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## Analysis of the Political Behavior of the Working Class in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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### Abstract

The working class in contemporary Iran has faced many problems and limitations in the political sphere for various reasons, including absolute authoritarian rule and the absence of political openness. Although from 1941 through 1953, like many other sectors of civil society, the working class also found a suitable breathing space, after the coup of August 19, 1953, the labor movement was once again suppressed. During the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the working class played a significant role in overthrowing the Pahlavi regime by participating in widespread and paralyzing strikes. It contributed greatly to the establishment and consolidation of the Islamic system. The present research aims to understand the interactions and political behavior of the working class in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, the question arises as to what behavior the workers exhibited within the framework of the Islamic Republic system. The research hypothesis is that in recent decades, Iranian workers, influenced by various factors, have tended towards legal political participation and did not have revolutionary and anti-system tendencies contrary to Marxist-Leninist ideology. In this study, we will examine the subject using a descriptive-analytical method and a historical approach.

**Keywords:** Political behavior, working class, labor actions, Islamic Republic of Iran

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## Introduction

The working class is a social class consisting of members and individuals who work in occupations that require physical strength and manual labor. The working class is divided based on skill level. Occupations of the working class vary in terms of full-time or part-time status and the level of job security that workers enjoy. Central sectors and areas are parts where workers are employed in full-time occupations, earn relatively high incomes, and have long-term job security. Peripheral sectors are areas where job security is lacking, wages are low, and the proportion of part-time workers is high. Skilled workers and some semi-skilled and unskilled workers are more abundant in central sectors, often forming trade unions. The remaining workers find employment in peripheral sectors, where besides low-income levels, unionization rates are also low. In Iranian history, the industrial working class is considered a nascent class, one that has always been the focus of various movements and groups, albeit labeled as "lowly" but constantly under scrutiny. Since the emergence of the first social democratic cores in the Qajar era of Iran, workers' concerns have always interested intellectuals. From the outset, until the formation of broader Marxist parties such as the Tudeh Party, their representation and leadership in the revolution have been the most significant expectation and concern. Yet, the historical reality is that throughout Iranian history, not only did this class never become revolutionary, but in many cases, it even refrained from accompanying revolutionary movements and maintained its distinct behavior. In its modern and contemporary sense, the Iranian working class has had behavioral

characteristics from its inception that have persisted. Iranian workers have never been enslaved or engaged in ideologies and intellectual currents during any period of history, and their most important demand has always been ordinary life and the attainment of a minimum level of welfare, which has made this class one of the prominent classes of attention for the Iranian government. Two historiographical perspectives have always controlled the history of the working class in Iran. On the one hand, we witness the complete dominance of orthodox Marxists over labor struggles, claiming complete ownership and leadership of labor struggles. On the other hand, governments and ruling powers attempt to present their interpretation of the identity and struggles of the working class. However, the common thread between these two currents is their indifference to the real and tangible experiences of the workers, and each attempt to shape the Iranian working class according to their own needs and ideological understanding. This study aims to evaluate the political behavior of the working class by reviewing the background of research conducted and the activities and formations of labor in recent decades. The research hypothesizes that Iranian workers in recent decades, far from left and right ideological biases, have been more inclined towards legal political participation. In this regard, we will first review the literature produced in this field. Then the theoretical framework of the research will be discussed. Subsequently, while familiarizing ourselves with the goals and charters of labor organizations, the political behavior of Iranian workers in recent years will be examined.

## Research Background

In contemporary Iran, the working class and labor movements have a significant background and relatively good studies have been conducted. The use of previous research is important from several perspectives; including paying attention to different studies from different perspectives on the subject which increases the depth of our understanding and somehow inspires our theoretical thinking To prevent repetition of the research. Now we will have an overview of some research about the subject under discussion.

1- Kheyrollahi (2018) in the book "Classless Workers: Empowerment of Workers in Iran After the Revolution" delves into the study of the power of the working class during the Islamic Republic era. He does not confine himself to merely recounting the rights or performance of worker organizations. Still, endeavors to assess the penetration and influence of these organizations among workers, and provides an extraordinary historical-legal description of the process of temporary employment contracts in Iran's economy. The author discusses the necessity of labor force optimization in recent decades and its consequences, as well as addressing deep-seated legal ambiguities in all aspects of workers' rights.

2- Akhtari-Far (2014) in his Master's thesis titled "The Impact of Islamic Leftist Movements on the Policies of Labor Institutions with an Emphasis on the First Decade of the Revolution" investigates and analyzes the influence of Islamic leftist movements on the economic policies of labor institutions in the first decade of the Islamic Revolution. After posing the main question with the hypothesis that "Islamic leftist movements have been

influential in designing and implementing economic programs of labor institutions aimed at social justice," he argues that Islamic leftist movements, by asserting their leftist orientation to overcome dependence on foreign ideologies, implemented a series of equitable economic policies, including nationalization of banks, industries, companies, and also cultural revolution in the first decade of the Revolution, thus sidelining all Western-oriented and opportunistic movements, especially the left, from political competition and grasping power.

