

## WORKERS RIGHTS WATCH

A biannual report on labor protests and legal developments in Iran

**Jul. - Dec. '23**

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# Executive Summary

This document represents the result of the Volunteer Activists' (VA) effort to thoroughly examine labor-related issues and protests in Iran during the period spanning July to December 2023. This report is the third in a series of reports that VA will publish twice a year, aiming to provide regular updates on labor issues and protests in Iran.

By doing so, VA aims to provide the global community with deeper insights into the prevailing labor challenges and protests in Iran. The acknowledgment of their voices on an international stage is crucial for the advancement of Iran's labor movement. Additionally, gaining a profound understanding of Iranian workers' needs and the requirements of trade unions advocating for them enables international donors to tailor subsequent programs and activities, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness. Leveraging its connections within Iran, VA is positioned relatively well to furnish this valuable information.

The intricate landscape of Iranian labor, characterized by its diversity, necessitated extensive and meticulous research to map the situation regarding labor issues and struggles comprehensively. Our evaluation of the landscape, encompassing labor issues and rights, drew upon both primary and secondary sources. VA engaged in (online) interviews with on-the-ground labor activists. Secondary data sources included verified media reports, published research, and social media monitoring.

From this research, several key observations emerge regarding labor issues and protests in Iran from July to December 2023:

- Despite government repression, labor protests not only persisted but surged by 75% compared to the first half of 2023.
- A significant catalyst for labor protests stems from escalating dissatisfaction with the Iranian economy's soaring price inflation, which is not met with a corresponding increase in wages and pensions.
- The government's management of pension funds teetering on the edge of bankruptcy was a contentious issue.

Other takeaways from this report are listed in Table 1 on the next page.

## July - December 2023

762

Total labor protests

70

Cities across Iran

31

Worker sectors

6

Government plans and bill drafts monitored

40%

Inflation rate

219

Online petitions completed

**Table 1: Key takeaways from labour protests and monitoring**

Encompassing 31 cities throughout Iran, there were more than 750 labor protests across the country between July and December 2023.

Labor protests included strikes by oil workers, a relatively powerful group in Iran, as well as workers in the mining sector, health care, industrial sector and job seekers.

Pensioners increasingly combined forces and were among the most vocal protest groups, often protesting in front of governmental offices and frequently demanding a governmental step down.

Dozens of trade union and labor activists were fired, denied salaries and/or arrested and prosecuted during the past six months just for trying to assert trade union and labor rights.

The Iranian government actively pursued numerous legal changes affecting labor rights in Iran.

While certain protests have achieved success in compelling the government and employers to reconsider their actions in specific areas, many fell short of achieving the desired outcomes.

By focusing more on organization and by adopting two-step strategies, Iranian labor activists have the potential to inspire greater successes.

The international community can assist Iranian workers by tightening links between foreign and Iranian labor unions and by focusing more on socio-economic rights in Iran.

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# 1 Introduction

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To an outsider, the Iranian government may seem stronger than ever. The regime showcases heightened strength on the global stage, engaging in international conflicts such as supplying drones to Russia and supporting Yemen's Houthi rebels to disrupt international trade over the Red Sea. Also, the widespread anti-government demonstrations that gained global attention in 2022 and were supported by Iranian labor unions have subsided, having been quelled by the Iranian state's forceful repression.

However, beneath this façade of strength lies an undercurrent of unrest. Despite this apparent calm, tensions persist, and the Iranian government faces opposition. For instance, as a concession to the demonstrators, the controversial Iranian morality police has been largely withdrawn from the streets. Also, resistance pockets endure, with women [in some places](#), particularly Tehran, steadfastly refusing to wear the veil. There are also critical voices within Iranian government circles. One example is Tourism and Heritage Minister Ezzatollah Zarghami. Zarghami [acknowledged](#) the existence of closed-mindedness in the country and suggested that those who oppose the unveiling of women can simply „close their eyes“ if looking at an uncovered woman troubles them. Meanwhile, prominent cleric Nasser Makarem, spoke out against the use of „[violence and pressure](#)“ to enforce the wearing of the hijab.

But that is not all. Soaring inflation rates have triggered a surge in ‚poverty protests‘ staged by Iranian workers and retirees, demanding stronger adjustments in wages and pensions to keep pace with inflation. Consequently, worker protests across Iran are gaining momentum, surpassing levels witnessed in the first half of 2023 and attracting thousands of people.

Although the scale of thousands of protesters may seem modest given Iran's vast population, this turnout holds significant importance. First, the Iranian government actively suppresses labor protests, arresting and imprisoning activists, making attendance dangerous. These protestors likely represent, to a great extent, the Iranian labor force, reflecting widespread anger and frustration among the working and middle class regarding a rich elite and an increasingly impoverished population.

Second, pensioners, turning out in relatively high numbers, contribute steadfastly to protests. With many pension funds on the brink of bankruptcy, their demands are increasingly echoed by workers. The Iranian government faces difficulty in violently arresting pensioners on a large scale for PR reasons.

Lastly, the protests include powerful groups, like oil workers, with the ability to significantly impact the Iranian economy or yield political influence.

This report delves deeper into these labor protests in Iran, with a focus on the latter half of 2023. More generally, it seeks to give an overview of the state of labor in Iran during this time frame.

Altogether, this report has three objectives:

- Identify labor challenges and subsequent labor protests during the specified period.
- Analyze governmental policies that impact labor issues and workers' rights.
- Propose a viable way forward for Iran's labor movement based on observed trends and patterns.

The data presented in this report stem from three primary sources. Foremost, we drew upon insights from our contacts within the labor community in Iran, providing valuable perspectives. Additionally, verified reports from Iranian newspapers were analyzed, and social media monitoring was conducted. It is crucial to

acknowledge, however, that this report is not exhaustive in capturing all actions and developments related to Iranian labor. Gathering information in dictatorships is inherently challenging due to potential reprisals for speaking out. Moreover, information availability varied across different economic sectors. Consequently, the labor issues in Iran are likely more extensive than what this report details.

In line with its three objectives, this report is divided into three parts. The next chapter will provide an overview of key labor issues in Iran and then focus on the labor protests that occurred between July and December 2023, exploring their outcomes. Moving forward, chapter three examines governmental actions influencing labor issues during the study period. In addition to detailing governmental responses to the labor protests described in chapter two, it also outlines (drafted) bills and laws, or adaptations to these, that may impact the labor rights of Iranian workers. Building upon the information presented in the preceding chapters, the fourth and final chapter of this report assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Iran's labor movement, offering suggestions for the way forward.

## 2 Labour protests in Iran

As mentioned in the introduction, anger over their detrimental socio-economic position and pervasive poverty drives Iranian workers to engage in protests. Before delving into the actual worker protests that took place in the second half of 2023, it is useful to better understand the precise reasons behind these protests. Additionally, it is important to note that labor protests are not common in Iran, mainly because strikes and gatherings organized by independent, non-registered labor unions are illegal in the country<sup>1</sup>, and participants can face persecution or other types of sanctions.

### Labor issues

Despite the differences among various protesting groups of workers, the grievances that motivate them to engage in strikes and other labor actions, transcend sectors and therefore show a lot of overlap. The text below offers more of an insight into these.

#### *Unindexed wages, benefits and pensions*

Due to governmental mismanagement of the economy, as well as international sanctions on Iran, inflation is very high in Iran. Food prices increased by 87 percent as a result (source: Trading Economics). Wages, pensions, and benefits haven't been adjusted to match these price developments, however. On March 21, 2023, the Supreme Labor Council<sup>2</sup> increased the minimum wage for the Iranian New Year by only 27%, despite a persistently high inflation rate fluctuating between 30% and 50% in 2023. In its following, wages in general failed to pick up in line with the level of inflation. Widespread poverty is the result, with people struggling to pay for life's necessities, from rent or mortgage to food, clothes and medical costs.

#### *Late payment of wages*

Not getting paid for months is, unfortunately, far from uncommon in Iran. 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. In some cases, salary arrears never get settled.

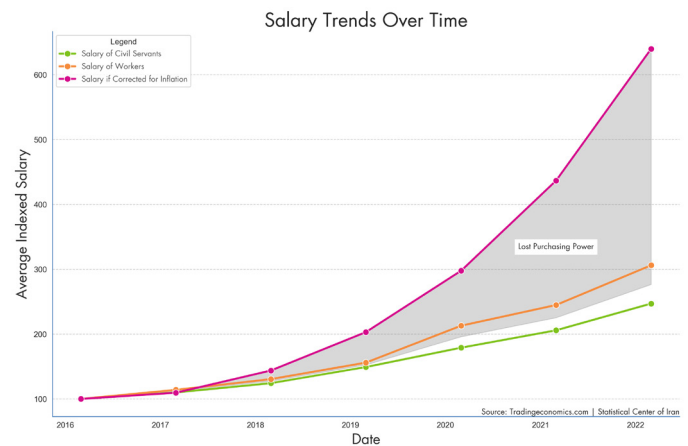
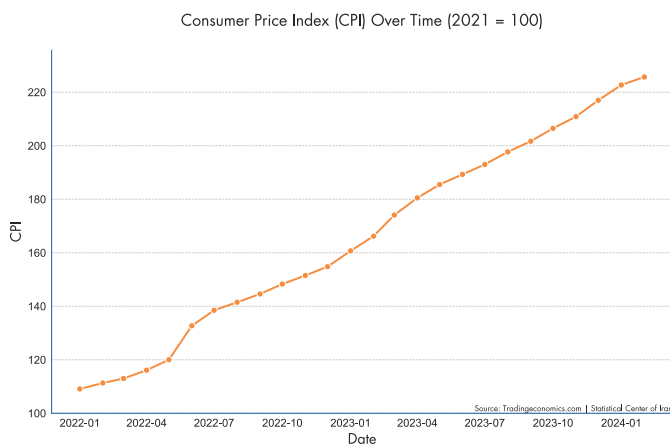
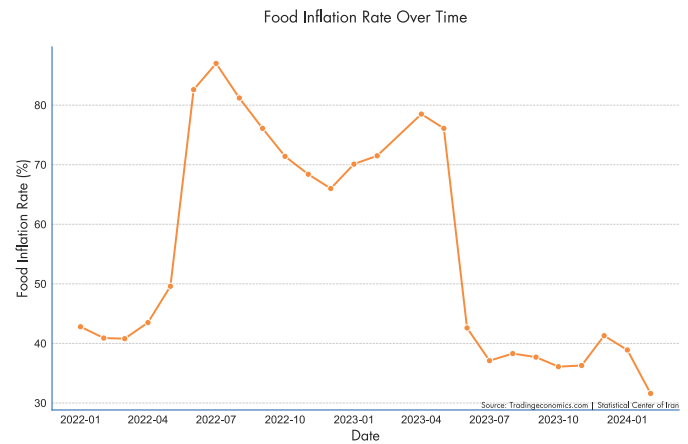
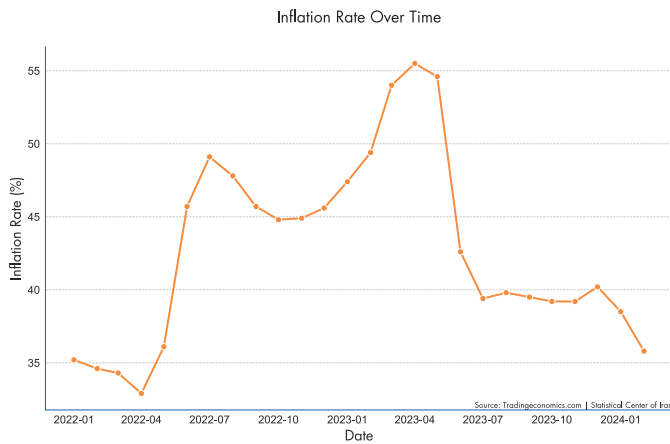
### Determination of the minimum wage

