

From Road to Class: Transport Strikes and the Necessity of Working-Class Independence



Internationalist Voice

The strike by truckers, lorry drivers, and hauliers, which began in Bandar Abbas, rapidly spread to over 160 cities from 21 May, quickly developing into a nationwide strike. Even a number of women driving school transport vehicles joined the protest. Although the strike emerged spontaneously and without clear organisational leadership, the widespread participation of truckers, drivers, hauliers, and transport companies has been striking. In other words, various social classes with differing class interests and goals are involved in this movement, each pursuing their own specific demands.

Since metropolitan capitalism seeks, as far as possible, to shift the burden of its structural crises onto peripheral capitalism, these crises take on a far more destructive form in peripheral capitalist countries than in the metropolitan core. In the case of Iran, the crippling sanctions imposed by the global bourgeoisie - particularly by the West - have significantly deepened and intensified this crisis.

As a result, it is not only the working class that suffers from the consequences of the capitalist crisis and sanctions; the petty bourgeoisie and in this particular case, truckers have also not been spared. They face declining incomes due to the reduction or removal of fuel subsidies, as well as rising costs for spare parts, insurance, and other operational expenses.

In such conditions—where the pressure from sanctions and the structural problems of peripheral capitalism has intensified—even segments of the bourgeoisie have joined the ranks of the protesters.

The strike and protest by truckers and drivers is a response to an economic crisis which, within the framework of peripheral capitalism, has devastating and far-reaching effects not only on the working class, but increasingly on the middle layers of society as well.

If we are to distinguish the demands of the protesters and strikers along class lines, the interests and demands of three distinct social classes can be identified.

The demands of waged drivers (the transport proletariat), who do not own their trucks and are employed by transport companies or private owners, are as follows:

- Increased wages
- Timely payment of wages and benefits
- Access to health and pension insurance
- Improved working conditions and reduced working hours
- Relief from excessive traffic police fines

Demands of truckers and private truck owners (the petty bourgeoisie):

- Increase in freight tariffs
- Reduction in insurance costs
- Lower prices for spare parts and maintenance expenses
- Access to bank loans with easier repayment terms
- Elimination of excessive taxes and road tolls
- Improved access to subsidised fuel
- Reduction in freight commission fees

Demands of large transport companies and owners of major fleets (the bourgeoisie of the transport sector):

- Liberalisation of freight rates
- Government support for the import of trucks and spare parts
- Tax exemptions
- Guaranteed access to low-cost fuel
- Simplification of customs procedures
- Enhanced security along international routes on the eastern borders

The more developed capitalism becomes, the more the middle class or petty bourgeoisie undergoes proletarianisation. However, in the peripheral countries of the capitalist system, the petty bourgeoisie constitutes a broad and significant layer compared to metropolitan countries; a layer that is

neither exploitative nor directly exploited. The extent of the middle class or petty bourgeoisie is inversely related to the level of capitalist development in each country. Unlike many other economic sectors, this characteristic is clearly observable in Iran's transport industry, where the petty bourgeoisie holds a significant share of the sector.

Currently, around 90 per cent of trucks in Iran are privately owned by individuals, whereas the situation in the United States is almost the opposite. Although the bourgeoisie has attempted to increase the share of companies in the transport industry, these efforts have largely been unsuccessful due to the structural problems of capitalism in Iran. Available statistics clearly demonstrate this reality:

“In Iran, 552,307 heavy vehicle drivers operate 433,388 trucks of various types. Of these, only 29,648 trucks are owned by companies.”¹

Other statistics show that over 80 per cent of drivers own their own trucks.² In other words, between 80 and 90 per cent of this sector is controlled by the petty bourgeoisie, while only 10 to 20 per cent belongs to transport companies; therefore, around 10 to 20 per cent of the proletariat work in this field. This situation contrasts with industries such as oil, automotive manufacturing, steel, and similar sectors.

Since fuel prices in neighbouring countries are up to 200 times higher than in Iran, a significant portion of fuel is smuggled to these countries by various means. This smuggling occurs either via land borders or by sea, using dhows and vessels to sell fuel to Gulf countries or foreign ships in international waters. The Islamic bourgeoisie considers fuel smuggling one of the fundamental problems facing the country's economy:

“Between 20 and 30 million litres of fuel are smuggled daily, with a value of approximately 7 billion US dollars.”³

¹ [IranInternational](#).

² [KhabarOnline](#).

³ [Ruydadiran](#).

