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

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CHAPTER 5

Trajectories of Resistance and Shifting Forms of Workers' Activism

(1979-2009)

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"E ʿteraz" [protest] (photo credits: *Iran Farda*, 2020)

Introduction

"When it came to issues such as shortage of salaries or safety in the workplaces, we were told to be patient and tolerant,"[458] said an industrial worker who shared his memories about the Workers' House, the 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and its consequences with the journal *Andisheh-ye Jāmʿeh*. His experience is emblematic, as it summarizes a crucial feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategy towards workers: keep them waiting. On the one hand, throughout the years from 1979 onwards, labor was framed differently according to the IRI's dominant narrative. Depending on the political agenda, discourses on workers – considered as a fundamental audience

[458] Reza Kangarani, "Kārgarān va Showrahā -ye Eslāmi-ye Kār (Workers and the Islamic Councils of Labor)," *Andisheh-ye Jāmʿeh*, No. 16, (Ordibehesht 1380/April 2001), 10-12.

for the continuation of the status quo power relations – were adjusted from time to time.[459] On the other hand, from the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to the populist president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's era in the late 2000s, workers were always invited to resist, to wait, to keep struggling for the nation and to be patient with regard to their own demands.

This chapter aims to investigate in greater depth, and from a workers' perspective, the historical and political processes in which discontent was rooted. It tackles the ruptures and transformations in the forms of workers' resistance and strategies of survival that took place between two key moments of upheaval in contemporary Iranian history: the 1979 revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. For instance – as chapter 3 explored – in 1979, the revolution would not have been successful without the workers' mobilization that paralyzed the Shah's economic apparatus. Almost twelve years after that moment, between 1991 and 1995, the IRI had to cope with repeated unrest on account of jobs and housing, and with inflation during the so-called "reconstruction" period (*sāzandegi*), which followed the eight-year war with Iraq. In 2005 and 2006, bus drivers, organized in a new independent – as yet not officially recognized – union took to the streets and demanded higher salaries, before being harshly repressed. In June 2009, the second re-election of populist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad triggered a new wave of unrest. Nevertheless, while some young activists called for a universal strike, workers as a cohesive and distinct group did not respond, and some labor activists labeled the Green Movement's participants as "narrow-minded liberals."[460]

Relying on an analysis of newspapers, website reports, and interviews conducted in Iran, this chapter explores expressions of workers' agency as well as emerging political subjects between 1979 and 2009. It also investigates the context, focusing on changing dynamics within the society and top-down mechanisms of repression. Examining shifting conditions for dissent is, in fact, crucial to understanding how individuals choose to engage in actions and which methods they opt to

[459] Morgana, "Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad," 133-158.
[460] Former labor activist. Conversation with the author, Tehran, March 2018.

use, whether formal or informal.[461] Therefore, this chapter contributes to the understanding of the shifting role of workers' and attempts at collective mobilization under the complex apparatus of the Islamic Republic. In particular, it evolves from the existing literature on labor activism in Iran, as it specifically problematizes the bottom-up responses to the top-down discourses and coercion, as well as the driving factors in the social context, which led to the reconfiguration of new paths of resistance.[462] The argument proposed here is two-fold. While from the 1990s onwards, the IRI's narrative was promoting neoliberal reforms and the "myth of the winner,"[463] workers as a collective entity were gradually fragmented, weakened, *precarized,* and eventually marginalized as political actors. Concurrently – as the effects of this discourse (together with repression) were generating new forms of discouragement for activists, emanating from several sources of power from across the whole of society – workers found alternative approaches to political mobilization. First, they managed to navigate authoritarian constraints by fluctuating from formal to informal activism. Second, they diversified their actions by using both online and offline spaces.

The politics of resistance

Contemplating the Iranian context through a Foucauldian lens, resistance can be seen as eluding power, which represents its direct adversary within a framework of shifting relations. If – as Michel Foucault suggested – "power comes from everywhere" in the social body[464] and "where there is power, there is resistance,"[465] one could argue that the politics of resistance builds on this state of continuous interchange and relations between political actors. Following this line of reasoning,

[461] For a definition of informal activism and platforms see Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.)
[462] See Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, "Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy," *Northwestern journal of international Human Rights,* Vol. 10, No. 4 (2012): 212-230; Malm and Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*; Sina Moradi, "Labour Activism and Democracy in Iran", Working Paper 22, Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries, The Hague (July 2013).
[463] M. Stella Morgana, "Produce and 'Consume' in the Islamic Republic: The 1990s Myth of the Winner in the Iranian Public Sphere and Its Impact on Workers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* 52, No. 2 (2020): 340-344. See also Shahram Khosravi, *Precarious Lives. Waiting and Hope in Iran*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 11-12 and 214; and Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 139-160.
[464] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 210.
[465] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 9.

while the outcome might depend on changing conditions, there is always a possibility of resistance. However, there is a crucial point to consider. By producing *rituals of truth*, several sources of power work to maximize the productive nature of subjects in order to decrease their resistive potential.[466] The politics of resistance also involves "the path of imagination," such as the daily narratives that construct the meanings of power and resistance.[467] Actors – such as the Iranian workers considered in this chapter – decide to mobilize when patterns of political opportunities transform, and new sites for struggle unfold within power relations. As Foucault argued: "We're never trapped by power: it's always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy."[468]

What were the strategies employed in the Iranian context? How did workers pursue their paths of defiance? In order to understand the inner dynamics of resistance against perceived constraints, this chapter focuses on methods and expressions of dissent that may mutate over time and place. For instance, from time to time, public spaces became sites of contestation of a source of power, such as the state. The streets, perceived as extended symbols of the authorities, were turned into sites of protest and strike, with the aim of renegotiating new spaces for expression. As Foucault suggested, it is more fruitful to examine resistance in terms of opposition to different forms of power, without perceiving power as monolithic in nature and fixed to the authority, thus meant as one omnipotent actor. A closer look shows that the inherent essence of the Islamic Republic presents several sources of power in the state apparatus itself: from the dual leadership President-Supreme Leader[469] to the different actors within the decision-making process (Parliament, Assembly of Experts, Council of Guardians, Expediency Council), and in the hierarchy of national security keepers (Security Council, Regular Army, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ministry of Intelligence and

[466] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 95; and Brent L. Pickett, *Polity*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), 445-466.
[467] Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.
[468] Michel Foucault, "The History of Sexuality: An Interview," Oxford Literary Review, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1980, 13.
[469] See Said Amir Arjomand, "Dual Leadership and Constitutional Developments after Khomeini," in *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 36-55.

