

# Labor Rights in Iran

A Zamaneh Project

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A Report By



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**Zamaneh Media** publishes its Labor Newsletter in Persian and English every two months. The focus of the newsletter is safety and health at work, discrimination in the workplace, labor laws, women, working children, contract issues, unemployment, postponement or non-payment of wages, and matters related to labor organizations.

Last year, we decided to provide a summary of events in the form of a yearly report in order to give an overview of the situation of Iranian workers over a longer period. This is the second annual report being published in Persian and English on May 1st, International Workers' Day. This report outlines the events and trends between May 2019 and May 2020.

For more detailed information please visit:

<https://www.tribunezamaneh.com/labor>

## Last Year Was a Bad Year

Last year began for Iranians with deadly floods and ended with the outbreak of the new coronavirus. As in recent years, the economic crisis, the halt in production, unemployment and rising living costs comprised the news headlines.

Be it a natural disaster, economic crisis, geopolitical tensions, or other crises, the remedy seems to always be the same for the rulers: pay the expenses out of the pockets of the workers and lower classes. Economic sanctions press hard on workers and other deprived social groups. Poverty and unemployment are on the rise. At the same time, the slightest protest by workers is crushed.

Many Iranian workers welcomed the year 1398 (Iranian calendar) while still waiting for deferred wages and end-of-year benefits. The same thing happened again on the opening night of 1399 (March 21, 2020).

The start of major floods in the first week of the Iranian New Year (March 2019) caused 25 casualties and financial losses in 25 provinces of Iran, leaving at least 30,000 workers unemployed. The Aghola industrial town in Golestan province was drenched in floodwaters, and farmers lost their jobs in Lorestan and Khuzestan provinces.

In the same year that Iran's Supreme Leader labeled the "year of production boom," the first labor news after the New Year holidays included collective layoffs, and the non-renewal of worker's contracts in oil, petrochemical and gas projects. The year ended with the decline in oil sales to its lowest level in four decades, with many oil and gas projects shut down or on the verge of shutting down. The production of industrial parts was also stagnant due to US sanctions.

Unpaid wages, layoffs and unemployment were the most recurring labor news of 2019-2020.

The Yaftabad Brick Factory, Naward Steel Factory in Ivan city, and Sahand Tabriz Combine Manufacturing, as well as many other production units, were forced to close last year. Shush Sugar Factory workers, like many other workers in large and small businesses, lost their jobs. The financial crisis led to 6,000 workers in the medical sector being dismissed.

In many companies and institutions, wage arrears now exceed 10 months.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in February 2020, the wave of forced holidays and layoffs intensified. Street vending was banned, borders were closed, *kulbars* (human mules) lost their jobs, and the weakened healthcare system collapsed in the shadow of privatization.

Thousands of construction workers, flower and plant market workers, workers at travel and tourism service companies, restaurant and hotel workers, among others, were sent on forced leave. At the same time, there have been numerous reports of workers continuing to work in inessential sectors and in crowded environments, without safety precautions.

It was in this context that, just as the coronavirus outbreak has endangered the health of the, the Supreme Leader called 2020 the year of the “production leap.”

In a statement, more than 150 intellectuals and social and political activists called for structural changes in favor of welfare and public social security, emphasizing demands such as basic public income and free health insurance. More than 900 additional people have signed the statement.

According to official statistics, the number of people infected with the coronavirus in Iran has reached 100,000, and nearly 6,000 people have died from the virus so far.

The coronavirus targets workers and wage earners both directly and indirectly. According to a survey by the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), income has fallen by more than 50%, the coronavirus crisis has shut down approximately 42% of businesses, and unemployment has reached 13.5% among wage earners. (This survey was conducted nationally by telephone on April 12-15 April 2020. The survey had a sample size of 1563 people who were 18+ years of age.)

Under these circumstances, the Supreme Labor Council set this year’s minimum monthly wage at 1,835,000 tomans (~ 123 USD). This was done without the consent of the workers' representatives (who are from Islamic labor organizations and aligned with the government) and without taking into account the official inflation rate and household subsistence basket (which are the two criteria for determining the

minimum wage in accordance with Article 41 of the Labor Code). In previous joint statements, independent labor organizations had called for an increase in the minimum wage to 9 million tomans (~600 USD).

