



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Jafari, P.

### **Citation**

Jafari, P. (2018, October 11). *Oil, labour and revolution in Iran: a social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry, 1973-83*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66125>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66125>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/66125> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Jafari, P.

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

**Issue Date:** 2018-10-11

## Conclusion

What would the history of oil in Iran look like, if we cracked it open with labour as an analytical tool, instead of using the usual suspects of finance, politics or organisation? Whilst crucial and novel in the context of the existing literature on oil in Iran, this question served merely as a trigger or a starting point and relocated oil workers from the margins of history into the spotlights. Once there, oil workers become an autonomous subject worthy of being studied in their own right, raising a new set of questions about their working and living conditions, experiences, subjectivity and agency. Rather than serving merely as an analytical tool, oil workers themselves become the subject of historical analysis.

This study, therefore, delved into the history of oil workers both in and outside their workplaces. It has explored the role of culture, religion and ideology in their everyday lives and in their activism. Far from treating oil workers as a homogeneous group, it analysed the role of gender, ethnicity, generation and class as sources of identity, solidarity and divisions. And rather than looking to class as a static structure, oil workers were placed in the longer process of class formation and re-formation. Not all, but certainly an important part of the social history of labour in the Iranian oil industry from 1973 to 1983 has been covered in this thesis. This history has also opened up new perspectives on the social, economic and political aspects of the 1970s, the Iranian Revolution and the early years of the Iran-Iraq War. Finally, this thesis was informed by a number of theoretical approaches that were useful in finding and interpreting the historical data, which in turn have stimulated theoretical reflection.

Before summarising and commenting on these historical and theoretical insights, let me start with a general remark about the temporality of this thesis, which I define as “eventful.” As explained in Chapter 7.3, an “eventful” temporality is characterized by path dependency, temporally heterogeneous

causalities, and contingency.”<sup>1801</sup> The history of the Iranian oil workers in this thesis began and ended with events of this type, i.e. the termination of the Consortium Agreement in 1973, and the revolutionary overthrow of the monarchy in February 1979, followed by the first two years of the Iran-Iraq War. At first sight, the revision of the Consortium Agreement in 1973 that transferred the administration and operation of the oil industry to the Iranian state might not seem to meet the requirements of an event.<sup>1802</sup> However, as explained in chapters 1 and 2, the new agreement, together with the oil price hike, led to important changes in the oil industry, most importantly its physical and geographical expansion, which was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of its employees, and changes in their incomes and living conditions. Furthermore, this event mobilized, assembled and channelled a number of structural processes into the social fabric of the oil industry, leading to the re-formation of its working class.

### **Class re-formation**

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be identified as the formative period of the working class in the oil industry. This class formation was the outcome of a specific configuration of a number of elements: the capitalist development of the oil industry in which foreign capital and its semi-colonial policies, and to a lesser degree the Iranian state, played an important role; the ways of life, which were until the late 1920s strongly marked by the tribal and rural background of the workforce, but became slowly urban and industrial in the following two decades; dispositions, which were based on the local cultures of ethnic and tribal groups, and religion, but also came to include nationalist ideas and collective forms of organisation (trade unions) and action (strikes). Additionally, from the 1940s, socialist and communist ideas and organisation became influential among oil workers as well, not merely expressing class consciousness, but actively shaping it by providing the discursive frames within which grievances were interpreted and articulated. This was not only true for communism but also for “resource nationalism,” which in many aspects overlapped.

The two decades after the nationalisation of oil in 1951 constituted a period of consolidation of the working class in the oil industry; by the 1960s, the experience of oil workers living in an industrial and urban context

---

<sup>1801</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 100-03.

