

# WORKER COMMUNISM AND THE POST-REVOLUTION SECULAR LEFT IN IRAN

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Worker communism has been an influential yet little examined political trend in Iran's post-revolution secular-left. With roots in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, its emergence represented a paradigm shift in the Iranian left which at that time was losing ground to the ascendent Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's political Islam. At least three factors helped distinguish worker communism from the main trends of the Iranian left preceding it and facilitated its rise. First, while the Iranian left saw the struggle against imperialist forces as the primary mission, legitimising an alliance with the national bourgeoisie, worker communism rejected this as a grave error and saw the struggle against all capitalist forces, including the national bourgeoisie, as being central. Second, the worker communist current was able to utilise the ethnic- and geo-politics of Iranian Kurdistan to survive revolutionary violence and implement key aspects of its paradigm inside Iran and even export it abroad. Third, worker communism overcame the ideological crisis of the Iranian left brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union relatively unscathed because it had been founded on a fundamental critique of Soviet communism. Despite being influential in the left inside and outside Iran, worker communism faced a crisis while formulating a response to the rise of the reform movement in the late-1990s. This response fell short as a result of doctrinal inconsistencies, which created internal fragmentation, and political radicalism, which was incompatible with the realities of Iranian society.*

## INTRODUCTION

Iranian politics in the 20th century was defined by, broadly speaking, three main political currents: nationalism, political Islam, and communism (herein “left”). Of the three, the left is the only current which never held political power, except briefly as a junior partner in a national coalition and at the local level. And today, the left does not even wield the limited influence it once did. Perhaps this modest historical legacy helps explain the limitations of the scholarship on the Iranian left, especially after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, compared to nationalism and political Islam. This is not to discount significant contributions by Abrahamian, Behrooz and Cronin, among others, on this subject. However, important blind spots remain, especially in regard to the evolution of the left after the revolution. The present paper sheds light on one of these blind spots: Worker communism, which is worthy of scholarly inquiry in the context of the post-revolution Iranian left for three reasons.

First, worker communism represented a significant departure from the main theoretical and political tendencies of the pre-revolution Iranian left, whose defining experiences were the 19 August 1953 coup d’etat and quarter century of struggle against the Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi regime that followed leading up to 11 February 1979.<sup>1</sup> Worker communism was a creation of the relatively open political climate following the revolution precipitated by the collapse of the Pahlavi regime and prior to the consolidation of power by the Islamic Republic. Its departure played out over a number of arenas, perhaps the most important being what the scholarship on the Iranian left has called the “doctrine of anti-imperialism” or “dependency paradigm”.<sup>2</sup> Such theoretical issues, which at first glance may appear trivial, would have a profound impact on the political choices of the Iranian left during the revolution. By rejecting how much of the pre-revolution Iranian left approached the doctrine of anti-imperialism and formulating its own unique position, worker communism was not only able to escape a political trap which contributed to the downfall of the left, but also remain relevant at a time when the left was increasingly marginalised.

Second, worker communism was not a minor and transitory phenomenon, like the scores of leftist groups which sprung up before, during and immediately after the revolution but shrivelled into obscurity soon after, but one which persisted through political

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<sup>1</sup> While we can find records of innumerable leftist organisations having existed between 1953 and 1979, numbering as few as a handful and as many as thousands of members each, only a small number of these are of historical significance and would go on to play important roles in the revolution. In the present paper the term “pre-revolution Iranian left”, against which worker communism is compared and contrasted, principally indicates: The Party of the Masses of Iran (Tudeh), whose pre-1953 coup legacy as a Iran’s first mass political party and Soviet-backing helped make it a relevant political actor well into the revolution; the Organisation of People’s Fadaï Guerrillas of Iran (OPFGI, or Fadaïan), the first and most legendary of the Iranian guerrilla movement, which is considered to have initiated the armed struggle against the Pahlavi regime with the Siahkal operation in February 1971; the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran (Marxist-Leninist) (PMOI-ML); and their principal offshoots, including after 11 February 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Behrooz, Maziar. *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1999. ; Moghadam, Val. "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran." *New Left Review* I/166 (Nov-Dec): 5-28. (p.2)

entrepreneurship that was deeply rooted in the Iranian context. Its paradigm filled a vacuum by the pre-revolution left and attracted a strong following in Iran and abroad. Indeed, after the Tudeh-Fadaian (Majority) alliance, the last vestige of legal leftist opposition in the Islamic Republic, was outlawed and eliminated in February 1983 and the disintegration of the left reached its zenith, worker communism continued to thrive. At a moment when political opposition to the Islamic Republic in much of Iran was becoming increasingly difficult, worker communism created a niche for itself in Iranian Kurdistan by articulating an approach to national self-determination. From here, worker communism was able to attract leftist Iranian Kurds and fragments of the Iranian left around itself and continue its struggle from inside the country for several more years.

Third, while worker communism was able to evolve after its campaign in Iranian Kurdistan had to be abandoned, and survived the final crisis of the communist left brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union, it ultimately failed to gain wide traction in Iranian society and politics writ-large. Given that it had been founded on a fundamental critique of international communism and the Soviet experience, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not generate the same ideological and political challenges for worker communism as it did for much of the rest of the global communist left. However, worker communism did not detect the tremors of the coming of the reform movement in Iran and was completely unprepared when this wave overtook Iranian society and politics. Its response to the reform movement was, on one hand, out of step with the paradigm of worker communism and, on the other hand, did not resonate with the mood of Iranian society.

