



From Labor to Political Activism: The Confrontation of Iranians with the South Caucasus Strikes (1900 to the 1905 Revolution)

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Extended abstract

Since the second half of the 19th century, with the extraction of oil, the expansion of industrial centers, the establishment of factories and mining and agricultural companies, and the construction of railways in the Caucasus, many people from different countries flocked to the region for employment and entrepreneurship, among whom the working population constituted a significant part. These workers came from Russian, Armenian, Georgian, Iranian, Turkish, and other backgrounds, working in various sectors of industry and agriculture. As a result, a vast industrial environment was formed in the Caucasus. In this environment, the utilitarian attitude of employers imposed discipline and order in the factory cities. This industrial development cannot be viewed solely in terms of the industrial revolution that produced oil, silk, and minerals, but also in socio-political terms, as it fostered the creation of a labor movement. Consequently, there was a contradiction, particularly in economic terms, between the interests of workers and employers, leading to protests and strikes. One of the most significant manifestations of the revolutionary crisis that engulfed Tsarist Russia, especially in the Caucasus, was strikes and labor demonstrations. Iranian immigrants, a significant population in this environment, had migrated to various cities in the Caucasus since the beginning of Nasser al-Din Shah's reign, driven by repulsive factors at their place of origin and attractive factors at their destination. Initially politically and mostly illiterate, these migrants became politically aware over a 70-year period of work and life in the Caucasus. As they integrated into the Caucasian working class, they became politically active, influencing events, though not decisively.

Considering the experience that these workers went through, their response to the strikes from 1900 to 1905 stands out as one of the most important issues in the historiography of the working community. Building on this context, this article aims to answer the question of how Iranian workers responded to the strikes from 1900 to the 1905 revolution in the Caucasus and what their lived experiences were like in relation to their participation in these strikes. By collecting data from archival sources and employing a bottom-up approach to history, inspired by Edward Palmer Thompson's methodology, this article examines the Iranian workers' engagement with the strikes from 1900 to the 1905 revolution in the Caucasus.



The situation of Iranian workers in the Caucasus led them to align with political organizations such as Hemmat, the Social-Amayoun, and others. In 1321 AH/1903 CE, several Muslim intellectuals, including Sultan Majid Efendiyev, Asadollah Javad-oghly Akhundov, Abbas Kazemzadeh, and Mohammad Amin Rasoulzadeh, formed a political group that led to the establishment of the Hemmat party a year later. Hemmat quickly gained support among workers. In addition to Hemmat, Iranian workers were also involved in the Iranian Social-Amayoun sect in the Caucasus. Iranians played a role in the labor strikes from 1900 to 1905.

The awakening of Iranian workers, along with other workers, during the early movements of the twentieth century alarmed employers, to the extent that workers, who had once been the means of accumulating wealth, had now become a source of trouble in the eyes of employers. This shift was evident in the participation of Iranian migrant workers in the general strikes of Jumada al-Awwal 1321/July 1903 and Shawwal 1322/December 1904, as well as in several other strikes.

Although the newspaper *Bakunski Rabochy* initially viewed Iranian workers as a “reserve army” and a “threat to the workers” who “were difficult to force into obedience to the organization,” writing, “Among them, those who are engaged in work are not yet ready for conscious struggle; they themselves do not have a regular organization, and this fact greatly complicates the struggle of the Baku workers for better working and living conditions,” according to Terminasyan, “gradually the practical experiences of strikes and revolutionary movements among Iranian workers... had their effect”.

In a statement written by Stalin in 1909 on behalf of the Baku Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party to Iranian immigrants on the anniversary of the 1904 strike, the political progress of Iranian workers was recognized. Thanks to the strike, it was stated, “We [Iranian] fellow citizens, a kind of animal, immediately turned into fighting men for a better life. This is what the strike and the December agreement brought us”. The involvement of Iranian workers in the strikes in the Caucasus demonstrated that the political ignorance often attributed to them had disappeared. Mulla Nasreddin writes, “The eyes and ears of our fellow citizens have been opened, their necks have straightened, and they cannot be approached.” This newfound awareness led Mulla Nasreddin to write to the Iranian consul in Batumi: “Your fellow citizens will not allow you... pack up your pots and pans and go to Khorasan, Turkestan, or somewhere else”. Pishevari also writes: “It is clear from the memoirs of prominent figures who participated in the workers’ movement in Baku and other cities of the Caucasus that the local socialist party attached great importance to the Iranian workers and made good use of their presence in its struggle. It is evident that among these previously marginalized workers, prominent and selfless socialists emerged and accomplished remarkable feats”. Artonian believes that Iranian workers were at the forefront of many revolutionary movements against tsarist and bourgeois tyranny. He quotes the Bolshevik newspaper *Nurkhosk* after a strike by workers in the factories and mines of the Allahverdi region: “It is necessary to emphasize in particular the courage, endurance, and chivalry of the Iranian and Azerbaijani workers, as they can be an example for others, because the entire burden of the strike fell on the shoulders of the Iranian migrant workers”. The strikes and riots of the workers were an outburst of class



hatred that had now been awakened. According to a craftsman who was present in the Caucasus, “With the arrival of the 1905 revolution, the working class practically manifested its strength and made it clear that it was the man of tomorrow. The Iranian worker was not without interference in this.”

The result was that although the strikes and demonstrations in the cities and working-class areas of the Caucasus were suppressed with great severity, the spirit of protest had been instilled in the workers, and they had gained a level of political awareness and consciousness that distinguished them from their past. Therefore, while the role of Iranian workers in the Caucasian labor strikes cannot be considered decisive on its own, it can be said that Iranian workers were able to imprint their class interests to some extent on the labor developments in the Caucasus.

Keywords: Iranian Workers, Caucasus, Labor Strikes, Lived Experience, Oil Industries.



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