

## **In defense of the struggles of a socialist prisoner or a call for reviving internationalism**

*In solidarity with Reza Shahabi*

By A. Hosuri

It is not an exaggeration to say that, we are witnessing a horrible period of modern human history, not only because of the quantity of capitalist invasions to the human domains (and nature) and human achievements, but because these invasions, during these turbulent times, have left only a small surplus for opposing transformations. It seems that the human beings, in its silent acceptance, looks at their own final declining trend. In the same context, the struggle of the left, on a global view, to stand against the waves of invasions of capitalist order has reached its lowest historical level: either in terms of the social extent and the degree of organization of these struggles, or regarding their political and social impacts, or their ability to mobilize public opinion and to develop mass resistance trends.

It should be acknowledged that, in addition to the set of developments that have led to the growth of the political power of the rulers of the present order and the expansion of their means of control and repression of the "oppressed" and dissenters, the left has still not come out from its historic defeat at the global level, in order to be able to provide a historical force against the increasing invasions of the domination system. For instance, a large part of what remained from the broad spectrum of the left and the active opponents of the capitalist system (in the wide sense of the word) remains its critique and negation of its historical past, without have been able to develop new effective means to fight its powerful, ever savage opponent. Perhaps, it could be even asserted that the aggressive advancement of the latter has a clear and close relationship with the retreat of the former. This terrible imbalance observed in confrontation between the system and its opponents intensifies the lack of vision (emancipative perspective), as well as the sense of disability and helplessness among the left forces, which in turn contributes to the continuation of this vicious cycle. Although, paradoxically, social contexts and political potentials of confrontations with the increased developmental problems of the system, and the concrete manifestations of these confrontations (even at the level of daily-life) have been growing more evidently.

This short text certainly does not intend to provide an analysis of the historical status of the left and its current structural problems, rather its direct concern is to enhance the call for the solidarity with the struggles of a socialist prisoner. In this sense, perhaps the short general image depicted above may primarily help clarify the location of such a call (as one of hundreds of similar examples) in the context of the current turbulent situation of the left. In the other words, the secondary purpose of this text is to show how a call of this kind is inseparable from the call for the revival of internationalist struggles.

However, the immediate purpose of this text is to alert its hypothetical audience to the danger threatening the life of a political prisoner (Reza Shahabi) in Iran, as well as to invite them to an "active solidarity" with his tragic struggle; In fact the extent and the degree of the injustice and oppressions that Reza (as a worker and an activist for the worker's basic rights) in particular, and the Iranian workers in general, have

been afflicted from, have moved him to use his body as the last barrier for his struggle: On 27<sup>th</sup> September Reza Shahabi, a 43-year-old bus driver in Tehran's Public Transportation Section, detained in a prison near Tehran (Gohardasht), has conditionally stopped his hunger strike, which took 50 days. Reza, who has spent recently about 7 years in jail (because of his engagement and persistence in setting up a labour union for bus-drivers in Tehran), was again shortly after his release arrested due to not cutting off with his activities, while the official justification for his detention is, even in the frame of existing oppressive laws, obviously “illegal”. He is facing this state punishment, because he, due to his resistances, has become one of the symbolic figures of current struggles of the working class in Iran; in fact, his punishment is a clear announcement from the new setting of state power in Iran to the dispersed but ever increasing resistance of workers all over the country, to show its determination in advancing its imposed neo-liberal politico-economic plans (which began about 3 decades ago and since then have been acceleratingly imposed by all different governments).

There have been so far several small campaigns setting up through Iranian underground “social media” (mostly due to the oppressive conditions), as well as a few solidarity statements and events in Europe and Canada (such as solidarity statements from some worker unions in France, England, Sweden, Canada and Germany) for rescuing his life and transferring his voice. More importantly, the banned union of bus drivers in Tehran<sup>1</sup>, announced a public gathering (on Sep. 25<sup>th</sup>) in front of the Ministry of labour in supporting the freedom of Reza, in which, some of the workers and political and civil activists were present, despite the usual police-security consequences<sup>2</sup>.

However, it should be confessed that all these efforts would unfortunately not suffice at all to provide a powerful and effective reaction against the inhuman situation, which Reza Shahabi and other political prisoners (including activist workers) are confronted with in Iran; and additionally the fact that, this insufficiency (which expresses itself in more and more cases) is in itself as tragic as Reza’s current situation. Perhaps, we could also assert that, this insufficiency -in its part- is one of the reasons forcing comrades as Reza to take such a tragic action in order to be heard. Hence, if we want to take serious Reza’s struggle, beside all efforts to save his life, we should also emphasize the broad causes that forced Reza to endanger his life as the last means of his struggle. In this regard, it should be also highlighted why setting up resistance and fight against such oppressive situations (despite the existence of widespread information and many direct experiences) has become so limited and difficult in Iran. And more importantly, related to our standpoint from abroad, it should be problematized why the international solidarity of the leftists with class struggles all over the world has become so weak in recent years. (This question, of course, has a overdetermined answer, for which the critique of the ordinary/habitual or conscious act of the left would only reveal one aspect of the causes of this weakness).

