

Nimrod Zagagi

An Oasis of Radicalism: The Labor Movement in Abadan in the 1940s

The history of the oil industry's labor movement during the 1940s has often focused on the Tudeh's ability to act overtly and rally the masses of workers. Thus, more often than not, the importance of union underground activity and the role played by the masses of ordinary oil workers during times of political and military repression, is overlooked. This article examines how the particular setting of the oil town of Abadan influenced motivations of oil workers and the dynamics between them and the Tudeh. As the article aims to show, these elements were an essential part in the ability of the labor movement in Abadan to remain viable and reemerge in force in the early 1950s as part of the oil nationalization movement.

Keywords: Oil Workers; Abadan; Tudeh, Labor History; Oil Nationalization; Oil Town; Khuzestan; Labor Movement

The history of the Iranian labor movement in the 1940s is inextricably linked to that of the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions to such an extent that, more often than not, the success and failure of the labor movement is closely identified with that of the *Tudeh*—from the early peak in 1946 to political and military suppression in subsequent years culminating in the outlawing of the party in 1949. Similarly, the depiction of the oil industry's labor movement, particularly in the oil town of Abadan, mainly focuses on the *Tudeh's* ability or inability to mobilize oil workers into action. Thus, the effectiveness and dynamics of the oil industry's labor movement are often gauged merely on their ability to carry out large-scale collective bargaining activities such as strikes and demonstrations. Therefore, since the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions were suppressed for the better part of the 1940s, the labor movement itself was perceived as impotent until it reemerged in the early 1950s as part of the oil nationalization movement.¹

Nimrod Zagagi is a Researcher based at the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University.

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¹See for example: Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 107–13; Abrahamian, “The Strengths and Weaknesses,” 184–93; Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*, 149–77; Foran, *Fragile Resistance*, 279–87; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 117–47.

This narrative, however, largely overlooks the importance of underground union activity as well as the motivations and influences that led oil workers in Abadan to support the underground unions en masse, in spite of the fact that these unions were continuously suppressed.² Moreover, the tendency to focus on large-scale overt labor activity diminishes the role of oil workers as political actors and, as Kaveh Ehsani points out, causes them to “become ‘invisible’ to scholars, policymakers, and the general public, once these spectacular interventions during rare moments of political openness are passed.”³

As will be shown, the dynamics which were at play were not only the result of developments on the local and national levels but also of Abadan’s particular circumstances. From its inception, the treatment of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) of its workers and the parallel and contradictory development of living areas in the city were the bedrock out of which a militant local Iranian workforce emerged. Once nationalism was fused with this militancy, the Iranian workers became a constant threat to the company. A threat that it tried, to no avail, to manage, socialize and assimilate into a controlled environment. The effects of World War II on Iran and its population served as an incubation period for an even more aggressive form of Iranian nationalism that, after the war, became increasingly focused on regaining control over Iran’s oil. In Abadan, this aggressive strain of nationalism was fueled by the resentment many felt toward the company and the British—resulting in a particularly militant strain of nationalism.

The strengthening of the *Tudeh* after the war and the party’s ability to act openly in Abadan provided the oil workers with an avenue through which they could assert their power and raise their morale vis-à-vis the oil company. Moreover, *Tudeh*’s activity expanded their awareness as to their own rights. When the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions were forced underground, partly because they were unsuccessful in their attempts to fully control the more militant segment of the workforce, they did not lose their relevance. In fact, as this article aims to show, it was exactly at those periods of “invisibility” that the dynamics between oil workers and the underground unions played an important part in keeping the viability of the labor movement in Abadan, allowing it to reemerge in force in the early 1950s.

The Oil Town of Abadan

Ever since the discovery of oil in May 1908 and up until the late 1940s, the oil-rich province of Khuzestan in southwestern Iran resembled more a British enclave than a province belonging to a sovereign state. Real control over the extraction, production and distribution of Iranian oil, as well as all aspects of life in Khuzestan, lay in the

²As opposed to the underground unions, the *Tudeh*’s military network was not overlooked. See for example: Behrooz, “Tudeh Factionalism and the 1953 Coup in Iran,” 366–70; Miyatu, “The Tudeh Military Network”; Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*, 177–80.

³Ehsani, “Disappearing the Workers,” 18.

hands of the AIOC and the British government. Nowhere was this more evident than in the city of Abadan.

The oil town of Abadan was established circa 1909 by the AIOC—known as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) until 1935—to house its staff and operations. The city embodied the physical, intellectual and cultural bedrock of its founders—in this case, that of the British Empire and its colonial system of rule.⁴ As such, living areas in the city were separated according to race and rank, clubs were segregated and even medical facilities were separate for Europeans and non-Europeans. The standard of building in the city was high and unprecedented in the country, but it was shared almost exclusively by its European residents. From the early stages of Abadan's establishment, the oil company was unable to keep up with the influx of migrant Iranian laborers who came to Abadan (the majority of whom came from rural and tribal communities). Nor did it put much effort or resources to build sufficient accommodation to house its growing worker population or make bearable the living conditions of those who were not afforded company housing. As a result, an urban dichotomy was formed between a “formal” city which provided its residents with modern housing, adequate sanitary conditions and modern infrastructure, and an “informal” one whose residents lived in abject poverty and squalid and unsanitary conditions.⁵

The social order in the city was determined according to the workplace hierarchy and the division of labor. These were mechanisms of segregation that served an important function—to create and then reaffirm a class system which asserted the dominance of the European over the non-European staff. As with the separation of living areas, this class system was rationalized by the company using professional and technical standards such as experience, education and possession of certain technical skills. But in truth, its guiding principle was a racial one. Thus, a hierarchy was established according to which the staff and labor force were largely divided into three classes.⁶ The first were all the European staff, no matter what grade they were in (and later on a few hand-picked Iranians who were educated in Britain). The second class consisted of office workers and technical men (engineers, master drillers, inspectors), who were mostly Indians. From the early 1940s Iranians were incorporated in larger numbers and gradually began replace the Indians. The third class was by the 1940s predominantly Iranian and included artisans, skilled and unskilled laborers.

The shared hardships these workers experienced as they made the transition from a rural lifestyle to an urban one, their harsh working conditions, lack of housing, and the

⁴For a more in-depth discussion on Abadan as an oil town or company town, see Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture”; Ehsani, “Social Engineering and the Contradictions”; Ehsani, “The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry”; Elling, “On Lines and Fences.”

⁵See, for example, de Planhol, “Abadan: morphologie et fonction du tissu urbain”; Banissadre, Vieille, and Ardalan, “Abadan: tissu urbain”; Bemont, *Les Villes de L'Iran*, 269–77. For a vivid description of the poor conditions between the two cities, see Bayat and Tafrahi, *Khaterat-e Duran Separi Shodeh*, 29–32, 117.

⁶Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 89–93.

demeaning treatment they received from the company's European supervisors resulted in a form of solidarity and a sense of shared fate that forged a new common identity. In a sense, it was the breaking of the old and forming of the new—workers who came from remote rural areas to work for a modern industry, leaving behind their traditional way of life and adopting a new common identity, one that was juxtaposed to their core identity (be it tribal, regional or ethnic).⁷

The formation of this identity was compounded by other developments in the national arena. Namely the effects of Reza Shah's authoritarian modernization and the aggressive modern nationalist discourse. These processes on the local and national levels soon converged as labor unions were formed in Abadan by professional union activists that were able to fuse the worker's local grievances with the nationalist discourse. This culminated in a workers' strike in 1929.⁸ While this strike was quickly suppressed and in its wake Abadan's labor movement was neutralized for more than a decade, it still provided the nascent labor movement in Abadan with its own cadre of leaders who played a major role in the labor movement in the 1940s.

The Rise of the Tudeh and the Labor Movement in Abadan during World War II

Several months before Britain declared war on Germany, the main supply route from Abadan via the Suez Canal was closed by the British Admiralty. This forced AIOC tankers to travel by longer routes around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope (nearly doubling the sailing distance).⁹ Once war broke out, Abadan suffered from a sharp decline in oil loadings; mainly due to the introduction of convoys, withdrawal from service of vessels for arming and losses due to hostilities.¹⁰ With much of continental Europe under German control, there was much less demand for AIOC's oil products. In the second half of 1940, as tanker losses increased, Britain preferred to rely on oil sources from the western hemisphere (mainly the USA) because the shorter haul allowed better chances for the safeguarding of tankers. As a result, oil loadings for Britain were stopped at Abadan.¹¹

Thus, during the early years of the war, there was a major decline in the AIOC's production levels, culminating in 1941 when production levels just barely exceeded those of 1935. Once Japan began its campaign in South East Asia and the Allies lost their access to oil from the region, Iran became the main source of oil for the

⁷Atabaki, "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker)"; Cronin, "Popular Politics"; Zagagi, "The Oil Town of Abadan," 188–97.

