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CODIR stands in solidarity with the university lecturers & students

UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS SACKED IN IRAN

According to media reports based on statements by students' associations and organisations in universities, a number of university lecturers were sacked and many students detained across the country during the height of popular protest from September 2022 to March 2023.

But Morteza Farrokhi, a deputy minister in the Department of Higher Education, has denied that this was the case. "There are no statistics relating to the dismissal of university professors following recent riots. Any dismissal of a lecturer is due to their scientific incompetence," he asserted.

However, the deputy minister's statement runs counter to the claims of domestic news media and student bodies that professors have had their contracts terminated specifically because they supported the protests. Twelve academic societies from within the university of Tabatabai confirmed that three lecturers at their institution had been dismissed and condemned the similar treatment of university teachers throughout the country.

The Association of Iranian Students' Unions reported the



expulsion of a number of lecturers from Tehran, Beheshti and Tabatabai universities. According to one report a disciplinary hearing had been held to assess the conduct of a number of professors in the University of Tehran's College of Engineering who had issued a statement condemning attacks by plain clothes security forces on halls of residence during which students were beaten and arrested and university property damaged. This referred to an incident on 29



October 2022 when students at Tehran University had organised a rally and demonstration in support of detained fellow students. Photographs of the protesting students had been published showing them being surrounded and arrested.

Amir Dabirimehr, a professor of Political Science, wrote on his Twitter account that nine professors from the Faculty of Political Sciences had unexpectedly had their employment terminated". Susan Safaverdi, a professor in the same faculty, reported the "collective [and forced] retirement of some lecturers of this university" and said that these measures were taken "without prior consultation with the university's administration". News of the sacking of the professors was posted on notice boards in university corridors.

The dismissal of Beheshti University Sociology professor, Mohammad Fazli, and Sharif University Philosophy professor, Arash Abazari made headlines last year. The Association of Students' Unions also reported that "the contracts of at least eleven visiting professors at Ferdowsi University had been terminated."

The ousting of university professors is not only a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the establishment of the Islamic regime in 1979. Many university teachers were expelled for various reasons, such as having democratic political tendencies, as the so-called "cultural revolution" got underway in the initial years of the regime. The practice has continued ever since. According to *Shargh* Daily Newspaper recently, "News of the summoning and dismissal of a lecturer is a daily occurrence and one can even predict who is going to be next, a problem that has got worse since last year and intensified since last September [when the recent wave of protests began]".

Interview: Global labour union leader stands in solidarity with the striking Iranian workers!



12 May 2023 - Kemal Ozkan, Assistant General Secretary of IndustriALL, sheds light on the current industrial action by workers in the oil, gas and petrochemical sector and argues that, as this action shows, true opposition to Iran's regime lies within the country, and is rooted in the workplaces and factories.

Q- To begin with, could you tell us about the situation of trade unions in Iran today? Are they recognised by the authorities and free to organise? How strong are they? What are the key challenges they face?

From the start, the Islamic Republic has sought to portray itself as a guarantor of labour rights. This was done to co-opt the thriving labour movement, which had been a driving force in the Revolution, and to undermine the Left.

They adopted the popular rhetoric of labour rights and set up structures - state-affiliated Islamic Labour Councils known as "Khaneh Kargar" (Worker's House) - that mimic their counterparts in other countries. Protections on the right to form trade unions and on trade union activities were included in the Constitution and regime-backed May Day events took place. This ended with the sharp dictatorial turn of the regime in the early 1980s and the bloody suppression of the left-wing opposition groups. Despite the provisions of the revised (1989) Constitution, which protect the right to form and be active in a trade union, the Islamic Republic does not tolerate independent trade union activities of any kind and has a long and brutal track record of suppression in this respect.

The regime refuses to recognise the right to strike and protest - even on matters as basic as claiming unpaid wages - and its default response is intimidation, violence, and repression.

The suppression of trade union activity begins with the non-recognition of independent trade unions and is typified by:

- *Security services attacking workers' rallies.
- *The intimidation of labour activists and protesting workers.
- *Arbitrary and summary dismissals.

