Also the workplace bonus (*fogholadeh kargahi*) was raised by 10 percent of their respective wages. ¹⁰⁴⁷ After these changes, NIOC announced the following housing

¹⁰⁴⁵ SAVAK, "Report on workers' strikes." 2-3562-پ, ICHS archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Ettela'at*, 12 Mehr 1357/4 October 1978. "Az Kargaran-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargaran-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]," (N.N.: Mobarezan-e rah-e ijad-e tabaqe-ye kargar-e Iran, Dey 1357/December 1978-January 1979).

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Ettela'at*, 11 Mehr 1357/3 October 1978.

allowance for its employees, who did not have company houses: married workers who had not made use of company mortgages would receive 9,000 Rial per month; married workers who had received a company mortgage would be eligible to an allowance of 3,000 Rial; unmarried karmands who had not made use of company mortgages would receive a monthly allowance of 6,000 Rial; and married karmands who had not received a company mortgage would receive an allowance of 10,000 to 26,000 Rial. Karmands who had received a mortgage would be eligible to 50 percent of the amounts mentioned above, as delineated for karmands.¹⁰⁴⁸

NIOC's propensity to make concessions reflected a more general attempt on the part of the government to diffuse the workers' unrest. The government made a concession to the workers of the water and electricity companies who fell under the regulations of the Ministry of Energy. Most importantly, their housing allowance was raised to a minimum of 3,000 Rial per month.¹⁰⁴⁹ The government also announced that it would provide 60 billion Rial of mortgages to 20,000 *karmands*.¹⁰⁵⁰ Notably, it made revisions to the final version of the Employment Law for state employees, which was to be presented to the parliament for ratification. It provided for improved pensions and the exclusion of the official holidays from the workers' vacation. The salaries of 900,000 civil servants were increased by 25 percent, at an annual cost of \$1.5 billion.¹⁰⁵¹ The pay rise resulted in the following scheme of 12 scales: 1) minimum 20,000 to maximum 32,000 Rial; 2) minimum 22,400 to maximum 35,540 Rial; 3) minimum 25,100 to maximum 40,160; 4) minimum 28,600 to maximum 45,190 Rial; 5) minimum 32,900 to maximum 51,320 Rial; 6) minimum 37,800 to maximum 58,960 Rial; 7) minimum 44,200 to maximum 68,510 Rial; 8) minimum 51,800 to maximum 80,290 Rial; 9) minimum 60,600 to maximum 93,930 Rial; 10) minimum 71,500 to maximum 109,390 Rial; 11) minimum 82,800 to maximum 135,170 Rial; and 12) minimum 94,500 to maximum 136,550 Rial.¹⁰⁵²

Instead of preventing more strikes, the concessions prompted more oil workers into action. More than 50,000 government employees who demanded higher wages and better benefits walked off their jobs on 5 October. They included workers from the Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Culture and Arts, the state tobacco industry and the Post Office.¹⁰⁵³ On 6 October, the workers of the Abadan petrochemical complex¹⁰⁵⁴ and the Abadan oil tanker drivers went on

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Ettela'at*, 10 Mehr 1357/2 October 1978.

¹⁰⁴⁹ *Ettela'at*, 10 Mehr 1357/2 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Ettela'at*, 23 Mehr 1357/15 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵¹ *The Washington Post*, 3 November 1978.

¹⁰⁵² *Ettela'at*, 12 Mehr 1357/4 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵³ *The Associated Press*, 5 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 79.

strike, while the teachers of the city held a meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Education to discuss their demands. On 9 October, some NIOC white-collar employees in Abadan announced to go on strike, but their demands were partially met. Their mortgages were raised from 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 Rial, and the five-year stipend for house maintenance was raised from 300,000 to 400,000 Rial. After a meeting, the karmands decided to cancel their strike.¹⁰⁵⁵ On 15 October, the workers at the Shiraz refinery went on strike.¹⁰⁵⁶ The government, however, was not only responding by making concessions; it sent troops with technical expertise to Kharg Island.¹⁰⁵⁷

The main distinguishing qualities of the oil strikes in the period of September to mid-October were their rudimentary organisation, the absence of any meaningful coordination, the focus on economic demands and their very short durations. The demands of the oil workers in this period suggest that scarce and expensive housing, and what a NIOC spokesperson called “inequalities in the National Iranian Oil Company in relation to blue-collar workers,” were two main grievances among oil workers. Most of the oil strikes came up quickly with a number of socio-economic demands, but they ended as soon as the government and the oil company made concessions. This was no coincidence, as Houchang Ansari, the chairman of NIOC, had instated a committee of seven people to investigate and respond to oil workers’ demands.¹⁰⁵⁸

The demands of the oil workers, however, did not translate into action “spontaneously,” as I have already argued. In almost every protest and strike that erupted from September, the initiative of a handful militant oil workers and political activists was crucial in moving larger numbers into action. In Tehran, this role was played by the 200 refinery workers and their family members. In the oil field, for instance, the production unit nr. 5 in Ahwaz and a number of workers employed in the subcontracting companies were the “agitators.” In Masjed-e Soleiman, the SAVAK reported the intervention of a number of “outside agitators” and “local agitators.”¹⁰⁵⁹ In the NIOC hospital in Aghajari, SAVAK identified a nurse who incited her colleagues to strike.¹⁰⁶⁰ In Mahshahr, SAVAK reported, “Shanbeh Hosseini, who had worked in the oil industry before being sacked due to his communist activities and who works

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Ettela'at*, 15 Mehr 1357/7 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵⁶ *Ettela'at*, 24 Mehr 1357/16 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Khosrowshahi, “Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us],” 429.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Ettela'at*, 13 Mehr 1357/5 October 1978.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 13 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1382/2003), 84-85.

¹⁰⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 691.

now in the Mahshahr petrochemical complex, is the main reason why a number of workers refuse to return to work.”¹⁰⁶¹

6.5 Abadan Refinery goes on strike (14 October – 30 November 1978)

The initial phase of the oil strikes that started in early September faded out in the first two weeks of October as the government made concessions. The beginning of the second phase of the oil strikes is marked by the transformation of the Abadan Refinery into a major site of labour activism. Some have argued that major strikes in Abadan took off later than in Tehran, because the Abadani oil workers had a long tradition of secular politics and were hesitant to join the revolutionary movement due to its religious character. Their attitude changed only after the Cinema Rex tragedy.¹⁰⁶² It is certainly true that the Abadani oil workers entered the strikes slowly, to the dismay of their colleagues in Tehran. Ali Pichgah, for instance, who played an important role in the Tehran Refinery strikes, remembers: “We were in discussions with our colleagues in Abadan [in September] who were not going on strike. One of us who had the address of one of the Abadan workers sent him a headscarf to point out they were behaving like women.”¹⁰⁶³ It was not mainly secularism, however, that held back the workers in Abadan – many of the strike leaders in Tehran were Abadanis themselves – but more so other factors which played a role.

First, in Abadan there was an old generation of oil workers that had become conservative vis-à-vis militant strike action; they often orientated themselves towards the Tudeh Party school of thought, believing in patient syndicalism around fundamental issues. Second, in Abadan Refinery and the city in general, the state and company monitoring of workers was much more organised and intensive.

According to a detailed report drawn up by an Abadan Refinery worker who was a member of the small communist organisation Fighters for the Formation of a Workers’ Party of Iran (*Mobarezan-e Rah-e Ijad-e Hezb-e Tabaqeh-ye Kargar-e Iran*), the first discussions among the refinery workers about the need to go on strike emerged in the last week of September, when a list of economic demands was distributed in the refinery canteen. As described

¹⁰⁶¹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela’at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 16, 447.

¹⁰⁶² Fattahi, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-ye Showra-ye Kargar-e Naft. Goftogu-ye Mohammad Fattahi Ba Yadollah Khosrowshahi [Oral History of the Oil Workers’ Council. Interview with Yadollah Khosrowshahi by Mohammad Fattahi]*, 30.

¹⁰⁶³ Interview with Ali Pichgah, 15 March 2015, Sundvall.

above, workers of the Central Workshop and the barrel-making department stopped working on 1 October, but on the following day, most of them gradually returned to work after Majid Tabataba'i Diba, the head of the refining section of NIOC and its vice-president since late August 1978, said he would attend to their problems and made a number of concessions. The lack of contact between the different sections of the refinery also contributed to the unravelling of the strike.¹⁰⁶⁴

This first strike and its demands came mainly from the older generation of oil workers, who were active in the trade unions. There was, however, as described in the previous chapter, a younger generation that had entered the refinery with more radical ideas. A group of young white-collar workers of the Materials Department (*Edareh-ye Kala*) had started to meet secretly to discuss the possibility of strikes. On 7 October, they held a sit-in for two hours inside the depot building and presented a list of demands to Mohammad Taghi Rikhtehgar, the director of the depots. Their demands included a pay raise, the right to have company houses and a new job ranking system. They gave the officials one week to carry out their demands.

After a week had passed without any official reply from the refinery management, around 80 white-collar workers gathered outside the depots on 14 October. Within an hour, military troops and SAVAK officers arrived with General Esfandiyari. Eight white-collar workers were arrested, among them Abbas Sangiyan, Mohammad Reza Mazra'ekar and Rahman Gelehzan. The remaining 70 or so white-collar workers were taken out of the refinery and released in different areas of the city.¹⁰⁶⁵

The arrests, and the fact that the refinery officials had allowed the army to enter the refinery, outraged many workers, who consequently demanded an official apology and the departure of the military. On 16 October, coinciding with the fortieth day of mourning for the victims of Black Friday, the workers of the Central Workshop, who had given a two-week ultimatum to the head of the refinery, went on strike. In order to prevent workers from going back to work again, the following day the strike organisers (blue-collar workers of the Central Workshop) went to the various departments of the refinery and gathered their colleagues in the Central Workshop for a meeting.¹⁰⁶⁶ The strike

¹⁰⁶⁴ "Az Kargarane 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargarane Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]." Retrieved from <http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=29102> (accessed 29 October 2014).

¹⁰⁶⁵ Mazra'ekar, "'Etesab-e Kargarane Naft Dar Sal-e 57 Va Zamineha-ye An. Bakhsh-e Avval [the Oil Workers' Strike in 1978-1979 and Its Causes. Part I]". (accessed 29 October 2014).

¹⁰⁶⁶ "Az Kargarane 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargarane Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

involved the following departments: the Engineering Department, the Research Department, the Materials Department (depots), the Auditing Department, the Financial Department, the Administrative Office, the Transport Repair Department and the Central Workshop.¹⁰⁶⁷ At this stage, only the Process Department (the control rooms and the production units) and the refinery's bus drivers were not on strike. Around a thousand white-collar workers in the non-basic operation units of NIOC in Abadan went on strike, as well, and gathered in front of the central building of the oil company to protest against the arrest of their colleagues.¹⁰⁶⁸ These included the workers in the maintenance offices of Braim and Bawardeh. At this gathering, a spokesperson of the strikers demanded the immediate dismissal of the head of the refinery security. He said: "An employee of the refinery is not allowed, even after thirty years of service, to bring a single match into the refinery, but the military comes in with their rifles." After a couple of hours, the head of Abadan Refinery came to the gathering of the strikers and declared that 18 of their 74 demands had been accepted. The strikers, however, said they would continue until the humiliation of workers was ended.¹⁰⁶⁹ At this point, two divisions were still prominent. The call for unity among blue-collar and white-collar workers during the gathering in the Central Workshop suggests that the gap between the two groups was still there. A partly overlapping division was between the militant young white-collar workers, who were calling for the end of martial law and the release of political prisoners, and the older workers, who put forth economic demands.

On the morning of 18 October, the refinery's bus drivers joined the strike and "White-collar workers of the non-basic operation marched from their offices to the central office of the National Oil Company, and at the same time around 3,000 employees of the Abadan Refinery gathered in front of the Materials Department, the Central Workshop and the Transport Department. . . . Currently, more than 5,000 oil workers are on strike in Abadan," *Ettela'at* reported. On 19 October, the workers of Annex, the fancy Abadan Refinery restaurant, went on strike. The following day, all the medical staff of the oil company's hospital in Abadan went on strike, for the first time, in solidarity with the refinery workers. Only four doctors continued working for emergency cases.¹⁰⁷⁰

The strike in the Abadan Refinery received support from the workers of the Tehran and Shiraz refineries, whose solidarity messages were written on

¹⁰⁶⁷ *Ettela'at*, 17 Dey 1357/7 January 1979.

¹⁰⁶⁸ *Ettela'at*, 17 Dey 1357/7 January 1978.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Ettela'at*, 26 Mehr 1357/18 October 1978.

¹⁰⁷⁰ *Ettela'at*, 29 Mehr 1357/21 October 1978.

banners and displayed inside the refinery.¹⁰⁷¹ Some bazaaris in Abadan also declared their support for the oil workers. As the strike continued, the central building of the oil company in Abadan (in front of the refinery) became a meeting point where workers of Abadan Refinery and its non-basic operations gathered every day and stated five demands on 18 October: a pay rise of 12.5 percent from the beginning of that month; a payment of 7,300 Rial financial aid (*komak-e shoghl*); a payment of rations to white-collar workers and their families; the immediate sacking of General Kalyayi, the head of the refinery security guard; and the persecution of the military forces that entered the refinery and mistreated the workers.¹⁰⁷²

On the same day, the strikes spread rapidly to various oil-producing sites in the south. The white-collar workers of OSCO in Ahwaz went on strike, mainly in solidarity with the striking teachers, and they started to gather in front of the OSCO headquarters in Ahwaz (known as *do tabaqeh*, "two storeys").¹⁰⁷³ The oil workers on Kharg Island, from where oil was exported, and in the oil fields of Lavan, Behregan, Ahwaz, Gachsaran, Aghajari, Masjed-e Soleiman, Marun and Bibihakimeh, stopped working, as well.¹⁰⁷⁴ The strike on Kharg Island was particularly harmful, as it affected the oil export. They were protesting the imposition of martial law and called for the replacement of foreign technicians by those from Iran.¹⁰⁷⁵ Around two thousand employees of the petrochemical company of Bandar-e Shahpour went on strike and handed over 37 demands to the officials. One of their demands was the dismissal of all foreign blue-collar and white-collar workers, reflecting the persistence of an anti-imperialist consciousness among oil workers.¹⁰⁷⁶ The strike lasted for at least several days. The strikes were not only spreading within NIOC, but they also involved subcontractors of the oil industry, such as Khodadadi, a subcontractor of the petrochemical company.

By 19 October, the majority of the blue-collar workers in the oil fields were on strike.¹⁰⁷⁷ Some of the strikers in the oil fields moved into the headquarters of NIOC in Ahwaz. By November, a couple hundred of them were living in the corridors, eating and sleeping there, with the goal of increasing pressure on OSCO and NIOC, while in the courtyard impromptu

¹⁰⁷¹ "Az Kargaran-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargaran-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹⁰⁷² *Ettela'at*, 27 Mehr 1357/19 October 1978.

¹⁰⁷³ *Ettela'at*, 30 Mehr 1357/22 October 1978.

¹⁰⁷⁴ *Ettela'at*, 17 Dey 1357/7 January 1979.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ferrier, "The Iranian Oil Industry," 687.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Ettela'at*, 27 Mehr 1357/19 October 1978.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Taeb, *Az E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Ta Piruziye Enqelab-e Islami [from the Oil Workers' Strike until the Victory of the Islamic Revolution]*, 76.

prayers grew from tens to hundreds.¹⁰⁷⁸ On 20 October, a gathering was organised in front of the OSCO headquarters in which a number of engineers, high-ranking employees and workers declared their solidarity with the protests of teachers and university professors and students. They hackled the head of OSCO (Syrus Naqshineh) and said that they were only prepared to negotiate with Ansari, the director of NIOC.¹⁰⁷⁹ The following day, five thousand white-collar workers (staff employees and services workers) of OSCO in Ahwaz had joined the strike. One or two days later, several hundred workers of the Production (*Bahrebardari*) and Maintenance Departments of Marun also went on strike and joined the white-collar workers' gathering in front of the OSCO headquarters in Ahwaz ("new site"), which continued into November. One of the strike organisers among the white-collar workers describes the organisation of the meetings:

When we first began the strike, we used to gather in the halls and rooms in the main office building. The troops surrounded the building, occupied it, and forced us to disperse. Later we gathered in the parking lots of the main office building. But special troops and Ranger units occupied these areas and forced us to disperse. We moved our assembly site to an area in front of the company hospital. We were able to gather there for a couple of days, but we were again driven away. Finally, we came up with a new tactic. It was to prepare our agenda and our instructions to the striking workers, get everyone together at a given place and give them the instructions. We could do this in the half hour it took before the troops could come and drive us away.¹⁰⁸⁰

During one of these gatherings, they declared that some officials of OSCO had stolen billions of Rials from public funds by shadowy business dealings with subcontractors. The oil workers demanded the government to investigate these allegations, and in particular the case of one OSCO official who had made investments in a beer-producing company. A group of striking teachers joined the gathering of the oil workers, who welcomed them with cheers.¹⁰⁸¹ On 22 October, the workers of the pipeline-building company in Ahwaz also joined the oil strike in Ahwaz.¹⁰⁸² During these days, the strikes were spreading rapidly to other sectors. In Ahwaz the workers of the public services such as the welfare, environmental and economic affairs bureaus, and of industries such as the Haft Tappeh sugarcane company, the Pars paper-producing company, the water and electricity company and the railways, as

¹⁰⁷⁸ Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, 678.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *Ettela'at*, 29 Mehr 1357/21 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Iranian Oil Worker, "How We Organized Strike That Paralyzed Shah's Regime. Firsthand Account by Iranian Oil Worker," in *Oil and Class Struggle*, ed. Petter Nore and Terisa Turner (London: Zed Press, 1980), 300.

