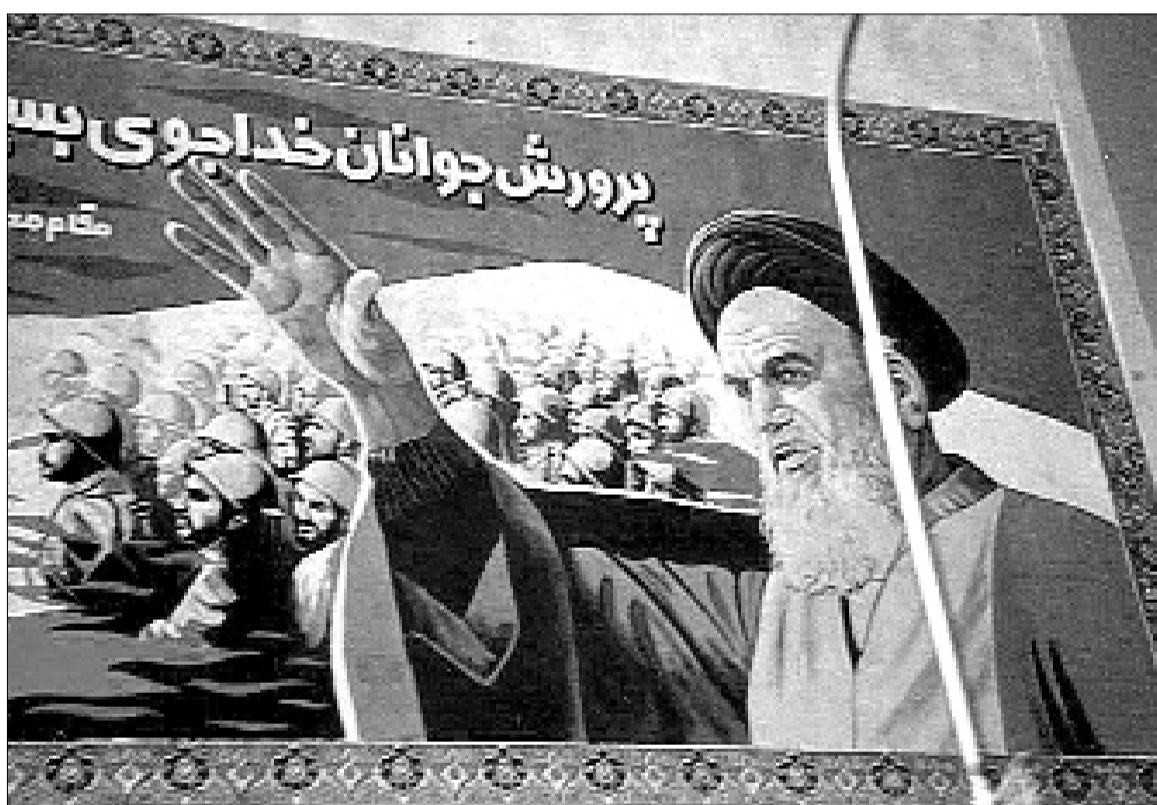


workers' liberty

reason in revolt



Iranian oil workers struck at the end of 1978 (top left). And then Khomeini got the oil workers to end their strike (top right) Khomeini becomes an icon (bottom left). Celebrating seven years of the Islamic Republic (bottom right).

Revolution and counter-revolution 1978-9

IRAN

How Iranian workers toppled a dictator

The Iranian revolution 1978-79 was one of the seminal events of the twentieth century, rich in lessons for working-class socialists. It is a story of class struggle, female self-assertion and the awakening of national minorities. The Iranian workers were the decisive force behind the toppling of the hated regime of Mohammed Reza Shah. Yet this movement was smashed by the theocracy that took the place of the monarchy. That Islamic state ruled by clerics has been a catastrophe for workers, for women and the oppressed. The events had huge repercussions for the politics of the Middle East and the world. In a three part article Paul Hampton tells the story.

MOHAMMED Reza Shah became the ruler of Iran after his father (Reza Shah, who founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1921) was forced to abdicate by the Allies in 1941. Then he too was sidelined in 1952 by nationalists led by Mossadeq. In 1953, backed by the CIA, the Shah's dictatorship was restored in a military coup.

Fuelled by oil reserves and repression, the Shah backed some state-sponsored industrial development and land reform, with dramatic economic consequences. Between 1950 and 1978, according to OECD figures, GDP increased nine-fold while GDP per capita increased four-fold.

In 1962 industrial workers made about just over 20% of the total workforce. By 1977, 33% of the workforce was in industry. In 1977 over 50% of the economically active population (of nearly nine million) were waged workers. Most wage workers were directly involved in industrial activities (2.38 million), such as manufacturing, mining, construction, utilities, transport and communications. However many workers were migrants who still had strong rural ties (Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*). As one historian Ervand Abrahamian put it: "Reza Shah brought the modern working class into existence; Muhammed Shah had nourished it to become the single largest class in contemporary Iran" (*Iran between two revolutions*).

This period of rapid development of capitalism (known as the "White Revolution") had other effects. The Shah's rule was marked by the savage methods of SAVAK — the secret police — where torture and state-sponsored murder was widespread. No opposition, neither a bourgeois parliament nor trade unions were allowed — only the Shah's National Resurgence Party. The Shah's policies drove peasants off the land into urban slums, squeezed the middle-class bazaar and challenged the entrenched clergy.

The 1953 coup ended efforts at unionisation and a 1959 labour law proscribed workers' self-organisation. The Shah



Reza Shah and his queen hold court

also set up SAVAK-run unions known as syndicates. According to Assef Bayat, when the state formed the Organisation of Iranian Workers in 1976, there were 845 syndicates and 20 trade unions with three million members.

In the mid-1970s, after a brief oil boom, the economy began to falter. Members of all classes began to challenge the Shah and it became clear that his rule was under threat.

The opposition

THE Shah was unable to create an adequate social base for his regime. In fact he faced an array of opponents. Firstly the working class a third of which was concentrated in large plants and a few major cities, notably in Tehran. But workers were politically atomised, lacking independent representation and able to organise only secretly in individual workplaces.

Secondly the national minorities. Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Balushis, Qashquaia and Turkmans constituted at least a third of the population of Iran and lived mainly in the countryside. They suffered regular repression at the hands of the regime and were denied their national, language and cultural rights. There was an armed rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan between 1967 and 1969.

Thirdly, the minority Sunni Muslims, as well as Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais, who suffered religious oppression.

Fourthly, there were also sections of the bourgeoisie, middle class students and intellectuals opposed to the regime. Some were members of the National Front, the party of Mossadeq. Others were members of the Liberation Movement of Iran, founded in 1961.

Others took part in left-wing guerrilla movements from the 1960s. The most notable group was the Organisation of Iranian People's Fadaian Guerrillas, known as the Fadaian, the result of a fusion between earlier guerrilla organisations, which began military attacks on installations and leading figures in the regime in 1971.

The Organisation of Iranian People's Mujahedin (Marxist-Leninist), known as the Marxist Mujahedin was born out of a Muslim organisation of the same name in 1975. The Tudeh (Communist) Party, had little organised presence in Iran for most the 1970s, with apparently only one branch functioning before 1979 (Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*).

All of these organisations were heavily influenced by Stalinism, either by particular states such as the USSR, China and Albania, or by its theories of two stage revolution, dependency, "anti-imperialism" etc.

Finally, the most visible group opposing the Shah were the mullahs and the bazaar. Both the clergy and the bazaar had lost out as capitalism developed. The Shah's land reform had reduced the mosque's revenue and educational reforms had weakened its influence at schools.

The figurehead and driving force of the mullahs was Ayatollah Khomeini. Expelled by the Shah in 1963, Khomeini spent most of the next fifteen years in Najaf in Iraq, developing his ideas on theocratic rule. It was his forces that

led the movement to overthrow the Shah and ultimately replaced him.

The overthrow of the Shah

MOST accounts of the overthrow of the Shah emphasise the role of intellectuals and of the clergy in undermining his rule. But the social force that turned their challenge into a real threat was the Iranian working class.

In June 1977 police were sent in to clear slums in south Tehran. Thousands of the urban poor clashed with the police for weeks, refusing to allow the work to take place. On 27 August 1977, 50,000 demonstrators drove the bulldozers and the police from their streets, forcing the regime to abandon its plans. This was the first successful mass protest against the Shah since the 1950s and showed that the regime could be defeated.

After years of industrial peace, workers in modern factories began to assert themselves. In July 1977 workers set fire to the General Motors plant in Tehran. Over the following three months there were over 100 more fires, in what was one of the largest workplaces in the country.

Intellectual and religious opposition became more assertive. In November 1977 writers, lawyers and poets began public readings. The following month religious opposition began to mount. It began with a call by Ayatollah Khomeini for the overthrow of the Shah in December 1977.

Khomeini was able to develop a network of clerics inside Iran to keep his message alive — for example using cassette tapes smuggled into the country. Crucially he developed his ideas on the kind of state he wanted to replace the Shah with.