This paper explores worker communism, highlighting its important place in the Iranian left as a stepping stone between the pre- and post-revolution left, in five parts. Part one lays out the methodology of the paper. Part two delves into the origins of worker communism in the Union of Communist Militants (UCM) and its divergence from much of the rest of the pre-revolution left on one of the most consequential issues: The doctrine of anti-imperialism. Part three picks up after the merger of the UCM and Kurdish leftist group Komalah, creating the Communist Party of Iran (CPI),<sup>3</sup> and its struggle against the Islamic Republic between the early 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Part four unpacks the first major schism in the CPI, which led to the formation of the Worker Communist Party of Iran (WCPI), and the latter's attempts to grapple with Iranian society and politics after the reform movement. Part five draws conclusions on worker communism's place in the post-revolution left and seeks to understand why it, like many other groups in the political opposition to the Islamic Republic, was unable to keep up with and remain relevant to Iranian society.

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<sup>3</sup> Given the secrecy with which the UCM/CPI conducted many of its activities during this period precise dates for certain key events, such as the UCM's entry into Iranian Kurdistan and the WCPI leadership's departure abroad, are difficult to ascertain with a high level of certainty from available documents. In the future, interviews with surviving worker communist leaders and members may help ameliorate this gape.

## METHODOLOGY

There are four main methodological issues that should be taken into consideration before we commence our substantive discussion of worker communism. First, this paper narrowly focuses on worker communism as an important post-revolution leftist trend in Iran, from a historical perspective. As such it relies heavily on the Hekmat's extensive online digital archive which includes a wide range of documents, beginning with Hekmat and Hamid Taghvaei's first political pamphlet in December 1978 until December 2001, a range which also corresponds with the chronological timeline of this paper. Given that Hekmat was the leading theoretical and organisational figure of worker communism, with one of the WCPI's successor organisations even adopting the title "Hekmatist", many of the key texts used in the present study were either written or co-written by him. Thus, as the majority of primary sources on worker communism used here were written by him and placed online by his supporters after his death, with virtually no secondary sources on worker communism, some of the claims about this trend are difficult to verify. Nonetheless, given the lack of scholarly work on worker communism, we can sketch a good basic picture of this trend using the sources at our disposal.

Second, the term *worker communism* in the present paper encapsulates the evolving political doctrine articulated by Mansoor Hekmat and other figures between December 1978 and December 2001, which took at least three major organisational forms: The Union of Communist Militants (UCM), the Communist Party of Iran (CPI), and the Worker Communist Party of Iran (WCPI). While worker communism is a term which only gained significance after March 1989 and is thus technically anachronistic when applied before this date, it has nonetheless been used in this paper to denote the paradigm underpinning the UCM, CPI, and WCPI, because of its relative consistency and coherence over time until Hekmat's death in 2002.

Third, while a comprehensive study of worker communism has been conducted, keeping in mind space limitations, the present paper has focused on a small set of important issues which demonstrate worker communism's divergence from the pre-revolution Iranian left during the period under study. In part two, we have focused on worker communism's rejection of the doctrine of anti-imperialism as articulated by the Iranian left. In part three, worker communism's approach to national self-determination in Iran has been highlighted. In part four, a spotlight has been shone on worker communism's attempts to organise the Iranian worker class while dealing with the rise of the reform movement.

Finally, we should note that to say worker communism was a new paradigm in its time is not to say that it was completely without precedent or that contemporary trends did not share some of its key characteristics. Khalil Maleki, Bijan Jazani, and Taghi Shahram, among others, were early advocates of some ideas later articulated by worker communism. And contemporary leftist trends of worker communism soon after the fall of the Pahlavi regime, most prominently Paykar and the Fadaian (Minority), shared certain proclivities. However, the totality of the paradigm formulated by worker communism and Hekmat arguably represents a decisive break with the Iranian left as it developed after August 1953 and was extinguished by February 1983.

## **UNION OF COMMUNIST MILITANTS**

### Critiquing the “traditional left”

Jubin Razani, who would come to be known in Iran by the *nom de guerre* Mansoor Hekmat, was born in June of 1951 in Tehran, Iran. Attending the storied and prestigious Alborz High School, where many of Iran’s best minds have been nurtured, Razani went on to study a bachelor in economics at Pahlavi University in Shiraz and to pursue graduate studies in the same field at Kent University in the United Kingdom. When Razani abandoned his studies in London and returned to Iran in 1978 to participate in the uprising which would become the Islamic Revolution of 1979, he had no prior background as a political activist, let alone in the communist left. In fact, he had assiduously avoided Iranian opposition politics during his studies in Iran and abroad. His initiation into leftist politics seems to have come from his background as an economist and close reading of Karl Marx and the history of the Russian Revolution. This academic background and lack involvement with the Iranian left before the revolution would contribute significantly in distinguishing worker communism from the left which had matured during the near quarter century between 1953 and 1979.

### The doctrine of anti-imperialism

Perhaps the best starting point for a discussing of the worker communism’s departure from the pre-revolution Iranian left is its attitude toward international communism as embodied by states such as Soviet Union, China, Albania, and Cuba. Like the left elsewhere in the global south during the 20th century, the Iranian left principally emerged under the influence of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and continued to look to communist states for ideological direction and material patronage. The Party of the Masses of Iran (Tudeh) was created 1941, gained Soviet backing in the 1940s and remained aligned with the Soviet Union throughout its meaningful political life afterward, and often receiving marching orders directly from Moscow. While Tudeh followed Nikita Khrushchev’s “revisionist” line after Joseph Stalin’s death, much of the Iranian left, including Tudeh splinter groups such as Revolutionary Organisation of the Tudeh Party of Iran (ROTPI) and Tufan as well as the guerrilla groups Fadaian, remained staunchly anti-revisionist and looked to China and Maoism or Albania and Hoxhism for ideological guidance and material support. Thus, the Iranian left in the quarter century leading up to the revolution was deeply enmeshed in international communism.

