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WORKERS AS PETITIONERS: DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF IRANIAN TEXTILE WORKERS, 1906-1941*

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Abstract

This study deals with the discursive practices of Iranian workers and their relationship with the state from the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 until the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941 with a particular focus on the late 1920s and 1930s. Although organized labour, such as trade unions, as well as collective labour actions, such as strikes, are undeniably important in examining the trajectory of Iranian workers' relationship with the state, only a small segment of workers joined in them, compared to their overall number. Thus, this article provides an analysis of workers' petitions as a more common and non-confrontational form of labour activism, and an often-deferential means of negotiating with the state over working and living conditions. In the main, it argues that the discursive formation of the Iranian working class, in its broadest sense, preceded its material formation. Also, since non-striking workers were not necessarily passive recipients of state policies, an emphasis is made on workers' petitions, mostly from the textile industry, to show how they tried to work the system 'to their minimum disadvantage', to use Eric Hobsbawm's phrase.[1]

Keywords: Iranian textile workers, labour activism, petitions, state-society relations

Dilekçeciler Olarak İşçiler: İranlı İşçilerin Söylemler Pratikleri, 1906-1941

Öz

Bu çalışma 1920 ve 1930'lara özel olarak eğilmek kaydıyla, 1906 Anayasal Devrimi'nden Rıza Şah döneminin sonuna tekabül eden 1941 yılına kadar olan sürede İran işçilerinin söylemsel pratiklerini ve devletle olan ilişkilerini analiz etmektedir. Her kadar sendikalar ve diğer işçi örgütleri gibi organize oluşumlar yahut grevler gibi kolektif işçi eylemleri İranlı işçilerin devletle olan ilişkilerini incelemek açısından önemli olsa da toplam sayılarına nazaran, en azından incelenen dönemde, işçilerin ancak küçük bir bölümü bu tarz

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1 Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973): 13.

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oluşum ve eylemlerde yer almıştır. Bu nedenle eldeki makale, daha yaygın ve çatışmacı olmayan bir emek aktivizmi türü ve aynı zamanda çoğunlukla riayetkâr bir üslupla devletle çalışma ve yaşam koşullarının pazarlığını yapma kanalı olarak işçilerin dilekçelerini ele almaktadır. Temel olarak makalede, her şeyden önce en geniş anlamıyla işçi sınıfının söylemsel oluşumunun maddi oluşumuna takaddüm ettiği öne sürülmektedir. Ayrıca, işçilerin grev yapmıyor oluşu illaki devlet politikaları karşısında pasif alıcı konumunda bulundukları anlamına gelmediği için, Eric Hobsbawm'ın ifadesiyle işçilerin sistemi nasıl "asgari zararlarına" getirmeye çalıştıklarını göstermek için çoğu tekstil işçilerine ait olmak üzere işçi dilekçeleri tetkik edilmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İranlı tekstil işçileri, emek aktivizmi, dilekçeler, devlet-toplum ilişkileri

Introduction

Whether in craft industries or large-scale industrial establishments, Iranian workers' worksite experiences, perceptions and actions are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the period stretching from the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 until the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941. Although this also holds true for later periods, the period under study is particularly important for the new political environment created by the revolution, which, roughly two decades later, resulted in the abolition of the Qajar dynasty and the foundation of the Pahlavi dynasty in its place. Furthermore, the same period witnessed drastic social and economic transformations with far-reaching impacts on labour relations, underscoring the working and living conditions of the huge number of people who made a living out of their labour. The revolution and its subsequent developments in the ensuing decades have often been analysed from political and economic perspectives in the narrow senses of these concepts. However, the period constituted a watershed in societal terms as well. For instance, it created a suitable environment for labour activism and a freer expression of labour-related demands and grievances, at least at the beginning of the period under question, much like in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire following the Second Constitutional Revolution in 1908. In both cases, workers seized the relatively free political atmosphere of the post-revolutionary period as an opportunity and launched various strikes as well as other forms of labour activism.[2] Then broke out the First World War, which seriously undermined Iran's political stability –despite its neutrality during the war- and weakened its economy by exacerbating its high inflation, among its other negative impacts.

On the other hand, a definite form of politicization was already underway among Iranian workers, but more so among the advocates of workers' rights, who

[2] Yavuz Selim Karakışla, "The Emergence of the Ottoman Industrial Working Class, 1839-1923", in *Workers and the Working Classes in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic,* (eds. Donald Quataert and Erik-Jan Zürcher), London: I. B. Tauris, 1995, p. 22.

were actively making publications and establishing organizations in such areas of the Tsarist Empire as Baku and Tbilisi, which hosted significant numbers of Iranian communities and were at the same time geographically close to Iran. The importance of Russia in this context lay in the fact that in 1911, for example, Iranians constituted as many as 160,211 out of 192,767 foreign workers who entered Russia legally.[3] This figure should be considered together with those who crossed the borders by illegal means. Many of these migrant workers came back to Iran with some political experience. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 added to the already existing labour activism. Moreover, the wartime hardships and post-war challenges called for an effective state intervention to restore order and improve peoples' working and living conditions. The Great Depression, which started in 1929 and continued throughout the next decade, also worsened the extant economic conditions in Iran, like in many countries in different parts of the world.

