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'Precarize' and divide: Iranian workers from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Green Movement

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CHAPTER 3

The Language of Resistance: the Iranian Revolution in Workers' Words and Slogans



Oil workers, February 1979 (Photo: petromuseum.ir)

Introduction

There are aspects of the history of the 1978-1979 revolutionary movement against the Shah that have remained marginalized. One of them is the story of the workers' role through their own words and slogans. How did workers find their own paths of defiance through discourse? What can their statements and slogans tell us about the evolution of the mass protests and strikes that culminated in the February 1979 Revolution? How did they reflect and respond to Khomeini's messages, discussed in the previous chapter? These questions stem from a meeting I had in early November 2018 in Iran, with a revolutionary who actively participated in the demonstrations that took place in the streets and around the factories of Tehran. While discussing the reasons that gave the impetus to workers to mobilize against the Shah and join the other protesters, he stopped his stream of

consciousness abruptly and told me: “The real story is in our stories, in our words.”²⁶⁸ This chapter will follow the path mapped out in this quote. Thus, it will shift the focus away from the broader perspective adopted by most of the existing academic literature on the 1979 Revolution, which mainly contextualizes labor strikes within a framework of structural factors and economic developments, as in the pioneering works of Asef Bayat, Ervand Abrahamian, Ahmad Ashraf and Misagh Parsa. Following the line suggested by Kurzman – “in favor of recognizing and reconstructing the lived experience of the moment” in approaching the study of the Revolution – this chapter concentrates on workers’ statements, rallying-cries, and memories as experiences.²⁶⁹ Building on Sreberni-Mohammadi’s work on macro and micro histories of the 1979 Revolution through the narratives of “small media,” it contributes to the study of communication culture with a specific focus on workers.²⁷⁰ Based on field research, and relying on primary sources such as interviews with workers, scholars, and journalists, along with historical newspaper articles in Persian, and foreign journalists’ reports from Iran in 1978 and 1979, it is an attempt to integrate the timeline of workers’ strikes with the evolution of their own expressions of dissent. As mentioned above, along with archival material, the chapter draws upon memories, which are here understood as tools that leave room for workers’ subjectivity. These have been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six workers (both affiliated and not affiliated to political groups, from Ahvaz and Tehran), each of whom I met more than once. In the context of this chapter, the value of memories, which are lived experiences mediated into inevitably fragmented or biased stories, lies in the diverse interpretations and individual representations of a past event. Memories are not understood as mere record or interpretation of the past. They do not carry any historical and

²⁶⁸ Former Leftist activist and scholar. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 1 November 2018.

²⁶⁹ See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 81-184; Asef Bayat, “Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers” in Lockman, 200-203; Ashraf, “Kālbod-shekāfi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San‘ati dar Enqelāb-e; Abrahamian, *Mardom dar Siasat Iran*, People in Iran’s Politics, (Tehran: Cheshme, 1394-2015), 83-123; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*; Ashraf and Banuazizi, “The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” 3-40; Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5 and 77-88; Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 126-188. Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, 89-101.

²⁷⁰ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

crystallized truth. Conversely, they are tools for unveiling the evolving political meanings given to words and the collective importance of testimonies attributed to individuals.²⁷¹ What matters here is the link between memory and resistance, as a bridge to explain political transformation. Therefore, the goal is not to follow impressions or workers' opinions, so as to use them as (impossible) keys to objectivity. Conversely, memories here represent tools used to tackle the (individual) triggers of a collective action, such as that of the revolution. Contributing some of the missing pieces of history through stories, they capture how workers' personal experiences became collectively political while the Revolution was unfolding.²⁷²

Three aspects are relevant to this analysis, which is based theoretically on Gramsci and Fairclough.

1) The construction of *the political*. Specifically, the process by which workers – acting as political subjects – constructed their struggle and generated a counter-hegemonic discourse in slogans; 2) what collective imageries and shared values formed the background to the discursive strategies that workers employed at the time of the 1978-1979 strikes; 3) what made the Revolution eventually “thinkable” and possible, according to the workers' understanding. Following this reasoning, the interaction between practices of language formulation and their premises, values, goals, and potential consequences is particularly relevant. It explains the factors that allowed workers to first, consciously transform slogans into calls to action and, second, to legitimize certain political choices. In particular, this chapter shows that – starting from the initial strikes in the summer of 1978 – there was a transformation in workers' statements and rallying-cries. These shifted in terms of the spectrum of their demands, as well as in the expressions of collective thinking. Initially, slogans served as a medium to spread economic complaints, housing demands, and class struggle-related requests. Later – particularly during the last months before February 1979 (when protesters

²⁷¹ See also Charles Tilly, “Afterword: Political Memories in Space and Time, in Jonathan Boyarin eds, *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 247.

²⁷² The author expresses her gratitude to Prof. Naghmeh Sohrabi for sharing her knowledge, reflections and empathy on the use of memories in the study of the Iranian revolution with me. See Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Muddling through the Iranian Revolution,” *Perspectives on History*, November 1, 2015. https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2015/muddling-through-the-iranian-revolution?fbclid=IwAR0Pa6M-vFTYfuwxlNUdi_yYVaXuG08AJcWn-K0YvU6pgRI5IQQIqxVuMdl and Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1981): 96–107.

celebrated the success of the Revolution and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty) rallying-cries became: a) more politically-driven, b) harshly anti-despotic and anti-imperialist, c) driven by claims for Iran’s independence, as well as freedom and rights, and d) more focused on Khomeini as a leader. Furthermore, flyers, along with word of mouth and oral summaries of books that were spreading in semi-private meetings, gradually served as sites of confrontation and sources of story-telling. In fact, they shed light upon both the cruelty and the vulnerability of the monarchy.²⁷³ When demonstrations became too dangerous – particularly after the “Black Friday” of September 8, 1978 – when the Shah’s forces carried out mass shootings of protesters in Jaleh Square²⁷⁴ – strikes developed as (almost) unique representational places of opposition.²⁷⁵

Interestingly, perceived threats coming from within the country (the Shah) and from abroad (“the imperialists”) brought out feelings of uncertainty/insecurity mixed with a sense of urgency that eventually translated into slogans. Thus, particular economic grievances or calls for solidarity were conveyed as necessities for the survival of the country. For instance, with their frequent references to “the people of Iran,” the Iranian workers were also trying to build bridges and a network of solidarity with other social groups such as students and peasants against a common enemy. In other words, political mobilization often arose and was spread through specific words, carrying shared emotions, and was based on communal experiences and a common adversary. It appealed to a collectivity, which was then galvanized into calls for unity, and collective opposition, as well as aggressive or defensive actions against the enemy.

