

Pro-Mousavi activists do not speak for Iranian workers

Analysis of the post-election protest movement in Iran

**Adapted from a presentation delivered by Iran Solidarity, Melbourne
at AAWL Public Meeting, 7 July 2010**

For the last 14 months now Iranians have been engaged in an ongoing courageous fight for democracy and human rights in the face of heavy repression. Ever since the fraudulent elections in 2009 June the so called "Green Movement" has seriously shaken the pillars of power in Iran and has brought under question the entire legitimacy of the ruling political system, including the role of the supreme leader, the military apparatus that props up the undemocratic power structures that dominate society along with the religious pretensions of the ruling clique that are used to justify the state's barbaric and inhumane policies.

This movement which is the most significant and persistent show of opposition and protest movement in Iran since 1979. It seemingly sprung out of nowhere on the morning after the elections and built its momentum on the back of a series of spontaneous street protests in which an unknown number of people were gunned down and killed and hundreds were beaten up or arrested. Armed with cheap camera phones and with the help of the global and foreign based Iranian media outlets and the internet, activists turned citizen journalists, succeeded in turning the Iranian uprising into the hottest news item in the world and for a short period, their stories along with all their gory details took over the front pages of the world's most prominent newspapers. However, the movement has actually been the climax of years of discontent and smaller scale struggles by workers, women, students, journalists and minority groups and that it does not begin and end with the issue of the elections.



Photo: Rally in Tehran, 15 July 2009

Note on July 2010 edition of AWO:

The article *Report on the Labour Movement in the Philippines*, was based on extracts from a report to Victorian Trades Hall Council, written by Shirley Winton, CWU P&T (Vic)

The full text can be viewed on AAWL's website at: http://aawl.org.au/files/pdf/ISA_report_VTHC_10June.pdf

Analysis of 2009 post-election protests

It is true that what we know as the Green Movement started out as a protest against the fraudulent elections with its main slogan being the rhetorical “where is my vote?”, but when it was revealed that the state’s entire machinery of repression had been mobilised prior to the elections to ensure the success of the coup and when the supreme leader threw his support behind incumbent President Ahmadinejad it gradually became clear that the regime was not going to concede to any of the democratic demands of the people and that instead they would embark on a mission to rid the Islamic Republic of all of the “moderate”, “liberal” and “reformist” political elements left within the establishment and to completely annihilate what was left of Iran’s battered civil society once and for all. So over the next few months the street protest movement gradually radicalised to the point where people’s slogans changed to directly attacking the supreme leader instead of just the president and tore up his photos and portraits in public and even chanted “down with the Islamic Republic” indicating that at least a section of the people no longer had any hopes of achieving any of their demands unless some fundamental structural changes took place.

This ideological radicalisation was also reflected in how people protested; what started as silent protests in June, had by Ashura (In November) turned into pitched street battles between ordinary unarmed people and the state’s security forces and footage started pouring out of Iran of ordinary people capturing police outposts.



Photo: Police attack protesters with watercannons, Tehran

Why has the movement lost the momentum and urgency that it had in 2009? To understand this we have to look at a combination of factors; severe state repression, a series of tactical mistakes made by the activists in the protests after Ashura, the shortcomings of the movement’s leadership and the movement’s orientation, or lack thereof, towards organising industrial action.

Why did the protests lose momentum?

So then the question needs to be asked, why has the movement lost the momentum and urgency that it had in 2009? To understand this we have to look at a combination of factors; severe state repression, a series of tactical mistakes made by the activists in the protests after Ashura, the shortcomings of the movement’s leadership and the movement’s orientation, or lack thereof, towards organising industrial action.

First it must be said that we cannot underestimate the impact state repression has had on the movement. Unashamed slaughter of young people on the streets in front of hundreds of witnesses and cameras, widespread use of torture and rape in prisons as a weapon of terror and intimidation, well publicised show trials and executions of political dissidents, attacks on university campuses and dormitories and widespread censorship over the last 14 months have all had the effect of demoralising people and creating a sense of helplessness.