3- Mir-Mohammadi (2008) studied "The Role of Labor Organizations in Labor Market Changes and Strikes" at the Institute for Economic Policy and Development. This research, using a descriptive-library method and employing econometric techniques, aims to demonstrate the role of labor institutions in shaping strikes. The study concludes that the basis for strikes lies in improving the economic conditions of firms and their increased activity, resulting from the surplus of labor employment under such conditions.

4- Habibzadeh (2008) in the book "Political Participation of the Working Class in Iran" examines the working class's political participation trend before and after the Islamic Revolution. In this research, the researcher admits that the decrease in workers' political participation in some elections was a reaction to negligence towards the demands and aspirations of this class. According to Habibzadeh, despite the extensive role of workers in the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the establishment of the Islamic Republic system, and the constructive process, they have not received serious attention.

5- In his thesis titled "Examining Inappropriate Responses to Labor Unrests," Majid Parviz explores workers' behavior in facing unrest and social movements of the 2000s. This study focuses on workers from five factories along the Karaj special road, which experienced the most unrest in the 2000s. A sample of 130 individuals was selected for the comprehensive statistical analysis of the study.

6- Hafezian (2001) provides a study on "Labor Organizations and Employers in Iran," examining the existence of organizations by scrutinizing the constitutional law's freedom of parties and investigating the nature and structure of these formations from the perspective of labor law. He elucidates the legal and local position of employers' organizations, their functioning, and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

7- Kamrani (2000) has researched "Political Participation in the Workers' Community in Iran" at the Labor and Social Security Institute. In this study, variables such as political participation factors, including institutional and motivational factors, are considered independent variables. Internal organizational factors affecting workers' political participation and leading to behavioral differences are regarded as institutional factors, while motivational factors are divided into positive and negative categories. The researcher concludes that motivational factors have played a significantly greater role than institutional factors in workers' political participation.

8- Wilhelm Four (1992) in "Labor Unions and Labor Laws in Iran" examines the working class and labor movements from the perspective of the activities of institutions and unions formed from above for workers. In this study,

he highlights the role of the revolutionary movement in Russia and the working class in Baku in forming Iranian unions, considering these unions primarily as instruments of Soviet policies.

9- Lajevardi (1990) in "Labor Unions and Autonomy in Iran," which adopts a historical approach to unionism, addresses labor issues for the first time and examines the role of organized movements in contemporary social and political developments and their impact on the authoritarian political governance of the Pahlavi era.

10- Kambakhsh (1972) in "A Review of the Workers' and Communist Movement in Iran," conducted by historians or memoirists of the Mass Party, scarcely distinguishes between the history of the workers' movement and the history of the Mass Party. By conflating the party's history with the history of the workers' movement and essentially attributing every significant action of the workers' movement to the Mass Party, he identifies the Tudeh Party and the leftist movement.

Considering that previous research has approached labor from various perspectives, focusing on workers' participation in political life or the historical discourse of the workers' and communist movements, as well as their organization and empowerment, primarily aimed at raising working-class awareness and improving their socio-economic and legal status in society, the current study focuses on the activism and political behavior of the working class during the era of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the commonality of the present research with previous studies is the direct attention to the labor issue and the examination of its historical and descriptive aspects to

achieve a conclusion that brings society closer to social justice.

### **Theoretical framework**

In analyzing the political behavior of the working class in Iran, mainly Marxist theories have been utilized. This research seeks to analyze the subject relying on the non-Marxist theory of "collective behavior" by Neil Smelser. Smelser contends, in contrast to the social psychology theorists, that the defining characteristics of collective behavior are not psychological. He believes collective behavior is mobilizational, based on a belief that addresses the redefinition of social action (Smelser, 2001, pp. 12-16). Smelser, like other Parsonsian theorists, examines "collective behavior" through a functionalist lens. He considers collective behavior to include the following: 1) Panic response, 2) Manic response, 3) Outburst of hostility, 4) Conformity-oriented movement, and 5) Value-oriented movement. He views the first three as collective eruptions and the latter two as collective movements (Moshirzadeh, 2002, p. 88). Smelser, akin to other Parsonsian adherents, is conservative and sees social movements as signs of crisis or a form of deviant behavior within the system. His critics argue that his theory overly emphasizes irrational elements and homogenizing effects of widespread beliefs and carries a "reactive" attitude towards movements that cannot explain the active and positive traits of social movements (Delaporta & Diani, 2004, p. 17).