⁸Cronin, "Popular Politics," 715–32; Bayat, "Dar Kenar ya bar Kenar."

⁹Bamberg, *The History of British Petroleum*, 216–17.

¹⁰The company's fleet was decimated as a result of hostilities. By 1945, AIOC had lost roughly 46 percent of its operational fleet. See Bamberg, *The History of British Petroleum*, 216; Fateh, *Panjab Sal Naft-e Iran*, 317.

¹¹UK India Office Records, Political External Files and Collections 1931–50, British Library, London (IOR) L/PS/12/3490A, *Social and Municipal Development Carried out by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Limited in Abadan and the South Persian Oilfields*, Undated (probably 1946); Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 217–18; Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 139.

eastern theater of war.¹² On 22 June 1941, Germany launched “Operation Barbarossa.” With this act of war, the Germans violated the 1939 Ribbentrop–Molotov agreement and prompted the Soviet Union to join the Allied forces. In order to support their new ally in the fight against Germany, Britain and the US sought to make use of Iran as a supply corridor into the Soviet Union. On 25 August 1941 British forces landed in Abadan as part of the British effort to take over Iran. Despite encountering fierce resistance from Iranian troops in certain areas in Abadan, the British army secured its hold over the city and its refineries fairly quickly.¹³

By the late 1930s Abadan had been transformed into a major industrial city. By the mid-1940s it housed the largest refineries in the world. But when it came to developing the city’s infrastructure to match this rapid expansion, the AIOC reacted sluggishly and, at times, with apathy toward the growing distress of its multitude of workers and their families. While foreign workers had to make do with crowded rooms, faulty appliances and intermittent electrical outages, the vast majority of the Iranian workforce, non-skilled and skilled alike, who lived outside the company’s area, were forced to pay exorbitant rental prices to obtain any sort of lodging in the city or in the surrounding villages and towns.¹⁴ Those who could not afford accommodation slept in makeshift shelters and homes or on the ground near the bazaar or the refinery gates.¹⁵

Another persistent problem, that was made worse by the war, was that wages could not keep up with the devaluation of the Iranian currency and the rising cost of living.¹⁶ Even before the war, the wages the company paid its Iranian workers were low and incompatible with the cost of living.¹⁷ After it raised the wages of its Iranian workers in the wake of the 1929 strike, the AIOC did not update the rate during the 1930s—despite the fact that the cost of living rose constantly.¹⁸ An article that was published by *Peykar* in 1931 claiming to be based on a report by an oil worker from Abadan described the harsh conditions of the workers:

They [the oil workers] are forced to either go to Mohammerah to buy bread and cheese or pay very high prices in the stores in their vicinity [i.e. the Abadan Bazaar]. The poor worker doesn’t even see the color of meat not once during a month, because his salary is so meagre.¹⁹

¹²Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 218.

¹³The company aided British forces by supplying them with intelligence and trucks for their troops. Stewart, *Sunrise at Abadan*, 78, 102, 117–18.

¹⁴L/PS/12/3490A, *Notes on Conditions of Employment of Indian Personnel in Abadan*, 3 July 1947.

¹⁵Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, 435; The Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research, Israel, IV-320-1944, Ben Aharon, “Ai Haneft (The Oil Island),” 31 July 1944; L/PS/12/3490A, *ibid.*

¹⁶Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, 434–5.

¹⁷On this and on the harsh living and working conditions during the war, see Atabaki, “Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold,” 95–103.

¹⁸Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 88–9; Lahsaiezadeh, *Jame’eh Shenasi-e Abadan*, 442.

¹⁹“Masmo’at az yek Nafar Kargar-e Abadan: Mokhtasari az Zendegi-ye Kargar-e Naft-e Janub,” *Peykar*, June 1, 1931.

The high cost of living was also a source of grievance for the foreign workers. For example, “Solel Boneh”²⁰ workers preferred to acquire all of their food and other commodities in the company’s stores because the bazaar was too expensive for them.²¹ Moreover, many “Solel Boneh” workers, especially those who had to provide for families, also complained that the company’s salaries were low in comparison to the cost of living.²² Despite rationing and subsidies, for the better part of the war period food supplies were low. While the company’s subsidies helped workers who were not entitled to company housing to obtain sustenance, it was not enough—especially for unskilled laborers who had families to support. Moreover, due to scarcity the quality of available food supplies was poor, and since the majority of dwellings in non-company areas lacked refrigeration facilities, residents could not preserve food for long periods. In most cases, if not consumed within a day of its purchase, food would go bad (it was only years later that ice boxes were supplied by the company for workers’ families).²³

The conditions of contract workers were even worse. They were not only paid less but were also excluded from all of the company’s amenities (such as access to the company’s stores). Throughout the 1930s, the AIOC employed contract workers in increasing numbers. This allowed the company to cut down on its expenses and, at the same time, improve the company’s official statistics of the number of Iranians it employed.²⁴

A testament of the harsh conditions that prevailed in Abadan are detailed in a confidential report from May 1944 that was commissioned by the AIOC to study the nutrition standards of its Iranian workers. The findings of the report showed that the longer an Iranian worker lived in Abadan, the worse his general state of health was. For example, adolescent apprentices, born and raised in Abadan, were found to be less developed, physically, with less muscle tone (due to malnutrition) than newly arrived apprentices.²⁵ The findings of the report illustrated well the difference in quality of life between the “formal” and “informal” cities. These disparities were, unsurprisingly, a major source of resentment on the part of Iranians toward the European residents of Abadan.

The living and working conditions also exacerbated tensions between the non-European communities in Abadan. Throughout the war and after it, police and

²⁰“Solel-Boneh” was a Jewish construction company based in Mandatory Palestine that signed in 1942 a three-year contract with the AIOC to build and maintain oil facilities in Iran. For more information on the cultural background and lives of these workers in Abadan and on how they perceived the city and its inhabitants, see Shenhav, “The Phenomenology of Colonialism.”

²¹IV-320-7, 3 December 1944, *Minutes of a Meeting Held between the Abadan Workers Council and Solel Boneh’s Emissary*. Also see IV-320-1944, Ben Aharon, “Ai Haneft (The Oil Island),” 31 July 1944.

²²IV-320-7, Memo—Presented by a Delegation of the Workers in Abadan, 23 April 1945.

²³Valizadeh, *Anglo va Banglo dar Abadan*, 242.

²⁴Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 89–90; International Labour Office, *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran*, 28–30.

²⁵British Petroleum Archive (BP) 41097, The State of Nutritional Health of Men Employed as Labour and Artisans by the Company, May 1944.

other security forces were regularly stationed in areas that served as points of contact between the various communities, such as the refinery, areas where the company's residential and non-company areas met (for example, between Ahmadabad and Indian Lane) and the bazaar. The latter, was considered to be a highly sensitive location and throughout the war was repeatedly the scene of violent confrontations between Iranians and non-Iranians.²⁶

Policing and law enforcement inside the more congested parts of Abadan, however, seemed to have been neglected after it was occupied. Following the collapse of Reza Shah's regime and the occupation of the city, law enforcement in these areas became lax, lacking discipline and ineffective. Thus, leaving some of the neighborhoods at the mercy of local bullies and strongmen (a situation that, in some areas, remained until the 1953 coup d'état against Mossadeq and the formation of the *Sazman-e Ettela'at-e Amniyat-e Keshvar* (SAVAK)).²⁷

The harsh limitations on political activity and the lack of a suitable political platform had rendered the power of the masses all but unfelt during Reza Shah's rule. This changed once the shah abdicated and was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who did not command the same strong position as his father. This change of power created a more accommodating atmosphere for political activity which, coupled with the chaos and tragedy of war, allowed for the emergence of new social forces, chief among which was the *Tudeh* party.

