

Iran: “The Worker House is one of the cogs of the regime”

Sunday 16 July 2023, by [LEROUGE Dominique](#), [SALEMI / SELAMI Sara](#) (Date first published: 4 July 2023).

Trade unions have no legal status in Iran. Their members can be dismissed, arrested or imprisoned at any time. One of the recognised organisations is the [Worker House](#) whose General Secretary was elected Vice-President of the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions) in 2022. We put a few questions on this subject to Sara Salemi. She is an Iranian exile and an activist of SSTI (Socialist Solidarity with Iranian Workers) in France. She was invited to the last CGT confederal congress, where her speech was warmly applauded. [1]

Dominique Lerouge: What is the WH’s position on the government’s repressive policies?

Sara Salemi: Not only does it not fight it, but it is a cog in the wheel. It provides the security services with the information they need to repress workers and in particular activists.

Its main activity is to prevent trade union organisations that are independent of the state from being set up or from being able to function. It also seeks to prevent strikes.

Workers who stand up to them are threatened with dismissal. They are the targets of daily harassment, persecution, imprisonment, physical violence and so on.

In 2005, for example, following the reconstitution of the independent trade union of the Tehran and Suburbs Transport Authority (Vahed), the men of the WH, on the orders of their leader Alireza Mahjoub and the security forces, stormed a union meeting, violently beat the trade unionists and had them arrested.

Is the WH defending employees’ rights?

SS: It was with the WH’s agreement that an ultra-precarious employment contract was introduced. This allows the boss to dismiss the employee at any time and without justification (93% of workers in Iran are hired under such “contracts”).

During his six successive terms in the Islamic Parliament (1996-2020), the President of the WH, Alireza Mahjoub, was in charge of the Social Affairs Committee. This committee played an active role in the adoption of laws aimed at strengthening the powers of employers to the detriment of employees’ rights, deregulation and privatisation. In 1990, Alireza Mahjoub was also promoted to advisor and special inspector to the then President of the Republic, the father of Iranian-style neo-liberalism.

The WH propagates racist and xenophobic slogans against Afghan workers who are refugees in Iran. At the official ceremony organised by the WH on 1 May 2015 in Tehran, large banners and hundreds of identical placards demanded that employers sack Afghan workers and employ only “Iranians”.

Is the WH independent of the State and the ruling party?

SS: Since 1979, three people have headed the central committee of the WH. They are closely linked to the state apparatus of the theocracy:

- Ali Rabi'i, secretary general of the WH between 1979 and 1989, became deputy minister of intelligence and security, then head of intelligence for the Revolutionary Guards (Sepah) in several regions, minister of cooperation, labour and social affairs (2013-2018) and government spokesman (2019-2021).

- Hossein Kamali, the current Secretary General of the ruling party, was also a member of parliament for three terms and was promoted to Minister of Labour and Social Affairs (1989-2001).

- Alireza Mahjoub has been Secretary General for 33 years. He was also a member of parliament for six terms. He was appointed Adviser to the Prime Minister in 1981, and Adviser and Inspector General to the President of the Republic in 1990.

What is Worker House's international orientation?

SS: Firstly, it follows in the footsteps of the Iranian state. The WH also plays a leading role in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) - the international centre formerly led by the former USSR.

In May 2022, at the same time as a massive wave of repression was unleashed, Alireza Mahjoub was elected Vice-President of the WFTU. This promotion helps to preserve the WH's control over the fate of workers in Iran. It is also intended to serve as a guarantee for the repressive policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly towards workers and organisations independent of the authorities.

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DOMINIQUE LEROUGE, SARA SALEMI

How was the Worker House created?

Its origins date back to the monarchical period. This institution brought together state trade unions and professional associations subservient to the government.

During the revolutionary upsurge that led to the fall of the monarchy in February 1979, strike committees and other structures for workers' self-organisation came into being. In Tehran, revolutionary workers' activists took over the headquarters of this organisation and transformed it into a meeting place for workers' activists, intellectuals and left-wing revolutionaries.

Four months after the proclamation of the "Islamic Republic of Iran", henchmen of the new regime violently seized the headquarters of the Worker House (WH). These assailants, closely linked to the clergy, were supervised by the intelligence and security services. The fundamental mission entrusted to the WH was to deal with workers' protests and prevent the formation of trade unions and other independent professional organisations, in order to reorganise the exploitation of labour power and thus consolidate the new regime.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See "[Pakistan's Yearning for Democracy and Freedom from US Dictates](#)".