

“Not *about*, but *for* workers”

## Media, Labour and Politics in Post-2009 Iran

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On June 18, 2015 access to the main server of the Iranian Labour News Agency—ILNA—was cut off. Minutes later, the journalists of the Labour Service desk were sacked. These journalists had published a news story on 300 cement workers who were protesting 10 months of wage arrears in front of the Ministry of Labour. Unknown to the journalists, the cement factory’s CEO had just been appointed directly by the Labour Minister to a managerial position at the corporate arm of the Social Security Organization—one of the largest economic vehicles in the country.

Broadcasting this protest could smear not only the reputation of the CEO, but more dangerously, that of the Minister of Labour, whose office ILNA was indirectly dependent on. For the ILNA management, this protest report was therefore the final

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straw in its long-standing efforts to neutralize this group of contentious journalists. For the Labour Service team this particular story represented their own red line, the trespassing of which would imply a permanent drawback in their autonomy and bargaining power over future reports. Redundancy was thus the most satisfactory outcome for both sides.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the preceding half decade, this five-man team of young, ambitious, left-wing journalists had radically changed the publicity, visibility and politics of workers in Iran. Relying on insider accounts, anecdotes and news reports, this essay will narrate and analyse the emergence and development of the ILNA Labour Service as a case study of how Iranian politics has interacted with, what I call, a fragmented labour protest boom penetrating all levels of society since the 2000s. In the process, the article also aims to reflect on the fragile, conjunctural and political nature of working class formation and democratic change in contemporary Iran.

The end of the 2009 Green Movement forced a shift in the composition and discourses of reformist politics. Ironically, the absence of economic and working class demands during the Green Movement contrasted sharply with prior and subsequent efforts by various reformist news outlets to broadcast the workers' cause. Not as a grand, centralized program, but as a gradual, trial-and-error approach, reformist groups that had since the early 1990s largely promoted a pro-business policy set found themselves in a paradoxical position in which working class visibility and representation turned into one of a potent tool to attract their conservative rival's self-defined core constituencies.

The majority of reformist media outlets pivoted toward covering the plight of labour as mere political tactic. Within that environment, the post-2010 ILNA Labour Desk had the simple, innovative and radical idea of reporting workers' resistances directly, relying on a broad network of local workers to produce news *about* themselves. I will show that this major democratizing innovation in Iranian journalism was only tolerated by reformist elites because it could help in their bid for power. Moreover, I will argue that the fine line ILNA walked between workers' representation and political strategy helped to normalize, channel and standardize labour protests along discursive, judicial and civil lines. In other words, in the post-2009 period, important sections of the reformist elites acknowledged the tactical benefits of co-opting workers, pensioners

<sup>2</sup>For the full story see E. Mohammadvali, "Dalayel-e Ekhrāj-e Gruh-e Kargari ILNA," *Ofogh-e Roshan*, 23 June 2015,

[www.ofros.com/khabar/mvali\\_deailna.htm](http://www.ofros.com/khabar/mvali_deailna.htm)  
(accessed 26 November 2016).

and the unemployed as reformist constituents, thus endowing the working class with a degree of visibility, accountancy and public representation unseen in years. By offering an analysis of ILNA's protest reporting, this essay will make the argument that the particular confluence of widespread labour protests with political competition in post-2009 Iran has provided news agencies and their political patrons with the opportunity to exploit, define and include grassroots social movements, and thus to re-define the broader interaction of state elites with the labour movement.

Conversely, the essay will stress the fragility of democratic initiatives in contemporary Iran. Due to the fate of the Green Movement as well as the imposition of sanctions by the US, EU and UN, state politics in post-Green Movement Iran has not centred on furthering democracy. Using the case of ILNA, I illustrate how endeavours for enhanced free speech and independent, non-factional reporting can come under attack when media patrons become electorally-accountable, as happened with the coming to power of a moderate reformist government in 2013.

The essay is structured as follows. The first section provides a condensed analysis of the socio-economic and political processes behind the transformation of protest visibility in Iran. The section consists first of an explanation of why labour unrest is common in today's Iran, and secondly, of an analysis of political competition since the 2009 Green Movement. In the second part, I will more concretely narrate the growth of the ILNA Labour Desk, centring the account on several themes that highlight the risky democratizing innovations that the news agency pushed for.

### **A Recipe for Resistance: Sanctions and the Post-War State**

The intensity and spread of labour unrest has been on the rise since the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) due to welfare reform and the concomitant extension of market relations. I hypothesize that protests have reached a peak over the past decade—engulfing both middle and working classes—as these marketization processes have accelerated and coalesced crucially with the sudden economic shock of trade and financial sanctions.<sup>3</sup>

I follow Beverly Silver's theoretical model of labour unrest differentiation.<sup>4</sup> Silver defines two main forms of struggles: Marx-type struggles and Polanyi-type struggles. Marx-type struggles, as theorized in Volume I of *Capital*, react against

<sup>3</sup>This is confirmed by the author's ongoing quantitative research in the number of protests over time.