In the early twentieth century, foreign economic and political domination and internal despotism created class-crossing alliances in Iran, which at times obscured, if only temporarily, class boundaries. Nonetheless, the subsequent developments and the dissemination of communist ideas contributed to the radicalization of segments of the Iranian working-class population, especially in urban settings. Formal labour organizations and the Communist Party of Iran, which was founded in 1920, radicalized workers and organized several labour actions throughout the period under investigation. Yet, in a country where craft industries and small manufacturers were the principle types of production, the impact of the leftist agitation was, for the most part, confined to urban centres and to factories, which employed only a small part of the workforce until well into the twentieth century. Thus, although the existing literature has put much emphasis on formal labour organizations and collective labour activism in Iran, as elsewhere in the Middle East, non-organized labour remains largely understudied. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been paid to the discursive formation of the Iranian working class at large.[4]

[3] Touraj Atabaki (ed.), "Disgruntled Guests: Iranian Subalterns on the Margins of the Tsarist Empire", in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, p. 40.

[4] The following four studies on Iran, Turkey and Egypt are notable exceptions: Touraj Atabaki, "From Amaleh (Labour) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry", *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 84, (Fall 2013), pp. 159–175; Zachary Lockman, "Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899-1914", *Poetics Today,* 15/2, (1994), pp. 157-190; Yigit Akin "The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics in Early Republican Turkey: Language, Identity, and Experience", *International Review of Social History*, 54/S17, (December 2009), pp.167-188; Serhan Afacan, "Revisiting Labour Activism in Iran: Some Notes on the Vatan Factory Strike in 1931" *International Labour and Working- Class History* (ILWCH), (Spring 2018), pp. 201-220.

This article deals with this dimension of labour activism in Iran by focusing on the petitions sent by textile workers to the official authorities during the period under inquiry with a particular emphasis on the late 1920s and 1930s. Although petitions sent by non-textile workers will also be analysed when and as much as necessary, the emphasis is put on the textile workers for three main reasons. First, broadly speaking, the textile industry was, both in terms of the total output and the workforce involved, the largest manufacturing sector in Iran during the decades under investigation and it remained so well into the twentieth century. The oil industry in southern Iran gradually came to be a relatively notable exception from 1908 onwards but unlike the former it was geographically restricted to certain areas. Second, the textile industry provides a suitable case to study and question the transition process from craft industry to factory-based manufacturing. Although a discussion of this process falls beyond the scope of the present study, its impacts are clearly seen in workers' petitions. Third, the textile workforce was rather diverse in terms of gender and age which enables the historian to see how female and child labour was exploited to bring down the production costs. Obviously, it is not always entirely possible to retrieve the voices of these double subaltern workers, but references are made to this point to the extent possible. Overall, the study argues that non-striking workers were not necessarily passive recipients of state policies, both at central and provincial levels, since a larger number opted for non-confrontational means to obtain better working and living conditions. In order to show how this process worked, the study investigates petitioning as a form of labour activism among Iranians workers. It does so by shortly analysing the background of Iranian workers' discursive formation which is followed by examples from their supplications in which they complain about the lost jobs and unpaid wages. In the concluding section, an evaluation of the discussion will be provided.

Workers' Discursive Practices

From the early 20th century onwards, Iranian workers slowly developed a language of their own through their discursive engagements and negotiations with the state, just as other classes did. Their discourse was far from revolutionary and was usually rather deferential. This discourse was not static, either, which is testified by its changing forms in the documents of petitioning workers throughout the years. For example, an analysis of workers' petitions shows that from the Constitutional Revolution until the foundation of the Pahlavi dynasty, workers stressed the effort they spent and the sacrifices they made for the revolution. Afterwards, they employed a predominantly nationalistic language which was very much in line with Reza Shah's policies. Although the anti-communist law of 1931 effectively prevented the organization of strikes and trade unions, the state continued to promote petitioning by workers for various reasons.[5] The first reason

[5] For a discussion of petitions and their significance for the writing of Iranian and Turkish social history see: Serhan Afacan, "Devletle Yazışmak: Türkiye ve İran Sosyal Tarihçiliğinde Dilekçeler"

was that petitioning consolidated the relationship between the ruling establishment and the workers, and the legitimacy of the former, for historically, the addressee of petitions was regarded in Iran, as anywhere else in the world, as the legitimate source of authority. Secondly, the Pahlavi regime discouraged and forbade collective forms of action from any social group including, but not limited to, workers, since feminists, intellectuals, tribal elements or religious groups were also seen as a threat to state power. Nonetheless, petitioning allowed for the ruling classes, and also for Reza Shah, to remain aware of people's perceptions, as well as local politics and rulers, on a scale difficult to attain by other means. As a matter of fact, generally speaking, "even the most autocratic of governments used petitions as a source of information about popular feeling."[6] Thirdly, by addressing their petitions directly to the central establishment, often after failing on the local level, petitioners in a sense consolidated the centralization process in Iran. Finally, Reza Shah was depicted by the Pahlavi elites as "the father of the nation" and cautiously maintained his image as a just ruler while liability for injustices and improper policies rested with those around him. Thus, by stimulating people to write petitions, Reza Shah effectively established and consolidated his image as "the protector of the nation" as well as the "reference point of justice and of fairness."[7] The petitioning workers were well aware of these discursive tools. In these petitions, one can potentially discover certain forms of communication between society and its institutions and to "reconstruct the procedures of mediation, repression, acceptance, and agreement" adopted by the authorities in response to social demands.[8] Put otherwise, as Cecila Nubola argues in her study on petitions in northern and central Italian states in the early modern age, "petitioning refers to different concepts of authority and sovereignty as well as to specific power relations between rulers and those ruled."[9] It was within the frame of these different concepts that Iranian workers expressed and negotiated their demands and grievances with the state.

Moreover, from the mid-1920s onwards, industrialization accelerated in Iran and turned into an ambitious state policy by the early 1930s. Therefore, the number of petitions increased accordingly, especially when other forms of expressing unrest as resistance were forbidden. In their petitions, workers voiced a variety of issues, such as irregular and unpaid wages, excessive working hours,

(Corresponding with the State: Petitions in Turkish and Iranian Social History), (in Turkish), *Türkiyat Mecmuasi*, 21, (Spring, 2011), pp.1-29.

