Iranian oil workers struck at the end of 1978 (top left). And then Khomeini got the oil workers to end their strike (top right). Khomeini becomes an icon (bottom left). Celebrating seven years of the Islamic Republic (bottom right).

Revolution and counter-revolution 1978-9

IRAN
How Iranian workers toppled a dictator

The Iranian revolution 1978-79 was one of the seminal events of the twentieth century, rich in lessons for working-class socialists. It is a story of class struggle, female self-assertion and the awakening of national minorities. The Iranian workers were the decisive force behind the toppling of the hated regime of Mohammed Reza Shah. Yet this movement was smashed by the theocracy that took the place of the monarchy. That Islamic state ruled by clerics has been a catastrophe for workers, for women and the oppressed. The events had huge repercussions for the politics of the Middle East and the world.

In a three part article Paul Hampton tells the story.

MOHAMMED Reza Shah became the ruler of Iran after his father (Reza Shah, who founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1921) was forced to abdicate by the Allies in 1941. Then he too was sidelined in 1952 by nationalists led by Mossadegh. In 1953, backed by the CIA, the Shah’s dictatorship was restored in a military coup. Fueled by oil reserves and repression, the Shah backed some state-sponsored industrial development and land reform, with dramatic economic consequences. Between 1950 and 1978, according to OECD figures, GDP increased nine-fold while GDP per capita increased four-fold. In 1962 industrial workers made up about 20% of the total workforce. By 1977, 33% of the workforce was in industrial activities (2.38 million were waged workers. Most wage workers were directly involved in industrial activities (2.38 million) and were denied their national, language and cultural rights.

By 1977, 33% of the workforce was in industrial activities (2.38 million were waged workers. Most wage workers were directly involved in industrial activities (2.38 million), such as manufacturing, mining, construction, utilities, transport and communications. However many workers were directly involved in industrial activities (2.38 million were waged workers. Most wage workers were directly involved in industrial activities (2.38 million). The Shah also set up SAVAK-run unions known as syndicates. According to Assaf Bayat, when the state formed the Organisation of Iranian Workers in 1970, there were 845 syndicates and 20 trade unions with three million members. In the mid-1970s, after a brief oil boom, the economy began to falter. Members of all classes began to challenge the Shah and it became clear that his rule was under threat.

The opposition

THE Shah was unable to create an adequate social base for his regime. In fact he faced an array of opponents. Firstly, the working class a third of which was concentrated in large plants and a few major cities, notably in Tehran. But workers were politically atomised, lacking independent representation and able to organise only secretly in individual workplaces.

Secondly the national minorities. Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis, Qashqais and Turkmans constituted at least a third of the population of Iran and lived mainly in the countryside. They suffered regular repression at the hands of the regime and were denied their national, language and cultural rights. There was an armed rebellion in Iran Kurdistan between 1967 and 1969.

Thirdly, the minority Sunni Muslims, as well as Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais, who suffered religious oppression. Fourthly, there were also sections of the bourgeoisie, middle class students and intellectuals opposed to the regime. Some were members of the National Front, the party of Mossadegh. Others were members of the Liberation Movement of Iran, founded in 1963.

Others took part in left-wing guerrilla movements from the 1960s. The most notable group was the Organisation of Iranian People’s Fadaiyan Guerrillas, known as the Fadaiyan, the result of a fusion between earlier guerrilla organisations, which began military attacks on installations and leading figures in the regime in 1971.

The Organisation of Iranian People’s Mujahedin (Marxist-Leninist), known as the Marxist Mujahedin was born out of a Muslim organisation of the same name in 1975. The Tudeh (Communist) Party, had little organised presence in Iran for most of the 1970s, with apparently only one branch functioning before 1979 (Maziar Behzad, Rebels with a Cause). All of these organisations were heavily influenced by Stalinism, either by particular states such as the USSR, China and Albania, or by its theories of two stage revolution, dependency, “anti-imperialism” etc.

Finally, the most visible group opposing the Shah were the mullahs and the bazaar. Both the clergy and the bazaar had undermined his rule. But the social force that turned their challenge into a real threat was the Iranian working-class movement.

The overthrow of the Shah

M OST accounts of the overthrow of the Shah emphasise the role of intellectuals and of the clergy in undermining his rule. But the social force that led the movement to overthrow the Shah and ultimately replaced him.

In June 1977 police were sent in to clear shun in south Tehran. Thousands of the urban poor clashed with the police for weeks, refusing to allow the bulldozers to take place. On 27 August 1977, 50,000 demonstrators drove the bulldozers and the police from their streets, forcing the regime to abandon its plans. This was the first successful mass protest against the Shah since the 1950s and showed that the regime could be defeated.