<sup>4</sup>B.J Silver, *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

attempts at increasing profit rates by degrading labour conditions, prolonging working hours, or intensifying production. In other words, these are struggles at *the point of production*. Although Marx-type struggles are a constant phenomenon in the production process, worsening work conditions might point to their rise in recent years. For example, research has pointed out that work-related accidents have risen in the mining and construction sector between 2009 and 2012.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, Silver defines Polanyi-type labour unrest as: “the backlash resistances to the spread of a global self-regulating market, particularly by working classes that are being unmade by global economic transformations as well as by those workers who had benefited from established social compacts that are being abandoned from above.”<sup>6</sup> Polanyi-type protests occur in relation to *market changes*. In practice, Marx and Polanyi-type struggles regularly fuse as the extension of market relations in social life combines with attempts to increase efficiency and profit rates at the point of production.<sup>7</sup>

Three processes have (unevenly and conditionally) intensified Polanyi-struggles in Iran over the past two and half decade. Firstly, privatization has driven resistance against expanding market relations in social life. Efforts to spin-off parts of the bloated war-time state-owned economy started in the early 1990s and accelerated slowly until 2006, when a cross-elite consensus presided over by the Supreme Leader materialized in a constitutional amendment that required up to 80 per cent of the shares of most state-owned enterprises to be sold to the private sector over the next decade.<sup>8</sup>

Privatization has thus been a political process from the start. Depending on the government in power, state-owned enterprises were redistributed among varying networks of political allies, including ‘revolutionary institutions’ (*nahad-ha-ye enqelabi*), institutions affiliated to the Revolutionary Guard Corps (*bonyads*), and welfare organizations like the Social Security Organization. These institutions have

<sup>5</sup>See M. Ravanshadnia and R. Khoshdel Niyat, “Tahlili bar Tanaqozat-e Amari-ye Havades Nashi az Kar dar Iran, 2<sup>nd</sup> National Conference on Applied Researches in Civil engineering, Architecture and Urban Planning (1394). Also see data released by the Social Security Organization, “Gozaresh-e Amari-ye Havades-e Nashi az Kar.”

<sup>6</sup>Silver, 20.

<sup>7</sup>For a recent example, see the Tabas coal miners’ strike: “Kargaran-e Bakhsh-e Estrekhrāj M’adan-ju Dast az Kar Keshidand,” *ILNA* (27 Farvardin

1394), [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-270771](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-270771).

<sup>8</sup>“Justice shares,” a voucher program for share distribution among citizens, modeled on similar programs in post-Soviet eastern Europe, was the main mechanism through which privatization was sped up and given an aura of legitimacy. See P. Alizadeh, “The Political Economy of Petro Populism and Reform 1997—2011,” in H. Hakimian and P. Alizadeh, eds., *Iran and the Global Economy: Petro Populism, Islam and Economic Sanctions* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<b>Table 1</b>	Rafsanjani Pragmatist 1989 - 1997	Khatami Reformist 1997-2005	Ahmadinejad Conservative-Populist 2005-2008
Share of total value of privatized state assets (inflation-adjusted)	4%	8%	88%

Source: Iran Privatization Organization; Central Bank of Iran; Ahmad Meidari, "Sharayet-e Siyasi va Sakhtar-e Malekiyat dar Seh Daheh-ye Akhir dar Iran." *Goftegu*, 56, Mehr 1389 (Autumn 2010): 29-49.

become the large semi-public 'parastatals' of Iranian economic life.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, these parastatal organizations have tended to pursue profitable strategies that reduce the labour force, wages and job security on the one hand, and production and the re-investment of profit on the other, while sometimes adhering to longer-term feudal strategies that involve selling non-profitable capital assets and speculating with factory land.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, the expansion of the welfare state before and after the 1979 Revolution had significantly 'socialized' individual economic life in the name of collective security, culminating not only in a set of social welfare institutions, but also the 1991 Labour Code, a mostly progressive document that provides protective regulations on contracts and contract termination, minimum wages, working conditions and working hours, but also limits workers' bargaining and associational rights.<sup>11</sup> The Labour Code was the product of war and revolution during the 1980s, and hence it was politically, not legally, history as soon as it was enacted.<sup>12</sup> Over the next two and half decade, the Labour Code lost much of its relevance as new amendments and exceptions were formulated, leading to the expansion of informal employment.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the increasingly profit-g geared behaviour of cooperatives and pension

<sup>9</sup>K. Harris, "Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-Privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, 45 (2013): 45—70. See also "Aya SHASTA Ghul Ast?," *Qalamru-ye Refah*, 6 (Mehr 1394): 10—37.

<sup>10</sup>Few in-depth empirical studies have been done, but see S.M. Hosseini, "Tabiin Khosusi Sazi-ye Sherkat-ha-ye Atiyyeh Damavand va Estratezhi-ha-ye Pishnehadi," (Tehran: Shahid Beheshti Publications, Autumn 1384); M. Fatehi Zadeh, "Tarh-e Saham-e Edalat: Hozur-e Bishtar-e Modiran-e Dulati dar Bongah-ha-ye

Dulati," *Islamic Parliament Research Centre* (Summer 1389). David Harvey has aptly called these capitalist processes 'accumulation by dispossession.' See D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>S.E. Araghi, *Hoquq-e Kar*, two vols. (Tehran: Sazman-e Motal'eh va Tadvin-e Kotob-e 'Olum-e Ensani-ye Daneshgah-ha, 1393).

<sup>12</sup>A. Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B Tauris, 1998).

funds like the Social Security Organization exacerbated internal contradictions in the workings of these institutions, inciting them to reduce social and financial commitments to their members.<sup>14</sup> Most crucially, the post-2009 period has been marked by unprecedented large-scale subsidy reform, which has sought to take price subsidies down on a range of staple commodities.<sup>15</sup>

A final factor behind intensifying Polanyi-type labour unrest has been deteriorating country-wide draught and overexploitation of natural habitats and resources, uprooting local communities and forcing them to adapt or migrate. While smaller and more fragmented, these protests also tend to be marked by immediate destitution, elevated levels of violence and intense solidarity among those affected.

