

How Can the International Community More Effectively Support the Iranian Labour Movement?

June 2021

Executive Summary

Iranian workers have been protesting at workplaces and going on strike to express their demands within different economic sectors of society. Despite seven years of consecutive protests across the country, their demands remain unmet and further protests seem inevitable. Workers' protests frequently lack strategic outlook and effective organization and coordination. Furthermore, workers are not sufficiently creative in their advocacy, relying purely on demonstrations and strikes. They struggle to communicate and network effectively with other workers, let alone engage regulators and employers. Absent clear strategies to voice their demands and realize their goals, Iranian workers all too frequently rely on outdated approaches rather than build their own unique solutions.

Recommendations

Help Iranian workers to diversify their methods of protest

Iranian workers need to get more exposure to 'behind-the-scene' and other subtle forms of advocacy to strengthen their voice and build power.

Stimulate the creation of independent trade unions

Encourage the creation and development of independent workers' associations and trade unions that can organise internally and build advocacy on behalf of workers' communities.

Strengthen trade union leadership in Iran

Build the capacity of Iranian workers to accelerate efforts through social media channels to raise public awareness about the issues affecting their communities. Help establish viable models of successful social advocacy campaigns that can then be transmitted on to workers in other sectors.

Enhance the international visibility of Iranian workers

The international community can help Iranian workers by drawing attention to their situation at International Organizations and other forums.

Actions to Empower Iranian Worker Rights Activists

Capacity building

Iran's workforce of 24 million workers represents a great force for positive change. Iranian workers and worker rights activists urgently need more training on building people power through collective action. Resources for capacity building are essential to help strengthen Iranian workers and worker rights activists. By building an extensive online learning hub, we hope to equip Iranian labour rights activists with significant and valuable resources in their own language.

Advocacy

Iranian workers urgently need increased awareness about their fundamental human and labour rights, as well as the need for independent trade unions. Furthermore, Iranian worker rights activists need to learn how to advocate more effectively for their issues and demands at local, national and international levels. More support is needed to help them formulate messages, develop strategies, and communicate effectively with stakeholders and so build support to demand change.

Exchange of information and experience

Iranian workers' rights activists need connecting bridges, both within and outside Iran. With such bridges, they will be better able to share their experiences and build relationships – particularly with the International Community – and gain insight into new practices and learn from others. By helping foster greater collaboration and bonds between workers in Iran with others around the world, valuable support, insights and mutual understanding will develop.

The Iranian government cracks down hard on workers' protests by, for instance, arresting or beating up their leaders, and even putting them in jail. Yet, despite this severe repression, workers' protests continue to take place in Iran. Any such protests are always heavily monitored by armed Police.

source of photo: <https://www.fardanews.com/fa/tiny/news-954788>



Situational Context: Why do Workers Protest?

The situation of workers in Iran has deteriorated severely over the past decade. Despite the [severe repression of worker protests by the Iranian government](#), worker protests in Iran are on the rise. The Iranian worker community is struggling. Most workers receive meagre and desperately low wages – even though the cost of living is rising dramatically due to bad governance, corruption, unfair redistribution, and the effect of International sanctions on Iran. This makes it hard for most people to cover their basic expenses in terms of food, housing and so on, let alone make a decent living.

In the meantime, the relentless and corrupt privatization of publicly-owned companies, which benefits primarily government loyalists and their family members, means that the short-term financial interests of shareholders increasingly outweigh those of the workers. Once in the hands of government loyalists and their family members, formerly publicly-owned companies are typically stripped of their assets, with every asset – including the land – converted to cash as rapidly as possible, despite the company or factory being perfectly profitable. The end result for workers at such newly privatized companies is typically the loss of their job without any social protection.

Rising levels of nepotism and cronyism in the country is making it increasingly difficult for workers to hold company leaders accountable for declining working conditions and unsafe workplaces. Furthermore, weak or absent unions, coupled with worker ignorance about their rights result in ineffective protests and unmet demands. Unsurprisingly, and despite government efforts to stifle protest during the coronavirus pandemic, worker protests continue to increase.



Our main problems consist of unfair wages, that are sometimes paid late or not at all, severe job insecurity and a lack of independent and efficient workers' associations that can fight for us. Moreover, these issues are all connected and strengthen one another.

