

# Labor Rights in Iran



BI-MONTHLY REPORT NO. 14

**August-September 2020**



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## Brief Introduction

This is the 14th bimonthly [Labor Rights Newsletter of Zamaneh Media](#). These bimonthly reports consistently focus on unemployment, deferment or non-payment of wages and benefits, protests and strikes, freedom of association and assembly, independent unions, discrimination in the workplace, issues of labor law, contractual violations, women's labor, child labor, and the conditions of the Kulbars in Iran.

Zamaneh Media monitors the above-mentioned labor issues daily and this bimonthly report presents an overview of the most important Iranian workers' rights issues every two months. The bimonthly newsletter aims to increase awareness regarding the situation faced by Iranian workers.

The 14th report covers labor issues which occurred in August and September 2020, though it is not exhaustive.

On May 1, 2020, Zamaneh Media published the [Second Annual Report](#), which examines major labor issues over the previous year.

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## Major Issues in August and September 2020

Over the past two months, poverty, unemployment, and labor protests have spread throughout Iran.

Workers in the oil and energy sector went on a nationwide strike, in addition to the workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industry Company and the Heavy Equipment Production Company (HEPCO) who continued to strike, citing an objection to the privatization of these industries.

In the Tehran Stock Exchange, a bubble that had recently flourished with government support burst. The market experienced a historic fall on August 16 with a drop of 89,000 points.<sup>1</sup> This downward trend lasted until September, and as a result of this unstable rise and early fall, the hopes and resources of many families have vanished.

During this time, the United States sought to extend its arms embargo on Iran. Despite the Trump administration's 2018 decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the president attempted to trigger the "snapback" mechanism embedded within the nuclear deal to reinstate international sanctions.

Meanwhile, insulin pens have become scarce in Iranian pharmacies due to U.S.-imposed sanctions.

In the past two months, teachers have repeatedly protested in front of the parliament to demand better salary and employment conditions. At the same time, the members of the ultra-conservative parliament dream of changing the country's presidential system to a parliamentary one. This shift would pave the way for military figures to overtake the country's political leadership.

Despite public protests, the state eventually executed political prisoners Mustafa Salehi and Navid Afkari. In a kidnapping-like operation, security agents transferred labor activist Jafar Azimzadeh from Evin Prison to a solitary confinement cell in Rajai Shahr Prison after he tested positive for COVID-19.

Like poverty in the country, the coronavirus is also spreading and claiming lives. Deputy Minister of Health Iraj Harirchi commented, "We no longer have orange and yellow (regions). The whole country is in a red state."<sup>2</sup>

In early September, the price of butter and eggs skyrocketed to make omelets an aristocratic dish. Social security retirees begged the government to calculate their salaries in dollars. These unironic requests are likely the secret desire of most wage earners in Iran.

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1 [Borna](#), August 16, 2020

2 [Entekhab](#), September 18, 2020

## Little Food on Workers' Table

Iranian families have been plunged into a whirlpool of a livelihood crisis as a result of the devaluation of the national currency, inflation, sanctions, the wave of unemployment caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, and the economy's structural problems. (The exchange rate at the time of this report is 1 USD = ~25,000 tomans)

In September, the price of butter rose 90% in two days. Within one week, the price of eggs increased by an unprecedented 85% from 20,000 tomans to 38,000 tomans per case (30 eggs).<sup>3</sup> To curb the price increase, the government announced the price of each egg case at 26,000 tomans. Essentially, the government officially increased the price of eggs by 6,000 tomans compared to August.<sup>4</sup>



Social security retirees in the city of Kermanshah spread an empty table on the street in protest of their living conditions. July 15, 2020

*Table: Rising food prices based on data from the Statistical Center of Iran over a two-year period*

	Price in July 2018	Price in July 2020
<b>Potatoes (one kilogram)</b>	1670 tomans	4000 tomans
<b>Sugar (one kilogram)</b>	4606 tomans	10719 tomans
<b>Imported rice (one kilogram)</b>	8072 tomans	18133 tomans
<b>Chicken (one kilogram)</b>	9894 tomans	17953 tomans
<b>Cheese (one kilogram)</b>	13234 tomans	26827 tomans
<b>Beef (one kilogram)</b>	46705 tomans	87224 tomans