The *Tudeh* was quick to take advantage of the general dissatisfaction and the prevalent hatred toward the ruling elite, the British and those who were believed to be their collaborators. The *Tudeh* quickly earned the support of many intellectuals, the middle class, workers and various other ethnic groups and minorities.²⁸ The party's emphasis on such issues as workers' rights and improvement of working conditions had come at a time when working conditions in the country had increasingly become a prominent issue in public debate. While steps were taken to improve the working conditions of industrial as well as agricultural workers, they were few and far between. They were also futile since there were no mechanisms in place to supervise employers or punish them for transgressions.²⁹ Therefore, using its image as the protector of the

²⁶IV-320-7, *Minutes of a Meeting Held between the Abadan Workers Council and the Histadrut's Executive Board Representative*, 24 November 1944; IV-320-7, *Minutes of a Meeting held between the Abadan Workers Council and the Histadrut's Executive Board Representative*, 22 November 1944; UK Foreign Office Records, National Archives, Kew (FO), 248/1436, *Statement of Mr. V.J.H. Gilbert Recorded at the Hospital at 9.00 am on the 9th October 1944*; FO\371\40179, *Khorramshahr Diary, December 1943—November 1944. Code 34 file 139*, 5 January 1944. Also see Elling, "On Lines and Fences."

²⁷Valizadeh, *Anglo va Banglo dar Abadan*, 249.

²⁸In its provisional political platform, published by its newspaper, "*Siyasat*", in late February 1942, the party declared that it would act to destroy the remnants of Reza Shah's dictatorship, safeguard civil rights and freedom, protect and keep safe the people's rights, especially those of the common masses and participate in the global struggle against the forces of fascism and barbarism. See Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 282.

²⁹Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 40–1.

downtrodden, the party was able to garner the support of the working class and cultivate its image as the champion of the workers.³⁰

Despite its meteoric rise during the war, the *Tudeh* and other labor organizers were largely unsuccessful in establishing a meaningful labor organization in Khuzestan and the oil industry.³¹ In Abadan, their attempts were curbed thanks to the strict security measures enforced by military authorities. These measures included prohibition on formation of parties, unions and the establishment of workers' clubs, censorship of newspapers and propaganda outlets and summary judgments that were served against potential "malefactors," such as union organizers.³² Furthermore, the *Tudeh's* careful approach to the oil industry seemed to have been attentive to that of the Soviet Union which refrained from undermining the position of its British ally in southern Iran.³³ As a result, throughout the war union organizers affiliated with the *Tudeh* party carried out their operations in Abadan underground and limited their activities to recruiting members and building up their financial resources. In a few instances, they provided financial assistance to workers who had been dismissed by the company for attempting to organize labor-related activities.³⁴

In contrast to the *Tudeh's* activists, other independent union organizers did try to carry out overt union activity. In April 1944, Farhad Falahati, a former AIOC worker, attempted to establish a workers' union called "The Union of Iranian Workers" (*Etehadīye-ye Kargarān-e Iran*). No sooner had he announced the union's establishment than it was closed down by order of the military governor of Abadan. Falahati attempted to re-open the union but was arrested, tried and deported.³⁵ Apparently Falahati was part of Yousef Eftekhari's independent union network. Eftekhari was one of the main union organizers in Abadan in the 1920s that were jailed after the 1929 strike in Abadan. He was released, along with many other political prisoners after Reza Shah's abdication. Once released, he resumed his labor activity in Tehran and established "The Iranian Workers and Cultivators Union" (*Etehadīyeh-ye Kargarān va Barzegar-e Iran*). In a relatively short time, Eftekhari succeeded in expanding his activity to the northern districts (particularly Azerbaijan) and to Khuzestan. Initially, he cooperated with elements from the *Tudeh* in its nascent stages but he quickly had a falling out with the party because of its strong affiliation with the Soviet Union.³⁶

³⁰Ibid., 37–43; Haliday, "Trade Unions and the Working Class Opposition," 8.

³¹Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 1201.

³²FO 248/1453, Extract from Rahbar of the 6th Ordibehesht (26 April 1945); FO/248/1453, British Consulate in Ahwaz to the British Embassy in Tehran, 14 September 1945.

³³Behrooz, Maziar. *Rebels with a Cause*, 1999; Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," 193; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 50–1; Ahmadi, "DarAmadi bar Etehadiyeh ha-ye Kargar-e Khuzestan," 51.

³⁴BP 43762, Report on Delegation to Persia—June 1946; BP, 130263, Gozaresh-e Owza'-e Abadan, undated handwritten report in Persian.

³⁵FO\371\40179, *Khorramshahr diary, December 1943—November 1944. Code 34 file 139*, 17 April 1944.

³⁶Bayat and Tafrahi, *Khaterat-e Dowran Separi Shodeh*, 70–9, 82–3, 96; Ahmadi, "DarAmadi bar Etehadiyeh ha-ye Kargar-e Khuzestan," 48.

While Falahati's attempt in Abadan was unsuccessful, Eftekhari's network managed to do slightly better in Ahwaz. Sometime during 1944, Ali Omid, a veteran labor organizer who been involved along with Eftekhari in the 1920s labor movement in Abadan, was sent by him to establish a union in Ahwaz. Omid, together with another labor activist, Nozar Ashouri, established a union called "The United Council of the Workers of the Province of Khuzestan" (*Showra-ye Motehadeh-ye Eyalati Kargar-e Khuzestan*).³⁷

At the same time Omid and Ashouri established their union, the *Tudeh's* umbrella trade union organization, Central Council of Federated Trade Unions (CCFTU—in Persian: *Showra-ye Motahadeh-ye Eyalati, Etehadiyah-ye Kargar-e va Zahmatkeshan*) was gaining strength. The CCFTU ran an aggressive (violent at times) campaign to bring all independent unions into its fold. By this time, the dispute surrounding the Russian oil concession had revived the Anglo-Soviet rivalry. This not only affected the inter-political Iranian scene (culminating in the November 1944 bill suspending negotiations for the duration of the war) by dividing it between Left and Right but also led to the rise of a more militant leadership for the CCFTU. Moreover, it exposed the close collaboration between the Soviets, the *Tudeh* and the CCFTU.³⁸

By May 1944, the majority of Eftekhari's unions had been taken over by the CCFTU. In its bid to gain a foothold in Khuzestan, the CCFTU began to cooperate with Omid and Ashouri's union, resulting ultimately in their incorporation into the CCFTU.³⁹ Thus "the Khuzestan United Council of the Trade Union of Workers and Toilers" (KUC) was born. But, despite its change in affiliation, the union's activities remained on a limited scale, concentrating its activities on the non-oil industries in Khuzestan.⁴⁰

The careful manner by which the *Tudeh* and the KUC chose to approach the oil industry frustrated many AIOC workers in Abadan. As the rivalry between the great powers over control of Iran's oil resources became increasingly overt, it became a symbol to many Iranians of the manner by which foreign powers exploited their country. Of the latter, many Iranians increasingly perceived the British Empire, and by extension the AIOC, as the main perpetrators, responsible for the country's troubles as well as their own personal trials and tribulations.⁴¹ As opposed to many others in Iran, those living in Abadan were in the unique position of being subjected directly

³⁷ Bayat and Tafrashi, *Khaterat-e Dowran Separi Shodeh*, 70–1.

³⁸ Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 50.

³⁹ Ahmadi, "DarAmadi bar Etehadiyah ha-ye Kargar-e Khuzestan," 49–53; Bayat and Tafrashi, *Khaterat-e Dowran Separi Shodeh*, 96; FO/371/45512, *Labour and Trade Union Movements in Persia*, Undated (probably 1945).

⁴⁰ Ahmadi, "DarAmadi bar Etehadiyah ha-ye Kargar-e Khuzestan," 51–3; BP 130263, *Gozarash-e Owza'-e Abadan*, undated handwritten report in Persian.

