

## Remarks on the Question of the Organization of the Working Class in Iran

Excerpts from a Speech delivered by comrade Poulad on behalf of the OIPFG on the occasion of May Day, the International Working Class Day, May 2003

The horrendous living conditions and the massive extent of cruelty and oppression inflicted upon the Iranian working class by the capitalists have made life so unbearable for workers that some of them would rather end their own lives. You may be aware of the increasing magnitude of this social ill and know, for example, the story of the desolate worker in one of the cities who blew himself up with a grenade in front of the Labour Ministry in protest of the desertion and injustice of both the employers and government agencies. Cases like this are, indeed, sheer proof of the intolerable conditions that have been imposed upon workers by the ruling class.

Under these circumstances and under the rule of the bayonet of a naked dictatorship where any kind of protest is brutally suppressed, and in the abundance of a massive army of reserve labour, which gives the Iranian dependent bourgeoisie a great manoeuvring power to intimidate and threaten the workers, we still witness the unrelenting struggles of the working class: struggles that, sometimes, force the government and the employers to retreat, and, in many cases, are also overpowered due to their lack of organization or falling for the deceitful promises given by the ruling regime. These struggles and their outcomes, while marking the insufferable working and living conditions of the working class, are also an indication of yet another grave problem, i.e. the lack of uniformity within the ranks of workers and the lack of their organization. The fact of the matter is that the Iranian working class suffers from the lack of independent organizations; of a long-standing popular organization, and of a combative revolutionary organization linked to this class. This is a reality recognized not only by most labour activists but also by the majority of political organizations and forces, except those who portray the regime-made institutions as “labour organizations” and in this way, think, in their fanciful minds, that they’ve answered the how about resolving the question of the organization of the working class. Or those who thought that by simply proclaiming a “labour union”, of course only on paper, they had put an end to this question, in the same way that some intellectuals, unconnected to the masses, have for years now, “resolved” the issue of attaining the vanguard party of the working class.

The question of the organization of the working class has always been debated among communist forces and labour activists. Obviously, due to both the long history of this discussion and the variety of the forces participating in it, we have witnessed various viewpoints all of which cannot thoroughly be discussed right here. Consequently, I will only briefly touch upon some of those views and ideas concerning the economic (trade) organizations of the working class.

First of all, let us take a look at the view that perceives the regime-made institutions as “labour organizations”, thus giving the axiom to join and participate in them. The advocates of this view state that vanguard forces must be present wherever the workers are. And to confirm this, they even refer to Lenin saying ‘one must participate within even the most reactionary unions and associations’. However, giving reference to this correct principal is completely incorrect here and, indeed, nothing more than a distortion. For, indeed, Lenin had emphasised that we must work in those unions and associations that have somehow assembled the proletarians and semi-proletarians within them, so that while bringing class consciousness to the unaware workers, we could release them from the sway of these unions and

associations and their propaganda. Whereas, “the Islamic Labour Councils”, “the Islamic Associations” and “the Islamic Republic’s House of Labour” are, in essence, nothing but the regime’s intelligence agencies; agencies that are despised and boycotted by the Iranian workers. In this case, therefore, workers have not been unified in these bodies, so to think that one could work within them in order to bring awareness to the workers and release them from their propaganda. Practical experience has proven that even where workers in a factory have no choice but to contact these institutions due to official regulations, contacting these bodies is seen as employees having to refer to the regime’s security and intelligence agencies. Therefore, recognizing such repressive institutions as “labour organizations” and giving the guidance or the directive to work within them would, indeed, have no meaning other than leading workers, including the militant elements among them, into the lines of “the unknown soldiers of the holy one” (the regime’s undercover mercenaries) and thus disgracing these workers in the eyes of their fellow workers. In other words, since the existing government agencies are by no means workers’ real and independent organizations, this view is fundamentally incorrect. Besides that, generally speaking, an organization that is defined as Islamic cannot be recognized as an organization for all workers who, with various viewpoints, various religious beliefs or no religion, work under one roof. In fact, these organizations are not even comparable to the yellow unions; rather they are the dark, repressive means of the Islamic Regime. This is a reality known to the working class not only during all the years of the rule of the Islamic regime and as a result of the actions of its anti-labour institutions in the work place, but also under the tyranny of the Shah’s regime. The older generation of the working class surely remembers that the Shah-made “worker syndicates” were but part and parcel of the Shah’s SAVAK (the regime’s Secrete Service) and had no other task than to monitor the working class. That generation of workers and labour activists definitely remember as to how, during the 1979 uprising when people assaulted and occupied the offices of the SAVAK and gained access to its existing documents, it was revealed that all the officials of those so-called worker syndicates in Tehran and other cities were, in fact, members or affiliates of the SAVAK.

The fact of the matter is that, both then and now under the rule of the Islamic regime, such organizations have been but the repressive instruments of the regime. They are not worker organizations, they are rather anti-worker institutions established in order to prevent the formation of independent worker organizations.