I argue that these struggles have combined with a third type since the early 2010s to produce a *protest boom* hitherto unseen in Iran's post-revolutionary history. While Marx-type and Polanyi-type struggles demand limits to the destructive effects of capitalist production and unregulated market relations respectively, this third type of labour unrest reacts against a sudden, externally-induced rupture in market and production *conditions* (and not *processes*). Specifically, the tightening of banking and trading sanctions by the UN, US and EU between 2010 and 2012 has induced this rupture, forcing a significant drop in oil revenues, imports and thus government expenditure.<sup>16</sup> In the Iranian fiscal year 2012/13, real government expenditures dropped by a massive 33 per cent.<sup>17</sup> More than earlier sanction rounds, the 2010-12 sanctions suspended productive activities by cutting off in- and output markets.<sup>18</sup> Put differently, with *labour protest boom*, I mean the coalescence of workers' struggles against shifting market and productive relations with the sudden and exceptional introduction of wide-ranging, internationally-enforced sanctions that temporarily choke off the financial lifelines, markets and supply chains of commercial and state institutions.

<sup>14</sup>M. Maljoo, "Tahlil-e Tabaqati-ye E'tesab-ha-ye Kargaran Petroshimi-ye Mahshahr," *Naqd-e Etesad-e Siyasi* (December 2012), [pecritique.com/2012/12/12/](http://pecritique.com/2012/12/12/); M. Maljoo, "Wither Iranian Petrochemical Labour," *MERIP*, 277 (Winter 2015).

<sup>14</sup>See "Bar-e Geran," *Qalamru-ye Refah*, 7 (Aban 1394).

<sup>15</sup>K. Harris, "The Politics of Subsidy Reform in Iran," *MERIP*, 254 (Spring 2010): 36—39; N. Habibi, "The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Middle East Brief," 74 (June 2013), 1-9.

<sup>16</sup>I will not here produce an in-depth economic analysis of the influence of sanctions on domestic demand. A good reference is the IMF's Country Report No. 14/93 of Iran (13 March, 2014).

<sup>17</sup>IMF's Country Report No. 14/93 of Iran (13 March, 2014); CBI.

<sup>18</sup>Research shows that Iran recovered from the 2008 UN sanctions within about a year. See J.I. Haidar, "Sanctions and Trade Diversion: Exporter-Level Evidence from Iran," *VoxEU.org* (9 April, 2013).

Although this is not the right place to theorize this type of sanction-induced unrest or determine its spread within the post-2009 protest boom in full detail, a few notes on the content and style of sanction-type struggles will be useful for an understanding of the contradictory politics of the contemporary labour movement. Because sanction-induced labour unrest reacts against sudden changes in conditions, it is fragmented and spontaneous, materializing when social, financial and contextual exigencies unite workers in a moment of desperation. Struggles are thus almost exclusively *defensive* and rarely put forward demands beyond immediate deprivations. They are constrained to singular work-places, with limited success in organizing trans-local alliances. Not only does unpredictability preclude to a large extent popular theorization of these sanction-induced protests, but they also tend to result in (non-absolute and conditional) workers' sympathy for the firm, its management, and their strategies for survival. In other words, due to its external and sudden nature, sanction-induced unrest tends to hinder the formulation of a class-based conception of capitalist accumulation, making protest participants more vulnerable to be co-opted into corporatist-nationalist political discourses and mobilized for a political program rooted in pronouncements on foreign policy and international relations.

The most notable consequence of international sanctions in the case of Iran has been widespread and persistent delays in wage payments as firms prioritize other debt commitments.<sup>19</sup> The prime slogan of the post-2009 protest boom is *wage disbursement*, while converging Polanyi and Marx-type reactions have also fixated demands on *low wages* and *workplace wage hierarchies*. The recent Iranian labour movement thus prioritizes salaries, while other issues, like political and associational rights, working hours and environment, have played a less immediate, but not less important, role.

### **Patronage, Politics and the Media's Turn to Workers**

Scholarly research has shown that the acceleration of political competition in Iran—a result of regime fragmentation since the death of Imam Khomeini—has co-opted new social groups in the political process.<sup>20</sup> Since the early 2000s, workers have

<sup>19</sup>Wage delays are not a new factor in protests, and have to do as much with the weak position of workers at the shop floor-level, as with the health of the macro-economy.

<sup>20</sup>E.H. Chehabi, "The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective," *Government and Opposition*, 36/1

(2001): 48-70; A. Keshavarzian, "Contention Without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation in Iran," in Posusney and Angrist, eds., *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

organized consecutive protest waves, but their discourses have remained reliant on developments in state politics.<sup>21</sup> In the following section, I will argue that Iran's patronage system of media plays an important role in influencing the discourses that workers affiliate with. In particular, I hope to show that the recent dynamic of political competition in Iran has led to a paradoxical resurfacing of 'working class'-based discourses, to an extent including labour in the political process as *a definable, bounded and politically certified constituency*.<sup>22</sup>

Due to extensive political patronage of the press, Iran's media plays an important role in formulating political discourses. Amir Arjomand describes the deep relationship between the press and politics in the post-war period as "an extreme case of negative politicization in which the arena of constitutional politics shifts away from the parliament as the main legislative organ to the press and informal channels of protest and even into the streets."<sup>23</sup>

Mohammad Khatami's reformist presidency (1997—2005) re-configured a set of formerly left-leaning statist elites into a liberal government that favoured international cooperation, private sector involvement and the improvement of cultural/civil rights. However, while his government enhanced press freedoms, reformist media remained largely uninterested in labour.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, newspapers closely affiliated to Khatami's circle, such as *Kian*, *Sobh-e Emruz* and *Khordad*, remained more interested in themes of corruption, fraud and money laundering in order to legitimize the government's push for the expansion of civil society (*jame'eh-ye madani*) and political development (*tuse'eh-ye siyasi*).

