

# Worker Protest in the Age of Ahmadinejad

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Painters at work in central Tehran.

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In June 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad unexpectedly won the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, after an intense campaign in which he exerted great effort to present himself as the defender of the poor and the working class. These classes, badly hurt by neo-liberal economic policies in the period following the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war, had staged a number of organized and noisy protests in the years preceding Ahmadinejad’s campaign, and they responded in significant numbers to his appeal for votes. The first year and a half of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, however, has seen an erosion of the social contract between working Iranians and the state of a magnitude that may be decisive for the future of democracy in Iran.

After Ahmadinejad assumed power, collective action by Iranian workers has subsided, despite strong popular dissatisfaction with the economy. Working people increasingly resort to disjointed, individual and quiet protests; what looked like a budding movement for social justice in 2004 now looks like a non-movement. What explains the downswing in labor activism? The commitment of working people to pursuing their collective interests has not flagged, but under Ahmadinejad, the

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political opportunities for collective protest have been severely restricted. Enconced in power by elections in 2004 and 2005, hardline conservatives are more willing than their predecessors to employ the force of the state to break workers’ movements. Pending adjustments to the law governing worker-employer relations appear to tilt the playing field further in the favor of management. Finally, the demise of the reformist movement inside the Islamic Republic, and the corresponding return of the conservatives, has sent a chill wind blowing through all realms of political activity. The form and vehemence of workers’ collective action in the future will depend on the political opportunities available to them.

## Economic Dissatisfaction at a Glance

According to a national survey of values and attitudes implemented in 2004 by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, about 71 percent of Iranians are dissatisfied with “the economic situation of the country,” while 25 percent are somewhat satisfied and only 5 percent are very satisfied. The survey data showed about 71 percent of men, 70 percent of women, 72 percent of the employed and 79 percent of university graduates classifying themselves as dissatisfied.<sup>1</sup>

Case studies of smaller groups also indicate a high level of disquiet with the economy. A questionnaire distributed to primary and secondary school teachers in Tehran found that nearly 60 percent, when asked to “consider your salary from the Ministry of Education,” expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, while only 18 percent evinced satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> These negative feelings are not confined to the capital. Another research project revealed that about 10 percent of teachers from the small town of Nishabur expressed strong job dissatisfaction, while only 1 percent said they were very satisfied with their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

According to one study, “One potent reason for job dissatisfaction could be tied up not so much, as is generally assumed, with the characteristics of the job as with the general satisfaction workers experience as members of society.”<sup>4</sup> Strong job dissatisfaction, as among these Iranian teachers, may have little to do with the particulars of the conditions of their employment. Instead, it might be a clear sign of deeper discontent with the situation of Iranian working people in the private and public sectors. The discontent is probably driven both by objective conditions, such as low and stagnant wages and declining job security, and frustrations related to the discrepancies between political slogans, like those of Ahmadinejad on the campaign trail, and state performance.

## Waves of Protest

In January 2001, a series of public gatherings unprecedented since the 1979 Islamic Revolution engulfed Tehran and several other Iranian cities. In Tehran alone, thousands of teachers assembled en masse on four separate occasions to call for pay equity among public employees, consistency in promotion policies and more generous budget allocations for education. First, the Iranian Teachers’ Organization called a meeting of approximately 4,000 teachers on January 15.<sup>5</sup> This gathering was followed on January 18 by another meeting convening some 2,000 teachers under the auspices of the Teachers’ United Front.<sup>6</sup> Four days later, tens of thousands demonstrated without a permit opposite the building housing the parliament of the Islamic Republic (Majles), and on January 26, there was another “illegal” gathering of 2,000 teachers in front of the offices of then-President Mohammad Khatami, culminating in scattered confrontations with the police.<sup>7</sup> “Neither left nor right—We are simply teachers,” their placards read. Apart from the content of the teachers’ demands, what paved the way for the continuation of this protest wave was the fact that the events took place in the open street, uniting protesters at a concrete time and place. The demonstrating teachers were joined by other citizens, not teachers, who brought their own grievances to the protests.