Security).[470] Furthermore, there are a series of agents that exercise social pressure and discourage activism, beyond the state apparatus. These are represented by family, school, friends, and partners.[471] Therefore, trajectories of activism are profoundly linked to all these dimensions, as forms of control are enacted both by the authoritarian state and society. Indeed, the effects reverberating from top-down narratives intertwine with discourses of morality/liberalism, safety or coercion that emanate from the whole social body. Eventually, as will be argued later, they can influence potential activists and discourage collective actions.[472]

Collective actions and counter-conduct: paths of defiance

What gives impetus to collective actions? Before trying to answer this question, another interrogative arises. How is it possible to distinguish a social force from a *collectivity?* The *awareness* of its members is fundamental. According to Gramsci, this distinction constitutes a demarcation line that identifies those who act *politically* and play a decisive role instead of waiting for a more opportune moment.[473] Thus, developing *collective* objectives means thinking in long-term goals, rather than relying on short-term individualism.[474] This is what Gramsci calls "awareness of duration", which is to be "concrete and not abstract."[475] Therefore, *collective action* becomes a tool to challenge domination: through *political action*, workers in the context of this chapter can exercise power and perform an act of resistance.[476] Moving forward to a Foucauldian perspective built on a Gramscian theoretical legacy, resistance erupts when power manifests itself

[470] See Kazem Alamdari, "The power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from populism to clientelism, and militarization of the government," *Third World Quarterly*, 26:8 (2005), 1285-1301.
[471] Former Green Movement activist. Interview with the author, January 2018.
[472] Similar mechanisms also occurred among student activists, as explored by Paola Rivetti and Francesco Cavatorta, "Iranian student activism between authoritarianism and democratization: patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the regime," *Democratization*, 21:2 (2014), 289-310, and Saeid Golkar "Student Activism, Social Media, and Authoritarian Rule in Iran" in Epstein I. (eds) *The Whole World is Texting*. Pittsburgh Studies in Comparative and International Education. (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2015).
[473] Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks,* 146-7; and Eric Hobsbawm, "Gramsci and Political Theory," *Marxism Today*, 21 (7), 208.
[474] See Enrico Augelli and Craig N. Murphy, "Consciousness, myth and collective action: Gramsci, Sorel and the ethical state," in *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, ed. Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25-38.
[475] Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks,*146-147.
[476] Hobsbawm, "Gramsci and Political Theory," 208-209.

as domination, even though power operates in invisible ways.[477] Moreover, although all forms of domination should be considered as power, this does not mean that power always belongs to the sphere of domination.[478] In Foucault's words: "In order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides […] This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, fight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all."[479] Therefore, room for *manœuvre* constitutes a crucial element in organizing and developing coherent (collective) action. Gramsci argues that even when subjected to severe disciplinary pressure, people may be able to perform acts of contestation together.[480] How do they do this? Understanding the nature of this contestation allows us to track its inner dynamics and relations from which a shared political vision might develop over time. Furthermore, shifting historical and economic specificities are pivotal to explaining why particular forms of mobilization occur. In Foucault's words, it is necessary "to analyze an event according to the multiple processes which constitute it."[481] For instance, in the context of this chapter, governmental power should be understood as "the way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed" and, consequently, not only as the "political structures or to the management of states."[482] Far from neglecting the authoritarian core of the Islamic Republic and the strategies it uses, this approach allows us to demonstrate that those who are subject to these mechanisms can perform moments of counter-reaction. Hence, "the strategic codification of [disparate] points of resistance" leads to "great radical ruptures and massive binary divisions."[483] The Foucauldian notion of counter-

[477] Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power" in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*.
[478] See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, (New York: Pantheon books, 1980); and David Couzens Hoy, *Critical resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique*, (London, MIT Press 2004, 81-83.
[479] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinov, 1997, 292.
[480] Marcus Schulzke, "Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault" in David Kreps eds, *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 71.
[481] Michel Foucault, "Questions of method," in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller, (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76-78.
[482] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Critical Inquiry, Vo. 8., No. 4, (1982), 777-795.
[483] Ibid. 796.

conduct, conceived as **"**the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price," describes this process and sheds light on the relationship between a source of power and protests against it.[484] This is to say that practices of resistance and forms of government are mutually related and constitutive, and they can both undermine or boost each other. [485] Moreover, the notion of counter-conduct not only allows us to grasp how the subjects of struggles subvert crystallized discourse and categories, such as the "good" worker or the "poor". It also illustrates how new subjectivities are (inter)dependent on certain mentalities of discourse and government, yet can – while resisting – reinforce the practices they are reacting to.

How workers emerged as revolutionaries in 1978-79 and consolidated in the 1980s

> In unity with the fighting people of Iran, the purpose of our strike is to destroy despotism and eliminate the influence of foreigners on our country, and create an independent, free and progressive Iran. These goals are the indisputable rights of the people. The people shall utilize all the means of self-sacrifice to achieve these goals.[486]

It was the end of 1978. With these words, the *Common Syndicate for the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry* publicly declared its participation in the popular movement that led to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the overthrow of the Shah. Workers called for self-determination and independence from foreign interference and meddling in Iranian domestic affairs. They announced their support for the "fighting people of Iran," and revealed their tools and strategies for engaging in a struggle against "despotism." Therefore, "all the means of self-sacrifice" were accepted. The factory was turning into a site for *collective action*. How did forms of *collective awareness* develop? Until June

[484] Michel Foucault, "What is critique," in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer; trans. L. Hochroth and C. Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 75.
[485] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977 – 1978*, ed. M. Senellart, trans. G. Burchell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 357.
[486] See OIPF, *Kārgarān Pishtāz-e Jonbesh-e Tudeh* in Mansoor Moaddel, "Class Struggle in Post-revolutionary Iran." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 323.