¹⁰⁸¹ *Ettela'at*, 7 Aban 1357/29 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸² *Ettela'at*, 2 Aban 1357/24 October 1978.

well as the Jandishahpur University, were all on strike.¹⁰⁸³ In Abadan the workers in slaughterhouses stopped working, as well.¹⁰⁸⁴

Ettela'at reported that the blue-collar workers of Tehran Refinery had gone on strike on 21 October and that,

"The strike of 5,000 employees of the oil industry in Abadan continued yesterday and today; the strikers gathered yesterday at 7.30 in the morning, just as the previous four days, in front of the main building of the National Oil Company. The number of female white-collar workers among the strikers had increased yesterday. . . . The directors announced that the demand of a pay rise had been accepted . . . but the strikers declared that they would continue their strike until all of their four demands are met. Regarding the arrest and imprisonment of a number of white-collar workers, the authorities should apologize and [the head of] the security guard of the refinery should be sacked, as the workers had demanded before. . . . The medical staffs of the [oil company] hospital have declared their solidarity with the strikers. The workers of the water and electricity department of the National Oil Company are continuing their work because of its importance, but they have declared their solidarity with the strikers. The same goes for the [production] workers of the [Abadan] refinery."¹⁰⁸⁵

At this stage, the demands still focused on economic issues, as one white-collar worker, Dadashpour, told an *Ettela'at* reporter: "We are not targeting the government or company, and we don't have a political goal. Our strike is related to our work and has no political colour."¹⁰⁸⁶ But this would change rapidly in the forthcoming days, against the wishes of some of the older workers.

Three factors were politicizing the oil strikes at that point. First, the military troops' entry into the Abadan Refinery made the oil workers in Abadan more receptive to the anti-military views of a small number of leftist activists among the oil workers. Second, the white-collar workers of OSCO in Ahwaz played a central role in connecting the oil workers to other striking workers and presenting political demands. According to 'Abdolhassan Mostafavi, one of the strike organisers in Ahwaz, about 30 representatives from Ahwaz, Aghajari, Gachsaran and other places in the region met regularly to discuss the developments.¹⁰⁸⁷ Third, a strike on 21 October in the oil reservoir

¹⁰⁸³ *Ettela'at*, 7 Aban 1357/29 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁴ *Ettela'at*, 29 Mehr 1357/21 October 1979.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Ettela'at*, 30 Mehr 1357/22 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁶ *Ettela'at*, 29 Mehr 1357/21 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Mohsen Qezli and Seyyed 'Abdolhossein Mostafavi, "Dastan-e Peyvastan-e San'at-e Naft Be Enqelab [the Story of the Oil Industry Joining the Revolution]," *Mash'al*, no. 676 (12 Bahman 1392/1 February 2014). Abdolrahman Monavi, one of the oil strike organisers in Ahwaz who supported Khomeini, mentions the founding of a 12-member strike committee in September or October 1978, which was trying to coordinate the strikes in Ahwaz and Abadan and also had contacts with Mohammad Zeyd Behbahani in Gachsaran. "Revayat-e E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Az Zaban-e Yek Enqelabiye Nafti Az Khatte Jonub [the Story of the Oil Workers' Strike by a Revolutionary from

in Rey, just outside of Tehran, helped to raise the consciousness among oil workers about the impact of their strikes, and their strategic position vis-à-vis the regime. Despite the fact that the strike lasted just a couple of hours and work was resumed after the authorities accepted the strikers' demands, this strike had a prodigious impact. The following day, the front page of *Ettela'at* ran the headline, "the shortage of fuel creates havoc in Tehran traffic." In its report of the strike, it wrote: "Despite the fact that Radio Iran at 8.42 p.m. announced that because of the reached agreement oil would be delivered to all locations, the surge of cars to the gas stations created turmoil and chaos; this situation continued until midnight." For the first time, the official media was giving wide coverage to the oil strikes, which helped the oil strikes to take centre stage in the revolutionary discourse, while increasing the self-confidence of the striking oil workers.

As the oil truck drivers started to join the oil strikes on 21 October, the government sent Houshang Ansari, the head of NIOC, to negotiate with the strikers of the Abadan Refinery.¹⁰⁸⁸ Ansari arrived at the Abadan Refinery on the morning of 22 October. Some workers received him with applause, while others protested against this gesture. The strike was temporarily dismantled, and in order to negotiate with Ansari, the workers from the various departments elected nine representatives. The negotiations lasted a number of days, during which Ansari sometimes left the meeting in anger and threatened to call the army. All the while, he was trying to deflect attention from the workers' main demands, like a pay rise, by focusing on long-term changes. Each day, the representatives informed the rest of the workers about the negotiations.¹⁰⁸⁹

The directors of the Abadan Refinery and its non-basic operations departments then issued a statement promising that the economic demands of the workers would be met. These included a 12.5 percent wage rise from 23 September, the payment of 7,500 Rial in financial aid (*komak-e shoghl*) and the provision of rations to karmands and their families.¹⁰⁹⁰ The demands for sacking the head of the refinery guard, General Kalyayi, and the call for punishment to the military forces that entered the refinery, were, however, not accepted. Further concessions were made by NIOC, which agreed to change the working hours of oil workers in the south from 6:00-14:00 to 7:00-15:00 in "wintertime" (23 September to 21 March), and to 7:00-14:30 during the

the Southern Region], "Naft News (11 Dey 1385/1 January 2017). Retrieved from <http://www.naftnews.net/view/4305/انقلابی-یک-زبان-از-نفت-صنعت-کارکنان-اعتصاب-روایت> (accessed on 25 March 2015).

¹⁰⁸⁸ *The New York Times*, 22 October 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁹ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Ettela'at*, 1 Aban 1357/23 October 1978.

“summertime” (22 March to 22 September).¹⁰⁹¹ This was not enough, however, to convince the strikers, and as one of the workers involved in leading the strike admits, “We presented the results to workers, but we hoped they would refuse, because at this stage we wanted the strikes to develop into a revolutionary movement.”¹⁰⁹² As a sign that this was not the end of the matter, representatives of the Abadan Refinery strikers left the meeting with Ansari in anger, protesting against his “intimidating” and “humiliating” tone.¹⁰⁹³ Conversely, Ansari had, according to the Shah, “escaped” from a meeting with the striking staff workers in Ahwaz on the night of 23 October.¹⁰⁹⁴

After the breakdown of the negotiations, the blue-collar workers of the Central Workshop and the maintenance departments of the Abadan Refinery resumed their strike on 28 October.¹⁰⁹⁵ In a show of solidarity, the striking white-collar workers marched around 10.00 a.m. to the Central Workshop and were welcomed by the blue-collar workers. One of the white-collar workers read out a solidarity statement, and one of the representatives of the blue-collar workers gave a summary of the negotiation results with Ansari. When some blue-collar workers chanted “death to Ansari,” they were opposed by others, who believed that this slogan would prevent the process workers from joining the strike, as they were planning to do the next day. This incident was

¹⁰⁹¹ *Ettela'at*, 4 Aban 1357/26 October 1978.

¹⁰⁹² Interview with Davoodi, 13 February 2013, Abadan.

¹⁰⁹³ *Ettela'at*, 17 Dey 1357/7 January 1979.

¹⁰⁹⁴ US Embassy in Tehran to Secretary of State, Washington D.C., 24 October 1978; Document Number 1978TEHRAN10383; Electronic Telegrams, 1978; Central Foreign Policy Files; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

¹⁰⁹⁵ At this point, a news list of 27 demands was circulated: 1) an end to the martial law in all Iran; 2) the release of all political prisoners; 3) return of all exiled Abadani workers with financial compensation; 4) dismissal of general Kalyayi; 5) the barring of military personnel from the refinery and written apology for their entrance and maltreatment of workers; 6) acceptance of all of the teachers' demands; 7) punishment for the Cinema Rex arson; 8) pension for workers with 30 years of service; 9) increase of the holidays to 30 days excluding the official holidays; 10) payment of technical, factory and weather conditions allowance; 11) increase of the travel allowance without tax deduction; 12) payment of a two-month bonus at the beginning of each year, without tax deduction; 13) annulment of the 35 percent of the costs workers paid in case of hospitalisation; 14) recruitment of female doctors for the wives and children of oil workers; 15) regular payment of workers who don't appear at work at doctor's instruction; 16) improvement of the Consumptive Cooperative Organisation of the Oil Company and clarification of the situation of the housing cooperative; 17) indexation of pensions and provision of urgent loans to retired workers; 18) payment of 150,000 Rial furniture allowance to all workers; 19) increase of the rations and improvement of their quality; 20) annulment of the existing yearly competence measurement scheme; 21) provision of transport for the oil workers' children; 22) use of company houses without consideration if the house has been bought with a company mortgage [unclear!]; 23) annulment of the house maintenance costs and electricity tax; 24) a 50 percent increase of the urgent loan for house maintenance; 25) improvement of the food during overtime work to a level equal with the food of the white-collar workers; 26) increase of the basic wage by 70 percent; 27) abolishment of the existing labour unions and the creation of genuine labour unions and labour union federations. Razmandegan-e Azadiye Tabaqeh-ye Kargar [Fighters for the Liberation of the Working Class], "Gozareshi Az 'Etesabat-e Qahremananeye Kargaran-e San'at-e Naft-e Jonub [a Report of the Heroic Strikes of the Oil Workers in the South]," (Dey 1357/December 1978-January 1979). Document 14274, IRDC archives, Tehran

symptomatic of wider divisions among workers at that moment. While some militant blue-collar workers and most of the white-collar workers wanted to politicize the strike, the older blue-collar workers wanted to focus on the economic issues at hand and involve more workers in the strikes.

This division became again visible when in the afternoon the blue-collar workers of the Central Workshop wanted to demonstrate inside the refinery but were opposed by some of their colleagues. As most of the blue-collar workers were in favour of the demonstration, they started marching and were joined by the white-collar workers, chanting, "long live unity," and "unity, struggle, victory," which were popular slogans among the Left. At the end of the demonstration, a number of speeches were held about Ansari's hypocrisy, the exploitation of workers and the necessity of the freedom of speech. One of the white-collar workers read out the demands that had been formulated by the white-collar oil workers in the south (see below), to which the gathering gave its support by a round of applause.¹⁰⁹⁶

The following day, 29 October, the process workers joined the strike, bringing the refinery's production to a halt. Encouraged by the strengthening of the strike, some workers gathered in front of the Central Workshop, carrying placards that had a number of political demands on them, such as "end the martial law" and "free all political prisoners." Once again, this was met by the objection of more cautious workers. This time, the situation became tense when these workers tried to bring down the placards and a physical confrontation seemed possible. Other workers intervened to defuse the situation and convinced the rest to bring down the placards in order to maintain unity. After the workers of the refinery's restaurant joined the strike as well on 28 October, almost all of the activities of the refinery came to a halt.

In the last days of October, the blue-collar workers continued gathering in front of the Central Workshop while the white-collar workers had their own meeting point in front of the depots; they organised joint demonstrations inside of the refinery with around 3,000 participants. These gatherings created a situation in which leftist workers could purposefully agitate the attendees in order to politicize the protests, giving speeches in which they attacked the exploitation of workers by capital, the dictatorship of the Shah and the injustices of imperialism. These gatherings helped to improve the relations between blue- and white-collar workers, but at this time they still had their own separate strike committees, while some stressed the necessity for a more intensive and unified coordination.

¹⁰⁹⁶ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

At this point, all of the workers of Abadan Refinery and its non-basic operations were on strike, except the workers of the refinery's catcracker and production unit (taqtir) number 65. The students of the technical school of the refinery (Amuzeshgah-e Herfehi-ye San'at-e Naft), and the barrel-making plant in Braim had also joined the strike.¹⁰⁹⁷

The oil strikes increasingly became more well-organised. A number of militant workers proposed the establishment of a Coordination and Supervision Committee (*Komiteh-ye Hamahangi va Nezarat*) for the blue-collar workers to attend to the following tasks: publication of information leaflets to be distributed and hung on the walls, organizing gatherings and speeches and negotiation with the authorities. This strike committee was established on 31 October, after the refinery workers elected 13 representatives at its head.¹⁰⁹⁸ They were in contact with the strike committee of the white-collar workers in Ahwaz.

In the last week of October, the oil workers in Ahwaz also established their own organisation. In the previous two months, even in Ahwaz the strikes had been organised separately in Karun and Khorramkush, suggesting there was little connection between the different striking groups. When the strikes started among the white-collar employees of Ahwaz oil company offices, the officials granted them for the first time the right to organise an association, which they named the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees. Each office elected one representative for every 50 white-collar employees, with a maximum number of three or four representatives in departments with more than 200 employees. The elections were organised by listing four or more workers as candidates for every position. A founding member explained the process:

The representatives were not elected by secret ballot. The vote took place in front of everyone. We put up a list on the wall. People came and signed their names next to the name of their preferred candidate. There were usually five or six candidates per position. The first duty of these representatives was to organise the association of professional and office workers. So, we called this body the Organizing Committee of Oil Industry Staff Employees.¹⁰⁹⁹

This Organizing Committee, which had 60 members, attempted to bring all white-collar employees into the Association of Oil Industry Staff

¹⁰⁹⁷ National Royal Police of Iran, "Report on demonstrations in Abadan," 0084309 (9 Aban 1357/31 October 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹⁰⁹⁸ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹⁰⁹⁹ Iranian Oil Worker, "How We Organized Strike That Paralyzed Shah's Regime. Firsthand Account by Iranian Oil Worker," 293.

Employees. They started to coordinate the strikes by organizing meetings with representatives of the production workers in the oil fields of the south, who had elected 20 to 30 representatives.¹¹⁰⁰ This was not an easy task, however, as one of the key organisers of the Ahwaz white-collar workers remembers: "The blue-collar workers told us 'you didn't support us in the beginning and so we will not support you now.'"¹¹⁰¹ Another white-collar worker who supervised a number of production units in the north of Khuzestan recounts:

I travelled to Cheshmeh Khosh to convince the blue-collar workers to join the strikes. One of the foremen in the production unit told me, "until now the strikes were organised by the blue-collar workers and the white-collar workers didn't intervene..." I wasn't able to convince them to stop production despite many efforts. So I made a move myself. Knowing that these three production units [Cheshmeh Khosh, Dehloran, Labsefid] were connected to the same pipeline to Ahwaz, one afternoon I and an number of colleagues went . . . and closed the break valve of the pipeline.¹¹⁰²

After some discussions, there was a mutual decision to organise all staff employees and draw up a list of demands, while the debate about the extent to which production and other activities in the oil industry should be stopped continued. In the last week of October, the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees presented the following list of demands to the authorities, which overlapped with the demands of the production workers, except on one point, the dissolution of SAVAK, which then also received support from the staff employees:

1. End martial law;
2. Full solidarity and co-operation with striking teachers;
3. Unconditional release of all political prisoners;
4. Iranisation of the oil industry;
5. All communications to be in the Persian language;
6. All foreign employees to leave the country;
7. An end to discrimination against women staff employees and workers;
8. The implementation of a law recently passed by both houses of parliament dealing with the housing of all workers and staff employees;
9. Support for the demands of the production workers, including the dissolution of SAVAK;
10. Punishment of corrupt high governmental officials and ministers;
11. Reduced manning schedule for offshore drilling crews.¹¹⁰³

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 295.

¹¹⁰¹ Qezli and Mostafavi, "Dastan-e Peyvastan-e San'at-e Naft Be Enqelab [the Story of the Oil Industry Joining the Revolution]."

¹¹⁰² "Bastan-e Shirha-ye Naft Az Yunit-e 5 Ahwaz Aghaz Shod [the Shut Down of the Oil Pipelines Started from the Nr. 5 Unit in Ahwaz]," <http://www.dana.ir/news/236242.html>/ صنعت-کارکنان-اعتصاب (Accessed 3 July 2016)

¹¹⁰³ Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 80-81.

These demands were presented to Ansari in the last week of October, but the negotiations between him and the 60 representatives of the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees broke down when Ansari said that he could only consider the economic demands, but not the political ones. The strikers had stressed, however, that the political demands were their main concern, and so the strikes in the south carried on. The oil workers also demanded the end of oil exports to Israel, which was for 60 percent dependent on Iranian oil, and South Africa, which was for 90 percent dependent on Iranian oil.¹¹⁰⁴ On 30 October, *Ettela'at* reported that the white-collar workers of NIOC and OSCO in Ahwaz, the production workers in Gachsaran, Masjed-e Soleiman, Aghajari, Marun and other oil fields and the workers of the Abadan Refinery were on strike.¹¹⁰⁵

By this point, the strike committees that had emerged under different names among the oil workers included supporters of the Left and Khomeini, although the Left was dominant. "At that time, we relied on the leftist forces that were more popular among workers and were better organised," an Islamist oil worker remembers.¹¹⁰⁶ In Ahwaz, the proposal for the establishment of the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees had come from Javad Khatami, a leftist engineer who, after the fall of the Shah, stood as a candidate of the Fada'is. 'Abdolhossein Mostafavi, who was a supporter of Khomeini and one of the main strike organisers in Ahwaz, remembers that both religious and leftist workers were present in the strike committees,

So we acted in a way not to alienate either of them and to maintain the unity. I was myself in daily contact with Mousavi Jazayeri [cleric, PJ] and informed him about the developments. One time I had to travel to Tehran, and he asked me with whom they should be in contact in order to provide the money for the continuation of the strike during my absence. So I proposed Javad Khatami, but Jazayeri objected that he was a leftist, but I insisted that he was trustworthy and that I could count on him.¹¹⁰⁷

In late October and early November, the strikes in the oil industry reached their zenith for the time being, involving roughly 37,000 oil workers in

¹¹⁰⁴ Turner, "Iranian Oil Workers in the 1978-79 Revolution," 272.