The state’s success in squeezing some of the life out of the movement and at least reducing the potency and size of the street protests lies in the activists’ strategy to move from spontaneous mass actions to periodic rallies on significant dates in the official regime’s calendar. The movement thus turned into a series of set piece actions that were at times 6-8 weeks apart with very little large scale visible actions to involve people in between them.

Unfortunately for the Green Movement, the repressed political atmosphere in Iran is such that during these intervals ordinary people had very little chance of actually organising themselves into coherent and lasting groups and it was very difficult for activists to involve

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new layers of people in ongoing activities and instead just relied on instant forms of communication such as SMS, email and even foreign media to call on people to join the protests. While in the meantime the state was able to use all the means at its disposal to crack-down and intimidate people during the movements down times in between the set piece actions.

The oppressive political environment makes it difficult to hold public meetings, where broader support can be mobilised, and mass participation can take place. Some public meetings were held in Tehran University but these soon dissipated after revolutionary guards occupied the university for a short period (last august, we believe).

Some poorly orchestrated protests have backfired and created an overinflated perception of the power of the state's security forces. For example, on 22 of Bahman (February 11, or the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian Revolution) a protest was organised at the very location that the government had mobilised its own supporters and security forces. Protesters were intimidated, and instead of a large central rally, a few smaller local ones took place which were less visible and effective. The day became a real political victory for the regime who then again immediately went on the offensive in the following period arresting and trying more activists and then following that up with horrific executions, the most high profile of which was the execution of Kurdish trade unionist, human rights activist and teacher Farzad Kamangar.

That direction to gather at Azadi Square, where the government's forces were assembled, was given by Mousavi and it had been taken up by the activists who promoted his ideas. Mousavi's motivation here was purely ideological and not at all pragmatic, he wanted people to gather at the government organised event in order to "reclaim it" and with it "reclaim" the Islamic Revolution from the hardliners. And this strategy needs to be seen in the context of his main slogan which is return to the "core values of the Islamic Republic" which incidentally has always been Ahmadijad's main slogan.

Mousavi supporters had greater political space in which to organise

There was some space for activist groups to organise Mousavi's campaign leading up to the election,

because of enormous social pressure and the regime's desire to portray the Iranian system as a democratic one. After the fraudulent election, these became de facto organising units for protest. To some extent they were able to project the political and organisational influence of Mousavi and the reformist politicians onto the movement, without effective challenge from more radical protest groups who were not organised to the same extent. So in this way the reformists who had their own newspapers and networks and legitimising leaders were easily able to dictate the official political line of the movement unchallenged. To understand this we also need to not forget the complete annihilation of the left in Iran after the Iranian revolution.

This state of affairs has lead many people to conclude that people like Mousavi remain the undisputed leader of this recent protest movement and that his ideas are taken up uncritically by people who participate in the actions. This is only true in the sense that there are no other organised alternatives. Iran Solidarity has



Photo: Protest rally in Tehran, 15 July 2009

observed that certain groups supportive of Mousavi and certain reformist politicians have attempted to silence or sideline other activists. This played out in Melbourne at a recent rally where the United for Iran campaign group attempted to stop Iran Solidarity from marching. Iran Solidarity has heard of similar tactics being used within Iran. For example, Students for Equality and Freedom (rough translation) who are an independent activist group that formed in Tehran University during Ahmadinejad's first term, are harassed by certain organisers of the green movement and told to not bring their own materials to the central protests, such as placards. But the reality is that increasing layers of people are no longer ideologically committed to the politics of Mousavi or even believe the Islamic Republic is reformable.



Photo: Police attack unarmed civilians in Tehran, 14 June 2009

Workers organisations

It is our observation that the workers movement has not been involved in organising actions as part of the massive street protests which were associated with the green movement. This is despite the fact that strikes over unpaid wages, conditions and social justice issues continue, such as the strikes in Kurdistan earlier in the year in response to Kamangar's execution. Furthermore, at the start of 2010 10 different workers organisations announced that in addition to the economic demands of workers they demanded the freedom of political prisoners, and end to political repression and women's oppression (all of which are slogans of the green movement).

