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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights,  
civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Verein Sudwind Entwicklungspolitik, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 May 2013]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Exclusion keeps Iranian workers in poverty**

As the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights present in her recent report<sup>1</sup>, participation is a human right in itself, a precondition or catalyst for the realization and enjoyment of other human rights, and of fundamental importance in empowering people living in poverty to tackle inequalities and asymmetries of power in society.

For workers participation in trade unions is an effective and well-honed tool to escape poverty, exploitation and the violation of their basic human dignity. Despite the fact that Iranian law recognizes the rights of workers to set up trade organizations and unions, the government has resisted and seriously opposes and prevents efforts by workers to set up independent organizations in support of their rights and demands. Progressive workers, who have worked to set up Syndicates and unions, have been harassed and pursued legally. For example, members of the Bus Drivers Syndicate of Greater Tehran, Haft Tapeh Sugar Worker's Syndicate of Ahvaz, Painters Syndicate, Free Workers Union, and the Committee for Support of Workers' Organizations, have all experienced pressures crackdowns by security officials. Many of the members of these workers organizations have been sentenced to long prison terms, and at present several of them are serving the sentences. The following workers' rights activists are serving their prison terms: Shahrokh Zamani, 11 years; Reza Shahabi, 6 years; Mohammad Jarahi 5 years; Behnam Ibrahimzadeh, 5 years (on furlough at the time this report was prepared), and Pedram Nasrollahi, 18 months. Some of other workers' rights activists and teachers' rights activists, who are currently in prison in Iran are: Behrooz Allamehzadeh, Behrooz Nikfard, Alireza Saeedi, Qaleb Hossieni, Ali Azadi, Rasool Bodaghi and Abdulreza Ghanbari, (both members of the teachers trade union), Mehdi Farahi Shandiz, Sharif Saed Panah, Mozafar Saleh Nia and Afshin Osanlu. A number of workers and union members currently in prison are severely ill, including Shahrokh Zamani and Mohammad Jarahi, and need urgent medical care and supervision outside of prison which until the time this report was prepared have been denied.

## **Workers live under the poverty line in Iran**

Meanwhile poverty among Iranian works has increased recently. On December 21, 2012 in an interview with PANA news agency (a governmental news website), a member of the High Council of Employment, announced that the official poverty line in Iran for a household of four is 15 million Rials. According to reports by Iran's Central bank and Iran's Statistics Center, the inflation rate in the last few months of the Iranian year was over 31% and for some consumable products it was reported to be as high as 40%. Due to this level of inflation, unofficial estimations show an increase in the poverty line for a family of four at 17 Million Rials at the start of the new Iranian year (March 20, 2013). In the same year, the High Council of Employment set the minimum wage for workers at 4,870,000 Rials. Comparing this figure with the estimated poverty line for the same year sheds light on the tragic and critical situation of workers in Iran. Despite the fact that the wages set for workers is extremely low, they still are denied this basic pay. Workers are often compensated for their work with several months delay or they don't get paid at all. For example, workers working at the Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Roads Construction for the department of roads and urban development of this province a sub department of the ministry of roads and urban development were on a seven months delay with their payments and benefits in February 2013. Living under such difficult circumstances constitutes exclusion and a slow death for most Iranian workers and their families.

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<sup>1</sup> A/HRC/23/36

Most workers are employed in small plants without any regulatory oversight. When they die or become disabled due to the injuries of these kinds of accidents, their families are left without a bread winner or financial recourse, as these workers are not insured. According to reports from the coroner office the rate of workers dying as a result of work related increased in 2011 to 1507 and in the last 10 months of 2012 this figure was 1517. Legal measures taken up by the courts in several incidents have not resulted in any redress for workers and their families.

Most workers in Iran are employed based on temporary contracts and as daily and hourly laborers. These workers do not have the benefit of unemployment insurance, health insurance and workers compensation insurance. Their contracts make it very easy for their employers to dismiss them individually or as a group.

Many employers on good terms with the state authorities have been able to take advantage of lower rates for purchase of currencies, to pay for their imports, their equipment or primary products necessary for production. The sale of the lower priced currency or investing in sales business, rather than production, generates more profit. As a result of these trends, many employers who are not subject to oversight and controls have closed their factories and workshops and dismiss workers. According to the head of the House of Workers, a government entity, between May 1, 2011 and May 1, 2012, 100,000 workers were dismissed from their places of employment.

### **The situation of female workers**

Female workers, in Iran's patriarchal society suffer from multiple historical, cultural, social and legal discriminations and exclusion. They are employed in low paying and intensive labor professions, with long hours and often informal and illegal working conditions, female workers receive lower pay, even for equal work and that officially. Female workers are also the first to be dismissed when their employers suffer economic woes. The rate of unemployment of women has increased from 33% in 2005 to 44% in 2010 according to official stats.

Due to official statistics, female workers comprise 5% of the total laborers. Female workers in the informal sector are often not counted in official statistics.

Benefits that according to the law they are entitled to female workers are often denied. These benefits, such as maternity leave, have in fact resulted in employers' reluctance to hire women workers or forced contracts which oblige women to avoid pregnancy during their term of employment.

According to Article 191 of the Law on Employment, workshops employing less than 10 persons or family workshops are not obliged to meet the laws and regulations set forth in the Law on employment. Workers working in this sector, who tend to be predominantly women, are employed without the right to health insurance, government pensions (which employers contribute to), annual leave, and maternity leave. They often work long hours, are engaged in difficult work and get paid a low wage. There is no oversight of safety and health issues provided at these workshops. With the adoption of the "Off-site Work Program", the government has encouraged this type of domestic production work.

Unfortunately to the ranks of these female workers, we have to add those engaged in prostitution, whose numbers are on the rise. This sector of female workers, not only does not benefit from any rights, but are at risk of arrest, prison and even execution.

### **Child labor/workers**

Article 79 of the Law on employment has outlawed the employment of children under the age of 15. Based on reports from Mashregh Website (a government website) and the Parliamentary Research Center in the Fall of 2012, three million and 265 thousand children were left behind from education. Three million of them were identified as child workers/laborers.

Child workers tend to be employed in small workshops or are engaged in production of products at home (domestic production) or work as street peddlers selling products to consumers on the streets. Given the 40% inflation rate and the poverty rate of vulnerable families, the number of these children is on the rise.

### **Afghan workers**

The situation of Afghan workers and in general the situation of refugee and migrant workers in Iran is disastrous. Of the two million Afghan workers living in Iran, about two thirds, meaning 1 million and 400 thousand do not have legal working papers. Despite the fact that they have lived in Iran for years, the government, has not addressed their situation. This situation has added to their problems, so much so, that they do not even benefit from the limited rights that other workers enjoy. The pay scale of Afghan workers, as compared to, workers who have been officially hired as full time permanent workers, is much lower, and their working conditions are much more difficult. Afghan workers do not benefit from health insurance, pension benefits, or workers' compensation. Their children do not have the right to be educated and they do not have identity cards.

We therefore urge the Human Rights Council and its member states to call on the Iranian authorities to fully respect workers' fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining as a means of empowering workers to improve their conditions.

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