¹¹⁰⁵ The production of oil from the main fields was before the start of the strikes as follows (figures are million b/d): Marun: 1.3; Gachsaran and surrounding: 1.2; Ahwaz and surroundings: 1.1. *Ettela'at*, 10 Aban 1357/1 November 1978.

¹¹⁰⁶ "Revayat-e E'tesab-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft Az Zaban-e Yek Enqelabiye Nafti Az Khethe Jonub [the Story of the Oil Workers' Strike by a Revolutionary from the Southern Region]." Retrieved from <http://www.naftnews.net/view/4305/روایت-اعتصاب-کارکنان-صنعت-نافت-از-زبان-یک-انقلابی-نفتی-جنوب-خطه-از> (accessed on 25 March 2015).

¹¹⁰⁷ Interview with 'Abdolhossein Mostafavi, 7 January 2013, Ahwaz.

the south.¹¹⁰⁸ The 400 employees of the Isfahan Refinery, which had not started production yet, joined the strikes in the final days of October. In the following weeks some of them became agitated, according to SAVAK, when the authorities refused to negotiate with them and withheld their wages, leading some workers to utter threats towards the American staff.¹¹⁰⁹ Work in the petrochemical industry had also come to a halt, and the National Iranian Gas Company joined the strikes on 26 October, stopping the export of gas to the Soviet Union. The delivery of gas to Tehran continued, however, from the Sarajeh gas field near Qom.¹¹¹⁰ "Production and export of Iranian oil have fully stopped," the Organizing Committee of the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees announced on 30 October in the conference hall of the OSCO building, where its 60 members from Ahwaz, Abadan, Masjed-e Soleiman, Gachsaran, Aghajari and representatives of blue-collar oil workers in the south were holding a meeting.¹¹¹¹ During this meeting, they nevertheless decided that the 350,000 barrels of oil for domestic consumption should continue to be produced in order to maintain popular support for their strike. Hence the number 2 oil well (*bahrebardari*) of Ahwaz that provided oil to the Tehran and Isfahan refineries was kept running. They also decided to partially continue the production from oil well number 1, which delivered oil to the Abadan Refinery. At this critical stage, the strikes in the oil fields and in the refineries highlighted the potential of the oil workers taking over full control of oil production.

By early November, the oil strikes were having a huge economic and political impact. The oil production had dropped from more than six million to little more than one million b/d. According to some members of the Iranian Oil Participants Ltd., a Western consortium that produced nearly 90 percent of Iran's crude oil output, only an estimated 400,000 b/d were available for export. But also the export facilities were suffering from the strikes, as only four of the fourteen loading berths of the Kharg Island terminal were open in late October, and about thirty tankers were lined up for loading.¹¹¹²

This coincided with the growth of mass strikes in various key sectors of the economy. In Ahwaz, for instance, the Jandishahpur hospitals number one and two, the Jandishahpur University, the steel plant and the teachers were all on strike on 30 October, and four days later the employees of the city's

¹¹⁰⁸ "Strikes Maim Iranian Oil Industry, Cut Exports," *Oil and Gas Journal*, 6 November 1978.

¹¹⁰⁹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 18 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1384/2005), 467.

¹¹¹⁰ *Ettela'at*, 10 Aban 1357/1 November 1978.

¹¹¹¹ *Ettela'at*, 10 Aban 1357/1 November 1978.

¹¹¹² "Strikes Maim Iranian Oil Industry, Cut Exports."

judiciary joined them.¹¹¹³ On 31 October, around 6,000 students and teacher demonstrated on the street, throwing stones and breaking the windows of a number of banks in the main streets of Abadan, and employees of the labour and social welfare office and the Bank-e Melli-ye Iran had gone on strike.¹¹¹⁴ On 26 October, the workers of the National Iranian Gas Company started their strike in defence of “national and social demands,” and in solidarity with the oil workers.

Confronted with the intensification of the oil strike and the development of a mass strike throughout the country, the government adjusted its strategy, combining concessions with a military crackdown. It had agreed to concede to most of the oil workers’ economic demands, but realised that it was losing control over the oil industry. Lieutenant General Boqrat Ja‘fariyan, who had become the governor of Khuzestan province, sent troops into the oil fields on the morning of 31 October, and by 4.00 p.m. the army had occupied all of the major oil wells and refineries.¹¹¹⁵ In Ahwaz, the authorities intimidated the white-collar workers by throwing a number of striking white-collar workers out of their company houses and by cutting off some of their salaries.¹¹¹⁶ On the same day, NIOC stationed a group of around 100 high-ranking staff members and managers to break the strike at Abadan Refinery.¹¹¹⁷

A detailed eyewitness account provides the following report on the military intervention in the Abadan Refinery on 1 November: At 7.40 a.m., soldiers were stationed in various locations in the Abadan Refinery, especially in front of the Central Workshop, where an officer called on the workers from a megaphone to go to their work. After talks between members of the Coordination and Supervision Committee of the refinery workers and the officer, he left the refinery, and at 9.50 a.m., the military commander of Abadan came back with the message that he was going to do everything in his power to realize their demands. After the workers refused to go back to work, he proposed two workers go with him to witness his well-intended efforts. Then two workers stepped forward, in violation of the agreement that talks with the authorities should only take place through the Coordination and Supervision Committee, thus highlighting the divisions between workers. The

¹¹¹³ National Royal Police of Iran, “Police report on demonstrations and strikes in Ahwaz,” 00084299 (8 Aban 1357/30 October 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran; National Royal Police of Iran, “Report on the demonstrations and strikes in Ahwaz,” 0084344 (14 Aban 1357/5 November 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹¹⁴ National Royal Police of Iran, “Report on demonstrations in Abadan,” 0084309 (9 Aban 1357/31 October 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹¹⁵ *Ettela‘at*, 9 Aban 1357/31 October 1978.

¹¹¹⁶ Qezli and Mostafavi, “Dastan-e Peyvastan-e San‘at-e Naft Be Enqelab [the Story of the Oil Industry Joining the Revolution].”

¹¹¹⁷ Fakhimi, *Si Sal Naft-e Iran: Az Melli Shodan-e Naft Ta Enqelab-e Islami [Thirty Years of Iranian Oil: From the Nationalization of Oil to the Islamic Revolution]*, 929.

committee then sent one of its members to accompany these two workers. The three workers returned at 2.30 p.m. with the message that the military commander had requested to have until 4 November in order to attend to their demands.¹¹¹⁸

On 4 November at 8.00 a.m., three military Jeeps equipped with machine guns were parked in front of the front door of the Abadan Refinery.¹¹¹⁹ Inside the refinery, the debate among the workers about their demands heated up, and the majority agreed to focus more on economic issues rather than political ones in order to prevent divisions. While some workers, mainly those of the older generation and with Tudeh sympathies, shouted “bread, housing and liberty,” others raised political demands. One of the militant workers from the Central Workshop with pro-Khomeini sympathies, who was in contact with Hojjatolislam Jami, remembers:

Many people had gathered, among them women, as well. . . . I saw a scaffold and took the opportunity to address the crowd. . . . I said, “Dear colleagues, you think that these work-related demands will solve our problems; they won’t. The problem is at a higher level. What we want is nothing compared to what the authorities are getting. Our gains will melt like snow under the sunlight; inflation will make them disappear. Remember, you will have to head to the call [say *labbeyk*, a term with religious connotations] of our people. Our religious leaders are paying with their blood,” etc.¹¹²⁰

Similar divisions existed among the oil workers in Ahwaz; some prioritised economic demands and negotiations, while others wanted to pursue political objectives and confront the state. At one point this division came to the surface when a number of workers who sympathised with the moderate cleric Ayatollah Shari‘atmadari contacted Mohsen Pezeshkpur, the chair of the parliament’s complaints commission and the representative of Khorramshahr in parliament, to visit Ahwaz and discuss their grievances.¹¹²¹ Other workers, however, objected and resisted Pezeshkpur’s visit.¹¹²²

While the politicisation of the strikes continued to divide the workers, the gap between the blue-collar and white-collar workers had narrowed considerably. This was impart an outcome of conscious acts by a number of blue-collar and white-collar workers who dragged their colleagues to the

¹¹¹⁸ “Az Kargaran-e ‘Etesabi-ye San’at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az ‘Etesab-e ‘Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargaran-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery].”

¹¹¹⁹ *Ettela’at*, 14 Aban 1357/5 November 1978.

¹¹²⁰ Interview with Davoodi, 13 February 2013, Abadan.

¹¹²¹ Mohammad Reza ‘Alam, *Enqelab-e Islami Dar Ahwaz [the Islamic Revolution in Ahwaz]*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Islami, 1386/2007), 203-05. *Ettela’at*, 13 Aban 1357/4 November 1978.

¹¹²² Interview with Baqeri, 6 January 2013, Ahwaz.

meeting points of the different groups and organised demonstrations inside the refinery. These demonstrations played an important role in creating a collective experience and a sense of solidarity.

As the military was tightening its grip over the oil industry, NIOC announced that all refineries, except the Shiraz Refinery, were functioning again and that that production had increased to two million b/d.¹¹²³ However, the workers of the Abadan Refinery were still continuing their strike in early November, stopping an estimated 75 percent of the refinery's activities, which resulted in a drop of production from more than 600,000 barrels to 340,000 b/d. A representative of the strikers in the oil fields told a journalist on 1 November that they would collectively resign if the government would continue the military occupation of the oil fields.¹¹²⁴ These were "strange" strikes by "Western standards," as on journalist reported, because "Workers are still paid, still live in company housing, still drive around in company cars with company-provided gasoline and, in the case of Abadan Refinery workers, still show up for their regular shifts, but do little of any work."¹¹²⁵ This peculiarity of the strikes had much to do with the Iranian Labour Law that "permits a worker to be laid off after six days of absence without an excuse. So the workers come back the fifth day and then leave again. There are always some workers on the job, but, as NIOC spokesperson admits, 'The situation is continually unstable. There are those who work a lot, others who work a little, and others who don't work at all.'"¹¹²⁶ Another journalist observed,

No sabotage has been reported, but company insiders are increasingly worried about a general lack of housekeeping in the vast Khuzestan oilfields. Maintenance staffs in the Khuzestan fields are reported working at less than one-third normal strength and their failure to repair oil leaks could eventually pose a safety problem, according to specialists. So far the only strikers returning to work have done so with strike leaders approval. For the most part they are involved in distributing petroleum products throughout the country where, for example, the relatively thin gas station network has caused gasoline shortages even in Abadan, site of the world's largest refinery.

Of course, we are producing for the home market, an indignant staff member said, "I'd kill any fellow striker who tried to keep me from getting heating oil to my old mother in Isfahan now that winter is coming in." Despite recurring reports of an ultimatum for employees to return to work or face firing, the national oil company's approach has not been based on threats. However, the army in Abadan cleared strikers away from the refinery main gate and from the company hospital grounds, where they had sought refuge over the weekend. There has been no discernible meeting of the

¹¹²³ *Ettela'at*, 13 Aban 1357/4 November 1978.

¹¹²⁴ 'Alam, *Enqelab-e Islami Dar Ahwaz [the Islamic Revolution in Ahwaz]*, 2, 202.

¹¹²⁵ *The Washington Post*, 10 November 1978.

¹¹²⁶ Paul Balta and Jim Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," *MERIP Reports*, no. 75/76 (March-April 1979): 18.

minds—quite possibly because the shah shows no sign of wanting to crack down hard to break the strike while the strikers seem incapable of realizing he is unwilling to accept all their demands.

At so far inconclusive meetings, the strikers keep insisting on their political demands, which management says are outside its purview. . . . Even some economic demands—such as reduced manning schedules for offshore drilling crews—are considered in some quarters as impossible to meet now because of a shortage of trained Iranian manpower.

Negotiations at best seem spaced out at odd intervals. Oil Company chief Houshang Ansary appeared at one negotiating session two weeks ago. He is now reported out of the country - like many of the shah's once closest lieutenants - pursued by demands for his arrest on corruption charges lodged by strikers in the central oil company in Tehran.

6.5.1 *“Fear reigns in the city”: the military government and the oil strikes*

The regime's response to the oil strikes in the first week of November reflected its changing overall strategy towards the revolutionary movement. The Shah had come to the realisation that Sharif-emami's government had failed to restore order by granting a number of concessions to the opposition. By the end of October, the Shah was clearly starting to panic as the oil strikes started to cause serious damage, because as one foreign ambassador put it, “Iran's oil supplies are the regime's jugular vein. To cut these supplies, is to cut the Shah's throat.”¹¹²⁷ The Shah, sighing, “We are melting away like snow in water,” continued to alternate between repression and concession, but now on a higher level.¹¹²⁸ Following Sharif-emami's resignation on 5 November, he appointed the armed forces Chief of Staff general Gholam Reza Azhari as head of a military government that lasted until 31 December 1978. This move came after students stormed out of the Tehran University campus on the same day, ransacking government buildings and attacking the British embassy to protest the killing of several students the day before.¹¹²⁹ Foreseeing the demonstrations during the holy Moharram month (in December), the Shah's advisors persuaded him that only a military government could take control over the events.

Following his inconsistent approach, the following day the Shah announced in a television and radio broadcast, “The Revolution of the Iranian

¹¹²⁷ Steven Strasser, Loren Jenkins, and Jeffrey Antevil, “Iran: At the Brink?,” *Newsweek*, 13 November 1978.

¹¹²⁸ Quoted in Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, 678.

¹¹²⁹ Nikazmerad, “A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution,” 337. According to some, General Gholam Ali Oveyssi, the martial law commander of Tehran had ordered his troops not to intervene in order to pursue the Shah to take a harder line. See Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution : From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 121.

people cannot be disapproved by me. . . . Once again before the Iranian people I swear that I will not repeat the past mistakes, and I assure you that previous mistakes, lawlessness, oppression, and corruption will not happen again. . . . I too, have heard the message of your revolution,” and he promised to realize its goals. He warned, however, that the revolutions was being used to create chaos, referring explicitly to the strikes: “The wave of strikes, many of which were justified, have attained a nature and direction, which damages the economic wheel of the country and the daily lives of the people; they have even stopped the flow of oil, on which the life of the nation depends. . . .”¹¹³⁰ This reflected the regime’s awareness of the existential threat of the oil strikes, and the necessity of terminating them.

Khomeini and other revolutionary forces grasped the Shah’s move as a weakness.¹¹³¹ In November, Azhari’s government continued to combine concessions, which included the sacking of 34 senior SAVAK officers and the promise to free 1,000 political prisoners on 10 December, World Human Rights Day, with repression.¹¹³² Azhari imposed a martial law and strict censorship on the media, which went on strike on 5 November, and remained closed until 6 January 1979.¹¹³³ Universities were shut down. The military government announced that those who refused to work would be sacked or arrested. In the following weeks, around 200 leaders of the oil strikers were arrested. As oil workers gradually returned to work, the strikes fizzled out by late November. The military government pursued the combination of concession and repression in the oil industry, as well, successfully undermining most of the oil strikes in November. The counter-information (Zedde Ettela‘at) office of the marine, for instance, reported that the Ahwaz army commander threatened the Kharg oil workers with exile if they continued their strike.¹¹³⁴ The developments in the Abadan Refinery are exemplary of what was happening in other oil-producing places.

¹¹³⁰ Published in Mehdi Bazargan, *Enqelab-e Iran Dar Do Harekat [the Iranian Revolution in Two Moves]* (Nehzat-e Azadi, 1363 [1984]), 207.

¹¹³¹ The Shah’s inconsistent and weak reaction to the revolution was exacerbated by the confusing messages from Washington. President Jimmy Carter asserted his firm support for the Shah’s “progressive administration,” but privately some US officials were becoming doubtful about the Shah’s chances to stay in power and urged him to take stronger action. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance told reporters that liberalisation and the restoration of law and order “are not at all inconsistent.” Strasser, Jenkins, and Antevil, “Iran: At the Brink?.” On 9 November, William Sullivan, the American ambassador in Tehran, sent a discomfiting message to Washington, titled “Thinking the Unthinkable,” suggesting that the Shah might not survive after all. William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1981), 200-03.

¹¹³² *The Washington Post*, 3 November 1978.

¹¹³³ No major Iranian newspapers be used for this period, others available sources include the Liberation Movement of Iran’s “News of the Islamic Movement,” foreign newspapers, and governmental and SAVAK documents.