Smelser points out six conditions for the emergence of social movements and understanding the collective behavior of dissatisfied groups with the current situation: 1 - Structural background, meaning general societal conditions

conducive (or unfavorable) to the formation of social behavior; 2- Structural strain, referring to tensions resulting in dissatisfaction, conflicting interests, deprivation, and ambiguities. When societal tolerance for economic, social, and political conditions becomes difficult, people often discuss these conditions with each other and propose solutions. In such situations of exhaustion, most individuals in society experience psychological conflicts stemming from regression. These psychological conflicts lead individuals to experience mental distress and feelings of deprivation (political, economic, and status-related) and may incline them toward deviating from the prevailing order. Thus, the groundwork is laid for various actions and behaviors to emerge. 3 - Dissemination of widespread beliefs or formation of ideology: Before collective action can reconstruct the situation arising from structural strain, this situation must become meaningful to potential actors. This meaning is provided in the form of widespread beliefs. Widespread beliefs introduce the source of strain and attribute certain characteristics to this source, suggesting appropriate or possible responses to the existing strain. Beliefs shaping collective behavior include anxious beliefs, imaginative beliefs, antagonistic beliefs, conformity-oriented beliefs, and value-oriented beliefs. The growth and dissemination of such beliefs are necessary conditions for the occurrence of any collective behavior; 4 - Accelerating factors, i.e., events and incidents that prompt individuals to enter the realm of action and may be of a specific nature; 5 - Mobilization of participants for action, meaning a coordinated mobilized group along with communication networks and financial support must exist to organize protesting people; 6- Social control performance refers to the



government's response to collective behavior in the form of creating reforms or suppression (Smelser, 2001, pp. 202-203-224).

Thus, Smelser, for organizing the determining factors of collective behavior, has proposed a framework similar to the concept of "value-added" in economics. For any type of collective behavior to occur, many determining factors and necessary conditions must be present. However, these determining factors must combine in a specific pattern. The occurrence of previous stages does not determine the subsequent stages. However, when combined, they increasingly determine and specify the type of desired behavior. Collective behaviors that may arise from class groups like workers fall into two general categories. Firstly, behaviors outside the framework, revolutionary, subversive, and norm-breaking, which are destabilizing; secondly, behaviors within the framework, such as demand-making through peaceful means, actions based on government desires or influenced by dominant ideology, traditional and rural lifestyles, consumption-based actions according to daily needs and away from temptations and enlightened teachings, which support the stability and perpetuation of the existing political system.

### **Workers and labor unions in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

After the revolution, following the emergence of a political atmosphere, matured organizations sought objectives primarily aligned with political and revolutionary aims. Moreover, these organizations provided a suitable ground for the formation of lofty ideals and even many spontaneous labor movements emerged during this time. Due to the fleeing of many

managers and numerous strikes occurring within workplaces, along with the unrest specific to the fervent period of revolutionary events, Iran's labor society underwent numerous difficulties. Therefore, this period could not yield practical and effective outcomes in pursuing these organizations' legal objectives. We will briefly examine the most prominent labor organizations post-Islamic Revolution below.

### **Islamic Labor Council**

According to Article 104 of the seventh chapter of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the cooperation of workers and employers, a council composed of representatives of workers, peasants, and other employees and managers is envisaged. Under this constitutional provision, the Islamic Labor Council was established on November 21, 1984, and its executive regulations were subsequently approved. Based on this, numerous councils are officially engaged in activities at present. It is noteworthy to consider how the Islamic Labor Council is perceived as a labor organization at the workshop level. Clause 4 of Article 131 of the Labor Law, stipulates the formation and representation of workers: Workers of a unit can only have one of three: the Islamic Labor Council, the guild association, or the workers' representative. Thus, the Islamic Labor Council is considered a labor organization in terms of trade affiliation. However, the Islamic Labor Council exclusively represents workers but also serves as a form of management representation. Therefore, if this institution is referred to as a council, it must, on the one hand, alongside the employer and as an employer consultant, fulfill its duty for better workshop management, and on the other hand, reflect workers' opinions for

optimal workshop Management. Unfortunately, this dual function faces major challenges both in labor law and the law governing the Islamic Labor Council. Regarding the dual duty of the council, namely participation in management and defending workers' rights, the primary function has practically replaced the guild assembly (Hafezian, 2001, pp. 105-104-103).

### **Workers' Guild Association**

Since the first regulations on the formation and scope of authority of workers' guild associations were approved in 1992, this type of organization has legally found its place in workshops. It can be argued that guild associations, compared to Islamic labor councils, have a less syndicalist nature and are much more democratic. When examining the legal status of guild associations, we are faced with two specific documents: 1. Regulations on the formation, scope of duties and authority, and functioning of workers' guild associations and relevant centers under Article 131 of the Labor Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and 2. It's a replacement regulation. Both were approved by the Council of Ministers on 28 December 1993 and 30 October 2010, respectively. Both regulations specify that a workers' guild association can be established at the workshop level with a minimum of ten workers and at the guild level with a presence of at least fifty individuals. It seems that this organization mainly has a consultative role, and its existence, like the Islamic Labor Council, is more for mediation between workers and employers and controlling protests. According to Article 160 of the Labor Law of 1990, the composition of the 9-member dispute resolution

boards includes three representatives each from workers, employers, and the government. Thus, the absolute majority of these boards consists of employers and the government, and therefore, the dissolution of guild associations by these boards constitutes government and employer interference in labor organizations. Since the approval of these regulations, government intervention in guild associations has become more apparent, and various governments have almost unlimited ability to interfere in the internal affairs of these organizations. Governments can now use their legal and extralegal influence more openly and manipulate the composition of the board members before and after the general assembly elections through pre-election constraints and filters (Kheyrollahi, 2018, pp. 47-46).