1978, workers had mostly been far removed from any street protests. The city of Tabriz constituted the only exception. By the summer of 1978, recession indicators had reached their peak. The Shah canceled annual bonuses and blocked wage increases. Thus, the number of marchers rose sharply from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands.[487] They joined protesters from universities, bazaars and seminaries. Mainly coming from oil, construction and manufacturing factories, workers stopped their activities and took to the streets. Initially, there were strikes among the electrical and water system workers in Tehran. Progressively, laborers in other cities, such as Abadan, Behshahr, Tabriz, and Ahvaz joined their colleagues. They demanded the reintroduction of annual bonuses, better wages and housing, and health insurance. The violence of the regime's repression disrupted other demonstrations in Mashad, then in Qom and in Shiraz during the holy month of Ramadan, while Isfahan also faced bloody clashes.[488]

Nevertheless, workers determinedly continued to join the revolutionary body, which was made up of diverse and heterogeneous forces. As historian Ervand Abrahamian noted, if "the traditional middle class" (merchants and clergymen) "provided the opposition with a nationwide organization, it was the modern middle class that sparked off the Revolution, fueled it, and struck the final blows", while "the urban working class" constituted "its chief battering ram."[489] Workers became distinguishable from other groups opposed to the Shah and relevant to developments in the socio-political order. First, they had their particular grievances that prompted them to strike: demanding higher wages, better housing conditions, medical insurance and complaining about rising inflation. Second, their participation was crucial to the outcome of the Revolution, since they economically "paralyzed the state apparatus", together with white-collar employees.[490] Oil workers played a particular role, as they first disoriented and then substantially undermined the basis of the Shah's

[487] See Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 510-525.
[488] Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 512-513.
[489] Ibid. 533-535.
[490] See Ashraf and Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," 34, and Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran, Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, (London, Harvard University Press, 2016).

regime.[491] On the one hand, they had *de facto* control of Iran's vital economic resource. On the other hand, previous strikes and the historical legacy of the Left had already provided them with a shared politically-driven experience.[492] By taking to the streets and through collective mobilization, workers became conscious of their common conditions, and aware of their impact on the outcomes of the social and productive processes that they activated.[493]

Religion did not act as a detonator for workers' protests.[494] Rather, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's followers within the factories, previously closer to Marxist groups,[495] were attracted by his "anti-despotic, anti-imperialist"[496] positions against the Shah and his attention to the declining living standards of the majority of Iranians.[497] As one worker told an American journalist: "We want Khomeini. He will take power from the rich and give it to us."[498] Another was reported as saying that Khomeini "has brought the eyes of the world on our problem here and made them see that the Shah is a puppet of the foreigners who are stealing our money."[499] Thus, in the last phase of the Revolution, part of the labor movement recast itself into the Khomeinist discourse, shouting rallying-cries such as: "The dark night of the people will turn into day. Khomeini will eventually win", "Long live the champion workers",[500] "Hussein is our guide, Khomeini is our leader", "independence, freedom, Islam", and "the Shah is a bastard."[501] Furthermore, secular slogans and symbols, such as class struggle, social justice and the fight against imperialism, were absorbed into

[491] For a detailed overview of oil workers' role in the 1979 revolution see Peyman Jafari, "Fluid History: Oil Workers and the Iranian Revolution," in *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, edited by T. Atabaki, E. Bini and K. Ehsani, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 69-98.
[492] See Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, and Parsa, *Democracy in Iran*, 75-76.
[493] The political impact of the Iranian workers as a class on the revolution is debated beyond the paralyzing effect of their strikes on the economic system, as discussed by Ashraf, in "Kalbod-shekāfi Enqelāb [Autopsy of the Revolution], 55-123.
[494] Oil worker who participated in the revolution. Interview with the author. Tehran, April 2019. See also Youssef Ibrahim, "Despite Army's presence, Iranian oil town is challenging the Shah," *New York Times*, November 19, 1978.
[495] For more elaboration on the role of the Left and the impact of the different Marxist groups on workers during the Iranian revolution, see Val Moghadam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review*, No. 166 (Nov.- Dec. 1987), 5-28, and Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution,* (London, Rutgers University Press), 141-167; and Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Guerrilla Odyssey*, 176-177.
[496] *Kayhān*, January 16, 1979.
[497] Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Social Revolutions*, 172.
[498] Ervand Abrahamian, "Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces," *MERIP Reports*, No. 75-76, (Mar-Apr 1979): 3-8.
[499] *New York Times*, 19 November 1978.
[500] *Akhbar*, 1979, No. 10, cited in Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 161.
[501] Abrahamian, "Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces," *MERIP,* 1979, 3-8.

the Khomeinist discourse. For instance, "Islam will eliminate class differences", "Islam is for equality and social justice", "the problems of the East come from the West, especially from American imperialism."[502] This assimilation of secular rhetoric was Khomeini's specific plan of action for all levels of power, aiming to nullify the Leftist secular groups within the anti-Shah movement.[503] The Marxist slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" was chanted as "Oppressed of the world, unite." Laborers' discontent, which struggled to find its own safe channels of organization, was engulfed in Khomeini's discourse for the masses of *mostaz'afin,* the oppressed. In Asef Bayat's words, this process rendered the historical Left confused: "Not only the working class but also the traditional Left became confused by the populist, 'anti-capitalist', and 'pro-downtrodden' stance of the Islamic state."[504]

The mentality of struggle gradually emerged among those who wanted to unite, despite a particularly fragmented labor force. Organized workers' movements with a long-term strategic project were hindered by the small scale of industrial enterprises nationwide. About 89 percent of the total units (6,738 factories) had fewer than one hundred employees, and 4,628 enterprises each had fewer than 19 workers.[505] In fact, at the beginning workers did not express political concerns or demands.[506] When industrial strikes caused upheaval among large numbers of workers, economic disruption started in the country as well.[507] As a result, the role of these workers became crucial in undermining the Shah's regime, as oil workers explained:

> Both the government and Iranian Oil Company officials suddenly realized that we were serious about the demands we had been putting forward from the start: end martial law, full solidarity and cooperation with the striking teachers, and unconditional release of all

[502] For Khomeinist slogans see Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 31.
[503] See Peter J. Chelkowski, and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution*, 9-10, Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, 71; and Morgana, "The Islamic Republican Party of Iran in the Factory," 237-249.
[504] Bayat, "Labor and democracy in post-revolutionary Iran", in *Post-revolutionary Iran* ed by Hooshang Amir Ahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, 41-54.
[505] Mansoor Moaddel, "Class Struggle in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23 (1991), 329.
[506] This point is the fruit of several interviews with the author, Tehran, July 2017 and May 2019.
[507] Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, 37.

