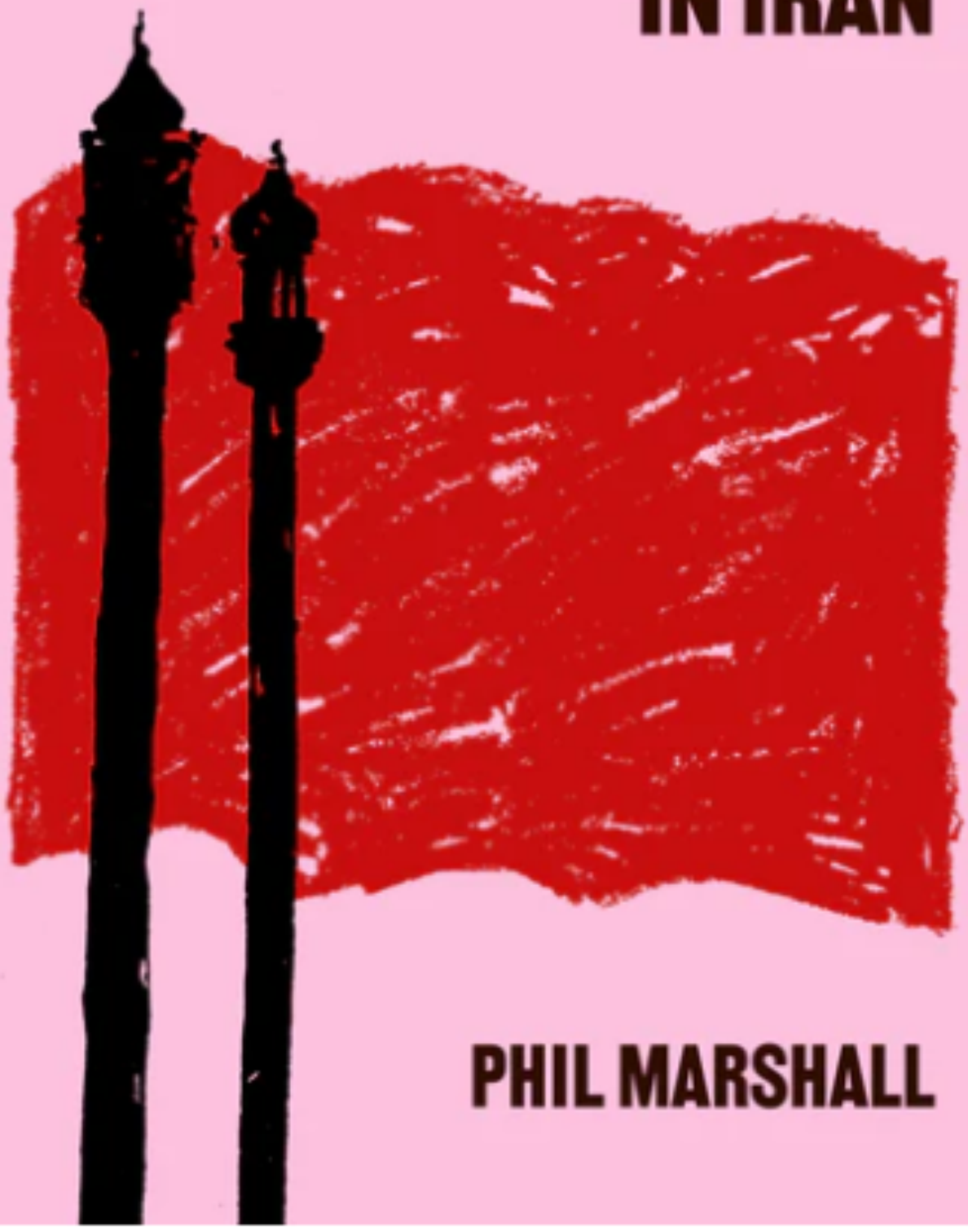
REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN IRAN



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Revolution and Counter-revolution in Iran

by Phil Marshall (1988)

The fall of any tyrant raises hope for oppressed people the world over. So it was when the Shah of Iran fled into exile in January 1979, propelled by a mass strike of millions of workers.

Yet within weeks independent workers' organisations were being suppressed. Within six months Ayatollah Khomeini was firmly in control of an "Islamic state". Soon, workers and peasants were being sent to die in their thousands in a war with neighbouring Iraq.

Today many socialists are at a loss to explain the events of the Iranian revolution of 1978-79. In the Middle East in particular many talk enthusiastically of the "Islamic" revolution and the positive role of religious leadership. Others look at the repression practised by the Khomeini regime and conclude that the whole experience was a catastrophe.

This book shows the immense importance of the Iranian revolution. It looks in particular at the positive role of the Iranian working class in the overthrow of the Shah, and the failure of the Iranian left to carry this great movement forward. In doing so, it provides us with an analysis which has vital implications for the socialist movement the world over.

Introduction

IT Is almost ten years since the Iranian revolution and still many socialists are at a loss to explain the events of that great mass movement. In Iran and around the world some talk enthusiastically of the 'Islamic' revolution, of the positive role of the religious leadership and today's 'progressive' government. Others look at the repression practised by the Khomeini regime and conclude that the whole experience was a catastrophe. For some, Iran has advanced towards a form of 'popular power'; for others, it has regressed to forms worse than those of the Shah's Pahlavi dynasty. For some, Khomeini is a strong anti-imperialist leader; for others, he is a butcher.

