

Workless Revolutionaries: The Unemployed Movement in Revolutionary Iran

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SUMMARY: This article chronicles the genesis, process and forms of collective protests by the unemployed in Iran immediately following the revolution of 1979. It analyzes the dynamics of jobless mobilization in demanding employment and social protection by exploring its complex relationships with the Islamic government, the opposition forces and the broader revolutionary process. In developing countries, an organized struggle of the unemployed for jobs and protection is extremely rare, notwithstanding high rates of open and concealed joblessness. Family, kinship, patron-client relationships and especially the informal sector provide essential mechanisms for protection and survival; lack of organization generally prevents the emergence of sustained protest movements. I argue that the conjuncture-based articulation of resources and political opportunity underlying the movement set the Iranian case apart. The resources included the post-revolutionary massive and sudden loss of jobs along with the rise of a revolutionary ideology among the jobless.

INTRODUCTION: THE REVOLUTION

On 11 February 1979 Tehran radio announced the victory of the Iranian revolution with feverish jubilation. This report marked the end of the 2,500-year-old monarchy. In a wave of ecstasy, the populace rushed into the streets *en masse*. Women milled through the crowd handing out candies and *sharbat* (sweet drinks). Drivers sounded their horns in unison, flashing their lights as they drove down the main streets that had been the scene of bloody clashes between the protesters and the army only days before. These same streets were now being patrolled by the revolutionary militias (the Pasdaran). For those present, this scene signified an unprecedented victory.

The victory day was the culmination of over eighteen months of mass demonstrations, bloody confrontations, large-scale industrial actions, a general strike and many political manoeuvres.¹ The revolution's roots lay

¹ This background section on the Iranian Revolution is based upon Asef Bayat, "Revolution Without Movement, Movement Without Revolution: Comparing Islamist Activism in Iran and Egypt", mimeograph, 1996. For a historical background to the Iranian revolution see Ervan Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); and Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (London, 1982). For literature on the



Figure 1. Iran, showing main towns and rivers

in the structural changes arising from the gradual modernization that had been under way in Iran since the 1930s. In 1953 the process accelerated dramatically after the coup engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), overthrowing nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and reinstating the Shah.

The modernization policy and economic change, initiated by the state under both Reza Shah (1925-1946) and his son, the late Shah, resulted in the growth of new social forces to the dismay of the traditional social groups. By the 1970s, the large and well-to-do modern middle class,

Islamic revolution reflecting different perspectives, see Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*; Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown* (Oxford, 1988); Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, State and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York, 1993); Mohsen Milani, *The Making of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, 1988). The best account may be found in Misagh Parsa, *The Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989).

modern youth, women who participated in public life and an industrial working class – in addition to a new poor comprising slum and squatter dwellers – dominated the social scene. With the exception of the group living in abject poverty, these crowds represented the beneficiaries of the economic progress and enjoyed an increase in status and commensurate economic rewards. The persistence of the Shah's age-old autocracy, however, prevented these thriving social layers from participating in the political process. This exclusion angered the new elite. At the same time, the old social groups – a segment of the traditional *bazaaris* or merchants, the old urban middle strata, the declining clergy and the adherents of Islamic institutions – were also frustrated by the modernization strategy, which undermined their economic interests and power bases.

The repressive closure of all the institutional channels to any expression of discontent increasingly alienated the populace from the state. In the meantime, corruption, inefficiency, a sense of injustice and a feeling of cultural outrage marked the social psychology of many Iranians. During the tense 1970s, at the height of the Shah's authoritarian rule and the remarkable economic growth, many people (with the possible exception of the upper class and landed peasantry) were therefore dissatisfied, albeit for different reasons. All blamed the Shah and his Western allies, especially the United States, for that state of affairs. Little surprise, then, that the language of dissent and protests was largely anti-monarchy, anti-imperialist, Third Worldist and even nationalist, and turned into a religious discourse in the end.

The opportunity for popular mobilization arrived with what we used to call the "Carterite breeze" (*nasseem-e Carteri*). In the 1970s, President Carter's human rights policy forced the Shah to offer limited freedom of political expression. This expression gradually mounted and swept aside the monarchy in less than two years. It began with a limited relaxation of censorship, allowing some literary and intellectual activities (at the Goethe Institute and the universities in Tehran) and public gatherings by the Islamists (in Oqba Mosque). The next step concerned the distribution by the intellectuals and liberal politicians of letters of open criticism to high-ranking officials. During this stage, an article in the daily *Entlilaat* insulting Ayatollah Khomeini triggered a manifestation in the shrine city of Qum in which some of the demonstrators were killed. To commemorate the tragedy, a large-scale demonstration took place in the Azeri city of Tabriz in the north. This gathering marked the beginning of a chain of events that formed a nationwide revolutionary movement with mass participation from diverse segments of the population (modern and traditional, religious and secular, men and women) which was led by the *ulama* (the Shi'i clergy).

Since the coup of 1953, over twenty-five years of the Shah's autocracy had removed or destroyed almost all effective secular independent political associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The coup

crushed both the nationalist and the communist movements; the secret police (SAVAK) infiltrated trade unions; publications were strictly censored; and hardly any effective NGOs remained in existence.² The main organized political dissent came from the underground guerrilla organizations, Marxist Fedaiyan and radical Islamic Mujahedin, whose activities were limited to isolated armed operations.³ Likewise, student activism was confined to campus politics inside the country and to efforts by the Iranian students abroad. In short, the organizational means of the severely dissatisfied secular groupings were decapitated.

Unlike the secular forces, however, the clergy had the comparative advantage of possessing invaluable institutional capacity, including its own hierarchical order, over 10,000 mosques, *husseiniehs*, *huwzehs*, and associations maintaining vital links of communication among the revolutionary contenders. Young Islamists – both girls and boys along with young clergymen – linked the institution of the *ulama* to the people. A hierarchical order facilitated unified decision-making and a systematic flow of order and information; and in mosques higher-level decisions were disseminated among both the activists and the general public. In short, this institutional capacity in addition to the remarkable ambiguity in the clergy's message secured the *ulama*'s leadership.

In the final phase of the revolution (December 1978–February 1979), under Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, a host of leftists, labor activists, students, women and ethnic groups took advantage of the dual power situation and began to mobilize. Yet they hardly influenced the leadership's religious composition. Their political impact was to come during the first two years after the revolution. Thus, the "Islamization" progressed largely from above by the Islamic state after the victory of the Islamic revolution. The process entailed the establishment of the *valaya-ti faqih* (rule of clergy), the Islamic legal system, restrictive policies toward women, "Islamic" cultural practices and social demeanor.

In the weeks and months following the day of victory, the joy and jubilation made way for a widespread sense of uncertainty about the future. The women who had previously appeared without veils felt betrayed by those who imposed mandatory veiling. In response, the women staged remarkable street demonstrations in Tehran on 8–12 March 1979. Ethnic groups (Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis and Iranian Arabs) – by now widely mobilized – soon felt the new regime's iron grip when Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the suppression of identity politics in the summer of 1979. Secular leftists and liberals quickly experienced the intolerance of the Islamic regime.

² On the anti-democratic nature of the Shah's regime and its political implications see Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London, 1977) (on SAVAK activities); Habib Lajevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse, NJ, 1985).

³ On guerrilla activities in Iran see Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*.

The Tudeh Communist Party resumed work after years in exile. Marxist Fedaii guerrillas and the radical Islamic Mujahedin emerged from the underground and began overt political activity. Dozens of new and splinter groups – Maoist, Trotskyite, Libertarian and Marxist – were added to the existing Marxist-Leninist organizations. While the Tudeh was more conciliatory toward the new ruling clergy, its general relationship with the radical left (i.e. the Fedaiian and Maoist groups) remained hostile. Indeed, immediately after the revolution, the clergy and the left competed fiercely in mobilizing the populace. Thus the universities, urban neighborhoods, factories, farms and street corners turned into sites of contention between the supporters of the left and the Mujahedin versus the pro-regime groupings such as the *pasdaran* (informal volunteer militias that were later institutionalized), Islamic associations and many dozens of well-organized street thugs known as the *hizbullahis*. The seizure of the US Embassy by Muslim students (4 November 1979) and the outbreak of war with Iraq (22 September 1980) undoubtedly undermined the leftist and liberal dissent for the cause of national unity against external threat. Nevertheless, their activities continued until the summer of 1981, when the bloody street battles between the government forces and the Mujahedin (20 June 1981) led to widespread suppression of all kinds of opposition.⁴

The unemployed were among those whose revolutionary romanticism was dashed before long by the harsh realities of daily need. This article chronicles the story of this subaltern group and the effort of its members to secure work and social protection in 1979, the most turbulent period in post-revolutionary Iran.