Therefore, tackling connections and disconnections between verbal and relational elements and an action or a promised move, this chapter argues that: 1) workers made a performative and conscious political act – not only driven by economic needs – through statements and slogans;

²⁷³ Former Leftist activist. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 5 November 2018. On the political function of leaflets and flyers, see also Sreberni-Mohmmadi *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 121-130.

²⁷⁴ See *Ettelā’āt*, 18 Shahrivar 1357- September 9, 1978.

²⁷⁵ Former Leftist activist. Conversation with the author. Tehran, 5 November 2018.

2) communication, transmitting shared knowledge and experiences, played a unique role in the processes of solidarity building.

Constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse

Gramsci conceived the relations of power between ruling classes and those ruled as a matter of interaction, where resistance to political hegemony or forms of counter-hegemony actually (co)-exist within the framework of the hegemonic context rather than outside of it *per se*.²⁷⁶ Workers' actions of resistance to the Shah and their participation in the revolutionary momentum are emblematic in this sense. In fact, the choice of slogans and their construction can be ascribed to the hegemonic context of the end of 1978, when a discursive war involving the Shah, Khomeini and Leftist groups was playing out before workers' eyes. Looking at the Iranian context through a Gramscian lens, it is possible to identify the stages workers passed through to reach the collective awareness that led them to take to the streets and loudly express their grievances. Throughout the summer and fall of 1978, their struggle progressed rapidly beyond "popular spontaneity," maturing into "awareness," although not fully "conscious leadership."²⁷⁷ As will be investigated in the next sections, unrest as acts of "popular spontaneity" represented the initial expressions of the workers' voices that had remained unheard under the Shah. As Gramsci argued, spontaneity is to be considered an inner element of the history of the subalterns. Spontaneous rebellion unites those who live on the margins of society and have not been able to fully develop forms of collective awareness. In Gramsci's words, "they [the subaltern classes] do not even suspect that their history can be of any importance and have any value worth leaving documentary traces."²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, within these spontaneous movements one can address some aspects which are moving in a "conscious direction or discipline."²⁷⁹ In fact, what Gramsci calls conscious direction entails an ongoing process of solidarity-building within a collectivity. This is the final product of the

²⁷⁶ Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q1, §44, 40-4.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. Q3, §48, 328-329.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 330-331

“elaboration of will,” which requires a “collective effort” made by concrete and not “fatal” individual efforts, that can be considered as “unrelated to the individual.”²⁸⁰ Accordingly, in the Iranian context, through their joint actions and thoughts, as well as the words they expressed, workers lead to a change from the class *in se* to the class *per se*, meaning that purely economic demands have transformed into political consciousness.²⁸¹ Hence, by experiencing political consciousness, workers were able to leave an imprint and have a tangible impact on the Shah’s hegemonic project that was until then based on a combination of coercion and consensus.²⁸² As will be explored in greater depth in the next section, the Shah’s hegemonic rule served to repress any independent political initiative coming from workers. Since 1953, despite its growing size, the working class had not been able to play a significant political role because it had been prevented from doing so, as it had been subjected to the Shah’s surveillance and sporadic actions of repression.²⁸³ Nevertheless, signs of the workers’ potential for resistance became manifest after the 1973 oil price rise, along with the Left increasing in influence.²⁸⁴ In 1978, when workers took to the street with their rallying-cries, their slogans gradually showed an overtly political character – beyond any economic grievances – that effectively challenged the status quo. Following this line of reasoning, within the frame of the hegemonic discourse, disconnecting the *political* from the economic represents a means of decoupling resistance from politics and, hence, of disempowering those who protest. As this chapter will show, by calling for collective solidarity and expressing dismay and economic demands in words and slogans, the workers of Iran were acting *politically* during the months that led to the strikes of 1978. Again, using Gramscian terminology, when popular spontaneity finds its paths lead through conscious political demands and when it brings power to account – putting pressure on it – a conscious political project *de facto* manifests itself.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁰ Ibid. Q6, §79, 761.

²⁸¹ Ibid. Q1, §47, 56-58. Here Gramsci refers to the Marxist definition of “class in itself” and “class for itself,” where the first applies to individuals with a similar source of income, and the second comprehend those who share also similar economic positions as well as political attitudes.

²⁸² Ibid. Q13, §37, 1638.

²⁸³ Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 213-214.

²⁸⁴ See Halliday, “Trade Unions and the Working Class’ Opposition,” 7-13.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. See also Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146.

However, once a collective solidarity is expressed, a further step is required: this is what Gramsci calls “awareness of duration,” a long-term goal. This is made explicit in everyday practice, which in the Iranian case took place over the months before the proclaimed success of the 1979 Revolution, and is necessarily intertwined and not independent from the power it engages with.

Therefore, everyday practice can be a form of resistance to cultural hegemony. Hence, it means resistance to a certain language. During the months leading up to the Iranian Revolution, this process unfolded through language itself, as this chapter will show in the next sections. While constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse, thus seeking hegemony, verbal as well as written expressions of dissent developed alongside the evolving dialectic of subjective/collective interpretations of those actually conducting the resistance. This is the point where the current analysis connects Gramsci to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. As Fairclough argued, “achieving hegemony entails achieving a measure of success in projecting certain particulars as universals. But this is in part a textual achievement.”²⁸⁶ This method allows us to concentrate first on the texts as elements of social events and on their “causal effects” for change; and, second, on the processes of meaning-making as being interactive (involving producers, the text itself and the receivers.) Thus, to assess the impact and meanings of workers’ words, this chapter will proceed along a twin track. Following the chronology of the events, on the one hand, it will look at how meanings evolved, reflecting, adapting and responding to the shifting context. On the other hand, it will examine the rhetorical strategies and discursive techniques used, in order to understand the effects of hegemonic relations at play in the production of ideology.

