

Workers walk out at Iranian petrochemical plants, amid ongoing nationwide anti-government protests

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In what could prove to be a highly significant development, oil and petrochemical workers at several sites along Iran's Persian Gulf coast staged anti-government protests and walkouts on Monday. The Council of Oil Contract Workers claimed 4,000 workers struck oil refineries and other facilities including in Abadan, Bushehr, and Asaluyeh.

Monday's actions are the first sign of organised working-class involvement in the mass protests against Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime that erupted following the September 16 death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini.

Asaluyeh appears to have been the centre of Monday's walkout of oil and other petrochemical workers.

Videos shared by bourgeois opposition forces showed the Asaluyeh strikers chanting slogans, including "Death to the dictator," a reference to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The semi-official Tasnim news agency reported the strike in Asaluyeh, but presented it as simply a salary dispute unrelated to the ongoing anti-government protests.

The protests over Amini's death began in Kurdish-dominated areas of western Iran, from which she hailed, before spreading to university campuses across Iran. They have focused on popular hatred towards the morality police, which enforce regulations requiring women to wear the hijab in public, and to the privileged political position of the Shia clergy within Iran's Islamic Republic. Amini was arrested September 13 during a trip to Tehran for allegedly wearing a hijab "improperly" and died three days later.

Underscoring the deep socio-economic and political crisis roiling Iran, the protests have continued for three-and-a-half weeks in the face of brutal state repression. Exile groups report at least 185 deaths, and thousands of injuries and arrests. The government, which claims multiple deaths among security forces, has not updated its official death toll since September 21, when it was recorded at 41. Reports circulated yesterday that tanks were dispatched to several cities in Kurdistan province in northwest Iran, where the largest protests have taken place.

At least five deaths were reported following protests in Tehran and in Kurdish cities Saturday, including a 14-year-old boy shot in the head. Reports from Tehran indicated that many shops in the bazaar, traditionally a pillar of support for the bourgeois-clerical regime, remained closed in an act of civil disobedience. State censorship and curtailment of social media and the pro-imperialist orientation of the Iranian sources touted by the western media make it difficult to verify reports on what is taking place.

Beginning with the mass anti-government demonstrations that erupted in early 2018, Iran has witnessed widespread strikes and protests by workers and the rural poor against pervasive social inequality, poverty, the non-payment of wages, and environmental devastation. This has included strikes by oil and gas workers, who played a leading role in breaking the back of the US-supported regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi during the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The desperate social conditions that the vast majority of the population confront are the product of the punishing and murderous economic sanctions the imperialist powers have imposed on Iran and the Khamenei regime's decades-long drive to eviscerate the social rights won by working people in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

US-led "maximum pressure" sanctions—imposed in 2018 when Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 civil nuclear agreement between the world's major powers and Tehran—have crashed the country's currency, making food and other basic necessities unaffordable. The sanctions have also compounded the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing Iran from accessing medications and vaccines as hundreds of thousands lost their lives to the virus.

The current protest wave has avoided directly raising these fundamental social and economic issues. Reflecting the predominance in the demonstrations of university students and middle class layers, particularly from the Kurdish regions, the main slogan of the movement has been "Women, Life, Freedom."

Moreover, within the protests and their leadership, there is a layer whose orientation and appeals for support are aimed at the imperialist capitals of Washington, Berlin, London, and Paris. These elements are hostile to and organically incapable of appealing to the Iranian working class, the only social force capable of sweeping away the overbearing clerical regime and defending and expanding democratic and social rights through a joint struggle with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East for socialism.

Iranian workers have a long and proud tradition of struggle against imperialist oppression and the Iranian bourgeoisie, having dealt the decisive blows that toppled the Shah's regime in 1979. The absence up to this point of a substantial organised working-class participation in the protests is not to be explained by any enthusiasm for the regime, whose morality police and neoliberal reforms are widely despised among workers and rural toilers. Rather, it reflects a reluctance to join a protest movement lacking a clear programme and that is influenced by openly pro-imperialist opposition forces.

In addition to unleashing savage repression, the rulers of the Islamic Republic have responded to the protests by whipping up anti-Kurdish sentiments and seeking to blame the unrest on “foreign actors,” i.e., the imperialist powers. This reaction only goes to show the regime’s fear of a social explosion uniting the working class and rural masses in struggle against the Iranian ruling elite. This it hopes to avert by whipping up ethnic strife and cynically appealing to widespread anti-imperialist sentiments.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi accused “foreign terror groups” based in northern Iraq, a reference to the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, which enjoys historic ties to the PKK of Abdullah Ocalan, of fomenting the “riots” with the aim of provoking Kurdish secession. Missile strikes by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on compounds controlled by these parties in Iraqi Kurdistan killed 14 people on September 28 and injured more on October 1.