The arrest of trade union activists and prosecution under charges such as "disrupting public order", "propaganda against the state", and "acting against national security" which can carry severe sentences, including capital punishment.

Physical and psychological torture during detention, including publicly broadcasting forced "confessions".

Imprisonment under arbitrary and indeterminate sentences, in horrendous conditions, and without access to medical care.

- *Preventing the free circulation of news about union activities.
- *Sabotaging bona fide trade unions by setting up parallel regime-backed bodies .

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

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*Attacks on attempts by unions to hold public events, including those related to May Day.

Despite this, Iranian unions occupy a position at the forefront of the current struggle not only for workers rights, but also for an end to the dictatorship, for human and democratic rights, and social justice.

Because of their principled and unwavering struggles during some of the darkest chapters in the history of the Islamic Republic, unions and their activists enjoy huge support among the general population and are afforded a lot of respect. The regime is acutely aware of this, and labour activists remain the largest of the contingents amongst Iran's significant population of political prisoners, with several activists having already served long or repeated sentences of imprisonment.

Because of the poor state of the economy - a result of sanctions as well as government mismanagement and the application of free-market policies - concerns relating to the workplace are at the forefront of the public's consciousness.

A recent example is the ongoing struggle of Iranian teachers and education workers - represented by the Iranian Teachers Trade Association (ITTA) and their confederation; the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers Trade Associations (CCITTA) - who have been a constant presence on the streets and academic campuses of the country. Not only were they one of the prominent trade unions that supported the recent "Woman, Life, Freedom" protest movement, they have continued their gatherings and vigils despite constant harassment and huge pressures from the regime. On 14 February, a 12-point charter was issued by a coalition of independent trade union and civil society organisations inside Iran, with the CCITTA foremost among them and a central driver of this major initiative. This major development has been warmly welcomed by progressive currents inside Iran and publicly endorsed by the incarcerated former prime minister and leader of the opposition Green Movement, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, amongst other high-profile public figures in Iran. The well-publicised campaign for the release of long-time political prisoner and former secretary of the ITTA, Esmail Abdi, is just one of several pertaining to activists from this union. It is testament to their unwavering resolve and stance that the teacher union activists currently account for one of the highest proportions of political prisoners from any single organisation in Iran today.



Q- Since the 1980s there have been many stories about the regime's abuse of workers' rights and repression of those who demand fair pay and decent working conditions. How does the ITUC respond? Does the ILO intervene?

Iran is in breach of its obligations under core ILO Conventions, including 87 and 98. However, because independent trade unions are not recognised by the regime, and are forced to operate underground, bodies such as ITUC and ILO have limited avenues to act. Complaints are submitted – including at the Committee on Application of Standards (CAS) during the ILO's International Labour Conference – but there are no effective sanctions that can be applied, and regime representatives do not engage in genuine efforts to address concerns. Iran's diplomatic isolation means that it is relatively immune to criticism at CAS and other fora.

Q- IndustriALL fights for union rights globally. Iranian workers are still deprived of these rights. In what ways is IndustriALL able to put pressure on the Iranian government to abide by core ILO conventions, including 87 and 98?

Generally, when faced with violations of workers' rights in a repressive regime, IndustriALL has two avenues for applying pressure: diplomatically, by lobbying governments, the ILO and other agencies, and economically, by putting pressure on multinational companies operating in the country, their supply chain and their investors.

None of these mechanisms are very effective in Iran. The sanctions regime means that the economy is largely self-contained, with few global investors that can be leveraged, and Iran's diplomatic isolation means that it is largely immune to these efforts.

IndustriALL has sought dialogue with the Iranian government, arguing that establishing an industrial relations system that accords with international standards would benefit the country, but has always been rebuffed. Given this context, we believe that change in Iran will come from within, with workers and citizens fighting for and winning their rights. Our role is to support them during this process, and to be at hand to offer both solidarity and technical assistance in strengthening unions.

Interview with Interview: Global labour union Conti./

We also believe that constantly highlighting cases of imprisoned trade unionists helps maintain international awareness and prevents them from disappearing into the prison system.