¹¹³⁴ Document 345/097 (20 Aban 1357/11 November 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

Reflecting the division between moderate and radical workers, the latter, who were dominating the strikes, chose on 4 November six of the 13 members of the Coordination and Supervision Committee to continue, as they accused the rest of acting too friendly towards the authorities. On the same day, employees of the general office of NIOC, the National Petrochemical Company and Nippon Petrochemical gathered in front of the main gate of the refinery to show their solidarity. A report by *Le Monde*'s correspondent Paul Balta presents a clear picture of how the oil workers' strike in Abadan involved the broader community:

Saturday, November 4, there is a meeting where 1,700 representatives gather from all the factories. It is held at the refinery in the presence of the military governor. The delegates lay out their demands and announce that a thousand persons will spend the night in the administrative buildings. The governor accepts this, but towards midnight he sends troops to drive them out. Result: eleven wounded of whom two die. Monday, the teachers march at Abadan and at Khorramshahr in solidarity with the oil workers, while in Tehran the government of General Azhari is formed.¹¹³⁵

About 160 white- and blue-collar workers, and 60 others (mainly students and teachers) were arrested during that night and the following morning.¹¹³⁶ The attack escalated the situation, angering and politicizing the oil workers and thus shifting the balance towards the radicals. It also enhanced the unity between white-collar and blue-collar workers who started gathering and protesting together. The news of the attack in Abadan, in combination with the footage of the attack on the students in Tehran, further radicalized the oil workers in the south. The following day, 5 November, Mokhtar Mo'aser, one of the members of the Coordination and Supervision Committee, used the opportunity at a gathering, as he held up a bloodied shirt, to argue that it was time to prioritise the political demands. The Coordination and Supervision Committee issued, with the support of the white-collar workers, its first communiqué, which included nine demands formulated in discussion with other strike committees of oil workers in the south:

1. Full support for the demands of the oil industry employees;
2. Ending of the martial law;
3. Unconditional release of the political prisoners and the right of returned for those who have been exiled;

¹¹³⁵ *Le Monde*, 16 November 1978, which was translation by Jim Paul in Merip Reports. Balta and Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," 18. General Gholam Reza Azhari was prime minister from 6 November 1978 to 31 December 1979. The two deadly casualties is not reported in other accounts of the event.

¹¹³⁶ Razmandegan-e Azadiye Tabaqeh-ye Kargar [Fighters for the Liberation of the Working Class], "Gozareshi Az 'Etesabat-e Qahremananaye Kargaran-e San'at-e Naft-e Jonub [a Report of the Heroic Strikes of the Oil Workers in the South]," 15.

4. Abolition of SAVAK;
5. Persecution and punishment of corrupt officials;
6. Persecution of those who are responsible for the recent killings in Iran;
7. Reversal of the Oil Day from 9 to 29 Esfand;
8. Solving the problems of the teachers;
9. Acceptance of the previous demands of oil workers.¹¹³⁷

The gathering ended with a speech by one of the members of the Coordination and Supervision Committee, who declared that workers should take the lead in the struggle against imperialism and the monarchy. The protests continued on 6 November as 600 oil workers and students gathered in front of the NIOC hospital and clashed with the military, which led to four members of the Coordination and Supervision Committee being arrested.¹¹³⁸ The following day, the Coordination and Supervision Committee held a five-hour meeting to discuss the new situation. After heated debates, it decided to accept negotiations with the new military government, with the precondition, however, that the four arrested workers were released. When the committee presented its decisions to a meeting of the workers, some of the radical, young workers protested that a sit-in should be organised until their colleagues were released. The majority opposed this, arguing that a sit-in would provide the military an excuse to invade the refinery, smash the strike and disperse the workers. The following day, 8 November, the military commander of Abadan, General Esfandiyari, came to the refinery but did not succeed in talking the workers back to work by promising that their economic demands would be realized.¹¹³⁹ Even the promise of a 10 percent wage rise was not persuasive enough. As a former refinery worker recounts, "Whatever we demanded, the representatives of the authorities accepted, but we came with another excuse. It was clear that they wanted to sooth the situation, while we wanted the strike to continue."¹¹⁴⁰

A journalist observed:

Interviews with two young leaders of the spontaneous coordinating committee running the strike at the Abadan Refinery suggested a devotion to utopian ideals

¹¹³⁷ Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]," 427. And "Az Kargaran-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargaran-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹¹³⁸ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 15 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1383/2005), 258.

¹¹³⁹ "Az Kargaran-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargaran-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹¹⁴⁰ Moqtada'i, *Az Kudak-e Kar Ta Ostandar [from a Child Worker to Governer]* 87.

rather than the give-and-take of labour-management struggles... "We were suppressed for so many years. We suffered for so long," one leaders said, "that now we have burst. It was not the Shah who liberalized," he added vehemently, "but we who grasped liberalisation from him. We took it." "I say why did my father not act and I do not want my son to ask me the same question," his colleague said. "We know we might be killed, but we say we are no better than the people who were killed in the Rex Cinema here in Abadan or in Zhaleh Square in Tehran," he added.¹¹⁴¹

Oil workers were not only protesting inside the refinery, but they also joined the demonstrations in the city. On 11 November, for instance, 47 of them were arrested for "sedition" and six for writing slogans on the walls during a demonstration that started after prayer in the mosque of Farahabad, a working class neighbourhood.¹¹⁴² After concession failed to break the strike, on 12 November the military commander of Abadan opted for a more aggressive approach by arresting more oil workers in Abadan and sending troops equipped with batons and bayonets into the refinery in order to prevent the workers from gathering. In the ensuing skirmishes, a number of workers were beaten and thirty were arrested, but released soon after. The soldiers surrounded the heart of the strike, the Central Workshop, but the strike continued as the workers of the Central Workshop declared they would not come back to the refinery in the afternoon.

In the following days, however, the presence and intimidation of the troops, on the one hand, and the acceptance of the majority of the workers' demands, on the other, started to break the strike. On 13 November a group of radical, young workers issued a statement saying they would not come to work and called on their colleagues to do the same. The call was heeded by the blue-collar workers of the Central Workshop, the maintenance, overhaul and Transport Departments. The bus and truck drivers, however, did return to work. On 14 November the workers of the Process Department also resumed their work. At the same time, the army started to arrest workers in their homes, and brought others back to work by force. This intimidation resulted in most workers showing up at the refinery in the forthcoming days, but they continued their protests in a go-slow form. In response to the go-slow, the management announced on 18 November that the maintenance workers of important places in the refinery would be divided in morning and afternoon shifts, making it easier to identify the participants in the go-slow.¹¹⁴³ The office workers, the

¹¹⁴¹ Randal, "Experts See No Quick End to Iranian Oil Workers' Strike."

¹¹⁴² Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Yaran-e Imam Be Revayat-e Asnad-e Savak: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami [Imam's Fellows According to Savak Documents: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami]*, 214-15.

¹¹⁴³ Mazra'ekar, "Etesab-e Kargarane Naft Dar Sal-e 57 Va Zamineha-ye An. Bakhsh-e Avval [the Oil Workers' Strike in 1978-1979 and Its Causes. Part I]".

workers of the non-basic operations and the workers of the National Petrochemical Company and Nippon Petrochemical continued their strike.

It is important to note, however, that the oil workers were not a homogenous group. Some refused to go on strike to the dismay of young radical workers, who at times tried to intimidate their colleagues to join the strike. As a then young militant Islamist refinery worker recounts,

Although the strikes were expanding, there were those who didn't join the strikers; some fundamentally opposed the revolution, others were afraid. One night we decided in our group of friends to take action to intimidate those who were not on strike so they would stay home instead of going to the refinery. Chadorabad was one of the bus stops where refinery workers stepped on the bus to go to work; the 10.00 p.m. shift workers were picked up here. . . . We prepared Molotov cocktails, but our aim was to create fear—not to harm anyone. Therefore we wanted to target the wheels of the bus. We drove with a yellow Peykan to the bus stop. I was driving. . . . We approached the bus, two of us got out, one of them was responsible for throwing the Molotov Cocktail. . . . We screamed throw, but he had become scared. . . . Finally he realized he couldn't throw the Molotov Cocktail, threw it in the gutter and ran to the car. . . . We later decided to avoid actions that could endanger people's lives, therefore . . . we threw stones to the bus that was taking the oil workers.¹¹⁴⁴

This was not an isolated incident, as another example from Gachsaran demonstrates. Mohammad Zeyd Behbahani, an Islamist oil worker, remembers:

We agreed to organise a meeting with the members of the syndicate of the oil company workers, and the influential workers of the production units such as the foremen, the supervisors and technicians, in order to organise and coordinate the strikes. We agreed to give a warning to those employees who broke the strike and went to work, and to call on them to cooperate. If they didn't respond, we agreed to give another warning and a deadline, and if they still didn't react, their house should be bombed without endangering their family. If he were to continue scabbing, and if his contribution to oil production was crucial, he should be killed by any means.

This was necessary, according to Behbahani, to counter the agents of the regime who tried to intimidate the strikers by telling them that those who joined the strikes would be sacked and even executed.¹¹⁴⁵

Arriving on 14 November in Abadan, the journalist Paul Balta gives the following description of Abadan and Khorramshahr:

¹¹⁴⁴ Moqtada'i, *Az Kudak-e Kar Ta Ostandar [from a Child Worker to Governor]* 82-83. Reflecting on these actions, Moqtada'i comments that "in those days everyone wanted to contribute to the revolution, and we were young and enthusiastic and disregarded these [safety, PJ] issues."

¹¹⁴⁵ Behbahani, *Majarahaye Man [My Adventures]*, 261.

The port city of Khorramshahr—12 kilometers from the oil port of Abadan—still seemed like ghost town... The violent incidents of Saturday and Sunday had resulted in thirty killed and about a hundred wounded in the tow cities. . . . [In Abadan] The soldiers are especially numerous in the working class quarters of Farahabad and Shahabad—blocks of low yellow brick houses constructed by NIOC. Tanks, half-tracks, armoured cars, trucks, jeeps with mounted machine guns point towards the streets, stand guard threateningly. The military governor, Gen. Esfandiary, announced that he had ordered the arrest of 80 workers considered to be troublemakers. (The workers say there were 140 to 160 arrested.) Fear reigns in the city.¹¹⁴⁶

The military thus invaded the working class districts to arrest the strike leaders. Abbas Sangiyan, Mohammad Mazra'ekar and other leaders of the strike committee were arrested, but many of the strike leaders escaped. Also some communist teachers of Abadan high schools, and communist students of the Abadan oil college who had been involved in organizing strikes and demonstrations, were arrested and transferred to a prison in Ahwaz.¹¹⁴⁷ After these events, the gatherings of oil workers moved from the refinery to the premises of the hospital and the AIT, where they gathered to discuss and debate ideological issues.

In the oil fields, too, the military was forcing oil workers back to work. Writing on 12 November, the American Embassy reported: "More strikers have resumed work and presently approximately 50 percent of the daily rated employees (laborers and blue collar workers) are working and about 40 percent of the Iranian staff are working. Nearly 100 percent of the senior and supervisory staff are working while nearly all the staff with less than 5 years experience (which comprises about 60 percent of the staff corps are still on strike."¹¹⁴⁸ This account confirms, as I argued in the previous chapter, the crucial role of the younger generation of oil workers as the driving force of the oil strikes.

By 19 November, around 80 percent of the oil workers in the south had returned to work, following a wage increase of 22 percent and the acceptance of most of their economic demands by the governor of Khuzestan.¹¹⁴⁹ Oil production exceeded 3 million barrels, and by 24 November, oil production had nearly returned to its old levels. Except the concession, four other factors contributed to the termination of the strikes: substitution of strikers, force and intimidation, lack of organisation and weak links to the rest of the working

¹¹⁴⁶ Balta and Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," 18.

¹¹⁴⁷ Mazra'ekar, "'Etesab-e Kargaran-e Naft Dar Sal-e 57 Va Zamineha-ye An. Bakhsh-e Avval [the Oil Workers' Strike in 1978-1979 and Its Causes. Part I]".

¹¹⁴⁸ US Embassy in Tehran to Secretary of State, Washington D.C., 12 November 1978; Document Number 1978TEHRAN11067; Electronic Telegrams, 1978; Central Foreign Policy Files; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

¹¹⁴⁹ "Iranian Oil Output Returning to Normal," *Oil and Gas Journal*, 20 November 1978.

class. As described above, the army started to occupy some of the oil installations in the south from early November and tried to break up the strikes by bringing in retired workers and technical navy personnel. However, this attempt was only partly successful, because the army technicians did not have the adequate knowledge and skills. The oil workers of the southern region declared in their 15th news bulletin: "the deployment of navy personnel to the exploitation units under the guise of technicians has led to serious injuries to the turbines and machines of these units."¹¹⁵⁰ In Aghajari, the navy personnel inflicted an estimated \$3 million in damage. The main problem was their inexperience in using the equipment, but also basic technical knowledge, such as the direction into which the oil was supposed to flow in the pipelines. The army also used force and intimidation to bring back oil workers to work, sometimes at bayonet point. This resulted in many arrests, while some workers were even tortured. In Ahwaz, the army threatened to harm the families of workers who had gone into hiding.¹¹⁵¹ Third, the oil workers lacked a national organisation to coordinate the different locations of the oil industry, especially the office staff and the workers at the oil pumping installations, refineries and export centres. Finally, while the striking oil workers declared their solidarity with other strikers such as teachers, participated in demonstrations and protested against the oppression of other groups such as students, organisational links between the oil and other workers failed to emerge. Hence, they lacked the ability to take the lead in coordinating a national strike that could cut through all sectors. All of this contributed to the break up of the oil strikes as the army regrouped and went on the offensive in November, but the organisers immediately started to draw lessons and made plans to resume the strikes on a more solid basis.

The events of November were a catalyst in the politicisation of the oil workers, but while the strikes had become more organised compared to September, these organisations were still weak and fragile. "The workers we meet use the same words. Who has given them the instructions to strike?" one journalist posed the question to a group of oil workers in Abadan, to which one of them replied: "No one in particular. Everyone agrees. There is really no organisation. It is too bad. But by firing on us, the army has forced us to organise ourselves and even to arm ourselves. We listen to Khomeini and read the tracts of the Mujahidin. . . ." ¹¹⁵² The military occupation of the oil installations increased animosity towards the dictatorship of the Shah among wider layers of oil workers. The revelation by the employees of the Bank-e

¹¹⁵⁰ Quoted in "Ta'sisat-e Naft Dar Eshghal-e Nezami-ye Rezhim [Oil Installation Are Occupied by the Regime's Army]," *Navid*, no. 63 (2 Dey 1357/23 December 1978).

¹¹⁵¹ Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 159.

¹¹⁵² Balta and Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," 19.

Melli-ye Iran (Iranian National Bank) that 175 people had transferred 13 billion toman out of Iran in the period of 23 August to 23 October led to a run on the banks and created a sense that the regime was collapsing.¹¹⁵³ The creaking of the political system became louder as various authorities in high positions started to defect. Houshang Ansari, the head of NIOC, was in fact one of the first high-ranking officials to jump ship. On 8 November, he travelled to Paris and called Tehran to announce his resignation and plans to leave for the US for further treatment for his heart problems, despite the Shah's insistence that he should return to Iran.

6.5.2 *The Tehran Refinery stands its ground*

While in November the military succeeded in pushing back the oil workers in the south, the workers at Tehran Refinery continued their struggles at the epicentre of the revolution: Tehran. After the blue-collar workers of the Tehran Refinery had gone on strike on 10 September, they were confronted with the refusal of the white-collar workers to join the motion. The strike committee then took two steps in order to stop production at the refinery. First, it contacted the Fada'iyan and identified a number of pipelines and pumping stations which were to be destroyed in case it became necessary. This was not carried out, however, because the second plan, convincing the white-collar workers to join the strike, succeeded. A number of blue-collar workers who had become white-collar workers and were sympathetic to the strike were contacted and agreed to take part in the following plan. On 6 November at 8.00 a.m., the strike committee organised a demonstration inside the refinery towards the canteen, where the white-collar workers had gathered. As the blue-collar workers were shouting, "*karmand, kargar*, long live your unity," those contacted white-collar workers stood up to greet the demonstration with the same slogan and flowers. This prompted the rest of the white-collar workers to join the strike.¹¹⁵⁴ The demonstration ended with a gathering in the canteen, during which a new strike committee was elected, the Oil Strike Committee (*Komiteh E'tesab-e Naft*), consisting of twelve members (blue- and white-collar workers) who represented the twelve departments of the Tehran Refinery.¹¹⁵⁵ The meeting resulted in the decision to immediately organise a 48-hour sit-in to protest against the killing of demonstrators in the previous

¹¹⁵³ Azhari, the new Prime Minister, first denied the allegations but then accepted to send them to the prosecutor for investigation, which confirmed the allegations were true.

¹¹⁵⁴ Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]," 426.

¹¹⁵⁵ Pelaschi, "Dar Khoruskhane Khun Tabaram Mikhanam - Goftogu Ba Ali Pichgah [Interview with Ali Pichgah]".

days, according to a leftist account.¹¹⁵⁶ According to an account by the Liberation Movement of Iran with an Islamic ideology, however, the sit-in was organised after workers had sought the advice of Ayatollah Khomeini and were awaiting his answer.¹¹⁵⁷ Whatever the truth of the matter, pro-Khomeini workers had a considerable influence within the Tehran Refinery.

In this account, the army officer who had come to negotiate with the strikers demanded that they take down Khomeini's picture. Not only did the workers refuse to do so, but a number of them started to pray collectively (*namaz-e jama'at*) when the officer entered the refinery. After Khomeini's message arrived, it was read out and the workers decided to end their sit-in on 9 November and stayed at home until 20 November in response to the army's encircling of the refinery. From the 20th onwards, they started gathering in front of the entrance of the Tehran Refinery every morning, and from there they went to the Behesht Zahra cemetery to join the mourning ceremonies for the martyrs of the revolution. In the evenings, many of them went to downtown Tehran to join the protests there.¹¹⁵⁸ During these protests, a number of oil workers were arrested, including the strike leaders.