<sup>21</sup>See introduction to C. Leon, M. Desai and C. Tugal, *Building Blocks: How Parties Organize Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>See D. McAdam, S. Tarrow, C. Tilly, *Dynamics of Contentions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Z. Lockman, "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899—1914," *Poetics Today* 5 (1994): 158-9. I do not want to reproduce quantitative measurements of the 'working class,' as has often been done, for example by S. Behdad and F. Nomani, *Class and Labour in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* (Syracuse University Press, 2006). It should also be noted that some protest movements, notably by teachers and nurses, have not openly affiliated with the working class, even if its

members might participate in labour issues, like the annual minimum wage debate. The essay unfortunately cannot discuss these cases in any depth.

For a discussion on the suppression of the Iranian working class in post-revolutionary years, see E. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

<sup>23</sup>Arjomand, Said Amir, ed., *Constitutionalism and Political Reconstruction* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 37.

<sup>24</sup>Related to this is the shift of political attention from masses to middle classes. See F. Sadeghi, "The Politics of Recognition: The Barefoot of the Revolution and Elusive Memories," *MERIP*, 277 (2015): 15-19.

It was only when the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's came to power on a populist platform of anti-corruption, oil redistribution and social justice that political competition became centred on his government's self-designated core constituencies of poor (*foqara*'), workers (*kargaran*), downtrodden and deprived (*mostazafin* and *mahrumin*), and the people and common man (*mardom* and '*avam*). His conservative-populist discourses, inspired by war and Khomeinist themes, gained a significant social following. Jumping on the bandwagon, reformists confronted his government using Ahmadinejad's terms. In the process moulding Ahmadinejad's populist injunctions into a more direct acknowledgment of workers and the working class.<sup>25</sup> While Khatami's civil discourses remained dominant in reformist circles until the end of the 2009 Green Movement, reformist news outlets increasingly started to allocate space to the plight of workers and other deprived social groups with the aim of delegitimizing the ruling government that ostensibly championed their interests.<sup>26</sup>

While the Green Movement showcased the popularity of civil over economic demands, its suppression also meant a premature end to regime tolerance for popular programs relating to civil rights. In the immediate post-2009 context, parts of the reformist elite sought to (re-) mobilize constituencies by shifting alliances and political orientation by dropping their civil reform program altogether and by embarking on an alternative, multi-thronged attack against Ahmadinejad by focusing on run-away inflation, international isolation, and last but not least, the plight of the working class. The former two reactivated dimensions of earlier reformist programs, namely proud economic technocracy and "dialogue among civilizations," but the emerging theme of workers as an independent, legitimate and aspiring socio-political unit was new. In other words, the post-2009 co-option of the working class has occurred in a context in which the reformist circles have agreed to reduce public support for democracy, republicanism and civil reform.

I aim to address three interrelated questions. First, why did ILNA turn to labour? Second, how did ILNA—now the most popular reformist news agency—contribute to the making and inclusion of the working class in contemporary Iran, particularly in terms of visibility, public representation and definability? Lastly, how has post-2009 politics interacted with media, freedom of speech and the labour movement?

<sup>25</sup>C. Leon et al, *Building Blocks*

<sup>26</sup>Including *Etemad*, *Sarmayeh*, *Sharq*, *Qanun* and other reformist newspapers. *Kalameh Sabz*

and *Rah-e Sabz*, the online pro-Mousavi Green Movement mouthpieces have also redistributed worker-related news.

## **The Iranian Labour News Agency: Making Inclusive Journalism Work<sup>27</sup>**

The Iranian Labour News Agency was named not so much after its subject of investigation as after its political affiliations. Founded by the Workers' House in early 2003, ILNA emerged as part of the reformist thrust into new media. The Workers' House, the surprisingly small but bustling central organ for all legal labour associations in Iran, has—since the suppression of the labour and Marxist movement in the early 1980s—functioned on the fringes of the state with relative autonomy from both governmental turn-overs and interference from the Ministry of Labour, to which it is related.<sup>28</sup> Autonomy has been reflected in the long reign of Alireza Mahjoob, a reformist politician who has headed the institution since the end of the War.

The Workers' House introduced web-based ILNA after realizing that its paper newspaper, *Kar va Kargar*, could not compete in Iran's pluralistic media-sphere. Like other reformist media, ILNA included limited analysis on workers' issues but only as a footnote to technocratic criticism of the Ahmadinejad government's economic record. The tension between government and ILNA eventually resulted in the news agency being banned for a year between 2007 and 2008.

As a compromise with the judiciary, the new managing director of ILNA was a businessman from working class background who was generally uninvolved in factional manoeuvring. His political neutrality reflected itself on ILNA's daily working as journalists enjoyed expanded liberties. In 2010, the management invited an experienced labour journalist in his mid-thirties. This journalist was given the space to turn the Labour Desk into an independent reporting unit by re-organizing and expanding its scope. Initially, his only partner was the CEO's former personal assistant, who was ordinarily addressed as '*amu*—an uneducated, mid-age and inexperienced journalist from a provincial town in the Caspian Sea region. Months later, another ILNA journalist—a former student activist—was encouraged to join.

After brainstorming on how to re-invigorate the Labour Desk, the team came up with the simple, creative and radical plan to distribute their desk's telephone number directly among workers to cover news on protests, lay-offs and wage arrears. Publicizing was a tedious process. PR departments and local governmental institutions were reluctant to put the news agency in direct contact with workers.

<sup>27</sup>All translations in the following section are the author's. Fieldwork was conducted in April 2016.

