Iranian oil workers mount wave of strikes as COVID-19 rages across the country

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Amid a resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic, thousands of workers in Iran's southern provinces have carried out wildcat strikes in recent days in the critical oil and petrochemical sectors.

Washington's campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran—including punishing economic sanctions, a de facto embargo on medical equipment and drugs, and military threats—has exacerbated the social and economic crisis in the country, which has also been compounded by the Islamic Republic's disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to reports, at least 10,000 workers have participated in a wave of strikes at nearly 30 oil and petrochemical facilities, including the Abadan, Parsian and Qeshm refineries. Strikes have also taken place in the Lamerd petrochemical complex, and some parts of the South Pars gas field, the world's largest gas field. Job actions have occurred in at least 11 provinces since Saturday, August 1, to protest unpaid wages and terrible working conditions.

It remains unclear if the strikes are continuing. One right-wing source, associated with pro-US opposition forces, claimed this weekend that the strike movement is continuing, even expanding. But this has not been confirmed by other Iranian or western media outlets.

The trigger that caused the growing anger to boil over was the death of a contract worker at the Mahshahr petrochemical facility on July 28 in nearly 50-degree heat. Workers at the North Azadegan oil field were reportedly the first to stop work to protest low wages on July 29.

The strike wave spread to the Kangan refinery and Parsian oil production complex on August 3, and to the Isfahan refinery in central Iran and Mashhad in the north east on August 4.

Workers are mainly employed as contract employees, meaning they lack a permanent job and social rights. As well as their unpaid wages and social insurance, workers are demanding decent dormitories and hygienic bathrooms.

The brave strike wave by workers in defiance of the Iranian regime is part of a broader upsurge in the class struggle internationally, against austerity, state violence and ever widening social inequality—all of which are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It marks a deepening of working class anger towards Iran's bourgeois-clerical authorities, following the mass protests and demonstrations across the country at the end of 2017, and in November 2019.

The fact that the wildcat strikes broke out in the most critical economic sector in Iran makes them all the more significant. It was a mass strike of oil workers in January-February 1979 that broke the back of the bloody dictatorship of the US-backed Shah.

The oil sector, which has been hard hit by the global recession triggered by the pandemic, remains the lifeblood of the Iranian economy. Due to the Trump administration's punitive sanctions—which were imposed in 2018, after the US scuttled the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, with the aim of crashing its economy and provoking "regime change"—Iran's crude oil production has dropped to its lowest level in 40 years, and its oil storage facilities have been filled to the brim.

In early July, Reuters reported, oil production fell to 1.9 million barrels per day, nearly half that in 2018. According to the report, Iran's "total liquid production—including crude oil, condensate and natural gas liquids—fell from 3.1 million barrels per day (bpd) in March to 3 million bpd in June." A further fall of 100,000 barrels per day was predicted for July.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced last month that it expects Middle Eastern energy producing countries, including Iran, to lose $270 billion in oil revenue compared to last year. At the end of June, Iran's First Vice President, Eshaq Jahangiri, said that Iran's oil revenues had plummeted to a mere $8 billion in 2019, as compared with $100 billion in 2011 and $62 billion in 2018.

In addition, Iran's currency, the rial, has fallen precipitously, to some 230,000 rial per one US dollar, as opposed to 35,000 to $1 in 2015. According to the IMF's latest estimate, Iran's inflation rate has reached nearly 35 percent, and is now the fourth highest in the world.

Washington has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to

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ratchet up its sanctions against Iran. This has directly contributed to mass deaths in the country, because the sanctions prevent Iran from obtaining medicines and supplies to treat coronavirus cases, cancer patients, and other deadly diseases. In early April, Washington vindictively declared its intention to use its veto power to prevent Iran from accessing a $5 billion emergency loan from the IMF to help deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Iranian regime's hope that the European powers would offer an alternative to help Tehran evade US sanctions has come to naught.

Iran is the country worst affected by the pandemic in the Middle East, with more than 18,000 coronavirus deaths, according to official figures. More than 2,000 new infections and about 200 deaths are being registered every day.

While the criminal sanctions enforced by Washington and its European imperialist allies are chiefly to blame for this catastrophic state of affairs, the focus of Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime amid the pandemic has been on defending and expanding the profits and privileges of the ruling elite, just as it has been throughout its decades long conflict with the US.

Placing the financial interests of the bourgeois elite before the lives and needs of Iran's workers and toilers, Tehran began reopening the Iranian economy in the second half of April, even as Iran was officially reporting more than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases per day. *Al-Monitor* reported that as of July 25, 138 medical workers in the country have lost their lives fighting the pandemic.

Iranian officials are increasingly fearful that the worsening conditions and the government's disastrous response to the pandemic will trigger a social explosion. In June, Hashem Hashemzadeh Herisi, a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, warned that "The current situation of the society is unbearable. The distance between the people and the establishment grows every day… The situation is very critical. We can't sit by and let the establishment die."

The energy workers' strike wave erupted amid growing social unrest. Despite increasingly harsh government repression, there appears to be a growing willingness among workers to struggle. According to reports, there were more than 200 protests across 74 cities and 24 provinces in June.

Workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company, in the oil-rich Khuzestan province, have been on strike for more than 50 days. Haft Tappeh sugar workers have repeatedly waged militant struggles over the past five years after the company was privatized. The Iranian regime has responded to the latest walkout with ruthless repression, including the imprisonment of some of the workers' leaders. The striking workers are demanding payment of their wages and benefits, rehiring of fired workers, "expulsion and arrest of corrupt company officials," and the cancellation of the privatization.

At the beginning of the month, around 200 workers at the Heavy Equipment Production Company descended on the company headquarters in Arak, in central Iran, to protest against delays in paying their wages, poor working conditions and the way the company is being run.

In early July, a court in Arak sentenced 42 workers from Azarab Industries to one year in prison, 74 lashes, and one month of forced labor for protesting unpaid wages and the privatization of the business. Due to a public outcry, a higher court was subsequently forced to withdraw these penalties.

Under these conditions, the executions of some of the participants in protests in Iran in December 2017 and January 2018 is aimed at intimidating the working class as it enters into struggle. Mostafa Salehi was reportedly arrested eight months after the protests and charged with the murder of an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officer during the demonstrations. Despite his denial of the murder challenges, his trial and conviction were concluded over the course of a mere 10 days in February 2019. One day after the verdict was released to the public last Tuesday, he was executed.

In July, three other protesters who took part in demonstrations last November came close to being executed. The decision to launch a retrial of their cases came only after a massive social media campaign against the executions, in which social media users tweeted 12 million times "do not execute" in Persian.

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