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Labor Rights and the Democracy Movement in Iran: Building a Social Democracy

Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad*

¶1 Since the early days of the twentieth century, the Iranian working class has suffered the consequences of an undemocratic, repressive capitalist state. Labor's basic human and social rights have been continually violated, with only occasional, brief periods of reprieve.¹ However, with the large and growing size of the Iranian working class, no viable and sustainable democratization process can take shape without independent labor organizations and without the working class's participation in the political arena. In the post-presidential election protest of 2009, one of the critical weaknesses of the Green Movement in its quest for democracy was that the working class was not massively and distinctly present among the middle-class women, men, and youth. Nevertheless, in the current struggle for democratization in Iran, the working class is becoming acutely aware of its important role as a social force in shaping the balance of class power. The working class is also coming to the realization that a forceful, independent labor movement and an advancing democratic movement are mutually interdependent.

¶2 Since the early 2000s, a new movement for independent labor organizations has challenged the existing state-sponsored labor organization. This new movement, while guarding its independence, has been supportive of the Iranian Green Movement for democratic rights.

¶3 In this article, we underscore some of the objective and subjective obstacles facing the Iranian working class in its struggle to attain basic rights—including the right to form independent organizations—and to protect and promote socioeconomic and political rights within the Islamic Republic.² However, the current workers' struggle in Iran—in theory and in practice—is linked to the problem of democracy within existing power structures of class, state, and transnational relations. For this reason, this article begins with an analysis of these three power structures. Our theoretical framework is focused on the role of the working class in its

* American University of Paris and Denison University, respectively. The authors would like to note that many Iranian web sites and blogs supporting Iran's labor movements have been censored or blocked by President Ahmadinejad's government over the past several years. All web sites listed in this article were last visited on April 29, 2012 unless noted otherwise.

¹ See *The IWSN Handbook, 2009*, IRANIAN WORKERS' SOLIDARITY NETWORK, <http://www.iwsn.org/handbook/index.htm> (last visited Feb. 6, 2012, but now no longer available). Reference to the *IWSN Handbook* is available at: IN DEFENCE OF MARXISM, <http://www.marxist.com/iwsn-handbook.htm>; Shahla Daneshfar, *Mobarezat-e Kargaran dar Deu Dah-e Akheer (The Struggle of the Workers in the Past Two Decades)*, KARGARAN.ORG (2005), <http://www.kargaran.org>. For information regarding the working class trade unions and their conditions before the 1979 revolution, see generally MOHAMMAD HOSSEIN, YEK GHARN MOBAREZEH-E TABAGHATI DAR IRAN (A CENTURY OF CLASS STRUGGLE IN IRAN) (Willowdale, Rodabeh Publisher, Vol. 1, 2008); WILLEM FLOOR, LABOUR UNIONS, LAWS AND CONDITIONS IN IRAN, 1900 – 1941 (John Dewdney & Heather Bleaney eds., 1985); HABIB LAJEVARDI, LABOUR UNIONS AND AUTOCRACY (1985).

² For a summary of recent labor strikes and workers' demands (in Persian), see generally IRANIAN WORKERS' SOLIDARITY NETWORK, <http://www.iwsn.org/> (last visited Apr. 29, 2012); *A Forum on Human Rights and Democracy in Iran*, GOZAAR, <http://www.gozaar.org/english/> (last visited Apr. 29, 2012). This website was discontinued in December 2011, but the archive remains accessible; see also *Iran's Workers Need Your Support: Freedom and Justice for Trade Unionists in Iran*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (June 10, 2011), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/063/2010/en>.

struggle for civil rights and democracy in the course of capitalist development. In Part II, we then present how the 1979 revolution and the Islamic government's policies toward the working class have constrained its efforts to organize and establish independent unions and democracy. Part III discusses how the working class struggle in Iran is once again on the rise. At times intersecting with the Green Movement, the labor movement is simultaneously democratic and economic in nature. We conclude by suggesting that progress towards democracy with socioeconomic justice is a reasonable objective for the advancement of Iran and its working class.

I. BACKGROUND

A. *Democracy, the working class, and power structures*

¶4 A *laissez-faire* developing market economy does not automatically result in a sustainable minimalist liberal democracy.³ The contrary, neo-liberal view—asserted by neo-liberal political theorists, scholars, international agencies, such as the World Bank, and many politicians—is based on economic reductionism, and implicitly assumes a linear and universal relationship between democracy and economic liberalism.⁴ However, respect for human and democratic rights does not perfunctorily emerge in a class-divided, capitalist society in its path to modernization.

¶5 This neo-liberal economic reductionism is as troublesome as another nuanced interpretation of democracy that disconnects democracy from socioeconomic relations, the state, and class struggles. This approach emphasizes that social justice is a purely normative concern and is not an element of democracy, per se. Thus, this conceptualization identifies democracy only with legal rights to vote, multi-party competition, and regular elections.⁵ Such a view inevitably limits political activity to elections, and thus, disassociates the political system from economic relations; by not seeing politics in terms of socioeconomic relations, social justice cannot be a democratic concern.⁶

¶6 Undoubtedly, the constitutional recognition and implementation of equal legal rights based on voting in a multi-party political system, as well as freedom of speech and association, are necessary for a minimal democracy. Yet, unconstrained and uneven wealth distribution can—through powerful economic, religious, and ethnic associations—concentrate political power in the hands of the privileged few.⁷ The same outcome is also true in cases where an authoritarian or repressive religious state interferes with free and fair elections and monopolizes “democracy” in the hands of a religious sect, an ethnic group, or economic and political elites. Uneven

³ Evelyne Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & John D. Stephens. *The Paradoxes of Contemporary Democracy: Formal, Participatory, and Special Dimensions*, 29 COMP. POL. 323, 323 (2007). A minimum working definition of minimalist democracy is: 1) “regular free and fair elections” on the basis of universal suffrage, of representatives who need no state approval based on ideological, religious, gender, ethnicity, political, or economic criteria; 2) accountability of the administrative organs of the state to the elected representatives; and 3) guarantees of freedom of expression, association, and protection against the arbitrary actions of the state.

⁴ See generally FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *THE END OF HISTORY AND THE LAST MAN* (Free Press 1992); see also AID AND POLITICAL CONDITIONALITY (Olav Stokke ed., Frank Cass 1995); see generally WORLD BANK, *WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1991: THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT* (1991).

⁵ See generally *DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: LATIN AMERICA* (Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz & Seymour M. Lipset eds., 1989); Terry Lynn Karl, *Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America*, 23 COMP. POL. 1, 1-2 (1990).

⁶ See *DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES*, *supra* note 5.

⁷ See generally DIETRICH RUESCHEMEYER, EVELYNE HUBER STEPHENS & JOHN D. STEPHENS, *CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY* (1992) (critiquing this approach).

command over resources undercuts the democratization process by biasing electoral outcomes in favor of the interests of the monopolizing elite or oligarchies, turning democracy into a tool for domination.

¶7 A more comprehensive and realistic interpretation is one that views democracy in terms of power relations that are subject to change. From this vantage point, democracy is neither an end in itself nor a static combination of institutions that remain independent from socioeconomic classes. This approach recognizes that in spite of the importance of political liberties achieved through elections, the mere recognition of democratic rights does not guarantee the stability and consolidation of democracies; this is because democracy and unconstrained capitalism are not mutually reinforcing systems, even for a minimalist liberal democracy. Capitalism only creates an objective condition for the rise in the number of wage and salary earners and the demise of pre-capitalist lords. Wage and salary earners benefit from the deepening of a democracy that respects political and judicial rights, as well as socioeconomic rights.

