

# Fluid History: Oil Workers and the Iranian Revolution

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## INTRODUCTION

“We are melting away,” laments the Shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) on December 26, 1978 in a phone tap of a conversation with his adviser and former Prime Minister Ali Amini.<sup>1</sup> Although mass demonstrations were causing havoc at the time, his desperation was caused by the strikes in the oil industry. Less than 7 weeks later, the monarchy was gone. Although there are other historical examples of mass mobilizations among oil workers, the oil strikes from September 1978 to February 1979 in Iran are, to my knowledge, the only case that heavily determined the outcome of a revolution. Therefore, this episode provides a particularly interesting opportunity to explore the politics of labor in the oil industry in two moves. One puts *politics* back into the study of labor in general and into the study of labor in the oil industry in particular, as it has been often left out after the “cultural turn” in labor studies. The second refers to the importance of putting *labor* back into politics, as most political science studies have

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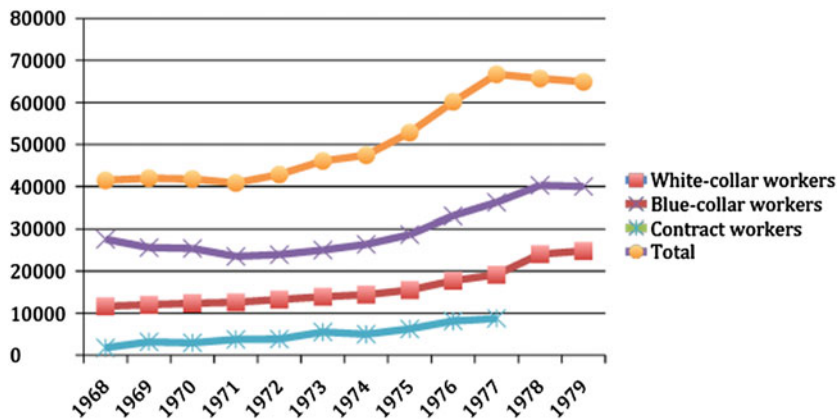
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tended to attribute the mediation between oil and national politics solely to the nexus between finance and elites, ignoring the agency of labor.

The first part of the chapter provides a brief summary of the development of the oil strikes and demonstrates their paralyzing impact on the state apparatus. The second part argues that the oil strikes were a key link in the developments that created or authorized revolutionary centers of power that emerged in parallel to the existing state in early 1979, a situation known as “dual power.” A detailed history of this episode is provided in order to explain the mechanisms through which the forces around Ayatollah Khomeini took control of the oil strikes, a strategic move that allowed them to steer the revolutionary movement and determine its outcome. This latter aspect has received much less attention in the historiography of the Iranian revolution, which has focused more on its causes than its dynamics. Moreover, the outcome of the revolution is often discussed in mere ideological terms—the resonance of Khomeini’s discourse through Shi’a symbolism<sup>2</sup>—and focuses on the “consolidation” period following the fall of the monarchy in February 1979. Arguing that the political strategies of the preceding months and the role of the oil strikes in the emergence of dual power were crucial, this chapter makes a novel contribution to the historiography of the Iranian revolution.

### OIL STRIKES: FUELING THE REVOLUTION

On the eve of the revolution, the oil industry was organized around the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and its subsidiaries, the Oil Services Company of Iran (OSCO) owned by foreign companies, and a number of private subcontractors. The oil industry employed relatively few workers compared to its production of five-to-six million barrels a day, but their numbers were still considerable according to Iran’s Statistical Centre. Having dropped to about 40,000 by 1970, the number of employees increased to 67,000 in early 1978 as Iran expanded its oil facilities and increased production. This number rose to almost 80,000 when we added the roughly 12,000 employees of the distribution organization of the oil industry and the few hundred employees of its Cooperative Consumptive Organization of the oil industry.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the oil industry had dozens of subcontractors that employed at least the same number. Its distribution organization alone employed about 50,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Thus, around 2.3% of the 3.54 million Iranian workers—4.5% when those working for subcontractors are included—worked for the oil industry.<sup>5</sup> A final point to



**Fig. 1** Number of workers in the Iranian oil industry. *Source* Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI), *Statistical Yearbook 1969–1982* (Tehran: SCI). Online version, retrievable from <http://www.amar.org.ir/> *سالنامه آماری*. *Note* the total number includes foreign white-collar workers. The number of white-collar and blue-collar workers in 1978 and 1979 includes contract workers.

consider is that most of the oil workers were concentrated in the south-western part of Iran, and in a number of refineries in the rest of the country (Kermanshah, Tehran, Shiraz, and Tabriz) (Fig. 1).

When the first oil strikes took place in September 1978, a revolutionary movement had already developed since January, mainly in the form of mass demonstrations. By June, however, the demonstrations had receded, and when they resurfaced in late August during the holy month of Ramadan, they were violently repressed on Bloody Friday (September 8, 1978). By then, it looked as if the regime would survive the political crisis, as it had on other occasions. As late as September 28, the prognosis of the American Defence Intelligence Agency was that the Shah “is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years.”<sup>6</sup> In the next 2 months, however, the revolutionary movement acquired a qualitatively different character as protests spread to workplaces and mass strikes erupted in the major economic sectors.

In the oil industry, the strikes developed in four phases. The first strikes started on September 8 in the Tehran Refinery and spread to other refineries and the oil fields of Ahwaz, Gachsaran, and Aqajari. This prompted the SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police, to report that the oil strikes “have no precedent in recent years; the strikes must have developed among

workers in the national oil company very quickly.”<sup>7</sup> By early October 1978, however, the oil strikes had subsided after officials made concessions. However, a second wave started when oil workers in Abadan staged a sit-in on October 16. Two days later, the white-collar workers (*karmands*) in the oil company offices of Ahwaz started a strike that lasted for 33 days. At the same time, the blue-collar workers (*kargars*) in the oil fields near Ahwaz went on strike as well. These strikes, which were mainly over economic issues like housing and wages, faded in the last 2 weeks of November, but in the meantime, oil workers had become better organized.

