The Shoras and the Shah

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Mark Hoskisson reviews Workers and Revolution in Iran, by Assef Bayat (Zed Books, London 1987, 227pp, £7.95)

The Iranian revolution of 1978/79 has been the subject of numerous studies over the past few years. Nearly all of them have concentrated on the role of the Islamic fundamentalists led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. This is hardly surprising. Khomeini was, after all, the victor in the revolution and in the power struggles that followed it. Shi?ite Islam seemed to be the only force worth considering as a factor in the revolution.

Assef Bayat?s book, by documenting in detail the role of the working class in Iran during and immediately after the insurrection, shows, whether the author intended to or not, quite how shallow such approaches to the revolution are. Despite the religious leadership, the Iranian revolution was a massive, popular, anti-imperialist upsurge. Millions took to the streets; hundreds, if not thousands, gave their lives to secure one single, simple demand?down with the Shah. That the realisation of this demand did not result in the establishment of bourgeois democracy, let alone a revolutionary workers? and peasants? government, should not blind us to the fact that a revolution did take place.

Indeed the revolution?s real successes began to be recorded only when the working class moved into action. The workers have been neglected by students of the revolution to a considerable extent, yet it is the case that their actions were decisive in bringing the Shah to his knees. The working class had grown to 2.5 million by 1977. By the end of 1978 1.5 million of these workers were locked in battle against the Shah. It was the four month long general strike by the workers that paved the way to the insurrection. Railworkers paralysed the Shah?s bloated military apparatus. Bank workers exposed the financial corruption of the court clique. Airport workers closed down the country to international traffic. Finally the vanguard of the Iranian working class, the oil workers, cut off the Shah?s economic lifeline by stopping virtually all oil production. Assef Bayat?s book is the first extensive, serious study of the unsung proletarian heroes and heroines of the Iranian revolution. It is a very welcome publication for that fact alone.

That said, it is not an easy book to read. It is not a history of the Iranian working class in the revolution. It is far more a sociological study of the working class, particularly at the point of production, during the revolution and counter-revolution. It bears the marks, scars even, of being a doctoral thesis turned into a book. Academic jargon abounds and political analysis tends to suffer as a result. In particular, the relationship between the emerging workers? movement and the political organisations of the left?the Stalinist Tudeh Party, the Fedayeen guerillas, the Islamic leftist Mojahedin?is virtually ignored.

Nevertheless, the core of the book is a meticulously detailed examination of the role of the Iranian working class in the revolution and, in particular the emergence of the shuras?the factory and workplace committees. Setting the scene, Bayat traces the development of the working class during the Shah?s industrialisation programmes and the way in which the suppression of any form of independent workers?
organisations fuelled the resentment of the workers against the regime. That resentment expressed itself in the revolution through the burgeoning strike movement and its demands for economic and political change. The demands of the oil strikers are a good example of the aspirations of the workers in the revolution. In October 1978 they formulated the following charter:

1. End martial law.
2. Full solidarity and co-operation with striking teachers.
3. Unconditional release of all political prisoners.
4. Iranization of the oil industry.
5. All communications to be in the Persian language.
6. All foreign employees to leave the country.
7. An end to discrimination against women staff employees and workers.
8. The implementation of a law recently passed by both houses of parliament dealing with the housing of all workers and staff employees.
9. Support for demands of the production workers, including the dissolution of SAVAK.
10. Punishment of corrupt high government officials and ministers.
11. Reduced manning schedule for offshore drilling. (pp 80-81)

This charter—hardly a programme for Islamic reaction—combined immediate economic concerns with anti-regime measures and anti-imperialist demands.