After years of industrial peace, workers in modern factories began to assert themselves. In July 1977 workers set fire to the General Motors plant in Tehran. Over the following three months there were over 100 more fires, in what was one of the largest workplaces in the country. Intellectual and religious opposition became more assertive. In November 1977 writers, lawyers and poets began public readings. The following month anti-government demonstrations began to mount. It began with a call by Ayatollah Khomeini for the overthrow of the Shah in December 1977.

Khomeini was able to develop his own forces outside Iran to keep his message alive — for example using cassette tapes smuggled into the country. Crucially he developed his ideas on the kind of state he wanted to replace the Shah with.

Religious demonstrations started in the holy city of Qom in December 1977. The demonstration for who was killed. Khomeini called for 40 days of mourning, to be followed by another demonstration, sparking a cycle of protest where repression was turned into a reason to march again. These religious-inspired protests, mobilising the petty bourgeoisie from the bazaar and the lumpenproletariat, continued through spring and summer 1978. As Ramy Nima points out, “The upheavals from October 1977 to June 1978 rarely involved the industrial working class, the urban poor or the newly recruited ‘migrant’ workers; and only seven major strikes were reported during this period” (The Wrath of Allah).

The industrial working class moves

If this point, the industrial working class imposed itself — although mainly for its own economic interests rather than for wider social and political goals. In March 1978 workers at the Abadan oil plant in south Iran went on strike against redundancies. In the same month six hundred gardeners employed in the oil industry stopped work demanding a pay rise. In April, 2,000 workers in the brick industry in Tabriz came out (Bayat).

As Nima puts it: “By mid-summer 1977 the situation had drastically changed; the number of strikes rose sharply as the economic crisis deepened, real wages fell and the number of unemployed increased. As the regime’s campaign against high wages and low labour productivity took effect, the working class entered the arena of struggle.”

The first wave of strikes in June 1978 was still mainly concerned with economic issues, especially bonus payments, overtime and wages. Water workers and some industrial unions in Tehran also stopped work. From July to September, the number of strikes multiplied. In Abadan, 600 sanitation workers demanding 20 per cent wage increases, annual bonuses and a health insurance scheme went on strike in early July. Towards the end of July, over 1,750 textile workers at Behbahan struck. As Nima points out, “the wave of strikes captured the nature of the state unions and demanded free elections for union representatives.”

In August a number of strikes took place in Tabriz, the most important of which was that of 2,000 or so workers at the main wheat flour factory. The strikes lasted out of two weeks demanding higher wages, annual bonuses, as well as better housing and social conditions. In September workers came out in a number of major strikes in Tehran, in the provinces of Fars and in Khuzestan, particularly the city of Ahvaz. car assembly plants, such as SADACO, factories, paper mills all became scenes of struggle.”

The religious mobilisations and the industrial struggles began to shake the regime. The Shah’s response was to increase the rate of repression. He declared martial law and then ordered troops to attack a demonstration in Tehran on 8 September 1978, known as “Black Friday”, when thousands were killed. 

Now that the regime and the country had been shown the way forward, the workers became much more militant. As Nima writes: “In June 1979 the Shah was forced to abandon his plans for a coup, and the army immediately asked the Shah to return to Iran.” It was later that the Shah would be deposed by the people of Iran.
The working class takes political action

A wounded demonstrator, autumn 1978

The response of workers was to take industrial action, both for their own immediate interests but also for social and political ones. Nima again describes the events vividly: “On 9 September about 700 workers at the Tehran oil refinery struck not, as previously, just for higher wages, but as a protest against the imposition of martial law and the massacre of demonstrators. Two days later, on 11 September, the strike, the strike had spread to the oil refineries of Isfahan, Abadan, Tabriz and Shiraz. On 12 September, 4,000 green workers at the Isfahan pipe factory went on strike. On 13 September, cement workers in Tehran went on strike demanding higher wages, freedom for all political prisoners, and the ending of martial law. The wave of strikes hit most towns and cities: cement workers in Tabbehan, bus drivers in Kermanshah, workers at the tobacco factory in Gorgan, teachers, bank employees, and even workers in some of the luxury hotels (including, for example, the Tehran Hilton).

Assaf Bayat, author of the most detailed book in English on the role of workers in Iran during this period, reported that, “According to the available data, in recorded strikes (fewer than the real number) at least some 35,000 workers at different factories stopped work in September, putting forward both economic and political demands, organising demonstrations and releasing resolutions.”

But in October the situation was transformed. As Bayat puts it: “When 40,000 oil-workers, 40,000 steel-workers, 30,000 rail workers had put down their tools within three weeks, the dynamism of the revolutionary process changed dramatically.”