On 22 November, around 800 Tehran Refinery workers gathered in front of the headquarters of NIOC in Tehran, to demand the release of their colleagues and the end of the occupation of the refinery by the army. As they returned to the refinery on the 24th, they were sent away. When the same happened the following day, the workers headed towards the NIOC headquarters in central Tehran, where they were tear-gassed and five of them were injured. This prompted the office workers of the NIOC headquarters to join the sit-in in front of the headquarters, where they chanted slogans, verses from the Quran and read out solidarity statements with their arrested colleagues. One of the workers told the crowd, "As long as the red blood of our youth is being spilt by the brutal Shah and his imperialist masters, it is shameful to continue our regular work and life." The clashes between oil workers and the army in front of the NIOC headquarters continued on the 26th as well. During these clashes the army entered the NIOC headquarters, injuring around 20 office workers. In response and in solidarity with the refinery workers, the employees of the NIOC headquarters joined the strikes and were followed by their colleagues in the exploration, pipelines, communications and

¹¹⁵⁶ A group of Tehran oil workers, "Message from Tehran oil workers: let's celebrate 6 November, the anniversary of the general strike in Tehran Refinery," 2678 006 and 26789 007 (1979), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁵⁷ "Akhbar-e Jonbesh-e Islami, Shomareh 2 (1 Azar 1357/22 November 1978) [News of the Islamic Movement, Number 1]," vol. 9, part 1, *Asnad-e Nehzat-e Azadi* [Documents of the Freedom Movement], <http://www.mizankhabar.net/asnad/archive/archive.htm>.

¹¹⁵⁸ Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]," 426-27.

distribution departments in Rey.¹¹⁵⁹ On the 27th, the refinery workers were allowed to enter the refinery, but gathered in the restaurant and demanded the army to leave the compound and to release their colleagues arrested in the previous days, who were then released two days later.¹¹⁶⁰

Without the backing of the strikes in the south, however, the Tehran Refinery workers stood isolated. By late November, the oil workers had been pushed back to work by the authorities' carrot and stick strategy (substantial wage rises combined with evacuation from company houses, dismissal and arrests), but it had also become clear that no economic concession was able to appease them – a revolutionary mood had become prevalent in the workplace. Many observers, such as the philosopher Michel Foucault who visited Iran in November, were surprised that even “privileged workers” were participating in the revolution:

I wanted to know what this strike movement, its magnitude hidden by censorship, is made of. In Tehran, I met some of the more “privileged strikers,” a crew from Iran Air. They had an elegant apartment, teak furniture, and American magazines. A thousand kilometres to the south, I met the “hard ones,” those from the oil sector. What European has not dreamed about Abadan, the biggest refinery in the world, producing six million barrels a day? It is a surprise to find it to be so huge, yet rather old-fashioned, surrounded by corrugated iron, with British-style management buildings, half-industrial and half-colonial, that one can glimpse above the flares and the chimneys. It is a colonial governor's palace, modified by the austerity of big Manchester spinning mill. But one can see that it is a powerful institution, respectable and rich, by the tremendous misery it has created on this island of sand between two yellowish rivers. The misery starts around the factory with a sort of subtropical mining village, then very quickly one enters the slums where children swarm between truck chassis and heaps of scrap iron, and finally one arrives at the hovels of dried mud bathed in filth. There, crouching children neither cry nor move. Then everything disappears in the grove of palms that leads to the desert, which is the front and the rear of one of the most valuable properties in the world. There are amazing similarities between the Iran Air strikers, who meet you in their living rooms, and those of Abadan, whom one must meet in secret after mysterious arrangements have been made...all these strikes graft political issues directly onto economic demands. The workers from the refinery received a 25 percent raise last March. After October 23, the beginning of the strike, they obtained, without too much discussions on labor issues, first a 10 percent wage increase, then a 10 percent “factory bonus”. . . . Then

¹¹⁵⁹ Workers of the oil central offices, Document 26789 074 (26 November 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁶⁰ People's Fada'i Guerrilla Organisation, “Zamimeh-ye *Nabard-e Khalq – Vizheh-ye Kargagaran va Zahmatkeshan* [Addendum of *Nabard-e Khalq – Workers and Toilers Special Issue*],” 14321001, IRDC archives, Tehran; A Group of Tehran Oil Workers, “Message of oil workers. Let's celebrate 6 November, the anniversary of the general strike in the Tehran Refinery,” 26789006 and 26789007 (no date), IRDC archives, Tehran; “Akhbar-e Jonbesh-e Islami, Shomareh 4 (11 Azar 1357/2 December 1978) [News of the Islamic Movement, Number 4],” vol. 9, part 1, *Asnad-e Nehzat-e Azadi* [Documents of the Freedom Movement] <http://www.mizankhabar.net/asnad/archive/archive.htm>.

they were given a hundred rials every day for lunch. . . . At any rate, like the pilots of Iran Air who cannot complain about their salaries, what they want is the abolition of martial law, the liberation of all political prisoners, the dissolution—some say—of SAVAK, and the punishment of thieves and torturers.¹¹⁶¹

6.5.3 *The foreign employees become a target*

As the oil strikes and the wider political crisis intensified in October and November, they started to affect the foreign employees in the oil industry. In 1978, there were roughly 1,200 Westerners working in the oil fields of the south; half of them were employed by NIOC and were not authorised to send their families out. The other half were employed by OSCO, and some of them started to move their families out in October and November.¹¹⁶² An estimated 2,000 foreigners were employed in the whole oil industry.¹¹⁶³ In the Ahwaz school for foreigners, 116 children had left in October. Despite the oil workers' demands for foreign employees to be ousted, no one had left their job by this time, however. The anti-Western sentiments were starting to worry some of them, however, and an exodus started in late December.¹¹⁶⁴

An English teacher working with her husband at the AIT recalls this period as follows:

Ziggy and I were slowly learning Farsi (Persian), but not well enough to keep up with current political events. We, and practically everyone in the country, were therefore surprised when some unusual events began taking place in the summer of 1978. We had thought, like most foreigners, that the Shah was well loved by the people and was quite secure on his Peacock Throne in Tehran. But a fire at a movie house in Abadan in late August drastically changed all that. . . . Our classes in September were postponed, and the president told all of the teachers simply to stay at home or take a short vacation until this temporary political turmoil calmed down. . . . In the late fall the expatriate workers in the refinery began developing a "secret" emergency exit plan in case a full-blown revolution should break out. I was put in charge of expatriates at AIT and went to several meetings with other groups about emergency travel plans to leave. By December it was clear that the Shah was going to be forced out of the country, and we were given notice by NIOC that our contracts would be terminated soon and that we should also prepare to leave Iran. . . . Finally, in the first weeks of February, a few flights from the Abadan airport resumed and we were able to fly to Tehran, with one suitcase each, and begin an awkward process of leaving the country. Together with many other expatriates from various parts of Iran, we spent a

¹¹⁶¹ Foucault, "The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes." Translated in Afary, Anderson, and Foucault, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.

¹¹⁶² Roger Vielvoye, "Iran Oil Exports Fall to 850,000 B/D," *Oil and Gas Journal*, 13 November 1978.

¹¹⁶³ David Butler and Loren Jenkins, "Calm but Not Quiet," *Newsweek*, 27 November 1978.

¹¹⁶⁴ Interview with Rosemary van der Laan, 7 April 2017, Amsterdam.

couple of days and nights in the American Embassy, sleeping on the floor waiting for space on a flight. . . .¹¹⁶⁵

“First they firebombed the Kian Pars nightclub and the El Chico restaurant [in Ahwaz],” a young British technician told *The Washington Post*, and the wife of one Western technician reflected a general sentiment, saying: “The strikers say they want us all out, and I know it sounds awful to say but if we leave the oil fields would stop functioning at full tilt.”¹¹⁶⁶ The fear among foreign employees increased and the evacuation plans of OSCO became more serious, however, after the car of George Link, the American head of OSCO, was bombed by two men in front of his house in Ahwaz on 14 November. He escaped uninjured, but the incitation of anti-Western sentiments escalated. Leaflets appeared on car windshields in Abadan and nearby Khorramshahr warning, “Don’t get killed. Get out of the country before 1 December.”¹¹⁶⁷

6.5.4 The oil strikes and the opposition

As the oil strikes gained momentum in late October 1978, they started to draw the attention of the oppositional forces. These forces not only attempted to influence the oil strikes from outside, however, but also through oil workers who sympathised with them. The pro-Khomeini Islamists and the various leftist organisations were the main forces contending for influence.

Despite the official historiography of the Islamic Republic that ascribes all major events of the revolution, including the oil strikes, to Ayatollah Khomeini’s authority, the (oil) strikes developed autonomously.¹¹⁶⁸ In fact, as a biography on Hojjatolislam Jami concedes, “In general the clergy in Abadan didn’t have much power and activity. Few of them were even loyal to the Shah. There were also, however, clerics who were committed to reflect and solve the main intellectual, religious and political problems. Hojjatolislam Jami stood at the head of them.”¹¹⁶⁹ The clerics lacked a solid base of support among the oil workers who were not particularly religious. As one of the Islamist refinery workers admits, “Among the 150 of us who were employed [in summer 1977, PJ], only a few fasted during Ramadan.”¹¹⁷⁰

¹¹⁶⁵ Novak, *A Love Affair: An Essay on Life, Love and Being Together*. Section 1362-1377 [kindle]

¹¹⁶⁶ *The Washington Post*, 11 November 1978.

¹¹⁶⁷ Butler and Jenkins, “Calm but Not Quiet.”

¹¹⁶⁸ Cf. Taeb, *Az E’tesab-e Karkonan-e San’at-e Naft Ta Piruziye Enqelab-e Islami [from the Oil Workers’ Strike until the Victory of the Islamic Revolution]*.

¹¹⁶⁹ Kazemi, *Neveshtam Ta Bemanad: Yaddashtha-ye Roozaneh-ye Jang-e Ayatollah Jami [I Wrote So It Will Not Be Forgotten. Daily Notes on the Days of War by Ayatollah Jami]*, 470.

¹¹⁷⁰ Moqtada’i, *Az Kudak-e Kar Ta Ostandar [from a Child Worker to Governer]* 79.

Moreover, the clerics were at the beginning not very much concerned with the oil strikes. In fact, it was not until the Shah's 5 November speech in which he referred explicitly to the oil strikes that Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamists started to pay serious attention to the strikes in general and the oil strikes in particular. It has been suggested that Ayatollah Khomeini was distracted by his expulsion from Najaf (Iraq) on 3 October, but on 8 October he settled in the Parisian suburb Neauphle-le-Château, from where he followed the developments in Iran closely and frequently commented on them. He mentioned strikes for the first time in an insouciant manner on 13 October, when he referred to "strikes all over Iran."¹¹⁷¹ Ten days later and as strikes had grown in force, he had more to say, but more so reactively rather than trying to lead the strikers. Referring to strikes in the oil industry, factories, schools, etc., he said: "Once there was no talk about strikes . . . people didn't know what strikes meant. Strikes have become a common thing now. . . . A group from Khorasan that is on strike, I forgot which group, has sent me a letter stating that those who say they are striking for wages, are lying. Our strike is political."¹¹⁷²

Responding to the Shah's conciliatory speech on 5 November, he sent an "admonition to the people and the army leaders" on the same day, stressing that the "Islamic goal" of the revolution was the overthrow of the monarchy and that the strikes, especially in the oil sector, had to be supported in order to achieve this goal.¹¹⁷³ Ten days later, as the military repression of the oil strikes intensified, he said:

I and the Iranian nation greet the blue- and white-collar workers of the Iranian oil company! May God bless you conscious people; you who have brought honour to the nation with your great strike. Every hour and every day of your strike is valuable and powerful. . . . Every hour of your strike is a service to God and to the nation. . . . It is the duty of the noble Iranian nation to respectfully give support and material compensation to the blue- and white-collar workers of the oil company, and of other state institutions and offices, whenever they go on strike. . . .¹¹⁷⁴

¹¹⁷¹ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Owza'-e Iran - Eslahat-e Amrika-Iye Shah [Iran's Situation - the American Reforms of the Shah]," 21 vols., vol. 3, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (21 Mehr 1357/13 October 1978), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=971>.

¹¹⁷² Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Soqut-e Hatmi-ye Rezhim-e Shahanshahi Va Tahavvol-e Daruni-ye Mardom [the Imminent Fall of the Monarchy and the Inner Developments of the People]," vol. 4, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (10 Aban 1357/1 November 1978), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=1006>.

¹¹⁷³ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Tazakor Be Mardom Va Saran-e Artesh [Admonition to the People and the Army Leaders]," 21 vols., vol. 4, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (14 Aban 1357/5 November 1978), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=1017>.

¹¹⁷⁴ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Zarurat-e Edameh-ye 'Etesabat Va Hemayat-e Mardom Az 'Etesabiyun [the Necessity to Continue the Strikes and of the Support of the People for the Strikers]," 21 vols., vol. 4, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (24 Aban 1357/15 November 1978), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=1062>. 498.

At this point, Ayatollah Khomeini had realized that the oil strikes were a strategic asset, but his comments also make clear that he did not yet have the means to direct them – a problem he was determined to resolve as soon as possible. The first step in this direction was his attempt to increase the direct involvement of the bazaari and the clergy in the oil strikes. On 9 November, Ayatollah Khomeini called on clerics to install committees in the provinces in order to assist those who were confronted with economic problems due to the strikes.¹¹⁷⁵

The Society of the Clerics of Ahwaz was one of the first to follow Khomeini's instructions. Within days, it published a statement signed by, among others, Ayatollah Jazayeri, saying, "It is our will to let the downtrodden [*mostazafin*] benefit from our kindness, to lead them and to make them the owners of the earth. . . . We the Society of Clerics in Ahwaz declare our support and solidarity with the brave and loyal employees of the oil company," and they called on the inhabitants of Ahwaz to respect 9, 10 and 11 November as days of mourning and solidarity with the strikers in the oil industry, in the steel plants, in the water and electricity company and with the teachers.¹¹⁷⁶ Significantly, the statement used the word "holy strike," reflecting the effort of its authors to give a religious meaning to the strikes and instill a sense of duty for workers to participate in them. At this stage, Ayatollah Jazayeri, who was Khomeini's representative in Ahwaz, was also in close contact with a number of the leaders of the oil strikes, including 'Abdolhossein Mostafavi, a grandson of Ayatollah Behbahani who was a white-collar worker in Ahwaz.¹¹⁷⁷

On 16 November, Khomeini's statement addressing the Abadan oil workers was distributed throughout the network of Hojjatolislam Jami.¹¹⁷⁸ In his message to the Iranian people of 22 November, Ayatollah Khomeini said that it was "up to the oil employees to prevent the exit of this life-creating wealth," because the Shah spent the money from oil exports to buy the weapons that were killing Iranians, and because he was supplying Israel with oil.¹¹⁷⁹ It is worth noting the language Khomeini and his supporters used to both support the oil workers and gain their support. They used words that referred to anti-imperialism, resource nationalism, freedom and social justice, rather than purely religious concepts. A leaflet by the Militant Muslims

¹¹⁷⁵ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Da'vat Az Ruhaniyun Baraye Komak Be Mahruman [Invitation to Clerics to Assist the Needy]," 21 vols., vol. 4, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (18 Aban 1358/9 November 1978), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=1139>.

¹¹⁷⁶ Quoted in 'Alam, *Enqelab-e Islami Dar Ahwaz [the Islamic Revolution in Ahwaz]*, 2, 207.

¹¹⁷⁷ *Keyhan*, 20 Bahman 1387/8 February 2009.

¹¹⁷⁸ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Yaran-e Imam Be Revayat-e Asnad-e Savak: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami [Imam's Fellows According to Savak Documents: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami]*, 224.

¹¹⁷⁹ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Vazifeh-ye Aqshar-e Jame'e [the Responsibility of Social Groups]," in *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (1 Azar 1357/22 November 1978).

(Mosalmanan-e Mobarez), for instance, addresses the Abadan oil workers with the following words: “Brothers, by continuing the strikes and walking along the movement of the Iranian Muslim people [khalq], the government of freedom and justice, science [‘elm] and fairness, brotherhood and equality – a society in which the fruits of your efforts will be your own, and no one will be allowed to exploit and repress others.”¹¹⁸⁰

At this point, Khomeini’s base of support among the striking oil workers was still very weak, and he continued to exert influence mainly through clerics. In late November, for instance, he sent a message to a number of clerics including Ayatollah Musavi Jazayeri in Abadan, saying that they should spare no effort to make sure that the oil strikes continue.¹¹⁸¹ Heeding his call, a number of clerics in Qom issued a call on 30 November, saying that the oil strikes were “entering a vital stage with the beginning of Moharram,” and they applauded the oil workers for their defiance against the regime’s repression and intimidation. The following day, a number of clerics in Tehran, among them Ayatollah Mohammad Mofatteh, published a statement in protest “against the inhuman pressures on the courageous [oil] strikers by the corrupt and vanishing regime.”¹¹⁸² Solidarity statements were issued by clerics in December, as well. On 19 December, for instance, a large number of clerics in Tehran issued a statement saying, “The military rulers working under the auspices of the oil-thieves and colonizers of the world whose illegitimate interests are threatened by the Iranian Revolution are planning to strike at the militant Muslim employees of the oil industry and energy sector (water and electricity). . . . We express our congratulation and support for the success of these strikers who have broken the back of the regime, prevented the wasting of our national resources, triggered the anger of the international oil-thieves and colonizers of the West and the East, and pushed the revolution of our Muslim people to new heights with their heroic actions. . . .”¹¹⁸³ Clerics also indicated their support for the striking oil workers at demonstrations, but as Figure 73 illustrates, they did so on their own terms by highlighting only the anti-imperialist nature of the strikes. The weekly gatherings in the mosques of Abadan provided an important place where religious oil workers were connected to and became influenced by the Khomeinist movement.¹¹⁸⁴

¹¹⁸⁰ Mosalmanan-e mobarez, Document 26789 015, IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁸¹ Payam, *Roozshomar’e Enqelab-e Islami Dar Khuzestan*, 179-80.