Religious demonstrations started in the holy city of Qom in December 1977. After demonstrators were killed, Khomeini called for 40 days of mourning, to be followed by another demonstration, sparking a cycle of protest where repression was turned into a reason to march again. These religious-inspired protests, mobilising the petty bourgeois from the bazaar and the lumpenproletariat, continued through spring and summer 1978.

As Ramy Nima points out, "The upheavals from October 1977 to June 1978 rarely involved the industrial working class, the urban poor or the newly recruited 'migrant' workers; and only seven major strikes were reported during this period" (*The Wrath of Allah*).

The industrial working class moves

AT this point, the industrial working class imposed itself — although mainly for its own economic interests rather than for wider social and political goals.

In March 1978 workers at the Azmayesh plant in Tehran went on strike against redundancies. In the same month six hundred gardeners employed in the oil industry stopped work demanding a pay rise. In April, 2,000 workers in the brick industry in Tabriz came out (Bayat).

As Nima put it: "By mid-summer 1978 the situation had drastically changed; the number of strikes rose sharply as the economic crisis deepened, real wages fell and the number of unemployed increased. As the regime's campaign against high wages and low labour productivity took effect, the working class entered the arena of struggle.

"The first wave of strikes in June 1978 was still mainly concerned with economic issues, especially bonus payments, overtime and wages... Water workers and some industrial units in Tehran also stopped work. From July to September, the number of strikes multiplied. In Abadan, 600 sanitation workers demanding 20 per cent wage increases, annual bonuses and a health insurance scheme went on strike in early July. Towards the end of July, over 1,750 textile workers at Behshar struck over wages; they questioned the role and nature of the state unions and demanded free elections for union representatives.

"In August a number of strikes took place in Tabriz, the most important of which was that of 2,000 or so workers at the main machine tool factory. The strikers stayed out of two weeks demanding higher wages, annual bonuses, as well as better housing and social conditions. In September workers came out in a number of major strikes in Tehran, in the provinces of Fars and in Khuzestan, particularly the city of Ahwaz; car assembly plants, machine tool factories, paper mills all became scenes of struggle."

The religious mobilisations and the industrial struggles began to shake the regime. The Shah's response was more repression. He declared martial law and then ordered troops to attack a demonstration in Tehran on 8 September 1978, known as "Black Friday", when thousands were killed.



A wounded demonstrator, autumn 1978

The working class takes political action

THE response of workers was to take industrial action, both for their own immediate interests but also for social and political demands. Nima again describes the events vividly:

"[On 9 September] about 700 workers at the Tehran oil refinery struck not, as previously, just for higher wages, but as a protest against the imposition of martial law and the massacre at Jaleh Square. Two days later, on 11 September, the strike had spread to the oil refineries of Isfahan, Abadan, Tabriz and Shiraz. On 12 September, 4,000 print workers and other staff at two leading newspapers in Tehran walked out in protest against the renewal of censorship ordered by General Oveissi, the military governor. On 13 September, cement workers in Tehran went on strike demanding higher wages, freedom for all political prisoners, and the ending of martial law. The wave of strikes hit most towns and cities: cement workers in Behbahan, bus drivers in Kermanshah, workers at the tobacco factory in Gorgan, teachers, bank employees, and even workers in some of the luxury hotels (including, for example, the Tehran Hilton).

Assef Bayat, author of the most detailed book in English on the role of workers in Iran during this period, reported that, "According to the available data, in recorded strikes (fewer than the real number) at least some 35,000 workers at different factories stopped work in September, putting forward both economic and political demands, organising demonstrations and releasing resolutions."

But in October the situation was transformed. As Bayat puts it: "When 40,000 oil-workers, 40,000 steel-workers, 30,000 rail workers had put down their tools within three weeks, the dynamism of the revolutionary process changed dramatically."

Bayat cited the liberal newspaper *Ayandegan* reports from the time:

"On 6 October alone railway-workers in Zahedan, 40,000 steel-workers in Isfahan, workers in the copper-mines of Sar Cheshmeh and Rafsanjan, at Abadan Petrochemical, at Isfahan Post and Telegraph Company and all the branches of the Bank of Shahriar went on strike. The day after was the same: all the refineries, the Royal Air Services, the Iranit factory in Ray, the customs officers in Jolfa, the Department of Navigation and Port Affairs of Bandar Shahpour, Tractor Sazi in Tabriz, radio and TV stations in Rezaieh, 80 industrial units in Isfahan, a steel-mill in Bafgh, employees of the judiciary throughout the country and employees of the Finance Department in Maragheh joined in. The next day it was the turn of the Zamyad plant in Tehran, General Motors, the Plan and Budget Organisation and the railway-workers in Zahedan (again). The next day (11 October 1978) the largest daily newspapers went on strike. The Canada Dry factory, the ports and shipyards in Khorramshahr, the Iran Kaveh plant, the fisheries of Bandar Pahlavi, Minoo factory, Vian Shre plant, Gher Ghare-i Ziba, all workers in Gilan province, 2,000 brick-makers in Tabriz, oil-workers in Abadan and Ahwaz, in the pipe plant and Machin Sazi in Saveh, 40,000 workers of Behshar Industrial Group throughout the country, bus-drivers in Rezaieh and communications workers in Kermanshah joined the strike in rapid succession."

The most important strikes in October were those in the oil industry, which were organised by militant strike committees. Nima described how, "The oil workers in Khuzistan elected a strike committee to organise the strike and link the struggles of workers in the oil fields, the refineries and the administration. Their political demands, formulated on 29 October, included the abolition of martial law, freedom for political prisoners, and the dissolution of SAVAK. Oil production was

completely stopped. At the important oil terminal of Kharg Island, dock workers and other employees had joined the strike, halting all movement of oil off the island.

A number of unsuccessful attempts were made to end the strike and finally the army was used to force the strikers back to work."

Mariam Poya described some notable elements of these struggles. Customs workers allowed the entry of medicines, baby food and paper. Tobacco workers came out against the import of American products. Coal miners struck in support of teachers and students.

"Every few days a new section of the workforce came out on strike or joined the streets demonstrations and protests. Every night for an hour communication workers blacked out the regime's radio and TV propaganda. Railway workers refused to allow police and army officers to travel by train. Atomic energy workers struck, declaring their industry had been imposed on Iran by the great powers in the interests of nuclear war rather than creative industry. The Russian-built steel complex was completely shut down. Just about every industrial establishment was closed, with the exception of gas, telephones and electricity: here workers explained they were continuing to work to serve the public, but that they supported the strikes and demonstrations to overthrow the regime. Dockers and seamen only offloaded foodstuffs, medical supplies and paper required for political activity." ('Iran 1979', in Colin Barker ed, *Revolutionary Rehearsals*)

Oil workers take centre stage

THE oil workers strike was especially significant, given its strategic place in the economy. The strike in October lasted 33 days and paralysed the economy.

After the strike committee met the head of the National Iranian Oil Company, workers reported that he would "consider the economic demands but that the others were outside his sphere". Their response was, "We told him we were not going to make any distinction between our economic and non-economic demands. We told him we had only one set of demands" (Nore in Nore and Turner, *Oil and Class Struggle*).

After the political demands were put and negotiations with the government failed, 1,700 delegates from various workplaces staged a mass meeting in the Abadan refinery in front of military forces, deciding to stay all night in the administration department. They were attacked by tanks (Bayat).

The Shah responded by sending in the army. But the workers did not give up. On 4 December 1978 they began an all out strike, bringing production to an absolute stop.

Across Iran, workers set up strike committees, occupied their workplaces or brought production to a halt. However there was limited coordination across industries. The best examples were when oil and rail workers discussed transporting fuel for domestic use, oil workers discussed production levels for other priorities and steelworkers at Isfahan and rail workers negotiated to carry coal to the furnaces. (Nore)

Although these struggles were not the result of the conscious leadership of revolutionary organisations, they were not simply "spontaneous". Bayat found evidence that some workers had been organising secret nuclei in their workplaces for as many as eight years before these events (Bayat).

The overall significance of the workers' action was not lost on bourgeois commentators at the time. The Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979, never to return.

As the *Financial Times*, put it on 17 January 1979: "Once strikes really applied pressure in key areas such as customs, banking and of course the oil fields, their's proved to be the most effective weapon to bring the Shah to the realisation that he had to go." (Nima)

The oil workers' programme

On 29 October, workers at Ahwaz oil formulated a wide-ranging set of demands:

1. An end to martial law
2. Full solidarity and cooperation with striking teachers in Ahwaz
3. Unconditional release of political prisoners
4. Iranianisation of the oil industry
5. All communications to be in the Persian language
6. All foreign employees to leave the country
7. An end to discrimination against women staff employees and workers
8. The implementation of a law dealing with the housing of oil workers and staff employees.
9. Support for the demands of production workers, including the dissolution of the SAVAK
10. Punishment of corrupt high government officials and ministers
11. Reducing manning schedules for offshore drilling crews

The role of the clergy

ALTHOUGH it was the power of the working class that brought the Shah to his knees, it was not working class organisations that led the overall opposition movement to his regime. Although the slogans on December demonstrations, "Hang the American puppet", "Arms for the people" and "The Shah must go", were secular, the organisation of these protests was in the hands of Khomeini supporters.