¶8 Democracy is essential for the transformation of class structure (class-in-itself) to class formation (class-for-itself).⁸ In a class-divided capitalist society, political democracy inevitably conflicts with socioeconomic power and inequality. For this reason, the working class strives to deepen democracy such that it incorporates social justice—that is, a viable social democracy. Further, the long history of labor movements shows that working classes become conscious of the fact that the development of democracy can be facilitated by creating a progressive space for civil society and working class organizations.

¶9 As such, a comprehensive interpretation of democracy holds that democracy is a process, and that this process entails continuous socioeconomic and political struggle. The progress of democratization in any society is not teleological; it is the result of the historically shaped power struggles between classes. This is because democracy is about power relations and the struggle for sharing power. Yet, the democratic process involves a compromise between demands for popular rights and representation of subordinate classes on one hand, and the preference of privileged elites to exclude popular classes from democratic processes on the other. The balance of socioeconomic and political forces could strengthen, weaken, or even reverse the democratic process.

1. Analyzing class, state, and transnational power structures

¶10 In the democratization process, economic and political struggles take shape based on the interaction of three omnipresent and complex types of concrete power structures that exist between class, state, and transnational power relations.⁹

a) *Class power structure*

¶11 In a capitalist society, class structure is determined by respective socioeconomic class interests. Classes in contemporary capitalist societies can be divided into capitalists, petty bourgeoisie, the middle class, the working class, and the ambiguous political functionaries. These class categories are defined based on primarily three socioeconomic interests: the

⁸ See ONLINE DICTIONARY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, <http://bitbucket.icaap.org/dict.pl?alpha=C> (explaining that “class-in-itself” is a social class composed of individuals who objectively share class membership, but are not conscious of their shared interests that unite them while “class-for-itself” is a class of individuals conscious of sharing a common social situation and who unite to pursue common interests).

⁹ See RUESCHEMEYER, STEPHENS & STEPHENS, *supra* note 7, at ch. 3 (presenting the analytical framework we adopt here for the study of the development of democracy in capitalist societies).

ownership of the means of production, authority in economic decision-making, and skills in relation to production.¹⁰ Thus, the interests of the working and middle classes are not always in correspondence with the interest of the dominant classes and the state. The support for the democratization process and the political inclusion of subordinate classes largely depends on the perceived threat to the interests of the dominant classes.¹¹

¶12 A viable democratization process therefore entails reducing the political inequality gap. Democratic participation may be sustained only if class, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender inequalities may be addressed by the organizational power of the working class and rights-based advocacy organizations.

b) *State power structure*

¶13 In this pluralistic democratization process, the structure of the state and its relations with society are also important power structures. The state structure is the product of, and remains under the influence of, class struggle. Yet, the dominant class also influences the state, which often imposes “order” in class struggles in favor of the dominant class’s interests. As such, the capitalist state is neither the mere instrument of the dominant class nor a neutral arbitrator between classes. Rather, it is the balance of power among classes and social groups.

¶14 History has repeatedly demonstrated that for a viable democracy to prevail, the need for state autonomy from class interests must be counterbalanced by the influence of civil society. States that are centralized, despotic, theocratic, bureaucratized, religious, or militarized in nature do not enjoy a balance of power with civil society, and thus cannot sustain a democracy.

c) *Transnational power structure*

¶15 Transnational structure of power affects class and state power relations and can constrain national policies. For example, economic dependence on foreign nations can affect class structure. Wars and geopolitical factors can affect class alliances by creating mass support for some governments and discrediting others. Furthermore, transnational capital owned by truncated formal democracies has increased social and economic inequality and thus impeded the development of democracy. Using that capital to increase the size and role of security forces, for example, hinders the development of democratic civil society and affects class relations.

2. Shifting the Balance of Class, State, and Transnational Power Relations

¶16 To attain a sustainable democracy there must be a change in power relations such that a social justice is realized. While capitalism can change the balance of class power by increasing the size of the working and middle classes, the sheer size of the working class alone is insufficient to create a social democracy.

¶17 The disadvantaged can effectuate a shift in the balance of class power by defending their interests in collective actions. In other words, the working “class-in-itself” could become a “class-for-itself.” Such efforts may be facilitated by industrialization, urbanization, rapid and mass transportation, and new forms of communication. Trade unions, social organizations, and

¹⁰ See FARHAD NOMANI & SOHRAB BEHDAD, *CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN: DID THE REVOLUTION MATTER?* 139 (2006) [hereinafter *CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN*]; see also ERIK OLIN WRIGHT, *CLASS COUNTS* (1997).

¹¹ See RUESCHEMEYER, STEPHENS & STEPHENS, *supra* note 7, at ch. 3.

political parties can aid in this transformative process by serving as important links between democracy and equitable socioeconomic development.¹²

¶18 Charles Tilly captures how inequality, state policies, and socioeconomic alliances affect the democratization process:

Democratization emerges from interacting changes in public politics, categorical inequality, and networks of trust, which in turn depend on specifiable mechanisms of change in social relations . . . Without significant transformations in the arenas of inequality and networks of trust strictly governmental changes toward democracy remain either unstable or nonexistent.¹³

¶19 In short, a sustainable social democracy depends on shifting the balance of power among class, state, civil society, and transnational power relations in favor of the disadvantaged so that they too have socioeconomic and political choices. Therefore, progressive and independent civil society organizations, such as political parties, working class unions, and women, ethnic, and student organizations must be empowered in order to deepen democracy in contemporary class-divided societies.

¶20 To shift power relations, it is important to distinguish class-in-itself (class structure) and class-for-itself (class formation). There are many countries with similar sizes of their working classes, but that vary in terms of the relevant strength of workers' parties, trade unions, and councils. Class structures, in other words, do not automatically create the space for political and economic collective actions that are critical to a properly functioning democracy or social democracy.

¶21 The popular classes living in authoritarian regimes suffer because their rights are not protected, including the right to organize. They are intimidated, degraded, and suppressed in their daily life by the state, its judiciary, and its bureaucratic, coercive institutions. It is important to recognize, however, that it is the protracted and conscientious action of popular classes that spreads over time and deepens the democratization process. For too long, the Iranian people have lived through the mistakes made by those who hold flawed, idealistic views on the role of democracy.

B. Labor and Democracy in Civil Society

¶22 Civil society is an analytical tool for making sense of the complexities of social life. It is a space of consent, conflict, and hegemony, and it is methodologically differentiated from political

¹² RUESCHEMEYER, STEPHENS & STEPHENS, *supra* note 7, at 40-69 (presenting historical case studies of democratization process in advanced capitalist, Latin American, and the Caribbean countries). This book concludes that historical progress of democracy has benefited most from the contribution of the working class, the class that has also benefitted from democratic process the most. This is in a sharp contrast with the view of those who identify the bourgeoisie and the middle class as the major advocates of democracy); *see also* COLLIER, *PATHS TOWARD DEMOCRACY: THE WORKING CLASS AND ELITES IN WESTERN EUROPE AND SOUTH AMERICA* (1999), and Collier & Mahoney, *Adding Collective Actors to Collective Outcomes: Labor and Recent Democratization in South America and Southern Europe*, 29 *COMPAR. POL.* 285 (1997) (explanation of the organized labor movement's major contribution to the transition to democracy, its democratic demand, and ability to destabilize authoritarian rules. They also note the mistakes, and the difficulties facing the labor movement in different countries in Latin America and the Southern Europe in the 1980s).

¹³ Charles Tilly, *Processes and Mechanisms of Democratization*, 18 *SOC. THEORY* 1, 1, 9 (2000).

and economic structures. In civil society, the subordinate social groups (or classes) may organize their opposition and form their own alternative hegemony.