THE REVOLUTION AND THE UNEMPLOYED

The victory of the revolution gave rise to unprecedented urban unemployment in Iran.⁵ Hundreds of companies, businesses and factories suspended operations. The owners and managers of these ventures, foreign and Iranian alike, had left the country months before the insurrections of 10–11 February 1979. Those who remained in the country shut down their enterprises in the midst of chaos pending the economic policy of the new revolutionary government. Labor strikes, which escalated after October 1978, had almost crippled industry, public services and the government offices. Hardest hit was the construction sector, where hundreds of projects were abandoned midway. Cranes and tools lay idle on the lots of half-finished building complexes, and work sites remained deserted. In the end,

⁴ Useful accounts of post-revolutionary events may be found in Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York, 1984); and Ali Rahnama and Farhad Nomani, *The Secular Miracle: Religion, Politics and Economic Policy in Iran* (London, 1990).

⁵ Bank Markazi Iran, *Annual Economic Report, 1358* (Tehran, 1979), p. 7.

thousands of laborers who had withdrawn their labor for the victory of the revolution found themselves without jobs on its morrow.

These jobless were joined by a new army of unemployed: those working in ideologically-unfit occupations. Western-style restaurants, cafeterias, cabarets, liquor stores, red-light district theaters and brothels were all closed down, not only because they were incompatible with the Islamic revolution but also because they were deemed symbolic of the decadence of the *ancien régime*. In Tehran alone, an estimated 3,000 employees of such establishments lost their jobs.⁶ The lottery ticket company was shut down entirely, laying off 200,000 low-income street ticket sellers. The arrival of about 150,000 high school graduates (*diplomehs*) gradually swelled the ranks of the unemployed. In the very first year after the revolution, therefore, some 2.5 million Iranians, equal to 21 per cent of the workforce, were out of work.⁷ According to an official survey of Tehran unemployed, well over one half of the jobless were laid off owing to closures. Ten per cent consisted of casual laborers who left their jobs because of low income and hardship. The rest of the unemployed comprised migrants and high school graduates seeking work for the first time.⁸ In short, between 1.5 and 2 million people lost their jobs within a few months of the revolutionary events.

The jobless were not a heterogeneous group. While factory workers and high school graduates led the protests, the articulation of interests and discontent with an extraordinary condition drew many poor unemployed, casual laborers and rural migrants into an audible and collective street politics.

In developing countries, organized struggle by the unemployed for jobs and protection is extremely rare, notwithstanding high rates of open and invisible joblessness. Family, kinship, patron-client relationships and especially the informal sector provide essential mechanisms for protection and

⁶ See *Paykar*, 13, 1 Mordad 1358/1979, p. 6.

⁷ Estimate from the Budget and Plan Organization based on the generalization of a survey of unemployed in Tehran in 1979; see *Statistical Yearbook 1358* (Tehran, 1979), p. 102, Table 30. On 24 Farvardin 1358/1979, the *Tehran Musavvar*, a Tehran weekly, reported that "according to an official figure, three million workers are unemployed; most are casual and construction laborers"; see *Tehran Musavvar* 1, no. 12, Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 12. The Council of Unemployed Diplomahs submitted a similar figure; see *Pirouzi*, 3, Azar 1359/1980, p. 31. In 1976, there were some 900,000 unemployed (10.2 per cent of the labor force). Assuming that their number had reached 1 million by the advent of the revolution, some 2 million lost their jobs as a result of the revolutionary events. See Farjadi, "Barrasi-ye Bazaar-i Kar, Ishtighal va Bikaari dar Iran" [A Survey of Labor Market, Employment and Unemployment in Iran], *Barnameh va Tawse'eh*, 2, no. 3 (Fall 1992), p. 69. By 1980, however, we know that fewer than 500,000 jobless had actually registered with the Ministry of Labor. On this subject and on an early discussion of the composition of the unemployed in post-revolutionary Iran, see "Jang, Kar va Bikari" [The War, Work and Unemployment], *Pirouzi*, 3 (Azar 1359/1980), pp. 30–35.

⁸ See Plan and Budget Organization, *Barrasi-ye Bikaari dar Tehran, Tabistan 1358* [An Overview of Unemployment in Tehran: Summer 1979] (Tehran, 1979).

survival; lack of organization generally prevents the development of sustained protest movements.⁹ In this article, I argue that the conjuncture-based articulation of resources and political opportunity underlying the movement set the Iranian case apart. The resources included the post-revolutionary *massive* and *sudden* loss of jobs along with the emergence of a revolutionary ideology among the jobless. The simultaneous *sudden* decline in the standard of living and general expectations caused a moral outrage. The movement was perceived as the continuation of a broader revolutionary struggle. Optimism had surged among the poor and the unemployed; the intense competition between the ruling clergy and the leftist opposition to recruit the support of the poor raised hopes still further. This ideological dimension was the driving force behind the huge pool of jobless who utilized both the existing relative political freedom and the mobilization skills they had acquired during the revolution.

THE ONSET

Some three months prior to the victory of the revolution, over 13,000 seasonal or project workers in the city of Abadan, a large oil port city in the south, became redundant when their companies discontinued operations. The workers had lost their jobs but considered their unemployment insignificant compared to the revolutionary struggles around them. Even those who still held their jobs were on strike. Yet, for these workers, the extraordinary days of unity and sacrifice were coming to an end. The revolution was entering a new stage in which groups and individuals would reveal their true colors. The factionalism and struggle for power among the new leaders grew as the clerical leadership started exhibiting intolerance toward dissenting political voices.

As the days passed, these workers began thinking about their precarious present and uncertain future. During the unstable premiership of Shahpour Bakhtiar (the last prime minister appointed by the Shah), a small number of these workers gathered frequently in local tea houses to discuss their plight and to decide on a course of action. Out of these and subsequent meetings emerged the Syndicate of the Unemployed Project Workers of Abadan (SUPW). This solidarity marked the start of collective actions taken by the unemployed. Within five months, the campaigns successfully secured jobs and unemployment benefits.¹⁰ Several demonstrations, all repressed by the Pasdaran, were organized in pursuit of these objectives. Two months later, on 13 April 1979, as social struggles intensified, some

⁹ See Asef Bayat, "Why Don't the Unemployed Rebel? Or Do They?", mimeograph (The American University in Cairo, 1996).

¹⁰ Interviews with Mustafa, an unemployed workers' organizer in the oil city of Abadan, conducted in Los Angeles, May 1986; also see Organization of People's Guerrilla Fedaii of Iran (OPGFI), *Gozarishi az Tashkil-i Sandika-ye Kargaran-i Prozheii (Fasli) Abadan* [A Report on the Formation of the Seasonal Workers' Union in Abadan] (Tehran, 1979).

400 laborers resorted to a sit-in in the syndicate headquarters and threatened to go on a hunger strike.¹¹

The protest movement of the unemployed was well under way in several big cities including Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Ghazvin, Gachsaran, and Kurdistan Province. In Tehran, the leftist organizations had initially mobilized several redundant and expelled worker groups (*kargaran-i bikaar-shudehs*). Before long they joined forces in a loosely-knit Organization of Unemployed and Seasonal Workers, which included laborers laid off from manufacturing, construction, and other industries.

