From ‘*Amaleh* (Labor) to *Kargar* (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry*

Touraj Atabaki
International Institute of Social History, The Netherlands

Abstract

The extraction of oil in 1908 and the ensuing construction of an oil refinery, shipping docks and company towns in southwest Persia/Iran opened a new chapter in the nation’s labor history. Enjoying absolute monopoly over the extraction, production and marketing of the oil, the Anglo-Persian/Iranian Oil Company (APOC, AIOC, now British Petroleum—BP) embarked on a massive labor recruitment campaign, drawing its recruits primarily from tribal and village-based laboring poor throughout a region. But, in a region where human needs were few and cheap, it was no easy task to persuade young men to leave their traditional mode of life in exchange for industrial milieu with radically different work patterns. Those who did join the oil industry’s work force were then subjected to labor discipline of an advanced industrial economy, which eventually contributed to the formation of the early clusters of modern Iran’s working class.

In the early hours of a spring day, May 26, 1908, following months of exploration and excavation in the Southwest of Persia, one of the wells in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains—not far from the ruins of a Parthian temple, Takht-e Suleiman—finally struck oil. A massive construction effort took place subsequently, opening up a new chapter in Iran’s labour history: roads were built, along with pipelines, an oil refinery, shipping docks and entire company towns. With its absolute monopoly of oil mining, production, and marketing, the Anglo-Persian/Iranian Oil Company (APOC, AIOC)—known today as British Petroleum (BP) undertook a grand labor recruitment campaign in the region. Its workers were drawn primarily from the tribal-pastoralist and village-based laboring poor. This new workforce was subjected to advanced industrial labor discipline. In due course, it led to the formation of the first clusters of the working class in the Persian/Iranian oil industry.[1]

As the new workforce was recruited for the burgeoning oil industry, rapid industrialization and demographic change occurred. The oil towns affected virtually all social relations, social organization, and government administrative structures at the local and national level. However, it soon turned out that the recruitment of labor for the oil industry was by no means as easy as the company had anticipated. In a region where human needs were few and cheap to satisfy, it was not so simple to persuade young men (women were excluded during this early period) to exchange their traditional mode of life for an industrial milieu with radically different work patterns and a new kind of labor discipline.

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Iranian province of Khuzestan and the Anglo-Persian concessionary activity zone, 1928

Reference: R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum,* volume 1, (London, 1982), xxvii, with some modification. Image used with permission from the BP Archive, University of Warwick.

Surveying these transformations, my research intends to develop an empirical and qualitative understanding of the lives of Persian oil workers. I investigate the material circumstances of daily existence at work and probe the inner world of popular experience in the workplace during the industry's formative years. Utilizing the narratives of individual workers, APOC sources, and other material in the Iranian National Archives, this research seeks to answer a number of questions. Who were the early clusters of workers in the Iranian oil

industry? What were the operational processes of recruitment, recruitment structure, recruitment agencies, and personal contacts? What tactics of coercion and inducement were employed by labor intermediaries in order to maintain labor recruitment and engagement? To what extent were the traditional patterns of communal life and bondage, which tied much of the workforce to the land, altered? What were the workers' perceptions of wage labor and labor discipline within the new industry? How did the oil company enforce and maintain labor discipline? How did the need for cash wages grow? And finally, how did the working people see themselves? How were they regarded and treated by the oil company employing them and by society at large?

The theoretical framework for my study involves two interdependent levels of analysis: the forms of labor and the class structure. The concept of forms of labor includes all aspects of labor analysis, such as the ethnic composition of the labor force, labor formation (recruitment, skills, training, and education), labor relations (remuneration methods and labor discipline), and labor migration, mobility, and integration. At the level of class structure, I aim to analyze the structural formation of the working class—both horizontally and vertically.

The horizontal dimension mainly deals with the relationship among workers and how working in the oil industry affected their cultural identity. At issue here is how the oil industry altered the workers' bonds of kinship and clanship upon which their social conduct and behavior was traditionally based. It governs the extent to which the new oil industry informed and guided personal interaction among the workers. I want to analyze whether or not the dynamics of proletarianization altered the sense of self-will and self-reliance among the workers and whether this led to the development of a collective solidarity. I also want to understand how the experience of industrial work promoted a sense of collective identity of class and, at the same time, a corresponding sense of individualism.

The analysis of the vertical dimension concerns the complexity of the labor process as a significant aspect of labor history in the Iranian oil industry. It refers to the multilateral labor relations between workers and the other main players in the labor process. It tries to explain modes of labor control and their application by each of the main actors—the representatives of the British government and the government of India, APOC; the highly complex, stratified tribal communities, characterized by internal and external strife; and a centralized state critically engaged in a multifaceted relationship with the first two. Each of these players shared a common interest: making the industry work effectively. But the means by which they exerted control over labor varied greatly—imposing individual rewards and contractual rights coupled with intimidation tactics and threats of coercion.

