When Sanctions Bite: The Dynamics of Labour Protest in Iran

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ABSTRACT

In the 2010s and early 2020s, Iran experienced widespread worker contention. This article, using an original protest dataset, describes and analyses this protest wave. It highlights five main elements. First, protests largely followed the arc of economic crisis, moving from industry to public administration as manufacturers recovered but public deficits deepened. Second, labour protests were concentrated not among the most deprived but among formal sector groups. Third, workers connected defensive claims about wages to more offensive demands about profit distribution and contract coverage. Fourth, protests were relatively low risk and often generated non-negative official responses. But fifth, concessions were overwhelmingly symbolic and promissory, locking protesters into extended bargaining processes. These findings help explain why Iranian workers refrained from movement politicisation and shed light on the complex ways in which economic sanctions can sometimes provide certain labour groups in target states with mobilizational resources and opportunities.

KEYWORDS

labor protest, Iran, economic sanctions

Introduction

Though rarely discussed outside Iran, the Islamic Republic in the 2010s and 2020s experienced extraordinary levels of worker contention. Integrating analysis of an original event catalogue with additional data sources, official reports, and news media, this article studies the dynamics of labour protest in Iran between 2012 and 2021. Among others, it asks: which labour groups mobilised, and which did not; how were claims made and settled; how did the protest landscape evolve over time; and how did economic sanctions structure the protest wave? In addressing these questions, the article seeks to provide some common ground on which competing claims can be assessed and contribute to our understanding of the relationship between sanctions, worker mobilisation, and the Iranian state.

The article identifies five main elements that characterise the dynamics of labour protests in contemporary Iran. The first is that the composition of labour protest largely followed the arc of economic crisis triggered in part by sanctions. Protests were initially concentrated in manufacturing following a sharp industrial contraction in the early-to-mid-2010s. But as industrial production recovered, the locus of unrest shifted, moving to public administration and pension funds by the end of the decade as government deficits deepened and austerity intensified following a second round of sanctions.

But while grievances and economics mattered, protests were not concentrated among the most deprived labour groups or those most severely impacted by sanctions, who were largely in the informal sector. Instead, the bulk of protests were staged by formal-sector groups. In manufacturing and industry, this mostly meant the formal private sector – a significant departure from earlier protest waves dominated by the public sector and workers in state-owned enterprises.

Third, worker mobilisations were mostly framed defensively around delayed wages, unpaid benefits, or job security. Yet, at the same time, these defensive demands were often connected to offensive demands about contract coverage, profit redistribution, and national policy. This suggests that while 'protests of desperation' (Lee, 2007) were the norm, workers often expressed a degree of resourcefulness derived from the institutional structure of the Iranian state and its labour-organisational system. Such markers of strength are further indicated by the ability of some worker groups – like truckers, nurses, engineers, or teachers – to stage cross-regional protests coordinated through informal activist networks as well as official unions.

Fourth, labour protests were relatively low risk. Most protests were conducted peacefully, and overt repression at the scene of the protest was rare. Moreover, to the degree revealed by available data, protests also often generated a non-negative response from authorities. Yet at the same time, and fifth, these concessions were often symbolic and promissory. The result of this was not protest containment. Rather, promissory rewards locked workers, employers, and officials into extended bargaining sequences, both demobilising movements and routinely generating further mobilisations down the line.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section on methods and data describes in more detail the main dataset, the Iran Economic Protest Database (IEPD), and is followed by a discussion of the spread and evolution of labour unrest in the 2010s and 2020s. The next five sections discuss the main characteristics in turn.

In the final section, I briefly discuss how these findings can inform our understanding of Iranian politics and the relationship between economic sanctions and labour movements. I make the case that labour protest dynamics help to explain why organised labour in Iran largely refrained from movement politicisation. I also briefly discuss the possibility that economic sanctions did not only yield grievances, but also, in indirect, limited, and institutionally mediated ways, provided some worker groups with certain mobilizational resources in the context of crisis and heightened state vulnerability.

Methods and Data

The article's primary evidential source is the Iran Economic Protest Database (IEPD), a large dataset manually coded by the author to study socioeconomic contention in Iran under sanctions. As its name suggests, the dataset focuses on economic protest, broadly defined, which may or may not express political, environmental, and civic demands. Here I examine economic protests by labour groups, which I define broadly to include all wage-earning and occupational groups, regardless of sector, occupation, or type of demand, and including pension fund beneficiaries.

The IEPD is constructed from Persian-language news reports published by two major Iranian news agencies, Tasnim and ILNA. These agencies were selected because they regularly report on economic protests and because they are commonly perceived as associated with two different factions in Iranian elite politics – Tasnim being closer to conservative and ILNA closer to reformist/moderate

factions. The IEPD was constructed thus: first, I scraped all news items from ILNA and Tasnim's websites; second, I used an extended key string to filter news reports based on whether they mentioned economic protest-related words; third, I manually checked the remaining dataset, removed all irrelevant reports, and logged the data contained in the remaining reports. The result is a comprehensive dataset of every economic protest reported by these two agencies between September 2012 and March 2021 (N=2,922), most of which (N=2,721 or 93 percent) were staged by labour groups.