The minimum wage in 1399 (March 2020 to March 2021) will increase by only 21% compared to 1398, while last year the minimum wage increased by 36.5% compared to 1397.

Given the escalation of economic sanctions, the deepening of the inflationary recession, the severity of social discontents and, of course, the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus, researchers predict the inflation rate for 1399 to be at least 40%.

According to Abdul Nasser Hemmati, head of the Central Bank of Iran (on March 29, 2020), the inflation rate in 1398 reached 41.2%, while in 1397, the figure was 31.2%.

According to the Statistical Center of Iran in March 2020, the misery index in Iran, which combines the unemployment and inflation rates, increased between the fall of 2017 and the fall of 2018. The highest rate on the misery index was 53.1%, which was recorded during the summer of 2019. The misery index then decreased slightly to 50.6% in the fall of 2019. This index was 20% from the spring of 2017 to 2018.

According to official figures of the Statistical Center of Iran, in December 2019, the total volume of liquidity in the country was about 151 billion dollars, which shows a growth of 20.2% compared to the end of 2018. Independent economists estimate liquidity growth rates at 22% to 28%. Central Bank reports in February 2020 also showed this upward trend. The rising liquidity combined with a decline in government oil revenues, and Iran's diminishing foreign exchange reserves being spent on managing the coronavirus crisis, will lead to a further budget deficit.

The year 1398 (March 2019 to March 2020) was also a year of protests by the lower classes, a crackdown of these protests, and heavy jail sentences for the labor activists.

In November 2019, after a sudden increase in the price of gasoline, a massive outburst by the unemployed, workers and marginalized urban groups erupted and engulfed Iran; a rage that was soon drowned in blood.



Those who were killed in November 2019

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## An Unprecedented November

With a continuing economic crisis, workers' protests and strikes have continued over the past year in various economic sectors and in different parts of the country.

Workers at the following companies went on strike for various reasons: Nekachub in Miandorod, Jahan Vegetable Oil in Zanzan, Kowsar Tile in Abarkuh, Chadormelo Mine, Qazvin Metering Company, Fasa Sugar, Combined Cycle Power Plant in Abadan, Imam Khomeini Hospital in Karaj, Niloufar Tile in Birjand, Bakhtar Pharmacy, Kermanshah Biochemistry, Pars Haft Tappeh Paper Making, Golnaz Kerman Vegetable Oil, Zayandeh Rood Chadegan Entertainment Village, Persian Gulf Transportation Company in Bandar Abbas, Mazandaran Foresters and Isfahan and Khuzestan Farmers.

Deferred wage demands are still the main reason for workers' protests in different parts of Iran. Non-payment of premiums, cessation of production capacity, dismissal of workers, lack of job security, privatization, non-implementation of the job classification plan, and the arrest and suppression of union activists are among the reasons for the labor protests.

In 1398, as in previous years, the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Industrial Complex, Hepco and Azarab in Arak were the main centers of workers' protests. The root of the workers' problems in these three companies is the same, in a word, privatization.



Azarab workers in Arak

In the past year, municipal workers, who have been employed on temporary contracts by temp agencies, have repeatedly staged sit-ins in various parts of the country to protest over wage arrears. Municipalities have blamed contract companies for delaying workers' wages. Contractors also blame municipal managers, arguing that municipalities do not pay their debts to contractors on time.

Workers and employees of the country's Railway Services & Technical Construction Engineering Co. in various parts of the country, as well as urban train workers in Tehran and Ahvaz, have repeatedly rallied to protest delays in their payments and job insecurity. Railway maintenance technicians are calling for the temp agencies to be dismantled and their temporary contracts to be converted to formal ones.

Over the past year in various cities, employed and retired teachers, preschool educators, and literacy movement staff have repeatedly rallied in front of government offices. Temporary contracts and job insecurity are the common focus of labor protests in the education sector.

In November 2019, 16,000 contract teachers wrote letters of protest to lawmakers in the Majlis (parliament) calling for an investigation into their living conditions.