3 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 15, 2020

4 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 18, 2020

According to Tirang Neyestani, director of the National Nutrition and Food Technology Research Institute (NNFTRI), 22,000 Iranian households have greatly limited or completely eliminated animal protein, including red and white meat, from their tables due to high costs.<sup>5</sup> According to a July poll by the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) on Iranian food baskets, 8% of Iranian households have not eaten red meat in the past year.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a July 2020 report by the Central Bank of Iran found that rental rates in Tehran increased by 27.4% compared to the same month last year. This report also indicated a 30.6% increase in rent costs for all urban area, though in informal reports this figure is significantly higher.<sup>7</sup>

In September, the Wage Committee of the Supreme Labor Council estimated the amount of the subsistence basket at 6,249,000 tomans, excluding housing and health costs. This figure is 2.4 times the minimum monthly wage with all other benefits included. If the cost of healthcare is added, the value of the subsistence basket increases to 6,434,000 tomans, which is approximately 3,823,000 tomans higher than the monthly minimum wage.<sup>8</sup> These figures do not include housing costs.

While government agencies have refused to disclose the exact number of people living below the poverty line, the Islamic Parliament Research Center reported that eight income deciles are struggling to make ends meet. In late July, the head of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Massoud Khansari, acknowledged that the bottom six income deciles, or about 56 million people, were below the poverty line.<sup>9</sup>

The government has promised to distribute support packages and reduce inflation, though these promises either halt in the middle of implementation or remain entirely unfulfilled.

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5 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 6, 2020

6 [ISPA](#), August 2, 2020

7 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 4, 2020

8 [ILNA](#), September 8, 2020

9 [Radio Zamaneh](#), August 3, 2020

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## No Medicine to Be Found

In addition to the lack of medical facilities for COVID-19 patients, the Iranian healthcare system is also struggling with a shortage of pharmaceutical items. U.S. sanctions have made it difficult or even impossible to obtain and transfer foreign currency for medical drug imports, and Ministry of Health officials have confirmed the shortage of some medicines. On September 13, Haidar Mohammadi, Director General of Medicine at the Food and Drug Administration, said that the shortage of medicine was due a lack of (foreign) currency.<sup>10</sup> The dollar exchange rate has steadily increased in the past two months and has now reached nearly 28,000 tomans. Contrary to the promise of government officials to provide foreign currency at the rate of 1 USD = 4,200 tomans for drug imports, merchants have said that the state has not yet provided the foreign currency that they need for these imports.

In this climate, certain groups of patients are more likely to go without the medicine they require. These individuals include diabetics, kidney transplant patients, and MPS patients.<sup>11</sup> Insulin pens are scarce in Iranian pharmacies and doctors recommend a similar domestically-produced medication to their patients. Kidney transplant patients experiencing scarcity of CellCept pills must now use similar home-made drugs.<sup>12</sup> In protest of this medication scarcity, a group of these patients gathered in front of the Food and Drug Administration building on September 16.<sup>13</sup>

Under these circumstances, and on the eve of the cold season that will be accompanied by flu outbreaks, the Ministry of Health has not yet been able to "adequately" import flu vaccines.<sup>14</sup> Senior Iranian government officials have placed the blame on U.S. sanctions for the shortage of medical drugs.

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10 [Hamshahri Online](#), September 13, 2020

11 [Radio Zamaneh](#), July 25, 2020

12 [Radio Zamaneh](#), August 2, 2020

13 [Iranian Association of Rare Diseases](#), September 16, 2020

14 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 6, 2020

## Rising Unemployment

After the outbreak of the coronavirus, the wave of unemployment still has not subsided. Bankruptcy declarations and business closures continue in the year that the Supreme Leader called the “year of production boom.” In small workshops, employers have used the coronavirus as an excuse to fire workers.

According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the working population of the country in the spring of 2020 decreased by 3.7% compared to the previous year. Iranians have lost approximately one and a half million jobs during this period.<sup>15</sup> Although there are no accurate statistics on the unemployment rate from spring to early autumn of this year, Yazdan Seif, Deputy Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade, stated on September 17 that 1.7 million people who have lost their jobs have registered for unemployment insurance.<sup>16</sup> In Fars province alone, the number of people unemployment insurance has increased fivefold since the outbreak of the coronavirus. According to Abbas Ghasemi, head of the Bushehr Islamic Labor Councils Association, 9,000 people in the province lost their jobs and became eligible for unemployment benefits from February to August 2020.<sup>17</sup>



Jahan Ara Arvand Steel Factory workers strike in Khorramshahr, 13 August

According to the Parliament Research Center, the COVID-19 outbreak will reduce the country's workforce by 2.9 million people, bringing it to 6.4 million. The Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Welfare has predicted that the COVID-19 crisis will affect around 4.8 million jobs, which is equivalent to 20.3% of Iran's total employment.<sup>18</sup>

The actual number of unemployed individuals is higher than the official figures because many who are employed in Iran hold part-time jobs or internships with wages much lower than the minimum wage. These figures also exclude street vendors and day laborers, whose work and livelihoods are most affected by COVID-19.