### **Representatives of Workers**

Representatives of workers, selected through general assembly and founding assembly, constitute a thin layer of activity consisting of workers. Essentially, it cannot be considered solely as a labor organization in the classical and standard sense. However, in the Labor Law of 1369, worker representatives were recognized as a labor organization alongside guild associations and the Islamic Labor Council. It should be noted that worker representatives play a significant role in organizing workers in workshops with fewer than 10 employees. In the regulations related to worker representatives, holding Iranian citizenship is listed as one of the necessary conditions for candidates to have the right to vote and participate in workshop elections. Also, practical commitment to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and non-affiliation with

illegal political parties and groups is required. According to Article 5 of the initial regulations, a committee composed of a representative of the unit's labor and social affairs, one educated and trusted worker from the same unit who is not a candidate for representation, and the representative of the employer of the same unit are responsible for assessing the qualifications of worker representation candidates. It should not be forgotten that the committee referred to in Article 22 of the Islamic Labor Council Law is the same committee composed of three representatives out of seven employers, with one representative from the present government. All of this implies that for a worker representative to become legal, they must 1- Have their qualifications approved by employers and the government 2- The individual can be an employer or an appointed manager of the workshop 3- Even if the employer or manager is not present, the matter will not proceed smoothly, as the employer or manager of the unit can at any time use their influence in the regional supervision board or dispute resolution board to dismiss the representative and subsequently revoke their accreditation letter. Of course, the power and right to dismiss this individual by the government are also reserved in the first place by law. Apart from these issues, it must be claimed that the duties and authorities of worker representatives, just like the duties and authorities of members of Islamic labor councils and guild associations, are mostly advisory and planned for resolving disputes and reconciling with the employer. From the above discussions, it can be concluded that the fundamental element of labor organizations envisaged in the Labor Law of 1990 is monopoly: the monopoly of organizations that can declare their existence; the monopoly of

workshops that these organizations can have; the monopoly of activities that can be carried out under these organizations in terms of guild and political aspects; the monopoly of individuals who can stand for membership in these organizations for the vote of workers; and the monopoly of power and oversight over these organizations - and, of course, their dissolution if necessary. The result of these multi-layer monopolies cannot be anything other than the lack of independence of organizations, their board members and inspectors, as well as worker representatives (Hafezian, 2000, pp. 133-130).

### **Islamic Workshop Associations**

According to Article 130 of the Labor Law, to promote and spread Islamic culture and defend the achievements of the Islamic Revolution and under Article 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, workers in production, industrial, agricultural, service, and guild units can establish coordination centers for Islamic workshop associations. The first note of this article also states: that Islamic associations can establish coordination centers for Islamic workshop associations at the provincial level and the central coordination center of Islamic workshop associations at the national level to coordinate the performance of duties and promotional methods. In the regulations (how to establish, limits of duties, authorities, and functioning of Islamic workshop associations), the authorities and duties of these associations, such as holding congregational prayers, respecting religious symbols, holding preaching sessions, sermons, and speeches for various occasions, are mentioned. Furthermore, membership conditions,



voting, and selection in the central councils of these associations are by no means free. Thus, these associations are inherently political and ideological, and referring to them as labor organizations (in the classical sense) is entirely erroneous, while they are strongly controlled by the government. Therefore, from all perspectives, they have the least possible relationship with labor organizations according to the International Labor Organization.

### **Worker's House**

The Worker's House, in terms of legal, administrative, and most importantly political structure, is the only labor organization that has survived the Pahlavi era, and the performance of these organizations is mostly based on the requirements of the Labor Law in the year 1958. For this reason, the structure of these organizations does not coincide with the legal structure of current labor unions and the sixth chapter of the Labor Law of 1990 (Kheyrolahi, 2018, pp. 51-52). However, the reason for its continued existence in the years after the revolution was that there was still a need for its political function. The Worker's House has been able to take on the responsibility of supervising labor organizations and directing their governance even after the revolution. With this logic, this organization, neither a formation nor a political party, in a completely exceptional manner and with extralegal behavior, calls itself the "Supreme Confederation of Workers" and has created unions based on its statutes. While no mention of a phenomenon called the Supreme Confederation of Workers is made in the Labor Law of 1990 or relevant laws. The term "union" also refers to a level of organizational activity for the

Worker's House lower than the congress, central council, and secretary-general, and in reality, has no connection to the labor union in its common sense. However, Worker's House organizations in recent years have been keen on using this nominal similarity and have so far established several labor unions; including the Contractual and Agreement Workers' Union, the Veterans' Union of the Labor Society, the Municipality Workers' Union of Tehran, the Automobile Workers' Union, the Leather and Skin Workers' Union, the Women Workers' Union, the Paper Industry Union, and the Electrical and Household Appliances Industry Union. Interestingly, establishing these unions, or at least using the title "union" by the Worker's House, does not face any specific legal or judicial obstacles. While workers in workshops and factories have no right to use this name for their organizations (Eilna, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the members of the central council of the Worker's House from 1979 until now have consistently been only three people, and its secretary-general has also remained unchanged for decades. Therefore, it does not seem that even with the assumption of labor organization, the Worker's House and its affiliated unions can still be considered to have a structure that is independent of the government and both free and democratic, in line with the standards of the International Labor Organization. The Worker's House of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a branch of the Labor and Guild Party that strives to operate as a non-governmental and professional organization. These organizations de facto constitute the national center of Iranian trade unions, a member of the World Federation of Trade Unions, and have declared their goal of pursuing professional demands and workers' rights and consolidating them in social arenas. Worker's

