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The Power Resources of Workers to Resist
Socioeconomic Insecurities:
The Case of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Felix Back

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About the Author

Felix Back is in the final year of the M.A. programme Peace Research and International Politics at the University of Tübingen. He holds a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from the University of Göttingen and was visiting Western Washington University in Bellingham for an academic year focusing on Political Science, Social and Cultural Anthropology, and Sociology. This paper was written as part of the seminar "Middle East Politics and Societies" by Dr Amjed Rasheed. felixback@gmx.de

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Introduction

Recent revolutionary movements across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have reiterated the importance of workers' organisations before, during, and after transition periods towards more participatory government structures by organising protests and concentrating demands. The two countries that seem to have achieved the largest momentum of their respective revolutionary waves in 2010/11 and 2018/19 are characterised by strong and durable worker organisations. Whereas the “Tunisian General Labour Union” (UGTT) was crucial for the Tunisian Revolution in 2011,¹ the “Sudanese Professionals Association” (SPA) played a fundamental role in bringing down Omar al-Bashir and entering a transitional period in 2019.² While these cases have been extensively explored, research on the revitalisation of union activities in other MENA countries remains scarce.³

This paper addresses this gap and zooms in on the case of Iran. Although the importance of labour actions during the peaceful Islamic Revolution of 1978/79 is often emphasised, research on workers in the subsequent Islamic Republic of Iran remains limited.⁴

But the failure of the Islamic Republic to meet the expectations of the revolution and commit itself to democracy and social justice still shapes its inner struggles.⁵ The number of protests has spiked since the Green Movement in 2009 and culminated in large-scale protests in 2017/18 and 2019/20. Moreover, workers from various sectors went on strikes against increasing socioeconomic insecurities – one of the most recent strikes was those by contract and temporary workers that spread to more than 100 oil, gas, and petrochemical industries and mobilised 10,000 workers in mid-2021.⁶ Even though protests and strikes are often met with government repression, they highlight the imperative for far-reaching domestic changes. The Islamic Republic of Iran is challenged by a “triple crisis” in which political reforms are needed to tackle the socioeconomic and ecological crisis.⁷ However, the various Iranian social movements, consisting of workers, women, and students, all have their demands and social bases that reach from political liberalisation as aspired by the “middle class” (Green Movement) to social equity as pursued by the “lower classes” (2017/18 protests) and would need to build an



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“organized intersectional alliance” to achieve fundamental changes.⁸

Nevertheless, this paper does not aim to discuss the revolutionary potential of workers. In contrast, it analyses the power resources workers may mobilise to assert their interests within the present context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It argues that socioeconomic insecurities and the lack of a legal framework that would provide opportunities for workers to effectively defend their interests have contributed to the re-emergence of a unionist movement that tries to challenge the marginalisation of workers and the state monopoly on worker organisations.

Since the 1990s, the pursuit of a neoliberal ideal within an autocratic environment has led to increased socioeconomic insecurities of large parts of the workforce. It is estimated that about 80 per cent of the total workforce is employed based on temporary contracts and lacks employment securities.⁹ While the rise of temporary work, private contractors, and decreased state employment made it difficult for workers to make ends meet, workers cannot officially form independent worker organisations to protect their interests.¹⁰ Moreover, becoming engaged in

labour actions comes with risks to health and liberty, as activists experience intimidation and have also been punished by imprisonment, torture, sacking, and the subsequent deprivation of access to work.¹¹ However, rather than understanding Iranian workers as powerless, as the rising vulnerabilities and repression of workers may suggest, this paper highlights workers’ agency. For this purpose, it puts forward the following research question:

What power resources can and have been mobilised by workers to resist socioeconomic insecurities in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

To tackle this question, the Power Resources Approach, as put forward by Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster,¹² will be utilised as a heuristic device to identify key sources of labour power that workers may mobilise to defend their interests and that shape the space in which labour actions occur.

This paper is structured as follows: First, the Power Resources Approach will be introduced and structural power, associational power, institutional power, and societal power are discussed. After these analytical categories have been established, the following sections will focus on the case



of Iran. A brief sketch of the emergence of Iranian worker organisations during the early 20th century and their ups and downs under the Pahlavi dynasty will be provided. Building on this, it turns to the Islamic Republic of Iran, where independent worker organisations were dissolved soon after the revolution. Finally, it analyses how the respective power resources of Iranian workers developed and shape the space for resistance against socioeconomic insecurities.

The analysis finds that in the absence of institutional power and severely restricted associational and societal power, Iranian workers rely predominantly on structural power – mobilised through an increasing number of labour actions – to defend their interests. However, while the Iranian Labour Code severely impedes workers’ associational power, various independent worker organisations have formed since the early 2000s. Subsequently, these were able to develop their associational and societal power resources by increasing cooperation and reaching out to larger parts of society, ultimately aiming to attain durable institutional power resources that would ensure representation and protection of workers’ interests. However, differences in interests and grievances persist, which,

combined with state repression, limit workers’ ability to cooperate with other social groups and with each other.