The picture is complicated by the Gulf War. With the West lining up behind Iraq and using its military might against Iran, socialists in the Western countries have been the first to defend Iran against a new imperialist threat. But does this mean they should look favourably on the Khomeini regime — and does the Gulf conflict mean that socialists in Iran should be less critical of their rulers? These questions can only be answered if we can understand the revolution and the character of the society it produced.

The revolution which removed the Shah in 1979 was of immense importance. It raised every key question in the Marxist tradition: the nature of imperialism; the fragility of capitalism in crisis; the role of the working class; the power of the state; the questions of ideology and religion, of nationalities, of women's liberation; above all, the question of the character of the revolutionary workers' party. Yet just as there is disagreement on the character of today's Iran, there is continuing dispute about each of these questions.

This book looks at the revolution in order to clarify these problems, allowing revolutionaries to add the Iranian experience to the fund of knowledge on which all international socialists must draw. It is also written in the belief that understanding the revolution is the first step towards the building of a healthy socialist current within Iran.

3: After the Shah

BY JANUARY 1979 the Shah was gone and Khomeini was preparing to return to Tehran in triumph. The ayatollah was widely accepted as leader of the mass movement and was already using his position to try to control the radical elements within it. He had been happy to encourage the strikers when concerted pressure on the Shah was needed — by late January he was preparing to destroy them.

On 20 January he established the Committee for Co- ordination and Investigation of Strikes (CCIS). This was composed of bourgeois opponents of the Shah - Bazargan, Sanjabi and Moinfar — and the religious leaders Bahonar and Rafsanjani. “Their task was ‘to call off those strikes which jeopardise the work of the main industries involved in the production of people’s urgent needs, and those threatening the country’s survival.” Within ten days — three weeks before the insurrection which removed the Bakhtiar government — the CCIS had succeeded in persuading 118 striking workplaces and some public services back to work.

This was an index of the increasing influence of the religious leadership, though the mullahs still did not dominate the strike movement. Despite a CCIS instruction to the railway strike committee to carry fuel ‘for the consumption of the people’, the strikers refused on several occasions. Customs workers declared they would release only vital goods, while the oil workers repeatedly rebuffed CCIS attempts to re-start production, one of their leaders resigning and publishing a declaration which attacked the ‘repression’ by Khomeini’s representatives.

But the disputes were a warning of what was to come once Khomeini and his supporters were formally in control. They showed that with the Shah gone the contradictory nature of the protest movement would rapidly be exposed, that despite the strike committees’ importance they did not lead the movement, indeed that the movement was under the influence of forces alien to working class interests.

“The revolution is over”

By mid-February, the Bakhtiar government was on the brink. Despite the clergy’s attempt to hold back the movement on the grounds that Khomeini had not issued instructions for armed confrontation, the insurrection in Tehran broke the back of the regime. This was soon followed by the destruction of the Pahlavi state apparatus - but while the police, the courts, Savak and sections of the armed forces disintegrated, the fabric of Iranian capitalism was largely untouched.

The contradiction in the movement was evident. When Bakhtiar fell on 11 February, Khomeini appointed a Provisional Government. The bourgeois liberal Bazargan, a founder of the Liberation Movement, was named prime minister. His cabinet was made up of representatives of the bourgeosie and petit bourgeoisie acceptable to Khomeini. It

was, wrote Shaul Bakhash:

> a cabinet of engineers, lawyers, educators, doctors, and former civil servants, men drawn from the professional middle class and the broad centre of Iranian politics. The majority had pursued successful careers. A number headed prosperous engineering or business firms.

The new government represented that section of Iranian capital unscathed by the revolution — plus the aspirant petit bourgeoisie which hoped to gain from the upheaval. Despite six months of mass strikes and factory occupations these social layers still dominated the Iranian system. Some employers and managers had gone into hidding or fled the country but many remained: they had supported the opposition movement, were not compromised by direct association with the regime, or were protected by their links with the mosque or individual religious leaders. In addition, the bazaar was not only intact but had greatly expanded its influence. In the countryside, though some landlords had fled, many remained, leaving political relations little changed.

The new government was immediately charged with returning the country to economic normality — in effect, consolidating the control of the social layers it represented. Meanwhile, the main object of its attention — the strike committees — held control in hundreds of workplaces. But nowhere were the committees moving towards a co-ordinated attack on the structure of the capitalist system.

The protest movement had originated as a response to the crisis of the Iranian system and its forms of struggle were those dictated by the structures of capitalism — but its leadership was not anti-capitalist. The national leadership's aim had been to modify the system by removing a ruling group which had refused it a share in power — when this was accomplished its concern was to put an end to the movement from below, which threatened the gains already made.

The bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie had remained within the opposition movement far longer than in 1951-53, when the threat from the working class had led them to re-align with the Shah and his Western backers. Twenty-five years later, despite the advances they had made under the Pahlavis, sections of these classes had been so alienated by the Shah’s policies that they believed they had more to gain from his removal. They also felt confident in a religious leadership with which they had much in common and which seemed capable of influencing the working class in a way which even the Tudeh had not been capable of doing under Mossadeq.

Under these conditions the new government prepared for an all-out offensive against the very forces that had made the revolution. With the ejection of Bakhtiar it launched a new form of class war — one directed against the mass movement. Bazargan’s spokesman, Abbas Amir-Entezam, was precise about its intentions. He insisted:

> Those who imagine the revolution continues are mistaken. The revolution is over. The period of reconstruction has begun.[4]

'A riot of democracy'

But millions believed that the revolution had just started. The fall of the Shah and then of Bakhtiar produced a surge of confidence and, as in the early 1950s, there was a sense of liberation which stimulated demands for further radical change.