House has fifty-two branches in other provinces of Iran and is also associated with 22 comprehensive scientific-applied university centers. Worker's House is the largest labor organization in Iran with over 2 million members. From the 1990s until now, Alireza Mahjoub (representative of several terms in the Islamic Consultative Assembly) has been the secretary-general of the Worker's House, and Ali Rabiee and Hossein Kamali are also other members of the central council of the Worker's House.

In the years after the revolution until the 9th and 10th governments took office, the main members and middle cadres of this party were the same members of the coordination centers of the Islamic Labor Council of the provinces, and the Labor House used their organizations as its executive arm. For this reason, it should be said that the political orientation of the Workers' House was essentially no different from that of the leaders of the Islamic work councils. In Article 20 of the Worker's House Constitution, the scope of duties of this organization is as follows: The Worker's House can take the following measures to develop the culture and improve the scientific level and awareness of workers in trade, economic, social, technical, and political fields.

1 - Publication of newspapers, weeklies, monthlies, yearbooks, or required books and materials;

2 - Collaboration with scientific, cultural, educational, sports, technical, and academic centers, and efforts to establish centers of this kind;

3- Exchange of information with media and information centers, and establishment of

news agencies and news websites across the country.

4- Formation of independent educational centers;

5 - Taking necessary actions to provide welfare, sports, recreational, and support services.

It is evident from the constitution and the general content of the manifesto of the Workers' House that firstly, the professional and political status of the Workers' House in recent decades has been completely uncertain, to the extent that the performance of these organizations has constantly fluctuated between the influence of a political party pole and a widespread workers' organization, but clear signs of the dominance of a political agenda in the performance of these organizations are noticeable. Secondly, despite the claims of professional representation by this party or political organization, in the description of the envisaged duties in the constitution of these organizations, there is no indication of the customary duties of a workers' organization such as representing workers, organizing protests, bargaining with employers, etc. The manifesto of these organizations also does not reveal any specific goals, plans, or duties of workers' organizations if we pass over general statements such as striving for self-sufficiency and national independence, eradicating poverty, supporting development, and strengthening fraternal relations with all Muslims, especially Muslim workers, and helping the deprived and the oppressed of the world. Thirdly, the legal status of these organizations is entirely ambiguous. Article 21 of the constitution of these organizations considers itself a party, but in its

media advertisements, it introduces itself as the Supreme Confederation of Workers.

### **Legal capacities of labor organizations**

After the revolution until the enactment of the Labor Law of 1990, Islamic Labor Councils replaced the former syndicates, and these councils were exclusively the only official labor organizations in the sixty's decade. In the year 1990, the new Labor Law, amidst many struggles between the government, the parliament, and the Guardian Council, was approved by the Expediency Discernment Council. In Note 4 of Article 131 of this law, it is stated that workers of a unit can only have one of the three options; Islamic Labor Council, guild association, or workers' representative. The Labor Law of 1990 provides for the formation of provincial coordination councils and the national supreme council for three official labor organizations. Thus, in addition to guild associations, this law recognizes Islamic Labor Councils and worker representatives or representatives at the workshop level; provincial coordination councils of guild associations, coordination councils of Islamic Labor Councils, and assemblies of representatives at the provincial level; as well as the supreme council of workers' guild associations, the supreme council of Islamic Labor Councils, and the supreme assembly of representatives of the entire country as national organizations. Many provisions of Chapter Six of the Labor Law of 1990 were allocated to explaining less important details such as the formation of coordination councils for labor organizations at the provincial and national levels and also foreseeing regulations to structure their implementation.

In Article 131 of this law, apart from Note 4, it was accepted that in implementation of Article 26 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to safeguard legitimate and legal rights and interests and improve the economic situation of workers and employers, which in itself includes safeguarding the interests of society, workers subject to the Labor Law and employers of a profession or industry can initiate the formation of guild associations. Here, two points exist: a) The substitution of the term "guild association" instead of familiar names like union or syndicate, which is done to present accepted organizations as non-political. b) In each of the three previous laws, justifications and restrictions for the necessity of establishing labor organizations were taken into account, which in the current law are repeated in a more explicit and with more numerous restrictions, such as a guild association for the preservation of legitimate rights and sometimes the improvement of the economic situation of workers, provided that this improvement of living standards is necessary for safeguarding the interests of society.

Article 134 of the Labor Law of 1990 recognizes the establishment of labor and managerial councils, but no association, council, or organization has been provided for unemployed workers. Article 138 of this law states that the Supreme Leader's office can have representatives in any of the mentioned organizations if deemed expedient (Kheyrollahi, 2018, pp. 40-39).