¹¹⁸² Nikbakht, *Zendegi Va Mobarezat-e Ayatollah Shahid Doktor Mohammad Mofatteh [Life and Struggle of Martyr Ayatollah Mohammad Mofatteh]*, 16, 257.

¹¹⁸³ A group of clerics in Tehran, Document 00245177 (28 Azar 1357/19 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁸⁴ Interview with ‘Abdolhassan Moqtada’i in Kazemi, *Neveshtam Ta Bemanad: Yaddashtha-ye Roozaneh-ye Jang-e Ayatollah Jami [I Wrote So It Will Not Be Forgotten. Daily Notes on the Days of War by Ayatollah Jami]*, 473.

Clerics, through their connections with bazaaris, had an important tool to influence the oil strikes: money. On 14 November 1978, for instance, just when the army was forcing the Abadan Refinery strikers back to work, several clerics contacted Hojjatolislam Jami's son (Mahmoud) about the strikes. Ayatollah 'Abbas Vaez Tabasi phoned from Mahshad to tell him that the bazaaris had offered to pay enough money and provide housing for the striking oil workers if they were sacked for continuing the strike.¹¹⁸⁵ In Abadan, the clerical-bazaar financial support remained a promise, although clerics played a role here, as well. When public sector workers collected money for the sacked oil workers in Abadan and gathered in Shahreza hospital to distribute it, they did so in the presence of three clerics.¹¹⁸⁶ In Gachsaran, Mohammad Zeyd Behbahani (see previous chapter), who was an Islamist activist employed in the oil industry, turned to local bazaaris such as Mohammad Ibrahim Shariati to raise money for the striking oil workers. More significantly, according to Behbahani, Hajj Sheikh Mohammad Ali Shar'i, a leading cleric from Mashhad, travelled with other clerics to the south with 14 million toman (\$1.4 million according to the 1978 rate) hidden in his car in order to finance the oil strikes. This figure cannot be confirmed and seems rather exaggerated, but there is enough evidence to suggest that the clerical-bazaar alliance had created a large financial fund to compensate the striking oil workers.¹¹⁸⁷ In Ahwaz, the cleric Jazayeri was responsible for collecting and distributing money among the striking oil workers.¹¹⁸⁸

The Tehran Refinery strikers had a substantial financial problem after the regime closed down the bank account of the Tehran Refinery Syndicate in September 1978. First, they approached students for help, who then collected around 2.5 million toman for the oil workers. This was insufficient, however, and the strike committee then approached Ayatollah Taleqani who was known for his pro-worker and left-leaning ideas, and whom Khosrowshahi and others had met in prison. Taleqani introduced them to someone who was coordinating the bazaar activities, and from that point they received considerable financial aid from the bazaaris. More importantly, Hadj Mehdi 'Araqi (1930-1979), an experienced Islamist activist, entered the strike committee. His involvement and the financial aid from the bazaar opened the door to Islamist influence

¹¹⁸⁵ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Yaran-e Imam Be Revayat-e Asnad-e Savak: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami [Imam's Fellows According to Savak Documents: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami]*, 218.

¹¹⁸⁶ The cleric were Ayatollah 'Abdollah Shirazi, Hassan Qomi, Kazem Akhavan Mar'ashi. SAVAK, Documents 210600048-49 (4 Dey 1357/25 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁸⁷ Behbahani, *Majarahaye Man [My Adventures]*, 262-63.

¹¹⁸⁸ Qezli and Mostafavi, "Dastan-e Peyvastian-e San'at-e Naft Be Enqelab [the Story of the Oil Industry Joining the Revolution]."

among oil workers in the Tehran Refinery.¹¹⁸⁹ Although it was certainly true that clerics could tap into the financial resources of the bazaar, it was also the case that the Left took no practical steps to provide an alternative, as one of the communist organisations actively involved in the oil strikes acknowledged at the time: “Although all revolutionary organisations, and particularly the Marxist-Leninists, view the existence of such a fund as necessary, no real steps were taken to establish one.”¹¹⁹⁰ The potential to create a workers’ solidarity fund is illustrated by instances of unorganised money collections for the oil strikers among, for instance, the customs workers.¹¹⁹¹

Figure 73 Clerics demonstrate in Tehran. The banner reads: “We support the just and anti-colonial strike of our brethren in the oil industry—Society of Clerics” (late November or early December 1978).¹¹⁹²



¹¹⁸⁹ Fattahi, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-ye Showra-ye Kargaran-e Naft. Goftogu-ye Mohammad Fattahi Ba Yadollah Khosrowshahi* [Oral History of the Oil Workers' Council. Interview with Yadollah Khosrowshahi by Mohammad Fattahi], 30. In his youth, Hadj Mehdi 'Araqi had collaborated with Navvab Safavi, the leader of the Fada'ian-e Islam and started working in the Tehran bazaar. During the oil nationalisation movement, he functioned as a contact person between Ayatollah Kashani and Mohammad Mossadeq. After the coup of 1953, he travelled to Qom and became a follower of Ayatollah Khomeini. He was one of the founding members of the Mo'tallefeh coalition, which was created to coordinate the activities of Khomeini supporters in the bazaar. He was arrested in March 1964 due to his activities during the June 1963 protests under the leadership of Khomeini. After being released in late 1976, he resumed his political activities and following the instructions of Ayatollah Beheshti went to Paris to assist Khomeini. He returned to Iran, however, to assist in the organisation of the demonstrations on 10 and 11 December (Ashura and Tasu'a).

¹¹⁹⁰ Razmandegan-e Azadiye Tabaqeh-ye Kargar [Fighters for the Liberation of the Working Class], "Gozareshi Az 'Etesabat-e Qahremananey Kargaran-e San'at-e Naft-e Jonub [a Report of the Heroic Strikes of the Oil Workers in the South]," 21. IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁹¹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak* [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents], 16, 199.

¹¹⁹² Document 736000007, IRDC archives, Tehran.

These statements, however, did not reflect the organisational involvement of clerics in the oil strikes. They rather illustrate that the most important groups in society were looking to the oil workers to give the final blow to the Shah. The staff of the Jandishahpur University in Ahwaz, for instance, issued a statement on 2 December, praising and encouraging the oil workers.¹¹⁹³ Another solidarity statement came from the Society of the Employees of the Planning and Budget Organisation, which thanked the oil workers for “blocking the exit of the nation’s wealth towards imperialism and for achieving freedom for us.”¹¹⁹⁴

The Islamist influence on the oil strikes not only came from the outside, but also from the inside by means of oil workers who sympathised with Khomeini and were in contact with his clerical and lay supporters. This internal element increased in importance the longer the strikes continued. As explained in the previous chapter, a number of oil workers were active in religious activities and visited mosques and other religious centres where Khomeini sympathisers gathered. A SAVAK report of 16 May 1978, for example, mentions two white-collar workers of the oil industry in Abadan (Haddady and Mo‘inian) who collaborated with bazaaris and gathered in the Hosseiniyeh-ye Isfahani-ha to establish a charity fund for providing loans (Sandoq-e Qarzolhassaneh-ye Imam Hassan). Another report (18 May 1978) mentions Mansour Amini, who was a safety consultant at the refinery, as an active Khomeini supporter. Meanwhile another report from 18 August on a gathering of 800 people in Jami’s mosque, mainly young men between 15 and 20 years-old, refers to Feyzollah Rajabi, an oil worker, as one of the arrestees.¹¹⁹⁵

As the Islamist oil worker Moqtada‘i remembers, “From which ever direction we started, we arrived at Mr. Jami. We the strikers of the refinery were in contact with him. Once we contacted the son of sheikh ‘Isa Torfi (Ali) through Bakhtiari (from the refinery) to borrow a copy machine and discovered that their circle around the Tashakori brothers (‘Abdolreza and ‘Abbas Ali) was in contact with Jami and received his instructions.”¹¹⁹⁶ Moqtada‘i and a number of other Islamist workers of the refinery, including Madanizadegan, consulted regularly with Hojjatolislam Jami during the oil strikes. In the early days of November, for instance, when the military had entered the refinery and the pressure on the strikes was building up, they met Jami to see if he advised

¹¹⁹³ ‘Alam, *Engelab-e Islami Dar Ahwaz [the Islamic Revolution in Ahwaz]*, 2, 221-23.

¹¹⁹⁴ Society of the Employees of the Planning and Budget Organisation, “Hail to the dear workers and employees of the oil industry,” 267800045 (15 Azar 1357/6 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹¹⁹⁵ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela‘at, *Yaran-e Imam Be Revayat-e Asnad-e Savak: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami [Imam’s Fellows According to Savak Documents: Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Jami]*, 175; 78; and 205.

¹¹⁹⁶ Kazemi, *Neveshtam Ta Bemanad: Yaddashtha-ye Roozaneh-ye Jang-e Ayatollah Jami [I Wrote So It Will Not Be Forgotten. Daily Notes on the Days of War by Ayatollah Jami]*, 476.

to roll back the strikes. Instead, he advised that the strike should be continued, and also promised that oil workers who lost their job could count on financial support coming from Qom.¹¹⁹⁷ Moqtada'i was responsible for distributing Khomeini's statements as leaflets: "Because our house was near the fence of the refinery, it functioned as a way to get the leaflets into the refinery. In the morning I hid the leaflets around myself, walked a long distance and entered through gate 13 as it wasn't guarded very strictly."¹¹⁹⁸

As Khomeini and his supporters were trying to expand their influence, they were competing with the Left and its discourse. Khomeini consciously used another vocabulary to refer to similar phenomena as the Left; most importantly, he referred to the poor or the oppressed as the *mostaz'afan* (downtrodden), and he started to use this term more frequently when the wave of strikes started in September 1978.¹¹⁹⁹ Earlier, he often used the terms *mostamandan* (the needy) and *foqara* (the poor) when referring to the religious obligation to assist them. However, during the revolution, Khomeini started using *mostaz'afan* to indicate a revolutionary subject that has to be mobilised – a conscious move that falls within the frame extension as discussed above.

He first started using the word on 4 February 1978, when in an address to the Islamic Association of Iranian Students in India, he referred to Islam as "the sole guarantor of freedom and independence for downtrodden nations."¹²⁰⁰ On 13 February 1978, in a talk on the responsibility of Muslim intellectuals directed to the union of Islamic Students' Associations in Europe, Khomeini stressed that Muslim intellectuals needed to propagate an "Islamic government" and "to invite non-Islamic groups with anti-Islamic ideas to endorse progressive and justice-creating Islam," or to exclude and ignore them, when they refuse.¹²⁰¹ He returns to this theme, more forcefully and frequently, half a year later, when the working class entered the revolutionary struggle with mass strikes, creating a more favourable climate for the Marxist discourse.

Quoting a verse from the Quran, on 15 August 1978 Khomeini called on preachers and clerics to mobilise the people in order to liberate "the downtrodden nation from foreign and domestic exploiters."¹²⁰² As the strikes

¹¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 491-92.

¹¹⁹⁸ Moqtada'i, *Az Kudak-e Kar Ta Ostandar [from a Child Worker to Governor]* 83.

¹¹⁹⁹ Other equivalents that Khomeini often uses are *paberahneha* (bear footed) and *zagheh neshinha* (slumdogs).

¹²⁰⁰ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Vazayef-e Gooyandegan Va 'Olama Dar Basij-e Mardom [the Duties of Preachers and Clerics in Mobilising the People]," in *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (15 Mordad 1357/15 August 1978).

¹²⁰¹ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Vazayef-e Roshanfekran-e Mosalman [the Duties of Muslim Intellectuals]," 21 vols., vol. 3, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (24 Bahman 1956 [13 February 1978]), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=905>.

¹²⁰² Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Vazayef-e Gooyandegan Va 'Olama Dar Basij-e Mardom [the Duties of Preachers and Clerics in Mobilising the People]," 21 vols., vol. 3, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (15 Mordad 1357 [15 August 1978]), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=942>.

spread all over the country, on 20 October 1978, Khomeini referred to the tradition of the Prophet in bringing together “the poor and the downtrodden,” and identified Islam and the clergy as the two main historical obstacles for colonialism and capitalism.¹²⁰³ A week later, in an address to the “the downtrodden nation of Iran,” Khomeini claimed that the historical record shows that the Prophet was not supporting the “capitalists” to exploit the people, but he mobilised “the weak and downtrodden people, those with bear feet and heads” against the “capitalists.” He continued to warn that “our youth sometimes hears things and accepts it without thinking and consideration,” when for instance communists try to turn them away from Islam by saying that Islam has “lifted the aristocrats and the wealthy on the back of the people.” Khomeini objected that “they haven’t read the Quran to see what Islam stands for. . . . Islam has declared war on the capitalists, the mighty, the kings and the sultans.” After defending the clergy against the charge of having been tools of the monarchy, Khomeini attacked communists for deceiving the youth and for being agents of the SAVAK.¹²⁰⁴

Despite their initially weak base of support among oil workers, the Islamist forces gradually expanded their influence. They were, however, confronted with leftist organisations that were vying for sway, as well. Traditionally, as we saw in the previous chapter, the Left had a long history of activism among oil workers, although its presence had become very weak by the time of the revolution. When the strikes started, however, many workers gravitated to the Left, and a number of leftist oil workers became the driving force in the strike committees. The organisations of the Left were nevertheless weak, and more significantly, they started paying attention to workplace struggles only when the strikes had already developed. As a consequence, they were not prepared to deal with the challenges of the strikes and the questions they raised. A look at the publications of most leftist organisations shows that the history, theory and practice of workplace struggles were all barely discussed. Such fundamental issues as labour unions, strike committees and councils, and their corresponding differences, had not been discussed and caused much controversy among leftist activists during the strikes and after the fall of the Shah.

¹²⁰³ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, “Islam Va Ruhaniyat, Do Sang-e Bozorg Dar Moqabel-e Nofuz-e Este'mar [Islam and the Clergy, Two Big Obstacles for the Infiltration of Colonialism],” 21 vols., vol. 3, *Sahifeh-ye Imam* (28 Mehr 1357 [20 October 1978]), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=981>.

¹²⁰⁴ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, “Islam, Maktab-e Harekat Van Khorush 'Aleyhe Shahan Va Sarmayedaran [Islam, the Religion of the Movement and Rebellion against Kings and Capitalists],” 21 vols., vol. 4, *Sahifeh-ye Imam* (30 Mehr 1357 [22 October 1978]), <http://www.jamarkan.ir/fa/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=985>.

The Tudeh Party had a considerable number of sympathisers among the oil workers, but they were often the older ones who were not at the forefront of the strikes. More importantly, the Tudeh Party lacked the organisational framework to connect its sympathisers and provide leadership to the strikes. The same was true for the most influential organisation of the Left, the People's Fada'is, which was, moreover, mainly focused on armed struggle rather than the workplace. As the revolution accelerated and the oil strikes expanded, Fada'is' influence grew rapidly, while it managed to recruit a number of oil workers. Tahmaseb Vaziri, who was one of its key leaders, remembers:

When the strikes started in Khuzestan, we didn't have much presence there, but we had some cells in Isfahan and decided to send one of our members and his wife to rent a house in Ahwaz, and I started commuting between Isfahan and Ahwaz to distribute the organisations leaflets there. After the Cinema Rex tragedy, we decided to assassinate the perpetrator. From this point on, our contacts with Khuzestan increased. . . . I was then introduced to the Khaksar family. . . . Having a solid base in Isfahan, we transferred our team, which included Behrouz Khaliq, to the Kampolo neighbourhood of Ahwaz. Another group started in Khorramshahr. . . . Our most important contacts were the Khaksars; Nasser was known as an experienced and leftist worker with lots of influence among the contract workers with whom he had worked. So during the revolution, his house became like a headquarters where workers met. Nasser was a supporter of the organisation. . . .

One of our activities concerned the Abadan Oil College. . . . I went there to distribute leaflets and then sat somewhere to just observe, and I identified a number of students who were the driving force behind the activities there. One morning, I went to their room and told them I was from the People's Fada'i Guerrilla Organisation and that we wanted them to coordinate their activities with us. They were first shocked, but then I showed them my belt, gun and hand grenade that had the organisation's initials on it. . . . They believed me and from then the College acted more or less under our guidance. . . . The students gave us houses and they distributed our leaflets.

When the refinery workers formulated their long list of demands, one of the workers, Beygi, gave a speech and I repeated what I had done at the College. I said I was from the Organisation and was sent to establish contacts with him, and he agreed and we sent the workers' statement to the Organisation. There are other examples. . . . We had a member who served as an officer under the martial law in Ahwaz and he was responsible for arresting striking workers. He provided us the names of targeted workers, then I drove on my motorbike to warn them. I threw a letter in their house saying they were going to be arrested and also wrote that if they wanted to work with the Organisation, they should put a cross on their door. Through this way we established a number contacts, one interesting example concerns a digging worker. He left a cross and moved to another address. I met him there and gave him leaflets that he distributed among the other oil workers. . . . The more leaflets we distributed, the more sympathisers we recruited.¹²⁰⁵

¹²⁰⁵ Interview with Tahmaseb Vaziri, 19 February 2017, Amsterdam.