CAMPAIGNS IN TEHRAN

On 2 March 1979, a small group of laid-off workers gathered in the Ministry of Labor to publicize their plight. Labor Minister Dariush Foruhar – a liberal follower of Mosaddeq – addressed the gathering. Disappointed in the minister, the workers concluded their protest by reading a resolution which called for job creation, a meeting place for a syndicate organization, a 40-hour work week and unemployment benefits. Soon the group returned better prepared and with over 2,000 members. Over the next two weeks, they visited the ministry more than five times. During the subsequent meetings they also demanded recognition for their organization and national radio and television coverage of their grievances.¹² Facing mounting pressure in its first few weeks in office, the Ministry of Labor decided to establish an “unemployed loan fund”.

The plan envisioned loans of between RIs 7,500 and RIs 9,000 per month for a maximum of six months. Workers aged 26 to 60 who had paid social security for at least one year would be eligible.¹³ This requirement effectively excluded casual laborers and recent high school graduates. In the debate that followed, the unemployed turned down this concession, demanding that the age and social security contribution requirements be eliminated. They further insisted that the payments be based on family size, and that representatives of the unemployed supervise the program. Most importantly, they demanded that the loan concept (*vaam-i bikaari*) be changed to a benefit plan (*haqq-i bikaari*). In the meeting, Sherkat-i Vahid, a worker who had been laid off from the Tehran bus services, echoed the concern of those who considered the loan idea a sell-out for the working-class struggle as a whole:

We represent all the suffering Iranian workers. Our demand is not an individual claim. Unfortunately, it was announced today that everybody will receive one thousand *tumans* and abandon the cause [. . .]¹⁴ Is it really fair to let these few

¹¹ See *Ayandegan*, 25 Farvardin 1357/1978.

¹² See OPGFI, *Gozarashi az Mubarizat-i Kargaran-i Bikaar-Shudeh*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ One *tuman* equals RIs 10. In 1979, US\$1 = about RIs 70.

pennies spoil the spirit of workers' struggle? How can they call themselves workers, those whose character is worth only one thousand *tumans*? [. . .] One hundred thousand were killed [for the revolution], and still our demands are not met!¹⁵

A representative of the unemployed offered his support in rejecting the plan. Addressing the laborers, he said:

you are the source of our power. We will act according to your decisions. I am glad that the group has consciously expressed its criticism and unwillingness to accept the offer. This decision proves that hunger is not our only concern [. . .] Rationality must prevail. Faith, conviction, and consciousness give us power.¹⁶

The loan versus benefits issue became the fundamental source of confrontation between the unemployed and the Provisional Government. Undoubtedly, the left was instrumental in articulating and radicalizing the workers' demands. As people who had supported and endured hardships during the revolution, this group of unemployed felt entitled to impose demands on the new leadership. The influence of the left on their movement did not affect their conviction that their demands were legitimate.

The Provisional Government, however, considered their demands unacceptable. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan associated this movement with communist currents attempting to undermine his government, especially since the left had characterized the government as liberal and pro-capitalist.¹⁷ Moreover, the government did not want to assume the huge responsibility of permanently feeding the unemployed.¹⁸ The Labor Minister insisted that the term "loan" could not be changed. On 12 March 1979 he told the workers' representatives: "I do not want to suggest that this is a grant without any repayment due. Workers' honor is above charity. I want this plan to be understood merely as a loan."¹⁹ Following a meeting on 17 March, therefore, over 3,000 jobless laborers began a sit-in in the labor ministry compound. When subsequent negotiations with the ministry proved futile, some 700 participants went on a hunger strike in the late afternoon in their frustration and anguish.²⁰ Three days later, in an effort to mobilize support from other citizens, they issued a statement that was distributed in Tehran:

¹⁵ See *Paygham-i Imrouz*, 11 Farvardin 1358/1979.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See, for example, *Kargar beh Pish*, the journal of the Paykar Organization, no. 5, 8 Khordad 1358/1979, p. 4.

¹⁸ See Mehdi Bazargan, *Masa'el va Mushkilat-i Sal-i Avval-i Inqilab* [The Problems and Difficulties of the First Year of the Revolution] (Tehran, 1983).

¹⁹ OPGFI, *Gozareshi az Karagaran-i Bikaar-Shudeh*, p. 30.

²⁰ See *Tehran Musavvar*, "Bar Bikaaran-i Mutahassen dar Nowrooz Che Gozasht?" [What Happened to the Unemployed in Sit-In in Nowrooz?], 10 Farvardin 1358/1979. See also *Ayandegan*, 9 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 3; also interviews with Naser (who participated in the operations), December 1994, Germany.

We are the unemployed workers who have staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Labor. Since the authorities have not responded to our demands, we have been on a hunger strike since 17 March (1:00 a.m.) and will pursue our strike to the point of our death, unless our grievances are considered. We request that our laboring brothers distribute this note and publicize our situation among the working people, so that they may all join us. As we finish this writing, [the authorities] have come to us shooting their guns.²¹

Immediately after the hunger strike started, the Labor Minister met with the workers' representatives at 1.00 a.m. An hour of negotiations failed to bring agreement. A spokesperson for the strikers indicated that the minister had insisted on the loan issue, which was unacceptable to the strikers.²² An additional attempt was made to appease the strikers, this time by a clergyman who tried to impose his religious authority. His appeals, however, fell upon deaf ears, and the workers continued their sit-in.²³ On the first night, *hizbullahis* (pro-regime street thugs) marched into the ministry to attack the strikers.

Outside the compound, leftist students joined groups of unemployed workers to express their solidarity with the strikers despite repeated clashes with the pro-regime thugs.²⁴ Inside, however, frustration and determination to continue the struggle characterized the protesters. Workers felt betrayed and cheated by the new politicians whom they had trusted. They sensed a kind of moral outrage and suspected their leaders of violating the tacit social contract that had evolved in the course of the revolution. They expected respect as well as material rewards, but felt they had obtained neither.²⁵ Zahra Dorostka, one of the women strikers, angrily vented this feeling at the compound:

I want to know why radio and television do not broadcast our grievances to inform the world of our sufferings and to make them appreciate how little [the authorities] are offering us. If they broadcast this injustice, the people will no longer be misinformed [by the government] that pretends to give us our due. We have gathered here and are on a hunger strike because we want unemployment benefits [*haqq-i bikaari*]. We do not expect charity. If there are jobs, we are prepared to work. Otherwise, our living expenses must be insured. We all cried out that we wanted Mr Khomeini; we supported the religious leaders. Now we expect them to address our problems. I have two children; my husband has worked for the last

²¹ A copy of the flyer is in the author's possession.

²² See *Ayndegan*, 29 Esfand 1357/1979.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See *Tehran Musavvar*, 10, 10 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 19.

²⁵ Based upon an interview with Naser (a leading participant in the hunger strike), December 1994. This sense of disappointment and expectation can be detected in the following angry statement from a laid-off worker: "We have now been out of work for the last seven months. Is this really the result of our Revolution – that we get left out in the cold and are penniless and unemployed? At the beginning of the revolution, during our strikes, the managers would threaten us by calling the police. Now, they do the same thing, by calling the Pasdaran!" See *Ayndegan*, 13 Khordad 1358/1979, p. 4.

six months but has not been paid; they say, "we don't have any money"! I used to work in the Vitana [a biscuit factory in Tehran]. I was forced to resign because they did not accept my children in their nursery. Now, [the Labor Ministry] tells us "take one thousand *tumans* for the time being"! I have not paid my rent for the last six months; we hardly have any food at home; my children are without clothes [. . .] What can I do with these one thousand tumans? I am telling you, I will not leave this place unless [the authorities] consider my living conditions.²⁶

While the laborers carried on their hunger strike, the negotiations with the authorities continued. The strike leaders had sensed that the provisional government was not prepared to back down. Some pro-government elements had begun to pursue a divide-and-conquer strategy. The loan offer undoubtedly exacerbated the differences between the laborers adhering to a political ideology and their counterparts driven by economic and social considerations. To make matters worse, sustaining a hunger strike against a government which had just emerged as the victor in the revolution was not easy. On New Year's Day, the Pasdaran broke into the compound, attacking the strikers and spreading terror by continuously shooting their guns in the air.²⁷ A number of hunger strikers passed out and were taken to hospitals; others were given glucose.²⁸ The strike leaders relented and eventually agreed to the loan principle. The remaining differences revolved only around the provisions of the loan. The parties finally reached a compromise on 22 March 1979. According to the agreement, each unemployed person was to be granted a monthly payment of Rls 9,000–12,000, with an advance payment of some Rls 10,000. The conditions for the payment were substantially modified. In addition, the unemployed succeeded in having the *Khane-ye Kargar* (House of Labor) recognized as their organizational headquarters in Tehran.²⁹

THE ESCALATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

The government hoped that the compromise would end the protest among the unemployed. Peace, however, did not return under the Provisional Government. Both the government and the unemployed knew that loans would not solve the misery of joblessness. The government's concession was primarily intended to pacify the jobless crowd. While the authorities privately assumed that the workers would not pay back the loans, they hoped the measure would defuse the protests from the unemployed. Similarly, the unemployed and their leftist leaders did not regard the payment

²⁶ *Ayandegan*, 29 Esfand 1357/1978.