Everywhere there was a rapid extension of popular power:

> Security had collapsed. The officers and the rank and file in the army, national police and gendarmerie in major towns and centres had abandoned their barracks, police stations and posts. The citizenry was in control of barracks and police stations, palaces and ministries. In government offices, private companies, factories and universities, employees, in a riot of participatory democracy, were demanding to be consulted on policies and appointments. Army units refused to accept commanders appointed by the provisional government; newly-appointed police chiefs were arrested by citizens' committees; governors found the way to their offices barred by revolutionary youths.[5]

The weight of the religious leadership was still not enough to restrain the masses. As in so many of the great mass movements – the 1917 revolution in Russia, the Spanish revolution of 1936, the Portuguese revolution of 1974, the Polish uprising of 1980 – people who had been oppressed for generations were expressing a new sense of freedom. While the government was committed to 'consolidation', everywhere the masses were raising the level of collective action.

This took many forms. There was a flood of publishing: with *Savak* and the censors gone, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and posters appeared in huge numbers. Even the classical texts of Marxist literature were freely available for the first time in a generation. Meetings – in the streets, in schools and universities – debated politics, history, religion and culture. Hitherto largely silent sections of the population produced a stream of new ideas and organisations: most prominent were the women's organisations, with their demands for equal rights.

In the countryside peasants began seizing the land. In Gorgan and Gonbad peasant councils were formed which began to cultivate on a communal basis. Meanwhile, among the national minorities which together made up more than half the population, there were demands for autonomy. In Kurdistan, Baluchistan, Sistan, Khuzistan and Turkoman Sarai there were calls for linguistic freedom, an independent press and and the right to form independent political organisations.

Most important, the workers' movement reached new levels of activity. During the first weeks of the Provisional Government an estimated 50,000 workers were engaged in new strikes – a pattern repeated for almost six months. In the 12 months from February 1979 there were more than 350 separate industrial disputes.[6] There were demands for the payment of delayed wages and against employers' lock-outs and lay-offs, and new occupations of workplaces where owners had fled or been declared bankrupt. Here the strike committees took control.

Most of the strikes on economic issues were successful. News of progress in one factory led to new demands and strikes in others – there were waves of disputes in the main industrial areas. As a result, in 1979 as a whole the average wage rose by 53 per cent, while the minimum wage for unskilled labourers more than doubled.[7]

There were also numerous struggles for improvements in working conditions and for the establishment of welfare services. Canteens, sports facilities, clinics, insurance schemes and even provisions for workplace education were extracted from employers – something formerly unthinkable. In those workplaces where management had fled, workers took control of the production process – they not only regulated the pace of work but began to organise the buying of raw materials and the sale of products. There was a genuine measure of 'workers' control' over production and administration.[8]

Throughout the country the organ of control was the council or *shora*. Peasants established *shoras* to organise collective work on the land, while there were attempts at 'neighbourhood *shoras*' in some areas.[9] In schools, universities and even in the armed forces, *shoras* mushroomed. But the real home of the *shora* was in industry, where the councils gave a new dimension to the

workers' movement. This new-found strength was a direct challenge to the forces of reaction grouped in the Provisional Government.

A process of permanent revolution was again unfolding. The bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie had discovered the point at which their own interests were under threat. Incapable of advancing the process of change, whether in the cities, on the land, or among the national minorities, they were now committed to 'reconstruction', an attempt to stabilise their own rule. The pattern of the Mossadeq years was at last being repeated: while the bourgeoisie discovered the limits of its ambition, the most advanced sections of society demanded further change. The next, most crucial phase of the revolution centred on the Provisional Government's efforts to smash the most powerful elements within the mass movement – the workers' *shoras*.

Workers' control and the power of the *shoras*

The *shoras* expressed a new level of working-class activity and consciousness. They were based upon the strike committees of the earlier period of the revolution, but were more formal bodies. In general, they operated as committees directly elected by the workforce, though the precise structure varied according to the size of the workplace and the type of industry, the nature of the production process, the form of ownership, the record of militancy, especially in the early months of the revolution, and the political orientation of leading activists.

According to Bayat:

> ...successful *shoras* were those which exerted full control over and ran the workplace without any effective control on the part of the officially-appointed managers. Their politics and activities were independent of the state and the official managers and were based upon the interests of the rank and file workers.[10]

When *shoras* operated in this way they controlled not only finance, administration and management but took over the 'security' functions formerly carried out by *Savak* and the army. At the Fanoos factory, an example of the most advanced organisation, these rights were enshrined in the *shora*'s constitution,

giving the council authority to organise groups of workers to deal with 'counter-revolutionary sabotage', military training and 'the purge of corrupt, anti-popular and idle elements, in any position'. When managers or workers were indicted by the committee, they came before a full mass meeting which voted on their fate.[11]

It was when the *shoras* operated in this fashion that they were most likely to raise general political issues and to co-ordinate activity. In those areas with the most activist and democratic *shoras*, links across workplaces were established. The Union of Workers' *Shoras* of Gilan and the Union of Workers' *Shoras* of Western Tehran provided a basic level of co-ordination between separate workplace councils. There was a national-link-up of railway workers, while in the oilfields the *shoras* met to discuss issues such as the level of production and even the pricing of crude oil for export.

Meanwhile, the office of the Shah's *Savak*-controlled unions in Tehran was occupied by unemployed workers and renamed *Khaneh Kargar* – Workers' House. Here, workers' councils and committees could hold meetings and co-ordinate activity.

