

14. How We Organized Strike That Paralyzed Shah's Regime

Firsthand Account by Iranian Oil Worker

The way the strike started was that the very broad movement that developed in our country made us realize that we staff employees in the oil industry were part of this nation too, and so we also had to participate in this movement. We knew from the start that, if we walked out, our strike could play a very important role in this movement.

So, on October 18, various sections began going out. In two or three days almost all the sections had joined us. Of course, five days before, we had heard that the Abadan refinery had gone on strike. But there had been no confirmation of this.

From the beginning, we felt the need to organize a committee that could give systematic direction to the strike. The purpose of electing or setting up a committee was not to set apart a leadership. In fact, a lot of people felt that, if we singled out a certain group as leaders, they would be immediately arrested and that would put us in a difficult situation. But at that time there was another development that made organizing a strike committee seem to be more called for. They told us that we could set up a staff employees association. So we decided to elect one representative for every fifty persons. However, if a section had more than 200 or 300 people, it still should not have more than three or four representatives. The representatives were not elected by secret ballot. The vote took place in front of everyone. We put up a list on the wall. People came and signed their names next to the name of their candidate. There were usually five or six candidates per office. The first duty of these representatives was to organize the professional and office workers association. So, we called this body the Organizing Committee of Oil Industry Staff Employees.

But from the very first days of the strike, we realized that there were more important questions facing us. The strike itself had to be organized. We had to define our aims. We had to clarify for our co-workers what our overall aims were. This was not clear to many of them. We had to specify our demands. Everyone had a few demands in mind, but all of them had to be put together and presented to the company in a list. Thus, the strike committee spent more of its energy organizing the strike and defining the demands of the strike than in building the association. We said, there will be enough time for that in the future. We sat down to plan the strike and work out a policy. We spent a lot of

at one negotiating session two weeks ago. He is now reported out of the country — like many of the shah's once closest lieutenants — pursued by demands for his arrest on corruption charges lodged by strikers in the central oil company office in Tehran.

Le Monde, November 16, 1978. Printed in MERIP, no. 75/6, *Revolution in Iran*, March-April 1979, p.18-19.

Washington Post, 10 November 1978. The oilworker was referring to a fire in the Rex Cinema in which some 400 people were burned to death in August, and to the September massacre of several hundred Iranians by troops in what is known as Bloody Friday.

New York Times, 19 November 1978.

*Quoted in *The Militant* (New York), 15 December, 1978, p.3.

Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York, New World Paperbacks, International Publishers, (1852), 1967, p.122.

Leonard Helfgott, 'Is class struggle emerging in Iran?' *In These Times*, (New York), 7-13 February 1979, p.17-18.

Kai Bird wrote in *The Nation* (New York) of April 21, 1979 that '... the Western press has concerned itself with minor technical questions about the Iranians' capacity to produce significant oil for export without the benefit of expatriate engineers (the answer is an unequivocal yes) ...' p.426.

Ibid. The discussion of oilworkers' *komitehs* is based on Bird's article. Evidence of the conservative stance of Iran's new government was provided in a March 31, 1979 speech by former Minister of Economy

Ali Ardalan who 'remarked that the United States dollar needed support, and that Iran was willing to recycle its petrodollars to the West. In support of this policy, Ali Ardalan cited his Government's decision to maintain Iranian investments in West Germany's Krupp industries and complete the construction of at least two West German-manufactured nuclear plants in Busher.' Ibid.

Ibid., p.427. The term Saffadi Shi'ism (or state Shi'ism) is a reference to the Saffavi Dynasty's 16th century subjugation of the clergy to secular power. Reformist theologians, like the late Dr. Ali Shariati, charge that many corruptions of the religion, including the wearing of the chador for women, were introduced during the Saffavi dynasty. Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., p.427-8.

Ibid.

The OSCO staff were expelled and no oil will be sold to the service company which, as a result, is facing collapse. *Platts Oilgram News* reported on 18 April 1979 that 'A spokeswoman at the Consortium's headquarters here [London] conceded that morale has worsened in the last couple of weeks. Employees haven't been given final notices, she said, but the feeling is they are only a matter of weeks away. There is little to do in the daily routine except "cleaning out desks," she said.' vol. 57, no. 75, p. 3.

Platts Oilgram News, 12 April 1979, vol. 57, no. 72, p.3.

See Chapter 14.