The annual minimum wage in Iran is officially determined by the Iranian Supreme Labour Council, which includes representatives from the government, employers, and employees, thereby following the tripartite system advocated by the International Labour Organization. However, in practice, the interests of employees may carry less weight compared to those of employers. Despite the council's stated purpose to adjust the minimum wage according to price inflation, this doesn't always happen or the government may disregard the council's recommendations. As a result, the Iranian minimum wage often fails to provide a liveable income, impacting overall wages and pensions. The establishment of the minimum wage for 2023 in Iran caused significant controversy and triggered public protests.

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. This data is from 2022.

<sup>1</sup> As are more 'spontaneous' strikes without clear leadership.

<sup>2</sup> Which is in charge of determining the minimum wages.



Over the past years, Iran has experienced hyperinflation. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose from 109 points in January 2022 to 222 points in January 2024. Additionally, salaries have not kept pace with inflation, leading to a significant reduction in the purchasing power of Iranians. Consequently, this economic situation has pushed approximately 40% of Iranians below the poverty line.

### Application of pay scales

Previously, many workers in the public sector, including teachers and nurses, demanded 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. In several sectors, job rating or classification schemes do exist now, but in practice the implementation of these may be lacking (see text box) or only be selectively applied.

Despite the law stipulating that all workers in workplaces covered by the Labor Law—regardless of their contract type, be it temporary, permanent, or seasonal—should be incorporated into the job classification plan, with their wages and benefits determined accordingly, reports indicate that over 70% of the country’s workplaces disregard this law and abstain from implementing the plan.

### Job insecurity due to 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.” Currently, a majority of Iranians (90% of the workforce) is employed on temporary contracts. In a country with an estimated unemployment rate of 10.8 percent, this



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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. Under these temporary contracts workers often enjoy far less favourable labor rights than they would under a permanent contract. More equal working conditions and/or the acquisition of permanent contracts may therefore be an important demand of temp workers.

### *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 often thank 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.

### *Lack of freedom of association*

During labor actions, demands for independent trade unions and freedom of association occasionally arise. While labor unions are not explicitly forbidden by law, these Civil Society Organizations need to be registered to obtain a license. In the case of independent labor unions, registration is typically denied, rendering them and their activities illegal.

### *Arrests of labor activists*

As will be illustrated in more depth in the following chapter, even the most peaceful labor union activists are detained in Iran and sent to prison. Demands for their release play often an important role in protests, especially those organized 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.

### *Dictatorship*

In a more general sense, anti-governmental sentiments are also sometimes part of labor 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.

### *Unsafe work environment*

Particularly in the case of so-called 'blue collar' jobs, working conditions can be dire. 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 therefore be an important demand of protesting Iranian workers. This was particularly the case in the period under study, during which many work-related accidents made headlines. The text box on the next page highlights some of these.

Precise statistics on work-related incidents in the country have not been published recently. However, among the workers who have suffered injuries from work accidents, construction workers and miners are notably prevalent.

**Incident 1:** On August 16, 2023 in one of the workshops in Sepidroud Industrial Town, a 33-year-old worker sustained a severe injury as his foot and a portion of his body became trapped in the „Mardoon“ lathe. To understand the nature of „Mardoon“ and the incident involving the young worker, envision the operation of a meat grinder; „Mardoon“ functions as the helical component of the meat grinder, described as a „spiral tube on a cylindrical shape, similar to the blade of the meat grinder with grooves, uniformly chopping materials.“ Unfortunately, the 33-year-old worker succumbed to his injuries a few days after the incident while in the hospital. Published images clearly indicate that the Mardoon lathe in the factory lacked any safeguards.



Source: [ILNA](#)

**Incident 2:** On August 24, 2023, at the Barez Kurdistan Tire Factory, a tragic incident occurred in the late afternoon. While unloading a load of tires, two forklifts collided, causing one driver to lose control. The forklift blade struck the head of a 45-year-old warehouse worker, leading to immediate fatality. The incident was attributed to an overload that disrupted the driver’s balance. It’s noted that, due to a shortage of forklifts, the factory’s forklifts are compelled to carry two baskets of tires, a practice acknowledged as diverging from the standards of safe cargo handling.

**Incident 3:** On September 3, 2023, an explosion occurred in the Razmjaye Gharbi tunnel of the Tazreh coal mine, located in the northeast of Damghan city. The incident tragically claimed the lives of six workers. The explosion, attributed to gas accumulation, took place at a depth of 400 meters in the tunnel, which has a reported depth of 700 meters. The mining unit operates under the supervision of the East Alborz Coal Company, and a lack of oversight in the mine’s operations over the past few years is noted, with similar accidents having occurred in the mine previously.

**Incident 4:** On December 9, 2023, tragedy struck as five workers from a contracting company entered the reservoir of the pumping station at the Bordaspi Oil Transfer Center in Kuhdasht city to clean the oil storage tanks. Regrettably, due to inhaling toxic substances during the operation, all five workers lost their lives. These individuals, part of the workforce of a contracting company stationed at the Bordaspi Oil Company, entered the oil pumping station’s reservoirs for dredging without the necessary safety equipment.

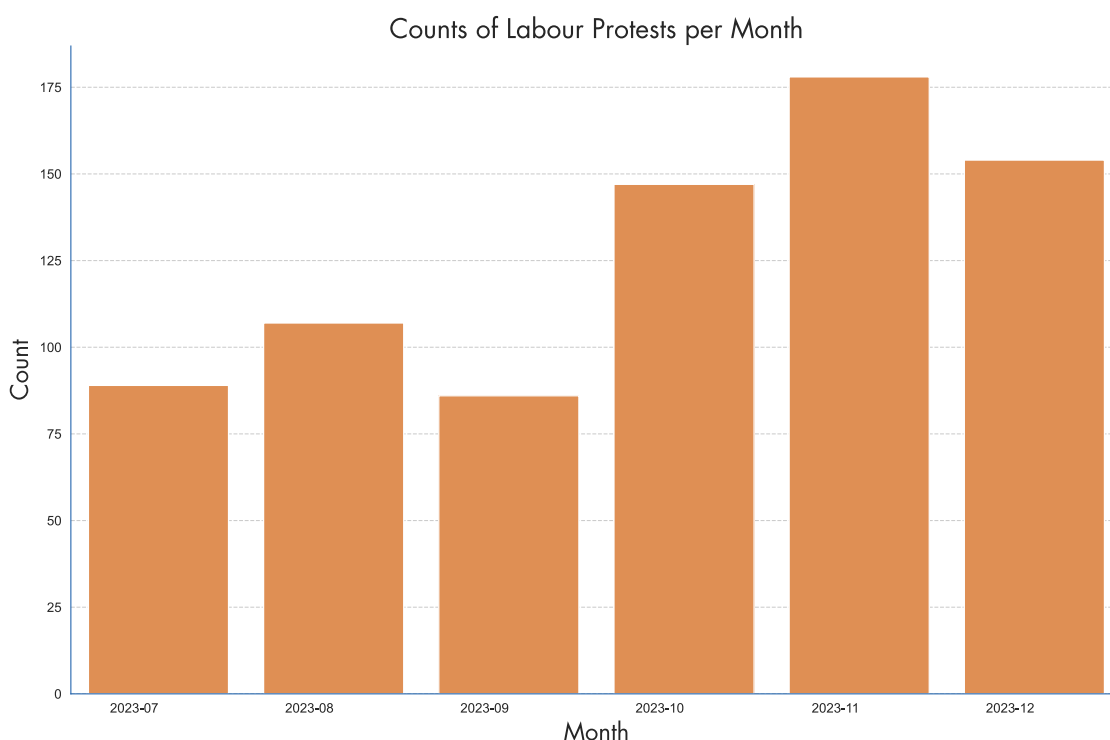
### Living on the periphery

Workers in borderlands, situated at a considerable distance from the capital, may perceive themselves as disproportionately affected by central government measures. They may feel overlooked by the elite in the capital or have to contend with measures impacting their livelihoods which are linked to cross-border trade. Additionally, the ethnic composition in these borderlands may differ from the predominantly Persian political elite, leading to tensions and discrimination. Consequently, the worker population in these areas may face additional challenges and engage in labor actions as a result.