Q- Current industrial action by contracted project workers in the oil, gas and petrochemical sector in Iran is expanding, with more than 60,000 workers now on strike. As the global union covering the oil, petrochemical, and textile industries, could you give some background and explain the strikers' demands?

Every country has an industrial relations system, even if unions are banned. In Iran, this functions through waves of coordinated wildcat strikes, which set wages and conditions in industry. Our argument to the Iranian regime is that legalising unions would allow disputes to be settled quicker. Unfortunately, they have not listened.

Our affiliate the Union of Metalworkers and Mechanics of Iran (UMMI), reports that instead of working with trade unions to find practical solutions to resolve conflict and meet workers' demands, the authorities rely on threats and intimidation.

This does not create industrial harmony in the oil industry, a major industry in Iran and a key source of revenue. Over the past five years, tension has been growing: workers work in very challenging conditions in temperatures that often reach 50 degrees Centigrade, with inadequate facilities. When workers protested in July 2018, the protest was violently suppressed and four worker leaders were detained, tortured, and imprisoned. In 2020 the workers reorganised, and in August 2020, UMMI and the workers' Coordinating Committee organized the first nationwide strike, with 45,000 workers on oil and gas projects taking part. This was a success, with employers agreeing to increase wages according to a matrix prepared by the Committee.

In July 2021, 125,000 workers took part in strike action to change the shift cycle to include more rest days, and to demand a 100% wage increase. This was relatively successful, although the agreements were applied unevenly across the sector. On April 30 2022, with the strike of 5,000 workers of Bushehr Petrochemical Site 1, the authorities invited Maziar Gilaninejad, the chief representative of UMMI, to meet with the director of Asalouye Special Region and the regional inspector and supervisor of the largest petrochemical contracting company in Bushehr, an agreement was reached to respect the legal rights of the workers. A 38% salary increase was implemented, and the workers returned to work. This sets a precedent for employers negotiating with and reaching an agreement with a workers' representative.

On 21 April, oil and gas project workers embarked on another nationwide strike. This time, the demands are for a 79% pay increase, and wages and social security contributions that reflect skill levels and shift patterns. Workers are also

demanding a new shift cycle of 20 days on followed by 10 days paid leave, and improvements to the dormitories and canteens they use while on shift, the provision of air conditioning, and an end to subcontracting. 4,000 workers went on strike the first day. By May Day, this had grown to 60,000.

Q- On 28 April, the daily newspaper Kar va Kargar reported that 4,000 of the protesting workers will be fired and replaced. What can IndustriALL, the ITUC or ILO do about this and other such repressive actions of the Iranian regime?

The threat was made by Sekhavat Asadi, managing director of Iran's Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ), and it was an attempt at intimidation. Other than raise a case at CAS, there is very little that can be done from outside Iran. The solution lies with the unity of Iranian workers. Kar va Kargar interviewed UMMI leader Maziyar Guilaninejhad about this issue. He said that it is troubling that instead of trying to address the demands of workers, the authorities respond with threats. He added that with the unity of the workers and awareness gained in contact with trade union, no worker has gone to work in this area. Where employers have tried to recruit strike breakers, many of these recruits have also joined the strike. This the threats have led to greater worker solidarity.

Q- How does IndustriALL publicise these actions to attract international attention and promote solidarity with the striking workers?

We regularly publish news on our website, as well as writing open letters to the regime and organising campaigns through LabourStart. Our message is not to portray Iranian workers and unions as victims in need of rescuing, but as powerful and influential organisations. The fact that oil and gas project workers are able to win their demands on wages, shift cycles and working and living conditions through coordinated wildcat action shows the strength of the Iranian movement, despite the fact that it is forced to operate underground. We want to communicate this strength, too!

In the global North, views on Iran are often filtered through organisations of Iranian exiles based in these countries, often with a specific political agenda or alignment, which may lead them to downplay the importance of unions. We want to demonstrate to the international community that the true opposition to the regime lies within the country, and it is rooted in the workplaces and factories.