The Power Resources Approach – A Theoretical Framework

In the following, the theoretical framework of this paper will be presented by providing its underlying conceptualisation of power as the “power to” and introducing the Power Resources Approach.

The Power Resources Approach draws upon Weber’s definition of power. In his understanding, power refers to all possibilities of a given group or individual to enforce their will against other individuals and therefore, it can exist in all forms of social actions.¹³ Accordingly, this paper conceptualises power “as the power to do something”.¹⁴ While worker organisations may also take part in “power over”, first and foremost, they aim to empower workers “by increasing their resources and capabilities and thus their capacity to act”.¹⁵ “Power to” therefore highlights workers’ agency to represent their interests and to influence social changes in the desired way¹⁶ by mobilising and developing various power resources.¹⁷ The Power Resources Approach



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is thus based on the assumption “that organised labour can successfully defend its interests by collective mobilisation of power resources”.¹⁸

The discussion about different power resources workers may possess and the basic tenets of the Power Resources Approach were put forward by Wright and Silver.¹⁹ Expanding upon and complementing their initial concepts of structural and associational power with societal and institutional power, Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster integrate different notions of labour power into two additional power resources that workers may mobilise.²⁰

However, while sources of labour power potentially enable workers to protect their interests, they are not the only ones that deploy power resources. For example, employers can mobilise their power resources to demobilise the workers’ organisation or quell labour action – it is thus in this complex interrelation between different combinations of power resources that may lead to asserting collective labour interests and compromises between labour and capital.²¹ Therefore, different local and political economy contexts produce different combinations of power resources that organised workers may deploy

to further their interests and the power resources they aim to develop.

This section presented power as the power of individuals and organised labour to assert their own will against others. In the following, structural, associational, institutional, and societal power will be introduced as central power resources that workers may mobilise.

Structural Power

Structural power can be understood as a “primary power resource” because this source of power can also be mobilised if workers are not collectively organised and their interests lack representation.²² In addition, structural power may also be understood as “disruptive power” as it conceptualises the leverage workers have to disrupt the value-adding processes of production cycles through the withdrawal of their labour or service provisions.²³ An actual or even the threat of disruptions then can lead to an increase in attempts to appease or oppress possible disruptors.²⁴

As structural power stems from workers’ position within the economic system,²⁵ one can differentiate between marketplace



bargaining power and workplace bargaining power.²⁶

Workplace bargaining power may be mobilised through work stoppages and is determined by the workers' position in the value chain.²⁷ The resulting expenses potentially motivate employers to enter negotiations and make concessions regarding working conditions or increased salaries.²⁸ Work stoppages can be executed in various forms and occur, for example, as overt actions like strikes or sit-ins but can also occur covertly through go-slows or sabotage actions.²⁹ Furthermore, they are not only restricted to the production process itself, but structural power may also arise as logistical power in the transport sector.³⁰

However, structural power also takes the form of marketplace bargaining power resulting from “(1) the possession of scarce skills that are in demand by employers, (2) low levels of general unemployment, and (3) the ability of workers to pull out of the labor market entirely and survive on nonwage sources of income”.³¹ Here, the focal point becomes the individual, and its power depends on the economy's structure and the ability to become independent from labour market pressures. In the case of high

marketplace bargaining power, employees must not fear losing their jobs and can easily change their employers if they wish.³² Accordingly, marketplace bargaining power highlights the power differences between various groups depending on the labour market (e.g., core and non-permanent workers, the unemployed).³³

Hence, the structural power of workers depends on the respective general labour market situation and their specific position in the production or service process. However, to apply structural power in a way that will further workers' interests, some form of organisation is required to develop strategic views and design and carry out effective labour actions.³⁴

Associational Power

In contrast to structural power, associational power emerges from workers' collective organisation.³⁵ Worker organisations may take various forms, including political parties, unions, and work councils.³⁶

Wright maintains that one can loosely connect each of those forms of workers' organisation to specific institutional settings in which conflicts and compromises occur and may be settled.³⁷ Workers organised in



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political parties act in the “sphere of politics” in which struggles over specific policies are carried out.³⁸ These workers’ parties represent workers’ interests in the political arena and are connected to societal power.³⁹ In contrast, labour unions typically engage in the “sphere of exchange” and are predominantly concerned with the labour and commodity markets.⁴⁰ Usually dealing with specific sectors, labour unions are related to marketplace bargaining power.⁴¹ Lastly, worker councils act in the “sphere of production”; they are preoccupied with “what goes on inside of firms once workers are hired and capital invested”.⁴² Hence, worker councils are closely related to workplace bargaining power.⁴³

