

## Workers fight for rights!



## Workers' rights are human rights!

# NO WAR! NO DICTATORSHIP!

**T**HE DANGER and threats of an illegal US-British war on Iran may have receded, but the war on all fronts against the Iranian people waged by the Islamist government in Tehran has continues unabated.

Moreover, the failure of the government to meet the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed Iran towards the top of the table of countries for deaths from the virus and where the underfunded health system is collapsing as hundreds of its workers die.

Worse still, the people are facing deepening widespread impoverishment and throughout 2020 have been compelled to take to the streets in protest in all parts of the country. The response of the regime has been arbitrary arrests, threats of executions and continuing oppression. The prospects for the working class, women and youth in particular are bleak.

In some provinces, youth unemployment is 60% and climbing. Across Iran, 70% of workers are existing below the poverty line and daily food shortages affect 1.5 million.

This catastrophic situation is not explained solely by - or by mere reference to - by US sanctions or other external pressures. Years of corruption and government mismanagement have brought this about.

Trade unions and organised labour action are banned. Trade union leaders are currently serving long sentences of imprisonment. Wages are unpaid and inflation is rampant. However, key sections of the organised working-class are responding to the situation despite government hostility and threats.

Central to Iran's economy, oil workers have withdrawn their labour and have been joined by sugarcane workers also seeking improvements to their wages and living standards.

Political struggle is restricted due to the ban on all left, progressive socialist and other parties. Meanwhile, the regime continues to deny women their full rights and campaigning against war and outdated legislations affecting women and children is outlawed. Reform of this system is impossible with the so-called parliament, departments of state and judiciary all being controlled by the fundamentalists and appointees of the all-powerful Islamic Guard Corps.

No matter what twisted messages are spoken by Iran's leaders - or particular manoeuvres they undertake in international affairs - they cannot hide the reality of dictatorship, largescale systemic corruption, abuse of human rights and the overall instability of the country. This is their daily practice and legacy.

The Iranian people are resisting. Tens of thousands came to the streets of Tehran, as well as towns and cities across Iran, in January 2018 and November 2019 to protest against endemic poverty and repressive theocratic rule. The protesters were brutally met by the security forces and dreaded Islamic Guards Corp and were targeted with live ammunition. Hostility and threats from outside Iran will not help create the conditions for progressive change, nor will cosying up to the oppressive regime and their phony anti-imperialist rhetoric. They have no long-term answers or future.

The Iranian people, political prisoners and progressive secular organisations need solidarity. Executions, imprisonments, and denial of basic human rights can be stopped. However, clarity and consistency in solidarity with the Iranian masses is an essential ingredient to success and the emergence of a new Iran - today and tomorrow!



## AFFILIATE TO CODIR

Solidarity with the struggle of the Iranian people for peace, equality and human rights

**STARTS HERE!**

CODIR supports the campaign for peace, human and democratic rights in Iran. It campaigns for the release of all political prisoners and for trade unions to have freedom to organise and campaign effectively. CODIR supplies news and analysis of events in Iran and related issues from the world.

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## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

### The only choices for young people in Iran

**A**S THE Islamic Republic of Iran continues its oppressive measures against any form of protest, the country faces a brain drain as young people seek to leave for greater opportunities overseas. **Jane Green** reports.

Waves of protest have been sweeping Iranian cities and factories almost constantly for nearly two years. The adventurist foreign policy of the regime, combined with the vindictive sanctions imposed by the United States, have seen ordinary Iranians struggling to put food on the table and pay their bills.

The population in Iran is very young, with 50% being under the age of thirty, born after the 1979 Revolution. They do not share the emotional or sentimental attachment to the Revolution of some of the older generation. Many are well educated. However, the tightening of sanctions and the intolerance of the regime are forcing many young people into making a stark choice between two options...

One is to leave friends and family to seek work and opportunities abroad for a life denied to them at home by the theocratic regime. This is an option for those with the resources and qualifications and who are free of the binding responsibilities that would necessitate them remaining in Iran. And increasing numbers are choosing to take this path.

According to World Bank reports, from 1989 to the present, Iran has consistently had one of the world's highest rates of brain drain.

For many young people though - often breadwinners within their wider family

networks - flight is simply not an option. Fight is the only course of action left open to them. Driven to desperate measures by the state of the economy and its impact upon their livelihoods, young Iranians are increasingly at the forefront of those taking to the streets to demand change in Iran. The treatment of those involved in such protests is becoming increasingly harsh.