1978-1979 workers’ strikes: a timeline through statements

In order to understand the effects of hegemonic relations in play in the production of ideology among workers, this section will follow the evolution of workers’ participation and statements,

²⁸⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 41.

starting from the mass strikes that occurred in fall 1978. It will look at how discourses from below concerning the factories reflected and responded to the shifting context. The following statement testifies that, until the first week of September 1978, workers had not actively participated in the revolutionary movement:

Today in all our cities masses of people [*tudeh-hāye mardom*] raised their voices against the criminal regime [*rejim jenāyatkār*]. Yet, this is just the beginning of our work. So far, a great part of the people [*khalq*] has not taken to the streets, especially workers. We, as the Organization of the Fedayān (*Sāzman-e Cherik-hā-ye Fedāii Khalq-e Iran*) are asking all the workers, toilers [*zahmatkesh*] and fighters [*mobārez*] to not keep silent while all these killings are perpetrated by the Shah's regime against the suffering masses [*tudeh-hā-ye ranjdideh*]. [You should] Protest against those who fired bullets [*goluleh bārān*] at the toiler people in the streets. Struggle against the plots [*tot 'eh-hā*] orchestrated by the government.²⁸⁷

This message, written by the Leftist Fedayān group – which was particularly close to workers in the Tehran refinery –²⁸⁸ was disseminated in early September 1978, soon after the *Jom 'eh-ye Siā*, the so-called Black Friday. Before concentrating on the different levels of discourse in the statement above, it is worth contextualizing one of the Revolution's key days of escalation. On September 8, 1978 (17 Shahrivar 1357) the Shah's army opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in Jaleh Square in Tehran, officially violating the curfew that had been imposed a few hours earlier. Violent clashes and confrontations between the people and soldiers took place in the southern neighborhoods of the Iranian capital as well. According to the military data announced that night – as reconstructed by

²⁸⁷ *Sāzman-e Cherikhā-ye Feda'ii Khalq-e Irān*, Shahrivar 1357/September 1978, reprinted by CISNU, (Berlin, 1978), as quoted in Ahmad Ashraf, "Kalbodshekafi Enqelāb: Naqsh-e Kārgarān-e San'ati dar Enqelāb-e Iran [Autopsy of the Revolution: The Role of Industrial Workers in the Iranian Revolution], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (2010): 55-123.

²⁸⁸ Worker and labor activist. Interview with the author. Tehran, 30 April 2019.

Abrahamian – 87 people were shot dead. However, the opposition declared that there were more than 4,000 victims: a full-scale massacre.²⁸⁹ Black Friday came as popular indignation across Iran, following the Cinema Rex fire of August 19 in Abadan that the opposition denounced as a mass killing perpetrated by the Shah regime's secret police, was being curbed. Although subsequent investigations uncovered that those responsible were elements of the religious opposition, Black Friday became a symbol for the revolutionaries. Until that moment, workers had not joined the students, intellectuals, *ulema* and *bazaaris* in the mass anti-Shah demonstrations.²⁹⁰ Nevertheless, across different sectors, they had organized a series of protests and strikes, mainly over unpaid wages and housing, that had systematically increased since summer 1978. In fact, the cancellation of annual bonuses had triggered a chain of protests in the electricity and water sector, which began at the Tehran plant at the end of July, and continued intermittently until October 3, before becoming widespread across the country. More than 850 white collar workers from the same industry staged their first large protest that year on September 7 in Mashad and Shiraz.²⁹¹ About 1,300 workers from the car factory in Tabriz stopped their activities, first on August 6, and then one month later, claiming their pay, annual bonuses and housing.²⁹² They were followed by car workers' protests throughout September in Arak, Tehran and Ahvaz. The newspaper *Kayhān*, reporting on several protests in the southern area of the Iranian capital, summarized workers' demands as follows: "Pay rise, safer housing and conditions, better health services."²⁹³ Moreover, in the last week of September 1978 railways workers started a six-day-strike, causing difficulties and inconvenience in the transportation system.²⁹⁴ Therefore, until September 1978 workers had expressed their dissent mainly: 1) through protests lasting one or a few days; 2) by organizing their strikes around the factories; and 3) by articulating economic grievances. Black Friday – and more importantly, how it

²⁸⁹ Abrahamian, *Iran between two Revolutions*, 515-516.

²⁹⁰ Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," 3-40.

²⁹¹ *Ettelā'āt*, 11 Mehr 1357, October 3, 1978.

²⁹² SAVAK documents, Enteshārāt-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, Vol. 11, 350.

²⁹³ *Kayhān*, 18 Shahrivar 1357 (8 September 1978).

²⁹⁴ *Kayhān*, 9 Mehr 1357 (1 October 1978). *Ettelā'āt*, 15 Mehr 1357 (7 October 1978).

was narrated – precipitated events. What workers remembered as the “bloody massacre” became a symbol of the Revolution. It also marked a shift in the development of the revolutionary momentum, which gave impetus to many workers to leave their factories and join the massive anti-Shah demonstrations.

Taking to the streets was, indeed, the next step. The Fedāyān, which had strong connections in both the Tabriz and Tehran car assembly factories,²⁹⁵ issued a call to action. Yet, as the statement opening this section demonstrates, they addressed a broader spectrum of the unheard within Iranian society. In fact, they referred not only to workers (*kārgarān*) per se, but they also solicited those who knew fatigue and resistance [*zahmatkesh va mobārez*] asking them to “raise their voices.” They gave meaning to the apparently faceless concept of “masses of people” who had already demonstrated. Leveraging the power from below to break “the silence,” in their message they envisaged a path of struggle, consisting of two phases. First, they made a call to protest against current events (“what is happening to people”). Second, they appealed for people to fight against the system as a whole (“the plots orchestrated by the government.”) They clarified that this was only the beginning, implying a Gramscian “awareness of duration” and the existence of a long-term goal. [*hanuz āghāz-e kār ast*]. Drawing on the language of defiance, the Fedāyān relied on linguistic choices that immediately connected them to Leftist realms. Instead of the generic *mardom*, they use the word *tudeh* “masses,” or *khalq* “people.” The imperative urge to break the silence “*sāket nabāshid*” formed the backdrop to the struggle “*mobārezeh konid*.” Furthermore, the Fedāyān, in their attempt to mobilize workers, framed the forthcoming struggle as a reaction against the Shah by those working, suffering, and living a life of fatigue [*kārgarān, ranjdideh, zahmatkesh*]. He, through a process of Othering, was presented as a “criminal,” responsible for the killings and suffering of the people, “conspiring” against the demonstrators. What justified this language of violence and pain were the events of Black Friday. In particular, the image of thousands of people

²⁹⁵ Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, April 28, 2019. Leftist activist, former Peykār member, 23 April 2019.

shot in the streets of Tehran initiated a trail of blood that the opposition, here in particular the Leftists talking to workers, wanted to avenge. As *Kār* reported:

The beginning of the organized movement of workers coincided with the massacre of people in the country, especially in Jaleh Square in Tehran, under the direct supervision of the Shah and his American advisers.²⁹⁶

Until early October, workers criticized the Shah's regime, its crimes, the violence of the army, but did not openly clamor for its overthrow. The demonstrations that followed protests and strikes began as acts of popular spontaneity, triggered by "anger," a "sense of solidarity with co-workers," [*hambastegi bā hamkāri-ye mā*] and by knowing that "the streets were crowded [*khiābān sholugh bud*]; people were demonstrating everywhere."²⁹⁷ Not all the strikers among the industrial workers were close to Leftist ideas. As those interviewed for this research observed, the situation in the different factories was extremely diverse and fragmented. Oil workers and car workers were historically more organized and more numerous. Some started their protest out of exhaustion, resulting from a combination of economic factors, pressure due to monitoring and repression in the factories. As one worker said: "Ba' zi az kārgarān kollān khasteh shode budand."²⁹⁸ De facto, intimidating forms of control and the fear of being reported to the SAVAK prevented many workers from keeping Leftist leaflets that were being secretly distributed.²⁹⁹ Some others were striking because of a generalized "sense of hope," as the news began to spread more easily and "censorship's pressure" diminished.³⁰⁰ Indeed, reports from the white-collar workers' strikes in the oil factory of Abadan began to circulate among workers, even in other cities. *Ettelā'āt* briefly

²⁹⁶ *Kār*, "Tashakkolat-e Naftgarān dar Enqelāb 1357" Organization of Oil Workers in the Revolution of 1357 (1978), No. 308.