As Bayat put it: "While the workers indeed controlled all revolutionary activities within the workplaces, they did not and could not exert their leadership upon the mass movement as a whole. This leadership was with someone else: Khomeini and the leadership associated with him."

Khomeini's followers had nurtured a well-organised network of cadres throughout the country, especially in the urban centres. Throughout the struggle the mosques received funds from the bazaars, which were used for political ends. Nima describes the social forces behind the religious leaders:

"No other opposition organisation could muster a network of 180,000 members with 90,000 cadres (mullahs), some 50 leaders (ayatollahs), 5,000 'officers' (middle clergy), 11,000 theological students and a whole mass of ordinary members such as Islamic teachers, preachers, prayer guides and procession organisers."

Khomeini called for strikes on 17 October and again on 18 December as part of his campaign to bring down the regime. Despite receiving funds from the mosques and bazaar merchants, the oil strike committee rebuffed proposals by Khomeini's representative Bazargan (later his first prime minister) to call off the strikes and simply stop exports. (Campaign Against Repression in Iran, *The Iranian Workers' Movement*) According to Poya, some oil workers sent an open letter to Khomeini, expressing their support but also demanding workers' participation in the future government."

It is notable for example that the oil workers' demands did not include the call for an Islamic Republic. And as the development of shuras (factory councils) from the beginning of 1979 showed, there was a clash of interests between the clerical leaders and the workers' movement — and the potential for an independent working class struggle against both the Shah and the new theocratic regime.

Could the nature of Khomeini's rule have been foreseen? It was clear from the slogans used on demonstrations (such as "Victory to the just rule of Islam", "Death or the veil", in Tabriz in February 1978). It was clear also from the book burnings, attacks on cinemas had a reactionary rationale — for example in a campaign against a bank because it had a Bahai capitalist as a shareholder. (*Workers' Action* 24 November 1978)

Khomeini's made it clear that he was hostile to the left. In *Le Monde* 6 May 1978, he said: "We will not collaborate with Marxists, even in order to overthrow the Shah. I have given specific instructions to my followers not to do this. We are opposed to their ideology and we know that they always stab us in the back. If they came to power, they would establish a dictatorial regime contrary to the spirit of Islam."

And it was also clear from his writings that he was intent on theocratic rule. In particular Khomeini formulated the idea of Velayat-e Faqih, the vice regency or government of Islamic jurists. In his 1969 lectures he argued that, "the real governors are the Islamic jurists themselves" (Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*).

In short, had the left been paying attention, there were obvious signs about the kind of regime Khomeini wanted to create.

The workers crushed

THE Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979. Crowds celebrated on the streets of Tehran. His last prime minister Bakhtiar, appointed only at the end of 1978, lasted less than a month. The sense of liberty, throwing off the shackles of years of repression, was tangible. As one worker at the Caterpillar factory put it: "The greatest grace that the revolution has granted to us is freedom... Nowadays, a man can speak out and protest; he can criticise; he can read books, can breathe..." (Bayat).

Khomeini had already appointed the Islamic Revolutionary Council in exile. He returned to Iran on 1 February 1979, greeted by millions at the airport. On 5 February he appointed Bazargan as his provisional prime minister.

An insurrection 9-11 February 1979 brought the end of Bakhtiar's farcial regime. On 9 February the Fadaiyan held an open demonstration in celebration of its first guerrilla operation in 1971. The demonstration coincided with armed clashes with the Imperial Guard. The following day the Tehran air force base rebelled against the government, coming under attack from the Shah's Imperial Guard. The Fadaiyan joined the defence of the air force. On 11 February the battle continued, until the army's supreme command ordered the troops back to barracks and for Bazargan to form a government.

Workers' self-organisation

AS the old state began to crumble, working class people took control of the basic societal functions — most importantly set up shuras (councils) in workplaces. These shuras took many forms — in Tehran alone there were as many as a thousand — and in the first months of 1979 they thrived (CARI).

As Maryam Poya put it: "Strikes committees in all the factories, installations, offices, schools, universities and other workplaces re-formed and began to function as shuras (councils); workers' shuras, students' shuras, office workers' shuras. Peasants in villages established their own peasants' shuras. In the cities power passed to local ad hoc bodies called Komitehs (committees). The membership of the Komitehs was made up mainly of supporters of the guerrilla organisations but also included local clergy and other fanatical supporters of the idea of an Islamic republic. Among the national minorities, power fell into the hands of their local shuras."

The workers' shuras were factory committees, shop floor organisations whose executive committee represented all workers in the factory or industrial group. They also elected sub-committees for particular tasks. Their major concern was workers' control. Bayat argues that the "successful shuras were those which exerted full control over and ran the workplace without any effective control on the part of the officially appointed managers. Their politics and activities were independent of the state and the official managers and were based upon the interests of the rank and file workers."

In the best examples — such as the Fanoos and Iran Cars factories — there was "continuous contact between the shura and the rank and file. The result of any activity or negotiations with any authority would be reported to the workers. This form of rank-and-file intervention reduced the bureaucratic tendency" (Bayat).

Bayat argues that in the period from February to August 1979, workers "waged a struggle independent from, and at times directly against, the [clerical] leaders of the revolution". He suggests that the shuras were embryonic soviets or workers' councils.

For example at the Chite Jahan textile factory near Tehran in the first few months of 1979, the shura organised to increase production, doubled minimum wages by cutting the pay of top

engineers and managers and provided free milk for workers (Poya).

At the Fanoos factory, the shura constitution gave the committee the authority to organise workers to deal with "counter-revolutionary sabotage", military training and "the purge of corrupt, anti-popular and idle elements, in any position". Anyone, management included that was indicted came before a mass meeting to decide their fate (Bayat).

Workers struggled for canteens, sports facilities, clinics and workplace education. In workplaces where bosses had fled, workers took control of production, regulating the pace of work, the buying of raw materials and the sale of products.

They also took action to gain control over their workplaces. Workers' general assemblies put directors, foreman and SAVAK agents on trial and sacked them. For example at the Arj factory, a worker explained that, "after the revolution, the management began to implement the same patterns of exploitation and oppression. But our lads had become conscious enough not to tolerate such a burden. As a result the lads threw the gentlemen out with a sudden rush" (Bayat).

At the Eadem Motor Company in March 1979, the factory shura decided to sack 11 managers, following an investigation of their cases. At the Pars car plant, workers struck, arguing that, "the employer has no right to hire or fire anyone without consulting the shuras" (Bayat).

At the Fama Beton cement works in Tehran, after forming a shura, workers forced their employer to accept the following conditions: "return to work with the payment of delayed wages and benefits; forty-hour week; monitoring properly the decisions of the Board of Directors, contracts, new recruitments, the determination of wages and salaries; and an inquiry into the financial situation of the company" (Bayat).

In May 1979 workers at the Mitusac Company, faced with redundancy, staged a 25-day sit-in and a 4-day hunger strike.

Khomeini made preparatins to confront the strike committees before his return to Iran — and began attacking the burgeoning labour movement from the moment he returned.

When this did save their jobs, they decided to "take over the workshop, running by our power" (Bayat).

The level of working class struggle remained high. The new provisional government estimated that 50,000 workers took part in new strikes in the first few months of 1979. Between February 1979 and February 1980 there were 350 separate industrial disputes (Bayat).

Workers struck for higher wages, with average wages increasing by over 50% in 1979 and the minimum wage more than doubled (Bayat).

One worker interviewed by Bayat explained the high level of understanding reached by many workers during this process: "Look, the reason why the Revolution was made at all, was because we wanted to become our own masters; to determine our own destiny... We did not want the situation where one or a few make decisions for two thousand. When we, 2,500 workers, are working around these walls, we want to know what is going on here; what we'll achieve in the future, in what direction we are running the company, how much profit we get, how much we could take for ourselves, how much we could contribute to government for national investment."

However other shuras, such as the Behshar Car factory, functioned only as a form of co-determination, with two members on the board of directors, some consultation and participation in administering the firm.

Some shuras did link up different workplaces. The Union of Workers' Shuras of Western Tehran and the Union of Workers' Shuras of Gilan were coordinating bodies between different workplace committees. National links were made by rail workers and by oil workers.

The high point of national organisation was the creation of the Founding Council of the All-Iran Workers' Union. On 1 March 1979 it issued a declaration of 24 demands (see box).

Unemployed workers were one of the most militant sections of the working class. For example unemployed workers occupied the Ministry of Labour and occupied the headquarters of the former SAVAK-controlled syndicates, turning it into the Workers' House (Khaneh Kargar).

A worker explained their attitude: "I suggest that we remain in this place until this ministry of bosses becomes a ministry of workers. The Minister of Labour should know that he is a minister in a provisional government, and is himself only provisional, not permanent. It is his duty to tell the owners and managers that

for 25 years they robbed millions and millions, so how are they now suddenly bankrupt? We don't want your promises, we want action. Don't accuse us of being non-believers. You meet our demands, and we will pray 37 times instead of 17." (Poya)

The power of this workers movement was demonstrated on May Day 1979, when one and half million workers marched through Tehran.