²⁷ See *Tehran Musavvar*, 10, 10 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 20.

²⁸ Interview with Naser (who participated in the hunger strike), December 1994.

²⁹ OPFGI, *Gozareshi az Mubarizat-i Kargaran-i Bikaar-Shudeh* [A Report on the Struggles of the Laid-off Workers] (Tehran, 1979). Also based on my interviews with Ghasem, an exiled worker who was active among the unemployed workers of the city of Abadan, and Mehrdad, a left-wing mobilizer.

as a loan but as a mere piecemeal monetary gain. In addition, the Tehran agreement had omitted a large number of casual laborers and recent high school graduates from its provisions.³⁰ The agreement ended the hunger strike in Tehran but failed to halt the protest actions of the unemployed in general. The campaign continued.

During the following three months the protest movement of the jobless escalated in different parts of the country. The organizations of the jobless in some regions flatly rejected the Tehran compromise; others continued their protests notwithstanding their desire to obtain the "loan". In the meantime, the migrant poor and the school leavers not covered by the "loan" became even more aggressive.

By 1 April 1979, less than two weeks after the initial agreement, over 3,000 jobless convened an open meeting in the Labor House. Outdoor loudspeakers broadcast the debates in the streets. The meeting condemned the "loan" plan once again and resolved to continue the campaign. An unemployed speaker angrily echoed the crowd's mood:

I would never have accepted the [Labor] minister's promise and would never have agreed to appear on television even to the point of death, had I sensed that [ending] our hunger strike would lead to this hopeless situation. I would rather die than face this situation. [. . .] We want neither a free ride nor charity. Give us work.³¹

The crowd subsequently staged a five-day sit-in within the Ministry of Justice. It ended only with liberal Justice Minister Asadullahi's promise to take the issue to the cabinet. He also helped the unemployed publicize their grievances on national radio and television.³²

The Syndicate of the Unemployed Project Workers of Abadan (SUPWA) focused its campaigns on consolidating its position and struggled to dislodge the rival Union of Workers and High School Graduates created by the local authorities to undermine the SUPWA. Meanwhile, the syndicate continued negotiating with local and national officials to win concessions from the government. Some three weeks after the Tehran agreement, in the same region, the Unemployed Workers of Ahwaz and Vicinity rejected the Labor Ministry's plan and demanded unemployment benefits instead.³³

Only a few days after the Tehran agreement, in the south-eastern city of Khorram Abad, hundreds of jobless laborers occupied the governorate's offices demanding jobs, an unemployment fund and headquarters for their assemblies. The protesters were attacked by pro-government forces, especially the Pasdaran of *Komite-ye Imam*, violently assaulted and fired

³⁰ See *Ayandegan*, 9 Khordad 1358/1979.

³¹ See *ibid.*, 15 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 3.

³² See *ibid.*, 27 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 3.

³³ *Kargar Beh Pish*, 5, 8 Khordad 1358/1979, p. 7.

upon.³⁴ The unemployed crowd in the industrial city of Gazvin initiated collective action by electing representatives to negotiate with city authorities. Demoralized by the ensuing request that they "wait two more months", they went on protest marches and organized gatherings in local mosques to discuss their strategy.³⁵

On 28 March in the north-western Azeri city of Tabriz, hundreds of unemployed and laid-off workers staged a sit-in lasting several days on the premises of *bashgah-i kargaran*, the Workers' Club.³⁶ Another group marched into Tabriz's radio and television station to force the authorities to publicize their grievances. Some two weeks earlier, the jobless had already been mobilized by left-wing activists and had voiced their grievances in a number of gatherings. One of the meetings culminated in a resolution calling for an immediate return to work, the establishment of a benefit fund for the unemployed and the assignment of a permanent headquarters.³⁷ Similar sit-ins and protest marches took place in Shahr-i Kord and Sari in April and May.³⁸

In each city, the frequent rejection of the demands or delayed response by the authorities prolonged such protest actions. The violent reaction of the security forces further escalated the protests. The Union of the Unemployed Workers of Isfahan and Vicinity (UWIV), established in March 1979, had also rejected the minister's loan provisions and made a number of other demands, giving the officials two weeks to respond. When a favorable response was not forthcoming, some 7,000 unemployed and their supporters organized a protest demonstration on 26 March 1979. They carried banners reading "the toiling masses assumed the burden of the revolution, but others have reaped the benefits". They called for government recognition of the Council of the Unemployed Workers and their right to assemble.³⁹ The demonstrators were blocked by the Pasdaran and by *hizbullahis* wielding clubs and knives. The governor rebuffed the demonstrators, and the Pasdaran arrested a number of organizers. In an effort to pressurize the authorities further, another protest march of some 10,000 marchers gathered in front of Isfahan's House of Labor less than two weeks later to demand direct talks with the governor. The negotiations yielded no tangible results, and the marches continued. According to a rumor, the demonstrators intended to attack the police station. In the ensuing violent confrontations with the security forces, one demonstrator (Naser Tawfiqian) was killed, eight others injured and nearly 300 detained.⁴⁰

³⁴ See *Kar*, 5, Farvardin 1358/1979.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 7, 30 Farvardin 1358/1979.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 6, Farvardin 1358/1979.

³⁷ A copy of the resolution is in the author's possession.

³⁸ See *Kar*, 9, 13 Ordibehesht 1359/1980, p. 8.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 7, 30 Farvardin 1358/1979, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

These collective protests were not always in vain: at times, desirable outcomes resulted. In the Kurdish towns, for example, where the left and the Kurdish nationalist organizations enjoyed mass support, the protests were fiercer and consequently more successful. In Mahabad, the capital city of the Kurdistan Province, the employees of the power and water supply who had been laid off during the revolution managed to regain their jobs following a bitter struggle. The Fedaii Organization appears to have been crucial in this success and launched appeals to the jobless in other areas.⁴¹ In Sanandaj, following intense negotiations with various municipal authorities, temporary measures served to assist the jobless population of nearly 7,000 and included immediate employment of 500, payment of benefits to those laid off and loans for others until reemployment.⁴²

In late May 1979, the unemployed of Kermanshah were mobilized by young socialist activists. Recent high school graduates, the unemployed poor, some groups of parents and other sympathizers joined forces in street demonstrations and sit-ins. They organized some of the largest protest marches in the city, with the number of participants in one demonstration reaching 5,000.⁴³

In one incident that month, the demonstrators intended to launch a sit-in in the governorate headquarters. Despite opposition from the guards, the demonstrators broke the gate and seized the building for a few hours. This action forced the governor, who had already fled the building, to return and listen to the crowd. The protesters agreed to end their sit-in only following the governor's assurances that he would seriously consider their demands. Before long, joint planning by the governor and the Union of the Unemployed (an elected body) resulted in the reopening of a house-building factory which was able to employ some 100 people. The plan also provided jobs at Kashmir Factory to another group of unemployed. The remaining jobless were to be compensated between RIs 7,000 and 15,000 per month until they found work.⁴⁴

Although the unemployed were mobilized in almost every town where workers had been laid off, the movement remained dispersed and isolated for the most part. Nonetheless, the protest actions of the unemployed culminated in a massive show of unity and force on May Day 1979. Some 500,000 people marched through Tehran and many more took to the streets in other provincial cities. The rally, organized by the May Day Coordination Council (a committee composed of various socialist and labor organizations), was the biggest independent gathering of the working class in years. Groups of men and women, parents and children marched hand

⁴¹ The leaflet of the Fedaii Organization, dated 57/12/21 (1978), is in author's possession.

