

WORKERS RIGHTS WATCH

A biannual report on worker protests and legal developments in Iran

July to December 2022

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
1 Introduction	6
Labour issues	8
2 Labour protests in Iran	8
Privatization	9
Pensioners	11
Venue of field protests	15
Map of labour protests	15
Distribution	16
Governmental responses to labour protests	17
3 Government policies & law-making	17
Successful strikes	20
(Proposed) legal adjustments	21
4 Analysis & Way Forward	24
Opportunities for trade unions	28

Executive Summary

This report is the outcome of Volunteer Activists' (VA) effort to undertake a comprehensive examination of labour issues and labour protests in Iran in the period July – December 2022. It is the first in a series of biannual reports on these issues that Volunteer Activists (VA) will publish in the coming years.

In doing so, VA aims to offer the international community more insights into current labour issues and labour protests in Iran. Knowing that their voices are heard internationally, is highly important for Iran's labour movement. Also, by gaining an in-depth understanding of the needs of Iranian workers, as well as the capacities and needs of trade unions advocating for these, subsequent programs and activities could be designed by international donors to meet these organizational needs, resulting in greater impact. Moreover, given its contacts with Iranian labour activists on the ground, VA is relatively well positioned to provide this information.

The Iranian labour landscape is vastly diverse and mapping the situation regarding labour issues and labour struggles was only possible through comprehensive and intensive research. Our assessment of the situation regarding labour issues and labour rights has been based on primary and secondary sources. VA conducted interviews, sometimes online, with some of our labour activists on the ground. (Verified) media reports and published research were the secondary data source, alongside social media monitoring.

Based on this research, the following key observations can be made on labour issues and labour protests in Iran in the period July - December 2022:

- While the Iranian government cracked down on labour protests, it couldn't ignore labour demands altogether and some cases gave in to workers on strike
- Many of the new laws or drafted bills that emerged in the period under study could endanger workers' rights
- Whilst Iran's labour movement is faced with many restrictions, it could create more room de manoeuvre by organizing itself and its actions differently

Other takeaways from this report are listed in Table 1.

Table 1a: takeaways about labour protests.

Labour protests
Workers' field actions experienced fluctuations and faced restrictions because of the nationwide protests, but they didn't stop.
Dozens of trade union and labour activists were fired, denied salaries, prosecuted, arrested, and imprisoned during the past six months just for trying to assert trade union and labour rights. Most of these people were teachers' rights activists.
While the intensity of the government's crackdown on protests reduced the frequency and scope of trade union protests among wage earning groups such as teachers, labour protests were on the rise in several economic sectors, namely in oil, steel, automotive and manufacturing industries as well as in the telecommunications sector.
Some union protests were held in solidarity with the actions of Iran's protest movement (virtual protests and teachers' sit-in, oil project workers' strike)

Table 1 b: takeaways about labour issues.

Labour issues
The government and the Iranian parliament both seek to alter the labour law, often at the expense of existing labour rights.
Due to Iran's censorship and control of the internet and (social) media, new workers issues are emerging. As a result of Iran's blocking and filtering of social media, employees in the online economy, such as owners of webshops, increasingly see their livelihoods threatened.
Planned laws regarding, among others, the eradication of 'fake news' pose a great threat to (critical) journalists.

Altogether, this report demonstrates the situation Iranian trade unions operate in, illustrates the current capacity of Iranian trade unions (and the limitations to these) and shows both existing and emerging needs of Iranian workers.

1 Introduction

Independent trade unions often struggle to thrive, or even exist, in authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, they have an important role to play in securing more equality and democracy for citizens. What trends were visible in Iran's worker protests over the last six months of 2022? And to what extent were these activities affected by the rise of Iran's protest movement from September onwards? And are there also new labour issues that haven't been the focus of protests yet, but that do affect workers' welfare? This report attempts to answer these questions with a focus on the period July - December 2022.

At a first glance, Iranian worker rights may appear to be well protected by the Iranian state. The Iranian Labour Law and the Social Security Act offer various forms of protection for workers. The Iranian Labour Law stipulates, for example, that the minimum wage should be adjusted to the national inflation rate, whilst the pension age is set at 55 for women and 60 for men.

Also, Iran is not just a member of ILO ; it was among the states that founded this UN organisation aimed at improving worker rights across the world. Conform ILO instructions, its Supreme Labour Council, a government organisation which, among others, sets the rate of the minimum wage, consists for one third of worker representatives.

Iranian laws protecting workers's rights have frequently turned out to be paper tigers however – just like formal decisions taken by the Supreme Labour Council that are in the interest of Iranian workers. Coupled with Iran's shattered and often badly managed economy, it is perhaps little surprising that labour rights continue to be a huge issue in Iran – in spite of all types of attempts by the Iranian state to suppress independent trade unions and workers' protests.

This report provides more of an insight into key issues in the realm of workers' issues and protests in the period July - December 2022.

In doing so the report has three objectives:

- To identify labour challenges and subsequent labour protests in the period under study
- To map governmental policy that has a bearing on labour issues and rights
- To suggest a viable way forward for Iran's labour movement, given the observed trends and patterns

The data in this report are derived from three sources. First and foremostly our labour contacts 'on the ground' in Iran. To add to their insights, analyses of (verified) reports in Iranian newspapers were also used, while social media monitoring was also used. Where applicable, use was sometimes also made of research findings, both academically and from (recruitment) companies.

It is important to note, that when it comes to actions and developments regarding Iranian labour, this report is far from exhaustive. One reason is that information gathering in dictatorships is notoriously difficult, including because people may be afraid to speak out of fear of potential repercussions. Also, in some economic sectors information was more forthcoming than in others. As such, issues in relation to labour in Iran are likely to be even greater than this reports details.

In line with its three objectives, this report consists of three parts. The next chapter will, after first giving an overview of key labour issues in Iran, zoom in on the labour protests that happened between July and December 2022. Following on from this, chapter three considers governmental actions with a bearing on

labour issues in the period under study. Besides mapping the governmental responses to the labour protests described in chapter two, it also lists (drafted) bills and laws, or adaptations to these, that may affect the labour rights of Iranian workers. Building upon the preceding chapters, the fourth and final chapter of this report considers the strengths and weaknesses of Iran's labour movement and offers suggestions for the way forward.