⁴¹ General Records of the US Department of State, RG59/Decimal File 1940–44/Box 5820, The Educated Iranian and his Belief about British Policies and Actions in Iran, 26 November 1943; Notes on Conversations Between August 15 and September 1 with: The Shah of Iran; Members of his Court; Some Ex-Ministers; Newspaper Owners; Journalists; Librarians; and Better Informed Iranians, 28 September 1943.

not only to the indignity of living under a foreign occupation, but also to one as prejudicial and humiliating as AIOC's was. It was an experience that was shared by all Iranians in Abadan—newcomers and long-time residents alike, poor and those of higher standing.⁴²

As the war in the Pacific drew to its end, some workers in Abadan, desperate for some reprieve, tried to pressure *Tudeh* union organizers to make their activity overt. But the latter refused, deeming the time was not right. In May 1945, some 200 workers in Abadan, frustrated by this policy, tried and failed to form their own union.⁴³ A slightly more successful attempt was made by workers in Kermanshah, but was quickly suppressed by the AIOC and the Iranian authorities.⁴⁴ This unfavorable trend continued under the Sadr government (June 1945–October 1945) that succeeded to curb the *Tudeh*'s ability to expand its activity to the southern industries, particularly to the oil industry.⁴⁵

The Labor Movement in Abadan after World War II

In late 1945, AIOC's Security Department began to notice increased signs of *Tudeh*-related activity among its workers. According to the company's estimates, at the time this activity encompassed some 1,000 employed and unemployed workers. During this phase, union activity mainly focused on gathering information and writing reports about the company and its officials and the general situation in Abadan. These reports were then sent to Tehran to be used as propaganda.⁴⁶ The movement's leadership numbered about twenty. Among the organizers were AIOC drivers, fitters and plant attendants, veterans of the 1929 strike, young Marxist intellectuals as well as prominent *Tudeh* members. One of them, Hossein Tarbiyat, was the former headmaster of a high school in Abadan and one of the founders of the *Tudeh* party.⁴⁷ In their appeal to the workers in Abadan, union organizers mainly focused on issues pertaining to their welfare, such as: an eight-hour work day, Friday pay, double pay for overtime, two weeks' paid vacation, pensions, sick pay, unemployment insurance, a ban on child labor, safety measures, safeguards against arbitrary dismissals and the right to strike and form unions.⁴⁸

⁴²Zagagi, "The Oil Town of Abadan," 226–41.

⁴³BP 130263, Gozaresh-e Owza'-e Abadan; Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," 193.

⁴⁴General Records of the US Department of State RG 84/1947 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, Recent Labor Disturbances among Anglo-Iranian Company Workers: Background and Implications, 5 September 1946.

⁴⁵RG 84/1947 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, *ibid.*; from the same file also see William J. Handley, Labor in Iran, 19 October 1946; Records of the Ministry of Labour and Successors (LAB) 13/628, The Tudeh Party and Iranian Trade Unions, 13 January 1947.

⁴⁶FO/371/52713, Tudeh Party Activities Amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May, 1946, 13 May 1946.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*; BP, 130263, Gozaresh-e Owza'-e Abadan; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 121–3; Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," 193–5.

⁴⁸Abrahamian, "Strengths and Weaknesses," 185.

The appointment of Ahmad Qavam (Qavam ol-Salataneh) as prime minister in mid-January 1946, provided the perfect opportunity for the labor movement to begin its overt campaign in the oil industry.⁴⁹ Qavam's policy was motivated by an attempt to diffuse the Soviet oil concession crisis, but also to gain the support of the working class. Therefore, he was much more accommodating toward the *Tudeh* and labor activity: restrictions on the press were removed, martial law was lifted (February 1946) and progress was made toward the legislation of a comprehensive labor law.⁵⁰

The KUC took advantage of the favorable political conditions and began to increase its efforts to unionize oil workers. As part of these efforts, the *Tudeh's* newspapers and other left-wing newspapers embarked upon an anti-British press campaign, focusing on the harsh living and working conditions in Abadan.⁵¹ By mid-1946, the CCFTU boasted it was leading a coalition of thirty-three affiliate unions with a total of 276,150 members, an increase of more than 60,000 members compared to the previous year. This large increase in members, according to the CCFTU, was brought about by the added membership of some 45,000 oil industry workers—the largest group of workers unionized by the organization.⁵² While these numbers were exaggerated on purpose by the CCFTU, there is no doubt that the organization did experience a remarkable growth in its membership.⁵³

The KUC's growing popularity in Khuzestan was a matter of much concern for AIOC officials, particularly since the Allied withdrawal from Iran and Abadan boosted the confidence of union leaders and labor activists. Conversely, the Allied withdrawal, coupled with Qavam's rise to power, caused local Iranian officials (particularly those who had enjoyed a fruitful cooperation with the company) to increasingly hesitate to act against union activity. This naturally further boosted the confidence of the labor movement in Abadan, especially once Tehran instructed its local officials in Khuzestan to maintain law and order but avoid disrupting labor activities.⁵⁴ Thus, in a fairly short time, unions in Abadan were able to increase their strength and activity.

⁴⁹Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 57.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 40–1.

⁵¹FO/248/1453, Military Governorate of Abadan, 15 August 1945; BP, 43762, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's Labour, 25 July 1946; FO/371/52713, British Embassy in Tehran to the Foreign Office, 31 January 1946; RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7234, Some Translated Extracts from the Persian Press, 30 September 1946.

⁵²LAB/13/628, The Tudeh Party and Iranian Trade Unions, 13 January 1947; RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, William J. Handley, Labor in Iran, 19 October 1946.

⁵³According to American records, the total number of industrial workers in Iran were estimated at about 190,000. More importantly, it seems that in some cases, the CCFTU's reported membership was identical to the overall number of workers. See RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, Labor in Iran, 19 October 1946; from the same file see Recent Labor Disturbances among Anglo-Iranian Company Workers: Background and Implications, 5 September 1946.

⁵⁴BP, 43762, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's Labour, 25 July 1946; FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946; FO/371/52713, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946.

Throughout March and April 1946, public demonstrations were held almost on a weekly basis in Abadan and Khorramshahr. By late April, temporary work stoppages by small groups of workers in various sections of the Abadan refinery were becoming frequent.⁵⁵ In addition, attacks against company personnel and theft of company property were also on the rise.⁵⁶ On May Day, the *Tudeh* used its momentum to stage a powerful display of force throughout Iran as tens of thousands participated in parades in the country. In Abadan, as part of the festivities, the KUC's club was inaugurated with a large crowd in attendance.⁵⁷ The parade in Abadan, claimed by the *Tudeh* press to be 80,000 strong, was covered extensively by the left-wing press, along with articles equating AIOC's control over Abadan to that of British imperialism over Iran.⁵⁸

The momentum continued throughout May as strikes broke out in the newly reopened oil field in Agha Jari (temporarily abandoned in 1938) and in Abadan. The strikes, which went on for the better part of two weeks, were covered extensively in the left-wing press. Demands included a pay increase, double pay for overtime, one month's holiday with pay each year and Friday pay.⁵⁹ What particularly caught the attention of AIOC officials in Abadan was the level of organization and the orderly fashion in which the strikers conducted themselves as they were led by *Tudeh* activists wearing armbands. To add to the AIOC's worries, Iranian security officials refused to disperse the strikers and urged the company to accept the strikers' demands.⁶⁰

By 13 May, faced with increasingly debilitating strikes and favorable conditions for the labor movement on the local and national levels, Elkington, one of the company's directors, was forced to admit that the *Tudeh* "is at present so firmly established in Abadan that we must be prepared to negotiate with Tudeh leaders here as long as they remain in control of the situation."⁶¹ On 18 May, the Labor Law was promulgated. The AIOC successfully influenced the phrasing of a number of articles,

⁵⁵FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946; FO/371/52713, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946.

⁵⁶FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946.

⁵⁷See for example "Dar Abadan Markaz-e Naft-e Janub," *Zafar*, 16 Ordibehesht 1325 (6 May 1946).

⁵⁸See for example *Zafar*, 3 Khordad 1325 (14 May 1946). I have not found any particular mention of a parade of this size in BP's archive or in other documents from the British National Archive and the US Department of State Archive. The references I did find mention there were only of several thousand people. One document estimated the number to be as low as 10,000. See for example FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946; FO/371/52713, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946.

⁵⁹"Baz Ham Aghajari," *Zafar*, 3 Khordad 1325 (24 May 1946); "Kargaran-e Aghajari beh E'tesab Edameh Mydahand," *Zafar*, 31 Ordibehesht 1325 (21 May 1946); FO/371/52713, British Embassy in Tehran to Foreign Office, Telegram no. 663, 13 May 1946; from the same file see Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946; Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 143.

⁶⁰FO/371/52713, British Embassy in Tehran to Foreign Office, 7 May 1946; from the same file see Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946.