At Abadan Refinery, the blue-collar workers formed a 13-member strike committee (*komiteh-ye hamahangi va nezarat*) in late October and the demands politicized.<sup>8</sup> They were in contact with the strike committee of the white-collar workers in Ahwaz, the Association of Oil Industry Staff Employees that consisted of 60 representatives elected from the different offices of the oil company in Ahwaz. A founding member explained the process: “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 preferred candidate. There were usually five or six candidates per position. The first duty of these representatives was to organize the association of professional and office workers. Therefore, we called this body the Organizing Committee of Oil Industry Employees.”<sup>9</sup> The Association was further formalized in the last week of November with the election of a Coordinating Committee. In the Tehran Refinery, a secret strike committee of blue-collar workers had been active since September, but a new committee including white-collar workers was established in the second week of November. Its 12 representatives were elected from the various refinery departments.<sup>10</sup> In late November, the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Iranian Oil Industry was established to represent the blue-collar and white-collar workers in the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries, but despite its name, it mainly operated in Tehran.

The composition of the strike committees differed from place to place, but often, the leading members belonged to or sympathized with the organizations of the secular left, including the Fada’iyan and, to a lesser degree, the Tudeh party, or the Islamist leftist Mojahedin. Others were independent, or they followed Khomeini. It is notable, however, that when the strikes erupted, the presence of the organized left was very weak among the oil workers as state repression had diminished the space for open political activities, which was reinforced and exacerbated by the guerrilla strategy of

the main current of the left. During the strikes, however, the left recruited new members and increased its influence. In Ahwaz, 35% of the delegates of the strike committee that oil workers had elected in November 1978 were “Marxists.” However, after the fall of the monarchy, the supporters of Khomeini, in coalition with liberal Islamic figures like Mehdi Bazargan who headed the Provisional Government, maneuvered to marginalize the left and organized new elections, in which the left gained 15%. According to the same report, only five of the 40 members of the Abadan refinery strike committee were leftists at this stage.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note, however, that most of the Islamist members of the strike committees and, later, the Islamic *shoras* (councils) belonged to the “leftist” faction that supported workers’ self-management. Soon after the revolution in 1979–1981, these strike committees clashed with the newly state-appointed managers, a conflict that led to the repression and dissolution of the *shoras*.

Having established a stronger organizational structure, the oil workers resumed their strike in early December 1978, this time with explicitly political demands that focused on the departure of the Shah. Following Khomeini’s call for a general strike on December 2—to coincide with the beginning of the holy month Moharram—the Common Syndicate issued a call for a general strike in the oil industry. The Abadan Refinery took the lead once again, but the strikes spread to the offshore oil platforms and the Ahwaz and Marun oil fields in the following days.<sup>12</sup> Gachsaran and Aghajari workers were forced to work at bayonet point, but they went on strike at the end of the second week of December. The government’s increased repression in December backfired, as over 6000 oil workers quit their jobs when officials threatened to dismiss striking workers.<sup>13</sup>

The fourth and final phase of the oil strikes that started in the last days of 1978 was not marked by an interlude, but by a qualitative change. While the strike committees of the oil workers had taken control of oil production at the local level, Khomeini set up a committee that took over the national coordination of the oil strikes. I will return to discuss in detail this phase, which lasted until the strikes officially ended on February 17, 1979, but let us first turn to the oil workers’ demands during the strike.

The oil strikes, like any other class-based protest, involved an uneven and complex process of social mobilization and articulation of demands that depended on various factors such as one’s position within the labor process, traditions of activism, as well as political, ethnic, and religious affinities. The willingness to support the strike varied among different segments of oil workers, but disagreements were generally overcome

through persuasion or social pressure.<sup>14</sup> As far as violence was involved, the targets were foreign and Iranian managers, and the perpetrators were political activists.<sup>15</sup>

Oil workers had different demands, which shifted from economic to political ones in the context of the revolution and due to the fact that the state was both their employer, as well as the target of the revolutionary upheaval. The claim that oil workers in Iran, as in the rest of the developing world, constituted a “labor aristocracy” ignored the great differences among white-collar and blue-collar workers, the permanent and contract workers, their harsh working conditions, and their connections to the wider working-class communities. As I have explained elsewhere, oil workers did not have any acute socioeconomic grievances except for the rising housing costs. What all workers shared was an intense resentment against the rigid and humiliating hierarchies and structured workplace discriminations that set blue-collar workers beneath the Iranian employees beneath the foreign staff, whose share in the total white-collar staff had increased from 4% in 1968 to 13% in 1977. Opposition against political repression in the workplace and in the wider society, as well as against the foreign domination of Iran, motivated oil workers as well.<sup>16</sup> By late October 1978, oil workers were demanding among other things an end to martial law, the release of all political prisoners, Iranianization of the oil industry, an end to discrimination against female employees, and the dissolution of SAVAK.<sup>17</sup>

As the oil strikes politicized and intensified, they became a force to be reckoned with. As a journalist predicted at the time, “the survival of the government may well depend on the Shah’s ability to put an end to the oil strike before the loss of export oil revenue combines with the effect of other labor disruption to put Iran’s economy in total disarray.”<sup>18</sup> Figure 2 shows oil production dropping considerably after the strikes became solid in December 1978, reducing Iran’s income by 65–68 million dollars per day.<sup>19</sup> As the strikes continued, military vehicles and ministries were increasingly confronted with fuel shortages.

As the oil strikes severely undermined the state’s administrative, financial, and repressive capacity, they had the opposite impact on the revolutionary movement. While the media were strictly censored until November 1978 and did not report on the demonstrations, the oil strikes created fuel shortages that could not remain unnoticed. Most importantly, after the national radio announced the strike of workers in the oil depots near Tehran on October 21, 1978, thousands rushed to the gas stations. “The shortage of fuel creates havoc in Tehran traffic,” printed the widely read

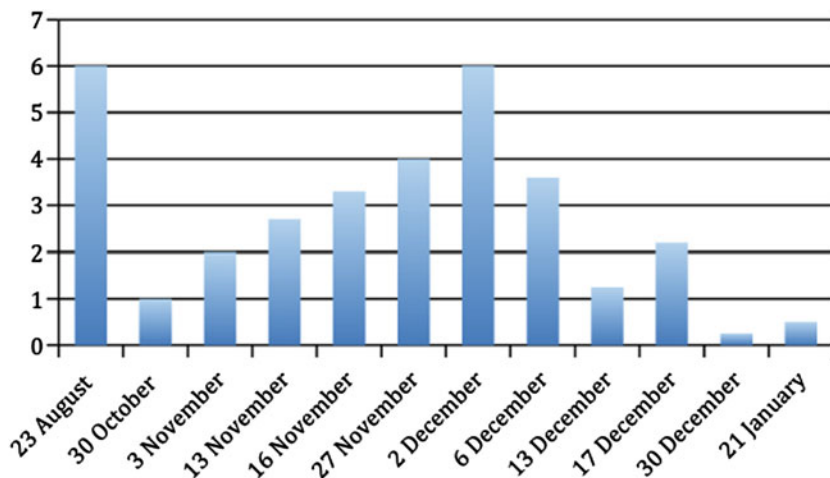


Fig. 2 Oil production in million b/d, August 1978–January 1979. *Source* collected from various issues of Persian and English newspapers.

daily *Ettela'at* on its front page the next day. For the first time, the official media gave a broad coverage to the oil strikes, which helped them to take a center stage in the revolutionary discourse and increased the self-confidence of the oil workers.