> political prisoners. Our economic demands included "Iranianization" of the oil industry, all communications to be in the Persian language, and for all foreign employees to leave the country.[508]

In the summer of 1979, owners fled abroad and many factories were nationalized.[509] The Revolution was accomplished, but a power vacuum was left in the industrial units of the country. The only surviving organization was the Worker Council, *Showra*, established in many factories after 1978 as a strike committee with a strong emphasis on management from the bottom up.[510] Mobilization had led to a phase of control from below. Although at the beginning workers had been protesting to achieve economic gains, month by month they had built a network of members who were *conscious* of their *political* role and goals. As a solution to the crisis of productivity in industry, the new ruling bloc promoted labor as a religious duty.[511] The idea of control from below in the factory began to vanish, while the Khomeinists started "purifying" labor activities of Leftist slogans and symbols. By 1981, most of the secular work councils were disbanded. Gradually, the workers' secular "control from below" disappeared under the Islamic Republic's discourse of "power from above".[512] Step-by-step, a slow process of "deproletarianization of labor"[513] was carried out and a purge of opponents started. Between 1981 and 1983, many work council activists were arrested, and about 600 of them were executed. Work councils were replaced by the state-controlled *Showrā-ye Eslāmi,* Islamic Labor councils,[514] and *Khāneh-ye Kārgar,* the Workers' House. The religious transformation of the Iranian factories was implemented by members of the

[508] Oil Workers, "How We Paralyzed the Shah's Regime," *Payam-Danesju/MERIP*, No. 75/76 (March-April 1979), 20-28.
[509] Ibid.
[510] See Saeed Rahnema, "Work Council in Iran: Illusion of Worker Control," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1992): 69-94, and Moghissi and Rahnema, "The Working Class and the Islamic State in Iran," 207-208.
[511] See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 181-184 and Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Workers" in *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, 200-203.
[512] According to Bayat (1987), the post-revolutionary history can be divided into three different phases. From an initial period of "power vacuum" in the factories and the illusion of "control from below" (1978-1979), Iran experienced a second stage of management from above (1979-1981), followed by the imposition of Islamist control over labor.
[513] Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* 101.
[514] Qānun-e Showrāhā-ye Eslāmi Kār (Law on Islamic Councils of Labor), *Majles*. Available at http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022

Islamic Associations (IAs) for labor, which were supported by the ruling Islamic Republican Party. The IAs were established for educational and social purposes, as mandated by the Iranian constitution, but they soon became instruments of control over workers.[515] Meanwhile, the war with Iraq (1980-1988) had broken out and its effects became visible: calls for patience spread within the factory. As a labor activist remembered:

> When [workers] raised the issue of wages, safety in the factory or surveillance, most of the times the advice of the *Khāneh-ye Kārgar*'s officials was to be patient and tolerant, because the pressure of power of capital was kept hidden from workers' eyes by certain managers and workers' nomination for leadership was [actually] threatened. The war [with Iraq] imposed patience and tolerance in relation to strikes and any other action [*harekat*] was made difficult, along with the lack of clever leadership in the factory. Some forms of resistance [*moqāvamat*] were [still] possible and some of the demands considered, but eventually it began an era of repression [sarkub] and there was no collective support [*hemāyat jāmʿeh*]. *Khāneh-ye Kārgar* had imposed passivity towards power and so undermined collective activity.[516]

While Khomeini was spreading messages of social justice and praising workers as "holy warriors," the relations between the state management of the factories and workers underwent radical change. The right of laborers to organize in independent unions was denied, except in councils under the Workers' House umbrella. As a process of "sanitization of labor activism"[517] took place and Islamic populism and nationalist discourses[518] sought to engulf workers' needs, spaces for dissent and collective actions were swept away.

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[515] See Bayat, *Workers and Revolution*, 186.
[516] Reza Kangarani, "Kārgarān va Showrahā -ye Eslāmi-ye Kār (Workers and the Islamic Councils of Labor)," *Andisheh-ye Jāmʿeh*, No. 16, (Ordibehesht 1380/April 2001), 10-12.
[517] See also Joel Beinin, "Sanitizing the Tunisian Revolution," 12 October 2015. Accessed 31 September 2018. Available here http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2015/10/sanitizing-the-tunisian-revolution.html.
[518] See Peyman Jafari, "Introduction: Against All Odds – Labor Activism in the Middle East" in *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts,* No. 7 (2015): 6-13.

From 1985, the Ministry of Labor started to be "required to work in units with more than 35 permanent employees that are allowed to form the Islamic Labor Council." [519] These came under pressure. As one oil worker said:

> Even when someone is elected as workers' representative, the managers of the contract firm put strong pressure on him through various ways, such as postponement of paying his wages or fringe benefits threatening him with changing his workplace, and dismissing him, so that he is forced to either resign or stay quiet. [520]

The Workers' House and its members established a direct connection with the IRI's state apparatus, as they received financial and logistical support from it:

> The *Khāneh-ye Kārgar* after the Revolution gradually turned into a state union or the governmental reign of labor. It receives money and help from the Islamic Republic. Their members and leaders are with the system, not with workers.[521]

Therefore, a combination of factors undermined organized labor activism: 1) the repression of militant opponents; 2) the co-opting of workers into the new Islamic councils and Workers' House; 3) a discourse that assimilated social justice slogans and Leftist symbols under the umbrella of religion/Islam. Throughout the 1980s, especially with the escalation of the war with Iraq, the opportunities for collective action within and outside the factories declined. Under these conditions – once the IRI had consolidated its institutional power – the spontaneous mobilization of labor and

[519] See Qānun-e Showrāhā-ye Eslāmi Kār (Law on Islamic Councils of Labor), *Majles*. Available at http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91022.
[520] Mohammad Maljoo, "The Unmaking of the Iranian Working Class since the 1990s," in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice*, 47-63.
[521] Former labor activist and academic. Conversation with the author on Skype, March 2017.

independent workers groups had very little room to flourish without being controlled, isolated and repressed.[522]

Negotiating spaces for struggle against liberalization policies in the 1990s

How did labor activists and workers' expressions of dissent manage to develop and survive, despite this situation? Is repression a definitive obstacle that prevents mobilization? As shown above, the circulation of *positive* discourses among the whole social body and the co-opting of workers into key institutions in the factory, such as Islamic councils or the Workers' House, contributed to the fragmentation of laborers' cohesion. The history of the Islamic Republic and the *sāzandegi* period, the period of the country's reconstruction after eight years of war, demonstrates that sources of power are mutually constitutive and that room for resistance exists even under repression. However, in this context, the forms of expression of dissent varied, as formal and independent networks of workers had already been disbanded. Between 1989 and 1997, during Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, manifestations of popular defiance and expressions of workers' dissent intensified. Liberalization policies, the removal of subsidies, increasing inequalities, and high inflation with the consequent fall in the value of wages brought about a rapid deterioration in the country's economic situation. While the top-down discourse was following the mantra of production, shifting its focus from the masses to the new middle classes, laborers and the lower strata of Iranian society were left behind.[523] Before workers raised their voices as a specific and distinguishable social group, thus collectively in a Gramscian sense, the masses of the oppressed and urban poor took to the streets. Embryonic forms of resistance appeared, due to economic pressure. The seeds of discontent lay in the suburbs of the cities, where illegal shacks – the product of a rapid urbanization of the country in the decade after the Revolution – had been built for the poor. In 1991 and 1992, breeding grounds