Unearthing the Oil

At the turn of the nineteenth century, discovery and control of reliable and secure major deposits of oil was one of the main challenges of British enterprises

worldwide. Imperial Russia owned the Baku oilfield, which at that time was the second-largest known oil deposit in the world, after that of the United States oilfields. This ownership equally gave Russia control over the emerging and expanding new energy market.[2] Their British competitors were keen to change that situation by discovering and mining new oilfields around the world. In May 1901, William N. D'Arcy, an Australian entrepreneur supported by the British legation in Tehran, succeeded in gaining a concession which gave monopoly rights to "search for, obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable for trade, carry away and sell natural gas, petroleum, asphalt and ozokerite throughout the whole extent of the Persian Empire, with the exception of the five Northern provinces for no less than sixty years."[3]

The exemption of the Northern provinces from the deal was obviously a gesture intended to avoid jeopardizing the relationship between Iran and its Northern neighbor, Russia. A year after obtaining this generous concession, the oil company launched its activities for the first time, in the western part of the country. However, the limited oil revenues obtained in the region failed to meet the expected turnover. This persuaded D'Arcy's agent, now called the "First Exploitation Company," to move to the south of the country, to the province of Khuzestan.

Following a massive increase in oil revenues and a series of complex financial deals in London, APOC was formed on April 14, 1909. APOC, with capital holdings of £2,000,000, monopolized the extraction, production, and marketing of Persian oil. It had the privilege of all rights granted in the D'Arcy concession. Additionally, it formed the provincial Bakhtiyari Oil Company with a capital investment of £300,000 in order to please the local Bakhtiyari tribal chiefs and, simultaneously, to secure their support.

After its success in discovering oil deposits, the immediate task facing APOC was the considerable challenge of transporting oil from the wellhead to the market, in crude or refined form. To maximize profitability, the company decided to refine the oil within Persia, where the proximity of the Persian Gulf offered the APOC easy access to the international market. Along the coastline, the Abadan Island in the Northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf—on the side of the waterway of Arvandroud (Shatt al-Arab River)—offered fine anchorages for shipping tankers. It seemed like an ideal location for building the refinery. The construction of Abadan Refinery began in October 1909. Three months later, in January 1910, an ambitious project was launched to construct some 220 kilometers of pipeline to transport the oil from the fields of Masjid Suleiman to Abadan.[4]

Recruiting Labor for the New Industry

Prior to striking oil in Masjid Suleiman, and while the surveying mission was still under way, the fieldwork employees included no more than a "dozen drillers, a few blacksmiths and mechanics, an accountant, a transport overseer, a doctor, an assistant and a number of local muleteers."[5] The needs of the mission,

including a labor supply, were met largely through negotiations with Bakhtiyari tribal chiefs. A 1907 report compiled by engineer H. E. Bradshaw, who was in charge of the road works, refers to the workers sent by Samsam al-Saltaneh (a Bakhtiyari khan) to build the road to Masjid Suleiman.[6] Similarly, Arnold Wilson recalls his days acting as the British political officer in the region, when he often contacted the "small tribal chiefs from whom to draw labor, pack animals and even supplies of straw, barley, wood for fuel and other local supplies" for the oil company.[7] In another agreement, reached in 1908 between Sheikh Khaz'al, a local Arab tribe chief from Muhammareh (later called Khoramshahr), and P. Z. Cox, political resident in the Persian Gulf, the oil company offered the Sheikh "a guarantee that no tribesmen be engaged without [the sheikh's] permission."[8] However, it turned out that in all the negotiations to recruit labor, the need for manpower guarding the oil company's activities, its machinery, and its personnel was the most troublesome.

Production had to be carried out in a region where the Persian central government could not assert its unmitigated authority, and that was a tricky business. The company realized quickly that in order to proceed, it needed the blessing of the chiefs of the local tribal, particularly the Bakhtiyari, whose cooperation was essential to guard the company against possible attacks by the pastoral nomads and peasants accusing the oil company of seizing their pastoral land. The consecration of the tribal chiefs was also vital for supplying the workface the company needed.[9]

In the early twentieth century, the structure of power within the Bakhtiyari tribes, at that time the largest tribal group in southwest Iran, was based on five class positions. These class positions were defined by economic status, the size of herds owned, and the allocated pastoral lands. They included the *ilkhan*, the chief of confederation of Bakhtiyari tribes, and his deputy *ilbeg*; the *khan*, the head of each tribe; the *kanatar*, the head of the *tayefeh* (clan or subtribe); the *kadkhoda*, the head of the *tireh* (branch or sub-*tayefeh*); and, finally, the lowest rank within each tribe, known as *'amaleh*, comprising *tofangchi* (gunmen), *Chubaki* (stick-holders), *tubreh-kesh* (bag-holders), and *dast-pati* (empty-handed).[10]

The *ilkhan/ilbeg* had hereditary status in the tribe, although they were accredited by the central government. The position of *khan*, and sometimes that of *kalantar*, was also hereditary. The *kadkhoda*'s election was based on his trustworthy position within the tribe. The lowest rank, the *'amaleh*, either had no herd, or owned small flocks of a few sheep or goats. The status of *'amaleh* (the singular form; the plural is *'amalehjat*), applied to those individual nomads who provided the logistical requirements of the tribe. They were *amal konandeh*, dealing with practical matters in the tribe. Their major tasks included guarding the clan against foreign incursion and organizing regular raids, mainly against the sedentary population of nearby villages. While the *tofangchi* and *chubaki* comprised the cavalry, the *tubreh-kesh* or *dast-pati*, among other things, collected booty following each raid. As I will show, this class of *'amaleh* were in fact the first group of Bakhtiyaris who joined the emerging oil industry, working at the wellhead or protecting the company's property as guards.