6 The definition is taken from: Lex Heerma Van Voss, "Introduction", *International Review of Social History,* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in Social History, (December 2001), pp.1-10.

7 Cecila Nubola, "Supplications between Politics and Justice: The Northern and Central Italian States in the Early Modern Age", *International Review of Social History,* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in *Social History* (December 2001), p. 36.

8 Nubola, "Supplications between Politics and Justice", p. 35.

9 Nubola, "Supplications between Politics and Justice", p. 35.

unfavourable working conditions, lost jobs, mistreatment by managers, and workplace injuries.

A Weeping Traveller: Mohammad Ali of Yazd and Lost Jobs

In the early twentieth century, foreign imports were perceived by workers as the main reason for the loss of their jobs. Already by the late 19th century, the negative effects of foreign imports on native textile manufacturing were pointed out. It was believed that ready-made imports not only devastated the native industries but also pushed people into further poverty.[10] As a result, the contraction of craft business in the provinces led many former craftsmen to seek employment in larger cities, such as Tehran, Tabriz, and towns in Khorasan, which apparently still provided employment opportunities.[11] In addition, going abroad, especially to Russia, was still a viable option until the First World War. Apart from these options, although some of the traditional sectors were declining, a number of new ones came into existence. For example, the making of Russian shoes *(orusiduz)* provided employment to an increasing number of workers from the late 19th century onwards.[12] Another success story was recorded by the cloak weaving *('ababafi)* industry.[13] *'Aba* weaving had become a significant source of employment to more and more people in the countryside, where mostly women spun and wove these traditional garments, although the business was not restricted to rural settings. By 1910, there were 120 master *'aba* weavers in the city of Isfahan.[14] Furthermore, although foreign imports hurt many traditional industries, international trade increased Iran's export-oriented production in such items as leather, opium, henna, and silk. The most striking growth, however, was witnessed in the Iranian carpet industry. Persian carpets were already among the export items of Iran by the early 19th century and the existing interest in Persian carpets increased in Europe after the World Trade Fair in 1851. The World Trade Fair in Vienna in 1873 substantially added to the demand for Persian carpets.[15] Regarding the leather industry, for instance, Sobotsinskii writes:

> *"Leather production which until now was in the hands of a large number of enterprises standing halfway between cottage and handicraft industry and employing 5-10 workers, is changing into manufactories. Thus, already in 1909 in Mashhad, and Hamadan, there were 8 workshops, with up to 40-50 workers each. The small handicraft shops were*

[10] For a discussion on popular reactions against foreign imports see: Serhan Afacan, "Foreign Goods Native Consumption: Popular Reactions to Foreign Economic Domination and the Grassroots Perceptions of Economic Development in Iran", *Iran and the Middle East: Transnational Encounters and Social History*, (ed. H. E. Chehabi, Peyman Jafari & Maral Jefroudi), London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015, pp. 137-160.

[11] Willem Floor, *Labour and Industry in Iran,* Washington: Mega Publishers, 2009, p. 6.

[12] Floor, *Labour and Industry,* p. 6.

[13] Floor, *Labour and Industry,* p. 6.

[14] Floor, *Labour and Industry*, p. 7.

[15] Floor, *Labour and Industry,* p. 7.

> *unable to withstand the competition and the large enterprises, and rapidly declined… In Hamadan in 1912, there were 300 small leather shops, compared with 400 in 1909, and in Mashhad 50 compared with 200."*[16]

During this period, craftsmen could leave one specific trade for another in the same town or else migrate to towns and cities in search of a job. However, Reza Shah's modernization policies happened to be a bigger challenge for craftsmen, since, for him, modernization meant factory-based industrialization. The economic policies adopted during his reign added to the size of the industrial proletariat. Nevertheless, the priority given to industrialization resulted in insufficient, if any, attention paid to the workers' conditions.

Craftsmen apparently condemned foreign investment and the factorization of production, as vividly illustrated in the following petition sent by the Union of Merchants of Hamadan, dated January 1926. After highlighting the unfavourable economic conditions in the country, the petition remarked:

> *"All over Iran one can see the dispirited and cheerless craftsmen whose numbers are already few. If you can spare some time, you can even visit their crypts (dakhmeh) which are the twentieth-century Iranian factories. Their look will answer all your questions. The most important of such factories are carpet-weaving factories, which are under foreign control. Go and see how small boys and girls work there for an entire day for a few pennies. If foreigners buy Iranians' carpets, it is because of the low wages. If we compare them with workers of the industrialized nations of the world, they earn a lot more money in a six to eight-hour workday. So, we work but cannot earn, and whatever we do earn, we spend it on foreign textiles and other goods."*[17]

The complaints about foreign imports and their negative effects on native production were universal phenomena in Iran. In September 1927, silk-stuff makers of Yazd complained about losing their livelihood due to cheaper imports.[18] Following this, they petitioned for the adoption of measures to promote native textiles. In the same petition, they also requested the appointment of an instructor to teach them how to use aniline dyes, which would help them bring down their production expenses. In the response from the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Utilities, it was stated that "The law for the use of national clothes" *(qanun-e este'mal-e albaseh-e vatani)*, which was adopted in February 1923, was meant to serve as an effective means to promote domestic industries.[19] It was also added that the manufacturer should try, to the extent possible, to increase the quality of their goods and lower their prices. As far as the issue of aniline dyes was

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16 Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran: 1800-1914*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 259.

