

From the strikes of contract-workers in the oil and gas industry of Iran to the global struggles of the working class¹

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Introduction

Over recent weeks a large part of the temporary and contract-workers (from now on *TCWs*) in the Iranian oil and gas industry have been on strike. The nationwide strikes began on 19th June and soon after more than 40 thousand *TCWs* joined the strike² in more than 80 oil and gas industrial plants (see the demands of *TCWs* in Appendix I). Those who follow the news about global labor struggles are already aware that daily protests and strikes by workers in Iran have been part of “normal” events since at least ten years ago. The aggravation of neoliberalism³ was combined

1 Originally published in German by *Untergrund-blättle*, (7 July 2021): “Von den Streiks der Werkvertragsarbeiter:innen in der Öl- und Gasindustrie im Iran”, <https://www.xn--untergrund-bl-tle-2qb.ch/politik/asien/iran-oelindustrie-gasindustrie-streiks-6539.html>.

2 Last year, too, the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry struck together for their request. Although they, for many reasons, did not meet most of their demands, but at least the experience they have gained helped them to organize the current strikes to a greater extent and more coherently.

3 The first phase of implementing the neoliberal policies in Iran began in 1989 (under the Rafsanjani government). From that time until today, all subsequent governments have actively contributed to the establishment and expansion of these policies.

with the structural inefficiency and corruption of the state, the massive costs of increasing militarization and international economic sanctions to lead together to a deep multiple-crisis in Iran. The result of the widening and deepening of this crisis in recent years has been acute poverty and the enormous class division, which is reflected in a 40-percent inflation and the sharp decline in incomes of more than half of the country's population⁴, pushing them below the official poverty line. In connection with this crisis and as a response to it, there have already been some mass uprisings, of which the uprisings of Jan. 2018 and Nov. 2019 are the largest and most famous ones. Consequently, workers (those who have not been paid for months; who have been made redundant through the privatization of public sectors and the intensification of the economic structural justifications; or who cannot afford their daily living costs because of extremely low wages, etc.) have had no other choice⁵ than to participate in the protests and strikes or to help organize them. The question, therefore, arises whether (and how) the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry differ from the usual course of workers' protests/strikes in Iran. This text tries to answer this question. Through answering this question, some characteristics of the general condition of workers around the world in contemporary capitalist circumstances will be presented/discussed. In this way, the text tries to raise the following question: what implications do the current strikes in Iran have for the redefinition and revival of class politics as well as for the realization of the potential historical subjectivity of the working class in today's world?

1. Some characteristics of the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry

The differences between the current strikes and the usual course of protests and labor strikes (in Iran) can be basically divided into two levels, the economic and the political level. However, the two levels are in fact closely intertwined. The inner connection between politics and economy in the capitalist system is best reflected in the societies of the Global South. As in Iran, the state represents the interests of the capital owners and the ruling economic oligarchy in a very direct way; because the state itself is not separable from this oligarchy and, as the exclusive actor on the political stage, rules predominantly via its massive repressive apparatus. With this note, some of the characteristics of the current strikes are listed below:

1.1 The working conditions of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran are very disastrous. Spatially, most of the workers who work in the south and southwest of the country (locations of oil and gas fields) have to work in unbearable heat (in many months over 40°) and under very poor safety, health and social conditions.

⁴ Iran's population is over 80 million.

⁵ In the meantime, the workers are certainly also reacting to the crisis in individual ways: from looking for informal part-time jobs such as street vendors and taxi drivers and goods transporters (or goods smugglers) to moving to the margins of the cities (to reduce housing costs), to desperate suicides, as poor peasants in India do.

These oil-rich (but disadvantaged) regions are mostly far from large cities, while the families of most workers live very far away. Under these conditions, the *TCWs* have to work 24 days a month and only have six days off to get back home for visiting their families.⁶ During those 24 days, they work more than 10 hours during the day, while spending their nights in overcrowded dormitories. On the other hand, due to the over-exploitative nature of contract labor, their wages are very low and they are not entitled to the minimum labor rights and protective laws.⁷ Because of this, the employers abuse them in the harshest possible way without any responsibility, and without even having to worry about providing minimal safety pieces of equipment to protect workers' lives during the working day. The slightest protest, even a complaint by workers, ends with their dismissal, either because of the one-sidedness and fragility of the employment contract or because of the high rate of unemployment in the country. Many of these workers use the term "modern slavery" to describe their own working conditions. As in China, this modern slavery takes place in the so-called "free economic zones", where the state has legitimized the "super-exploitation" process to the satisfaction of domestic and foreign capital investors. This clearly means that there is no other law ruling above the capital's law in these areas. Thus, the recent strikes in Iran can be viewed as collective protests against the widespread prevalence of modern slavery.