On the eve of the Masjid Suleiman operation, in November 1905, an agreement was reached between the British Consul-General of Isfahan and Sardar As'ad, "the principal spokesman" for the Bakhtiyaris chiefs (who were all *Ilkhan*s and *Ilbeg*s). According to the agreement, the Bakhtiyari chiefs received £2,000 per annum in return for supplying regiments of guards from their associated tribe and for protecting the company's property against robbery in Bakhtiyari territories.[11] After the agreement, a regiment of eighty Bakhtiyari men was formed to guard the drilling sites from three positions. The guards were to be paid by Bakhtiayri *khan*. Their wage was between fifty and one hundred *Tumans* (the Persian currency) per year, plus fodder for their horses.[12] However, it soon turned out that the assigned guards, who were drawn exclusively from the stratum of *'amaleh* in the tribe, received "no penny in hard cash" and were left to meet their needs by "other means."[13] Only from March 1909, when the oil company finally reached an agreement with the Bakhtiyari chiefs, did the guards receive their wages directly from the head guards, for an allowance of £600. This sum was deducted from the previous annual cost of arrears, which amounted to £2,500.[14]

When, at last, the oil flared up at Meydan-e Naftun, in Masjid Suleiman—a sparsely populated region—the problem of mass recruitment of labor became one of the biggest challenges the oil company faced. Arnold Wilson recalled, "Much labor is being imported from India, and much from other parts of Persia; some from the Gulf ports and some from Turkey (Ottoman Empire)."[15] The Indian workforce comprised the main trunk of semiskilled labor. Along with the activities of road construction and transport, the Iranian workers were mainly employed for unskilled work in the drilling tasks, except for masonry, carpentry, and painting, which was done mainly by *Isfahani* skilled workers. However, in the following year, the ethnic composition gradually changed in favor of a largely Persian workforce.[16]

By the end of 1909, as the drilling activities of the oil company expanded, the transport pipeline was laid, and the Abadan oil refinery began production, the newborn industry accommodated a fast-growing workforce. Within one year, the number of Iranian workers in the field had reached 457, while for the pipeline and in Abadan it had reached 770 and 590, respectively.

Anglo-Persian Oil Company Staff and Labor in Iran 1910

	Iranian	European	Indian	Others	Total
Oil Field	457	17	66	1	541
Ahwaz	67	3	1	12	83
Abadan	590	8	218	70	886
Pipeline	770	26	49	105	950
Total	1,884	54	334	188	2,460

Source: British Petroleum Archive (BP). ARC141294, January 1938. Laurence Lockhart, *Unpublished Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Vol. I: 1901–1918*.

The composition of the workforce in the early stages of recruitment was loosely regulated by the terms of the oil concession of 1901. To understand the pattern of recruitment in the following years, it is essential to take a look at the Agreement of 1901, which refers to the employment of labor under the concession. According to Article 12 of the Agreement, “the workmen employed in the service of the company shall be subject to His Imperial Majesty the Shah, except the technical staff, such as the managers, engineers, borers and foremen.”[17] In the terms of this article, APOC was free to recruit skilled and semiskilled labor beyond Iran’s borders, which it did—mainly from India. To obtain unskilled labor, APOC looked primarily to the region adjacent to the oil field. The Bakhtiyari peasants and pastoral nomads living there became the main source of the workforce. However, there were some exceptions to this rule. For example, a letter sent by Sadiq al-Saltaneh (the oil commissar of the Persian government) to the Persian Charge d’Affaire in London refers to the employment of some Ottoman coolies, from around Basra and lower Mesopotamia, by APOC.[18] In response to Sadiq al-Saltaneh’s protest against this practice, Arnold Wilson, at that time the British consul in Mohammareh, stressed the necessity to

> . . . obtain foreign labor for other than technical work. The Arabs of Mohammareh were, he said, agriculturalists who derived an ample sustenance from their lands with the expenditure of a relativity small amount of labor. As a rule they are probably more prosperous and less hard working than any other in Persia. They are under no necessity to work hard and prefer not to do so.[19]

The Sadiq al-Saltaneh’s protest and Wilson’s reply related mostly to the company’s recruiting practices in the Southwest, by the shoreline of the Persian Gulf, where the majority of the Iranian Arab community resided. However, in the North of the province near the oilfields of Masjid Suleiman, Persian labor drawn from both the Bakhtiyari pastoralists and sedentary cultivators were the main part of the unskilled workforce.