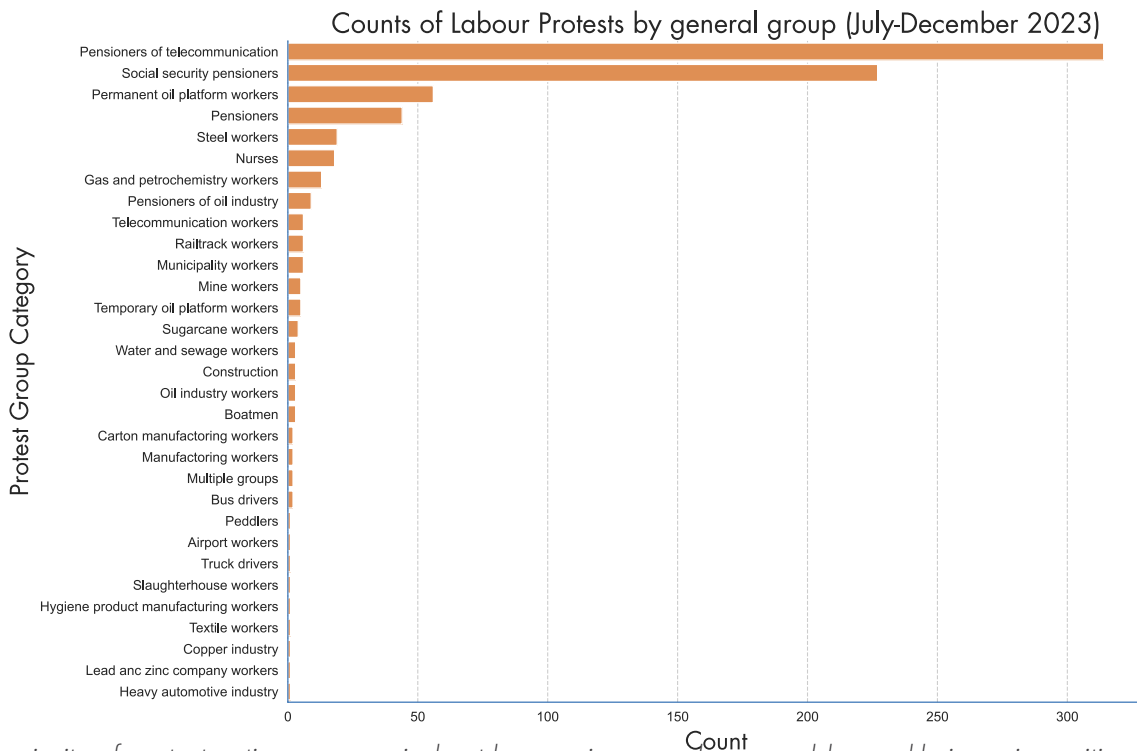
### Labor protests

An examination of the notable protests held throughout the summer and autumn of 2023, as chronicled monthly on the [Davtalab.org](http://Davtalab.org) platform, underscores the extensive range of labor groups involved and the diverse nature of their demands. These reports reveal that protests occurred in a variety of sectors, featuring oil platform workers, gas and petrochemical workers as well as telecommunication, social security organization and other pensioners, mine workers, nurses and employees of large industrial companies. Also, social security and other pensioners stages numerous protests as job seekers sometimes did.

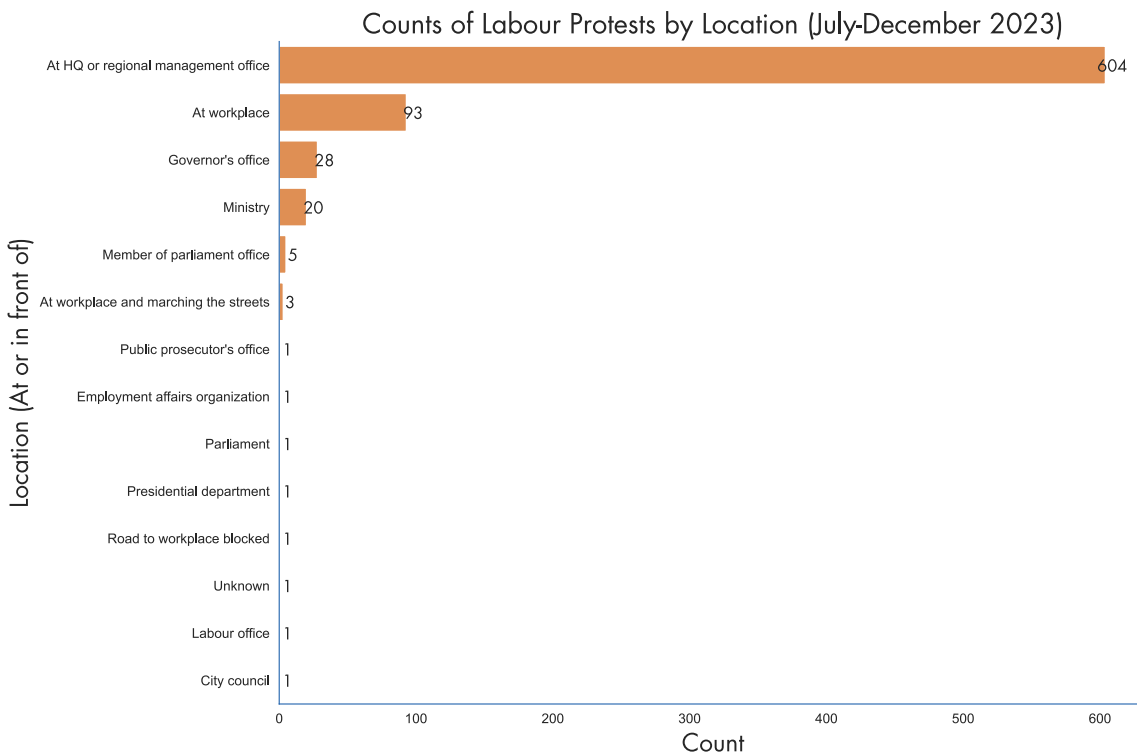
The expressions of discontent varied, with many groups articulating their grievances through physical gatherings and strike actions conducted at their workplaces or in front of government offices. Certain groups, such as teachers, opted for online activities and campaigns as their mode of participation over the past six months.



*Compared to the same period in 2022 and the first half of 2023, there has been an increase in the number of protests. It's important to note that these figures represent only in-person actions and do not include online protest activities.*

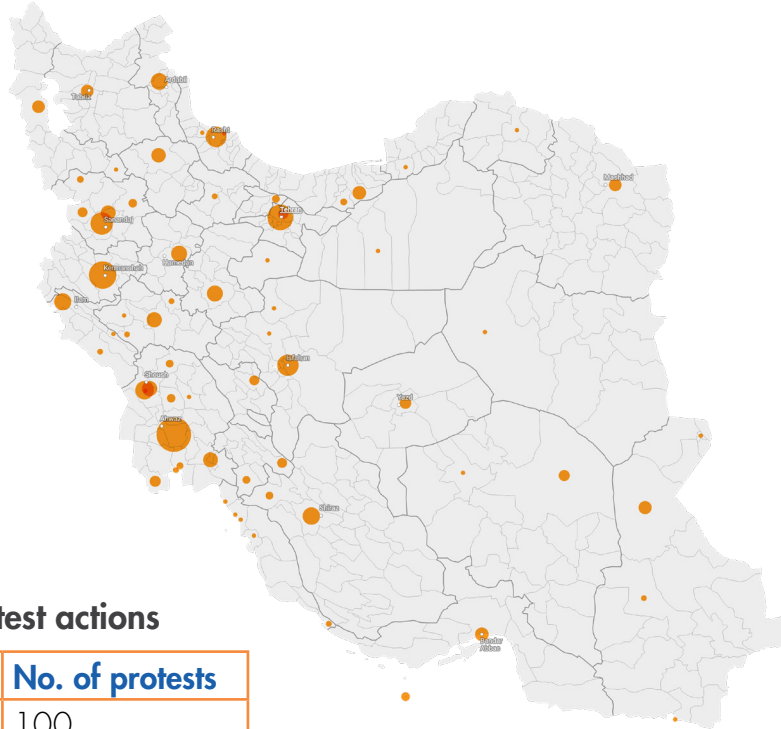


The majority of protest actions are carried out by pensioners, who assemble weekly in various cities across Iran. 31 different industries and worker groups organized protest actions between July and December 2023.



Overall, the predominant form of protest actions was gatherings, primarily in front of the regional management office. Most documented protests were conducted by pensioners, who assembled in front of the pension fund or the relevant government department.

## Map of worker protests across Iran from July to December 2023



### Top 5 cities with most protest actions

City	No. of protests
Ahvaz	100
Kermanshah	62
Tehran	54
Sanandaj	41
Isfahan	37

### Protests of oil, petrochemical and gas platform workers

In the latter half of 2023, prominent labor protests occurred in refineries, oil and gas platforms, and terminals, involving both permanent and project-based contract workers.

The status of oil workers varies significantly. The table below provides insights into the types of contracts employed.

Firstly, continuous demonstrations unfolded among oil workers. Their protests were on an upward trajectory since the beginning of October 2023, at times occurring daily. The protesters mainly consisted of permanent employees in oil units, who demanded the complete removal of salary ceilings and a payment of wages based on employment laws by the Ministry of Petroleum. They contended that the new wage structure disproportionately affects workers with average or lower incomes, who were anticipating increased wages in their final years of service. Therefore, they are seeking the removal of any salary ceilings, similar to those in government jobs.

Table 2: Types of contracts in Iran's oil sector.

Source: [Oil News Agency](#)

Contract type	No. of workers
Permanent	61,000
Fixed-term contracts	4,000
Temporary contracts*	34,500
Project-based (umbrella)	105,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>205,000</b>

\*The estimated number of workers on temporary contracts is less clear, also because these contracts fluctuate. Estimates are between 34,000 -35,000.

Demonstrations were often held in front of oil companies and platforms, and were also justified by pointing out to the challenging conditions faced by oil industry workers, and call for an agreed-upon salary without explicit ceilings per salary scale.

In addition to permanent workers in the oil industry, temporary workers contracted to umbrella companies for oil industry projects also protested. They demanded an end against job discrimination among employees.



*The salary and working conditions vary significantly between temporary and permanent workers. In this picture, this oil industry worker passed out due to extreme heat (above 50°C) and long workdays of 12 hours. Source: [rouydad24.com](http://rouydad24.com)*

Temporary project workers in Abadan Oil Refinery emerged as a key group staging protests and strikes during the autumn of 2023. They protested against the non-payment of overdue salaries, the failure to change their employment status, and discriminatory practices by officials based on the political views of the employees. Also, the protesters demanded amendments to the job classification plan to make their salaries higher in the classifications, the issuance of oil industry store cards – discount cards that can be used for daily shopping, books, papers and so on – and help to create a housing cooperative, with participation of both the employer and workers.