Such co-ordination reached its highest level with the establishment of the Founding Council of the All-Iran Workers' Union. This body showed that the *shoras* were stimulating generalisation above the level of the workplace and the industrial group and were doing so at a national level. On 1 March 1979 it issued a declaration which asserted:

> We the workers of Iran, through our strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations overthrew the Shah's regime and during these months of strike we tolerated unemployment, poverty and even hunger. Many of us were killed in the struggle. We did all this in order to create an Iran free of class repression, free of exploitation. We made the revolution in order to end unemployment and homelessless, to replace the *Savak*-oriented syndicates with independent workers' *shoras* – *shoras* formed by the workers of each factory for their own economic and political needs.[12]

Its 24-point programme included demands for a 40-hour week, longer holidays, sick pay, tax-free bonuses, and free canteens and health services at work. It also called for government recognition of the *shoras*, the freedom to demonstrate and the right to strike,

and the expulsion of all foreign experts and capitalists and the appropriation of their capital in the interest of the workers.

This national body – and the regional co-ordinating councils – were the most advanced bodies prooooduced by the revolution. In the most militant areas – Gilan, Tehran and the Khuzistan oilfield – they were proto-*soviets*, organisations which expressed the interests of the most advanced groups of workers, with an understanding of the need to carry the movement beyond the individual workplace. But still they did not generalise the interests of the class as a whole and like the strike committees of earlier months they did not develop into fully-fledged organs of workers' power.

The battle for the *shoras*

In response to the growing militancy of the working class and the spread of the *shoras*, the Provisional Government adopted a two-pronged strategy: whille it attempted to salvage industry, commerce and finance, it spared no effort in its attempt to destroy the workers' movement.

In a move designed to plug the gaps left by fleeing employers and managers, and those businessmen who had been declared bankrupt, the new regime nationalised 483 production units as well as banks and insurance companies. This was not an attempt to bring industry under state control for ideological reasons but to strengthen the badly-weakened structure of Iranian capitalism, which, the government understood, needed swift attention. New managers were appointed to run the plants and offices.[13]

Meanwhile a direct assault on the *shora* movement was under way. Three days after the insurrection, Khomeini instructed all strikers to return to work. A month later, when it had become clear that new strikes were spreading and *shoras* were being established everywhere, the government issued a new statement. This declared:

> Any disobedience from, and sabotage of the implementation of the plans of the Provisional Government will be regarded as opposition against the genuine Islamic Revolution. The provocateurs and agents will be introduced to people as counter-revolutionary elements, so that the nation will decide about them, as they did about

the counter-revolutionary regime of the Shah.[14]

But still the *shoras* could not be halted. According to one survey of industry, while the number of workplaces making new demands for improved pay and conditions remained steady throughout the spring, political demands of the most advanced workers became more insistent.[15] *Shoras* showed no sign of complying with the government, which now stepped up the pace of its offensive.

In May it introduced the Law of Special Force to prevent *shoras* intervening 'in the affairs of the managements and of the appointments' of government-nominated managers.[16] In June, the new constitution also attempted to restrict the activity of the *shoras*. According to Articles 104 and 105, they were to be composed of 'representatives of workers, peasants, other employeees, and the managers, in the productive, industrial and agricultural units.' In addition, 'decisions taken by the *shoras* must not be against Islamic principles and the country's laws.'[17]

Even these measures did not diminish enthusiasm for the councils. In June and July the pace of struggle accelerated until more industrial units were raising demands than in February, when the mass movement had been renewed after the fall of the Bakhtiar government. But suddenly, in mid-summer, a retreat began. The number of factories raising new demands fell sharply – according to Bayat from 67 to a mere 14. By August the total had dropped to just five. The regime had reversed the tide and in many workplaces, *shoras* were forced on to the defensive. The six months after the insurrection had been the crucial period; from mid-summer the government seized the initiative and Khomeini – as determined to destroy the movement as he had been to remove the Shah – never let go.

A number of objective factors aided the government's offensive on the councils. One was the collapse of some areas of industry. Even before the protest movement broke in 1978, the Shah's policy had produced dislocation in some key areas, with bankruptcies and closures. When mass political strikes began in October 1978 businessmen who feared the movement had sold off or broken up their holdings; others had distributed their raw materials or finished products among *bazaaris;* records had been

removed and destroyed.

In addition, the events of 1978 had interrupted the flow of raw materials and machinery into the country, with serious results for an economy in which much industrial production depended upon imports. Thus in 1977-78 raw materials and semi-finished goods worth $5.6 billion were imported. By 1978-79 the figure had fallen to $3.9 billion and by 1979-80, to $3.8 billion. Imports of equipment for industry fell by two-thirds over two years: imports of capital goods for industry were worth $2.5 billion in 1977-78 but only $1 billion by 1979-80.[18]

By the spring of 1979 these pressures were taking their toll on the working class. Production in most industrial plants fell steeply and despite the strength of the strike committees and later the *shoras*, unemployment rocketed. Demonstrations of unemployed workers took place in several cities and in Tehran the ministries of labour and justice and the former *Savak* offices (now *Khaneh Kargar*) were occupied by protestors demanding work.

Despite the unity of employed and unemployed workers – evident in a huge 1 May demonstration in Tehran – the rising level of unemployment had its impact on workplace organisation.

