


ROUND TABLE

Revolt with a Revolutionary Perspective

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At the zenith of the Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) protests in October to December 2022, the call for (general) strikes became a rallying point for activists who were seeking to increase the protests' social reach and political strength in the face of increasing state repression. Therefore labor provides an advantageous analytical lens for exploring some of the constraints and potentials of the social dynamics of the WLF protests.

Although it is too soon to offer any definitive characterization of the WLF protests, I define them as a revolt with a revolutionary perspective, to differentiate between their constraints as a delimited event and their potential or aspiration as a revolutionary process. On the one hand, this revolt represents a formidable challenge to the Islamic Republic, but it stopped short of creating the critical mass, organization, and political narrative to mobilize millions, and to fracture the political and military elites.¹ On the other hand, the WLF revolt facilitated the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity among a significant number of Iranians, which opens the possibility of radical change in the future. This revolutionary subjectivity is reflected in at least two developments.

First, the very concept of revolution has been reclaimed from the authorities of the Islamic Republic and has become hegemonic in oppositional discourse. As a result, a significant portion of the population now no longer see the protests as “antirevolutionary,” reserving that descriptor for state oppression itself. Moreover, the ambiguous (in terms of agency) notion of *barandazi* (overthrow) that had become popular in oppositional circles mainly outside of Iran has been exchanged for *enqelab* (revolution), which unambiguously defines social forces inside Iran as the agent for radical change-from-below. Second, revolutionary subjectivity is now being expressed as important shifts in mentalities regarding women and gender relations, ethnic communities and center-periphery relations, and cultural freedoms. In other areas, however, such as labor relations, the shift has been marginal, creating a serious obstacle for the development of the WLF revolt into a revolution, as I argue below.

Examining labor in contemporary Iran, I explore the constraints and possibilities that occupy the space between what the WLF protests are and what they aspire to be—revolt and revolution. These constraints and possibilities can be observed in two crucial realities: the ubiquity of socio-economic grievances and their relative absence in the slogans of the WLF revolt; and the complex relationship between street protests and labor strikes during the WLF revolt.²

¹ On the significance of numbers, see Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). This study of protests since 1900 argues that it takes, on average, the participation of around 3.5 percent of the population to ensure significant change. In the case of Iran, with 85 million inhabitants, this would amount to at least 3 million people.

² For a broader discussion of WLF, see Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Iran’s Uprisings for “Women, Life, Freedom”: Overdetermination, Crisis, and the Lineages of Revolt”, *Politics* (SAGE), forthcoming.

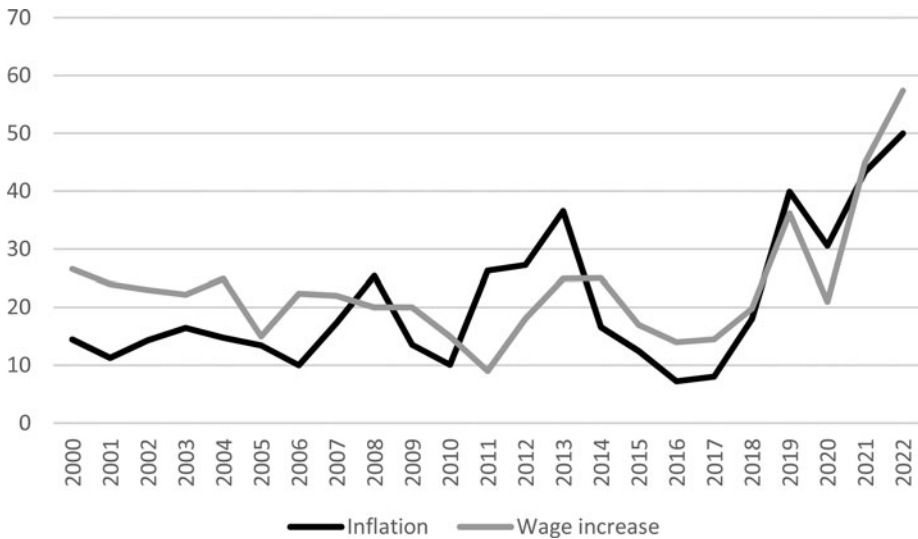


FIGURE 1. Inflation (consumer prices) and wage increase (annual percentage), 2000–2021.