"Unemployed workers also played a major role in the first of May demonstrations... The Founding Council of the Iranian National Workers' Union called on all employed and unemployed workers to celebrate May Day, by joining a march from Khaneh Kargar. On the day, unemployed men and women and their children led the march, carrying their banners and congratulating each other on the celebration of Workers' Day. They were followed by employed workers. Each plant or industry represented with its own banners. School and college students and political organisations also supported the march" (Poya).

The workers demonstration was massive: it took six hours for the one and a half million marchers to pass in the streets of Tehran. Marchers carried banners in Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish and Azari with slogans such as "Long live real unions and shuras", "free speech, free press", "Down with the old labour law", "Workers and peasants, unite and fight" and "Work for the unemployed".

However it did not pass with incident. "At times the march was harassed by small groups of Islamic thugs shouting anti-communist and pro-Islamic slogans. The demonstrators replied: 'The workers will be victorious, the reactionaries will be defeated'" (Poya).

Khomeini supporters organised a separate rally from 'Iman Hussein Square' in Tehran, which only drew a few thousand demonstrators. The Mujahedin refused to join the independent workers' rally, holding their own event near Tehran, attracting only a few thousand supporters.

Islamist reaction

KHOMEINI'S attitude towards the working class was clear from the outset. He made preparations to confront the strike committees before his return to Iran — and began attacking the burgeoning labour movement from the moment he returned.

On 20 January 1978 Khomeini established the Committee for Coordination and Investigation of Strikes (CCIS), which included Bazargan and future president Rafsanjani. Its main tasks were to "call off those strikes which jeopardise the work of the main industries involved in the production of people's urgent needs, and those threatening the country's survival". (Bayat) Within ten days it had persuaded over 100 striking workplaces to go back to work.

The CCIS was not completely successful. The Railway Strike Committee refused a number of times to resume work and carry fuel for the 'consumption of the people' as it requested.

According to Bayat, "The Oil Strike Committee accepted the request of the CCIS to resume production for domestic consumption only after a long debate, negotiations and assurances.

"The Strike Committee of the oil industry possessed a high degree of independence and authority, and seemed to Khomeini and his allies a parallel organ of power... The confrontation culminated when, some three weeks before the insurrection and before the Shah had departed, the leader of the oil strikers [M J Khatami] resigned as a gesture of protest against 'the dogmatic reactionary clergy', and against 'the new form of repression under the guise of religion'. His immediate concern, according to his open letter 'to the masses of Iran', related to the 'existing repression... and arbitrary interferences by the Especial Envoy (of Khomeini) in the duties and responsibilities of the Committee of Strikers representatives'."

There was further outrage and bitter confrontation immediately after the insurrection [9-11 February] when oil strike leaders were arrested by the new regime and charged as counter-revolutionaries (Bayat).

The new government made its intentions clear. Bazargan's spokesman said: "Those who imagine the revolution continues are mistaken. The revolution is over. The period of reconstruction has begun." (Bakhash)

Three days after the insurrection Khomeini ordered all strikers to return to work "in the name of the revolution". The provisional government opposed the shuras and set up a special force of appointed inspectors inside the plants to report on their activities. Instead the government advocated syndicates. (Bayat).

On 18 February the Islamic Republic Party was formed to spearhead Khomeini's supporters in official politics. Militias and other storm troopers such as the Hezbollahi (Party of Allah) were organised to attack opponents in the streets and in workplaces.

Speaking in Qom on 1 March 1979, Khomeini said: "Democracy is another word for the usurpation of God's authority to rule." (Dilip Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs*).

He added: "What the nation wants is an Islamic republic; not just a republic, not a democratic republic, not a democratic Islamic republic. Do not use the term 'democratic'. That is the Western style." (Bakhash)

In March 1979 Khomeini resorted to threats: "Any disobedience from, and sabotage of the implementation of the plans of the Provisional government will be regarded as opposition against the genuine Islamic Revolution. The provocateurs and

National minorities

FEWER than half of the people of Iran in 1979 were Persian and spoke Farsi. Suffering oppression under Shah, the national minorities, Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Balushis, Qashquaia and Turkmans participated in the movement to overthrow his regime to further their demands for self-government and self-determination.

However Khomeini's regime soon turned on these minorities. On 18-21 March Kurdish villages in Sanandaj were bombed for demanding national self-determination and for seizing land from the landlords.

On 26-29 March, troops shot down Turkman peasants in Gonbadkavoos, again for seizing land.

On 26 July fighting broken out between Kurdish fighters and government troops in Marivan. In mid-August Kurdish fighters and government troops fought over Paveh. Government troops killed 400 people in the assault. Khomeini ordered a general mobilisation to put down the Kurdish rebellion. The Kurdish Democratic Party was banned. Fighting continue in Saqaz and Sardasht. Although Kurdish troops called a truce, Khomeini ordered troops to crush the rebellion.



Top: fighting in the streets, shortly before the fall of the Shah;
middle: greeting Khomeini in Qom; bottom: picture of
Khomeini with the words "do not go against his movement".

agents will be introduced to people as counter-revolutionary elements, so that the nation will decide about them, as they did about the counter-revolutionary regime of the Shah" (Bayat).

On 31 March the Minister of Labour announced that the government "was in favour of Syndicates and believes that workers can defend their interests only through a health Syndicate; therefore the ministry will support such organisations and intends to dissolve any other forms of organisation which are wasteful." (Poya)

The government began interfering in the workplaces, appointing its own representatives as managers and trying to downgrade the role of the shuras. It encouraged groups of supporters to establish Islamic societies in workplaces to emphasise the priority of religion and Islamic attitudes to work and property.

Many workers did not accept this. One worker at the Roghan Pars, a subsidiary of Shell put it very well in March 1979:

"The revolution was victorious because of the workers' strike. We got rid of the Shah and smashed his system, but everything is the same as before. The state-appointed managers have the same mentality as the old managers. We must strengthen our shuras, because the management are afraid of them. They know that if the shuras remain powerful they've had it. They can't impose their anti-working class policies directly; but they're now opposing the shuras on the basis of religious belief. If we say anything, their answer is, 'This is a communist conspiracy to weaken your religious belief'. What I would like to know is, what have shuras got to do with religion? Workers are exploited all the same: Muslim, Christian or any other religion. That bloody manager who's been sucking our blood has suddenly become a good Muslim and tries to divide us by our religion; so we should know that the only way for us to win is to keep our unity through the shuras." (Poya)

Another put it stridently:

"If they don't recognise the rights of our shuras, there will be sit-downs and sabotage. If they outlaw the shura, the workers will never let them inside the factory. If they dissolve the shura, they themselves must go." (Poya)

The foundations of the Islamic state

THE provisional government pressed ahead with plans for an Islamic constitution. On 30-31 March they organised a referendum, with the question: Yes or No to an Islamic Republic. The voting slips were red for No and green for Yes. Members of local Komitehs handed voters their preferred voting slip and stamped their identity cards. (Hiro)

The government also resorted to outright repression. On 10 April 1979 an unemployed workers' demonstration in Isfahan was attacked by Khomeini militias and one worker was killed.

In May 1979 the government introduced the Law of Special Force to prevent shuras intervening "in the affairs of the managements and of the appointments" of government-nominated managers. (Bayat)

On 6 May Khomeini ordered the creation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, the Pasdaran, which were formally founded on 16 June. (Hiro)

The regime nationalised 483 factories, 14 private banks and all insurance companies in June 1979 (Bayat). It took control of 70% of the private sector, paying compensation to foreign and domestic capitalists. They did so in reality because workers in many plants had already effectively ousted their bosses and the regime wanted to regain control by imposing its own managers.

In addition, the Islamic Mustazafin Foundation took over the assets of the Shah's family Pahlavi Foundation, which included 20% of the assets of all private companies. State managers were appointed to impose government policy.

The regime also used economic sabotage to undermine factories with shuras. Transactions with the SAKA plant shura were banned by the state and the bazaar merchants, the grounds that the shura members were communists. In the Orkideh Chinese factory

The demands of the All Iran Workers' Union

"We the workers of Iran, through our strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations overthrew the Shah's regime and during these months of strike we tolerated unemployment, poverty and even hunger. Many of us were killed in the struggle. We did this in order to create an Iran free of class repression, free of exploitation. We made the revolution in order to end unemployment and homelessness, to replace the SAVAK-orientated syndicates with independent workers' shuras — shuras formed by the workers of each factory for their own economic and political needs."