The massive protests which erupted across Iran on Friday 15 November 2019 are a case in point. The protests followed the sudden announcement by the Islamic Republic government of a triple-fold hike in the price of gasoline. They quickly spread and took hold in towns and cities across the country.

The scale of the protests rocked the Islamic Republic and the authorities struggled to reassert control for at least a week afterwards. A huge mobilisation of the state's intelligence and security apparatus continued into January. An estimated 7,000 people were detained. There are reports that at least 600 protesters were murdered by the regime's security forces who were operating a shoot to kill policy.

Amongst those arrested were Amir Hossein Moradi, 26, Saeed Tamjidi, 28, and Mohammad Rajabi, 25, who were alleged by authorities to have taken part in street disturbances during a protest on Saturday 16 November in the Sattar Khan district of Tehran.

Moradi was subsequently picked up by security forces on 19 November, having been identified on CCTV. Tamjidi and Rajabi went into hiding the following day before fleeing to neighbouring Turkey.

Their desperate situation and request for asylum were made clear to Turkish officials, who responded that they would have to stay in a refugee camp for a year while their case was considered. On 26 January, following the visit of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani to Ankara, the 3 were handcuffed and put on a bus. Over the next two days, without food or water, the men were driven to the eastern border town of Aghri where they were deported at the Bazargan border crossing along with 30 other Iranian citizens. They were then arrested by Iranian security forces waiting at the border.

Not long after they were returned to Iran, lawyers announced that, "Amir Hossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi and Mohammad Rajabi, each of whom are accused of 'Participation in destruction and incitement to confront the Islamic Republic of Iran', have been sentenced to death."

A huge international campaign against the verdict, in which CODIR took an active part, brought massive pressure to bear upon the regime and this forced them in July to issue a stay of execution and order their cases to be heard in the highest court in the land.

Given that the three men were detained in extremely dubious circumstances and were, from the very outset, denied anything resembling due process, a retrial is the least that can be expected. The campaign to have their sentences completely quashed and for their subsequent release will continue in earnest.

Above: Hossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi and Mohammad Rajabi.



## DESPERATE NURSES DESERVE BETTER

As the people of Iran struggle to survive the biggest COVID-19 outbreak in West Asia, **Liz Payne** examines the plight of thousands of the country's nurses serving at the front line.



ON 26 JULY 2020, a large demonstration gathered outside the Ministry of Health building in Tehran. Protestors included health workers from across the board – doctors, anaesthetists, operating theatre staff, psychologists, nutritionists, laboratory workers and many nurses. As a second wave of COVID-19, much greater than the first, swept Iran, the demands of these much-lauded ‘frontline fighters’ focussed on the abysmal state of the public health service, in a country where only the super-rich can buy the medical care they need, at a price far beyond the reach of the vast majority of Iran’s 85 million population.

Those assembled in front of the ministry that day shone a light on the regime’s long-term failure to address staff shortages, the de-professionalisation of health work, widespread use of private recruitment agencies to hire staff on detrimental and insecure temporary contracts, poverty wages and unsafe working conditions. This huge protest came only days after nurses held a demonstration outside the headquarters of the judiciary in Mashad. On that occasion, the regime’s security forces physically attacked the peaceful gathering and made ten arrests. This time, in the capital city, banners reminded the Ministry that these were the demands of skilled, professional workers and they were calling for real and immediate change.

The nurses of Iran are desperate. In

terms of wages, they are the poorest of the poor in the health service, with pay falling as low as 20% of that on the poverty line. They work in obsolete premises. Few state hospitals have been built in recent decades. Of those serving the 15 million people of greater Tehran, only one has been constructed since the 1979 revolution. In some states not a single new hospital has been put up since the theocratic regime came to power. Little, if anything, has been done by way of modernisation of the old and dilapidated provision. This has led to tragedy, as when a basement explosion at Sina At’har Clinic, north Tehran, left 19 dead and others injured on 30 June.