Socioeconomic Grievances

The WLF revolt has been fueled by multiple grievances, including those against the systematic assault on women’s social and bodily autonomy, authoritarian politics, and marginalization of ethnic communities and peripheral regions. Deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, which ignited the protests of December 2017–January 2018 and November 2019, also have created a massive pool of discontent, as several indicators suggest.

Inflation, for instance, has increased dramatically since 2017, due to domestic factors such as low productivity, loose fiscal and monetary policies, and subsidy reforms (Figure 1). As the timing of the inflation hikes suggest, sanctions introduced in 2010 to 2012 and reintroduced in 2018 have played a major role as well. COVID-19 and the Russia–Ukraine war are additional external contributing factors.³ Although overall inflation increased at a slower pace in 2022, food prices notably increased after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and after the Rouhani administration slashed subsidies for essential goods in March 2022, pushing prices up by 25 percent from April to May 2022. Point-to-point inflation for food products was 86 percent in July 2022, and 67.7 percent in November 2022, reaching above 70 percent in 12 provinces (84 percent in Sistan and Baluchestan).⁴

Inflation has been a major contributor to the increasing poverty rate during recent years, reversing the trend of the previous two decades. Although 60 percent of the population had less than \$6.85 (2017 purchasing power parity) per day to spend in the 1980s, the portion of the population living under this international poverty line had declined to 15 percent in 2012. It then increased to a provisional peak of 27 percent in 2019, declining again to 19 percent in 2021. Significantly, the poverty rate in rural areas has increased much more dramatically, up to 34 percent in 2021, than in urban areas, where it remained at 15 percent. Iran’s accelerating environmental crises such as drought have most likely contributed to this divergence.⁵ Consequently, increased migration from rural areas to small provincial towns has put

³ H. Elif Ture and Ali Reza Khazaei, “Determinants of Inflation in Iran and Policies to Curb It,” International Monetary Fund, Working Paper 2022/181, 2022.

⁴ “Enfejar-e Tavaromi Dar 10 Ostan-e Keshvar” (Inflationary explosion in 10 provinces), EcoIran, August 12, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/26s2wrna>.

⁵ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Iran Poverty Rates Updated,” *Tyranny of Numbers* (blog), December 31, 2022, <https://djavadsalehi.com/2022/12/31/iran-poverty-rates-updated>.

pressure on the social conditions in these urban areas. Workers have been impacted as well: according to the Statistical Center of Iran the median annual expenditure of households headed by blue collar workers fell from \$4600 to \$3900, a decline of 15 percent, in the decade between 2010 and 2020.⁶ As Figure 1 illustrates, this drop in workers' living standards has occurred mainly since 2018, as wage increases have been outpaced by growing inflation, which is in reality higher for lower-income Iranians given the larger share of food in their overall expenditures.⁷

Furthermore, neoliberal restructuring has subjected many workers to precarity, undermining their collective bargaining power. Following a verdict issued by Iran's Supreme Administrative Court in 1996, employers have increasingly hired workers on temporary contracts. Most companies and public institutions also have outsourced their activities to contractors or employ their workers through agencies. As a result, more than 90 percent of current employment contracts of blue-collar workers in Iran are temporary, according to the labor deputy of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare.⁸ An estimated one-third of workers on these temporary contracts receive only a basic wage, with no overtime or shift work allowances.⁹