Javad Khatami, who was an influential leftist white-collar worker, was an important asset to the Fada'i when he joined the organisation during the strikes. Although the Fada'i's influence was rapidly increasing in the fall of 1978, this influence was not invested in strengthening the oil strikes in terms of organisation and strategy. They were focused instead on organizing an insurrection. As Vaziri remembers,

Once there were speeches in the main office of Ahwaz by some activists of political forces that later became known as the "third line" and founded the Maoist Peykar. When I interrupted, those who were gathered protested, but then I showed them my gun and said I was from the Fada'i's and that this wasn't a time for speeches—we were near the fall of the regime then—but a time to attack the police stations and overthrow the regime. You won't believe it, but about 50 people approached me saying they had a group, a copy machine and a house. After we established a headquarters in Abadan, we were swamped and our workers' meetings were attended by 300 to 400 workers.¹²⁰⁶

As this example makes clear, there were also other leftist organisations orientated towards the oil workers. The *Razmandegan-e Azadiye Tabaqeh-ye Kargar* (Fighters for the Liberation of the Working Class), for instance, had a presence among the oil workers and reported on the strikes. The *Mobarezan-e Rah-e Ijad-e Hezb-e Tabaqeh-ye Kargar-e Iran – Mottahedin-e Khalq* (Fighters for the Formation of a Workers' Party of Iran – People's Allies) had at least one active member in the Abadan Refinery when the strikes started who would report on the strikes.¹²⁰⁷ Overall, the influence of the Left was increasing rapidly among oil workers, despite its weak presence when the strikes started. This trend was worrying SAVAK so much that it approached the cleric Sheikh Mohammad Taher Shabiri on 24 November 1978 in Khorramshahr to ask him to counter the influence of communists.¹²⁰⁸ Three days later, SAVAK approached Gholam-Hossein Ja'mi in Abadan with the same message.¹²⁰⁹

6.6 A general political strike (2– 28 December 1978)

After the army occupied the oil installations in early November, most workers had returned to work by 19 November. Having established a stronger organisational structure through the various strike committees, the oil workers

¹²⁰⁶ Interview with Tahmaseb Vaziri, 19 February 2017, Amsterdam.

¹²⁰⁷ Interview with Iraj Jafari, 8 June 2013, Delft.

¹²⁰⁸ SAVAK, Document 00109052 (n.d.), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²⁰⁹ SAVAK, Document 00109053 (n.d.), IRDC archives, Tehran.

resumed their strike in early December on a much bigger scale with explicitly political demands, and in that process strengthened their national coordination, which was driven by two different dynamics. The first dynamic was rooted in the strike committees that sought contact with each other on the basis of the necessities of their struggles. The second dynamic was driven by the pro-Khomeini clerics who, in cooperation with their sympathisers among the oil workers, provided guidance and money. This reflected the fact, as we saw in the previous section, that Khomeini and his allies had become aware of the significance of the (oil) strikes and spared no effort to support their continuation. As we will see in the following chapter, they attempted to bring the oil strikes under their total control from the final days of 1978.

In December, however, the oil workers were still acting independently from the clergy, although collaborating and coordinating with them. In the Tehran Refinery, a secret strike committee of blue-collar workers had been active since September, but a new committee including white-collar workers was established in the second week of November. Its 12 representatives were elected from the various refinery departments.¹²¹⁰

In the Tehran Refinery, the syndicate had fallen under the leadership of the Islamic current, through the financial and political influence that it exerted. It was headed by Aminian, who was a member of Mehdi Bazargan's FMI and chair of the syndicate, and he was in direct contact with Beheshti and Rafsanjani.¹²¹¹ They raised funds through the bazaar and distributed the money among the striking oil workers. This financial role, together with the Islamists' propaganda that [stated that] they would return the oil money to the people, convinced many workers that the Islamist leadership would indeed after the revolution use the oil money for the people.¹²¹²

By launching the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry (*Sandika-ye Moshtarak-e Karkonan-e San'at-e Naft*, Common Syndicate hereinafter) in early November, the Tehran Refinery workers had taken a major step in creating a national umbrella organisation. The Common Syndicate (Figure 74) was mainly rooted among the Tehran oil workers, but by early January 1979, it also brought together representatives from the strike committees in Kermanshah, Shiraz and Tabriz refineries, in the exploration, drilling, pipelines and trade departments, and in the gas and petrochemical

¹²¹⁰ Pelaschi, "Dar Khoruskhane Khun Tabaram Mikhanam - Goftogu Ba Ali Pichgah [Interview with Ali Pichgah]". Its membership consisted of Ali Pichgah, Sorkhabi, Pedram, Rahimi, 'Abbas Daneshvar, Hassan Hassanpour, Farahmand, Hossein Borhani, Kazem Birshavi, Mohammad-Hashem, and Aminian.

¹²¹¹ After the February insurrection, Aminian became a member of the central showra (council) of the Tehran Refinery and clashed with the ministers of oil. *Kar Majority*, 19 Bahman 1379/7 February 2001.

¹²¹² Interview by Ahmadi with Heshmat Re'isi, 19 June 1995 (Tape 10), Berlin.

industries.¹²¹³ The Common Syndicate had a leadership of 14 people representing blue- and white-collar workers in the oil, gas and petrochemical industries.¹²¹⁴ Despite its name, it did not function as a trade union, but rather as a strike committee. It published until 1981 a newsletter with the same name and had three subcommittees: a financial committee that was tasked with providing the strikers with financial aid; a committee tasked with the coordination of the activities of oil workers in different places; and a committee to coordinate the activities of oil workers and other workers and groups in universities, the railways, the water and electricity company, radio and television, etc.

The composition of the strike committees differed from place to place, but often the leading members belonged to or sympathised with the organisations of the secular Left, including the Tudeh Party and the Fada'ayan, or the Islamist leftist People's Mojahedin. Others were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini or independents. It is notable, however, that when the strikes erupted, the presence of the organised Left was very weak among the oil workers, as state repression had diminished the space for open political activities, which was reinforced and exacerbated by the guerrilla strategy of the main sections of the Left. Yet during the strikes, the Left was recruiting new members and becoming more influential. According to one report, quoting two Islamist engineers in Ahwaz, 35 percent of the delegates that the oil workers had elected in November 1978 in the strike committee were "Marxists." This dropped to 15 percent when new elections were organised in the third week of February 1979, thus after the fall of the monarchy, when Ayatollah Khomeini supporters had already taken over political power in coalition with liberal Islamic figures like Mehdi Bazargan, who headed a Provisional Government. According to the same report, only five of the 40 members of the Abadan Refinery strike committee were Leftists at this stage.¹²¹⁵ It is furthermore important to note that most of the Islamist members of the strike committees, and later, the Islamic *showras*, belonged to the "leftist" faction that supported a certain level of self-management, resulting in clashes with the new managers between 1979 and 1981 and an ensuing conflict that led to the repression and dissolution of the *showras*.

¹²¹³ Yadollah Khosrowshahi, "Tashkilat-e Mostaghel-e Kargari Va Zarf-e Tashakolpaziri-ye Kargarane Iran Dar Moghe'iyat-e Konuni [Independent Worker Organizations and the Possibility to Organize Workers in Contemporary Iran]," *Kargar-e Tab'idi*, no. 36 (January 1997): 14. IISH archives, Amsterdam. According to *Ayandegan* (4 Ordibehesth 1358/24 April 1979), the Common Syndicate published its first leaflet titled "why are we on strike?" in Aban 1357 (October-November 1978).

¹²¹⁴ These included Hassan Aqa'i, Nasser Heyati, Javad Khatami and Shabar Ma'ili.

¹²¹⁵ *The Washington Post*, 26 February 1979, 14.

Figure 74 Logo of the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Oil Industry.



In the last days of November, strikes were resumed in the refineries of Tehran and Shiraz.¹²¹⁶ After some preparations in late November, and following Ayatollah Khomeini's call for an indefinite general national strike on 2 December, the beginning of the holy month Moharram, oil workers issued a call for a general strike in the oil industry.¹²¹⁷ Reflecting the oil workers' determination to continue the new round of strikes until the fall of the regime, their main slogan was, "For the country and the people, we have closed the oil valves. Until the death of the traitor Shah, we will be on strike" (*Az bahr-e molk-o mellat, ma shir-e nafto bastim. Ta marg-e shah-e kha'en, mar dar e'tesab hastim*).¹²¹⁸

The strike in the Abadan Refinery started on 2 December; only the refinery's bus drivers and the workers of the Process Department continued working.¹²¹⁹ The following day the strikers discussed marching to the Central Workshop, but finally decided not to do so in order to avoid a clash with the soldiers who had surrounded the Central Workshop. Meanwhile, a group of workers distributed a leaflet with the heading "We are preparing for 7 December," signed by the name "Heydar 'Amuoglu Group."¹²²⁰ The white-collar workers of the general office gathered inside the refinery, but they were dispersed by tear gas, further announcing that they would remain in their houses the following days. On 3 and 4 December, the strikes spread to the offshore oil platforms and the Ahwaz and Marun oil fields.¹²²¹ In Gachsaran

¹²¹⁶ Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*.

¹²¹⁷ *The New York Times*, 1 December 1978.

¹²¹⁸ Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]," 430.

¹²¹⁹ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹²²⁰ Heydar Khan 'Amuoglu (1880 – 1920) was a leading activist in the Constitutional Revolution and one of the founders of the Communist Party of Iran.

¹²²¹ *The Washington Post*, 4 December 1978.

and Aghajari, however, workers were forced to work at bayonet point, but they went on strike at the end of the second week of December.

On 4 December, the bus drivers of Abadan Refinery joined the strike, and a statement was distributed from the Central Workshop workers, including five demands: "1) revocation of the martial law all over the country; 2) the unconditional release of all political prisoners and those exiled; 3) nationalisation of all parts of the oil industry and the cancellation of all oil agreements that hold us captive; 4) punishment of the authorities who are responsible for the recent killings; 5) acceptance of all the economic demands." By this time, the workers' self-confidence had increased considerably; radical workers openly took illegal books, including the writings of Marx and Lenin, to the refinery, and various leaflets were distributed including those of the Heydar 'Amuoglu Group, the Maoist organisation Sarbedaran (Shafaq-e Sorkh), the Peykar dar Rah-e Azadi-ye Tabaqeh-ye Kargar (a 1976 Marxist split from the Islamist-Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq People's Organisation), and statements of the Kharg Island oil workers and the workers of the water and electricity company. Also various slogans appeared on the reservoirs of the refinery, such as "Death to the traitor Shah," "Long live the struggling [mojahed] workers" and "Long live Khomeini."¹²²² Abadan's Petrochemical Complex and schoolteachers also went on strike, leaving the city buzzing with numerous small demonstrations and riots.¹²²³ The ports of Mahshahr and Khorramshahr were shut down by strikes, as well.

On 4 December, the Tabriz Refinery, which had continued working in the previous weeks, was shut down by a strike, and the following day the workers of the Kermanshah Refinery stopped working as well, except in one small unit that continued production. Iran's six natural gas plants were shut down.¹²²⁴ In Kermanshah, 80 percent of the shopkeepers, and the workers of the public construction company were on strike.¹²²⁵ In the meantime, the process workers of Abadan Refinery were still refusing to go on strike, which started to create serious tensions among the workers. In the previous weeks, some process workers who continued working were sent headscarves by their colleagues – a sexist symbol of contempt for their weakness.¹²²⁶ But the methods to pressure the unswayed process workers became harsher. On the

¹²²² "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹²²³ National Royal Police of Iran, "Report on protests and strikes in Abadan," 00084062 (14 Azar 1357/5 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²²⁴ Randal, "Spreading Protest. Strike Cuts Output of Iranian Oil."

¹²²⁵ National Royal Police of Iran, "Report on strikes in Kermanshah," 00084055 (15 Azar 1357/6 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²²⁶ Interview with Gholam-Hossein Shoja'i, 10 February 2013, Isfahan.

night of 5 December, a number of workers set on fire the company bus that was parked in "station 1," from where most of the process workers would be transported to the refinery; this disruption, coupled with phone threats, still did not stop them from going to work the next morning. A number of process workers were then attacked and beaten by their angry colleagues, and one of them was hospitalized. According to a NIOC spokesperson, the strikes had halved the oil production by 6 December, and three refineries (Tehran, Kermanshah and Shiraz) were shut down; production in the Abadan Refinery continued on a lower level than usual.¹²²⁷

In an attempt to defuse the tensions, the management sent the workers home on paid leave until the end of Ashura and Tasua (10 and 11 December) – two Shi'a holy days that saw major demonstrations all over the country. More than 300,000 people demonstrated in Ahwaz, and the clashes in Abadan left several dead. By this time oil workers were not only protesting in their workplaces, but were actively involved in street protests, such as a two thousand-strong demonstration in front of the oil company houses of Jamshid Abad.¹²²⁸ The process workers finally joined the strike on 10 December, and the workers of one subcontractor, Afshari, went on strike and gathered in the middle of the refinery on 12 December.¹²²⁹ The Shiraz Refinery was shut again, as well.¹²³⁰

While oil production had reached its old level of just below 6 million b/d by 2 December, it dropped to 3.8 million b/d by 4 December as the strikes started to spread in the southern oil fields and in the refineries.¹²³¹ Until the end of the second week of December, the regime had been able to ensure the production of 1.25 million b/d from Gachsaran and Aghajari oil fields, and part of the domestic consumption of oil products from the Abadan Refinery.¹²³² But by mid-December, oil production had fallen way below 1 million b/d as the workers in Gachsaran and the process workers in Abadan Refinery had joined the strike.

At this stage, the fuel shortage became a bone of contention as the regime accused the oil workers of refusing to produce oil for domestic

¹²²⁷ Payam, *Roozshomar'e Enqelab-e Islami Dar Khuzestan*, 185.

¹²²⁸ SAVAK, Documents 34900070-076 (20 Azar 1357/11 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran. According to the report, several buildings, a band and the electricity plant of Jamshidabad were damaged during the skirmishes between the police and the demonstrators.

¹²²⁹ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹²³⁰ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 20 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1385/2007), 96.

¹²³¹ Randal, "Spreading Protest. Strike Cuts Output of Iranian Oil."

¹²³² Payam, *Roozshomar'e Enqelab-e Islami Dar Khuzestan*, 191.

consumption and tried to mobilize the moderate forces against them. In response, striking oil workers in the south published a letter to Ayatollah Hajj Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Shari'atmadari, claiming that "the oil production for domestic consumption has continued since the start of the strikes; the shortage of fuel is caused because 60 percent of the oil that is provided by the Abadan Refinery for domestic consumption is exported to Israel and used for the savage military, and the rest is provided for domestic consumption."¹²³³ These claims, of course, were part of the propaganda war waged against the regime, although it was certainly true that the military was dependent on fuel. But the continuation of production for domestic consumption also divided the oil workers, as some wanted to continue production for domestic consumption, while others claimed the regime was using it for the army and for exports to Israel and South Africa.¹²³⁴

In a statement, the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry declared on 15 December 1978: "Because we oil workers are witness to the savage pillage and robbery of our national wealth by imperialism, we are determined to stop the production and export of oil by withdrawing our labour and by preventing [others to] work so that the fifth column of the enemy is unable to continue the destruction of our lives without taking into account the rage of the Iranian nation."¹²³⁵ In another statement, they added: "In unity with the fighting people of Iran, the purpose of our strike is to destroy despotism and eliminate the influence of foreigners in our country, and create an independent, free and progressive Iran. These goals are the indisputable rights of the people. The people shall utilize all the means of self-sacrifice to achieve these goals."¹²³⁶

In a meeting with Iranian students abroad on 16 December, Khomeini said oil workers had been tricked by the regime, which had claimed that the "600,000 barrels" that were still produced were for domestic consumption; instead, they were being exported to Israel. "I am now giving oil employees the message," he said, "that it is your religious duty, your holy duty, to broaden the strike and make it general, and prevent the export of oil."¹²³⁷ As on many other occasions, instead of being a mastermind, Khomeini was proving to be a leader

¹²³³ Striking white-collar and blue-collar workers of the south, Document 26789 025 (n.d.), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²³⁴ *The Washington Post*, 13 December 1978.

¹²³⁵ Communiqué of the United Syndicate of the Workers of the Iranian Oil Industry, Dey 2, 1357/December 23, 1978, document 33408001, IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²³⁶ Quoted in Mansoor Moaddel, "Class Struggle in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 03 (1991): 323.

¹²³⁷ Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, "Manteq-e Hoquq-e Bashar-e Carter. Sarpushi Bar Edameh-ye Jenayat-e Shah. Lozum-e E'tesab-e Karkonan-e Sherkat-e Naft [the Logic of Carter's Human Rights. Hiding the Shah's Atrocities. The Necessity of Strike by the Oil Company Employees]," in *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (25 Azar 1357/16 December 1378).

who absorbed the impulses and insights from below and generalised them into a strategic orientation for the whole movement.

As the strikes started to cut oil production drastically, the military government decided to respond harshly, given that every one million barrels of unsold oil equated to a loss of about \$12.5 million in December 1978. It was not only the decreasing oil revenues, however, that were hurting the regime; the government was also facing a shortage of fuel for domestic consumption, including crucially for its military, as refineries had stopped production. Thus, it took two measures. First, the military government scaled up the repression of the oil workers and threatened to sack strikers, which increased oil production to 2.2 million b/d on 17 December.¹²³⁸ Second, it tried to arrange with the help of its allies the import of kerosene, which was widely used for cooking in Iran. On 16 December, Parviz Mina, the chair of the Iranian Oil Company Ltd. in the UK from 1975 to 1979, wrote to Prime Minister Azhari that Mobil had agreed to buy kerosene from Russia and sell it to its clients, so it could send its own ships with kerosene from a refinery in Italy to Iran.¹²³⁹

As part of the government's severe policy programme, the military head of Abadan gathered some process workers in the Annex building on 14 December. A number of them returned to work in the following morning, but the day and night shifts did not turn up. The morning shift of process workers started again on 16 December, but because their unit needed maintenance and the maintenance workers were still on strike, production was stopped. During the morning, a number of colonels and eight trucks full of soldiers entered the refinery and went to the Central Workshop in order to intimidate the workers back to work. The following events demonstrated the high level of confidence that the workers had attained by that time. When one of the colonels told the workers they should resume work as all their demands had been met, a worker replied that the perpetrators of the recent killings were still walking free, and he added that this was understandable because the colonels of course could not arrest themselves. When the colonel threatened the workers with the use of force, mass layoffs (by taking away the employee cards of the strikers) or evacuating them from their company houses, the worker replied that everybody would walk away in the case of any sackings and that the workers, too, would use force (i.e. damage to the refinery). After lunchtime, the workers of the Central Workshop turned on their machines as they were surrounded by soldiers, but they did not work, and the maintenance workers in the rest of the refinery simultaneously carried on the strike. The rising tension resulted in an

¹²³⁸ "Iran's Oil Output Rises but Industries Face Strike," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 December 1978.