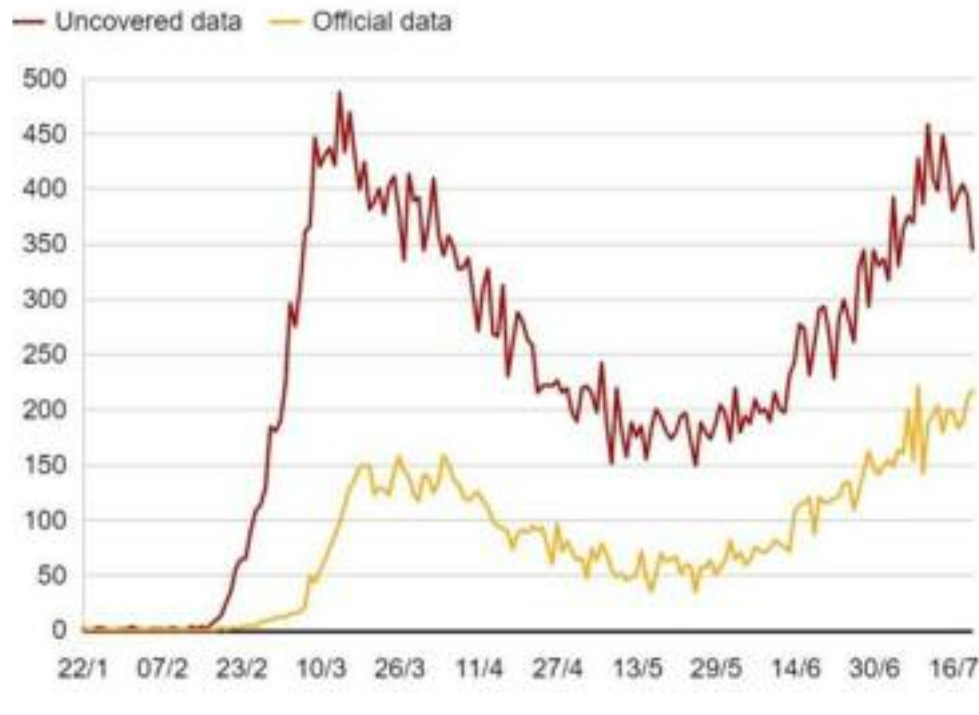
The deplorable condition of the hospitals is just one of the factors fuelling the shocking statistic that over 9,000 nurses have contracted coronavirus, as announced by the Head of Iran’s Nursing Organisation on 15 July. In one hospital every member of the anaesthetics team was infected. Other factors include chronic staff shortages, resulting in forced overtime and long shifts of up to 19 hours, with constant exposure to the virus and permanent exhaustion that weakens workers’ immune systems.

Many nurses have died, including Zahra Shiroieh, the Head of Nursing at Borujerd General Hospital. She was a much-loved figure, as was proven when the whole town turned out for her funeral procession, lining the streets to wait their turn to lay

Nursing staff are being supported in their demands by the full spectrum of medical professionals, and they are unlikely to back down.

## Daily number of deaths from Covid-19 in Iran

Official figures vs uncovered data, 22 January to 20 July 2020



flowers as her coffin passed. President Rouhani, back in May, called them, “health service martyrs”. But actions speak louder than words and there’s been precious little action by the regime to improve the health service in two generations and a state of denial about the pandemic that amounts to criminal negligence. “We are not witnessing a major crisis”, said the head of state on 18 July”, while forecasting that 55 to 60 million of Iran’s 85 million people would ultimately be infected!

A significant measure of responsibility for the severity of the pandemic must be laid at the regime’s door. It has been called incompetent, but that is not the main issue. Wilful disregard for the safety and lives of the majority, amounting to criminal negligence, is. The government even delayed its initial announcement of the emergency to allow the country to turn out to vote in the general election on 21 February. It was then disastrously slow to act, trying to keep business and industry running and profits flowing in, choosing wealth over health at every turn. Even as belated measures were put in place, many employees were being forced to work, including through the period of the spring Nowruz national holiday in the second half of March, notably in the oil, petrochemical and mining industries. When lockdown measures were finally taken, it was already too late, and Iran became one of the worst COVID-affected countries anywhere in the world.

Then, in a desperate attempt to forestall economic collapse, measures were lifted prematurely and millions of reluctant and frightened workers made to return to workplaces. In late April, President Rouhani stated that the government would rather see 2 million dead from coronavirus than 30 million coming to the streets to protest at their poverty and hunger. Temperature checks on employees were now no longer conducted, and often even the most basic protective equipment was unavailable. The government instituted a seven-fold hike in the price of face masks and workers were expected to buy their own. With 70% of workers on the minimum wage or less, many were just too poor to do so. As for testing, people with symptoms had to pay for that too – almost a third of their monthly income. That was out of the reach of most, while a few made their fortunes! As infections surged, the inadequate public hospitals were overwhelmed. According to recent statistics, 25 of Iran’s 31 provinces were COVID red zones or rapidly heading that way. The country was recording 2,500 new cases a day, with the death toll soaring. In Zanjan province alone, the General Director of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare announced, on 22 July, that number of industrial and production plants in which COVID was “spreading rapidly” was in double-figures.