2 Labour protests in Iran

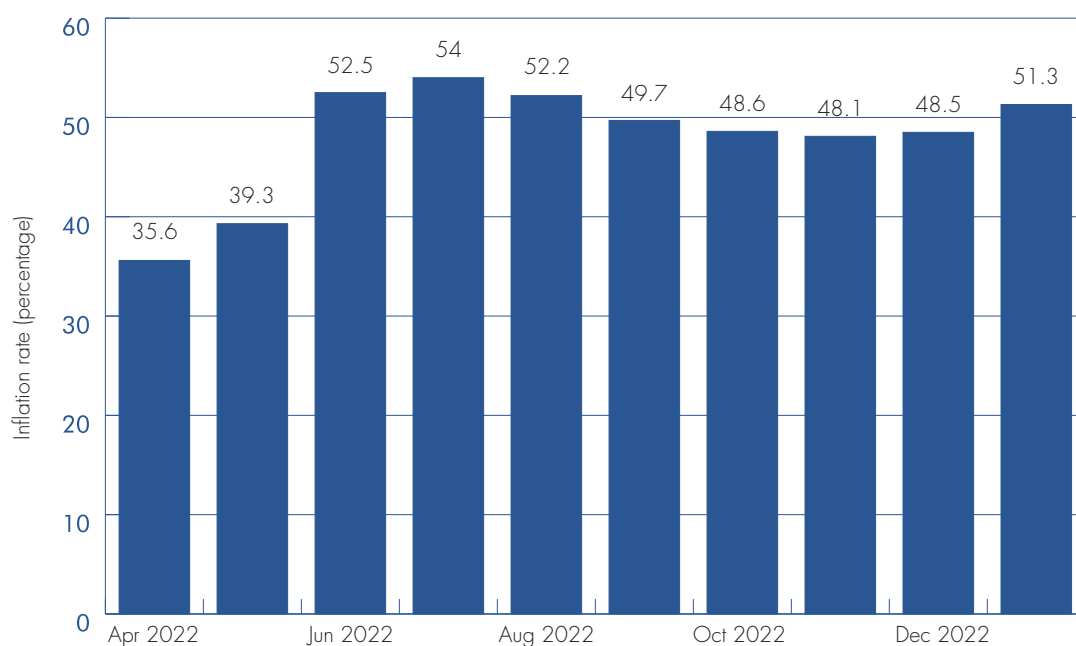
As mentioned in the Introduction, there is a gap between the welfare of workers as outlined in Iran's Labour Law and Social Security Act, and the reality on the ground. This chapter sets off with an overview of the most pressing labour issues in Iran, after which it will zoom in on the labour protests that took place between July – December 2022.

Labour issues

Iran is a huge country with a wide range of economic sectors. As such, the precise struggles of working Iranians may differ according to profession or sector or even region. Still, there are some universal grievances that are widely shared and that have been key incentives for strikes and other labour action across professions and sectors over the past decade – including the period under study.

Unindexed wages, benefits and pensions

Due to the international sanctions on Iran, as well as governmental mismanagement of the economy, inflation is very high in Iran. In July 2022 the annual inflation rate had risen to 54 per cent (from 52.5 percent in June). Food prices increased by 87 percent as a result (source: Trading Economics). Wages, pensions and benefits aren't usually adjusted to match these price developments, however. This has led to widespread poverty, with people struggling to pay for life's necessities, from rent or mortgage to food, cloths and medical costs.



Inflation rate over time according to the Statistical Center of Iran (tradingeconomics.com)

Late payment of wages

Iranian workers frequently face late payment of wages by employers. Not getting paid for a couple of months is, unfortunately, far from uncommon. Clearly, this has a huge impact on the welfare of the workers concerned, as well as their families. The immediate payment of salary arrears or deferred health or pension insurance may therefore be an important demand of protesting workers.

[According to data from Human Rights Activists](#), an Iranian NGO, around 76 percent of workers suffering

from payroll arrears work for the public sector, 7 percent in the energy sector and 14 percent for (private) companies.

Unsafe work environment

Iran's Legal Medicine Organisation [reported](#) that 15,997 Iranians died in work-related incidents in the period 2008 - 2018. Particularly in the case of so-called 'blue collar' jobs, safety conditions are an issue. For instance, 42 percent of workers who died in this period [fell from unsecured building ledges and about half of those injured were alleged to be construction workers](#). According to Human Rights Activists, at least 10,707 workers were injured in work-related incidents between May 2021 and May 2022, while 811 workers died in work-related incidents in that period. Better working conditions may be an important demand of protesting Iranian workers.

Lack of pay scales

Many Iranians complain about favouritism in the workplace and, linked to this, about salaries being determined in an unfair and untransparent manner. Nepotism, rather than objective guidelines, may inform the allocation of salary and promotions. According to Professor in Public Administration Ali Gholi Rowshan, this problem is [particularly prominent in the public sector](#). As such, many of those working for the public sector, including teachers and nurses, demand the introduction of (progressive) pay scales and, linked to this, a (progressive) grading system based on acquired knowledge and skills, levels of experience, performance evaluations and other measurables.

Job insecurity due to temporary contracts

90-95 percent of Iranians are estimated to be employed on temporary contracts. In a country with an estimated unemployment rate of 10.8 percent, this creates great job insecurity – whilst also making it more difficult for Iranian workers to insist that employers treat them correctly, as they can be laid off very easily. People in non-office jobs are particularly likely to be contract workers. For instance, 95 per cent of oil workers are estimated to work on temporary contracts.

In 1996, Iran's Administrative Court of Justice stipulated that employers were allowed to use temporary contracts for jobs "of a continuous nature." According to Iranian labour activists, this has caused a severe rise in temporary contracts. Under these temporary contracts workers often enjoy far less favourable labour rights than they would under a permanent contract.

Mismanagement of companies

Iranian strikers sometimes also protest against the mismanagement, and consequently malfunctioning, of the companies they work for, demanding more competent leadership or governmental intervention.

Following the (partial) privatization of many former state companies, appointed CEO's and other high-ranking managers sometimes thanked their position more to their ties to the Iranian government than their capacities. When this compromises a company's performance and turnover, this can have huge consequences for workers, from job losses to unpaid salary (arrears). The textbox below provides further details on this issue).

Privatization

The relentless and corrupt privatization of publicly owned companies, which benefits primarily government loyalists and their family members, has also meant 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, even when 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.

Internet disturbances

Like in many countries around the world, the rise of the Internet, and, in its following, social media, has meant that economic activities in Iran increasingly take place online. Some Iranians now work even entirely online, from small businesses selling their goods through online channels to tech workers. However, the Iranian government often deliberately throttles internet access, especially when there is social unrest in the country (see the text box for further details), which has led to widespread anger among Iranian workers.

In the period under study, this issue became even more prominent. Following the emergence of large-scale, nationwide protests after Mahsa Amini's death on the 16th of September, Iran heavily disrupted internet access in an attempt to curb these protests. Popular social media such as Instagram and WhatsApp were especially targeted, but also Skype, Apple Store and Viber. This near Internet blackout took place throughout September, October and November, with the heaviest restrictions being between the 21st of September and the 4th of October. As the Freedom Online Coalition noticed on the 20th of October, these actions had severe economic impacts and '[reinforced a continued climate of economic uncertainty](#)'.