¶23 Within the context of capitalism, civil society may be conceptualized as the sum of social activities, organizations, and structures positioned between the state's political and economic structures. For example, civil society consists of voluntary associations, including trade unions; workers' committees; political parties; religious associations; and women's, students', and youth organizations. Civil society is both related to and partially determined by the state and economic structures. As Hall states, "Civil society is . . . a complex balance of consensus and conflict, the valuation of as much difference as is compatible with the bare minimum of consensus necessary for settled existence."¹⁴ Analytical differentiation between spheres of civil society, state, and economic relations enables us to avoid falling into two types of common reductionism: 1) the liberal and neoliberal reductionisms that identify civil society solely with the market, individuality, and private property, and 2) the ultra left reductionism that views any democratic activity to be in the service of the ruling class and its state. Our adopted model, however, identifies both class and social movements as forces involved in shaping civil society. As such, our analysis of civil society in Iran avoids the pitfalls of the two extremes mentioned above.¹⁵

¶24 Some Iranians on the left argue that civil society is the exploitative capitalist economy itself, and, therefore, reject it as an obstacle to change toward a non-exploitative society.¹⁶ This view, however, ignores the fact that civil society is a sphere of not only inequality, hegemony, and consent, but also conflict and struggle. The working class can find their way out of exploitative societies by struggling for political democracy and social justice, by gaining some improvements in socioeconomic conditions, and by struggling against reactionary hegemonic powers. In an industrial capitalist society, the working class's capacity to form its own organizations and fight for significant gains in its work conditions is correlated with the prevalence of democracy.

¶25 There is also a possible fallacy at the other end of the spectrum: advocating strongly for civil society without special regard for the labor movement. This is the fatal error of the "reformist movement" in the past decade in Iran. The discourse of civil society became a matter of intellectual and practical concern in the mid-1990s, as was reflected by the 1997 election of President Khatami, whose campaign shibboleth was "civil society." The respect for the rule of law was repeatedly invoked by Khatami and other Islamic reformists. As Kamrava notes, for instance:

[I]n the context of Iran, the rule of law means an end to arbitrary arrests and to intimidation of women and men, and the young, by security forces, an end to

¹⁴ CIVIL SOCIETY: THEORY, HISTORY, COMPARISON (John A. Hall ed., 1995); *see also* JOHN EHRENBERG, CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF AN IDEA 233-41 (1999).

¹⁵ Our emphasis on the heuristic aspect of the concept of civil society based on a three-part model of state, civil society and economic structure distances itself from one of the most influential contemporary three-level models by Cohen and Arato. Their post-Marxist analysis downplays the significance of working class and class conflicts in contemporary societies. For Cohen and Arato, civil society is the "terrain and target," or the means and the objective of struggle for democratization in contemporary societies. The agent for the realization of this emancipatory objective is the new social movement (NSM). The goal of NSM is constraining the excesses of the market and the authoritarian-oppressive tendencies of the state. This movement is neither for total social transformation, nor for revolutionary change, but rather for "construction from below of a highly articulated, organized, autonomous, and mobilizable civil society." *See* JEAN L. COHEN & ANDREW ARATO, CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL THEORY 32 (1992).

¹⁶ *See, e.g., Bahman Qahremani, Tabaqeh Kargar Iran va Mas'aleh Demokrasi (The Working Class of Iran and the Problem of Democracy)*, WORKER TODAY (2011), http://www.workertoday.com/maqale/BP61_BGH_tabaghe.pdf.

ensorship and nepotism, the existence of an independent judiciary, citizens' ability to participate in various associations without fear of government reprisals, and absence of arbitrary laws.¹⁷

¶26 In their interpretation of civil society, Iranian reformists were influenced by Habermas; they were under the impression that rule of law can be gained mainly by rational discourse.¹⁸ Partly for this reason, the Islamic reformists focused on conformity and communication within the ruling elite, hoping that this approach would change the behavior of their conservative and politically authoritarian adversary in the Islamic state. By linking solidarity with communication, this interpretation of civil society was close to a teleological triumph of harmony and civil behavior.¹⁹ Where the Islamic reformists departed from Habermas, however, was in dividing the progressive civil society organizations into "Us" (*khodi*) and "Not-Us" (*ghair-e khodi*). The reformists thus tried the idea of "harmony", "civil behavior," and "discourse" only with the hard-liner Islamist adversary while neglecting the need for democracy and social justice for all.

¶27 Historical anecdotes demonstrate that the democratic potential of civil society is realized only by independent, transparent, and democratic civil society organizations, such as trade unions, political parties, human rights committees, journals, associations, ethnic federations, women's groups, schools, mosques and churches, and the media. We now know that without this counterbalance to dominant classes and their state, progress is suppressed and marginalized. The realization of a social democracy depends on the strength of socioeconomic and political progressive movements within civil society. Yet, this "requires a willingness to recognize that the social totality shaping civil society is a sphere of inequality and conflict—and that maybe revitalizing civil society requires heightened levels of political struggle over state policy rather than good manners and civil discourse."²⁰

II. LABOR IN IRAN

A. *Revolution and the Working Class*

¶28 In 1976, around forty percent of the Iranian employed workforce comprised the working class, about half of whom worked in enterprises larger than fifty workers.²¹ The middle class comprised only five percent, and less than one-third of them worked for the private sector. Nearly one-third of the Iranian employed work force was self-employed, petty bourgeois—99 percent of whom were in traditional occupations (such as farmers, textile or rug makers, carpenters, grocers, truck drivers, and taxi drivers). Among capitalists, the large majority owned small enterprises and held traditional occupations.

¹⁷ Mehran Kamrava, *The Civil Society Discourse in Iran*, 28 BRIT. J. MIDDLE E. STUD. 165, 173-74 (2001).

¹⁸ Mehran Kamrava, *Non-Democratic States and Political Liberalisation in the Middle East: A Structural Analysis* 19 THIRD WORLD Q. 63, 63-85 (1998); Kamrava, *supra* note 17; Farzin Vahdat, *Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourse of Mohammad Khatami*, 25 COMP. STUD. S. ASIA, AFR. MIDDLE E. 650, 650-64 (2005).

¹⁹ JURGEN HABERMAS, *THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION: LEWORLD AND SYSTEMS, A CRITIQUE OF FUNCTIONALIST REASON* 57 (Thomas McCarthy trans., Polity Press, Vol. 2, 1987).

²⁰ JOHN EHRENBERG, *CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF AN IDEA* 249 (1999).

²¹ For the data in this paragraph see CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN, *supra* note 10, at 88-90; Sohrab Behdad & Farhad Nomani, *What a Revolution! Thirty Years of Social Class Reshuffling in Iran*, 29 COMP. STUD. S. ASIA, AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST 84, 89 (2009) [hereinafter *What a Revolution*].

¶29 The 1979 revolution was a social rupture, egalitarian in character and openly antagonistic toward capitalists, especially those affiliated with foreign enterprises. The revolution disrupted the “normal” functioning of society. Most significantly, it jeopardized the sanctity of property rights and safety of capital, thereby weakening capitalist production, and entangling the elaborate maze of the market networks. This condition was conducive to the growth of petty-commodity production and small-scale capitalist activities. We call this degenerative process “structural involution.” The Islamic state amplified the involutory trend with its populist policies, at times even inciting anti-capitalist tendencies and encouraging small-scale economic activities in retailing or manufacturing. The resulting changes in political and economic structures affected the class composition of the Iranian work force.