<sup>28</sup>A. Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran: A Third World Experience of Workers' Control* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

Much-needed support arrived when two other journalists were employed, bringing the team to a total of five.

Not more than a year after the team had started calling up factories, the project took on a life of its own. The Labour Service's phone number was circulating among workers' neighbours, former and new colleagues, and kin. In no time, the Labour desk's single phone was ringing off the hook, with journalists taking turns to answer. The Labour team had effectively put itself at the disposal of protesting wage-earners. In the words of one of the journalists, labour media in Iran was henceforth "not just *about*, but also *for* workers" (*na faqat darbareh-ye balkeh baraye kargaran*).<sup>29</sup>

Within Iran's context of media patronage, broadcasting workers' struggles could not long remain a neutral affair for ILNA. Soon enough, a range of overlapping corporate and political interests were activated, driving the Workers' House and ILNA management to control, channel and modify contentious news stories.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the case of ILNA was rather special given the innovativeness and directness of the journalistic methods it started employing. The Labour Service protest reporting exposed not only ownership structures but also ruthless, selfish and profit-driven practices of state and parastatal institutions, regardless of political affiliation.

It did not take long before the daily functioning of the Labour Service was penetrated by politico-corporate interests. On the one hand, powerful outside forces led the management and Labour team to clash. Unsurprisingly this resulted in the blunting of the Labour Desk's initial non-factional stance. On the other hand, these new networks also assured the continued survival of labour protest coverage at ILNA. The Workers' House was able to bank in on corporate elites vexed with the publication of their workers' plight, strengthening its position as a power broker. In short, ILNA's protest reporting enabled the Workers' House to expand its capacity as an independent intermediary between the corporate and the political.

### **ILNA's Role in Protest Education and Improving Government Accountability**

The failure of politico-corporate interests to decimate and shut down the Labour Service allowed the Labour Desk journalists to pursue their own ambitions of

<sup>29</sup>Personal communication.

<sup>30</sup>For a clear example, see the court complaint levelled against ILNA by the Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization

for reporting on the workers' actions against this institute's management, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-110441](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-110441) (accessed October 1, 2016).

buoying up a politically and legally-conscious working class. To achieve this, the team used protest reports themselves as means of communication with protestors, providing clues on legal procedures, rights and unfolding political developments. Tracking ILNA's reporting of their own protests, protestors would then occasionally adapt their tactics accordingly. By providing a set publishing format, ILNA was thus able to influence not only the sequence of events, but also helped to create a protest culture and consciousness that turned spontaneous struggles of destitution into standardized and discursive public claim-making for political rights and legal rules. Discursive elements were drawn from existing legal codes (notably the Labour Law). Standardization involved channelling sudden outbursts of workers' anger via judicial redress and mediation, as well as making protestors more conscious of other forms of public claims, like petitioning and official complaints.

ILNA's coverage of the winter 2014-15 protests at Wagon Pars illustrate how media can normalize and standardize contentious claim-making, and in turn produce a measure of government accountability. Established half a decade before the 1979 Revolution on the industrial east-side of Arak, Wagon Pars is the main producer of train and railway vehicles in Iran, and one of the largest such manufacturers in the Middle East. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has been the majority shareholder since the company's privatization in 2004. Wagon Pars is heavily dependent on government demand. When the government postponed orders in the wake of sanctions, the company's outstanding debts exploded. In turn, Wagon Pars cut down on labour costs. Resentment came to a head first in the late summer months of 2014, with employees striking about months' worth of wage arrears.<sup>31</sup> Calling on the management to resign, workers were also angered by what they saw as government complicity.

The experience of protest sparked spontaneous solidarity, eventually radicalizing the official Wagon Pars workers' union itself, which, like most workers' associations in Iran, has tended to be weak and influenced by the management. While in earlier protests the union leader had clashed with colleagues over his soft negotiating positions, his bargaining position eventually became less compromising.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>“Khatemeh-ye E'tesab-e Wagon Pars pas az Dah Ruz/ Kargaran be Darkhast-e Shura Karr a az Sar Gereftand,” *ILNA*, 15 Dey 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-239221](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-239221);

“E'teraz-e Kargaran-e Vagon Pars beh Ta'viq-e 3 Mah Hoquq,” *ILNA*, 5 Mehr 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-208393](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-208393);

“Kargaran-e Vagon Pars va Karfarma dar Qarargah-e Khatem Ol-Osia' Mozakereh Kardand,” *ILNA*, 8 Mehr 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-209546](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-209546).

<sup>32</sup>“Eteraz-e Kargaran-e Vagon Pars beh Natiجه-ye Mozakerat-e Dishab,” *ILNA*, 8 Mehr 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-209606](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-209606).

Uncomfortable with the idea of a well-organized, anti-managerial labour union in such a key factory, the management demanded that the union leader be sacked. The sacking caused immediate ripples amongst workers. On the 24th of December, 900 employees halted production and launched a strike that would last ten days, calling for his immediate release.