Among the most important implications of the Iranian left’s near wholesale adoption of international communist paradigms was an overwhelming emphasis on what has been called the “doctrine of anti-imperialism”. Iranian leftist parties, despite intricate doctrinal differences, saw the root of Iran’s social, political, and economic problems as stemming from imperialism. Whatever degree of agency Iranian leftists of the period assigned the Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi regime and its “comprador bourgeoisie” elite, the prevailing belief was that it was ultimately a puppet of global capital and imperialist states and sacrificed Iran’s national interests to their needs. Any struggle against the Pahlavi regime therefore also necessitated a struggle against imperialism, creating room for leftist parties to form alliances with other anti-imperialist social strata, including what they labelled the “progressive national bourgeoisie”.

The proclivity toward an alliance with social strata beyond the working class was compounded by the belief on the part of many leftist parties that Iran was socio-economically semi-feudal/semi-colonized or dependent capitalist, falling short of full domestic capitalism. The theoretical implication of this was that because the Iranian working class was not the sole agent of change in the country, a communist revolution would not be possible from the outset. Instead, the country would first have to pass through a “national democratic” phase in which it worked with other social strata, once again confirming the need for an alliance with the national bourgeoisie. As a consequence, even as Iranian leftists paid lip service to the emancipation of the working class, they shifted emphasis from the conflict between labour and capital to the conflict between “the people” (*khalgh*) and imperialism.<sup>4</sup> In prioritising the latter conflict - and thus the alliance with national bourgeoisie - as the most immediately important in the country, Iranian leftists ended up in practice de-prioritising working class interests or ignoring them altogether. The doctrine of anti-imperialism would thus have profound implications for how much of the left thought and acted during the revolution.

#### “The myth of the national and progressive bourgeoisie”

The orientation of the Iranian left toward international communism and its overwhelming emphasis on doctrine of anti-imperialism was a primary point of contention for Hekmat and worker communism. As we see again and again in his writing, Hekmat’s communism was not mediated through international communism, but a more worker-centric reading of Marx and a close analysis of Iranian history and society. This led Hekmat to emphasise the conflict between labour and capital as the most important, with all other conflicts (including against imperialism) as extending from this. In this context, the sole normatively positive agent of social, political, and economic revolution became the working class, irreconcilably arrayed against not only the comprador bourgeoisie, but the bourgeoisie in its entirety. One of the main points of departure of this analysis, the argument that Iran at the time of the revolution was already a full domestically capitalist society and economy, was laid out in a foundational UCM documents:

“The mode of production in Iran is capitalism. The land reforms of the decade of the ‘40s [1960s] brought the long and slow current of development of Iran’s mode of production from feudalism to capitalism to an end. The land reforms, whose main goals were the creation of an urban proletariat, brought to the wage labour market millions of villagers who as a result of this were uprooted, mainly in cities and to a lesser degree in villages, and created that vast wage-labour army who are the necessary condition of production and exploitation of capitalism. This uprooting which happened fundamentally

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<sup>4</sup> “The people”, or *khalgh* in Persian, was so fundamental to the theoretical and political doctrine of the pre-revolution left that it was ubiquitous in the political lexicon of the revolution and found its way into the names and key political documents of not only many leftist but also Islamist organisations.

based on the needs of imperialist capitalism, pulled Iran as a country under the domination of imperialism to the capitalist countries' bloc.”<sup>5</sup>

Hekmat was especially critical of those Iranian leftists who claimed that Iran was not yet a fully capitalist state on superficial grounds, pointing out that:

“Marx, in order to determine whether a mode of production is capitalist or not, does not search for “mother industries”, “balanced domestic market”, “a high level of technology”, “useful commodities”, “skyscrapers” and “underground metros,” etc...” He underlined that for Marx, the existence of the capitalist mode of production in a state was instead “determined by the “confrontation between the wage-labour of the worker lacking the means of production with the capital of the bourgeoisie possessing the means of production.””<sup>6</sup>

Having deemed that Iran since the White Revolution was fully capitalist, Hekmat asserted that this placed Iran within the the global capitalist system as a peripheral state exploited for its cheap labour and natural sources. This formulation in places bears a great resemblance to World System Theory (WST) and other structuralist IR and development models, which also divided the world into a “core” and “periphery” and questioned the role of bourgeoisies in the global south. For Hekmat Iran’s position within the global capitalist system as a state “under domination” whose bourgeois elites needed to repress labour to extract surplus value to satisfy themselves and the “metropole” states at the centre of the system, meant that any bourgeois government would necessarily be a dictatorship:

“On one hand in the country under domination a harsh and naked dictatorship, repressive, and denying all democratic rights, is the necessary and inescapable condition for the exploitation of workers, and on the other hand in the metropole country “bourgeois democracy” continues to exist for reason of the creation of a specific objective conditions through imperialism (i.e. the growth of a working class nobility benefitting from the imperialistic super-profits) and the resulting mental condition from that (i.e. the intense penetration of bourgeois ideology in the working class and its political organisations).”<sup>7</sup>

This quote demonstrates how Hekmat rejected the feasibility of Western social democracy, because in his conceptualisation of the global capitalist system social

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<sup>5</sup> "The Program of the Union of Communist Militants - April 1981 (Barnameh-ye Ettihad-e Mobarezan-e Communist - Farvardin 1360)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <[www.hekmat-public-archive.net/archive/BEMK/bemk\\_02.html](http://www.hekmat-public-archive.net/archive/BEMK/bemk_02.html)>. p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "The Myth of the National and Progressive Bourgeoisie - 2 (Ostureh-ye Bourgeoisie-ye Melli Va Moteraghi - 2)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Taghvayi, Hamid, and Mansoor Hekmat. "The Iranian Revolution and Role of the Proletariat (Enghelab-e Iran Va Naghsh-e Proletariat)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/>>.

democracy is only possible by the metropole's domination of the periphery and imposition of oppressive and extractive regimes on them. Put another way, capitalism in a periphery state like Iran would always be dictatorial and exploitative because of its position in the global capitalist system, regardless of whether the bourgeois elite was comprador or national. The political consequence of this was that an alliance with any strata of the bourgeoisie, comprador or national, anti- or pro-imperialist, was impossible for a truly communist party:

“All of the layers of capital are benefitting from this dictatorship and capitalist government cannot be anything else in Iran except complete and naked dictatorship...A bourgeois government cannot be democratic in Iran.”<sup>8</sup>

The Tudeh, which after 1975 viewed Iranian revolutionary conditions to be at a “national democratic” stage, believed that because of the relative weakness of the working class it would have to unite in an alliance with other “democratic classes”, namely progressive intellectuals and petit and middle bourgeoisie.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the revolution, this meant placing its support behind what it viewed as the most powerful and anti-imperialist national bourgeois force, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his supporters (henceforth Khomeinists). By 1981, when the Fadaian began to fragment under the pressure of a rapidly expanded organisation and social tensions, the Tudeh was joined in this enterprise by the Fadaian (Majority) and they voluntarily collaborated with the Islamic Republic in the extermination of the left. Although the Fadaian (Minority) and Paykar, among others, came into conflict with the Khomeinists not long after the revolution, their rejection was in part based on the belief that the Iranian economy remained comprador bourgeois dominated and dependent under the new regime. Thus, even for these two major leftist organisations which were more prescient in sensing the dangers posed to them by the Islamists, the emphasis of the struggle remained on anti-imperialism.

Hekmat attacked the pre-revolution left, which he called the “traditional left”, for believing in what he called the “myth of the progressive national bourgeoisie” and in his more polemical writing derided them as “populist socialists” for shifting revolutionary agency from the working class and conflict between labour and capital to the “people” and the conflict between anti-imperialism and imperialism:

“The populist socialists in Iran have separated combat for the destruction of capitalism, poverty, and exploitation of a specific class and instead of that specific social force which is capable of creating a new socialist society, meaning instead of the proletariat, replaces it with all people. The appearance of the issue is that populist socialists have considered all of the people to be on the front of the battle for socialism, however the reality is that the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Behrooz, Maziar. *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1999.p. 150.



real struggle of the proletariat for socialism has been reduced to combat for petit-bourgeois democracy.<sup>10</sup>

This position led Hekmat and the UCM to reject any alliance with the Khomeinists, who they viewed as both regressive and oppressive, from the outset. He emphasised working class hegemony, which saw as being necessary for not only the victory of communism in Iran, but also democracy: "The necessary condition for the victory of the Iranian democratic revolution is the imposition of the hegemony of the proletariat in this revolution."<sup>11</sup>

While Hekmat and UCM were a strong voice in the left, until 1983 they remained a relatively small player when compared to major pre-revolution left groups. As the theoretical and political positions came back to haunt the left and their organisations began crumbling under the weight of the Islamic Republic's repression and their own errors, Hekmat and the UCM were well positioned to collect many of the broken shards of the left thanks to positions taken early on during the revolution which proved prescient. Ironically, the utter rout of what Hekmat had called the "traditional left" vis-a-vis the Islamic Republic created space for worker communism to gain prominence as a major political force in the left inside Iran. But the continuation of worker communism's opposition activities required a geographical zone not fully in the control of the Islamic Republic and its security apparatus. Iranian Kurdistan was precisely just such a zone, which Hekmat and the UCM were able to successfully use as a base of operations.

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<sup>10</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Three Sources and Three Elements Iranian Populist Socialism (Seh Manba' Seh Joze' Socialism-e Khalghi)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/fa/0020fa.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> Taghvayi, Hamid, and Mansoor Hekmat. "The Iranian Revolution and Role of the Proletariat (Enghelab-e Iran Va Naghsh-e Proletariat)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/>>.

## COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRAN

### Merger with Komalah

The period between the fall of the Pahlavi regime in February 1979 and the fall of the Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr administration in June 1981 was one of relative political freedom, in which the left could publish and hold meetings in the open. The fall of the Bani-Sadr in June 1981 was followed by a near civil war between Khomeinists and the Peoples Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI), with the left playing a secondary role by supporting one of the two sides or declaring neutrality. State repression expanded rapidly during this period and, with the exception of the Tudeh-Fadaian (Majority) alliance, much of the opposition to the Khomeinist-led Islamic Republic was outlawed. Hekmat, who along with the UCM had decided to withdraw to Iranian Kurdistan, captured the prevailing mood of this period during a speech to the opening session of the Third Congress of Komalah, among the two most important Kurdish parties of the period:

“In our opinion, despite this pressure, repression, and suffocation which today rules Iran, despite every day our best friends, friends of us all [being] arrested, imprisoned, and executed, and distancing [them] from active revolutionary struggle, the horizon of the communist movement is positive. It is true that there have been many blows to the political forces outside of Kurdistan and specifically communist forces. It is truly a black period.”<sup>12</sup>

The UCM and Komalah joined to form the Communist Party of Iran (CPI) between 26 August and 02 September 1983, with the UCM's former senior leadership presiding over the organisation as a whole and Komalah designated as the Kurdish region branch and retaining some of its independent structure.<sup>13</sup> Worker communism's ability to expand at a time when the rest of the left was disintegrating can be explained by at least two factors. The first factor, as highlighted in part two, was that it's paradigm had been more prescient in analysing the social and political situation in Iran and had thus not been ideologically outmanoeuvred by the Khomeinists on issues such as anti-imperialism, as the rest of the left had been.<sup>14</sup> Once the Fadaian (Minority), Paykar, Arman, Razmandegan, and many others had retreated to Iran Kurdistan, this enabled the CPI to absorb many of their cadres.

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<sup>12</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Speech at the Opening Session of the Third Congress of Komalah - May 1982 (Sokhanrani Dar Jalaseh-ye Eftetahieh-ye Kongereh-ye Sevom Komalah - Ordibehesht 1361)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/fa/0020fa.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "A Discussion about the Draft of the Common Program of Komalah and the Union of Communist Militants (Bahsi Piraamun-e Pishnevis-e Barnameh-ye Moshtarak Komala Va Ettihad-e Mobarezan-e Communist)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/>>.