17 Raziyeh Yoosofi Neya, *Asnad-i Tejari-ye Advar-e Avval ta Panjom-e Shura-ye Melli*, Tehran: Library, Museum and Documentation Centre of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (LMDCIP), 2009, p. 503.

18 LMDCIP. d6/k59/j27/p69, "To the Presidency of the Parliament", 21 September 1927.

19 LMDCIP. d6/k59/j27/p69, "From the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Utilities to the Presidency of the Parliament", 26 June 1927.

concerned, it was stated that the Ministry did not have enough budget for the appointment of an instructor, but factory owners and producers could themselves come to Tehran to receive training at their own expense.

Additionally, not only his economic policies but also other aspects of Reza Shah's modernization project worked against the craftsmen's interests. The Uniform Dress Law of 1928 is a good example.[20] Traditional clothes were replaced in state offices by Western-style clothes, which were supplied by the newly founded factories –much to the frustration of traditional manufacturers. Thus, in 1929, the cloak makers of Isfahan complained in a petition about the deterioration of their business due to this law. In response, Mehdi Qoli Hedayat, the Prime Minister, suggested that they weave fabrics suitable for "normal clothing" *(lebas-e ma'mul)* and added that the use of cloaks in winter was not forbidden.[21] According to the local *Akhgar* newspaper, published in Isfahan, in February 1929, the weavers of Tehran protested against the Vatan Factory, and complained that the weavers of Yazd had lost their livelihood due to the mechanization of the textile industry.[22]

That being said, hardly anyone criticized these modernization policies as fiercely as Mohammad Ali of Yazd, a silk weaver, who, in an exceptionally long and utterly critical petition sent in January 1929, condemned the deputies of the Majles (Iranian Parliament) for not paying attention to the plight of the perishing craftsmen. His petition is worth quoting at length, as follows:

"To the Honourable Head of the National Assembly,

When the Creator of humankind, the Instructor and the Trainer (mo'allem va morabbi) of human beings, the Leader of the revolutionaries and the Rebutter of the claims of naturalists, May peace be upon Him, fought against His enemies who were also the enemies of humankind, He was defeated by them.[23] *When He was victimized and fell to the ground from His horse and when His enemies attacked His tent for plunder, he addressed their honour and said: "if you do not have religion do be free in your world" (in lam yakun lakum dinun kunu ahraran fi dunyakum). In order to make people cry,*

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20 Dress regulations for men and women were an integral part of Reza Shah's modernization policies. By the law promulgated in 1928, all Iranian male subjects, with the exception of those who were required to wear special clothing in conformity with service in the government, would wear uniform clothing within the country. The exceptions, like the Muslim and non-Muslim prayer leader and clerics, were specified in Article II of the law. Houchang E. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah", *Iranian Studies,* 26 (Summer/Autumn, 1993), pp. 213-14.

21 National Library and Archive of Iran (NLAI), 290/8508, "To the Guild of Cloak Makers of Isfahan", 1 Tir 1308, (22 June 1929).

22 Abdol Mahdi Rajai, *Esfahan az Negah-e Akhgar* (Isfahan from the Lense of Akhgar), Isfahan: Isfahan Municipality, 2014, p. 125.

23 He is referring to the Battle of Karbala, which was fought on 10 October 680 (10 Muharram 61 in the Islamic calendar) between the army of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid I and a small army led by Husayn b. Ali, son of Ali b. Taleb, the fourth of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and the grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, at Karbala region in Iraq, where the latter was martyred by the former's army.

popular preachers (rowzeh-khan) translated this as "kill me and do whatever you want." However, those who have a deeper understanding (ahl-e ma'ani) know its actual meaning. So, they do not restrict its meaning to that ignoble crown and to that particular day, for the real meaning addresses humankind in general and Muslims in particular and is valid until the end of time. The word means "O worshippers of their world and desires (donya va shahvat-parastan) if you do not have religion then work hard for your world." (Which is a characteristic absent in Iranians). I am not trying to pretend to be a preacher here. My objective is to remind and be a witness to Iranians in general and to the deputies in particular who are in this time a source of emulation for the people. I am telling you that it would be very good if you were sincere about your declarations and listen to this advice. […]. You present yourselves as the proponents of toilers (tarafdaran-e ranjbar) and I wish you could sometimes turn this from simple words into reality. Have you ever wondered about the situation of this miserable folk of Yazd? […]. Have you ever thought about the consequences of the Uniform Dress Law for the silk-stuff makers of Yazd? Their goods are no longer purchased by people. I remember well that their goods were exported to Russia twenty years ago and were used there. Today, due to lack of your consideration, their products are neither sold nor used. Your lack of consideration and attention to this community is the reason for this. Why is this? This is because Iranians and the entire world turned into imitators and as you know it is the ones at the top who are imitated. When you use European socks, pants, shirts and even staffs, the lower classes try to become like you, as a result of which Iranian industries and handicrafts disappear just like those people who produce those goods. The populist gentlemen (aqayan-e surat-mardom) preferred foreign fabrics to Iranian ones and they do not need the silk-makers of Yazd and Kashan. Iranian weavers do this business to make the Iranian gentlemen purchase their goods and you are their leaders. Actually this sickness had spread a few years ago but did not receive widespread recognition.[24] *Also, if only at least the landowners and notables ('ayan va ashraf) wore in wintertime the 'aba produced in Na'in*[25] *to protect themselves from the cold! But of course, how funny would the Pahlavi hat*[26] *appear with an 'aba! An overcoat must be worn with it, or a jacket or a dressing gown! […]. If it was only to protect yourselves from the cold and to stay warm, it is possible to make both of them from the 'aba produced in Na'in. But why to bother? Instead it is easier to use the sacred cloth (parcheh-e mobarak) of whatever name which is produced by Monsieur Foreigner!"*[27]

Following this harsh introduction, Mohammad Ali then embarks upon explaining the plight of the silk-stuff makers of Yazd and the miseries of their families. However, he was very careful to make sure his obedience to Reza Shah "the father of this bunch of helpless people, the Sultan who from the beginning,

24 He sarcastically refers to the Law for the Use of National Clothes passed in 1923. The law made it compulsory for all state employees, including the military, to wear clothes produced from native fabrics and of Iranian make.