International Labor Organization cooperation with the Iranian government in 2004 culminated in the signing of the Iranian Social Partners Agreement (worker-employer-government) regarding the strengthening and development of labor and employer guild

associations in the country. This document, signed by workers, employers, and government representatives, and with the presence of three experts from the International Labor Organization, was formalized, and its signatories declared their consent in four clauses.

1 - Need for revision in the sixth chapter of the Labor Law... in line with strengthening and developing guild associations;

2 - Preparation and drafting of the amendment draft related to the sixth chapter of the Labor Law, under internationally recognized principles;

3 - The necessity of amending the existing regulations and rules related to guild associations as soon as possible;

4- Need for a review of the law establishing Islamic labor councils to strengthen the functional role of this organization at the appropriate time and under the terms of agreements numbered 87 and 98 of the International Labor Organization.

Article 101 of the Fourth Development Plan Law emphasizes the presentation of a dignified national employment program considering fundamental labor rights, including the freedom of associations (subsection a), social dialogue between the government and social partners (subsection b), the right to pursue legal, occupational, and civil rights of labor (subsection d), and the alignment of laws with standards and international agreements (subsection c). According to Article 73 of the Fifth Development Plan Law, the government was obliged to amend the labor law while considering matters such as strengthening the harmony of interests between workers and employers and the government's duties with a

focus on supporting production and tripartism (subsection e) and strengthening labor and employer organizations, including the right to legal strike for these organizations (subsection f) (approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2004-2010: numbers 59515 - 73285 / 419).

### **Political actions of workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Today, Iranian workers encompass a population of over 26 million in various sectors including industry, mining, services, agriculture, as well as administrative and banking domains. Workers, under various employment conditions and establishment of work relations, include 13.7 million insured individuals (private sector), 3.7 million wage earners employed in the public sector, 3.2 million retirees and pensioners receiving benefits from the Social Security Organization, 6.2 million unemployed, and a significant number of uninsured wage earners in the private sector, contributing to production or realization of value-added (Statistical Center of Iran). This potential yet dormant and ailing social force, occasionally affected by pressures and various economic-social actions, often exhibits defensive and scattered reactions, sometimes intermittently harsh and widespread, due to a lack of class awareness and other influential factors, deprived of forming independent and specialized class formations and influential presence in their own and the society's destiny (Abrahamian, 1998, p. 331).

However, statistics indicate that by the year 2018-2019, approximately 10,196 workers' organizations have been registered in the form of Islamic Labor Councils and Workers'

Guilds, showing a significant increase compared to the pre-Islamic Revolution era, where labor unions were active. Thus, workers' actions have significantly increased proportionally with the rise of guilds and workers' organizations. Below, we delve into the examination of some of these actions:

### 1 - Peaceful Demand Making

Freedom of assembly and demonstration is one of the fundamental human rights emphasized in Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as Conventions No. 87 and 98 of the International Labor Organization and other documents. Governments are obliged to recognize the right to protest for all segments of society, including workers, and to respect it. Governments must protect peaceful assemblies and facilitate their organization. Peaceful demonstrations are considered one of the symbols of democracy and important indicators of a vibrant and flourishing civil society. This right empowers all citizens, civil activists, and workers to freely convey their demands and protests regarding policies and programs to those in power and government officials and hold them accountable for their policies, programs, and actions. The most important characteristic of workers' movements in Iran, especially during the years following the Islamic Revolution, has been their demand-oriented nature within legal frameworks. Demand-oriented in the sense that Iranian workers have never demanded a revolution or grand political narratives during their strikes and protests, but rather they have demanded a normal life. Even in the deepest political upheavals in Iran,

we see that the most political demand of Iranian workers in protest gatherings, such as the textile workers of Qaemshahr, Hepco in Arak, and Haft Tapeh in Shush, has been this ordinary life; something that never allowed them to become revolutionary in the Marxist sense. Iranian workers have always sought to provide a relatively suitable and normal life for themselves and their children, and for this purpose, they have not spared any effort or work.

In the late 1990s due to the end of the war and the relatively favorable atmosphere for freedoms, despite legal limitations, workers' actions, in the form of gatherings, protests, and many cases, road closures or work stoppages, manifested themselves more than in the first decade after the victory of the Islamic Revolution (Behdad, 2006, p. 160). From the mid-1970s onwards, other demands such as the establishment of independent workers' organizations and labor unions also came into focus. Labor unions in Iran, after the revolution, are based on scientific theories that directly link social disparities and inequalities with the creation of social movements and political and economic revolts. To the extent that political and economic disparities and social inequalities expand and deepen in society, political revolts, economic protests, and social movements will also expand and deepen accordingly (Bashiriyeh, 2006). Despite the multiplicity and diversity of workers' protests in the years following the imposed war, these protests were never colorfully politicized. Rather, they mostly presented their demands within the framework of the system. In other words, the struggles of the workers' class in the Islamic Republic of Iran are "struggles within the system, not against the system." However, even this amount is sometimes not tolerated, and we occasionally witness harsh



government reactions against peaceful workers' actions.