Following the outbreak of widespread protests in September 2022, the disruption of the mobile internet, the filtering of popular social networks, and the increased talk of a complete cut off of the global internet hugely damaged Iran's economy. Source: [Etemadonline.com](#)

- 95% less advertisement in Instagram.
- 80% less online sales.
- Over 2 million small business had no income.
- 70% less online transactions.
- Over 9 million Iranians lost (some of) their income.
- 97% less online visits to Instagram pages of small businesses.

A widely published [report by Job Vision](#), a major recruitment and employment website in Iran, shows this effect on a microlevel. Job Vision had held a survey among 8000 workers in the digital space regarding employment in the period that internet restrictions were at a height. The answers, which were published on the 28th of November 2022, indicated that 1 out of 5 workers had lost their jobs due to the internet disruptions – while 16 percent expected to be fired soon. Also, 1 out of 5 companies indicated they had had to cut back 30 percent of their workforce due to the Internet disruptions. In addition, 45 percent of surveyed businesses stated that they were forced to reduce or delay staff payments as a result of faltering business due to the Internet restrictions.

According to the ISNA news agency, 10 million Iranians earn their income through Instagram. Furthermore, over 2.4 million businesses use Instagram as their primary mean of sales and marketing. Overall, the digital space has a share of 7.2% in the gross domestic product (GDP) in Iran.

Source: [ISNA news](#), September 28, 2022

The filtering and blocking of Instagram –Iran’s most popular social network – turned out to have had an especially profound impact. Nearly 80 percent of those who lost their work believed that restricted access to Instagram was the main reason behind their unemployment.

Besides the economic grievances outlined above, political demands may also inspire labour actions. These political grievances tend to relate to the authoritarian nature of the Iranian state and include the following:

Lack of freedom of association

During labour actions, demands for a lift of the governmental ban on independent trade unions and freedom of association sometimes surface, including in statements by labour activists.

Arrests of labour activists

As will be illustrated in more depth in the following chapter, even the most peaceful labour union activists are detained in Iran and sent to prison. Demands for their release play an important role in protests, especially those organised by the union they belong to. When ‘common’ workers get arrested during a strike or other actions, demands for their release also may become part of, or [a reason for, follow-up protests](#).

Anger over the treatment of (young) protesters

The rise of Iran’s protest movement after Mahsa Amini’s death led to harsh state crackdowns, during which even [minors were killed](#). Strikes and other labour actions were organised to express solidarity with the protesters and to demand an end to these governmental actions.

Dictatorship

In a more general sense, anti-governmental sentiments are also sometimes part of labour actions. Slogans like ‘Down with the dictatorship’ can sometimes be heard or seen. Whilst these sentiments became more prominent after the rise of Iran’s protest movement, they were always there.

The issues outlined above underpinned workers’ actions over the past decade, including between July and December 2022. The remainder of this chapter will now consider these labour protests in more depth.

Pensioners

The largest labour protests in the period under study were not staged by workers, but by retirees who demanded higher pensions and better living conditions. Iranian pensioners covered by the Social Security Act defied governmental bans on gatherings in the street and staged both protest marches and protest gatherings in front of governmental buildings. In doing so, the pensioners didn’t just brave police and security troops, but also the high temperatures of the Iranian summer. In the city of Ahwaz, gatherings were even held in 50 degrees Celsius.

The protests by Iranian pensioners started on the 6th of June 2022, when the Iranian government announced an increase in the pensions of non-minimum-wage retirees by 10 percent. This not only violated an earlier pledge to increase it by 38 percent plus 5.15 million Iranian rials (\$16 on a monthly basis), this 10 percent raise was much lower than the inflation rate (52 percent in June). As such, the retirees de facto lost income notwithstanding the 10 percent rise. Source: [RFE/Radio Farda](#)

The retirees expressed their anger through various slogans, including [„government betrays, parliament supports,“](#) and [„the master \(Khamenei\) acts like a god, the nation begs.“](#) To show and symbolise their

precarious situation, pensioners would sometimes also sit besides empty table cloths. Particularly towards the end of 2022, the protests grew more political, with some protestors also demanding that the government resign.

Besides being the largest protest, this was also the longest-lasting labour protest, continuing into 2023, and a protest that occurred all over the country.



Protestors show their empty tablecloths, as a symbol for the low pensions. Image: AzadeMokhtari/Twitter

Telecom workers

During the summer of 2022, another type of labour protest also took place. Both workers and retirees from the telecommunication sector engaged in actions¹. For instance, telecom workers went on strike in Shahr-e Kord city on the 6th of July.

Meanwhile, telecom retirees staged protests in 18 provinces [to protest the non-payment of their pensions](#). Like the pensioners covered by the Social Security Act, they gathered in front of government buildings, including the Ministry of Communications in Tehran. Protests also took place in Shiraz, Rasht, Ahvaz, Tabriz and multiple other cities. The slogans carried or chanted by the pensioners sometimes addressed president Ebrahim Raisi directly, stating for instance, „Shameless liar, what happened to your promises.“

Like the protests by the pensioners covered by the Social Security Act, these strikes were relatively long, still being ongoing at occasions.

Miners

In early July, strikes also occurred in the Sungun Copper Mine – the largest open-cast copper mine of Iran, located in East Azarbaijan. Estimated numbers ran in the 1200. The miners on strike demanded, among others, higher salaries and better working conditions.

It was not just in the summer that labour actions took off, however. October and November also saw the emergence of a number of strikes, including in sectors in which strikes also already occurred in preceding years.

¹ Who are covered by a different pension fund than the protesting pensioners mentioned above



Protestors at the Sungun Copper Mine. Image: [Iran Wire](#)

Workers in the oil and petrochemical industry

This included the oil and petrochemical industry – of vital importance to Iran’s economy. In the first week of October, there was a petrochemical workers’ strike in Asalouyeh (off the coast of the Persian Gulf), which was soon followed by workers’ walk-outs in (Phase 2 of) the state-owned Abadan Refinery.

A main demand of the strikers was for all workers to benefit from Article 10 of the Law on Duties and Powers of the Ministry of Petroleum – as had initially been the arrangement – rather than just office workers. An end to temporary contracts, higher wages and better working conditions were additional labour demands.

Among workers in the oil and petrochemical industry, project workers have one of the most insecure jobs in terms of work contracts, welfare and insurance facilities. On top of that, their working conditions tend to be dire. They generally work in construction and/or the maintenance of refinery equipment and structures. The nature of their job is fundamentally different from that of (permanent) workers in the operation, production and distribution sectors, which are the pulsing heart of the oil and gas industry.

But that was not all. By October, the Iranian protest movement had emerged following the death of Amini, to which the Iranian government responded with great force, even [killing teenagers](#). In response, the Organizing Council of Oil Contract Workers in Iran announced a strike by (temporary) petrochemical contract workers on the 29th of October to express solidarity with the ‘popular revolt’ in the country. A little later it announced that permanent workers in Iran’s oil industry would likewise [go on strike that day](#).