25 It is a town in the province of Isfahan, 170 km north of Yazd and 140 km east of the city of Isfahan. It was famous for its *'aba* which is a loose outer garment, generally for men, without sleeves. It was worn widely in Iran, as throughout the Middle East, and was relatively cheap.

26 The Pahlavi hat or *Kolah-e Pahlavi* was a type of hat introduced during Reza Shah's reign. Its form was based on the French military hat with a cylindrical main shape and short brim in the front.

27 LMDCIP. d7/k155/j35.1/13, "To the Honourable Head of the National Assembly", 17 January 1929.

ceaselessly worked for improving and developing the homeland and for removing the oppression caused by the foreigners as well as by their worshippers inside the country *(zolm-e ajnabi va ajnabi-parastan)*." He then continued:

> *"So, I spent my valuable time to write these lines and I am reminding you that if you do not have religion, be free in your world. […]. Would it not be good if you behaved like pious people do, and work to make Iranians, from the lower and upper classes, from ordinary people to the notables, wear Iranian clothes produced in this country?"*

He then claims that from the previous New Year to the day when the petition was written, twelve or fifteen thousand people migrated from Yazd to other towns. In the meantime, he not only condemns the Uniform Dress Law but also the monopolization of the opium trade and several other measures. He finally requested the adoption of necessary measures to ensure the use of native clothes and to develop domestic industries. Most strikingly, or maybe most expectedly, he signed the petition as "a friend of the Pahlavi" to leave no doubt about his loyalty to the Shah!

However, despite the careful distinction he makes between the Majles deputies and the Shah, the case of Mohammad Ali of Yazd was still rather exceptional. Usually, the petitioners used more deferential language to make their point, as exemplified in the petition of the muslin weavers of Isfahan. In a collective petition dated 24 December 1929 with hundreds of signatures on it, they complained about losing their livelihoods and falling into misery because of the decline of their craft.[28] By employing a deliberately dramatic language, they stated that their only source of income was producing uniforms for state employees. However, they added that this business had lately been awarded to a certain "merciless" contractor *(kontratchi)* named Haj 'Abbas 'Ali Isfahani, who did not pay the craftsmen their money and deprived them of their livelihoods. The workers argued that they neither had the power to confront Isfahani nor the intention of giving up their craft. They wrote: *"We call upon you to redress our grievance. If you want, you can order our execution and save us from this misery since in this situation death is better than living. Finally, we pray to God to give you, the trustees of the nation, eternal fortune and support."*

Apparently, if not for any other reason than the sake of convenience, the official authorities placed their orders with the contractors and the latter mediated between the producers and the purchaser –in this case, the local political establishment. This brought the craftsmen face-to-face with the ever-increasing penetration of state power into their lives and the threat posed by the nascent large-scale industrial establishments. It is not known what workers meant by not receiving their wages. We may assume, however, that they either fulfilled their part of the contract but were denied their wages, or the contractor subcontracted the order to some other individuals or to a company. The reaction of the Iranian

28 LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/p94, "To the Glorious Parliament", 24 December 1929.

Parliament reinforces the second possibility. On 22 April 1930, it was argued, as a response to the petition, that this case had been considered, but since trade was free in Iran, nothing could be done about it.[29] It appears that following this response, the workers tried their chance with the Ministry of Economy, but to no avail.

The petition of the muslin weavers of Isfahan who complain about deteriorating trade

Source: LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/94, 24 December 1929.

The Ministry replied on 25 May 1939 that it did not compel the local authorities in Isfahan to continue their contract with Haj 'Abbas 'Ali Esfahani, nor to make contracts with other individuals.[30] The petitioners then were advised to apply to the city's judicial authorities if they believed that they had incurred any losses because of their situation.

Occasionally, the tension between the workers employed in craft industries and the nascent large-scale industrial establishments becomes obvious, as in the case of the *barak* weavers of Isfahan.[31] In a petition dated 29 March 1930, they complained in the following words of their misery and deprivation, which they argued was caused by the Vatan Factory:

> *"To the Noble Presence of the Deputies of the Glorious Majles, May God Empower its Pillars,*
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> *As the representatives of the barak weavers of Sadahi [?] we the minor servants, Qadam Ali 'Ala'i Sadahi and Mir Ali Mokhtari Sadahi, present the following. In this period the state and the deputies are struggling for the advancement of national production and of the guilds. The nation and the homeland chose the path of progress only in order to*

[29] LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/ p94, "To Hajj Esma'il Hava'i and the other Weavers of Isfahan", 22 April 1930.

[30] LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/ p94, "To the Honourable Weavers' Guild of Isfahan", 25 May 1939.