Protests by oil industry employees intensified following a proposal by the Iranian government to merge the Oil Industry Pension Fund with the Civil Servants Pension Fund<sup>3</sup>. This decision also triggered a wave of protests by oil industry pensioners, who protested with marches, as well as with open letters and statements. The Coordination Council of Oil Industry Workers and other groups cautioned against the regime's "unlawful actions" and [urged](#) the Guardian Council<sup>4</sup> to intervene.

Meanwhile, petrochemical workers [also protested](#). On July 11, a gathering of Dehloran Petrochemical Project workers took place in front of the Dehloran Governorate, protesting the shutdown of the project and the subsequent unemployment of approximately 2,000 workers. That same day, employees of Reitoun Company, the contractor for Aria Sasol's petrochemical polymer projects in Asaluyeh, demonstrated against

<sup>3</sup> Rumors had been circulating for a while, but the proposal made headlines in November 2023 after leaks from government circles.

<sup>4</sup> A constitutionally mandated 12-member council with significant power in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## Oil Industry Pension Fund

The Oil Industry Pension Fund, regarded as one of Iran's wealthiest, was established in 1948 by Mansour Dehdashtian, an accountant at the Abadan Refinery. Operating independently as a non-governmental entity, it manages internal resources and pension disbursements. Financial experts express concerns that the proposed merger jeopardizes the existence of this specialized fund, a significant investor in the oil and gas sector, potentially leading to its demise. Such a scenario poses a risk not only to the fund itself but would have widespread implications for the country.

the non-payment of their wages for six months and the unfulfilled promises by the contractor. They initiated a strike, blocking the entry and exit gates of Aryasassol, preventing both employees and machines from entering or leaving the premises.

Finally, on October 21, 2023, gas and petrochemistry workers staged a protest at the Zone 1 Miankoh gas transmission operation. The demonstration aimed to express dissatisfaction with the failure to implement the plan for organizing employee employment, a matter addressed in the January 2021 resolution of the Administrative and Employment Council regarding the alteration of employee status.

## Mining Industry Protests

Among the various groups whose grievances have resonated prominently in the past six months, miners have emerged as a particularly noteworthy voice. The prevalence of temporary contracts, job instability, and frequent accidents – especially in coal mines – due to a lack of adherence to safety and occupational health standards, poses a significant challenge in recent years, particularly in the past months. Many workers attribute the crisis's escalation in this sector to the privatization of mines, which started three decades ago. Also, labor protests in certain mines have been sparked by issues such as unemployment and the hiring of non-local labor. Some of the mining protests that have garnered attention in the past six months include:

### Protests by Tazreh coal miners

On September 3, 2023, Iranian media reported a tragic incident at Tazreh coal mine in Semnan province, where six miners were trapped at a depth of 700 meters due to a gas explosion and tunnel wall collapse. Regrettably, all six trapped miners [lost their lives](#). The deceased miners were all experienced workers with direct contracts with the company.

In response to public outcry, the Minister of Labor visited Damghan, and mining operations were halted, following a Semnan justice department's order to facilitate an investigation into the cause of the tragedy.

However, for the miners at Tazreh, this response was insufficient. They expressed their discontent with the persistent work accidents in the mine, demanding that the company ensure legal consequences for the contractors involved<sup>5</sup>. Gathering at the mine site, workers also called for the removal of contractors altogether to enhance working conditions within the mine. They asserted that a thousand workers in the

Tazreh is one of the mines supervised by the East Alborz Coal Company and has been marred by numerous work accidents and reports of safety negligence in recent years. These include deaths of a worker in December 2019 and two workers in May 2021.

<sup>5</sup> In a controversial move, the East Alborz Coal Company replaced the contractor involved in the incident without pressing charges, leading to accusations of a cover-up.

Tazreh coal mine are employed by contractors, exposing them to subpar safety circumstances.

### Protests by Chadormalu miners

Over summer there were also already protests by miners. On July 23rd, 2023, strikers of the contractor company working at Chadormalu's copper mine [initiated a strike](#). The striking employees put forth several demands, including a wage increase commensurate with inflation, the equalization of pay across different roles, and the implementation of supplementary insurance for workers.

### Protests at the Agh-Darreh Gold Mine

Finally, on the 31st of July 2023, Kurdish residents from Aq Darreh village held a demonstration outside the Aq Darreh gold mine, demanding increased employment opportunities for local people.

The village of Agh-Darreh is home to two of the largest gold mines in the Middle East and a substantial travertine mine, all operated by the private sector. Despite the commitment of mine officials to engage local labor, the persistent challenge of providing employment opportunities for the residents of Agh-Darreh remains unresolved. An examination of events over the past decade reveals that villagers and workers have engaged in widespread protests against the non-employment of local labor and the dismissal of seasonal workers on at least three occasions since 2014. These conflicts and tensions are typically adjudicated in favor of the employers by provincial authorities, resulting in severe judicial punishments such as imprisonment and flogging for the workers involved.

### Nurses

Nurses in Iran face significant underpayment despite working in strenuous conditions, often putting in [long hours a day and mandatory overtime with low overtime rates](#). In the past six months, nurses have been actively protesting against the flawed implementation of the nursing services tariff law (see textbox on the next page) and experiencing delayed payments.

A protest at Milad Hospital in Tehran on 23 August 2023 gained prominence, particularly as – besides other medical staff – patients joined the protesting nurses. Whereas nurses chanted slogans such as „[Unworthy officials! Where are you?!](#)“, patients chanted slogans such as „Dear nurse, we support you..“.



Nurses of the Milad Hospital gathered in front and inside of the hospital. Patients and visitors joined the gathering and chanted slogans along the nurses. Source: [Youtube](#)



The nursing community is confronted with a significant challenge due to the incomplete and inequitable implementation of the nursing services tariff law. Approved by 192 parliament representatives in 2021, after 16 years of deliberation, this law aimed to address disparities in payments and bridge the substantial gap in allowances between physicians and nurses—disparities that, according to nursing activists, surpass 100 times. Unfortunately, its flawed execution has resulted in nurses becoming some of the lowest-paid government employees.

In a similar vein, on August 26, medical staff from Isfahan and Mashhad hospitals stopped working to engage in protests. In Isfahan, the rally took place [in front of the governor's office](#), with participants chanting, „We worked hard, but we were not appreciated.“ Also, on December 25, nurses employed at Tehran's Shahid Beheshti University's Mahdiyeh Hospital [staged a protest](#), within the hospital premises. Besides protesting against inadequate wages and the non-implementation of tariff laws, they also expressed anger at the imposition of low fees for forced overtime work.

The government's lack of responsiveness to the nursing community's demands resulted in a tepid response to the 2023 elections for the Nursing Council, a pseudo-independent body which supervises the nursing profession: from handing out licenses to work as a nurse to issuing disciplinary measures. During, only [around 20% of the organization's members participated](#). Besides dissatisfaction with the Nursing Council's previous performance, its disqualification of senior members of professional nursing associations, such as the Secretary-General of the Khaneh Parastar Nursing Association who opposed Ministry of Health policies played an important role. Approximately 80% of the nursing community abstained from the sixth round of elections for the board of directors of the Nursing Council in October 2023, effectively boycotting them.

### ***Protests by Esfahan Steel and Ahvaz Steel Workers***

Workers from several major industrial facilities, including Ahvaz Steel and Esfahan Steel which employ over 18,000 and around 3,000 workers respectively in Esfahan province, have orchestrated extensive protests and strikes in the latter half of 2023. While these protests have been driven by various demands such as increased wages and the right to form associations, the primary catalyst for their intensification has been the non-implementation of the job classification plan.



*On December 2, 2023, thousands of workers from various sections of the Esfahan Steel plant initiated a strike as part of a pre-announced collective action.*

Esfahan Steel is Iran's first and largest specialized steel production factory, focusing on the production of construction steel and rails. It operates as a quasi-governmental entity, subjected to stringent government control and security surveillance concerning the work environment and workers' activities. Even union activities carried out by recognised, quasi-governmental unions, are heavily restricted and overseen by the government so as to safeguard the government's financial interests. Because the steel industry is considered so vital, security and surveillance officers are employed on the sites of these factories, keen to avoid any disruptions and preemptive threats.

The protestors, estimated by BBC Persian to be [in the thousands](#), marched through the factory, eventually gathering in front of the management office. Expressing discontent over inadequate living conditions, they called for the proper implementation of the job classification plan, alignment of wages with those in other steel companies, and various other salary-related improvements. Despite the company's resistance and security measures, the protest persisted for three consecutive days, with numerous day, night, and evening shift workers actively participating.

The company's management, in collaboration with security forces, attempted to suppress the ongoing workers' protests using various tactics such as sending threatening text messages, summoning workers, and selectively closing sections. Despite these measures, the workers remained steadfast. In an attempt to quell the demonstrations, special forces were deployed on the second day of the strike. On the third day of the protests, as workers gathered and moved towards their usual meeting point, chanting slogans like „Batons and riot police have no effect anymore,“ they encountered riot police and security forces, leading to the detention of some individuals.

Telegram channels of the workers reported that the management of the steel mill claimed the detention of workers was “beyond the control of the management.” Meanwhile, security staff of the factory warned workers not to disclose news about the protests outside the factory. Around 200 workers intending to enter the factory in the days following the gatherings were prevented from doing so. Still, subsequent negotiations between workers' representatives and the factory management took place.

While the exact outcome of the strike and protests by Esfahan Steel workers is not definitively documented, they seem to have inspired a wave of new protests, namely at the prominent Ahvaz Steel Company. On December 20, 2023 workers from the Iran National Steel Industries Group (INSIG) in Ahvaz [gathered to express](#) their discontent with the CEO's failure to implement the job classification plan. In a bold response, the workers entered the management's office, removed the CEO from the factory, and declared their intention to persist in their strike and protest until their demands were met. These worker protests escalated following the CEO's decision to prevent 21 workers, who played pivotal roles in organizing the protests, [from entering the factory](#). After two weeks of gatherings and strikes, the protest group managed to achieve some of their demands. These included the implementation of the job classification plan, a higher increase in wages, and the reinstatement of the 21 workers who had been suspended.