How can the medical services possibly cope? The shortage of nursing staff is chronic. Iran has 1.9 nurses and midwives for every 1,000 people. This is nothing new, and it is one of the worst ratios on the planet, a quarter of the world’s average. By way of comparison, the ratio in Norway is 18.2 and in Uzbekistan 11.3. There are an estimated 125,000 vacancies and this is likely to be a conservative figure; calculations of vacancies are made on a hospital bed count rather than a people count and bed spaces at public hospitals are in short supply.

Nurses are desperately needed, but the government is not prepared to pay, and this is where, perhaps, the biggest scandal of all comes in. Rather than hire direct, the Ministry of Health has taken on private agencies to do its recruitment for it, as cheaply as possible. Not only is this an example of privatisation of a public service, with funds going to pay agencies rather than nurses, it is a clear indication of an attempt to depress the wages and conditions of nurses to such an extent that the whole nursing service becomes an attractive proposition for the private profit-driven sector. The government is trying to force nurses onto 89-day contracts, just too short to guarantee them any rights, in a blatant bid at super-exploitation. At Guilan University of Medical Sciences, during the final days of their 89-day contracts, nurses were warned their pay would be withheld unless they signed a new hourly-based contract! The move was met with protest rallies.

Nursing staff are being supported in their demands by the full spectrum of medical professionals, and they are unlikely to back down. Their demands are for better pay, equal recompense for equal work across the sector, a massive fully-funded nurse recruitment drive to eliminate the national shortfall, an end to the involvement of private agencies and exploitative short-term contracts, professional recognition and, of course, safe and hygienic conditions in which to do their jobs. These are basic demands from those on the frontline of fighting the pandemic. Their special protection during the COVID-19 crisis, bonuses for the huge overtime selflessly worked, and paid leave in which to recover from exhaustion should be beyond dispute. If the regime values nurses, as it says it does, it should stop attacking their demonstrations and arresting those who voice concern. Now is the time to act, before the public health system collapses completely.



# STRIKE ACTION SPREADS IN IRAN

As oil workers engage in co-ordinated strike action across Iran, Jane Green considers the response of the Iranian regime and the prospects for trade unions in Iran reports **Jane Green**

An unprecedented wave of strike action is underway in the gas and oil fields of Iran, as workers down tools over the late payment of wages, insecure employment contracts, poverty wages and intolerable working conditions.

Temperatures in Iran's refineries can reach up to 50 degrees Celsius, a danger to health and almost impossible to work in.

**A**N ESTIMATED 10,000 workers have been involved in wildcat strike action which has hit major refineries and industrial projects in Iran's South Pars gas fields. The strike has remained solid for over a week. Localised protests have been common in recent years, as employers have squeezed pay and conditions in order to maximise profits, but the co-ordination of action, affecting a number of refineries and many contractors, is a new dimension.

The strike action was triggered when Ebrahim Arabzadeh, a contract worker at Mahshahr petrochemical complex, died from heat exhaustion at work on 28th July. His colleagues presented a list of demands to the contracting companies which were largely ignored.

As a result, by Saturday, 1st August, of the 10,000 workers on strike, 5,000 had abandoned the gas fields entirely and returned home. Other remained in their dormitories, waiting for employers to give in to their demands.

Those on strike cover a range of trades including builders, electricians, welders and pipefitters, who work for employment agencies and gang masters on a variety of industrial projects in the world's largest natural gas field. They work a shift cycle of 20 days on, ten days off, and are housed in dormitories close to the workplace while on shift.

The action has seen hundreds of workers

protesting outside the offices of the contractors, declaring their intention to refuse to work for an entire 20-day shift cycle.

IndustriALL Global Union's Iranian affiliate, the Union of Mechanics and Metalworkers of Iran (UMMI), has to operate under restrictive conditions in which independent trade unions in Iran are not officially recognised by the regime. In spite of this UMMI is optimistic that, given the scale of the action, workers may have a chance to win concessions and possibly gain representation at major industrial sites.