An Iranian worker



Key Findings

After analysing worker protests in Iran over the past 7 years, three major trends are visible:

First, labour protests have become more widely distributed in Iran. Instead of being confined to the big cities or large factories, they now take place all over the country. **Second**, workers from more economic sectors are expressing their demands and protesting collectively. Protests, once limited mainly to the mining sector and heavy industries, now routinely involve educational and service sector workers in street protests and elsewhere. **Third**, there is an increased level of networking and collective action among workers from different companies – which is a relatively new phenomenon in Iran. For instance, oil industry workers in the Southern

part of Iran all agreed to protest at the same time in 2019 and 2020. Truck drivers did the same in various cities throughout in Iran in 2018.

Limited Success

The trends show that Iranian workers are growing in their activism for better working conditions. Sadly, the activism and protests have not yet resulted in significant improvements in their lives, since employers generally refuse to give in. In addition, these protests represent significant risks to those involved and can result in job losses. Iranian worker activists need more support in developing strategies and methods to express their demands and achieve change effectively and efficiently.

Alternative Forms of Protest

There is significant scope for further development and capacity building. Iranian workers routinely, and often very quickly, take to the streets or engage in strikes as a means to be heard. Iranian worker activists need mentoring and training from International Organizations and the International labour Trade Union movement. Our analysis of recent large-scale protest in Iran indicates that it can, at times, be more fruitful for workers to work 'behind the scenes' in order to build advocacy and power. Initiating conversations with regulators and public officials, grabbing the public's attention through online media, and building awareness among workers, all represent potential alternative strategic approaches.

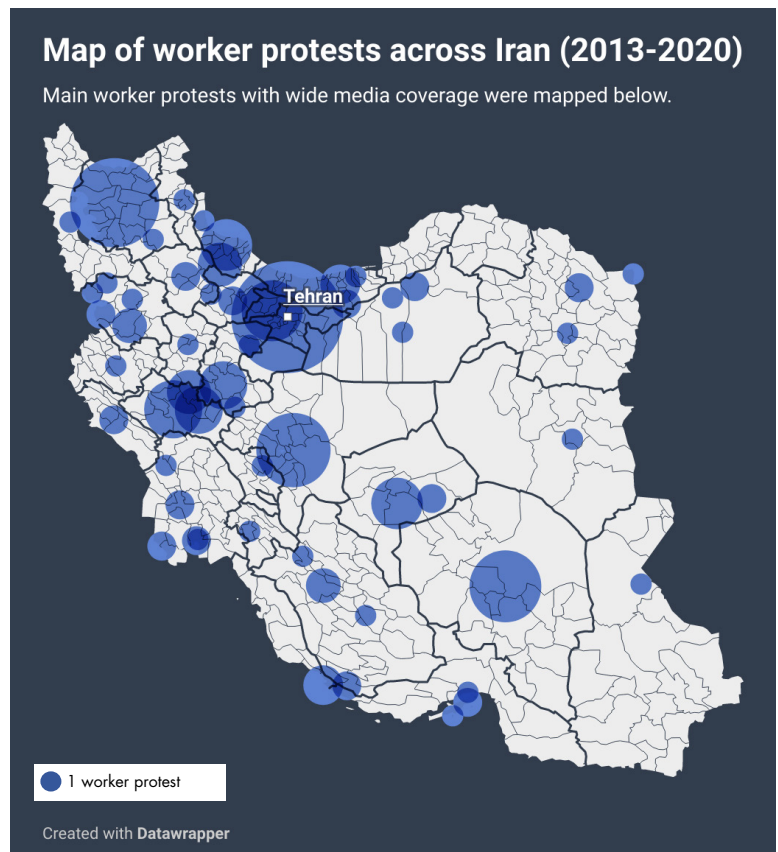
Protests organised by teachers in 2019 and 2020 represent a useful case study. Besides strikes and sit-ins, teachers proactively used social media to generate public attention for their cause, leading to widespread public outcry, which ultimately pushed officials to meet the teachers' demands.

Lobbying constitutes another possible and relatively safe form of action. Involving relevant (government) officials or MPs through targeted letters can help put workers' issues onto the political agenda. Also, meetings with local and national entities such as Islamic Councils has proven to be fruitful in some industries and sectors.