The fuel shortages intensified in the last weeks of 1978 and in early 1979, creating an acute awareness of the gravity of the crisis that engulfed the state. Ordinary people began to directly experience the impact of the oil strike and the resulting shortages as they queued for fuel (see Picture 1). Thus, by targeting a commodity that everyone in Iran considered to be the lifeblood of the monarchy and something they depended on in their own everyday life, the oil workers helped to create the sense of what Charles Kurzman has called a “viable” movement, a movement that was perceived as a viable challenger of the status quo in the consciousness of a broad layer of the population.<sup>20</sup> Given its impact on the everyday material life of ordinary people, oil became a key transmitter of revolutionary consciousness, which flowed from the sites of production and refining into the households.



**Picture 1** Iranians queuing for fuel in Tehran. The small print Persian text reads: “Queues that are few kilometres long emerged in the streets for gasoline and kerosene. Bagh-e Shah gas station, Sepah Street.” The large print states: “Shortage of kerosene, gasoline, and diesel.” *Source Ettela’at*, January 6, 1979.

## OIL STRIKES AND DUAL POWER

As we saw earlier, the oil strikes had become more organized and effective by December 1978, causing a massive shortage of fuel by early January 1979. “Tehran and most of the provinces are confronted with a shortage of petroleum, gasoline and diesel. More than half of the cars are not used, most houses can’t be warmed while the weather is cold, and there are long queues for petrol and gasoline in the streets,” *Ettela’at* reported on January 6, 1979, adding that domestic consumption of fuel in the winter was estimated to be around 960,000 barrels per day—almost four times higher than oil production at that time.<sup>21</sup> At this crucial stage of the revolution, the oil strikes became a launching pad for the establishment of revolutionary institutions: the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee (OSCC), the neighborhood committees (later the Committees of the Islamic Revolution), and the secret Council of the Islamic Revolution. All three, I argue, are closely linked to the dynamic of the oil strikes—a connection that has received little attention in the historiography of the Iranian revolution.<sup>22</sup> The nucleus of an alternative political pole had already emerged in September 1978 when Khomeini appointed a small number of clerical



leaders to act on his behalf in Tehran. Khomeini then asked Mehdi Bazargan, leader of the religious-liberal Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI), to propose the inclusion of new members who could lead the transition of power in the post-Shah era. This group of 18 people regularly met to discuss strategies and advised Khomeini, forming the core of the future Council of the Islamic Revolution that was established in January 1979.<sup>23</sup> The transfer of power into the hands of the Council of the Islamic Revolution went through the establishment of the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee, which was created to prevent the autonomy of the strike committees in the oil industry.

### THE OIL STRIKES COORDINATING COMMITTEE

As the oil strikes were becoming more organized and effective in December 1978, the idea of establishing a committee for their supervision was floated in the group of 18 discussed above. Bazargan then asked Ebrahim Yazdi, another prominent FMI member, to propose the creation of this committee to Khomeini, as both were in Paris at the time.<sup>24</sup> On December 29, 1978, Khomeini wrote a letter to Bazargan, the text of which was mainly written by Bazargan himself, requesting him to lead a committee, to which I will refer as the Oil Strikes Coordinating Committee (OSCC).<sup>25</sup> As the letter made clear, Khomeini was worried that the Shah would use the fuel shortage to legitimize the crackdown on the revolutionary movement, and at the same time, he tried to win the oil workers' support by demanding that the military leave the oil fields and installations.<sup>26</sup>

In the letter, Khomeini asked Bazargan to lead a committee of five people, which should include Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the engineer Mostafa Katira'i. The remaining two members were to be selected by Bazargan in consultation with the other two members, who then appointed the engineer Kazem Hasibi, a veteran of the oil nationalization movement and a leading figure in the National Front and the FMI, and the engineer Hashem Sabaghian, another prominent member of the FMI. Two other engineers, Abolfazl Hakimi and Hossein Bani-Assadi, played an important role in organizing the practical activities of the committee, highlighting the critical role that the university-trained religious members of the new middle class would come to play in building the postrevolutionary institutions. After praising the oil workers in his letter, Khomeini tasks the OSCC to visit oil fields and installations and convince the workers to resume at least partial production for domestic consumption. This was not

an easy task, as oil workers blamed the fuel shortages on the military government. The Common Syndicate, for instance, issued a statement on December 31, 1978: “Compatriots, there is a variety of fuel present in depots to serve domestic consumption for a year, but the regime, which is installed by foreigners, is not distributing it in order to change the direction of the holy struggle of the people and to sow discord in the rows of the militants.”<sup>27</sup> In other statements, the strike leaders also blamed the fuel shortage on the continuation of oil exports to Israel and South Africa.

Bazargan started his activities as head of the OSCC on December 29, 1978, meeting with the new director of NIOC, ‘Abdollah Entezam, who agreed to the following measures: (1) the departure of the military from all oil fields and installations; (2) the departure of all military personnel who had been assigned to work in the oil industry; (3) the restatement of the strikers who had been sacked and the right of return for those workers who had been thrown out of their company houses; (4) the release of all arrested oil workers; and (5) the payment to oil employees of wages and salaries not received since November 22, 1978. Having won these concessions, Bazargan and Rafsanjani traveled to the oil workers in the south, calling on them to resume work.<sup>28</sup> Khomeini and more than 200 clerics threw in their weight, urging oil workers to negotiate with Bazargan and NIOC head Entezam.<sup>29</sup> In the following weeks, OSCC issued a number of internal reports, public communiqués, and decrees that provide an overview of its activities and decisions, establishing its authority as an administrative organ. These documents illustrate how OSCC was gradually taking over the organization of the oil strikes and related activities. Its first decree on January 5, 1979, for instance, called on the security guards to guarantee the safety of the oil installation,<sup>30</sup> followed by a second decree calling on the pipeline workers to resume work and conduct the necessary maintenance work in order to enable the transport of oil (products) from the Abadan Refinery to Tehran.<sup>31</sup> Further statements called on the workers in the refineries of Tabriz, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and Tehran to resume production.<sup>32</sup>