[522] Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, "Iranian Labor and the Struggle for Independent Unions," Tehran Bureau – PBS, April 2011. Accessed on 2 October 2018. Available here https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/labors-struggle-for-independent-unions.html
[523] See Morgana, "Produce and 'Consume' in the Islamic Republic," 340-344.

for rebellion manifested all over the country: in South Tehran, Shiraz, Mashad, Khoramabad, Arak. Throwing stones and setting police cars and buses on fire, rioters expressed their frustration for days. Shiraz experienced a violent one-day protest in March 1992, initiated by war veterans complaining about the "lousy" management of the Foundation of the Dispossessed. Squatters joined the riots and two people were killed. In the industrial city of Arak a riot that had been triggered by a dispute involving a municipality pickup, that had killed a boy while trying to remove a dump truck, turned into three thousand people marching against the mayor.[524] It was May 1992. A few days later the religious city of Mashhad became a battleground as squatters mobilized against the destruction of their dwellings. A small unrest developed into a big crowd of people, impoverished and lacking the basic money to live. Once again, the police acted harshly in repressing the mobilization.[525] These protests were deemed to be the "most serious urban disturbances in 12 years."[526] A witness of the Mashhad protests commented:

> The state insists on calling these people enemies of the Revolution. Men, women and children who are economically much worse off than they were 10 years ago, they are not going to go away if we deny that they have problems.[527]

Sources of defiance were mainly economic and not politically directed by a specific group or network. Images of riots were broadcast on national TV, showing a massive deployment of police forces. Protestors were portrayed as violent agitators threatening the IRI's security. However, new sites of struggle were being unveiled within power relations. Impoverished daily workers and street vendors joined the protests that were taking place in Islamshahr, in the suburbs of Tehran, where

[524] Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movement in Iran*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 106-107.
[525] Ibid.
[526] *New York Times*, June 1, 1992. Accessed 20 October 2018, available here https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/01/world/violence-spreads-in-iran-as-the-poor-are-evicted.html
[527] Ibid.

more than five hundred thousand people were living in illegal settlements. As water supplies were scarce and the cost of a transport ticket rose, two hundred young boys initiated the protests. In a few hours, the crowd had increased to fifty thousand people, calling for better living conditions and blaming the IRI for food shortages and inflation. The *mostaz'afin* raised their voices once again. Under shifting economic conditions, opportunities for acts of contestation appeared. However, these riots did not show particular *awareness of duration*, with regard to the protesters' grievances or goals. Fuel prices had soared, bus fares had almost doubled.

> Early one morning, workers from a nearby shantytown en route to Teheran revolted. They marched to the bigger town of Islamshahr, picking up jobless supporters, smashing storefront windows, and setting fire to banks, gas stations and government buildings along the way.[528]

Most of the people taking to the streets were jobless, and they chanted that they had nothing to lose. Tehran state radio spread the news, reporting that a crowd had assembled to protest against water shortages. Rioters were called "agitators," in a discourse that minimized the protestors' demands. The police opened fire on protesters:

> Agitators among them attacked vehicles, public transport and other facilities, causing damage (…) With the intervention of security forces, several agitators were arrested and handed over to the judicial authorities.[529]

[528] *New York Times*, July 16, 1999. Available here https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/16/world/town-hushed-in-95-crackdown-sees-no-reason-to-join-iran-riots.html
[529] Radio Tehran, 14 Farvardin 1374, 3 April 1995. Confirmed by an Iranian scholar in a conversation with the author, Tehran, August 2017 and March 2019. See also "Iran Police Open Fire On Protesters," *Upi archives*, April 4, 1995, available here https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/04/04/Iranian-police-open-fire-on-protesters/2958796968000/.

Concurrently, discontent was mounting inside the factories as well. In addition to experiencing repression, the legal conditions did not fully satisfy the workers. The Labor Law (ratified in 1989 and finally approved in November 1990) provided for written or oral contracts, which began to pave the way for blank signed contracts.[530] Bargaining power was reserved for Islamic Labor Councils and workers' representatives (and later to Guild Societies,) which all operated under the Worker House's umbrella. Interestingly enough, the Workers' House was not specifically mentioned in the Labor Law. Yet, free independent unions had no right to exist beyond it. Furthermore, for the first time since the Revolution, the IRI drew up temporary contracts. This policy granted greater power to employers, who were able to hire and fire employees more easily. Initially, workers expressed their economic grievances, that rapidly became more political and collectively shared. Nonetheless, the expression of these demands remained weak and could not flourish due to both repression and lack of support from the Workers' House.[531]

Workers started to pursue their own "paths of imagination," such as the daily narratives that construct the meanings of power and resistance mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter. Overdue payments and short contracts were at the core of the strikes. In 1995, workers from Khalifeh Abad, in the northern province of Gilan, went on strike for the fourth time in less than a year. They started with a sit-in in front of the Asalam Lumber factory, asking for their salaries, which had not been paid for two months. Then they blocked the Anzali-Hashtpar road for hours. The same year, Khavar Benz's factory workers went on strike demanding rights and greater bargaining power. A statement published online by workers described a "critical" economic situation for the Islamic Republic:

[530] Labor Law, article 7. *Iran Data Portal*, Syracuse University. 1990, available here in Persian http://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/labor-law-2.pdf and here in English http://irandataportal.syr.edu/labor-law

[531] Interview with the author, workers. Tehran, March-April 2019.

> The regime's critical economic state has stagnated Iranian factory production. Most of the factories operate at 20% of their capacity. Workers routinely do not receive their salaries for several months. Presently 16 million workers are either unemployed or laid off from their jobs.[532]

Almost a year later, in December 1996, oil workers at the refineries in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz and Esfahan organized a two-day strike. They went out of the factories and for the first time in the 1990s, seventeen years after the Revolution, they took to the streets with structured political demands. The strike stood out as the main headline in *Kār*, the magazine of Fedayān (Minority), that extensively reported workers' frustrations at the Workers' House actions in monitoring potential sources of dissent. It also analyzed the roots of workers' dissatisfaction, that originated in the lack of collective bargaining rights in the refineries.[533] Two months later, in February 1997, the same workers organized a sit-in in front of the Oil Ministry, protesting the arrest of labor leaders. The security forces repressed the demonstration.[534] A statement from the Committee for the Defense and Support of Iranian Workers described a "direct confrontation" between workers and regime, with clear political contours:

> The oil workers are involved in a direct confrontation with the Iranian regime. They are protesting against their working conditions, the level of wages and for the right to form a workers' organization. Up to now the regime which governs Iran has refused to accept these

[532] Iranian workers statement, IASWI. Available at https://workers-iran.org/old/asalem.htm
[533] *Kār*, "E ʿtesābāt Sarāsari Kārgarān San ʿat Naft (Oil Workers Strikes)", Bahman 1375 – February 1997, No. 298, 1-3.
[534] *Kār*, "Tazāhorāt-e Hezārān az Kārgarān San ʿat Naft (Demonstration of thousand oil workers), Esfand 1375- March 1997, No. 299, 4.