This mix of economic and political demands was also visible in renewed oil workers’ protests that occurred in the midst of December 2022. Protest actions, including strikes, took place in cities such as Mahshahr, Ahvaz, Asaluyeh, Gachsaran and Tang-e-Bijar.

The actions followed a call by the Council for Organizing Oil Contract-Workers’ Protests for a nationwide strike. Lack of job security and demands for higher wages and retirement bonuses were listed as prime areas of concern. But the same call for action also stated that [“we all know that executions and repressions serve to enslave us more, and workers will suffer the consequences”](#) thereby entangling sympathy for the fate of the young protesters with labour concerns. In some cases, workers also shouted ‘Down with the dictator’ and other anti-governmental slogans in front of governmental buildings.

Oil strikes constitute a main problem for the Iranian government, as the oil industry is a key sector of Iran’s

(battered) economy. Also (massive) strikes by oil industry workers played a key role in overthrowing the regime of the Shah, during the Islamic revolution. As such, such strikes also carry political weight.

Workers in the steel, iron, and automotive industries

From October onwards, there were also strikes in Iran's manufacturing industry, mainly in steel, iron and automotive industries. A main one followed the call for a national strike by the truck drivers union. On Saturday the 26th of November, there were strikes at steel and automobile factories, including at Esfahan Steel Company, a company with around four thousand employees and [a producer of construction steel and rails](#). Strikes also occurred at Alvand Sarma Afarin Incorporation, Morattab Car Manufacturing, Safe Khodro Car Manufacturing Company and Qazvin's Pars Appliances Company.

Besides demands for better payment and better job security, workers protested against managerial inefficiency and issued calls for governmental intervention, including regarding the struggling Ahvaz Steel Company in the southwest of Iran and the Moratab Khodro Company, a renowned SUV manufacturer in Tehran.

Truck drivers and (long-distance) bus drivers

Both in terms of media exposure and geographical distribution, the most prominent labour protest in the period under study appears to have been the one by (self-employed) truck drivers and drivers of long distance buses. It was primarily organised by the truck drivers union and started on the 26 of November. The strikers demanded first and foremostly [extra fuel subsidies and lower freight rates](#): the rate at which a certain cargo is delivered from one point to another. A (better) supplementary insurance like health insurance and a proper implementation of the law on hard and harmful jobs were other demands. The strike lasted altogether 10 days and took place in several cities, including [Qazvin, Isfahan, Kashan, Bandar and Abbas](#).

As with the other strikes, there were also political aspects to these protests. The Union of Truck Owners and Drivers of Iran justified the strike by pointing to '[the government's lack of response to the problems facing its members](#)' as well as 'the plight of our innocent colleagues and other people in Kurdistan, Baluchistan and Izeh and other blood-stained cities'².



In spite of governmental anger and threats, truck drivers did not move their trucks but often parked them alongside the road instead. As a result, lots of goods and cargo could not be delivered throughout Iran, resulting in great pressure on the government. Image: [DW](#)

² Thereby referring to the lethal governmental crackdown in these provinces following popular uprisings in these places related to Mahsa Amini's death on the 17th of September.

Nurses and teachers

Besides pensioners and workers in (partially) privatized companies, workers in the public sector also staged protests. This was particularly true for teachers and nurses. Like the labour protests mentioned above, these protests often reflected both economic and political demands. For instance, nurses launched an extensive (online) campaign on, and went on strike for, a 'fair and full implementation of a pay scale system for nurses'. But solidarity with the attacked protesters also played a role.

In the case of teachers' protests the latter motive dominated. The Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations was the first labour union to issue a call for a strike to support the protesters. It called upon teachers (and students) to strike in the first week of the academic year (starting from the 23rd of September). In doing so, it responded to appeals by the protestors on social media for employees in key government economic sectors "not to show up for work".

This plea was followed by several other calls for action. For instance, the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA) [announced a period of mourning on Telegram](#) on the 20th of October over the deaths of protesting pupils and students, both in street protests and during protests at schools. On the 22nd and 23 of October, it called for a sit in, stating, amongst others, that: "Military, security and private forces have been invading the privacy of schools and educational spaces. During this systematic repression, they have cruelly taken the lives of a number of students and children," and "rulers should know that the community of Iranian teachers do not tolerate these atrocities and brutality."

Alongside the protests mentioned above, shopkeepers and other small business owners sometimes closed down their businesses to protest. Also, there were rumours of incidental strikes by tech workers to protest the governmental internet interruptions. Since these strikes were hard to monitor and not part of collective labour actions, they are not considered in-depth for the purposes of this report.

Having zoomed in on the protest actions that emerged between July and December 2022 one by one, the remainder part of this chapter will show the larger picture, by displaying data emerging from comparisons between these strikes and an overall analysis.

Venue of field protests

The protests held in the last six months of 2022 were mainly held in the following locations:

- Workplace gatherings
- Gatherings in front of government buildings (e.g. ministries, provincial government offices, departments such as Social Security Organisation, etc.)
- Main streets of cities

Map of labour protests

A review of labour protests between July and December 2022 shows that from the 1.110 registered protests by Volunteer Activists, the most prominent strikes, both in terms of sequence of protests and level of media coverage, took place in the following sectors:

- Retirees (684 reported protests³)

³ Number of reported protests is across Iran. Protests in different cities at the same time were counted as individual protests. Through media investigations and journalist contacts inside Iran, a database of protests was formed and analyzed for this report.

- Public service sector (public, educational, health, etc.): nurses and medical staff, teachers, municipality workers (207 protests)
- Road transport: truck drivers and cargo transport drivers (72 protests)
- Oil and petrochemical industries: fixed-term contract, operational and permanent employment workers (44 protests)
- Manufacturing: workers of steel, iron, and automotive industries (parts supply chain) (24 protests)

In terms of duration, the protests by pensioners covered by Social Security Act rank first (more than three consecutive months). They are followed by public service sector workers like teachers and nurses, truck drivers and cargo transport drivers, workers of Esfahan Steel Company and temporary and permanent workers of oil and petrochemical industries, and finally car parts supply workers (Crouse and Bahman Motor Industrial Group, Moratab Khodro Company) and workers of steel and iron companies.

Distribution

Protests were mostly concentrated in Tehran, Bushehr, Khuzestan, Esfahan, and Qazvin provinces, respectively.



Map of worker protests across Iran from July 1st 2022 to December 31st 2022.

3 Government policies & law-making

The extent in which workers rights can be pursued will greatly depend on the room de manoeuvre provided by the state. To that end, this chapter considers policies and (proposed) legislative changes with a bearing on labour rights in Iran in the period under scrutiny.