Leadership and Better Organization

Spontaneous protests that erupt without clear leadership stand less chances of success than those that are channelled and coordinated by a labour union. For instance, workers in the service industry have gained greater success in their advocacy through their labour unions and associations.

Furthermore, union officials are often more experienced and skilled in negotiation, and may also be more inclined to use the alternative types of protest outlined above as part of an overall advocacy strategy.



Our study

To gain more of an insight into the dispersal of these protests, as well as their effectiveness, Iranian news coverage on labor protests taking place over 2013-2020 was mapped and analyzed. Altogether, over 130 newspaper articles were studied. Note, not all protests will receive press coverage, nor will the article always report on the outcome of these protests, or how they came about.

To gain further insight, in-depth interviews were held with eight workers who were willing to talk to us on the condition that their identities remain anonymous (so as not to endanger their or their families' lives). These interviews supported the analysis and helped to build a detailed needs assessment for Iranian workers engaging in successful protest.

Increasingly, Iranian workers indicate the urgent need for a truly independent labour union. Whereas worker protests in Iran traditionally focused on getting better pay or working conditions, modern demands revolve around the right to legally engage in collective action. As such, the need to be represented by a real labour union is a top priority. As described in [our March 2021 Policy Brief](#), the International Community, Governments Officials, Labour Unions, and the ILO can all help by advocating for the establishment of free and independent labour unions in Iran and demanding that Iranian workers be granted the right to freedom of association and assembly!

Recommendations

Demonstrations and strikes have been the most popular, yet least successful form of protest for Iranian workers over the past seven years. As the situation deteriorates for Iranian workers and their demands remain unmet, more such protests are expected, which frequently come at great personal cost for those involved.

To be more effective and reduce the personal risks for those involved, it is necessary for Iranian workers to have access to a more diverse 'action toolkit' of options. Our analysis indicates that workers usually do not consider other forms of protest, either because they are unaware of the alternatives, or because of concerns about a lack the knowledge regarding alternative methods.

In addition, there is an urgent need for the establishment of more independent labour unions in Iran, and for the existing ones to be able to operate freely and independently, without the government interference on their scope of action and choice of leaders.

To support Iranian workers in their struggle and to increase their chances of achieving positive change and better working conditions, policy makers and labour unions outside Iran should:

Help Iranian workers diversity their methods of protest

Share information and best practice on the use of social media and lobbying with Iranian workers. The use of social media as a means to pressure employers and the government to advocate on behalf of workers' needs is essential for successful social activism and strategic planning.

Stimulate and support the creation of independent labour unions

Educate and support workers in establishing or joining existing unions and associations to help build and advance their advocacy efforts in both formal and legal channels. Advocate to the Government of Iran and the ILO to allow free and independent labour unions (see our [March 2021 Policy Brief](#)) in the country. Support advocacy training and capacity building to share information and knowledge on principles and best practices of freedom of association to help Iranian workers organize their networks locally.

Strengthen trade union leadership in Iran

Share best practices and skills to support worker rights activists and trade union leaders in their efforts to secure better working conditions for workers and their communities. This includes: negotiation skills, using existing labour laws, exploiting legal strategies, etc. Share information and knowledge to call out the Iranian government through the ILO and elsewhere in violations of fundamental human rights; for example, when arresting labour union leaders. Provide training on the use of infographics, video clips, and other tools.

Increase the visibility of Iranian workers around the world

The international community can help Iranian workers by drawing attention to their situation at International Organizations and other forums. Besides putting pressure on the Iranian government to respect workers' rights, international attention for their cause will help worker activists feel supported in the extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances they continue to face. Increased support and resources for emotional resilience and mental health would represent enormous support to the community of Iranian workers and worker rights activists.

VolunteerActivists

Volunteer Activists is a non-profit civil society organization based in the Netherlands. We envision dynamic, inclusive, and democratic civil societies in Iran and the MENA region, representing all citizens in their efforts to build pluralistic and diverse societies and establish accountable governments.

Our mission is to expand and strengthen the civic space in Iran and the MENA region, to reflect and amplify the marginalized voices, and to accelerate the transformation of civil society to a stronger position to become an influential right holder and duty bearer.

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