But in the battle for control of the workplaces, it was the character of the *shora* movement and especially the nature of its political leadership that was decisive. When Khomeini's Provisional Government began its assault on the working class it was assisted by the fact that the *shora* movement was far from homogeneous. The most advanced *shoras* were democratic bodies, drawing their authority from mass meetings, subject to recall and open to radical and socialist ideas – by this stage some sections of the left had recognised the importance of the *shoras* and were attempting, with mixed results, to influence them.

But other *shoras* were run on a far less open basis. Where managers remained, these *shoras* co-operated with them or with government appointees sent in under the nationalisation measures. And in that minority of *shoras* in which leading activists were enthusiastic supporters of the mullahs, there was liaison between the council and government to the extent that the *shora* worked to dismiss secular managers and install so-called *maktabi* loyalist managements, which backed the regime. The government could thus attack the *shora* movement from within.

But pro-regime *shoras* were in a tiny minority and the Provisional Government needed other allies inside the workplaces. It found these among the technicians, production managers and supervisors. This layer was an important part of the new petit bourgeoisie which had emerged over the preceding 20 years and was essentially conservative. As in many semi-industrial countries it was relatively well-educated, highly paid and had little in common with the shopfloor workers. Before the revolution it had operated as an agency of bourgeois and state interests in industry. Many of its members now opposed the Shah but saw the purpose of the opposition movement as modifying the system to better express their own interests. The Provisional Government reflected just these petit bourgeois aspirations.

With rare exceptions the technicians obstructed the *shoras*. They refused to use their specialist skills to continue or restart production, supported pro-regime, *maktabi* managements or government representatives, and backed the activities of the most reactionary *shoras* – those seeing themselves as an expression of the government's will. As the regime brought greater pressure on the *shora* movement and it became clear that the workers had no overall strategy of their own, the technicians became more confident and were able to erode the position of some worker militants.

Most *shoras* represented the whole workforce – manual workers, administrative staff and the technical grades. This meant that in some workplaces the technicians could be a bridge between the workforce and management. Where the shopfloor was relatively weak, or the *shora* acted as mainly as a 'consultative' body, the technicians and supervisors could be decisive, In these workplaces, management saw the *shora* as a method of incorporating activists – and the technicians made the process of bureaucratisation of some militants much easier.

But there was another dimension to the struggle taking place inside the *shoras*. Unlike the strike committees, which had been produced by the mass action of the 1978 movement, the *shoras* developed under conditions in which the workers' movement was under attack from the leadership of the revolution. Once confident that he could oust the Shah, Khomeini had set out to destroy the workers' movement. His supporters in the *shoras* were

at first marginal but as time passed they became more influential – their impact in each workplace being a function of the degree of political development of the workers' movement nationally and of the leading local activists.

The experience of the strike movement was now repeated, for Khomeini's influence in the workplaces increased largely because of the absence of a coherent political alternative, and, where secular organisations did offer new strategies, as a result of their inadequacy.

The left commits suicide

All the organisations of the Iranian left developed in a tradition which had revised Marxism, seeing forces other than the working class as the agents of revolutionary change. This substitutionism meant that during the mass strikes of 1978 all these organisations were marginal. But during the insurrection of February the guerrilla organisations had their moment – the Fedayeen and Mojahedin playing the leading role in assaulting loyalist strongholds in Tehran and breaking the back of the Shah's state. Conditions then moved sharply in favour of the left. The 'riot of democracy' was in full swing, with the workers', women's, peasants' and national minority movements setting the pace. Fevered debates were taking place in every area of Iranian society and potentially the left had a huge audience.

For the first time since the early 1950s the left could organise openly. Conditions were particularly favourable during the first four months after the insurrection, when the workers' movement was on the offensive. The level of workers' self-confidence is demonstrated by the hundreds of workplaces raising new demands and the repeated demonstrations and rallies which took up workers' issues.[19] These reached a climax on May Day when a huge parade filled Tehran – among an estimated one and half million people were many factory delegations and large groups of unemployed workers carrying banners inscribed with slogans which reflected the demands of the most advanced workers: 'Nationalisation of all industries', 'There is no kind capitalist in the world', 'Long live real unions and real *shoras*', 'Equal wages for women and men', 'Work for the unemployed'.[20]

But in practice the audience of the left was less among workers than among university and school students and professionals. Here the Fedayeen and Mojahedin had their roots and could attract large numbers – indeed they became the main pole of attraction among the secular organisations; the pulling power of the Fedayeen being illustrated by their ability to attract 150,000 to a rally called at Tehran University in late February. The Tudeh, too, won fresh interest on the basis that it was the traditional opposition to the Shah, though as we shall see, it did not attract those who looked for an alternative to the new regime.

Belatedly recognising the significance of the workers' movement, some guerrilla activists attempted to influence the *shoras*. There were isolated successes: at the important Chit-e Jahan factory at Karaj, for example, which had a long history of political activism, there was strong Mojahedin influence on the workers' council.[21] Elsewhere individual workers were attracted by the guerrillas and helped to give them small audiences among militants. But these were exceptions which proved the rule: nowhere did the guerrillas have a firm base in industry and nowhere did they have an opportunity to influence the direction of the *shora* movement. But this was only half the problem – the real difficulty was that the left did not understand the significance of the *shoras*. As Bayat comments:

> Almost all of the left was surprised by the sudden emergence of the *shoras*. Almost all the left-wing organisations, as well as the *shoras* themselves, were confused about what to do and about what kind of possible role the *shoras* could play politically.[22]

Thus even where the left had contact with worker militants it had little to say about the direction of the *shora* movement. On the most important development of the revolutionary experience the left was silent – or worse, offered negative advice. For the left did have ideas about the way forward for the mass movement as a whole – ideas which soon proved suicidal.