1.2 Although not a day goes by in Iran without several protests and strikes, these protests / strikes are mostly sporadic (in individual companies) due to the long-standing ban on the establishment of independent workers' organizations and the suppression of all pertinent attempts. That ban facilitates the repression of the usual workers' protests and at the same time reduces their chances of success as well as their indirect political influence. In this context, the hallmark of the current oil and gas strikes is their cross-company character and the remarkable coordination of the striking workers in separate production units. To date, the first strikes have spread to more than 80 companies in the oil, gas and refinery sectors, while significant numbers of workers in other manufacturing and service sectors have also shown solidarity with these strikes and even some have started their own strikes (e.g. truck drivers, *TCWs* in other industrial sectors⁸, such as in some power plants).

1.3 Security surveillance in all workplaces as well as the suppression of organization attempts and protests/strikes of the workers are quite common in Iran. However, such approaches are intensified especially in the oil and gas industry.⁹

6 For this reason, these strikes were initially called "Campaign 10-20", which expresses one of the main demands of the temporary and contract-workers in the oil and gas industry: 10 days of monthly vacation for 20 working days.

7 In Iran, there is a completely corrupt form of the outsourcing system and contract work, in which a certain project will be traded between several contractors (i.e. companies). The subcontractor at the bottom who conducts the project in the site resorts to over-exploiting the labor (as well as reducing other safety and efficiency costs) to secure its own profit of the project.

8 The total number of *TCWs* that have joined the nationwide strikes so far is estimated at over 80,000. In addition, contract teachers and retirees have resumed their mass protests.

9 To get an overview of the scope of state-specific security control measures in the oil and gas in-

Because this sector is the most important economic artery of the state, so it must be controlled and secured by special measures. The rulers of the Islamic Republic are well aware that the nationwide workers' strike in the oil industry in the autumn of 1978 functioned as the last powerful blow to overthrow the already shaky foundations of the Shah's rule. In spite of all this, the level of over-exploitation and deprivation of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry has reached such a level that the implementation of special security measures in this sector could not prevent the preparation and organizing of these large-scale strikes. So a brilliant feature of this event was the secret preparation and coordination of the strikes, without having any legal organization, under very strict security controls and repressive conditions.

1.4 The workers who make up the bulk of the current strikes in the oil and gas industry are not on permanent contracts; but on temporary contracts. So those workers do not have contracts with a primary employer, but with hundreds of different contractor companies. Their income, benefits and legal entitlements are much lower and their working conditions are much worse than their permanent coworkers. But there are many more of them (see Appendix II). On the other hand, in their earlier protests to raise their monthly wages, the representatives of the permanent workers did not accept the demands of the *TCWs*. In addition, they recently issued a statement to announce that they have distanced themselves from the recent strikes of *TCWs*. While they admitted, in the statement, the very difficult working conditions of the *TCWs*, they claimed, however, that strike is not a good way to enforce workers' demands. This example should be enough to demonstrate that the ongoing coordinated strikes of *TCWs* took place in a situation where there is an obvious split in the body of the oil industry workers. As we know, a usual method to divide the workers in a particular workplace or within a certain production sector is to employ them on different types of employment contracts (see Table 1 for the information on the distribution of workers by employment contract in the oil and gas industry in Iran). However, in contrast to the representatives of the permanent workers, the *TCWs* have shown their class commitment and awareness in their strikes by including the demands of their permanent coworkers and thereby calling on them and other workers to show solidarity. It remains to be seen to what extent their initiative can bridge the existing divisions and doubts in order to raise the level of the class struggle.

