



Labor Rights in Iran

A Zamaneh Project

Volume 12

April - May 2020



Workers' Rights in Iran

No. 12

April - May 2020

Contents

Introduction	2
Major Issues	3
Wage Suppression	4
Coronavirus: Poverty Threatens the Lives of Unemployed Workers	5
Coronavirus: Working in Unsafe Conditions	8
Coronavirus and Medical Staff: If They Survive, They Are Fired!	10
Imposition of Poverty on Retirees	12
Protests	12
Summons and Trials Never Stop	15
Migrant Workers: The Harirud Incident	16

Introduction

This is the 12th bimonthly [Labor Rights Newsletter of Zamaneh Media](#). The focus of these bimonthly reports has consistently been on unemployment, deferment or non-payment of wages and benefits, protests and strikes, freedom of association and assembly, independent unions, discrimination at workplace, issues of labor law, contractual violations, women's labor, child labor, and the conditions of the *Kulbars*.

Zamaneh Media monitors the above-mentioned labor issues daily and this bimonthly report presents the “big picture” about the most important Iranian workers' rights issue over the past two months. The bimonthly newsletter aims to increase awareness regarding the situation faced by Iranian workers. The 12th report covers issues that occurred in April and May 2020. The report does not cover all labor issues or events that occurred during this period.

On May 1st every year, Zamaneh Media publishes an annual report examining major labor issues over the past year. On May 1, 2020, the [Second Annual Report](#) was published.

Major Issues

Iranian workers welcomed the new year on March 21 without an adequate minimum wage or guaranteed job security after the Nowruz holidays.

Government officials and employers, under the pretext of the COVID-19 outbreak, delayed deciding on the minimum wage and eventually suppressed wages for millions of workers when the holidays were over. The outbreak also shut down small and large businesses. Service industry workers on temporary contracts without insurance coverage lost their jobs. A recession in the construction sector resulted in these workers becoming unemployed. Street vendors hoping to make ends meet at the end of the Persian year were denied access to the streets and crowds. Restaurants were closed and their workers, who often work part-time without contracts, were fired. Employees in the tourism services sector faced a similar situation, as did clothing store staff, bazaar porters, and everyone who was not covered by labor and insurance laws. Nurses and clinical workers did not fare better; many of them were fired even though public and private hospitals were suffering from a nurse shortage. The coronavirus outbreak has exacerbated the shortage and increased the workload of the health workers who remain employed. Under the same pretext of the pandemic, several industrial enterprises stopped production and sent workers on forced short- and long-term leave. Some companies did not renew the workers' contracts.

Working conditions were also hazardous for individuals who were forced to go to work despite the restrictive regulations known as social distancing. The companies refused to provide protective equipment or improve the safety of the work environment. Workers in non-standard and high-risk areas were most likely guaranteed to be exposed to the virus. Protests by the laborers have been fruitless.

Amid this situation, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, called on workers, in his Nowruz message, to work harder and called for a "production leap." The government and the judiciary approved and implemented policies to help employers to increase production.

The spread of COVID-19 and the resulting social constraints made labor gatherings impossible. The ceremony to mark International Workers' Day was not held, but the summoning and prosecution of workers and labor rights activists continued.



Graffiti in Tehran to protest the dismissal of nurses

Wage Suppression

After the Nowruz holidays, the Supreme Labor Council approved and announced the new minimum wage, despite opposition from worker representatives of the Council, who are themselves government-affiliated workers. The Council's workers-contingent members did not sign the resolution, which imposes wage suppression on at least 13 million workers.

