



May Day on Workers Street: Trade unions and the status of labour in Afghanistan

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More than 1,000 Afghan men and women took to the street on International Labour Day on 1 May. With the country's latest mining disaster, killing at least 24 workers only one day earlier, the participants had one acute problem to address: workers' safety in the mining sector. However, the new leadership of Afghanistan's largest trade unions association, which organised the march, also pointed to long-term issues, ranging from joblessness to several forms of work-related discrimination. Thomas Ruttig, a senior analyst at AAN, looks at the past and present of Afghanistan's trade union movement, the tradition of May Day demonstrations and the long list of grave labour-related problems waiting to be tackled by workers, employees and, not least, the incoming Afghan president. (With a contribution by Ehsan Qaane.)

Afghanistan – a country almost without industries and, therefore, a working class – seems an



unlikely place for upholding a tradition of the international workers' movement. Nevertheless, demonstrations on International Labour Day have a long history, established by left-wing movements as early as in the 1960s. This year, again, Kabul saw a demonstration. Unlike the hundreds of thousands who came into the Red Square in Moscow with "Putin is right" banners (a reference to events in the Ukraine) or the pro-democracy protests at Istanbul's Taksim Square who were fired on with tear gas by the Turkish police, Kabul's was more of a traditional workers' rights related sort of demonstration. Pajhwok news agency [said](#) there were more than a thousand participants, "both men and women", at the Kabul demonstration, which was organised by the *Ittehadia-ye Melli-ye Kargaran wa Karmandan-e Afghanistan* (National Union of Afghanistan Workers and Employees, Dari acronym: AMKA. People with disabilities, a group marginalised in the job market, also participated in the May Day event (see earlier AAN analysis on this [here](#)).

Just one day before May Day, a shaft in a coal mine in Mardanha-ye Tor village, in Darra-ye Suf-e Bala district of Samangan province, had collapsed, killing 24 workers in the age of between 15 and 34 years. Many more were injured and at least 25 others trapped underground. AMKA chairman Abdul Maruf Qaderi picked up the issue at the Kabul May Day demonstration and slammed lax safety in the privately-owned mine and demanded more government attention to the country's workers in general. He also pointed out that this was not the first Afghan mining disaster of the last years: only last September, another 23 miners [lost their lives](#) in the same province and three years earlier, eleven miners [were killed](#) in an accident in Baghlan province. (On the situation in Bamyán coal mines, see [this AAN dispatch](#).)

A short look at the history of the Afghan labour movement

May Day events organised by the Afghan trade union movement have a long tradition. The first trade unions were established by the left-wing *Hezb-e Dimokratik-e Khalq-e Afghanistan* (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, PDPA) (1) around 1967. According to a 1986 East German PhD thesis,(2) workers close to the PDPA set up so-called 'funds of mutual support', in various enterprises that collected money for cases of emergencies that befell the workers, something which was then illegal.

By the late 1960s, workers organised by the PDPA and other leftist groups were already involved in industrial action in Kabul. Nationwide, 1968 alone saw 40 strikes countrywide, beginning at Kabul's Jangalak factory in the west of the city, a site which had started as a collection of repair shops, but by this time had extended into pre-fabricated housing production. Similar strikes took place in the gas fields of Sheberghan, the Gulbahar textile factory and the Pul-e Khumri cement factory. According to the East German thesis, the PDPA's working class membership was estimated to be as low as five per cent during these years (overall membership was 500 in 1967, up to 20,000 in 1977). (3)

These were the years when first monarchist and then left-wing governments tried to modernise the country, including some industrialisation on the basis of five-year plans that started as early as 1956 and were funded by foreign development aid. Since the country maintained its position



between the two major blocs led by the US and the USSR for some decades, it was able to attract such funding from both sides. This also led to an expansion of the still tiny Afghan working class. According to a dissertation written by Abdur Sattar, an Afghan in Kiev in 1978 using official government figures, in the Afghan year 1354 (1975/76) there were 38,400 Afghans working in 188 industrial enterprises with more than 20 employees nationwide (five times more than in 1956/57) and 311,000 labourers working at home, in handicraft industries and trade. Together, they represented [*corrected on 21/1/2015*] ca. seven per cent of all employees (officially 4.9 million; of 8.9 million in employable age), but brought 21.6 per cent of the Gross National Product. A large part of this workforce migrated between agricultural work during the warmer seasons and industrial employment during winter. Horst Büscher, the West German author of a 1969 book about Afghanistan's workers, described most skilled workers in the 1960s as literate while unskilled labourers as mostly illiterate. Lacking statistics, Büscher added that, according to his experience, the ethnic composition of the staff of industrial enterprises reflected that of its area, "possibly with a slight dominance of Hazaras in Kabul".