ILNA decided to make the protest its daily headline digest as its local contacts provided rich information on new developments. From the start, the Labour Desk both encouragingly educated protestors and put pressure on politicians to intervene. It did this by bombarding news stories with appropriate references to legal clauses. For example, when discussing the union leader's redundancy, ILNA also repeatedly referred to the Labour Law, which states that official labour representatives have immunity, and thus "the employer does not have the right to fire him."<sup>33</sup>

The ILNA—protestor alliance frustrated the management. In the first few days of the strike, an IRGC commander entered the factory, openly insulting protestors and threatening them with mass redundancy. While similar employer behaviour might not be unusual in Iran, ILNA did not normally obtain such direct evidence of threat and insult. The Labour Desk decided to broadcast the story, strategically phrased in the most general terms possible but damaging to the management's political position. Emboldened by the blemished image of the management, provincial politicians successfully convinced the IRGC to re-instate the labour union leader.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, local politicians openly distanced themselves from the IRGC commander's behaviour. Referring to the insults, the governor's security advisor explicitly stated that he did not "accept this sort of talk."<sup>35</sup> In short, ILNA's "discursive interventions" influenced the protests themselves first by providing workers with a standardized language of redress, derived from existing legal codes, through which claims could legitimately be made, and secondly by influencing public behaviour and interaction with protestors.<sup>36</sup>

## Free Speech in Cyberspace and the Limits of Class

In 2012, the last year of Ahmadinejad's presidency, ILNA became even more involved in workers' actions when an open comment section was launched to its

<sup>33</sup>See above.

<sup>34</sup>"Ekhrāj-e Ra'is-e Nahad-e Kargari-ye Vagon Pars Laghv Shod," *ILNA*, 8 Dey 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-237208](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-237208).

<sup>35</sup>"Ekhrāj-e Ra'is-e Nahad-e Kargari-ye Vagon

Pars Laghv Shod."

<sup>36</sup>See Fateh for a similar argument about ISNA. A. Fateh, "The Foregrounding of Homelessness in Iran by a Progressive Media," *Iranian Studies*, 46/2 (2013): 149-164.

website. The short existence of the comment section is notable not only because it provided a popular platform for virtual debate among various social groups, but also because it reflected the deep fissures within the labour movement and the fragile nature of free speech initiatives in contemporary Iran.

The comment section quickly became one of the most contentious aspects of the site. Unlike ILNA's own stories, it had limited restrictions on freedom of speech, soon transforming it into a trusted, much-frequented space where web users could share experiences and debate workers' issues. There are strong indications to believe that the majority of users had a working class background. For one, users would regularly self-identify as "worker" (*kargar*). Typos and bad spelling were also rife, indicating that the website attracted many first-time users not acquainted with the medium. Labour union leaders, workers' activists and politicians also participated actively in discussions. Online debates would occasionally involve hundreds of comments, indicating high user participation and news circulation.

Encouraged by this new social following, the Labour Desk realized that free debate in cyberspace could reshape outcomes of on-going protests and provide polls on policy shifts, working conditions and labour relations. Hence, the Labour team came up with the idea—again radical and simple—to turn these online debates into news stories, thus partially circumventing internal restrictions on free speech. In short, ILNA systemically and actively included workers in textual production: the production of public discourse by *themselves*.

In what follows, I will discuss two of the most popular online discussions, each representing an example of the divergence and the convergence of working classes in contemporary Iran respectively.

### **Razi Petro Strike<sup>37</sup>**

The Razi Petro Strike is an example of how ILNA's reporting became a vehicle for the expression of hierarchy, divisions and sectionalism. Following global trends in informalization, and specifically the global South, economic development

<sup>37</sup>All of this sections information was retrieved from the following two news articles:

"Tajamo'-e Kargaran-e Peymani Petroshimi Razi dar E'teraz be Tab'iz-e Hoquq," *ILNA*, 18 Dey 1392, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-135274](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-135274); "Goftegu-ye Interneti-ye Kargaran-e Petro-

shimi Razi," *ILNA*, 26 Shahrivar 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-205500](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-205500). While all comments have been removed on the new website, I managed to retrieve them using the fantastic Internet Archive at [www.web.archive.org](http://www.web.archive.org).

in Iran has promoted hierarchies among a privileged workers' cadre and more precarious workers with fewer rights.<sup>38</sup> More recently, contract flexibilization and the unwinding of earlier welfare contracts has sharpened these historical divisions, as an ever smaller labour aristocracy increasingly feels threatened for its continued existence and the masses of temporary workers fantasize about one day obtaining such privileged contracts.

Razi Petrochemical Company, located in Bandar Imam Khomeini on the Persian Gulf, is one of the largest of its kind. As is common practice in the Iranian oil and petrochemical industry, the company used to enforce strict hierarchy between on the one hand workers employed by the Ministry of Labour (*kargar*), and on the other hand official employees working on privileged contracts at the Petroleum Ministry (*karmand-e rasmi*). Official employees enjoy additional benefits including higher salaries and pensions, wider insurance coverage, better food and access to local recreational facilities.<sup>39</sup>

When Razi was privatized in 2008, a Turkish fertilizer company became the main shareholder in what was then considered to be the largest ever foreign industrial investment of that country.<sup>40</sup> Privatization facilitated the spread of human resource contractors, who reproduced and exacerbated existing discriminatory practices by making contracts for workers more temporary and insecure, while putting downward pressure on their wages. By 2014, about half of Razi's 3000 strong labour force was an agency (or contract) worker (*kargar-e peymani*).<sup>41</sup>

Tensions escalated in early January 2014 when a thousand contract workers staged a strike, demanding equal right with official employees.<sup>42</sup> Under the ILNA report on the protest, an intense, exclusive and polarized discussion followed between Razi's workers and employees.

<sup>38</sup>Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 29; J. Beinini, *Workers and Thieves: Labour Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>39</sup>"On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City," Rasmus Christian Elling, in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation-State*, ed. Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro et al (Oxford: Berghahn: 2015); T. Atabaki, "From 'Ameleh to Kargar: Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of

the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry," *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 84 (2013): 159—175.

<sup>40</sup>See Gübretaş website at [www.gubretas.com.tr/tr/kategori/34/26/tarihce.aspx](http://www.gubretas.com.tr/tr/kategori/34/26/tarihce.aspx).