For youth, women, and ethnic minorities, all of whom experience a range of social and cultural discrimination, these deteriorating economic conditions form an additional source of grievances. Youth (ages 20–29) unemployment, for instance, has increased considerably in the last two decades, reaching around 30 percent for men and 50 percent for women. Due to unemployment, low wages, and high rents, 38.5 percent of men and 33.6 percent of women in the 25 to 34 age group lived with their parents in 2021.¹⁰ Women are not only confronted with exclusion and sexual harassment in public spaces, but also on the job market and in the workplace.¹¹ This is reflected in Iran's low female labor force participation, which increased from less than 10 percent in the 1980s to nearly 20 percent in 2018, but remains one of the lowest in the world.¹² As troubling as these figures are, they do not include women working in the informal sector, where they face more precarity and discrimination. The same pattern is visible among ethnic communities, such as Kurds and Balochis, who face above-average rates of poverty. For informal sector workers in these provinces, life is even more precarious and dangerous than elsewhere, as exemplified by the conditions of Kurdish porters.¹³

Despite their pervasiveness, socioeconomic grievances have not found adequate political articulation in the slogans, demands, and intellectual narratives of the WLF revolt. In this respect, Asef Bayat's observation that "the activists of the Arab Spring separated in some way the realm of the polity from the realm of the economy, as if they were two separate spheres" applies even more appropriately to Iran. If in Egypt "they didn't do or say much

⁶ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj and Zep Kalb, "Why Won't the Workers of Iran Unite?" *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/03/iran-workers-general-strike-oil-protests>.

⁷ Inflation figures are derived from the World Bank, World Development Indicators, www.data.worldbank.org. The wage increase percentages are calculated from annual wage data published by the Iran Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare. The inflation figure of 50 percent for 2022 is a personal estimate.

⁸ "90 darsad-e qarardad-ha-ye kar movaqat ast" (90 percent of labor contracts are temporary), *Rooznameh-ye Jahan-e San'at*, October 1, 2022, <https://jahanesanat.ir/90-295701-سوقت-است-درصد-قراردادهای-کار-موقت-است>.

⁹ "35 darsad-e kargaran-e qarardad movaqat faqat payeh hoquq daryaft mikonand" (35 percent of workers with temporary contracts receive only the basic wage), *Tasnim News Agency*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/01/16/2479129/35-درصد-کارگران-قرارداد-موقت-فقط-پایه-حقوق-دریافت-می-کنند-ضرورت-اجرای-ماده-7-قانون-کار>.

¹⁰ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Revisiting Youth Social Exclusion in Iran," *Tyranny of Numbers* (blog), December 5, 2022, <https://djavadsalehi.com/2022/12/05/revisiting-youth-social-exclusion-in-iran>.

¹¹ "Iran: Women Face Bias in the Workplace," *Human Rights Watch*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/25/iran-women-face-bias-workplace>.

¹² World Bank, World Development Indicators, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=IR>.

¹³ Sanan Moradi, Adam C. Morse, Alexander B. Murphy, Delaram Pakru, and Shehabad H., "Geographies of Precarity and Violence in the Kurdish Kolberi Underground Economy," *Political Geography* 95 (2022): 102562, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102562>.

about the economic relations, except for calling for ‘social justice,’” during the WLF revolt even that general demand was marginal to the political and intellectual discourses that emerged in its support.¹⁴ Despite radical slogans and practices among labor and grassroots activists, those discourses have not (yet) articulated a socioeconomic program as part of a radical project for democratization that can significantly improve the lives of subaltern groups.¹⁵

Street Protests and Labor Strikes

The limits and the potentials of the WLF revolt, as well as the separation of the political and the economic realms in its dominant narratives, also are visible in the relationship between street protests and labor strikes. As the former spread and faced increasing repression, many activists in Iran and in the Iranian diaspora started to see labor strikes as a powerful tool to successfully confront the Islamic Republic. Although understandable, this logic carries the risk of instrumentalizing workers, rather than taking their agency, conditions, demands, and the practical obstacles they face as a starting point to overcome the separation between the political and the economic realms that is hindering the development of the WLF revolt.