### *Protests by Pensioners*

#### **Social Security Pensioners**

Amidst a deepening economic crisis and widening income disparities, various pensioner groups have joined wage earners in expressing discontent with government policies. Social security pensioners, numbering an estimated 4 to 6 million people, have been particularly active in voicing their economic grievances over

the past six months.

Almost every week, small groups of around 50-100 retirees assemble in front of social security offices across various cities. In provinces like Khuzestan, with a history of organized labor movements, these protests have been most widespread and frequent, occurring weekly during both the heat of summer and the coolness of autumn. Standing for hours in front of social security offices, they chant slogans expressing their grievances. Slogans include „We are all united, tired of promises,“ „Implementation of the equalization plan is our undeniable right, „Yesterday’s warriors, today’s hungry,“ „We can get our rights only through the streets,“ and „Neither the parliament nor the government cares about the people.“ Referring to unfulfilled promises by the 13th President, they chant, „Raisi, the liar, resign, resign.“

One of their key demands is to receive pensions proportional to the cost of daily living, efficient healthcare services and the implementation of the „equalization“ law. Although officials have promised to implement the equalization of salaries for pensioners and active workers for years, in practice, this has not occurred.



*The employment of retirees in the country, especially those covered by the Social Security Organization, poses a common problem in the job market, limiting opportunities for young people in an already scarce employment landscape.*

### Civil Service Pensioners

Civil service pensioners have also been expressing their concerns about living conditions for years, encompassing issues from inadequate monthly pensions to the inefficiency of medical insurance. These

Parvin Esfandiari, an activist among civil service pensioners, is currently under two years of house arrest with electronic monitoring due to her union activities. She served as a teacher in the education system for 30 years and was sentenced for protesting against the non-implementation of the Civil Service Management Law.\*

\*Although teachers have their specific job classification, they also fall under the broader framework of civil services management law, which delineates the working conditions, recruitment procedures, and retirement criteria for civil servants, including teachers. While being solely punished for membership is a rare occurrence, authorities often employ protests, for instance, as a pretext to justify punishment or accusations of activities against national security.

pensioners consistently approach responsible authorities, seeking responses to their grievances, and their demands have gained more prominence in the past year due to worsening economic conditions.

The inefficiency of health insurance is a primary source of dissatisfaction for civil servants' pensioners. They insist on budget allocations to improve basic insurance and advocate for the consolidation of insurances to eliminate the need for supplementary coverage. As one civil servant retiree [put it](#), "It is illogical for a retiree who has diligently paid all insurance premiums for 30 years to still be burdened with additional costs for supplementary insurance upon retirement." Despite payments made for supplementary insurance, pensioners often find themselves responsible for numerous expenses, and critical services such as dental care remain uncovered. This is particularly problematic as dental care ranks among the costliest medical services in the country, and retirees, given their age, frequently require extensive dental treatment. The cap set for hospitalization and surgery expenses is also deemed excessively low. For instance, a pensioner may be required to cover half the costs of an open-heart surgery in a high-quality private hospital.

Civil service pensioners receive pensions from the Civil Servants Pension Fund (CSPF). Overlooked provisions in the Civil Service Management Law, particularly Articles 64 and 125, are being demanded to be revived and fully implemented. Article 64 explicitly calls for the equalization of pensioners' salaries with those of peer working employees, stating that any increase in the salaries of government employees should also apply to pensioners. Article 125 addresses the need for annual increases in pensions based on the official inflation rate, a provision that has yet to be implemented.

With the persistence and amplification of protests, there has been a shift from everyday slogans in this group, such as „Unity, unity, against poverty and corruption“ or „with these meagre salaries, lives are on the line,“ to more politicized slogans. Expressions like „Their slogan is piety, their actions are all lies and theft“ have resonated loudly in recent months.

At times, protesting retirees of the Civil Servants Pension Fund joined forces with protesting pensioners dependent on Social Security, engaging in joint demonstrations.



*Pensioners of the Social Security Fund and Civil Servants Pension Fund gathered in front of the Social Security Office. Source: [VOA News](#)*

### Telecom Pensioners' Protests

For over two years now, Mondays have consistently served as a day of activism for telecom retirees. A series of protests also unfolded between July and December 2023, with demonstrations held in front of the Ministry of Communications in Tehran and certain telecommunications offices in provincial cities. On average, these protests have persisted in more than 10 cities across the country over the past six months.

This included a gathering on September 25th in Mashhad, which resulted in [the arrest](#) of several retirees.<sup>6</sup>

Telecom retirees protest the violation of workers' rights following the privatization of the telecommunications sector in the 2000s. Like the social security and civil servants' pensioners, the estimated 50,000 telecom retirees are grappling with challenges concerning the reimbursement of medical expenses. Despite

When retirees seek medical assistance from contracted healthcare centers, there are no issues. However, if these facilities lack necessary services or fail to meet required quality standards, and the retiree turns to non-contracted centers, insurance coverage does not extend to cover any expenses. The insurance provider cites the telecommunications company's outstanding debts as the reason for not covering all medical costs. This predicament has given rise to significant hardships for both telecom retirees and employees.

Furthermore, in early 2023, the telecommunications company raised pensioners' contributions for supplementary health insurance by 30%. Previously, pensioners covered 20% of the supplementary insurance premium, with the company shouldering the remaining 80%. However, the current arrangement divides this cost equally, with pensioners now sharing 50% of the burden alongside the telecommunications company.

deductions from their pensions for supplementary insurance, they contend that pledged medical services are not being delivered.

What deeply angers telecom retirees is the authorities' lack of responsiveness and indecision. In April 2023, the Minister of Communications remarked that, although the Ministry is not obligated to monitor the situation of workers and retirees in the privatized telecommunications sector, it had urged the telecommunications company to take requisite measures to address retirees' claims. In response, the telecommunications company and its board of directors directed provincial telecommunications entities to settle retirees' claims using funds generated from the sale of non-productive assets. This never materialized, however.

### Teachers

Security pressures on [teacher activists escalated in 2023](#), prompting the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers Trade Associations (CCITTA) – previously one of the most powerful unions of Iran – to curtail their on-the-ground activism. Instead, they shifted their focus entirely to online campaigns and issuing statements through social media.

For instance, together with Education International<sup>7</sup> (EI) a tweet storm on X was organized to highlight the pressing health concerns of imprisoned teacher activist Jafar Ebrahimi and to demand his release.

Other initiatives include:

- Issuing a statement in support of the demands put forth by retired teachers.
- Releasing a statement in response to the tragic death of Armita Garavand, a 17-year-old high school student who reportedly lost consciousness after an encounter with hijab patrol officers employed in Tehran's metro. Armita passed away after 28 days in a Tehran hospital. In their statement, the CCITTA

<sup>6</sup> Typically, authorities do not crack down on pensioners, and it remains unclear why there were arrests during the gathering on September 25th in Mashhad.

<sup>7</sup> Education International, the world's largest global union federation, represents over 32.5 million members in 384 organizations across 178 countries and territories. It is the foremost global organization for unions of teachers and education professionals.

blamed the government for the student's tragedy and demanded transparency regarding the suspicious circumstances leading to Armita's death.

Also, approximately 1,200 teachers signed a petition urging the liberation of detained teachers and an end to the prosecution of activists in the first week of July 2023. However, both the Iranian president and the head of the judiciary rejected the petition, asserting that it represented only 1% of the teaching population. In response, CCITTA organized an online campaign on 14 July 2023 urging both employed and retired teachers to sign the petition. By September 2023, over 36,000 teachers had signed the new petition, after which authorities banned the collection of additional signatures.

کمپین یکصد هزار امضاء برای آزادی معلمان زندانی و پایان دادن به پرونده سازی علیه فعالان صنفی

به اشتراک گذاری بر روی فیس بوک

Statistics 298 23 امضاها دادخواست

تعداد امضاء در این دادخواست وجود دارد. 23298

« 2344 ... 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 »

Date	استان:	شهر	نام	#
2023-07-08	تهران	تهران	ابوالفضل رحیمی شاد	1
2023-07-08	تهران	تهران	محمود بهشتی لنگرودی	2
2023-07-08	فارس	کازرون	ژیلا خیر	3
2023-07-08	تهران	تهران	مسعود زینال زاده	4
2023-07-08	خراسان شمالی	بجنورد	زهرا عوض زاده مقدم	5
.The signatory decided not to show his/her name on the Internet				
2023-07-08	مرکزی	شازند	فاطمه بهمنی	7
2023-07-08	خراسان	مشهد	منصوره عرفانیان	8
2023-07-08	کردستان	سنندج	شهریار نادری	9
2023-07-08	البرز	کرج	لطف اله جمشیدی	10

« 2344 ... 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 »

Teachers persist in expressing their voice through virtual activism. The petition of teachers to release arrested teacher activists reached 23298 signatures on [petitions.net](https://petitions.net). Multiple platforms were used for the petition.

### Journalists

Teachers were not the sole professional group to articulate their protests in writing. The same applies to journalist activists, including those from the Tehran Journalists' Trade Association, who objected to the arrests of numerous journalists who had been reporting on the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement (refer to the textbox below). In addition to conveying their concerns in reform-minded newspapers<sup>8</sup>, they sometimes expressed their apprehensions through union statements. The Tehran Journalists' Trade Association denounced the sentences imposed on journalists Niloufar Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi, who received a combined 25 years in prison in the initial rulings by the Islamic Revolutionary Court on September 23, 2023, and

<sup>8</sup> A powerful example being [a letter](#) from Elias Hazrati, journalist and editor-in-chief, published in E'temad newspaper (a reformist newspaper published in Tehran and among the top 3 of most sold newspapers in Iran). The letter protested the detention of Sara Masoumi while also drawing attention to the lack of free press in Iran.

called for the withdrawal of charges. Both were among the reporters involved in the initial coverage of the incident with Mahsa Amini. Subsequently, they were detained on charges such as propaganda against the system, actions against national security, and communication with hostile governments.

This association also expressed dissatisfaction with the sentences given to two other journalists, Nasim Sultanbeygi and Sara Masoumi, who are each facing [three years](#) and [six months](#), respectively. In December, the association issued a press release urging the judicial system to adopt a more considerate approach towards journalists critical of the system.