Bayat cited the liberal newspaper Ayandegan reports from the front:

“On 6 October alone railway-workers in Zahedan, 40,000 steel-workers in Isfahan, workers in the copper-mines of Sar Cheshmeh and Rafsanjan, at Abadan Petrochemical, at Isfahan Post and Telegraph Company and all the branches of the Bank of Shahriar went on strike. The day after was the same: all the refineries, the Royal Air Services, the Kiamis factory in Ray, the customs officers in Jolfa, the Department of Navigation and Port Affairs of Bandar Shapour, Tractor Suazi in Tabriz, radio and TV stations in Rezayeh, 80 industrial units in Isfahan, a steel-mill in Balg, employees of the judiciary throughout the country and the employers of the Finance Department in Maragheh joined in. The next day was the turn of the Zamyad plant in Tehran, General Motors, the Plan and Budget Organisation and the railway-workers in Zahedan (again). The next day (11 October 1978) the largest daily newspapers went on strike. The Canada Dry factory, the ports and shipyards in Khorramshahr, the Iran Kavosh plant, the fisheries of Bandar Shahpur, Minos factory, Vian Shire plant, Gher Ghore-iz Zba, all workers. Nima again describes, 2,000 brick-makers in Tabriz, oil-workers in Abadan and Ahwaz, in the pipe plant and Machin Suazi in Shiraz, 40,000 workers of Behshar Industrial Group throughout the country, bus-drivers in Rezay and communications workers in Kermanshah joined the strike in rapid succession.”

The most important strikes in October were those in the oil industry, which were organised by militant strike committees. Nima described how, “The two leaders in Kianpar was elected by the strike committee to organise the strike and link the struggles of workers in the oil fields with the urban centres. The situation was tense and the administration did not want a strike. Their political demands, formulated on 29 October, included the abolition of martial law, freedom for political prisoners, and the dissolution of SAVAK. Oil production was completely stopped. At the important oil terminal of Kharg Island, dock workers and other employees had joined the strike, halting all movement of oil off the island. A number of unsuccessful attempts were made to end the strike and finally the army was used to force the strikers back to work.”

Mariam Poya described some notable elements of these struggles. Customs workers allowed the entry of medicines, baby food and paper. Tobacco workers came out against the import of American products. Coal miners struck in support of teachers and students.

“Every few days a new section of the workforce came out on strike or joined the strikes demonstrations and protests. Every night for an hour communication workers blacked out the regime’s radio and TV propaganda. Railway workers refused to allow police and army officers to travel by train. Atomic energy workers struck, declaring their industry had been imposed on Iran by the great powers in the interests of nuclear war rather than creative industry. The Russian-built steel complex was completely shut down. Just about every industrial establishment was closed, with the exception of gas, telephones and electricity: here workers explained they were continuing to work to serve the public, but that they supported the strikes and demonstrations to overthrow the regime. Dockers and seamen only offloaded foodstuffs, medical supplies and paper required for political activity.” (Iran 1979, in Cohn Bardak ed, Revolutionary Rehearsals)

The workers’ programme

The role of the clergy

Although it was the power of the working class that brought the Shah to his knees, it was not working class organisations that led the overall opposition movement. Adams, writing on the events vividly: “Hanging of American puppet, ‘Arms for the people’ and ‘The Shah must go’, were secular, the organisation of protests was in the hands of Khomeini supporters.”

As Bayat put it: “While the workers indeed controlled all revolutionary activities within the workplaces, they did not and could not exert their leadership upon the mass movement as a whole. This leadership role was none other than Khomeini and the leadership associated with him.”

Khomeini’s followers had nurtured a well-organised network of cadres throughout the country, especially in the urban centres. Throughout the struggle the mosques received funds from the bazaars, which were used for political ends. Nima describes the social forces behind the religious leaders:

“No other opposition organisation could muster a network of 180,000 members with 90,000 cadres (miqtads), some 50 leaders (ayatollahs), 5,000 ‘officers’ (middle clergy), 11,000 theological students and a whole mass of ordinary members such as Islamic teachers, merchants, the oil strike committee rebuffed proposals by Khomeini’s representative Bazargan (later his first prime minister) to call off the strikes and simply stop exports. (Campaign Against Repression in Iran, The Iranian Workers’ Movement) According to Poya, some oil workers sent an open letter to Khomeini, expressing their support but also demanding workers’ participation in the future government.”

It is notable for example that the oil workers’ demands did not include the call for an Islamic Republic. Adams described the development of shuras (factory councils) from the beginning of 1979 showed, there was a clash of interests between the clerical leaders and the workers’ movements — and the potential for an independent working class struggle against both the Shah and the new theocratic regime.”

“Could the nature of Khomeini’s rule have been foreseen? It was clear from the slogans used on demonstrations (such as ‘Victory to the just rule of Islam’, ‘Death or the veil’ — in Tabriz in February 1978). It was clear also from the book burnings, attacks on cinemas had a reactionary rationale — for example in a campaign against a bank because it had a Bahai capitalist as a shareholder. (Workers’ Action 24 November 1978)”

Khomeini’s made it clear that he was hostile to the left. In Le Monde 6 May 1978, he said: “We will not collaborate with Marxists, even in order to overthrow the Shah and to destroy their ideology that they always stab us in the back. If they came to power, they would establish a dictatorial regime contrary to the spirit of Islam.”