C.C. Pocock, op.cit., p.2.

time discussing some questions. But at the end we made some good decisions. One such question over which there was a lot of discussion was whether we should extend the strike through the entire oil industry, or whether some facilities such as hospitals, part of the telecommunications network, and some teams that do emergency repairs on the oil pipelines should be kept in operation. In particular, there is always a danger of explosions in oil pipelines, and if such accidents occur people may be killed along the route of the lines. So, we said that we would designate a group of workers to make emergency repairs if there was an accident or if someone did something deliberately. Thus, the final decision in the meeting was that this group of workers should remain on the job simply so that they would be able to take care of any such problems if they arose.

There was also a lot of discussion about maintaining production for domestic consumption. We decided finally to assure the supply for domestic needs. Domestic consumption is about 250,000 to 350,000 barrels a day. You know, oil consumption is generally less in the summer. But in the winter it gets cold in Iran. The cold weather was on its way, and so we knew that consumption was going to be high. We had to provide at least 350,000 barrels. So, we assigned some of the workers in Ahwaz to continue to operate one of the wells, namely Well No. 2. This well furnishes crude to those refineries that supply the needs of internal consumption. We came to the decision that we would let this plant continue operating, and it did maintain production. We also allowed Well No. 1, which includes the pumping system, to continue functioning and pump the crude to the refineries in Abadan and elsewhere.

But later on, we found ourselves facing another problem. We were in fact producing the amount of oil required for domestic needs, even more than the necessary 250,000 or 350,000 barrels a day. But we discovered that the RAY refinery had gone on strike. In other words, they would not refine the crude that we were producing and pumping to them. The same thing happened with the Abadan refinery. We began discussing with the refinery workers and urging them to refine the crude we were producing and pumping to their plants. We reasoned with them, explaining that the government would exploit this situation. So as not to allow the government to misrepresent our action, to set one section of the people against another, to open up a propaganda campaign against us, we thought that it was better for them to go ahead and refine the crude that we were producing to cover domestic needs. If they did that, we argued, the government would not be able to divert people's attention from the central issues involved in the strike by playing up the long lines in front of the gas stations and petroleum distributors.

The workers at the refineries accepted our arguments and decided to go ahead and produce. But the next day, they reported to us that the government was taking all the fuel being refined and using it for military purposes. They said that they were resuming their strike, believing that we would agree with their decision. We told them that was fine, since they knew the local situation better than we did. They should go ahead and do what they thought best. We reaffirmed that the essential aim was to meet the needs of domestic con-

consumption. But if, for any reason, they thought that they were not achieving this objective they should act accordingly. Their decision was to go back on strike for eleven days. They also called on all workers to boycott the plants. The reason for this was that previously some workers were showing up at the plants to stage a slowdown. The call for a boycott was to keep the workers from turning up at the plants at all.

This is why a fuel shortage developed in many cities, including Tehran, and why long lines of cars and people formed in front of the gas stations.

Three or four days later the production workers in Ahwaz sent a delegation to our staff employees association, pledging their support to our strike. They said that they would collaborate with us provided we went all the way and stuck with them to the last. They warned us not to stop at a halfway point. We agreed to this since we had already decided to keep up our strike as long as necessary to attain our objectives. We told the production workers that that was our intention, and they joined with us.

At that point, we ourselves had about sixty representatives and we had no hall large enough for them to meet in. We discussed this problem with the production workers, explaining that if they elected seventy to eighty representatives, we would then have about a hundred and forty representatives and it would be a real problem finding a place big enough to hold so many people. They said that they had already elected twenty to thirty representatives, but in view of this problem they would send only seven to ten persons to represent them, if we agreed. Although this procedure was not very democratic, we decided to go ahead with it since there was no other choice.

After the production workers joined us, news of the strike reached practically all the oil fields. Perhaps I should mention the names of some of the oil producing areas in Iran. They are as follows: Ahwaz, Aghajari, Maroon, Gachsarran, and secondarily Naft-e Saeed, Babahakim, and Kazerun. The oil workers and staff employees in all these places also joined us. As a result, oil production dropped sharply. The average daily oil production in Iran is, or was, 6.5 million barrels. It dropped off abruptly to 800,000 barrels. It was at this point that oil tankers coming to Kharg Island to load had instead to drop anchor and wait up to forty hours. There was no oil. In the following days, production dropped to an even lower level — to about 500,000 barrels a day.