The IEPD's uniqueness lies in its detailed recording of information on labour protest dynamics. Among other things, it includes variables on date, location, sector, firm and institution, target, demands, protester type, and protest outcomes such as state responses and concessions. In contrast to conventional protest catalogues, which usually log a single 'main' demand, the IEPD logs *all* the demands reported in news media. This both provides a fuller picture of the articulation of protest and sidesteps the methodological difficulty of identifying a primary demand. The result is the most comprehensive dataset currently available for the study of worker protest in Iran.[1]

Protest data comes with well-known limitations (Dribbusch and Vandaele, 2016; Weidmann, 2015). The IEPD is sourced from domestic news media, which comes with biases. To mitigate some of these concerns, I supplement the IEPD with analysis of other publicly available datasets, notably ACLED (Raleigh, Kishi, and Linke, 2023), a well-known global conflict dataset, which since 2019 has also drawn on "new" and social media, alongside case studies drawn from the dataset and supplemented by media analysis, statements by labour leaders and officials, and government reports.

The Timing and Evolution of the Protest Wave

Economic sanctions on Iran were significantly tightened in 2011–13, including an oil embargo. Yet, available evidence suggests that labour protests did not take off until several years later, from around 2015. The IEPD only starts in 2012 and thus cannot provide a macro-longitudinal picture. But various other independent event catalogues and official reports exist that can guide us in the right direction.

Perhaps the best-available labour protest data on pre-2013 Iran is compiled by Amir Javaheri Langroodi, an independent researcher and activist based in Sweden.[2] According to Langroodi's estimates, the level of worker protest appeared largely flat between 2009 and 2013 apart from an uptick following on the heels of the 2009 Green movement. His dataset records 299 worker protests in the Persian year 2009–10, 505 in 2010–11, 464 in 2011–12, and 344 in 2012–13.[3] The International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran (IASWI), which has published its own protest counts since the early 2010s, confirms these trends, recording 365 labour protests in 2014–15, about the same as Langroodi's 2012–13 estimate. Then the IASWI estimates spike, rising to 1,264 in 2016–17 and hitting 1,915 in 2020–21.

Public statements by Iran's intelligence agencies corroborate the mid-2010s upsurge. In late 2016, one security official claimed that the number of "social, labor, and occupational gatherings" had increased by 69 percent over the preceding three years (Tasnim, 2016). Another official stated in early

[1] For the IEPD codebook upon which this article builds, see Kalb (2024).

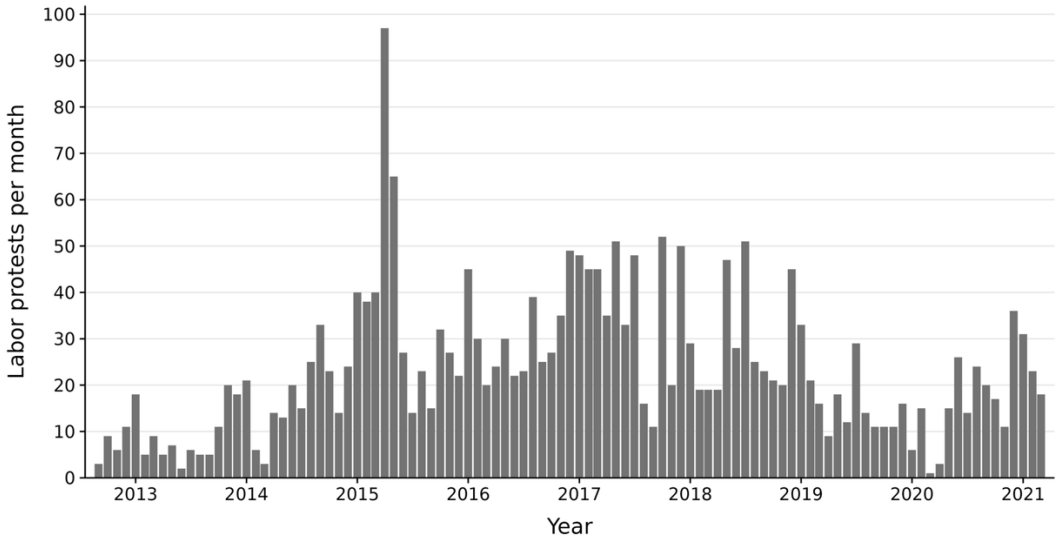
[2] I thank Mr. Langroodi for sharing this data with me.

[3] The Persian year starts and ends in March.

2018 that protests about "economic, social, and unemployment" issues were up 35 percent year on year (Tasnim, 2018). This is strong evidence that the independent estimates are capturing something real – not just, say, higher event prevalence due to the spread of social media and wider protest reporting. Moreover, official estimates are higher compared to those from the early 2000s (Mehr 2004), when another major labour protest wave roiled the country (Maljoo 2006; Yekta and Abkhoun 2000), making it likely that the 2010s-20s wave is unprecedented in Iran's postrevolutionary history.