The lack of wage increases in line with rising living costs, the supply of shares of the teachers' Reserve Fund in the stock market, and the commodification of education are among the reasons for teachers' protests. Teachers, meanwhile, call for the elimination of discrimination in the structure of the education system, the right of everyone to free education in accordance with Article 30 of the Constitution, the abolition of the "full-time teacher" plan (a bill that extends the full time schedule from 24 to 30 or more hours a week in return for a modest salary increase), an increase in the share of educators in the state's annual budget, and the right to organize and strike.



Teachers' sit-in, the city of Marivan

In November 2019, the Teachers' Ranking Plan was finally approved by the Cabinet after years of waiting. With a 50% increase in government employees' salaries on February 19, 2020 (according to Chapter 10 of the Civil Service Management Law), however, teachers were virtually deprived of the benefits of the ranking scheme.

Nurses and health workers have rallied several times in various parts of the country to protest their employment situation and wages. This is the

same labor force that has been at the forefront of the fight against the coronavirus without protective equipment since early February.

On November 29, 2019, workers and staff at Isfahan's Al-Zahra Hospital went on strike to protest the non-payment of wages. On January 2, 2020, nurses in Mashhad gathered in front of the Khorasan Razavi governor's office to protest the postponement of their wage demands. A few days earlier, the Nurse's House (a nursing union) wrote in an open letter to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani that nurses would not participate in government ceremonies as a sign that they want to protest the poor work conditions and low salaries. The Ministry of Health has entrusted the hiring of nurses to private temp agencies. They hire temporary nurses at minimum wage. The overdue claims of nurses in some public hospitals have reached 14 months. Nurses also oppose the implementation of the *Ghasedak* Payment System - a plan based on “performance pay” (instead of overtime pay) that even the Minister of Health, Saeed Namaki, does not support.



Medical staff sit-in for wage arrears

Retirees also rallied several times last year, including on June 18, November 10, and December 23, 2019, in front of the Islamic Consultative Assembly building.

The main claim of the pensioners' protest was the insufficient funding for the implementation of the law on the equalization of pensions and the “parametric reform of the Social Security Law” plan.

Not only does the government not provide credit for the implementation of the law on equalization of pensions, they also refuse to pay a debt of 250 trillion tomans (~17 billion USD) to the Social Security Organization. The consequence of this situation is that the Social Security Administration cannot pay pensions. According to official statistics, 70% of Iranian retirees and pensioners live below the poverty line.

The largest protest movement of the year started at midnight on November 15.

The National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company, without prior notice, announced in the middle of the night on November 15, 2019 that a gasoline quota had been reinstated and that the price of a liter of gasoline had increased by 50% to 1,500 tomans. The price per liter of non-quota gasoline increased by 300% to 3,000 tomans. This sudden increase in gasoline prices was approved by the Supreme Council for Economic Coordination, which includes the heads of the three government branches as members and was fully supported fully by the Supreme Leader. The change bypassed Iran's parliament entirely.

The Iranian government raised the price of gasoline overnight while its oil revenues were plummeting, facing a budget deficit.

Following the news, people took to the streets in the major cities of Mashhad, Tehran, Ahvaz, Kermanshah, Sanandaj, Javanrood, Marivan, Urumia, Bukan, Sirjan and Shiraz. The protests then spread like wildfire to 200 other cities, both large and small.

Iranian security forces violently suppressed the protests. At the same time, the internet was shut down nationwide from November 16-24 by order of the Supreme National Security Council.

According to observers, analysts, and senior government officials, the protesters were composed primarily of the unemployed, economically disadvantaged, and the urban marginalized strata. Seyed Hossein Naghavi, spokesman for the National Security Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, said on November 25 that most of those arrested were unemployed or low-income workers. This shows that an increase in gasoline prices directly and gravely affects the living conditions of wage earners and urban poor.

## Suppression of Trade Union Activities

The Islamic Republic of Iran does not tolerate the activities of independent trade unions and, with a police perspective on trade union issues, it explicitly refuses to recognize the right to strike and protest. The government almost always violently suppresses workers' protests.

The cycle of suppression of trade union activity, which begins with the non-recognition of independent trade unions in Iranian labor law, is completed in practice with:

- Police attacking workers' rallies;
- Threatening and intimidating labor activists and protesting workers and expelling them from the workplace;
- Arresting trade union activists and filing criminal charges against them such as “disrupting the public order,” “propaganda against the state” and “acting against national security”;
- Physical and psychological torture during the arrest and detention of labor activists, which sometimes includes extracting and broadcasting their forced confessions;
- Preventing the free circulation of news about union activities;
- Trying to create parallel unions that are aligned with the government; and
- The imprisonment of labor union activists in unsanitary locations without access to medical care.