Both the government and Iranian Oil Company officials suddenly realized that we were serious about the demands we had been putting forward from the start. We had presented a list of twelve demands. Three of these were not economic, and had been raised separately. They were as follows: end martial law, full solidarity and co-operation with the striking teachers, and unconditional release of all political prisoners. Our economic demands included Iranianization of the oil industry, all communications to be in the Persian language, and for all foreign employees to leave the country. In regard to the expulsion of the foreign staff employees, we said that this should be done gradually and according to a plan. Some of these employees were simply superfluous. They were drawing salaries and doing nothing. Such people could leave Iran very quickly, or else we would expel them. As for the others, there should be a plan

to start replacing them.

The second economic demand was for an end to discrimination against women staff employees and workers. The third demand called for implementation of a law recently passed by both houses of parliament dealing with the housing of oil workers and staff employees. Another demand was for revision of the regulations governing retirement of staff employees. Our final demand was for support to the demands of the production workers. The production workers had raised a demand not included in the list presented by the oil industry staff employees. It was for dissolution of SAVAK. The other demands raised by the production workers coincided entirely with ours.

When we presented our demands, the oil company officials realized that they had to come and discuss these demands with us. Oil production had been completely halted. It was no longer profitable for them to load the tankers. Moreover, on Kharg Island the dock workers and staff employees had already struck. Even if we were to produce oil there was no one to load the tankers and they could not get any oil out. Since Kharg is a very small island, they usually do not keep the tankers there for very long after they have been filled up. This is extremely dangerous. So, when oil is not being transported out, they keep the tankers empty to avoid the risk of explosions.

We saw that Mr. Ansari [Iranian Oil Company official] went first to the southern oil producing regions. He began an inspection tour, stopping at such secondary fields as Gachsarran and Aghajari. Apparently he thought that in these areas he would be able to convince or intimidate the workers more readily. Only later did he go to Kharg Island, and Aghajari again. In these places the workers who talked to him and his entourage told him that their demands were the same as those raised by the workers in Ahwaz. In fact, the workers had realized what he was up to. We had told them that his objective was to start with them, since they were in a minority, and to force them to go back to work. Then we in turn would be forced back ourselves. We told them that they should not go back and that they should refuse to negotiate with Ansari. So the oil workers in Abadan told Mr. Ansari that their demands were the same as those raised by the oil workers in Ahwaz. He said, then they must know what those demands were and should present them. The workers replied that since he was ready to discuss the demands, the Ahwaz workers should be brought there so that they could present the demands themselves. Ansari tried again to get the Abadan workers to present the demands, and they again refused. As a result, he left Abadan, having achieved nothing in his talks. He had no choice but to go to Ahwaz.

In Ahwaz, Ansari participated in our assembly, trying to sell the government's proposals. He said that he had come there to discuss all our demands. Making money was his specialty, he said, and if we wanted more pay or more retirement benefits, he would be willing to meet such demands. He also made a number of other promises. He said that since there were a lot of us there, close to 7,000 persons, he could not possibly talk to all of us. He asked us to elect a number of representatives so that he could meet with them, in the hope that some sort of agreement could be worked out. In that same meeting, we

once again laid out all of our twelve demands. He said that he would consider the economic demands but that the others were outside his sphere. We said that we only expected him to convey these demands to the government, since he was the highest official in the oil company. He said that he would be happy to do that. At this point we decided to hold another general assembly.

The meeting was scheduled for 5.30 the next afternoon. Mr. Ansari did not arrive until an hour after the meeting had actually begun, even though it had started an hour late for some other reason. He came at about 7.30, and asked us to present our demands. In order to speed things up, we had elected someone to speak for us. Our representative began reading the list of demands, and the first was for an end to military rule. At this point Mr. Ansari broke in, asking him not to read the non-economic demands. He said that they had nothing to do with him. We reminded him that he promised us that he would take all the demands to the government. Ansari said that he could not do that and asked us to read just the economic demands.

When we realized that he had not been honest with us, we told him that we were not going to make any distinction between our economic and non-economic demands. We told him that we had only one set of demands, from number one to twelve. Up till now we had considered demands one through three as non-economic, and from four to twelve, economic; but now we had just one set of demands, from one to twelve.

Ansari insisted that we should not present our non-economic demands, but we would not accept this. At this point, he pulled a trick on us. Someone came to the meeting telling him that he had an important telephone call. Ansari left the assembly, ostensibly to answer the call, but he never returned. All in all, our meeting with him lasted about three minutes. Later on he sent a message complaining that the air in the meeting was really impossible and suggested that three, four, or five of us meet with him in another location. We replied that not only were we not going to accept this proposal but that we insisted that any meeting had to be held in the same room with the same number of people and had to begin that very day. That is, it had to start that day, and it might last three, four, or five days. He did not accept our offer and went off to Tehran.