However, the boundaries between these different spheres and the allocation to different forms of worker organisations are fluid and often interrelated rather than fixed. Moreover, of increasing importance are global union federations, which enable collective action in the transnational sphere and pursue counterbalance of an increasingly globalised production chain by providing support to unions in countries that lack institutional or organisational capacities.⁴⁴

In order to determine associational power, various indicators have been suggested. For example, while member numbers contribute to associational power, the capacity to mobilise members to act collectively is essential.⁴⁵ Thus, infrastructural resources, organisational efficiency, member participation and internal cohesion are all important determiners of associational power.⁴⁶

Institutional Power

Institutional power can be characterised as a secondary power, as it emerges out of workers’ structural and associational power and is the historical result of prior compromises between labour, employers, and the state.⁴⁷

Institutional power refers to the existing institutionalised norms in terms of labour laws, welfare services, or worker participation in decision-making processes.⁴⁸ These arise out of concessions from capital holders and indicate prior efforts to increase cooperation or co-opt labour movements.⁴⁹ Thus, the spheres where institutional power is formed resemble the four levels where associational power may be exerted: the political system through political parties, the



sectoral level through labour unions, and the workplace through worker councils.⁵⁰ Likewise, at the transnational level, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) provides institutional power resources by setting labour standards that workers may use in domestic struggles.⁵¹

Significant institutional rights include the right to strike, the freedom of association, and workplace safety regulations; however, institutional power always hinges on the capacity of workers to fully utilise their existing institutional power resources and legal opportunities to defend their interests.⁵² While these institutionalised securities are relatively stable once they are obtained and may compensate for decreasing structural and associational power for some time, in the long term, decreasing primary power resources will usually result in decreasing institutional power as well.⁵³

Institutional power thus refers to labour rights that have been obtained, but institutionalised norms may also narrow workers' ability to become engaged in labour actions.⁵⁴

Societal Power

Societal power highlights workers' cooperation with other social groups and the opportunities to protect their interests that may arise thereof. It transcends the focus on workers and widens the analysis to include other aspects of society.

Societal power can be defined as "the latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society's support for trade union demands".⁵⁵ It originates from coalitional as well as discursive power.⁵⁶

Coalitional power refers to systems of coordination with other actors and the ability to mobilise them to pursue shared objectives; worker organisations can thus increase their associational power by utilising resources and support from, *inter alia*, social movements, political parties or non-governmental organisations.⁵⁷ Coalitional power may influence the spheres where institutional power is formed, and associational power is exerted through receiving support from other social groups in struggles related to the workplace, the sectoral, the political, and the trans- or supranational level.⁵⁸



Furthermore, societal power also rests on shaping public discourses and challenging hegemonic meanings by providing counter-narratives to worker-related issues. Achieving discursive power thus depends on developing frames that will resonate with other parts of society and are most convincing if the perception of unjust treatment is shared with the society at large.⁵⁹ As such, coalitional and discursive powers are essentially connected and will reinforce each other.⁶⁰

This section has identified four interconnected analytical categories that will be used to analyse the power resources that workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran can mobilise to resist socioeconomic insecurities. Before turning to the analysis, the subsequent section establishes the context of workers' organisation in Iran by providing a brief sketch of the emergence of organised cooperation between Iranian workers.

The Emergence of Iranian Worker Organisations

The following part will focus on the case of Iran. This section presents the historical context of Iranian worker organisations. Based on this, it uses the Power Resources

Approach to analyse the spaces in which workers can act to protect their interests within the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The beginnings of Iranian worker organisations date back to the early 20th century and were strongly influenced by developments in Russia.⁶¹ While most Iranian people worked in the agricultural sector, and only a small fraction of the population was employed in industries and manufactories, the first strata of a modern proletariat emerged through Iranian migrant workers in the oil industries of Baku.⁶² Moreover, especially the Russian October Revolution (1917) and the Great Famine (1917-1919) shaped workers' interests to organise and pursue their rights and welfare more collectively.⁶³ A printworkers union was the first to become formally recognised after a successful strike in 1918 and subsequently motivated townspeople from other occupations to form worker organisations.⁶⁴ However, all unions were eventually banned in 1928 and only the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941 again officially enabled union activities; in the meantime, the rapid industrialisation after the 1920s had provided the backbone for an influential labour movement as more and



more people were employed in ever-larger companies.⁶⁵ Moreover, the emergence of the Tudeh Party encouraged the creation of unions and the establishment of the United Central Council of Unified Trade Unions of Iranian Workers (CUCTU), an umbrella organisation of different worker organisations.⁶⁶

Thus, by the middle of the past century, workers amassed substantial associational power in the sphere of politics, as well as the spheres of exchange and production. Even though workers made use of their disruptive power through various strikes, they were divided by diverse modes of production with a highly industrialised oil sector, but most people were employed in non-industrial sectors.⁶⁷

