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

Jafari, P.

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Author: Jafari, P.

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Propositions

1. Iranian oil workers were neither simply a content “labour aristocracy,” nor an impoverished rebellious group. There were important inequalities among them, mainly between blue- and white-collar workers, and between Iranian and Western employees. These forms of inequality, and the contradiction between a meritocratic culture and a repressive apparatus within the oil industry created grievances that resonated with those of a significant part of the population, and which transformed radically by the revolutionary process in 1978-79.
2. Understanding the social, cultural and political changes among the oil workers is not only important for its own sake; it provides an essential bottom-up perspective on modernisation in Iran, because the oil industry stood at the core of this process. It demonstrates that modernisation was not only uneven, but that it combined characteristics from different times and places in new hybrid formations, and it identifies migration as a salient mechanism facilitating this combination.
3. The history of the working class in Iran, from the discovery of oil in 1908 to the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, can be divided in three periods. The 1910s to the late 1940s were a formative period. The late 1940s to the late 1960s were a period of consolidation. During the 1970s, the working class in the oil industry went through a process of re-formation due to the influx of a new generation of workers that had a different cultural, political and education background than the older generation, and was more inclined to join the Iranian Revolution when it started in 1978.
4. Oil workers’ mass strikes during the Iranian Revolution did not only play a vital role in the downfall of the monarchy; they contributed directly to the creation of the revolutionary organisations that underpinned the post-revolutionary state. Hence understanding the dynamics of the oil strikes is key to understanding the Iranian Revolution and its outcome.

5. Political contestation and social mobilization continued after the fall of the monarchy. The oil workers' *showras* (councils) were the most important expression of this dynamic and created the possibility of workplace democracy, which formed a serious challenge to the increasingly repressive post-revolutionary state. Independent *showras* were banned and replaced by corporatist organisations. The fate of the *showras* is crucial to understanding the processes through which the post-revolutionary state was built and consolidated: repression, diversion, ideological and material incorporation, and social mobility.
6. Oil workers' interests and struggles were articulated through Islamist and socialist discourses and organisations, which demonstrates the importance of politics and language for labour history. At the same time, politics and discourse were shaped in important ways by conflicts that emerged from class contradictions in the oil industry.
7. The history of oil has been often written as the history of a commodity with magical powers, creating money, dictatorship, underdevelopment and (civil) war. It is time to demystify oil and make visible the workers who produce it – it is time to crack oil with labour history.
8. The historiography of Iran needs an urgent injection of labour-centered studies in order to attain a better understanding of social and political transformations, and their connections with global developments.
9. History and theory are not opposite poles. Without processing historical insights into meaningful ways of understanding and explaining, theory would be mere speculation; and without theory, recovering historical facts would become difficult, let alone meaningful.
10. Studying history is not only a matter of retrieving the past as it was, but also of retrieving the silenced voices and the unrealised possibilities hidden in that past – not through speculation, but through a historicized critique to which Antonio Gramsci referred as “realistic immanence.”
11. It is possible for historians, as it is for other scholars to be truthful to the criteria of objectivity, without being indifferent to normative issues. Objectivity and taking sides are not mutually exclusive.
12. Writing the propositions of a dissertation on the history of oil in a month that broke all-time temperature records (July 2018) might be an indication that there is no future for oil.