Though official and independent estimates suffer from limitations, not least problems of data replicability, they nevertheless suggest the existence of a labour insurgency that many Iran observers and activists have sensed. These sources locate the start of the protest wave around 2015. Importantly, this was precisely around the time when international negotiations on sanctions removal were in advanced stages, which might have created limited political openings under the self-proclaimed "moderate" President Hassan Rouhani, elected in 2013. Yet, labour protests did not subside after the US unilaterally exited the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and in fact continued at elevated levels over the next years, including after the reimposition of sanctions in 2018.

Figure 1: Monthly Labor Protests, September 2012 – March 2021



Source: IEPD.

The IEPD confirms the 2015 protest surge that other estimates point to. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of recorded labour protests increased by 278 percent. Protest levels peaked in 2017 and declined over the following years, falling to 224 in 2020. My analysis of ACLED, which algorithmically logs protests from all available national and international sources, thereby producing significantly higher overall protest levels, reveals a broadly similar decline, though the ACLED data better captures the trucker strikes of 2018.[4] ACLED shows a less pronounced decline after 2017, which is likely a

[4] I created a labor dummy in ACLED based on whether variable assoc_actor_1 contained any of the following keywords: 'Labor', 'Workers', 'Teacher', 'Lawyer', 'Journalist', 'Employees', 'Taxi Driver'.

function of the undercounting of pensioners' and public sector protests in the IEPD.[5] ACLED suggests another remarkable doubling of protest levels in 2020–21, which is mostly the result of protests by petrochemical workers (Kadivar et al., 2021), teachers (Mehvar and Miller, 2022), and pension beneficiaries. Table 1 provides yearly counts and percentage changes for both datasets. Thus, the protest wave commenced circa 2015 and continued into the early 2020s.

Table 1: Number of Labor Protests in Two Datasets, 2013–22

	IEPD		**ACLED**	
	Total	% Change	Total	% Change
2013	125		*NA*	
2014	244	*+95.2*	*NA*	
2015	472	*+93.4*	*NA*	
2016	421	*−10.8*	1,189	
2017	493	*+17.1*	1,553	*+30.6*
2018	381	*−22.7*	1,882	*+21.2*
2019	247	*−35.2*	1,294	*−31.2*
2020	224	*−9.3*	1,309	*+1.2*
2021	*NA*		2,760	*+110.8*
2022	*NA*		2,107	*−23.7*

Source: IEPD, ACLED.
Notes: IEPD year counts are based on publication dates.

Protests Followed the Arc of Economic Crisis

Between 2012 and 2021, the sectoral concentration of protests shifted, moving from manufacturing and large industry in the early 2010s to pension funds and public administration by the late 2010s. This shift largely follows the arc of economic crisis and grievances. In the early-to-mid 2010s, following the tightening of sanctions, Iranian industry experienced widespread disruption. By the late 2010s, large manufacturers had mostly recovered and, having achieved a degree of resilience, avoided a similar crisis after the reimposition of sanctions in 2018. The number of labor protests in industry declined from a peak of 244 in 2016 to 68 in 2020; and relative shares show a similar decline (Table 2).

At the same time, the number of protests staged by groups more directly linked to the state and its finances – the civil service and public sector, public utilities, pension funds, municipal employees– increased from 26 percent of labor protests in 2013 to 60 percent in 2020.[6] In fact, the initial upsurge

[5] It seems likely that the IEPD undercounts groups that fall outside what in Persian are known as *kargaran* (which can be loosely translated to blue-collar, menial, or industrial workers) since this is the focus of ILNA reporting.

[6] Calculated using Table 2 by adding education, health, utilities, municipal, and welfare funds.

can be attributed largely to the cross-regional protests by public teachers and their unions, who staged widely reported protests in 2015. My analysis of ACLED, not depicted here, corroborates these trends using an alternative dataset.