From the late 1960s, Kabul also began to see regular May Day demonstrations attended by thousands, not only workers but also university and high school students making use of the relative political freedom under the 1964 constitution. The first one took place in 1968. During this demonstration, the establishment of official trade unions was demanded, but the government reacted with arrests and layoffs. According to a PDPA source – a 1982 brochure entitled *Tabaqa-ye Kargar-e Afghanistan* (Afghanistan's Working Class) –, there were May Day demonstrations in 30 Afghan cities in 1973. Party leader, Babrak Karmal, (his second name means 'friend of labour') was often seen at the front of the Kabul demonstrations, clad in working class leader outfit, leather hat and jacket – despite the fact that he was actually the son of a general close to the court. (Karmal died in exile in Moscow in December 1996.)

After the PDPA seized power in 1978, it pulled together the mutual support funds and other labour activists into the Central Council of Afghan Trade Unions (CCATU). Its constituent unions were enterprise-based; Afghanistan does not have sectorial trade unions. With Karmal's takeover, linked to the Soviet military intervention in the last days of 1979, the CCATU became the country's only legal labour organisation and was turned into a party-led, quasi-state institution – as in the eastern bloc countries. In 1984, it had 203,00 members in 170 enterprises. Its chairman, Abdul Sattar Purdeli, a Baloch from Nimruz province, was a member of the PDPA's Central Committee. Trade union functionaries were sent to training courses in the Soviet Union and other eastern European countries, but, as there, real workers were rare birds in the party's leading bodies. In 1985, the party admitted that still only 30 per cent of its new members were "workers, peasants and artisans". In 1990, during President Najibullah's rule, CCATU changed its name into AMKA – a name it has kept to the present day.

Today's trade unions: reform, internal power struggle...

Today's AMKA is institutionally – despite much change – a continuation of the pre-1989 trade unions. Former PDPA members led by one of their former trade ministers, Muhammad Qasem Ehsas, revived the union in 2003. During that year's public debate about the future constitution,



AMKA advocated the inclusion of workers' rights in the document. It also protested against the planned privatisation of the state-owned Kamaz Transport Company, the related layoff of 1,200 employees and the privatisation of the real estate belonging to the Jangalak factory, one of the country's oldest industrial estates that had been destroyed during the civil war. The government wanted to sell it off for building projects by the governmental Enterprises Evaluation Commission (*Kamisiun-e Arzyabi-ye Tasadiha*). At that time, AMKA claimed 30,000 members. (4) However, it was unable to achieve these goals and subsequently became largely invisible, kept alive mainly by income from renting out the organisation's real estate acquired during the PDPA rule in Kabul, most prominently Ariana Hotel. The third-best hotel in the city in the 1980s, which used to serve a decent coffee in a city of green tea, has, since 2001, been housing the CIA. Control over revenue from the hotel spawned an internal power struggle between leftists and Jamiatis.

Beginning around 2008, supported by Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) which is close to Germany's Social Democratic Party, AMKA tried to reform itself, elect a new and more active leadership and reach out to its original clientele – Afghanistan's workers. Its 1980s leader, Abdul Sattar Purdeli, who had remained in Afghanistan, made a short come-back as AMKA leader and was elected as one of civil society representatives to the international Afghanistan conference in Bonn in 2011 (see [here](#)). (5) However, as a result of a 2012 congress, he lost his position to the current AMKA leader Abdul Maruf [Qaderi](#), a former mujahedin commander from Kapisa linked to Jamiat-e Islami. This led to a split in AMKA. A minority group challenged the legality of the election at the 2012 congress and sought the support of parliament and even claimed the name-rights for AMKA. But it lost the argument everywhere. Adrienne Woltersdorf, who heads the FES' Kabul office, says the 2012 AMKA election had been observed by the country's Independent Election Commission and other national and international observers and confirms that it was fair. Qaderi, she told AAN, managed to re-integrate ANKA's different political camps; he currently has a deputy each from both the PDPA's former main factions, Khalq and Parcham.