Recruiting *‘amaleh* from the Bakhtiyari pastoralists soon became a major burden for APOC because of the discrepancy between the lifestyle of the pastoralists and the employee requirements of APOC. The Bakhtiyari pastoralists migrated seasonally twice a year. In the late spring, they left the scorching desert plains in the South with their flocks and herds and headed for the Northern highlands and the snow-clad mountain range of Zagros, where fresh pastures could be found. That was their *yaylaq* or summer quarter. In late autumn, when the grass died in the freezing weather of the elevated Zagros plateau, the Bakhtiyaris descended to the lowlands again, in search of grazing pastures and fresh grass on the plain, which provided plenty of food for their flocks of sheep and goats. That was their *qeshlaq*, or winter quarter. The *qeshlaq* was also the season for marketing their surplus and buying what they needed in market towns of Dezful, Shushtar, Ramhormoz, and Isfahan.

The pastoralist Bakhtiyaris routinely followed their seasonal migration every six months. They commonly lived in tents, especially when on the move, or in their *yaylaq*. When the *qeshlaq* came, they lived in sandstone or sun-baked mud shelters in nearby villages North of Masjid Suleiman; their winter pastures lay in the vicinity of the oilfield. An eyewitness recounts their simple lifestyle:

> The inhabitants of that part of Persia in which the work was to be done were, for the most part, pastoral nomads, consisting mainly of the famous Bakhtiyari tribes. The Bakhtiyari follow the grass … they live in tents or in rude shelters … their wants are few and the hardships of such a life is to them scarcely irksome. Of money they have little need and such exchange as they require is done largely by barter. It was from this nomadic human material that the company had to enlist the labor it required.[20]

The seasonal migration was not compulsory for all members of the Bakhtiyari tribe. For example, when periodic droughts occurred and when the weather in *yaylaq* or *qeshlaq* was not favorable, a member of the tribe, usually from the *'amalehjat*, would go to the *khan* and ask for permission to stay behind. Permission was usually granted. It was among these *'amalehjat* that the APOC enlisted its early unskilled labor employees, first as assistants in the elementary operations of rig-building and drilling, or in road-building and transport, and later in laying the oil pipes, or in constructing the Abadan oil refinery.

Since the oil company operated year-round, the major challenge was obviously how to retain the recruited labor in the off-season, for more than six months at a time. There were

> … few men to come for six months and then return, the nomad to his flocks, the townsman to his city. This was partly due to the climate: a few, if any, nomad had ever remained in the sultry foothills during the summer months. They went with the flocks to the highlands in quest of grass at the first breath of the hot summer winds, and there remained till the autumn.[21]

Along with this difficulty of securing a supply of permanent employees, the introduction and acceptance of labor discipline, orderliness, and punctuality became even more challenging, both for the employer and the workers themselves: "It was not sufficient to attract the tribesmen to service with the company by the prospect of regular pay and additional comfort that pay could bring; measures had to be taken to keep them when enrolled."[22]

Labor Recruitment and Labor Settlement

The *'amaleh* recruits gradually adopted the new industrial lifestyle. Some of them formed a new cluster of the workforce known as *sarkar*, an abridged form of *sar-kargar* (headworkers). The *sarkar*s were distinct from the foremen; the latter represented a labor category exclusively reserved for

European skilled workers in the early days of APOC’s activities. Among other functions, the *sarkar* recruited labor for the company. In the early days of oil excavation, it was the Bakhtiyari *khan* who, through negotiations with the oil company, acted as the main provider of labor. But now there were *sarkar*s who not only supervised the performance of the new recruited labor, but also took charge of recruiting new workers. They were paid bonuses per head of each new recruit hired. Thus, in the formative years of the oil industry in Persia, the function of the intermediary, the *sarkar*, was not only to conscript men for the new workforce of the expanding industry, but also to ensure their loyalty in performing their new tasks. It was a dual mission: *sarkar* was both a recruiter and, effectively, a foreman.

The practice of recruitment by Bakhtiyari *khan* and *sarkar* lasted until the birth of the Abadan refinery, the construction of which began in October 1909; in May 1912 the first crude oil was refined.[23] With the expansion of APOC’s activities, and especially with the building of the Abadan refinery, the company decided to consolidate and extend its activities. The range of activities

> … was not confined to the oil business but included authorization to act as merchants, bankers, traders; commission, commercial and general agents; ship-owners, carriers and dealers in all kind of commodities. The right was given to establish, acquire and expand branches, trading stations, factories, stores, depots, docks and ships, and to takeover or enter into partnership with any business or persons running businesses of a similar nature.[24]

Within these terms, a new Labor Office was soon established on the premises of the Abadan refinery. One of the main tasks commissioned by this new office was to bring seasonal work to an end, in favor of permanent employment. To reach this goal, the Labor Office utilized ancestral bonding in the organized, networked migration. It encouraged the employment of workers’ descendants “in an elementary apprenticeship in use of lathes and simple machine tools.”[25] In the long run, this preferred employment policy reshaped social relations among oil workers by trying to get successive generations to work in the oil industry. The impact of this policy went beyond the shop floor and fashioned a new culture in the public space of the Iranian oil towns.