For the Tudeh, the Provisional Government merited uncritical support and the party liquidated its members into the movement around Khomeini. For the guerrilla organisations of the 'new left' the situation was more complicated; they were not only disoriented by the character of the mass movement but

adopted equivocal attitudes towards the Provisional Government. Thus even where the guerrillas were able to influence individuals in the workers' movement they could not offer a perspective which expressed working-class interests.

The disorientation shown by all the organisations was a result of the tradition in which each was rooted. Each had pursued strategies directed away from the working class. When the Shah fell, these propelled them towards the workers' most determined enemies – the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeosie.

Why, at the most important moment in modern Iranian history, did the left insist on maintaining such an approach?

The tragedy of Stalinism

The Tudeh, and later the guerrillas, had developed in a tradition which led them to abandon the working class as the agency of revolutionary change. The result was that at the highest point of the revolutionary movement they were unable to distinguish their class enemies. This was a problem which had dogged the left since the degeneration of the communist movement in the 1920s.

After the isolation of the Russian revolution in the early 1920s and the emergence of a new ruling bureaucracy in Russia, the Communist International (Comintern) entered a period during which it became no more than an arm of Moscow's foreign policy. By the late 1920s it was imposing a set of strategic principles on the international communist movement which reflected the priorities of Russian state capitalism but had little to do with the needs of the world working class. It insisted that in a relatively backward country such as Iran any idea of independent working class action was a nonsense: that the principle guiding the activity of communists must be the need to form a 'class bloc' which could assist the 'democratic forces' present in such countries.

The idea of the class bloc was imposed on communist parties in the backward regions of the world as part of a package of ideas which included a number of already bankrupt theories. Among these was the notion that in countries less developed than the industrialised states of Europe and North America, socialist

revolution was impossible. Rather, it was argued, social change would proceed through 'stages', the first of which, in countries dominated by the imperial powers, would be a 'democratic' stage. During this phase, the bourgeoisie would lead a struggle to free the nation from the imperialist yoke and establish democratic rights – such as universal suffrage, a parliament, freedom of association and a free press – similar to those enjoyed in the advanced capitalist states. Only when this stage had been attained, it was argued, would it be possible for the working class to advance towards the prospect of a revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism.

Such an approach had been understandable in the years before the Russian revolution. Then, the majority of revolutionaries, including the Bolsheviks themselves under Lenin's leadership, had accepted variants of the stages theory, despite Trotsky's insistence that the experiencee of the Russian revolution of 1905 proved that only the proletariat – the industrial working class – could make a revolution in the backward countries. In 1917 Trotsky's approach, which he termed 'permanent revolution', was vindicated as the bourgeoisie vacillated and collapsed, the working class showing itself to be the only force capable of bringing change. At this point Lenin was won to Trotsky's analysis of the permanent revolution. He then convinced the Bolsheviks of the necessity for a working class struggle for power. Lenin and Trotsky led the party in its effort to convince workers that their *soviets* were the basis for an assault on the state and the establishment of a new order.

After the October Revolution, in which the workers of Russia destroyed the remnants of the Tsarist state, the idea of permanent revolution in the backward countries became a Bolshevik principle and a tenet of the Communist International. Only when the Comintern started to degenerate under the influence of Stalin and Russia's new state-capitalist ruling group was this principle abandoned. By the late 1920s the Russian bureaucracy had achieved power in the face of a scattered, weakened and demoralised working class among which *soviet* democracy had become a fiction, and it now developed a new set of principles for the international communist movement. Resolved to pursue the counter-revolutionary project of 'socialism in

one country', Stalin's party sought bourgeois allies abroad and a theoretical structure which would legitimise its policy.[23]

This new policy discovered 'progressive' elements of the bourgeoisie under circumstances which the theory of permanent revolution and the experience of the October revolution had long since ruled out. It reasserted theories in which forces other than the working class could play a 'revolutionary' role, directing communists to participate alongside them. In short, the Stalinist conception of change removed the working class from the centre of the political stage, placing other classes and blocs of classes in its place.

The results of the policy were catastrophic. In 1925, it was 'rehearsed' in China. Moscow instructed the Chinese Communist Party to participate in a front with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang, despite the activity of a mass workers' movement, in order to support a nationalist leadership which Stalin hoped to make into a reliable ally. The policy was justified on the basis that China was about to pass through the 'democratic' phase of change and that the bourgeoisie should be supported by the workers' and peasants' movements – which themselves should raise only limited demands. The theses of permanent revolution were ignored. Predictably, within months the Kuomintang had destroyed much of the workers' movement and murdered thousands of Chinese communists.[24]

Despite this disaster and subsequent changes of line in Comintern policy, the idea of a 'bloc' of progressive classes and the notion that any social revolution needed to pass through the 'democratic' stage were elevated to strategic principles, together with the related idea of the 'Popular Front', which when implemented in Europe caused further disasters, notably in Germany and Spain.[25]

The Communist Party of Iran (CPI), which looked to the Comintern for its strategic principles, was much affected by these policies. During the late 1920s, Moscow's desire to come to an accomodation with Reza Shah had been a serious blow to CPI members and the party effectively collapsed. Subsequently, Iranians who looked to Moscow for guidance were enjoined to seek out sections of those 'progressive' classes with whom they could form an appropriate bloc against the regime and its Western

backers. While there was a break between the disintegration of the CPI and the formation of the Tudeh in 1941, leftists who remained active during the 1930s, such as the famous 'Fifty-three' arrested in 1937, who later formed the nucleus of the Tudeh, all developed their political ideas in the Stalinist context.[26]

The Tudeh declined to declare itself a Marxist organisation but bore all the hallmarks of a party operating within the framework laid down by Moscow. It argued that the left must guard against the danger of 'premature' revolution, as shown by the experience in Spain, and that Iran was not ready for such radical change.[27] The main task, the party argued, was that of weakening the ruling class by 'uniting all progressive forces'. It announced a reformist programme directed towards 'the masses', among which it included intellectuals, small landowners, craftsmen-traders and government employees.