A look at how these institutions were formed, the laws governing them and their actions up to now, in themselves, confirm the very same reality.

During the revolutionary period of 1978-79 and after the uprising of February 1979 when the Islamic regime had not yet consolidated its rule, a number of spontaneous worker organizations including a type of trade council were formed and the House of Labour, which actually became a centre for workers coming together and for revolutionary organisations coming into contact with workers, was born. (Let me take this opportunity here to honour the memory of Asad Rafiyan; a keen activist of the House, and a member of the Iranian People’s Fadaee Guerrillas who later on was murdered by the mercenaries of the Islamic Republic.) As you know, soon after, the ringleaders of the Islamic regime, in order to secure their rule, gradually began their assaults on the achievements of the February uprising. Consequently, the House of Labour was attacked and the workers’ trade councils were repressed and replaced by the Islamic Councils. Thereafter, the regime-made institutions were formed in order to fight communists and vanguard workers and to unarm the working class.

The platform of the Islamic House of Labour, in itself, demonstrates well its very anti-labour nature. It is clearly stated, in this platform, that this house has been established “in order to achieve its great, pure Mohammedan’s aims as a society committed to the Rule of the Supreme Clergy and to the constitutions” of the Islamic Republic. In the case of the Islamic Councils that were decreed by a legislation in 1984, too, it has been stated that these councils are given the task of “cooperation with the management” and that the prerequisite for membership in these councils is “actual obedience to Islam and to the rule of the Supreme Clergy and allegiance to the Constitutions of the Islamic Republic”. “Lawful” institutions as such, therefore, possess an anti-labour nature by “law”. Precisely for this reason, radical workers observe those who visit these institutions often with suspicion, not to talk about those who advocate working in them.

Another issue that I would like to touch upon here is the view that, while stressing the necessity for independent worker organisations, claims, however, that it is a number economic imperatives rather than some political considerations that have compelled the Iranian bourgeoisie to move toward establishing these organisations. This view claims that under the rule of the Islamic Republic, the conditions for the formation of independent worker organisations are becoming available. For, as one of the advocates of this view states, “the Iranian industries and the owners of these industries are now in need of worker organisations” and that this is a “basic need” for them now because these organisations lead to greater productivity. This trend believes that the “reform movement” is the outcome of the shifts in world capitalism and of what is called “globalisation”. In consideration of the necessity for merging the Iranian market within world markets, then, this view suggests, the owners of Iranian industries are trying to enter into political power. The “reform movement”, therefore, according to this view, is the movement of the Iranian bourgeoisie to partake in power. A bourgeoisie that ironically enough, as this view puts it, “really needs a type of independent workers’ organisation”.

The subjectivity and incorrectness of this view is so obvious that it reveals itself no matter how we look at it. However, since our discussion here is centred on the question of the organisation of the working class in Iran, we, therefore, focus only on the fact that this view argues that the Iranian bourgeoisie is moving toward the formation of independent worker organisations. A look at the course of events in Iran and at the repressive policies of the Islamic regime as the representative of the dependent bourgeoisie of Iran, however, demonstrates that, contrary to this view, the Iranian bourgeoisie resorts to any and every means to prevent the formation of such organisations. Indeed, all factions of the ruling class are unanimous in suppressing the labour movement and preventing these independent worker organisations from coming into reality.

Speaking of the bourgeoisie trying to enter into political power, when in fact the Iranian dependent bourgeoisie has for many years now taken possession of political power in Iran, only illustrates that the proponents of this view have no objective understanding of the existing realities in Iranian society, and that they assert and stipulate the possibility for the formation of these organisation especially under the rule of the Islamic regime, based on the mere observation of some discussions on “civil society” and the necessity of having civil institutions within the government-run media. However, the course of events in the past few years has clearly demonstrated that the Islamic Republic’s reform is nothing but a fable and that this regime not only forbids the formation of any kind of independent worker organisation but also resorts to any mediums to tear apart even the most minimal interactions that come about among militant workers in the course of workers’ protesting activities. To confirm this, we should draw our attention to the suppression of the conscious and militant workers who played a leading role in the workers’ fights in the past few years, i.e. the savage attacks and police arrests waged on these workers by the regime’s undercover thugs and police agents.