On April 26, 2019, four days before International Workers' Day, security forces arrested 12 labor activists, including Alireza Saghafi, Haleh Safarzadeh, Parvin Mohammadi, and Valeh Zamani, at the Jahan-Nama Park in Karaj.

On May 1, 2019, Labor Day, security forces arrested more than 40 people during a rally in front of the Islamic Consultative Assembly building, including Neda Naji, Atefeh Rangriz, Hassan Saeedi, Farhad Sheikhi, Nasrin Javadi, Nahid Khodajoo, Marzieh Amiri, Anisha Asadollahi and Keyvan Samimi. Some detainees remained in custody for an extended period, including Neda Naji, who spent 300 days in temporary detention.

On July 6, 2019, Neda Naji's husband revealed that prison officials had “beaten” her and Atefeh Rangriz.

One day after Labor Day, police stormed a rally in front of the Ministry of Education buildings in several cities, arresting several teachers, including Rasoul Badaghi and Mohammad Taghi Fallahi, two board members of the Teachers' Union.

In the beginning of the school year in September, Mohammad Habibi, Ismail Abdi, Mahmoud Beheshti Langroudi, Abdolreza Ghanbari and dozens of other teachers' rights activists were imprisoned.

During the first half of last year alone, security and judicial officials summoned, arrested, interrogated, tried and imprisoned more than 60 teachers, according to the Iranian Teachers' Union (of Tehran).

On April 21, 2020, while Mohammad Habibi, a teacher and trade union activist, was still in prison, the Education Department issued his severance pay and notified him of his dismissal.



Wall slogan: Mohammad Habibi, teacher and union activist, “*His crime is demanding a free education for all. Prison, flogging, dismissal; Our education sinks in a swamp!*”

Over the past year, there have been several reports of police raiding protest rallies in three major factories, including the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Industrial Complex, Hepco, and Azarab in Arak, each time threatening or detaining groups of workers.

On June 17, 2019, sugarcane workers in Haft-Tappeh published the names of about 100 workers and activists who had been persecuted throughout the year.

Earlier last summer, Iran's Deputy Police Chief, Ayub Soleimani, announced that the Economic Security Police had been set up to guarantee the "security of the business environment," which many interpret as intending to suppress workers' protests. According to Soleimani, the purpose of forming the Economic Security Police is to deal with those who "intentionally or unintentionally act as the enemy's infantry, intending to disrupt the country's economy."

Last year saw heavy sentences for labor activists, labor rights advocates and labor journalists.

*Table of Labor Activists' Arrests and sentencings*

Date of sentencing in the Court of First Instance	Name of imprisoned labor activist	Case related to	Verdict issued by the First Court	Date of sentencing in the Court of Appeal	Judgment issued by the Court of Appeal	Enforceable sentence	Court of First Instance branch – Judge's name	Court of Appeal branch – Judge's name
7 September 2019	Ismail Bakhshi	Haft Tappeh	14 years imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years in prison and flogging	<b>Five years and whipping</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
7 September 2019	Mohammad Khanifar	Haft Tappeh	6 years imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years in prison and flogging	<b>Five years and whipping</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
12 December 2019	Ali Nejati	Haft Tappeh	5 years imprisonment					
7 September 2019	Sepideh Gholian	Haft Tappeh	18 Year of imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
7 September 2019	Amir Hossein Mohammadi Fard	Gam magazine	18 Year of imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
7 September 2019	Sanaz Allahyari	Gam magazine	18 Year of imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
7 September 2019	Asal Mohammadi	Gam magazine	18 Year of imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
7 September 2019	Amir Amirgholi	Gam magazine	18 Year of imprisonment	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
24 August 2019	Marzieh Amiri	Workers' Day demonstrations	11 years and six months in prison and 74 lashes	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
24 August 2019	Atefeh Rangriz	Workers' Day demonstrations	10 One year and six months in prison and 148 lashes	14 December 2019	Five years imprisonment	<b>Five years</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar

4 December 2019	Neda Naji	Workers' Day demonstrations	5 years and 6 months in prison	18 February 2020	Two years and six months in prison	<b>Two years and six months</b>	Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court - Mohammad Reza Moghiseh	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
24 August 2019	Hassan Saecdi- Member of the Workers' Union of Tehran Bus Company	Workers' Day demonstrations in connection with the workers of Tehran Bus Company	5 years in prison and 2 years ban on the use of smart telecommunications and membership in political and social groups	29 December 2019	Five years in prison and two years ban on the use of smart telecommunications and membership in political and social groups	<b>Five years in prison and two years ban on the use of smart telecommunications and membership in political and social groups</b>	Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court - Iman Afshari	Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals - Ahmad Zargar
28 November 2019	Maryam (Anisha) Asadollahi	Workers' Day demonstrations in connection with the workers of Tehran Bus Company	One year in prison, copying of designated books, one month providing social services to "veterans"	He did not appeal	He did not appeal	<b>Six months in prison, three months out of these six months can be turned into providing social services to "veterans"</b>	Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court - Iman Afshari	He did not appeal

The table above includes only some of the rulings issued against labor activists last year. The complete list is much longer.

In one example, Branch 101 of the Criminal Court in Borujen sentenced dozens of farmers in Beldaji village to a total of 344 months in prison and 2,580 lashes on charges of “disturbing public order” and “disobedience to government officials while on duty.” According to the July 31, 2019 verdict, 86 of the 103 defendants in the case were each sentenced to four months in prison and 30 lashes. Farmers living in the village of Beldaji had protested on July 19, 2016 against the plan to transfer water from Choghakhor to Sefid Dasht in Borujen. The protest turned violent with the intervention of security forces. One person was killed, 108 injured, and more than 70 were arrested.

The most severe and violent crackdown in the history of the Islamic Republic since the deadly prolonged violence of the 1980s took place in November 2019.

At least 304 protesters, including 23 children, were killed by Iranian military and police forces during the November protests, according to Amnesty International. Reuters quoted Interior Ministry sources as saying that the death toll had risen to about 1,500 in 190 cities. About 7,000 to 8,600 people were arrested in 22 provinces of Iran. Many were tried with complete media silence.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement on November 22, 2019, expressing “deep concern” over the killing of protesters in Iran.

## Women and Labor Rights: Unemployment, Discrimination, Imprisonment

According to the World Economic Forum's 2019 annual report, Iran ranked 148th in the gender gap after countries such as Saudi Arabia, Togo and Bahrain, six places lower than the previous year.

According to official statistics, the employment rate for women is almost one-fifth of that of men, and the unemployment rate for women is about twice that of men. This figure increases for educated women compared to educated men. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for women in urban areas is more than twice as high as for women in rural areas.

According to the [Statistical Center of Iran](#), in the winter of 2019, the participation rate of women aged 15 and older was 15.3%. This figure is 69.4% for men. According to the report, 69.1% of all unemployed women are graduates of higher education. This statistic is calculated based on information regarding employment status of individuals from February 1-14, 2020 (before the outbreak of COVID-19).

According to an independent academic study, if you compare the fall of 2019 with the fall of 2018, about 472,000 people were added to the male workforce, while during the same period, the number of female employees decreased by about 5,000.

A review of official statistics on the employment of women in Iran shows that the rate of women's economic participation between 2005 and 2016 decreased from 17% to 14.9%. In 2018, of the 33.3 million working-age women, only 16.1% were economically active.

Contrary to the International Labour Organization's conventions 100 and 111, which have been adopted by Iran, women in the Islamic Republic of Iran are deprived of equal rights to work. Compared to men, not only are women less likely to find employment and have unequal access to job opportunities, there is also gender discrimination in wages, health coverage, and job benefits.

As the economic downturn intensified in 2019, job security for female workers degraded more than for male workers, as many women are employed in informal jobs and on temporary contracts.

According to the Social Security Research Institute, restated by Somayeh Golpour, Chairwoman of the Women's Committee of the Supreme Council of Trade Unions (which is government-affiliated), 80% of the uninsured workers in 2017 were women.

Government agencies and religious institutions keep calling for women to return home and to work in domestic jobs. The Islamic Republic's plans to support women's employment are often limited to jobs that are done at home. In the face of this discriminatory trend, women are forced to leave the job market early, get married and become mothers.

