

# DETERMINED TO LIVE IN DIGNITY

IRANIAN TRADE UNIONISTS'  
STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL





**Iran's workers are fighting to protect their rights and their livelihoods. Prohibited by law from unionizing freely and independently, they are battling for decent wages, better working conditions and job security. They want their voices to be heard and their labour rights to be respected. The response of the government to workers' demands has been brutal – the authorities regularly attack, harass and detain trade unionists. Some are serving long prison sentences.**

**The rights that workers are calling for are universal human rights. They need your support now.**

Workers in Iran have been gravely affected by an ongoing economic crisis. The value of the current minimum wage (equivalent to US\$303) is shrinking due to ongoing double-digit inflation. The government's programme of subsidy reductions, which started in March 2011, is set to push up the price of water, electricity, petrol, natural gas and other goods and services. Many workers have not been paid their salaries for long periods of time – in a 2009 report to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the government acknowledged that hundreds of enterprises have delayed payment of wages to workers and accumulated wage arrears to many thousands of workers. For example, 280,000 textile workers, mainly in the northern Mazandaran province, had the payment of their wages delayed for up to four months. Consequently, many workers and their families fear being forced into poverty, especially those who are not guaranteed steady employment such as construction or seasonal workers or those on short-term contracts. The situation is particularly dire for working women, who make up about a quarter of the workforce and who are often the first to lose their jobs in a downturn.

#### **INDEPENDENT UNIONS FORBIDDEN**

Now more than ever, Iranian workers need independent trade unions that are able to support and defend their rights. Yet independent trade unions are banned in Iran.

There are two government-controlled bodies that claim to represent workers' interests in Iran: the Islamic Labour Councils (ILCs) and the recently formed Assemblies of Workers' Representatives (AWRs), along with their respective national coordinating bodies. However, ILCs are not fully representative

of workers because candidates standing for election to ILC boards are subject to discriminatory screening procedures. They must demonstrate their Islamic belief and “practical allegiance” to Islam and show that they are faithful to the ideological basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The national body representing regional AWRs in Iran was created in August 2008. However, its role and remit are not clear, including to Iranian workers themselves.

Iranian labour rights activists have told Amnesty International that people elected to lead these workers’ bodies, particularly the ILCs, must first be vetted and approved by an official selection body under discriminatory selection criteria which require candidates to demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its conception of Islam. Candidates may be disqualified because of their political opinions or affiliation.

## DEFIANT IN THE FACE OF OPPRESSION

Some Iranian workers have courageously defied the ban on independent trade unions. Since 2001, a growing awareness of the importance of workers’ rights has resulted in the creation of a small number of independent unions and workers’ support organizations. Bus drivers and metal workers in the capital Tehran, bakers in Kordestan, sugar workers in Khuzestan and teachers across the country are among those determined to struggle for their rights. They have been fighting against the withdrawal of subsidies, unpaid wages and precarious work conditions, and have been united in their demand for the freedom to organize, employment security for all workers, freedom for imprisoned trade unionists, equality for women and ethnic and religious minorities, eradication of child labour and quality public services

accessible to all. Their union activities come at a great risk. Members have been dismissed from their jobs and regularly harassed by the authorities, attacked and beaten by the police, arrested and sentenced to prison – where some are tortured or otherwise ill-treated. For example, on 1 May 2009, the authorities arrested more than 200 people after forcibly dispersing a peaceful rally for International Labour Day. All were believed to have been released by September 2009. The authorities routinely refuse to grant permission for workers’ rallies to take place.

## TEACHERS’ TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

Members of the Iran Teachers’ Trade Associations (ITTAs), which is affiliated to Education International (EI), have been facing harassment and arrests for years. Rasoul Bodaghi, a member of ITTA in Tehran was arrested in September 2009. A teacher for 20 years, he was sentenced to six years in prison for “propaganda against the system” and “gathering and colluding with intent to disturb national security”, both vaguely worded charges. In January 2011, the Appeal Court confirmed Rasoul Bodaghi’s sentence and banned him from taking part in any civil society activities for five years. According to reports, he was severely beaten by two prison officers in May 2010.