¶30 The first post-revolutionary decade was a setback for capitalist production. By 1986, the working class (in the state and private sector) had shrunk to less than 25 percent of the employed work force.²² At the same time, the number of petty bourgeoisie had grown by more than double the growth rate of the workforce, making up 40 percent of the employed workforce (nearly all in traditional positions). The number of small capitalists almost doubled since the last census in 1976. This increase was mainly in the number of very small capitalists, with two or three employed workers. In the same period, the middle-class employees in the private sector decreased to half of what it was in 1976. Obviously, the smaller, more traditional enterprises needed fewer managers and professional workers. At the same time, the middle-class employees of the state increased by almost 90 percent. Moreover, between 1976 and 1986, more than one million people were added to the rank of government functionaries (800,000 of them to the armed forces). Women’s employment decreased not only relatively, but also absolutely.

¶31 A disrupted economy with a bloated state machinery, a costly war, a glut in the world oil market, suffocating economic sanctions, and a rapidly growing population were all factors that led to Iran’s dire economic situation. By the late 1980s, the state came to the realization that its claim for establishing the Rule of Mustazafan (Oppressed) and its plan for erecting an Islamic economy were fantasies. With the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the time for breaking away from the revolutionary taboos arrived. President Hashemi-Rafsanjani entered the stage as a champion of economic liberalization, and by 1992 the liberalization policy was underway for reconstructing and rejuvenating the market and its institutions.

¶32 Economic liberalization policies may look attractive when isolated from political realities. In short, they imply removing all market barriers from foreign-exchange and domestic price controls, letting resource scarcities determine market prices and directing resources to the highest bidders. It is suggested that this policy will increase productivity and profitability, which could *potentially* increase investment and thus employment and economic welfare. Yet, these may take place (if all goes well, which it often does not), after a period of high inflation, high unemployment, the bankruptcy of many small capitalists and petty bourgeois producers, and a decline in the real income of many wage earners.

¶33 It did not take long before the liberalization policy of Hashemi-Rafsanjani came under popular criticism. During the Rafsanjani presidency, the Islamic Republic found for the first time that open political unrest constrained its public policy. Thus, Hashemi-Rafsanjani pursued a zig-zag policy of economic liberalization. Despite the limited advances of economic liberalization in the 1990s, which continued into the Khatami presidency, the involutory trend of the Ayatollah Khomeini decade was substantially reversed. We call this trend a “de-involuntary process.”²³

²² CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN, *supra* note 10, at 128.

²³ See CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN, *supra* note 10, at 34-36 (elaborating on “involution” and “de-involution”).

The foreign exchange rate was realigned, price controls were mostly lifted, some subsidies were reduced and others were eliminated. Increases in oil prices in these years, allowing for a continued inflow of imports, made the timid liberalization policy somewhat palatable. By 2006, one could see the impact of this rejuvenation. The share of the employed working class increased to 30 percent (still much lower than 1976), and the middle class increased to 12 percent (from four percent in 1976 and seven percent in 1986).²⁴ During the same period, the share of the petty bourgeoisie declined to 36 percent.²⁵

¶34

Thus, the Iranian working class suffered a serious decline in the first revolutionary decade. In subsequent decades, their number increased from 3.6 million in 1976 to 6.2 million in 2006 (after a decline to 2.7 million in 1986), and their share in the employed work force substantially declined.²⁶ This decline has coincided with an increase in the share of the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class. Moreover, the working class has become more fragmented as they are dispersed in small capitalist enterprises. In 1976, there were 16.3 working class employees per private sector employer in Iran. By 2006, there were only 3.1. This change—what we call “concentration ratio”—reflects an overall increase in fragmentation of the working class. We note, however, that the increase in fragmentation is mainly in small capitalist enterprises. More than half of the working class population works in large enterprises (private or state-owned) with more than 50 workers. Meanwhile, those who are unemployed (15 to 20 percent of the labor force) are mainly potential members of the working class. Moreover, in the Iranian labor market, a significant number of those who are considered petty bourgeoisie, such as street vendors and petty traders, are in fact unemployed persons for whom, because of the absence of a social safety net, unemployment is not an option. These small vendors of various goods or services barely make a living by engaging in some sort of activity. They too, are potential members of the working class.²⁷

B. Labor Law and Labor Organizations

1. State-sponsored versus Independent Labor Organizations

¶35

Iranian labor enjoyed a brief period of freedom during the revolutionary period and the months following the revolutionary uprising. That period, however, corresponded with general chaos and widespread disruptions in economic activities. By 1981, all of the independent unions and councils as well as the secular Worker’s House (which were all set-up by workers and labor activists during and after the revolution), were forcibly taken over by pro-government Islamist workers and organized mobs. These organizations were officially liquidated and banned.²⁸ In their place, Islamic Labor Councils were instituted with the sponsorship and support of the state. At the top of the network of Islamic Labor Councils was the newly reconstituted, and newly Islamic, Worker’s House. Thus, Worker’s House became a self-appointed federating “union,” which gradually formed a “labor empire.” The Worker’s House has relied on the financial and logistical help of the government, even though it receives membership dues and benefits from

²⁴ *What a Revolution*, *supra* note 21, at 89, 91-93.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Data in this paragraph from *id.* at 89.

²⁷ See CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN, *supra* note 10, at ch. 5.

²⁸ On workers’ councils see Saeed Rahnema, *Work Councils in Iran: The Illusion of Worker Control*, 13 *ECON. & INDUS. DEMOCRACY* 69, 69-94 (1992); ASEF BAYAT, *WORKERS AND REVOLUTION IN IRAN: A THIRD WORLD EXPERIENCE OF WORKERS’ CONTROL* (1987).

overseeing two lucrative cooperatives, one for the distribution of consumer goods (EMKAN) and the other for housing (ESKAN).²⁹ At present, the only labor organizations legally recognized by the Islamic Labor Law are state-sponsored Islamic Labor Councils and their security-propaganda appendices, Islamic Associations. In cases where Islamic Labor Councils do not exist, workers are allowed to form Guild Societies (*anjoman-e senfi*) by the permission of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the approval of the Worker's House.

¶36 According to the Labor Code (Section 131), the Islamic Labor Councils and Guild Societies can be established for both employers and employees.³⁰ Until now, however, only employers and bazaaris have been successful in setting up their own Guild Societies. Employees, especially in the private sector, have been forced to accept the institutionalization of Islamic Labor Councils in establishments with more than 35 employees. They have come under the umbrella of Worker's House.

¶37 It is interesting to note that the Labor Code in Iran avoids the term "trade unions," and only allows formation of *Anjoman-haye Senfi* (Guild Societies) (Section 131). The Labor Code also avoids the use of the word "strike" for the same reason, but recognizes "work slow down" or "stoppage" while workers are present in the workshop (Section 142). These inadequate protections for trade unionism are due to the influence of the Islamic government's conservative bazaari faction.

¶38 Strikes occur, however, and they are frequently confronted by various coercive government agencies. Economic crises, high inflationary trends, and persistently high rates of unemployment put workers under pressure. Job insecurity increases as factories close for various reasons. Wages are low and workers' payments are frequently delayed for months. The use of temporary contracts, which are exempt from many benefits of the Labor Code, including protection from arbitrary firing, is spreading. The repressive acts of government in dealing with workers' grievances have often forced workers into a defensive struggle for their basic economic demands.³¹

2. Workers and the Islamic State

¶39 In the Khomeini decade, Iran's economy suffered from a deeply degenerative involutory process. Nearly all political or civil society organizations were destroyed or taken over by the official or unofficial arms of the Islamic regime. However, labor activism became gradually possible after the death of Khomeini in 1989. The effort for post-revolutionary normalization of the economy gave rise to the de-involuntary phase, which resulted in an increase in the size of the working and middle classes. Moreover, Mohammad Khatami, who ran for presidency in 1997 on a platform of cultural liberalization, was instrumental in opening the political space, albeit marginally and briefly due to being attacked by the more conservative factions of the regime. Khatami, in his eight years of presidency, kept the promotion of civil

²⁹ ASEF BAYAT, MAKING ISLAM DEMOCRATIC: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE POST-ISLAMIST TURN 109 (2007) (explaining that in 1998, Worker's House claimed that one-third of Iranian workers were its members, however there is no independent verification for this claim).