Following the negotiations with Bazargan during the first week of January, the “striking employees of the oil industry in the south” issued their first communiqué, stating their “willingness to implement the edict of Imam Khomeini,” because it served “the welfare of the defiant nation of Iran and the consolidation of his [Khomeini’s] holy struggle for the overthrow of the illegal government.” They also announced the following

decisions: (1) the distribution of gas to the entire city of Ahwaz from production unit number 2 from January 4, 1979; (2) the selection of a group of blue-collar and white-collar workers for unit number 2 (in Ahwaz), so that crude oil could be delivered to the refineries in Abadan and Tehran; (3) the appointment of a number of workers to continue work in the telecommunication office in order to guarantee communication between oil fields and other places in case of an emergency; (4) the establishment of a number of committees for the practical and technical implementations of the production of oil and gas; (5) the return of the security personnel of the oil industry to their positions, which had been taken over by the military; and (6) contact between the oil representatives of the oil workers in the south with those in other places, e.g., the refineries, was to run through the Committee for the Coordination of the Oil Strikes.

The final point, of course, seriously limited the oil workers' ability to collectively and independently coordinate, take decisions, and implement them. The communiqué also stated that "It is necessary to bring to the attention of the defiant nation of Iran that the blue-collar and white-collar workers who are responsible for effecting the Imam's directive, are pious strikers who are working in the production units and the refineries for the welfare of the defiant nation and have no intention to gain anything for themselves." Hence, the statement continued, the workers will stop production whenever the government violates the points mentioned in the Imam's directive.<sup>33</sup> On January 18, Bazargan's committee issued its 14th decree, calling on the Abadan Refinery employees to return to work in order to increase production from 240,000 to 360,000 b/d.<sup>34</sup> By late January, the committee was overseeing almost the entire activities of the oil industry, including issuing permits for exports.<sup>35</sup>

As these developments illustrate, the establishment of OSCC signified a crucial turning point in the revolution, as it involved two power struggles. First, it represented the attempt by the Islamist forces—both the radicals around Khomeini and the liberals around Bazargan—to take control of the oil strikes at the expense of the autonomy of oil workers. Bazargan was very clear that his objective was to take "control of the oil strikes." In order to do this, the OSCC realized that it had to bypass and marginalize the leftist oil workers, who, despite their small numbers, played a leading role in the oil strikes. As Hakimi explained:

The main issue confronting us was that we had to deal with different groups of oil workers... We treated them well but we also tried to find out the level of their influence and popularity among the oil workers and in discussions we tried to understand whether they were committed and Islamic or leftist... The labor troubles in Tehran were mostly in the pipelines and depots of Rey..., but the Tehran Refinery was in our total control, especially [because] there was a very faithful and intelligent brother among the refinery workers, called [Assadollah] Amininian, who was enormously popular and influential... The committee of the Tehran Refinery travelled for a number of times to Abadan, Tabriz and Shiraz and had various talks with them... through the workers of the Tehran Refinery we could discipline them as well.<sup>36</sup>

The methods by which the pro-Khomeini forces became hegemonic in the oil strikes need more scrutiny, but an important factor was the lack of a strong independent national organization among oil workers. Every workplace had one or more strike committees, but there was no single organization capable of representing all strikers and coordinating their activities at the national level. The Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Oil Industry was established in the third week of November 1978, but it was mainly rooted among the workers of the Tehran Refinery.

The material and social conditions of the oil industry certainly did not pose an obstacle to national coordination. The specific history of the oil industry's expansion, the spatial construction of urban networks, and social relations based on kinship and ethnicity potentially provided the basis for establishing solidarities and organizations.<sup>37</sup> The internal telephone network of the oil industry enabled communication between different locations and oil workers' delegates could also travel to these locations. There were also social networks among oil workers that created an esprit to corp. Some oil workers, particularly the more experienced, had come to know each other through official trade union activities before the revolution, and more importantly through the overhaul procedures in the refineries and the training schools. However, there were a number of obstacles too. First, political events unfolded very rapidly, leaving little time for oil workers to strategize and react to the new situation. Second, the militant oil workers were not politically prepared for this situation. Some experienced oil workers had a background in the Tudeh party, which steered them away from any move that could challenge the leadership of Khomeini within the revolutionary movement. The younger generation of leftist oil workers, who often sympathized with the more militant guerrilla

organizations, lacked the network, experience, and the strategic perspective that could help them to unite the struggles in the working-class communities around the strikes in the oil industry. Third, generational and regional divisions among oil workers exacerbated their political and ideological differences. In the Tehran Refinery, for instance, there was an active group around the leftist trade unionist Yadollah Khosroshahi. These were mostly from Abadan, but they lacked organic links to the younger workers who had been recruited from the small workshops of Tehran and had stronger religious dispositions. None of these obstacles, however, were insurmountable if the required *political* and *organizational* steps had been taken prior to and during the revolution in order to increase the coordination among oil workers.

More concretely, the existence of a leadership among oil workers was indispensable for the independent coordination of the oil strikes.<sup>38</sup> Surveillance and repression in large workplaces made this task daunting, but not impossible. If it was possible to print banned leftist publications in the Tehran Refinery and smuggle them out, for instance, or to distribute pro-guerrilla pamphlets in the Abadan refinery before the revolution,<sup>39</sup> then it also must have been possible to organize a network of militants around industrial issues. The strikes in the 1970s in the oil industry provided an opportunity to do this, but at that time, the new organizations of the left, with which some oil workers were sympathizing, had committed themselves to clandestine armed struggle, rather than workplace and community activism.

The establishment of the OSCC did not only involve an internal power struggle within the oil strikes and by extension within the overall revolutionary movement; it was also a precondition for the external struggle waged against the monarchy. The oil strikes and the establishment of OSCC facilitated the creation of two other institutions: the Council of the Islamic Revolution and the neighborhood committees.