Local ITTA members in different parts of the country, including south-western Chaharmahal-Bakhtiari province, Tabriz in the north-west and Mashhad in the north-east, have been imprisoned because of their trade union activities. Hundreds were briefly detained in March and April 2007 during nationwide demonstrations and a strike over pay rates and conditions. On 9 May 2010, a member of the ITTA, Farzad Kamangar, was executed in Tehran. He had



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**Left:** Members of the Iran Teachers’ Trade Associations (ITTAs) protest pay rates and work conditions opposite parliament in Tehran, March 2007. The handwritten banner on the right says “Parity in pay is our undeniable right”. It refers to legislation aimed at creating a national unified system of pay for all state employees, then under consideration, asserting that workers should receive like pay for like work. ITTAs members in Iran have faced years of harassment and arrests.

**Above:** Members hold an ITTA banner to assert the legitimacy of their union, Tehran, March 2007. Independent teachers’ associations were banned by the Iranian Ministry of the Interior in 2007.

**Cover:** Iranian worker shovelling asphalt at an oil refinery, Tehran, 2007. © Javad Parsa

been sentenced to death for alleged membership of and activities for the armed opposition group the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which he denied.

Independent teachers’ associations were banned by the Ministry of the Interior in 2007 following the nationwide strike by teachers protesting against their conditions of employment. In February 2011, a Tehran court overturned a government request to formally dissolve the ITTA. The union was to seek renewal of its registration but it remains to be seen whether other attempts to close the union will be made.



## THE TEHRAN BUS DRIVERS' UNION

The Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (Sherkat-e Vahed), banned after the Islamic Revolution, was re-founded in 2005, after many bus workers had not received their wages for months. Union members have been subjected to repeated harassment ever since.

Mansour Ossanlu (also Osanlu, Osanloo or Ossaloo), President of the Union, was imprisoned between July 2007 and early June 2011. He has spent several periods in prison in the past and has faced harassment and intimidation as a result of his trade union activities. In December 2005, he was detained alongside 14 others. Up to 1,000 members of the Union were arrested after they announced a strike to call for his release in January 2006. The Bus Company subsequently dismissed

more than 40 workers. Mansour Ossanlu was released in August 2006, but detained again in November, then released in December 2006.

In June 2007, Mansour Ossanlu travelled to Europe to represent his fellow union members and to seek global union support in building an independent trade union movement in Iran. During his visit, he said that appeals from Amnesty International members and trade union activists who had campaigned on his behalf "made us know that we were not alone. When I was in prison and heard of all the support my spirits rose. In this struggle it is very valuable to get so much support from so many thousands of miles away. This campaigning has also disclosed the repression and made sure that the authorities know that they are being watched by the outside world."

Mansour Ossanlu's appeal for support is as urgent as ever. A month after returning from Europe, he was dragged from his bus by a group of plain-clothed men, forced into a car, beaten and arrested. In the 48 hours immediately after his arrest, the authorities denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. He was later sentenced to five years in prison for "acts against national security" and "propaganda against the system". In August 2010, while in prison, Mansour Ossanlu was sentenced to an additional one year prison sentence after conviction of a fresh charge of "propaganda against the system" in relation to statements he is alleged to have made while in prison. He was reportedly not aware of the charges until the time of the trial and his lawyers were not informed that he faced new charges or that he was to be tried. On 11 February 2011, Mansour Ossanlu had a heart attack in Raja'i Shahr Prison and



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**Far left:** Mansour Ossanlu, President of the Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, began serving a five-year prison term in July 2007. He was released temporarily on 2 June 2011.

**Left:** Mansour Ossanlu (second from right), his wife Parvaneh Ossanlu (first from right) and other members of their family celebrating his earlier release from detention, 10 August 2006. **Above:** Reza Shahabi, Treasurer of the Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, is in prison and awaiting the end of his trial.

was transferred to hospital where he was shackled with metal cuffs to his bed while receiving treatment. Despite his deteriorating health, including problems with his eyes, he has at times been denied medical treatment. Mansour Ossanlu was released temporarily on 2 June 2011.

The authorities have been targeting Mansour Ossanlu's family too. On 23 June 2010, his daughter-in-law Zoya Samadi was abducted on her way home from work and beaten by security forces. "Just as she was trying to board the train, some men pulled her hair from behind", Mansour Ossanlu's wife, Parvaneh Ossanlu, told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. "She screamed and asked people to help her, telling people that she was Ossanlu's daughter-in-law. But her captors quickly put duct tape on her mouth and blindfolded and transferred her to an

unknown location. The forces tied her arms and feet and beat her severely. They told her she had to sign a document promising that once Ossanlu is released, either [his family] would not engage in any activities, or they would have to leave the country and go away... she refused to sign the document." Zoya Samadi suffered a miscarriage as a result of the beatings. Further harassment stopped as a result of Parvaneh Ossanlu's complaints to the authorities.