¹²³⁹ Parviz Mina, "On Mobil," 16 December 1978," 42-299-7a (16 December 1978), ICHS archives, Tehran.

accident during which a white-collar worker yelled at an officer who then pulled his gun at him, angering the rest of the workers who then demanded that all soldiers should leave the refinery.¹²⁴⁰

When on 17 December workers arrived at the refinery, the military occupation of the refinery had been reduced to dozens of soldiers stationed in front of the refinery parking lot. The workers of the Central Workshop turned on their machines in order to avoid another invasion by soldiers, but they went on a go-slow strike or did not work at all. During the day, the different departments were in contact through the apprentices, and it was decided that no one should turn up the following day, 18 December, in observance of Ayatollah Khomeini's call for a national day of mourning for the dozens who had been killed in the demonstrations of the previous two weeks.

On 18 December many workplaces were closed down in what amounted to a national general strike. In the following week, the strike of the maintenance, overhaul and depot workers of the Abadan Refinery continued, as most of them stayed home. Not only the strike, but also an old debate ensued after one of the workers in the Central Workshop who had been active in the Coordination and Supervision Committee and who had considerable influence among the older workers, put up a leaflet on the notice board, which only contained economic demands. The older workers, mainly those who had been members of the syndicate or sympathizers of the Tudeh Party, focused on the slogan "bread, houses and freedom." The younger, more radical workers were complaining that with this move, they would go back to the starting point of the strikes. The leaflet was then replaced by one containing the "national" demands.¹²⁴¹ Another debate that intensified in this period was about the question of how to deal with scabs. Most workers agreed that it was time for force. Those who continued working received threats, and in the night of 23 December, the house of a worker who had received 16,500 toman wage in the previous two weeks was burnt down.

Scabs were not the only problem for the strikers. Despite the spread of the strike, there was still noticeable distance between the blue-collar and white-collar workers. Some white-collar workers had not joined the strikes in December yet, but a number of radical white-collar workers stopped working on 25 December. Finance was another emerging problem. During the strikes, the wages of the refinery workers had not been stopped, but the management announced that no wages would be paid out on 26 December. There was an "Islamic fund," but few workers had turned to it at that time. In the meantime,

¹²⁴⁰ "Az Kargar-e 'Etesabi-ye San'at-e Naft Che Miamuzim? Gozareshi Az 'Etesab-e 'Azim Va Yekparcheh-ye Kargar-e Palayeshgah-e Abadan [What Can We Learn from the Striking Oil Workers? A Report of the Big and United Strikes of the Workers of the Abadan Refinery]."

¹²⁴¹ Ibid.

various groups, both secular and religious, continued distributing their leaflets in the Central Workshop. The Fighters for the Road of Establishing a Party of the Iranian Working Class, also known by the name "People's Allies," (*Mobarezan-e Rah-e Ijad-e Hezb-e Tabaqeh-ye Kargar-e Iran – Mottahedin-e Khalq*) distributed one leaflet calling for the establishment of a "strike fund," but no such fund existed. Finally, and most importantly, there was no strike committee in December in order to coordinate the different departments, bring together the white- and blue-collar workers and to maintain contact with other refineries and with the workers in the oil fields.

By late December, three important groups had still not fully joined the strike in the Abadan Refinery: the process workers, the bus drivers and the maintenance workers of the Precision Tools Department. The latter were in a go-slow protest, but announced their decision to go on strike on 26 December in a leaflet. As the strike started to draw in more workers, the military responded by an attack on the Central Workshop in the morning of 26 December, during which the trainees and young workers were beaten up. This intimidated the rest of the workers who turned on their machines. A number of young white-collar workers responded by demonstrating in the refinery compound, but they were dispersed by the soldiers. The following day, the soldiers entered the refinery again, and the workers of the Central Workshop pretended to work. The workers' wages were paid out, as well, but only after the white-collar workers operating the computers protested. The management had asked them to calculate the wages of the scabs, but after they refused to do so, they were allowed to calculate all workers' pay checks and stop working again afterwards. In order to raise the morale, some young white-collar workers and blue-collar workers organised a demonstration inside the refinery, shouting slogans such as "Workshop, resist, resist!" and "Process you are betraying the nation." The military responded promptly by manoeuvring six small tanks around the compound.¹²⁴²

Meanwhile in Tehran, the authorities had a small success. On 26 December, they were able to bring 500 mostly retired blue- and white-collar workers to resume production of unit 1, which produced 17,000 b/d.¹²⁴³ This illustrates that although most oil workers had joined the protests, the workforce was far from a politically homogeneous group. According to a report by the Liberation Movement of Iran, oil workers in Tehran gathered in front of the NIOC headquarters on 26 December, shouting slogans like "The people's dark

¹²⁴² Ibid.

¹²⁴³ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, "Gozaresh Az Owzaye Palayeshgahe Tehran [Report on the Situation of the Tehran Refinery]," in *Engelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]* (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1384/2005).

night will end, Khomeini will be victorious,” “Strike, strike, the school of revolution” and “Worker, worker, your fist displays your faith.” One of the workers gave a speech, saying, “Our nation knows what it struggles for and it demands justice, cultural, economic, political and social independence. Our nation seeks to base its demands on Islam and it has chosen Khomeini as its leader because he combines all the characteristics of a leader.” Inside the building, some workers had hung up a banner saying, “We employees of the oil industry want the establishment of an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Imam Khomeini.”¹²⁴⁴ Considering its source, this is obviously a one-sided account, but it nevertheless reflects the fact that by late December, the influence of the Islamists and Ayatollah Khomeini had increased considerably among the oil workers in Tehran. On the same day, the Tehran Refinery workers issued the following statement: “Considering the fact that the products of the Tehran Refinery flow to the houses of the army personnel, the SAVAK, the police and the American advisors, while the ordinary people have to wait in long queues, restating our determination to shut down all the refinery’s installations on 27 December 1978, we will go on hunger strike today and hold a sit-in in the restaurant for one hour.”¹²⁴⁵

As the oil strikes were intensifying in December, developments took a violent turn when on 23 December three gunmen of the Islamist guerrilla group Movahedin ambushed and killed Paul Grimm in Ahwaz (in the Kiyan Pars district). Grimm was the American general director of OSCO who had replaced George Link after his car was bombed in November, and during heated debates with some strikers, he had threatened to dismiss them if they would not return to work. Almost simultaneously, an Iranian oil official, Malek Borujerdi, was shot dead on the other side of the river Karun by Mansurun, another Islamist guerrilla organisation.¹²⁴⁶ The assassinations caused a flight of foreign employees. James Buchan, who was in Iran at the time, depicts the following picture of the chaotic events: “The elementary school [for the children of foreign employees] in Ahwaz closed, the snowflakes on the windows and Christmas decorations in the classrooms still gathering dust months later. The strike at Iran Air, and the shortage of motor fuel, compounded the panic. Gulf

¹²⁴⁴ “Akhhbar-e Jonbesh-e Islami, Shomareh 10 (12 Dey 1357/2 January 1979) [News of the Islamic Movement, Number 10],” vol. 9, part 1, *Asnad-e Nehzat-e Azadi [Documents of the Freedom Movement]*, <http://www.mizankhabar.net/asnad/archive/archive.htm>.

¹²⁴⁵ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela’at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 25 vols., vol. 22 (Tehran: Ministry of Information, 1385/2006), 265.

¹²⁴⁶ The assassinations were attributed to the People’s Mojahedin Organisation, but they were claimed by the Movahedin Organisation, a small Islamist guerrilla organisation, established in Ahwaz by some members of the Islamic Student Society.

Air pilots ran shuttles to carry some 1,200 foreigners from Abadan International Airport to Bahrain.”¹²⁴⁷

With the departure of the foreign employees, the little oil production that had continued under their auspices came to a halt. At the same time, the military government’s attempt to force workers back to work by threats and intimidation backfired as more than 6,000 oil workers quit their jobs in protest in December.¹²⁴⁸ On 18 December, a large group of OSCO’s 2,000 employees published a letter in which they announced their collective resignation from the following day by referring to “the fact that the lackeys of colonialism have increased their savagery and inhuman acts by attacking the houses of the oil field workers and insulting their families, causing some of them . . . to flee and forcing others to work under the threat of bayonets and torture.”¹²⁴⁹

As the strikes became more solid, oil production dropped rapidly, reaching a mere 250,000 b/d on 30 December. Oil shortage caused a 50 percent increase in taxi fares and the restriction of bread sales due to fuel shortage in bakeries.¹²⁵⁰ As the following anecdote illustrates, the fuel shortage was being felt in the small cities as well: “[E]verybody is suffering from a shortage of oil. It is a cold winter, and people are used to overconsumption of oil for heat and light. It now takes hours to stand in the queue for oil.”¹²⁵¹

The fuel shortage prompted the government to organise an emergency meeting on 26 December with a number of ministers, representatives of the army and of the NIOC to discuss how to guarantee the distribution of fuel. According to the NIOC representative, “the situation had worsened significantly compared to the previous week,” with “no or negligible amounts of fuel present throughout the country.” The meeting concluded that, because of the “situation,” i.e., the strikes, it was impossible to introduce the rationing of fuel.¹²⁵² The fuel shortage also caused a war of rumours, as the oil workers accused the government of withholding fuel in depots and using it for the military and exports to Israel and South Africa, while the government pointed the finger to the oil workers.¹²⁵³ According to a SAVAK report, oil workers were spreading the story that they were producing 600,000 b/d, while the domestic consumption of oil was merely 100,000 b/d; therefore the authorities

¹²⁴⁷ James Buchan, *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 203.

¹²⁴⁸ Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 160.

¹²⁴⁹ Document 26789 014, IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²⁵⁰ *The New York Times*, 31 December 1978.

¹²⁵¹ Homa Rouhi, *A Woman from Kerman with Memories of the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), 52.

¹²⁵² Prime Minister’s Office, “Meeting on fuel shortages, 26 December 1978,” 7-299-7, ICHS archives, Tehran.

¹²⁵³ On rumours and the revolution, see Karen L. Pliskin, “Camouflage, Conspiracy, and Collaborators: Rumors of the Revolution,” *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980).

were lying when reporting on oil production figures. The report also highlighted another story that was spreading among oil workers, which was that the Iranian government, due to its previous commitments, was still supplying oil to Israel and that an Israeli airplane had landed in the south, bringing technicians who were going to Abadan in order to get the oil industry running again.¹²⁵⁴

The last week of December was also marked by much violence as the military government was making its last efforts to crush the revolutionary movement. On 26 December, Kamran Nejatollahi, a young professor was killed as the army stormed the Ministry of Education to break up a sit-in of around seventy professors and lecturers. The following day, tens of thousands were led by Ayatollah Taleqani in a funeral ceremony that left more than 200 people dead after the army opened gunfire on the demonstrations. The victims were commemorated the following day by tens of thousands, and the anger against the regime reached new heights. The oil workers had become even more politicized through their strikes and demonstrations, and they had occupied an increasingly pronounced role within the revolutionary movement. This was reflected, for instance, in statements like this, which was addressed to lecturers and students:

By announcing a week of solidarity [after the death of Kamran Nejatollahi], you provided an opportunity for people from all walks of life, like me as a worker, to link up with your struggle and contribute to its growth, so we can believe in our own power and [demonstrate that] the movement has deeper roots than the bloodthirsty regime believes . . . with every bullet that the oppressors fires, the true dawn comes closer.¹²⁵⁵

Having failed to crush the revolutionary movement by installing a military government, the Shah now made a last attempt to hold onto power by turning to moderate oppositionists and dissident loyalists. In the last days of December, the Shah accepted the proposal to establish a Royal Council (*Showra-ye Saltanat*), a plan that had been around since September.¹²⁵⁶ The Royal Council was a major concession on the part of the Shah in a final bid to quell the revolutionary tide, yet it was one that came, however, too late. The Shah would leave the country temporarily, and the Royal Council would function as the executive authority in his absence. ‘Abdollah Entezam, who had followed Ansari after his departure in mid-November as head of NIOC, was one of the first to agree to join the Royal Council. The final list of the Royal

¹²⁵⁴ SAVAK, Document 411/123 (29 Azar 1357/20 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²⁵⁵ Quoted in "E'lamiyeh-ye Qahremanan-e San'at-e Naft [Statement of the Heroes of the Oil Industry]," *Akhbar-e Enqelab*, 16 Dey 1357/6 January 1979.

¹²⁵⁶ It had been proposed by former Prime Minister Ali Amini, but rejected by the Shah at the time.

Council's members was presented on 14 January, as most candidates refused to take a seat.¹²⁵⁷ Entezam was chosen for his experience and his independent image. He had participated in the oil negotiations after the 1953 coup d'état and had served as head of NIOC from 1957 to 1963, before being dismissed by the Shah due to his opposition to the repression of the demonstrations of that year and the persecution of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shah and his advisors, however, underestimated the confidence and the determination of the revolutionary movement, which considered their concession as too little and too late. The appointment of politicians like 'Abdollah Entezam could not turn the tide.

In an open letter of 28 Decemer to 'Abdollah Entezam, the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Oil Industry objected to his appointment as head of NIOC, summing up some of the most important grievances of oil workers. They held him to account for taking up the post of foreign minister in General Zahedi's military government after the 1953 coup d'état against Mossadeq, signing up to bad oil deals for Iran, selling oil to South Africa and Israel, dismissing over 10,000 workers in Abadan Refinery because of mechanisation, sacking militant workers, ordering Iranian employees to bend in front of foreign employees, discriminating practicing Muslim employees, refusing to allow a prayer room in the Abadan Refinery, promoting torture and attempting to destroy the national culture and religion.¹²⁵⁸

By the start of 1979, the oil strike committees, operating under the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the oil Industry in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz and Kermanshah, were in practice running the oil industry. Notably, however, by this point the Common Syndicate was operating closely with the clerical leadership. Referring to meetings between its representatives and those of the Tehran clergy on 31 December to 2 January, the Common Syndicate states in a communiqué, "the holy oil strikes will not deviate from the path, and they will continue to further the aims of the Islamic movement under the leadership of Imam Khomeini."¹²⁵⁹

¹²⁵⁷ The Royal Council had 8 other members: Shapur Bakhtiar (Prime Minister); Mohammad Sajjadi (Chairman of the Senate); Javad Sa'id (Chairman of the Parliament); Aliqoli Ardalan (representative of the royal court); Ali Abadi (former attorney general); Mohammad Varesteh (Minister of Finance); Seyyed Jalal Tehrani (former senator, Chairman of the Royal Council); 'Abbas Qarebaghi (general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff).

¹²⁵⁸ Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Oil Industry, "Open letter to Mr. Abdollah Entezam," 00462003 (7 Dey 1357/28 December 1978), IRDC archives, Tehran.

¹²⁵⁹ Document 4331008 (n.d), IRDC archives, Tehran.

Figure 75 Oil workers in a demonstration in Tehran, December 1978, with a banner reading: "Until the fall of the regime and the establishment of a republic of Islamic justice, the struggles and strikes in the oil industry will continue."



Shana/Photo: Received

6.6.1 Violence in the oil strikes

The oil strikes, like any other class-based protest, involved an uneven and complex process of social mobilisation. There were differences related to positions within the labour process, traditions of activism, political and religious affinity and local conditions. To give an example, the workers operating in small teams in the process division of the Abadan Refinery were the last to go on strike, even when some of them were intimidated by their colleagues, while the central workshop of the refinery, where there were a few hundred experienced workers, was a hotbed of activism. Strikes developed sooner in Tehran Refinery where the workers were exposed to the revolutionary movement much earlier and where spatial and industrial control was less strict than in Abadan. Also, given the composition of the workforce, the influence of the Islamist movement was greater in the Tehran Refinery than in the Abadan Refinery. Naturally, the unevenness in the willingness to go on strike and the nature of the demands raised led to tensions and divisions that were often overcome by persuasion or social pressure.¹²⁶⁰ There were, of course, also instances of violence, but there is no indication that violence by militant workers played a significant role in the organisation of the strikes. The

¹²⁶⁰ For a number of examples, see Khosrowshahi, "Bar Ma Cheh Gozasht [What Happened to Us]."

most visible violence was not committed by oil workers, but by Islamist activists against a number of foreign and Iranian oil officials. These, however, occurred when the strikes were already in full swing. In November 1978, a bomb was thrown at the car of George Link, the American general director of the Oil Services Company of Iran. On 23 December, three gunmen of the Islamist guerrilla organisation Movahedin ambushed and killed his successor in Ahwaz, whom they accused of being a CIA agent. Almost simultaneously, Malek Borujerdi, the Iranian director of the production units in the east of Ahwaz, was shot dead by Mansurun, another Islamist guerrilla organisation. The attackers had accused him of opposing the strikers and sending cars to pick them up from their homes.¹²⁶¹

¹²⁶¹ Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi-ye Vezarat-e Ettela'at, *Enqelab-e Islami Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak [the Islamic Revolution Based on Savak Documents]*, 22, 60.