⁶¹FO/371/52713, Tudeh Party Activities amongst Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Labour, March/May 1946, 13 May 1946.

including reducing mandatory overtime rates and restricting workers' right of complaint against infringement of laws or contractual obligations.⁶² However, the law further strengthened the labor movement's popularity, as many believed—no without justification—that its swift approval was the result of the *Tudeh's* political power supported by the pressure of the strikes.⁶³

As the *Tudeh* and the KUC were honing their message they focused mainly on the daily hardships of oil workers but also infused it with nationalist content. The strikes in the oil industry were used by the leftist press in their relentless campaign against the AIOC. *Zafar*, for example, reported almost on a daily basis on the strikes, encouraged other workers in the country to go on solidarity strikes and even ran a fund-raising campaign in support of the striking oil workers. Among those who contributed money were bank workers, Tehran municipality employees and workers from various government ministries.⁶⁴ Indeed, the actions of the labor movement in the southern oil industry were depicted in the leftist press as a struggle for national liberation against imperialism. The liberal newspaper *Iran-e Ma* portrayed (on 27 May) the strikers as the flag bearers of the nation's struggle against the British.⁶⁵ In addition, the *Tudeh* press attacked Iranian officials in Khuzestan, accusing them of collaboration with the oil company and calling for their dismissal (particularly that of Mesbah Fatemi, the governor of Khuzestan).⁶⁶

By late May, union activists in Abadan were confident enough to hold rallies in the middle of the week, with thousands attending. British reports described the atmosphere in these rallies as one that seemed "more of an anti-British than an industrial demonstration."⁶⁷ By the end of May, the popularity of the *Tudeh* and the KUC had soared. According to AIOC conservative estimates, the labor movement's network in Abadan consisted of a hard-core group of supporters that numbered some 6–7,000 workers (out of roughly 33,000 salaried employees and wage earners)⁶⁸ who regularly paid their union dues. Moreover, prominent union members held key positions in the refinery and elsewhere, including foremen, members of the company's fire brigade and its police. This well-placed network of activists allowed the unions in the city to mobilize workers on short notice, disrupt the

⁶²Shaw, "Strong, United and Independent," 7.

⁶³RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, Recent Labor Disturbances among Anglo-Iranian Company Workers: Background and Implications, 5 September 1946.

⁶⁴FO/248/1468, Note on the Tudeh Party Meeting held on 20 May 1946; "E'tesab dar Naft-e Janub," *Zafar*, 25 Ordibehesht 1325 (15 May 1946); "Beh Kargaran-e Mobarez-e Naft Komak Konid," *Zafar*, 1 Khordad 1325 (22 May 1946); "Yek Movafaqiyat-e Faramoush Nashodani Khatm-e E'tesab-e Kargaran-e Naft-e Aghajari," *Zafar*, 8 Khordad 1325 (29 May 1946); from the same issue also see "Meeting dar Shahrestan-ha beNaf-e Kargaran-e Aghajari."

⁶⁵Biglari, "Abadan in the National Press"; "Baraye Rofaqa-ye Kargar az Natayej-e Peyrooz-ye Aghajari Sohbat Mikonim," *Zafar*, 9 Khordad 1325 (30 May 1946).

⁶⁶See for example the following issues of *Zafar*: 31 Ordibehesht 1325 (21 May 1946); 1 Khordad 1325 (22 May 1946).

⁶⁷FO/371/5217, Political and Labour Troubles in Southern Persia, 22 May 1946; FO/248/1468, Note on the Tudeh Party Meeting held on 20 May 1946.

⁶⁸International Labour Office, *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry in Iran*, 9.

work as well as enforce order among the strikers.⁶⁹ The party's union also had its own headquarters, a bookshop in Abadan Town⁷⁰ called "Ketabkhaneh-ye Mardom" (the People's Bookshop) and even administrative officials who enforced order.⁷¹

Union activity in Abadan was not limited to the oil industry. In a town where labor relations were at the basis of every human interaction it was hardly surprising that almost every field of work in Abadan that was directly or indirectly related to the oil industry was unionized. KUC union organizers even succeeded in establishing a union among the workers of Abadan's ice plant, and were effectively in control of ice distribution in Abadan. This meant that no one in Abadan Town could purchase ice unless they presented a signed note from a local *Tudeh* operative. In addition, in early June, a women's union was founded by one of the local *Tudeh* leaders.⁷² Solidarity with the workers as well as support for the *Tudeh* and its unions seemed to have been particularly strong among the smaller bazaar merchants, traders and artisans.⁷³

Emboldened by their new-found power, workers and laborers would now also chant slogans to the public as they passed them by on trucks in support of the *Tudeh* and against the company (such as "Mordebad Sherkat-e Naft-e Janub"—Death to the AIOC).⁷⁴ Moreover, many workers felt confident enough to openly defy the AIOC's carefully constructed social order and boarded company transportation that was reserved only for the senior British staff.⁷⁵ Instances of intimidation of foreigners and calls for them to leave the country also increased. Other similar incidents included the assault and even arrest and interrogation of foreigners (such as sailors) by *Tudeh* activists. Similarly, workers who refused to join the KUC were beaten up on occasion.⁷⁶

As the labor movement in Abadan grew in strength and size, officials in London became increasingly worried and pressured AIOC officials to take steps to improve its relations with its Iranian labor force, warning that: "if we are to counter Communist propaganda we must see that our relations with Labour cannot be exploited to our disadvantage."⁷⁷ Local Iranian officials held a similar view and also tried to convince AIOC officials to take ameliorating steps toward the workers, while curtailing the *Tudeh's* ability to operate freely.⁷⁸

⁶⁹FO/371/52713, Elkington to Berthoud, 22 May 1946.

⁷⁰Abadan Town, colloquially known as the Shahr or Shahr-e Abadan, is one of the first urban areas that developed ad hoc to the east of the refinery, as part of the "informal city." It was a highly congested area with a teeming bazaar.

⁷¹FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946.

⁷²FO/248/1468, Underwood to Abadan General Manager, 10 June 1946.

⁷³FO/248/1468, Here Are Resolutions Passed by Tudeh at Meeting, 11 June 1946.

⁷⁴FO/248/1468, Underwood to Abadan General Manager, 8 June 1946.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶FO/248/1468, no. 169, 29 May 1946.

⁷⁷FO/371/52713, Foreign Office to Tehran Embassy, reply to Telegram no. 669, 20 May 1946; from the same file see William Fraser to R. G. Howe, 10 May 1946; Tehran Embassy to Foreign Office, 14 May 1946.

⁷⁸Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, 437; FO/248/1468, Underwood to Abadan General Manager, 8 June 1946.

By early June, the British government feared that the party would translate its success in the oil industry in the coming *Majlis* elections and could even eventually bring about the cancelation of the oil concession.⁷⁹ Another issue that occupied the thoughts of many in Whitehall was whether the *Tudeh* truly was an independent and genuine movement or a Soviet pawn. It seems that the majority of officials subscribed to the latter view.⁸⁰ Only a few were prepared to explore a third and more probable option that, while the *Tudeh* served Soviet interests in Iran on a national level, the actions of its activists in Khuzestan were also motivated out of genuine nationalist aspirations and to improve the living and working conditions of workers. In light of the party's growing strength, there was also near consensus in Whitehall that Qavam's attitude toward the *Tudeh* was increasingly detrimental to British interests. There was disagreement, though, whether this attitude was out of a position of weakness or out of support for Moscow.⁸¹ In response to these concerns, the British Foreign Office instructed the British ambassador to warn Qavam that should *Tudeh* activity continue unchecked, Iran may be divided once more as it was in 1907.⁸² Qavam, however, did not readily buckle under the pressure and told the British ambassador that he considered adding one or two *Tudeh* members to his government in the hope of "sobering them with responsibility." This only increased the ambassador's concerns.⁸³

By late June, however, Qavam had responded to pressure applied on him by the British and Iranian factory owners and extended a warning to labor unions not to interfere in the affairs of government.⁸⁴ This warning was not something that the *Tudeh* could readily dismiss. Despite the party's relative success in the elections for the fourteenth *Majles* and in spite of its growing popularity, it still lacked a power base inside the Iranian government. Therefore, while the KUC and the *Tudeh* in Abadan were able to amass a great amount of power in a very short time, they were still very much dependent on Qavam's good will and grace. For example, in early June, *Tudeh* and union leaders in Abadan warned the crowds attending their public meetings and assemblies that while the pressure on the AIOC must be maintained, they were not to interfere with the work of the police.⁸⁵ Thus, the *Tudeh*'s ability to act openly in the country, particularly in the south, was dependent on its political alliance with Qavam (this was especially true once the Soviets withdrew from northern Iran).

