Analysis of the Strikes by the Oil Industry Workers of Iran during the First Half of the 20th Century

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INTRODUCTION

Iranians have a great cultural background and a remarkable civilization. During Ghajar dynasty, wide relations between our country and European nations influenced the social, cultural, economic and political conditions.

After Mozaffareddin Shah endowed Darcy with the right to extract oil, and after the eruption of oil from Naftoon oilfield in Masjed Soleiman and the transference of oil to Abadan, industrial cities were rapidly established and a huge portion of the workforce started work in those areas. Iranians, as a reaction against the extreme working conditions and occupational, political, social and economic dissatisfactions, assisted their leaders in opposing the Oil Company. They formed trade unions, led labor movements, went on numerous strikes and mounted protests throughout decades so as to regain their rights and resist and protest against the managers of the company, the government and the numerous hardships. Dissatisfactions arose in each period due to different reasons which will be mentioned later on in the paper. In this study, the question is whether the workers in the oil industry have been able, through their strikes, to play a significant role in the changes that took place in Iran during the first half of the 20th century. This question will be answered in relation to each specific event through the paper.

An outline of the strikes in Iran from the beginning until the first half of the 20th century:

<<<<Khuzestan, the first industrial district in contemporary Iran, is considered as the first center for political activities related to guilds and workers in a large scale. Just as the strikes by workers of the oil industry in 1929 was not comparable to any of the upheavals in Iran before the second world war, so the activities of workers in the oil industry during the years after August 1941 enjoyed an outstanding situation due to the organization of these activities and the centrality of their political efficacy [6].

Yousef Eftekhar was one of the leaders of the striking workers of oil industry in 1929, who spent 12 years in jail during the reign of Reza Shah. In his book, he writes about his experience: << in mid 1927 I went to Khuzestan. The entrance of Armenians and Turks into Khuzestan was extremely difficult, for they were monitored closely. There were political reasons behind this. They were afraid that they might be dangerous. I

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managed to travel to Abadan with a lot of difficulty and start work at a refinery. I made friends who had national inclinations. We gradually gained control over the workers and expanded the organization greatly. We were improving rapidly. During those times, some negotiations had started concerning oil. The British were supposed to yield the installations to Iran after 30 years. We tried to stage a strike. We wanted to annul this contract. We had called a strike. Workers surrounded the national police. It took some time for the British warship to arrive. First, they surrounded Abadan and then they attacked the workers. Sir John Cadmon left immediately; they couldn’t make the contract and the right to extract oil was not extended>> [2].

<< In 14th May 1929, just when it seemed that the government had taken full control of all the would-be dissenters, nine thousand workers from the oil industry of Abadan went on a strike all of a sudden. The political consequences of this event were felt in Tehran. Rumor has it that this strike was instigated by the USSR. The workers’ demands were: 15 percent increase in wages, recognition of their trade union, considering the first day of May as holiday, participation of the representatives of workers in issues such as employment and dismissal of workers, determining 7 hours as the maximum amount of time a person younger than 18 is allowed to work>> [5].

The union of Iranian workers and farmers was founded by Yousef Eftekhar, one of the major leaders of the labor movement in Khuzestan, who was arrested in 1929 and sent to prison for organizing the oil industry workers to go on strikes. <<When Yousef Eftekhar established this union in 1942, he was able to expand it in a short time and find followers among the workers of Khuzestan and the northern provinces of Iran specifically Azarbayjan and Tehran. However, since Eftekhar had anti Soviet and anti Tudeh inclinations, the central corporate council opposed him and stopped him from continuing his activities>> [6].

It is necessary to mention that the newly emerging national bourgeoisie in Iran was closely allied with the land owning lords, a fact that remarkably lessened its progressive role in economic, social and political life of the country. On the other hand, the working class Of Iran, which was formed in factories and new industrial centers, began to grow, so that <<at the beginning of the world war about 650 thousand workers were working in industries in Iran. During the reign of Reza Shah the working class conditions were pitiable. Since, though the costs of life had doubled during 10 years, the wages of the workers had not increased. The maximum wage of 50-80 Rials for a day’s work from sunrise to sunset was paid while the minimum cost of daily life was 120-140 Rials. Also, women and kids had to work with the lowest wages possible>> [3].

<< Some of the members of the central corporate council and the union attached to Yousef Eftekhar were constantly looking for ways to create an organization in Khuzestan using the available resources thereby strengthening their stance. In April 1944, Farhad Falahati, the dismissed employee of Oil Company, founded the corporate provincial council of workers and laborers of Khuzestan in Abadan. But about three weeks after that, in 27th of April, the military governor of Abadan commanded that the doors of the building of the union be closed; Falahati was arrested and was exiled to Ahvaz.