Due to its own economic difficulties, and with the stated aim of combating fuel smuggling, the government has restricted the supply of subsidised fuel, while simultaneously offering semi-subsidised fuel and fuel at market rates. However, the government's claim that these policies are intended to curb smuggling has been rejected by drivers. They argue that smuggling by individual drivers and “informal fuel carriers”⁴ is minimal and limited, and that large-scale smuggling takes place in an organised manner, beyond their scope of activity or control.

For example, the discovery of a two-kilometre-long pipeline used to steal aviation fuel in Bandar Abbas — transferring around 70,000 litres daily in secret — points to significant investment and a high level of organisation.⁵ In this context, some speculate that a large part of the organised fuel smuggling, particularly under the cover of sanctions, is carried out by institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and government-affiliated companies.

Protests by truckers (drivers who own their own trucks), alongside farmers, are also taking place in advanced capitalist countries, as the crisis of capitalism affects them as well. We have seen such instances in countries such as France, Britain, and the Netherlands. As with any other social issue, the protests and strikes by truckers and drivers can only be understood within the context of struggles of different social classes, each defending its own interests.

The first point to consider when analysing these protests is to reject the assumption that they are purely workers’ strikes. In particular, some leftist groups, by deliberately using terms such as “truck driver” or “lorry driver” instead of trucker (owner-operators), attempt to present these actions as proletarian in nature — as a workers’ force capable of paralysing the country

⁴ The term “*informal fuel carrier*” refers to individuals living near border areas who transport small quantities of fuel to neighbouring countries, making a living by selling it and profiting from the price difference.

⁵ Isna.

and challenging those in power. Although a segment of the transport proletariat is indeed involved, the bulk of these protests has been driven by truckers — the petty bourgeoisie of this sector.

Unlike the capitalist class — which exploits workers by employing their labour and owns factories, transport companies, technology firms, and other means of production — and unlike the working class, whose only possession is their labour power, there are social groups that fall between these two classes. These groups are neither capitalists nor workers, and are referred to as the middle class or, in Marxist terminology, the petty bourgeoisie.

The petty bourgeoisie may own small means of production — such as a farmer who owns land or a trucker who owns their own lorry. These individuals are often self-employed and directly involved in their own economic activities. They work, but unlike workers, they own their means of labour. However, compared to capitalists, they generally do not significantly benefit from the surplus value generated by wage labourers. Engels described the precarious nature of the petty bourgeoisie as follows:

*“The modern petty bourgeoisie is the most changeable; bankruptcy has become one of its institutions. With its slender capital it shares the status of the bourgeoisie, but by the insecurity of its livelihood it shares that of the proletariat.”*⁶

The fact that some truckers may have previously been workers (drivers) does not change their current class status. Apart from exceptions, it is the class position and outlook of a social group or class that determine its social stance and actions, not the individual backgrounds of its members. Moreover, the protests by truckers are also a reaction to their own process of proletarianisation: bankruptcy, loss of their small capital (the truck), and becoming drivers without ownership — in other words, proletarians within the transport sector. Engels clearly explains this issue:

⁶ [The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party – Engels](#).

“Eternally tossed about between the hope of entering the ranks of the wealthier class, and the fear of being reduced to the state of proletarians or even paupers... possessed of small means, the insecurity of the possession of which is in the inverse ratio of the amount,—this class is extremely vacillating in its views.”⁷

The petty bourgeoisie is politically an unstable and precarious class that lacks the capacity to play an independent role. For this reason, it is often referred to not as a “class” but as a “stratum”—a stratum that, at critical historical moments, tends to align itself with one of the two main classes of capitalist society: either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat.

During the widespread protests and strikes in autumn 2018, when the ground beneath the working class was shaking due to the workers’ protests, truckers also went on strike. At that time, we regarded this action as part of the labour movement, because the vanguard of this movement was the workers with their class demands, and the truckers followed their lead.⁸ Similarly, during the October Revolution, the petty bourgeoisie stood behind the working class.

The same petty bourgeoisie initially stood alongside the workers during the events of 1978–79, but as soon as signs of the workers’ movement’s failure and a shift in the balance of power became apparent, they became part of the body of the Islamic Republic. Similarly, in the 1930s, following the defeat of the working class in the previous decade, the petty bourgeoisie became one of the main pillars of fascism.

Unlike the propaganda from both the right and left wings of capital, which portray the protests by truckers and drivers as a “nationwide strike” primarily aimed at anti-government goals—and with some leftists even going so far as to describe it as a form of anti-capitalist strike—it must be emphasised that

⁷ [Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany – Engels](#).

⁸ For further information, please refer to the booklet [Lessons from Strikes, Labour Struggles and the Internationalist Tasks](#).

petty-bourgeois struggles cannot offer a clear and liberating prospect for the working class. In contrast, only the independent struggle of the working class can provide a clear political and class horizon for the working class.