⁷⁹FO/371/52713, British Embassy at Moscow to Foreign Office, 31 May 1946; from the same file see Policy in Persia, June 1946.

⁸⁰L/PS/3490A, Foreign Office to Tehran Embassy, 14 June 1946; Shaw, 'Strong, United and Independent,' 6–9.

⁸¹Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 65; FO/371/52713, Cabinet Distribution from Foreign Office to Tehran, 4 June 1946; from the same file see Telegram no. 5672, June 1946; Cabinet Distribution from Foreign Office to Tehran, 10 June 1946.

⁸²FO/248/1468, British Embassy in Tehran to Foreign Office, 8 June 1946.

⁸³FO/248/1468, British Embassy in Tehran to Foreign Office, 8 June 1946.

⁸⁴Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 66.

⁸⁵FO/248/1468, Underwood to Abadan General Manager, 8 June 1946.

However, by late June, union leaders in Tehran and in Abadan were beginning to lose their hold on their rank and file members in Abadan. It seems that many oil workers were beginning to feel a dissonance between the strength the unions displayed in Abadan and the lack of any discernible improvement in their living and working conditions. AIOC's refusal to discuss increase in wages until the extended deliberations in Tehran on the rate of minimum wages were concluded only increased this feeling of dissonance. Some workers even began to question whether the union dues they were paying (1 percent of their salaries) were put to good use, especially once rumors (that were, at least in part, generated by the AIOC) were beginning to circulate that union funds were being embezzled by union leaders.⁸⁶

On 2 July, union leaders presented a list of demands to the company, among them Friday pay, a yearly increase in wages, transportation for workers and to appoint a workers' representative in workshops to settle differences between management and labor. Union leaders threatened that if these demands were not met they would go on strike.⁸⁷ It seems that this ultimatum was in part an attempt by union leaders to regain the trust of the workers.⁸⁸ According to a report by Underwood, AIOC's political officer, on the day the ultimatum was issued, workers in the refinery were pressing to go on strike:

Telephone enquiries to Union Headquarters made by a number of Tudeh leaders of different departments in the Refinery received the reply "do not come out on strike. The Union does not authorize you to do so now. When it does you can all be out within five minutes."⁸⁹

Despite this plea, members of one union in Abadan went on strike and refused to heed the union HQ's order to return to work.⁹⁰

On 14 July, partly in response to increasing pressures from oil workers, a general strike was announced in the refinery. The strike went ahead despite demands from Tudeh officials in Tehran to end it, fearing it would sabotage negotiations for joining Qavam's government.⁹¹ Strikers took hold of transportation and the telegraph office and used it to send reports on the strike and their demands to Tehran (the reports were also published in *Rahbar*).⁹² In addition, pickets were established in

⁸⁶RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7234, American Embassy in Tehran to Washington, 9 July 1946; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 132-3.

⁸⁷BP, 68923, letter sent by Union representatives to the AIOC, 2 July 1946.

⁸⁸L/PS/12/3490A, report by D. Willoughby, British Consul at Khorramshahr, no. 66-T, 21 July 1946.

⁸⁹FO/248/1468, Underwood to Abadan General Manager, 2 July 1946; Atabaki, "Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold," 116-17.

⁹⁰RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7234, American Embassy in Tehran to Washington, 7 September 1946.

⁹¹Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran*, 156; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 129.

⁹²See for example *Yek Telegraph-e Digar Raje' bejaryan-e E'tesab*, undated, BP, 68923.

strategic locations which allowed strikers to isolate the Europeans in their living areas.⁹³

On the evening of 14 July, the tensions exploded into a flurry of violence as Tudeh union members clashed with a members of the Arab Tribal Union—a union that was established by the local Arab sheikhs as a counter-measure to the *Tudeh's* attempt to recruit their tribesmen.⁹⁴ In total, twenty-five people were killed (the majority of whom were Arab tribesmen) and scores of others injured on both sides.⁹⁵ The clash convinced Iranian authorities to intervene and pressure the AIOC to make some concessions toward the workers and end the strike. While the *Tudeh* had won the day, it proved to be a pyrrhic victory. In late July, Qavam appointed three ministers from the *Tudeh* to his government. This proved to be a fatal mistake on the part of the party as it allowed Qavam to act more firmly against the KUC in Khuzestan.

In mid-August 1946, local security forces arrested prominent *Tudeh* and KUC leaders.⁹⁶ In the months that followed, further waves of arrests and deportations were carried out. By late November, the *Tudeh* HQ and all branch offices and clubs belonging to the party in Khorramshahr and Abadan were closed and their sign boards removed. Members found in club houses were arrested and the landlords of the various building used by the party were ordered to find new tenants. Mass arrests of *Tudeh* leaders and activists were also carried out during December, including Mohammad Kaveh, the *Tudeh's* treasurer in Abadan.⁹⁷ Thus, by the end of 1946, the labor movement in Abadan was forced to go underground.

The Labor Movement Goes Underground

The aggressive crackdown by Iranian authorities on the *Tudeh's* network forced the latter to adapt its operations to working underground. In March 1947, the *Tudeh* and the KUC formed a shadow committee and reorganized their ranks in Abadan.⁹⁸ Small gatherings of the different cells were attended by no more than a few dozen people at a time. These gatherings were usually held late in the evening, under the cover of darkness, in private residences located in the non-company living areas (mainly in Ahmadabad) as well as on labor estates (such as Bahmanshir). Larger gatherings, which were naturally less frequent, were also

⁹³General Strike in Abadan—14th, 15th, 16th July 1946 Food etc. Supplies to Staff, 21 July 1946, BP, 68923; Diary of Events (14th/18th July 1946), BP, 130264; William J. Handley, *Labor in Iran*, 19 October 1946, GRDS, RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13.

⁹⁴For a balanced and detailed presentation of these events see Elling, "War of Clubs." Also see Mann, "The Khuzestan Arab Movement"; Zagagi, "Urban Area and Hinterland."

⁹⁵BP, 68914, Medical Report on the Situation 14th to 17th July 1946, 24 July 1946.

⁹⁶BP, 43762, AIOC Abadan to London, 17 August 1946.

⁹⁷FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Diary no. 13 for the month of December 1946.

⁹⁸FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 3 for the month of March 1947.

held under the cover of darkness but outside of the urban areas at the nearby date groves.⁹⁹

The speakers, some of them company foremen and artisans, would change frequently and participants were carefully checked before entering the meeting place, making it very hard for security services to gather intelligence about what went on at the meetings.¹⁰⁰ Beyond the anti-British and anti-AIOC rhetoric that was used in these meetings, mostly the issues discussed were relevant to the workers' daily plights. Some of the speakers in these meetings also tried to inform workers on how to gauge and be critical regarding various reforms or other steps that the company announced as meant to ameliorate their situation.

In an attempt to root out the *Tudeh*, the AIOC departed from its long-time policy of opposing trade unions and attempted to foster, in conjunction with Iranian authorities, what they defined as "genuine," "non-political" and "healthy" unions that would allow Iranian workers to air grievances and "obtain concessions" from the company.¹⁰¹ Much like the Union of Iranian Workers Syndicates (ESKI—*Ettehadiyeh-ye Sendika-ye Kargarane Iran*), the government-sponsored unions that were established in the rest of the country, the real purpose of these "non-political" unions was to undermine the KUC. At the very least, AIOC officials hoped that sponsoring such unions would sow discord among the unions, compartmentalize workers' grievances and thus prevent large-scale collective bargaining activities.