With the expansion of drilling operations and the construction of access roads and pipelines to bring the oil to the Persian Gulf, “gradually a community began to settle on the spot and [the] problem[s] of health and housing came to the fore; carpenters from Isfahan and iron-workers from Dezful and Shushtar, finding employment regular, commenced to settle.”[26] The Labor Office launched its activities in major cities in the Southern part of Iran, to recruit a workforce—both from tribal Bakhtiyari pastoralists and village-based cultivators, as well as from a non-Bakhtiyari workforce, drawn from other cities: “The great majority of the elaborate machinery both at Abadan and at Masjid Suleiman and Ahwaz [was] worked by these men, as well as by

tribesmen, for truth to tell, the nomad has shown a greater willingness and aptitude to take to machinery than has the townsman."[27]

The human migration to Masjid Suleiman, either to seek employment in the oil industry or to provide services to its employees, extended the frontiers of the newborn city. An oilfield accommodating 523 employees in 1910[28] gradually developed into a company town with a population of 17,000 around 1920.[29] While APOC offered housing to its European staff in brick bungalows and to the Indian employees in large common barracks, the Persian recruits had to live in shelters made of sticks or bamboo lashed loosely together and roofed by palm leaves. It was not until later on, during the interwar period, that APOC launched its first housing project for the Persian workers.[30]

As an added inducement to retain workers, the oil company provided free basic medical care for laborers and their families in Masjed Suleiman. Other measures were also taken to make working for the oil company more desirable, such as providing a local market, or bazaar, where workers could spend their wages buying food, clothing, utensils, tobacco, and ornaments, among other things.

> It has been indicated that the prospect of regular pay, in the first instance, attracted the nomadic tribesmen to service with the Company. The wages, of themselves, could do little, however, to keep the men in service unless opportunities were provided of purchasing with the wages those commodities and comforts not obtainable in nomadic life. It was not enough to give money; ways of spending the money had also to be provided.[31]

The first such market was established in Masjid Suleiman. The migrants from Shushtar were the leading vendors in this bazaar. They were also the pioneer settlers who built a community at the outskirts of the first oil well. The district was called *Kalgeh*.[32] Soon other districts with shelters roofed with palm leaves were founded by newly recruited laborers. Districts such as *Sarkoureh*, or *Malkarim*, which were divided from each other along the Bakhtiyari tribal structure association lines.[33] However, these division lines could not resist the expansion of settlement when new migrants from other parts of the country came to join the fast-growing oil company, and, consequently, a population with various new identities developed.

Labor Recruitment and Labor Discipline

As I mentioned earlier, in the formative years of the Iranian oil industry, the recruiters had a dual function: conscripting a new labor force for the expanding industry and overseeing the new employees' steady, continuing effort at their assigned tasks. Within this context, specific labor disciplines were practiced.

There were numerous reports about individual workers who simply deserted the site after only a few days of work, without giving prior notice.[34] To overcome this problem, the company adopted some special regulations for

wage payments. Instead of making a daily payment, which, in the early days, was made in Indian rupees instead of Persian rials (the Persian currency), remuneration was distributed on a fortnightly basis. This was the first measure implemented by the oil company to ensure the continuity of work. In the long term, however, the new payment rule potentially could have other outcomes, including drawing the workers into indebtedness to bazaar moneylenders, which inexorably secured the continuity of work.

Some inauspicious measures were also adopted to assert labor discipline. Although there is no direct reference to fines or physical punishments within the APOC work regulations charter, on more than one occasion references can be found to such practices in the company’s archive. One confidential report from the field, dated July 24, 1911, concerns a British foreman by the name of Melvie, who kicked an Iranian worker in the chest, accusing him of not working “properly.” The angry reaction of the worker astonished the manager, since “never before has a native dared even to raise his hand to a European, and with all their faults of laziness, etc. they were quite submissive to fines and even to occasional boxing, about which complaints were infrequent.”[35] Following this incident, records show another case, in which a European engineer—Mr. Ritchie, one of the managers—issued a warning that “a fine of 50 qerans (the Persian currency) would be imposed on any offender, and which would be doubled, for any subsequent offense in the matter of assault.”[36]

Payday, Masjid Suleiman, 1910

Source: Persian Oil Collection. *Archive of the International Institute of Social History.* Image used with permission from the BP Archive, University of Warwick.

Long working days and modern time measurement were among the methods of labor discipline introduced by the oil company. The narratives of Iranian workers in the first cohort of the native workforce all indicate that, in the early years of the oil company's life, there was simply no standard working day for the employees. Persian workers, just like Indian or Ottoman subjects (often referred to as "Turks"), were all expected to work seven days a week, from sunrise to sunset. Some years later, however, on the eve of the First World War, a new workday regime was implemented: six days a week for nine to twelve hours a day, depending on the season. Work started at six o'clock in the morning and ended at six o'clock in the evening during the winter, and from six o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon during the summer. In the early days of its activities, the oil company adopted Sunday, and not Friday, as a day off. However, in later years, the day off started at noon on Thursday and included Friday.