²⁹⁷ Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, 28 April 2019.

²⁹⁸ Oil worker, interview with the author. Tehran, 21 May 2019.

²⁹⁹ Leftist activist, former Peykār member, 23 April 2019; Car worker, interview with the author, Tehran, 28 April 2019; oil worker, interview with the author. Tehran, 3 May 2019.

³⁰⁰ Manufacturing worker, interview with the author. Esfāhan-Tehran, 14 May and 8 June 2019.

reported their demands, mainly concerning annual bonuses and wages, but also contesting the martial law and curfew.³⁰¹ On October 13, the entire workforce at Abadan refinery went on strike, and two days later workers sent a message “in solidarity” with striking teachers in Tehran.³⁰² After five more days, Ahvaz white and blue-collar workers started their protest. Their grievances related to the deteriorating economic situation, but the strikes of both *kārgarān* and *kārmandān* lasted for about a month. During those days, workers had the opportunity to become more conscious of their own conditions and of their potential impact on the stability of the Shah regime. In fact, their demands politicized “against the regime and the foreigners.”³⁰³ In the meantime, along with the news of the Shah’s army’s cruelty in Tehran on Black Friday, Khomeini’s messages started to spread across the country. Tape-recorded speeches were smuggled in and distributed. Furthermore, “some students printed leaflets secretly and they also provided us copies of Shariati’s books,” one worker from Ahvaz related.³⁰⁴ By the end of October, oil workers emerged as the most politically organized of the sectors. Less than ten days later, the Abadan refinery – which employed 12,000 people – went on strike, and newspapers started reporting people standing in long queues in the streets, complaining of fuel shortages. It was October 22:



“Thousands of cars in Tehran without gasoline.” (*Kayhān*, 30 mehr 1357, 22 October 1978)

³⁰¹ *Ettelā'āt*, 2 Mehr 1357 (24 September 1978).

³⁰² *Ettelā'āt*, 23 Mehr 1357 (15 October 1978), and 30 Mehr 1357 (22 October 1978).

³⁰³ Oil worker from Ahvaz, interview with the author. Tehran, 9 May 2019.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

From that moment on, workers gradually realized that they could effectively paralyze the state apparatus by blocking the economy of the country. Political awareness-building grew along with workers' consciousness of the economic impact and consequences of their actions. The strikes' committees in Abadan and Ahvaz were in contact with one another and produced a series of statements. They presented a list of demands:³⁰⁵

- (1) The end of martial law [*hukumat-e nezāmi*].
- (2) Full support and cooperation [*hemāyat va hamkāri*] for striking teachers.
- (3) Freedom and unconditional release of all prisoners.
- (4) The 'Iranization' of the oil industry [*Irāni kardan-e san'at-e naft*].
- (5) All relations in the oil industry to be held in Persian.
- (6) Exit/expulsion [*khoruj*] of all foreign employees.
- (7) An end to discrimination [*tab'iz*] against female workers and employees in the industry.
- (8) Implementation of the newly approved law on housing for workers and employees.
- (9) Support for workers' requests [*taqāzās*], including the dissolution of the SAVAK.
- (10) Continuation of the battle against the proximity of some employers to corrupt government.
- (11) Reduction in working hours on the oil rigs in the Persian Gulf.³⁰⁶

As the abovementioned demands demonstrate, from this moment onwards, the oil workers' requests abandoned the purely economic realm. Conversely, they showed a high level of politicization.

³⁰⁵ *Kayhān*, 9 Aban 1357, (31 October 1978).

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Because of the massive intervention of the state in capital accumulation and the central role of the oil industry in the Shah's economy, oil workers engaged in a direct negotiation. The restriction of oil exports in favor of domestic consumption was at stake. They knew their strikes could disrupt the country's economy. Strengthened by this awareness, the *United Syndicate of Oil Industry Workers* sought to up the ante. Three key themes are worth highlighting in their demands. First, the confrontation involved very sensitive topics – such as the release of political prisoners and the disbandment of the Shah's secret police – which were functional to a further politicization of the strikes and indicate a more structured plan with long term goals. Second, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment, mixed with a nationalist narrative, permeated the strikes. This constituted one of the bridges connecting the workers' struggle to Khomeini's populist discourse. Third, trajectories of solidarity-building networks with strikers from other sectors, although weak, materialized into words. Thus, they were elevated to an element that was potentially dangerous to the stability of the regime. A few days later, a foreign correspondent from the French newspaper *Le Monde* visited Abadan. He reported of a city in fear, where a large portion of the 5,000 striking workers went back to their units in the refinery, surrounded by tanks and soldiers. Workers had not forgotten the Cinema Rex fire in August, which they blamed on the Shah's army. The management threatened them again at the beginning of November: "If you don't start work again, you will be killed."³⁰⁷ At least 30 people had reportedly been killed in the clashes following the strikes in Khorramshahr and Abadan in the previous days. Resentment at the combination of violence and repression overtook mere economic demands. Moreover, lines of collective assent and approval of the strikes began to take shape, as the following words from a worker show:

³⁰⁷ As reported in *Le Monde*, November 16, 1978. English translation available, Jim Paul, "Fear Reigns in Abadan," MERIP Reports, No. 75/76, *Iran in Revolution* (1979), 18-19.