But it was also clear from his writings that he was in entrench on theocratic rule. In particular Khomeini formulated the idea of Velayat-e Faqih, the vice regency or government of Islamic jurisprudence. In his 1949 book Fatwa, he argued that the legal governments are the Islamic jurisprudents themselves” (Bakhsh, The Reign of the Ayatollahs)

In short, had the left been paying attention, there were obvious signs about the kind of regime Khomeni wanted to create.
Workers' self-organisation

In the old state began to crumble, working class people took control of the basic societal functions — most importantly set up shuras (councils) in workplaces. These shuras took many forms — in Tehran alone there were as many as a thousand — and in the first months of 1979 they thrived (CARI).

As Maryam Poya put it: “Strikes committees in all the factories, installations, offices, schools, universities and other workplaces re-formed and began to function as shuras (committees). The membership of the shuras was made up mainly of supporters of the guerrilla organisations but also included local clergy and other fanatical supporters of the idea of an Islamic republic. Among the national minorities power fell into the hands of their local shuras.”

The shuras’ shuras were factory committees, shop floor organisations whose executive committee represented all workers in the factory or industrial group. They also elected sub-committees for particular tasks, such as workers’ control of work. Bayat argues that the ‘successful shuras were those which exerted full control over and ran the workplace without any effective control on the part of the officially appointed managers. Their politics and activities were independent of the state and the official managers and were based upon the interest of the rank and file workers.’

In the best examples — such as the Fanoos and Iran Car factories — there was a continuous contact between the shura and the rank and file. The result of any activity or negotiations with any authority would be reported to the workers. This form of rank-and-file intervention reduced the bureaucratic ‘tendency’ (Bayat).

Bayat argues that in the period from February to August 1979, workers ‘waged a struggle independent from, and at times directly against, the [clerical] leaders of the revolution’. He suggests that workers did not lose their embryonic form. A majority of rank and file councils.

For example at the Chah Jahan textile factory near Tehran in the first few months of 1979, the shura organised to increased production, doubled minimum wages by cutting the pay of top engineers and managers and provided free milk for workers (Poya).

When this did save their jobs, they decided to ‘take over the workshop, running by our power’ (Bayat).

Workers’ self-organisation culminated when, some three weeks before the insurrection and political organisations also supported the march” (Poya).

Khomeni made preparations to confront the strike committees before his return to Iran — and began attacking the burgeoning labour movement from the moment he returned.

The power of this workers movement was demonstrated on 9-11 February 1979 when oil strike lead-...
The demands of the All Iran Workers' Union

“We the workers of Iran, through our strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations overthrew the Shah’s regime and during three months of strike we tolerated unemployment, poverty and even hunger. Many of us were killed in the struggle. We did this in order to create an Iran free of class exploitation, free of exploitation. We made the revolution in order to end unemployment and homelessness, to replace the SAVAK-orientated syndicates with independent workers’ shuras — shuras formed by the workers of each factory for their own economic and political needs.”

Workers demanded:
1. government recognition of the shuras;
2. abolition of the Shah’s labour law and enactment of a new labour law written by the workers themselves;
3. wage increases in line with the cost of living;
4. tax-free bonuses;
5. free health service instead of the present semi-private insurance system;
6. housing benefits in the shortest possible time;
7. sick pay;
8. a forty-hour five-day week;
9. the sacking of all elements closely linked with the old regime;
10. the expulsion of all foreign experts and foreign and Iranian capitalists and expropriation of their capitals in the interests of all the workers;
11. an end to discrimination against blue-collar workers and an increased annual holiday of one month;
12. improved health conditions in the factories;
13. sick pay;
14. an end to disciplinary punishments and fines;
15. an end to the intervention of the police, army and government in labour disputes;
16. inclusion of workers’ shuras in industrial decisions such as investment and the general condition of the plant, as well as buying, selling, pricing and the distribution of profits;
17. determination of hiring and firing by the shuras;
18. freedom of demonstrations and protests, and legalisation of strikes;
19. return of the capital of cooperatives to the workers;
20. free meals, washing facilities and improved safety at work;
21. provision of ambulance, nurse, bath and nursery services at work;
22. official employment and job security for temporary workers;
23. creation of a medical consulting body to review the condition of unhealthy and sick workers and to grant them exemption from work and retirement;
24. reduction of the retirement age in the mining and moulding industries from 39 to 25 years’ service.