³⁰ ROUZNAMEH RASMI [Labour Code] Tehran 1370 [1990] (Iran) (The official text of the Labor Code can be found at the web site of Islamic Republic Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs: <http://www.irimlsa.ir/page.php?103/>. The English translation of the Labor Law is available at the web site of International Labor Office (ILO): <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/21843/64830/E90IRN01.htm>).

³¹ For the most current news of workers' movement in Iran see Jonesh-e Kargari, AKHBAR-E IRAN (LABOR MOVEMENT: IRAN'S NEWS), <http://www.jonbeshekargary.org/news/newsiran/>.

society as his main political agenda. In this period, independent, progressive Iranian workers and labor activists succeeded in making some advances for labor mobilization. However, the conservative factions of the Islamic Republic, formally (through security forces) and informally (through bands of vigilantes), have repeatedly attempted to disrupt the mobilization efforts of progressive workers.³² The limitation on organizational efforts of the working class, and civil society in general, have increased substantially since the 2005 presidential election of Ahmedinejad.

¶40 The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs does not recognize independent trade unions, and therefore, does not allow them to be established. Meanwhile, since 2005, Worker's House has been active in its legal attacks (and at times physical attacks by its informal agents) constraining the activities of the newly formed independent unions, set up by workers themselves. The leaders of these unions have been repeatedly imprisoned, and their families have been threatened, taken into custody, or even beaten. For example, on May 9, 2005, members of the Worker's House and Islamic Labor Council of the Tehran Bus Company violently disrupted a meeting of the independent trade union of Tehran bus drivers. This led to the arrest of union leaders, as well as someone running a blade on the tongue and face of one of the leaders of the bus drivers' trade union.³³

¶41 Worker's House has been pressured to establish Guild Societies by some people in the reformist faction of the Islamic Republic who prefer a new approach to the outmoded and unpopular Worker's House - Islamic Labor Council twins. The reformists also would like to mend their relations with the International Labor Office (ILO). The ILO, in its overview of the Islamic Republic of Iran, recognizes the dependence of the Worker's House on the government. The Islamic Republic of Iran has not ratified either the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), or the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98). Ratifying these conventions requires serious changes to Chapter VI of the Labor Code and official recognition of independent unions.³⁴ Khatami intended to accept these conventions before the end of his presidency, but the Worker's House succeeded in blocking the plan. Later, the 2005 Islamic reformist presidential candidate included the establishment of Guild Societies in his campaign program. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has also been critical of the trade union and human rights situation in Iran.³⁵

¶42 The current leadership of the Worker's House, including its Director General Alireza Mahjub, have been close to the former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani and the pro-market political party, Kargozaran-e Sazandegae. As a member of the Majlis (House of Representatives), Mahjub headed its Labor Committee. From 1982 to 1997, he was the labor representative and advisor to Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and President Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Given Mahjub's infamously active and explicit involvement against the secular labor movement over the past thirty years, especially in the early revolutionary period,³⁶ it is ironic

³² See CLASS AND LABOR IN IRAN, *supra* note 10, at ch. 3, 5; *What a Revolution*, *supra* note 21, at 100-01.

³³ See ANDREAS MALM & SHORA ESMAILIAN, IRAN ON THE BRINK: RISING WORKERS AND THREATS OF WAR 116-22 (2007) (detailing the movement of the independent union of Tehran bus drivers in 2005-2006).

³⁴ Labor Code, *supra* note 30, § x.

³⁵ See Search Results for "Survey07 Iran," INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION, <http://survey.ituc-csi.org/Iran.html>.

³⁶ He also opposed Khatami's plan to ratify the ILO conventions on the freedom of forming independent trade unions.

that in the late 1990s he became instrumental in the creation of the Islamic Workers Party which was one of the 18 political associations of the Islamic reformist coalition movement.³⁷

¶43 On the other hand, the relationship between Ahmadinejad and Alireza Mahjub is strained. Ahmadinejad cannot forgive the close political relationship of Mahjub with Hashemi-Rafsanjani and the Islamic reformists. At the same time, Ahmadinejad's government is set to place its own operators in the leadership of Islamic Labor Councils, while limiting the influence of Worker's House. Ahmadinejad has been partially successful in this effort. Worker's House has been losing its state-supported status because of the confrontation between Ahmadinejad and Mahjub.³⁸ Thus, Ahmadinejad is set to officially incorporate Islamic Labor Councils into the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs under the pretext that workshops should not be politicized and workers should not engage in politics. This suggests that the Ahmadinejad government does not tolerate secular and independent unions and does not wish to allow Worker's House to have influence over the current state-sponsored labor organization network. Ahmadinejad also keeps criticizing Worker's House for politicizing workers and workshops.

¶44 Due to their failure in defending the basic economic demands of the workers, the authority of Worker's House and Mahjub is under question by rank and file as well. Its Islamic zeal among the young workers has diminished, and the advent of the independent labor movement makes Worker's House appear useless.

¶45 In these circumstances, Worker's House leadership has somewhat modified its view about the integrated relationship between Islamic Labor Councils and Worker's House. Worker's House leadership has also recently expressed interest in the importance of new forms of trade unionism while criticizing the anti-labor policies of the government. Nevertheless, for the time being, Worker's House benefits from its extended economic, managerial, and organizational power. However, although Mahjub may hope to fend off Ahmadinejad's attack as another manifestation of the chronic factional infightings of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's attempt to bring the state-sponsored organization of labor under total government control is evident.

3. The Insurgence of Independent Labor Organizations

¶46 The early 2000s witnessed a surge in the confidence of labor activists and intellectuals, leading to the widespread translation of books on labor movements from other countries and the publication of books and journal articles on trade unionism, social movements, civil society, politics, and philosophy. Meanwhile, the number of workers' strikes for economic demands and work conditions increased.³⁹ Workers in public and private industries and services have protested, demanding payment of their unpaid wages (a chronic problem in Iranian enterprises), opposing the widespread use of "blank signed" contracts and temporary contracts, and demanding that government and employers respect the application of current labor law. Some of the most confrontational labor protests have been in cases of laid-off workers demanding their

³⁷ See PAJOOHE.COM, <http://www.pajooh.com/25513/index.php?Page=definition&UID=40436>.

³⁸ For Mahjub's criticism of Ahmadinejad's policy of targeted direct monetary subsidies in Alireza Mahjub, see *Hoshdar-e Dabir Koll-e Khaneh Kragar Darbare-ye Bohran-ha-ye Nashi az Hadafmand Kardan-e Yraneh-ha dar Astaneh Rooz-e Kargar (The Warnings of the Executive Secretary of Worker's House about Targetted Subsidies on the Occasion of the Labor Day)*, NEDAY-E SABZ-E AZADI (IRAN GREEN VOICE), Apr. 20, 2010, www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2010/apr/20/2668.