### *Council of the Islamic Revolution*

On January 12, 1979, 2 weeks after the OSCC started its activities, Khomeini ordered the establishment of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, which reconstituted the existing group of 18 people with some changes. Khomeini declared that the Council of the Islamic Revolution “included competent and committed Muslims” who had to “study and explore the conditions for a transitional government and take the first

preparations for its establishment form a constitutive assembly and hold elections.”<sup>40</sup> Without the OSCC taking over one of the state’s key functions—oil production—the Council of the Islamic Revolution would have lacked the authority to function as an alternative pole of power. This was made quite explicit by Bazargan, when he advised Khomeini to call on the management of the oil company to cooperate with the OSCC so that Khomeini, “despite the Shah and his government would seize control over the state apparatus and order state employees.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Neighborhood Committees*

The management of the oil strikes played a much more organic role in the emergence of the third institution of revolutionary power, i.e., the neighborhood committees that were later transformed into the Committees of the Islamic Revolution. Given a shortage of kerosene, which was widely used for heating and cooking, the need to organize the distribution of fuel among the population was an urgent task that gave rise to the neighborhood committees. While Tehran’s domestic consumption had been 9–10.5 million liters per day in the winter of 1977–1978, the capital was only receiving 5–5.5 million liters per day in late December 1978 and early January 1979.

Following a week of intense negotiations between the OSCC and the strikers, oil started to flow from the depots of Abadan Refinery to Tehran on January 6, 1979. Two weeks later, the refinery’s production increased from 240,000 to 360,000 b/d, and crude oil production in Khuzestan stood at 500,000 b/d.<sup>42</sup> The shortages continued, however, and the engineer Abolfazl Hakimi was sent to the distribution organization of NIOC to take care of fuel distribution. In mid-January, the “employees of the distribution organization of NIOC” called on “clerics” and “patriotic groups” to help organize “fuel distribution committees.”<sup>43</sup> This was another missed opportunity to establish—through the existing infrastructure of the oil industry—a national organization that could have linked the oil strikes and the working-class communities. At the time of the revolution, the oil industry had 2358 fuel outlets in the cities and more than 10,000 in the rural areas. These were strategic points, around which the distribution of fuel and other activities in particularly Tehran could have been organized by the workers of NIOC’s distribution organization. However, in the absence of an independent national organization and strategy, the distribution organization played a subordinated role, taking

their orders from the OSCC. Hakimi asked the local clerics to come up with a list of “active and trustworthy young people,” who were subsequently gathered in a mosque and received instructions. Within 2 weeks, almost all neighborhoods in Tehran had established their “distribution committees,” which distributed the available fuel through coupons or waiting lists. Hakimi also helped to organize a group of volunteers who managed the distribution of fuel at gas stations from 9 am to 10 pm.<sup>44</sup>

The creation of the fuel distribution committees was not always initiated by the OSCC. In some locations, it facilitated their creation, but in other places, it merely connected the local initiatives that were already emerging. During the winter, the distribution of oil became the central point around which everyday forms of solidarity were formed, as locals helped the needy and the youth queued for the elderly. Others took the initiative to coordinate the oil distribution, but quickly gravitated toward the mosques as there were no alternative centers of coordination. A SAVAK telegraph on January 3, 1979, for instance, reported that the head of NIOC in Hamedan was refusing to provide oil to the SAVAK.<sup>45</sup> Confirming this report, *Ayandegan* wrote that the distribution of oil coupons in Hamedan was in the hands of a committee led by Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Ahmad Madani and Hojjatoleslam Mohammad-Taqi ‘Alami.<sup>46</sup> However, as Farhad Khosrokhavar wrote at the time, the Hamedan committee was from its inception directed by clerics, while in Tehran and most other places, the committees expressed “a popular will” and were not initially dominated by clerics.<sup>47</sup> “From the day that the fuel shortages started,” a young man told a *Kayhan* reporter in Tehran, “we, the youth of the neighbourhood got together to do something about it so this problem wouldn’t be added to those we already had. We made some carts and went to the houses and asked for their containers and we also convinced the fuel seller that it was better to delegate the distribution to us rather than have long queues.”<sup>48</sup>

On 4 January, a stunned SAVAK agent in Tehran telephoned the following report to his commander: “A number of Khomeini supporters have taken initiatives to distribute fuel among needy people of the neighbourhood. A number of these distribution [teams] have been observed and they claim that the distribution of fuel has been ordered by Khomeini.”<sup>49</sup> Similar reports poured in other cities. In Isfahan, a SAVAK agent reported that ordinary people were protecting the gas stations and distributing fuel.<sup>50</sup> In his memoirs, ‘Emadaldin Baqi provides another example when describing his reaction to the tensions that arose among people queuing for fuel: “I went to the mosque, thought a bit and concluded that we should

gather the kids in the mosque and create an organization to take the distribution of fuel in our own hands.” After their plan to distribute coupons failed, they decided to form couples to bring the fuel to the houses.<sup>51</sup> By 14 January, the queues for fuel had almost disappeared, as the neighborhood youth had organized, with the guidance of the local clerics, the door-to-door distribution of fuel, giving it away for free to those who had been identified as low-income families. As an offshoot of fuel distribution, some local youth developed other activities, such as the control of prices, the provision of urgent health care, and armed defense in a neighborhood committee.<sup>52</sup>

Another report explicitly mentions the Islamic neighborhood committees and “cooperatives” that started distributing fuel in eight poor neighborhoods, from where they spread to other places.<sup>53</sup> The youth in Narmak, for instance, divided the neighborhood into districts with a radius of 300 m around a fuel distribution center. Each district issued to every household a coupon that had the stamp of the district, and mentioned the number of times and the dates on which they could collect their share. In other places, the fuel was taken door-to-door.<sup>54</sup>

For many Islamist activists, the neighborhood committees that were organized around fuel distribution had an explicit aim: to counter the leftist influence in the oil industry. Saeed Jalili, now a leading politician among Iran’s Islamist hardliners, recalls that “At the height of the revolution and also afterwards, the neighbourhood committees played an important role in serving the people’s needs... Revolutionaries gathered in mosques and created coupons.... At that time, Marxism had many followers and, just as liberalism is defined by civil society, the slogan of Marxism was based on the *shoras* [councils]. This slogan was everywhere; there were students *shoras*, workers’ *shoras*, etc.... In this situation, the neighbourhood committee, with at its centre the mosque, was a ‘slap in the face’ [*tudahani*] and a harsh reply to them [the Marxists].”<sup>55</sup> The Committees of the Islamic Revolution that were established after February 1979 drew their members from the pool of volunteers who coalesced around the fuel distributing neighborhood committees.<sup>56</sup> Bringing together Islamist activists at neighborhood level, these Committees of the Islamic Revolution were an essential step in consolidating the political power of the supporters of Khomeini.