The sponsored unions enjoyed substantial support from the AIOC, the Ministry of Labor and the local government. For example, the Ministry of Labor issued special instructions to allow one such union, led by Yousef Eftekhari and called "the Oil Workers Union" (*Etehadiyeh-ye Kargarane Naft*), to register in Abadan. The military governor of Abadan provided the union with the premises of the former *Tudeh* HQ to hold meetings. In addition, the company provided it with a bakery to bake bread and sell at prices lower than those paid in the bazaar and also provided classrooms to hold night classes organized by the union.¹⁰²

However, this attempt to undermine the KUC's standing among the workers failed miserably. The KUC and the *Tudeh* waged an effective war against their rival unions—speakers in meetings denounced the union; *Shabnamehs* were hung all over Abadan and inside the refinery describing the rival unions' failure to alleviate the economic distress of the workers; KUC activists infiltrated the unions, surveilled their activities and even managed to break up some of their meetings.¹⁰³ More importantly, despite

⁹⁹RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7235, Semi-Monthly Report of Colonel H. John Underwood Security Officer, Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Report up to Noon 30 August 1947.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹L/PS/12/3490A, Labour Conditions—Anglo Iranian Oil Company-Persia, 31 December 1946; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 145.

¹⁰²FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 3 for the month of March 1947; BP, 67011, Trade Unions, undated probably late 1950; Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy*, 146.

¹⁰³FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 2 for the month of February 1947; in the same file see Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 4 for the month of April 1947; Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 6 for the month of June 1947; RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, Enclosure no. 1 in

the suppressive measures that were employed by the AIOC and Iranian authorities to neutralize the KUC and the *Tudeh*, the majority of workers continued to support them and denounced the sponsored unions. For example, in June 1947 the British consulate in Khorramshahr reported that workers in Abadan were signing a “monster” petition stating that exiled KUC leaders ‘Owdat and Najafi were their only true representatives.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, the sponsored unions led a largely uneventful existence and failed to develop a meaningful following. They spent a large part of their time bickering among themselves and with rival unions without presenting any real achievement that improved the workers’ living and working conditions. The vast majority of oil workers shunned them, believing them to be a government tool meant to control them rather than improve their lives.¹⁰⁵ Peer pressure was also a factor as many workers were afraid that once the *Tudeh* regained its strength nationally and locally, their support to these unions would turn into a source of embarrassment for them.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, as early as June 1947, the British consul in Khorramshahr reported that: “it is generally believed that much of the ground lost by the Tudeh Party during the past year has recently been recovered and that it now maintains a firm hold on the workers in this area.”¹⁰⁷ By August 1947, Iranian army intelligence estimated in a report that there were 179 different *Tudeh* cells in Abadan. According to this report, between one and three cells were active in the various departments of the Abadan refinery.¹⁰⁸ The CIA’s assessment of trade unions in Abadan for June 1949 accurately summed up the affair of these unions by stating that “the synthetic government-sponsored labor unions are vociferously anti-Tudeh but have developed no positive program designed to appeal to the workers.”¹⁰⁹

In addition to the “synthetic unions,” the AIOC and the Labor Ministry tried to encourage the establishment of Factory Councils (their name was later changed to Adjustment Boards). The purpose of such councils was to aid in settling disputes between management and workers as well as improve the workers’ productivity and efficiency. The council consisted of workers’ representatives, government officials and a company representative. In April 1947 and again in September, Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar, the director of the Khuzestan Department of Labor, attempted to establish Factory Councils in Abadan. Both attempts failed as many of the workers thought

the following report: William J. Handley, Visit of W.F.T.U. Delegation to Iran, 4 April 1947; BP, 70596, General Situation, 13 June 1948.

¹⁰⁴FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 6 for the month of June 1947.

¹⁰⁵RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7235, Semi-Monthly Report of Colonel H. John Underwood Security Officer, Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Report up to Noon 30 August 1947; BP, 67011, Trade Unions, Undated report, probably late 1950; BP, 35198, Refineries Industrial Relations Report December 1950.

¹⁰⁶FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 3 for the month of March 1947.

¹⁰⁷FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 6 for the month of June 1947.

¹⁰⁸Semi-Monthly Report of Colonel H. John Underwood Security Officer, Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Report up to Noon 30 August 1947, GRDS, RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7235.

¹⁰⁹General Records of the US Department of State, CIA report ORE 65-49, The Current Situation in Iran, 27 June 1949.

that it was another attempt by the government and the company to undermine the KUC.¹¹⁰ Bakhtiar fared much better outside of Abadan, especially in Masjed Soleyman.¹¹¹ As opposed to the diverse background of the workforce in Abadan, the one in Masjed Soleyman was much more homogenous and consisted mainly of the local Bakhtiari population. This last, coupled with Shapour Bakhtiar's standing among the Bakhtiaris, seemed to have played an important part in his success in organizing the workforce.¹¹² In fact, *Tudeh* newspapers accused him and the AIOC of establishing a "Bakhtiari Union."¹¹³

Eventually, Bakhtiar and the AIOC succeeded in establishing Factory Councils in Abadan. However, by early 1949 their numbers were reduced to three (initially there were nineteen). A major cause for this reduction in the number of councils was the result of the workers' apathy toward the whole concept of Factory Councils, believing it would not improve their situation. Other reasons included a high turnover of the officials of the Labor Department, their inexperience as well as disagreements between the Labor Department and the "Central Council of Khuzestan" (in Persian *Showra-ye Markazi-ye Etehadieh ha-ye Kargari Khuzestan*), another government-sponsored union.¹¹⁴ The AIOC did have a limited success in establishing joint departmental committees but these committees excluded 80 percent of the workforce.¹¹⁵

Thus, the various measures and devices that were employed by AIOC and the Iranian government to undermine the KUC and shift the support of workers to more manageable unions failed. The support of the workers in Abadan persevered even after the *Tudeh* was outlawed following the assassination attempt on the shah's life in February 1949.¹¹⁶

Why Did Ordinary Workers Continue to Support the Tudeh and the KUC?

A workers' union is often gauged by its ability to carry out various collective bargaining activities that gain various achievements for its members. Why is it then that laborers continued to support the *Tudeh* and the KUC even though they were unable to act in the open, let alone better their living and working conditions?

¹¹⁰BP, 67011, Joint Consultation, Undated report, probably late 1950; FO/248/1475, Report up to Noon 15 September 1947.

¹¹¹FO/371/62025, Khorramshahr Consulate Diary no. 7 for the month of July 1947.

¹¹²BP, 70596, General Situation, 13 June 1948.

¹¹³FO/248/1475, Report up to Noon 15 September 1947.

¹¹⁴BP, 67011, Joint Consultation, Undated, probably late 1950; International Labour Office, *Labour Conditions in the Oil Industry*, 56–7; BP, 35198, General Manager's Monthly Report Industrial Relations June 1950 (Abadan), 2 August 1950; from the same file see General Manager's Monthly Report Industrial Relations August 1950 (Abadan); A Report on the Adjustment Board Elections 1950.

¹¹⁵Zagagi, "Oil Town of Abadan," 286–8.

¹¹⁶BP, 130022, security review marked 2995/8, 28 January 1950; ORE 65-49, The Current Situation in Iran, 27 June 1949.

As a general statement, it can be claimed that, in the eyes of many oil workers, the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions, despite their weakness, represented the best avenue to both improve their living and working conditions as well as oppose the AIOC and by extension, the British.

The short-lived period of overt activity in Abadan became for many of the workers a part of the ethos of the labor movement.¹¹⁷ As part of their actions to protect workers and defend their rights, many *Tudeh* and KUC activists were willing to face arrests, persecution and even imprisonment. In this sense, the fact that the *Tudeh* was eventually forced by the AIOC and the Iranian government underground and the continuous campaigns that targeted its infrastructures, only bolstered its reputation as protector of the workers and as the only true opposition to the Company. Ironically, the KUC was forced underground at a time when many workers began to question its achievements and its handling of funds. Perhaps the crackdown on its operations in the wake of the July 1946 clash was also instrumental in restoring its "oppositionist credentials" and preserving its popularity among the workers.

Moreover, it is true that until the establishment of the National Front in the late 1940s, the *Tudeh* was the only conduit that channeled the working class' grievances. But this did not mean that oil workers had, almost by default, remained loyal to the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions. The AIOC and Iranian officials often viewed the masses of workers as inherently passive and amenable to any propaganda (particularly a Soviet one). But this was a conclusion based more on preconception than on objective observation. In fact, as evidence suggests, Iranian skilled and unskilled workers as well as Iranian staff members, were, to varying degrees, aware of their rights.¹¹⁸ This awareness was in part the result of the *Tudeh*'s keen union activity, but also the result of a growing general awareness for labor conditions and rights.