> basic demands. The oil workers had previously threatened to go on an all-out national, unlimited strike if their legitimate demands are not met.[535]

Eighteen years after the Revolution, workers finally had the chance to re-organize collective actions, as they kept trying to form independent unions. As previously discussed, when viewed through a Gramscian lens, even when subjected to severe repression, workers were seeking to perform acts of collective contestation.

> On 5 and 6 February, they [workers] elected representatives who then went to Tehran to form a national organization. This organization met there on 7 February, but the Iranian government intervened and dissolved the meeting. It then forced the representatives to return to their respective cities and prohibited them from leaving them, putting them under "city" arrest.[536]

However, the only response to come from the IRI at that moment was to refuse permission:

> The government has declared all oil workers' organizations illegal, prohibited the formation of a national organization and refused the collective bargaining demand.[537]

As inequalities were increasing, workers continued to demand higher wages. In September 1997, workers in Arak protested for better salaries at a machinery factory. Beyond repression, the state's need to address these continuous demands and strikes finally compelled the Labor minister to

[535] Committee for the Defense and Support of the Iranian Workers (Communist Party of Iran, Iranian Workers Left Unity, Iranian refugee Workers Association), "Iranian Oil Workers Arrested," February 16, 1997. Available at http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/086.html
[536] Ibid.
[537] Ibid.

intervene: "The workers' main grievance is an increase of their pay. This should be pursued through legal channels."[538]

While the oil workers were making a breach in the wall of Iranian public debate on the issue of labor rights, the gap between social classes and between generations was widening. As the neoliberal policies promoted by Rafsanjani spread across the whole country, a new middle class emerged. On the one hand, the discourse of social justice and the redistribution of wealth disappeared from official May Day speeches, as described earlier.[539] On the other hand, the new middle class began to promulgate its self-perception as "the successful entrepreneur" as a social model. Throughout the 1990s, the Rafsanjani government promoted privatization and neoliberal policies as a means of solving Iran's economic problems. This line of reasoning followed a trend of liberal ideas, that spread particularly among upper middle-class Iranians, who believed that these policies would pave the way to democracy.[540] Among the lower classes and the youth, a refusal of poverty and a rejection of the label of "lower/working class members" circulated. Slogans championing social justice and ideology were gradually robbed of their significance, as society began to perceive them as associated with IRI propaganda.[541]

Resisting precarity and isolation in the Reformist era (1997-2005)

With the process of stripping concepts such as ideology and modernity of meaning, as well as progress and the redistribution of wealth, the needs and demands of workers were gradually being overlooked. Both the government and parts of society dismissed them, while chasing after a cultural and intellectual opening offered by the newly elected president, the reformist Mohammad Khatami. Meanwhile, workers were fighting both social isolation and the precarity/fragmentation created by

[538] Quoted in a Statement of *Confederation of Free Trade Unions*. Available here http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/090.html
[539] See Morgana, "Talking to Workers: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad," 133-158.
[540] Independent scholar. Conversation with the author, Tehran, August 2017. See also Sohrab Behdad, "From Populism to Liberalism: the Iranian Predicament," in Parvin Alizadeh *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State* (London and New York, IB Tauris 2000).
[541] Worker, interview with the author. Tehran, October 2018.

temporary contracts and the use of employment agencies.[542] These measures were threatening job security and collective bargaining, in a particularly complex context.[543] On the one hand, Khatami's administration limited legal access to job security, by exempting small enterprises with five or fewer workers from being subject to the Labor Law.[544] On the other hand, it sought to open up the space for participation and limited criticism. In fact, his administration tried to reform, without success, chapter VII of the Labor Law on collective bargaining and workers' organizations.[545]

As the economic situation deteriorated, workers gradually exploited the greater – although still limited – space for collective mobilization. In early January 1999 more than 1,500 workers from several factories organized an action in Kashan and demonstrated in front of the governor's office.[546]

Beyond demands for higher salaries and overdue pay, between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the workers' political positions took shape again. They continued to demand their rights, raising their voices against temporary contracts and the expulsion of workers from the factories. This was the case between February and April 1999, when oil workers gathered in Ahvaz, Abadan and Shiraz, with sixteen of them being arrested. Likewise, the Azmayesh factory workers in Sarvdasht were in open conflict with their management, marching together against them in late May 1999.

As *Rāh-e Kārgar* reported:

> In early June Oil Refinery workers in Abadan, Mahshahr, Bandar Abbas, and Masjed Soleiman warned President Khatami's administration of strike action if he did not increase wages in accordance with inflation and is prepared to accept group negotiation. Teheran refinery workers added their support.

[542] *Kayhān*, 24 Mordad 1383 (14 August 2004).
[543] Legal expert, interview with the author. Tehran, May 2019.
[544] See Majles, amendments of Labor Law as approved on 27 January 2003 (7 Bahman 1381). Available here: http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/ show/122666
[545] *IRNA*, 24 Ordibehesht 1382. English translation *Payvand*, 15 May 2003 http://www.payvand.com/news/03/may/1084.html
[546] *Khordād*, 15 Dey 1377 (5 January 1999).

> The regime had accepted both demands in January last year after nationwide strikes and demonstrations outside the oil company headquarters in Teheran. Instead hundreds have been arrested. More ominously, a number of oil workers have died under mysterious circumstances, suggesting extra-judicial execution.[547]

Across the country, almost four hundred factories and manufacturing units were shut down in 1999.[548] Hence, the specter of unemployment loomed over laborers. Iran Khodro, one of the biggest car factories in the Middle East, went on strike demanding the removal of temporary contracts from the Labor Law, safer working conditions, and higher salaries for night-shift workers. The demonstrations continued for months.[549] In a statement the workers declared:

> In the early hours of 18th May 2005, a 30-year old worker in Assembly Section 4 of the Iran Khodro car plant was killed in a horrific accident involving a defective lift, while on a night shift. He was the 9th worker to die at Iran Khodro in the past two years due to the hazardous conditions at the plant. Lack of training, raised output targets, speedups, long hours (including forced overtime, weekend work and night-shifts), and the resulting overwork, are among the factors behind the deaths and injuries. Furthermore, more and more of Iran Khodro's workers - in line with the government and employers' agenda nationally - are being forced to work under temporary contracts, for private contractors, with few or no rights.
>
> The management's response to the workers' protests over pay and conditions at Iran Khodro has been to bring in the factory's Security Organization (Harassat) to interrogate and detain

[547] *Rāh-e Kārgar*, 24 Tir 1378 (15 July 1999). Translation available here https://workers-iran.org/old/archives.htm
[548] Ibid.
[549] International Labor Organization, ILO. Report No. 337 (2005).