Strikes of oil workers also played an important role in the appointment of Mossadegh and the following move towards oil nationalisation.⁶⁸ However, after the 1953 coup d'état, mass organisations through labour unions ended were repressed, and in 1957 all labour unions were outlawed again.⁶⁹ Eventually, labour unions were allowed once again, but only if the Ministry of Labour licensed them, and subsequently, a General Iranian Labour Union was formed,

headed by the Minister of Labour.⁷⁰ Even though worker organisations were put under government control, various strikes continued throughout the 1970s.⁷¹ Eventually, however, the national strikes that substantially contributed to the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 did form rather spontaneously and were not based on a coherent organisation.⁷² Moreover, especially the participation of oil workers and the loss of the most important asset of the regime had enabled its fall.⁷³

Immediately after the Iranian Revolution, workers took control of some enterprises and formed worker councils, as no official rules existed anymore on how to organise those businesses.⁷⁴ However, within two years after the revolution, the left that had protected workers' interests was removed from the political realm, and subsequently, all independent worker organisations were eliminated during the reign of prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi (1981-1989).⁷⁵ Worker councils were replaced by Islamic Labour Councils and again put under state authority to control a potential labour movement.⁷⁶

The following sections will focus on the individual power resources that workers may mobilise – after all independent worker organisations had vanished in the process of



power consolidation of the newly created Islamic Republic of Iran during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988).

After this paper has introduced its theoretical framework and the case of Iran, it utilises the established analytical categories to analyse to what extent Iranian workers can mobilise power resources to resist socioeconomic insecurities.

State Controlled Worker Organisations and the Exclusion of Workers from the Labour Code

This section will focus on institutional power resources and the existing institutionalised norms that represent the current state of labour relations and shape the spaces in which labour actions occur. Due to the lack of access to international labour standards, it focuses on the Iranian Labour Code as the primary source of workers' institutional power.

According to the ILO, 62 Conventions have not been ratified by the Islamic Republic of Iran, among them: the “Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention” (C087), the “Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining

Convention” (C098), and the “Minimum Age Convention” (C138).⁷⁷ Therefore, Iranian workers cannot use major international labour standards to protect their interests domestically.

The labour code of the Islamic Republic of Iran came into existence in 1990.⁷⁸ However, it prohibits collective action and bargaining by workers and does not allow them to establish independent worker organisations.⁷⁹

According to section 131.4 of the labour code, workers can “establish an Islamic Labour Council, a guild society or workers' representatives”.⁸⁰ Even though the right to organise exists in those three specific cases, unemployed workers have no right to legal organisation.⁸¹ Moreover, the right to organise is severely limited for employed workers as well. Workplaces with less than ten workers are legally not allowed to set up worker organisations, and workers in large public enterprises are often prevented from establishing Islamic Labour Councils as well, as they would need the approval of the High Labour Council.⁸² As at least 50 per cent of workers are employed in workplaces with less than ten workers, most Iranians are unable to make use of any official worker organisation.⁸³



However, besides these restrictions on the organisation of workers, neither the Islamic Labour Councils nor Guild Societies are mere organisations of workers but include representatives of their employers as well.⁸⁴ In addition, worker candidates must be authorised by the Ministry of Labour, which also supervises the elections of Islamic Labour Councils and Guild Societies.⁸⁵ Hence, those worker organisations function as political tools that prevent individuals critical of the regime and those not following any officially recognised religions from being elected.⁸⁶ Moreover, the potential of women to exert influence in those organisations is limited, and their activities are often impeded.⁸⁷

As a result, no official worker organisation exists that is designed to represent and protect workers' interests. While most workers do not have any right to organise, those that do are put under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and their employers.

The lack of institutional power also manifests itself in the exemption of large parts of the workforce from the benefits and protection clauses of the labour code. According to section 191, companies with less than ten employees can be exempt from parts of the

labour code.⁸⁸ Even though this section of the labour code had not been enacted until the turn of the century, it has lost its temporary character and is withholding protections of the labour code not only to small-scale enterprises but also to those that circumvent the labour law by only legally employing a small number of workers.⁸⁹ Thus, like the restrictions on forming state-dependent worker organisations, it is estimated that more than half of the workforce is unable to benefit from the protections of the labour code.⁹⁰

This section has shown that workers' institutional power is severely restricted and diminishes workers' associational power and the space in which legal labour actions can occur. More than half of the total workforce is excluded from parts of the labour code. Additionally, workers lack the legal possibility to organise independently from state control and, therefore, any possibility to represent their interests collectively. However, many workers who can utilise institutional power resources have pro-regime sentiments and are authorised to represent workers' interests. At the same time, the state discretion in appointment procedures of candidates for workers' representation results in the discrimination of



large numbers of workers and aims to control potential labour activities critical to the regime.