As political control over the production and distribution of oil was increasingly taken over by Khomeini and his allies, practical control over oil production was still in the hands of the oil workers. Confronted with the attempts of Khomeini and Bazargan to take control of the strikes, the oil



strike leaders continued publishing statements and tried to gain a stronger position. On January 16, they announced, “Oil workers are a part of Iranian working class and the greatest ally of progressive, anti-despotic, and anti-imperialistic strata,” and added, “Considering the decisive role of workers, especially workers in the oil industry, throughout the anti-despotic struggles, the future government is obligated to consider the interests of the working class.” Less than 2 weeks before the fall of the regime, a group of oil workers declared that a workers’ representative should be included on the Council of the Islamic Revolution, whose membership had not yet been disclosed by Khomeini. They stated:

Just as workers have played a crucial role in the current revolutionary situation, they should participate the day after the revolution when it is time for the genuine construction; this is only possible by workers’ participation in the political affairs of the country. The first step would be taken by participation of a workers’ representative in the revolutionary council.<sup>57</sup>

Without an independent national organization, however, oil workers lacked the political weight to put pressure on their demand. As the pro-Khomeini forces gradually took over the oil strikes, the tensions with the left increased. In Ahwaz, a number of clerics intervened to restrict the independence of the strike committee and the role of secular oil workers’ representatives, prompting the resignation of Mohammad Javad Khatami, the leading representative of the production units. In an open letter (January 21, 1979), he accused “reactionary” clerics of making death threats against him and other representatives who didn’t agree with their “reactionary ideology.” He also criticized the OSCC for acting beyond its duties of “inspection and supervision” of the oil strikes and sidelining the strike committee, leaving local affairs to a number of “not progressive” clerics instead of appointing a group to mediate between the oil strikers and the OSCC, as was originally called for.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that, despite increasing repression after February 1979, the committees in the oil industry continued to operate is testimony to the organization and class consciousness that oil workers had developed during their strikes. A few months after the fall of the Shah, the journalist and future Pulitzer Prize winner Kai Bird, who interviewed oil workers wrote, “The oil industry is virtually controlled by dozens of independent worker komitehs which, though loyal to the central Government, are nevertheless participating in all the decisions related to the production and marketing of

Iranian oil to the Western industrial world. Perhaps even more significant, the worker komitehs have unquestionably demonstrated that they can run the oil fields and refineries without their top-rank Iranian managers and without the expertise of some 800 foreign technicians...<sup>59</sup> This situation was not tolerated by the postrevolutionary leaders as they consolidated their power. The committees in the oil industry and elsewhere were repressed and weakened after Iraq invaded southwestern Iran in August 1980, and were officially banned early in 1982.

### POPULISM AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

The fate of the oil strikes poses an important question: why oil workers did not create a national network with political autonomy and the organizational capacity to project their power beyond the workplace, but instead accepted a subordinate role to that of Khomeini and the OSCC? This question can best be answered by looking at the development of class consciousness within the triangular relationship between the oil workers, the wider labor struggles, and the revolutionary movement.

To begin with labor struggles in general, it should be noted that these were significantly hindered by the predominance of small-sized enterprises. In 1976, Iran had an employed workforce of 8.8 million, of whom 3.5 million were classified as working class. Another 1 million were unpaid family workers. Some 719,000 worked in manufacturing, as wage earners and unpaid family workers. Of these, some 43% were mostly unskilled workers, employed in small establishments (1–9 employees).<sup>60</sup> While taking part in demonstrations, most of these workers did not participate in the revolution as a distinct collective. However, “at the same time there was a significant portion of the working class that was skilled and concentrated in large enterprises of the private sector and particularly the state sector,” which did have a greater capacity for collective action.<sup>61</sup> In 1976, 793 of the private manufacturing units (11%) were larger enterprises that employed more than 100 workers. Moreover, the majority of the 566,000 workers employed by the state were concentrated in a few major cities and in a number of large enterprises. Thus, as in many other developing countries, on one end of the working class, there were a large number of workers merging into the petty bourgeoisie who were mainly active in retail and petty production, while at the other end, there was a concentration of industrial workers.

Oil workers, in particular, exhibited a significant capacity for collective action, as we saw above, and hence, they took a leading position within the strike movement that developed in the fall of 1978.<sup>62</sup> While initially no significant solidarity networks existed among the workers of the oil industry and other sectors, these started to develop during the strikes. In Ahwaz and Abadan, oil workers organized in solidarity with striking teachers.<sup>63</sup> The solidarity actions were reciprocal as teachers in Abadan and Khoramshahr joined workers' demonstrations a few weeks later. The Society of the Employees of the Planning and Budget Organization issued solidarity statements thanking oil workers for "blocking the extraction of the nation's wealth towards imperialism and for achieving freedom for us."<sup>64</sup> Particularly in Tehran, striking workers in other industries looked to oil workers for leadership, shouting "our oil worker, our determined leader" at various demonstrations. However, it was not until a week before the fall of the monarchy that striking workers started to meet in order to "strengthen their organization, increase solidarity, and promote workers' consciousness in order to serve their class interests." More than one hundred workers representing auto, oil, and electrical unions gathered on February 3, 1979 in Ghand Riz Syndicate in Tehran, denouncing the dismissal of factory workers, demanding the inclusion of a workers' representative in the Council of the Islamic Revolution, and discussing the formation of a workers' solidarity council.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, oil workers were well positioned to play a more independent—and leading—role within the labor struggles and the wider revolutionary movement, but the question is why this possibility did not materialize. Pointing to "objective" conditions is not sufficient, as both the oil workers' position within the class structure and the physical characteristics of the oil industry enabled them to launch mass strikes and develop organizations of their own. The real issue was the lack of *political independence*, which leads us to look at the oil workers' subjectivity. As E.P. Thompson argued, "class consciousness" is shaped by "class experience," a process that is culturally mediated. Moreover, working-class formation is an "active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning."<sup>66</sup>

From this perspective, there is no teleological development from working-class experience to a specific form of working-class consciousness, which is contingent on the mediating role of culture and human agency. For the same reason, the expectation that oil workers should have developed a (secular or socialist) class consciousness leading them to challenge the monarchy while maintaining their independence from the clerical and

bazaari opposition is based on a flawed premise. What I argue instead is the *possibility* of this trajectory. My strategy for developing this argument is a critical dialogue with Asef Bayat's "Historiography, Class and Iranian Workers," which provides the most sophisticated account of the development of class consciousness in Iran before and during the Iranian revolution.