One member of the Iranian Free Workers association

by the name of Jaffar Azimzadeh, has addressed the question of why workers aren't taking the lead in this movement. He argues that "workers are more likely to participate in political strikes in Iran if these are general strikes". Azimzadeh here is alluding to the fact that isolated workers strikes have been so far brutally suppressed and that for workers to want to come out on the streets and protest it literally needs to be an all out or nothing scenario where the activists are committed to organising an ongoing general strike and ongoing protests that are harder to suppress. And so far there hasn't been any real orientation towards this goal. Sporadic protests that give the state time to react and round up individuals are especially dangerous for striking workers in a way that they're not for random people or students, because striking workers are easier to track down as individuals considering that their managers often know who they are and where they live.

Here we return to our earlier point: that the strength of the movement is limited by the fact that the green movement is dominated by groups that were able to develop organisational roots campaigning around Mousavi's election campaign, but who do not necessarily represent the most widely held political opinions amongst protestors. So while the aftermath of the elections provided the activist groups with an unprecedented opportunities to build their forces and campaigns and to relate to the workers campaigns, they have had no orientation towards fusing the inspiring workers movement with the courageous street based green movement.

But the whole philosophy of these groups has, to this day, emphasized placing demands on existing governments instead of relying on the actual power of people to change things and this is only recently starting to change. While this approach may have been justifiable at a time when there was little visible political activity in society, it could only hold the movement back in the post-election period. After the elections these groups were faced with the energised masses on the streets, hungry for change and willing to risk their lives to achieve it. We have even seen workers burning themselves in protest against non-payment of wages, indicating the desperation and willingness to do anything for change.

Workers organizations had some interaction with the

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protests following the 2009 election. For example, the state's official workers organisation The House of Workers was one of the organisations involved in promoting Mousavi's election candidacy. The House of Workers is the state's representative body for workers and is the only officially recognised "worker's organisation" in Iran. Its role historically has been to undermine the independence of workers organisation in Iran and to root out "un-Islamic" (read: left wing, radical) ideas within the working class. The House of Workers has traditionally been an extension of the Ministry of Labour.

On the other hand, examples of workers' organizations that did not endorse particularly presidential candidates are the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company which formed in 2005, and the Syndicate of Workers of Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company. Instead of endorsing a particular presidential candidate, they instead adopted an approach of pushing for their demands through industrial actions regardless of who is in power.

One activist from the Sugar Cane workers syndicate demanded that the future president of Iran adhere to article 44 of the constitution and grant the right to freedom of association to workers. And the Coordination Committee to form Independent Workers Organisation refused to back either presidential candidate. This is an organisation formed to raise the economic demands of the sugar cane workers of Haft Tapeh and have had several militant strikes in their history and many of their activists are jailed. It's position of refusing to back either candidate stems from the fact that the workers' own experience has shown them that even a reformist government does not necessarily guarantee that the workers economic and political demands are met and they are not convinced that a Mousavi presidency is necessarily going to be any different to the previous reformist presidency.

Ahmadinejad's first term saw an increase in industrial action, with strikes across the country which included strikes by teachers, pipe makers, bakers, coal miners, finance sector workers, health workers, auto plant workers, and other manufacturing sector workers. But trade unions are key targets for state repression. Several leading trade unionists are languishing in prisons such as Ibrahim Maddadi, Ali Nejati, Ali Reza Sanfi and perhaps the most well known case being

Mansour Osanloo, the founder of the Bus Drivers' syndicate who has been in and out of prison several times and is currently serving a 5 year prison term for his activities. In fact according to workers' organizations mentioned above, the security forces have announced that:

"The Islamic Republic does not currently recognise the need to adhere to international standards of industrial relations and does not recognise the formation of independent workers organisation as a fundamental human right and anyone who is found to be taking steps towards the realisation of this objective will be seen as being against the regime of the Islamic Republic and will be accordingly punished."

The prospects for workers' activism are influenced by the economic stress currently affecting many working people. The unemployment rate hovers around the 25% mark and domestic industrial output is around 40% of capacity with the government's main strategy of combating inflation being the importing of foreign goods at the expense of local industry which has the effect of further lay-offs and increases in unemployment. 22 million people are under the official line of

FREE OSANLOO



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poverty.