³⁹ See Shahla Daneshfar, *Mobarezat-e Kargaran dar Deu Dah-e Akheer (The Struggle of the Workers in the Past two Decades)*, KARGARAN (2005), <http://www.kargaran.org> (details on labor grievances and actions in 1997-2004. Select *Persian*, Click on Mozo'at – in *Persian*- then Negahi be Vaz'iyat-e Kargaran dar Iran _in *Persian*).

jobs back. Nevertheless, these defensive demands and peaceful strikes are not tolerated by the government's security forces. In many instances, the Islamic reformists of Khatami's administration were either unable or unwilling to curb the violent attacks of security forces on peaceful strikes and sit-ins of workers.

¶47 Some of the most tragic examples of these years demonstrate the brutality of the security forces against the peaceful workers' movement. In July 2001, the workers from Jamco clothing and Shadanpoor shoe factories were seriously beaten by security forces in front of the Majles as they demonstrated for the payment of their delayed wages.

¶48 In 2004, one-third of the teachers in Isfahan followed the call to strike by a leader of their Islamic Society (*Anjoman Eslami*), who was later arrested. The teachers demanded their unpaid salaries and a salary raise to compensate for the inflation. Eight hundred schools in Isfahan and 300 in Tehran shut down on the first day of the strike. This was an impressive expression of protest by Iranian women, who comprise 80 percent of Iran's teachers.⁴⁰

¶49 Also in 2004, construction workers participated in a strike and sit-in in the Copper Smelting Plant near the village of Khatounabad, in the Kirman province. This plant belongs to the National Copper Industries of Iran and was operated by a Chinese contractor. The construction workers' complaint concerned the unfulfilled promise of being hired by the firm upon the completion of the plant. The workers' families had joined the sit-in at the plant. On January 24th, the eighth day of the sit-in, on, security forces attacked the strikers and their families. Four workers were shot dead, 300 wounded, and many were arrested.⁴¹

¶50 The tragic event of Khatounabad was a catalyst that escalated the workers' protest movement. The small number of independent labor committees that were created in the early 2000s became more vocal, and new committees were set up in several large factories in the following months. In early 2004 in Saqqez, Kurdistan, groups of seamstresses, bakers, and brick-makers formed a *shora* (council). A report notes: "They linked up with labor activists in Tehran and five other cities. . . . After secret meetings and coordination, a resolution had been agreed upon . . . on May Day, workers would demonstrate simultaneously in all seven cities."⁴² In May 2005, workers in the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company formed the Tehran and Municipality Vahed Bus Workers Syndicate as an independent trade union.⁴³ The formation of the Vahed Bus Workers Syndicate was followed by the creation of the Haft Tapeh Sugar Refinery Workers Syndicate and the reactivation of the Kermanshah Electrical and Metal Workers Trade Society. Several committees and boards were formed to organize the nascent labor syndicates or associations and re-inaugurate previously active ones. Among these are the Free Assembly of Iranian Workers, the Board for Re-inauguration of Metal and Mechanical Syndicate, and the Board for Re-inauguration of Painting Workers Syndicate. In addition, numerous committees were formed by labor activists with the objective of providing support for the creation of independent unions, coordination of unions' actions, and reaching out to other progressive civil

⁴⁰ Malm & Esmailian, *supra* note 40, at 75-76.

⁴¹ See Andreas Malm & Shora Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink: Rising Workers and Threats of War*, 71 (2007); Behzad Sohrabi, *Be Yad-e Kargarane Jan Bakhteh Khatoun Abad (In the Memory of the Workers who Lost their Lives in Khatoun Abad)* (2009), <http://www.fwhi.org/maqale>; *Geramidash-e Kargarane Janbakhteh Khatounabad (In Memory of the Slain Workers of Khatounabad)*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4k5afi133P8>; Daneshfar, *supra* note 39.

⁴² *Id.* at 3.

⁴³ See Saeed Turabian, *Jam'bandi se saleh-ye Mobarezat-e Kargarane Sandika-ye Sherkat-e Vahed (A Three-year Summary of the Vahed Syndicate Workers' Struggles)*, AKHBAR-ROOZ.COM (Jan. 29, 2009), www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=19179 (the spokesperson for the Vahed Bus Company Workers Syndicates on the story of the formation of the syndicate).

society organizations. Most of these labor committees have been active in defending the workers' right to strike, form independent trade unions and labor organizations, and elect their own representatives. There are also those who call for the "abolition of waged labor," and the establishment of revolutionary councils. Labor committees have created many websites and news bulletins, many of which we have used as our sources in this article.⁴⁴

¶51 May Day, the international day for workers, has ritually strengthened the solidarity among Iranian workers, who have for so long been under the suppression of the state. In recent years, May Day celebrations have come under attack by the coercive forces, ending with the disruption of demonstrations and the brutal harassment and arrest of many demonstrators and labor organizers.

¶52 Major international labor confederations have repeatedly expressed their solidarity with the plight of Iranian workers. Among those are the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and International Syndical Confederation (CSI).⁴⁵

III. CURRENT DEBATES ON LABOR ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAN

¶53 Two factors have forced the leadership of the Worker's House to reconsider its outdated position and to devise a new strategy: 1) the rising demand by workers for the creation of independent labor unions, in spite of the government's repressive actions against this movement; and 2) the effort of Ahmadinejad's administration to reduce the organizational power of Worker's House over Islamic Labor Councils. Soheila Jelodarzadeh, an Islamic reformist member of the *Majles*, one of the leading members of the Worker's House and one of the founders of the Islamic Labor Party, has explicitly stated that the Worker's House should seriously think about alternatives for the current monolithic preference for Islamic Labor Councils. She intends to form women's labor unions.⁴⁶ Jelodarzadeh's position indicates that the present arrangement in government-supported labor organizations is approaching its final days as Worker's House is challenged from both sides. Ahmadinejad and his faction in the Islamic Republic do not see any reason to keep a labor organization with even the slight autonomy inherent in the workers council, a remnant of the early revolutionary period. Islamic Labor Councils were devised only to replace the spontaneously organized councils, for the purpose of controlling the labor councils that were created by workers in the revolutionary upheaval. In the view of Ahmadinejad, council structures of labor organizations must be eradicated and with it the Worker's House. Ahmadinejad and his faction believe that the close relationship between the

⁴⁴ For an impressive list of links to many of these committees' websites, articles, statements, and resolutions written by labor activists and issued by different independent labor organizations with varied political orientations within the left movement inside and outside of Iran, see, e.g., *Other Sites*, OFROS.COM, <http://www.ofros.com/payvandha.htm>; RAHE KARGAR.NET, <http://www.rahekargar.net/links/links.html>.

⁴⁵ For a list of expressions of support for these confederations, see *Search Results for "Iran survey,"* ITUC-CSI, http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?page=recherche&recherche=survey07+iran#pagination_articles; *Archive for the 'Recent Updates' Category*, IRAN LABOR REPORT, <http://iranlaborreport.com/?cat=1>.

⁴⁶ See Fariba Shirazi, *Goftogo ba Khanoom Mohandes Soheila Jelodarzadeh Namayandeh Majles Shoray-e Eslami (Interview with Ms. Engineer Soheila Jelodarzadeh, Representative to the Islamic Consultative Assembly)*, HAWZAH.NET (Apr.-May 1997), <http://www.hawzah.net/Hawzah/Magazines/MagArt.aspx?MagazineNumberID=4024&id=22581>; S. Jelodarzadeh, *Dar Keshvareman Bayad az Hame Sarmayeh-ha-ye Mardomi Esteffadeh Shavad na Bakhshi az an (In Our Country All of Our People's Abilities, not Only Some of Them, Must be Mobilized)*, KERMEN KHABAR (KERMEN NEWS) (Nov. 12, 2006), <http://kn.blogfa.com/post-626.aspx>; *National Union of Women Workers Issues an Statement on May Day*, IRAN LABOR REPORT, <http://iranlaborreport.com/?p=520>.

reformists, albeit the right wing of it, and the Worker's House and Islamic Labor Councils adds to the urgency of the need for the eradication of the Worker's House.