This was the policy which, despite the favourable conditions of the 1940s and early 1950s, led the Tudeh to disaster in 1953. Then, arguing for the need to form a 'progressive bloc' with liberal capitalists and to carry through the 'democratic stage' of the revolution, the Tudeh had abandoned the workers' movement and watched while the Shah's imperialist allies rescued a relieved bourgeoisie.

The defeat of 1953 led young critics of the Tudeh to develop the current which, almost 20 years later, produced the Fedayeen. For these activists the rejection of the party's passivity and the launching of an armed struggle marked a sharp break with the old tradition. But the founders of the Fedayeen had not broken with the Tudeh's Stalinist heritage, they had merely modified it. Most important, they had absorbed the fundamental flaw in the Stalinist method – the substitution of other forces for the working class.

Fedayeen founders such as Pouyan argued that in the absence of workers' struggle the task of socialists was to begin an armed struggle. This would break the deadlock on the left, allowing the re-groupment of 'revolutionary elements' and would shock the masses into activity, precipitating an upsurge which would threaten the regime. The principal role in stimulating revolutionary change thus lay with the guerrilla.

This was the crudest form of the substitutionism which was at the centre of the Fedayeen strategy, replacing the activity of the workers' movement with that of the fighter. But the politics of the Fedayeen incorporated another and more complex idea which also drew on the traditions of the Tudeh and reinforced the substitutionist core of their strategy. This was the notion of the system of 'dependent capitalism'.

This theory had become well established by the 1960s as the ideas of the 'Latin-American' school became popular on the left in both the advanced capitalist countries and the 'Third World'. It emphasised the dependent status of countries outside the capitalist heartlands of Western Europe and North America and the imperialist strategy of developing a *comprador* class within those states they had subordinated. Such a class, usually built around the local representatives of Western multinationals, it was argued, became an agent of imperial capital. It was profoundly reactionary, unlike the 'national bourgeoisie', a class seen as having roots in the indigenous economy and which was hostile to the rule of foreign capital.

The task of revolutionaries in Third World countries, argued the 'dependency' theorists, was to secure a 'people's alliance' between the workers, the peasants, the national bourgeoisie and other progressive elements – one aimed at challenging the power of the *comprador* class and hence imperial hegemony.

One of the Fedayeen's most influential documents, written by its leading theorist, Bizan Jazani, explained how the theory should be applied under Iranian conditions. **The Socio-Economic Analysis of a Dependent Capitalist State** was published in 1973. This maintained that during the decade of the 1960s the *comprador* bourgeoisie had come to dominate Iran, a result of 'the channelling of the bourgeoisie towards *comprador* capitalism, the dissolution of feudalism, the fragmentation of the small bourgeoisie and the polarisation of the petit bourgeoisie'.[28] Iranian revolutionaries were thus faced with the task of uniting all 'progressive' classes – the workers, peasants, intelligentsia, progressive petit bourgeoisie and national capitalists – against the *comprador* class.

Jazani was quite explicit about the consequences of his analysis. He argued:

> Since the relations of production in this system are based on capitalism, there seems to be a tendency among some Marxist elements to believe that the principal contradiction in Iran today is that between capital and labour. If this is the case then our country is on the verge of a socialist revolution and the working class together with its allies forms the basis of the revolution. But this is an erroneous belief ... the contradiction between labour and capital, with its social manifestation of a confrontation between the proletarian and the bourgeoisie, cannot be the principal contradiction of the system prevailing in Iran. For this reason our society is not at the stage of a socialist revolution, ie it is not a revolution where the slogan would be the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the expropriation of all private capital. Moreover, the need for the reconstruction of the national economy, and the need to uproot dependent industries and to end the economic domination of imperialism immediately after the people's triumph make it imperative that our society should go through a necessary period of transition before the establishment of socialism.[29]

Jazani recognised that there was a 'contradiction' in the people's movement against the *comprador* class, that the working class did not share fundamental interests with the 'national' bourgeoisie. However, he argued, it had more in common with the latter than with the *comprador* class and its imperialist backers. As a result the workers should participate in the overall national struggle but should also sustain 'positive and active rivalry' within the liberation movement.

The dependency theory was a modified form of the theory of stages and of the need for the class bloc. It also relegated the working class to a secondary role, as a mere element in a people's liberation front. Riddled with contradictions at every level it was particularly inappropriate under Iranian conditions. The Fedayeen argued that Iran had been transformed, during the boom of the 1960s, by the massive influx of foreign capital. At this level, too, they were wrong. By the late 1960s just 90 foreign companies had invested in Iran, and while giants like Mercedes-Benz had made major investments, many were small. Even at the height of the oil boom, when foreign capital was most attracted by

the growing Iranian market, its involvement was modest. By the early 1970s the government anticipated that of $72 billion to be invested in its ambitious 1973-78 development plan, just $2.8 billion, or 4 per cent, would be foreign capital. Iran had not been transformed by foreign capital but by the rapid expansion of state investment and the emergence of a far stronger and better-integrated indigenous bourgeoisie.