A hesitation on the very last question (as the secondary purpose of this text, which ends also it up) shows why the apparently petite and isolated case of Reza Shahabi and any call to save his life (and solidarity with his struggle) can not be seen independent of (or separated from) the general situation of the global

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1. Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company

2. Since this banned labour union (as other worker initiatives in Iran) has been during the last decade under highest oppressions and harassments by the state (just because of its persistence on holding their own union), such a call is, of course, considered unlawful by the state and holding or participating in this gathering (as in other similar cases) is usually subject to police crackdowns and subsequent follow-ups to organizers and presenters (available news so far have reported the pressure of police forces and filming the event by security guards; meanwhile, a new wave of arrests of labor activists - including the members of the banned Teachers' Union - or reinforcing of judicial-security pressures on them has begun in recent days).

left. At a historically more wider view to the specific situation of Reza Shahabi, it could be indicated that his particular situation in the final analysis is an expression of the culmination of a prevailed political crisis caused by the global defeat of the left, while the more severe consequences of the crisis in the past 4 decades, namely political oppression (even physical eliminations of the leftists at the individual or collective levels), have been touched in the southern countries of the world; just similar that, the economic crisis of capital also transmits its direct acute consequences (such as the expanded and intensified poverty and exploitation) to the “world-south”. Indeed, the seemingly "individual" and "voluntaristic" struggles of those like Reza Shahabi in "remote" corners of the world is a clear manifestation of the fact that the general level of political struggles of the left (despite the increasing intensity of exploitation and suppression in the world) has declined dramatically. In the same context, both as a consequence and as an expression of it., the usual left armament of international solidarity has been specifically forgotten or at least used in much less effective ways. The inevitable bond of this decline with our local, limited or even individual efforts as left-wing activists reminds us of a sentence that Marx once told the German workers in his introduction to *Capital*: "This is your story, which is narrated". To support this claim, let's focus a bit on some backgrounds of Shahabi's 50-day hunger strike:

Perhaps if we widen the scope of our vision to a certain extent, we will find that Shahabi with his "individual" practice reminds us that: Iran's workers, in response to the expanding and intensifying economic and political pressures (arising from the growth of global capital relations and its imposed integration with special features of state in Iran<sup>3</sup>) have been always fighting and have been steadily cruelly suppressed, while the global left (apart from its historical constraints) has never paid enough attention to the situation of the Iranian society and its labor struggles. On the one hand, the numerous protests and strikes of workers, in response to the escalation of their wretched livelihoods or long postponed payments or collective expulsions, have been (are being) most severely suppressed and punished (for instance: gunfiring at Khatunabad's copper workers; whipping gold-mine workers of Agh-Darre; or brutal oppression of protesting workers of Hepko and Azarab in Arak just in recent days, and tens of other indicative examples). On the other hand, labour activists who defend the basic rights of workers or participate in establishing any labor organization have been (are) quickly arrested and imprisoned and sentenced to lengthy imprisonment. (for example, just two years ago, in Sep. 2015, Shahrokh Zamani, another symbolic figure in the Iranian labor movement, lost his life in prison due to inhuman conditions, as well as the lack of medical examination).

However, most of the non-Iranian left-wing activists, if at all look at the situation in Iran (the “problem of Iran”) look often from the scope of the periodic eye-catching issues highlighted in the main-stream media. Here is a list of the topics of recent years: Ahmadinejad, nuclear policy and sanctions, confrontation with the US and Israeli governments, Islamic fundamentalism, battles on power between “reformist” and conservative elite forces, diplomacy of the current government of Rouhani, women's veil and similar stereotypes; such an attitude, in the field of action eventually would be absorbed in transient "human rights" campaigns in opposition to the death penalty (and stoning) and women's veiling etc.

Certainly, in order to properly understand the reasons for the fragmentation and dispersion of anti-capitalist struggles, confined in more or less closed and limited geographic frameworks, and in order to properly analyze the improper and heterogeneous reflections of the existing widespread class struggles

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3. It can be shown that the historical course of the developments of these features has also had significant overlaps and interactions with the historical dynamics of the expansion of capitalist world relations.