Structural Power and the Pursuit of a Neoliberal Ideal

The structural power of Iranian workers arises from workers' positions within the economic system.⁹¹ After briefly discussing Iran's neoliberal turn, this section focuses on how the pursuit of neoliberal policies influences workers' work- and marketplace bargaining power.

Neoliberalism is a term used to describe a political and economic theory maintaining "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade".⁹² The state establishes this institutional framework, uses privatisations and deregulations, and reduces its social services.⁹³ The Islamic Republic of Iran has embraced neoliberal policies in conformity with worldwide tendencies since the late 1980s.⁹⁴ However, because this takes place in an authoritarian context with specific

characteristics, it has also been labelled "authoritarian neoliberalism".⁹⁵

Even though privatisation processes occur,⁹⁶ the regime still dominates the economy through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the bonyâds, and the Supreme Leader Khamenei.⁹⁷ In particular, the private sector offers most work opportunities, but this is not reflected in Iran's GDP; instead, "most capital-intensive sectors remain under state control (above all the energy and petrochemical industries), while most labor-intensive ones are relegated to the private sector".⁹⁸

Although a new upper class had formed during the first ten years of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this did not result in any improvement for workers in terms of welfare or rights, for which they strove during the revolution.⁹⁹ In contrast, under Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), this newly established "economic upper class" was favoured and allowed to accumulate capital, while the needs of workers were neglected.¹⁰⁰ Even though workers were supposed to be served by the "trickling down effect", this did not come into effect as ruling



elites were able to dominate employers, who in turn dominated employees.¹⁰¹

In the following, key developments will be discussed that shape the market- and workplace bargaining power of Iranian workers.

Section 7.2 of the Iranian Labour Code provides the legal opportunity for employers to specify the time of employment which led to a rapid increase in temporary contracts.¹⁰² Even though temporary work at first remained rare, it mushroomed after temporary contracts were allowed to be extended indefinitely in 1995.¹⁰³ As a result, about 80 per cent of all Iranian workers now have temporary contracts.¹⁰⁴ The use of temporary contracts drastically reduces workers' bargaining power as most workers can now be dismissed at almost any time and have a low degree of security of employment while strengthening the position of employers.¹⁰⁵

In addition, it has become common practice for employers to commission private contractors to hire workers, which provides them with favourable contracts while cutting legal ties with their employees.¹⁰⁶ In this “triangular employment relationship”, a vast

proportion of work is now outsourced, and many employees are no longer employed directly by their employer.¹⁰⁷ While the employer provides working conditions, legal complaints and actions must be directed to these third parties that often maintain close links with elites responsible for decision- and policymaking.¹⁰⁸ Hence, the bargaining power of workers hired through private contractors has decreased, as they lack the privity of contracts with their employers.¹⁰⁹

Moreover, many workers were previously hired by the state, for example, the Ministry of Oil, yet, “the oil ministry now hires private contractors, who then employ workers on a temporary basis without the benefits and insurances granted to state employees and without the protections afforded by the labor laws that apply to permanent employees”.¹¹⁰ While in 1986 approximately 31 per cent of workers were employed by the state, this decreased to about 24 per cent in 2006.¹¹¹ The number of workers that enjoy relative protection under the state has thus been reduced, and many have been released into a disputed labour market.¹¹²

While these and other policies since the 1990s can be cumulatively labelled as a neoliberal turn, they have functioned to



decrease the overall bargaining power of workers at the workplace as well as in the labour market and led to increasing socioeconomic insecurities. At the same time, they have increased the power resources of employers.

Marketplace Bargaining Power

The marketplace bargaining power of workers is also shaped by the overall deteriorating economic situation in Iran and, most recently, its problems in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Iran's economic recession, caused by, *inter alia*, decreasing exports, a spike in inflation, and decreasing currency values,¹¹³ negatively affects workers' bargaining power while increasing their socioeconomic insecurities. The purchasing power of workers has declined,¹¹⁴ and it is estimated that about 50 per cent of workers are threatened by poverty.¹¹⁵

Looking at the long-term trend, the marketplace bargaining power is undermined by pulling people out of society's traditional agricultural and manufactural organisation, thus making them wage-dependent to make a living. In 2011, the agricultural sector made up about 18.6 per cent of the total workforce, while 33.4 per cent were working in the

industrial sector, and 48 per cent were in the service sector.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, especially young people lack employment opportunities. In 2018, the unemployment rate was about 12 per cent, but in the age group between 15 and 24 years about 28 per cent were unemployed.¹¹⁷ Although approximately 18 per cent of the population has achieved higher education¹¹⁸ – marking a massive proliferation since the revolution – many lack proper employment.¹¹⁹ In total, around 2,5 million graduates remain unemployed.¹²⁰ The rapid expanse of tertiary education and the pursuit of a neoliberal ideal thus meet the failure to provide corresponding employment opportunities, creating what has also been referred to as “middle-class poor”.¹²¹ However, even though people might have different aspirations, the marketplace bargaining power of the middle-class poor remains limited. Moreover, the oversupply of highly educated workers increases competition and limits the marketplace bargaining power of those that were able to get a job that corresponds to their aspirations.

