

Workers Fund Iran at Hamburg Marathon 2011

Supporters of Workers Fund Iran will be pounding the streets in the Hamburg marathon on May 22. They will get their running shoes on to raise sponsorship money for the important and unique work of this charity – can you support them?

Workers Fund Iran (WFI) was founded in December 2005 inspired by suggestions from veteran Iranian labour activist Albert Sohrabian (1927-2004). WFI aims to reduce and relieve poverty amongst Iranian workers (both employed and unemployed). This results from both the economic policies of the Iranian regime and the sanctions imposed by other countries. The charity puts at the centre of its activities the drive

to rebuild international working class solidarity, directly with the workers of Iran. The charity is an independent organisation. Funds sent to Iran will be distributed amongst the most needy working class families who are facing destitution, regardless of political affiliation. We hope the funds will stop families sending their children to



the streets as beggars or peddlers and selling their body parts, which is a common practice.

You can sponsor us by filling out the form on the Hopi stall - or online by using Charity Choice's website (via www.hopoi.org). On our website, you can also purchase one of the t-shirts the runners will be wearing.

So far runners from England, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden and USA will participate to raise funds for this cause. You can show your support by wearing Workers Fund Iran T-shirt and walking with us. If you would like to run the half marathon or the marathon with us and support our cause please send an email to workersfund@gmail.com.



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IRAN WORKERS BULLETIN

Hands Off the People of Iran was founded in 2005 in London by a number of individuals, political organisations and exiled Iranians who recognised the urgent need to establish a principled solidarity campaign with the people of Iran – a campaign that necessarily must fight on two fronts:

1. Against imperialist threats of war and any sanctions on the country (which always affect the people more than the regime)
2. In active and practical solidarity with the workers', women and student movements that struggle against the theocracy.

We recognise that effective resistance to the threat of war can only mean the militant defence of the struggles of the working class in Iran and of the rising social movements in that country. We want regime change – both in Iran and in the imperialist countries. But we know that change must come from below, from the struggles of the working class and social movements, if it is to lead to genuine liberation. We call on all anti-capitalist forces, progressive political groups and social organisations to join us!

Hopi is supported by John McDonnell MP, the Green Party, the PCS, ASLEF, Bill Bailey, Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, Ken Loach, the Labour Representation Committee, Iran Bulletin-Middle East Forum, Iranian Workers Bulletin and many more.

“Selling your kidney has turned into a profession”

In April, Jafar Azimzadeh of the Free Union of Iranian Workers gave an interview to Deutsche Welle Radio on the state of the labour movement in Iran. (Translation by ILR, edited by Hopi)

There is news of shut-downs or slowing-down of work in factories and production facilities on account of sanctions.

First, I should say that in my opinion, these closures are not down to sanctions, although sanctions have had their own effects. The closures of factories began in the late 80s and early 90s. These policies, imposed over the last 30 years, have snowballed into the deep economic crisis that we are seeing today.

The workers' situation is now dismal. They receive extremely low wages and live under very difficult conditions. There are no or very little unemployment benefits, and what exists is very limited. But unemployment is constantly rising: We have heard that Kaveh Industrial Park and a number of factories in Saveh are closing down, which employ 100 workers each. Dena Road Construction, which employs 800 workers, has announced its closure for the time being. Overall, it appears that unemployment is going to be further on the rise during this year.

When the workers are laid off and production is down, what do these workers do?

Those that do have unemployment insurance receive benefits for about eighteen months or two years. Those that do not - i.e., the great majority - engage in peddling, driving passengers or selling their kidneys. Nowadays, selling your kidney has turned into a profession. Layoffs and so-called rationalisations have led to an increase in the number of addictions, social ills, depression and psychological problems.

The workers suffer a lot from unemploy-

ment and psychological pressures. I personally witnessed some Alborz Tire factory workers who were very close to having strokes following their layoffs. Imagine an employee who was trained at this factory and whose whole life organised around that. Then, all of a sudden, he is told that from tomorrow on, he should not show up for work.

Unemployment rises by 1.6 million each year

Iran's unemployed population increases by about 1.6 million each year, the Tehran-based newspaper Shargh reports, citing parliamentary member Jalal Mahmoudzadeh.

According to official figures, however, there are only 2.5 million unemployed in Iran. This number fails to take into account many part-time workers and those on precarious temporary contracts. Hundreds of thousands of people might officially have a job - but they haven't been paid for many months.