The Supreme Labor Council set the monthly minimum wage at 1,850,000 tomans (116 USD, at the current rate of \$1=16,000 tomans), an increase of 21% over last year, but

still half the official inflation rate of 42%. According to Article 41 of the Labor Code, the minimum wage must be based on the inflation rate announced by the Central Bank as well as the subsistence basket. The subsistence basket is equivalent to the cost of living for a family of four. The salary committee of the Supreme Labor Council estimated the subsistence basket at 4,940,000 tomans (309 USD).¹

However, under the pretext of the “inability of the production sector to increase costs” and “loss of existing jobs,” government and employer representatives in the Supreme Labor Council did not accept the workers’ demand to increase the minimum wage to 2.8 million tomans. Ignoring the three worker members, the Supreme Labor Council agreed on 1.85 million tomans as the monthly minimum wage.

Many labor organizations denounced the minimum wage bill as illegal and appealed to the Court of Administrative Justice for it to be reconsidered.² The Court of Administrative Justice ordered the Supreme Labor Council to re-examine the minimum wage. Employers, however, have threatened to lay off workers if wages increase, making it impossible for the minimum wage to be reconsidered.³

Coronavirus: Poverty Threatens the Lives of Unemployed Workers

The outbreak of the coronavirus in Iran was followed by a wave of service and manufacturing company closures. At least two million people are expected to lose their jobs. The Research Center of Iran’s Parliament (Majlis) has estimated that the country’s output during the first half of this year (March 21 to September 21, 2020) will be between 7.4% and 17.3% lower than last year. The Center also estimates that 12% to 27% of employees (totaling 2,876,000 - 6,431,000 individuals) will lose their jobs either temporarily or permanently.⁴ The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare has announced that unemployed workers will be covered by unemployment insurance. This, however, only applies to workers who have a record of receiving insurance. As of

¹ Radio Zamaneh, April 23, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/498344>

² Radio Zamaneh, May 11, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/504095>

³ Tasnim News Agency, April 14, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2SXfRSb>

⁴ Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, April 27, 2020; <https://rc.majlis.ir/en/report/show/1510373>

the publication of this report, no funds have been paid to any of the eligible unemployed workers.



Many construction workers have lost their jobs and are not eligible for unemployment insurance.

On May 10, President Hassan Rouhani announced that approximately 800,000 workers are registered for unemployment insurance.⁵ Unemployment insurance does not apply to all registrants. The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare estimated the number of workers covered by unemployment insurance at 650,000.⁶ The Central Bank has listed 13 job groups that have suffered the most from the COVID-19 outbreak:

1. Businesses that prepare and distribute ready-to-eat foods, including restaurants, buffets, kitchens, reception halls, cafes, and grocery stores.
2. Tourism-related companies, including hotels, inns, room-in-apartment rentals, tourist complexes, guesthouses, pilgrimages, ecotourism centers, museums, catering, leisure, and travel services.

⁵ Iranian Presidential Information Center, May 10, 2020; <http://president.ir/en/115252>

⁶ Hamshahri Online, May 7, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2LITCBu>

3. Public transportation for passengers outside of cities, including travel by air, road, rail, and sea.
4. General public transportation for passengers in cities.
5. Travel, tourism, and pilgrimage service offices.
6. Production and distribution of clothing.
7. Production and distribution of bags and shoes.
8. Nuts, confectionery, ice cream and juice distribution centers.
9. Sports and leisure clubs.
10. Cultural, educational, artistic and media centers and complexes.
11. Manufacturing, distribution, and sales centers of handicrafts.
12. Private institutions that have operating licenses from the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education, and are active in the medical and diagnostic fields, including laboratory and paraclinical facilities.
13. Driving schools, hairdressers, beauty salons and public baths.