UMMI is also confident that, as the strike continues, workers at other refineries and petrochemical complexes will join the action. By 4th August, protests had already spread to the Isfahan refinery in central Iran and Mashhad in the north east.

Given the precarious state of the Iranian economy the action may well force employers to the negotiating table. A number of companies have started to message their workforce saying that they will improve their pay and conditions if they return to work. The power station in Iranshahr in South East Iran is an example. However, the workforce is standing firm and demanding agreement on all aspects of pay and conditions of service. The companies are showing signs of desperation.

The development of the South Pars fields is Iran's flagship hydrocarbons project. The



**Above:** British trade unionists outside the Iranian Embassy demand release of imprisoned trade union leaders

**Far left and left:** Iranian sugarcane workers started their strike on 12 June. The workers at the Haft Tappeh sugarcane factory in Shush, south-western Iran have gone on strike to protest a dispute over unpaid wages and a demand for their factory to be returned to the public sector.

The strikers are also pressing for improved terms and conditions and the reinstatement of their colleagues sacked for their trade unionists activities. During similar strikes two years ago, trade unionists were arrested and tortured by the authorities.

**Lower left:** Striking oil workers



economy depends on the project for foreign exchange as it experiences hyperinflation. The significance of the fields is underlined by the fact that it is the state-run oil and gas company that has jurisdiction over all projects in South Pars.

Lost revenue therefore has a direct impact upon the beleaguered Iranian exchequer. While this may augur well for a negotiated solution the Iranian regime is not noted for conceding to workers demands and a long struggle may yet be ahead. Organisers are already wary of retaliation by the security forces, a common tactic in Iran, as the strike spreads. There are already reports of arrests and surveillance against key activists.

French energy giant Total signed a deal to develop the fields in 2017, but pulled out due to US sanctions. The fields are being developed in partnership with other multinational energy companies, but Iran has struggled to raise the necessary financial commitment. Contractors are under pressure to complete work on projects which are behind schedule, and often face liquidity problems due to delayed payments on government contracts due to banking sanctions.

International support will continue to be a crucial factor in sustaining the immediate action but also raising the profile of the struggle for wider trade union recognition in Iran.

IndustriALL assistant general secretary

Kemal Özkan, recognised the scale of the task facing Iranian workers recently, stating,

“Iranian workers have proved time and again that no amount of repression will silence them. They will stand up for their rights and continue to protest until their voice is heard.

“The workers in the gas fields are taking coordinated, strategic industrial action in defence of their rights. If they hold firm, they can win a substantial change. Iran will suffer industrial conflict until independent unions are recognized.”

Sources inside Iran have stressed the significance of the actions as this is the first time in the history of Iran’s labour strikes that contract workers in the country’s oil, gas and petrochemical industries have managed to organise strikes on such a scale.

Contract workers make up about 70 percent of the total workforce in the sector, but are generally unable to organise such large-scale protests due to their dispersal across a range of companies and contractors.

The fears of the regime that the action could spread from economic to political demands were intensified recently when 14 independent organisations, from different social classes and spheres, issued a statement in support of oil, gas and petrochemical workers’ strike movement. “A general strike is the only way” is the final sentence of this statement.

Trade union, human rights and solidarity

organisations have been quick to respond to the action by the Iranian workers and show expressions of support and solidarity. In the UK, the Committee for the Defence of the Iranian People’s Rights (CODIR), has been at the forefront of leading calls for solidarity with the Iranian workers action and soliciting expressions of support from labour and trade union movement organisations.

CODIR Assistant General Secretary, Jamshid Ahmadi, stressed the importance of messages reaching the workers in Iran and the need to expose the failure of the regime to recognise legitimate trade union activity, stating,

“Once again, we see repression and arrest as the Iranian state’s response to workers making reasonable demands, given their totally unreasonable conditions of work. The rapid spread of this action is a reflection of the deep underlying dissatisfaction many workers in Iran feel, not only with their employment situation, but also with the government itself.”

CODIR will continue with its campaign for immediate messages of solidarity and support with the oil workers currently on strike to be sent by trade unions in the UK.