The managers seem to be using the opportunity to hire workers on low wages and precarious contracts. There are also subcontractors who take a percentage off their wages.

These practices have become very widespread. At the Iran Khodro car plant there will be mass layoffs. However, the management is planning to keep production at the same levels, but have the work done by 300 workers - instead of 500. Those workers who keep their job are compelled to accept the worse conditions out of the fear of short term contracts or unemployment.

The minimum wage rate just rose by nine percent, while the inflation rate is much higher. Are there protests against this?

It seems on the surface that many workers are capitulating, but in reality this is not the case. Let me give you an example. You can push a car that has broken down for a little while, but eventually this car will stop and not move any more. Currently, the conditions in the factories are such that the workers can hardly show any signs of solidarity or raise their voices. This is down mainly to the fact that there aren't any workers' organisations in Iran that could coordinate the protests on a national level.

But this situation will not last long. Their silence does not mean they have capitulated. There are local and individual protests – and successes. Iran Khodro's general manager has announced that they would add another three to five percent to the officially agreed wages. Iran's rulers know that this minimum wage will lead to increased workers' protests.

Even now, there are protests going on. Alborz Tire workers were successful in receiving part of their wages because of their demonstrations at the presidential offices.

How have the 2009 protests changed the situation?

On the surface, it appears that the workers' organisations cannot even issue a communiqué calling for May Day celebrations. This is worse than it was before. But the reality is that this situation cannot be sustained, and the workers and their organisations will not stand still in the face of existing pressures.

The workers remain silent for one year, or two, but not forever! The effects of the cutting back of subsidies will hit the workers in another month or two. And then, I am sure, they will break their silence.

Trade union successes

Workers in Iran are under extreme pressure for a variety of reasons.

- The theocratic regime prevents them from establishing free unions or secular political parties. Many union activists get fired from their jobs (see letter from the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Factory Workers), dozens more have recently been arrested.

- They are suffering from ever-increasing food prices. This is partly down to the general world crisis of capitalism, but also because the Iranian government has abolished 30-year old subsidies for food and fuel in accordance with conditions set by the IMF and the world Bank. Despite all his anti-imperialist rhetoric, president Ahmadienjad has for many years imposed extremely harsh neo-liberal policies on the country, which have led to large-scale privatisations, the imposition of increasingly precarious working conditions and mass unemployment. The economic situation is extremely dire and the currency has been devalued a number of times in the last few years. Many workers have not been paid for many months.

- The sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, too, are driving up prices and seriously undermine the class's ability to organise and fight back.

But the working class in Iran is making strides forward. As our brief reports from Iran below show, they are getting more and better organised every day. Hands Off the People of Iran is in active and direct solidarity with those in Iran who are fighting the military threats of imperialism (of which sanctions are a part) and their own theocracy.

- In April 2011, textile workers at Ghazvin

Naznakh protested for almost a week near the Iranian parliament buildings. Some workers there have not been paid for over 27 months, leaving many on the verge of destitution.

- They were joined by workers at the Ziaran slaughterhouse, some of whom have not received their wages for more than 24 months. “The problem has arisen since the firm was privatised, after which the owners backed out, claiming that they have not received ample budget from the government to run the firm,” a Ziaran worker says.

Workers on strike at the Kian Tyre Factory



- On April 24, several workers from the Isfahan steel plant staged a protest opposite the Iranian parliament to obtain back wages and benefits.

- On the same day, more than 800 workers at the Kian Tyre Factory assembled by the president's office. Kian Tyre was closed by management from March 20 until April 23. During the temporary closure, the factory was to secure funds and buy the necessary raw materials for operations. But the factory was closed instead, so the workers protested near the presidential offices. Since the factory was privatised in the 1990s, its 1,300 workers have been paid irregularly.

- In April, 10,000 workers at the Port Imam Petrochemical Works ended their 11-day strike after reaching a settlement with management. 25 representatives (five each from the oil complexes in Kimia, Abnirou, Faravash, Baskaran, and Khawrazmi) negotiated a deal which severely limits the power of the contracting firms. For example, workers on temporary contracts will now enjoy the same 37 benefits that workers on 'permanent' contract receive. Also, the contracting companies will not be allowed to deduct any insurance or taxes – often, they are taking more than they should. Further, they are not allowed to “pressurise” contractual workers or fire them.

Representatives from these disputes were met by ministry officials and told that they will receive back wages – but only a month and a half's worth of payment. The government has also approved a \$28 million budget to resume work at the Kian Tyre factory. But many other disputes are still ongoing.