The labor movement of Khuzestan did not come to an end when Falahati was arrested; it started again, from another spot. << Ali Omid, the old Syndicalist and the early companion of Yousef Eftekhar in the strike staged in Khuzestan in 1929, went to Ahvaz in the beginning years after September 1941 in line with the activities of Yousef Eftekhar. With the help of Nozar Ashouri, he organized a union called <<the corporate provincial council of the workers of Khuzestan>>. Following the establishment of this union, the party of the masses of Iran also decided to organize <<a place for the party and for installing bulletins>> [6].

From the early years of its establishment, some of the members of the party of the masses of Iran who were the previous actors of labor movements during the reign of Pahlavi I, were against the <<liberal>> structure of the party and the polar composition of the central committee. They attempted to move beyond the frameworks restricting the party and through organizing workers and leading the labor movement, to strengthen the communist cause of Iran. The establishment of the central council of Iranian workers’ unions in March1940 by Arshades Avansian and Reza Roosta – two communists and previous laborers of trade unions – was a result of this.

<< In the months after the first congress of the party, the party of the masses of Iran kept spreading, especially through the southern provinces of Iran. This party established departments in 44 cities that had populations more than 20000 people, and in 32 cities that had more than 10000 people in them. The party of the masses of Iran started attracting members, not only in big urban centers such as Yazd, Boushehr, Dezfool and Zahedan, but also in small industrial centers such as Aghajari, Raamhormoz, Mah Shah port and Dashte Mishan. The rapid expansion of the party of the masses of Iran during the years 1943 and 1944 is represented in the unexpected growth of local organizations in Tehran, Shiraz, Yazd and the oil-rich Khuzestan>> [1].

The central council of the Iranian workers’ unions was attached to the party of the masses of Iran, a fact that was in itself an obstacle to its development and expansion. For the communist tenets of the party which had become known to all after the first provincial gathering of the organization of Tehran in October 9, 1942, could be an obstacle in the way of the workers masses being attracted to it. That is why, until 1944, the central council attempted to convince its critics that it is a free guild, not a blind follower of the party. <<In 1944, in one of the turbulent journeys, Dr. Jodat who was one of the major members of the party of the masses of Iran traveled to
Abadan. He did not want to ease the tensions. On the contrary, he gave a seditious speech; he even started insulting us who had gone there as the representatives of the government for inspection, so much so that I was afraid they might slaughter us. Abadan was not like other cities. The moment a dissenting voice was heard, about 10 to 20 thousand workers gave up work and chaos started>> [4].

The party of the masses of Iran prevented strikes from being staged by workers of weapons factory and workers of Abadan Oil who wanted an increase in their wages and also asked for union prerogatives. The party did this in order to keep peace behind the front lines of the Soviet union during the war, since, according to its assessments, the conflict between fascism and democracy was the most important one. This, however, intensified the class conflict between Iranian laborers and capitalists. Workers, instigated by the heads of the party of the masses of Iran, went on strikes every day. They not only stopped work, but also destroyed the factories and installations. The municipality and national police were quite incapable of controlling them. The government treated them leniently, because it didn’t want the foreign governments to accuse it of killing people. But the members of Tudeh were not afraid of killing>> [4].

The most considerable successes of the party of the masses were achieved in Khuzestan. <<After four years of limited underground activity among the workers of the Oil Company, the party finally staged a demonstration of 80000 workers on the labor day in 1946 in Abadan, through which it showed off its power. One of the members of the labor party of the British Parliament gave a formal visit to Khuzestan, and wrote that the communists had influenced the illiterate workers and <<we should take seriously the 81000 resolute and apt human beings who form an industrial force>>. The party of the masses staged some strikes in June and July among the workers of the Oil Industry. But the real power of the party was known when a public strike of more than 65 thousand workers was launched in Khuzestan. It is the biggest strike of industrial workers in the history of the Middle East. After 3 days of street conflict which caused 19 deaths and 300 casualties, the prime minister (Ghvaam) sent an intermediary group to the Oil Company so as to convince them to accept some of the demands made by strikers>> [1].

All through 1946, the activities of the party were oriented toward inciting the workers against the government and sending numerous telegraphs to the parliament and the papers of the freedom party in which they wrote about unemployment and its consequences for Khuzestan. In the years 1943-44, unrest among the British workers was another problem for the Oil Company. Increase in the hours of work and the cancellation of the rents, without consulting with the English workers, caused them to found <<the union of shift workers>>, threaten to launch strikes and call the embassies <<the employees of the Oil Company>>. The government of Britain sent a representative parliamentary group to investigate the situation immediately, the head of which was a woman who was a member of the conservative party. When she told the English workers that they were lucky that they hadn’t been sent to the Japanese prison, the angry workers suggested that they would take her to <<Abadan cemetery>> or <<to treat her in a totally Japanese manner in a dark corner>>. From the point of view of the foreign ministry of Britain, most of the English workers, since they were communists, did not want to strike during the war; but this unexpected position was probably taken by them in order to <<have an unfavorable influence on the Iranian workers>> [6].