Today, AMKA claims 140,000 members – 30 per cent of them women (a percentage not reflected in its leadership bodies yet) – and offices in 22 of the country's 34 provinces. This makes it the largest among a number of trade unions. (6) Qaderi claims most AMKA members work in the building industry and agriculture, but it looks as if, as in the 1980s, state employees form the bulk element of its membership. Given the absence of any sectorial organisation, AMKA's leadership pushes for deals between its members and individual employers on issues ranging from pay to maternity leave (see [here](#) and [here](#)). It has a new, more religious character, reflected, for example, in how Qaderi demanded compensation for the Samangan miners lost in the 30 April disaster: "In accordance with the Islamic law, we want the family of each worker killed in the line of duty to be compensated with 100 camels." AMKA's current logo also bears the inscription: *Kar ebadat ast* – "work is worship".

... *any employees' real problems*

At the Kabul May Day demo, the AMKA chief pointed out some of Afghanistan's burning social



issues. Apart from the lack of safety in the mining sector, he says that particularly private mine owners do not pay compensation after accidents. He also highlighted the general lack of jobs. (7) The Deputy Minister of Education, Muhammad Asif Nang, [said](#) recently that in the coming year alone, 500,000 graduates are expected to join the country's workforce. The World Bank, in its last quarterly update on Afghanistan, [puts the figure](#) substantially lower, at 400,000 "in the next few years", although still highly problematic.

Due to high unemployment, many workers see themselves forced to work long hours for often miserable pay. The Washington Post, for example, [reported](#) that the workers at the Samangan mine earned four Dollars for a nine-hour shift — "still more than double the nation's average pay". A participant in the May Day demo [said](#) that, when he works, he gets 300 Afghani (about six Dollars) per day. However, most of the time, he is unemployed.

Qaderi further criticised the lack of proper health insurance for workers, the government's failure "to implement the law of work on private sector" or to oversee and support workers' rights, as well as the fact that more than one million children have to work and are deprived of their right to education. According to UNICEF, this figure could, actually, be closer to two million (between the ages of six and 17). It says this represents at least 25 per cent of Afghan children and that the numbers are rising with growth in the mining and construction sectors, as [quoted](#) recently in the Los Angeles Times. The newspaper gave the example of a 13-year old who had been working six days a week since the age of ten, earning about 80 Dollars a month, in contravention of what the newspaper calls the "vaguely written" labour laws(8) which prohibit children younger than 14 from working full time. Officially, children who are 14 and older are allowed to serve as apprentices and those aged between 15 and 18 can perform "light work". Nevertheless, the newspaper says, "children as young as six years old work in brick making, carpet weaving, construction, mining and farming. Others resort to begging, collecting garbage or selling trinkets on the street." A 2014 US Labour Department report also detailed the sexual abuse of children in their jobs, the maiming and killing of children in construction and the way children are forced to work in extreme cold and heat, carry heavy loads, smuggle narcotics and serve in the security forces. The International Labour Organisation has [said](#) there is no national policy to tackle the problem of child labour.

Meanwhile, women face many problems getting into the workforce. The Kabul-based think-tank Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) published a survey on 1 May from Kabul and Parwan provinces which [found](#) that social taboos, fear of rights violations, lack not only of loans and access to the market, but also durable economic development and specific women-focussed support programs are all barriers to women going out to work; full report [here](#)).

At the May Day march, Qaderi also lashed out against the employment of foreign workers, particularly those from Pakistan. Furthermore, he urged the government to pay "an additional one month's salary to the law-ranking staff of the government" and demanded it send labour attachés to its embassies in Pakistan and Iran to protect Afghan migrant workers (as reported [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).