Table 2: Labor Protest by Sector, 2013–20

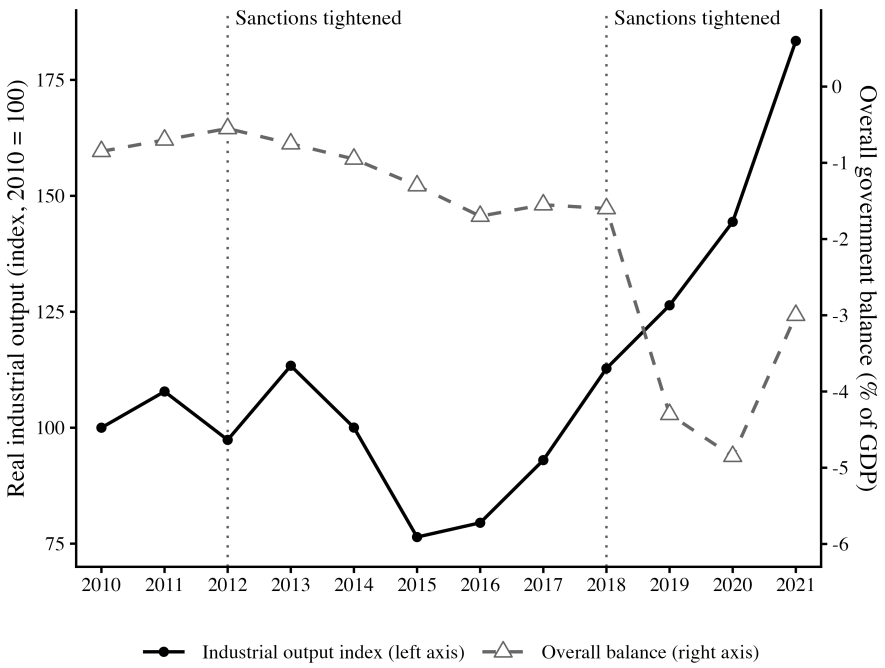
	Industry	**Education**	**Health**	**Utilities**	**Municipal**	**Transport**	**Welfare funds**	**Other**	***Total***
2013	84 (67.2%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	9 (7.2%)	9 (7.2%)	6 (4.8%)	12 (9.6%)	3 (2.4%)	*125*
2014	174 (71.3)	10 (4.1)	4 (1.6)	13 (5.3)	12 (4.9)	5 (2.0)	9 (3.7)	17 (7.0)	*244*
2015	233 (49.9)	111 (23.8)	17 (3.6)	37 (7.9)	25 (5.4)	15 (3.2)	10 (2.1)	19 (4.1)	*467*
2016	244 (60.4)	24 (5.9)	4 (1.0)	10 (2.5)	34 (8.4)	15 (3.7)	25 (6.2)	48 (11.9)	*404*
2017	230 (47.6)	36 (7.5)	14 (2.9)	34 (7.0)	57 (11.8)	25 (5.2)	41 (8.5)	46 (9.5)	*483*
2018	145 (39.4)	27 (7.3)	23 (6.2)	11 (3.0)	41 (11.1)	50 (13.6)	32 (8.7)	39 (10.6)	*368*
2019	79 (32.9)	23 (9.6)	15 (6.2)	9 (3.8)	30 (12.5)	23 (9.6)	17 (7.1)	44 (18.3)	*240*
2020	68 (30.9)	25 (11.4)	17 (7.7)	27 (12.3)	33 (15.0)	4 (1.8)	30 (13.6)	16 (7.3)	*220*

Source: IEPD.

Notes: 2012 and 2021 excluded because incomplete years. Events with unknown sectors are dropped from total counts.

Figure 2 contextualises these dynamics by depicting industrial output (left axis) and government deficits (right axis). The differential impact of the two sanctions 'shocks', first in 2011–13 and then in 2018–19, is quite visible from the graph. The first round of sanctions led to a sharp decline in manufacturing output, which helps to explain the spike in industrial unrest around that same time. The second round barely impacted overall industrial production, but shook government finances, with deficits widening to 3-5 percent of GDP annually. This informs our understanding of the wave of public-sector and pensioners' protests in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

Figure 2: Industrial Output and Fiscal Deficits, 2010–2021



Source: Statistical Center of Iran (2010-2021), International Monetary Fund (2026).
Notes: Industry data is originally in Persian years, here rounded to the nearest Gregorian equivalent.

Only 7.3 percent of labour protests involved strike action.[7] Thus most events – demonstrations, gatherings, rallies, sit-ins, road blockages, and so on – did not interfere with the production process. The low level of work stoppages is not surprising given Iran's poor economic conditions. Scholars also find that weaker union movements in contexts of low institutionalisation, which describes most developing countries, tend to rely more heavily on protest actions beyond the workplace strike (Höltmann, Borbáth, and Hutter, 2025).

The Formal Private Sector Takes Centre Stage

While the protest wave was closely linked to grievances and economic crisis, it was *not* concentrated among the weakest, most impacted, or most deprived segments of the workforce. There were few recorded protests by Iran's large informal workforce, whether Snapp ride-hailing drivers, carpet weavers employed in small handicrafts firms, or construction workers involved in urban real estate projects (see also Karshenas and Moghadam, 2024). Of course, these workers made claims (Hashemi, 2025), but they were severely constrained in their capacity to mobilise collectively (Morgana, 2022).

Rather, protests were concentrated in the *formal sector*. Moreover, with the notable exception of teachers and some medical groups, most formal sector workers were employed by *private firms*. This stands in sharp contrast to the 1990s and 2000s when labor protest activity was largely confined to the public sector and state-owned enterprises (Haq, 2004; Maljoo, 2015). But by the mid-2010s, Iran's

[7] This is likely an underestimate given the stigmatization of strike reporting in Iran.

accelerated "pseudo-privatization" project had moved much industrial employment out of state ownership (Harris, 2013) and into the hands of private and parastatal conglomerates (Kalb and Harris, forthcoming).

Within the formal sector, protest activity was not concentrated among workers in the most strategically located or protected core insider jobs, i.e., among those with the highest degree of structural power. The IEPD, for instance, does not record a single protest involving core workers at Mobarakeh Steel, one of Iran's largest and most valuable enterprises. Similarly, when judiciary employees staged rare demonstrations in 2022, the events attracted disproportionate media attention precisely because such mobilisation among highly protected state employees was so unusual (Radio Farda, 2022).