To sum up, the marketplace bargaining power of most Iranian workers is low, even though some workers will have acquired



specific qualifications that raise their bargaining power, for example, in the petrochemical industries.

Workplace Bargaining Power

Taking the contract status as an indicator, many Iranian workers also have limited workplace bargaining power. Most workers are only employed temporarily and can be discretionarily dismissed at almost any time. Many are also hired through private contractors that cut legal ties with their employers. As most workplaces consist of fewer than ten workers, their power to disrupt entire supply chains is usually low. Despite constrained power resources, several occupational groups have utilised their disruptive power over the past decades. Labour actions occurred predominantly in the service and non-industrial sectors, as the cases of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Workers Syndicate, and the Syndicate of Khabbaz workers show.¹²² But these labour actions were met with repression rather than forcing their employers or the state to negotiate and make significant concessions, indicating that their bargaining power remains low.

However, in recent years strikes have also spread to major industrial plants. Yet, as the example of the 2021 oil strikes illustrates, substantial structural power differences between permanent and contract or temporary workers exist. These imbalances divide the workforce as different grievances and interests impede collective actions and the ability to raise unified demands.

Approximately 70 per cent of about 250,000 workers in the oil sector are hired through private contractors, and about 10,000 of them participated in strikes that started in June 2021.¹²³ While strikes continued without achieving substantial concessions, the Ministry of Oil responded by stating that the issues and demands should be directed to their contract companies.¹²⁴ Permanent workers did not participate but had announced their own protests; in contrast, state officials quickly agreed to their demands for wage increases.¹²⁵

This section argued that the pursuit of neoliberal policies within an autocratic environment coincided with decreasing workplace and marketplace bargaining power for most workers. However, it has also highlighted that while permanently employed workers have higher bargaining power than



temporary or contract workers, they are less inclined to use their disruptive power as they are not as affected by socioeconomic insecurities and can also make use of the protections of the labour code. In contrast, temporary and contract workers, as well as the unemployed, more often experience poverty and have issues getting by daily but lack structural power resources that would force employers or the state into making concessions. Hence, the regime tries to co-opt the parts of the workforce that occupy critical positions in the economy and are vital for the most value-generating, state-controlled sectors (e.g., permanent workers in the oil sector). At the same time, the regime suppresses those it deems redundant. Nevertheless, workers are able to mobilise their limited structural power to engage in labour actions. However, low structural power coincides with the persistence of state-controlled worker organisations and reduces workers' ability to officially question state policies. As a consequence, this may contribute to their increasing socioeconomic insecurities.

The Struggle for Independent Worker Organisations

The previous sections have shown that, on the one side, the favouring of employers over workers led to increased socioeconomic insecurities and decreased bargaining power for most of the workforce. On the other side, workers' lack of institutional power resources leads to severe restrictions on their associational power, as the freedom of organisation and association is absent. Associational power has been identified as the capacity to mobilise workers for collective actions.¹²⁶ This paper argues that, despite these restrictions, workers nonetheless have and could use their associational power by establishing unofficial worker organisations that challenge the monopoly of state-controlled worker organisations. For this purpose, this section discusses the re-emergence of independent worker organisations during the early 2000s. The cases of teachers and bus drivers will provide examples of how workers could rely on their associational power to mobilise their disruptive power.

Even though several small-scale strikes took place during the 1990s, more organised labour actions started to occur in the early



2000s, after the Reformist Movement under Khatami (1997-2005) was unable to achieve substantial changes concerning workers' rights and protections. Teachers, mostly women, organised the first large-scale labour actions in 21st century Iran.¹²⁷ Due to being positioned outside the private sector and being assigned the responsibility of educational matters that affect and directly impact most of the population, teachers possess high structural power. Teachers can also affect the economy at large by using their disruptive power, as pupils must be cared for.