<sup>41</sup>"Bazkhani-ye Ruz-e e'teraz / 18 Dey dar Petroshimi-ye Razi Cheh Gozasht?" ILNA, 25 Shahrivar 1393, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-205325](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-205325).

<sup>42</sup>"Bazkhani-ye Ruz-e e'teraz / 18 Dey dar Petroshimi-ye Razi Cheh Gozasht?"

From the start, agency workers pitched a religious line, in which active solidarity with the Supreme Leader was sought, and thus one that reminds of revolutionary discourse (see picture). Religious/revolutionary invocations also found their way in the comment section. One user claimed that: “We want the justice of Ali (peace be upon him), and asking this is not too much.” Another agreed: “with the support of our Supreme Leader we want what is our right, not more than that.”

Secondly, contract workers’ main targets were contractors and shareholders. A common theme can be expressed thus: “I have a question for the management and the shareholders. Isn’t your stomach full yet? . . . I guess there is a hole in your pocket. Oppression! Enough already! We won’t let you invade on our rights any longer.”

Thirdly, many contract labourers put their faith in privatization, claiming real privatization should balance, not extrapolate differences. The argument was particularly focused on the exclusive contracts with the Oil Ministry. One contract worker stated: “Mister official employee . . . It’s no longer the case that the company is state-owned and that you parasites (*moft khur-ha*) can waste money. The company is private, do you understand, or are you just trying not to?” ‘Worker Farhad’ argued that: “in a private company . . . there should be one law and everyone should have the same benefits. . . . If you want, go on and work in a state-owned company with the Oil Ministry’s benefits: here it is privatized.” Yet another claimed: “the company is private, so what is the Oil Ministry doing here? . . . You are bloodsuckers exploiting us till we have no breath left. . . . Who are the rascals? We or you—you who have proudly participated in infidel terrorist groups (*monafeqin*, reference to the Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq). Our nation has a leader (*sahib*)—the Master of Age [may God hasten his reappearance].”

Overall, official employees reacted angrily and reproachfully. ‘Ali’ ridiculed contract workers for resorting to revolutionary speech: saying: “discrimination is everywhere!!!!!! You can say ‘death to America’ as much as you’d like.” Employees also rejected the contract workers’ claim to additional rights. “Interesting . . . Striking that includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, and transport service. . . . and then they say they don’t have any of these benefits. Damn the liar!”

Others resorted to downward hate speech, mostly on the basis that official workers were employed after passing an employment exam, leading to accusations that contract workers were illiterate and lacked education. In response to a comment from a female contract worker, an official employee said: “Ms Sara, you and your

husband should perhaps go study and enrol for the Oil Ministry Employment Exam in order to receive the oil employees' benefits. Of course, it is possible that you study and don't get accepted because you don't have the intellectual capacity, but that then is your problem." Referring to the increasingly exclusive access to the welfare state, another contract worker quickly replied: "well, unfortunately the exam does not take place anymore . . . , and if it did they would give your [official employees'] children priority access."

A minority of official employees also cautioned against the balancing effects of privatization. One striking comment read: "the problem with you [contract workers] is that instead of saying that your wages are low, you ask why employees' wages are high. . . . We employees agree that your wages are low, but we will fight any of your claims that our wage is too high. A samosa vendor earns 10 times more than me, how is my wage high?"



Iranian Labour News Agency

*Banner reads: "Discrimination has no place in Islamic law.  
Workers' rights have roots in religion."*

In short then, the Razi protests show how the ILNA comment section could provide a space for long-divided workers to debate and express their opinions, perhaps uniquely so. Nevertheless, those opinions echo long-held resentments that are reproduced and exacerbated by a combination of local systems of hierarchy, and wider processes of state re-configuration and deregulation. Politically the Razi case shows that contract workers preferred strategies of non-solidarity with their more

privileged colleagues, which included reaching out to politico-religious leaders in opposition to fellow workers and management as well as staunch advocacy of privatization.

### **The 2014-15 Minimum Wage<sup>43</sup>**

The 2014-15 (original Iranian year: 1393) minimum wage bill symbolized the reformist government's approach to social inequality after one year in power. The case exemplifies how democratic platforms can backfire against their initial political proponents when they start occupying the most powerful positions of Iran's republican system. Indeed, soon after the minimum wage debate in spring 2014, the comment section was closed down—indicative of the limits to democratic initiatives in the current political climate.

Whatever the practical relevance of the minimum wage, its annual rate-setting provides a key occasion during which workers' rights can legitimately be debated. The 2014-15 minimum wage sparked particular tensions. Reformist President Hassan Rouhani had repeatedly, before and after his election in mid-2013, promised that changes in the minimum wage would follow article 41 of the Labour Code, which pegs increases to at least the rate of inflation.<sup>44</sup> However, the negotiations ended with the decision to increase the minimum wage by 10 per cent less than the average annual inflation rate.

Covering the negotiations in depth, the Labour Desk put particular emphasis on Rouhani's breach of promise, the inconsistent manoeuvring of the worker representatives involved, and the Minister of Labour. The negotiations played out over two days in a nine-member tripartite committee consisting of employer and worker representatives, and government officials.

The negotiations ended unexpectedly when worker representatives abandoned their own red line in favour of the Minister of Labour's proposal, which implied a much lower increase. The comment section soon became the main platform of contention. The principle news article on the outcome of the minimum wage negotiations counted 152 comments, later summarized and published by ILNA.

<sup>43</sup>Comments come from two main articles: "Bang-e 'Rouhani Motshakerim': Vakonesh-e Kargaran be Dostmozd-e 93," *ILNA*, 24 Esfand 1392, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-153644](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-153644); "Dast-mozd-e Kargaran 10 Darsad Kamtar az Nerkh-e

Tavarom Ta'iin Shod," *ILNA*, 23 Esfand 1392, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-153437](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-153437).