¶154 The Worker's House and the existing network of Islamic Councils are under pressure by a genuine and increasingly forceful labor movement demanding independent labor syndicates and unions. Over the past decade, the struggle of militant workers and labor activists for independent labor organizations—and the impressive and extended support that they have mustered among Iranian intellectuals, students, academicians, women, and progressive civil society organizations—is unprecedented in the history of the Iranian labor movement. The strong support that this labor movement and its imprisoned labor leaders have received from international labor organizations adds to the momentum of the Iranian labor movement. It is becoming more and more apparent that the future belongs to the praxis that rejects government sponsored or supported labor organizations.⁴⁷ This militant tendency, however, despite its progressive, secular outlook, is not homogeneous in its ideological and political preferences.

A. *Four Labor Reform Tendencies in Iran*

¶155 The past decade has witnessed committed, vigorous and, up until now, civil and friendly, debates amongst labor activists of different labor committees and militant workers. This stands in stark contrast to the history of the Iranian labor movement. The current debates concerning the establishment of an independent labor movement can be classified into four tendencies: 1) reform from above for independent trade unions; 2) pressure from below for independent trade unions; 3) exploring social movement unionism and reclaiming the streets; and 4) revolutionary labor councils and committees. All of these tendencies have become known for expressing and acting upon their views despite the prevailing system of censorship and oppression.

1. Reform from above for independent trade unions

¶156 The first tendency (reform from above) has been advocating work among the Islamic representatives of existing Islamic Labor Councils and Worker's House, changing the existing institution from within, and seeking international pressure by the ILO for a reformed Islamic Labor Council network, guilds, and unions within the current rules of the game. Mobilizing workers to create independent unions is thus not their primary strategy. This tendency had some popularity among workers as a possible alternative before the rise of the Green Movement in the summer of 2009. It has a low political-security cost for its activists, and receives support from more senior skilled workers. However, the popularity of this tendency has diminished with the intensification of economic and political crises. Young workers, who have participated in the social movement, and generally feel attached to political organizations on the left, no longer find this alternative attractive. This large and growing segment of the labor force—more educated and with less ideological baggage from the early revolutionary period—is closely attached to the activism of the Green Movement and is sympathetic toward its leadership. This group of workers, who are participants in the existing system of Islamic Labor Councils, is in search of a new alternative. It is the support of this group of workers that Worker's House has been losing.

⁴⁷ The list of links to the existing supporting committees is available at OFROS, <http://www.ofros.com> and <http://www.ofros.com/payvandha.htm>. See also KARGARAN, <http://www.Kargaran.org> (click on etesalat –in Persian- to see relevant links).

2. Pressure from below for independent trade unions

¶57 Many of the existing independent trade unions and labor activists' committees on the left favor the second tendency (independent labor union by pressure from below). The strategy of this tendency is the creation of unions from below (but it does not exclude pressure from above by international trade unions and the ILO) in order to expose the anti-labor policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its preferred labor organization in the prevailing conditions in Iran is the formation of trade unions. However, this tendency has not yet explored the optimal form of a trade union in the oppressive political conditions of Iran. That is, it has not entertained questions such as whether unions should be industry-wide, skill-based, or trade-oriented. They have not yet specified their approach for mobilizing workers and their concrete demands and slogans.

¶58 This tendency was initially cautious and equivocal with regard to the Green Movement, but soon the dominant position within the group stood for a lukewarm and conditional support for the movement, and favored only individual participation in it. Their hesitation in supporting the Green Movement is due to the influential presence of Islamic reformists in the Green Movement leadership and the paradoxical and ambiguous relations of this leadership with Worker's House. The timid pro-labor position of the Green Movement leadership was also a detracting factor for these labor organizers. After all, in the past decades many anti-labor positions were held by the Islamic Republic when the very same members of the leadership of the Green Movement were high level administrators of the state: Khatami was president, Mousavi was prime minister, and Karoubi was speaker of the *Majles*.

¶59 On May Day 2010, ten independent Iranian labor organizations, belonging to the first two tendencies, issued for the first time a joint resolution stating their demands.⁴⁸ At the same time, many other workers groups and civil society organizations, such as a group of Iran Khodro Auto Workers, Iranian Writers Center, Human Rights Activists in Iran, and a network of Iranian Labor Associations, issued statements in support of this resolution. This resolution includes an agenda of fifteen issues concerning economic, social, and political demands; it expresses its position not only in terms of labor demands, but also with respect to the current democratic social movement in Iran. It insists on the formation of independent labor organizations, the right to strike, immediate payment of unpaid wages, and an end to worker lay-offs and to white-signed and temporary contracts. In addition, the resolution demands freedom of expression for all Iranians and an end to capital punishment and discriminatory laws against women. The resolution expresses solidarity with teachers, nurses, and other working strata of society. It also underscores its alliance with the workers of the world in their struggle against the hardship of capitalism, and it condemns the extradition and imposition of any discrimination against Afghan refugee workers in Iran.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ These independent workers organizations are: Tehran and Municipality Vahed Bus Workers Syndicate, Haft Tapeh Sugar Refinery Workers Syndicate, Free Assembly of Iranian Workers, The Re-inauguration Board of Metal and Mechanical Syndicate, The Re-inauguration Board of Painting Workers Syndicate, Kermanshah Electrical and Metal Workers Trade Society, Pursuing Committee for the Formation of Free Workers Organizations, Coordination Committee for Support of the Formation of Workers Organizations, Support Society for Laid off and Unemployed Workers in Saghez, and Women's Council. See *Statements of Support Continue on the International Workers' Day*, IRAN LABOR REPORT, <http://iranlaborreport.com/?p=582>.

⁴⁹ See the text of the resolution at WEBLAGRAHEKARGAR, <http://weblagrahekargar.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/876-11/#more-1883>.

3. Social movement unionism and reclaiming the streets

¶60 The third tendency among labor activists advocates social movement unionism and the “reclaiming the street” strategy.⁵⁰ Their argument is influenced by the theory and practice in contemporary trade unionism in advanced capitalist societies. This tendency emphasizes integration of workers, trade unions, and the labor movement into broader coalitions for social and economic justice. Thus, it focuses on establishing support networks among unions and other civil society organizations based on mutually beneficial goals of social justice, democracy, anti-war, or any idea that supports freedom and social justice, women, youth, and ethnic issues. Obviously, this tendency is very much in favor of the Green Movement along either conditional or unconditional lines mentioned by the other two tendencies.⁵¹

4. Revolutionary labor councils and committees

¶61 The fourth tendency is in opposition to the other three approaches. In a pejorative sense, it identifies the other approaches as reformist within the left movement. It stands for the creation of revolutionary committees or councils in factories and work places. This tendency reckons the existence of revolutionary conditions in Iran. Its issue-driven statements demand, among other things, outright abolition of waged-labor. This tendency claims that the working class is comprised of any wage or salary earner, the unemployed, and the petty bourgeoisies in Iran—in short, the great majority of the population. Therefore, this tendency asserts that all of these groups have a common interest in establishing a society without wage labor. This tendency identifies the Green Movement as a working class movement, and therefore, supports participation in the movement in order to transform it into a revolution against the waged-labor system by setting up labor councils in factories and asking for a general strike.⁵²

¶62 It must be emphasized, however, that within all these tendencies and their supportive position vis-à-vis the current dissent movement, there are further nuanced positions. For example, one notable view identifies the Green Movement as an anti-labor movement that bourgeois reformist and reactionary.⁵³

⁵⁰ See, e.g., ALLIANCE OF PROGRESSIVE LABOR, <http://www.apl.org.ph/> (social movement unionism); RECLAIM THE STREETS, <http://rts.gn.apc.org> (the Reclaim the Streets movement). The latter, originally formed in London in 1991, defines itself as non-violent and anti-corporate, with the objective of using the streets for other reasons than automobile traffic. It has become an anti-capitalism and anti-globalization movement. See also BAYAT, MAKING ISLAM DEMOCRATIC, *supra* note 29 (indirectly referring to this movement as a possible form for protest movements in Iran).