<sup>14</sup> The centrality of the anti-imperialism issue has been well established in the scholarship on the revolution, as has the Khomeinists outmanoeuvring of the left on this burring question through such actions as the hostage-taking at the United States embassy in Tehran. This enabled the Khomeinists, who already had a solid clerically- and religiously-oriented constituency, to expand their legitimacy and base of support. The pre-revolution left, in contrast, which had focused on anti-imperialism to the detriment of other important issues such as democracy and the interests of the working class, was put in a position where it had to concede leadership on anti-imperialism to the Khomeinists without really being able to expand its legitimacy, constituency, and power in other areas.

The second factor was worker communism's ability to find a niche for itself in Iranian Kurdistan by taking a much larger organisation, Komalah, under its wing through persuasion. The UCM-Komalah union was not cemented through appeal to Komalah's leftist tendency alone. Worker communism was also able to articulate an approach to national self-determination within its framework which was also appealing to the leftist-oriented Kurdish population. Worker communism's approach to self-determination, as elaborated over a period of time and implemented in Iranian Kurdistan during its struggle with the Islamic Republic, has been explained below. While our focus in this section is on the worker communist approach to self-determination during its struggle against the Islamic Republic there between September 1983 and November 1991, in effort has also been made to look at this approach more broadly especially as it evolved after 1991 to give a more complete picture of this approach.

### Iranian Kurdistan and the right to national self-determination

The Tudeh Party was among the first political organisations in Iran to seriously address the question of national self-determination. The Tudeh Party's 1960 program and statutes is one of the first and clearest documented examples we have of a mainstream political party appealing to non-Persians.<sup>15</sup> This document states that Iran is "formed of numerous nationalities" and calls for "recognising the right of national self-determination" and "establishing full social, educational, and national rights for all the national minorities living in Iran". Its subsequent actions, however, show that at least by the time of the revolution the Tudeh Party had abandoned all pretence of championing this issue. Despite self-determination being an important issue after the revolution because of Kurdish and Turkman demands for greater rights through both peaceful and violent means, arguably no other leftist party was able to address this as thoroughly as the CPI.

The necessity for worker communism to address the question of self-determination was catalysed by the need to move to Iranian Kurdistan. Here the UCM negotiated a union with Komalah, which was ideologically imploding, and converted them to worker communism.<sup>16</sup> During the negotiations with Komalah and afterward, Hekmat acknowledge the existence of the oppression of the Kurds and other non-Persian peoples in Iran. However, he suggested that the necessary condition for solving Kurdish oppression was closing the labour-capital gap.<sup>17</sup> This meant cooperating with the rest of the working class in Iran, Persian or otherwise, and turning against the bourgeoisie, Kurdish or otherwise, the latter in this context being represented by Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (DPIK). According to Hekmat: "The necessary condition for the

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<sup>15</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982. Print. p. 383

<sup>16</sup>The Revolutionary Toiler's Organization of Iranian Kurdistan, or Komala, was originally a Maoist group which claimed to have originated in the 1969 Kurdish revolt in Iran. See: Behrooz, Marziar. *Rebels With A Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*. New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000. 131-132

<sup>17</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Speech on the Editorial Columns of Communist Worker Journal #3 and #9 - Rule, Nationalism and Adventurism in the Kurdish People Movement (Dar Mored-e Sarmaghaleh-haye Kargar-e Communist #3 va #9: Hakemiat, Nationalism Va Adventurism Dar Jonbesh-e Khalgh-e Kord)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmatarchive.net/>>.

progress of the revolutionary movement is the separation of the working and toiling masses from the goals, ideals, and policies of bourgeois parties [e.g. DPIK] in Kurdistan and strengthening communism against nationalism at the social level.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, Hekmat understood that ending socio-economic inequality between Persians and non-Persians would not end the desire among some peoples for greater self-determination. One of the first acknowledgments of this was in the “Bill of Rights of the People in Kurdistan”.<sup>19</sup> According to article three “Self-determination is the inalienable right of each nation. The Kurdish people are free to determine the political future of Kurdistan however they wish and to shape the structure of political governance and legal and administrative relations.” Beyond this acknowledgement, he expressed support for specific cultural and linguistic rights in article 14: “The people of Kurdistan are completely free in benefitting from their national culture, using their mother tongue in official correspondences and government offices, and teaching their language and culture in schools.”

What concrete form would national self-determination for the non-Persians of Iran take? The answer, while hinted at in earlier works, is perhaps best illustrated by the way he answered it in the context of the Kurds in Iraq in 1995.<sup>20</sup> Following Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kurds of Iraq, Hekmat argued for three options depending on the circumstances. The first was a workers revolution leading to the creation of a workers state in Iraq. Where this was not possible, he argued for a non-national secular state in Iraq. However, Hekmat accepted that since these two options appeared unlikely in the case of the Kurds in Iraq, outright separation of the Kurds from Iraq after a democratic referendum was the best option. It should be noted that the Kurd’s national oppression and lack of self-determination was only a secondary consideration in Hekmat’s call for separation. More important than these “national” considerations was his conviction that Kurdish independence from Iraq would be able to create a workers state or a non-national secular state in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Despite accepting self-determination through outright separation, Hekmat was very staunchly against territorial federalism in Iran. Anti-federalism was a major theme throughout his works and was predicated on the notion that it would promote social disintegration and regression by emphasising national identities that would inevitably come into conflict with one another. Especially given the complex geography of Iran’s demographics, Hekmat saw federalism as being a recipe for balkanisation and civil war. This was most clearly articulated in Hekmat’s “Black scenario, white scenario” article in

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<sup>18</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Our Strategy in the Kurdish Movement (Strategy-e Ma Dar Jonbesh-e Kurdistan)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmatarchive.net/fa/3080fa.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Bill of Rights of the People in Kurdistan (Sanad Payeh-ye Hoghugh-e Mardom-e Kurdistan)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmatarchive.net/fa/1140fa.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "In Support of the Demand for Independence for Iraqi Kurdistan - Introducing the Discussion (Dar Defa Az Khast-e Esteghlal-e Kurdistan-e Iraq - Tarh-e Moghadamati-ye Bahs)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmatarchive.net/fa/0820fa.html>>.