Workers demanded:

1. government recognition of the shuras;
 2. abolition of the Shah's labour law and enactment of a new labour law written by the workers themselves;
 3. wage increases in line with the cost of living;
 4. tax-free bonuses;
 5. free health service instead of the present semi-private insurance system;
 6. housing benefits in the shortest possible time;
 7. sick pay;
 8. a forty-hour five-day week;
 9. the sacking of all elements closely linked with the old regime;
 10. the expulsion of all foreign experts and foreign and Iranian capitalists and expropriation of their capitals in the interests of all the workers;
 11. an end to discrimination against blue-collar workers and an increased annual holiday of one month;
 12. improved health conditions in the factories;
 13. sick pay;
 14. an end to disciplinary punishments and fines;
 15. an end to the intervention of the police, army and government in labour disputes;
 16. inclusion of workers' shuras in industrial decisions such as investment and the general condition of the plant, as well as buying, selling, pricing and the distribution of profit;
 17. determination of hiring and firing by the shuras;
 18. freedom of demonstrations and protests, and legalisation of strikes;
 19. return of the capital of cooperatives to the workers;
 20. free meals, washing facilities and improved safety at work;
 21. provision of ambulance, nurse, bath and nursery services at work;
 22. official employment and job security for temporary workers;
 23. creation of a medical consulting body to review the condition of unhealthy and sick workers and to grant them exemption from work and retirement;
 24. reduction of the retirement age in the mining and moulding industries from 30 to 20 years' service.
- (Sick pay appears twice in the original, from Poya)

the state cut off the import of raw materials from West Germany after the workers took control of the plant. Credit to two factories of the Naz-Nakh and Isfahan Wool industry were cut back, in order to dismantle the shuras (Bayat).

On 22 June a demonstration at Tehran University demanding a popularly elected assembly was broken by the Hezbollahi. The government decided that an Assembly of Experts would draft the new constitution. The new constitution, endorsed by referendum in December 1979, contained articles designed to restrict the shuras. For example Article 105 said that, "decisions taken by the shuras must not be against Islamic principles and the country's laws" (Bayat).

During Ramadan, on 25 July 1979 Khomeini announced a ban on music on radio and television, comparing it with opium. (Hiro 1985 p.127)

On 7 August 1979 the government enforced a two-month old press law, with the Pasdaran occupying the offices of the liberal daily paper, *Ayandegan*. Later that month the government banned 41 opposition papers and took over two large publishing houses. This was a significant blow to the left, who's papers had a circulation of around a million (CARI).

In August Khomeini created the Reconstruction Crusade, to repair roads and government buildings. Workers from General Motors, Caterpillar and Iran National, were sent out on the grounds that parts were not available in their factories. Strikes and sit-ins were declared illegal, as "communist conspiracies".

The first widespread wave of outright suppression against the shuras was launched in August. According to Bayat, "many independent shura activists were arrested and a number of them executed."

Khomeini's forces also attacked the left. On 12 August a demonstration called by the National Front, Fadaiyan and Mujahedin was attacked by Hezbollahi and Pasdaran. The following day the offices of the Fadaiyan and Mujahedin were besieged by Khomeini's forces.

The workers subdued

From page 5

Khomeini made his attitude clear in a speech on 19 August in Qom: "We made a mistake. If we had banned all these parties and fronts, broken all their pens, set up gallows in the main squares and cut down all these corrupt people and plotters, we would not be facing all these problems." ('Why Khomeini wants gallows in the streets', *Workers' Action* No.150, 25 August 1979)

In October 1979 the Khaneh Kargar was occupied by the local Komiteh — though not without unemployed workers taking it back twice.

The government also used Islamic Associations and "Islamic shuras" to undermine independent organisation in workplaces.

It was in this context that the occupation of the US embassy occurred on 4 November 1979. According to the Campaign against Repression in Iran (CARI), "it was designed and organised by the ruling party (IRP) and its main objective was to divert the mass movement", using "empty anti-imperialist demagogy".

In early 1980 many factory shuras, including in oil, rail and toolmaking workplaces, were shut down. In August 1980 the regime abolished profit-sharing and passed a law giving shuras only a consultative role.

Workers continued to resist. One worker told the newspaper *Keyhan*: "This law aims to weaken the power of the workers; this is in effect the recognition of semi-Syndicate rights, which only preserves the rights of the capitalists. Shuras are the basis of our power in the factories. It is now clear that as long as capitalists are running the factories, they will continue to weaken our power." (Poya)

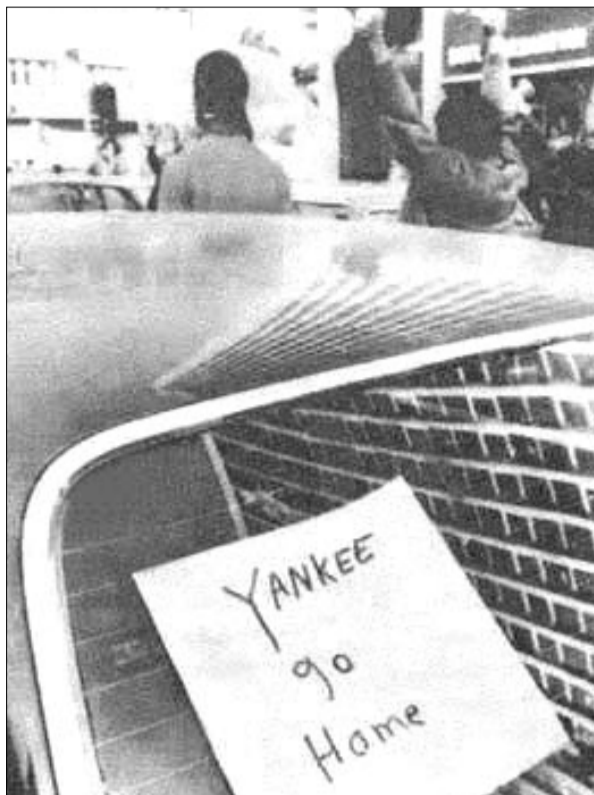
The Khaneh Kargar became the headquarters of the Islamic Associations and the "Islamic shuras".

These Islamic Associations had the following functions: indoctrination of labour with the ruling ideology; policing the workplace; mobilising workers behind the regime. According to Bayat they were viewed by many workers as "new SAVAK agents who grow beards instead of wearing ties".

When Iraq attacked Iran in late September 1980, the result was "an hysterical chauvinist wave which rapidly engulfed the country, including the working class and most of the left". The other major effect was the militarisation of society, with the regular army revived, the Pasdaran trebled and new organisations such as the Basij corps set up. Even the Islamic Associations were armed. (CARI, *The Iranian Workers' Movement*)

Workers continue to resist

EVEN in 1981, militant workers were defying the dictates of the government. Bayat reports an incident he witnessed. "In the state-run Iran Cars factory, a severe confrontation occurred after the shura withdrew funds from the financial department to pay the workers their year-end bonus in March 1981. Some of the shura members were jailed as the state reacted against the action. The workers withdrew their claims in order to get their shura members released. The day I visited the plant, the representatives of the Imam (Khomeini) and of the Prosecutor-General turned up at the factory to settle the continuing dispute. After a bitter argument between the workers and the representatives, one Azerbaijani worker stood up and declared, 'Just as we brought down the Shah's regime, we are able to bring down any other regimes'. At this moment the



workers started clapping."

But by June 1981 the last traces of independence by the shuras were stamped out. In the Iran Cars factory, "the armed Pasdaran had rushed into the factory and begun arresting shura members and other activists according to a blacklist prepared by the Islamic Association." (Bayat).

The number of industrial disputes fell from 180 in 1980-81 to 82 in 1981-82. Workers in the oil industry, who had won a 40-hour week through struggle, lost it as the Revolutionary Council decreed a 44-hour week.

Based on a quotation from Mohammed that "to work is like jihad in the service of God", an instrumentalist conception of work was used by the regime to raise productivity. It aimed to impose a "classless" Islamic community over worker-capital relations. To do so, even language was changed: the word kargar (worker) was replaced by karpazir (one who agrees to do work).

As Bayat described it: "As for workers, Islamisation of workplaces goes hand in hand with Islamisation (better to say regimentation) of leisure. The factory is assumed to be a barricade against kofar (infidels), where the agirs (labourers) have to listen to official religious sermons as well as perform 'the divine duty of production'. Hence, massive dispatches of factory mullahs, a religious transformation of the atmosphere in factories, the putting up of special picture, posters, huge slogans on the walls and the loud broadcasting of official speeches during break and lunchtimes etc."

The subordination of workers was summed up by the head of the judiciary in March 1983: in the factories "the management is the brain, the Islamic Associations are the eyes, the rest the hands" (Bayat).

However resistance, passive and active continued. In 1984-85 some 200 industrial disputes were reported. Bayat reports on some significant incidents:

"In a metal factory in Tehran, I attended a mass prayer at the factory's mosque. Out of a workforce of 700, less than 20 workers, most of them old, were in attendance. The rest of the workers were playing football in the factory yard or chatting. From then on (spring 1981), participation in mass prayer became compulsory in the factories and offices. In another plant, a junior manager explained that the workers themselves demanded prayer sermons, but did not participate. Instead, I observed, they would sit in the sunshine talking."



Casualty of the Iran-Iraq war

The failure

THE Iranian working class was the decisive social force that overthrew the Shah in 1978-79. But workers did not go on to create their own state, but instead came under the rule of a regime no less repressive than that of the Shah.

Workers built organisations and took action in defence of their own interests. The development of independent working class politics was a real possibility in 1979. Yet this potential was not fulfilled — in large part because of the failure of the left, both inside Iran and internationally.

