Iranian Workers say: "We have nothing to lose but our unpaid wages"

written by Yassamine Mather | January 12, 2010

HALF A YEAR AFTER THE demonstrations of June, 2009 in Iran, it is probably easier to examine in more depth the events that changed the country's political landscape. The bourgeois media in Iran and abroad is unanimous: the presidential elections of June 2009 and predictions of a Moussavi victory gave hope that change within the exiting regime was possible; millions of Iranians took part in the elections; the regime rigged the results; the rest is history.

Activists in the Iranian working class have a slightly different take on this. Of course they agree that the majority of the population, many of whom are under the age of 30, are opponents of the regime. And they acknowledge that the relative freedoms of the short-lived "election period" and the subsequent escalation of conflict between the various factions of the regime, exposing each other's corruption, repression and duplicity, have presented a unique opportunity for the opposition. However these workers also remind us that sham elections, electoral fraud, repression are not recent phenomena of Iran's Islamic regime. They point out that what is different this time, not just in the initial stages of the protests but also in the continuation of defiance against the regime in workplaces and universities, stems from the dire economic situation facing Iranians.

These workers tell us that the current protests should indeed be seen in the light of the world economic crisis — the effects of which have been felt far worse in the countries of the periphery — as well as the impact of sanctions.[1] They are adamant that the economic situation, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, high rates of unemployment, etc. are the main reasons why protests have continued and evolved after the mass demonstrations of June 2009, despite the suffocating silence of the leaders of the Green movement.

Reformists and Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran

WE SHOULD BE CLEAR that Iran's presidential elections were a charade from the day they started. All four candidates were supporters of the existing system. All supported the existing neoliberal economic policies and privatizations. All four were in favor of Iran's nuclear program. Moussavi has criticized Ahmadinejad for the outcome of Iran's talks with world powers in October 2009, making clear he is against a proposal to send Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium abroad, as part of a UN-drafted plan meant to ease tensions over Tehran's nuclear drive.[2]

It was therefore no surprise that until early June, most Iranians had shown little interest in these elections, as they knew that neither candidate would lead to real change. But it was the live TV debates that changed the apathy. The debates between Ahmadinejad and Moussavi and Ahmadinejad and Karroubi were unique events in the history of the official media of the Islamic Republic. They confirmed what most Iranians knew through their personal experiences but which they had not yet heard on the official media: Ahmadinejad stated that Iran had been ruled for 24 years (up to his presidency) by a clique akin to an economic and political mafia. "Elite" clerics such as the reformers Rafsanjani and Khatami had forgotten their constituents and were corrupt; Moussavi, Karoubi, and Rezai stated that the economy had been in a terrible state, particularly in the last four years

The first mistake of the regime (the Supreme Leader and the network of un-elected officials around him) was to allow such debates to take place. The second mistake was the declaration of Ahmadinejad as the winner and the way this "victory" was announced: Ahmadinejad was declared the winner by the official media even before some polling stations had closed; his final result was almost identical to what the (rigged) polls predicted all the way through the elections. This percentage did not ever vary by more than three percent. The third mistake was to underestimate the anger of the Iranian population at this blatant manipulation of the results. Iranians had to choose between the lesser of two evils — and when the worse was declared the winner, they showed their contempt for the system by huge demonstrations culminating in the massive protests of June, 2009 and September, 2009.

However we should not forget that in terms of the current situation Moussavi and Karoubi are weak characters who had already shown the limits of their political outlook. They do not consider the nine previous presidential elections, most of them with very dubious results, a charade. In the 2009 election, they did not bat an eyelid when the Council of Guardians disqualified over 400 candidates. They did not think the process was a charade when the Supreme Leader intervened time and time again to defend Ahmadinejad.

Even now, although they are furious about losing the elections, they are not calling on the Iranian people to mount a fundamental challenge to the Islamic Republic. While Moussavi did urge people to join the Nov. 4 protests, he also urged them not to use "radical" slogans against Khamemei or call for the overthrow of the Islamic regime. In most of the major demonstrations, the leaders of the Green Movement have been among the last to arrive. Instead, during the first two months after the elections they addressed the "Religious Centers of Guidance" (elite Shia ayatollahs),[3] in denouncing the electoral results, and they are now cooperating with the "national unity plan."[4] Neither Moussavi nor Karoubi is a fan of democracy or mass movements. Like Iran's reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami, they are well aware that the survival of the "Islamic order" is in their interests. That is why, even when they are clearly victims of the Supreme Leader's lunacy, they cannot rock the boat.

After all, irrespective of the illusions of their supporters, Moussavi and Karroubi are no radical opponents of the regime. For eight years, Moussavi served as prime minister of the Islamic republic, during some of the darkest days of this regime. He was deeply involved in the arms-for-hostages deals with the Reagan administration in the1980s — what came to be known as Irangate. He also bears some responsibility for the brutal wave of repression in the 1980s that killed a generation of Iranian leftists. During this period, thousands of socialists and communists were jailed, with many of them executed while in prison.

Over the last few months Ahmadinejad's government and the security forces have done all in their power to stop the protests through repression and intimidation, at times assisted by the suffocating silence of the leaders of the Green Movement. Hundreds have been arrested; at least 70 protesters have died during demonstrations or in custody; show trials have been televised; yet none of these efforts have succeeded in silencing the opposition. Almost daily Iranian workers have been protesting, at times in the thousands, at their workplaces and outside government offices, complaining about job losses, non-payment of wages, privatization. Universities have been the scene of daily protests and ordinary people have used every opportunity, even football matches, to express their opposition to the regime. The massive demonstrations of Sept. 18 and Nov. 4 are proof of the continued confrontation between the regime and its opponents.

