



LONDON RETIRED MEMBERS

Free Esmail Abdi!

Solidarity with Workers in the Gulf!

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Iranian Teachers under Fire.

In August 2015 UCU London Retired Members branch reported on the arrest of teachers' leader Esmail Abdi by Iranian state officials. Our intervention arose in support of a campaign launched by Labour Start opposing repressive measures against both Esmail and representatives of the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers Trade Associations more generally.

The trigger for Esmail's seizure was his attempt to obtain a visa to attend a World Congress of Education International in Canada. Labour Start described the immediate circumstances and class struggle context of his arrest on 27 June:

"After his passport was confiscated at the border, he was ordered to return to Tehran to meet with prosecutors. However, upon reporting to the prosecutors' office he was arrested while more than 70 teachers waited outside in support.

Abdi's arrest comes after nationwide rallies were held...to protest wages that leave the majority of teachers below the poverty line."

On 22 February of this year, some eight months after his original arrest, Esmail was finally sentenced to six years' imprisonment by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court. Labour Start reports:

"In custody since his arrest, Abdi was charged with 'gathering and colluding with intent to harm public order' and 'propaganda against the system.' His colleagues say that these charges were prompted by his legitimate trade union activities and leadership role."

The call raised by Labour Start for "the immediate and unconditional release of Esmail Abdi and for the respect of the fundamental rights of all Iranian teachers" has the support of Education International (EI). In a statement dated 23 February the latter notes:

"Previous efforts to free Abdi fell on deaf ears, despite a letter writing campaign, along with a LabourStart appeal promoted by EI, which garnered over 12,000 signatures."

These are welcome first steps, but clearly more needs to be done. Local and regional levels of EI affiliated unions, including UCU, are additional avenues for raising awareness throughout the labour movement as a whole. Such activity, including through trades councils, should be central to our answer to the hounding of Esmail Abdi by the Iranian regime.

Workers in Post-Sanctions Iran

The victimisation of Esmail parallels the persecution of Bahraini teachers' leaders by the rulers of that other despotism, just across the Gulf waters. Moreover his experience is no anomaly, as anti-union measures have been taken against various Iranian worker groups in recent months. Owen Tudor points out that the arrest of Esmail last summer coincided with the sacking by state-run Iranian Labour News Agency of their entire labour reporting team. The journalists' "offence" was twofold: refusal to report labour developments in a way agreeable to management, and taking steps to build their own union organisation.

In late February 2016 the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) condemned ongoing repression. Its report noted aggressive state practices within sectors including transport and copper mining as well as education. Drawing on the ITUC statement, the Committee for the Defence of the Iranian People's Rights (CODIR) notes: "...human rights violations are part of a coordinated policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to maximise pressure upon trades union activists, their colleagues and family members in order to silence them and pressurise the trade union movement in Iran."

The focus in CODIR coverage is on incorporation of human rights concerns within ongoing negotiations between Iran and "world powers", above all the United States. So far development of that process has been toward lifting of nuclear related sanctions and general easing of tensions between Iran and the west. CODIR is proposing enlargement of the discussion agenda to include rights abuses by the Iranian state.

The scenario outlined by CODIR appears plausible, particularly given the unfolding de facto alliance of Iran with the US and its allies to secure control of the ruins that were once Iraq. But beyond general optimism there seems no specific reason to expect this military-centred convergence to benefit Iranian workers in any way. Indeed there are strong grounds for anticipating the opposite. Persistent refusal of America, and Britain, to promote reform in Bahrain, regardless of occasional inconsequential US distancing, is relevant here. The effective silence of both in the face of Bahraini repression, including of trade unionists, underlines the indifference, where not hostility, of these imperialist "great powers" to democratic norms across vast territories policed by allies and client states.