Construction workers who are not covered by social security and unemployment insurance laws are not included on this list. Despite the lull in projects, tens of thousands of construction workers who are without work will not receive unemployment insurance. According to Ali Khodaei, the Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Supreme Center of Islamic Labor Councils, 150,000 construction workers have registered to receive unemployment insurance, but their requests have not been granted and no action has been taken on their behalf.⁷ The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare claims about 900,000 construction workers are covered by insurance. Akbar Shoukat, President of the Construction Workers' Union, has said, however, that workers in the sector are not covered by unemployment insurance because they do not have a permanent employer and insurance contract.⁸

Massoud Babaei, Director General of the Office for the Protection of Jobs and Unemployment Insurance (at the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare) said, "Unemployment benefits only apply to those covered by the Labor Law, the Social Security Act and the Unemployment Insurance Act. It does not include other insured persons, including 'special insurance' members, self-employed, construction workers, carpet weavers, urban transport drivers, etc., who are exempted from the above-

⁷ Gostaresh News, May 7, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2Wp1Ejm>

⁸ Javan Newspaper, April 23, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2yQ5hFL>

mentioned rules.”⁹ The number of workers covered by “special insurance” without an employer is estimated to be about 4 million.

The government has promised to provide free aid and bank loans to unemployed people without insurance. Hossein Mirzaei, a spokesman for the Corona Support Facility at the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, said the loan amounted to one and a half to two million tomans, which would be paid to three groups: (1) construction workers who are named by the Social Security Administration, (2) drivers and peddlers identified by the Ministry of the Interior, and (3) individuals working in the guilds affected by the coronavirus, whose list is provided by the Chamber of Guilds.¹⁰ In addition, a loan of one million tomans will be paid to 20 million households. Installments of these loans are to be withdrawn from the household’s cash subsidy.

Coronavirus: Working in Unsafe Conditions

Beginning in early April, the National Command Center for Management and Countering the Coronavirus has put the reopening of shops and the return of workers to low-risk jobs on the agenda. By April 20, many service centers and some markets had reopened throughout Iran. Employees in these areas often use public transportation. The government made the reopening conditional on health protocols, but the shortage of public transport, and the lack of public access to safety equipment, made doctors and city officials warn that the spread of the coronavirus could accelerate and the number of patients could increase.¹¹

Prior to the reopening of jobs that the government deemed “low-risk”, there were reports of workers suffering from the coronavirus in medical centers, municipalities, public transport, manufacturing units, and “informal” jobs.

In Tehran Municipality, it was officially confirmed that 44 workers were infected and that 17% of the municipality’s workers were suspected of being infected. A member of the Islamic City Council of Tehran announced in March that 10 municipal workers had died of the disease.¹²

⁹ Tasnim News Agency, April 11, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3cplqQ5>

¹⁰ Tabnak, May 11, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2YV2sOz>

¹¹ Hamshahri Online, April 19, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3dGZb9B>

¹² Zamaneh Radio, May 5, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/502625>

The Ministry of Health of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the custodian of the country's COVID-19 statistics, refuses to provide detailed reports and has not yet announced the number of infections and deaths separately. Majid Askarizadeh, a member of the Islamic City Council of Bandar Abbas in Hormozgan province, said: "Coronavirus has seriously endangered street sweepers." In the same city, 110 fish market vendors have been infected with the coronavirus.¹³ In the city of Boroujerd, 24 workers and municipal employees were infected with the coronavirus.¹⁴

The deaths of four Red Crescent staff members was also officially announced. According to the head of the organization, 51 of the organization's employees and volunteers have contracted the coronavirus.¹⁵

On May 2, the CEO of the Tehran Taxi Organization also confirmed the deaths of at least 31 taxi drivers in the city due to the coronavirus. He said the virus had infected at least 450 taxi drivers.¹⁶ The virus also killed two drivers of the Tehran Bus Company, which reported that 181 of its employees had been infected.¹⁷ In March, a member of parliament told the Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance that approximately 3,000 bank employees had contracted COVID-19 and 42 of them had died.¹⁸

The situation was reported to be even more deplorable in production lines, especially those with densely populated working areas. Despite the secrecy of government agencies, it was finally revealed that 40 workers at Urumia Petrochemical Company had contracted COVID-19. When the first case of the disease was reported in February, the company's CEO said he could not delay the production schedule.¹⁹ Ignoring the protests at the refineries, the Ministry of Petroleum of the Islamic Republic of Iran opposed the temporary suspension of the petrochemical projects.²⁰