[31] The *barak* is a garment made of camel's hair.

promote the national products and to develop the guilds (asnaf) and the home industries. Therefore, the government, the authorities and especially the deputies of the Parliament should give equal consideration to the guildsmen and the industrialists, and should only care about the benefit of the country and the development of the guilds. They should not discriminate against any person at the expense of another since everyone enjoys the same rights in society. The labourer (ranjbar) and the millionaire are the same. We the barak weavers of Sadabi are over ten thousand people and we have taken the contract for the manufacturing of the overcoats for the armed forces in Southern Iran and produced them with our labour and elbow grease (dast-ras va ranj). Each piece of our finished products cost the state three tumans and can be used for three years. Last year, the Vatan Factory obtained the contract for the same business and produced each piece for three tumans and a bit and could only be used for two years. As your servants, when our products, which are good for three years, are compared with those of the Vatan Factory, which can be used only for two years, the competent people will confirm the durability of the former. Moreover, since the main objective of the authorities is to promote national manufactures, it should be considered that we are ten thousand citizens of the homeland (ahl-e vatan) while the owner of the Vatan Factory is one single individual. Also, once this state contract is taken from us, we will disappear for we have no other craft or trade, but the owner of the Vatan Factory does not need this contract at all, as he can produce different clothes of various colors. If we take the state budget into account, our products reach the army for three tumans each, to be used for three years. Our business is patriotism, our business is progress-loving, and our business is proper since it does not only serve the interests of the state but also saves the ten thousand citizens of the country (nofus-e mellat) from deprivation. The Vatan Factory can produce different goods of various colours for the army. After all the peaceful decision rests with your noble presence. May God prolong your fortune."[32]

Upon not receiving any response to their case, the weavers sent after about three months another petition in which they reproduced the same account.[33] In this second petition written on behalf of "the ten thousand minor workers of the guild of *barak* weavers, both male and female" *(in chakeran-e karegaran-e senf-e barak-baf-e balegh bar dah hezar nofus az zan va mard)* the stress on labour was more deliberate. The petitioning workers particularly focused on the notion of the homeland *(vatan)* to counteract the Vatan Factory which was named to address the same patriotic feelings. Besides, as a discursive tool the workers explicitly presented the owner of the Vatan Factory as the sole beneficiary of the contract by dismissing altogether the hundreds of workers employed in it.

Throughout the 1930s, state support for large-scale industrial establishments in general and for the Vatan Factory in particular, along with foreign imports even as late as the mid-1930s, continued to be held liable by the craft workers for the decline of their craft and their lost jobs as in the case of the cloak makers of Isfahan. In February 1934 they sent a petition in which they complained about the

32 LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/p89, "To the Glorious Parliament", 29 March 1930.

33 LMDCIP. d7/k102/j14.2/p89, "To the Glorious Parliament", 22 June 1930.

hardships they faced for the decline of their craft.[34] They stated in the petition that after cloak making was no longer possible, they started to produce different fabrics which also failed because of the cheaper imports. Thus, they demanded the establishment of an institution where they would be educated to find themselves a sustainable job. As an alternative, the cloak makers asked the government to order the police and other security forces to purchase from them some of their needs which they had been buying from the Vatan Factory. The cloak makers also argued that the state could establish a company for the craftsmen and import machine by which they could produce clothes.[35]

Occasionally, workers lost their jobs due to the unintended consequences of modernization policies, of which the decree regarding the unveiling of women or Kashf-e Hejab, dated February 1936, is an example. The decree aimed to remove Iranian women's *chador*, a loose, enveloping, sleeveless piece of cloth which covered the whole body, in addition to their face mask, known as the *picheh*. As a result, women could either go out unveiled or stay at home. On 12 July 1936, the drapers of Najafabad, a town in Isfahan province, complained about their deteriorating business due to Jewish peddlers, from whom the veiled women who could not go out to the bazaars shopped.[36] They complained that such peddlers had no shops and were not subject to taxes. They in turn requested that these peddlers should be ordered to hire shops and get involved in other businesses. According to the drapers, since Najafabad was an agricultural town, men were busy working on the land while shopping in the bazaars was undertaken by women, who, since the implementation of the unveiling decree, could not go out at all. In another petition dated 26 January 1937, the drapers operating at the bazaars in Isfahan once again complained about losing their livelihood due to the Jewish peddlers.[37] They stated that women who no longer could go out to the bazaars chose to shop from the peddlers, which had become a common practice among the women of Isfahan. The drapers finally requested the prohibition of peddlers who neither were subject to any taxes nor had shops of their own.

Factory workers, too, frequently complained about losing their jobs for a variety of reasons. Economic issues played a role, but conflict with factory

34 NLAI. 291/2480, "To the Honourable Governor of Isfahan", 6 Esfand 1312 (25 February 1934).

35 The unrest was not limited to textile workers. Those workers employed at other industries also protested against the establishment of factories, which they argued had replaced their crafts. A similar case was made by cigarette sellers in a petition dated March 1932. According to what they had read in newspapers, wrote the cigarette sellers, some merchants and other investors involved in cigarette selling had imported a number of cigarette-cleaning machines, with a daily product equal to that of nearly a hundred workers. Although these machines did not yet work at full capacity, the workers and their families, they argued, were in a state of decline. The cigarette-sellers then asked the Majles to show mercy to the workers and their families and save them from their misery. LMDCIP. d8/k168/j6, "From the Cigarette Sellers", 3 March 1932.