This series of gatherings was the zenith of teacher unrest until March 2003, when a second significant wave of protest began, though in a completely different mode. In this month, teachers in several cities, including Tehran, went on strike, refusing to hold their classes for a week. The one-week strike,

which started on March 6, was recorded as the seventh teachers’ work stoppage in the years 2002–2003.<sup>8</sup> Some media outlets reported that more than 30 percent of teachers throughout the country had withheld their labor in this period, so that about 400 schools were closed down just in the capital city.<sup>9</sup> In the 2003 school strikes, knots of protesters assembled in multiple closed spaces within school buildings, unlike in the 2001 street gatherings, with their open common space.

If the dominant methods of teacher protest in 2001 and 2003 were the street demonstration and the school strike, respectively, in 2004 and early 2005 discontent took a radically different form. In that year, the third major wave of teacher protest saw teachers sending petitions to the authorities. On January 19, 2005, a leading reformist newspaper, *Sharq*, published an open letter to the conservative Seventh Majles signed by a large number of teachers.<sup>10</sup> While such petitions to the authorities were accessible to the public, the element of common space that had energized protest in 2001 was, of course, absent.

The decision of the teachers—in reality, an accumulation of multiple small-group decisions—to switch to less and less confrontational tactics points to their diminished ability to engage in loud and public collective action. The teachers voiced the same demands, and the organizations articulating teachers’ interests remained just as strong and effective in 2004–2005 as in 2001, but the ambient political struggle between “reformists” and “conservatives” within the state was shifting dramatically in favor of the conservatives by 2004. With the victory of conservative forces in the February 2004 Majles elections, and then Ahmadinejad’s triumph the following summer, the “reformist moment” that commenced in 1997 came to an end. The recrudescence of the conservative faction brought back the fear of retaliation for vocal protest and the suppression of weak civil society organizations. No extensive protests were reported among teachers after the early months of 2005.

That year, it seems, was the year of the bus drivers.

## Squashing Independence

The Union of Bus Company Workers, which had been founded in 1968 and banned after the 1979 revolution, began to be reorganized in 2004 by a number of worker activists, who neither sought nor received official license. The drivers and service and repair workers held a general assembly and then successful elections of officers, reactivating the union in May 2005 under the name of the Syndicate of Workers of the United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs. The syndicate represents workers employed by that state-owned company. From the beginning, the syndicate’s reactivation had many diehard opponents, who fell into three categories: the bus company management; the Islamic Labor Councils, worker-management councils which exist in every establishment with more than 35 employees and which are overseen by the state-run Workers’ House; and, last but not least, ideologues who are against all trade unions and consider them illegal.

In December 2005, in a quest for better pay, bus drivers in Tehran began refusing to take passengers' fares, in a protest called by the syndicate. On December 22, police raided the homes of 12 of the syndicate's executive committee members and arrested them, usually on charges of "causing trouble (*ekhlal*) and disorder," and immediately closed down the syndicate's office in Tehran. On December 23, those syndicate leaders who had not been arrested invited all drivers and workers of the company to take part in a general strike the next day. Consequently, most of those arrested were released at midnight, with the exception of Mansour Osanlou, head of the syndicate. Nevertheless, the bus drivers in five of ten Tehran Bus Company districts went on strike on December 25, and 16 strikers were reportedly arrested. After promises from Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf, mayor of Tehran, to secure the release of all the arrested drivers and to address their economic concerns, the strikers finally decided to call off their work stoppage in the evening. On the other hand, the United Bus Company's management threatened workers who supported the strike call with the loss of their jobs. The official Mehr news agency reported unprecedented heavy traffic in Tehran, not least in the southern half of the city. All arrested drivers were released over the next two days, again with the exception of Osanlou.<sup>11</sup>

The next month witnessed another wave of protests and arrests. On January 24, 2006, the syndicate issued a declaration that the Tehran drivers would go back on strike from January 28 onward. To prevent this occurrence, the Revolutionary Court issued summonses for the arrest of several key members of the syndicate's executive committee on January 25. Police also violently assaulted the homes of key strike organizers during the night of January 27, arresting even their wives.<sup>12</sup>

On January 28, the streets of the capital witnessed important events. Tehran bus workers were due to strike, calling for the release of Osanlou, among other demands. From the beginning of the strike early in the morning, police and security forces cracked down severely, eventually arresting more than 500 of the roughly 2,000 strikers. Government forces made extensive use of buses borrowed from various state institutions to transport passengers and, thereby, to check the spread of news of the strike in the city. In an interview with the official Islamic Republic News Agency, the mayor of Tehran described the union as illegal and said that the authorities would not permit the strike to go ahead.