⁴² *Kar*, 9, 13 Ordibehesht 1358/1979.

⁴³ Interview with Reza, who organized the unemployed in the city of Kermanshah (Bakhtaran), conducted on 10 February 1993.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

in hand through the city's main streets chanting slogans. May Day showed the strength of the working class and especially the left. The massive numbers mobilized were "their" forces. Young male activists held hands along both sides of the march, thereby creating a human chain to shield the demonstrators from the occasional assaults by organized thugs (the informal groupings under the protection of some powerful mullah). A number of state organizations, such as *Sepah-i Pasdaran*, the *Jihad-i Sazandegui* (the Construction Crusade), and the Islamic Republican Party, issued statements about May Day; some took part in the marches as well. The focus of these groups, however, lay on the "danger of Communism", the "agents of the United States" (referring to socialist activists), and *Wahdat-i Kalameh* (the unity of the Islamic Ummah) rather than on specifically labor-related issues.⁴⁵

The unemployed accounted for a substantial portion of the demonstrators. The slogans reflected the strategy of the organizers: "The struggle of the unemployed is not separate from that of the employed workers." The march ended with the reading of a resolution praising Ayatollah Khomeini and calling for, among other things, the nationalization of industry and banking, changes in labor legislation and the expulsion of foreign experts.⁴⁶

THE VARIETY OF STREET PROTESTS

Not surprisingly, jobs were the main concern of the jobless. During the first five months after the revolution, 86 major collective actions by workers protested lock-outs and lay-offs and campaigned for their return to work. This series of efforts was the largest group (some 20 per cent of all campaigns) among the industrial actions waged by the working people.⁴⁷ Yet the variety of demands reflected the unemployed movement leadership's strategy of relating the struggle for jobs to other political and social concerns of the working class. Socialist leaders highlighted well-known demands, such as the 40-hour work week, better working conditions, equal pay for men and women, and the right to strike. Whether the demands were intended simply to radicalize the movement or had received careful consideration as to their possible implications remains unclear. Certainly, the insistence in almost every campaign on headquarters indicates the value placed on organizational work. Some demands (such as expulsion of foreign experts) contradicted the central concern for

⁴⁵ See the statements made by those organizations on May Day 1358/1979. See also Ervan Abrahamian, *Khomeinism* (Berkeley, 1993), the chapter on "May Day in the Islamic Republic".

⁴⁶ For a detailed report on May Day 1979 see *Farhang-i Novin*, 4, Ordibehesht 1358/1979, special May Day issue.

⁴⁷ See Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London, 1987), p. 104, Table 7.1.

saving jobs; the withdrawal of foreign companies was partly responsible for many closures and lay-offs.

The protest actions mainly took the form of demonstrations, sit-ins and the issuing of resolutions. The demonstrations voiced the plight of the jobless both to fellow citizens and to the authorities. Some groups forced the local radio and television stations to publicize their grievances. Demonstrations were also staged as a means of collective action and protest. In the post-revolutionary conditions, however, where street marching had become commonplace, their immediate impact was less than satisfactory. Sit-ins (*tahassun* and *ishghal*), or temporary occupation of a public premise and disruptive conduct, prevailed as a pressure tactic. The buildings of the Labor Ministry, local labor offices, the governorates and the Ministry of Justice were the main targets. The occasional practice of combining sit-ins with hunger strikes resulted in some immediate gains.

Although *tahassun* seems to be an established custom in Iran, the practices of the unemployed are unlikely to have drawn on this history. Traditionally, in *bast-nishini*, the actors seek refuge in holy places, such as shrines or mosques, in an attempt to seek forgiveness, stage a protest and pursue justice. The act represents a defensive cry for clemency and justice, normally by one suffering under arbitrary rule.⁴⁸ Thus, a perpetrator of a crime would seek refuge in a shrine where he would enjoy immunity as long as he remained in asylum.

The connotations of the contemporary repertoire are essentially different. The unemployed referred to their acts not by the traditional term (*bast-nishini*) but in terms of *tahassun* (sit-in) and *ishghal* (occupation, squatting). For the unemployed, the terms had a different meaning and signified a form of collective action through which the actors sought either publicity for a cause or, more often, a method of disruption to bring public pressure to bear on the authorities.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, some symbolic ele-

⁴⁸ See Abbas Khalesi, *Tarikhcheh-ye Bast va Bastnishini* [A Short History of *Basnishini*] (Tehran, 1987).

⁴⁹ Khalesi, in *Tarikhche-ye Bast*, sees a continuity, from ancient to contemporary times, in the usage of the concept *bast-nishini* (pp. 59–70). In addition, the term *tahassun* is described in the major encyclopedias of both Dehkhoda and Mo'in as a synonym for *bast-nishastan*. While some elements of traditional ideology (such as recourse to the Royal Court, or *tahassun* at the Ministry of Justice), persist, the term's meanings have largely changed over time. Traditionally, *tahassun* meant the efforts by individuals or groups to seek refuge at a holy site as a means of escaping punishment or voicing a protest. It was a mechanism of justice in the absence of laws by means of resorting to divine protection. The concept changed slightly at the beginning of modern times. In Iran, since the Qajar dynasty (1797–1921), the places of refuge included not only the holy sites but also the royal courts, stables of aristocrats, public telegraph offices, and especially foreign embassies (*ibid.*, pp. 19–20). During this period, concepts evolved such as political asylum, diplomatic immunity, and the like. In this altered sense, the actors resort not so much to divine protection as to political authority. Finally, the term's contemporary connotations are entirely different. Today, it is understood essentially as a collective action by a group of people who either pursue publicity for a particular belief or cause disruption to pressure the author-

ments of the traditional concepts remain. For instance, the unemployed did organize sit-ins in places such as the headquarters of Workers' Syndicates or the House of Labor without any disruptive intent. Similarly, staging a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Justice was a cry for justice in a more traditional sense.

In spite of the large number of sit-ins, no evidence is available in Iran of direct actions, such as mob looting or rent riots. Historically, these measures result from a sudden drop in income and a lack of alternative means of survival. Rapid, massive and unexpected unemployment may produce such phenomena, as evidenced during the depression in the United States.⁵⁰ In Iran, though, as in most developing countries, people are better prepared to adopt survival strategies relatively quickly. Kinship, friendship, patronage and especially informal economic activities are the most convenient mechanisms. In Iran those who had already been unemployed were equipped with coping techniques, and those recently laid off could rely in part on the support of their kin members in searching for alternative employment.

The unemployed also launched a fund-raising campaign, albeit on a limited scale. The contributions came largely from working people who still held their jobs. Significantly, the bazaar – a major source of funds during the revolution – was of no assistance.⁵¹ “Unemployment loans”, however meager, provided immediate relief. As long as the jobless believed they could gain ground through collective resistance, they refrained from limiting their actions to individualist operations and survival strategies. As long as the unemployed poor lacked any institutional setting in which they could take direct action, such as the workplace, they needed to resort to collective protest. This interest in collective activity – encouraged by the leftist groups – paved the way toward some degree of association-type activities among the jobless.

GETTING ORGANIZED

The struggle of the jobless was somewhat disorganized. For one thing, the unemployed were not a homogeneous group. Their varied backgrounds meant that their capacities for mobilization and collective action differed. As indicated earlier, the jobless population comprised three main groups: laid-off and suspended workers, recent graduates, and already jobless and

ities to satisfy certain demands. The concept is almost mixed with the modern practice of “temporary occupation”, where the actors resort neither to God nor to political authority but rather to public pressure.