No one in particular [*gave us instructions to strike*]. Everyone agrees. There is really no organization. But by firing on us, the army has forced us to organize ourselves and even to arm ourselves. We listen to Khomeini and read the tracts of the Mojāhedin.³⁰⁸

This testimony gives an indication of both the evolution of workers' awareness and the potency of the popular spontaneity that triggered the strikes, at least in the first phases. The power of collectivity is manifest in the expression "everyone agrees." In this regard, a Gramscian framework helps us understand how a shared language, summarized in the plural "we" that precedes a list of common actions, shaped collective consciousness and characterized the strikes. By then, Khomeini's speeches, with their anti-imperialist, populist and anti-Shah class rhetoric, which chapter 2 explored, were being heard. A few weeks later, in mid-November 1978, Siegmund Ginzberg, who was special correspondent in Tehran for *L'Unità*, interviewed a group of workers in Abadan. He reported that they had took "some distance from 'Marxists' and 'capitalists.'" However, he added that it was "clear that in the Abadan refinery among the organizers of the strikes not everybody is religious and that here an organized tradition of the Left is still alive."³⁰⁹ As the army occupied all the country's refineries and memories of repression and bloodshed were accumulating in their minds, workers decided not stop their strikes and to continue indefinitely.

"We realized then just how far the regime could go in its ferocity," a blue-collar worker in Abadan said.³¹⁰

However, supported by students and bāzāris, the refinery workers avoided any confrontation with the army. "The workers call the soldiers their 'brothers' and are trying to win them over," reported a

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ *L'Unità*, "Giorno per giorno lo sciopero di Abadan," [Strike in Abadan, day by day], 24 Aban 1357 (15 November 1978).

³¹⁰ *Le Monde*, 16 November 1978.

foreign correspondent in Ahvaz in late November (as most Iranian newspapers were not on sale between November 5th and January 6th).³¹¹ Nevertheless, their anger against the Shah and social injustice persisted. The anti-Shah sentiment was bred by a discourse of “robbery” and “crime” against the people, present in both Khomeini and the Left’s narratives. As the following words show, it was not a structural economic factor that eventually galvanized workers and led them out onto the streets:

We never saw any of that money anyway. It was all going in the pocket of Ali Baba and his 40 thieves.³¹²

On December 2, workers in Abadan announced that their straightforward intention was to “fight until victory [*piruzi*].” The politicization of their struggle was clear to the government, who attempted to mute the workers’ resistance in a number of ways. Alongside using the army as a deterrent tactic, the management made some economic concessions. As the *Washington Post* reported: “The political nature of the strike was underlined by the handsome 40 percent increase in pay and fringe benefits won by oil workers last month as their price for dropping political demands.”³¹³ Two weeks later, the Common Syndicate of Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry (*Sāndikā-ye Moshtarak-e Karkonān-i san‘at-e naft-e Iran*) showed full political consciousness of their strikes’ impact, as they declared: “We know that our strike was a decisive factor. We control the country’s economy.”³¹⁴ On January 7, the first complete statement of oil workers was published

³¹¹ *New York Times* 28 Aban 1357 (19 Nov 1978), “Despite Army’s Presence, Iranian Oil Town Is Challenging the Shah” Available here <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/11/19/archives/despite-armys-presence-iranian-oil-town-is-challenging-the-shah-no.html>

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Washington Post*, 5 December 1978, “Spreading Protest Strike Cuts Output of Iranian Oil” available here https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/12/05/spreading-protest-strike-cuts-output-of-iranian-oil/b4822343-68d0-4128-ac42-eadc5360fb80/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f2cbd80c6fd4

³¹⁴ See OIPF, *Kārgarān Pishtāz-e Jonbesh-e Tudeh* as quoted in Mansoor Moaddel, “Class Struggle in Post-revolutionary Iran.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 323.

at the bottom of page 4 by *Ettelā'āt*. Titled “The first statement of the striking oil industry,”³¹⁵ it granted full support to Khomeini.



Ettelā'āt, 17 Dey 1357, January 7, 1978

Writing from the refineries in the south of the country – as specified in their statement – workers not only recognized Khomeini’s fight, but announced their will to follow his lead towards the overthrow of the Shah’s regime.³¹⁶ They declared themselves ready:

To implement Khomeini’s instructions for the convenience of the fighting nation [*mellat-e mobārez*] of Iran and the firmness of the holy struggle [*mobārezeh-ye moqaddas*] to overthrow the illegal regime [*rejīm gheyr-e qānuni*].³¹⁷

Using Khomeini’s vocabulary, they openly entered the revolutionary movement and cast themselves under the Ayatollah’s umbrella. Indeed, this declaration weaves together the three pillars of Khomeini’s discourse, as described in chapter 2: the nationalist-populist [“fighting nation”], the revolutionary [“overthrow the illegal regime”] and the religious [holy struggle]. Workers’ goals, through an economic plan of action listed in bullet points, were directed towards

³¹⁵ *Ettelā'āt*, 17 Dey 1357 (7 January 1978).

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

delivering *the coup de grace* to the Shah monarchy by diverting oil exclusively to domestic production. First, they decided how to continue production, in order to guarantee the domestic supply, starting from the distribution of gas in Ahvaz. Second, they decided which particular unit should function in Ahvaz, and gave instructions for the distribution and coordination with the other refineries in Abadan and Tehran. Third, they assigned a group of workers to the telecommunications unit in order to guarantee phone communications and emergency calls between the regions producing oil for domestic consumption. Fourth, they announced specific committees in charge of managing the technical and safety operations, “in order to implement Khomeini’s orders.” Fifth, they designated the return of officers to guarantee the refinery’s “protection” and replace the Shah’s soldiers that had surrounded the plant. Sixth, they established that contact between the oil workers, representatives and refineries had to be coordinated by a specific committee in charge. Therefore, the decision of the workers to follow the path traced by Khomeini came only in the final months before the Revolution and displayed both political and economic characteristics. It can be interpreted as a conscious political move, rather than a calculation driven by religious fervor. Another example follows this line of argument. When Tehran’s refinery workers took to the streets in late January and marched to the university building, most of the rallying-cries – as the next section will explore – addressed general economic and political requests, without specifically mentioning Khomeini. On January 21, workers’ actions captured the headlines and the frontpage of *Ettelā’āt* once again: “Thousands of workers demonstrate.”³¹⁸

³¹⁸ *Ettelā’āt*, 1 Bahman 1357 (21 January 1979).



Ettelā'āt, 1 Bahman 1357, 21 January 1979.

They had no intention of ceasing their strikes and demonstrations, believing that their fight was a tool with which they could reach the main goal: freedom. By identifying workers' struggle with the act of giving "blood for free," the *Sāndikā-ye-moshtarak-e kārgarān-e naft* presented the path towards freedom and a lack of corruption as a route of sacrifice, evoking the imagery of martyrdom that permeated Khomeini's rhetoric. A week before the Revolution was finally accomplished [February 11, 1979 - 22 Bahman according the Persian calendar], they issued the following statement:

It is at these moments of history that you give your blood free of charge as you will [*work to*] be free from corruption and punishment.³¹⁹

Therefore, as this section has investigated, what Gramsci called "popular spontaneity" unfolded through workers' mobilization in the making of the Iranian Revolution, as it exposed the discursive dynamics involved in the process of constructing *the political*. Eventually, workers found their own path to tread through conscious political demands. Thus, they put pressure on the Shah's apparatus

³¹⁹ *Kayhān*, 15 Bahman 1357 (4 February 1979).

and contributed to the shift in power relations.³²⁰ In fact, after expressing collective solidarity, they attempted to build their own plan of action – sowing the seeds for “awareness of duration” – towards a common goal: revolution.