Other protest groups in Iran

Meanwhile, other nascent movements are also having trouble establishing themselves, because they get hit by state violence when they are still small. For example the 1 million signatures campaign was met with brutal state violence from the outset with its first congregation being attacked by security forces and 70 or so activists being arrested (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Million_Signatures).

Once again, many of the activist groups have responded to problems such as state repression and economic hardship by using the relatively open atmosphere of the elections to campaign for the reformist candidates. Never having proposed any alternatives to a reformist presidency and a theocratic state, leading activist groups in the Green Movement have not been able to capture the imagination of the masses. We can see that they still continued to emphasize the election of Mousavi 12 months into the life of the movement, while at the same time we actually see less and less of these slogans at public gatherings which is showing the increasing irrelevance of this approach.

In addition this approach had no chance of appealing to some of the most radicalised elements in society. If we take the example of the Kurds who have suffered under a war waged on them by the Islamic Republic from its very outset which continued under Mousavi's Prime Ministership we can see that these people were never going to be involved in a movement whose main objective was promoted as being the election

of Mousavi. The experience of the Kurds during the last reformist presidency was especially bitter when they actually did endorse Khatami, the then reformist president, and still suffered a brutal crackdown for their activities in 1999 under the same president they endorsed. These factors combined has meant that while the Kurds have definitely been politically active and Kurdish workers have staged some of the most impressive strikes they have not been officially taking part in the so called Green Movement. For things to go forward this situation clearly needs to change and the green movement needs to go beyond its current sectarianism and have a more inclusive approach to social change which incorporates the industrial actions of workers and encourages them to participate in political actions as well.

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OTHER RESOURCES

Justice for Iranian Workers

www.justiceforiranianworkers.org

International Transport Workers' Federation

www.itfglobal.org

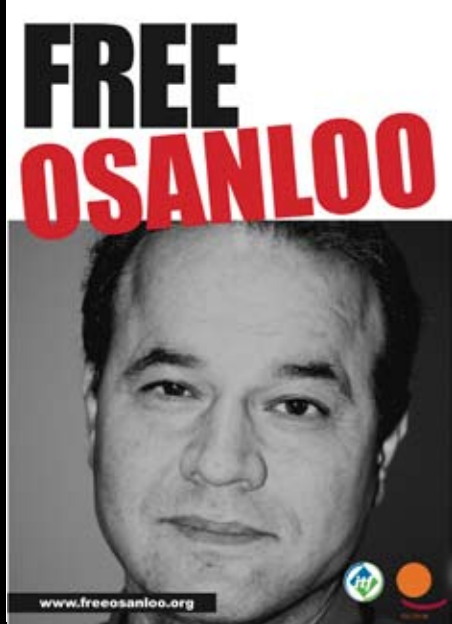
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Transport Workers Around the World Protest the Imprisonment of Mansour Osanloo



Photos: South Korea, Australia, Belgium, South Africa



FREE OSANLOO

The campaign to free Mansour Osanloo has been going on since 2005, and is more urgent now than ever. The Iranian government has defied global protest, and increased Osanloo's jail sentence by one year. Meanwhile, his health is deteriorating after prolonged imprisonment and violent attacks.

Mansour Osanloo is the elected leader of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, a trade union founded in 2005. Even though the organisation is free, democratic and legal it has been violently attacked by Iranian security forces.

As a result of his work Osanloo has been beaten, arrested and had his tongue sliced as a warning against speaking out.

Osanloo is currently serving his fourth year of an existing five year jail term. In August 2010, he was sentenced to additional one year in prison.

He is now being held in Evin Prison in Tehran, where he is in danger of losing his sight in one eye due to a previous beating. He is suffering serious ill health, including a heart condition and severe back pain, and a medical commission has recommended his release.

Send your letter of solidarity to Mansour Osanloo via:

Victor Moore, Secretary

Rail, Tram and Bus Union (Vic Branch)

Level 2, 365 Queen St, Melbourne, VIC 3000 (03) 9600 3030

victor.moore@rtbuvic.com.au

AAWL August 2010

For more information:

International Transport Federation <http://www.itfglobal.org>
Justice for Iranian Workers: www.justiceforiranianworkers.org



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