15 [ILNA](#), July 13, 2020

16 [Tasnim News](#), September 17, 2020

17 [ILNA](#), September 17, 2020

18 [Mehr News Agency](#), August 16, 2020



According to official statistics, the female employment rate is nearly one-fifth that of men. Additionally, the unemployment rate among the active female population is almost twice that of men. This figure increases for educated women compared to educated men. Meanwhile, the female unemployment rate in urban areas is more than double that of women in rural areas.

Several workers' rallies to protest dismissals occurred in August and September 2020, including gatherings by the following groups:

- Lushan Cement workers
- Workers of the Iran Meter Factory in Qazvin
- Saham Edalat staff
- Fired workers of Qazvin Highways and Roads Transport
- Soap-making workers in Khorramshahr
- Fired workers of Omidieh Municipality
- Fired workers of the Barfab Factory in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari provinces

## Continuation of Workers' Protests

The wave of labor protests that began in early May and peaked in mid-summer has continued over the past two months. Literacy movement educators, preschool teachers, contract teachers, and non-profit schoolteachers have held several rallies in front of parliament. Their most important demand is job security. "Purchasing service" teachers, or those whose services are purchased from the private sector by the government, went on strike in front of the Ministry of Education. Teachers who are regularly sent to work in Iranian schools in other countries also rallied in front of the Administrative Court of Justice to dispute unpaid salaries.

Other occupations have also taken part in this wave of protests. Nurses in Mashhad have continued their protests and railway contract workers in Karaj, Tehran, and Khorasan also went on strike several times.



Mashhad nurses protest in front of Khorasan Razavi Governor's Office, August 13, 2020

The number of nurses per capita in Iran is 1.5 per thousand people. In an attempt to compensate for the shortage of these professionals, the Ministry of Health has been hiring nurses on a contract basis through contractors since 2013. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated the shortage of nurses in hospitals. This practice of outsourcing healthcare with temporary employment contracts has led to job and livelihood insecurity in the health sector. At the same time, this policy has made the health of citizens subject to the calculations and profits of contracting companies. According to Mohammad Sharifi Moghaddam, Secretary General of the Iranian Nurses' House, about 30% of the country's medical staff consists of contract workers.<sup>19</sup>

In the cities of Kut Abdullah, Lali, Srisha Abad, Bonab, Saravan, Mirjaveh, Boroujerd, Lushan, Lodab, Iranshahr, Mahshahr, Yasuj, Khorramshahr, and Abadan, municipal workers gathered in front of municipal buildings to demand back wages and employment security.

19 [ILNA](#), August 16, 2020

Bakers in Yazd province and tomato-growers in Kermanshah gathered in front of government buildings to protest the fact that the prices of their products have not risen in line with inflation.

City bus drivers in Kermanshah, workers of Jahan Ara Arvand Steel Factory in Khorramshahr, transport staff of Homa Airlines, and workers of Karun Agro-Industry Company were among those whose strikes and protests were in the news over the past two months.

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## Retirees: Pay Us in Dollars!

On August 23, retired workers of the Iran Telecommunication Industries Company (ITI) in Shiraz gathered in front of the Fars governor's office. After 13 years, wage-related claims of 1,300 retired telecommunications workers remain unfulfilled.<sup>20</sup>

On September 7, several National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) retirees staged a protest in front of the NIOC building in Tehran.<sup>21</sup>

On August 15, September 5, and September 15, social security retirees in various cities (Tehran, Isfahan, Urumia, Neishabour, Arak, Karaj, Rasht, Sari, and Mashhad) gathered in front of the Social Security Organization's buildings to protest their wage conditions.

The focus of the pensioners' protests in recent years has been the lack of sufficient funding to implement the law on pension equalization. According to Article 96 of the Social Security Law, this organization is obliged to increase the pensions in proportion to the rise in the cost of living. In addition to this law, the Fifth and Sixth Development Plans also oblige the government to adjust or "equalize" pensions with those of currently working employees.