“Unity,” “freedom from dictatorship” and “foreign interference”: analyzing the slogans

From the section above, recounting the chronology of workers’ engagement in the revolutionary movement, it became evident how the factories’ blue and white collar workers reacted to a shifting context by adapting their strategies of struggle. Language, through statements and declarations, represented an inherent part of this process. This section further explores these discursive mechanisms by zooming in on the slogans chanted in the making of the Revolution. The rallying-cries brought to the streets between October 1978 and February 1979 can further demonstrate that words represented sites of struggle, carrying contending ideologies and discourses. They served as tools to empower workers. At the same time, they represented imaginary stones to throw at the Shah’s regime, as they were dialogic and interactive. Moreover, they conveyed shared emotions (such as anger or frustration), along with images and hopes (blood and freedom) constituting the collective (and ideological) imaginings of most of the Iranians who were taking to the streets. As mentioned in the introduction, the current analysis is guided theoretically by the work of Gramsci and Fairclough. Drawing from Gramsci, Fairclough’s analysis concentrates on the use of specific vocabulary and expressions to serve the speakers’ ideological interests. That is the direction of the present section.

When workers joined the demonstrators in October, their slogans mainly called for unity among the different groups constituting the revolutionary body and made economic requests. As instruments to build solidarity with the poor, peasants, and students, they used the following rallying-cries:

³²⁰ Ibid. See also Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 146.

Kāregar, dāneshju, mostaz ‘af: mobārez va mottahed [worker, student, downtrodden fighting and united];

Kāregar, dāneshju: piruz piruz [worker, student, the winners].

These kinds of slogans were primarily needed to create a sense of common identity and purpose, a sort of horizontal identification. Rhythmically constructed and chanted without verbs, they placed the worker at the beginning of the sentence, as they were the main addressees. At the same time, they encouraged the mass of workers, students and the broader category of the downtrodden to build solidarity for a common struggle: “fighting and united.” Short and repetitive, so as to be easy to remember, they envisaged victory to foment the crowds.

Furthermore, as other rallying-cries used during the first months of the strikes show, clearly distinguishable economic grievances emerged:

Huquq-e kārgar pardākht konid [Pay the worker’s salary];

Na boyad kārgar ekhrāj konid [You should not fire workers].³²¹

Imperative and short, shouted with anger, they were conceived as a warning to the capitalists, a desperate plea calling for rights. Exposing the politics of the everyday, engaged with fighting against workers’ being fired, these slogans addressed a narrower segment of the Iranian revolutionaries and did not present a specifically ideological imprint.

Throughout November and December 1978, they evolved, adapting once again to the historical context. A revolutionary present was unfolding, with massive strikes and demonstrations in all the

³²¹ Slogans have been mostly collected from *Ettelā’āt* and *Keyhān* archives (October 1978-February 1979) and discussed with the workers during author’s interviews. See also *Donyāh Eqtesād* 19 Dey 1398, (Accessed 10 January 2019), and Mohammad Hossein Panahi – *Jām ‘eh shenāsi Sho ‘ārhā-ye enqelābi eslāmi Iran, The Sociology of Slogans of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Tehran, Nashr ‘elm, 1392).

urban settings across Iran. Furthermore, victory was looming for the crowds, embodying their main goal. Hence, workers had to strengthen their own identities as revolutionaries. They needed self-encouragement, so they started to praise themselves and their struggle. Oil workers' voices became louder. They were in strong need of incitement, as the army had surrounded their factories and there had been violent clashes. They wanted unity and support “until the victory”:

Dorud dorud dorud bar kāgaran-e mobārez-e san'at-e naft [Hail to fighting workers of oil industry];

Ettehād ettehād ettehād [union, union, union];

Kārgarān irāni, ettehād ettehād [Iranian worker, union union]

Ettehād, mobārezeh, piruzi [alliance, struggle, victory].³²²

Repetitive and short, they used incitement as a tool for mobilization. They called for unity in the factories and in the streets. The third one, in particular, was intended to energize the participants through their nationality, as it represented a claim for all Iranian workers, who were demanding the expulsion of foreign staff from the factories. The fourth slogan mentioned above summarized the road map in three steps to the main goal (the Revolution), which was identified automatically with victory. This could be achieved only through unity and continuous struggle (means-goals). Furthermore, workers chanted anti-despotic slogans against exploitation, which was mainly understood as coming from several sources (the Shah, foreigners, capitalists in a broader sense):

Kārgar, kārgar, mā boyad mottāhed bāshim tā rishey-e estesmār ro bar konim [worker, worker, we should be united to eradicate the root of exploitation];

³²² Ibid.

Hey mellat-e mā, mottahed bāshim tā rishey-e estesmār ro bar konim [Oh dear nation, let's be united to eradicate the root of exploitation].³²³

Vocative and imperative at the same time, both of the abovementioned slogans presented a shared goal: getting rid of a common enemy. The enemy was metaphorically referred as a harmful plant, whose roots should be removed.³²⁴ In the first slogan, the pronoun “we” (plural) was associated with the worker, interestingly called to in the singular, before joining the collectivity. The second one, by appealing to “*mellat-e mā*,” called for unity, by evoking a patriotic sentiment and a sense of belonging to the same nation. It also framed the struggle as a sort of liberating instrument for the victimized (exploited) nation, apparently following Khomeini’s lines of discourse, as explored in chapter 2.

At the end of January, the slogans reflected a full consciousness of workers as an inherent component of the revolutionary masses. Less than a month before the overthrow of the Shah, thousands of workers demonstrated in the streets of Tehran. They were organized in groups of hundreds, as they were trying to reach the university for a big meeting. Parading down the street in the city center, they chanted their rallying-cries, also showing support to Khomeini. What is relevant to the context of this analysis is that workers framed their endorsement of Khomeini as a leader. Their chants emphasized political rather than religious elements.³²⁵

Khomeini was expected to return to Iran soon. Workers shouted their support for him, while demonstrating in the streets. They were also looking forward towards a system in the factories that entailed a control from below, through the establishment of independent workers’ councils

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ *Ettelā’āt*, 1 Bahman 1357 (21 January 1979).