Viewing petty-bourgeois struggles merely as protests by truck drivers is a deliberate attempt to conceal the class nature of this movement and to divert attention from the real position of the working class within the capitalist structure. The working class can only effectively defend its interests by organising struggles independent of other social classes and by developing a clear awareness of its true place within capitalist relations.

When workers go on strike or protest against declining living standards, job insecurity, intolerable working conditions, or inadequate pensions, mainstream media outlets are generally reluctant to provide extensive coverage—especially when such protests have the potential to spread or inspire other sections of society. In contrast, protests deemed acceptable and non-threatening within the framework of the capitalist order are far more likely to receive widespread media attention. The coverage of Iranian truckers' protests by outlets such as the Associated Press, Fox News, Voice of America, and others is a telling example.

The nationwide strike by truckers and drivers, who primarily belong to the petty bourgeoisie, generated widespread support across social media and the arts. In contrast, workers' protests—due to their more fundamental and class-based nature—often receive limited media coverage, and celebrities, quite understandably and in accordance with their own class position, tend to remain indifferent. A clear example of this is the widespread protests in autumn 2018: neither Palme d'Or winners at the Cannes Festival, Oscar nominees, nor prominent cultural figures showed any significant response or support.⁹ However, movements rooted in the petty bourgeoisie undoubtedly receive backing from celebrities.

⁹ Among the figures known as artists or celebrities, only Mehdi Yarrahi responded to the protests and strikes of autumn 2018.

In this context, celebrities such as Jafar Panahi describe the truckers' strike as "a loud cry against injustice," Mehdi Yarrahi warns that "suppressing the truckers' strike will only fan the flames of public anger," and Katayoun Riahi calls them "the bearers of Iran's honour." Furthermore, 32 filmmakers, including Tahmineh Milani and Mohammad Rasoulof, expressed their support for the truckers' demands in a public statement.

The Islamic bourgeoisie has adopted a dual approach towards the truckers' strike, based on a "carrot and stick" policy. On the one hand, the judiciary has announced the opening of cases and the arrest of several drivers accused of "disrupting transport order." On the other hand, government officials have attempted to contain the protests and reduce the demands to a manageable level by promising reforms such as changes to the fuel rationing system, improved insurance, payment of fares, and halting the plan to introduce a three-tier diesel pricing scheme.

The crisis of capitalism, especially in peripheral capitalism, will profoundly affect the petty bourgeoisie; it will drive part of this class into bankruptcy and push them towards proletarianisation. Therefore, in the future, we should expect not only an expansion of protests and strikes by the "middle class" or petty bourgeoisie, but also a likelihood of uprisings, increased instability, and chaos in many countries.

Protests by the petty bourgeoisie, including those by truckers, not only fail to clarify the path of the workers' struggle but can also lead it astray. Workers who align themselves with these movements become influenced by petty bourgeois ideology and deviate from the course of class struggle. Consequently, instead of strengthening the workers' fight, we will witness its weakening.

The bourgeoisie does not limit itself to the direct suppression of the proletariat; it also seeks, through ideological and political tools, to stifle in the cradle any emerging forms of solidarity and class consciousness among workers. In this regard, leftist parties and tendencies, by reproducing outdated ideas such as the "convergence of struggles", attempt to present

petty bourgeois protests—like truckers’ strikes or peasant movements—as arenas for “class unity”. However, these calls are, in practice, efforts to dissolve the independent struggle of the working class within broader “everyone together” movements, thereby neutralising its radical and anti-capitalist character.

The responsibility of revolutionaries towards the working class is to highlight the dangers that undermine the class struggle. As the crisis of capitalism deepens, social strata that are neither in the position of exploiters nor directly exploited—such as truckers, farmers, and other layers of the petty bourgeoisie—will increasingly take to the stage in protest. However, these groups lack the capacity to offer a clear and radical horizon for class struggle, and the movements that emerge from them cannot serve as a substitute for the independent organisation of the proletariat.

The working class can only expand its struggle on its own class terrain—as an exploited and revolutionary class—by maintaining its class independence. In doing so, it can rally behind it layers of the petty bourgeoisie. This was evident during the widespread workers’ strikes of autumn 2018, just as it was during the October Revolution, when petty-bourgeois followed the lead of the working class. In such circumstances, it is not the proletariat that is absorbed into petty-bourgeois movements, but rather the rise and intensification of class struggle that enables the proletariat to draw in unstable and wavering strata, mobilising them in anti-capitalist struggles and outlining a clear horizon for liberation from capitalist domination.

The Future Belongs to the Class Struggle!

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