



A REPORT FROM LO INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT

Woman, life, freedom – and trade unions

Mats Erikson



The Swedish Trade Union Confederation

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Foreword

WHEN MASHA AMINI visited Iran's capital Teheran in autumn 2022 she was arrested by the "morality police". They didn't think her hijab covered her hair sufficiently. A few days later she was dead. LO of course stands together with all those who mourn her. And we do not hesitate to point to those guilty of her death – the regime in Iran.

To express their fury, Iran's women rose up under the slogan "Woman, life, freedom". Since then they have protested against the Islamic dictatorship that has been repressing them for decades. Workers, students and teachers have joined in to show their solidarity through manifestations and strikes. Many have been imprisoned and several executed. Yet the popular protests continue.

Iran's free trade unions are also part of the fight for democracy. The system in Iran has made trade union work both difficult and dangerous outside the state-run Islamic workers' organisations that the regime has formed. Despite this, independent, real trade unions now exist in Iran; trade unions for bus drivers, sugar cane workers, teachers and workers in the oil, gas and petrochemical industries. However, they are confronted by brutal violence. Not infrequently trade unionists have to pay with their lives. At present, more than 50 union leaders are in prison. The figure is probably higher because many are imprisoned without it becoming known internationally. We know that three trade union leaders have died under unclear circumstances in prison since 2014 and we have no reason to believe that they died a natural death.

Over the years, LO and its affiliated unions have done what we could to support our trade union comrades in Iran, and our support continues, of course. You can read more about that work in this publication.

It may feel hopeless to face oppression like that in Iran. But in the trade union movement we know that solidarity produces results, even if the struggle is sometimes long and difficult. For there is nothing that oppressors fear more than international solidarity. That's why we will never give up our solidarity work for a free Iran where everyone's – women and men alike – human rights are respected.

Susanna Gideonsson

President of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)



All over Iran, women are rising up against oppression.

Photo: Artin Bakhan

1. *Hundred years of democracy struggle*

IRAN EXPERIENCED TWO REVOLUTIONS in the 20th century. the so-called constitutional revolution of 1906-1907 and the Islamic revolution of 1979.

The first revolution led, among other things, to the first democratic constitution of the Middle East. In 1921, however, the military seized power in a coup d'état and its leader proclaimed himself Shah, "ruler." During World War II, Iran was invaded by the Allies, the United States and Britain, and the Shah was forced out of power. After the war, an elected government was formed. However, when the new government tried to nationalise the country's oil resources, it led to a US-backed military coup that reinstated the Shah. Many trade unionists and political activists fled the country or were imprisoned. The Muslim clergy, the mullahs, supported the coup d'état and supported the Shah.

In the coming decades, Iranian industry developed, and many countries began to invest in Iran. The workers began to organise themselves. Demands for political reform increased and the opposition grew. The clergy also began to criticise the Shah. In 1979, the protests led to the second Iranian revolution of the 20th century. When the regime collapsed, the mullahs took power under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and began a brutal persecution of all dissenters, an oppression that has been going on ever since.



The outside world has for several years tried to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Photo: Jack Mikrut

2. Iran and the rest of the world

IN 2015, A NUCLEAR AGREEMENT was signed between Iran, Russia, China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. The aim of the agreement was for Iran to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. In exchange, several international sanctions were lifted, leading to increased trade. When Donald Trump became president, the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement and reintroduced harsh economic sanctions against Iran in 2018. Those hardest hit were Iran's workers; unemployment rose as well as inflation. After Joe Biden became president, negotiations began to restore the nuclear agreement, but they are currently suspended. Following the assassination of Mahsa Amini and the brutality of the regime against the protests that followed, the EU have imposed sanctions on a large number of people, organisations and companies in Iran.

Iran has historically been one of Sweden's most important export markets outside Europe and many Swedish companies have a long tradition in the country. Exports to Iran include machinery, transport equipment and telecommunications. Since the US sanctions were reintroduced in 2018, Swedish trade with Iran has largely ceased¹.

LO has long called for those who have official contacts with Iran to raise the issue of trade union and other human rights. This is too seldom done. However, when the Social Democratic Government led a Swedish trade delegation to Iran in 2017, the issue was raised. Among other things, a list of imprisoned union leaders was handed over, several of whom were subsequently released.²

1 <https://www.svd.se/a/na0o0e0/tvarnit-for-svensk-iranexport>

2 <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/lofven-om-iranresan-det-ar-bra-att-aka-hit/>



The enforced wearing of a veil is the clearest symbol of the oppression of women in Iran.

Photo: Andri Onet

3. Gender apartheid

IRAN HAS BEEN a religious dictatorship since 1979. Candidates in the elections must be approved by the religious Guardian Council. All opposition is silenced with imprisonment, torture, beatings or execution. Homosexual acts carry the death penalty.