Reza Shahabi Zakaria, the Union's Treasurer, is also in prison. He was arrested at the headquarters of the Bus Company on 12 June 2010 as part of a crackdown on the Union. Security officials searched his home and confiscated his computer. Reza Shahabi has been refused bail and on December 2010 went on hunger strike. He was taken to hospital after his health deteriorated. At the time of writing, he

continues to be held and awaiting the end of his trial. Ebrahim Madadi (also Maddadi), Deputy Head of the Union, is currently serving a three and a half years' prison sentence for "acts against national security". Other members of the Union, which is affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), have been regularly targeted for harassment. At least eight of them are currently challenging a ban on their working as bus drivers.

Amnesty International considers Ebrahim Madadi and Reza Shahabi to be prisoners of conscience and continues to call for their immediate and unconditional release.



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## THE HAFT TAPEH TRADE UNION

The Haft Tapeh (or Tappeh) Agro-Industry Sugar Cane Company (HTSCC) is a state-owned company in the city of Shush in Khuzestan province, south-west Iran. The company grows and processes sugar cane and has some 17,000 employees. Since 2006, workers, particularly at the HTSCC refinery, have been engaged in numerous strikes and protests for non-payment of wages. Strikers have been intimidated and their leaders prosecuted and imprisoned.

Insistent on their independence, refinery workers petitioned to dismiss the ILC at the site in January 2008 and began a 42-day strike in May. By October 2008, they had set up their independent union and soon after affiliated to the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF). Within a year, all workers had received some of the money owed to them by the HTSCC.

"The establishment of the union has been something of an achievement for the other [sugar cane] workers", the union's current president Reza Rakhshan said in November 2010. "The authorities [took] a sudden interest in the company's affairs – after three years of continual neglect – by virtue of the union's mere existence. The result: the condition of workers and that of the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company are in much better shape than before."

Union members have been paying a heavy price for trying to defend their livelihoods. Many have been intimidated, imprisoned and dismissed from work. Reza Rakhshan himself was arrested on 3 January 2010.

He was eventually released on 19 January 2010 on payment of bail equivalent to approximately US\$150,000 after being charged with "spreading lies" and "propaganda against the system". In January 2011, Reza Rakhshan was imprisoned for six months for "spreading lies" after previously being acquitted of this charge. His conviction may be connected to an article he published on the internet on 18 December 2009, entitled "We are One Family", in which he condemned arrests and harassment of his fellow workers. At the time of writing, he was temporarily released from prison but he faced further charges, possibly for media interviews he had given.

Five other leaders of the Haft Tapeh Union, Jalil Ahmadi, Ghorban Alipour, Mohammad Haydari Mehr, Ali Nejati and Fereydoun Nikufard, were tried in 2009. They were sentenced on 12 October 2009 and immediately imprisoned on charges of "propaganda against the system" after they gave interviews to foreign media about their struggle for workers' rights in 2007. All were sentenced to six months' imprisonment, with another six months' suspended sentence. The five men were also banned from working at the HTSCC for five years. All were released in February 2010, apart from Ali Nejati, who was released in May of the same year.



**Above left:** Members of the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company Trade Union standing outside a Revolutionary Court in Dezful, Khuzestan, southern Iran, 10 November 2009. Members of the union's leadership have faced harassment and jail.

**Above:** Members of Turkish transport unions protesting against the imprisonment of Mansour Ossanlu near the Iranian embassy in Ankara, Turkey, during a global day of action on 26 June 2009.

*"The Iranian labour movement is enduring one of its darkest times ever... The Iranian government has not only completely disregarded its commitments to international labour conventions and basic workers' rights, but in light of the political situation in Iran during the past year, [it] has paved the way for fiercely attacking even the most basic workers' rights, and to strike against the few existing Iranian labour organizations with ever increasing intensity... We wish for you to take greater steps towards driving back the horrendous conditions imposed upon Iranian workers."*

Five independent Iranian trade unions – including The Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company Trade Union – in a message to the second World Congress of the International Trade Union Confederation, June 2010, Canada.