Jane Green is a member of the Executive Council of CODIR. For information on Iran please visit [www.codir.net](http://www.codir.net) or write to [codir\\_info@btinternet.com](mailto:codir_info@btinternet.com)

WOMEN

# PROTEST, EQUALITY

and the challenge of the pandemic for women in Iran



The Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women (DOIW) has been for decades at the forefront of the struggle for social justice and equal rights for women in Iran. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up new challenges.

CODIR invited Dr Azar Sepehr of DOIW to portray the life of women in Iran, battling to survive and save their social and economic lives, while tackling the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

**Iran Today:** Thank you for accepting our invitation for this interview. We are familiar with your organisation's activities in promoting women's equal participation in social, economic, and political life in Iran. So, let's start by asking you to paint a general picture of the women's rights of assembly and organisation.

DOIW: Thank you for inviting DOIW for this interview.

Put simply, there is no freedom of assembly in Iran. Peaceful gatherings are treated as security threats. The regime's response to peaceful rallies in December 2017 and then December and January 2019, using live bullets, is typical of its response to peaceful assembly. These difficulties are compounded by the Islamic Republic's Judiciary having formalised discrimination against women and girls by enshrining it in law. These include restrictions on women's right to work and the right to education, partly through the introduction of gender quotas and restrictions in some fields of study. There are also educational permits; gender segregation in certain public places; no right to leave the country without the husband's permission; no right to divorce; no right to the custody of children; restrictions on the choice of dress; no equal rights to inheritance; and recognition of the

right to polygamy for men in Iranian law. Peaceful gatherings of women are broken up violently and participants are arrested. Women's gatherings on International Women's Day, March 8th, 2018, which held in front of the Ministry of Labour in Tehran, was violently broken up by the police. More than 10 people were arrested and later released. These events were reported on the telegram channel set up by the activists for the purpose of reporting the event and were cited in other sites.

**Iran Today:** How has the lockdown in Iran impacted on the lives of people and their families?

DOIW: The spread of coronavirus has impacted every aspect of people's lives and affected their livelihoods. Iran's economy was in a dire state already before COVID-19. The rate of unemployment among the population of working age is reported to be 12.4%, at 3 million people. Among the young the rate of unemployment is 30.6%, nearly twice the overall rate, and 57% of the unemployed are under 30 years of age. The imbalance of job opportunities where women are concerned becomes clear with the statistics on the economic participation of men and women. In 2016, the rate of economic participation among men was 64.1% as opposed to 14.9% among women. According to statistics more than half of





the unemployed are those who have been employed before. Their condition reflects the scourge of insecure or temporary jobs. Given the fact that many people are on temporary (or zero hours) contracts, or are self-employed, without state support, a large number of people do not socially distance allowing the pandemic to spread even more easily.

**Iran Today: What have been the key priorities of DOIW in its work with Iranian women during the period of the pandemic.**

DOIW: Our organisation continues its work campaigning for equal rights, fighting misogynistic laws, child marriage, segregation laws that deprive women of the right to education, and social, cultural and political life.

DOIW continues to oppose the regressive and discriminatory Family Protection Law, its campaign against child marriage and promotion of UN initiatives against violence against women are as relevant today as ever. In its most recent statement, our organisation has condemned the horrific murder of the young girl, Romina Ashrafi, at the hands of her father, under the pretext of ‘honour’ killing, an event that shook Iran and yet is all too common under the Islamic Republic’s laws that do not value girls and women.

**Iran Today: Many women will have no option but to work during these difficult months. Have women at work been disproportionately affected by COVID related measures?**

DOIW: The closure of schools and nurseries has meant that mothers have had to juggle looking after the children, who are now staying at home, with their many other responsibilities, whether in the form of unpaid housework or often low-paid work outside the home.

Privatisations in the health service have also led to the worsening of the conditions of the workers and the poor, as profits are prioritised over the needs of patients, and the pay of nurses and medical staff are cut. In recent weeks news of the dismissal of nurses at a private hospital and the adjustment of the pay scales, while nurses are on the frontline of the battle with COVID 19, has puzzled the public in Iran. Temporary contracts are the norm, not only in private hospitals, but also in state-run hospitals attached to universities. Limited 89-day contracts predominate for nurses, the majority of whom are women. Employers prevent the nurses from qualifying for the benefits that contracts over 90 days would afford them. In addition, poverty adds a new dimension to the threat of COVID-19. It is no secret that death from coronavirus is more prevalent among the poor because they do not have access to healthcare. The deputy Head of the Health Service in the country has admitted as much.