More than 200 striking drivers spent the ensuing months in limbo. Forty-three of them were referred to the bus company's personnel office for dismissal, even though that office has pretended that the drivers were resigning rather than being fired.<sup>13</sup> Mansour Osanlou objected, in a letter dated July 25: "In this country all the elite speak of being a democracy. And in the words of the Supreme Leader, [this] year is a 'year of public participation and national unity.' Then for what crime have I and my colleagues been made

unemployed?" Osanlou was finally released on August 9, after the movement had fallen into inactivity.

The activist bus drivers seem to have made many missteps in undertaking to recreate their independent trade union. The legal reasoning invoked by the authorities in blocking the union has its origins in the 1990 labor law, according to which any independent trade union must be banned when an Islamic Labor Council already exists in the establishment in question. Security forces and the Islamic Labor Councils cited exactly this statute in their successful drive to prevent Tehran Bus Company drivers from organizing a general assembly to establish a new union. The 1990 labor law has been strongly criticized by worker activists and analysts for not giving workers the right to form independent trade unions. Possible modifications of the law under Ahmadinejad do not offer workers any prospect of redress.

## A Lose-Lose Game

To mollify the critics, the Ministry of Labor submitted draft amendments of the 1990 labor law in 2006. The new draft seems, however, to be strongly influenced by the discourse of the free market. According to neo-liberal economists, the main conflict in worker-employer relations is not so much between labor and capital as between the employed and unemployed: It is not labor in a titanic battle against capital, but one good for labor against another good for labor. Such rhetoric holds that Iran's labor law offers a high degree of protection to employed workers in the form of job security and fixed remuneration unrelated to productivity and, accordingly, advises more intense competition between the employed and unemployed in the labor market.<sup>14</sup> If a modified labor law loosens restrictions on employers, allowing them to dismiss workers more easily, employed workers may lose their job security, but unemployed workers will be better able to find jobs.

Rooted in such theory, the draft amendments propose several changes giving *carte blanche* to employers seeking to get rid of employees. The suggested changes to sections 21 and 27 of the labor law are quite important. According to section 21, which has to do with termination of employment contracts, an employment contract may be terminated only by such events as the worker's death, retirement, total disability and resignation. The proposed draft, however, adds two other possibilities: a decrease in the firm's productivity, firm restructuring or technological updating, and a decrease in the physical power of the worker leading to a decrease in firm productivity.

According to section 27, "where a worker is negligent in discharging his duties or if, after written warnings, he continues to violate the disciplinary rules of the workplace, the employer shall, provided that the Islamic Labor Council is in agreement, be entitled to pay to the worker a sum equal to his last monthly wage for each year of service as a length-of-service allowance,

in addition to any deferred entitlements, and to terminate his employment contract.” The new draft would alter section 27 so that the employer can terminate an employment contract with a worker after two written warnings, without any need for the approval of the Islamic Labor Council. These changes to sections 21 and 27, if passed, will allow employers to dismiss workers much more easily.

If employers are to obtain such an advantage, is there any advantage accruing to workers in the draft amendments to the 1990 labor law? A glance at chapter 6 of the existing law shows that it does not allow for the existence of any independent worker organization, except the Workers’ House, which is really a channel for government control over workers. According to section 130 of the chapter, “in order to propagate and disseminate Islamic culture and to defend the achievements of the Islamic Revolution,” workers in industrial, agricultural, service and craftsman’s establishments may establish Islamic associations whose duties, powers and functions shall be drawn up by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the Islamic Propagation Organization, and approved by the Council of Ministries. Moreover, according to note 4 of section 131 in the chapter, the workers of any given unit may establish only an Islamic Labor Council, a guild society or workers’ representatives, which in practice means that workers are not allowed to set up anything, since Islamic Labor Councils already exist in every workplace of any size. All these provisions remain in the draft, in which a single section has replaced six sections of the 1990 law, but with the same consequences for workers. According to the new section, “in order to propagate and disseminate Islamic culture and to protect the legitimate and statutory rights and interests of workers and employers and to improve their economic situation, in a manner guaranteeing the protection of the interests of society as a whole,” workers subject to the labor code and the employers of a given profession or industry may establish Islamic associations, Islamic Labor Councils or elect their own representatives. At least as far as workers’ demand for having independent organizations is concerned, the changes made in the draft give no advantage to the workers. The new draft proposed by the Ministry of Labor under Ahmadinejad seems to be a lose-lose game for workers: Employers get the right of expedited dismissal, without workers gaining any right to form independent trade unions.