1.5 The widespread prevalence of temporary and contract works in the age of neoliberalism around the world (be in Iran or in Germany) pursues several goals, among which the most important are: reducing wages; concessions to employers through the withdrawal of labor rights and legal protection of workers; making work more flexible; and avoidance of spatial concentration and temporal continuity

dusty, it is sufficient to consider that the number of employees as security agencies in the oil and gas industry is around 40,000. That's roughly half of the number of striking *TCWs* in this sector. In addition, according to a government decree, around a third of official workers in the oil and gas industry are recruited among those who belong(ed) to a military or paramilitary organization. See: <https://ksazmandeh.com/2021/07/04/قشر-بندی-نظامی-کارکنان-رسمی-نفت-ایثارگران>

of work activities, which in turn leads to the dispersion of workers, weakening their possible organizing efforts. The imposition of this situation confronts workers with job and life precariousness and the threat to their existence, while depriving them of both legal protection and the possibility of collective resistance. In Iran, for example, over 90% of workers are now employed on temporary contracts¹⁰, many of whom are hired via temporary employment agencies. An immediate consequence of this situation is the increase in the fear and reluctance of the *TCWs* to take part in any collective action, since their distance from dismissal and unemployment is very short. Therefore, the massive strikes of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry required a high level of courage and willingness to take a risk, which in turn required a high level of class determination and awareness.¹¹

1.6 The current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry are of immediate political importance for at least three reasons: **A)** These strikes began exactly one day after the presidential election, which was accompanied by a far-reaching boycott of the Iranian people. In this sense, the start of these strikes was actually a call to continue the struggle against the regime on a further level beyond the symbolic reactions; In other words, these strikes showed the real arena for preparing effective struggles against the prevailing political and economic order in Iran; **B)** The recent election shows that the Iranian state has taken a clear and decisive step towards the final homogenization of the power structure, the main purpose of which is to prepare for the confrontation with the spread of resistance and struggles; this includes also the preparation for a confrontation with the future uprisings of the Oppressed¹², which are the inevitable consequences of the worsening of the current crisis. Against this background, if the recent strikes continue despite the current sabotage, threats and repression performed by corporations and the state¹³, and if they are not supported by further strikes in other sectors and by general political protests, they will most likely be suppressed by full violence; **C)** With the intensification of the economic and political crises in Iran, together with the inefficiency and fragility of the state¹⁴, the question of liberation from the totalitarian and neoliberal dictatorship in Iran is

10 In 1989, at the beginning of the implementation of neoliberal policies in Iran, the proportion of temporary contracts was less than 10% of all wage workers.

11 In view of the current economic crisis (over 40% inflation and widespread unemployment) and the lack of legal and insurance protection for the *TCWs*, it is obvious that they are too dependent on maintaining their jobs. But in many videos that the striking workers themselves recorded with their cell phones of the scenes and published on social media we see workers who laughingly hand over devices and join the strike. This contradiction, this euphoria, despite the awareness of the dire consequences of layoffs and unemployment, can only be understood through a reference from *Manifesto*: “The proletarians of this world have nothing to lose but their chains”.

12 About ten days after the presidential election, one of the most terrible figures in the judiciary has been appointed as the minister of justice; Thus the Islamic State of Iran has made its determination more and more evident to wage a tougher combat against the society.

13 Few examples of that are the discharging of over 700 striking workers in a refinery just one day after the strike was announced; as well as the closure of drinking water or workers’ canteens and dormitories in some strike centers.

14 The extreme resort to direct repression is just a failed way to hide this fragility.

becoming more and more significant for the majority of Iranians. The challenging questions are, however, what options we have for making a political transformation; which direction it will lead and which political subjects can/will carry out this “liberation process”. There is no doubt, that the real answers to such questions are only determined by historical practices. In this context, the recent strikes in the gas and oil industry open up new perspectives and timetables to answer these questions.