After a four-month delay, pensioners' pay rose by 26% in July based on the minimum wage approved by the Supreme Labor Council. Officials of the Social Security Organization announced the implementation of the equalization plan after receiving 32 trillion tomans (= ~1.143 billion USD) of government debt through the transfer of shares. This 26% increase in pensions did not stop the pensioners' protests, however, as the increase was still not commensurate with inflation and the working-class livelihood basket.

Ahvaz retirees held a placard at their September 15 rally saying, "Calculate our salaries in dollars!" According to Ali Rastgoo, chairman of the Fars Province Social Security Retirees Association, 70% of Iranian retirees live below the poverty line.<sup>22</sup>

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20 [ILNA](#), September 4, 2020

21 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 7, 2020

22 [ILNA](#), September 13, 2020

## Haft-Tappeh and HEPCO Workers Strike

The ongoing strike by workers at Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industry Co., which began on June 15, 2020, is now approaching 100 days.

Their most important demands are:

- Immediate payment of arrears and renewal of insurance agreements
- Immediate return to work for dismissed workers
- Immediate arrest of CEO Mr. Omid Asadbeigi, accused of currency theft
- Cancel privatization and oust current managers
- Restore the embezzled wealth to the workers



Workers of Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industry Co. on strike

On August 8, Abdul-Nabi Mousavifard, the Friday Prayer Imam of Ahvaz, visited the workers' protest and explicitly suggested that Haft Tappeh management should be entrusted to "capable institutions such as the Foundation for the Oppressed, the Executive Headquarters of Imam Khomeini, or the IRGC."<sup>23</sup>

Four days later, on August 12, representatives of the protesting workers met with members of the Article 90 Parliamentary Commission. Members of Parliament (MPs) promised to follow up on some of their demands within a week, such as extending workers' insurance terms, paying deferred wages, and reinstating fired workers. They also promised to eliminate the risk of the factory being bought by the private sector.

On August 17, Haft Tappeh's public relations department issued a statement inviting employees to return to work and saying that the company had paid the workers for their two months of unpaid salary in arrears.<sup>24</sup> However, these workers disagree with the company on how to calculate wages and they have other demands such as avoiding

23 [IRNA](#), August 8, 2020

24 [ILNA](#), August 21, 2020

privatization and dismissing current managers. The official Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) reported on September 14 that the government opposes the eviction of the current company owners.<sup>25</sup>

Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industry Co. is one of the oldest sugar factories in Iran. The company began operations in November 1961 with more than 200 hectares of cultivated land and the production of 12,600 tons of sugar. In 2015, the company was privatized and some of the workers continue to strike in protest of the privatization.

Even though labor protests in the Iranian manufacturing sector have had a major focus on eliminating privatization, officials continue to emphasize the need to expedite the transfer of factories to the private sector. On September 2, Iranian Justice Minister Alireza Avaei stressed that “privatization is an inevitable necessity for our economy,” saying that “the path to privatization is well underway,” and must be “accelerated.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to the workers at Haft Tappeh, employees at the Pars Ampul plant in Saveh, the Ramin power plant in Ahvaz, and the HEPCO plant in Arak have also gone on strike over the past two months to protest the privatizations.

Workers at HEPCO in Arak went on strike for at least two weeks in August to protest wage arrears, privatization, and reduced production.

HEPCO was first privatized in 2006. Three years later, a crisis of production and workers' strikes led to the ousting of the private owners. In early 2017 the company was privatized for the second time. This re-privatization, however, intensified the crisis. HEPCO production is currently at less than 10%, and half of the workers are on leave until production rises.

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25 [ILNA](#), September 14, 2020

26 [IRNA](#), September 2, 2020

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## Oil Industry's Contract Workers on Strike

The most widespread strikes over the past two months took place in the energy sector. These strikes, which began on August 1, involved contracted oil and petrochemical workers mostly in the south of the country, with power plant workers joining later.

More than 10,000 contract workers in the energy sector participated in these strikes to protest job insecurity, low wages, payment delays, unsafe working conditions, and poor housing. These strikes extended to 50 refineries and power plants across 10 provinces. On August 17, 17 days after the strikes began, Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh attempted to downplay the government's responsibility by saying that the protests were related to "second-class contractors" and "had nothing to do with oil."<sup>27</sup>

As the strikes continued, some refineries decided to pay overdue wages while others increased workers' wages. Despite these concessions, the protests persist in some energy facilities.