It seems that it was the Shah's birthday, and Ansari wanted to take part in the royal ceremonies. Later on, his stooges began spreading it around that we had insulted him; supposedly we had put our feet on the table. We had not spoken to him with due respect, we had not stood up in reverence before him, and so on. They also said that we had some kind of complexes. The purpose of these stories was to sow division between our representatives and the ranks. But fortunately these divisive tactics did not work. We reported the proceedings of the meeting as they occurred to our fellow workers. A great majority of them agreed with us, but some did not, thinking that Ansari may have had a point. At any rate, we found it necessary to act to neutralize these tactics. At the same time, our co-workers were pressing us, wanting to know what we were going to do next. They wanted to know who we wanted to talk to since we had refused to talk with Ansari. We replied that we did want to talk to

him. He was the one who was not willing to talk.

So, in order to outdo Ansari in using this tactic, we sent a telegram to the Association of Iranian Jurists with copies to the newspapers *Kayhan* and *Ettela'at*, as well as the Complaints Commission of the lower house of parliament. Another copy was sent to the Association of Iranian Lawyers. In this telegram we described the context in which the oil strike was taking place and pointed to the harm it was doing to the economy of the country. We also said in the telegram that the responsibility for the continuation of the strike rests on Mr. Ansari's shoulders, since he was not willing to negotiate with us. At the end, we called on all the people of Iran to consider this crucial political question, so that they could understand where the responsibility really lay for the continuation of the strike.

When Mr. Ansari found out that we had sent a copy of the telegram to the Complaints Commission, he got in touch with Mr. Pezashkpour, the head of this body. Ansari said that the workers had lied, and that he was willing to meet with us at any time, in any place in Iran, and with any number of workers' representatives. Mr. Pezashkpour, in turn, telephoned us, and relayed what Mr. Ansari had told him. We told Mr. Pezashkpour that we had not slandered Mr. Ansari. And in order to prove to Mr. Pezashkpour that Ansari had lied, we declared our willingness to meet with him at any time and in any place in Iran. Pezashkpour invited us to send about fifteen representatives to the Complaints Commission and meet with him, which we agreed to do. Since Iran Air was also on strike, we used the oil company's plane to travel to Tehran, and availed ourselves of their hotel. We used all their facilities.

When we arrived at Mr. Pezashkpour's office, he handed us a message from Mr. Shariatmadari [a religious leader] supporting our strike. This was in spite of the fact that Mr. Sharif Emami, the prime minister at the time, had called our strike an act of treason because it had dealt irreparable damage to the country's economy. In his message, Mr. Shariatmadari not only did not call us traitors but praised us as acting in the service of the nation.

In his capacity as head of the Complaints Commission, Mr. Pezashkpour declared that our strike was legal, and no one had any right to declare it illegal and try to break it. He also pointed out that the three non-economic demands we had raised were really national demands, since the entire nation supported them. So, Mr. Pezashkpour met with the fifteen representatives we had sent, but Mr. Ansari never showed up. On that very day, he left Iran, taking with him 480 million tumans [nearly \$70 million]. In his place, Mr. Ansari had sent two lawyers, Mr. Najmabadi and Najand. We started the meeting, and the first question we asked was: Where is this Mr. Ansari who was willing to meet with us at any time and in any place? The answer was that he was ill. Later on they said he had a heart ailment and had to go to the United States or France for treatment.

At any rate, we had exposed Ansari pretty well by that time. We had already told the entire nation that he would not meet with us to negotiate. Once again we sent a statement to the press pointing out that he had not showed up for this meeting. So the entire nation approved of what we had done.

In the meeting, Mr. Najmabadi tried to give us a lecture on the history of the Iranian Oil Company. We told him there was no need for that because we knew that history better than anyone. What he really wanted to do was confuse things and stall. Mr. Najmabadi also refused to listen to our non-economic demands, saying they did not concern him. As for our economic demands, he said they had been attended to, and no more raises would be granted.

So, they started using methods of intimidation to force us back to work. In the meantime, they came up with another tactic for breaking the strike. They brought in 200 retired workers and employees, paid them enormous sums of money, and tried to get them to operate the wells. But these people were unable to get the installations functioning. They were not fully familiar with the new equipment that had been introduced since their retirement. They burned out a couple of pumps and turbines.