In 2001, several thousand teachers were demonstrating for equal pay, standardised promotion policies, and higher education budgets.¹²⁸ In the following years, demonstrations turned into strikes and culminated in a one-week work stoppage in 2003; consequently, about 400 schools had to close in Tehran alone.¹²⁹ However, after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) came into office and the reformist period under Khatami had lost ground, teachers initially abstained from mobilising their disruptive power and instead turned to writing petitions as they feared the repression of conservative forces.¹³⁰ Following several demonstrations

since 2007, many participants received wage cuts, got sacked, or were imprisoned.¹³¹

After the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, the suppression of organised workers increased, even though the campaign presented him “as the defender of the poor and the working class”.¹³² Hence, workers' dissatisfaction was not only based on increased socioeconomic insecurities (e.g., low wages and reduced employment securities) but also on the gap between the political rhetoric and the subsequent performance.¹³³

Nevertheless, collective labour actions also occurred in other sectors. The example of Tehran bus drivers highlights the struggle of workers to establish independent worker organisations and how the regime tries to limit workers' associational power through various means. Yet, like teachers, bus drivers can use their high structural power if they act collectively – their capacity to disrupt public transportation has also been referred to as “logistical power”.¹³⁴

In 2005, Tehran bus drivers, mechanics, and service workers illegally re-established the Syndicate of Workers of the United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs— a worker



organisation that dates back to 1967 but was outlawed and substituted with an Islamic Labour Council in 1983.¹³⁵ More than 9,000 workers out of a total workforce of 17,000 signed a petition demanding the replacement of the Islamic Labour Council with their Syndicate.¹³⁶ However, the Syndicate immediately got opposed, inter alia, by the bus company and the Islamic Labour Councils.¹³⁷ In their struggle for better pay and against poor living conditions, members of the Syndicate refused to collect money for bus tickets.¹³⁸ Subsequently, several members were arrested, and the Syndicate's office was closed.¹³⁹ Aimed at achieving the release of those imprisoned, a bus drivers' strike in early 2006 eventually led to a severe crackdown and the arrest of more than 500 of the 2,000 participants, while the Bus Company had also fired many.¹⁴⁰

The case of the Syndicate not only emphasises the government repression of independent worker organisations but also that they must balance the potential gains that emerge from cooperation with international worker organisations (e.g., mobilising resources or exerting discursive pressure) with the potential drawbacks that occur domestically. Shortly after the Syndicate had been established, it became a member of the

“International Transport Federation”.¹⁴¹ After its president, Mansour Osanloo, had returned from the “International Trade Union Congress” in 2007, he was charged with “propaganda” and “activities against the state” and punished with a five-year prison term.¹⁴² Hence, cooperation with “Western” worker organisations may discredit domestic labour activities by branding them as relations with “enemies” of the state.

These two cases mark the beginning of a new movement in which workers aim to organise themselves independently from the state and their employers. Even though labour activists have been charged and imprisoned or fired by their employers, various other independent worker organisations were formed in the following years. Notable examples include the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Workers Syndicate, which got re-established in 2008 after 2,500 workers unsuccessfully tried to petition for the dismantling and replacement of the Islamic Labour Council with its preceding Syndicate from 1974, and the Kermanshah Electrical and Metal Workers Trade Society.¹⁴³

To sum up, workers were able to mobilise their associational power and engage in collective actions despite severe restrictions.



Moreover, in response to socioeconomic insecurities and the lack of interest representation in state-controlled worker organisations, multiple independent worker organisations were formed. However, the state responded by mobilising its power resources to prevent these unofficial organisations of workers. As such, they are forced to operate covertly and have limited organisational capacities. While the severe state repression limits their ability to attract member participation, the increasing association of workers also highlights the severity of economic insecurities.

Moving Towards an Intersectional Alliance?

The previous section has argued that workers were able to amass associational power by creating independent organisations that challenge the state monopoly on worker organisations. Building upon this finding, this section will discuss the societal power of workers. For this purpose, it first discusses the coalitional power resources of workers before turning to the analysis of their discursive power.

Coalitional Power

Even though several independent worker organisations have been established since the early 2000s, they initially lacked national cooperation.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, when the Green Movement, led by the middle class, formed in response to the 2009 election and demanded democratic reforms, most workers did not participate.¹⁴⁵

Nevertheless, on the first of May 2010, basic demands were for the first time jointly stated by ten independent worker organisations, among them, the Syndicate of Workers of Teheran and Suburbs Bus Company, the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Workers Syndicate, and the Kermanshah Electrical and Metal Workers Trade Society.¹⁴⁶ Their demands did not only address worker-related issues, like “the formation of independent labor organizations, the right to strike, immediate payment of unpaid wages, and an end to worker lay-offs and to white-signed and temporary contracts”, *but they also stated socio-political demands like the* “freedom of expression for all Iranians and an end to capital punishment and discriminatory laws against women”.¹⁴⁷ Hence, these worker organisations have tried to connect with the women and student movements, as well as



international worker organisations, to mobilise them in the pursuit of socioeconomic security.¹⁴⁸ Even though differences between workers' interests persist, many have also determined that democratic reforms are needed to create social justice.¹⁴⁹

Moreover, the mid-2021 strikes in oil, gas, and petrochemical industries emphasise not only the inner divisions between workers but also their increasing associational and societal power. The strikes by contract and temporary workers result from increasing national coordination and shared demands and grievances among large parts of Iranian workers.¹⁵⁰ As labour actions repeatedly occurred during the past years, workers were able to learn from prior struggles and established a coordination committee, which led to dispersed strikes in more than 100 industrial plants throughout the country.¹⁵¹ The societal support strikers received through statements from various domestic and international groups, including the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Workers Syndicate, had been unprecedented.¹⁵² Nevertheless, while permanent workers of the oil industry also stated their support, they did not join the

strikes of contract and temporary workers.¹⁵³ Thus, the structural power differences between permanent and contract/temporary workers translate into obstacles for cooperation and negatively affect their coalitional power.