Since the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Petroleum has implemented the so-called "structural adjustment" policies (privatization) by outsourcing four companies under its auspices to contractors: the National Oil Company, the National Gas Company, the National Petrochemical Industries, and National Company for Refining and Distribution of Petroleum Products. It is estimated that currently 70% of oil industry workers are parties to contracts with contractors.<sup>28</sup>

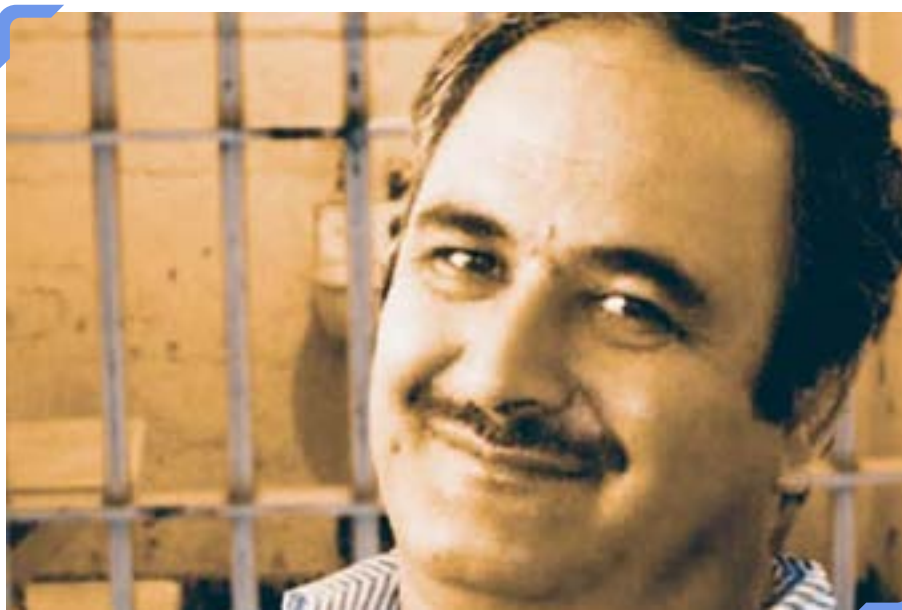
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27 [ILNA](#), August 17, 2020

28 [Radio Zamaneh](#), August 5, 2020

## Suppression of Labor Activities

The Islamic Republic of Iran does not tolerate the activities of independent trade unions, refuses to recognize the right to strike, and violently suppresses workers' protests. On several occasions over the past two months, security forces attacked trade union gatherings. Two of these events included the August 25 Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company workers' rally in front of the governor's office in the city of Shush (Susa)<sup>29</sup> as well as the September 7 rural telecommunications agents' rally in front of the parliament.<sup>30</sup>



September 13: The fifth anniversary of the death of Shahrokh Zamani, a trade union activist, who lost his life behind bars in Karaj's Rajayishahr prison. Prison officials claimed the cause of death was a stroke.

On August 21 this year, civil activist Keyvan Samimi was sentenced to three years in prison. Security forces had arrested him during a Labor Day rally in front of parliament on May 1, 2019. Although he was released on bail on June 17, 2019, about a year later, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court sentenced him to six years in prison in absentia. Following an appeal, the state held a court hearing in his presence on May 18, 2020, during which he was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of "conspiracy against the government."

Security forces arrested two protesting meter workers in the city of Qazvin during a rally at the previously shut-down Meter Manufacturing Company on September 12.<sup>31</sup> The two workers were released on bail.

The Tehran Revolutionary Court also sentenced labor activist Sajjad Shokri to four years in prison on charges of "conspiracy against national security" and "propaganda against the regime" in September. The court cited the reason behind this sentence was his participation in a rally on International Workers' Day in front of the parliament in 2019.<sup>32</sup>

With the beginning of the academic year 1399-1400 (2020-2021), Mohammad Habibi,

31 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 13, 2020

32 [HRANA](#), September 14, 2020



head of the Iranian Teachers' Union, Ismail Abdi, secretary of the Iranian Teachers' Union, Yaser Amini Azar, member of the Mahabad Teachers' Union, Mohammad Ali Zahmatkesh, teachers union activist in Shiraz, and Hashem Khastar, board of directors member of Mashhad Teachers' Union, are in prison for union activities. Two retired female teachers, Nahid Fath'alian and Zeinab Hamrang Seyed-Biglou, are also currently in prison.