(Sick pay appears twice in the original, from Poya)

The foundations of the Islamic state

The provisional government pressed ahead with plans for an Islamic constitution. On 30–31 March they organised a referendum, with the question: Yes or No to an Islamic Republic. The voting slips were red for No and green for Yes. Members of local Komitehs handed voters their preferred voting slip and stamped their identity cards. (Hiro)

The government also resorted to outright repression. On 10 April 1979 an unemployed workers’ demonstration in Isfahan was attacked by Khomeini militias and one worker was killed.

In May 1979 the government introduced the Law of Special Force to prevent shuras intervening “in the affairs of the management and the appointments” of government-nominated managers. (Bayat)

On 6 May Khomeini ordered the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, the Basdaran, which were formally founded on 16 June. (Hiro)

The regime nationalised 485 factories, 14 private banks and all insurance companies in June 1979. (Bayat). It took control of 20% of the assets of the private sector, paying compensation to foreign and domestic capitalists. They did so in reality because workers in many plants had already effectively ousted their bosses and the regime wanted to regain control by imposing its own managers.

In addition, the Islamic Mustazafin Foundation took over the assets of the Shah’s family Pahlavi Foundation, which included 20% of the assets of a private company. The managers were appointed to impose government policy.

The regime also used economic sabotage to undermine factories with shuras. Transactions with the SAKA plant shura were banned by the state and the bazaar merchants, the grounds that the shura members were communists. In the Okkleh Chinese factory the state cut off the import of raw materials from West Germany after the workers took control of a client. Credit to two factories of the Naz-Nakh and Isfahan Wool industry were cut back, in order to dismantle the shuras (Bayat).

On 22 June a demonstration at Tehran University demanding a popularly elected assembly was broken by the Hezbollah. The government decided that an Assembly of Experts would draft the new constitution. The new constitution, endorsed by referendum in December 1979, contained articles designed to restrict the shuras. For example Article 105 said that, “decisions taken by the shuras must not be against Islamic principles and the country’s laws” (Bayat).

During Ramadan, on 25 July 1979 Khomeini announced a ban on music on radio and television, comparing it with opium. (Hiro 1983 p 127)

On 7 August 1979 the government enforced a two-month old press law, with the Pasdaran occupying the offices of the liberal daily paper, Avandegag. Later that month the government banned 41 opposition papers and took over two large publishing houses. This was a significant blow to the left, who’s papers had a circulation of around a million (CAR 1980).

In August Khomeini created the Reconstruction Crusade, to repair roads and government buildings. Workers from General Motors, Caterpillar and Iran National, were sent out on the grounds that parts were not available in their factories. Strikes and sit-ins were declared illegal, as “communist conspiracies”.

The first widespread wave of outright suppression against the shuras was launched in August. According to Bayat, “many independent shura activists were arrested and a number of them executed”.

Khomeini’s forces also attacked the left. On 12 August a demonstration called by the National Front, Fadayan and Mujahedin was attacked by Hezbollah and Pasdaran. The following day the offices of the Fadayan and Mujahedin were besieged by Khomeini’s forces.
The workers subdued

From page 5

The workers continued to resist. One worker told the newspaper Keyhan: “This law aims to weaken the power of the workers; this is in effect the recognition of semi-Syndicate rights, which only preserves the rights of the capitalists. Shuras are the basis of our power in the factories. It is now clear that as long as capitalists are running the factories, they will continue to weaken our power.” (Peyda)

The Khaneh Kargar became the headquarters of the Islamic Associations and the Islamic shuras. These Islamic Associations had the following functions: indoctrination of labour with the ruling ideology; policing the workplace; mobilising workers behind the regime. According to Bayat they were viewed by many workers as “new SAVAK agents who got hands instead of wearing ties.”

When Iraq attacked Iran in late September 1980, the result was “an hysterical chauvinist wave which rapidly engulfed the country, including the working class and most of the left”. The other major effect was the militarisation of society, with the regular army revived, the Pardisan trebled and new organisations such as the Basji corps set up. Even the Islamic Associations were armed. (CARI, The Iranian Workers’ Movement)

Workers continue to resist

Even in 1981, militant workers were defying the dictates of the government. Bayat reports an incident he witnessed: “In the state-run Iran Cars factory, a severe confrontation occurred after the shura withdrew funds from the final bonus to pay workers their year-end bonus in March 1981. Some of the shura members were jailed as the state reacted against the strike. The workers withdrew their claims in order to get their shura members released. The day I visited the plant, the representatives of the Imam (Khomeini) and of the Provos (government factory) were trying to settle the continuing dispute. After a bitter argument between the workers and the representatives, one Azerbaijani worker stood up and declared, ‘Just as we brought down the Shah’s regime, we are the representatives of the people. We will not fa...

The Islamic Associations and “Islamic shuras” to undermine independent organisations in workplaces. It was in this context that the occupation of the US embassy occurred on 4 November 1979. According to the Campaign against Repression in Iran (CARI), “it was designed and organised by the ruling party (IRP) and its main objective was to divert the mass movement, using “empty anti-imperialist demagogy”. In early 1980 many factory shuras, including in oil, rail and toolmaking workplaces, were shut down. In August 1980 the regime abolished profit-sharing and passed a law giving shuras only a consultative role.