> dissident workers. In 2005, one of these workers, Parviz Salarvand, was taken away for questioning and kept in detention for nearly a month.[550]

However, other social groups, such as the middle class, did not share this frustration or the desire to participate in the decision-making process in the workplace. As Behdad and Nomani wrote on the subject of the Khatami era and the president's allies:

> Their potential advances were limited by their liberal economic position, prevailing unfriendly (and somewhat arrogant) attitude toward subordinate classes, and preference for a truncated, exclusionary brand of liberal democracy in the face of rising secularism across every social class.[551]

As this discourse spread throughout society, the number of crackdowns by the security forces dropped, but suffocating protests did not stop being a useful strand of the IRI's policy. Nonetheless, workers managed to continue to create moments of counter-reaction to coercive measures, both in online and offline spaces. There was little support from most of the reformist intellectuals. In fact, the rift between the so called *roshanfekrān* [the "enlightened"] and workers widened irremediably further, as the divide between rich and poor grew. From the end of the 2000s, consumerist habits merged with the rising inequality growing in the country. The desire for luxury began to permeate the upper-middle classes, particularly in the big cities: clothes, cars, houses, restaurants.[552] The myth of the winner contrasted with the working man or woman, who were no longer seen as models for the country's youth.[553] Working-class men remained trapped in their "precarious status."[554]

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[550] *Etehādchap Kārgari* (Workers Left Unity Iran), 8 June 2005, in Yassamine Mather & Majid Tamjidi, "Iran Khodro," *Critique*, 19.
[551] Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, "Iranian Labor and the Struggle for Independent Unions," Tehran Bureau – PBS, April 2011. Accessed on 2 October 2018.
[552] This affirmation is confirmed by the author's archival research and fieldwork interviews between 2017 and 2019.
[553] Green Movement activist. Conversation with the author, Tehran, February 2018.
[554] Shahram Khosravi, "The Precarious Status of Working-Class Men in Iran," *Current History*, Vol. 116, No. 794: 355.

Nevertheless, having benefitted from the opening of a relatively freer political space under Khatami, they did not give up their struggle.

Coping with Ahmadinejad's crackdown: struggle, informal activism and the internet

From 2005, when the conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the helm of his populist government, the IRI president claimed to speak once again for the masses and the lower classes. In actual fact, his government repressed the spaces for renegotiating workers' activism that had been relatively open. Nonetheless, workers found their own way of coping with the transformed political context. First, labor activists responded to the repression and arrests with sit-ins and other demonstrations. Second, they continued to demand room for dissent and the recognition of their rights: new independent unions were born, such as the Tehran Bus Drivers Syndicate, *Haft Tapeh,* the Sugar Factory Workers' Union and the Free Union of Iranian Workers. Third, when the state reaction began to be excessive, most of the workers decided to avoid contact with official networks. Forms of activism shifted from formal to informal groups, from organized unrest to individual participation, from semi-public action or statements to those online networks that had partly flourished during the reformist era.

Two interesting developments occurred in labor activism between 2004 and 2007, representing important attempts at official collective organization. The first one involved the United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs (*Sherkat-e Vahed Otubusrani-ye Tehran va Humeh*), usually referred as *Sherkat-e Vahed,* which was re-founded, having been disbanded in 1983. Collectively organized, bus workers called for the abolition of Islamic Councils and their replacement with independent trade unions. A semi-public meeting was organized in 2005 and 9,000 signatures were collected in favor of founding a new syndicate. In September 2005 the bus drivers staged their first strike, and in December almost 5,000 of them gathered in downtown Tehran. Nevertheless, both of these actions were met with harsh persecution and the organizers of the protests were arrested. The syndicate president was jailed between 2006 and 2011. Likewise, the syndicate's treasurer Reza

Shahabi was kept in solitary confinement and charged with "conspiring" against the Islamic Republic. Moreover, according to labor activist Davoud Razavi in a long piece published online, more than 400 workers were arrested and 300 were expelled from their workplaces on account of their union activities.[555] He also added:

> Decisions on the expulsion of the Syndicate's main members were taken at the highest level of the country's security authorities, and copy (proof) is available.[556]

However, in a long piece published online in Persian, Said Torabian, board member of *Sherkat-e Vahed*, denied the importance of repression as a tool to stop workers' actions:

> Members and the board of our syndicate believe that expulsion, unemployment, repression, arrest, and imprisonment are not convincing reasons to quit the struggle […] Despite all these problems there is still hope to change. What we experienced over the past few years for all our workers and activists and board members not only did not stop us, but represents also an incentive to continue our work and make further efforts to regain the lost rights of workers.[557]

Following the experience of Tehran's bus drivers, workers from the *Haft Tapeh* sugar cane factory in the southern region of Khuzestan, repeatedly went on strike in 2007. Although labor activists were arrested and imprisoned, 2,500 workers signed a letter calling for the abolition of the Islamic Council and the establishment of an independent union. In November 2008, a second illegal trade

[555] *Akhbar-e Rooz*, 22 Dey 1391, January 11, 2013. Available here http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=50292
[556] Ibid.
[557] *Asr-e Nou*, "Jāmʿeh Bandi Se Sālhā-ye Mobārezat-e Kārgarān Sendikā-ye Sherkat-e Vahed" Sum up of three years of Workers' Struggles of the Syndicate United Company, 11 Bahman 1387/30 January 2009. Available here http://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=2054.

union was established.[558] The Free Union of Iranian Workers followed a similar path: established between 2006 and 2008, one of its main goals was to gather together all the expelled and unemployed workers. Despite being weak in its organization and harshly targeted by state police, throughout those years it represented a significant collective experience in the long battle to form independent labor organizations and diminish *Showrā Eslāmi*'s control over workers.[559]