1995. Here, Hekmat acknowledged that all great social and political upheavals, including the workers revolution he sought, carried with it a high price in blood. Yet he perceived federalism, especially in times of upheaval, as being particularly disastrous because "...in the case when the framework of society is disturbed and ordinary economic life is suspended, [the reality that] some people would perceive their salvation as being in national identity, nationalism, and cutting ties due to a lack of options is not impossible."

<sup>21</sup> After the experience of the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s, Hekmat's polemic against federalism sharpened considerably, culminating in the CPI's "Resolution of the Political Bureau against the Federalism Slogan" of 1996. Here he argued that:

"The regressive characteristic of the slogan of federalism and its destructive social and the political consequences for people and society is very clear. Federalism is the formal recognition of the ethnic division of the people, cutting out false national and ethnic identities for the people, and issuing of ethnic identity cards for the millions of humans who live and work in Iran. Federalism is the retreat of the political consciousness of people and political culture of society and lionising of ethnocentrism and racism in the people's mind, social institutions and laws. Federalism is formally recognising and generalising political, economic, and cultural discrimination among the people based on national and ethnic labels, ethnic-cleansing in various regions of the country, building up leaders from among the most reactionary individuals and parties for the people of various regions, and the retreat of forces and movements which are striving for a secular, non-religious, and non-ethnic country and equality of all citizens independent of gender, race, religion, and ethnicity. The slogan of federalism is a prescription for the creation of the deepest ethnic divisions and disunity in ranks of the country's working class. The slogan of federalism is anti-worker and anti-socialist."<sup>22</sup>

Hekmat emphasised that he, unlike nationalists, was not concerned with territorial integrity as much as he feared the breakdown of the civic framework in Iran, leading not only to the weakening of progressive forces but also ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

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<sup>21</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Black Scenario, White Scenario - a Discussion on the Course of Political Developments in Iran (Scenario-ye Siah, Scenario-ye Sefid - Bahsi Piramun-e Ravand-e Oza-e Siasi Dar Iran)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/fa/0810fa.html>>.

<sup>22</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Resolution of the Political Bureau against the Federalism Slogan (bayanieh-ye Daftar-e Siasi-ye Hezb-e Communist-e Kargari-ye Iran - Dar Mahkumiat-e Shoar-e Federalism)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/fa/0920fa.html>>.

## **WORKER COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRAN**

### Re-emphasising the working class

By the late 1980s, the conflict with the Islamic Republic in Iranian Kurdistan had reached its practical limits, and this was acknowledged by Hekmat and the CPI leadership. The Kurdistan campaign had not been without its successes. The party had been able to grow considerably as one of the few opposition groups to continue resistance inside Iran, hold and govern territory, and inflict some military defeats on the Islamic Republic. But the cessation of the Iran-Iraq war meant greater allocation of resources by the Islamic Republic to the Kurdish front, and the CPI now faced a situation in which it had to once again evolve to survive. It was in this context that Hekmat expressed dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the CPI and laid out a blueprint for the evolution of worker communism in a series of seminars, beginning in March 1989.

The thrust of these seminars was that the CPI, in the course of its absorption of various leftist cells following its arrival in Iranian Kurdistan, had lost touch with its worker communist roots and had little or no influence on the lives of workers inside Iran: “Six, seven years from my active practice as a cadre of the communist movement of Iran passed and I objectively saw that my daily practice had no influence on that worker generation that lives with me, is contemporary to me.”<sup>23</sup>

He was particularly harshly critical of the lack of actual workers in the party, an issue which had afflicted most of worker communism’s leftist predecessors, remarking with some irony that: “In the party of the worker’s revolution, workers are rare. When you look at it, you see that it has essentially organised society’s intellectuals. Why is it like this? Why is the party of the worker’s revolution not organising workers.”

“Communism has become a profession. It has become a life-style. It has become a system to build a reputation. It is the reserve army of intellectuals. It is a movement which contains in itself society’s radical intellectuals, organises them until their age reaches so high and the pain of life moderates so much that they can find a place in the cycle of production [capitalism].”<sup>24</sup>

He called for entry into a new, more worker-oriented, phase suited to a period in which revolutionary conditions no longer existed in Iran and the regime had consolidated power. Stressing that the CPI had become a magnet for leftist political refugees who sought to continue the struggle against the Islamic Republic from inside Iran, he asserted that many of these elements were not well-suited for the pursuit of worker communism: “The communist party has received all of the material of that [traditional] left, meaning that it has not left much outside of itself except the pro-Russian faction [Tudeh-Fadayeen (Majority)]...Iran’s radical left has been collected in a vessel named the Communist Party of Iran, and the Communist Party of Iran is the main base of radical communism and

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<sup>23</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Bases of Worker Communism - The First Seminar of Worker Communism, March 1989 (Mabani-e Communism Kargari - Seminar Aval-e Communism-e Kargari, March 1989)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat.public-archive.net/fa/0560fa.html>>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

radical and revolutionary marxism in Iran and this is an honour and position which no one can take from it.”