Instead, protest activity was driven primarily by workers who perceived themselves as excluded from core protections, discriminated against within their workplaces, and entitled to greater rights and benefits. Typically employed through temporary contracts or third-party subcontractors, and often receiving lower compensation than colleagues viewed as possessing comparable skills or responsibilities, these workers constitute a growing segment of Iran's 'informalized' formal sector (Khosravi 2017; Maljoo 2015). Among municipal employees, for example, protests were led not by permanent staff but by street sweepers, gardeners, janitors, and garbage collectors, many of whom were employed through private contractors. A similar pattern was evident in the petrochemical industry, where the core workforce of large firms remained relatively quiescent while precariously employed contract workers emerged as a major source of labour unrest. Characterised by insecurity, precarious employment, and fragmented labour relations, this segment emerged through the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting broader global trends in labour market flexibilization (Kheirollahi, 2017; Maljoo, 2015).

This pattern of relative disadvantage extended beyond individual workers to firms themselves. Some of the most sustained episodes of labour unrest occurred not in the more successful enterprises, but in lagging firms operating within otherwise resilient and expanding sectors. Khuzestan Steel and Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane provide illustrative examples. Although both steel and sugar production increased during the 2010s, these firms performed poorly and suffered from predatory tendencies (Seyf, 2021). Workers could therefore compare their circumstances not only to those of employees in other firms, but also to the apparent success of the industries in which they were employed. This discrepancy lent legitimacy to their grievances and often generated sympathy among elected and unelected local officials concerned about unemployment, regional development, and industrial resilience.

A similar dynamic characterised protest activity in the public sector. Here too, mobilisation was concentrated among groups that perceived themselves as disadvantaged relative to comparable occupational categories. Teachers, for example, frequently demanded parity with other segments of the civil service (Hashemi and Taavoni, 2023), while nurses sought higher minimum standards and a reduction in inequalities vis-à-vis physicians. Significantly, Iran possesses large private education and healthcare sectors, yet workers in those sectors were far less likely to mobilise. Lacking the legal protections, institutional footholds, and organisational resources available to their public-sector counterparts, they were less able to translate grievances into collective action.

Resources mattered, as they usually do. As in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (Eibl, 2026; Karshenas, Moghadam, and Alami, 2014), Iranian labour law affords extensive protections

to a relatively narrow category of "insider" workers while, through a dense network of exemptions and carve-outs, excluding the majority of wage earners from many of its core provisions (Kheirollahi, 2017). Consequently, labor unrest frequently emerged among workers who possessed either a perceived proximity to, or a credible claim upon, insider status. These included long-serving temporary employees working alongside permanently employed colleagues; contract workers denied direct employment despite performing functions fully integrated into the firm; and skilled employees whose contractual status appeared misaligned with their level of education, skill, or seniority. The uneven distribution of labour protections thus generated not only exclusion but also a framework through which excluded workers could formulate claims.

Organisational and institutional resources were also important. Some of the most effective and sustained mobilisations were undertaken by groups that possessed not only strong internal solidarities but also access to official unions, informal protest networks (Nikou, this issue), and avenues of influence within policymaking processes (Kalb, 2025). Truckers and public teachers, despite having little else in common, exemplify this dynamic. Both groups repeatedly organized coordinated protests across multiple regions (Mehvar and Miller, 2022), often timed to coincide with key governmental decision-making processes. Official unions and their leaders were involved in these negotiations, yet were simultaneously subject to pressure from local affiliates and protest organisers demanding more confrontational bargaining strategies. The result was a recurrent cycle in which militant protest campaigns strengthened unions' bargaining position, while providing protest movements with channels of government access that many other groups lacked.

In the manufacturing sector, official concerns about social order and resilience also created opportunities for worker mobilization. Although Iranian labour law imposes strict limitations on dismissals, most employees in large industrial enterprises are employed on temporary contracts, which means firms can reduce their workforce through non-renewal without needing to resort to formal termination. But when industrial output plummeted in the mid-2010s, authorities, fearing social unrest and capital flight, imposed significant restrictions on company restructuring. Employers were discouraged or prevented from reducing their workforce, declaring bankruptcy, or relocating invested capital elsewhere (Kalb, 2024). As a result, employment levels in large industry remained remarkably stable despite substantial declines in production. Many firms continued operating at a fraction of their capacity, retaining workers who were formally employed but received little work and accumulated unpaid wages and benefits. This arrangement both generated grievances and sustained workers' capacity to act collectively. Scholars have identified such gaps between *de jure* and *de facto* labor protections as a recurring feature of labor relations across the Middle East and North Africa, where authoritarian governments frequently seek to preserve social stability while avoiding the full economic costs of employment guarantees (Cammett and Posusney, 2010).