<sup>1802</sup> For the pre-Consortium period see Ehsani, "The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry (1908-1941)." For the Consortium period, see Jefroudi, ""If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me"."

expanded over four or five decades, and new recruits came increasingly from families who had made their living in the oil industry. There were also a number of important changes. Following the 1953 coup d'état, the generation of workers that had some experience with labour activism was demoralized. Technological developments reduced the size of the workforce and entrenched into the consciousness of many workers the fear of redundancy. There was also fear of the widespread political surveillance in the workplace. At the same time, however, the expansion of the oil industry's social services and relatively high wages lessened the conflicts in the workplace. In this period, the influence of secular nationalism and communism was seriously weakened, and the number of strikes decreased dramatically.

The early 1970s ushered in a period of the re-formation of the working class in the oil industry – a transformation that was missed by most contemporaneous observers.<sup>1803</sup> As mentioned above, this re-formation resulted from the expansion of the oil industry and its workforce, which became the focal point where a number of other processes coalesced. The sudden increase in the number of oil workers created, among other things, a generational shift as the cohort entering the oil industry had cultural and political dispositions that were different from those of the older generation. Many of the newly recruited workers were influenced by radical socialist and religious ideas, such as Ali Shariati's Islamic liberation theology. Some of them later gravitated towards the Mojahedin, and a very small group of religious workers was in contact with pro-Khomeini clerics. The small forces of the Left played an important role as Chapter 5 demonstrated, but what was new was the emergence of the Islamic discourse in all its varieties as a constitutive force in the process of re-formation.

The sudden increase of the size of the workforce was also accompanied by a geographical differentiation; in new locations like Tehran, many of the new blue-collar workers had an immigrant background and had worked only a few years in small workshops. Unlike their colleagues in Abadan, they tended to be more religious, which had important consequences during the strikes, as was discussed in Chapter 6. The recruitment of more workers from outside the educational system of the oil industry, which had a socialising function besides providing training, reinforced these trends. The expansion of the national higher educational system that resulted from the Shah's reforms created a larger pool of graduates from which the oil industry could recruit white-collar workers as it attempted to improve the educational level and hence the

---

<sup>1803</sup> This is also true for more general transformations of the time. This blind spot has become widely debated in recent years in Iran after the publication of a survey from 1973, which for instance showed the increasing influence of religious values and practices among the population. Assadi et al., *The Voice That Wasn't Heard*.

productivity of its workforce. On the one hand, this policy increased the pressure on blue-collar workers, some of whom were replaced by white-collar workers. On the other hand, the technological changes in the oil industry led to some degree of “deskilling.” Consequently, this exerted pressures on some white-collar workers who saw their work and status becoming more similar to those of the skilled blue-collar workers. In general, however, the inequalities between the two groups remained, creating both tension and the potential for collective action. Finally, the 1970s saw a return of the strike action, the number of which increased gradually during the decade.

The increased strike activity had two sources. First, the scarcity of skilled labour on the market gave oil workers more confidence to take strike action. Secondly, oil workers’ expectations increased as they saw oil price quadruple and as they heard state officials promise political and economic progress, while their grievances continued. These grievances included the lack of housing, the high inflation that undermined wage increases, the rigid inequality between blue-collar and white-collar workers, the inequality between Iranian and foreign workers, the precariousness of working for subcontractors, the presence of SAVAK in the workplace, and the sense of lacking national control over the oil resources.

### **Working for oil, living with oil**

Methodologically, both diachronic and synchronic analyses have been used in this thesis. Class re-formation provided an analytical lens to understand and contextualise labour in the Iranian oil industry diachronically. Two other lenses, however, provided a synchronic perspective: the labour process and social reproduction. Despite its importance, no significant studies have been conducted on the workplace and the labour process in the Iranian oil industry in the 1970s, or for that matter in other sectors. Without an understanding of the nature and organisation of work, it is impossible, however, to fully grasp the experience of oil workers and the social relations they enter at the point of production. Focussing on a number of locations, most importantly the Abadan Refinery, this thesis looked closely into some aspects of the labour process and its practical organisation.

One advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to understand the different positions and experiences of oil workers within the oil industry and the possibilities and limits this creates for collective action. Let me recall two examples from Chapter 6. First, the nature of the continuous production in the refinery and the centrality of the Process Department to it partly explain why

its workers were the last ones to join the strikes during the Iranian Revolution. The small number of operators and the internalisation of a sense of responsibility for the entire functioning of the refinery functioned as a break on their willingness to join the strikes. Secondly, the overhaul (maintenance) procedure in the refineries created unique opportunities to create networks and collective actions among refinery workers in different locations.

The labour process perspective is also important to understand why conflicts were recurrent in the oil industry, even if wages and social provisions were relatively good. It is at the point of production that what Cornelius Costariadis calls “instituted heteronomy” emerges from conditions in which workers have no or very little control over the labour process and face “coerced commodification of their labor power.”<sup>1804</sup> This is a fundamentally antagonistic relationship between workers and employers that creates alienation and conflicting interests. These conflicts were not always expressed in collective actions, but also in individual acts of resistance, varying from sabotage to ridiculing managers.

The capitalist labour process, however, does not only produce conflicts; it also produces consent, as Michael Burawoy has pointed out. Chapter 3 discussed two factors that performed this role in the oil industry – the factory regime and its internal market. Unlike Burawoy, who views “manufacturing consent” as nearly the sole possible outcome of these factors, I pointed out that the specific nature of the factory regime and the internal market in the Iranian oil industry created both consent and conflict, mainly due to their internal contradictions.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the internal state of the factory regime in the oil industry combined “bureaucratic despotic” and “hegemonic” features, one of those combinations or hybrid forms that resulted from Iran’s uneven and combined development. While the hegemonic element of the factory regime contributed to the creation of consent through the establishment of collective bargaining and the provision of social services, its “bureaucratic despotic” aspect undermined it with its overtly repressive measures, such as the involvement of the SAVAK in the workplace. Many oil workers thus had a contradictory experience of being an industrial citizen and a subject, and developed a citizen-subject consciousness. This contradictory experience was, of course, also produced by the political and social relations outside the factory, as discussed in Chapter 7.

The internal market of the oil industry had the same contradictory impact. The focus on meritocracy, the rigid and hierarchical division between blue-collar and white-collar workers, and, more in general, the job

---

<sup>1804</sup> van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, 33-34.

classification and its corollary differentiated income levels, status and social-cultural amenities, all created a strong sense of individualism and competition among the employees. These aspects created individual options for climbing up the hierarchical ladder in the workplace and undermined the incentives to engage in collective action. On the other hand, however, these aspects created high expectations that were not always realised and oil workers experienced concrete obstacles on their way up the ladder, which then created grievances and conflicts. Besides consent and conflict, there was also a strong element of control in the workplace. This control was partly exerted by the SAVAK, as I already mentioned, but much more important for the daily functioning of the oil industry was the role of the white-collar workers, how they were defined as representatives of the management on the shop floor. This mechanism, of course, created its own conflicts with the blue-collar workers.

One final hallmark of the labour process in the Iranian oil industry, as in most other places, was the gendered division of labour. The productive activities were almost entirely conducted by men, while the ancillary and reproductive activities, such as the work in administration, the hospitals and the schools were done by women. The gendered nature of the oil industry was also reflected in the cultural norms of masculinity, which themselves formed a serious obstacle for women entering it.

Moving from the point of production to the sphere of social reproduction, Chapter 4 considered the mediating role of wages and salaries. From the data gathered on oil workers' income, we can conclude that compared to other workers, oil workers on average benefitted from relatively high living standards. This statement needs three qualifications, however. First, it emerged that the income levels could vary significantly among the employees, particularly between blue-collar and white-collar workers, and between the regular workers and contract workers. The income of most of the blue-collar workers, for instance, was only slightly higher than that of blue-collar workers in other industries. Secondly, these higher income levels served as compensation for the extraordinarily harsh conditions of work in the oil industry, without which it would have been very difficult to recruit workers, particularly from other places like Tehran. Therefore, the higher income levels didn't mean that all oil workers experienced "embourgeoisement" and developed into a "labour aristocracy." This is underlined by a third issue. Oil workers often shared their income with their family members and remained connected to the larger working class communities through kinship, religious and cultural activities, and shared public space like sport stadia, cinemas etc.