But by June 1981 the last traces of independence by the shuras were stamped out. In the Iran Cars factory, “the armed Pasdaran had rushed into the factory and began arresting shura members and other activists according to a blacklist prepared by the Islamic Association.” (Bayat)

The number of industrial disputes fell from 180 in 1980-81 to 82 in 1981-82. Workers in the oil industry, who had won a 40-hour week through struggle, lost it as the Revolutionary Council decreed a 44-hour week. Based on a quotation from Mohammed that “to work is like jihad in the service of God”, an instrumentalist conception of work was used by the regime to raise productivity. It aimed to impose a “classless” Islamic community over workers-capital relations. To do so, even language was changed: the word kargar (worker) was replaced by karpazir (one who agrees to do work). As Bayat described it: “As for workers, Islamisation of workplaces goes hand in hand with Islamisation of the atmosphere in factories, the putting up of special picture, posters, huge slogans on the walls and the loud broadcasting of official speeches during break and lunchtimes etc.”

The subordination of workers was summed up by the head of the judiciary in March 1983: in the factories “the management is the brain, the Islamic Associations are the eyes, the rest the hands” (Bayat).

However, resistance, passive and active continued. In 1984-85 some 200 industrial disputes were reported. Bayat reports on some significant incidents:

“In a metal factory in Tehran, I attended a mass prayer at the factory’s mosque. Out of a workforce of 700, less than 20 workers, most of them old, were in attendance. The rest of the workers were playing football in the factory yard or chatting. From them on (spring 1981), participation in mass prayer became compulsory in the factories and offices. In another plant, a junior manager explained that the workers themselves demanded prayer services, but did not participate. Instead, he observed, they would sit in the sunshine talking.”

Workers started clapping.”

Tail-ending Khomeini

Socialist Worker (28 October 1978) compared Khomeini to Father Gapon to justify their tail ending. “It is almost as though the masses have seized on a tradition that is embodied in their history — the tradition of religious opposition — the one thing they know is continuous to all, understood by all, sacrosanct to all. This religion of theirs into a mighty weapon, that has nothing to do with godliness, or holiness and everything to do with mass power.” (Saheb Nickinian, Iran: The Unfolding Revolution, SWP pamphlet)

“We have already reviewed what really lies behind this mass movement and had nomenclature it is to characterise it as a religious movement. Regardless of whatever force that may be at its head and despite whatever demands through which it may express itself, the mass movement has absolutely nothing to do with religion of any kind, let alone a reactionary one.” (Saber Nickinian, Iran: The Unfolding Revolution, SWP pamphlet)

FMG leader Brian Gregory lambasted “Allo Ahh” on a demonstration in Tehran, justifying it on the grounds that it made the people stronger than the Shah’s army. In December 1978 The Campaign against Repression in Iran (CARI) in Birmingham issued a leaflet denouncing the conflict between the mass movement and Iran’s regime. In March 1979 CARI changed its name because “the tasks of solidarity movement are different” (Socialist Challenge 29 March 1979)

“Socialist do not fight against religion. We don’t think the fight in Iran is Black and White.”

T he Iranian workers’ class was the decisive social force that overthrew the Shah in 1978-79. But workers did not go on to create their own state, but instead came under the rule of a regime no less repressive than that of the Shah. Workers built organisations and took action in defence of their own interests. The development of independent working class politics was a real possibility in 1979. Yet this potential was not fulfilled — in large part because of the failure of the left both inside Iran and internationally.

Part of the explanation for the left’s failure lies in its repression at the hands of the Khomeini’s government. For example when the Fadayan refused to return the weapons it seized during the insurrection on 9-11 February 1979 and organised a demonstration at Tehran University, Khomeini denounced them as “a group of bandits and unislamic elements” and “non-Muslims at war with Islam”. (Hiro) The left was harassed by Hezbideh and banned in 1979-80 and 1981-82. Many trade unions and fronts, broken all their pens, set up gallows in the main squares, were shut down. In August 1980 the regime abolished profit-sharing and passed a law giving shuras only a consultative role. Even the Islamic Associations had the following functions: indoctrination of labour with the ruling ideology; policing the workplace; mobilising workers behind the regime. According to Bayat they were viewed by many workers as “new SAVAK agents who got hands instead of wearing ties.”

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Khomeini led the mass movement against the Shah and disguised his programme for a theocratic state beneath vague liberal-sounding phases. The left failed to analyse the nature of his plans or predict the likely form of his rule.

Organisational failure

The central organisational failure of the Iranian left during 1978-79 was its inability to build a revolutionary party capable of leading the working class against the counter-revolution and its instruments.