Part of the explanation for the left's failure lies in its repression at the hands of the Khomeini's government. For example when the Fadaiyan refused to return the weapons it seized during the insurrection on 9-11 February 1979 and organised a demonstration at Tehran University, Khomeini denounced them as "a group of bandits and unlawful elements" and "non-Muslims at war with Islam". (Hiro) The left was harassed by Hezbollah from the beginning — and by other forces of the new state such as the Pasdaran until it was finally driven underground.

But repression does not account for very much — and certainly not for the possibilities in early 1979 that were wasted. It was the ideological confusion of the left, its political disorientation and its organisational mistakes that meant an historic opportunity for working-class power was lost — and Iranian workers subjected to a new despotism that lasts to this day.

Ideology

THE central failure of the left in Iran and internationally, which conditioned all else, was its ideological errors. Almost the entire left was Stalinist, and the impoverished Stalinised pseudo-Marxism prevented any of its constituents from charting an independent working class path.

Almost the entire left lacked any systematic class analysis of the Iran social formation as it had developed by the mid-1970s. Most defined Iran as a backward society with little capitalist development, in line with the Third Worldist dependency theory that was widespread at the time. The left perceived the Shah largely as a puppet of the US, and Iran in general as simply dominated by imperialism.

The result was the "theory" of the two-stage revolution, whereby the Iranian working class was expected to play a subordinate role in a general "democratic" struggle to overthrow the Pahlavi dynasty. It meant that the leadership of such a "democratic revolution" was assigned to other social forces, providing they were sufficiently "anti-imperialist".

This led the left towards political subordination to the mullahs. Almost the whole of the left failed to grasp the specific character of Khomeini's movement and the type of state he explicitly envisaged creating after replacing the Shah. At its worst, the Tudeh party peddled the illusion of the potential "non-capitalist" path of development for the regime. But most believed that because the regime was "anti-imperialist" (i.e. anti-American) it was in some sense progressive.

The left did not grasp that, given the forces involved in the opposition movement, the state that would emerge after the

Tail-ending Khomeini

Socialist Worker (28 October 1978) compared Khomeini to Father Gapon to justify their tail ending.

"It is almost as though the masses have seized on a tradition that is embodied in their history — the tradition of religious opposition — the one thing they know is common to all, understood by all, and hammered this religion of theirs into a mighty weapon, that has nothing to do with godliness, or holiness and everything to do with mass power." (Joanna Rollo, *Iran: Beginning of a Revolution*, SWP pamphlet)

"We have already explained what really lies behind this mass movement and had nonsense it is to characterise it as a religious movement. Regardless of whatever force that may be at its head and despite whatever demands through which it may express itself, the mass movement has absolutely nothing to do with religion of any kind, let alone a reactionary one." Saber Nickbin, *Iran: The Unfolding Revolution*, IMG pamphlet)

IMG leader Brian Grogan boasted of chanting "Allah Akhbar" on a demonstration in Tehran, justifying it on the grounds that it meant the people were stronger than the Shah's army.

In December 1978 The Campaign against Repression in Iran (CARI) in Birmingham issued a leaflet denouncing "Down with the mullahs" as a reactionary slogan. In March 1979 CARI changed its name because "the tasks of the solidarity movement are different" (*Socialist Challenge* 29 March 1979)

"Socialist do not fight against religion. We don't think the fight in Iran is between the Marxists and the Muslims". (*Intercontinental Press/Inprecor* 17 September 1979)

e of the left

overthrow of the Shah could be pro-national capital, independent of global capital and simultaneously viciously anti-working class. The lauding of “militant Muslims” blurred the reactionary nature of Khomeini’s rule.

The absence of a class perspective led to the underestimation of the strike committees and later the factory shuras, built by workers to defend their interests. As Assef Bayat put it: “Almost all of the left was surprised by the sudden emergence of the shuras. Almost all the left-wing organisations, as well as the shuras themselves, were confused about what to do and about what kind of possible role the shuras could play politically.”

The left was also unable to grasp the important dynamic of the struggle for women’s liberation. From the International Women’s Day protests in March 1979 and in the two years that followed, women waged a persistent struggle against the regime. But the left did not understand that the fight against the veil and other restrictions on women were a vital part of the struggle for democracy and for women’s liberation.

Nor did the left fight the right to self-determination of the national minorities. As CARI put it, when Khomeini launched his holy war against the Kurds, “the reaction of the shura and progressive groups left a lot to be desired”.

In short the left lacked a consistently democratic and socialist programme to unite the working class and draw other exploited and oppressed groups behind it, as a bridge towards the fight for workers’ self-liberation.

Khomeini led the mass movement against the Shah and disguised his programme for a theocratic state beneath vague liberal-sounding phases. The left failed to analyse the nature of his plans or predict the likely form of his rule.

Organisational failure

THE central organisational failure of the Iranian left during 1978-79 was its inability to build a revolutionary party capable of leading the working class against the mullahs and for its own self-rule.

Bayat expressed this idea well, when he wrote: “The most important limitation, however, was the absence of an effective political force committed to organising the working class for the strategic objective of socialist construction.”

The largest left organisation, the Fadaiyan, had around half a million supporters. It already had some credibility after its guerrilla campaign against the Shah. This was enhanced by its role in the insurrection on 9-11 February 1979. It was right to boycott Khomeini’s referendum on the Islamic Republic in March 1979.

However the Fadaiyan’s politics were Stalinist and mired in stages theory. It did not sharply attack the new regime until it was attacked in August 1979. Although its members took part in the shuras, women’s organisations and the struggles of national minorities, it did not craft a programme or a strategy for taking on the emerging theocratic state. Nor did the “Marxist” Mujahedin, renamed Paykar in early 1979, which promoted Maoist Albanian Stalinism.

One measure of the Fadaiyan’s ideological confusion was its split in June 1980, when the majority joined the Tudeh party, i.e. the Communist party and representatives of the USSR in Iran.

The Tudeh party pledged its support for Khomeini’s government in February 1979 and remained its staunch ally. This went as far as actually helping the state smash the left. The Tudeh party told its supporters in August 1981: “Uncovering the policies of the counter-revolution in the workplace, in the family and in any place where the masses are present is one of most important duties.” It was clear what this meant when the Fadaiyan Majority and the Tudeh party received letters of thanks from the army commander responsible for suppressing the Kurdish revolt. (Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause*)

There were some small organisations that attempted a more serious analysis and intervention. The Organisation of Workers’ Path, ex-Fadaiyan and ex-Mujahedin supporters who opposed Maoism, argued that Khomeini’s rule was a “religious-

Bonapartist” regime composed of the petty bourgeoisie, bazaar bourgeoisie and semi-proletarian population, under the leadership of the clergy. The Organisation of Communist Unity (OCU) was anti-Stalinist and took part in building the women’s movement. (Behrooz, 1999 p.132)

There were also some Iranian Trotskyists. The founders became active in Britain in the 1960s. They formed an Iranian Commission within the Mandelite USFI. Trotskyists in exile in the United States and Europe formed the Hezb-e Kargar-e Socialist — HKS (Socialist Workers’ Party) in early 1979. It was publicly announced in Tehran on 22 January 1979.

The HKS faced repression from the outset. Its first public meeting on 2 March 1979 was suspended when Islamic students and Maoists attempted to break it up. (Robert Alexander, *International Trotskyism*) However its leader Babak Zahraie held two televised debates in April and May 1979 with Khomeini’s spokesman Bani-Sadr, who later became president of the regime.

The HKS was active among oil workers in Khuzistan and in the women’s movement. After a series of strikes, workers in the oil and steel industries were rounded up in May 1979, including 16 HKS members. In August 1979, 14 HKS members were tried by the local “Imam’s Committee”, with 12 sentenced to death — later suspended*

Zahraie led a split from the HKS in the autumn of 1979, to form the Revolutionary Workers’ Party (HKE). The HKE effectively offered critical support to Khomeini’s regime, as did another Trotskyist group, formed in January 1981, the Workers’ Unity Party (HVK). But they suffered the same fate as the HKS, and were finally snuffed out by 1982.

But even the HKS was unable to develop the programme and strategy needed to oppose Khomeini’s rule. It failed to warn the Iranian working class of the nature of the new order. It lacked the necessary implantation in workplaces. It was therefore powerless to resist the onslaught of the state.

Failure of the international left

THE international left, especially the USFI, bears a heavy responsibility for the defeat of the Iranian left. Repression was not a factor and it had access to the history of past mistakes (such the crushing of the Chinese Communists by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927). The international left had the necessary materials to analyse the Iranian social formation, the nature of mullahs and the lessons of past defeats — but it largely failed to do so.

Hardly any group on the international left came out of the Iranian revolution with any credit.

But the group that deserves particular ignominy is the US Socialist Workers’ Party (US SWP). Once the pride of the Trotskyist movement, by the mid-1960s it was a Castroite, semi-Stalinist sect. The US SWP deserves particular dishonour because it had close relations with HKS and the other Trotskyist organisations — and was the intellectual author of the political line of critical support for Khomeini.

The US SWP defined Khomeini’s regime “an anti-imperialist government” (*The Militant*, 10 July 1981), exaggerating the “gains” of the revolution and downplaying or simply denying the counter-revolutionary nature of the regime towards the working class.