(Showrā), that – as it will be explained in chapters 4 and 5 – would be dismantled during the first years of the Islamic Republic.³²⁶ However, in January 1979, workers chanted:

Dorud dorud dorud dorud bar Khomeini [Long live Khomeini];

Dorud dorud dorud dorud bar Khomeini, barābari hokumat-e kārgari [Long live Khomeini, equality and worker's government].

Encouraging, inciting and galvanizing the crowd of workers, who were mainly from the oil and car sectors in Tehran, these slogans mixed the support for Khomeini with class discourses. The latter, as already discussed in the previous section, were championed by the Left and Leftist sympathizers in the factories. Rhythmically simple and repetitive, these slogans invoked equality and a government run by workers, while hailing Khomeini. A discursive war was already unfolding in the streets, as the Left represented a threatening shadow for the Islamic Republic project.

Nevertheless, the expressions of defiance developed throughout the months and as discussed above, revealed that workers cast themselves under the Khomeinist umbrella only in the very final phase of the revolution. As the first oil workers' statement analyzed in the previous section demonstrated, Khomeini gained strategic, political and economically driven support from blue and white collar workers. The religious element did not constitute a priority trigger. During the demonstrations in December and January in particular, workers chanted the following rallying-cries:

Dorud bar Khomeini, Rahbār-e enqelāb, modafe esteqlāl, āzādi va huquq-e zamatkeshān

[Long live Khomeini, guide of the revolution, defender of independence, freedom and rights of the poor;]

³²⁶ Saeed Rahnema, "Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, February 1992, Vol.13(1), 69-94 and Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema. "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran." *Socialist Register*, No. 37 (2001): 207-208.

Dorud bar mā kārgarān-e pālāyeshgāh Tehrān. Dorud bar Khomeini [Long life to our workers from the Tehran refinery, long life to Imam Khomeini;]

Kāregar, dehghan, mostaz‘af, randjbār, Khomeini ast rahbar [Workers, peasants, downtrodden, toilers, Khomeini is the guide;] ³²⁷

As these examples show, Khomeini’s figure as a leader and guide for the revolutionary movement was fully acknowledged during workers’ demonstrations. Although this does not mean that the Left’s legacies did not carry any weight, the present analysis suggests that a discursive interconnection and conflict with the populist elements of Khomeini’s narrative developed in the last phase of the revolution. By January 1979, secular slogans and symbols – such as class struggle, social justice and the fight against imperialism – appeared to be interwoven with Khomeini’s discourse. Some mottos, reported by Abrahamian, are emblematic in this regard: “Islam will eliminate class differences,” “Islam is for equality and social justice.”³²⁸ The Marxist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” was chanted in Persian as *Kārgarān jahān, mottahed shavid*. The famous “Oppressed of the world, unite” became *mostaz‘afān jahān, mottahed shavid*.³²⁹

Nonetheless, as chapter 2 explored and chapter 4 will explain in greater depth, there were other contending actors. Khomeini’s discourse aimed to assimilate the secular rhetoric of class, in order to nullify the Leftist secular groups within the anti-Shah movement.³³⁰

However, beyond supporting ideologies, how did workers portray themselves? The next section will delve into their self-definitions and memories of why the “unthinkable” revolution happened.

³²⁷ For Khomeinist slogans see also Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 31.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ For further context on this process, see Peter J. Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 9-10; Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 71; M. Stella Morgana, “The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory,” 237-249.

Self-definitions and memories from the Revolution

In demonstrating and striking against oppression, as well as claiming freedom, workers presented themselves as “obstinate,” “awake, conscious”, the “pillar of the revolutions,” real “toilers,” fighting for their nation, “awakening” or “arising” – as in the discursive tradition of the Left –³³¹ from a sleepy past and “tired” of the monarchy, as the following slogans show:

Kārgarān san ‘ate naft-e mā, hāmi sarsakht mā, dorud bar khalq irān [Our oil workers, obstinate, long life to the people of Iran];

Kārgarān hoshyārand, bozorgan bidaran [Workers are conscious, the great ones are awake];

Kārgarān Irān sotun enqelāband [Iranian workers are the backbone of the revolution];

Kārgarān Irān farzandān-e Irānand [Iranian workers are sons of Iran];

Kārgarān bidārand, az Pahlavi bizārand [Workers have awakened, they are disgusted and fed up with Pahlavi].³³²

Therefore, was it loathing provoked by the Shah’s regime, economic pressure, anti-imperialism, and Khomeini’s political stature that triggered the revolution? Why did the revolution happen? Why did workers ultimately take to the streets? A few excerpts from their memories can help us in the process of tracking back this escalating parable, while identifying key factors.

Social pressure and lack of political freedom within the factories exhausted workers:

I was twenty at the time of the revolution. Even before the revolution, I participated in some protests. For this reason, I was fired and I could no longer work in the factory. As co-workers, at that time we were able to understand each other. At one

³³¹ As in the “International”: “Arise ye workers.” See <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/international.htm> Accessed 15 September 2020.

³³² See *Kayhān* and *Ettelā’āt* archives.

point we became fully conscious of the pressure in our lives and we found a way of forming a solidarity.³³³

In fact, poor economic conditions were not the main reasons for supporting the revolution. Most of the workers saw the housing shortage and rising costs as a heavy burden to carry.³³⁴ But repression and class inequalities were what truly provoked them:

There was no space to speak freely. We were tired of the daily general situation. Especially starting from the fall 1978, we received some flyers or other political information from outside the factory. Everything was hidden and everyone should be careful. We were afraid. These flyers or info were spread most of the time by members of our families who were students or close to Leftist groups.³³⁵

As explored in the previous sections, workers actually started their protests for economic reasons. However, their role gradually evolved and they eventually emerged as conscious revolutionaries:

At first, [our aim was] achieving our demands for better working conditions [...] When the Shah's regime opened fire on demonstrators in Tehran in September 1978, and when a cinema in Abadan was set on fire, killing many innocent people, we couldn't put up with such a situation any longer. That is why we didn't stay silent, and we entered the political arena rather than remain spectators. In other words, we were influenced by the people's struggles. That is why we set up the strike committee and we decided to encourage all oil

³³³ Worker and labor activist. Interview with the author. Tehran, 30 April 2019.

³³⁴ On this point see also Peyman Jafari, "Reasons to Revolt: Iranian Oil Workers in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Vol. 84 (2013), 197-217; and Terisa Turner "Iranian Oil Workers in the 1978-1979 Revolution," in *Oil and Class Struggle*, ed. Peter Nore and Terisa Turner (London, Zed Books: 1980).