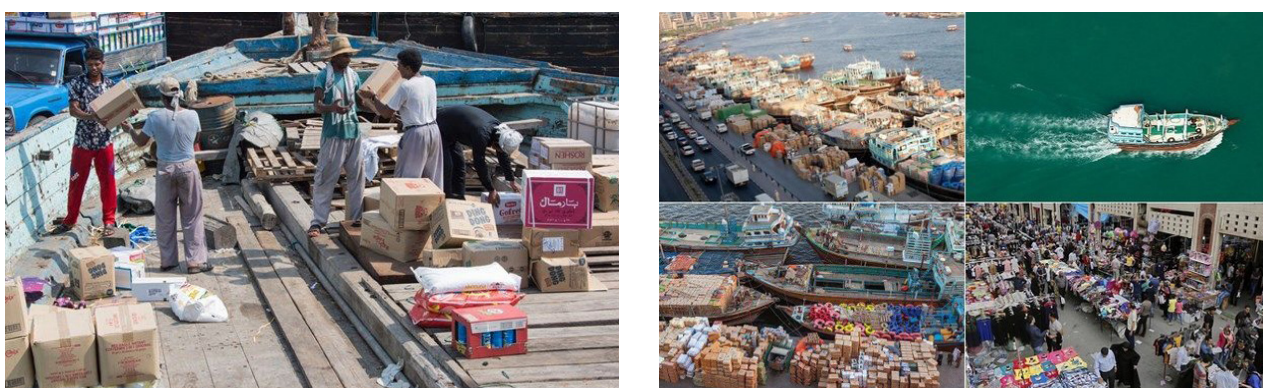
During the anti-government protests in the autumn of 2022 in Iran, known as the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, journalists and media activists were detained for covering news related to the protests. According to the Committee to Follow up on the Detention of Journalists during the Autumn 2022 protests and in the following year, over 90 journalists, photojournalists, or reporters were detained or summoned. While many were released on bail, some remain in prison. For certain journalists, heavy judicial sentences have been issued.

### **Textile Industry Workers**

On 6 August 2023, textile industry workers in the city of Borujerd protested the adjustment and the banning of 25 (activist) workers as well as the non-payment of salaries and [better wage conditions](#). Also, they called for a stop to the outstanding interference of some members of parliament in the affairs of this factory

### **Freighters and vendors**

In protest against the government’s decision to “regulate and supervise” cross-border trade more, both freighters and vendors working in the city of Gonaveh went on strike for around three weeks. They demanded an end to the newly imposed limitations on the import of goods, [which would turn their activities into “smuggling”](#). This would affect the lives of thousands of people, whose livelihoods strongly depend on cross-border trade over the Persian Gulf. Their strike effectively blocked the entry of relatively luxurious goods into the country through this route, from which the Iranian elite also benefits.



Gonaveh is located in Bushehr province and serves as a trade route to countries in the Persian Gulf. The majority of people in Gonaveh are involved in commerce, with their livelihoods dependent on the Port of Gonaveh. Source of images: [Khakriz Gonaveh](#) and [Mehr News](#)

### **Inter-sector labor action**

In the latter half of 2023, beyond the local or sector-specific protests mentioned earlier, there was also broader action addressing overarching issues. Like the protests of the teachers and journalists, these protests were all carried out in writing, often encompassing online initiatives. Below, some of the most noteworthy

On Sunday, November 19, 2023, the parliament decided to gradually increase the maximum years of service for men to 35 years and for women to 30 years. Consequently, the retirement age was set at 62 for men and 55 for women. Before the approval of this clause in the 2023/2024 budget bill, the maximum retirement age for men and women under the Social Security Act was 60 and 55 years, respectively. Advocates of this decision, including the government, argue that by raising the retirement age and implementing what they term ‚parametric‘ reforms, they can offset the budget deficit of pension funds, preventing their imminent bankruptcy. However, opponents, including some members of the parliament, workers, and retirees, reject this claim. They believe that the ultimate result of this decision is the exploitation of workers, and they consider it both legally and religiously incorrect.

of these campaigns and demand charters is spotlighted.

### ***Statement by 127 of the Country’s Workers’ Organizations Protesting Against Retirement Age Increase***

In December 2023, workers and retirees from various sectors voiced their opposition to the increase in the retirement age. This dissent was reflected in a protest statement issued by 127 trade associations of construction workers nationwide, receiving support from independent groups such as the „Pensioners Alliance“ and the „Tehran Journalists Association“. Furthermore, the „Iranian Teachers’ Organization“ released a protest statement. Meanwhile, even the quasi-governmental „Islamic Labor Councils of Tehran“ initiated a petition signed by [over 30.000 workers](#) in nine factories. Simultaneously, there was a large number of online campaigns against the retirement age on platforms like „Karzar“<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Declaration of Solidarity with Afghan Migrants and Refugees by 540 Civil Activists, Journalists, Artists, Academics, Lawyers, and Doctors***

The Iranian government has implemented a stricter policy towards Afghan migrants. On September 27, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi announced plans to deport the 5 million „illegal Afghans“ in the Islamic Republic.

According to [media reports](#), in August 2023, approximately 89,000 Afghans left Iran, with 46,000 doing so voluntarily and 43,000 deported due to a lack of valid papers. In the first week of November, Iranian authorities intensified measures, denying even Afghans with temporary work permits the right to seek employment.

Over the past three decades, an estimated 1 million to 7.6 million Afghans entered Iran, doing some of the most demanding and least popular work, including the construction of buildings, bridges, dams and tunnels.

In response to Iran’s expulsion project, 540 civil activists, journalists, artists, academics, lawyers, and doctors expressed solidarity with Afghan migrants and refugees by issuing a statement. The statement highlighted that approximately „5 to 8 million Afghans live in Iran, mostly residing illegally,“ and about „two million of them migrated to Iran in the past two years due to poverty, unemployment, and fear of the Taliban.“ It also warned against „the development of narratives of violence, hate and discrimination against Afghans to solve the immigration problem“ while highlighting the necessity of „respecting human values and the rights of migrants according to the Iranian ethics, moral values, and international law.“ The statement was published in various media outlets, inside and outside Iran, like „BBC Persian, Radio Farda, and inside Iran Shargh News, Etemad Online.

<sup>9</sup> Karzar functions similarly to websites like Change.org. Notably, Karzar has achieved numerous successes, allowing anyone to initiate petitions or campaigns as long as they adhere to their rules.



## Data on online petitions on Karzar.net during reporting period

219

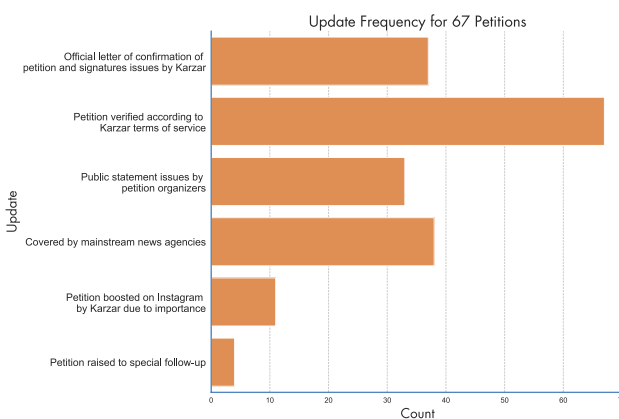
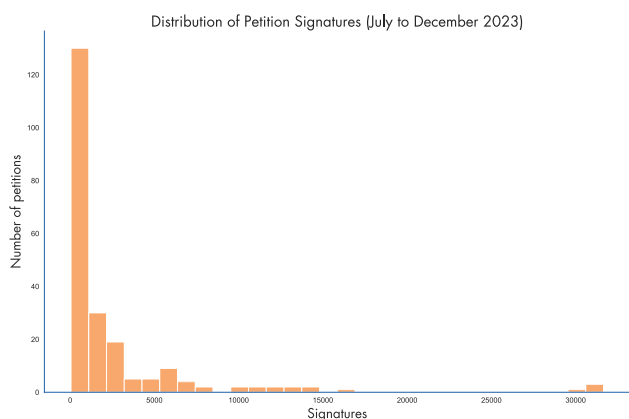
Petitions by workers started and completed

2497

Signatures on average

67

Petitions with registered follow-up



The distribution of the number of signatures is depicted in the figure above. Of the 219 petitions initiated between July and December 2023 and completed so far, 67 have received a follow-up. Some petitions gained mainstream media attention, and a select few entered the 'special follow-up' phase at Karzar, enhancing the petition's reach and impact.

### Table of top 5 petitions started and completed between July and December 2023

Petition topic/demand	On behalf of	No. of signatures	Updates
Permission for a special bonus for healthcare personnel	Defenders of health and healthcare personnel	31.655	The petition received official confirmation and was covered in mainstream media, including <a href="#">Khabarban</a> and <a href="#">ILNA</a> . The demands were met by the responsible government entity.
Complaint Regarding Increase in Retirement Age	All workers	30.390	The petition was shared with the media and covered by social media channels. The petition was not successful, since the retirement age was increased.
Equalization of teacher pensions with salaries	Retired teachers	16.536	The group issues a press release but did not reach its goals.
Stop temporary contract jobs and employ workers directly	All temporary workers	14.765	The petition was covered on social media, but no concessions were made from employers or authorities.
Institutionalize and increase level of services to veterans of war	Veterans	13.023	The group issues a press release but did not reach its goals.

## 3 Government policies & law-making

The pursuit of workers' rights is intricately tied to the leeway granted by the state. This chapter examines government actions, policies and legislative proposals influencing labor rights in Iran during the specified period. The initial section maps and scrutinizes governmental reactions to labor protests. It covers both repressive measures to quell labor unrest, as well as passive responses and instances where the government acquiesced to the demands of certain worker groups. Following this, the latter part of the chapter delves into the legal landscape, exploring (the status of) proposed changes to labor laws that either introduce new issues or partially resolve existing ones.

### Governmental responses to labor protests

#### Suppression

While Iran is a member of the International Labour Organisation, it does not endorse independent activism, and even formerly recognized independent trade unions are now disregarded. In line with this policy, the government frequently sought to suppress trade unionists and labor rights activists in the period under study, thereby making use of a varied package of measures, including arrests, judicial prosecutions, prison sentences and other deterrents.