## 2- Traditional and Rural Lifestyle

Throughout the history of the working class in Iran, from the Qajar period to the present, the main characteristic and prominent feature of this class has been its rural and peasant nature in lifestyle. The majority of the working class in Iran were migrant villagers who had left their cultivated lands and moved to the city. However, the important point is that for these migrants, factories or workshops continued the rural way of life. As Asef Bayat showed in "Workers and the 1979 Revolution," many categorizations in factories were based on ethnic and linguistic classifications, with ethnic consciousness prevailing over class consciousness among the workers. This has always been a significant obstacle to the formation of class consciousness among Iranian workers.

Social movements worldwide often adopt traditions for the continuation and advancement of their goals. Revolutionary traditions serve as vital sources for future generations of activists to avoid repeating mistakes. For various reasons, the Iranian working class never had a continuous tradition of intellectual and revolutionary struggle, always being forced to start anew. One of the most significant obstacles to the continuity of revolutionary tradition among Iranian workers was the seasonal nature of their work. Because workers had to return to their villages when the harvest season arrived, they never experienced continuous presence in a factory or workshop, constantly changing their work environment and experiencing new places. This is significant because the environment plays a crucial role in shaping

individuals' experiences, understanding, and awareness. Apart from workers' personal experiences in Iran, a very important event was the Iranian labor movement being relegated to historical oblivion (Bayat, 2022, pp. 50-100).

## 3- Acting Based on Daily Needs and Away from Ideological Attachments

Leftist intellectuals and Marxists have played a significant role worldwide in advancing workers' struggles. The history of labor struggles worldwide has shown that the presence of intellectuals in factories and workers' living environments has played a considerable role in the working class's consciousness. However, this has faced challenges in Iran. The majority or a significant portion of Iranian intellectuals came from the middle class, generally lacking experience in labor or a precise picture of Iranian workers' lives. They often developed ideological preconceptions of the working class by reading short and simple translations of Marx or Lenin or some leftist thinkers, assuming that workers were devoid of these ideological traits. While it cannot be denied that government policies also contributed to creating a gap between workers and intellectuals, the existence of this gap prevented a deep and stable relationship between Iranian workers and leading intellectual currents from forming. Iranian intellectuals were unfamiliar with the language of the Iranian working class, and vice versa. In Iranian history, the industrial working class is considered a nascent class, a class that, although economically weak, has always attracted the attention of various groups and movements. Since the formation of the first social democratic nuclei in Iran, the concerns of workers have always been a focus for intellectuals. From the outset until the emergence of broader Marxist parties

like the Tudeh Party, their most important expectation and concern from the working class has been representation and leadership in the revolution. However, the historical reality is that Iranian workers never became revolutionary; instead, in many cases, they refrained from participating in revolutionary movements. Despite all the efforts of leftist parties in Iran and even governments, this class never adopted a revolutionary policy, or at least it can be said that this class never led a revolutionary movement. This is while leftist literature in Iran indicates that all their efforts were aimed at making this class revolutionary and leading them in socio-political transformations. According to researchers like Ahmad Ashraf, Iranian workers were even the last class to join the 1979 revolution. This issue has been reflected in many writings and requests of Marxist currents in the early days of the revolution.

The Iranian working class, in its new and modern sense, has had one fundamental and common characteristic from the beginning of its formation to the present. They have never been captive to ideological doctrines and intellectual currents, and their most important demand has always been a simple and minimal life, which has turned this class into one of the most politicized classes in Iran. The history of the Iranian working class, especially after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, is under the control of two historiographical approaches. On the one hand, the complete dominance of orthodox Marxists, who claim to have complete ownership of workers' struggles, and on the other hand, governments and ruling powers have tried to present their interpretation of the identity and struggles of the working class. However, the common thread between these two currents is their indifference to the real

and concrete experiences of the workers, each attempting to shape the Iranian working class according to their own needs and ideological cognition.

#### 4 - Working Class Consumerism

Consumerism refers to the immediate importation of consumer goods, both luxury and non-essential, which, by altering the taste and culture of people, including the working class, leads to the destruction of the country's economy. In the current circumstances, despite ideological claims against consumerism, Iranians are encouraged to consume luxury and non-luxury goods through various means, especially the national media. However, this attitude stems from government programs in the early years after the end of the imposed war, aimed at accelerating development. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that consumption is the engine of the economy, and the growth and development of the country depend on the consumption of domestically produced goods by various social sectors, including workers, as the largest social sector in Iran. However, consuming foreign and luxury goods that have domestic substitutes is not beneficial to the country (Miles, 2022).

