

Rising Force

Iran's Oil Workers Assert New Powers; Leftists Gain Foothold, Keep Organizing

By ERIC MORGENTHALER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

AHWAZ, Iran—Among the revolutionary posters plastered by the entrance of National Iranian Oil Co. office here, one stands out.

In bold red and blue letters, it lists 11 managers who workers are demanding be relieved of their jobs because of their alleged connections with Iran's old regime.

Since a workers' committee posted the list over two weeks ago, the 11 have stayed away from the office. A couple of them are in jail. The workers absolved a third of any wrongdoing. The others are awaiting a decision by a committee of three outside arbiters, which the company named with worker consent to settle such disputes.

Things may never be the same at the state-owned oil company. In recent weeks, the company has resumed its oil production and exports—in lower volumes and at higher prices than before the strikes that stopped the oil flow and helped bring down the Shah. But as it gears back up, the company is having to come to grips with the political awakening of its own workers. "We are witnessing the creation of a power that nobody can ignore," says a manager of the company in Tehran.

New Power Bloc

Oil workers are demanding, and getting, a greater say over how their company is run. They are one big reason why Iran isn't likely to return to its former cozy relationship with Western oil companies—no matter what sort of government eventually evolves here.

"Western countries have to understand that Western economic interests don't matter that much to us," says one young oil worker, a devout Moslem loyal to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Another worker, a leftist, puts it more bluntly: "The feeling against the Americans and the Europeans is very high."

The oil workers also are rising as a political force at home. Most of them are thought to support the present government. It was at Ayatollah Khomeini's behest that they ended their strike last month. But leftists have a strong foothold in the oil fields, and they are organizing relentlessly, particularly among younger workers.

"The militant workers want to give the government some time to see what it does," says a young organizer here for the Socialist Workers Party of Iran, a Trotskyite group. "They think the government will answer their demands. But if it doesn't answer them, they don't care who is up there—they are going to take action against them."

Repercussions for Government

That, of course, could mean interruptions in the oil flow and new problems for the world's oil consumers. It could also mean new trouble for the embattled government.

The leftists, an assortment of political groups ranging from Marxist guerrillas to Islamic militants to Trotskyites, concede

that they are just getting started in the oil fields, and they say the Khomeini forces now have the upper hand. However, the leftists figure that time is on their side.

Managers in the oil company say they don't see any big problems, for now. "My own appraisal of the oil-industry employees is that leftist groups are definitely in the minority," says Jahangir Raofi, a director of National Iranian Oil Co. and general manager of its southern oil fields. "As long as there is religious leadership, and there is today, I don't think the leftists could really bring us to a halt."

Mr. Raofi says the company has "well over 30 or 40" production facilities, with personnel "spread all over the fields." He adds, "Even if in one area you have full control by the leftists, that's only one part of your production. To halt it all, you have to have support all over the place, and I don't see a chance of that."

"Normal Operations"

Thus, Mr. Raofi and other managers expect Iran's oil industry to continue its recovery. Most say things already are going better than they had expected.

"We are at normal operations, and we have had normal operations for some time," says Ali Tabanfar, general manager of the big refinery at Abadan, south of here. He says the refinery will soon be producing 550,000 barrels daily. "I will be pushing for 600,000," which is capacity, he says.

All told, the company says Iran's production has reached 2.5 million barrels a day, of which 1.8 million are for export. That's considerably below the 5.5 million barrels being exported each day before the oil strike, and the new regime says it intends to keep exports lower.

Hassan Nazih, chairman of the company, said recently that although the level of future production hasn't been set, "I know it will be low, and I think in any case it will be no higher than 3 million barrels a day for export."

Prices are high, however. Some Iranian crude is going for 50% above the official price set by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. And Iran says that in pricing and production, it intends to be guided by its own self-interest. "Our only principle is what will be the best for the nation," says an official of National Iranian Oil.

A Central Demand

The workers agree. "One of our central demands is cutting the foreign hands out of our business," says the leftist organizer in Ahwaz.

"If the government is contributing to anti-imperialist action, we support the government," says a leader of the Fedayeen Khalq, a Marxist guerrilla organization that some observers say stands the best chance among leftist groups of winning the oil workers' allegiance. (The Tudeh Party, the Moscow-backed Communist wing, has more support in the oil fields than most other places, but it doesn't have much of a following among the younger militants.)

"But if the imperialists want to interfere in Iran again, we will fight the imperialists," the Fedayeen man says. "Our struggle with the nationalist government is a political one, but with the imperialists, it will be armed."

That isn't to suggest that Iran won't accept any foreign help. "For sure we will have need for foreign technicians and foreign spare parts," says a bearded young oil-maintenance worker who is a member of the Khomeini committee that oversees labor problems in Ahwaz. "But the difference between the old regime and the new regime is the difference between dependency and voluntary assistance. We don't want to be the

Past Role of Foreigners

Mr. Raofi says that before the revolution, Iran had about 600 foreigners working in its oil operations. He says that "very few" of them were involved in producing or exporting oil—and he thinks the country can boost exports or production all the way to capacity without "a single expatriate."