More broadly, these cases suggest that labour contention emerged most readily where grievances intersected with organisational capacity and institutional leverage. Workers were more likely to protest not where they were completely excluded from systems of protection and representation, but where they occupied an ambiguous or inferior position near them. This combination of relative disadvantage and partial incorporation (Harris 2026), rather than deprivation alone, generated many of Iran's more consequential labour mobilisations.

Strength in Defense

These patterns of resourcefulness are also reflected in the demands workers articulated. As I mentioned earlier, the IEPD, unlike conventional protest datasets, records all demands reported in the news media. This permits more nuanced analysis. Among labour protests for which at least one demand was recorded (N = 1,818), the average protest expressed 1.96 demands. This section shows how workers often sutured immediate claims to more offensive claims about policy and profits, and how state institutions mediated the articulation of those grievances.

Table 3 summarizes labor protests by protester demands, grouped into major thematic categories. It shows that the overwhelming majority of labour protests (92 percent) advanced defensive demands related to wages, unpaid benefits, or job security. Yet these demands were directed not only at market outcomes but also at the enforcement of state regulations. Even where wages were paid on time, employers frequently failed to provide benefits mandated under Iranian labour law, including social security contributions and supplementary allowances like the New Year's bonus (*eidi*).

Equally notable is the degree to which protesters joined defensive claims to more offensive demands about profit distribution, government policy, contract coverage, working conditions, and – more rarely – civic or associational rights. As Table 3 shows, almost 30 percent of protests expressed defensive *alongside* more offensive demands – a not insignificant number. Protests that made offensive claims usually also made defensive ones, whereas the reverse was not true: 70.6 percent of protests were defensive only, 8.3 percent were offensive only, and 21.1 percent were both. Moreover, the data reveal that in 2016 and 2017 – years of JCPOA sanction relief and deep industrial crisis – there was a much higher share of defensive struggles *without* offensive demands. This suggests that sanctions do not depress worker offensiveness *per se*, and might even embolden workers to make more offensive claims – a possibility explored in the discussion section.

The layering, linking, or tagging of offensive onto defensive claims should be understood in relation to the resources – legal, institutional, and organisational – available to different groups of workers. In this respect, the Iranian case resembles what Ching Kwan Lee (2007) in the Chinese context describes as "protests of desperation": mobilisations in which workers take grievances to the streets and pursue political bargaining by framing claims in moral and legal terms, shaming officials, disrupting public order, and only occasionally resorting to formal legal channels. Yet, as Lee emphasises, protests of desperation are not simply expressions of weakness. They draw on important mobilizational resources, including workers' incorporation into social pacts and their ability to invoke officially sanctioned norms and symbols. Similar dynamics can be observed in Iran. Indeed, scholars have argued that these forms of contention, closely related to Beverly Silver's (2003) notion of "Polanyi-type protest", are prevalent in regions where industrial "capital bypasses" and departs, including much of the Middle East and North Africa (Karatasli et al. 2015).

Table 3: Labor Protest Demands, 2012–21

Theme	% of protests		% of protests
Wages & payment timing	78.7	More Defensive	91.7
Benefits and allowances	47.5		
Employment & job security	21.7		
Contracts	12.3	More Offensive	29.4
Policy & Law	12.1		
Other (incl. political)	11.1		

Source: IEPD (N=1,818).

Notes: Percentages sum to more than 100 percent because protests can express multiple demands.

Labor Protests are Relatively Low Risk…

"Repression" is often the first word that comes to mind when labour protests in Iran are discussed in the West. Ask an AI chatbot whether participating in a worker protest in Iran is dangerous, and it will almost invariably respond that it is "extremely high-risk". Yet the available evidence points to a substantial degree of regime toleration of labour contention. Here the IEPD is insufficient because it is based on national news sources. However, data from ACLED paints a striking picture. Between 2019 and 2022, ACLED recorded 7,343 labour protest events of which 7,219 (98.3 percent) were classified as peaceful. Restricting the dataset to events reported only by international and independent sources yields nearly identical results: 6,465 out of 6,577 reported protest events (98.3 percent) were peaceful. By comparison, non-labour protests were considerably more violent and dangerous. Nearly one-quarter of reported non-labour protest events during the same period involved state violence, a figure heavily influenced by the 2019 Aban and 2022 Woman Life Freedom uprisings. Table 4 summarises these patterns.

Table 4: Protest Type and Reported State Violence in Iran, 2019–22

	Non-Labor	**Labor**
Peaceful	77.3 %	98.3 %
Violent	22.7 %	1.7 %
Total	*100 % (n=4,701)*	*100 % (n=6,577)*

Source: ACLED.

Notes. Four-year period (2019–2022). Only from 2019 included because independent media not included in earlier years. Figures based on state violence, and do not count protester violence.