Just like the [first half of 2023](#), in the latter part of 2023, the government engaged in targeted suppression, specifically directing its efforts towards teacher activists affiliated with the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Association (CCITTA). Between July and December 2023, over 40 active and retired teachers faced detention or imprisonment. Some were also sentenced to suspended flogging, as seen in the case of four members of the teachers' trade association in Bushehr. Some of these educators were temporarily released on substantial bail amounts, while others, like Zahra Esfandiari and Abdolrazzaq Amiri, received unconventional punishments, such as „house arrest with electronic monitoring.“ Furthermore, they were compelled to pay a monthly fee of IRR 6 million for the cost of wearing the electronic ankle monitor, in addition to a prepayment of IRR 50 million<sup>10</sup>.

Job discrimination is another tool the Iranian government resorts to in order to suppress teacher activism. One example is Shiva Ameli Rad, a dedicated teacher representative, who faced expulsion by the Ministry of Education in August 2023 – in spite of Iran's teachers shortage. This was in the aftermath of her visiting South Korea to receive on behalf of the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Association (CCITTA) a peace prize from The May 18 Memorial Foundation during a national teaching congress [organized by the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union union](#).

Despite her 18 years of teaching experience, Shiva Ameli Rad was removed from her teaching position in Marivan city, Kurdistan, following the receipt of this award, including because she didn't wear the hijab. Notably, no administrative procedures were observed, and she was denied any opportunity to challenge the decision.

Meanwhile, teachers advocating for trade union rights may also find themselves excluded from the teacher ranking system or subjected to other penalties, such as salary deductions or being forced to retire prematurely.

Besides teacher activists, the Iranian government also targeted other activists in the period under study. Well-known female labor activist Reihaneh Ansari-Nezhad, faced a four-year prison sentence from the Tehran Revolutionary Court on July 28, 2023, for “assembly and collusion against national security and

<sup>10</sup> 11 USD and 90 USD respectively, which represents a substantial sum of money in the Iranian context.

It has been approximately a year since one of the teachers' long-standing demands, known as the „teacher ranking law,“ was finally implemented after more than a decade of delays. Through the introduction of this job classification scheme, Iranian teachers aimed to eliminate nepotism and arbitrary practices related to salary allocation. However, rather than alleviating concerns, the government's actions have heightened job discrimination by classifying teachers into „good“ and „bad“ groups, holding teacher activists hostage.

acting against national security.” As an additional punishment, Ansari-Nezhad was prohibited from leaving the country, joining political and civil groups, and engaging in online and media activities for two years. Among the trade unions condemning her verdict were the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Mill Labor Syndicate and the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company condemning the verdict respectively as a “fabrication and plot, and “illegal”. It was also noted how “routine procedures of the Ministry of Intelligence,“ were “not followed in their customary manner”.

Furthermore, dozens of trade union and labor rights activists in Iranian Kurdistan were detained. For instance, the Free Union of Iranian Workers' Telegram channel announced the arrests of activist Muzaffar Salehnia, [a board member](#) of the Free Union of Iranian Workers in early September 2023. Similarly, in September 2023, the brothers Khabat and Ramyar Dehdar<sup>11</sup> [were arrested](#), as was seasoned activist Majid Hamidi, a dedicated member of the „Coordination Committee to Support Building Labor Unions. While some of the arrested labor activists were released shortly after their detention, others remained in custody<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to targeting labor activists, ordinary workers who dared to protest were also sometimes subjected to arrests. A case in point is the arrest of 32 protesters from the Gold and Travertine Mines in Agh-Darreh, Takab, on security charges.

### Focused repression of Kurdish activists

Kurdish labor activists are a primary target of the Iranian regime. This is due to the fact that labor associations and unions are more robust in Kurdistan. Left-wing groups in Iran, particularly communists, have predominantly originated in Kurdistan over the past 70 years. Furthermore, the ‚Women, Life, Freedom‘ movement in Iran commenced with protests in Kurdistan following the death of Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Amini in morality police custody. Since then, Kurdistan has been the scene of numerous violent protests and even more brutal crackdowns by the regime, with hundreds believed to have been killed in state-sanctioned violence.

This policy is also reflected in the sentence for 17 protesters from the Iran National Steel Industries Group (INSIG) issued by the Revolutionary Court of the southern city of Ahvaz on 27 September 2023. According to the verdict, individuals participating in the workers' protests at INSIG in 2022 were charged with „disturbing public order through creating commotion and nuisance.“ Consequently, they were fined IRR 25 million each (45 USD), in place of three months of imprisonment, along with a sentence of 74 lashes, [suspended for three years](#).

Just like with the targeting of labor activists, the Iranian government was particularly harsh on Kurdish protestors. The earlier-mentioned peaceful demonstration organised outside the Agh-Darreh mine by [unemployed villagers](#), was met with severe government force. Three protestors, Naser Bahramian, Hojjat

<sup>11</sup> Both are civil and labor rights activists in Sanandaj, the capital of Kordestan province in northwestern Iran.

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately more information regarding the arrested activists was not available.

MomenZadeh, and Armin Nikzad, were shot and [had to be hospitalized](#).

The violence didn't stop there. When villagers engaged in protests following the incident, security forces conducted raids. They [detained 50 individuals](#), all of whom were workers from the Agh-Darreh gold and travertine mines. While most of the detained miners were released on bail, ranging from IRR six to twelve billion, six individuals spent over two months in prison and were eventually released from Urmia Prison after posting bail. The final verdict on the charges against the miners is still pending. Additionally, many houses were destroyed during the process.

INSIG workers consistently organize protest gatherings, both in the workplace and in the city and other public spaces. They also frequently engage in strikes. As a result, they faced repeated suppression by security forces in the second half of 2023. A prime motivation for the protests concerns the way the company is led. Workers accuse the leadership of bad governance, reflected in, among others, salary scales of the job classification plan not being implemented and honored, even though the company is legally obliged to do so.

Besides pro-active suppression, the Iranian government's response to labor actions and labor activists between July and December 2023 can be categorized into two other types:

### *Passive and unresponsive*

In numerous instances, the government adopted a passive stance toward protesting workers and retirees taking minimal or no action to disperse gatherings. This does suggest implicit recognition, to some extent, of the validity and legitimacy of these organized labor protests by the Iranian government. On the downside, this approach resulted in the continued neglect of workers' demands, even when legally justified or despite prior assurances.

### *Striking compromises<sup>13</sup>*

While, as a whole, the workers' struggles outlined in the previous chapter didn't yield eye-catching achievements over the past six months, certain groups of protesting workers did experience partial success in securing their demands. These instances include the following:

Contractor miners working in the Chadormalu copper mine in Yazd demanding salary increases and improved insurance and welfare services successfully negotiated with the employer. This negotiation resulted in enhanced wages and improved welfare facilities.

The protests by textile workers in the city of Borujerd also yielded positive outcomes. After several days of union protests at the factory, the employer convened a meeting with labor representatives. During the meeting, the employer committed to meeting the workers' demands and to addressing the issues faced by temporary workers. Consequently, the workers received one month's wages, and those initially made redundant were temporarily reinstated under a three-month contract until their job status was clarified. Concurrently, Moslem Moradi, the governor of Borujerd, urged a „comprehensive inspection of the company“ by provincial auditors.

The nurses and other medical staff at Milad Hospital in Tehran achieved a victory as a result of their strike and union rally. This collective action led to the payment of a portion of the legal arrears owed to the

<sup>13</sup> This didn't always involve the Iranian government directly since employees might first and foremostly negotiate with the employer(s) in question. Given the entanglement between businesses and the Iranian government, the Iranian government would nevertheless control these employer responses to some extent.

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nurses and medical staff.

The same goes for the actions of the workers of the petrochemical facility in Dehloran. The Governor of Ilam promised that Dehloran Petrochemical would not be closed and that the workers could return to their work.

Also, the December strike by boatmen and market vendors in Gonaveh led the government to issue new guidelines aimed at increasing the quantity of imported goods. Under the new guidelines, the weight limit for customs clearance was increased to 77 tons (from an initially intended 59) while the number of eligible items for clearance was expanded to encompass 80 types of goods.

Finally, of the statements issued by labor organisations, the statement by CCITTA, backed by Education International, demanding the release of imprisoned teacher activist Jafar Ebrahimi due to urgent health issues, appeared to have had an impact. Ebrahimi was released [shortly afterwards](#) on a two-week medical furlough.

### *Intersectoral successes*

Besides achievements through sectoral or local strikes, workers also booked a success in the period under study through intersectoral action.

In May 2023, the draft text of the Seventh National Development Plan Bill was revealed, triggering substantial reactions, particularly from labor relations experts and activists. Articles 15, 16, 66, and 67 raised in particular concerns as they touched upon matters such as permitting employers to pay half of the minimum wage for the initial three years of employment, granting unilateral termination rights to employers, raising the retirement age, and altering the method of calculating retirement benefits.

Just a few days after the release of the draft, online protest campaigns opposing the anti-worker provisions of the Seventh National Development Plan Bill were initiated. In less than a month, some of these petitions garnered over 40,000 signatures. The petitioners directed their appeals to the government and the parliament, urging them to abstain from compromising the rights of workers and retirees. These protests proved effective, resulting in the removal of Articles 15 and 16 from the final draft presented to the parliament, prompting a retreat by the government.

### **(Proposed) Legal Revisions**

Traditionally, alterations to labor laws in Iran have been influenced significantly by the government's intentions outlined [in its 5-yearly development plans](#), or are tied to stipulations in those plans. However, the realization of these plans often faces challenges, which critics attribute [to inadequate planning or a lack of realism](#). For instance, despite the announcement of the 7th development plan for Iran in May 2023, certain provisions from the preceding 6th development plan have remained unimplemented. Concurrently, the 5th development plan continues to serve as a foundational basis for some ongoing initiatives.

More generally, plans for new laws sometimes get stuck in the pipeline or encounter delays for other reasons. For that reason, the legal initiatives discussed in this section originate from both earlier proposals still under consideration and new legal proposals arising from the 7th Development plan.