Although national culture was directly affected by modernization, the rhythms of modern urbanized life nevertheless could not prevail. Persia was a society composed essentially of an upper class of literati, and a large mass of peasants who counted their time in "days and months, not in minutes or hours," where "the clock had little chance to play the role of a useful practical contrivance."[37] In the oil industry, the daily production period was divided into two shifts, where each shift consisted of a twelve-hour working period.[38] Given the absence of watches and clocks, the only way to make the workers conscious of time-discipline in the workplace was a horn or claxon, which was usually mounted at the top of towers. Twice a day, the horn was sounded to indicate the start and finish of the working day. This horn was known in the oil industry as the *feydus* (from fagottist, the bassoon player). It hooted at six o'clock in the morning and six o'clock in the evening.[39] On Thursdays, due to the shorter working days, it was sounded at noon.

In 1929, the workers of the Abadan refinery launched a strike to improve their working conditions and pay. Among the demands of some nine thousand striking workers—out of an oilfield workforce numbering fifteen thousand—was the reduction of the working day from ten hours to seven hours in the summer, and eight hours in the winter.[40] Since the police crushed the strike, this call for a shorter working day had no effect.[41]

Representation and Recognition of Labor-Worker, 'Amaleh-Kargar

In the foregoing, I outlined how the *'amaleh* left his pastoral or sedentary village life, having been recruited by an intermediary; how he joined the oil industry; and how he became subject to specific work disciplines, earning daily wages, and finally settling down in the vicinities of the workplace. Could this process be interpreted as a progression to a new role for labor (*'amaleh)*? Or did they leave behind their traditional labor status altogether, to become workers (*kargar*)? Was their new social status more imagined than real? If it represented a real change in social status, how might this reality be observed? And if it was

merely imagined, how did the imaginary change in status relate to their real conditions of life?

The interpretation of working-class formation and representation as a direct outcome of structural economic change and capitalist development is common to the labor historiography of many societies, North and South. Iran is no exception in this regard. In Iranian labor historiography, the standard interpretation of working-class formation and representation can often be found in the narratives mooted by teleological Marxists. The typical argument goes as follows: the rise and expansion of the capitalist relations in Western Europe, embodied in the colossal development of heavy industries and mass production of commodities, the rising European powers were poised to expand the realm of their power—not only to add new markets, but also to acquire raw materials desperately needed for their industries. The results of these processes set the standard for a new division of labor, worldwide. From the mid-nineteenth century, Iran joined this global capitalist relationship, and by the end of the century, with the introduction of capitalist development in Iran and its integration into world markets, the labor force was created as a new working class. However, the consolidation of working-class consciousness was only realized by unionist and political movements that the Iranian workers organized in the early twentieth century. By that time, the making of the Iranian working class had already been accomplished for all intents and purposes.[42]

However, such a “conventional structuralist, objectivist definition of the worker and working class,” as Zachary Lockman puts it, combined with a “narrow sense of what should be classified as authentic activism,” can be challenged as inadequate.[43] In his study of the formation of the working class in Egypt, Lockman traces out the same kind of paradigm in Egyptian labor historiography, including in his own previous work, which he now believes should be criticized:

> Working-class formation (in fact, all class formation) is as much a *discursive* as a *material* process. In Egypt, as elsewhere, the working class as an entity and “worker” as a form of subjectivity can be usefully conceptualized as product, as effect, not only of certain material practices (for example, wage employment in large enterprises as the result of capitalist development), but also of a particular discourse that, by providing categories of worker and class identity, gives people a (never unambiguous) language with which to organize their experience, to make one of several different and possibly conflicting kinds of sense of the world and their own places and possibilities within it. These categories are moreover, the (always provincial) outcome of conflicts in which, by promoting certain representations of self, society, and the world, various forces seek to organize some group around some pole of identity in order to realize some particular sociopolitical project.[44]

In studying working-class formation in the Persian oil industry, which is “as much as discursive as a material process,” I join Zachary Lockman in

questioning the validity of the "conventional structuralist, objectivist definition of the worker and working class." My aim here is not only to avoid presuming the birth of a working class as a direct and automatic outcome of structural economic change and capitalist development. It is also to explore whether, after the lengthy process of recruitment and subjection to a new labor discipline, working people in Persia ended up with a new image of themselves as a distinctive group with a collective social identity. Such an image is meant to reflect an iconic vision of group solidarity—one that brings people together through the cultural contestations of their everyday life: not only forging a collective *class*-consciousness, but also other forms of consciousness. Borrowing Raymond Williams' phraseology, we are dealing with the fashioning of a kind of practical consciousness, of what is "actually being lived," as distinct from that which is "thought to be lived."[45] Along with an examination of such self-perceptions of belonging to a class, it is, of course, just as important to understand how the social representation of working people was recognized, defined, and marked out by their employer, the oil company, and by society at large.