In March, at least 11 Golgozar miners in the city of Sirjan were infected with the coronavirus and taken to the hospital. The mine's managers, however, did not stop production and actually increased the working hours.²¹ Saeed Samadi, Secretary of the

¹³ Sobh-e-Sahel, April 26, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WS4lc9>

¹⁴ Roozha-ye-Boroujerd, April 23, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3bxAcE2>

¹⁵ Imna News Agency, May 13, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WtbKPW>

¹⁶ Radio Zamaneh, May 2, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/501896>

¹⁷ Shora Online, May 12, 2020; <https://www.shoraonline.ir/news/10137947/>

¹⁸ Hamshahri Online, April 12, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2T6dMn0>

¹⁹ Radio Zamaneh, April 21, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/500103>

²⁰ Radio Zamaneh, March 12, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/493666>

²¹ Radio Zamaneh April 1, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/497071>

Iranian Coal Association, said on April 21 that mining is not considered a high-risk job. Mine workers must work in dark, closed, and crowded environments (in some places, about 600 people together), which makes it impossible to maintain social distancing at all.²²

Coronavirus and Medical Staff: If They Survive, They Are Fired!

The deaths of 130 nurses and medical staff resulting from COVID-19 were recorded between the official announcement of the outbreak and the end of April.²³ The Deputy Minister of Nursing at the Ministry of Health said, however, that the death toll will be announced after the necessary inspections.²⁴ Previously, Mohammad Sharifi Moghaddam, Secretary General of the Nurses' Home, said that the death statistics were a matter of national security and could not be released.

According to the Deputy Minister of Nursing at the Ministry of Health, 65% of the nurses in the hospitals covered by the ministry (equivalent to 80,856 people) are caring for COVID-19 patients. Most of the nurses work part-time and on a temporary basis through HR agencies. Iran's healthcare system was already facing a shortage of nurses before the outbreak of the coronavirus. The spread of the disease exacerbated the shortage, and the Ministry of Health started hiring applicants on temporary and short-term contracts.²⁵

On April 15, a group of nurses at a private hospital in Mashhad were fired as Iran's coronavirus outbreak continued to escalate.²⁶ Farshid Al-Azmani Nodeh, Executive Deputy Director of Tehran's Nursing Organization, said that at least 500 nurses in the province were fired, some of whom had been employed for more 20 years.²⁷ At Atieh Hospital in Tehran alone, 500 nurses were fired. The head of the hospital confirmed the dismissal of the nurses, saying: "Because we could not afford to pay the staff, we had to either let half of the staff go, or cut 20 working days of overtime pay and bonus for all the staff. 100 hospital staff volunteered to go on unpaid leave because they could make

²² Mine News, April 21, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3cuprE4>

²³ IRNA, April 28, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2zDRuSG>

²⁴ Tabnak, April 20, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2LshOSC>

²⁵ Khabar Online, April 16, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WuDBsB>

²⁶ Radio Zamaneh, April 15, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/499081>

²⁷ Borna News, April 18, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2LrGUKz>

a living from other sources. So, we had to terminate the contracts of another 500 out of 1,200 hospital staff.”²⁸



Contract nurses protesting wage inequality

In Gilan province, where the coronavirus outbreak was reported as being critical in March and April, 600 nurses who had been recruited on temporary contracts were fired after the number of visits to medical centers subsided and the number of hospitalized patients decreased.²⁹

Most nurses in Iran’s public and private hospitals are employed by HR agencies on a temporary basis and are not subject to salary increases. Zamaneh Media has written about this issue in detail in the previous bimonthly report.