### *Public Sector Employee Organization Plan*

Status: Awaiting Parliament Approval

The plan for organizing public sector employees, presented to Parliament in October 2020, awaits

consideration. The main provision dictates that, upon enforcement, all employment within organizations falling under Article 29 of the Sixth Development Plan be exclusively through public advertisements, centralized nationwide exams, or the recruitment procedure.

Upon approval, the plan aims to organize a minimum of two million fixed-term and contractual employees, altering their employment status. The plan categorizes employment into three types: permanent, fixed-term, and contractual, eliminating other forms like hourly paid teaching contracts and service provision contracts<sup>14</sup>. The shift intends to address employment concerns, boost salaries, and enhance fringe benefits.

Pending approval, the government has not addressed the financial implications, with worker activists suspecting that private sector contractors' influence has contributed to the delay, as they perceive their interests at risk.

### *Pension Harmonization for Pensioners Covered by Civil Servants Pension Fund, Armed Services Pension Funds, and Social Security Pension Fund*

Current Status: Awaiting Final Approval in the Parliament

During the review of the Seventh National Development Plan on November 22, 2023, the Parliamentary Commission for Planning and Budget approved a proposal to equalize pensions for civil service, armed services, and social security retirees.

Eleven years ago, the Islamic Consultative Assembly already passed a law aiming to align the salaries of retirees with those of active workers over a specified period. Unfortunately, the implementation of this law has faced persistent delays due to insufficient budgetary allocation. This postponement has led to protests among retirees, especially since the mid-2010s, expressing discontent with their living conditions, and making pension harmonization a central demand.

While the Budget and Planning Organization allocated funds in 2020 to harmonize the pensions of civil servant and armed forces retirees, this initiative excluded over four million retirees covered by social security.

The proposal will be presented as a resolution to the Joint Commission for the Seventh National Development Plan, where a final decision will be made. However, retirees remain skeptical and doubtful about the effectiveness of such resolutions until finally concrete measures are taken.

### *Plan for the Merger of Pension Funds*

Status: Under Government Consideration

In line with the objectives outlined in the Seventh National Development Plan, the Iranian government sought to merge the oil industry fund with the general-purpose social security fund, as detailed in the previous chapter. This is part of a wider government initiative to [merge pension funds](#) to prevent their bankruptcy as successive governments have fallen short on their commitments<sup>15</sup>.

The proposal to merge pension funds in Iran has ignited significant controversy, not only among oil workers but also in other sections of society. While the government sees consolidation as a solution to avert insolvency, critics, including labor activists and economists, strongly oppose it. Some argue that, instead of

<sup>14</sup> For that reason, the plan is often dubbed „the Plan to Eliminate Manpower Supply Companies,“ as it will exclude contracting firms from the job market, leading to their eradication.

<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, the government faces a significant budget deficit, with projections indicating a shortfall of IRR 4000 trillion (7.3 billion USD). This financial challenge is further compounded by sanctions that curtail oil revenues, casting a looming shadow over the future viability of pension funds.

### *Development plan for Gaza*

Status: Under consideration

As part of its foreign policy objectives, the Iranian government initiated the creation of another five-year development plan, specifically for Gaza. However, public responses in Iran have generally been less than enthusiastic, given the 50-percent annual inflation rate and [for other reasons](#). Criticism has also emerged in parliamentary circles, including by Moeinoddin Saeedi, MP for Chabahar. Critiquing the government in an interview with a journalist of the *Roydad24* website in Tehran, Saeedi [stated](#), „We have only completed 20 percent of our own country’s development plan, and yet government intends to formulate a five-year development plan for Palestine, because Israel has allegedly entered its last stage of collapse.”

dismantling the protective framework for fund beneficiaries or risking the bankruptcy of two funds through merging, a more effective remedy involves entrusting fund management to their rightful owners—workers who contribute to their pension. In the oil sector, three official, semi-governmental unions in the oil sector, including the Islamic Labor Council and the Labor House (Khane Karegar), are lobbying to represent workers.

### *The Plan to Increase Retirement Age and Service Years in the Seventh National Development Bill*

Status: Approved by the Parliament, awaiting confirmation by the Guardian Council

As outlined in the previous chapter, to address the pension fund crisis, the Iranian Ministry of Labor stipulated in the Seventh Development Plan its goal of increasing the retirement age. Based on Article 29, the maximum years of service for men would gradually increase to 35 years, and for women, to 30 years. Despite widespread protests, including the labor protests detailed in the previous chapter, the Iranian parliament approved the Seventh Development Plan on November 18, thereby sanctioning the raising of the pension age. Consequently, the retirement age will be set at 62 for men and 55 for women.

In accordance with the Seventh Development Bill, the relevant parliamentary commission also endorsed that individuals working in difficult and harmful occupations will lose out on their additional incentive years granted for retirement. Instead of each year being counted as 1.5 years, each year worked would now count as 1.2 or 1.3 per year actually worked, depending on the job. This change poses a detriment to workers in challenging occupations, such as construction, mining, and the oil and gas sector, as they will be required to work for an additional 3 to 5 years.

### *Extension of Sixth Development Plan*

Status: Approved by the Parliament

Meanwhile, the Iranian Parliament approved an extension of the Sixth Development Plan of Iran in September 2023, [thereby extending it for the third time](#). The recent extension provides the Iranian government with an opportunity to address the unfulfilled objectives from the past seven years. The 6th Development Plan, initially scheduled for implementation from 2016 to 2021, has seen many aspects untouched due to the government grappling with a series of foreign policy and economic challenges<sup>16</sup>. According to the Parliament Research Center’s analysis, so far 30% of the plan was implemented, 40% not yet and 30% could not be assessed. There’s speculation that the old plan could face yet another extension when the Majles reviews the government’s progress in approximately six months.

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16 One of these involves enhancing the status of nurses as a strategy to enhance healthcare in Iran.

## 4 Analysis & way forward

Despite a repressive regime, a surge in labor demonstrations rocked Iran throughout the latter half of 2023. This was a direct response to worsening living conditions, primarily fueled by the stark mismatch between wages and pensions versus skyrocketing inflation rates. Consequently, ordinary Iranians find themselves struggling to put food on the table and maintain shelter.

Their plight intensifies due to inadequate labor law enforcement, resulting in delayed payouts and unsafe working conditions. Tightened government regulations primarily benefited employers and the government. Changes included withdrawing extra financial support for workers in challenging occupations and refusing formal recognition of independent labor unions. In some instances, the ongoing economic crisis and job insecurity drove desperate workers to tragic measures.

The challenges extend to retirement, where additional complexities arise. Pensions lag behind inflation, and healthcare services fall short. This compels retirees, particularly those with minimal pensions, to pick up extra work—such as street vending, taxi driving, and various odd jobs—even after officially retiring.

While some of the labor protests yielded results, the majority did not. An important reason for this failure lies in the absence of organized representation for workers' demands. Most workplaces lack access to an independent union that can effectively organize protests and negotiate on behalf of the workers. Many labor protests, such as those involving steel industry workers, lacked organization and organizing capacity. As a result, they lack the power that organizing can provide including by having supporting strategies needed to influence politics and society in their favor.

Without organized structures, protesting workers cannot mobilize forces, lobby effectively, or even officially communicate with the media to have an influence through public opinion. Additionally, they face challenges in interacting with international organizations. In short, the absence of organized representation hampers their ability to navigate and shape the broader socio-political landscape in support of their cause.

Internal and external challenges, including security threats, throw another wrench into the works. This might mean getting sacked before achieving anything or discontinuing a labor protest due to the fear of (also) getting arrested – or simply due to a lack of income. This makes it hard to turn this pressure into concessions by an unwilling government.

To make these protests more effective, a two-pronged strategy is essential: a long-term commitment to sustained protests and short-term actions aimed at achieving immediate outcomes to boost morale and incentivize workers. For example, focusing on issues like receiving delayed salaries, pressuring for the removal of problematic directors, or securing the return of workers unjustly fired. These actions help workers understand the power of collective action and the importance of working together. While immediate outcomes may not be systematic or transformative, they serve as positive signals and contribute to the overall long-term strategy.

A top priority for labor activists should therefore be to raise awareness among workers about the importance of organization and guiding them in channeling their demands for favorable outcomes. This emphasis on organization can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of labor movements, empowering workers to advocate for their rights more cohesively and efficiently.

To elevate their efforts, labor activists and workers could focus on:



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**Formation of Workers' Associations and Institutions:** Establish workers' associations and institutions, even if they're somewhat informal and virtual, with direct stakeholder participation and democratic mechanisms.

**Coalition Building:** Join forces with other worker associations, both formally and informally, around common demands like annual (minimum) wages, scrapping regulations violating fundamental labor rights, and committing to international treaties.

**Strategic Approaches:** Mix it up with short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies to advance trade union actions, draw support from the workforce, and involve new players.

**Boosting Tolerance:** Foster a sense of tolerance and solidarity among workers, using resilience and conflict-solving techniques to navigate crises and keep morale high.

**Social Media Utilization:** Use social media for needs assessment, spotting potentials, rallying the troops, and launching online campaigns or press releases.

**International Complaints:** File complaints with international bodies like the International Labour Organization (ILO), of which Iran is a prominent member, and the Committee on Freedom of Association (CFA) for violations of labor and human rights.

### **International community**

Finally, members of the international community, including labor unions and policymakers, can bolster the efforts of Iranian labor activists to improve the livelihoods of workers in Iran.

**Connecting:** Fostering connections and support between international labor organizations and independent unions in Iran is crucial. Also, collaboration on advocacy, sharing resources, and promoting awareness of certain issues is helpful.

**Socio-economic human rights:** It is imperative to direct attention towards the prevailing issues of poverty and the suppression of workers demanding fundamental living and working conditions. While international organizations play a crucial role in advocating for political human rights, it is equally important to highlight socio-economic human rights in Iran. Foremost among these concerns is the pressing issue of poverty and food insecurity which resonates deeply within a significant portion of Iranian society.

In conclusion, effectively addressing the labor issues in Iran requires coordinated efforts and strategic measures, spearheaded by Iranian workers themselves along with dedicated labor activists. However, to amplify the resonance of their concerns and elevate them onto the global stage, it is also imperative for the international community to emphasize the pursuit of Iranian workers for better working conditions, especially considering the current plight and poverty of Iran's working force.

## 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.

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