The ACLED data also indicate that labour protests categorised as involving state violence did not necessarily entail arrests. In fact, fewer than half, or 51 protests in total, reported one or more arrests. In most of the remaining cases, violence was described more narrowly as police "dispersing" or

"clashing" with demonstrators. Although subject to their own reporting biases, data from independent human rights organisations point to similarly low levels of repression. HRANA, for example, recorded 1,841 labor protests and 67 arrests linked to labor activism in 2025 (HRANA, 2025).[8]

These figures suggest that arrest was a relatively uncommon outcome of labor protest participation. Even under conservative assumptions about protest size, the probability of any individual participant being arrested at the protest scene appears low. This stands in marked contrast to political protests, which routinely attract far more intensive forms of state repression. While labour activism in Iran is by no means risk-free, the available evidence indicates that routine labour protests generally occupied a more tolerated position within the Islamic Republic's repertoires of contention.

The relatively low risks associated with labour protest in Iran are not unusual in comparative perspective. Contrary to popular assumptions, scholars have found that authoritarian regimes often tolerate small-scale and economically focused protests. The costs of repression may outweigh the benefits, officials may view such mobilization as posing little threat to regime survival, and, from a more functionalist perspective, these protests can even provide valuable information about social grievances and policy failures (Bao, 2025; Chen and Moss, 2018; Onursal, 2026). From this perspective, the relative tolerance extended to labour protest in Iran reflects a broader authoritarian logic in which contention perceived as "regime-engaging" (Li 2019) is often accommodated, even as overtly political mobilisation remains subject to severe repression.

…And Yield Tangible but Low-Value Benefits

Labour protests in Iran are not only relatively low risk; they also often yield tangible benefits. By this, I mean that protesting workers frequently elicit non-negative responses from employers or state authorities. The IEPD records information on official reactions to labour protests, although reporting is incomplete and only a minority of events contain such data.

What Dina Bishara (2015) terms "ignoring" is nevertheless common. A familiar tactic of authoritarian governance, ignoring is often used by officials to demobilise and drain movement energy. Ignoring is not the same as non-responsiveness, which is also common to Iran's labour scene. Rather, protest ignoring captures situations in which officials deliberately refuse to communicate with protesters, dismiss their grievances, issue condescending statements, or physically avoid engaging with them.

Yet the data also reveal a significant degree of responsiveness. Approximately one-fifth of labour protest events in the IEPD contain information on official reactions. Among these cases, only 11.4 percent elicited an explicitly negative response, such as threats of dismissal, demands that workers abandon their claims, or outright rejection by a relevant state agency. By contrast, 88.7 percent generated a non-negative response from employers or authorities, ranging from negotiations and promises of investigation to partial concessions and direct intervention on workers' behalf (Table 5).

[8] To calculate the figure, I combined the categories '*senfi*' and '*kargaran*'. I could not independently confirm how HRANA defines these categories or its data collection methods.

Table 5: Negative and Non-Negative Official Responses

	n	% of all labor protests	% of labor protest with a response
Non-negative only	456	16.8	86.4
Negative	60	2.2	11.4
Both	12	0.4	2.3
No response recorded	*2,193*	*80.6*	

Source: IEPD.

Promissory Concessions and Sunk Costs

But a non-negative official response does not mean that workers' demands have been met or that a movement has ended. To the contrary, such responses often constitute only one step in extended sequences of bargaining. These interactions can generate follow-up mobilizations or drain movement energy but simultaneously impose accumulating sunk costs that discourage movement politicization and other forms of regime-threatening behavior.

To see how, let us return to the protest data. The IEPD distinguishes between symbolic and substantive concessions. Symbolic concessions include delayed, promissory, or procedural responses, notably the ubiquitous "promise to follow up" (*ghol-e peygiri*), but also meetings with authorities, investigations, or assurances that wages will soon be paid. Substantive concessions, by contrast, involve immediate and tangible accommodations, such as paying wage arrears, restoring benefits, or postponing layoffs. Authorities occasionally deploy both strategies simultaneously, and the IEPD records all reported responses. Among protests that elicited a non-negative response, only 15.8 percent secured a substantive concession. By contrast, 82.5 percent received only symbolic or promissory concessions.

Table 6: Symbolic and Substantive Concessions

	n	% of non-negative concessions
Symbolic only	386	82.5
Substantive only	47	10.0
Both	27	5.8
Unclear	8	1.7
Total	*456*	*100 %*

Source: IEPD.

Given the constraints imposed by sanctions, austerity, and economic crisis, it is perhaps unsurprising that officials are often unable to satisfy workers' demands immediately. More notable is the state's willingness to offer symbolic concessions, thereby committing itself and other agencies to prolonged bureaucratic and bargaining processes. Far from dismissing protests outright, authorities frequently respond by opening channels of communication and negotiation whose outcomes remain uncertain.

From the perspective of outside observers, symbolic concessions may appear meaningless or inconsequential. For participants, however, they constitute real rewards obtained through collective action. Unlike outright ignoring, symbolic concessions create obligations, establish expectations, and furnish workers with resources that can be used to sustain future mobilization. These are tangible rewards that become reference points against which officials can be judged or pressured (Leuschner and Hellmeier, 2024).