²⁸ Rasa News Agency, May 14, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3cuBzF6>

²⁹ Khabar Online, May 14, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2yYJCeL>

Imposition of Poverty on Retirees

In this year's budget law, the government is tasked with increasing the pensions of retirees to at least 2,800,000 tomans (175 USD monthly). The increase does not include those covered by Social Security Administration. In April, with the first pension payment of the new Persian year, it became clear that the increase had been postponed. The government has cited a budget deficit as the main reason for the delay in raising the minimum wage for social security pensioners.³⁰

According to Akbar Eftekhari, CEO of the Civil Servants Pension Organization, the minimum pension should be increased to 2.8 million tomans,³¹ a figure that is still far less than the subsistence basket determined by the Supreme Labor Council.³²

Retirees of the Social Security Pension Fund are facing more difficult conditions. Their pensions are based on the minimum wage set by the Supreme Labor Council at 1,850,000 tomans (116 USD), which is 2.5 times less than the subsistence basket. Nearly 75% of retirees in Iran are minimum wage earners and are forced to work part-time, sometimes in informal jobs, to earn a living.

The lack of funding for pension and social security funds comes at a time when inflation has risen to more than 40% and is projected to jump even higher as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Wage suppression has put more retirees on the brink of poverty.

Unofficial estimates put the poverty line at 9 million tomans this year (562 USD), which is nearly four times higher than the minimum wage for Social Security retirees and 2.5 times higher than the average monthly income received by pensioners of the Civil Servants Pension Organization.³³

Protests

The outbreak of the coronavirus prevented workers from holding rallies and delayed a wave of protests. As expected, however, delayed payment of wages, dismissals and

³⁰ Radio Zamaneh, May 9, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/503399>

³¹ Fararoo, May 13, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3cylSfQ>

³² Radio Zamaneh, May 8, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/503007>

³³ Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, May 9, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WVOgSD>

termination of employment, privatization, and failure to provide protective equipment against the virus eventually led to the resumption of protests.

Qazvin Metering Company workers, whose salaries have been delayed for more than three years, rallied several times in front of the Qazvin governor's office.³⁴ Employees of Kut Abdollah municipality in Khuzestan province also stopped working several times to protest the delay in the payment of their wages. Municipal workers in Kurdistan, Lushan, Khorramshahr, Hormoz Island, Khorramabad, Ravansar, Tabriz and Manjil also expressed discontent with the salary delays, which they did by holding rallies, posting videos on social media, or writing letters to government officials and municipalities.³⁵ Most municipal workers are employed on temporary contracts through HR agencies.

Workers of Ahwaz Garbage Recycling Plant gathered on May 5 to protest a two month delay in payment of their wages and the temporary closure of the plant. Workers at a passenger and freight trains company in the city of Joopar in Kerman province, who were laid off after the outbreak, also held a rally to protest their situation.³⁶

Intra-city transportation workers in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Qom, Tehran, Ilam and several other provinces also gathered to protest the government's failure to fulfill its promise to support jobs affected by the coronavirus.

The biggest labor strike, however, took place in Kerman province. On April 20, Kerman mine workers simultaneously stopped working in the cities of Kuhbanan, Ravar, and Zarand, and gathered in front of the governor's office and the Supreme Leader's representative office. The sit-in lasted for three days. Protests resumed on May 4 after the promises that were made by officials and company executives did not materialize. A major cause of the protests was an announcement by the directors of the Steel Pension Fund, the owners of the Kerman mines, that the company's shares would be transferred to a commercial entity called the Tejarat Dalahoo Company. The company plans to sell its shares on the stock exchange. In addition to calling for a halt to the transfer process, the workers demanded that jobs be ranked, wages increased, job security guaranteed, and contracts changed from temporary to permanent. On May 12, after seven days of sit-ins, workers at Kerman Coal Mining Works finally returned to

³⁴ Radio Zamaneh, April 22, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/500292>

³⁵ Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, May 12, 2020; <https://bit.ly/3czRB0c>

³⁶ Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, May 12, 2020; <https://bit.ly/35Z0DRU>

work after the company owner agreed to meet some of their demands.³⁷ The next day, however, the workers went on strike again.³⁸



Workers at Kerman’s state coal mining companies took to the streets twice to protest the privatization of their firms and their employment status.