The possibilities for workers to mobilise other parts of society remain limited, but during the past decade, workers were able to improve their societal power through increasing cooperation between different worker organisations and by reaching out to other social movements.

Discursive Power

The official narrative about workers changed fundamentally after the revolution and limited the discursive space of workers.¹⁵⁴ However, the far-reaching statements in support of recent strikes widen workers' discursive space and challenge the discursive power of the state. As a result, this might contribute to convincing other parts of society of what they perceive as unjust treatment and mobilise them for their issues.

Moreover, to challenge hegemonic discourses, shape public perceptions, and reach out to society, workers have also used the language of the state to highlight its



inconsistencies.¹⁵⁵ In their struggle to increase the minimum wage, workers incorporated official data in their discourse even though they were aware of its flaws and alternative measures about the cost of living were available.¹⁵⁶ Yet, by utilising the official data, they can exert pressure by raising demands that are likely to be perceived as more legitimate and may reduce the likelihood of state repression.¹⁵⁷ Thus, even though workers' discursive power is limited, they can challenge hegemonic discourses. Moreover, the mobilisation of discursive power has become a central practice. However, instead of direct opposition, many workers subtly defy official discourses by utilising their accounts.¹⁵⁸

In a nutshell, workers could increase their limited societal power resources through increased cooperation between different worker organisations and by reaching out to various other social movements during the past decade. However, different interests and grievances limit the ability of workers to cooperate with other social groups and with each other.

Summary of Results and Conclusion

This paper was concerned with the power resources that Iranian workers may mobilise to resist socioeconomic insecurities. For this purpose, it utilised the Power Resources Approach and took its four categories of labour power to analyse the case of workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This section will discuss the central findings and provides some concluding remarks.

The socioeconomic insecurities that affect many Iranian workers are associated with neoliberal reforms in an autocratic environment, the overall deteriorating economic situation, and the lack of available channels through which workers and civil society at large could influence decision-making procedures. While employers and, as such, often elites related to the political regime have benefited from various laws and policies, many workers find themselves exposed to a vicious cycle that challenges them to make ends meet daily.

The structural power of workers was found to be primarily influenced by an increase in temporary contracts, private contracting, and privatisation processes. It is also shaped by



the economic crisis, which is marked by rising inflation, unemployment, and the lack of proper employment for university graduates. Accordingly, many workers' market- and workplace bargaining power has decreased as their employment security declined. As a result, most workers have only limited disruptive power. However, in the absence of alternative channels to raise demands and defend their interests, structural power is currently the most important source of power as it enables workers to raise attention to their hardships. Nevertheless, most labour actions could not force employers or the state into making significant concessions. Moreover, neoliberal policies have also divided the workforce and resulted in significant power differences between permanent and contract or temporary workers. Therefore, recent labour actions of temporary and contract workers did not threaten Iranian oil production, as they could be absorbed by permanent workers who are less inclined to utilise their disruptive power.

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that workers' institutional power is severely restricted by excluding most Iranian workers from the protection clauses of the labour code and prohibiting independent worker organisations. The legal framework

constrains workers' structural, associational, and societal power resources because the state uses its executive power to enforce the labour code and cracks down on independent worker organisations and labour activists.

Nevertheless, this paper argued that socioeconomic insecurities and the lack of a legal framework that would provide opportunities for workers to defend their interests have contributed to the re-emergence of independent worker organisations, which aim to challenge the marginalisation of workers and the state monopoly on worker organisations. Even though workers' lack of institutional power narrows their space for collective action, workers could develop their associational and societal power resources by increasing cooperation and reaching out to larger parts of society. In this way, workers aim to acquire institutional power resources that would guarantee the representation and protection of their interests. At the same time, state repression and the persistence of different interests and grievances limit workers' ability to cooperate with other social groups and with each other.

However, the Islamic Republic of Iran seems to lack the capacity to address existing



socioeconomic grievances and has proved unable to provide significant reforms from above, as indicated by the failures of the Reformist Movement under Khatami and its present lack of political reach. Consequently, workers' increasing organisation and cooperation mark a significant challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran and workers' use of disruptive power may threaten its survival. Meanwhile, the emergence of relatively unorganised protests and strikes that led to its formation has shown that no large-scale national organisation of workers and other social groups is necessarily needed to bring about revolutionary changes



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