36 NLAI. 291/2581, "To the Governor of Isfahan", 21 Tir 1315 (12 July 1936).

37 NLAI. 291/2581, "To the Glorious Governor of Isfahan", 6 Bahman 1315 (26 January 1937).

management was another reason for losing their jobs. During the 1930s, workers were somehow aware of the interventionist state role in industrialization and called on the official authorities to help in times of economic problems. The case of the three hundred and fifty former workers of the Khosravi Tannery in Tabriz attests to this point. The workers stated in a collective petition sent to the Parliament in June 1936 that they had lost their jobs because of financial difficulties and increased taxes, which had led the factory's management to close its shoe-making department.[38] They argued that the department had been producing military boots, but had to shut down due to increased customs duties on the necessary chemicals. Therefore, they asked for the removal of the factory's financial difficulties in order to be able to get back to their work.[39] Consequently, the factory was saved from its financial problems by orders placed by the army.[40]

In an undated petition, which apparently belongs to the mid-1930s, the workers of the Pashmbaf Factory in Isfahan complained about their mistreatment and the arbitrary practices of their manager. The workers criticized the powers granted to the factory's management for the implementation of the adopted measures in the following words:

> *"Currently, the Pashmbaf Factory management fires a worker from the factory, who wasted years of his life for it, every day, through various pretexts and imaginary excuses. For this, they receive no permission from official authorities. Three days ago, a worker named Mohammad Ali Mohammadi, who was employed at the spinning department, was dismissed for no reason… Workers are worried about the possibility that such arbitrary decisions may in time turn into established practices among factory managers."*[41]

Unpaid Wages

Unpaid wages constituted another problem for which workers sent petitions. Such complaints mostly came from factory workers. Although there are numerous petitions about unpaid wages, one particular example by three hundred-woman workers from the Wool Spinning Factory in Mazandaran, in northern Iran, which was established by the House of Industries to provide employment for needy women, will be discussed here. In August 1921, they submitted a petition to the Parliament, in which they asked for their unpaid wages for the last nine months that they had worked before the factory was finally shut down.[42] They wrote in their supplication that the factory was managed by an Armenian named Monsieur Mowl and that they had to work in very unfavourable conditions. They also added that each of them had several orphans to take care of. In addition, they pointed out that their previous appeals to various state authorities for a redress of their

38 LMDCIP. d/k107/j16, 26 June 1936.

39 Consequently, the factory was saved by these army orders. See Floor, *Labour and Industry*, p. 132.

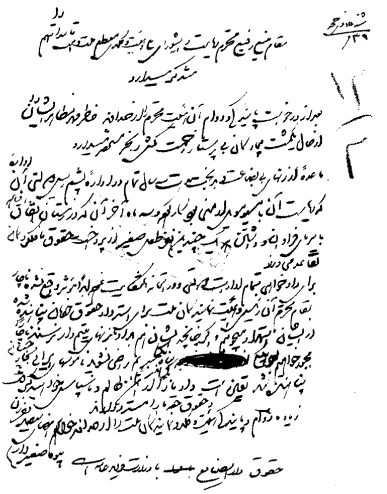
40 Floor, *Labour and Industry*, p. 132.

41 NLAI. 291/565 "To the Governorship of Isfahan".

42 LMDCIP. d4/k25/j12/p2. "To the Glorious National Assembly and to the Honourable Members of the Cabinet", August 1921.

grievance did not yield any results. Finally, after stressing their need for protection, they wrote that the deputies should let "the Iranian women who are the honour of the country *(namusha-ye irani)* seek protection from foreigners." The petition was apparently forwarded by the Petitions Commission to the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Utilities, which informed the Speaker of the Parliament that the House of Industries was established in 1918 and was placed in 1920 under the authority of this ministry.[43] However, according to the Ministry, the House of Industries was subsequently relegated to the Tehran Municipality. Therefore, the Ministry suggested that the female workers had to appeal to the Municipality. Three months later, on 19 November 1921, the workers sent a second petition, which addressed all of the deputies and in which the woman workers reproduced the same account regarding the difficulties they had to face.[44] By using the same honour discourse, they added, "Does your clemency allow you to leave a bunch of your women and your honour *(avrat va navamis-e shoma)* without food and clothing?" Finally, they stated that if their grievance was not redressed, they would take, as a protest, sanctuary at Baharestan Square, where the Parliament was located.

Petition of the Woman Workers of the Wool Spinning Factory in Mazandaran



Source: LMDCIP. d4/k25/j12/p2., August 1921.

43 LMDCIP. d4/k25/j12/p2. "From the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Utilities to the Head of the Majles", 3 September 1921.

44 LMDCIP. d4/k25/j12/p2, "To the Honourable Deputies of the Sacred Majles May God Endure their Power", 19 November 1921.

Here, the female workers appealed to the patrimonial feelings of the deputies and their role as the protectors of the nation. However, since the issue concerned previous years, the Tehran Municipality denied any responsibility in the matter and stated that it concerned the House of Industries. Therefore, it was suggested that the workers should apply to Monsieur Mowl [?]. Shortly afterwards, the workers sent a third petition. The petition, dated 12 December 1921, addressed the Speaker of the Parliament, the Cabinet and the Petitions Commission and provided further details about the women's living conditions. The workers wrote that during the famine years between 1917 and 1919, Americans used to support them, but as the famine had ended, they had stopped their help, as well. They then repeated their request to receive their unpaid wages. This petition was followed by a written reply from Monsieur Mowl, who addressed the petitioning woman workers. He denied any responsibility and argued that his "only desire was to help the helpless class (tabaqah-e bicharegan)." According to him, the responsibility rested with the Ministry of Commerce, rather than himself. However, for the women, seeking support from Monsieur Mowl was not an option for "there is a big difference between a woman who received twelve tumans a month and a manager whose monthly income is one hundred and fifty tumans." The result of this case is not clear from the documents, as in the case of a former worker from the Hamadan branch of the British owned East Carpet Factory, who complained in September 1926 that after twelve years of service at the factory, part of his wage had remained unpaid. For this reason, he had applied to the factory, but to no avail. He then applied to the Governorship of Hamadan, but they had refused to help him, since the factory was owned by the British. The worker then applied to the British Consulate in the city and was advised to apply to the judicial authority of Hamadan.