Bayat argues that "we must start not from the structure and 'objective interests' to arrive at class consciousness, but from the language of the class to characterize its political movement."<sup>67</sup> From this perspective, he analyzes the Iranian revolution: "Islam serves as a central element in articulating working-class consciousness in Iran" by spreading a "populist ideology... that works against the development of *class* consciousness and the idea of class division in society." This could happen, because "the ruling clergy shared an Islamic language with the workers, albeit with a populist content."<sup>68</sup>

Although this is a welcome corrective to the Eurocentric and structuralist analyses of class, it bends too much toward the reified notion of language advocated by Gareth Stedman Jones and other critics of E. P. Thompson, and privileges too much the Islamic discourse in the Iranian revolution. Acknowledging the importance of language, Marc Steinberg argues that class consciousness is not a discourse but emerges "through the friction of discourses produced in struggle."<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, the populist discourse in the Iranian revolution was not simply present in Islamic culture or texts, but was crafted within the context of concrete struggles, and in competition with other discourses. These discourses do not simply reflect different "class experiences"—they are constitutive to the formation of class consciousness. "Working class formation is," as Zachary Lockman summarizes, "as much a discursive as a material process."<sup>70</sup> Applying this approach, and focusing on the process of representation and recognition in class formation, Touraj Atabaki has shown how a distinct class identity took form among oil workers in the aftermath of the WWI, expressed in the use of "kargar" instead of "amaleh" by both workers, and company and state officials.<sup>71</sup> The formation of a working class (consciousness), with the oil workers at its core, matured during the 1940s. In the following two decades, however, shifts in the economy, politics, and culture led to a significant class reformation. As Bayat argues, the massive rural–urban migration of the 1960s created a new generation of workers who lacked industrial and urban experience, "Yet from the 1970s things started to change. By this time, the new workers of the 1960s had acquired a fair amount of experience in industrial work and urbanism... The result

was the development of an ‘industrial consciousness’ that derived its elements from an industrial setting, an urban lifestyle, and industrial work. This industrial consciousness manifested itself in a series of demands and covert strikes in the mid-1970s... Beyond industrial awareness, the workers also developed a more general form of class consciousness in terms of the expression of identity and differentiation.”<sup>72</sup> A few pages later, however, Bayat argues that the diversity of workers did not lead to “common non-work experiences among them.” However, “whatever their differences,” he continues, they “do share a common religion: Islam.” Even if we discard the fact that the experience of religious practices varied among Iranian workers, it remains a fact that both their industrial and urban experiences and the Islamic culture shaped workers’ consciousness. The dominance of the populist Islamic discourse, however, must be explained through an approach that sees language both as a constitutive element as well as an outcome of class struggle inside and outside the workplace.

“Islam,” Bayat correctly argues, “was reinterpreted by the industrial workers to express their own immediate and class interests.” However, this statement underestimates the importance of the distinction between individuals’ immediate awareness of action and their more general worldviews, or in Bakhtinian terms, the distinction between primary and secondary speech genres that create a tension between unmediated communication and mediated ideology.<sup>73</sup> The role of ideology, its intellectual producers, and organizational expression are, therefore, essential in the formation of class consciousness. Islamic populism was crafted by figures, such as Ali Shariati, who articulated grievances against social inequality, repressive domestic politics, and foreign domination through a language that mixed Islamic and Marxist vocabulary. Many of the oil workers I have interviewed referred to the influence of his ideas, which they knew through publications or the talks he gave at the Abadan Technical Institute in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Shariati was anticlerical, Khomeini formulated a populist version of Islam that assigned a revolutionary role to the clerics. Both men formulated their populist discourse in reaction and competition with leftist discourses.

While anticapitalist and anti-imperialist, the dominant leftist discourse of this period, however, was not geared toward the articulation and political translation of “class experience,” but rather focused on notions of individual sacrifice and courage connected to guerrilla warfare. This discourse, therefore, did not help workers to articulate a worldview and a practice that linked their day-to-day conditions and struggles with those in society at large. In reaction to repression and surveillance the radical left had adopted guerrilla

warfare and armed struggle, but this had been a strategic decision, rather than an unavoidable choice. This is illustrated, for instance, by the alternative path taken by the Revolutionary Workers' Organization of Iran, which managed to organize a few hundred members and sympathizers and create a few chapters in a number of important workplaces in the late 1960s, until it was rounded up by SAVAK after the Fada'iyan attack on the Siyahkal police station in 1971.<sup>74</sup>

Once oil strikes erupted in 1978, all these different discourses could be detected among the oil workers. Interviewing Abadan oil workers, one journalist observed, "Most of the oil workers are devout, practising Moslems but of the anti-clerical kind that believe that a religious movement which began with the uncompromising demand for the removal of the Shah will not end until the religion itself undergoes radical change." "We give Khomeini due respect for so stubbornly refusing to compromise with the Shah," said a boilermaker in the Abadan refinery. "But after all, Dr. Shariati wrote this revolution. Khomeini only led it"... "We are not going to be slaves to these machines," says a young welder. "...in an Islamic Republic, the community and not consumption is the goal."<sup>75</sup> Most oil workers who supported Khomeini were not so much attracted to his theology but to his uncompromising political strategy. Khomeini's establishment of the OSCC gave him even more credit in this respect.

Thus, for many oil workers who sympathized with Shariati's or Khomeini's Islamic populism, political independence did not seem necessary at first, although some clashed with the postrevolutionary state when it started to attack the workers' committees. Along these groups, "a minority of workers who embraced some form of socialism emerged in the final stage of the revolutionary struggles and played a leading role."<sup>76</sup> This was particularly the case in the oil industry, where more than a third of the members of the elected Ahwaz strike committee were leftists, and nine of the 14 members of the council of the Common Syndicate of the Employees of the Oil Industry were secular leftists (four others were Islamic leftists). However, even among them, the idea of independent organization and strategy was not a priority for ideological reasons.