## Conditions of Possibility

The decline in militant collective action among both Tehrani teachers and bus drivers under Ahmadinejad seems to capture the situation of Iranian working people as a whole. Unhappy Iranian workers increasingly pursue their interests through individual activities, whether political or economic, rather than collective political action. Indeed, the “vertical” communication of grievances to the authorities that was prevalent during

the “reformist moment,” thanks to the more open society of those years, has given way to “horizontal” grumbling with co-workers and colleagues. Alternatively (or simultaneously), Iranians dissatisfied with their jobs seek additional income-generating opportunities in their struggles to survive and improve their individual lots.

How do we explain this trend in Iranian society? Fortunately, social theory has something to say in this regard. The political economist Albert O. Hirschman demonstrated that modern societies are predisposed to oscillate between periods of intense preoccupation with public issues and periods of almost total concentration on individual improvement and private welfare goods. By taking the psychological mechanism of disappointment seriously, Hirschman explains the swing from public to private concerns as the result of the frustrations of participation in public activity. Nevertheless, disappointment by itself cannot explain the recent downturn in labor activism in Iran.

As one of Hirschman’s critics writes, people’s choices may change either as their preferences change or as their possibilities change.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in contemporary Iran, it is the shrunken possibilities for working people that most credibly explain their relative quiescence. At the legal level, the Ministry of Labor is slated to forward amendments to the 1990 labor law that appear designed to forestall independent worker organization. At the level of the state, following the reconsolidation of hardline conservative control over all the branches of government, the authorities are determined to continue the repression of mass protest as well as to maintain an intimidating atmosphere of retaliation. Last but not least, the power struggles among reformist and conservative factions within the state, which protest movements could sometimes exploit to promote their own agendas, have disappeared with the defeat of the reformists. The main question for Iranian workers is whether these structural conditions of possibility will change in favor of revived worker activism. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 *Results of Survey in 28 Centers of Iranian Provinces: Iranians’ Values and Attitudes* (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, 2004), pp. 78, 84. [Persian]
- 2 Mohammad Maljoo, “The Economic Demands of the Middle Class in Iran: A Case Study of Teachers,” *Goft-o-Gu* 46 (Spring 2006), p. 26. [Persian]
- 3 S. Moidfar and G. Zahani, “A Study to Explain Job Dissatisfaction Among Teachers: The Case of Nishabur’s Teachers,” *Iranian Journal of Sociology* 6/1 (Spring 2005), p. 144. [Persian]
- 4 Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 25.
- 5 Shirzad Abdollahi, “Tasks That Had to Be Done by Teachers Before the Demonstration,” *Lowh* 13 (July 2002), p. 43. [Persian]
- 6 *Resalat*, January 19, 2001.
- 7 Iranian Students’ News Agency, January 26, 2001.
- 8 *Sharq*, March 11, 2003.
- 9 BBC Persian, March 9, 2005.
- 10 *Sharq*, January 19, 2004. This newspaper has subsequently been closed.
- 11 *Naghd-e No* (January 2006).
- 12 *Nameh* (March 2006).
- 13 *Gooya.com*, April 27, 2006.
- 14 See, for example, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Human Resources in Iran: Potentials and Challenges,” *Iranian Studies* 38/1 (March 2005).
- 15 Arthur L. Stinchcombe, review of *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*, by Albert O. Hirschman, *Theory and Society* 12/5 (September 1983), p. 691.