In the last two decades, the number of labor strikes in Iran has increased notably over issues such as low wages, wage arrears, unsafe work conditions, layoffs, and declining living standards in general.¹⁶ According to a human rights organization, 780 labor strikes were organized in the twelve months from 1 May 2021 to 27 April 2022—an 85 percent increase from the 117 strikes in the preceding year.¹⁷ The first labor strike that emerged after the WLF protests began was organized by the Council for the Organization of Protests of Contract Oil Workers on October 10 and 11, 2022, at the petrochemical industry in Asaluyeh and the refinery of Abadan. Although it was relatively small and did not involve tenured workers of the oil industry, it was one of the few industrial actions with a clear political demand in support of the protests, expressing the progressive politics of the organizers.¹⁸ In the following weeks, more strikes followed.

According to the data I have compiled from newspapers and social media sources, there were forty-six labor strikes from October 2 to November 29, 2022—a weekly average of 5.5.¹⁹ This is comparable to the weekly average number of strikes recorded by Enqelab.info, which collects data on the WLF protests. According to their count, there were ninety-two strikes from October 1, 2022, to January 17, 2023—a weekly average of 6.1, which might be higher due to an uptick in strikes in December 2022. To assess whether the strikes during this period were “regular” or connected to the WLF protests, one can look to the weekly averages of the previous years: ten strikes from March 21, 2015, to March 20, 2016; 12.5 strikes from March 21, 2016, to March 20, 2017; thirteen strikes from March 21, 2017, to March 20, 2018;²⁰

¹⁴ Linda Herrera and Heba Khalil, “Critical Voices in Critical Times: Revolution without Revolutionaries: An Interview with Asef Bayat,” *OpenDemocracy*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/critical-voices-in-critical-times-revolution-without>.

¹⁵ A step in this direction was taken by twenty labor, feminist, and student grass-roots organisations inside of Iran. See “20 Independent Trade Unions and Civil Organisations Issued a Joint Charter of Basic Demands – Full Text,” *Zamaneh Media* (blog), February 15, 2023, <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/33695/>.

¹⁶ Kevan Harris and Zep Kalb, “How Years of Increasing Labor Unrest Signaled Iran’s Latest Protest Wave,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/19/how-years-of-increasing-labor-unrest-signaled-irans-latest-protest-wave>.

¹⁷ “A Statistical Look at the Situation of Iranian Workers over the Past Year,” *Hrana* (blog), April 29, 2022, <https://www.en-hrana.org/a-statistical-look-at-the-situation-of-iranian-workers-over-the-past-year>.

¹⁸ On contract oil workers’ protests, see Ali Kadivar, Peyman Jafari, Mehdi Hosseini and Saber Khani, “Labor Organizing on the Rise among Iranian Oil Workers,” *MERIP Online*, August 25, 2021, <https://merip.org/2021/08/labor-organizing-on-the-rise-among-iranian-oil-workers>.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Ladan Ahmadian Heravi for her assistance in collecting these data.

²⁰ Yashar Daralshafa, “Gahshomar-e tahlili-ye e’tesab-ha va e’teraz-ha” (Analytical chronology of protests, strikes and organization of workers in Iran, part 3), *Naghd* (blog), May 2, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8cs69w>.