Following on from the previous chapter, the first part of this chapter maps and analyses governmental responses to labour protests that occurred between July and December 2022. It considers both the repressive tactics that were used by the Iranian state to try and suppress labour unrest and the ways in which the Iranian government conceded to the demands of (some of) the protesting worker groups. The second part of the chapter looks at the legal picture, by delving into (proposed) changes to (labour) laws that either evoke new labour issues or partially settled existing labour issues.

Governmental responses to labour protests

The Iranian government predominantly ignored the demands issued by workers in the worker protests discussed in the previous chapter. But that was not all. In an attempt to curb labour unrest, it employed several repressive strategies. In doing so, it targeted particularly protesting groups that it deemed relatively powerful. For instance, while demonstrating pensioners were sometimes treated harshly by the riot police, few ended up in jail, because they were not considered a major threat. It would be too much to consider all the repressive strategies used by the Iranian government to try and counter the protests. Instead, the section below discusses the strategies most commonly used.

Arrests

Whenever Iranian workers were participating in labour protests – in particular strikes – Iranian police or security forces routinely arrested some of them. In doing so, it often targeted labour activists especially, particularly those belonging to a relatively powerful union⁴, such as the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations.

For instance, the Center for Human Rights in Iran reported that various labour activists were arbitrarily detained at the start of October. Their names, date of arrest and location are displayed below.

Arrested Labor Rights Activists in September/early October

- Leila Abbasi, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
- Jafar Valadkhan, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
- Ms. Ghelichkhani, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
- Mohammad Reza Nosrati, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
- Melika Kavand, teachers' activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
- Mozaffar Salehnia, Free Workers Union of Iran board member, September 21st, Sanandaj
- Shadi Aslani, teacher, September 21st, Sanandaj

⁴ This policy was at times not just influenced by the development of the protests in the period under study, but also by the government's earlier experiences with some of the labour unions organising these protests. For instance, earlier in 2022 there had been major strikes and campaigns by teachers and bus drivers, organised by respectively the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations and the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company.

- Reza Sharifeh, retired teacher, September 21st, Sanandaj
- Mohammad Karam Zamani, teachers' rights activist, September 27th, Bijar
- Davoud Razavi, bus trade union official, September 27th, Tehran
- Kamran Sakhtemangar, labor activist, September 29th, Saqqez, western Iran
- Mohammad Aref Jahangiri, retired teachers', October 1st, Sanandaj
- Hesam Mehdizadeh, teachers' rights activist, September 29th, Kamyaran, western Iran
- Edris Mehdizadeh, teachers' rights activist, September 29th, Kamyaran, western Iran
- Farzin Movafaghi, teachers' rights activist, September 29th, Kamyaran, western Iran
- Khabas Mozaffari, teachers' rights activist, September 29th, Kamyaran, western Iran
- Shahram Azmoudeh, teachers' rights activist/journalist, October 2nd, Talesh, northern Iran
- Mohammad Saeid Boueshagh, teachers' rights activist, October 2nd, Lordegan, southern Iran
- Bahram Yaghobi, teachers' rights activist, Tabriz, October 3rd

Source: Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Besides labour activists, ordinary strikers also ran the risk of being detained. One the groups that fell victim to this on a relatively large scale were temporary oil workers. Over 250 employees working on temporary contracts in Iran's oil industry were arrested on the 10th and 11th of October 2022, following their participation in the strikes in Kangan, and Phase 2 of the Abadan Refinery.

Excessive bail costs

Arrested labour activists were also hard hit financially, because of the relatively high bail that the Iranian judiciary demanded in exchange for their release. For instance, more than 150 billion Iranian Rial⁵ was charged by the Iranian judiciary for the release of 26 arbitrarily detained teachers. Such high bail sentences easily cause financial ruin. As the teachers' association stated: "Such heavy bails put extreme pressure on these trade union activists and their families and colleagues who have to put their homes and belongings up as collateral in lieu of cash."

Prolonged arbitrary detention

Whereas the majority of arrested workers were relatively quickly released upon paying bail, in some cases arbitrary detention lasted for weeks or even months. While the latter happened in particular to labour activists, ordinary strikers might also be held for weeks. For instance, a small group of protesting oil workers was detained for weeks and only then released. Such incarnation doesn't just cause great personal suffering because of the detention itself. In a country riddled with poverty, the subsequent lack of income constituted a major problem for these workers and their families. Moreover, being on a temporary contract, they couldn't claim any social security benefits.

Long prison sentences

⁵ 150 billion IRR equalled \$500.000 at that time. The annual income of a teacher in Iran is around \$5000 dollar annually.

In the period under study, the Iranian government also sentenced some labour activists to long prison sentences. For instance, teachers' association key activists Mohammad Habibi, Jafar Ebrahimi and Rasool Bodaghi were each sentenced to 15 years in prison in November 2022 by the Tehran Revolutionary Court.

Their court case was linked to the earlier arrests of French school teachers' union official Cécile Kohler and her partner Jacques Paris. Kohler and Paris' forced confessions, aired on Iranian state tv on the 8th of October 2022, stated that they had collaborated with Iranian teachers' and workers' union activists to pave the way for revolution and riots in Iran. Pointing to these 'admissions', the Iranian government, by means of the Tehran Revolutionary Court, subsequently issued long-term prison sentences for Habibi, Ebrahimi and Bodaghi.

Activists belonging to the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company [were another main target](#).

The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company is a trade union based in the Greater Tehran region. It has over 17,000 members; the majority of which work for the United Bus Company of Tehran.

Seasoned labour activists Reza Shahabi and Hassan Saeedi had been arrested in respectively May and June 2022 following their involvement in strikes on Labour Day. In early November 2022, the Tehran Revolutionary court sentenced them to [6 years imprisonment each](#) (of which 5 years active) for having allegedly engaged in 'propaganda against Iran', and 'assembly and conspiracy with the intent to commit a crime against national security'.



Labour rights activists in Iran that are imprisoned often end up in Evin Prison, Iran's most notorious prison located in Tehran's Evin neighbourhood, alongside many other political prisoners.

In addition to the activists named above, 7 other union activists of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and of the Teacher Association were sentenced to a total of more than 30 years in prison.

Loss of income

Besides being arrested and/or sent to prison, Iranians participating in labour protests also risked losing

their jobs, particularly if they worked in the public sector or in (partially) state-owned companies, such as refineries. For instance,

many teachers that had been protesting either lost their job or received less salary. While protesting teachers were hit particularly hard, similar dynamics were at play in other sectors. For instance, according to local labour news sources, it was not easy for many of the protesting oil industry workers to follow up on their demands. Many of them lost their jobs following their participating in union activities. While those employed on a temporary contract were hit particularly hard, this also applied at times for oil workers employed on a permanent contract

Successful strikes

Besides employing the ‘bullying’ strategy outlined above, the Iranian government would in some cases sit down with workers’ representatives and negotiate with them to find a compromise⁶. This was relatively rare, however. Of the nine labour protests discussed in the previous chapter, only three delivered some tangible results.