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL IN SOLIDARITY WITH TRADE UNIONS

Workers' rights are human rights. Ever since it was founded in 1961, Amnesty International has been campaigning for governments to respect the fundamental rights of workers to form and join trade unions, to bargain collectively and to take strike action. In fact, one of the very first cases that led to the foundation of Amnesty International was that of an imprisoned trade unionist in Greece. For 50 years, the organization has defended trade unionist prisoners of conscience and trade unionists at risk in every part of the world.

Since 2006, Amnesty International has worked very closely with the ITF and IUF, together with EI, which represents 30 million teachers worldwide, and the 175 million strong International Trade Union Confederation in support of Iranian workers' rights. This collaboration has included joint support for global action days. Most recently, activists in more than 40 cities in the world demonstrated in June 2009. Amnesty International works closely with its global union partners and co-ordinates with them on protests, lobbying and advocacy work. Together we have

raised awareness among the public, the media and the ILO about workers' rights in Iran. Our shared objective is clear: to secure freedom and justice for imprisoned trade unionists and to ensure that labour rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in Iran.

Amnesty International members are encouraged to collaborate wherever possible with national trade unions and with education, transport and food workers unions in their own countries on the call for action published here. For advice, please contact Shane Enright, Global Trade Union Adviser, by emailing [shane.enright@amnesty.org.uk](mailto:shane.enright@amnesty.org.uk)

To find out more about Amnesty International's work with trade unions, visit our UK website (in English) [www.amnesty.org.uk/tradeunion](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/tradeunion)

To find out more about the work of the global unions in support of Iranian workers, please go to [www.justiceforiranianworkers.org](http://www.justiceforiranianworkers.org)



Trade unionists and Amnesty International members and supporters call for the release of Mansour Ossanlu and Mahmoud Salehi during a global day of action, South Korea, 6 March 2008. Mahmoud Salehi is the spokesperson for the Organisational Committee to Establish Trade Unions in Iran; he was detained in 2007 and released in 2009.

## TAKE ACTION NOW

Iran is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 22 (1) of which states: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests". Iran is also a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 8 of which guarantees the "right of everyone to form trade unions and join the trade union of his choice".

As a member of the ILO, Iran has an obligation to respect, to promote and to realize the principles and rights set out in the organization's fundamental conventions, including Conventions 87 and 98: the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (1948) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (1949). Iran's obligation as a member of the ILO applies even though it has not ratified either of these Conventions.

By restricting workers' rights to organize freely and independently, the government is also breaching Articles 26 and 27 of Iran's Constitution. Article 26 guarantees the formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations; Article 27 ensures that public gatherings and marches may be freely held.

**Call on Iran's Head of the Judiciary Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani and on Iran's Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Abdolreza Sheikholeslami to:**

- Immediately and unconditionally release Rasoul Bodaghi, Ebrahim Madadi and Reza Shahabi as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly in connection with their trade union activities and not to re-imprison Mansour Ossanlu and Reza Rakhshan for the same reasons.
- Ensure that all those held are protected from torture and other ill-treatment, and are granted immediate access to their families, to lawyers of their choice, and to adequate medical care.
- Initiate legislation to allow workers to exercise their right to form and join independent trade unions and to collectively bargain in line with Iran's obligations under international law.
- Officially recognize the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company Trade Union, the Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, the Iran Teachers' Trade Associations and other independent workers' bodies and not harass their members for the peaceful exercise of

their rights to freedom of association and their right to strike.

- End all victimization, discrimination and harassment and arrest of trade unionists.

### PLEASE WRITE TO:

#### Head of the Judiciary

Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani  
[care of] Public relations Office  
Number 4, 2 Azizi Street  
Vali Asr Ave., above Pasteur Street  
intersection  
Tehran  
Islamic Republic of Iran

Email: bia.judi@yahoo.com  
(Write in the subject line: "For the attention of Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani")  
Salutation: Your Excellency

#### Dr Abdolreza Sheikholeslami

Minister of Labour and Social Affairs  
Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs  
Azadi Avenue, near to Behboudi Avenue  
Tehran  
Islamic Republic of Iran

Email: info@mlsa.ir  
(Write in the subject line: "For the attention of Minister of Labour and Social Affairs")  
Salutation: Your Excellency