2. Linking the current strikes in Iran with the global class struggles

A common goal to reporting workers’ strikes/struggles in different parts of the world is to attract the attention/solidarity of workers organizations and anti-capitalist militant forces. This approach is based on the conviction that in the unprecedented complexity of capitalist conditions in today’s world, internationalist solidarity is necessary more than ever. But in addition to the need for practical solidarity with an ongoing strike, special attention must be paid to the possible experiences, which can be transferred or appropriated through such struggles. Thus, the question is what general and transnational lessons a given labor strike has; What facts/truths each individual class struggle reveals about the global conditions of capitalism in today’s world and what solutions it offers to combat these conditions. Therefore, the question arises, what do the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry say beyond the situation of workers and class struggles in Iran? As for the general and transnational implications of these strikes, at least the following interrelated aspects can be enumerated:

2.1 With the global expansion of neoliberal conditions, contract works and outsourcing-system have become the predominant form of work in many societies, the ultimate function of which is to increase profits by increasing the rate of exploitation and weakening the resistance potential of workers. In addition, the greater compatibility of this form of work with tendencies towards corruption (especially in the Global-South) increases its attractiveness for the states and capitalists, while the corruption factor in turn increases the enhanced rate of labor exploitation even more. The development of so-called “free economic zones” is a widespread legal method for the creation of special areas that enable an easier and more comprehensive implementation of this over-exploitation. Given the relative novelty of the consolidation of this form of work and the spread of “free economic zones”, any manifestation of the struggles of corresponding workers against this situation can contain lessons for the growth and deepening of workers’ struggles in other societies. If the workers’ struggles are to grow and deepen in relation to the rapid changes in capitalism, the workers must carefully follow and analyze or appropriate for themselves the new struggles of their brothers and sisters in other countries. Comprehensive solidarity with the current strikes in Iran can only be accomplished through this step.

2.2 Neoliberalism is the newest form capital accumulation which necessitates more integration of the Global-South into the world market system under its

domination rules. The rulers of many of these countries (as dominant political and economic elites) have special interests in enforcing and developing neoliberal policies. Because, in this way, they can guarantee the stability of their own states within the global power relations, as well as guarantee their own class interests and exclusive economic profits (so to say: *killing two birds with one stone!*). The consequences of this rising trend are the widening of the distance between the states and the majority of wage workers, as well as the increase in political dissatisfaction and resistance among the population. As a result, many states in the Global-South tend more towards dictatorship and militarism, i.e. expansion of the oppressive apparatus, while at the same time protecting the global prerequisites of neoliberal capitalism in their own territory¹⁵ (as another axis to conserve the stability of their own power). In order to effectively counter the oppression and over-exploitation of the globalized capital, the labor movements in these societies must therefore simultaneously conduct struggles against the oppression, corruption and the authoritarianism of the state alongside with their daily struggles against exploitation. From this perspective, the situation of the working class and its struggles in a country like Iran has in principle a special relevance for the workers of other societies in the Global-South of the world.

2.3 In the historical course of capitalist development around the world, the peripheral countries were condemned to absorb and adopt the patterns of the dominating capitalist economy. This development, imposed by colonial, imperialist and neo-colonial mechanisms, was not compatible with the creation of minimal democratic structures (such as the liberal-democratic political system and relatively free parties and press), independent trade unions, social welfare institutions and protective laws for the disadvantaged. As a result, capitalist exploitation and the repression of resistance of the subordinated in these societies are largely more naked and brutal; This tendency became more obvious, as the economies of these societies have been articulated unequally with the global centers of capitalism in the context of the world market through state coercion and repression. From this perspective it is understandable why the manifestations and consequences of neoliberalism in the Global South are so harsh and brutal. Accordingly, Marx's allegory "Human anatomy is the key to understanding ape anatomy" can be used in a different way to compare the Southern and the Northern countries: in the societies of the Global South, due to the lack of socio-political barriers, neoliberalism (as the late phase of

15 Now, as you read this text, the powerful states of the world are negotiating with the representatives of the Islamic Republic to limit the nuclear and regional ambitions of that state. The two sides certainly have many differences, which explains why these long negotiations have not yet come to an end. But the important thing on which they fully agree is the need to continue and intensify the Iranian state's oppression of workers; because if the workers of different countries do not submit to neoliberal conditions, the prevailing capitalist order and global capital accumulation will be disrupted. The irony, however, is that some left forces (within the Iranian left, as well as the global left) believe that the Iranian state is proceeding an "anti-imperialist" struggle against their Western opponents. The objective situation of the workers in Iran as well as their tough struggles are, however, the best proof of the invalidity and fatality of this viewpoint.

capitalism) has been rapidly in progress to become more “mature and advanced” than in capitalist centers; therefore, understanding the status of these societies is key to understanding the essence of neoliberal politics in the societies of the Global North. Likewise, studying the struggles against neoliberalism in these countries can inspire the spread of anti-capitalist struggles in advanced capitalist countries.