However, he says, foreigners did play an important role in such areas as drilling, gas

and gas-liquids projects and in engineering and construction efforts. They might be needed there again, he says, depending on the country's plans. If foreign technicians are brought in, most probably will be politically acceptable—Palestinians, for instance.

They can expect to join a group of Iranian workers flush with the excitement of new-found power. "They have been fighting for their freedom, and now they all want to be free, to be able to express their ideas," one oil executive says. The organizer for the Socialist Workers Party puts it somewhat differently: "They want to run the whole company," he says.

What's happening in oil—the demands posted on the doors, workers' committees in the offices, brief sit-down strikes by women in support of their rights—isn't much different from what's happening throughout industry here. But Iranian oil's importance to the economy inflates the significance of the oil workers' activity.

Most of the militants are young. "The workers who are under the age of 30 have a tendency towards the leftist groups," a manager of the national oil company says. "The people on the other side have more sympathy for the religious authorities. But you always have the silent majority—and what they want is political and economic stability."

The Khomeini people are trying to restore that stability, but they often find themselves at cross-purposes with the workers. "You have two different trends," says a leftist here. "Some of the workers are really militant. On the other hand, you have all these committees appointed by the Khomeini forces from above. And they're trying to cool down the workers."

Disaffection in Iran Grows as Ayatollah Consolidates Victory

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Enormous Problems Confront Nation; Referendum Plan Is Among Most Explosive

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By ERIC MORGENTHAUER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

TEHRAN—A middle-aged man, balding and his eyes somewhat sad, sits on the couch in his modern apartment as neighbors wander through, looking at the furniture, all of it for sale.

"I think I've contributed a lot to this country, but I can't stay under the present

conditions," says the man, a senior employe of one of Iran's big state-owned companies. Thus, he plans to move his family to Europe to escape what he fears will be the strictures of an Islamic Republic.

"My daughters have never worn a chador," he asserts, referring to the cloth wrap that Islamic leaders want women to wear in public. "I can't keep them here to live like that."

Opposition Is Growing

As even such disaffected Iranians concede, the Islamic republic is fast becoming reality in Iran. The religious authorities, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, clearly are ascendant for now. They expect to confirm their authority with next Friday's referendum on whether people want to make Islam the overriding political force in Iran.

But, though Ayatollah Khomeini seems to have broad support among the masses, opposition already is picking up—on the left, among the educated classes, among women

—and it seems likely to increase with time.

There's the problem of bringing Iran's tribes under control, a problem underscored by this week's battles between government troops and Kurdish rebels who are trying to win autonomy. Unofficially, more than 500 deaths have been reported in the week's fighting.

Economics also could work against the regime. Despite the recent resumption of oil exports, Iran's economy still is moribund in many ways, and unemployment apparently is quite high. Ayatollah Khomeini recently urged his countrymen to try to revive the "bankrupt economy" and to "rebuild this slum."

Perhaps the most explosive problems, aside from the Kurdish rebellion, involved the government's political preferences. "The influence of Khomeini and some religious leaders is being used to retard the movement for establishing a democracy," says a leader of the Socialist Workers Party of Iran, a Trotskyite group, voicing a belief

that's widespread on the left and increasing in the middle. "That can't succeed for long," he adds.

Indeed, the question of democracy is clearly mixed into the approaching referendum. As things stand, Iranians will be asked to vote "Yes" or "No" on the question of whether they want an Islamic republic. They are expected to vote "Yes" overwhelmingly.

A "Milestone"

The Khomeini supporters think the referendum will be a "milestone" in the revolution. It will clear the way for the selection of a constituent assembly, the approval of a new constitution and the establishment of a permanent government. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's government is "provisional."

Opponents, however, describe the vote as a "joke." They worry that Ayatollah Khomeini—who has made clear his disdain for democracy, which he considers a Western concept—will use the results as an excuse for

installing a strong-armed Islamic regime. "The temper of dictatorship is increasing day by day," says an Iranian journalist, who adds that because of pressure from Khomeini loyalists, "we already are effectively under censorship."

Certainly, the referendum, as it stands, isn't any model of free expression; voters must sign their names and addresses to the ballots, for instance. But most observers think that even if it were organized differently, the Khomeini forces would win.

Little Debate of Issue

What's perhaps most worrisome for the future is that there has been little debate about what an Islamic republic is, or what alternatives there might be to one.

One new political grouping, the National Democratic Front, this week proposed a two-stage referendum: one stage to vote on abolishing the monarchy and forming a republic; a second, to be held sometime later, on the nature of the new republic.

Some people believe that if such ques-

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tions aren't thrashed out, the struggle over political structure will just be postponed.

"The most important task of the revolution at this time is democracy," says one professor who sympathizes with the left. "If we don't get a democracy, people will say the Moslems came along and led a revolution but they didn't do anything after the revolution."