During the same period, workers also held rallies at the North Drilling Company, Chodan Kavir Khavaran Cast Iron Plant, Fakoor Sanat Iron Concentration Plant, Jahan Vegetable Oil, Khuzestan’s Rural Water and Sewerage Company, Sirjan's Golgohar Mine Company, and Aminyar Chromite Company in Faryab.

Nurses also held sit-ins in several cities, including Tehran, Gilan and Shiraz.³⁹ Many nurses did not have their contracts renewed, did not receive a salary increase, and saw their work conditions worsen with the outbreak of COVID-19.

³⁷ Radio Zamaneh, May 12, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/504225>

³⁸ Radio Zamaneh, May 14, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/504816>

³⁹ Radio Zamaneh, May 6, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/502676> and <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/502930>

Summons and Trials Never Stop

Although some parts of Iran's administrative system were halted by the coronavirus outbreak and working hours were reduced, workers and labor activists were still being summoned, prosecuted, and sentenced just as before.

Jafar Azimzadeh, Chairman of the Board of the Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, was again summoned to court while serving his prison sentence. He wrote in a letter that he would not appear in court.⁴⁰

On May 12, protesting workers of Kut Abdollah Municipality in Khuzestan province, who had gathered to protest delayed payment of wages, were arrested after complaints from municipal officials.⁴¹

On the eve of May Day, International Workers' Day, labor activists in several cities were summoned or threatened by telephone. Osman Ismaili and Mahmoud Salehi were summoned to the Saqez city court.⁴² Adnan Fathi, a labor activist in Sanandaj, was summoned and interrogated by telephone on April 28. Ramin Karimi, Yousef Geramiparparvar, Seth Amani, and Sharif Saedpanah were also among the labor activists summoned for interrogation in Sanandaj.⁴³

The Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Workers' Union announced on April 29 that Hossein Kiarsi, a worker at the Pars Haft Tappeh Paper Company, had been summoned and arrested.⁴⁴ Board members of the Kamyaran Construction Workers' Union were also summoned, interrogated and arrested following a campaign under the heading "Quarantine without livelihood means hunger."⁴⁵

Keyvan Samimi, Editor of Iran Farda journal, was sentenced by the Revolutionary Court to five years in prison.⁴⁶ Samimi was previously arrested on Labor Day in 2019 at a rally along with a number of other labor activists and students, and was later released on bail. Nahid Khodajoo, a board member of the Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, was

⁴⁰ Radio Zamaneh, May 3, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/502057>

⁴¹ Radio Zamaneh, May 12, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/504172>

⁴² Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers, May 4, 2020; <https://bit.ly/35XNE37>

⁴³ Radio Zamaneh, May 1, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/501746>

⁴⁴ Human Rights in Iran, April 29, 2020; <https://humanrightsinir.org/?p=74124>

⁴⁵ Aasoo, April 11, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2AsZLcO>

⁴⁶ Radio Zamaneh, April 20, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/499903>

also summoned to prison in March of this year. Khodajoo has been sentenced to six years in prison for participating in a rally in Karaj on April 29, 2019.⁴⁷

Teacher unionists were also not spared the wrath of the judiciary. Mohammad Habibi, a teacher and member of the Tehran Teachers' Union, received a letter of dismissal from his job while in jail.⁴⁸ Habibi was arrested two years ago during a rally in front of the Planning and Budget Organization building and sentenced to seven and a half years imprisonment.