The humanitarian hopes of CODIR run up against a key component of present global and regional dynamics. More or less public cooperation with Iran as well as the Gulf monarchies, above all Saudi Arabia, is an attractive option for America. The pressure toward bipartisanship derives significantly from enhanced Iranian influence within the region since 2003. Largely catalysed by western military intervention, the shift has been most obvious and deadly in Iraq and (in tandem with Russia) in Syria, but also in Lebanon through Hezbollah. Within this context it makes perfect imperial sense for the USA to flexibly back both sides of the Saudi-Iranian standoff. The issue between those Gulf rivals is political hegemony within the region. The United States, meanwhile, is pursuing a broader capitalist hegemony with itself as undisputed global hegemon, including around the oil rich Gulf. In relation to that overriding imperative there are no principled objections to a tactical tilting toward both transparent and covert cooperation with Iran. That, after all, is what happened in the Iran-Iraq war during the mid-1980's.

Unquiet Ghosts

There is another, if less obvious, precedent for Iranian-western convergence. Far from fantasies of fundamentally incompatible value sets or mythical "clashes of civilisations", the

ruling classes of both the USA and Britain have good historical grounds for gratitude toward the clerical regime. Notwithstanding spectacular displays of anti-Americanism packaged as anti-imperialism, the agenda of the Shah's successors was reactionary and anti-working class to the core. In the course of Khomeini's consolidation of power in 1979 and over the following years, his senior clerical allies and enforcers performed sterling service for international capital by crushing the movement of organised Iranian workers and poor. It was their struggle and opposition which had broken the back of the Pahlavi dictatorship. They, the labour movement and related social strata, had challenged both employers and regime through mass militancy. This happened even as the Communist Party derived, traditional opposition Tudeh, an organisation with established union associations, was making fatal political adaptations to the Khomeini movement.

At the heart of the ensuing clerical counter-revolution were mass arrests and labour movement persecution on a scale comparable to that imposed by US allies in Central America around the same time. Anglo-American interests, of course, raised no objections to these developments. The new governments of Reagan and Thatcher were simultaneously forging a rightward strategic shift in both domestic and international policy. Labour rights were prime targets within their "New Right" draft of what is now more widely known as neoliberalism. Coercive repression of organised labour, in Iran and many other places, would and did provoke no objection whatsoever from that direction.

In an earlier phase of more direct imperial tampering, the Anglo-American alliance contrived the anti-democratic, anti-working class coup which in 1953 reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah, who had briefly fled the mass movement for reform. From that intervention flowed a relationship that endured for a quarter of a century. Predictably the USA and UK delivered bountiful political and military support throughout the Shah's restored regime of torture and repression. The strategic ambition of both was subversion of popular democratic aspirations as a negative foundation for ongoing imperial control.

As regards the post-Pahlavi Islamic Republic, there is nothing to stop Iranian-American cooperation, particularly under cover of declared "moderates" now moving more centre stage in Tehran. At the same time, neither Saudi Arabia nor Israel are likely to welcome attempts, even by the American fairy godfather, to legitimise Iranian regional ascendancy. From Riyadh and its allies we can expect further sectarian assaults and provocations, whether delivered by state or by terrorist agencies - to the extent that the two can be distinguished in a meaningful way.

A Class Response to a Ruling Class Offensive

Once again we need to seek and develop specific working class approaches, through independent class organisation, to repression in Iran and within the region as a whole.

[Support the Labour Start appeal for the release of Esmail Abdi!](#)

Defend his right, and that of all Iranian trade unionists, to associate freely within the labour movement internationally!

Defend teachers' and all unions against attack from ruling gangs across the Gulf region, from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to Iran!

Some online links concerning Esmail Abdi

Labour Start's statement and petition opposing the recent sentencing of Esmail:

http://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=2969

A further account and solidarity statement on the Education International website:

http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/3880

Labour Start's original 6 July 2015 campaign text:

http://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=2779

The initial UCU LRM report:

<http://www.ucu-retired-london.org.uk/pdf/Defend-Iranian-Teacher.pdf>

Owen Tudor's account of the sacking of ILNA journalists, written last summer:

<http://strongerunions.org/2015/07/08/take-action-on-irans-crackdowns-on-teachers-journalists/>

CODIR's statement on violations of the human rights of union activists by the Iranian regime:

<http://www.codir.net/?p=245>

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