Such recognition and representation of a new social existence created a new language, a new vocabulary. Moreover, the newly adapted and adopted vocabularies used by the worker and the employer often differed from each other. In my study, the petitions signed by protesting workers are worth examining for evidence of the new vocabulary of the workers.[46] As regards the vocabulary of the employer, correspondence between the different departments of the Persian government and with APOC reveals much about how the working people in the oil industry were actually regarded by both the oil company and the Persian government.

In one of the earliest pieces of correspondence between the oil commissioner of the Persian government and the Persian Charge d' Affairs in London about labor recruitment in the oil industry, unskilled labor—including Ottoman subjects—was referred to both as *'amaleh* and "coolie." In the same letter, the word *kargar* is used exclusively for the non-Asian workforce, among them British, Australian, Portuguese, and some Ottoman subjects.[47] In the following years, the unskilled workforce in the oil industry continued to be referred to by the employer and by government agencies as *'amaleh*, and occasionally as "coolie" or *tandil*.[48] That practice somehow lasted until late 1920s.

In the early period of the oil industry, working people did not regard themselves as any more than the *ra'iyat* (subject) or *bandeh-e haqir va jan-nesar-e homayouni* ("the slightest and most obedient servant of his majesty, the King"). I found no petition during the period prior to the First World War in which the working people called themselves *'amaleh* or *kargar*. As I mentioned, during this period the term *'amaleh* was exclusively used by the employer and the government to distinguish certain groups within the unskilled workforce. However, during the period following the First World War, some petitions used the term *kargar* to describe the workforce. In a petition to the national parliament in 1924, for example, in which the working and living conditions of the

Abadan workforce are described as “extremely miserable and beyond any human endurance,” the workforce is described in the following terms:

> Abadan is a city where the majority of its residents are poor and wretched. Facing unemployment in their home town, these residents accepted the offer of the oil company to work in the very harsh and hot climate of Khuzestan, with all infections around for the period of nine months a year, receiving a salary of thirty rupees per month. However, every month, the company deducts some amount from their salaries. According to the company, paying the full salary stops the workers (*kargaran*) from staying at work during summer when the weather is hot. Therefore, the company needs to stay in debt to all workers.[49]

In response to this petition, the head of the national parliament urged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to use every possible means to guarantee that workers of APOC would get the utmost support of the Persian government.[50]

By the end of the First World War—some ten years after the first discovery of oil in Khuzestan, after extensive oil extraction, and with an oil refinery in place—the industry had acquired its own established workforce, which became predominantly nonseasonal. While their ancestral, religious, tribal, and regional identities still survived, the working and living conditions of this workforce forged new class and territorial identities. Reflected in the language adopted by the employee, the employer and the state, the new linguistic icon of “worker” (*kargar*) replaced the old tribal status of *‘amaleh* and the new territorial distinctiveness of Masjid Suleimani or Abadani (resident of Masjid Suleiman or Abadan) juxtaposing the tribal or regional association of Bakhtiyari or Shushtari. The working class in the Iranian oil industry was, gradually, being born.

NOTES

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1. At the turn of the century, Iranian industries employing 23,500 workers comprised 0.7 percent of the total workforce in the country. See Touraj Atabaki, Willem Floor, and Nazanin Sadeghi, *History of Labor Relations 1500–2000.* Forthcoming in: http://socialhistory.org/en/projects/history-labour-relations-1500-2000.

2. The free exploitation of the oil deposits in the Absheron peninsula on the Caspian coast in 1872 soon caused the region to supply about ninety-five percent of all Russia’s consumer oil. The Russian state authorities anticipated they could benefit from the underground resources of a territory, which, on the eve of its occupation and annexation, was still considered to be only of geopolitical and military importance. The strongly state-oriented industrialization policy in Russia during the late nineteenth century paved the way for a massive expansion of domestic industries, the development of huge mining projects, and a dazzling extension of railway networks into the southern regions of the Tsarist Empire. See: M. E. Falkus, *The Industrialization of Russia, 1700–1914* (London, 1972), 44–46, and 64–66. As a result of the “oil rush,” the population of Baku rose from 13,000 in 1859 to 112,000 in 1879, and to 300,000 in 1917. Another case is the workforce in the Baku oilfields, which grew from 1,800 in 1872 to 30,000 in 1907.

3. J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near East and Middle East: A Documentary Record*, vol. 1 (New York, 1956), 251.