## Jafar Azimzadeh's Life Is in Danger

Jafar Azimzadeh is the general secretary of the board of the Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers. He is one of the most prominent labor activists in the country and is among the organizers of a petition to raise the minimum wage that collected 40,000 signatures. In April 2015, Azimzadeh was sentenced to six years in prison by Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on charges of "collusion against national security" and "propaganda against the regime." He was also suspended from joining political groups and having any media presence for two years. According to a March 18, 2020 directive from the judiciary, Azimzadeh was scheduled to be "pardoned by the Supreme Leader" and released. Despite this directive, in June 2020 he was sentenced to 13 months in prison for "propaganda against the regime" in another case.<sup>33</sup> Branch 36 of the Tehran Court of Appeals upheld this new ruling in August.



Jafar Azimzadeh

July 26, 2020: Two prisoners attacked Jafar Azimzadeh and severely beat him in two separate attacks; one in the morning, and the second in the afternoon. Later, one of the assailants threatened to kill Azimzadeh in the presence of a prison guard.<sup>34</sup> In Evin prison, political prisoners are held alongside dangerous criminals rather than being segregated based on the type of crimes committed. Trade union activists believe that prison authorities organized these attacks. The activists have expressed concern about the possibility of further attacks and warned that Jafar Azimzadeh's life was in danger.

August 9, 2020: It was announced that Jafar Azimzadeh tested positive for COVID-19, along with 11 other prisoners in Evin Prison. Authorities randomly tested 17 prisoners in total.<sup>35</sup>

33 [Hrana](#), June 8, 2020

34 [Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers](#), July 26, 2020

35 [Hrana](#), August 9, 2020

August 16, 2020: A prison doctor diagnosed Azimzadeh's condition as critical and ordered that he be sent to a hospital immediately. Security agents, however, transferred Azimzadeh to solitary confinement in Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj instead of Taleghani Hospital as ordered by the doctor.<sup>36</sup> The Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers issued a statement describing the secret and illegal transfer of Azimzadeh to Rajai Shahr Prison as "kidnapping" and "planned" by security agencies.<sup>37</sup> Following this incident, Jafar Azimzadeh went on a hunger strike.

September 3, 2020: 500 civil society activists and family members of Iranian prisoners and those killed in demonstrations issued a joint statement warning of the danger to Jafar Azimzadeh's life. In this statement, they called for his immediate transfer to a hospital for treatment and release.<sup>38</sup>

September 5, 2020: After 21 days, Jafar Azimzadeh ended his hunger strike while being transferred to the public ward of Rajai Shahr Prison.<sup>39</sup>

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36 [Radio Zamaneh](#), August 19, 2020

37 [Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers](#), August 19, 2020

38 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 3, 2020

39 [Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers](#), September 6, 2020

## 4 Million Students at Risk of Being Deprived of Education

On September 5, 2020 President Hassan Rouhani announced on video the start of the 1399-1400 academic year (2020-21) despite concerns about the coronavirus pandemic.

The Iranian educational system faced major challenges with the approaching new school year. Some of the primary challenges included crowded and poorly-ventilated classrooms, lack of preventive equipment, management confusion, vague and sometimes contradictory protocols, expensive but slow internet, and lack of equal access to hardware and software facilities and resources for virtual classes.

In light of these problems, the Tehran Teachers' Union denounced the decision to reopen schools as "hasty" and criticized the "chaotic structure" of how the Ministry of Education dealt with the lack of infrastructure and facilities to meet health standards in schools.<sup>40</sup>



Artwork by Hamid Nikkhah: Reopening of schools in the shadow of the coronavirus

Mansour Bahrami, president of the Iranian Society of Pediatrics, also wrote in a letter to Health Minister Saeed Namaki that "if a pandemic occurs during the reopening of schools. . . there are not enough childcare beds in the country."<sup>41</sup>

According to Rezvan Hakimzadeh, Deputy Minister of Primary Education, 4,718,000 students have not been able to join the "Shad," a virtual education network, due to a lack of access to tablets and mobile phones. Many fear that these students will drop out of school.<sup>42</sup>

According to official statistics, 141,000 children dropped out of school in the Iranian academic year 1398-99. Given the outbreak of the coronavirus, and the worsening of poverty due to sanctions, this figure is expected to jump sharply in the new school year.