The experience of Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane illustrates this dynamic. The company's workers, who staged more reported protests than any other workforce in the IEPD, repeatedly received expressions of official sympathy, promises of intervention, and assurances that their grievances would be addressed. Threats, harassment, and occasional arrests certainly occurred, but symbolic concessions were routine. Although implementation was often limited, these promises became embedded within dense networks of worker solidarity and collective action. In Haft Tappeh, rather than demobilising the movement, concessions frequently served as the basis for further rounds of contention. At the same time, there are also many instances, harder to trace using the IEPD, where bureaucratic bargaining drains movement energy. Administrative burden and "attrition" are common authoritarian tools to discourage claim-making (Yuen and Cheng, 2017).

Moreover, such extended, often informal bargaining processes invite workers to remain committed to protest moderation, and "regime-engaging" rather than "regime-threatening" contention (Li 2019). Once workers and labour leaders become invested or locked in ongoing negotiations, they accumulate organisational and political sunk costs that can be jeopardised by overt movement politicisation. Labour leaders may therefore be reluctant to align themselves with broader political uprisings, not because they lack sympathy with those movements, but because their primary obligations lie with their members and with securing concrete gains for them. The result is a self-reinforcing dynamic in which labour protest remains contentious and persistent while stopping short of directly challenging the political order.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article used an original protest dataset to examine the dynamics of labour protest in Iran between 2012 and 2021. Five findings stand out. First, labour protest surged in the wake of economic crisis. Second, mobilisation was concentrated in the formal sector, especially among workers occupying precarious positions within it. Third, labour struggles frequently combined defensive with offensive demands about profits, contract coverage, and government policy. Fourth, labour protest was generally low-risk and often yielded tangible but low-value benefits: the likelihood of severe repression was relatively limited, while the probability of eliciting a non-negative official response was substantial. Finally, official concessions were generally symbolic and promissory rather than substantive, drawing workers, employers, and state authorities into extended bargaining processes. Throughout the article, I have argued that many of these features, including regime toleration, the predominance of formal-sector protest, and the relatively limited use of strikes, reflect broader characteristics of authoritarian governance and political economy that are common across much of the region and the developing world.

These findings shed light on two broader questions. The first concerns the relationship between organised labour and political uprisings like the 2022 Woman Life Freedom uprising. During these

episodes, activists often appealed for labour solidarity, inspired both by the visibility of labour struggles in contemporary Iran and by memories of the 1979 revolution, in which workers played a pivotal role in toppling the Shah (Jafari, 2019). Yet organized labor refrained from joining these uprisings in any sustained manner (Khatam, 2023).

The dynamics documented in the article help explain why. For workers, protest is rarely a one-off event. Rather, protests are embedded in bargaining relationships characterised by accumulated commitments and significant sunk costs. These dynamics discourage both regular workers and labour leaders from pursuing riskier forms of political action. Much of this restraint likely stems from mundane organisational realities and from fears that movement politicisation could jeopardise hard-won gains. Viewed in this light, protest management in Iran has been remarkably effective. Through a combination of accommodation, negotiation, selective responsiveness, and limited coercion, the Islamic Republic has been able to contain labour unrest despite its scale, persistence, and occasional militancy.

The second implication concerns the relationship between economic sanctions and labour contention. Contrary to claims that sanctions would immediately generate mass protest, the evidence suggests no simple shock effect. Labour protest increased several years after sanctions were imposed, driven by a broader economic crisis that sanctions only partially produced, as well as by political opportunities associated with international diplomacy. Protest levels remained elevated after sanctions were reimposed in 2018, although the sectoral composition of labour unrest changed significantly.

Sanctions nonetheless appear to have generated selective forms of worker leverage. As external pressure intensified, officials became increasingly concerned with social stability, economic resilience, and regime survival. In some sectors, this enhanced workers' structural bargaining power. Steelworkers and petrochemical workers, for example, gained some leverage as the state hunted for new sources of foreign exchange in the context of falling oil revenues. Protecting these industries became a strategic priority, encouraging officials to intervene in workplace conflicts and facilitate negotiated settlements. Similar dynamics were visible among truckers and in prominent cases such as Haft Tappeh. State restrictions on workforce reductions likewise provided workers in larger firms with limited but meaningful structural resources.

Yet structural conditions alone cannot fully account for labour protest dynamics. Politics mattered at least as much, if not more. As this article has shown, workers' ability to articulate and pursue claims was heavily mediated by the state and its institutions, including employment law, social policy, and the union system. Iranian coalitional politics and regime discursive shifts, notably surrounding the Supreme Leader's 'resistance economy' campaign (Bazoobandi, 2023; Kalb, 2024), also offered some space for labour agency in the context of heightened state vulnerability and geopolitical exposure. Weak incumbent governments sought support from organised labour as they confronted elite paralysis and entrenched opposition by rival factions, providing certain labour groups, organisations, and leaders with access to the state and its resources. Finally, Iran's institutional arrangements incorporate various worker groups into governance processes while the statist features of Iran's political economy provide normative and organisational foundations for collective action. Thus, the positive correlation between sanctions and worker protest in the Iranian case is unlikely to be universal or permanent. The 2010s and early 2020s labour insurgency emerged within specific conditions that may not persist over time or recur in other cases of comprehensive sanctioning.

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