

Free Mansour Osanloo

BY PAUL HAMPTON

MANSOUR Osanloo, the president of the Iranian independent busworkers' union was kidnapped by plain clothes police on Tuesday 10 July and taken to the notorious Evin prison.

Osanloo was stopped while he was returning home by a public transit bus in Tehran. According to Iranian workers' sources, a Peugeot car stopped the bus and unidentified plain clothes agents attacked him — beating him severely while telling people that he was a thief! Osanloo tried to identify himself as the president of the union for the witnesses in

order to get help but the agents stopped him.

Security forces tried to arrest Osanloo in similar circumstances in May. Then, Osanloo freed himself because people rushed to help. But this time the agents did not give him any chance.

Last November Osanloo was kidnapped and incarcerated in Evin prison. After enduring a month of detention, he was released. Before that in December 2005 Osanloo was imprisoned for eight months. Earlier this year a Tehran Revolutionary Court issued a prison sentence of five years against Osanloo. His lawyer had filed an appeal.

A few days before Osanloo's kidnapping, Ebrahim Madadi, the union's vice president,



Meeting of bus drivers

was arrested by uniformed police officers but freed a day after without charges following union protests.

This is part of a new wave of suppression in Iran against labour activists as well as women's rights activists and students. At the same time armed security forces attacked protesting students at Amir Kabir University in Tehran and arrested six students. Worker activist Mahmoud Salehi has been in jail since April this year and has been deliberately denied life-saving medical treatment by the authorities.

Messages of solidarity can be sent via Labour Start at www.labourstart.org

“I will not be intimidated”

Mansour Osanloo, president of the Iranian bus workers' union Sherkat-e Vahed (Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company) recently visited the UK. This is the text of an interview with Labour Research where he talks about the persecution he and other union members have endured at the hands of their employer and the Iranian authorities.

DURING his overseas visit, Osanloo was notified that a five-year prison sentence had been passed on him, but he remained defiant, saying: “I will not be intimidated by this.”

Osanloo was in the country at the invitation of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), the global transport workers' body.

He was elected president of the bus workers' union in June 2005 and went on to hold industrial action as part of the union's campaign for a living wage and decent working conditions.

In his interview with Labour Research he talks about his periods in detention and the brutality that he, his family and union members have endured, but why he feels it his duty to continue campaigning. Mehdi Kouhestaninejad from the Canadian Labour Congress acted as interpreter.

Labour Research: Can you explain why you became a trade union activist?

Mansour Osanloo: My father was a trade unionist and I was born into a family of trade unionists. I learned to fight for justice, for the right to live, for a decent life. I started work and I noticed the reality of work - so I started fighting for justice in the workplace.

My first job was as a bus driver, but even when I changed jobs, I learned the hardship in other workplaces. This gave me the motivation to start our trade union.

LR: What does the bus workers union want?

MO: First the government should recognise our right to freedom of association. Once we have free independent association, then we can negotiate collective agreements.

After we have established our rights, we can negotiate for better wages and for social benefits. I tell you we don't even have a toilet at work, so after our shift most of us have kidney problems.

Workers are expected to do five different jobs as well as driving buses (such as collecting fares, making announcements -



Mansour Osanloo

even cleaning the buses) but we are paid for only one. Our wages are under the poverty line. I want to emphasise that low wages are one of our key issues.

The bus company is owned by the municipal authorities. Since Ahmadinejad became President, all of the management have come from the military. They don't believe in workers' rights and they are starting a privatisation programme to try to break up our union.

LR: How is the union organised?

MO: Two friends, Ibrahim and Hossain, and I started to build a union organisation 20 years ago. The workers trusted us because they understood the logic of what we were saying. The circumstances existed, creating the pressure to form a union.

Another element was my record. I was a good activist — I paid for my activism. Every time I was moved to another area, workers believed that I would “walk the walk”, not just “talk the talk”. They believed me. We were honest, what we were saying had the truth behind it — they had heard so many untruths from the employer. We paid - we lost our jobs, we didn't have any money.

We tried to educate the workers about the law, about human rights and social dialogue.

Even after the first election [in June 2005], 17 of us were attacked by the employer but we did not relent in what we believed. Our first meetings were held in the bakery association building. The security services tried to prevent a general assembly taking place and to stop the vote taking place. Workers joined us because of the humungous misery - they wanted to get a voice.

LR: Does the union produce a newspaper?

MO: We started with an A4 flyer, producing 50 or 100 copies. After we began collecting dues, gradually the publications increased and we now have a newsletter called the Union Messenger. We started a union fund and worked with webmasters to produce a website www.syndicavahed.com

I have no security in my life. We are harassed every day of our lives. They call me, they call my wife and my sons, they ask me to go to the Revolutionary Courts.

[in Farsi]. We have issued two books in the last four years, about union training and about the history of the union.

LR: Can you describe your treatment by the authorities? I understand your tongue and face were slashed in 2005.

MO: (Showing his scars) In November [2006] I was walking with friends and a few people grabbed me. They kidnapped me on the way to buy a newspaper. They told me to come with them and I asked them who they were. They didn't show me any kind of identification card. They put a scarf around my neck and I was unconscious for three hours. I was imprisoned for one month. My face had bruising. No one could visit me.

In May [this year] eight of us, members of the union, were on our way home on the metro. Four or five plain clothes intelligence officers said to come with them. They handcuffed me and pushed me into a fence. We started shouting and screaming and ordinary people noticed what was going on and they helped free me.

I have no security in my life. We are harassed every day of our lives. They call

me, they call my wife and my sons, they ask me to go to the Revolutionary Courts. Even when I got on the plane, I didn't feel safe until it took off. My family were there but they didn't feel confident that I would make it to Britain.

LR: And your trial?

I went to Revolutionary Court in February [this year]. They wouldn't let me speak. They wouldn't let my lawyer speak. It was like the interrogation I had in the prison - in solitary confinement. It was a one-way discussion. I have received nothing in writing about this. We are still waiting to hear from them. But it is nothing to do with the government. I have a problem with my employer. But it is becoming a national case and they are worried about that.

(Since this interview Osanloo has learned about his five-year prison sentence)

LR: Can you tell me about other workers' organisations and committees. (Since 2004 organisations have linked up after particular struggles. In March, the Co-operation Council of Labour Organisations and Activists (Komiteh-ye Hamkari) was formed to unite different committees.)

MO: All those organisations are part of the coalition. They have no legal basis - they are not accepted even as trade unions. I don't know whether they want a trade union or a political party.

They are the result of the oppression of the government during the reform period [under Khatami] over the last eight years. They started to come out and talk. Their existence is very positive - they are talking about workers' realities.

LR: Solidarity — what do you want UK trade unionists to do?

MO: I want to start by expressing my appreciation. We have received so much support internationally, for example from the ITF. In the last few days I've heard this again and again, that you feel you have a responsibility towards us. Solidarity and support has a long tradition among the trade unions. Over 40 of our members are still dismissed and we are going back and forth with mediation.

There are lots of ways you can help. We do not even have a place to meet. We used to meet in the bakery association, but they've been threatened for helping us. We can't run education and training for our members. We need computer training and to be taught how to run our website.