**Iran Today: The latest report on the gender gap in the two indicators of economic and political participation does not illustrate a favourable situation for Iranian women. Will the prevalence of the coronavirus increase the gender gap in economic participation this year?**

DOIW: The percentage of women in unemployment is twice that of men. The most significant areas of employment where women are represented in larger

numbers are in education and the health service. Although women do participate in higher education, they are not able to access appropriately paid work in their fields. The pay gap between men and women is very high. University graduates with postgraduate degrees have to work for minimal pay, no health insurance and no holiday pay. Recruitment agents exploit these young people by only offering below minimum pay. The supply is high, and employers have no incentive to pay any more. High inflation further reduces the actual value of any earnings. Job opportunities are fewer for women as many employers, in the public and private sector, prefer men for permanent posts.

As I mentioned earlier, women have been impacted due their role in the home looking after their children, the unpaid housework, and the need to keep a paid job in order to look after themselves and their families. Women dominate the number of street vendors who sell their wares on pavements or on the Metro. The reduction in the number of people travelling, and a reluctance to purchase things due to the threat of the virus, has meant serious loss of income for these poverty-stricken women.

**Iran Today: What are the DOIW's priorities going forward?**

DOIW: We work towards an end to the misogynistic policies of the Islamic Republic, an end to discrimination and violence, an end to child marriage and the abuse of girls and women in Iran. What is needed also is the establishment of anti-discrimination discourse by cultural and civic institutions and the removal of barriers and restrictions on women's civic, cultural and political participation, freedoms and activities. The Islamic Republic must be made to ratify and implement international conventions to which it is signatory, such as ILO C87, C98. The regime has obstinately refused to sign the Bill for an end to violence against women. It must be made to do so.

The government must take measures to deploy women's abilities – their knowledge, expertise and skills - to assist with macroeconomic and social development goals. Social, economic and political participation of women should be recognised as an undeniable right for them and the society as a whole. Segregation must end in higher education. The limits for the number of female students that gain access to university, some at 10%, must end. Employment law must cease to discriminate against women and their access to employment.

## DEFIANT WOMEN

# VOICES OF RESISTANCE

**W**OMEN HAVE often played pivotal roles in the struggle for human rights and civil liberties in Iran. Despite their prominence within the movement, the courage and activism of Iranian women remain arguably underreported. Attention remains focussed almost exclusively on protests surrounding the mandatory hijab, and ultimately fails to recognise that women's focus and role within the struggle is much wider and extends much farther. **Mitra Sophie** reporting for *Iran Today* believes that women activists in Iran are not just participants but challengers to the regime, innovators, and leaders.



Women such as **Bahareh Hedayat** - student activist, campaigner, and women's rights defender - have indelibly shaped the landscape of civil activism in Iran. Bahareh's activism has spanned her adult life. Her tireless campaigning for women's rights through the unprecedented 'One Million Signatures' campaign, amongst other activities, has led to international recognition - with Bahareh receiving the Edelstam Prize in 2012 for her courage and unyielding commitment to activism. Yet this commitment has drawn the attention and ire of the regime, and Bahareh spent 6 years in prison from 2010 to 2016. More recently, Bahareh was brought to Tehran's infamous Evin prison on dubious charges for her participation in peaceful demonstrations during the November 2019 protests, and in the aftermath of the downing of the Ukrainian civilian airliner in January 2020. Her family was unaware of her location, or the purported charges. As the regime doubled-down on silencing voices such as Bahareh's in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Bahareh was

sentenced to a further 4 years and 8 months in prison. She has since been transferred to Qarchak prison in southern Tehran, facing charges such as "propaganda against the regime". Students protesting at Tehran's Amir Kabir University have loudly demanded Bahareh's freedom, and the international community must now follow suit. Action is urgently needed - today, still, Bahareh remains behind bars.



Citizen journalist **Sepideh Gholian** has been similarly persistent in her activism, providing a vital voice to trade unions and labour activists, and casting light on the precarious and deteriorating situation of workers within the past few years. Sepideh was arrested alongside prominent trade union activists, such as Esmail Bakshi, whilst reporting on a strike organised by workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane complex in January 2019. Charges included 'gathering and collusion against national security', leading to an 18-and-a-half-year prison charge, later reduced to 5 years after significant uproar. Sepideh's outspoken reports on life in custody chillingly illustrate the daily humiliation, mistreatment, and brutality that goes on. As a result of her exposing this abusive treatment, the regime has attempted to slander Sepideh as a foreign agitator. Throughout her ordeal and the regime's attempts at silencing labour rights activism, Sepideh has remained defiant. Her refusal to request a pardon from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei led to her being transferred to Qarchak prison in June 2020. Treated inhumanely and denied the means of legitimate protest and freedom of expression, Sepideh Gholian remains behind bars.