⁵⁰ See Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor Peoples' Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1979).

⁵¹ Interview, conducted in October 1993, with Roham, a reporter on labor issues for the Tehran daily, *Paygham-i Imrouz*. The newspaper was published after the revolution of 1979 but banned in the summer of that year.

casual laborers. No organizational link between them was conceivable. The laid-off workers had largely been employed in factories or on construction sites. Whereas a common workplace gave this group some basis for communication, the other two groups tended to be scattered, lacking even a physical location to gather. Within these categories, individuals met briefly and accidentally. Leaders of the groups were often chosen spontaneously following little deliberation or competition. At times excitement prevailed over rational decisions and calculated actions. As one participant commented, “[w]e had not decided to occupy the Labor Ministry; it just happened. We were only demonstrating in the streets; chanting slogans; people got very excited; all of a sudden we were jumping over the fences”.⁵²

Nevertheless, some degree of organization and coordination could be observed. Two factors underlay this development: simple necessity and the role of mobilizers.

Organizational necessity

Above all, before demonstrations and sit-ins, and instead of looting or rioting, the unemployed relied on the disposition of the new authorities. Negotiating was their initial strategy of preference. This approach required appointing representatives (as in the cities of Ghazvin, Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz and Kermanshah). If negotiations did not bring results, the unemployed made sure to maintain some kind of communication and network to continue their campaign. To this end, they needed, first, a place to assemble and, second, recognition of their representatives by the authorities. They believed that such recognition would protect them from the arbitrary assaults by the Pasdaran and others. These formal groupings of unemployed workers received different labels depending on the perception of the leaders. Among the most common names were *shura* (council), *sandika* (syndicate) and *kaanun* (center).

Some groups went beyond merely appointing representatives and attempted to form a more durable structure for their organizations. When the jobless in Isfahan realized that securing jobs was more complicated than they had imagined, they began to consolidate their organization by involving unemployed workers from the entire city and its environs in the UUWIV. In Tehran, when the initial negotiations with the Ministry of Labor failed, jobless leaders gathered in the House of Labor to plan a more structured organization on 5 March 1979. This meeting was followed by the formation of a Steering Committee of Casual/Seasonal Workers and by official recognition of the House of Labor as their permanent head-

⁵² Interview with Merdad, a left-wing activist involved in the unemployed movement, July 1993.

quarters on 22 March 1979. The House of Labor became a significant institution for the laboring poor.

The House of Labor had originally been taken over by the unemployed under strong influence from the Paykar Organization, a Maoist group. Its early meetings, which were open to all, covered various topics. These general meetings were often both dynamic and chaotic, drawing crowds of 300 to 400, and to remedy this problem separate workshops were sometimes held. As political groups became more involved, some disciplinary standards were introduced: discussions became more organized, speakers more articulate and, simultaneously, ideological divisions more pronounced. Speakers espousing a specific line of politics were heckled by opponents and cheered by sympathizers. The ambitiously formulated slogans hanging on the background wall ("The Only Solution for the Toiling Masses is Unity and Organization" and "Workers' Democracy Is Limitless") seemed to have lost their resonance. The debates initiated by militants tended to center on issues such as "democratic vs socialist revolution" and "economic vs political struggles", which appeared less relevant to the daily concerns of the unemployed.⁵³ Notwithstanding the subjects of the debates, official recognition of the House of Labor signified both a practical and a symbolic victory for the laboring poor: it legitimized their organizational activities and their capacity for independent collective action. Many used the House of Labor as a personal shelter: "Some would spend nights there; others would bring food and share with fellow laborers. Some individuals came to the House for their lunch breaks and discussed topics of interest. In this way, many simple-minded lads experienced class solidarity. The House had practically turned into a school for collective action [. . .]"⁵⁴

The organized activities of the jobless extended beyond the House of Labor. A number of associations for the unemployed were founded as well. Unemployed workers in the oil and port city of Abadan in southern Iran formed a more elaborate organization known as the Syndicate of Project/Seasonal Workers of Abadan (SPWA). As mentioned earlier, the foundations of the syndicate were laid in the casual gatherings of laborers at the local tea houses (*Bushehri-ha*), where preparatory registration and campaigning began weeks before the insurrection. The next step involved the assembly of a group of workers in the Oil Industry College that resulted in a steering committee (*shura-ye nuassess*). The committee began recruiting members by using tea houses as their meeting points. At this stage, obtaining a permanent headquarters topped the agenda. Following intense negotiations and confrontations with city officials, the members secured the state-owned premises of the former Workers Union as

⁵³ Interview with Roham, October 1993.

⁵⁴ Interview with Naser, a worker activist in the House of Labor, December 1994.

their headquarters.⁵⁵ They also registered the SPWA with the Komite-ye Imam, the local Pasdaran and the office of the Governorate.⁵⁶ The SPWA managed to organize over 13,000 unemployed workers from twenty different trades, representing various skills and income levels.⁵⁷ The steering committee produced a set of by-laws based on the union experiences in newly independent Algeria, post-revolutionary Nicaragua and Iran during the 1940s. The most pressing tasks concerned negotiations with employers over the reemployment of the laid-off workers. They also included finding jobs for the rest of the unemployed members and securing unemployment benefits.⁵⁸ In the long run, the SPWA aimed to found unions of unemployed workers in other provinces and to establish a unified national union.

During its lifetime, the SPWA won a number of concessions through negotiations with the Provisional Government, including reemployment of groups of workers and unemployment loans.⁵⁹ A conflict arose between the SPWA and the authorities regarding the allocation of the unemployment loans. While the Ministry of Labor recognized the role of the SPWA in this process, the local clergy and the Pasdaran dissented and insisted that the loans be distributed through the local mosques. The SPWA, however, did not relent. As a compromise, both sides agreed on schools instead of mosques as the place of loan disbursement.⁶⁰

The role of the mobilizers

Young activists (mainly students) with radical Islamic and socialist orientations played a major part in mobilizing and organizing the unemployed. Initially, activists often targeted recent high school graduates (*diplomeha-ye bikaar*), who were more suitable for mobilization purposes: the revolution had given students extensive experience in group efforts. The activists then linked the concerns of these young job-seekers to those of the general mass of unemployed. The social skills, literacy and mobility of the high school graduates made them potential mobilizers in their own right. A socialist organizer described this tactic's effectiveness in creating an unemployed organization in Kermanshah, a city in the east of Iran:

We gathered the others [*diplomehs*] and asked them to express their views [on protest actions]. We concluded that each of us present should assume an area of

⁵⁵ OPGFI, *Gozareshi az Tashkil-i Sandika-ye Kargaran-i Bikaar-Shudeh*.

⁵⁶ See *Kargar Beh Pish*, 5, 1358/1979, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Interviews with Mustafa (one of the leaders of the SPWA) conducted in Los Angeles, May 1985.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

responsibility. We should, for instance, inform our friends, relatives, neighbors, and classmates of such an action. We should also prepare flyers for distribution throughout the city.⁶¹

At first, the *diplohehs* in Kermanshah insisted on an exclusive organization of their own. Later, however, they became convinced that they shared a common cause with other jobless people.⁶² Thus their recruitment campaign began among the unemployed poor and the construction and casual laborers in working-class neighborhoods. In their first collective effort, they managed to bring one thousand unemployed workers together. At this assembly, the speakers stressed the importance of setting up an association of the unemployed and uniting all jobless masses. Following a street march, the organizers convened a sit-in on the premises of the governorate. On this occasion the crowd appointed seven representatives, including four *diplohehs* (two men and two women), two unemployed laborers, and one representative from the parents of the *diplohehs*. A few days later, the representatives met in a public park with a group of fifty participants to decide on an official name for the organization and to propose by-laws for discussion and adoption. The Union of Unemployed People of Kermanshah was thus established.⁶³

Although widespread, the organizational activities of the unemployed remained largely localized and isolated in different parts of the country. Most were so involved in the daily struggle for survival that they paid very little attention to the outside world. The vital tasks of recruitment, confrontations with the Pasdaran and sustainment of morale consumed much of their energies. The idea of founding a national coordinating association came by and large from left-wing activists.⁶⁴

One crucial attempt was made to link these individual campaigns in a national framework. On 23 April 1979, delegates from over twenty cities and towns gathered in the House of Labor in Tehran. They aimed to unify their stands and strategies with a view to founding a nationwide organization of unemployed. Delegates also discussed the conditions of the jobless in different parts of the country, especially the ramifications of accepting the "unemployment loan".⁶⁵ The meeting, which lasted three days, was closed to reporters. A concluding statement instructed all unemployed masses in the country to stage demonstrations on May Day 1979 and to direct their demands toward the government. The resolution warned that if the authorities did not respond positively, the national organizers would

⁶¹ Interview with Reza, a labor activist, May 1993.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ayandegan*, 4 Ordibehesht 1358/1979, p. 3; see also *Tehran Musavvar*, "Gozareshi az Khane-ye Kargar va Sokhanan-i Kargarani Bikaar", 2, 18 Khordad 1358/1979, pp. 24–25.