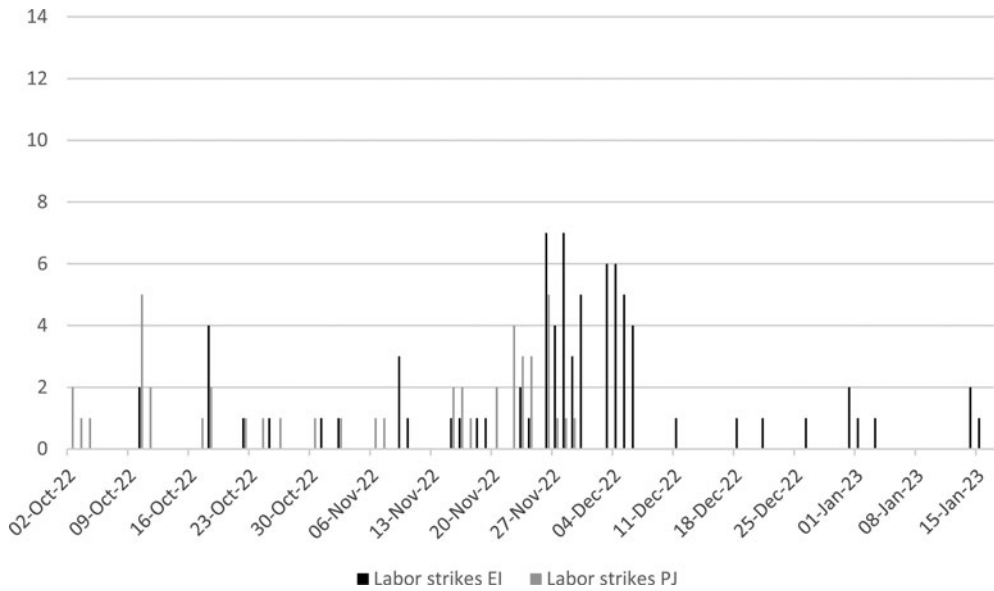


FIGURE 2. Labor strikes, October 2, 2022, to January 15, 2023. Data compiled by the author (“Labor strikes PJ”) and retrieved from Enqelab.info: <https://tinyurl.com/5bvcmmnz> (“Labor strikes EI”).

2.3 strikes from May 1, 2020, to May 1, 2021 (COVID lockdown); and fifteen strikes from May 1, 2021, to April 17, 2022.

As these figures show, the average weekly number of strikes during the WLF protests was actually lower than in previous years. This may be a result of the politicized and securitized context, which increased the risks of taking strike action. As the experience of the 1978–79 revolution shows, street protests can create a radicalism that flows into the workplace and, when large enough, can weaken the state and thus diminish the risks of taking strike action. This can create a positive feedback loop in the interaction between street protests and strike actions. This interaction did not emerge, however, between September and December 2022, although it might in the future. Although several strikes took place, for instance at the Isfahan Steel Company, they centered around specific socioeconomic demands predating the WLF protests, and their connections with the street protests remained weak.

This trend also is visible in the relatively low turnout at the three general strikes on November 15 to 17 (to commemorate the November 2019 killings); November 24; and December 5 to 7, 2022. Although there was a small uptick in the number of strikes on or around these dates, the number of strikes in the industrial sector was small relative to the number of strikes among shopkeepers (Figures 2 and 3). These strikes were strongest in terms of numbers and duration in the Kurdish towns, although it is difficult to estimate the real size of shopkeepers’ strikes in each town as reporting has been based solely on photographs and videos of closed shops in a specific section of a street or a bazaar. Moreover, shopkeepers’ strikes do not have the same impact on the economy as strikes in the industrial sector or at large service providers such as hospitals and banks.

The numerous teacher’s strikes have been of great importance as well, especially because teachers are well placed to play an intermediary role between the middle and the working classes. The Coordination Council of the Iranian Teachers’ Trade Associations issued four calls for strikes of schoolteachers to take place on September 26 and 28; October 4; October 23 and 24; and November 20 and 21, 2022. Although these did not result in a national strike of schoolteachers, protest gatherings were organized at dozens of schools, mostly in Kurdish towns, and were widely reported on social media and in the international media.