Women sometimes face ideological barriers to employment as well. For example, fisherwomen on Hengam Island in Hormozgan province announced last year that officials would not give them fishing licenses on the pretext that “fishing is not a woman's job.”



Wall slogans: Anisha Asadollahi, Marzieh Amiri, Neda Naji, and Atefeh Rangriz, labor rights activists in prison

In 2019, the list of imprisoned female labor activists was longer than in previous years.

Marzieh Amiri, Neda Naji, Anisha Asadollahi, Asal Mohammadi, Sanaz Allahyari and Sepideh Qalyan were among the female prisoners last year who were either sentenced or serving long prison terms.

In the November 2019 protests, the role of women was so significant that it provoked the male-dominated government spokespersons to say that women led the protests.

Fars News Agency, a media outlet closely aligned with Iran's security and military agencies, wrote on November 20: "In many places, especially on the outskirts of Tehran, women, apparently between the ages of 30 and 35, played a special role in leading the riots."

On the evening of November 20 at 20:30, the official tv news, while claiming that women, under the influence of "foreigners", led the protests, broadcast a "confession" by a woman named Fatemeh Davand who had apparently organized protests in the city of Bukan.

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## **Afghan Workers: Double Discrimination and Exploitation**

In 2019, more than 48,500 Afghan refugees left Iran or were deported, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in Iran in early February, the outflow of Afghan citizens back to Afghanistan intensified. In just two weeks, from March 8-21, 2020, 115,410 migrants returned to Afghanistan, according to Toby Lanzer, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the UN's political office in Afghanistan.

At the same time, in March 2020, there were reports of discrimination in Iranian hospitals regarding the treatment of Afghan patients suspected of having contracted COVID-19. At least 50 Afghan citizens have died in Iran from the coronavirus, according to Ebrahim Hejazi, head of immigration affairs at the Afghan embassy in Tehran (March 29, 2020).

Under these conditions, the penalty for hiring a foreign worker increased by 24% compared to last year. Employers who use foreign labor in 2020 will be fined 305,904 tomans (about 20 USD) per day for each illegal foreign worker.

According to different statistics, there are between 1.5 to more than 2.5 million Afghan refugees living in Iran, at least one million of whom are

undocumented. Most of these immigrants are seasonal workers. They often work in low-income, informal, and unsafe jobs, without insurance, and in sub-standard conditions.

According to Article 120 of the Iranian Labor Law, foreign nationals cannot work in Iran unless they have an entry visa with a specified work permit. Any employment of foreign nationals without a work permit, or their employment in a business other than that specified in their work permit, is punishable by 91 to 180 days in prison under Article 181 of the Labor Code.

In addition, the employment of Afghan migrant workers in Iran's 16 western and central provinces has been banned. In the provinces where employment is still permitted, Afghans are only allowed to work in construction, agriculture, kilns, stone cutting, waste recycling, well drilling, grave digging, chemical fertilizer production and the like. Their employment in supermarkets, restaurants, and grocery stores are forbidden.

These regulations push migrant workers to accept difficult jobs in work environments that do not meet health and safety standards. They receive the lowest possible wages. This is the main reason for the high rate of work accidents among Afghan migrant workers. In addition, government officials treat Afghan workers in ways that are humiliating and discriminatory.

The Iranian government has systematically refused to issue or renew residence permits for Afghan refugees. Afghans are under a constant threat of dismissal.

On May 9, 2019, Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, in a televised interview threatened that if sanctions cause oil sales to reduce to zero, the Islamic Republic will expel Afghan immigrants.

Following the November 2019 protests, some officials laid blame on Afghan immigrants. On December 21, 2019, Mansour Haji, Director General of Foreign Citizens and Immigrants of Tehran Governorate, called immigrants and "Afghan nationals" the "main axis" of the protests on the outskirts of Tehran. He warned that "many Afghans and other foreigners are not working class anymore; they are becoming

employers themselves." He called on the Labor Department to "take serious action in the field" and address the issue.

On December 25, Mehdi Mahmoudi, Director General of Citizens and Immigrants Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior, threatened foreign immigrants by saying that they would be transferred to an "immigrants' camp" to be eventually expelled if they entered Iran illegally.