4. For a study of the Abadan oil refinery, see Touraj Atabaki, *The Making of the Abadan Oil Refinery* (forthcoming).
5. R. W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, vol. 1 (London, 1982), 114.
6. ARC 78726, March 19 and 22, 1907, British Petroleum Archive.
7. Arnold T. Wilson, *S.W. Persia. Letters and Diary of a Young Political Officer, 1907–1914* (London, 1942), 28.
8. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 124.
9. Arash Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran* (Seattle, 2009), 112–158.
10. Interview with Houshang Keshavarz, Paris: January 21, 2009. See also Javad Safinezhad, *'Asahyer Markazi Iran* (Tehran, 1989), 461–71 and 525–48. For more study on Bakhtiyaris and tribe in modern Iran, see Arash Khazeni, *Tribes and Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran* (Seattle, 2009); Gene R. Garthwaite, *Khans and Shah: A History of the Bakhtiyari Tribe in Iran* (London, 2009) and Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflicts and the New State*, 1921–1941 (New York, 2007).
11. ARC141294, January 1938, Laurence Lockhart, *Unpublished Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, volume 1, 1901–1918*, 68, British Petroleum Archive.
12. FO 248/894, British Charge d'Affaires, Evelyn Grant Duff to Sir Edward Grey, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Tehran, May 18, 1906, British National Archive.
13. Ibid., 90.
14. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 128.
15. Ibid., 123.
16. For a study of the Indian migrant labor in the Iranian oil industry, see Touraj Atabaki, *Indian Migrant Labour in the Persian Oil Industry* (forthcoming).
17. J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near East and Middle East: A Documentary Record* (New Haven, 1975), 249.
18. 240014788, Sadiq al-Saltaneh to the Persian Charge d'Affaire in London, December 11, 1910, National Library and Archive of Iran.
19. ARC141294, January 1938. Laurence Lockhart, *Unpublished Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company*, 146. British Petroleum Archive.
20. J. W. Williamson, *In a Persian Oil Field. A Study in Scientific and Industrial Development* (London, 1927), 120.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 151.
24. Ibid., 128.
25. Ibid.
26. Arnold T. Wilson, *Persia* (London, 1932), 97.
27. Ibid.
28. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 276.
29. The figure presented here as the population of Masjed Suleiman around 1920 is based on the estimation derived from differed data collecting from the British Petroleum Archive and the National Library and Archive of Iran.
30. For making Masjed Suleiman and Abadan as company towns, see Kaveh Ehsani, "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed Suleiman," *International Review of Social History* 3 (2003): 361–99.
31. Williamson, *In a Persian Oil Field*, 142.
32. ARC 185578, C. E. Capito, "Early Days in Masjed Suleiman," *Naft*, 16/4 (1940): 5–11. British Petroleum Archive.
33. Kamal Athari, "Masjed Suleiman; Shahrak Madaniyyat-yafteh," *Ettelat Siyasi-Eqtesadi* 47–48 (1991): 65–69.
34. 240004338, National Library and Archive of Iran.
35. ARC 70335, July 24, 1911, British Petroleum Archive.
36. Ibid.
37. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Clocks & Culture 1300–1700* (London, 1967), 88.
38. For a comparative study of time and labor discipline in Iran and Turkey, see Touraj Atabaki, "Time, Labour Discipline and Modernization in Turkey and Iran," in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran* (London, 2007), 1–16.

39. In the North of Iran, in the region bordering the southern side of the Caspian Sea, the horn was called *sisto* (from Russian word *svistok,* referring to the horn or claxon apparatus). One of these *sistos* was assembled in a silk preparation factory in the Amin al-Zarb district in the city of Rasht.

40. Ardeshir Avanesian, *Safahati chand az Jonbesh-e Karegari va Komunisti da Dowran-e Avval Saltanat-e Reza Shah (1922–1933)* (Leipzig, 1979), 75–83.

41. For a detailed study of labor activities aiming to reduce the working day in Iran, see Touraj Atabaki, “The Comintern, the Soviet Union and Labour Militancy in Interwar Iran,” in *Iranian-Russian Encounters. Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London, 2012). For further study of the Abadan 1929 strike, see Kaveh Bayat, “With or Without Workers in Reza Shah’s Iran: Abadan May 1929,” in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London, 2007), 111–22; and Stephanie Cronin, “Popular Politics and the Birth of Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (2010): 699–732.

42. See for example, Ali Ashtiyani, “Formation of the Working Class in Iran,” *Nazm-e Novin* 5 (1984).

43. Zachary Lockman, “Reflections on Labour and Working-Class History in the Middle East and North Africa,” in *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, 2nd edition, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern, 2008), 136.

44. Zachary Lockman, “Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914,” *Poetics Today* 5 (1994): 158–59.

45. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 131.

46. For a detailed study of petitions in Persia and beyond, see “Petitions in Social History,” *International Review of Social History* Supplement 9 (2002); Irene Schneider, *The Petitioning System in Iran: State, Society and Power Relations in the Late 19th Century* (Wiesbaden, 2006); Mansoureh Ettehadieh Nezam-Mafi, “The Council for the Investigation of Grievances: A Case Study of Nineteenth Century Iranian Social History,” *International Society for Iranian Studies* 22 (1989): 51–61; John Chalcraft “Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 303–25.

47. 240014788, December 11, 1910, National Library and Archive of Iran.

48. 293005892, August 27, 1921, National Library and Archive of Iran. In south and south-east Asia, the term *tandil* was often used to name the overseer or foreman. See Russell Jones, ed., *Loan-words in Indonesian and Malay* (Jakarta, 2008), 312.

49. *Documents of the Fifth Parliament*, June 5 1924, National Library and Archive of Iran.

50. Ibid.