In May 1946 in the government of Ghavam Al Saltaneh, the workers of the Oil Company launched a public strike with the help of the party of the masses and due to the end of the war and the emergence of a free environment, and the government sent numerous commissions to the oil fields. These commissions who had become aware of the extreme unfavorable conditions of workers, cooperated with them in order to help them regain their rights, but the members of Tudeh turned these successes to their own advantage. Although the Oil Company was obliged to accept some of the demands made by workers such as providing water, electricity and ice for them and paying them for Fridays and the overtime for which they did not previously pay them, they delayed the actual implementation of their promises; a fact that caused internal, eternal discontent and animosity among the workers for they saw that they even had to fight for their legal rights. The employer had become like an enemy to them. The party of the masses, through untrue but effective propaganda, accused the government of collaboration with the Oil Company. All in all, the workers’ conflicts in increased in Abadan and other places of Iran while the government observed these conditions. The armed nomads who had come to Abadan in order to found a nomadic club, clashed with the striking workers >> [1].

The negotiation of the contract between the central government and the national government of Azarbayjan, and the success of the strike staged by 10000 workers of Oil in Aghajari alarmed imperialism in England and its followers. They were obliged to break their silence and take action in order to oppress the freedom movement of Iran. <<This strike was stage with unprecedented discipline, resistance and unity. The moment the beginning of the strike was announced the all the workers of Oil Company along with all the staff and the major English managers stopped work as a single body and despite the pressure inflicted on them from the curfew and the police force, they managed to carry out the instructions of leaders of the strike carefully. However, as a result of the armed men of <<the nomads union>> and the soldiers, 46 people were killed and 170 were wounded; under curfew, the bodies were buried even without jotting down the names and identifications of the dead. Immediately, Mozaffar Firooz and Aramesh as representatives of the central government, and Dr. Raadmanesh...>>
and Dr. Jodat as the representatives of the party of the masses of Iran, went to Abadan and managed to break the strike by promising to consider the complaints and punish those responsible for the slaughter. But practically, the government did nothing to the wrongdoers and instead arrested and exiled the leaders of the strike. In 1946, most of the clergymen had opposed the party of the masses. The British embassy in Bushehr reports that the great priests in Karbala and Najaf are extremely worried about the expansion of communism.

Ghavam Al Saltaneh, who followed the upheavals in Khuzestan closely, forced the cabinet of ministers on May 18 to pass the labor law which was one of the demands of the workers. According to this law the minimum wage should be decided after taking into account the price of food in any specific area, children should be exempted from work, the daily hours of work should decrease to 8 hours, wages should be paid for Fridays and six annual holidays (among which is the labor day) and unions should be allowed to have their own organizations and formations and to have negotiations with the employers.

Mostafa Fateh writes about the magnificence and grandeur of this strike in his book “fifty years of oil”: 

“...To be fair and unbiased, one can say that the betterment of the conditions of the workers of Oil during the last years of the Company’s operations in Iran is indebted to two factors. First was the freedom of speech which was made possible for the workers after foreign armies left Iran and they somehow found a chance to talk about their horrible, excruciating conditions. Second, was the great strike on July 14, 1941 that revealed the workers true power to claim their rights and made the Company understand that continuing the previous ways had become impossible and that it had to change its policies as soon as possible. The labor law, the social insurances law, the designation of the minimum wage and other reforms that have been made possible during the recent years in Iran are all because of the measure taken by the workers of the Oil Company. This strike alarmed the British government to the extent that, near the end of July three English battleships entered the waters of Shatt Al-Arab and anchored in Abadan, without any permission from the government of Iran.”

Conclusion:

Strikes of the workers of the oil industry and the labor movements in our country went through years of bitter experience and numerous successes and failures. A generation of the best and the worthiest children of the masses, who were our country’s biggest wealth, were lost. They worked to pave the way toward freedom at a time when internal reactionary forces and external imperialism were reigning over the oppressed people.

The workers of the Oil Industry, who form a part of our nation, paid a great price in order to gather experience; their strikes were considered as political and economic movements. All in all, the perseverance of the workers of the oil industry in their campaigns was accompanied by lots of hardships, suffering, imprisonment and exile in spite of all of which they managed to have a effect positive changes in Iran during that specific period of time.

REFERENCES