Bakay expressed this idea well, when he wrote: “The most important task of the left was to form a revolutionary political force committed to organising the working class for the strategic objective of socialist construction.”

The largest left organisation, the Fadaiyan, had around half a million supporters. It already had some credibility before its guerilla campaign against the Shah. This was enhanced by its role in the uprising in February 1979. It was the first time Khomeini’s referendum on the Islamic Republic in March 1979. It was relatively well organised and experienced in struggle.

But the group that deserves particular ignominy is the US Socialist Workers’ Party (US SWP). Once the pride of the Trotskyist movement, the US SWP was one of the most nauseating examples of Stalinism. It was a political force committed to organising the working class for the strategy of socialist construction. The contradictions in our position were summed up in an article by Jim MacGregor Smith, “The US SWP had a third camp line of ‘down with the Shah, down with the mullahs’ was (ironically) the Spanish Salvationist League, which came out strongly against the new regime. It was precisely the left’s failure to do these things, which made Khomeini’s ideas and his movement, as well as the kind of regime he favours a moderate bourgeois democratic and nationalist programme – the cities of the Shah’s apologist and that the clerics, have been until recently been almost the only people able to speak out against the regime. “Even the demand for ‘Islamic government’ does not (for the demagogues who raise it) mean religious bigotry, but a drive against the bourgeois-hyena of the oil rich Iranian middle class. “Ayatollah Khomeini, the chief leader of the Muslim opposition has declared many times that he does not want the barbarities of ‘Islamic law’ as practiced in Islamic countries, where there are supposed to be punished by having their hands cut off; nor does he oppose equality for women.” (“Workers’ Action No.124, 11 November 1978)

The left was also unable to grasp the important dynamic of the workers’ movement. There were some small organisations that attempted a more radical approach, notably the Kargar-e Socialist (Socialist Worker) journal. However the Fadaiyan’s politics were Stalinist and mired in Bonapartism. The only organisation which had a third camp line of “down with the Shah, down with the mullahs” was (ironically) the Spanish Salvationist League, which came out strongly against the new regime. It was simply to draw attention to the fact that the workers and popular mass were the main agents of change in the revolution. It was simply to draw attention to the fact that the workers and popular mass were the main agents of change in the revolution.

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**The Islamists versus liberation**

The emerging women’s movement

**However** the demonstrations had forced the regime to retreat — and resulted in the proliferation of women’s organisations.

For example the Emancipation of Women group, which published a monthly paper of the same name and part of the Organisation for Communist Unity (OCU), was “one of the first Marxist organisations to denounce the Islamic state after the revolution” (Nahid Yeganeh, “Women’s Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, in Tabari and Yeganeh).

Another organisation, the National Union of Women, formed in March 1979, was very much vocal against the government. It published 6 issues of its paper Equality and a monthly journal Women in Struggle. Other organisations included the pro-Chinese Society for the Awakening of Women, the Women’s Rights Defence Committee, initiated by the Trotskyist HKS and various local women’s groups among the national minorities. There were also pro-government and Islamist women’s organisations formed (Tabari and Yeganeh).

However, the number of these mobilisations was not great. As Farah Azari put it: “During the women’s demonstrations of March 1979 when the issue of the hijab was first raised, the finest women, on March 18, 19 and 20, were arrested; many smaller groups went on towards the ministry of justice. – where there had been a sit-in by women lawyers – and Ayatollah Khomeini’s office. On 3 March the appointment of women judges in the three dars very near to the women’s universities were dismissed. On 7 March speaking in Qom, Khomeini said that women must wear the veil at work.”

Women oppose compulsory veiling

The suspension of the Family Protection Act and the publicising of Khomeini’s veiling edict galvanised women to begin demonstrating in their thousands on international women’s day, 8 March, and in the days that followed. A number of women were the most detailed accounts of these protests. She wrote: “On the morning of the 8 March, around 15,000 women began marching towards the university of the Technical Faculty of Tehran University. Numbers were much higher than had been anticipated by the organisers and even more surprising given the heavy snow that had been falling that day. Among them were housewives, workers, teachers, office workers and students, but in particular there were many high school girls whose teachers had cancelled their classes and set off with them. Obstruction by the reactionary elements began immediately when the women arrived at the building. Building were blockaded, politicians and other members of the Islamic revolution, including Talaghani’s house. The first group held a meeting outside the ministry, specifying their demands and pledging support for the women’s movement. The second group made a march, swelling the numbers to almost 30,000. The march was later split when two smaller groups went on towards the ministry of justice – where there were policemen and women lawyers – and Ayatollah Khomeini’s house. The protest was one of the first major demonstrations to visit the march to the private minister’s office.”

The emerging women’s movement

On 21 May 1979 the Ministry of Education banned co-education and ordered all classes to be segregated. On 3 June it banned married women from attending high school classes. On 8 July several Caspian Sea ports initiated sexual segregation on board and this was later extended to all Iranian ships. These were just the beginning of the suppression of the Islamic “men’s section”. On 12 July three women were executed on charges of prostitution and corruption.