The family, using the unwaged labour of women, played an essential role in the social reproduction of workers, of course. With this aim, the oil



company's housing policies actively contributed to forging the nuclear family structure. The family and the home were also the main spheres where oil workers spent the majority of their leisure time. The most important aspect of the oil industry was, however, the extent to which the oil company itself had entered the sphere of social reproduction, providing housing, healthcare, education, and cultural and leisure facilities to oil workers. This was, partly, a compensation for the underdeveloped role of the Iranian state in providing these services that were necessary to maintain a productive workforce. The oil company's role in social production, however, also served to maintain control over the workforce through socialisation and ideological interpellation. The educational system, for instance, provided not only essential training, but was also an important institution where adolescent oil workers were socialised. The publications of the oil industry provided not merely information, but also contributed to their cultural and ideological formation.

### **From revolution to war**

As mentioned above, this thesis ends with the period marked by the revolutionary events of 1978-79 and the start of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, which can be considered as one event in the sense of their combined transformative impact on social structures. For the sake of clarity, however, they will be discussed first separately, before we turn to their combined affect.

Having provided a detailed description of the emergence and development of the oil strikes during the Iranian Revolution, this thesis has filled an important gap in the literature. As discussed in Chapter 6, the oil strikes started in September 1978 in Tehran and spread rapidly to the oil fields of Ahwaz and the refineries of Abadan, Shiraz and Tabriz. During the strikes, oil workers established their own organisations, mainly in the form of various strike committees.

A number of factors explain the involvement of oil workers in the revolutionary process. First, oil workers, like many other Iranians, had been increasingly mobilized by the official political discourses and policies of the state, such as participation through the Rastakhiz Party and official trade unions. While this raised their expectations, they experienced the limits imposed on them. For instance, increased political participation wasn't accompanied with more political freedom, as oil workers were obliged to join the Rastakhiz Party, but then found that decisions were not made by them but by state-appointed officials. Secondly, many of the revolutionary movement's

demands about freedom, social justice and national independence resonated strongly with the existing grievances summarised above.

Most importantly, oil workers were placed at the heart of Iran's international relations and identified strongly with the ("resource") nationalism espoused by the revolutionary movement. Thirdly, the revolution as an "event" transformed the cognitive and cultural categories within which grievances and possible alternatives were interpreted, and thus created a new reality in which many oil workers gradually defined themselves as revolutionary subjects serving the "nation," and/or "the working class" and/or the "*ommat*" (Islamic community). Fourthly, this revolutionary transformation of consciousness among oil workers didn't occur automatically, but agitation, leadership and framing all played an essential role. This observation led me to give proper attention to the political and social networks in which militant oil workers were embedded. As a result, the thesis has uncovered a number of these networks, some connected to Islamist and others to leftist milieus, some pre-dating the revolution and some emerging in its midst.

One of the most important historical insights gained in this research relates to the emergence of "dual power" in the last weeks of 1978 and January 1979. In most accounts of the revolution, the clerical leadership around Ayatollah Khomeini receives all the credit for creating this situation. My reading of the oil strikes demonstrated, however, that oil workers not only played an essential role in the fall of the monarchy by paralysing the state, but that they also played an important role in the emergence of "dual power," and in the outcome of the revolution. This role is reflected in the contribution they made to three organisations on which the revolutionary pole of power rested during the "dual power" period of December 1978 – February 1979.