At least nine Afghan citizens were killed during protests in November, according to Ibrahim Hejazi, head of immigration at the Afghan Embassy in Tehran.

## ***Kulbars on Deadly Slopes***

Last year, hundreds of *kulbars* (border porters or "human mules") in the Kurdish areas of western Iran (including the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam) were killed or wounded by frost, landmines, falling from heights, or by direct gunfire from border guards.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in early February 2020, and the closure of Iran's western borders, the *kulbars*, who had previously been victims of the cold and bullets, were deprived of their high-risk job.

In 2019, at least 76 *kulbars* were killed and 176 others were injured in the border region of Kurdistan, according to a Kurdish human rights organization. Compared to 2018, the number of deaths and injuries increased by 8.3%. According to the report, seven of the victims were children, including 17-year-old Azad Khosravi and 14-year-old Farhad Khosravi, two children from Marivan who died in December 2019 from frostbite in the Tete Heights of the Oramanat Mountains.

There are no official statistics on the number of *kulbars*. In July 2019, Hassan Alavi, a Sanandaj MP, estimated that in Kurdistan province alone there are more than 100,000.

Islamic Republic officials have repeatedly announced plans to organize and settle *kulbars* in border markets, none of which have materialized.

After the tragic deaths of Azad and Farhad Khosravi, two young Marivani *kulbars*, some MPs announced a plan to ban border guards from firing directly on *kulbars*. That plan also did not come to fruition.



Death of 14-year-old Farhad Khosravi, a *kulbar* from Marivan

Independent experts see *kulbari* in Iran's Kurdish regions as the result of decades of underdevelopment and discriminatory policies by the Iranian government in these areas. According to official statistics, the unemployment rate in these areas is higher than the average unemployment rate in the country.

## **Working Children: Garbage, Coronavirus, and Bullets**

In May 2019, the Statistics Center of the Ministry of Labor announced the existence of 499,000 working children aged 10 to 17 based on 2017 data. Human rights activists, however, estimate the number of working children to be between three to seven million.

The Statistics and Information Center of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare announced in June 2019 that the number of working children has increased by 21% over the last two years.

Iran's crisis-stricken economy is sending more and more children to the labor market instead of school. Coinciding with the start of the school year, Ahmad Reza Parandeh, Director General of Social Harms at the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, put the number of children who had dropped out of school at 141,000.

According to Alim Yarmohammadi, Zahedan's representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, in Sistan and Baluchistan province alone, the number of children who had dropped out of school was 127,000.

Over the past 35 years, Iranian officials have unveiled nearly 30 different projects to organize working children, almost all of which have failed. In the summer of 2019, there were reports that an old plan approved by the Cabinet in 2005 to organize working children in Tehran and several other cities would be implemented. The implementers of the project, which include private institutions, the police and municipal officials, have come under criticism by children's rights activists for their violent behavior towards working children.

At the time of the project's implementation, the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights announced that there were about 4,700 child garbage collectors in Tehran alone. Many of these children are collecting and sorting waste and debris through municipal contractors.

The employment of children in waste recycling centers is a clear violation of the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (182), which Iran agreed to in 2002. According to the agreement, which was approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly in 2001, along with its supplementary recommendations in 16 articles and approved by the Guardian Council, the use of children in 36 jobs has been banned, including employment in garbage collection, waste treatment, garbage transport and dumping sites.

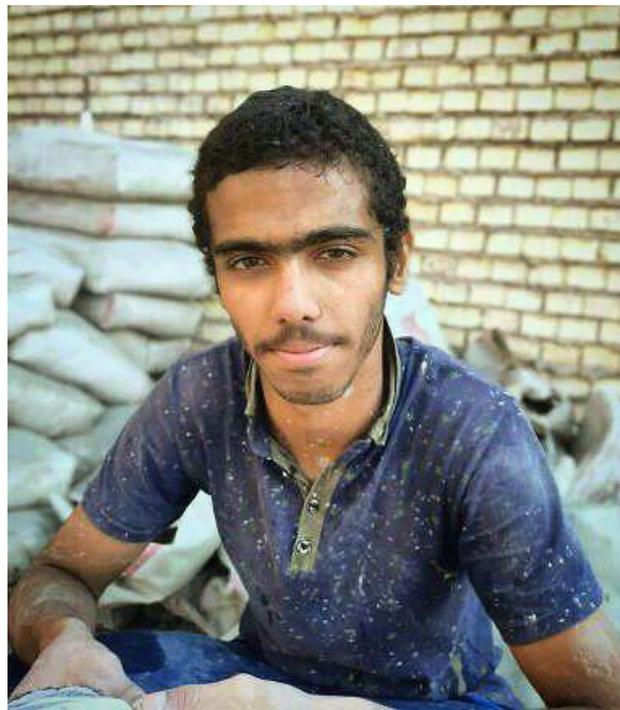
Article 79 of the Iranian Labor Law prohibits the employment of children under the age of 15. According to Article 84 of the same law, hard and harmful work is prohibited for children under the age of 18.