In interpreting human behavior, it must be said that humans consume to facilitate meaningful exchange. Consumption is a societal construct for acquiring social identity. However, from a psychological and existential perspective, overconsumption has undesirable consequences. From an existential or psychological perspective, in the act of overconsumption, humans significantly diminish their vitality. Humans seem to forget that they are supposed to live. Human life is forgotten due to overconsumption. Through their consumerism,

humans forget themselves. Reducing humans to that animalistic dimension is one of the consequences of consumerism that existential philosophy refers to. The next psychological consequence of consumerism is a materialistic attitude towards the world. Through overconsumption, humans adopt a materialistic perspective towards friendship, love, fellow humans, the world, nature, and anything imaginable, and they become indifferent to their environment, surroundings, and surroundings. Revolutionary humans are socially responsible and concerned individuals. The prevalence of consumerism severely damages this culture and is replaced by irresponsibility.

The beginning of consumerism as a modern phenomenon in Iran can be traced back to the Qajar period, and its evolution can be traced to the present day. Therefore, the roots of consumerist thinking should be sought in modernity. The negative effects of this phenomenon do not only include economic waste and diverting resources from limited production capacities, but also encompass extensive social, cultural, and political repercussions for human societies, especially developing societies like Iran, and are considered one of the factors hindering their growth. In Iranian society after the revolution, despite the spiritual nature and orientation, material values such as consumerism have become prevalent for various reasons, overshadowing spiritual values. This issue is intensifying and has also affected the working class. Today, the Iranian working class is engaged in a serious intellectual and cultural shift, and in the aspects of life, it is heavily inclined towards consuming luxury imported goods.

## 5 - Government-Driven Activism

According to the Labor Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the right to association for workers and employers is recognized. The form of association allowed for workers by the Labor Law is the guild association. However, according to the same law, associations that operate without government intervention and the presence of government representatives are contrary to Iranian labor law. Therefore, workers can only take actions that the government approves. This leads workers down a path determined by the government or regime. An obvious contradiction can be seen in Iranian law, which is that the right to strike is not recognized for workers. In none of the labor laws in Iran, whether the law passed in 1958 or the law passed in 1990, is the right to strike recognized for workers? Although from the early years after the enactment of the Labor Law in the Islamic Republic of Iran, we witnessed many workers' protests and strikes.

Historical examinations indicate that Iranian workers have largely been influenced by governmental orders and directives, and at times have been under the sway of religious ideology, adopting a conservative approach, and rarely adopting a confrontational and overthrowing attitude towards the government. Especially after the Islamic Revolution, given the religious nature of the Iranian working class, their susceptibility to the commands and teachings of the religious government has significantly increased. The Islamic Republic government has conveyed to the workers the understanding that it is more familiar with the pains and concerns of the workers than any other actor. Therefore, implicitly, it has somewhat garnered their satisfaction to the extent that in difficult economic conditions, there is

not necessarily a need for aggression and turmoil. Rather, it promises success in achieving the goal with hope for the near future. In recent years, a method of struggle has been vigorously promoted and embraced, and that is protest yes; revolution no. Of course, with the expansion of modern approaches and the acceptance of economic reforms and social changes within the government structure on one hand, and the increase in literacy and awareness among various social sectors on the other, the groundwork for softer methods of struggle among the working class will become smoother.

## Conclusion

The Islamic Revolution of Iran succeeded under circumstances where the working class played a determining role in its victory, not as vanguard, but alongside other social classes. Their conception of the revolution involved the consideration of their demands and aspirations by the new government emerging from the revolution. During the days of political inflammation and explosion, they actively participated through joining sit-ins, strikes, and nationwide demonstrations, and were actively involved in the scene even before the Cultural Revolution. With the onset of the imposed war, influenced by universal mobilization and the prescribed ideology of the Islamic Republic, they also played a serious role in the battlefronts. In the early years of the revolution, they endured many hardships through a strategy of silence. By the end of the 1980s, with the enactment of a new labor law, the working class recognized their rights and obligations. According to this law, the right to strike was revoked from the working class. However,

this class did not remain passive, and following the enactment of the labor law in the Islamic Republic, a wave of workers' protests and strikes to assert their minimum rights, which had been neglected by the private or state sectors, spread. Regarding the role of labor organizations in confronting protests, it should be noted that these organizations do not play a leadership or organizational role in the crises present in the workplace and are generally observers of developments. In the less reported instances of labor protests in recent years, we see that Islamic Labor Councils or Workers' Guilds take the lead in protests, or provincial and national centers of these organizations, at least symbolically and spiritually, support the striking workers who demand nothing but their rightful wages. Of course, the actions of the working class were not necessarily limited to participation in protests and strikes. Workers have been active in various ways throughout the half-century of the establishment of the Islamic Republic. These actions and behaviors have been examined in five indices. Firstly, they tried not to enter into a confrontational process with the government and did not seek to disrupt social order under any pretext. Rather, they attempted, as much as possible, to communicate their demands to the authorities and decision-makers through peaceful means, and sometimes waited silently for their demands to be met. This class, influenced by the dominant ideology, often acts conservatively, is very traditional in intellectual and ideological matters, and lives a rural lifestyle. However, because it is placed in the context of the modern world today, it has been influenced by bourgeois classes and has made consumerism its profession; the sum of these inhibitory elements prevents the working class of the Islamic Republic from

revolutionary actions and makes it indebted to it, mostly acting rationally and self-interestedly within the framework of its activities.

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