First, the impact of the oil strikes and their political potential created the necessity for their national coordination. With this in mind, the clerical and religious-liberal forces established the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committees (OSCC), which partly took control of the production and export of oil. Secondly, this act enabled the Council of the Islamic Revolution, whose members partly overlapped with those of the OSCC, to establish its authority vis-à-vis the monarchy. Thirdly, the neighbourhood committees emerged out of the local groups that were organizing fuel distribution on a neighbourhood level, thus creating a potential connection between the locations of oil production, refining and consumption.

These observations raise two questions: why were the oil strikes able to mobilize at such a large extent, and why didn't they develop their own autonomous organisations that could push for a more democratic outcome of the revolution? Chapter 7 identified four factors that provide a possible answer

to the first question: the size and concentration of the workforce; the positional power of oil workers; oil workers position on the labour market; and finally the organisational structure of the oil industry. These insights should lead to an adjustment of the historical and theoretical assumptions (see 7.2) about the inherent material nature of oil, which would prevent oil workers from engaging in large-scale mobilisation.

The answer to the second question is much more complicated. The historical evidence points to serious objective obstacles that oil workers faced in coordinating their actions within the oil industry and with the strikes in other industries, and in providing an alternative leadership within the revolutionary movement. These obstacles include the fragmentation of the working class, its low level of literacy, and the rapid pace of the revolutionary developments. Despite these obstacles, there was a significant part of the urban working class, with oil workers at its heart, which had the potential to play a much bigger role. In order to explain why this potential was not realised, subjective factors have to be taken into account as well, which brings us back to the “path dependency” and “contingency” of events discussed above.

As explained in Chapter 7, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters managed to become hegemonic in the revolutionary movement and to gain control over the oil strikes, two aspects that mutually reinforced each other. The attribution of this role to Islam and the “mosque network” as a resource for mobilisation is too simplistic, however. Rather than being ready-made, Islam was reinterpreted and crafted as a revolutionary ideology in competition with secular ideologies, and the “mosque network” was actively created and turned into a tool of mobilisation during the revolution. Both projects were led by a small network of Ayatollah Khomeini-supporters who had been active since the 1960s, and who had actively tried to build and expand this network and crafted a political discourse. During the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini could wield this network as cogwheels that could bring larger cogwheels into motion, to use an industrial metaphor. This could have worked out differently, emphasising the contingency of these developments. When, fearing the appeal of the guerrilla movements on the youth, this initial small network contemplated turning towards armed struggle in the late 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini and other clerics intervened against this orientation and argued that social and political activities should be prioritised.

In contrast, a new generation of communist activists turned towards the guerrilla warfare. The fact that they lacked the financial and organisational resources that parts of the bazaar provided to the clergy surely put them at a disadvantage. But the guerrilla orientation turned them into the state’s number one target of repression, and prevented or hindered their involvement in the

day-to-day struggles at workplace and community levels. By the end of 1976, the Fada'is had lost most of their cadre. The Fada'is had, of course, also many sympathisers some of whom were active in workplaces as well, independently from the organisation. They didn't, in general, develop any meaningful activities at workplace level in the 1970s because they were oriented towards mobilising workers towards an immediate confrontation with the state, rather than building the small workplace struggles and creating activist networks around them. Hence once the choice for the guerrilla warfare was made, the consequences conditioned the ability of the revolutionary Left to intervene during the revolution and in the oil strikes, revealing the element of "path dependency" at work. The same can be said for the revolutionary period. Once oil workers had missed the opportunity to organise and coordinate autonomously at the national level, and this task fell into the hands of the OSCC, it became incredibly difficult in the following period to assert the power of the *showras*, without a presence in the centres of political power.