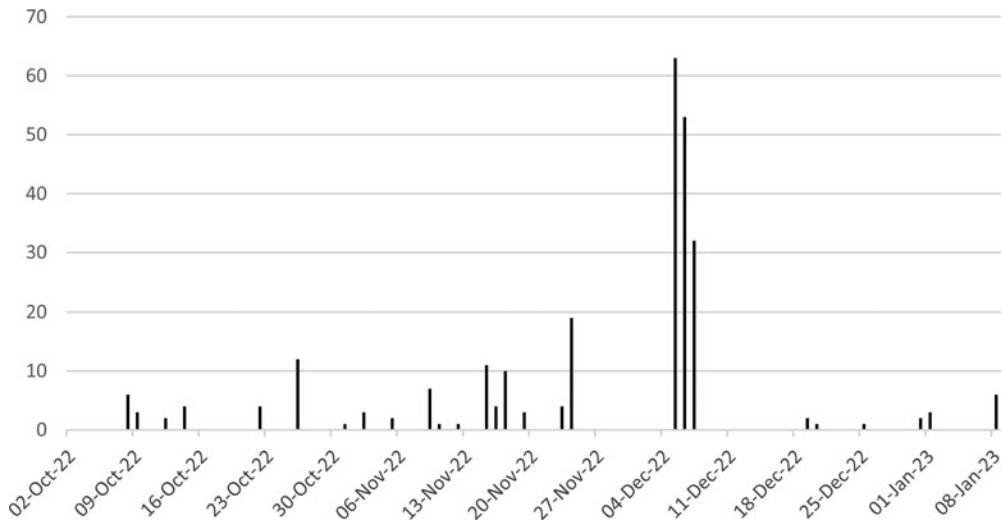


FIGURE 3. Number of strikes by shopkeepers. Data retrieved from Enqelab.info: <https://tinyurl.com/5bvcmnzn>.

This situation raises several questions. What explains the discrepancy between the pervasiveness of socioeconomic grievances and the relatively small number of labor strikes? Why did workers not use the political crisis that engulfed Iran in the final months of 2022 as an opportunity to organize more strikes? One obvious explanation is state repression, which prevents workers from joining strikes and creating national labor organizations. Repression alone, however, is not a sufficient explanation, as the emergence of mass strikes under similar conditions, such as in 1978–79, illustrates. A second related explanation is that the street protests did not achieve the critical mass needed to radically alter the perception of the majority of workers about the viability of the state and its repressive capacity. Because workers in large- and medium-sized companies that are mainly state- and semi-state-owned face additional surveillance and risks, they tend to go on political strikes only when the state's repressive capacity has diminished, as happened during the strikes of 1978–79.²¹ Third, the state combined repression with some financial concessions, increasing the salaries of state employees, and the allowance of pensioners and low-income families under the protection of charity organizations.²²

Finally, as explained above, the WLF protests did not address workers' socioeconomic grievances, and, despite popular assumptions, high levels of poverty alone do not translate into labor strikes. Strikes require resources such as job security, long-term employment that facilitates workplace networks, and financial reserves that can help compensate for loss of income during strikes. By undermining these resources, Iran's deteriorating socioeconomic conditions have impeded rather than facilitated strikes.²³ Instead, anger boils over into street protests that are easier to organize, but also subside more rapidly in the face of repression.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated through the lens of labor, the WLF revolt has faced several obstacles that must be overcome to extend its social reach and political horizon. These include the

²¹ Peyman Jafari, "Linkages of Oil and Politics: Oil Strikes and Dual Power in the Iranian Revolution," *Labor History* 60, no. 1 (2019): 1–20.

²² Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "'Little Readiness for General Strikes': Iranians Put Jobs before pro-Democracy Protests," *Financial Times*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/0fef4595-4784-4f56-832f-a0aef84188bd>.

²³ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Iran's Deadly Street Protests Are Replaced by Quiet Acts of Rebellion," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-protests-hijab-11675177547>.

absence of socioeconomic demands that can match the revolutionary subjectivity that has emerged in other areas, such as gender relations, and the absence of labor strikes that can counter state power. Overcoming both obstacles, I would suggest, requires an intellectual and political approach to labor that is intersectional and places workers at the heart of democratization. As a recent study of political change in 150 countries concluded, “workers have been key agents of democratization and, if anything, are even more important than the urban middle classes. When industrial workers mobilize mass opposition against a dictatorship, democratization is very likely to follow.”²⁴

²⁴ Sirianne Dahlum, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Tore Wig, “We Checked 100 Years of Protests in 150 Countries. Here’s What We Learned about the Working Class and Democracy,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/24/we-checked-years-protests-countries-heres-what-we-learned-about-working-class-democracy>.