“take harsher and more resolute measures to ensure that the Iranian working people achieved their just objectives”.⁶⁶

Indeed, these organizational efforts were carried out with extraordinary speed. The Tehran Meeting on 23 April – the climax of the organizational activity – came only two months after the revolution. Setting up a structured association is often the final stage in a campaign. If mass action, spontaneous protests and unstructured mobilization do not yield the desired results, a structured organization is required to ensure continuity. In Iran, the line between mass action and organizational work seemed blurred. First, people had just emerged from a successful revolution and were ready to be mobilized. Second, the mobilizers greatly valued association-building and viewed this practice as a measure of success. The left adamantly insisted on organizational work, viewing institution-building as essential for creating a sustained working-class base for its own purposes. Mostly, however, these associations retained a loose structure, often serving only as *ad hoc* coordinating committees to mobilize the campaigns. They rarely used any elaborate organizational procedures, advocated electoral campaigns or competed to appoint representatives. Despite these intensive efforts, lack of time prevented these organizations from evolving and confronting the test of efficacy. The unemployed movement was soon stopped in its tracks.

THE DEMISE

The unemployed movement withered away as quickly as it had sprung to life. May Day marked the climax of the collective action of the workless. Afterwards, interest gradually waned until the movement’s virtual demise by mid-autumn of 1979. In the summer of 1979, the war in Kurdistan undermined the campaign’s activities and the government used its repression of Kurdish nationalists as an opportunity to quell other dissent. Although a number of jobless protest marches took place, their scope remained limited. On 1 October, a crowd of 1,500 workless, the second such march organized within a week, demonstrated outside the prime minister’s office. The Pasdaran fired over their heads and the government threatened to deal with the protesters severely.⁶⁷ In the dramatic ambience associated with the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the concerns of the unemployed were lost amid the noisy campaign of “Islam against the Great Satan”. Indeed, on the very same day that the Muslim students climbed over the embassy walls, a large group of unemployed marched in the streets of the capital. The desperate appeals of these marchers were stifled by the nationalist outcry of the mass demonstrations that emerged from the embassy compound.

⁶⁶ The Resolution of the Central Constituent Council of the Unions of the Unemployed Project and Laid-off Workers of Iran. The original text is in the author’s possession.

⁶⁷ See *Middle East Economic Digest*, 5 October 1979, p. 29.

Why did the movement disappear so rapidly? First, political pressure intensified. Pro-government paramilitary organizations stepped up psychological and physical attacks, raiding and ransacking the headquarters of the jobless. The movement's leaders were branded as "infidel communists" or *munafiqs* (hypocrites), referring to the Mujahedin-i Khalq, a leftist Islamic group. Armed Pasdaran members violently attacked almost any sit-in by the unemployed, especially when they were convinced that the radical left and the Mujahedin were scheming to undermine the revolution. Various attacks were reported in Tehran, Isfahan, Abadan, Ahwaz, Gachsaran, and Khorram Abad, most within the two months following the victory of the revolution. In addition, employers formed "worker gangs" to harass laid-off workers who voiced their protests, especially those calling on the government to take over industry.⁶⁸ Friday prayer leaders would often denounce the unemployed activists as agents of a counter-revolution, inciting the praying crowd – often from working-class backgrounds themselves – to attack and disrupt gatherings of the jobless. The Islamic leaders were able to mobilize the poor against the poor. Notwithstanding their differences, the various factions within the ruling elite all favored ending the unemployed protest. Radicals and conservatives, liberals and Islamists, all considered the activists impatient opportunists who aimed to harvest the fruits of the revolution before they were ripe.⁶⁹

Second, an internal battle among the leaders, especially those with strong political convictions, further weakened the movement. Whereas Muslim activists and workers motivated by economic and social concerns tended to compromise to achieve immediate gains, radical leftist leaders and workers adhering to a political ideology insisted on prolonging the campaign and incorporating it in the general struggle to undermine the Provisional Government.⁷⁰ In addition, despite the efforts by the mobilizers to unite jobless graduates and unemployed laborers, the rift between the two persisted.

While the left strove to publicize the plight of the jobless masses, it was particularly adamant that the movement be radicalized and politicized. Most leftist publications,⁷¹ especially those of the Maoist groups, known as *khatt-i sevvum* (Third Road),⁷² carried diverse reports on the struggles of the unemployed. They analyzed the causes of lay-offs, while often relating them to the "crisis of capitalism" and offering recommendations for combating joblessness. The weekly *Alaihe-i Bikaari* (Against Unemployment) of the Razmandegan Organization was well known for

⁶⁸ Interview with Rohamm, a labor reporter, October 1993.

⁶⁹ The statements by many officials immediately after the revolution substantiate this argument.

⁷⁰ Interview with leftist activists involved in the movement confirm this point.

⁷¹ Such as *Kar*, *Paykar*, *Khabar-i Kargar*, *Khabar Nameh*, *Kargar-i Komonist*, *Mujahed*.

⁷² The Tudeh (Communist Party) was considered the "first road" and the various Marxist guerrilla Fedaii organizations the "second road".

raising these issues.⁷³ A number of militant workers, such as Ali Adalatfam, Hassan Lur, Asad and others – mainly with a Maoist outlook – led the campaign in Tehran; their counterparts mobilized job-seekers in the provincial cities.⁷⁴

While the leftist activists were primarily motivated by their desire to help the poor, they nevertheless utilized the campaign for their own political ends: first, to undermine the “liberal bourgeois” Provisional Government and, second, to obtain popular support for their own organizations. In practice, this strategy meant sacrificing the movement’s interests to further the political strategy of the individual socialist groups.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the exceptional conjuncture and conditions (i.e. the sudden and massive loss of work during the revolution) that had given rise to the movement were gradually transformed. A number of the factories resumed operations, reemploying some of their labor force. Within the first six months of the revolution, some 50 per cent of industries and small plants were once again operational.⁷⁵ The labor-intensive construction sector, which had previously employed some one million laborers, still needed to be revived. To this end, the Provisional Government extended RIs 12 billion in credit to contractors to enable them to pay back wages and to revitalize the sector as a whole.⁷⁶ In the second half of the Iranian year 1358 (1979), construction slowly revived by building small and inexpensive housing units.⁷⁷ By May 1979, some 21,000 jobs had been created in this sector.⁷⁸

Occasionally, laid-off workers took over their workplaces, appointing a *shura*, or workers’ council, to run the operations. At times they requested that the government appoint professional managers to resume work.⁷⁹ On 6 May 1979, for instance, ten workers from the Metusak factory attempted to regain their jobs by staging a sit-in at the factory. They continued to occupy the premises for twenty-five days, after which they issued a statement: “Twenty-five days sit-in including four days of a hunger strike! The result? [. . .] Nothing!” “What could we do?”, they went on. “No choice remained but to take over the workshop, operating it by ourselves.” So, “on Sunday 9 Ordibehesht [1 May 1979], we entered the workshop and, after repairing the machines and assigning responsibilities, we began to

⁷³ A Marxist-Leninist organization with a Maoist orientation.