According to a study published in May 2019 on the garbage collection mafia in Iran, of the 14,000 people in Tehran who earn a living by collecting waste, 53% are under the age of 17. According to the report, 89% of these children are immigrants - mostly from Afghanistan.

The outbreak of the coronavirus has raised concerns among children rights activists about these youth, who often work without gloves and masks and in unhealthy, non-standard conditions.

On March 13, 2020, the Association for Helping Children at Risk issued a statement warning of the danger posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, which threatens the health of working children, especially garbage collectors, and called on the government to allocate funds to support children as soon as possible. Government agencies, however, are passing responsibility to each other, and no effective action has yet been taken.

Iranian government officials often deflect responsibility by saying that a large percentage of these children are non-Iranian immigrants.



Mohsen Mohammadpour, 17, who was killed by a riot police baton hitting his head during a labor protest.

Many hazards threaten Iran's youth – underage work, lack of education, garbage collection, the threat of the coronavirus - and now death by deadly weapons has been added to the list. At least 17 children were killed by the Iranian security forces during protests in November. Among them was 17-year-old Mohsen Mohammadpour, who lived in Khorramshahr and worked in construction while finishing his studies.

## Work Accidents Continue to Take Their Toll

According to the Mehr state news agency, during the first quarter of 1398 (March 21 to May 21, 2019), 421 workers lost their lives, a number which grew by 17.9% when compared to the same period last year. According to the Iranian Legal Medicine Organization (ILMO), this number reached 898 in the first six months of the year, which indicates a 7.5% increase in work accidents leading to death, compared to the first six months of 1397. According to official statistics, this number reached 1,363 in the first nine months of 1398.

ILMO reports show that the annual number of work-related accidents in Iran has been on the rise since 2015.

Official statistics on work accidents in Iran only reflect workers covered by labor law and social security insurance. Most victims of work accidents are day laborers without social security.

According to Article 148 of the Iranian Labor Law, employers are required to insure their workers under the Social Security Act. According to Article 95, the responsibility for enforcing the law and observing the health and technical standards is generally borne by the employer. According to Article 91 of the same law, the employer is required to provide the necessary equipment and facilities to ensure the protection and health of its workers, to train them, and to observe safety and health regulations.

Iranian government agencies often admit the main reason for the accidents is the lack of safety standards in the workplace. They do not mention, however, which organizations are responsible for monitoring the safety measures. According to Article 96 of the Labor Law, the Office of Labor Inspection in Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for overseeing the proper implementation of the labor law and compliance with the rules of technical and safety protection.

The highest accident rates are in the construction sector. Falling from a height is the most frequent cause of death. Severe injuries, electrocution, burns, and suffocation are other common causes of death from work-related accidents in Iran. Since early February, another factor has been added to the list: the coronavirus.

Despite the outbreak of the coronavirus in Iran, work in non-essential sectors has not stopped. Workers in the service and medical sectors do not have protective equipment. Many workers are now at a crossroads: should they work in an unsafe and crowded environment, often without insurance or protective equipment, or face unemployment and hunger?

A video released by the media shows sugarcane workers of Haft Tappeh being sprayed collectively without wearing masks and gloves.

Officials have not provided statistics on the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 in the workplace. According to reports released on March 15, 2020, however, at least seven nurses have died after contracting the coronavirus at work.

Please visit the Labor Rights in Iran webpage:

(Persian) <https://www.tribunezameh.com/labor>

(English) <https://en.radiozameh.com/labor>