The following groups of workers profited from strikes in their sector:

Permanent oil workers

The workers gained the following:

- A 10% pay increase
- More favourable salary scales
- Bonus when retired will be paid depending on how long they worked
- Better hygiene facilities (in response to the demands for better working conditions)

Truck drivers

The second group of protesting workers that had part of their demands fulfilled were the truck drivers. Ten days into their strike, the Iranian government promised to increase the reduced price fuel quota and to create an automated digital system for cargo distribution, leading to more equal distribution of jobs.

Workers in the steel, iron and automobile industry

The third group of protesting workers that saw their strike partially rewarded were employees in the steel, iron and automobile industry. The Iranian government conceded to some of the demands of the strikers, namely better remuneration. For instance, following their complaints about poor wages, Iron industry workers got some of their unpaid salaries paid, and they received a small bonus. As such, their demands were satisfied to some extent.

Other groups that went on strike received nothing, including the coppermine miners, the telecom workers and the teachers and nurses/medicals. As mentioned, the pensioners weren’t successful either in the pursuit of their demands. As will be detailed in the next VA report on labour issues and labour protests in Iran,

⁶ This wasn’t always directly; it might also be through the employer(s) in question. Given the entanglement between (state-owned) businesses and the Iranian government, the Iranian government would nevertheless control these employer responses to some extent.

protests by these groups have continued to flare up in 2023.

Analysis

An important reason explaining why the three groups mentioned above did manage to (partially) get what they wanted, appears to be the timing of their protests. All three protests were carried out in the months that the Iranian government saw itself confronted with the large-scale protests by the 'women, life, liberty' movement. As such, it might have been more susceptible to trying to solve this protest, also because this would weaken the strength of the protest movement, who had called for nation-wide strikes.

Meanwhile, the fact that all three sectors are highly relevant to the Iranian economy in terms of income may also have played a role. In the case of the strikes in the oil industry, governmental fear that history might repeat itself might also have played a role. Alongside widespread public unrest, strikes in the oil industry were instrumental into bringing the Shah regime down in 1979. As such, besides economic considerations, securing its political survival appears to be an important factor in the way the Iranian government approached the various strikes. To that end, the Iranian government employs a two-pronged approach towards labour protests in Iran, relying on a mix of suppression and appeasement.

(Proposed) legal adjustments

The same duality is visibly in the area of law-making. In the period under study, several (adjustments to) laws were planned or carried out that were detrimental to good worker rights or that affected the ability to pursue these. On the other hand, some (proposed) legal adjustments had mixed results or were actually in the interests of Iranian employees.

Changes to labour laws

There were several (proposed) changes to the Labour Law.

Proposal to amend Article 167 of Labour Law (change to the composition of the Supreme Labour Council)

According to section 167 of the Iranian Labour Law, the Supreme Labour Council is a state institution whose main mission is to set the minimum wage, establish workers and employer committees and hold meetings to evaluate developments affecting the minimum wage. The council consists of a) the Minister of Labour and two representatives nominated by the Ministry of Labour b) three employer representatives and c) three employee representatives.

As it is, the functioning of the Supreme Labour Council is already contested. The process of determining the workers' annual minimum wage is a prime example of this. While each year workers' representatives recommend wages that reflect inflation rates conform the stipulations of the Labour Law, the government commonly bypasses this advice and sets the wages independently.

In the proposed plan, the government is seeking to add both the head of its Plan and Budget Organization – a governmental department responsible for mapping and evaluating of Iran's resources and the preparation of annual budgets – and the Minister of Economy to the Council. This will give more weight to a government which is also the country's biggest employer. The plan was presented to the Parliament in August 2022. Labour activists protested against these one-sided alterations in the bylaw in the absence of input by workers' representatives.

This plan is a major concern for labour activists, who protested it severely.

Sec. 167 of Iran's Labour Law

A council, called the Supreme Labour Council, shall be established within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The Council shall discharge the obligations entrusted to it under this Code and other relevant statutes. The membership of the Council shall be as follows:

- (a) the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, as the Chairman of the Council;
- (b) two persons experienced in social and economic matters, to be proposed by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs and approved by the Council of Ministers. One of the said two persons shall be appointed from among the members of the Supreme Council for Industry;
- (c) three employers' representatives (including one from the agricultural sector), to be elected by the employers;
- (d) three workers' representatives (including one from the agricultural sector), to be elected by the High Centre of the Islamic Labour Councils.

The Supreme Labour Council shall be responsible every year for fixing minimum wages for the various regions of the country according to the sectors of industry, with regard to the following criteria:

- (1) The minimum wage of workers shall be fixed taking account of the rate of inflation announced by the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran;
- (2) Regardless of the physical and intellectual abilities of workers and the characteristics of the work assigned, the minimum wage shall be sufficient to meet the living expenses of a family, whose average number of members shall be specified by the appropriate authorities.

Proposal to amend the bylaw on hard and harmful professions

Meanwhile, employers and the Iranian Chamber of Commerce also introduced a plan affecting labour right: They proposed a reduction in the severance pay of workers (in hard and harmful professions, such as mining and road transport).

In response to this plan, labour activists condemned any violations of, and tampering with, the protective articles of the Labour Law and demanded the cessation of such unilateral efforts in absence of labour activists and other labour relations experts.

Besides the proposed legal changes above, which would clearly impact worker rights' negatively, other plans were also introduced by either the Iranian government or the Iranian parliament. The results of these plans would be mixed and, in some cases, even positive. These plans are displayed below.

Plan to increase the retirement age

Latest status: Under review

According to this plan by the government, which was taken into account for the Iranian 2023/24 Budget Bill, "the years of service accepted for retirement can be increased by two years, regardless of the formal retirement age, if the employer needs the employment and the employee is happy to continue."

Parliament's plan to provide insurance for construction workers

Latest Status: Approved/Awaiting Funding

A bill to amend Article 5 of the Construction Workers' Insurance was ratified by the Iranian Parliament in December 2022, after two years of its introduction.

The insurance of construction workers has been a long-standing issue in Iran. The "Law on Compulsory Insurance for Construction Workers" was adopted in 2006 [to help construction workers access social security benefits](#). Insurance protection covers, among others: accidents, diseases and disability and the payment of retirement pensions. However, there were many implementation issues, after which the Law on Resolving Administrative Obstacles to the Law on Construction Workers Social Insurance and Defining Punishment for Violators was introduced in 2019.

The newly approved plan differed from the original plan to the dismay of construction workers' union activists. According to the Parliament Resolution, the index for the insurance premiums will be 1 to 4 percent. In the original plan, announced in April 2022, the index was planned to be 1 to 14 percent. Nevertheless, upon the approval and implementation of the plan to reform the Construction Workers Insurance Act, around 500, 000 construction workers who had been waiting to be covered by social security insurance will be insured.