40 [Akhbar Rooz](#), September 5, 2020

41 [Hamshahri Online](#), September 15, 2020

42 [ILNA](#), August 4, 2020

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## Working Children: Horror Stories from Shahinshahr

In early August, it was reported on social media that officials at the Shahinshahr Welfare Department had “collected” 10 working children from the streets and locked them in the basement of the building. Officials at the Shahinshahr Welfare Office denied this news, but soon after, the Director General of Welfare in Isfahan province announced the dismissal of those who had imprisoned children.<sup>43</sup>

On September 11, the bodies of four working children were found in an agricultural water canal. All four children were Afghan immigrants in Iran.<sup>44</sup> According to Marzieh Farshad, Director General of Isfahan Welfare, these drowned children were not the same ones as those locked in the basement of the welfare office. In this case, welfare officials have not released enough information.

According to Habibullah Masoudi Farid, Deputy Minister of Social Affairs at the Welfare Organization, admissions of working children in welfare centers has decreased since the outbreak of the coronavirus. He stated that 12,000 children attended these centers in 2019.<sup>45</sup>

Working children are more susceptible to the coronavirus due to the type of work they perform (e.g., garbage collection), malnutrition, and lack of access to adequate sanitation and shelter.

At the same time, the security police harass and sometimes shut down child protection non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example, the NAJA Security Police shut down the Society for the Defense of Working and Street Children in Tehran in April 2017. In late June, the office of Jamiat Imam Ali, an NGO with more than 10,000 members, was shut down and its founder and two directors arrested.

In June 2019, the Statistics and Strategic Information Center at the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare announced that the number of working children in Iran was around 500,000. Unofficial statistics, however, indicate that there are five to seven million working children in Iran, and most of these children are Afghan immigrants.

Over the past 35 years, Iranian officials have unveiled nearly 30 different plans to organize working children, almost all of which have failed.

Article 79 of the Iranian Labor Law bans child labor under the age of 15. Article 84 of the same law prohibits harmful work for children under 18 years of age.

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43 [ISNA](#), September 5, 2020

44 [Akhbar Rooz](#), September 14, 2020

45 [ILNA](#), July 7, 2020

## “They Are Trying to Find a Neck for Their Rope”<sup>46</sup>

On the dawn of August 5, 2020, Mustafa Salehi, one of the detainees of the January 2018 street protests, was executed in Isfahan. A few days earlier, activists had launched a campaign against the death penalty to protest the confirmation of the death sentence for three detainees of the November 2019 protests: Amir Hossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi and Mohammad Rajabi. This campaign spread widely in Persian cyberspace and had a global impact.

Amnesty International condemned the execution of Mustafa Salehi, saying that there were serious concerns about his case, including torture and denial of access to a lawyer during the investigation.

Thirty-eight days after the execution of Mostafa Salehi, the death machine of the Islamic Republic of Iran began working again. On September 12, 2020, Navid Afkari, a young wrestler and one of the participants in the 2018 protests against the increase in the cost of living in Shiraz, was hanged. This execution disregarded the global campaign that formed in opposition to his execution.

Many have condemned the execution of Navid Afkari, including Amnesty International, senior human rights experts from the United Nations, the European Union, and a number of world political figures. Some of these political figures include the U.S. president, the U.S. Democratic Party presidential candidate, and the foreign ministers of several European countries.



Navid Afkari

<sup>46</sup> Taken from one of Navid Afkari's voice messages before his execution from Adelabad prison in Shiraz.

## Kulbers, Carrying the Burden of Their Own Death

On July 30, 2020, the Islamic Republic's military forces shot and killed a young *kulbar* named Vazir Mohammadi in the border areas of Nosud, Kermanshah province. After this event, a campaign formed in cyberspace with the hashtag “Don’t kill the *kulbars*”. On the evening of August 2, this hashtag was tweeted thousands of times and became the number one trending hashtag in Iran.

The police, however, have not stopped shooting at *kulbars*.



A kulbar (human mule) at the border

According to the Hengaw Human Rights Organization, five kulbars were killed and 26 wounded on the Kurdish border in Iran in August alone. Border patrol shot directly at 22 of these *kulbars*, killing four and wounding 18 of them.<sup>47</sup>

On August 31, border guards shot and killed three young *kulbars*, Zanko Ahmadi, 27, Zanest Hassannejad, 25, and Soroush Makari, 20, in the Bazhar area near Sardasht.<sup>48</sup>

Less than one week later, on September 6, a 14-year-old cobbler from Paveh in Kermanshah province named Mani Hashemi fell from the Nosud border heights while fearing detention by officers. Hashemi sustained severe injuries.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to direct targeting by border guards, other incidents such as falling from heights, frostbite, and landmine explosions kill hundreds of kulbars annually in the Kurdish regions of western Iran, including the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam.