The Fedayeen analysis, like all such neo-Stalinist approaches, was based on premises which distorted the real economic and social problems. The process of uneven development that had been at work since the early years of the century had produced a system in which fundamental change could only be brought about by concerted working class activity, for whatever the differences between sections of the bourgeoisie, it was united in its opposition to movements from below which might threaten its own interests.

The upsurge of workers' activity after the First World War had indicated the direction from which a challenge to the system would come – the events of the 1940s and early 1950s had confirmed it. But the Tudeh then produced the disaster of 1953 – and in the absence of a revolutionary socialist alternative its perspective was given new form in the 1960s. While the notion of 'dependency' gave new clothing to the popular front and the idea of stages, it reproduced the Stalinist analysis which had already proved such a costly failure.

By the 1960s the bourgeoisie had even more to lose from an insurgent mass movement than under Mossadeq. The 'class bloc' advocated by the dependency theorists was even less appropriate and enthusiasts such as the Fedayeen were heading for another disaster. The same was true of the Mojahedin: their Islamic orientation being combined with the very same substitutionist assumptions. And the Mojahedin were to suffer the same bloody fate.

It is not true, as Moghadam[30] has claimed, that during the 1960s and 1970s the Iranian left displayed 'a distaste for theorising'. Its problem was not contempt for ideas – rather, it was the absorption of ideas that had been tried and tested in Iran and abroad, and had failed.

Lessons of the Revolution

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL of the Iranian working class is not in doubt. What remains in question is the political tradition of the Iranian left.

The left is fragmented and disoriented. Tens of thousands of activists have abandoned socialist organisations — most have subsided into passivity and even despair. This is not merely a result of the regime's reign of terror — the left's malaise is also a product of its refusal to absorb the lessons of the revolution, its stubborn attachment to ideas which have failed — its inability to explain the fate of the revolutionary movement.

The revolution offers a wealth of lessons. Of these, the most important are those which confirm the Marxist analysis of the capitalist crisis and the strategy for socialist revolution. Earlier they were dealt with in detail; they can now be summarised:

'**Exceptionalism'**: Iran is not a 'special case'. The revolution was a result of processes at work throughout the world system. It was the crisis of Iranian capitalism which brought down the Shah,

Capitalism: The history of Iran is not that of a 'dependent' capitalism, in which Iran has been a mere creature of imperialism. The Iranian bourgeoisie has had its own interest in maintaining the power of capital. The theory of 'dependency' leads to false conclusions about the role of the bourgeoisie and its allies.

The **'progressive' bourgeoisie**: The bourgeoisie cannot play a role in the revolutionary transformation of Iranian society. Such change can only be accomplished by the class to which it is implacably hostile — the proletariat. Marxists cannot, therefore, accommodate to sections of the bourgeoisie identified as 'progressive', 'patriotic' or 'anti-imperialist'; or to the petit bourgeoisie, which maintains an interest in the status quo.

The theory of 'stages': There are no 'intermediary' stages between a developing capitalism and a socialist revolution. The idea of a 'democratic' stage results in surrender to the bourgeoisie.

Permanent revolution: Only in a process of permanent revolution can Iranian society be fundamentally changed. In such a process the working class will lead other oppressed groups against the bourgeoisie and those vacillating layers which back capitalism.

Substitutionism: The workers' movement emerges from the needs of the proletariat in struggle. It cannot be engineered by 'revolutionaries' engaged only in abstract propaganda or guerrilla struggle.

The mass strike: Rising workers' struggles produce the mass strike — the workers' principal weapon against capitalism. In such a movement 'economic' and 'political' demands are combined; each stimulates the other as the movement gathers confidence, leading to the rapid politicisation of large numbers of workers.

Workers' councils: In the mass movement workers establish organs of democratic control based on the workplace: in the case of Iran these took the form of strike committees and *shoras*. When such organisation is generalised outside the workplace, organisations representing the advanced sections of the whole class may be formed. Such soviets can be the basis for a revolutionary assault on the bourgeois state, which must be smashed. In Iran *shoras* reached a high level of development — but they did not become *soviets*:

The revolutionary party: Under conditions of a rising workers' movement, the role of the revolutionary workers' party is vital. It can generalise political issues, organise the leading militants and eventually lead the assault on the capitalist state. No such party existed in Iran — with a handful of exceptions, 'revolutionaries' were outside the workers' movement.

The struggle for power: With or without soviets, the workers' movement cannot be sustained indefinitely. Its survival depends on its ability to confront bourgeois attempts at counter-revolution. In Iran the counter-revolutionary force was led by the clergy and its petit-bourgeois allies.

Revolutionary independence: In such a struggle for power revolutionaries must assert the independent identity of the working class. In the case of Iran the left subsumed the interests of the proletariat below those of a 'progressive' bourgeoisie, directing workers into the camp of the counter-revolution.

Stalinism: Despite a historic opportunity the Iranian left was unable to provide the workers' movement with the leadership it needed. This was a result of its bankrupt political traditions — those of Stalinism. This ideology, alien to the interests of the working class, is also the result of a counter-revolution — that which followed the defeat of the Russian revolution in the 1920s. Its main principles — those of the theory of stages, the need for class blocs, the substitution of other social forces for the working class — dominated the Iranian left. As a result, *the conduct of the left contributed to the victory of the counter-revolution in Iran*.