The plan to give government workers a permanent contract

Latest status: under review

According to this parliamentary plan, the Iranian government will be obliged to change temporary contracts of employees in governmental departments into permanent ones or into contractual civil service employment. This will provide these employees with all the benefits of the Civil Service Management Law, similar to other official government employees. This plan will result in more legal and welfare benefits for civil servants.

The plan to eradicate the use of contractors and recruitment agencies for state-employed Iranians

Latest status: Under review

This plan, likewise put forward by parliamentarians, pursues several major goals. The first is the prohibition of the use of temporary contracts for jobs of a permanent nature, the second is the elimination of contractors and the third is the criminalization of the use of recruitment contracting companies. Upon approval of this plan, employees that will perform long-term (more than one year) types of work can only be recruited through a rigorous process involving public job posting and testing and vetting after which the selected candidate will receive a direct contract. This plan applies to all Iranians working for the government, from civil servants to teachers and oil workers.

4 Analysis & Way Forward

Despite decades of severe governmental repression, the discussed events over the second half of 2022 show that the Iran's labour movement is far from stifled and continues to be 'alive and kicking'. While street protests remained largely a no-go – apart from the Iranian pensioners – on site activism, such as strikes occurred. Also, the internet became an important source of labour protest.

Moreover, when faced with relatively widespread protests that were featured heavily in Iranian media, such as the strikes of truck and permanent oil industry workers, the Iranian government ultimately conceded to (some of the) demands such as rectifying regulations or (finally) enforcing existing laws or arrangements. At times the Iranian government does need to make concessions, also because not doing so might be at its own peril: Public anger over Iran's malfunctioning economy runs high in the country and fully ignoring it could be politically difficult.

As such, the relationship between the Iranian state and Iranian workers has not become entirely one-sided –with the Iranian state holding all the power – in spite of all the crack downs and other repressive measures.

The (proposed) favourable changes to labour laws discussed in chapter three, such as amendments to the labour laws that promote more permanent contracts or better insurances for certain groups of workers, also reflect this tendency.

Having said that, when put into a historical context, the second half of 2022 showed in many aspects a weakened labour movement that had great problems mobilizing Iranian workers. For instance, compared to the summers and autumns of 2019, 2020 and 2021, both the volume and the number of strikes was low.



Number of worker protests over time in 2022 as documented by Volunteer Activists.

This is remarkable for several reasons. First, in a context of economic chaos, declining living standards and a hugely unpopular government, dissatisfaction and anger runs high among Iranian workers. As such, the protesting workers were the representatives of a much bigger group that shared their anger and demands. Secondly, from the end of September onwards, there was considerable and widespread popular unrest throughout the country, with protestors asking Iranian workers to go en masse on strike to turn the country into a more equal, women friendly and liberal society. These ideals coincide with, and support, many of the political demands of Iranian workers. Yet, unlike in 1979, when popular resentment against a highly unpopular regime also ran high, such a surge in strikes did not happen. Meanwhile, while the government's fierce repression of labour unrests may clearly deter workers from engaging in labour action, the level of repression was not that different from the preceding periods mentioned above.

The absence of large-scale strikes and other types of labour protests throughout the country can be said to represent a missed opportunity. These strikes could not just have put significant pressure on the government to resign or change its course towards a more democratic one, they could have secured better labour rights. This is very visible when comparing the labour actions that didn't gain any concessions to those that did.

All of the latter ones took place at the height of civil unrest and union leaders explicitly used them to support the 'women, life, liberty' – protesters. This was strategically a smart move, as shown in the outcome: all three ended up being taken seriously by the Iranian government, who conceded to many of the protesting workers' demands.

Contributing to the absence of large, nation-wide strikes, was that calls for strikes by unions during this time didn't always create an effect or hardly so. For instance, the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations urged teachers to go on strike, but few teachers did so, and those who did were mostly confined to the Kurdistan province.

The ability to organize and mobilise (large masses of) workers is an important *raison d'être* for labour unions and a key requirement for them to be effective. This makes it imperative to find out more into the reasons behind the low attendance of labour actions from July to December 2022– also as a means to gauge future needs.

Reasons for low turnout

The relatively low levels of engagement in labour actions by Iranian workers in the period July – December 2022 is likely to be caused by many factors while reasons may also differ at an individual level. Taken as a whole, the following aspects are likely to have played a role, however:

Weakened trade unions

Governmental repression of trade unions affected their functioning. For instance, actions of the once relatively powerful Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations and the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company hardly played a role in the period under study – in contrast to the first half of 2022. These two unions suffered hugely as a result of fierce governmental suppression and the arrests of some of its most renowned activists. The relative halt in the activities of these trade unions coincide with the rise of the „Woman, Life, Freedom“ movement.

Meanwhile, internal problems, which were mainly caused by organizational individualism, gradually surfaced. This is, for instance, indicated by the poor response to the Teachers' Council's calls for sit-ins and strikes against the arrest and killing of children and students. As a result, the activities of this teachers' union

became limited to virtual campaigns⁷ which consequently reduced its organizational weight and credibility (at least in the situation described).

At the same time, such sector-oriented unions are focused on very particular groups within Iran's workers' population and as such cannot explain the low attendance as a whole.

Temporary contracts

Another possible explanation of the low turnout is likely to be related to the large extent of Iranian workers employed on temporary contracts. When large parts of the Iranian workers population rose against the regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (the last Shah of Iran) in 1979, temporary contracts were relatively uncommon. These days they have become the norm. Coupled with growing levels of unemployment and price inflation in Iran, this makes it risky to participate in strikes.

Lack of connection with grassroots

The distance between often highly educated labour union activists and 'common' workers is sometimes relatively large. Also, the reach and influence of labour unions in instigating and controlling labour strikes can greatly differ per sector. In the past, in some instances strikes and other protests actions occurred more or less spontaneously following incidents at work, upon which labour unions joined, rather being the instigators of these strikes.



Small protests occur nearly daily in Iran, but these are not always channelled by independent labour unions, who struggle to survive in a hostile political environment.

Limited appeal of the protest movement

Another reason for the absence of large, nation-wide strikes to support the protest movement could be a lack of enthusiasm among workers to become affiliated with this movement. Not every Iranian can identify with this movement, which for the most part attracts youngsters. The following issues play a role:

Lack of a common dream

The Women, Life, Freedom movement did not have any slogans related to welfare, social justice, and

⁷ Under the hashtag No to killing children.

better livelihood in a financial sense. These aspects were ignored by the young protesters. Furthermore, the slogans were mostly political and regime-change oriented. These two elements resulted in the lack of a common dream, and workers did not become active.

Lack of a road map

The protest movement remained romantic and emotional both in theory and practice and failed to develop a road map for the inclusion and cooperation of different social groups. The lack of a road map led different social groups, including workers, to support the movement only to some extent and distance themselves from it at other times.