Speaking to police cadets on October 3, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei declared that Amini’s death “broke our hearts,” then accused the US and Israel of inciting the protests. He urged security forces to crack down on the protesters, stating that they had faced “injustice” during the demonstrations.

Last Friday, the regime released what it termed a “forensic report” into the death of Amini, who was reportedly brutally manhandled at the time of her arrest. It made the improbable claim that she died of multiple organ failure due to an undiagnosed pre-existing medical condition, rather than the effects of the beatings to which she was subjected while in police custody.

The imperialist powers, backed by their corporate media mouthpieces, have cynically seized on the protests to denounce the Iranian regime for its violation of “human rights.” The politicians and journalists in Washington, Berlin, Paris, and London never care to acknowledge that their governments bear a large portion of responsibility for the social and economic misery in Iran due to the devastating sanctions they have enforced. Moreover, the Western powers are in no position to lecture anyone about protecting “human rights” and “democracy” given their role in laying waste to Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and other countries in more than three decades of uninterrupted war.

US imperialism and its European allies could well seize on Iran’s strikes on the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq to intensify their military threats against Tehran. Washington has already taken several steps that have dramatically escalated tensions throughout the Middle East. With Western backing, Israel has stepped up air strikes on Iranian targets in Syria over recent months, while US president Joe Biden travelled to the Gulf in July to cement an anti-Iranian alliance with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Gulf states. After US forces in Irbil shot down an Iranian drone during one of the recent air strikes, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responded with a belligerent statement threatening to target the three US military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish bourgeois nationalist parties would be more than willing to play the role of imperialist proxies, as shown by their long and sordid history of collaboration with the American and European imperialists, and regional powers like Israel and Turkey—all states implicated in the ruthless oppression of the Kurdish masses.

Washington and its European allies hope to exploit the increasing crisis of the Islamic Republic to deepen the longstanding cleavages within the ruling elite so as to “turn” Tehran—i.e. break its increasingly close ties with China and Russia—and ultimately reduce it to the status of neocolonial bondage that existed under the Shah.

The Obama administration repeatedly threatened Iran with war, declaring “all options are on the table.” But in 2015 it traded a rolling back of sanctions in exchange for sweeping restrictions on Iran’s civil nuclear program, on the calculation that this would enable it to leverage the support of a faction of Iran’s bourgeois elite long eager for a rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers.

Led by the then-President Hassan Rouhani and previously by his mentor, the one-time president and business tycoon Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, this faction dominated Iran’s government between 2013 and 2021. But Washington, seeking to arrest the accelerating decline in its world position, kept increasing its demands on Tehran. In 2018, the “America First” President Trump trashed the nuclear accord, then in January 2020 brought the region to the brink of all-out war by ordering the assassination by drone strike of the IRGC leader General Qassem Suleimani.

The conservative or hardline faction—to which the current president, Ibrahim Raisi belongs—was always skeptical of the nuclear accord. It saw its doubts confirmed by Trump’s actions and then by those of Biden. The latter criticized Trump’s unilateral abrogation of the nuclear accord and continues to claim he would like to see it revived, but has retained and in fact increased Trump’s “maximum pressure sanctions.” In response to the unrelenting US pressure, the now dominant “hardline” faction has sought to further strengthen economic and military-strategic ties with Russia and China.

Notwithstanding their sharp differences over foreign policy, all factions of the Islamic Republic’s elite are united in their hostility to the working class. The onslaught against what remains of the social and democratic rights won by working people through the revolutionary overthrow of the Shah’s bloody US-sponsored dictatorship has continued unhindered under “reform” and conservative or “principlist” presidents alike.

The 43-year history of the Islamic Republic has provided further vindication of Trotsky’s insistence that in countries of belated capitalist development the fundamental democratic tasks—including freedom from imperialist oppression, the separation of church and state, civil equality, and the radical restructuring of agrarian relations in favour of the rural masses—can and will only be realized through the struggle for workers’ power and socialism in opposition to all factions of the national bourgeoisie.

The only way forward in the struggle for social and democratic rights in Iran is through the arming of the working class with the programme of permanent revolution, which demands the independent political mobilization of Iranian workers in struggle for the socialist transformation of society alongside their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East. Workers in the West must come to the defence of the Iranian working class, first and foremost by demanding the immediate lifting of all sanctions against Iran and the withdrawal of all US, Canadian and European military forces from the Middle East as part of a global, working-class mass movement against imperialist war.



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