All the above-mentioned experiences suffered harsh persecution, but workers' endurance led them to find new spaces where they could express their dissent. Labor Committees and the new independent unions started to move their activities online. Several websites were set up, spreading news about labor activism and strikes across the country, among them Kargaran.org, Ettehadchap.org, Jonbeshekargary.org, Iranlaborreport.org, and Gozaar.org. However, once they became too popular the government decided to shut them down.[560] Through email exchanges, blogs and forums, informal and small networks flourished keeping labor activism alive. Beyond repressive mechanisms and concession from the government, even during and immediately after harsh repression, ordinary people and workers' agency was not erased or nullified. What became routine under Ahmadinejad in particular however, was the fear of being labeled activists.[561]

Therefore, the transformations explored above show that, before the Green Movement took to the streets in 2009 in the largest mass revolt since the 1979 Revolution, with its liberal requests for change (democracy and civil rights instead of social justice), labor activism had already been weakened and fragmented. Demands had changed: no social justice grievances or strong anti-imperialist rallying cries were chanted. Instead, the movement's main slogan was "where is my vote?", which was far removed from workers' specific needs. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, workers' demands had been gradually neglected and there

[558] See "Kārgarān Haft Tapeh az Sāzmān-e Jahāni Kār Komak Khāstand," Haft Tapeh Workers ask International Labor Organization for help, 11 Mehr 1386, October 3, 2007 and Worker-Today (Persian). Available here http://www.bbc.com/persian/business/story/2007/10/071003_mf_hafttappe.shtml and here http://www.worker-today.com/gozaresh/7tapeh_1.htm

[559] See International Labor Organization, Report No. 346 (2007), available here http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50002:0::NO::P50002_COMPLAINT_TEXT_ID:2910267

[560] See a list in Persian here http://www.ofros.com/payvandha.htm

[561] This was confirmed to the author by several activists and ordinary people met in Iran between 2017 and 2019.

was no realistic chance of them being manifested and shared within the social body at that time. There were also other reasons. First: harsh repression, as more than 150 activists were arrested and jailed a month before the Green Wave erupted. By the same token, precarity reduced workers' collective awareness and their will to look to long-term goals.[562] A third point relates to the radical Left's reaction to the 2009 revolt: it dismissed the potential of the Movement as speaking for the liberal upper-middle class and not for the masses.[563] Finally, most workers – as a result of all the motivations mentioned above – were individual activists, in other words disconnected from formal networks or independent unions. In fact, as formal activism was made illegal, informal groups were more difficult to track.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored ruptures and transformations in the processes of resistance undertaken by Iranian workers. It investigated the historical and social context where seeds of revolt flourished. It contested the idea that the emergence of workers' agency and new subjectivities were impacted solely by state repression and concessions by the authorities. Rather, labor activism in Iran evolved systematically between two key moments for the Islamic Republic, the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 Green Movement. By adopting the perspective of the workers, this chapter attempted to examine labor protests beyond the idea of an omnipotent state, although without neglecting the IRI's inner dynamics and mechanisms of controlling dissent. Therefore, its analysis dealt with a fundamental question: while authoritarian regimes diversified and reinvented their response to several forms of organized and semi-organized expressions of dissent, how did labor activism change and manage to survive?

[562] See M. Stella Morgana, "Precarious Workers and Neoliberal Narratives in Post-revolutionary Iran: Top-down Strategies and Bottom-up Responses," *Middle East Institute*, MAP Project, January 28, 2020.
[563] See Maljoo, "Tabaqeh Kārgar pas az Entekhābāt Dahom: Enzevā ya Eʿtelāf" [The Working Class after the Elections: Isolation or Coalition], *Goftogu*, No. 55 (1389-2010): 7-16. See also "Iran After the Elections," *Jacobin magazine*, 5 November 2016. Available here https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/iran-elections-rouhani-reformists-nuclear-deal/. Accessed 23 October 2018.

Over the thirty years between the Revolution and the Green Movement, workers' role within society and as a distinguishable advocate for political change gradually weakened. It was first contained and suppressed from the top, and was then fundamentally overlooked and isolated within society as a whole. Eventually, it became fragile, fragmented and without long-term goals.

On the one hand, in order to divide and "precarize" the workers, the IRI employed various strategies, which were both negative and "positive," in other words discursive in a Foucauldian understanding. 1) It monitored, controlled and repressed any form of independent defiance against the Khomeinist apparatus. 2) As social justice and labor mobilizations were instrumental in the success of the Revolution, throughout the 1980s labor was associated with Islam and fashioned as a religious duty. This *positive* discourse spread throughout the social body and merged several sources of power. 3) While Leftist symbols (perceived as a threat to the stability of the IRI) were assimilated into a broader narrative in favor of the downtrodden and the masses, workers lost their specificity. 4) Some workers identified themselves as revolutionary laborers and were co-opted through Islamic councils and Workers' Houses. 5) Beginning in the 1990s, with the ratification of the Labor Law, workers were denied the right to organize into independent unions, and temporary contracts were introduced. 6) During the reformist era workers did not represent the main audience for the IRI's discourse on progress.

On the other hand, most academic research concentrates only on constraints and repressions, and depicts the IRI as an omnipotent entity. However, this approach erases people's agency. In the workers' case, it is worth clarifying the following points. 1) They demonstrated that repression alone may not silence or block acts of resistance. 2) Perceived and/or experienced repression, both in the protests of the early 1990s and in the case of the Bus Drivers Union, did not deter workers from engaging in new activities. 3) Strategies for performing acts of defiance evolved, along with the changing context. 4) From the mid-1990s onwards, workers on temporary contracts did not have the opportunity or the time to strengthen networks. As a result, most of the protests did not have long-term goals. 5) The myth of success spreading as a model within the social body contrasted

with the ideal of the working man or woman. 6) Social justice demands were not shared by the new middle class that flourished in the 1990s. 7) When public places were considered too dangerous, workers reinvented their methods of organization and opened websites, moving channels of resistance online. 8) Exercising self-censorship, caused by a certain social pressure, workers began to avoid formal activism in order not to be expelled from workplaces or factories.

In conclusion, what has emerged from a closer analysis of the trajectories of labor activism in Iran, is a new subjectivity of the worker/activist who is able to assess how "red lines" shift and is more aware of which places to go or how to merge online and offline spaces. This new subject may lack formal connections and long-term goals, also being restrained by several sources of power within society (family, friends, colleagues) that can discourage acts of rebellion. In fact, activism and collective actions in Iran are continually *de facto* described in terms of disorders and public security, as well as relegated to the realm of what is illegal, not only by state officers or supporters. The next chapter will navigate the top-down processes that contributed to isolating the collective element versus the individual.