<sup>44</sup>Zaman-e 'Amal beh V'adeh-yi keh Ruhani she Bar Tekrar Kard," *ILNA*, 19 Esfand 1392, [www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-152343](http://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-152343).

Some reacted to the decline in the real minimum wage in a satiric or humorous way:

Reza (175 likes, 5 dislikes):

*What a curious government we have. It tries itself to turn lawlessness (bi qanuni) into law. I'll also make promises of the President's kind. I promise I'll work hard so that that the high-up (aqazadeh) employers and factory owners won't see their profits decline...*

Others had less mercy:

Unknown (39 likes, 11 dislikes)

*Long live the government of moderation, death to the government that deceives workers (kargar farib).*

Again others ridiculed Iran's form of Islamic rule generally:

Unknown (56 likes, 7 dislikes)

*Ensha'allah Ali's government of justice (peace be upon him) will reveal itself with the coming of the Master of Time (may God hasten his reappearance). That time, the workers' cry for six month of wage arrears will not echo like today, ensha'allah. Workers' wages have been trampled upon over the last year, Mister Rouhani. . . . Now come on, hand out food coupons already.*

Only a singular case came out in defence of the government's decision:

Farhadi (3 likes, 33 dislikes)

*. . . I know people [employers] who have thrown their whole life in the basket of economic growth, while himself not leading an easy life, and with all his property being confiscated by banks. Please don't look at the problem from just one side.*

Unsurprisingly, the comment was subsequently torn apart by other users.

A comment which I found to represent many others ran as follows:

Mika (21 likes, 3 dislikes)

*ILNA, I beg you to get my story out to Mr Rouhani. I work in a factory with around 40 workers (kargar). The absolute 100 per cent of us, together with our families, voted for you [Rouhani] in the elections. Now, in the wake of the promises that you've given the worker community (jame'eh-ye kargar), each one of us is cursing himself to not to repeat the mistake of voting for you again. Please change your mind if that possibility exists, and reclaim the confidence of the worker community. Thanks.*

Indeed, many users were grateful for ILNA's reporting style. One user (20 likes, 3 dislikes) stated:

*Long live ILNA which at least has endeavoured to truthfully turn the voice of workers from comment into headline.*

In sum, these two case studies indicate that the comment section provided a unique and short-lived platform for workers' discussions in the official Iranian media. While evidence seems to point to both high circulation as well as extensive participation by web users that identified with the working class and their plight, the ILNA cyberspace also constituted a politically dangerous mechanism. The free discussions that it involved, and the Labour Service's radical idea of turning these into news stories, became unwanted as soon as it ran counter to the prevailing relation of forces and the political interests of ILNA and the Workers' House. Within Iran's system of media patronage, the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as moderate reformist president put pressure on ILNA and the Workers' House, which had backed his presidency, to scale back the scope of its labour reporting and become less critical of the government. The comment section was shut down and in the summer of 2015, the Labor Desk's core journalists were fired.

### **Coda: The Future of Labour Reporting**

This essay argued that since the 2009 Green Movement reformist media has increasingly tried to include workers in the production of news. There were several reasons behind this shift from an apathetic to a sympathetic press attitude towards workers. After the 2009 Green Movement, workers became the most salient social movement in Iran, expressing their grievances in petitions, strikes and demonstrations. Within the context of media patronage and accelerating political competition, some reformist media thus became increasingly keen to attack the incumbent conservative government by including the government's self-defined constituencies in its own news production.

Specifically, I postulated that due to their unique position at the intersection of state- and labour politics, ILNA and its parent institution, the Workers' House, have played a central role in encouraging working class visibility, (limited) representation and formation. ILNA was able to influence not only the sequence of labour-related events through discursive interventions, but also helped to create a protest culture that turned spontaneous struggles of destitution into standardized political and legal claim-making.

Nevertheless, the political nature of labour visibility in contemporary Iran also underpins its fragility. The radical team of the ILNA Labour Desk was tolerated as long as it proved useful in processes of political competition. With reference to the online 2014-15 Minimum Wage debate, I showed that at the moment when media and the labour voice unite against their own dominant political allies, reformist state institutions not determinedly supportive of democratic initiative are tempted to restrict channels of free expression.

Additionally, while the moderators of the ILNA cyberspace were ambitiously lobbying for a united workers' movement by providing a space for discussion, the ability to talk was only partially effective in solving differences. Discussions reflected entrenched fissures within the labour movement, including those produced by histories of labour hierarchy, welfare reform, and revolution. These fissures help to explain why the contemporary labour protest boom in Iran has remained fragmented and spontaneous rather than systematic and coordinated.

While the Labour Desk has been neutralized after the redundancy of its key activists, it has not been dismantled. The sacked journalists were duly replaced and ILNA continues its direct contact with workers across the country—a practice on which it has largely maintained a monopoly. Moreover, other official news agencies have started to imitate ILNA's labour reporting, making social movement and protest reporting an increasingly normalized feature of contemporary Iranian media. However, these news agencies do not command their own grassroots network of involved workers, and rely instead on local officials and their own informants. It could be argued that these processes have damped the socially empowering and democratic aspect of labour reporting, turning it into a more singular strategy for political competition.

The large question remains whether workers have learnt enough from their struggles, and whether and how they will align themselves with other and better organized interests of state, parastate, and capital, within a highly competitive as well as limiting and contradictory political-corporate landscape. At the very least, important strides have been made to increase the visibility and normalcy of grievance and protest, and thus the collectively understood right to it.

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