Oil workers' political sympathies covered a wide spectrum, from Islamist populists to those who saw themselves as part of an industrial proletariat that should base its politics on working-class solidarity. Adherence to rival ideological and political outlooks kept shifting with circumstances, but increasingly the populist Islamist trend took the upper hand. The dialectics between

the struggles outside and inside the workplace was decisive here. Before and during the strikes, many oil workers participated or were influenced by the street demonstrations dominated by the slogans of Islamic populism. In Tehran, for instance, oil workers started to march to the Behesht Zahra cemetery, where the martyrs of the revolution were taken to be buried. During these charged and politicized rituals, the oil workers' slogans began to merge with those of Islamists. However, the influence of Islamic populism did not come only from the outside. In the Tehran refinery, many of the workers had been recruited from the nearby maintenance and petty production shops. These were recent migrants from rural areas and had worked and lived in the neighborhoods around the grand bazaar of Tehran and its mosques. However, it is important to note that the mosque-bazaar network was not an organizational resource in the hands of Khomeini and his supporters from the outset. As Kurzman has argued, the pro-Khomeini forces fought a political battle for hegemony within this network, and only after they had achieved it, could they use it as a lever to mobilize the mass demonstrations?<sup>77</sup>

To use the same analogy, the oil industry provided a potentially valuable resource for mass mobilizations that could have given direction to the whole revolutionary movement as the establishment of the OSCC demonstrated. If before the revolution, the left had developed a discourse that articulated workers' experiences in terms of class, and if it had created a stronger organizational presence that could have steered the oil strikes toward political autonomy, the oil workers might have influenced the outcome of the Iranian revolution. Despite a weak organization, the secular left had a reasonably strong *potential* for playing a much bigger role in the coordination of the oil strikes. This was rooted in the left's historical ties to oil workers (especially the Tudeh party), the guerrilla movement resurrecting the left's popularity and prestige, and the left-leaning university graduates joining the ranks of white-collar workers. However, mainly for ideological reasons, this potential failed to be realized.

Far from speculative, such an approach acknowledges the "inadequacy of confining our inquiry to the immediate and present world of the people interacting... Otherwise, we would be bound to deterministic explanations of interaction relying on initial resources and game-theoretic algorithms that rob interaction of its specific content. If, however, we accept that interactions are contingent, that how they turn out is not the only way they could have turned out, or that their effects might spill over the boundaries of people obviously interacting, we need a way to understand the real potential of interactions. Further, the space of interactions is itself shaped

by larger, historical institutional developments, which cannot, in turn, be understood without reference to political projects and attempts to form hegemonic coherence.”<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The salient role of oil workers in the Iranian revolution invites us to revise a number of dominant interpretations of the relationship between oil and politics, and of the outcome of the Iranian revolution. Our understanding of the former was enormously advanced with the publication of Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, which focuses on the mediating role of labor between oil and politics and argues that the oil industry’s material characteristics deprive oil workers of the potential for large-scale mobilizations that can successfully challenge authoritarian rule. The general applicability of this claim, I believe, should be nuanced in light of the experience of the Iranian revolution.<sup>79</sup>

A second revision concerns the influential reading of the Iranian revolution itself, which stressed the role of Shi’a Islam among the subaltern classes as an important factor explaining the ability of Khomeini and his supporters to become hegemonic within the revolutionary movement. Without ignoring the role of religion, my account of this process demonstrates the role of political strategizing and organizing as a key factor. The creation of the OSCC had little to do with religion; rather, it was a political and strategic intervention in the oil strikes that enabled Khomeini and his allies to get hold of a key link in the chain of events, through which they could steer the entire revolutionary movement into their desired direction. In contrast to Khomeini’s bold initiative, the oil workers failed to create a strong national organization that could coordinate the local strikes and represent them effectively in negotiations.

As a result, the Khomeinists along with their liberal religious allies succeeded in taking advantage of this vacuum and effectively took control of the direction of oil strikes by launching the OSCC. In turn, this helped them establish the Council of the Islamic Revolution as an authoritative alternative to the old state. Without a national organization through which they could coordinate with other strikers, the oil workers did not have the leverage to demand a bigger role in the emerging political structures, let alone vie for political power. Finally, the popular committees that emerged in the neighborhoods were not linked to the workplace struggles, but instead became incorporated by the mosques and clerics. Here,



again, oil workers were well positioned to initiate, guide, or influence the neighborhood committees because of the role of fuel in everyday life. But once again, as we saw, Khomeinists proved more successful in taking control of these grassroots organizations of local self-rule.” The physical structures of oil production, distribution, and consumption could function as the veins and capillaries that reached deep into society, allowing the oil workers to exert organizational and ideological influence well beyond their numbers.

Thus, the history of the relationship between oil and politics, and its role in the Iranian revolution appears to be more contingent or fluid than we might expect. The Islamist forces around Khomeini might have failed to take full control of the oil strikes if their ideological discourse and political organization had been challenged more effectively by alternative discourses and organizations that stressed the autonomy of workers’ organizations. As Eric Selbin observes, “what was so revolutionary about the Iranian revolution... was the palpable sense of possibility, the opportunity to create a new world or perhaps a return to a (g)old(en) one, regardless of whether there had ever been just such an age before.”<sup>80</sup> He rightly stresses, “revolutions, as with history, are made by people, notwithstanding, as Karl Marx suggests, not necessarily under the circumstances of their own choosing.” The Iranian revolution was made by what its protagonists deemed possible, but also by the choices they did not make.

## NOTES

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53. “Islamic cooperatives” were set up, often by bazaaris, shop owners, office workers and students, to provide low-priced necessary products to the poor.
54. “Gostash-e Shorahaye Mahali Va Ta’avoniha-ye Islami [Expansion of Neighbourhood Committees and Islamic Cooperatives],” *Ayandegan*, 25 Dey 1357/15 January 1979.
55. “Goftogu ba Saeed Jalili: Mardom Khedmatresan-e Vaque’ira be Zur Kandida Mikardand [Interview with Saeed Jalili: People Would Nominate Those Who Served Them by Force],” *Mehrnews* (1 Shahrivar 1392/23 August 2013), <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2036830/> - مردم-خدمت-رسان-واقعی-را-به-زور-کاندیدا-می-کردند.
56. “Mosahebeh ba aghaye Mohandes Abolfazl Hakimi [Interview with Engineer Abolfazl Hakimi].”
57. Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*, 161–162.
58. Mohammad Javad Khatami, “Be Karkonan-e Mobarez-e San’at-e Naft va be Hame Mobarezan-e Rah-e Azadi [To the Militant Employees of the Oil Industry and to All Who Struggle for Freedom],” *Ayandegan*, 12 Bahman 1357/1 February 1979.
59. Kai Bird, “Iranian Oil Workers and Revolution,” in *America’s Energy. Reports from the Nation on 100 Years of Struggle for the Democratic Control of Our Resources*, ed. Robert Engler (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 235.
60. Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran*, 218.
61. Ibid., 101.
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73. Paul Blackledge, "Thinking About (New) Social Movements. Some Insights from the British Marxist Historians," in *Marxism and Social Movements*, ed. Colin Barker et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 265.
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77. Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, 44–49.
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79. For a more elaborate discussion of this point see Peyman Jafari, "Linkages of Oil and Politics. Oil Strikes and Dual Power in the Iranian Revolution," in *Labor History* (forthcoming).
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