⁷⁴ Interview with Darvishpour (who participated in unemployed workers campaigns), conducted in November 1993.

⁷⁵ See Bazargan, *Masa’el va Mushkilat-i Inqilab*, p. 122.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See Bank Markazi Iran, *Annual Economic Report* (Tehran, 1982), p. 8.

⁷⁸ This information was released by the Labor Ministry in *Ayandegan*, 2 Ordibehesht 1358/1979, p. 1. In addition, the Ministry of Roads and Supply announced that it employed some 5,000 skilled and unskilled laborers for road construction; see *Ayandegan*, 16 Khordad 1358/1979, p. 4.

⁷⁹ For the details, see Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*.

produce and sell the products.”⁸⁰ Similarly, laid-off workers in Plastou Masourehkar reopened their plant and went back to work.⁸¹ While these tactics were effective ways of regaining jobs in some cases, they were not universally successful. Former employees of un-Islamic operations, such as cabarets, night clubs and the lottery business, for example, stood no chance of reemployment.

Under intense pressure from the movement, the Ministry of Labor attempted to create some temporary jobs, including public works such as road construction and planting trees in public places. Although Bazargan’s government officially banned any further state sector employment, a number of new revolutionary institutions (*nahadha-ye inqilabi*), such as *Pasdaran Komitehs* (Revolutionary Guards), *Jihad-i Sazandegui* (Construction Crusade), *Nihzat-i Savad Aamuzi* (Movement for Literacy) and *Bonyad-i Maskan* (Housing Foundation) nevertheless absorbed a considerable share of the jobless population. For instance, the Construction Crusade, which was established in June 1979, maintained 327 centers throughout the country and employed 14,800 paid workers and 4,700 volunteers in 1979.⁸² A small percentage of the 200,000 lottery ticket sellers were hired by the local *Pasdaran Komitehs* to sell cigarettes in the streets as a measure against hoarding.⁸³ In December 1979, a job creation project was ratified for high school graduates that provided for production cooperatives throughout the country.⁸⁴

In the end, the unemployment loan offered by the government, however meager, proved a temporary solution for some poor unemployed. The offer undoubtedly divided the ranks of the jobless. By 6 July 1979, within three months of its institution, about 182,000 unemployed workers had received an average monthly loan of Rls 9,500.⁸⁵ By the end of the summer of 1979, after six months of operation, however, the entire scheme was discontinued on the grounds that “industrial investment has started, and workers are gradually returning to their jobs”.⁸⁶ As for the unemployed *diplomahs*, the government planned to extend an “honorary loan” (*vaam-i sharafati*) from a fund comprising 1 per cent of the monthly salaries of any citizens wishing to contribute. The contributions were to be repaid by the state in five years’ time.⁸⁷

In the meantime, institutions of family, kinship and traditional networks continued to protect the jobless. Young unemployed depended on their

⁸⁰ An original copy of the flyer issued after the workers began their sit-in is in the author’s possession; see also *Kar*, 9, 13 Ordibehesht 1358/1979, p. 10.

⁸¹ See *Ayandegan*, 27 Mordad 1358/1979, p. 5.

⁸² See Bank Markazi Iran, *Annual Economic Report*, 1982, p. 50.

⁸³ See *Ayandegan*, 21 Farvardin 1358/1979.

⁸⁴ See *Ettilaat*, 2 Shahrivar 1364/1985.

⁸⁵ *Ayandegan*, 17 Tir 1358/1979.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ See Bazergan, *Masa’el va Mushkilat-i Inqilab*, p. 125.

immediate families, while older ones counted on friends and relatives to secure some type of work, loan and assistance. In the end, the traditional method of relying on informal networks as opposed to politically-oriented associations, combined with the force of political pressure and economic change, led to the movement's demise. Traditional institutions made the unemployed less desperate; economic changes eroded the movement's constituency; and political repression deprived it of its leadership. The beginning of the war in Kurdistan inflicted a heavy blow on the vulnerable movement, while the wave of euphoria following the US Embassy seizure drowned out its presence.

CONCLUSION

Despite organizational weaknesses, the movement of the jobless in Iran made some important inroads. It forced the Provisional Government to grant loans and aid to over 180,000 unemployed workers for six months and to create a number of temporary jobs. In some provinces, the campaigns of the unemployed forced the authorities to reopen factories that had shut down. Eventually, groups of laid-off workers began reopening their workplaces without the consent of their employers. Most importantly, the movement prompted the Provisional Government to rush economic recovery, especially in the crippled industries where the most jobs had been lost. These achievements undermined the movement itself. The laid-off factory workers who led the organizations and campaigns of the unemployed began to return to work. Others either found jobs, resumed their old occupations or sought alternative means of survival. In short, the decline of the unemployed movement was primarily attributable to its limited success.

However, many of the people without work remained jobless, especially as new groups of job-seekers entered the labor market. The concessions neither reduced unemployment significantly nor relieved the plight of many of the jobless. The movement failed to win the unemployment benefits it had originally demanded and accepted an unemployment loan instead. The loan, which the government never truly expected to be repaid, covered only about 10 per cent of the unemployed and was discontinued after six months.⁸⁸ Job creation schemes remained limited. Not only did thousands of the remaining jobless fail to find work, but a new wave of rural-urban migration inflated the size of the jobless population even further in the years that followed. In short, the exceptional circumstances (massive and sudden unemployment and an ideological element) facilitating the formation of the unemployed movement changed while unemployment persisted. The jobless needed to adjust their activities to the new political and economic reality. The Islamic regime stabilized and seized

⁸⁸ *Ayandegan*, 9 Khordad 1358/1979.

control of popular struggles. The critical masses of unemployed (i.e. the laid-off factory workers) largely regained their jobs and exited the movement. For the remaining jobless, activities in the informal sector, petty trade and street vending served as the most common recourse.

While involved in their movement, many jobless revolutionaries continuously searched for alternative sources of personal income. There were probably many like Ahmad Mirzaii, a *diplomeh*, who described his position as “owing to unemployment, I take care of the electrical problems of my neighbors and receive payment; sometimes, I drive my brother’s taxi”.⁸⁹ Some were convinced that they could secure work only through concerted efforts. Ali Golestani, a *diplomeh* who was on the job market for six months, believed that “a bit of resourcefulness will provide thousands of opportunities; people can sell fruits in the streets, peddle wares, work as salespersons, or do part-time or casual work”.⁹⁰ Indeed, thousands of the jobless resorted to street subsistence work, occupying spots on the sidewalks, public parks and busy thoroughfares of the big cities to set up kiosks and stands. While the jobless were previously the main agents of the street politics, street subsistence workers – such as the street vendors – now assumed that role.⁹¹

Beyond the immediate concern for day-to-day survival, the unemployed movement achieved a broader political impact. As a form of early popular radicalism, the movement challenged the revolutionary regime’s legitimacy. It demonstrated that contrary to the prevailing assumptions, the new revolutionary regime lacked established hegemony over the popular classes. It faced dissent from many of those in whose name the Islamic revolution and the new state were legitimized: the *mustaz’afin* (the downtrodden).

Some attribute such popular protests to the political manipulations of the radical left. While leftist groups admittedly influenced much of the post-revolutionary popular opposition including the movement of the jobless, the jobless poor were not merely a tool in the hands of socialists. The unemployed poor, once they became aware of their position as a critical constituency, learned to use the left as well as the government to further their own interests. They were driven more by pragmatism than by ideological (Islamic or socialist) inclinations. The unemployed took advantage of the intense competition between the leftist opposition and the Islamic government over mobilizing and leading the mass movements. In this way, the poor and the workless revolutionaries both benefitted from and contributed to the radicalization, or populism, of the ruling clergy.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 Khordad 1358/1979.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ For a discussion of these issues and events, see Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran, 1977-1990* (New York, forthcoming, 1997).