Rare Labor Petition in Iran Shows Economic Alarm

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TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — For weeks, a manifesto complaining about Iran's stumbling economy circulated in secret among factories and workshops. Organizers asked for signatures and the pages began to fill up.

In the end, some 10,000 names were attached to the petition addressed to Iran's labor minister in one of the most wide-reaching public outcries over the state of the country's economy, which has received a double pounding from tightening Western sanctions and alleged mismanagement by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government.

The rare protest document — described to The Associated Press this week by labor activists and others — suggests growing anxiety among Iran's vast and potentially powerful working class as the ruling system struggles with the latest sanctions, which have targeted critical oil exports and blackballed Iran from international banking networks.

It also appears to reinforce the U.S. and European assertions that the economic squeeze is bringing increasing pressures on Iranian authorities. President Barack Obama and others argue that sanctions and diplomacy are the best way to wring

concessions over Iran's nuclear program even as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushes for a "red line" declaration that could trigger military action.

While Iran's leadership still has broad-based public support in the nuclear standoff with the West, the petition and sporadic street demonstrations over the slumping economy suggest a growing distinction between the national pride of nuclear technology and the economic hardships from Tehran's defiance. The Iranian currency, the rial, hit another all-time low against the dollar Monday, which is certain to further drive up prices of imported goods.

Jafar Azimzadeh, a labor rights activist and gas-pipe fitter, warned of stronger fallout if the government does not find ways to prop up salaries and rein in prices. "Workers would not stay at the level of writing petitions," he said. "They would go toward street gatherings and other actions."

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the drop in the value of the rial "speaks to the unrelenting and increasingly successful international pressure that we are all bringing to bear on the Iranian economy. It's under incredible strain."

Iranian officials have repeatedly said Iran can ride out the sanctions through measures such as keeping oil flowing to Asian markets that include China and India. But Ahmadinejad last month acknowledged that Iran faces "barriers" to sell oil and make international banking transfers critical to keep commerce flowing.

In May, Ahmadinejad was cheered in the northeastern city of Mashhad as he promised to create 2.5 million new jobs and boost worker benefits. It was a welcome reception after facing mounting criticism for policies that include scattershot privatizations and allowing inflation to surge.

But the petition sent to his labor minister, Abdolreza Sheikholeslami, offered a far more bleak assessment of a country burdened by rising prices and increasing economic isolation.

"A staggering increase in prices has been biting over the past year as wages of workers have only increased 13 percent this year," said the petition, whose full text was not made available to the AP, although selected parts were viewed. It added: "Millions of workers cannot afford their monthly housing costs."

Unskilled factory workers in Iran make an average monthly wage of 3 million to 7 million rials, or about $95 to $220 at Monday's exchange rate. The official poverty line is about 10 million rials, or about $315, a month.

Meanwhile, prices keep rising — partly due to sanctions — and the rial keeps falling. A 1.5-kilogram (52-ounce) container of yoghurt has doubled to about 24,000 rials (75 cents) since early September. Various meats and rice, both staples of Iranian kitchens, have risen 48 percent and 34 percent, respectively, since last year.

Official reports put Iran's inflation rate at 23 percent, but Iran's parliament speaker last week estimated it was close to 29 percent. The unemployment rate is officially 12 percent, but some economists place it nearly three times higher.

"It's not ideology that is the weakest link for Iran's ruling system," said Sami al-Faraj, director of the Kuwait Center for Strategic Studies. "It's the economy. This, of course, was an important element of the Arab Spring, and that fact is definitely not lost on Iran."

Iran's factory workers and laborers have provided the tipping points at pivotal moments. They gave vital populist backing to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and generally sided with the ruling clerics when they were under threat by riots after Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009.

The petition contains no warnings or ultimatums against the Islamic system, or references to the nuclear program, activists say. But the scope of the signatures — representing several Iranian cities — is an unusual show of grassroots unity without umbrella organizations such as unions.

"When we do not have rights for major protest rallies and strikes, petition is the only way," said Parvin Mohammadi, a retired metal industry worker and one of the organizers. She said the workers wrote a protest petition about irregular pay of their wages earlier in June.

Another labor activist said signatures were gathered clandestinely at factories and work sites. "Sometime we collected signatures through the mail," said the activist, who would only give his first name of Sadegh because of fear of reprisals from authorities.

The signatures included mine workers in the mineral-rich center and west, food and textile producers in Tehran and central Iran, and bus drivers in Tabriz, in northeastern Iran. Conspicuously absent, activist said, were workers in the oil industry, which provides up to 80 percent of Iran's foreign revenue. Iranian oil workers usually receive better wages than others.

Labor groups also object to changes in Iran's labor law, which give employers a freer hand in firing workers and would cut annual leave to 20 days from 30 days. Ali Reza Mahjoub, a representative of workers in the parliament, said he would lead fights against the changes with possibly more street protests.

"This is an exercise for unity of workers," said Hamid Reza Shokouhi, editor of independent Mardomsalari daily. He said the petition demands are not directly political but carry a whiff of dissent since "activities of workers were blocked because they were interpreted in the past as opposition to the ruling establishment."

Iranian officials have made no comment on the petition, which was only reported by the semiofficial ILNA news agency and pro-reform Shargh daily. But some lawmakers have thrown the petition their support. Abbas Ali Mansouri, a parliament member, said higher wages are needed "while workers are falling under the poverty line."

At a square in downtown Tehran, laborers gather to be picked for day jobs at construction sites, making about 300,000 rials ($9.50) a day.

"I wish I was among signatories. I was not aware of it prior to reports," said Abbas Hodavand, an unemployed construction worker. "Every day, in heat and cold, we

wait to be picked up by a possible employer. This is not a life."

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Murphy reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

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