Some Iranians have also expressed fears that when the current Iranian regime is toppled, Iran could be on the path to civil war and foreign intervention and become a 'second Syria'. For that reason, even Iranians with staunch anti-government views adopted a 'wait and see' mentality towards the protest movement.

Generational and cultural gap

Another factor which prevented a meaningful link between the workers and the protest movement was the deep gap between the protest movement and classical civil society in Iran. The language and style of activism of the youth who represented the protest movement differed greatly from traditional discourses dominating civil society and its activists. This movement had no practical relationship with existing citizen and labour organizations and focused on unorganized protest actions. As a result of this gap, even the independent labour and union organizations (such as the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teacher Trade Associations) could not go beyond issuing statements of solidarity and failed to play a strategic role in advancing the woman, life, freedom movement.

Intensified state violence

The government's reaction to the protest movement included very violent clampdowns from the start. According to unofficial reports, between 19 September and the beginning of December 2022, the death toll reached was above 500. In the meantime, four of those arrested were executed, some faced long-term jail sentences, and hundreds of people are still in detention. This extreme suppression forced some social groups with a relatively weak internal organisation to withdraw.

More generally, the rise of the protest movement also saw a rise in state violence and a reduced tolerance for those expressing anti-government sentiments. Besides the protest movement, the Iranian government kept a close eye on sympathizers, including labour activists. For instance, the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations was among the first trade unions to issue call for a strike in support of the protesters and to protest state violence against them. Following this, numerous activists from this union were arrested. Labour groups, including contractual oil workers, who joined the nationwide protests by going on strike, faced widespread repression as reflected in the 250 arrests following these actions. As such, some workers might fear the increased wrath of the government and not join strikes for that reason, giving that going on strike expressed de facto alignment with the protest movement.

The reaction of trade union groups to the rise of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement can be divided into three stages. During the early days of the protests, most of these groups remained spectators. After a short period of time, they tried to support the protests by issuing calls for participation. However, these measures (especially among teachers' and oil workers' unions) were ineffective as they couldn't mobilize

their constituencies and were not properly organised. In the third step, activists endeavoured to promote trade union demands and to establish links between the demands of the movement and their own political and civil demands.

The above-outlined inquiry into the obstacles to widespread worker actions in Iran, didn't just show some of the major hindrances, it also showed that trade unions work in a dire environment in Iran, in which they are severely limited by governmental repressive tactics and other constraints. This greatly limits their effectiveness, which in turn reduces the chances of Iranian workers to achieve better worker rights.

At the same time – and in spite of these severe constraints – it is possible for Iranian trade unions to create more room de manoeuvre and to circumvent or even change some of the limitations on their functioning. The next section discusses these opportunities.

Opportunities for trade unions

Given the structural weakness of Iran's labour movement to overcome the heavy hand of the government, labour activists could employ the following strategies:

Alternative action methods

Iranian workers routinely, and often very quickly, take to the streets or engage in strikes as a means to be heard. These protests represent significant risks to those involved and can result in job losses, however. Also, in the end employers may not give in. Our analysis of labour protests in Iran over the past years indicates that it can, at times, be more fruitful for workers (representatives) 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.



Demonstrations and strikes have been the most popular, yet least successful form of protest for Iranian workers over the past seven years.

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 a 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.

Intra-organisational changes

Organising themselves more effectively is another way for Iran's labour unions to become stronger and have more capacity.

The following actions could be undertaken:

- Devise and write up an action plan for sustainable activism and specify short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. Reduce the prospect of overly radical or inappropriate labour actions, such as openly anti-government declarations or collaboration with (radical) political groups, by framing demands firmly in line with trade union ideology
- Evaluate and monitor weaknesses, strengths, threats and opportunities for virtual and field activities periodically.
- Make it a priority to create and revive official and unofficial assemblies, as a means to encourage maximum participation by stakeholders.
- Use social media in a targeted manner. Being active on social networks (if accessible) can be a great way to assess needs among workers, identify potential, mobilise the masses, and to create virtual associations. It is important, however, to not just keep on 'sending' for the sake of 'sending' when it comes to communication. For instance, when online calls for action fail, instead of posting more, and similar ones, it might be better to change the course of action. This can also prevent rumours that the account in question might be hacked⁸, as happened with a labour union that engaged in such actions in the period under study.

Miscellaneous

To pursue their demands, labour unions needs to build and use political and economic connections and make use of 'leadership strategies', such as embarking on negotiations, letter writing (including to newspapers), creating petitions, campaigns, alliances with peer organisations, assemblies, etc.). Only if these methods fail, should strikes or large-scale public gatherings be organised.

Using this sequence not only limits safety risks for both labour activists and protesting workers, it is also likely to increase the chances of success of the strikes or public gatherings. Having already build up to the strike or public gathering in question, will most likely make it easier to organize and run. Also, by having already secured the ears of relevant and influential actors, such a strike or public gathering in question is likely to have more of an impact, including because of increased visibility.

Create inclusive alliances to pursue common demands such as higher wages, salaries and annual pensions.

⁸ Since labour activists operating online accounts may not always want to reveal their identity publicly or may choose to operate relatively covertly for security reasons, it can be difficult to address such rumours by speaking up and showing 'the face' behind the messaging.

This will also allow the creation of a united front against the proposed alterations of the Labour Law which would greatly harm workers' interests.

Opportunities for the international community

Members of the international community can greatly contribute to, and help to optimise, the quest of Iranian labour activists to secure better livelihoods for Iranian workers. These possibilities are outlined in the text box below.

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

Help Iranian labour unions diversity their methods of protest

Share information and best practices 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.

Support advocacy training and capacity building among Iranian labour unions, for instance through targeted online programs for Iranian labour activists. Provide training on the use of infographics, video clips, and other tools.

Stimulate and support the creation of independent labour unions

Advocate to the Government of Iran and the ILO to allow free and independent labour unions in Iran.

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.

Increase the visibility of Iranian workers around the world

The international community can help Iranian labour unions by drawing attention to the plight of Iranian workers 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.

By engaging in the activities outlined above, the international community can support Iranian labour unions and strengthen their position vis-à-vis the Iranian government – which will in turn increase the chances that the voices of Iranian workers will be heard, and their lives improved.

About us

Volunteer Activists (VA) is a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands. From 2001 to 2007, VA operated inside Iran as the largest capacity building organization in the country. From 2012, the VA team continued its activism from Amsterdam following security threats. Assisting Iranian CSOs through research-informed capacity building is one of the primary activities of VA. Other specialisations include: facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, advocacy and expansion of democracy and human rights and peace building - both within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.

Contact us:

info@volunteeractivists.nl

Radarweg 29

1043 NX, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

<https://volunteeractivists.nl/en>

www.volunteeractivists.nl
info@volunteeractivists.nl

Address

Radarweg 29
1043 NX Amsterdam
The Netherlands