Even in late 1981 the US SWP claimed “these shuras continue to exist under the Khomeini regime” and that Iranian Trotskyists continued to operate openly in the factories and by publishing newspapers. They argued: “Efforts to stifle debate and roll back the gains won by Iran’s workers and farmers have not succeeded. Efforts to disband the workers’ committees, roll back land reforms, or eliminate political parties have failed.” (Janice Lynn and David Frankel, *Imperialism vs the Iranian Revolution*)

Conclusion

THE Khomeini regime was a bourgeois government, resting on the sections of national capital, the bazaar bourgeoisie and the substantial financial power base of the mosques. It was a form of “reactionary anti-imperialism”, opposed to the domination of foreign capital but utterly hostile to the Iranian working class. It is not an abuse of language to describe it as a form of clerical fascism, given its destruction of the labour movement.

Khomeini led the mass movement against the Shah and disguised his programme for a theocratic state beneath vague, liberal-sounding phrases. However the left failed to analyse the nature of his plans or predict the likely form of his rule. As Nima put it: Khomeini’s “rhetorical allusions to freedom were unfortunately misunderstood by many within the anti-Shah opposition, including many on the left.”

The left failed to prepare the Iranian working class and warn of what to expect. Instead the left used spurious analogies to incorporate Khomeini’s movement within a mechanical parody of “permanent revolution”, which was far from Trotsky’s original theory.

For example, the religious nature of the leadership was rationalised with reference to historical figures, such as Father Gapon in the 1905 revolution in Russia. But whereas Khomeini was a central figure in the Shia hierarchy, Gapon was a maverick priest

Our record

DURING the late 1970s the forerunners of the AWL published a weekly paper, *Workers’ Action*, which contained extensive coverage of the Iranian revolution.

In the last months of 1978 the paper carried detailed reports of the strike wave that eventually toppled the Shah. The reports emphasised the need for workers to organise themselves independently. For example in an article, Not an Islamic state, but workers’ rule, we wrote: “To bring the Iranian workers’ movement to victory, however WORKERS’ COUNCILS must organise the struggle now and the future revolutionary power after the overthrow of the Shah.” (*Workers’ Action* 9 December 1978)

However like most of the left we underestimated the nature of Khomeini’s ideas and his movement, as well the kind of regime he was planning to create. For example, in an article Down with the Shah, we wrote:

“The role played by Muslim clerics in the opposition movement does not mean that it is reactionary. Many progressive movements have had priests playing a prominent role – the civil rights movement in the USA, the nationalist movement in Ireland or even the early stages of the Russian Revolution of 1905. It means no more than that the mosques have been the only possible meeting places for the opposition, and that the clerics, have been until recently been almost the only people able to speak out against the regime.

“Even the demand for ‘Islamic government’ does not (for the demonstrators who raise it) mean religious bigotry, but a drive against the corrupt luxury of the oil-rich Iranian middle class.

“Ayatollah Khomeini, the chief leader of the Muslim opposition has declared many times that he does not want the barbarities of ‘Islamic law’ as practiced in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, where thieves are supposed to be punished by having their hands cut off; nor does he oppose equality for women.” (*Workers’ Action* No.124, 11 November 1978)

The paper carried an interview with Khomeini from Le Monde where he made some democratic noises. (*Workers’ Action* No.121, 21 October 1978)

The contradictions in our position were summed up in an article, Islam in Iran: the sign of the oppressed.

We wrote: “A bourgeois ‘Islamic government’ will swindle the Iranian workers and peasants just as ruthlessly as the Shah does. The task of socialists, nevertheless, is to support the struggle of the masses against the Shah, even when these struggles take an Islamic government to be their aim. In Iran, of course, revolutionary socialists will fight to convince the workers and peasants that their aspirations for democracy and justice can only be betrayed by the bourgeoisie and by Islam.” (*Workers’ Action* No.125, 19 November 1978)

And in the article, Not an Islamic state, but workers’ rule, we added: “Even if the Ayatollah Khomeini wanted to turn the clock back 1300 years – and all the evidence, on the contrary, is that he favours a moderate bourgeois democratic and nationalist programme – the cries of the Shah’s apologists about ‘Islamic reaction’ would not be justified.” (*Workers’ Action* No.128, 9 December 1978)

About the closest we came to warning of the impending catastrophe was an article by Rhodri Evans, Can Khomeini halt the revolution?, which said: “With almost mathematical certainty we can predict a clash between Khomeini and the workers. British socialists must be ready to give every support we can to the Iranian workers.” (*Workers’ Action* 24 February 1979)

The only organisation which had a third camp line of “down with the Shah, down with the mullahs” was (ironically) the Spartacist League, which warned in advance of the consequences of theocratic rule for the emerging workers’ movement, the left, women and national minorities.

Although *Workers’ Action* opposed the exclusion of the Sparts from meetings and demonstrations on Iran by the SWP and the IMG, we did not spell out clearly the dangers of Khomeini coming to power.

in favour of the separation of church and state. Khomeini made it clear about the kind of state he wanted from the beginning; Gapon at least called for a constituent assembly in 1905. And of course despite his opposition to the Tsar, Gapon was not lauded by the Bolsheviks as a “progressive clergyman” – whereas Khomeini was awarded progressive credentials by wide sections of the Iranian left.

To call for opposition to both the Shah and the mullahs would not have been to equate the two and ignore the differences between the two regimes, nor to swallow the propaganda against the whole movement as simply religious reactionaries, as portrayed in much of the western media. It was simply to draw conclusions from the facts about Khomeini’s movement.

Nor would opposition to the mullahs have implies a passive, abstentionist strategy for the Iranian left. It would have meant active involvement in the factory committees that shook the Shah’s regime. It would have meant active involvement in the workers’ shuras, in the women’s movement and in the struggles of national minorities.

It would have meant fighting for democratic demands such as for a constituent assembly. It would have meant preparing the left to defend itself, forming workers’ militias. It would have meant joining the women’s demonstrations. It would have meant fighting for workers’ self-management in workplaces and for linking up the network of shuras to take control of whole sectors of industry, with the aim of control over the whole economy.

It was precisely the left’s failure to do these things, which gave Khomeini’s regime the opportunity to consolidate itself and then cement its rule. An active, interventionist third camp approach was exactly what was missing in Iran in 1978-81.

* The best HKS members, some in exile in Britain, have provided a sharp critique of the left’s mistakes during 1979-81 and a clearer analysis of the nature of the regime. After 1983 some HKS members left the USFI and produced *Socialism va Enghelab (Socialism and Revolution)* journal until 1990 and since 1991, as the Iranian Revolutionary Socialist League, Kargar-e Socialist (*Socialist Worker*).

The Islamists versus liberation

THE overthrow of the Shah was a festival of the oppressed. Women, lesbians and gay men and national minorities participated in the revolution, believing that a new regime would bring democracy and freedom.

From the start, Khomeini's government proved itself to be utterly opposed to liberty. Within the first month of his rule, attacks on national minorities striving for self-determination began. Local Komitehs began issuing identity papers and sharia courts were set up. In March 1979, "12 people were summarily tried and put to death for alleged sexual crimes such as prostitution and homosexuality" (Nima).

Above all it was the oppression of women and the suppression of the emerging women's movement that indicated the reactionary nature of Khomeini's regime.

Women in the revolution

WOMEN were involved in the overthrow of the Shah, on demonstrations, strikes and in other protests. As Farah Azari explained: "There were large numbers [of women] who participated in the general insurrection [9-11 February 1979], either as back up forces, delivering food and medicine, or more directly behind the street barricades." ('The Post-Revolutionary Women's Movement in Iran', in Azari, *Women of Iran: the conflict with fundamentalist Islam*)

However one of the first acts of the provisional government was to take over radio and television stations. As a result "women broadcasters were either sacked or forced to dress in Islamic fashion. All the arts and entertainment programmes were cancelled. Women singers were removed from schedules, and music in general was very much limited" (Azari).

On 26 February, the Shah's Family Protection Law, which gave women some rights in marriage and divorce, was suspended on the orders of Khomeini's office. On 3 March the appointment of women judges was stopped and three days later women serving in the military were dismissed. On 7 March speaking in Qom, Khomeini said that women must wear the veil at work.

Women oppose compulsory veiling

THE suspension of the Family Protection Act and Khomeini's comments on the veil galvanised women to begin demonstrating in their thousands on international women's day, 8 March and in the days that followed.

Azari has written the most detailed account of these protests. She wrote: "On the morning of the 8 March, around 15,000 women had gathered for the rally in the small building of the Technical Faculty of Tehran University. Numbers were much higher than had been anticipated by the organisers and even more surprising given the heavy snow that had been falling that day. Among them were housewives, workers, teachers, office workers and students, but in particular there were many high school girls whose teachers had cancelled their classes and set off with them. Obstruction by the reactionary elements began immediately when the loudspeaker system in the building was disrupted, preventing the large numbers unable to enter the assembly hall from hearing the proceedings outside. As anger and resentment heightened, those inside the hall decided to join those outside and set off on a demonstration march to the prime minister's office.