After this tactic failed, they brought in 200 technicians from the navy. These are trained technicians who are usually sent abroad for education. They got one of the pumping stations operating for a while but got rattled when they realized that they did not know the direction of the oil flow in the lines. That, of course, is a very alarming situation, since a fire can result from doing the wrong thing. Finally, our people went in to help them shut down the equipment and get out of the area.

The authorities finally realized that we were the only people who can operate the oil industry in Iran. And that is why they went with troops to the homes of workers in Aghajari and Gachsarran to pull workers out of their houses and take them to the plants, where they forced them to work. But the workers in Aghajari had seen this coming and had left the area for the weekend, so that they were not forced to go back to work.

The authorities did succeed in forcing some of the workers from Gachsarran back to work with the help of armed soldiers. And so, oil production picked up a little, gradually reaching 500,000, 800,000, 900,000 and even one and a half million barrels a day. When the workers returned to Aghajari after the weekend to see their families, they were picked up by the troops and forced to go to work. This forced labor operation finally raised oil production to four million barrels a day.

At this point, we realized that our strike had suffered a setback. It was no longer effective. The government could have continued this sort of thing, forcing the workers back until oil production was restored to the 6.5 million barrel level. So, we decided to go back to work. But at this point, a couple of things happened that threw a monkey wrench into the government's strike-breaking operation. In those days, during the premiership of Mr. Sharif Emami, when radio and TV censorship was partially lifted, they would broadcast the list of all the governmental or non-governmental organizations that had come out in support of our strike. Sometimes this would go on a whole hour. This showed the support that existed for our strike, but we needed more substantial backing.

Of course, Ayatollah Khomeini had issued a statement supporting our strike

and pledging financial help. We were not overly worried about money at that time since everyone could have endured the financial hardship for a few months. And we did not think that it would last longer than two or three months. Since the entire nation had joined the movement, we thought that sooner or later the government was going to have to retreat and grant our demands. But this did not happen.

The government did all it could to isolate our strike and keep it from getting help from other sectors of the population. Students and teachers at various universities across the country had tried to open up their schools and stage demonstrations. This would have helped take the military pressure off the oil strike. But the government kept the schools from being opened.

Here I should mention some things about the military pressure brought to bear on us and about the military occupation of the oil fields. When we first began the strike, we used to gather in the halls and rooms in the main office building. The troops surrounded the building, occupied it, and forced us to disperse. Later we gathered in the parking lots of the main office building. But special troops and Ranger units occupied these areas and forced us to disperse. We moved our assembly site to an area in front of the company hospital. We were able to gather there for a couple of days, but we were again driven away. Finally, we came up with a new tactic. It was to prepare our agenda and our instructions to the striking workers, get everyone together at a given place, and give them the instructions. We could do this in the half hour it took before the troops could come and drive us away.

Despite all our tactics, many of our mates had been forced back to work and production had gone up considerably. At this point, we decided to go back to work along with other workers and prepare for a new strike. We did not consider ourselves defeated, since it was obvious that there was a continuing movement of the entire Iranian people.

What was happening was that one group would retreat one day, and the next day would resume the struggle in a different form and propel it forward. This is why we decided to go back to work and prepare everyone to strike again. This gave us a chance to draw a balance sheet of our strengths and weaknesses and to get ready for the next battle. At the same time, we decided to build up the structure of the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees.

Our first strike lasted thirty-three days. The first day we went back to work, we held an assembly. The agenda dealt with setting up the association. We elected a committee of fifteen persons. Their primary task was to contact other organizations and individuals to solicit help and coordinate our work. We called this body the Co-ordinating Committee. It was also given the task of drawing up a constitution for the association. A preliminary draft was prepared and distributed among the employees. I think by this time, the constitution must have been approved by a general assembly of the membership.

I should mention another point. When our strike began, it was virtually ignored by all the major press including *Kayhan* and *Ettela'at*, and even the BBC. We decided to boycott the daily papers since they would send their reporters to meetings but never give us any coverage. When we complained to

the papers about the lack of coverage of our actions, they said that their reporters were having difficulty getting the straight facts at our meetings. They said that they would be glad to report our actions, if we would elect a person or a number of persons to keep touch with them, and inform them of our strike demands.

So, we decided there was a need for a committee to keep in touch with the press. We set up a Communications Committee, including six persons. One of these was in charge of communications between the strike representatives and the Board of Directors of the Oil Company. Another was in charge of receiving and sending telegrams. Another was responsible for contacting the media. The work of this committee helped to get us a lot of support from all sections of the population.