By the late 1940s, many Iranian staff members were not only aware of the vast difference between the various amenities they were entitled to and those their foreign counterparts received, but also of the differences between them in the rates of monthly wages and pensions. Some of those Iranians who had been selected by the AIOC to study in British universities encountered this discrimination upon their return and preferred to seek employment elsewhere.¹¹⁹ Salaried oil workers were also aware of particular changes in their wage structure. For example, once the Iranian government began to deduct income tax from their wages, they were certain the company pocketed the deducted funds and questioned where the money goes and why they were not given receipts. In another instance, workers told Company representatives that they were certain the Company mishandles those sums deducted as income tax and demanded to pay it directly to the government.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷Mirzai, "Hezb-e Tudeh dar Abadan," 63.

¹¹⁸RG 84/1947: 800 to 850.4/2738/Box 13, Labor in Iran, 19 October 1946; Ladjevardi, *Khaterat-e Shapour Bakhtiar*, 24–5.

¹¹⁹Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, 436.

¹²⁰BP, 35198, General Manager's Monthly Report Industrial Relations, May 1950, 21 June 1950; From the same file see General Manager's Monthly Report Industrial Relations, June 1950.

This last example also demonstrates well just how deep-seated was the distrust and hatred harbored by many workers toward the company—perceiving it, like many others in the country, as an omnipotent evil being. It also demonstrates well how in Abadan the personal experiences of the oil workers were embroiled with nationalist sentiment.

This embroilment of the national and personal was a crucial element in workers' militancy, a sentiment that seemed to be omnipresent in Abadan. In mid-1948, Colonel Monipour, the military governor of Abadan, wrote a memo in which he described how the difficult living and working conditions in Abadan aggravated tensions to such an extent that:

if one or two men start talking about the employer having to supply accommodation or transport, they will soon find a large crowd of workmen gathering round them. Such a gathering is obviously a threat to security and smooth working. The first thing which could happen is for a small department to announce a strike and as all departments have liaison with other departments, even a small strike cannot be regarded as unimportant. With the present conditions in the Town a large crowd might soon assemble in the streets numbering tens of thousands.¹²¹

In addition to the actions of the dedicated core of labor activists and the *Tudeh's* cell meetings and propaganda activities, the actions of ordinary workers were also instrumental in preserving the spirit of resistance in the city, particularly during those periods of union inactivity. Many workers chose to oppose the AIOC in other ways. Their actions were calculated so they would not, on the one hand, provoke a harsh response from law enforcement or endanger their livelihood. On the other hand, they were sufficient to qualify as an act of opposition. The use of these methods was particularly noticeable in the months that preceded the nationalization of the oil industry. They included, for example, writing slogans and even profanities on memos sent to British company officials, tearing down AIOC posters and notices, and deliberately impeding production by working slowly.¹²² Moreover, workers continued to pay their union dues to the underground unions.¹²³ These payments from Abadan, according to AIOC estimates, were a major source of income for the *Tudeh*.¹²⁴ This is quite remarkable considering the fact that the KUC was unable to represent the workers or stage any collective bargaining activity.

¹²¹BP, 70596, Memo marked Strictly Confidential, 10 June 1948.

¹²²BP, 68931, Paterson to Jeacock, 23 August 1947; FO/248/1524, no. 2, 15 May 1951; from the same file see Khorramshahr to Tehran, 7 June 1951. Kemp, *Abadan: A First-hand Account*, 123. Workers in the 1970s also deliberately slowed down production and knew exactly the boundaries of their ability to operate without evoking a harsh response from law enforcement. See Peyman, "Reasons to Revolt," 195–217.

¹²³See for example RG 59 Decimal File 1945-49-Box 7235, Semi-Monthly Report of Colonel H. John Underwood Security Officer, Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Report up to Noon 30 August 1947.

¹²⁴FO/248/1475, Report up to Noon 15 September 1947.

Finally, the refusal of oil workers to cooperate with the government and AIOC-sponsored unions and with factory councils can also be seen as an act of support for the *Tudeh* as well as an act of opposition. Thus, while all the actions described above consisted of small acts that were within the tolerated boundaries of AIOC's disciplinary code, they helped maintain a certain mode and mood of opposition that allowed oil workers to oppose the political and economic circumstances that governed their lives.

Thus, strengthening of the *Tudeh* after the war and the party's ability to act openly in Abadan provided the oil workers with an avenue through which they could assert their power and raise their morale vis-à-vis the oil company. In addition, *Tudeh's* activity expanded their awareness as to their own rights and, more importantly, provided them with an ethos from which they would later draw strength. Moreover, even though *Tudeh* and the KUC were forced underground, their activity in Abadan not only managed to retain a wide underground network, but also helped focus national attention on the oil industry and Abadan. For example, in April 1947, in an attempt to improve its image amid the rising tide of Iranian nationalism, AIOC invited fifteen Iranian journalists from various mainstream newspapers to visit Abadan, inspect the oil installations and observe the workers' living conditions. This turned out to be a miscalculation on AIOC's part, since it turned the focus of the national press to conditions in Abadan. While many marveled at the technology and modern installations, they also increasingly focused on the dissonance between the modern aspects of the city and the deplorable conditions in which the majority of its inhabitants lived.¹²⁵

Similarly, as the proponents of nationalization were increasing their attacks on the British and the AIOC, they also used Abadan and the treatment of the oil workers by AIOC to drive home the need for nationalization of the oil industry.

This is not to claim that Mossadeq and the other members of the "National Front" were mainly driven by the plight of the workers in their bid to nationalize the oil industry. In fact, according to Shapour Bakhtiar, Mossadeq, was quite removed from the plight of the common workers and was less aware of the social issues pertaining to the workers. Moreover, he claims that many other prominent members of the oil nationalization movement such as Makki, Baqai and Kashani did not truly understand the issues concerning the workers and their sociology.¹²⁶ But they understood perfectly that the company's conduct toward its workers in the oil industry was an excellent rallying point demonstrating to the masses how the continued control of the British over Iran's oil caused suffering to the country and those in Khuzestan. It allowed the simplification of an otherwise complicated nationalist narrative that involved calculations, statistics and legal arguments dealing in royalties and the percentage of Iranians employed by the industry.

¹²⁵Biglari, "Abadan in the National."

¹²⁶Ladjevardi, *Khaterat-e Shapour Bakhtiar*, 27–8.

Conclusions

According to Abrahamian, one of the weaknesses of the labor movement in Iran was that the working class in the 1940s only made up 10 percent of the population and thus it was “an oasis of radical radicalism in a desert of widespread conservatism.”¹²⁷ Well, that is exactly what Abadan was—an oasis of radicalism. The particular conditions of Abadan, the militant anti-AIOC vibe that seemed to course through the veins of the city itself, were an integral part in the fact that workers chose to align themselves with the *Tudeh*'s affiliated unions—even though they could not even formally negotiate on their behalf. Still, in the eyes of many oil workers, the *Tudeh* and its affiliated unions remained the best avenue for workers to improve their living and working conditions as well as oppose the AIOC and, by extension, the British.

The continued support of the vast majority of oil workers, enabled the KUC to pose a viable threat to the company and the Iranian government, as well as thwart their attempts to undermine its standing among the workers. The KUC guided and provided oil workers with a platform to carry out collective bargaining activity. But they did not necessarily control events. As we've seen, union leaders were goaded into action once workers felt they were not active enough. The intense hatred toward the company and the militancy of the workers were important aspects in the underground labor movement's success. It was also, as was evident in the lead-up to the events of 14 July, a force that the *Tudeh* was able to control only to a certain degree.

The formation of the National Front in 1949 posed, for the first time since the end of World War II, a serious challenge to the *Tudeh* on who best represents the oppressed lower-middle classes. In Abadan, the persistent activities of the underground union network and the continued support they received from the majority of oil workers provided the *Tudeh* with an impressive base of support. By 1951 when the oil nationalization movement under the National Front acquired momentum, the *Tudeh* had become an experienced mass party based in urban areas and especially strong among the working class, experienced in underground and semi-legal activity. The union network and the *Tudeh*'s mobilization capabilities, combined with the mass support of oil workers in Abadan, produced various strikes and demonstrations during the crucial months of March–May 1951 that challenged both the AIOC and the British government and constituted an important part in the dynamics that led to the nationalization of the oil industry.

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¹²⁷Abrahamian, “Strengths and Weaknesses,” 192–3.

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