(whether selective or random) into the global left sphere, we require a multi-faceted approach; namely, an approach that considers, amongst others, the macro-historical trends and concrete conditions/constraints together with the effects of intellectual and discursive procedures and strategic policies (and interactions between these spheres). But if, in the narrower context of the present text, in spite of its inadequacy, we consider only the extent of some of the intellectual and discursive effects, then this "neglect" in the final analysis (and at the level of the dominant tendencies within the left) is due to a lack of comprehension of interconnectivity and the entanglement of the relations of the world order, which is in turn related to the lack of a profound understanding of the material necessity of developing or strengthening the global aspects of the ongoing local/"national" struggles against the "status quo" (we will return to this issue).

However, how can the global left indeed react properly to the status of the class struggle in a society like Iran? A very short answer to this question would be as follows: Only by reconstructing, organizing and coordinating its struggles around an expanded conception of the class struggle in fight against capitalism and by developing and expanding of its immanent internationalist strains. More generally, an important part of any response to an external challenge in the field of struggle is, inevitably, the consideration of the internal problems and inadequacies of the struggle. From this point of view, looking at the inadequacies of the left, the lack or decline of an internationalist conception of the struggle against capitalism would draw our attention. While, due to historical developments, the necessities of the expansion of internationalist struggles have become more and more clear and the material conditions for them are being more provided than ever: either because of the growth of the global strains of capitalism and the increasing expansion and interconnection of the mechanisms of the capitalist world order, whether by the globalization of the dimensions and consequences of the oppressions arising from these mechanisms, or because of the huge growth of information transfer, communication and linkage, and the growth of mobility and interconnectivity of human beings at the global level (compulsory and half-compulsory immigrations).

In this sense, internationalism is not merely an "outward" periodic solidarity with the struggles of people elsewhere in the world, but an essential inner requirement for the continuation and expansion of the struggle against the capitalist order. The fact, that despite this clear necessity, left-wing struggles have been mostly confined to dispersed national frameworks only reflects the backwardness of the most of the left-wing forces from the course of the history movement. We have to look at and examine this backwardness (and the resulting dispersion and discontinuity); Maybe part of the capitalist dominant values have been internalized in us: Including the rationale of the nation-state and thereby a (unwantedly) nationalist perception of social change; an Eurocentric understanding of the universal human conditions and the (unwanted) prioritization of the domains of struggle in favor of the "First World"; and more fundamentally, a positivist perception of the nature of an emancipative struggle based on separating the apparently distinct phenomena and losing the connections with the whole system.

The fact that the Iranian exiled leftists (merely as an example of many exiled communities), in their dispersed and unsuccessful efforts over the last decades to highlight the suppression of the struggles of the Iranian people, have been mostly alone and thereby have become more and more exhausted and fissure (apart from bearing the consequences of the huge repression of their previous struggles as well as paying partly their own political mistakes) should be an alarm to the leftists of the "free world"; namely, to which extent we have forgotten the immanent continuity and interweaving of the global capitalist order and thereby the importance of internationalist struggles, and in this respect, we have -more or less- merged the

elements of the cognitive-cultural logic of capitalism (i.e., positivism) into our "logic" of struggle. In this sense, if in the 1960s, in the German academic atmosphere, a fight against the dominant positivism took place, then it might be time to develop such a fight in the field of practical struggles. Indeed, one of the most important measures of progress in such a fight would be the reconstruction of an alternative understanding of internationalism and practical set-up of that. From this standpoint, some of the currently one-sided or subsidiary political activities or movements<sup>4</sup> would receive a totally different strategic meaning and significance and perspective.

And the last word: as the sovereignty of Iran complements, before the eyes of the world, the verbal eloquence of its "new diplomacy" with domestic and regional repressive policies, while the most significant and systematic aspect of its internal repression, namely the persistent political repression of the workers' movement (along with the intensification of the economic deprivation of working class) is largely ignored at global reflections, obviously Reza Shahabi needs now our immediate and practical supports and solidarity; but in a wider perspective, the global left requires struggles of people as Shahabi, by the inspiring impulse of which it could step beyond its current status. So, let's get up to respect of the magnificent fight of Shahabi and take a step forwards.

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**PS.** More information could be accessed (amongst others) via this Email:

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4. including: anti-racist and anti-fascist movements, solidarity with refugees and fighting against border policies (NATO, Frontex, etc.), anti-war struggles and protests against militaristic interventions, struggles against militarism and weapon-export, anti-austerity protests and movements against neo-liberal international policies and treaties, struggles against other forms of imperialist policies including the intransparent relationships of western powers with the dictatorial regimes, fighting against global injustice and global poverty, environmental movements and protests against climate change, etc.