The spread of strikes by the end of 1979 the entire country was strikebound?led workers to set up organisations of struggle, the shuras. Beginning in many instances as strike committees they went beyond that role becoming?particularly after the insurrectio?as organs of struggle for workers' control within the factories and in some cases acting as trade union type bodies. Their role as organs of workers' control was a product of both the aspirations of the working class to ensure that it won tangible material gains from the revolution and of the fact that many of the managers of the factories had taken flight after the revolution and the workers were obliged to fill the vacuum in order to get production going after the general strike ended. Bayat describes the shuras as follows:

?The shuras, or factory committees (councils) were a particular form of workers' organisation that emerged in Iranian industry following the overthrow of the Shah's dictatorship in 1979. They were shop floor organisations whose elected executive committee represented all the employees of a factory (blue and white-collar) and/or an industrial group, irrespective of their trade, skill or sex. Their major concern was to achieve workers' control.? (p 100)

In the early days of the revolution the shuras were relatively successful in securing their goals. During the period of the Bazargan provisional government workers ran many factories (causing Bazargan to launch a campaign for the introduction of one man management, eventually successful but in an Islamic guise known as the maktabi). The working class developed the view that the revolution had made them the owners and masters of the factories. The shuras were the organisational expression of their mastery. One metal worker interviewed by Bayat expresses these sentiments clearly:

?We have formed and appointed this shura with overall responsibility for the factory, for the investigation of work and problems. We formed this shura for the sake of our revolution.? (p 111)

A shura leader in the Tehran Metal Works explained what this ?overall responsibility? could mean in practical terms when there was a clash with the bosses:

?During the second shura, of which I was a member in the Central Office, they [the management] had
issued a cheque to withdraw a sum of 6,100,000 toumans [about $762,500] from the company’s account. We discovered that and stopped it . . . [the manager] claimed he wanted to pay off a debt. Later we found out that only a very small part was debt in fact; the rest was to go to [the employer’s] brothers.? (p 123)

Other examples of workers’ control expressed via vetoes, the control of prices, opening the books of companies, control over raw material supplies and control over the production process itself (manning levels, track speeds, hiring etc) abounded in the first period of the revolution. Every example revealed the enormous potential that the shuras had to become organs of working class power not only in the factories but in society as a whole. Yet this potential was never realised. Instead, after August 1979 when the first really decisive physical blows of the counter-revolution were struck by the clergy against the Kurds, the left and the workers, the shuras were thrown onto the defensive and were eventually destroyed altogether.

Bayat traces the process of this retreat. He states:

?September 1979 to June/July 1981 was marked in labour relations by; b) the consequent gradual demise of the shuras as effective organs of workers? control; and c) a necessary shift from offensive to defensive struggle.? (p 101)

Following this period of piecemeal counter-revolution in which the government established and backed Islamic Associations as alternatives to shuras, the Khomeini-ite white terror destroyed the shuras altogether. Thus after June/July 1981:

?The period was characterised by a) the domination of both maktabi management and the Islamic Associations as the real power holders in the factories; b) militarisation of the factories and attacks on the real and formal wages of the workers; [attacks made all the more important to the regime due to the strains of the war with Iraq] and c) an official ban on the formation of even pro-regime shuras for the time being.? (p 102)

Any dissent or protests by the workers was now dealt with, not by sermons from mullahs and pro-Islamic workers, but by the knives and knuckle dusters of the Islamic Pasdarans.

But Bayat fails to explain why the counter-revolution occurred. In fact the counter-revolution was the result of the working class? failure to seize state power. Control of the factories without control of the state can only be a short lived, precarious state of affairs. This was the real contradiction faced by the Iranian working class.

Why did the working class fail to press forward and seize state power? The empirical data assembled by Bayat does provide us with clues as to the answer. To gainsay all of those who insist that the working class was itself hopelessly hooked onto Islamic fundamentalist dope Bayat reveals the existence of conflicts and contradictions between the strikers and the clergy within the revolution itself. Of course, he does not deny that religious influence was present inside the working class?stronger in some industries and areas than others. The recent rural origins of many workers did serve to maintain Islamic ideology within the factories. Nevertheless the potential to overcome such influence was revealed on a number of occasions. The most significant example was the conflict between Khomeini and the oil strikers prior to the insurrection. Khomeini feared the power of the oil workers? strike committee and, in January 1979, ordered the oil workers to end their strike:

?The confrontation culminated when, some three weeks before the insurrection, the leader of the oil strikers resigned as a gesture of protest against ?the dogmatic and reactionary clergy?, and against ?the new form of repression in the guise of religion?.? (p 94)
The influence of the clergy within the mass movement as a whole was far stronger than amongst the working class. Islam did not triumph automatically or immediately inside the factories but, using the support it did have amongst backward workers and its state power, it conducted a relentless and brutal struggle to secure its domination and defeat the initially, mainly secular shuras. The victory of the Islamic Associations (ironically now themselves victims of the pragmatic Islamic capitalists in Iran) was achieved only after a protracted class struggle.