First arrested in 1998 for criticising the



government, **Narges Mohammadi** - engineer, journalist, and women's rights activist - has unflinchingly exposed the inadequacies of women's rights in Iran throughout the decades. Her campaigns have run the gamut - protesting against the death penalty, advocating for human rights reform, and championing legal representation of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. Her role as an independent journalist as well as former Vice President of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre has similarly placed her in opposition to the regime. After participating in a peaceful sit-in demonstration in Evin, Narges was transferred to Zanjan prison in December 2019, and physically abused by security agents in the process. Like Bahareh and Sepideh, charges against her include "spreading propaganda against the regime" as well as "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security". Narges, whose pre-existing health conditions place her at high risk of COVID-19, has recently displayed suspected symptoms of the illness. Held in inhumane conditions, authorities continue to deny her healthcare. Amidst the pandemic, Narges Mohammadi, stalwart activist for women's rights over the decades, languishes behind bars.

Despite these obstacles, all three women remain unbowed, and display a profound resilience and unwillingness to yield to overwhelming pressures. In the face of these attempts to suppress legitimate dissent, it is the duty of the international community to stand beside Bahareh Hedayat, Sepideh Gholian, Narges Mohammadi, and demand the fair treatment of likeminded women and activists who continue to struggle for human rights and civil liberties in Iran.

## CONTINUING THE CAMPAIGN FOR TRADE UNION RIGHTS

The Islamic Republic of Iran's reaction to protests organised by the teachers' union CCITTA and other groups of workers has been one of police brutality, condemning trade unionists as a threat to national security.

Hundreds of trade unionists have been arrested, imprisoned or forced into exile.

The Iranian Teachers' Trade Association (ITTA) (affiliated to the CCITTA), the Iranian Journalists Association and organised blue-collar workers have also faced intimidation and legal obstacles which aim to deny their rights to function as representative trade union bodies.

Iran's labour laws allow for the formation of trade unions. However, the Iranian authorities routinely seek to suppress any attempt to establish free, democratic independent trade unions.

Iran's trade unionists want nothing more than the right to exist (for example, to establish offices and secure bank accounts), the right to participate in collective bargaining and the right to represent their members in hearings or tribunals.

**Teachers currently in prison or exile, or awaiting a prison sentence, include:**

- Mohammad Habibi
- Mahmoud Beheshti-Langaroudi
- Esmail Abdi
- Abdolreza Ghanbari
- Mohammad Sanayi
- Rouhollah Mardani
- Bakhtiyar Alami
- Mokhtar Asadi

### Teachers' complaints

The reasons for the CCITTA protests include:

- the failure of the government to provide funding for the implementation of the Law on the Administration of State Services;
- the failure to implement teachers' professional grading;
- the lack of adequate wage increases corresponding to inflation and the cost of living;
- the plundering of the teachers' pension fund;
- the privatisation of education.

These complaints remain unresolved.

At the same time, teachers are calling for:

- the elimination of discrimination in the structure of the educational system;
- the right to free public education in accordance with Article 30 of the Constitution;
- the withdrawal of the 'full-time teacher plan', which will significantly increase standard contractual teaching hours by 50%;
- the release of the imprisoned teachers;
- the right to organise and strike.

Iran remains in violation of ILO Conventions 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise) and 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining).

### Find out more

Visit [www.nasuwat.org.uk/international](http://www.nasuwat.org.uk/international) for more information about the situation affecting teachers in Iran and how the NASUWT is working with the international community to tackle the violation of trade union rights.



Esmail Abdi was presented with the NASUWT International Solidarity Award in 2018

NASUWT Deputy General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach meets Peyman Nodniran, Head of the CCITTA, Iran at Education International (EI) World Congress, July 2019

# Solidarity with political prisoners in Iran!



The Islamic Republic of Iran should cease the arrest, torture, prosecution and imprisonment of workers, women, youth, university students, national and religious minorities, and environmental activists

**Free all political prisoners in Iran!**