

Petrochemical workers in Iran strike over pay and conditions

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Petrochemical workers across Iran have been waging strikes since June 19 to demand higher pay, the payment of back wages, the elimination of intermediary contractors and better health and safety conditions.

The workers, mainly technicians and tradesmen such as scaffolders, fitters, welders and electricians, want monthly wages increased from \$300 to \$500 to keep up with Iran's soaring inflation rate, which has reached 50 percent. They are also calling for the implementation of 2010 labour law provisions that give fixed-term contract workers 10 days off for every 20 workdays. This would allow them to return from oil rigs and offshore facilities to their homes often far away. Currently, only permanent workers—whose numbers have fallen precipitously in recent years due to contracting out—are given the legally mandated time off.

The strike is part of a broader movement of opposition among workers across the country to the decades-long assault of Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime on their economic and social conditions. This assault has continued and deepened amid the coronavirus pandemic, which is now surging for the fifth time in Iran, as the new more transmissible and deadly Delta variant takes root.

According to a recently published Interior Ministry report, there were around 43,000 protest demonstrations in Iran between 2013 and January 2018, or 30 protests per day. The protests in November-December 2019, triggered by an overnight hike in gas prices and widespread economic hardship, were only suppressed by the security forces' use of extreme lethal force. At least 1,500 people were killed, 2,000 wounded and 7,000 arrested during the government crackdown.

The strike, the oil workers' most extensive industrial action to date, was called by the Coordination Council of Oil Industries Contract Workers, an advocacy group for 41,000 contract workers in the oil industry. It has spread to at least 70 oil and gas installations and refineries and petrochemical plants, with tens of thousands of workers reportedly staying at home or in their dormitories.

Most of the strikers are employed as casual labourers or on short-term contracts by contractors and sub-contractors of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), and National Iranian Oil Refining and

Distribution Company. Workers claim that around 154,000 temporary workers or 80 percent of those employed in the sector do not have regular contracts.

Over the last twenty years, the government-owned INOC stopped employing workers on regular contracts as older workers retired, turning thousands of new hires into short-term contract employees. This practice spread among smaller, newly emerging companies in the sector, as INOC, like its counterparts internationally, moved to access lower-waged workers by outsourcing many of their operations.

The Contract Oil Workers Council issued a statement on June 26 saying, "We want to be involved in the decision-making process that helps to realize our demands," adding "We have seen that sometimes, the management of some companies has ruthlessly fired the striking day-workers and replaced them immediately." There are reports that 700 workers employed by contractors at the Tehran Refinery have been fired.

The Iranian Labour News Agency (INLA) cited one worker as saying that contractors in southern oil projects such as Asalouyeh, in Bushehr province, had cut salaries to levels in the rest of the country where working conditions are not as harsh as in the oil and gas fields. Temperatures at remote oil fields in the south of Iran can exceed 50 degrees centigrade (122 Fahrenheit) in the summer. Other workers said that contractors frequently paid wages late and only "every few months."

The strike movement, dubbed "Campaign 1400," as the year 2021 is known in the Iranian calendar, and launched under the banner "We Do Not Give Up Our Rights," is the continuation of a struggle that began in July 2020, when workers at 15 refineries, petrochemical companies and power plants took part in a nationwide protest. Days later, workers from other industries, including auto manufacturing and power generation, joined the "1400 Protest" campaign, with permanent workers in the oil industry saying they would join the strike on June 30. Last Wednesday, permanent NIOC employees held rallies at refineries and petrochemical plants in Abadan, Ahwaz, Mahshahr, Damavand and Asalouyeh, in support of their demands for higher wages and better retirement conditions.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's Shiite populist president from 2005 to 2013, issued a statement Sunday voicing support

for the contract petrochemical workers and warning the government about the implications of a strike by such a key section of the working class. It was the oil workers' strike that erupted in late 1978, amid a wave of mass protests by workers, students and the urban poor, that broke the back of the blood-soaked US-backed regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi. Ahmadinejad described the energy workers as among the most committed and technically qualified group of workers in the country, and said they are right to demand they be treated like regular employees.

The strike has clearly roiled the authorities. The government, led by President Hassan Rouhani, whose second and final term ends in August, has called on the workers to end their strike in view of the importance of the oil industry and Washington's continuing efforts to strangle Iran's economy through punitive sanctions. It has promised a review of their demands. The Iranian Parliament's Energy Committee held an extraordinary session with Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zangeneh on Sunday, June 27 to discuss the strikes and find ways to end the unrest in the oil sector.

According to Parvin Mohammadi, the Deputy Secretary of the Iranian Independent Workers Union, strikes in the oil sector have spread to 70 companies in eight provinces. She told London-based Iran International TV that the authorities had not addressed the workers' demands, while adding that they have made empty promises and arrested workers for refusing to end protests or strikes. Independent unions and workers organizations are not recognized by the government and have been repressed, often savagely, since the bourgeois-clerical regime consolidated its rule in the early 1980s.

The contract oil workers' strike started the day after Iran's presidential elections, which saw a record abstention rate. Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's chief justice and a prominent conservative connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, prevailed in a race from which all but a handful of candidates were arbitrarily excluded. According to *Kahyan.London*, a right-wing opposition newspaper, workers delayed the start of the strike until after the elections because "security and judiciary authorities [always target] striking workers with security charges and prosecute them" as part of heightened pre-election security measures. They had also avoided slogans that would lead their actions to be interpreted as a political protest.

The Iranian-focused Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), which is part funded by the US-sponsored National Endowment for Democracy, a notorious locus of imperialist intrigue, claims that in the week since the start of the strike there have been a number of protests against the results of some of the municipal elections held in conjunction with the June 18 presidential election, as well as actions by other workers protesting poor labour conditions.

The growing support for the strike testifies to Iran's deep-going political, social, and economic crisis. The Iranian

bourgeoisie fears an eruption of class struggle driven by declining living standards and a dramatic increase in social inequality, as those at the top have sought to place the full burden of the US sanctions on the working class. Some 1,600 US sanctions targeting Iran's oil and gas exporting sectors as well as its banks and financial institutions were imposed and/or reimposed after President Donald Trump unilaterally abrogated the 2015 Iran nuclear accord in May 2018, costing the country between \$300 to \$400 billion, as part of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign for regime-change in Iran.

In the process, Iran's corrupt elite have continued to enrich themselves, while working people have faced death, disease, unemployment and impoverishment. According to a parliamentary report, Iran's super rich, who account for just 0.1 percent of the 82 million population, have over 5,000 trillion rials (\$20 billion) stashed away in their bank accounts that earn them a whopping annual income of 1,000 trillion rials (\$4 billion) in interest. The report suggests that even a 10 percent tax take from the 83,000 super rich would make up for the financial shortfall in the lives of low-income Iranians. At least 60 percent of Iranians live in poverty, many in extreme poverty.

Adding to the crisis, the rial fell further following the election of Raisi, trading at more than 250,000 to the US dollar in Tehran's unofficial exchange market as the likelihood of Tehran reaching a deal with Washington to revive the 2015 nuclear accord recedes.

The Iranian working class's struggle to defend its living standards and secure basic democratic rights can be advanced only by it forging its political independence and joining forces with workers and the oppressed across the Middle East and around the world in opposition to capitalism and imperialism. It must resolutely oppose all factions of the bourgeoisie and all its political representatives, both the Islamic Republic's bourgeois-clerical establishment and the pro-imperialist opposition forces within and outside Iran.



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