Women are kept down by a system that in practice involves a kind of gender apartheid. The main symbol of the oppression of women is the enforced wearing of a veil. However, women are discriminated against in almost all areas. A woman must have a male guardian's approval for marriage regardless of her age. She cannot obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband. In legal disputes, a woman's words carry only half the weight of a man's. Women who are not considered to be decently dressed are at risk of being apprehended by the country's morality police. Abortion is illegal.

4. Trade union opposition

IRAN HAS BEEN A MEMBER of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for 50 years. The Member States of the ILO must, among other things, ratify and respect the organisation's core conventions against forced labour, child labour, discrimination in employment and career choices, the right to organise and the right to negotiate collective agreements. Iran has refused to ratify the conventions on the right to form independent trade unions and the right to negotiate collective agreements.

In support of the protests following the assassination of Masha Amini, a series of workers' protests and strikes are ongoing in Iran³ and despite the repression, Iran's trade union movement has a long history. As early as 1905, Tehran's printing workers formed the country's first trade union organisation, and the trade union movement grew slowly but surely over the decades that followed. At the beginning of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 there were high hopes for democratic development, and trade unions were formed in workplaces all over the country. The hopes were soon dashed by the new Islamic regime. Trade unions and political organisations were attacked. Independent trade unions were declared illegal and their leaders were imprisoned.

Despite the repression, there are a number of independent trade unions in Iran. Three of them have close contacts with the Swedish trade union movement:

The bus drivers' union Syndika Vahed

Syndika Vahed was founded in 1958 and was active until 1982 when they were forced to cease their activities. They managed to resume activities in the early 2000s and are now mainly active in Tehran and its suburbs. In 2017 Syndika Vahed became a member of the International Transport Federation, of which the Swedish Transport Workers' Federation is also a member. The organisation's most famous leaders are Mansour

3 <https://truthout.org/articles/iranian-labor-unions-have-led-unprecedented-solidarity-strikes-amid-the-uprising/>

Osanlou, Reza Shahabi, Davood Razavi and Hassan Saidi. The last three are currently in prison, accused of “conspiracy against national security” and “collaboration with foreign spies.” Mansour Osanlou was forced to flee the country and is now active in the USA.

The teachers’ union KSMI/CCITTA

KSMI/CCITTA was active already in the time of the Shah and is the best organised trade union in Iran today, with regional representation throughout the country. CCITTA is a member of EI, Education International, of which the Swedish teachers’ unions are also members. Several of the organisation’s leaders and activists have been sentenced to prison, including Esmail Abdi, Rasoul Bodaghi and Mohammad Habibi.

The sugar cane workers’ trade union organisation Haft Tappeh

Haft Tappeh was founded in 1974 in the Khuzestan Province and was active in the first period after the Islamic Revolution. In the early 1980s, they, like other independent trade unions, were subjected to increasing repression and were forced to cease their activities. In 2008, more than 1,000 sugar cane workers gathered at a meeting where they officially re-started their trade union organisation. In recent years, Haft Tappeh members have been repeatedly harassed in their workplaces. Several of Haft Tappeh’s leaders have been sentenced to prison, including Esmail Bakhshi and Ali Nejati.

5. Violations of trade union rights

IN THE 2022 GLOBAL RIGHTS INDEX⁴ the International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC, lists several recent examples of violations of trade union rights in Iran:



Iran's free trade unions fights for human rights in working life.

Photo: TT

⁴ <https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2022/countries/irn>

- On 22 June 2022, 700 workers were fired for participating in an extensive strike in which 20,000 oil and petrochemical workers in eleven provinces stopped work. They were striking, among other things, for higher wages, increased leave and a better working environment.
- On 11 March 2022, Haleh Safarzadeh and Alireza Saghafi, members of the Center for Workers' Rights, were arrested along with 17 other activists during a meeting at Saghafi's workplace. They were imprisoned at Kachuei Prison in Karaj and are still interned.
- On 13 September 2021 Haft Tappeh's defence lawyer Farzaneh Zilabi was sentenced by a Revolutionary Court to one year in prison for "propaganda against the state". In addition to the prison sentence, Zilabi was banned from leaving the country for two years and given a six-month professional ban.
- On 11 January 2021, the term of imprisonment of Esmail Abdi, KSMI teachers' union, was extended for another 10 years. He was convicted in 2006 for "spreading propaganda against the system". The long prison sentence and continuous ill-treatment have seriously affected his health.

Yellow trade unions

The Iranian regime, through its own "workers' organisations", has built a system to control the workers and keep real trade unions away. In practice, these are yellow trade unions, i.e. unions controlled by those in power and the employers. Members are recruited through food rations and free trips to sacred Islamic sites. Some of these "trade unions" have tried to become members of the ITUC, the International Trade Union Confederation of free trade unions whose members include LO, TCO (Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) and Saco (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations). ITUC has refused them membership, a line that the Swedish trade union movement naturally supports. Among these regime-controlled organisations are Workers House (Khane Kargar), Workers Islamic Council (Shorahay Islami Kar), Workers Interest Council (Anjomanhay Senfi Kar) and Congregation for Workers Representatives (Majmae Omomi Namayandegane Khargaran).