Conclusion

From the inception of the constitutional system in 1906 until 1931, when the anti-communist law came into effect, Iranian workers took part in several strikes of varying significance. Organized labour actions were first seen in such services sectors as telegraph offices and tramway operations to gradually involve others too. Nevertheless, the greater part of the Iranian workforce remained non-organized until the end of the period under study especially in the textile industry. The small number of large-scale industries, the tendency of craft workers to abstain from collective actions and the primarily politically oriented agendas of the leftist organizations determined the course of organized labour activism during this period. The unstable political atmosphere, foreign intervention, and the eruption of the First World War, as well as narrowly defined politics and security issues further distracted attention from growing labour issues. Once the war was over, labour actions experienced a major increase once again. However, with the state's ever-increasing grip over the political, social and economic fields, especially from the establishment of the Pahlavi regime in 1925 onwards, the frequency and the

number of labour actions witnessed an obvious setback. As the government forbade trade unions, especially the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions (CCFTU), which was established in 1921, 150 labour organizers were arrested between 1927 and 1932.[45] Also, upon the forced retirement of Solayman Eskandari as its leader, *Hezb-e Susyalist* (Socialist Party), which was also founded in 1921, had dissolved with its clubs having been burnt down by organized mobs.[46] The recently adopted position of the Communist Party of Iran towards Reza Shah and the existing political establishment was one of the main reasons for the government's uncompromisingly hostile attitude towards leftist movements. First in the party's Second Congress in Urumieh in 1927, and then, in the Third International in Moscow ten months later, the 1921 coup was described as a British plot and the Shah was denounced as an imperialist stooge.[47] Moreover, the Congress also called for a revolution of "peasants, workers, and national capitalists."[48] Leftist organizations, just like other organized political and social groups, were repressed throughout 1930s to resume their activities after Reza Shah's forced abdication from the throne in 1941.

The experiences of such movements and organizations tell us a lot about the history of the period and they deserve close scrutiny. Nonetheless, many of the labouring people who chose to stay out of the early labour organizations or fell outside the predefined scope of such organizations were busy earning their bread and livelihood. For the most part, as these people remained peripheral to the concerns of modern Iranian history-writing, their voices were also hardly heard in "old labour history" whose focus was on organized labour and labour institutions as well as on workers' collective actions.[49] Although "new labour history"[50], which attempted to contextualize workers' struggles, gave us important insights into the environment in which workers worked and lived, the original voices of labouring people were still missing. Petitions can potentially help historians fill this gap. Through petitions, one can trace the discursive formation of the Iranian working class to see how workers came to identify themselves as such. Apart from this, worker's petitions are important for three main reasons. First of all, they enable one to call into question the traditional distinction made between organized and non-organized labour and problematize the teleological role attributed to factory

45 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 139.

46 Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 139.

47 Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 139. The Congress was actually held in Ivanova, near Moscow, in the autumn of 1927. Yusof Eftekhari, *Khaterat-e duran-e separi shodeh: Khaterat va asnad-e Yusof Eftekhari, 1299 ta 1329*, (eds. Kaveh Bayat & M. Tafrashi), Tehran, 1370/1991, pp. 28-29. Quoted in Chaqueri, *The Left in Iran, 1905-1940*, London: The Merlin Press Ltd, 2011, p. 89.

48 Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 139.

49 Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global", *African Studies*, 66/2-3 (August-December 2007), p.169.

50 Van der Linden, "Labour History", p. 169.

workers as a supposedly progressive force to avoid what Quataert calls "the factory orthodoxy" which refers to the excessive and disproportionate attention given to factory labour.[51] Secondly, in the petitions one can also have first-hand information about the living and working conditions of labouring people since a typical petition starts with a display of respect to the authority in question which is followed by petitioners' introduction of themselves where they present information about various aspects of their lives and environments. Thirdly, petitions serve as a channel between the state and the society and provide a good opportunity to investigate state-society relations. This is particularly crucial for periods, such as 1930s, when other channels were practically closed. During this period, petitioning served as "a privileged communicative space" in which dissimulation rather than transparency was the main discursive tool of workers.[52] Workers' discourse "intended to be ambiguous, to have a double meaning, to be garbled so that they cannot be treated as a direct, open challenge and, hence, invite an equally direct, open retaliation."[53] In most cases, any relatively harsh criticism on the part of the workers was almost immediately softened in the following line and a clear line was cleverly drawn between the Shah and the lower authorities. Loyalty was so overly stressed in petitions that no room was left for any suspicion of rebellion or open confrontation.

Nevertheless, petitions should be read with a certain degree of caution. It goes without saying that petitions, just like any historical document, must be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence for a petitioner' top priority was to persuade their addresses about their demands and grievances in strongest terms possible. To achieve this, petitioners can at times manipulate certain facts and 'adjust' them to fit their cases. Also, there is the problem of disproportionate number of petitions both in terms of time and geographical scope. The number of petitions from a certain period can outnumber those from another period which also applies to geographical distribution of available petitions. We certainly have more petitions from such major cities as Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz etc. compared to smaller and faraway towns where petition sending facilities, such as telegraph offices, were less accessible. Therefore, petitions are most useful when used with other types of data. Finally, since the past was equally complex as the present, we should reconsider the previously held dogmatic and clear-cut division of history into political, economic and social spheres and should instead try to produce a more comprehensive narration of the past. This is certainly easier said than done, but it is worth trying. If Iranian

51 Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 14.

52 Ken Lunn & Ann Day, "Deference and Defiance: The Changing Nature of Petitioning in British Naval Dockyards", (ed. Lex Heerma Van Voss), *International Review of Social History,* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in Social History (2001), p. 132.

53 James Scott, "Everyday Form of Resistance", *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies,* 4 (1989), p. 55.

workers' petitions teach us one thing it is that they are important not only for examining Iran's labour history but also in better understanding modern Iranian history in general.

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