Ismail Abdi, another member of the Teachers' Union, who was on leave under the Judiciary's directive, was arrested on April 20 while on his way to the Evin Prosecutor's Office to extend his leave. The imprisoned teacher's lawyer said on May 4 that the court had elevated Abdi's 10-year sentence to a mandatory jail term.⁴⁹ Mahmoud Beheshti Langroudi, another member of the Teachers' Union who was sent on leave, was returned to prison.⁵⁰

In a statement on May 14, the Iranian Teachers' Union protested the summoning and interrogation of its members, including Mohammad Taghi Fallahi, Secretary of the Teachers' Union, Jafar Ebrahimi in Tehran, and Eskandar Lotfi in Marivan. The statement condemned the arrest of the retired teacher Nahid Fathaliian in Tehran and enactment of an eight-month prison sentence for Mohammad Ali Zahmatkesh, who had previously been released on bail. The Teachers Union's statement added that "these sentences are part of a vicious cycle of repression against trade unions and independent legal organizations."⁵¹

Migrant Workers: The Harirud Incident

The coronavirus outbreak, the closure of many small workshops, the halt in construction work and the banning of so-called informal occupations have made living conditions even more difficult for Afghan migrant workers in Iran.

⁴⁷ Hrana News, April 16, 2020; <https://www.hra-news.org/?p=238028>

⁴⁸ Radio Zamaneh, April 22, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/500301>

⁴⁹ Iran Online, May 4, 2020; <https://bit.ly/35YIntb>

⁵⁰ Teachers' Union Telegram Channel, May 11, 2020; <https://t.me/kasenfi/9404>

⁵¹ Teachers' Union Telegram Channel, May 14, 2020; <https://t.me/kasenfi/9441>

Before 2019, thousands of Afghans voluntarily returned home or were deported from Iran each year. This year, from February to late April, about 240,000 Afghans left Iran. Iranian medical centers initially refused to admit Afghan patients for free at the outbreak of the coronavirus. According to Afghan government officials, however, after consulting with Iranian officials, Afghan patients were also admitted to medical centers free of charge. Another problem faced by Afghan workers, who often do not have insurance and are employed in day-to-day jobs, was their inability to use the support packages, albeit of low-value, provided by the Iranian government. The Iranian government announced that it will provide financial assistance to unofficial workers and those who were not covered by social security insurance and lost their jobs and income due to the outbreak. These benefits, however, are not available to Afghan migrants in Iran, whose population is estimated at 1.5 to 3 million.⁵²

On May 2, Afghan media reported that Iranian border guards had arrested a group of Afghan migrants seeking to enter Iran. After beating them, the border guards drove the migrants into the Harirud River, causing several of them to drown. Iranian officials initially denied the allegations, but the Afghan government formed an inquiry commission to investigate the incident. The delegation has been active since May 13.⁵³ As of May 8, 18 drowned bodies have been found, according to Abdul Ghani Nouri, the governor of Gulan in Herat province.

The Iranian government, which has previously imposed many restrictive policies on the employment and residency of Afghan immigrants, has increased the fine for employing migrant workers without work permits to five times the daily wage.

Mohsen Ebrahimi, Director General of Foreign Citizens Employment at the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, said that due to the closure of workshops after the outbreak, “employers hiring foreign workers will be fined 305,000 tomans per worker per day.”⁵⁴

The number of Afghans living in Iran who have a residence card is approximately 951,000, and the number of Afghan passport holders who can work or study is 450,000.⁵⁵

⁵² Radio Zamaneh, April 26, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/500900>

⁵³ Radio Zamaneh, May 13, 2020; <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/504451>

⁵⁴ IRNA, April 19, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2WRkQVM>

⁵⁵ Critique of Political Economy, March 28, 2020; <https://bit.ly/2LtXj80>

Last November, Iranian government officials pursued tougher policies against Afghan refugees as protests spread across the country over gasoline prices. The refugees were transferred to camps outside the cities to later be returned to Afghanistan. Seyed Hossein Alemi Balkhi, Afghanistan's Minister of Immigration, has called for the signing of a labor agreement between Iran and Afghanistan.

Please comment on this report and let us know what you think. What suggestions do you have for future reports?

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[Volume 11](#)

[Volume 10](#)

[Volume 9](#)

[Volume 8](#)

[Volume 7](#)

[Volume 6](#)

[Volume 5](#)

[Volume 4](#)

[Volume 3](#)

[Volume 2](#)

[Volume 1](#)