2.4 Neoliberal conditions are ultimately nothing than legitimizing the withdrawal of the most basic human rights of workers by excluding them from the scope of the labor laws¹⁶. It must therefore be recognized that after the imposing of the structural adjustment program in many countries, the majority of workers do indeed no longer have a place in the existing legal framework. Therefore, their struggles can neither be limited to the legal framework, nor be followed through the existing official worker-institutions that recognize the new laws and thereby normalize them. Nowadays most of the official trade unions (especially in the West) try to bring the demands and means of the labor struggles in line with the current neoliberal laws, bringing the level of struggle down to the level of the imposed laws. Therefore, it’s necessary to think of and to develop other possibilities/means for organizing the workers and their struggles in order to make their combat against the prevailing conditions more effective and goal-oriented. The experience of the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran shows that workers could better organize themselves and their struggles without any intervention of the official (state-based) worker unions.

2.5 After the outbreak and persistence of the 2008 economic crisis, which exposed the consequences of the neoliberal phase of capitalism on a global scale, the issue of the subjectivity of the working class (after decades of ignoring or downplaying) became a historical issue again. In this regard, in recent years within the leftist and anti-capitalists milieus (including in Western Europe) the need to restore class politics has taken on a new tone. To speak of a new class politics, however, means recognizing the political potential of the working class which until recently have been stubbornly denied. This negligence had been facilitated just because of the ever-extending realm (domain) of this class in the society, which itself can be traced back to the unprecedented diversity of forms of labor and exploitation in the late capitalism. Given the current enlarged breadth of the working class, the new class politics must therefore begin with recognizing the political subjectivity of those who live and fight in the most unstable social positions and under precarious working conditions; including temporary workers, contract workers, and the unemployed; And above all those who, due to their subordinate social status, are increasingly condemned to precarious work or unemployment (such as the refugees). Any

¹⁶ The President of Iran (Hassan Rouhani) and his Cabinet Minister for Oil (Bijan Zanganeh) made the revealing statement, in a late reaction to the strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry, that “these struggles are illegal because contractors (companies) are operating within the Laws.” Of course, these two politicians do not reveal that this so-called *legal framework*, which deprives workers of legal rights and protection, is the result of a major policy, in the development of which they themselves played an effective role.

collective struggle of this huge labor-force for the mere survival or the improvement of their living and working conditions (like the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran) is at the same time a struggle against the intensification of exploitative conditions in the present world. Such struggles therefore show the potential and the future role of a new working class that is emerging increasingly around the world.

Appendix I.

The demands of the striking temporary and contract workers in the oil and gas industry (Iran)

- Immediate wage increase and fixing of the minimum wage in the amount of 12 million *toman* (approx. 400 €) in the oil and gas industry;
- Immediate payment of arrears and timely payment of wages;
- The abolition of temporary and contract work and the abolition of contractor companies;
- Job security and permanent employment contracts as well as a ban on dismissal for workers;
- Immediate repeal of the slavery-like laws of special economic zones or free economic zones;
- Provision of safety equipment in companies as well as adequate cooling and heating equipment and air conditioning systems;
- Return to work for all dismissed workers;
- Raising the health standard in workers' dormitories and public spaces such as toilets and bathrooms, etc.;
- Abolition of security controls in the factories;
- Freedom for workers to organize independently, to assemble and to protest;
- Meeting the requirements of the official workers in the oil and gas industry;
- Realizing basic rights for all people, such as free health care and public education

Council for Organizing TCWs Protests in the Oil and Gas Industry - June 20, 2021

Appendix II.

Distribution of employment contracts in the oil and gas industry in Iran¹⁷

Type of employment contract	Number of workers	Participation in strikes
Special contract	850	No
Official workers (permanent)	64.000	No
Official workers (temporary)	34.000	Mostly Not
Contract workers: repeatable	106.000	Yes
Contract workers: project-based	?	Yes

¹⁷ Source: www.ksazmandeh.com/?p=6365.