"Once in the streets other women joined the march, swelling the numbers to almost 30,000. The march was later split when two smaller groups went on towards the ministry of justice. - where there had been a sit-in by women lawyers - and Ayatollah Talaghani's house... The first group held a meeting outside the ministry, specifying their demands and pledging support for the women lawyers. The second group similarly demonstrated, seeking Talaghani's support for the women's demands." (1983 pp.194-195)

Some of the slogans on the demonstrations were: 'Freedom is our culture, to stay at home is our shame', 'Liberty and equality are our undeniable rights', 'In the dawn of freedom, we already lack freedom', 'Women's Day of Emancipation is neither western nor eastern, it is international' and 'Freedom does not take rules and regulations' (Azar Tabari, 'Islam and the Struggle for Emancipation of Iranian Women', in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh eds.).

Azari added that, "conferences and rallies were also organised in other cities on the 8 March. According to [one] report, 3,000 women participated in a rally in Shiraz where they declared their solidarity with women across the world".

The women's manifesto

ON the same day women also demonstrated in front of the National Television, protesting against the news blackout of their activities.

However the authorities ignored the protests. As Azari explains, "The radio and television stations dismissed it as agitation both by promiscuous women opposed to hijab and agents of the previous regime. In angry response, many took to the streets again in three days of continuous demonstrations."

In response, Bazargan announced that wearing the veil is not compulsory and that Khomeini's comments had been misunderstood.

On 11 March, despite the withdrawal of some organisations, 20,000 women attended a rally at Tehran University. Marchers set off for Azadi Square and were joined by other women from offices, hospitals and schools. However they came under attack from Islamists.

Azari described it thus: "During these days the fundamentalists, Muslim zealots and some of the city poor, roaming around in bands of thugs, attacking and harassing women demonstrators by any means possible. This ranged from sexual insults and indecent exposure to beatings, stabbings and simply throwing rocks and stones at the women marchers. Vans and pick up trucks were used to obstruct the marches at various points."

As a result, "the organisers called for a halt as casualties were mounting and it was feared that this strife would be manipulated by counter revolutionaries to destabilise the new regime". (Azari)

The emerging women's movement

HOWEVER the demonstrations had forced the regime to retreat - and resulted in the proliferation of women's organisations, often part of left groups.

For example the Emancipation of Women group, which published a monthly paper of the same name and part of the Organisation for Communist Unity (OCU), was "one of the first Marxist organisations to denounce the Islamic state after the revolution". (Nahid Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in Tabari and Yeganeh)

Another organisation, the National Union of Women, formed in March 1979 and part of the Fadaian, was less vocal against the government. It published 6 issues of its paper *Equality* and a monthly journal *Women in Struggle*. Other organisations included the pro-Chinese Society for the Awakening of Women, the Women's Rights Defence Committee, initiated by the Trotskyist HKS and various local women's groups among the national minorities. There were also pro-government and Islamist women's organisations formed (Tabari and Yeganeh).

However the record of the left in general in these mobilisations was not great. As Farah Azari put it: "During the women's demonstrations of March 1979 when the issue of the hijab was first raised, the Fadaian, Mujahedin and most of the small Marxist groups did not support these demonstrations. The Mujahedin and the Tudeh Party even criticised them for playing into the hands of imperialists and endangering the revolution."

Islamist reaction

ON 21 May 1979 the Ministry of Education banned co-education and ordered all classes to be segregated. On 3 June it banned married women from attending high school classes.

On 8 July 1979 several Caspian Sea resorts initiated sexual segregation - women were flogged in public for swimming in the "men's section". On 12 July three women were executed on charges of prostitution and corruption.

On 2 October 1979 new family legislation giving the right of divorce almost exclusively to the husband; reinstated the husband's "right" to forbid his wife from taking a job; lowered the minimum age for women to marry from 18 to 13 and permitted men to take four permanent and an unlimited number of temporary wives (Tabari and Yeganeh).

Terror was also used. Nima cites a rape by Revolutionary Guards an example of the terror used to beat down women's organisations: "One family recently received the news of their daughter's execution. The Pasdaran returned her belongings and gave the parents £3, explaining that 'she was a virgin, and since they do not execute virgins in Islam, one of the Pasdars married her temporarily the night before her execution and the money is the price for temporary marriage."

On 3 February 1980 wearing "Islamic uniforms" was made compulsory for nurses and other women employees of the Ministry of Health. In May unveiled women in Urumieh were attacked and knifed and bazaars in Bushehr refused to serve unveiled women. On 10 June women at the ministry of Justice were told to come to work in "simply and Islamic clothes" (Tabari and Yeganeh).

On 28 June 1980 Khomeini issued a decree requiring women in all government offices to wear the veil as part of the "administrative revolution". In July women were required to wear the veil during the month of Ramadan.

In July 1980 all co-educational schools were abolished. With teaching segregated, women teachers were assigned to girls' schools and male teachers to boys' schools. All female school students were ordered to wear special uniforms by the Ministry of Education - women teachers were given stipulations the following month. Also in July, the Tehran bus company announced that the first three rows of seats in buses would be allocated for women passengers.

On 21 April 1981, Fatima's birthday celebrated as women's day in Iran. Finally, in July 1981, the Majlis (parliament) ratified a Bill of Retribution sanctioned, among other things, stoning to death on adultery charges, flogging in public and cutting off limbs in retaliation-in-kind (Tabari and Yeganeh).

Women's fightback

DESPITE these attacks, women's groups continued to fight and organise. Azari wrote that: "Other major women's groups were formed in Bank Mellî, the major national bank in Iran, the Ministry of Labour, the Telecommunications Office, the Planning Organisation and many other ministries and public organisations and in some factories with high proportions of female employees. The demands of these groups revolved mainly around the provision of childcare facilities, equal pay, and maternity benefits. In many cases, employers were forced to

provide a crèche or expand an existing one."

On 9 June 1979, women lawyers staged a five-day sit-in after they were excluded from nomination ceremonies for new judges. In September 1979 there were protests by female students at technical training schools whose courses had been suspended following the decision to segregate classes.

On 30 October 1979 women demonstrated against the new family laws, despite attacks by Hezbollah. On 3 November women lawyers organised a sit in at the Ministry of Justice against the new laws. The Women's Solidarity Coalition announced itself.

On 25 November 1979, the Women's Solidarity Coalition, which included groups such as the Emancipation of Women and the Society for the Awakening of Women organised a successful women's conference. The conference condemned government measures against women's rights.

According to Azari: "Encouraged by the success of the conference, well publicised in some of the press, the committee continued by preparing for the organisation of celebration for international women's day in March 1980. A large rally was held in one of the Tehran university buildings and messages of solidarity were read from various left and progressive organisations in Iran and abroad. The committee was then renamed Women's Solidarity Council. A number of meetings and rallies were also held in other major towns."

After Khomeini's decree on the veil in June 1980, several thousand women demonstrated in front of the offices of the president. Azari describes the reaction: "The demonstrators were met with club-wielding and vicious gangs of Hezbollah who were happy to add sexual assaults, whether verbal or physical, to their customary attacks and abuses on the opposition."

The women's demands

A mass meeting held at the Ministry of Justice on 10 March produced the following resolution:

"Considering that human beings are both free and the gift of freedom belongs equally to all regardless of sex, colour, race, language and belief;

Considering that women form half the population of Iran and that the contribution of this half to the education of the future generations as well as to social, cultural, political and economic life is undeniable;

Considering the selfless participation of Iranian women in the struggle against imperialism and dictatorship was an important contribution to the Iranian Revolution and that their role in the victory of the Revolution is admitted by all strata that made the Revolution;

Considering that during the difficult and critical days of this country, women participated in struggles and sacrifices that were approved by the leader of the revolution; and that the messages, interviews, and statements that the leader issued all testify to the promise of freedom, equality and enjoyment of all political and social rights by women, and that the leader had explicitly pointed out that he does not intend of revert back to conditions of 1400 years ago;

We Iranian women, now declare our demands in the form of this resolution:

1) We women, who, shoulder to shoulder with men, perform our social duties towards the country and educate the future generation at home are quite competent and perfectly capable of preserving our character and honour. We believe strongly in the preservation of a woman's character but that a woman's honour does not reflect itself in any particular form of clothing, and that the common clothing of women should be left to themselves, taking into account the exigencies of custom and society;

2) Equal civil rights with men should be recognised and all discrimination in law, particularly family law, should be abolished;

3) Political, social and economic rights of women should be guaranteed with no discrimination;

4) Complete security of women to enjoy their rights and legal liberties should be guaranteed;

5) True enjoyment of fundamental liberties, freedom of the pen, of speech, of belief, of employment, of association must be guaranteed for all men and women;

6) All existing inequalities in the current laws of the country, including those in the employment and labour laws, should be abolished;

7) Current occupational positions of women must be safeguarded;

8) While approving the government decision to keep the Family Protection Laws, we demand the inadequacies of the current law be removed in favour of guaranteeing women's rights.

We ask of the provisional government of prime minister Bazargan to declare its views on our demands." (Tabari and Yeganeh)