Another issue to which I would like to draw your attention is an incorrect tendency that has become common among the forces who claim to be the defenders of the working class. For many years now, everybody within this category, according to their own taste, singles out this or that type of the various forms of worker organisations and prescribes it for the working class. From syndicates to unions to factory committees and councils, etc, are called for by these forces without having arrived at these types of organisations on the ground of the struggles of the working class itself, and without clearly and candidly illustrating as to how these organisations are to be attained. Furthermore, while these organisations have not even been born yet, some go about discussing their open or clandestine character, and even on the necessity for their independence from political organisations. However, the problem with all of these discussions is that the forces promoting them do not realise or it's perhaps not in their interests to consider the fact that different forms of worker organisations are basically derived from the very struggles of the working class itself, and that revolutionary intellectuals can by no means, in their own minds and without consideration to the objective realities of the labour movement, determine the forms of these organisations and impose them on the working class. As you know, the struggles of the working class might, in a certain situation, necessitate unions while, in another, instead demand for factory committees as the main form of organisation of the working class. For instance, since 1824, when labour unions became legal in England up to now, unions have always been one the most important economic organisations of British workers. While in Spain let's say, in a period during Franco's regime, it was the workers' committees that were greatly spreading within the labour movement. In other words, that in the struggle against capital and for better living and working conditions, the working class must organise, and that organisation is, in principal, the best means to achieve these goals are all irrefutable. That the history of the working class movement, worldwide, is full of diverse forms of organisation each of which being formed according to specific circumstances and playing a real part in the advancement of the working class struggles, is also an uncompromising issue. We must understand, however, that these correct principals are to be utilised only as guiding paths by workers and the labour movement activists, and that no political organisation has the right to waste the revolutionary energy of the labour activists by engaging them in scholastic discussions, as such, that are alien to the realities of the labour movement. On the other hand, the experiences of all the attempts made in this relation (of course, here I am talking about the genuine efforts made towards establishing labour organisation and not those false and worthless claims made by some on paper) correctly show that one of the most basic factors preventing the formation of independent worker organisations in Iran is the state power and the repression that this power imposes on society. The truth is that all those who uselessly write about various forms of workers' trade organisations, indeed, do not pay attention to this very factor and whenever they have decided to do so, we have seen, on the other hand, as to how they have ashamedly retreated from their claims.

The fact is that the inherent dictatorship of the rule of dependent capitalism is the main factor for the dispersion within the ranks of the working class and the main barrier for its organisation. Therefore, any solution in this regard must primarily answer the question as to how to overcome this barrier.

A look at the long history of the rule of dictatorship in Iran as well as the history of the labour movement clearly illustrates that the possibility for the emergence and the formation of popular and independent worker organisations has become available precisely wherever this dictatorship has been weakened or cracked. Let's look at a few of these historic moments:

The first worker organisations were established during the Iranian constitutional revolution. With the British-led coup of Reza Shah, however, all popular organisations including worker syndicates and the Communist Party of Iran were consequently repressed and destroyed. The possibility for the formation of popular and independent organisations practically vanished as a result of the rule of Reza Shah's notorious dictatorship. Subsequently, there were no signs of such organisations up until the World War II when Iran was occupied by the Allied forces and Reza Shah was expelled from the country in 1941. From the summer of 1941 until the American-led coup in 1953, within a 12 year period when the state power weakened, labour syndicates and unions were subsequently again emerged now including the Workers' United Council ; an affiliate of the Tudeh Party. The rise in the labour movement reached the point where in May 1946, tens of thousands of people poured onto the streets celebrating May 1st. With the 1953 coup, however, once more the rule of bayonet cast its shadow over the country where yet another chapter of worker organisations came to an end. Thereafter, even the relatively open political atmosphere of 1960 up until 1963, which ended by the suppression of the 15th Khordad's protests (June 5th, 1963), was not enough to allow for these organisations. This situation continued throughout the rest of the 60s up until the rise of the 1978-79 popular struggles, the subsequent weakening of the Shah's dictatorship and the fall of his regime resulting in the wavelike rise of worker organisations so much so that we witnessed a type of worker councils after the 1979 uprising. The revolutionary atmosphere of these years, the fall of the Shah's regime and the lack of consolidation of the replacing regime, all together created a situation where worker councils and the Workers' Centre were officially established and began their activities, and where hundreds of thousands of people marched onto the streets of Tehran in response to the Organisation of the Iranian People's Fadaee Guerrillas' call for a May Day demonstration. This situation, however, ended as a result of the Islamic regime's bloody and systematic suppression beginning in 1981 and since then, we have not seen popular and independent worker organisations as such due to the reign of brutal despotism and unprecedented repression of the Islamic regime over more than two decades. Therefore, we must categorically state that in order to form these organisations and assure their permanence we must, of necessity, create cracks in the existing dictatorship barrier and must engage in a struggle that would weaken state power and bring about the opportunity for the formation of these organisations.

It is here where the revolutionary and communist intellectuals, having in mind and understanding this reality, must think as to how they can crack this barrier and provide the possibility for the mobilisation of the waves of popular struggles and the formation of these organisations. This is the real problem facing the labour and communist movement in Iran to which unfortunately most of those relating themselves to this movement traditionally avoid answering, even though experience has proven that it is only through revolutionary force that the survival of communist organisations, and at the same time, the weakening of the dictatorship and facilitating for the emergence of these organisations become possible allowing for these political organisations to establish connection with the working class and end the saddening separation of communist intellectuals from the proletariat.

Undoubtedly, drawing our attention to this reality and focusing our efforts in this direction does not undermine the value of other forms of struggle and organisation. On the contrary, it creates a solid ground to channel all the streams of defiance in society towards the main objective and the giving rise to the conditions for the overthrow of the enemy, i.e. the dependent capitalist system.