“However, for someone looking from the perspective of the social movement of the working class, the determining event which must take place has yet to take place. After all, the centre of gravity of communism and the objection of communism to capitalist society was supposed to transfer within the working class and for a worker party of communists to take shape; for a communist party of workers to take shape. Worker socialism and communism are supposed to find their party. This, from my perspective, has not yet happened. In my opinion the Communist Party unfortunately, with all of the efforts being made within it, is the party of Iranian intellectuals.”<sup>25</sup>

In November 1990, Hekmat formed the worker communist faction within the CPI, but by 30 November 1991, had created the Worker Communist Party of Iran (WCPI) and formally separated from the CPI.<sup>26</sup> In leading the exodus of the worker communist element from the CPI and soon the WCPI leadership from Iranian Kurdistan in the early 1990s, Hekmat may have had a second motivation. Following the Persian Gulf War, Iraqi Kurdistan had increasingly asserted its autonomy from the Iraqi state and become a safe-haven for Kurdish nationalism, which was beginning to make inroads into Komalah. Given Hekmat’s reservations about nationalism of all stripes, he found the rising nationalism in Iranian Kurdistan and Komalah disconcerting and sought to distance himself and worker communism from it.

This transition came at a time when the global order and Iran itself were in flux. As already noted above, worker communism was not confronted by the same crisis as the rest of the communist left when the Soviet Union collapsed. Having rejected international communism in its entirety, worker communism was insulated from the loss of ideological guidance and material support experienced by other leftist trends. Thus, from 1991 to 1997, Hekmat and the WCPI were preoccupied with organising the working class inside Iran and countering the “End of History” and “New World Order” type discourses which sought to assert the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism.

### Facing the Reform movement

What worker communism, with its leadership now firmly ensconced in the diaspora, failed to see coming was the rise of the reform movement. Before this watershed event, worker communism, along with much of the rest of the Iranian opposition, could claim that the Islamic Republic and its elections lacked legitimacy because of the relatively closed social and political atmosphere in Iran. After a profound social wave brought

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Announcement of the Declaration of Existence of the Worker Communist Party of Iran (Ettelaieh-ye E'lam Mojuidat-e Hezb-e Communist-e Kargari)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat-public-archive.net/fa/0560fa.html>>.

The declaration was signed by four senior worker communist figures: Hekmat, Iraj Azarin, Koroush Modarresi, and Reza Moghadam.

Khatami and the reform movement to power, it became more difficult to portray the Islamic Republic's politics in such stark black and white terms.

During the course of this paper, it has been argued that the worker communism, in its various iterations, from its start in December 1978 until well into the 1990s, articulated a paradigm capable of analysing the social and political situation in Iran and formulating an organisational response in tune with the needs of the time. Whether its prescient rejection of the doctrine of anti-imperialism, introduction of an approach to self-determination attractive to leftist Iranian Kurds, or recognition of the end of the revolutionary period and need for re-focusing on the working class, worker communists had been relatively in tune with the times. This would not be the case in its response to the reform movement, which was disconnected with the theoretical underpinnings of worker communism and premised on flawed analyses of Iranian society and politics. Worker communism's response to the reform movement was laid out in two seminars by Hekmat, the first entitled "Party and political power" and the second "Party and society".

The thrust of the analysis and change of direction envisaged by Hekmat in these two seminars, which would precipitate a schism in the WCPI, was twofold. First, while Hekmat, in contrast to many other opposition groups, accepted that "the people", to his surprise, "have participated in the election in large numbers," he also claimed this showed anti-regime and revolutionary sentiment among the population.<sup>27</sup> Second, he argued that worker communism need not become a truly worker-oriented party until after the next revolution, and that rather than workers alone it should focus on "regime-change" forces in society, including students, women, and youth.

Hekmat's reaction to Khatami's election was that, while accepting the people's vote, he did not fully accept that it entailed support for the continued existence of the Islamic Republic and its continued existence and that, perhaps with the experience of Mikhail Gorbachev in mind, this was the beginning of the end of the regime: "About the recent [events], the people of Iran have not participated in an "election", they have participated in a tactical show of strength against the regime to moderate and more importantly to destabilise and weaken it."

"First, they wish and desire for the destruction and overthrow of the regime. About this reality, that the large majority of Iranian people want to completely free themselves from the Islamic regime and religious government, there is no doubt for anyone who has the smallest familiarity with Iran's situation and people in Iran. This is the first hope of the people. Second, the people at the same time want and attempt to make living under the Islamic regime as bearable as possible."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "An Interview with the International Publication: Following the Election of Khatami (Mosahebeh Nashrieh-ye International: Be Donbal-e Entekhab-e Khatami)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat.public-archive.net/fa/1030fa.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



How could this movement be simultaneously reformist and revolutionary? Hekmat viewed it like a train which, on the route to its final destination, showed different characteristics at different stops along the way. But Khatami was not to be a Gorbachev, and reformism, even in its most radical form (the Green Movement), never sought regime-change as Hekmat envisioned it.<sup>29</sup>

Hekmat also called into question what had been a central premise of worker communism since its foundation, namely that its most immediate objective was to become a party of workers. Hekmat had led the departure from the CPI over this issue, but now seemed to reverse his position and declare that the most immediate objective was seizing power, even if this was without the backing of majority of the working class. He readily accepted that many of followers would see this as a “blasphemy” to the worker communist tradition, but said that they would all become irrelevant if they did not seize the revolutionary opportunity which he saw coming.<sup>30</sup>

“The first point which I want to say, and perhaps it will seem blasphemous, is that this party has intentions toward political power and wants to take political power, and not only does this not have a conflict with the coming to power of the working class, but in essence the only way for the working class to take political power is that it takes power with its own party. Although, the party taking power may not lead to the class taking power, it depends on what kind of party that party is. I am talking about a worker communist party.”<sup>31</sup>

He believed a WCPI-led seizure of power was acceptable in the absence of working class support as long as the WCPI was the working class’ “own party” or “a party which the working class accepts as its representative, and supports.” But how would the WCPI demonstrate that it had working class support? Hekmat’s answer was that, just as a bourgeois party showed its popularity through elections, worker communism would do so through a workers revolution. This mode of thought which Hekmat now sought to advance in the WCPI went against worker communism’s history of placing political agency in the hands of the working class. Grievously, he now believed that he and his party, which admittedly were still not a party of workers, could designate what was and what was not a workers’ party in the absence of objective signals of working class support. Hekmat was proposing becoming the very kind of party which he had critiqued the pre-revolution left parties of being.