The Iranian Working Class and the Current Protests

SOME HAVE CLAIMED that only the middle classes have been protesting against the regime. Nothing could be further from the truth. Iranian workers believe it was their protests, factory occupations, and sit-ins over the last three or four years that paved the way for the mass demonstration of this summer.

If you live in a country where the ministry of labor states that over 80 percent of the workforce are employed on limited contracts and reassures capitalists that by 2010 the figure will have reached 100 percent, is it surprising that workers will join protest demonstrations? If you live in a country where in the year ending March, 2009, despite the repression, there were more than 4,000 workers' actions against privatization and job losses (unemployment stands at 30 percent while inflation moves between 15 and 25 percent), including sit-ins and the kidnapping of managers, as well as strikes, is it any wonder that workers will join protest demonstrations? If you live in a country that has been praised by the International Monetary Fund for its firm pursuit of neoliberal economic policies, all under a certain Mr. Ahmadinejad, is it not to be expected that workers will join protest demonstrations?

Teachers and nurses have waged major strikes in the last two years against their government's economic and political stance, and they were among the first groups that joined this summer's protests.

On June 18, Iran Khodro car workers issued the following statement:

> We declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran. Autoworkers, fellow workers, what we witness today is an insult to the intelligence of the people and disregard for their votes, the trampling of the principles of the constitution by the government. It is our duty to join this people's movement. We, the workers of Iran Khodro, will stop working for half an hour on every shift to protest against the suppression of students, workers, and women and declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran.

Similarly, the union of Vahed bus workers declared on June 19:

> In recent days, we continue witnessing the magnificent demonstration of millions of people from all ages, genders and national and religious minorities in Iran. They request that their basic human rights, particularly the right to freedom and to choose independently and without deception, be recognized. These rights are not only constitutional in most countries, but also have been protected against all odds.

The statement went on to condemn the threats, arrests, murders, and brutal suppression and called for support for the protests, demanding a response from each responsible individual and institution.

In today's Iran, millions of wage earners have no choice but to continue their struggles against the regime in their daily confrontation with factory owners and the religious state that backs them. In the words of those at Wagon Pars, who went on hunger strike in October, workers have nothing to lose but their unpaid wages. The 1,700 employees of Wagon Pars, manufacturer of freight wagons and passenger coaches, have been in dispute with management and the state for months over unpaid wages. In August 2009, these workers went on strike and staged a sit-in protest on factory grounds, locking the gates and preventing managers from entering.

The factory had been privatized as a subsidiary of troubled car maker Iran Khodro, after Iran's Supreme Leader changed article 44 of the constitution, removing the guarantee of public ownership for key industries. Protests and threats of strike by Iran Khodro workers forced the government to retreat, showing the vulnerability of the rulers when confronted by united working class action. Iran Khodro workers have now won five of their demands, including an overtime pay raise of 20 percent for all workers on the production line.

In late October there were also major workers' protests over non-payment of wages in Louleh Sazi Khouzestan (manufacturers of pipelines) and a demonstration by Tractor Sazi workers in Kurdistan, where tens of workers were sacked, while others are expected to work longer hours. Managers in most of these disputes blame the world economic downturn for the new wave of job losses. Nearly four months after the huge demonstrations of June, the continuation of protests in workplaces and universities proves that opposition to the regime goes well beyond the issue of the sham presidential elections.

Nowhere is the state's control more severe than in the oil industry. Worker activists discussing possible strike action are moved from their regular posts to other areas. Yet none of the increasingly repressive measures seem to deter the Iranian working class, who are turning the defensive actions of last year into more aggressive forms of protest, establishing road blocks, taking managers hostage, bringing their families to occupy closed factories and workplaces. In order to overcome the lack of news coverage of their struggles, Iranian workers are setting up their own means of communication through internet sites and email.

But the combination of proposed new sanctions and the new economic policies of the regime will make life even harder for the majority. Just when it became clear that the United States has begun passing legislation to impose new unilateral sanctions, the *Majles* (Islamic parliament) discussed regulations that would sharply reduce energy and food subsidies, in compliance with long-term demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.[5]

Nothing Will Ever Be the Same Again

THE DRAMATIC EVENTS OF SUMMER/AUTUMN, 2009 will have a lasting effect in Iran and almost everyone agrees that nothing will be the same again, yet our supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei is still deluding himself: conspiracies are all around us and, just as in colonial times, the British are behind it all. Of course, the expulsion of foreign reporters and banning of many newspapers have reduced media coverage of the protests. In the foreign press there is nothing about the changing nature of the demonstrations, workers' protests and the new slogans. However, even those that have not followed recent developments in Iran agree that the very existence of the Islamic Republic regime is being challenged. The slogans "death to dictator" and "death to the Islamic Republic" are no longer limited to the events following the presidential elections. Iranian workers are unlikely to return to passive, defensive opposition. Students, youth, women, and national minorities will make sure demonstrations and protests continue. Arrests, summary executions, torture, show trials have all failed to silence this most serious threat to the religious state in Iran. Those of us who combine opposition to imperialist war and sanctions with calling for the overthrow of the Islamic regime were vindicated by recent events. Imagine what would have happened if during the last year we had witnessed a military strike by Israel against Iran's nuclear industry, or if various U.S. plans for regime change from above had materialized. Political Islam in Iran and the region would have been the undisputed winner of such a scenario. We were right to argue that positive change can only happen from below, and from inside Iran, and we will continue to maintain this position.

Footnotes

1. Iranian oil workers.
2. Iran's Mousavi criticises nuclear fuel plan.
3. Response of the Grand Ayotollah Saanei to Mir Hossein Mousavi's letter.
4. Cleric MPs to examine Council of Experts national unity plan.
5. Majlis approves subsidy cut bill.