

May Day on Fire: Against Empire and Theocracy

The Western left will march on May 1st under red banners, chanting slogans of internationalism and workers' power. But we must ask—is there room for Iranian workers in your May Day?

Decolonize Anarchism

04/30/2025

On April 26, 2025, a massive explosion rocked the Shahid Rajaei port near Bandar Abbas, Iran's largest commercial port. The blast resulted in at least 70 deaths and over 1,200 injuries, according to official reports. The explosion originated from improperly stored chemicals, including ammonium perchlorate, a compound used in missile fuel. The responsible company, operating under the umbrella of Bonyad Mostazafan, is not a private entity in any liberal capitalist sense. It is part of a network of Islamic charitable foundations tied directly to the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), whose revenues, assets, and military links make them the engine of Iran's internal accumulation. These foundations are tax-exempt, exempt from labor law, exempt from accountability, and sustained through the direct appropriation of social surplus. They represent **a fusion of state capital and clerical authority**, animated not by market efficiency but by ideological legitimacy and paramilitary discipline.

This catastrophe, like countless others before it, occurred not in a vacuum but within the structural context of disposability, abandonment, and class warfare from above. Bandar Abbas's port is staffed largely by contract workers from impoverished ethnic minorities, particularly Baloch and Afro-Iranian communities. Many of them are undocumented, working without IDs or birth certificates, excluded from the most basic forms of legal protection. Some are refugees. Most are hired on short-term contracts with no benefits, no health coverage, and no recourse to independent union representation. These workers were engaged in highly dangerous work—chemical handling, container loading—without adequate safety equipment or emergency protocols. The explosion was the consequence of precisely this neglect, compounded by systemic corruption and a lack of regulatory oversight.

This is not an isolated event. Between May 2024 and April 2025, over 2,081 Iranian workers died due to unsafe working conditions. Children as young as 12 labor in mines, waste disposal, and textile workshops. In the informal economy—which comprises up to one-third of Iran's workforce—accidents, injuries, and deaths go unreported. The state, which should enforce labor laws and safety standards, is instead the largest perpetrator of labor exploitation. Some 90% of

workers in Iran are employed under temporary contracts, and over a third are uninsured. In practice, this means no job security, no severance, and no healthcare, even for those engaged in the most hazardous work.

The repression of labor activism is systematic and ferocious. At least 19 labor activists remain in prison as of this writing. Among them are **Sharifeh Mohammadi**, **Pakhshan Azizi**, and **Verisheh Moradi**, three Kurdish labor and women's rights activists sentenced to death. Like many Kurdish militants, they were held in prolonged solitary confinement, denied legal access, and tortured into a confession in a sham trial that violates every basic principle of justice. They are not alone. The fact that these women are Kurdish, secular, and radically committed to collective self-organization makes them dangerous in the eyes of a regime that depends on ethnic division, patriarchal control, and submission to centralized power. The rope around their necks is not just the regime's — it is the hangman's knot of all counterrevolution: nationalism, authoritarianism, and the mystification of capital.

The **racialization of labor and repression** is stark: in Kurdistan, **kulbars** (cross-border porters) are routinely killed by border guards. In Iran's southeast, Baloch workers, often undocumented, face daily exploitation and militarized violence. In April 2025, eight Pakistani Baloch workers were gunned down in Mehrestan. Killed not for politics, not for protest, but for being poor, racialized, and disposable. At least 50% of executions in recent years have targeted Baloch individuals, who make up only about 5% of the population. This racialized proletariat — mobile, informal, and excluded — represents one of the most vulnerable yet most radical sectors of the Iranian working class.

The plight of Iranian workers must also be read through the lens of gender. Women workers in Iran face the double burden of labor exploitation and patriarchal repression. They are pushed into the most invisible and least protected forms of labor. In unregulated sectors like domestic work and agricultural labor, they are routinely exposed to sexual violence and economic coercion. Female labor activists, such as **Sosan Razani** and **Sepideh Qolijan**, have faced imprisonment, flogging, and exile. At Bandar Abbas, many of the injured were women subcontracted into logistics and custodial roles, paid far less than their male counterparts, and denied maternity or medical leave.

Against this backdrop, the Islamic Republic continues to perform an anti-imperialist script. Its leaders claim to defy U.S. hegemony while simultaneously engaging in back-channel negotiations with Washington. These diplomatic maneuvers serve only to reinforce elite power. They do nothing to alleviate the conditions of mass unemployment, unlivable wages, and state terror faced by Iran's workers. The regime uses anti-imperialist rhetoric to justify militarism abroad and repression at home, criminalizing dissent and blaming sanctions for domestic failures, while continuing to implement neoliberal austerity policies dictated by the IMF blueprint: privatization, deregulation, and the dismantling of public services.

This hypocrisy—where the Iranian state denounces imperialism while exploiting and repressing its own people—is too often mirrored by segments of the Western left. Trapped in a Cold War binary mindset, they reduce Iran to a simple victim of U.S. aggression, ignoring the reality that the regime crushes labor movements, jails teachers and retirees, and executes minority workers. By framing these atrocities as unfortunate but inevitable responses to sanctions, they erase the agency of Iranian workers and revolutionaries who resist both imperialism and the authoritarian regime. True anti-imperialism must center the struggles of the oppressed—not their oppressors in anti-American clothing.

The labor movement in Iran today is fragmented but persistent. Between January and April 2025 alone, there were 44 labor protests across 26 cities, from petrochemical workers in Mahshahr to rural health workers in Minab. These protests are not simply about wages; they are about the right to live, the right to organize, and the right to dignity. In Kurdistan, Balochistan, Khuzestan, and Hormozgan—regions of ethnic oppression and economic dispossession—workers are rising up not only against economic exploitation but against the very structure of the state that maintains it.

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When you denounce U.S. imperialism and condemn neoliberalism, do you name the 2,000 Iranian workers killed last year in preventable workplace “accidents”? Do you speak of the Baloch laborers criminalized and executed, or the Kurdish kulbars shot on mountain paths? Or are these lives too messy, too resistant to your binary frameworks—too inconvenient to your alignment with whichever state you feel obliged to defend or oppose? You claim solidarity. But when labor organizers in Iran are imprisoned, tortured, even sentenced to death, too many of you look away.

You do not need to echo the lies of Washington or Tel Aviv to name the crimes of Tehran.

If your anti-imperialism does not include those fighting from below—against both local despotism and global capital—then it is not solidarity. It is shadow diplomacy. International solidarity must refuse false choices. To support the working class of Iran is to support their right to organize autonomously, to resist both domestic repression and foreign domination, and to imagine a future beyond theocratic capitalism and imperial violence.

May Day is not about choosing your favorite regime. It is about the power of a class that has no regime, no flag, no master.

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