There have been a wide range of trade union manifestations in support of the fight against repression in Iran.

Photo: Oscar Ernerot

6. Trade union solidarity with Iran

LO AND ITS AFFILIATES have carried out several manifestations in support of the trade unions in Iran and the ongoing feminist revolution. In October 2022, LO, TCO and Saco also sent a joint letter to Iran's ambassador condemning the regime's violence against the protests and calling for the immediate release of imprisoned trade union activists and other dissidents.⁵

When the International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC, held its congress in Australia in November, a solidarity statement was adopted in support of the popular protests in Iran⁶. The ITUC demands include:

- The immediate release of imprisoned trade unionists, and all of those detained and imprisoned in blatant violation of international law.
- The cessation of the Iranian government's suppression of women's and girls' fundamental human rights and the attacks on their lives.
- A guarantee to all Iranians of freedom of association, freedom of expression, bodily autonomy and security of the person.
- Iran's ratification of all ILO Conventions on human rights at work and full respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁵ <https://arbetet.se/2022/10/18/lo-tco-och-saco-stoder-protesterna-iran-mahsa-amini/>

⁶ https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/5co_e_5_b_ii_-_emergency_resolutions_-_iran.pdf



Saied Tagavi is active in the Swedish Transport Workers' Union and has been working for a democratic Iran since the 1960s. Photo: Saied Tagavi privat

7. Saied Tagavi fights for Iran's free trade unions

BORN AND RAISED IN TEHRAN, Saied Tagavi participated as a young man in the 1960s in protests against the Shah's dictatorship. In 1965 he came to Sweden. He chose to stay and decided to study social science with a focus on the labour market. Since then, Saied has been active in trade unions and politics for a free Iran, including as co-founder of the Trade Union Platform for Iran, where several LO affiliated unions participate ⁷.

In the 1970s, Saied worked as a journalist for Sveriges Radio. In that role he visited Paris in 1978 and interviewed the man who would take power in Iran a year later, Ayatollah Khomeini. At that time Khomeini was in exile in France.

“What Khomeini said sounded fine and democratic and many, even on the left, believed him. But they were just empty words and smoke screens,” says Saied.

In 1980, the year after the revolution, Saied visited Iran again.

“The Iran I met then was something quite different from what Khomeini talked about before his takeover of power. All I saw was barbarism, executions and oppression.”

Together with SR journalist Ingvar Lundin, Saied covered the student protests against the regime. When they interviewed students in Ahwaz, in the province of Khozistan, they were arrested by Basij, the regime's paramilitary force, and abducted.

“They confiscated our recordings. We didn't know what would happen to us and of course we felt threatened. They had murdered people before. But suddenly they got orders from above to return to the university, so they let us go and went there. At the university they massacred the protesting students.

Back in Sweden, Saied Tagavi worked as a refugee coordinator and helped both Iranians and other refugees to establish themselves in their new homeland. He also led a project to prevent addiction and criminal-

⁷ <https://www.transport.se/paaverka/paverka-internationellt/facklig-plattform-iran>

ity. When he reached retirement, he started driving a taxi. He joined the Transport Workers' Union, where he has been active for a long time.

In 2014, Saied co-founded the Trade Union Platform for Iran, where the Transport Workers' Union and several other LO affiliated unions participate. The aim is to highlight in various ways the difficult situation of trade unions in Iran, increase trade union interest in Iran and develop trade union cooperation in support of Iran's free and independent trade unions.

"Trade union rights are human rights and over the years it has become increasingly clear to me how important trade unions are in the struggle for a democratic Iran. But they need the support of the rest of the world," says Saied and continues:

"In the Trade Union Platform for Iran we have built up long-term contacts in Iran and through the years above all worked to spread knowledge about the trade union situation in the country. We also regularly arrange Iran days, two to three days of activities in Stockholm."

"Like all those in power, the rulers in Iran fear the working class. They see organised workers as a threat. Therefore, it is extremely important that we do not fail in our solidarity with the Iranian trade unions, especially now during the ongoing feminist revolution and popular uprising. We know from history that trade union opposition can overturn oppressor systems. Iran is no exception."

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All dictatorships have one thing in common: they fear free trade unions. Iran is no exception. Both under the Shah's regime and under the current Islamic dictatorship, people are denied the basic right to unionize to change their working lives. But free trade unions are also important in the fight for democracy throughout society. It is not least clear in the feminist uprising that has been going on since last autumn, where Iran's women are now rising up against the oppression that has kept them down for so long. Iran's free trade unions are also involved in that struggle. Because trade union rights are human rights.

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