³³⁵ Oil worker from Ahvaz. Interview with the author. Tehran, 12 May 2019.

industry employees to demonstrate, stage sit-ins and, later, a strike. We were now determined to overthrow the Shah.³³⁶

Personal awareness came first, and collective consciousness later, intertwined with the process of politicization and collective thinking:

When the Revolution started some students had connections with the comrades in the factories. They gave books or papers to workers who could read and they talked a lot to those who were not educated.³³⁷

Another crucial element that contributed to pushing workers together against the Shah was anti-imperialism:

On the eve of the Revolution there were several political groups, either religious or Marxist, which were particularly active and were able to influence people. They were claiming that the Shah was under the influence of America [Shah yek niru-ye Amrika bud.] Beyond the religious groups, most of the others belonged to the Mojāhedin-e Khalq and the Cherikh-haye Fedayān-e Khalq [...] At that time I was only 19 years old and in our factory in Ahvaz there were many foreigners. All these words were coming both from the Leftists but also from the increasing number of Khomeini's supporters and we [workers] began to like the idea of the Revolution [...] They were all saying that the Shah was a tyrant [zālem] and his behavior was very cruel.³³⁸

Repression and facts about the bloodshed that occurred in Jaleh Square in Tehran on September 8th created an unbearable situation for many workers:

³³⁶ Former Tehran refinery oil worker and activist, interview with Ali Pitchigah, "Oil workers in the Iranian revolution" in *Weekly Worker*, 4 Dec 2008.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Oil worker from Ahvaz. Interview with the author. Tehran, 20 May 2019.

That day the intellectuals demonstrated and the people supported Khomeini against the violence of the Shah's army. We received the news of those days in Ahvaz. Our solidarity strengthened.³³⁹

In this situation, the Shah's secret services tried to maintain an extreme control of the factories:

We could not talk and say what we thought. The SAVAK was everywhere in the factory. They were among us, they were working with us. The pressure from daily life (*feshār-e zendegi*) was very strong. When we started striking they also used many strategies to intimidate us and to force us to stop.³⁴⁰

In the middle of an ideological war then, where informal communication channels intertwined with rumors and there was a real need for exchanging ideas, workers created effective solidarity networks. Ultimately, it was that collective will that made them join the other social classes and overall made the Revolution possible.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the 1979 Iranian Revolution by studying workers' statements, slogans and memories. It focused on the words of resistance and on the evolution of collective thinking within the factories, which eventually created the impetus for the participation of laborers in the strikes and protests between 1978 and 1979 that led to the Iranian Revolution. As shown throughout the previous sections, the process of solidarity building was accompanied by powerful statements and slogans, that conveyed images of common realities such as exploitation, bloodshed, and suffering, as well as shared feelings.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

From workers' statement and memories, six elements stand out in the analysis of the chronicles of the revolution-in-the-making.³⁴¹ First, workers' consciousness of their role became gradually distinguishable over the months leading up to February 11. Initially expressing their discontent through semi-spontaneous protests, workers felt an "active part of the nation," and towards December 1978 demonstrated themselves to be fully aware of their strike's impact on the economy. Most of them framed the impetus to participate in the movement as a collective need. A second factor is the expressed need for a guiding group. Workers were aware that a form of leadership was indispensable in order to coordinate, give security, and organization. This is why a strikes' committee emerged, to give the struggle a more systematic character. Third, workers had a precise list of priorities, which included the definition of their own grievances that needed to be shared with other co-workers, but also with other factories as the contacts between the Ahvaz and Abadan refineries demonstrated. Fourth, interrupting domestic production was initially seen as a trump card for the Shah's regime, which would have been able to manipulate workers' strikes in the *public opinion*.³⁴² For this reason at the beginning, and before Khomeini's encouragement, workers doubted whether they should go further with this kind of action, fearing a propaganda campaign against them.³⁴³ Fifth, the process of forming a collective thinking passed through a stage of solidarity building, before arriving at shared goals. In this sense, the frequent exchanges between the striking white and blue collar workers on the strategies for action are emblematic. The sixth aspect which is worth noting concerns the fact that workers' grievances evolved, as they began to be: a) completely distinguishable from those claimed by other groups within the revolutionary body (such as intellectuals, students, bāzāris and public employers) and b) no longer merely economic, as they were entering the political sphere.

³⁴¹ Iranian oil worker. "How we Organized the Strike that Paralyzed Shah's Regime: First-hand account by Iranian Oil Worker," P. Nore & T. Turner, Eds., *Oil and class struggle*, (London: Zed Books, 1980), 293-301.

³⁴² Public opinion is here understood again through a Gramscian lens, thus as a tool of the hegemonic project. See Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere [Prison Notebooks]*, Q7, §83,914-915.

³⁴³ Iranian oil worker. "How we Organized the Strike that Paralyzed Shah's Regime."

The effect of words through slogans was powerful in inciting the masses and galvanizing workers to mobilize. Rallying-cries were made to be chanted aloud, often with a particular rhythm. They were also relatively concise, as the main aim was to make them memorable and easily recalled. Another striking element was the unique link between the power of the words and the addressees, so that the slogans could become representative of all in the process of solidarity-building. Language acted as a tool to communicate emotions (economic discontent or frustration over class inequality), together with images of bloodshed or projections about a freer future away from the Shah's dictatorship. The analysis of slogans allowed us to understand that words were utilized as sites of struggle for contending discourses: Leftist, religious/populist, revolutionary. Moreover, rallying-cries on the one hand empowered workers and promoted their unity; while on the other hand, they served as direct and public accusations against the Shah. In this sense, slogans were dialogic and interactive, as they also called for unity within and beyond the factory. The Iranian Revolution in workers' words took shape, following a pattern where: a shared enemy was identified in the "assassin monarchy;" the concepts of grievances, protest and struggle overlapped, and statements and communiqués were used as calls for unity and latterly for action; the Shah's army's cruelty marked a fundamental shift that culminated in the Revolution. Furthermore, dissatisfaction and rage mounted, as the spontaneity of the workers' movement mutated into a more organized and united one. Therefore, workers' demands became sharply distinguishable from other groups within the polyphonic revolutionary body. Eventually, most of them recognized Khomeini as the leader of the Revolution and of the "holy struggle" to "eradicate" those deemed guilty of the sufferings of the country. Nonetheless, this move can be interpreted more as a political calculation than a decision driven by religion. In conclusion, the articulation of the voices of resistance in the workplaces passed through a combination of personal awareness and collective action. If workers were distinguishable within the social body for their particular economic demands and because they were able to paralyze the state apparatus, this research has also shown that the politicization of the oil workers in particular was influenced by the Left, as framed in the context of class struggle.