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Iranian steelworkers strike for back-wages, safety, and jobs

According to social media reports, striking Iran National Steel Industrial Group (INSIG) workers protested yesterday in Ahvaz, outside the headquarters of the government of the southwest Iranian province of Khuzestan.

Nearly 4,000 steelworkers have been on strike at INSIG's massive steel complex in Ahvaz, Iran's eighth largest city, since November 10. They are demanding payment of two months' back wages, improvements in workplace safety, and fresh investment so that shuttered production lines can be restored.

Riot police reportedly attacked yesterday's protest, when the striking steelworkers tried to cross a bridge and demonstrate through the center of Ahvaz.

The current strike is the third by INSIG workers this year. In June, more than 60 workers were arrested and jailed by security forces. Several were beaten while in prison and denied medical treatment. They were only freed after the striking INISG workers intensified their protests and won support from other workers.

Iranian authorities have all but completely blacked out reports of the INSIG workers' struggle. But the pro-government Iranian Labour News Agency (INLA) did carry a report about the strike two weeks ago. It said that the workers were angered that the state-owned Bank Melli Iran, which took control of INSIG's four steel mills last May, has failed to order the raw materials needed for production, placing thousands of jobs at risk.

The INLA report cited comments from several protesters, including a worker who said, "The officials keep making promises but they don't act." "Even if the employer pays our

back salaries all at once,” said another, “we will not end our protests until raw materials are supplied for the plant’s operation.”

INSIG was privatized in 2010, as part of a privatization drive that has continued under successive Iranian administrations, whether headed by so-called hardliners like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, “reformers” like Mohammad Khatami or the current president Hassan Rouhani.

In 2010 the steel complex was purchased by Mahafarid Amir Khosravi, who with a fortune of more than a billion US dollars was reportedly Iran’ richest man at the time. However, Khosravi was soon implicated in a massive bank fraud and in 2014 was executed.

The strike at INSIG is part of a growing wave of worker struggles across Iran against unpaid and poverty wages, privatization, and rampant social inequality. In late December 2017 and the first days of this year, Iran was convulsed by mass protests against years of austerity and mass joblessness. The protests—which the authorities brutally repressed on the spurious claim they had been incited by Washington, London and Riyadh—were especially pronounced in regional cities and towns that had hitherto provided a popular base of support for Iran’s bourgeois clerical regime.

Since then, the class contradictions have only deepened, as Iran’s rulers try to maneuver between the rival imperialist and great powers and an increasingly militant working class.

In an act tantamount to a declaration of war, Washington has unilaterally imposed an illegal embargo on all Iranian energy exports and frozen Tehran out of the world-banking system, so as to cripple the rest of its trade. The publicly declared aim of Trump and the cabal of anti-Iran hawks at the summit of his administration is to crash Iran’s economy, so as to compel Tehran to accept unbridled US domination over the Middle East.

Since last spring Iran’s currency, the rial, has lost well-over half of its value, resulting in sharp price hikes, whose burden has fallen most heavily on the poorest sections of the population.

The INSIG strikers have expressed solidarity with four thousand workers at the Haft Tappeh sugar refinery in Shush, a city in Khuzestan one hundred miles south of Ahvaz.

The Haft Tappeh workers have been on strike since Nov. 4 to demand payment of four months’ back wages, continuing pension-payments for retired workers, increased job security and the “revoking of privatization.” They have staged numerous protests in Shush over the past three weeks and have also travelled to Ahvaz to seek redress.

Riot police have been deployed at the sugar mill and last week, security forces took more than 15 workers and a journalist, who had been covering their protest, into custody. According to news reports, all but one of the workers have since been freed on bail.

Thus far, the sugar workers have only received payment for one of the four months owed them.

As in the case of the Ahvaz steelworkers, conditions for the Haft Tappeh sugar refinery workers deteriorated after the company was privatized two years ago.

The spark for their strike were reports that one of the company's owners had fled the country and another had been detained.

The head of Iran's official Privatization Organization, Mir Ali Ashraf Pouri-Hosseini, has since said that several Haft Tappeh board members have been arrested "over forex (foreign exchange) issues and other ambiguities." In August, Pouri-Hosseini boasted that privatization in Iran had witnessed 100 percent growth in the first five months of the 2018-19 Iranian fiscal year.

The Haft Tappeh workers are demanding the government retake control of the sugar refinery. In a Nov. 22 statement, the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Workers' Union complained that in reporting on their strike the BBC has failed to even mention what they consider to be their key demand, "revoking privatization."

Recent weeks have also seen ongoing protests by teachers. In October, thousands of teachers participated in several days of strikes over "poverty level" wages and on Nov. 13-14, the Co-ordination Council of Teachers' Trade Organisations of Iran staged sit-ins in several parts of the country. The protests appear to have been especially strong in the country's majority Kurdish areas.

In addition to demanding pay increases, the teacher protests condemned the introduction of school fees, which they denounced as a form of privatization and a violation of the country's constitution, and the release of teachers arrested for their part in previous protests.

In August, Mohammad Habibi, a leader of the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association of Tehran (ITTA-Tehran), was sentenced to ten-and-a-half-years in jail and 74 lashes. Habibi had been arrested by security forces after participating in a peaceful demonstration last May.

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