⁵¹ There are many labor activists who have been engaged in lively analytical and practical discussions on labor organizations and movements representing these three tendencies, including: Hosein Akbari, Mohammad Hossein, Ali-reza Khabbaz, late Yadollah Khosroshahi, Mehdi Kouhestani, Yousef Langaroudi, Hossein Moghaddam, Parvin Mohammadi, Heshmat Mohseni, Mariam Mohseni, Ali Nejati, K. Omid, Mansour Osallo (who was released from prison in June 2011 for medical reasons), Homayoun Pourzad, Reza Rakhshan, Roza, Davoud Razavi, Mostafa Saber, Alireza Saghafi, Mohammad Salehi, Bahman Shafeegh, Reza Shahabi, Behzad Sohrabi, Varya Shafei, and Saeed Turabian.

⁵² For a representative view, see Mohen Hakimi, *Sandika: Az Inja Mandeh va az Anja Randeh! (Syndicate: Neither here nor There!)*, OFROS.COM, http://www.ofros.com/maghale/hakimi_syndica.pdf.

⁵³ See Nasser Zarafshan, *Savar bar Amvaj-e Resaneh-hay-e Gharbi (Riding on the Waves of the Western Media)*, ARASH MAGAZINE, at 107, <http://www.arashmag.com/content/view/775/47/1/4/> (link “temporarily” unavailable, alternatively see <http://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=17482>).

IV. LOOKING FORWARD

¶63 For the first time since 1979, the working class can no longer be ignored on the windy road to democracy in Iran. Despite all the historical, political, legal, and structural obstacles, and in the face of repression and intimidation, the power of the working class has grown within its fragmented existence. Now, its struggle is once again on the rise. Although the number of independent unions in Iran is few, their reverberation is there. Since 2004, with their committees, strikes, “illegal” celebrations of May Day, independent unions have crossed the seemingly unbreakable hegemonic barrier of the Islamic state-sponsored labor organizations. In many cases, workers have firmly defied the state by civil means despite the high cost of brutal state repression. With the waning of the Green Movement, the significance of organized worker participation has gained the attention of political activists.⁵⁴ Workers, however, demand of the Green Movement leadership an expression of a more concrete, strategic focus and lucid objectives on democracy and socioeconomic justice.

¶64 In the past thirty years, working people have suffered economically and politically. Their deep dissatisfaction has been reflected in their repeated dissents in workshops, strikes, and sit-ins, which have many times become bloody. The shooting and stabbing of demonstrators in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election resulted in the death of ten workers (mostly young workers between the age of 17 and 28, and the oldest being 48).⁵⁵ That is why an important part of the organized working class has supported the popular demand for democratic reforms. However, in the past, the disunity of the working class and labor activists, often caused by political affiliations, has been an obstacle in the advancement of labor organizations. The lack of consensus on their political and economic objectives disorients the labor movement both internally and externally with regards to the progressive social movement.

¶65 The existence of a viable social democracy facilitates the working class movement. But in the absence of these democratic conditions, labor activists, workers, and working class organizations cannot make any notable advances. The implementation of neo-liberal policies, whether under transnational dictate or imposed by national governments, weakens and demoralizes working people’s solidarity in their pursuit of political democratization and independent civil society organizations. Foreign economic sanctions and the threat of military interventions also undermine and seriously destabilize the efforts of numerous struggles for democratic rights—by women, students, ethnic populations, and the working and middle classes—by effectively emboldening the authoritarian regimes to suppress freedom of information, demonstration, and mobilization.

⁵⁴ Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi both have expressed sympathy for workers’ and teachers’ demands on May Day 2010. According to Mousavi, workers and teachers “want the progress of the country . . . They want freedom as freedom allows them to form their trade and political organizations . . . They are seeking justice as justice in living conditions and economy and distribution of wealth allows them to serve better, create wealth, defend the economy of the country . . .” *Statements of Support Continue on the International Workers Day*, IRAN LABOR REPORT, <http://iranlaborreport.com/?p=582>.

⁵⁵ The last report of the *Kanoun-e Hemayat az Khanevadeh Shohad va Dasgeershodegan (Center for the Support of the Family of Martyrs and Imprisoned Persons)* identifies ten workers who were killed in the post-election protest movement, http://www.hambastegimeli.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6287:2010-04-26-19-32-39&catid=41:2010-04-02-13-43-00&Itemid=79. For an informative statistical report concerning workers’ strikes, sit-ins, demands, and labor disputes in Iran in March 2009/2010, see Negar Raasti, Ahmad Raasti, Reza Rais Daana & Amir Javaher Langaroudi, *Moor-e Amari bar Etesabat va E’terazat-e Kargaran-e Iran dar Sali keh Gozasht (A Statistical Review of the Strikes and Grievances of Iranian Workers in the Year that Has Passed)*, ETEHADCHAP.ORG (Mar. 2012), <http://www.etehadchap.org/>.

¶66 In a viable social democracy, with the active support of the working class movement, in alliance with all the disadvantaged masses, the social and political arena would become hospitable for working class activities. Significant potential exists in terms of organizing within industries that have large concentrations of workers, including oil, automotive, petrochemical and heavy industries. The proliferation of supportive labor committees outside of the workshop is necessary, but it cannot substitute for the organization of workers inside workshops. Additionally, to truly progress the labor movement, labor organizations must not be conflated with political parties.

¶67 Trade unions must work hard for the daily mundane, yet concrete, difficulties and demands of workers in order to relate to millions of young female and male workers of different ethnicities. More attention to the specific demands of female workers and their participation in the leadership of progressive unions in various sectors is indispensable. Lastly, labor activists educating workers on organizational matters must also stand to be educated in turn by the workers with regards to the complexity of their aspirations.

¶68 A successful labor movement must aspire to be both democratic and economic in nature.

V. CONCLUSION

¶69 Viable progress towards democracy with socioeconomic justice is a reasonable objective for the advancement of Iran and its working class. This progress is part and parcel of the realization of collective democratic ideals for our working people to find their way out of the exploitative society that exists in Iran. However, as we have argued, consistent dealing with political and socioeconomic inequalities requires a look at the impact of the interactive class, state, and transnational power structures. In Iran, the current balance of power between class, the anti-democratic military-security-theocratic state, and its economic structure is an obstacle toward the advancement of a viable democracy. In this situation, organizing the working class in a movement for democracy and socioeconomic justice can weaken the existing power block and facilitate the democratization process in Iran. This, indeed, will be a struggle. In the words of Charles Tilly: “Just as past democratization has always occurred through struggle and has frequently suffered reversal, the path ahead contains many an obstacle in the form of new inequalities and their political consequences.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Charles Tilly, *Inequality, Democratization, and De-Democratization*, 21 SOC. THEORY 37, 42 (2003).