The practice of border guards shooting at *kulbars* under the pretext of preventing illegal entry and exit from the border violates Article 35 of the Passport Law. This law states that

47 [Hangaw](#), 31 August 2020

48 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 6, 2020

49 [Hangaw](#), September 9, 2020

any Iranian who enters or leaves the country illegally will be sentenced to one to three months in prison. If a person enters or leaves unauthorized places without a passport, he or she will be sentenced to the maximum punishment mentioned in Article 34 of this law. This sentence includes two to six months imprisonment, payment of a fine (from 100 to 1,000 tomans), or both. The punishment for "smuggling" goods, according to Article 18 of the Law on Combating Smuggling of Goods and Foreign Exchange, is only a fine.

In recent years, the authorities have repeatedly announced plans to assist the *kulbars*, including organizing and concentrating them in the official border markets and creating legal avenues for them to cross. Despite these announcements, officials have not implemented any of these measures.

Exact statistics on the number of *kulbars* are not available. Hassan Alavi, the parliamentary representative of Sanandaj, estimated the number of *kulbars* in Kurdistan province alone at more than 100,000 in the summer of 2019.

Independent experts attribute the *kulbari* phenomenon in the Kurdish regions of Iran to the underdevelopment of these areas and the discriminatory policies of the Iranian government there. The official unemployment rate in these areas is higher than the average unemployment rate in the country.



## Workers' Bus on the Road to Death

According to the Forensic Medicine Organization, 759 people lost their lives in work accidents in the first five months of 2020. This statistic represents a 4.1% increase over the same period last year when the death toll from work-related accidents was 729.<sup>50</sup> 40% of work accident casualties are due to falls from heights. Some of these incidents are as follows:

On September 6, a coal mine collapse in Hojdak, Kerman province, killed four workers.<sup>51</sup>

On September 7, an electric shock killed a 19-year-old worker in Ilam.<sup>52</sup>

On September 9, an 18-year-old worker lost his life in a car repair shop in the village of Nisaneh, in the Nosud district of Paveh city in Kermanshah province.<sup>53</sup>

On September 11, a 48-year-old worker in Rasht died of electric shock. The same day, a 28-year-old worker also fell into a foundry furnace while working in a factory in the Lenjan Steel Industrial Town.<sup>54</sup>

On September 16, two workers lost their lives during a construction operation at the Abali Snow Sports Complex, and two others were injured.<sup>55</sup>

These events were just some of the deadly work-related incidents reported in the Iranian state media over a 10-day period in September 2020.

A recurring issue in August involved workers' buses. On August 3, a minibus carrying seasonal workers overturned on the side road of the village of Tatar-e Sofla in Ramyan County, Golestan Province.<sup>56</sup> On August 10, a bus carrying workers from the Goharzamin Company overturned on the Sirjan-Shiraz road.<sup>57</sup>

Earlier in June, there was an accident involving a bus carrying Iran Khodro workers on the Neyshabur-Mashhad road, killing one person, and injuring 34 others.<sup>58</sup>

According to statistics from the Forensic Medicine Organization of Mazandaran Province, 32 people lost their lives in work-related accidents in the province during the first three months of 1399 (approximately April - June 2020). This number shows a 28% increase compared to the same time period last year.<sup>59</sup>

Ali Safaei-Fard, Director General of Forensic Medicine in the East Azerbaijan, reported that 34 people in the province lost their lives during the first four months of the year due to work-related accidents. This number was 21 in the same period last year.<sup>60</sup>

50 [National Forensic Medicine Organization](#), September 20, 2020

51 [Radio Zamaneh](#), September 6, 2020

52 [Mehr News Agency](#), September 7, 2020

53 [ILNA](#), September 9, 2020

54 [ILNA](#), September 11, 2020

55 [Fars](#), September 16, 2020

56 [ILNA](#), August 3, 2020

57 [ISNA](#), August 11, 2020

58 [ILNA](#), June 24, 2020

59 [ISNA](#), August 3, 2020

60 [ISNA](#), August 20, 2020

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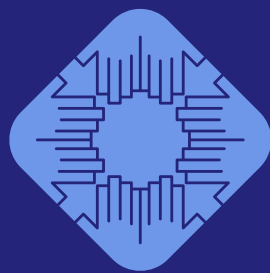
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