This proposition, of course, is not *the* explanation for the failure of oil workers to create autonomous organisations that could provide, or at least attempt to provide, an alternative leadership for Ayatollah Khomeini. It is a proposition that also needs more historical examination, but a number of facts point to its plausibility. First, the fact that Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters had to appropriate the language of class in general and that of the Left in particular, while changing its meaning and integrating it into a populist framework, at least suggests that class interests and identity, and their particular articulation by the secular Left played an important role among workers. Secondly, many oil workers were attracted to the ideas of the revolutionary Left and to Shariati's Islamic liberation theology, and they did organise independently in their workplaces. Thirdly, the Islamist discourse was not homogenous. While Ayatollah Khomeini's brand of Islamism was dominant, many religious workers looked to the ideas of radicals like Shariati and Taleqani, who favoured a form of Islamic anti-capitalism. Some of them aligned with the secular Left, and as the developments of the *showras* demonstrated, the tensions between religious workers and religious managers and state officials could run high. It was the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War that prevented these tensions from developing into serious conflicts. This impact of the war, as its general impact on the development of the workers' movement, illustrates once again the contingent nature of the post-revolutionary developments.

These observations invoke another issue that this thesis has raised: the paradox of the revolution. While (oil) workers had participated in the Iranian Revolution, and had in that process established their own organisations, they

lost the freedom to articulate their own interests independently. Making the situation even more paradoxical, many oil workers accepted or supported the consolidation of the new state, despite losing their independence. As discussed in Chapter 8, the element of repression certainly played a role. But the revolution also created, at least initially, real improvements that aided the new regime's attempt to incorporate part of the oil workers into a populist coalition that underpinned it.

Wages and salaries of oil workers increased or remained unchanged in the first year after the revolution, despite the economic crisis. The 5-day working week was initially conceded to them, and the oil company started building new houses. The oil company also brought contract workers under its formal coverage, even if their precarious conditions more or less continued. The foreign-owned drilling companies were nationalized, after protests from oil workers, of course. The fact that some managers, engineers and high-ranking employees left or were purged from the oil industry opened up new venues for upward social mobility for the remaining employees, if they supported the new state, of course. Two other achievements were the most important ones, however. The inequalities between blue-collar and white-collar workers were significantly reduced, and the participation of oil workers in the affairs of the oil industry was broadened and increased.

Another important achievement of the revolution was the creation of the *showras*, which remain one of its least researched aspects: the workers' *showras*. Given the long history of authoritarian politics in Iran, the democratic organisation of the *showras* was their most interesting aspect. In various workplaces in the oil industry, oil workers gathered in general assemblies where various topics were discussed and representatives were elected. Another crucial hallmark of the *showras* was their participation in the administration and production. Initially, this participation took the form of direct control, but as the new state (the Ministry of Oil) imposed new managers and its own policies from the top down, the role of the *showras* was reduced to ad hoc interference and then to consultation as part of a corporatist arrangement, and the *showras* lost their democratic function.

Not only were the oil workers' *showras* rolled back by the new state, before being banned in early 1982, but also the achievements mentioned above were one by one cancelled. The impact of the Iran-Iraq War was the main decisive factor that changed the balance of forces between the oil workers and the newly established Islamic Republic. The war weakened the oil workers and the workers' movement in general through a number of mechanisms.

First, important centres like the Abadan Refinery were destroyed and oil workers were displaced. Secondly, the extraordinary conditions of the war

convinced many oil workers to accept and even support the state and its policies, including the rolling back of their achievements. Thirdly, the war prevented the fissure that had developed between religious oil workers and the state official from developing into serious conflicts. Fourthly, the war created a situation in which the mobilisation of oil workers that had started during the revolution could continue in a different form and direction. Oil workers volunteered for the front, made financial and material donations, heeded the managements' call to raise the productivity and joined paramilitary groups (*basij*). As a result, the new state could consolidate its power by presenting the war as the continuation of the revolution, not only ideologically but also socially, which, of course, held an appeal to the oil workers who had joined the revolution. The revolution and the war thus mobilised and entrenched nationalist consciousness among oil workers, and changed the composition of the workforce through purges, demotions and promotions, and dislocation. As such, the war opened a new chapter in the history of the oil workers, which I hope to research in a future follow-up study.