On 2 October 1979 new family legislation giving the right of divorce almost exclusively to the husband; reinstated the husband’s “right” to forbid his wife taking a job; lowered the minimum age for women to marry from 18 to 15 and permitted men to take four permanent and an unlimited number of temporary wives (Tabari and Yeganeh).

Terror was also used. Nima cites a rape by Revolutionary Guards as an example of the terror used to beat down women’s organisations. As an illustration of the news, in July 1980, a young woman was a victim of the Israeli forces, two days after her release from prison her images were broadcast in a TV programme, including a woman demonstrating in a march to the private minister’s office. “General Qasem Kianoush, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, has said that there would be more such demonstrations due to the ‘subversion’ of the regime.”

On 27 June 1980 Khomeini issued a decree requiring women in all government offices to wear the veil as part of the “administrative revolution”. In July women were required to wear the veil during the month of Ramadhan. In July 1980 all co-educational schools were abolished. With teaching segregated, often male teachers were assaulted to their schools and male teachers to boys’ schools. All female school students were ordered to wear special uniforms by the Ministry of Education — these included hijabs and long veils for the month. Also in July, the Tehran bus company announced that the first three rows of seats in buses would be allocated for women passengers.

On 21 April 1981, Fatima’s birthday celebrated as women’s day in Iran. Finally, in July 1981, the Majlis (parliament) ratified a Bill of Restitution sanctioned, among other things, stoning to death on adultery charges, flogging in public and cutting off limbs in retail.

Women’s fightback

Despite these attacks, women’s groups continued to fight and organise. Azari wrote that: “Other major women’s groups were formed in Bank Melli, the major national bank in Iran, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Telecommunication Office, the Planning Organisation and many other ministries and public organisations and in some factories with high proportions of female employees. The demands of these groups revolved mainly around the provision of childcare facilities, equal pay, and maternity benefits. In many cases, employers were forced to provide a cliche or expand an existing one.”

On 9 June 1979, women lawyers staged a five-day sit-in after they were excluded from nomination ceremonies for new judges. On 30 October 1979 women demonstrated against the new family laws, despite attacks by Hezbollah. On 3 November women lawyers organised a sit in at the Ministry of Justice against the new laws. The Women’s Solidarity Coalition announced itself. On 25 November 1979, the Women’s Solidarity Coalition, with affiliated groups such as the National Economic Committee and the Society for the Awakening of Women organised a successful women’s conference. The conference condemned government measures against women’s rights.

According to Azari: “Encouraged by the success of the conference and the recognition of this half to the education of this future generation as well as to social, cultural, political and economic life is undeniable;”

The women’s demands

A mass meeting held at the Ministry of Justice on 10 March produced the following resolution: “Considering that human beings are both free and the gift of freedom belongs to them without any regard to sex, colour, race, language and belief;”

Women, lesbians and gay men and national minorities participated in the revolution, believing that a new regime would protect their rights.

Women opposed compulsory veiling. The suspension of the Family Protection Act and the publicising of Khomeini’s veiling order galvanised women to begin demonstrating in their thousands on international women’s day, 8 March, and in the days that followed. A number of women were the most detailed accounts of these protests. She wrote: “On the morning of the 8 March, around 15,000 women began marching towards the university of the Technical Faculty of Tehran University. Numbers were much higher than had been anticipated by the organisers and even more surprising given the heavy snow that had been falling that day. Among them were housewives, workers, teachers, office workers and students, but in particular there were many high school girls whose teachers had cancelled their classes and set off with them. Obstruction by the reactionary elements began immediately when the women arrived at the building. Building were blockaded, politicians and other members of the Islamic revolution, including Talaghani’s house. The first group held a meeting outside the ministry, specifying their demands and pledging support for the women’s movement. The second group made a march, swelling the numbers to almost 30,000. The march was later split when two smaller groups went on towards the ministry of justice – where there were policemen and women lawyers – and Ayatollah Khomeini’s house. The protest was one of the first major demonstrations to visit the march to the private minister’s office.”

**The women’s manifesto**

On the same day women also demonstrated in front of the National Television, protesting against the news blackout on the demonstrations.

However the authorities ignored the protests. As Azari explains, “The radio and television stations dismissed it in agitation both by promoting Khomeini’s veiling edict and by attacking the hijab and agents of the previous regime. In angry response, many took to the streets again in three days demonstrations.”

In response, Bazargan announced that wearing the veil is not compulsory and that Khomeini’s comments had been misunderstood.

On 11 March, despite the withdrawal of some organisations, 20,000 women attended a rally at Tehran University. Marshals set off for Azarad Square and were joined by other women from offices, hospitals and schools. However they came under attack from Islamists.