But how was power gained in the revolutionary wave which Hekmat foresaw? Was the party to moderate its policies? In discussing the “social mechanisms for taking political

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<sup>29</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "This Seyed Is Not up to Glasnost (In Seyed Ahl-e Glasnost Nist)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat.public-archive.net/fa/1550fa.html>>.

<sup>30</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Party and Political Power: A Speech in the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Iran - 15 April 1988 (Hezb Va Ghodrat-e Siasi: Sokhanrani Dar Congreh-ye Dovvom-e Hezb-e Communist-e Kargari-e Iran - 15 April 1988)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmat.public-archive.net/>>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

power”, Hekmat began shifting emphasis from “class” to “society”, speaking little about the working class and methods for organising it. That is not to say that Hekmat wanted to moderate the WCPI’s radicalism by moderating and shifting to the right, as he claimed many leftist parties did when they sought to expand their popularity and social base because society was not as radical. On the contrary, he wanted worker communism to become popular and take power on the basis of radicalism and maximalism:

“Historically, when the leftist parties have wanted to become social and to be active on the social-scale, they have turned right. They have justified it in this way that society is more right-wing and if they want votes they must turn right...We are one of the few communist organisations after the Bolsheviks that wants to become popular on the basis of its radicalism and maximalism, an organisation that actually wants to popularise and socialise maximalism and communism.”<sup>32</sup>

But how could radicalism and maximalism become mainstream social phenomena? The answer, according to Hekmat, was to mobilise certain existing grievances against the Islamic Republic in Iranian society: “Those who are exhausted of Islam have us, they who are exhausted of the inequality between men and women have us, those who are tired of “Eastoxification” ruling the regime and its opposition...There are those who say we have come with you because you speak the desires of the youth. We have come with you because you speak the desires of woman, or because you speak of a more modern culture, or because you have stood up to religion.”<sup>33</sup>

This raised the question of whether such party, trying to appeal to broad swaths of society, could remain a worker’s party. To this, he responded: “This party must have a united communist backbone, and this backbone must constantly grow.” He was confident that the WCPI’s worker-centrism would not be diluted. For some WCPI cadres, this deviated from the essence of worker communism. For them, a worker communist party either had to have a worker leadership and membership or seek to principally attract workers. The path now being proposed by Hekmat would mean that the WCPI would no longer be a worker communist party in any meaningful way. Not long after Hekmat delivered this series of seminars Azarin and Moghadam, two of the signatories of the WCPI declaration of existence, left the party alongside dozens of senior leaders and cadres in April 1999. The long-term effect of this final shift of worker communism under Hekmat was to weaken unity and enable major schisms after he passed away from cancer in 2002. Moreover, the idea of mobilising opposition to the Islamic Republic around Hekmat’s radical and maximalist strategy was out of tune with the concerns and mood of Iranian society and politics after the rise of the reform movement. The confluence of these two factors - paradigmatic inconsistencies causing internal fragmentation and political radicalism generating social isolation - marked a major dropping off point for worker communism after nearly a quarter century of existence.

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<sup>32</sup> Hekmat, Mansoor. "Party and Society, Social Mechanisms for Taking Political Power (Hezb Va Jame'e, Mechanism-haye Ejtema'i-ye Ghodrat-e Siasi)." *Mansoor Hekmat Public Archive*. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://hekmatspublicarchive.net/>>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Worker communism burst onto the political stage as a relatively minor leftist trend in December 1978. Under the organisational incarnation of the Union of Communist Militants (UCM), it went against the grain of the anti-imperialist politics of the time, instead drawing on a novel reading of Marx to strongly advocate for working class interests in the conflict between labour and capital as well as for greater democracy. Despite increasing political repression after June 1981, by the time of the pre-revolution Iranian left's defeat in February 1983, worker communism was among the few trends actually growing thanks to the paradigm shift it was trying to introduce to the left. By September 1983, the UCM had merged with the much larger leftist Kurdish group Komalah and fled to Iranian Kurdistan, with worker communism now taking the organisational incarnation of the Communist Party of Iran (CPI). Its move was successfully executed through the articulation of an approach to national self-determination which appealed to a segment of the Iranian Kurdish population. From here, it collected many of the shattered fragments of the pre-revolution Iranian left inside of itself and continue the struggle against the Islamic Republic until the early 1990s.

By March 1989 however, Hekmat and many others saw the original worker-centric nature of their project as being diluted in the CPI and found Komalah, which had retained some of its organisational independence, increasingly under the influence of Kurdish nationalism. This convinced them to form an independent faction in the CPI in November 1990 and to form a new party altogether and gradually withdraw from Kurdistan by November 1991. Now under the organisational incarnation of the Worker Communist Party of Iran (WCPI), the worker communists sought to grapple with the post-revolution Iran and organise Iranian workers. However, they were unprepared for the rise of the reformist movement and scramble to form an adequate response to this phenomenon. In so doing Hekmat, who had led the organisation through many a crisis, diluted the worker-orientation of the party by seeking to appeal to broad swaths of society without also moderating the WCPI's radicalism and maximalism. This had the dual effect of alienating many worker communist cadres and creating divisions without broadening the WCPI's appeal in society.

This paper has highlighted one important episode in the history of the post-revolution Iranian left. Despite many stellar scholarly works covering aspects of the post-revolution left, much of this history remains to be written. Indeed, while the present work has drawn on online digital archives to sketch a picture of worker communism, many blind spots remain which can only be ameliorated through the discovery of new sources and/or interviews with individuals who were a part or in contact with it. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this short paper has contributed to the writing of this history.

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