The absence, during that struggle, of a coherent strategy for working class power being fought for by a party, was the real cause of the shuras? downfall. In the first place the shuras weakened their position within the mass movement by confining themselves strictly to the workplaces. By and large they remained factory committees, not soviets. That is, they did not become democratic councils representing and uniting in struggle all the fighting groups of the exploited and oppressed and based on geographical districts as well as workplaces.

Certainly some shuras did begin to function as embryonic soviets, linking up different sections of workers. But they existed parallel to, rather than combined with, the neighbourhood committees which organised the urban poor. These committees took on administrative functions on a city wide basis and organised the armed guards of the revolution, the Pasdaran. They filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the Shah?s regime. But they were separated from the workers? organisations and, precisely because of this, were extremely prone to Islamic influence. They eventually became weapons against the workers organisations. Bayat notes this weakness without himself realising its full political significance: ?However, there is no evidence to suggest an organisational link between the working classes and the neighbourhood popular shuras.? (p 96)

Moreover it would seem from Bayat?s findings that no significant forces within the shura movement advanced a policy of developing the factory committees into real soviet type bodies. The lesson from it that must be learnt is the centrality of soviets in revolution and the need for them to act as organs of struggle against capitalism and organs of power in a workers? state. The subordination of the shuras, ideologically and then physically, to the Islamic Republic sealed their fate. No party existed to shape the spontaneity that took the workers from the stage of no organisation to exercising workers? control in less than a year, into a conscious challenge for power.

Bayat?s own political conclusions from the ?experiment? (his word) of the shuras are flawed. On the one hand he rightly concludes that the experience proves the possibility of workers? control being established in a backward country (though he never uses the categories of imperialist and imperialised countries and sometimes muddles workers? control with collaborationist workers? participation). However, he believes that workers? control and its organs, like the shuras, should be directed not at the foundations of capitalism?s rule and power, but should rather serve as an adjunct of bourgeois democracy in a ?mixed economy?. Workers? control would, in his schema, actually become fully blown workers? participation. Iran would follow a bourgeois democratic path and this would constitute a transition to socialism:

?In short, Iran can no longer afford to be an Indonesia (an authoritarian capitalist state) or another Ethiopia (an authoritarian one-party state) but it can try a Nicaraguan road.? (p 203)

This is a recipe for further defeats at the hands of the capitalists. The working class has shown, since the counter-revolution, that it has the capacity to struggle on despite the regime of clerical terror. Since 1982 the working class has regrouped. In the militant steel industry, especially at the big plant at Esfahan, in the car industry, in the food industry, strikes have repeatedly taken place. Each May Day has become a test of strength as the workers have organised May Day committees to enforce a holiday. Significantly in 1985 the government were obliged to retreat on this question in the face of what was effectively a May Day general
strike. In late 1984 the Esfahan workers once again took the lead, staging a two week strike against redundancies. The management—who had the solid backing of the regime—were obliged to beat a retreat. This victory led to a strike wave in early 1985 culminating in the May day events. Perhaps most significantly there have been a whole series of strikes against the war with Iraq.

All of these actions are markers for the future, harbingers of the workers’ revolution. The workers’ movement is recovering. Victory is possible. But there is one condition, a condition not considered in Bayat’s “Nicaraguan road” schema. It is that a Trotskyist party, capable of leading the working class in the future revolution, is built and assimilates the lessons of the 1978/79 revolution and the counter-revolution that followed it. Despite its conclusions Bayat’s book is a gold mine of information that can help Trotskyism learn some of those lessons.

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