According to the [ILO](#), there are 13 main challenges in Afghanistan's system of labour. Apart from those articulated at AMKA's May Day demonstration and by AREU, this includes that the country's labour laws are largely out-dated, government capacity is "too weak" to implement both them and the ILO conventions it has signed, unawareness of employees of these laws, largely antiquated job training centres with "obsolete curricula", an "extremely under-developed" small and micro enterprise sector and "weak or almost non-existent old age benefits and social security schemes". On 17 July 2010, the ILO, the Afghan Government, employers – represented by the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries – and trade unions signed Afghanistan's first "[Decent Work Country Programme for Afghanistan](#)" for the period from 2010 to 2015. The programme has three priorities: promoting productive employment, promoting and applying international labour standards and strengthening employers' and workers' organisations, "contributing to national policy formulation and improving industrial relations at all levels". (9)

Efforts to protect employees' rights in Afghanistan have definitely not kept pace with the substantial growth of the Afghan economy since 2001. It was nine per cent on average until 2012, but fell to 3.1 per cent last year, a drop caused by the on-going withdrawal of western soldiers and much of western funding. The lack of such efforts partly explains the gap between the "remarkable growth" (World Bank) and the fact that the country is at the bottom of rankings of social indicators, such as the UN's human development and gender equality indexes (see earlier AAN analysis [here](#)). The Afghan trade unions (and other professional associations) need to show they are seriously engaged in trying to secure workers' rights. First steps have finally been taken: Woltersdorf from FES says AMKA has started courses on labour law awareness in several provinces this year. The same goes for employees and the government: they need to become much more active, implementing Afghan labour laws and the country's international obligations under the ILO conventions. The ILO calls this "tripartite talks".(10) That Kabul's municipality used 1 May to [name a street](#) in eastern Kabul "Workers Street" was a nice gesture but does not improve a single person's working or living conditions.

For Dari readers: A background article on Afghanistan's labour situation on BBC Farsi [here](#).

- (1) The PDPA itself was founded in 1965, leaned ideologically to the USSR but was never officially recognised as a 'brotherly party'. It received official Soviet and Warsaw Pact support, including for the allied trade unions, only after it took power in a military coup d'état in 1978.
- (2) Joachim Ludwig, *Einige Probleme der Strategie und Politik der Demokratischen Volkspartei Afghanistans (DVPA) in der nationaldemokratischen Revolution in Afghanistan (1978-1985)*, Berlin, 1986.
- (3) 18,000 according to then party leader Babrak Karmal in a speech in 1985.
- (4) Source: Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, 20 and 25 November 2003 (not online).
- (5) The list of participants has him as representative of the Central Council National Union of



Afghanistan Employees (CCNUAE) but this seems to be a mis-interpretation. The terms for 'workers' and 'employees' (*kargaran* and *karmandan*) are sometimes used synonymously; AMKA now uses both terms in its official name and on banners (see [here](#)). In December 2013, Purdeli was [listed](#) as chairman of the Mahmud Tarzi Think-Tank in Kabul.

(6) The ILO [speaks of](#) "around 12 trade unions" representing Afghan employees. This might include professional associations like those of teachers, journalists or lawyers. Some other Afghan trade unions and professional associations are mentioned in [this database](#); but some of the listed ones seem to be identical, due to different translations. This Afghan media report also [names](#) an All Afghanistan Federation of Trade Union (AAFTU).

(7) The International Labour Organisation (ILO) which is part of the UN system, [gives the following data](#) on employment in Afghanistan, based on a general population of 30 million:

Labour force (2012): 7.2 million (5.9m male; 1.3m female)

Labour participation rate (2011-12; of the population aged 16 or over): 49.8% (80.3% male; 19% female); here, according to [another ILO document](#) (p 2), the ration among the urban population is lowest with 49%

Employment-to-population ratio (2011-12): 45.7% (74.9% male; 15.5% female)

Unemployment rate (2011-12): 8.2% (6.4% male; 15.5% female)

Under employment rate (2011-12): 16.8%

(The World Bank gives "more than 48 per cent of employed individuals work an average of less than 35 hours per week, which we refer to as 'underemployed'".)

Youth unemployment rate (2011-12): 10.4%

(In comparison, in 1975 4.9 of 8.9 million Afghans in working age had employment, according to a dissertation defended by an Afghan in Kiev in 1978 using contemporary official government figures.)

ILO adds that

More than 90 per cent of jobs can be classified as vulnerable employment because they do not offer secure, stable or sufficient income.

Gender inequality and child labour are pervasive. Day labourers, salaried workers, employers and self-employed workers are predominantly male, while the majority of unpaid family workers are female. Nearly half the population is under the age of 15 and many of these children are working in highly exploitative and hazardous conditions. ...



(The World Bank puts “vulnerable forms of employment in informal and low productivity jobs” at 81 per cent.)

See also the Afghan government’s latest (July 2010) [poverty status report](#) (here).

(8) Afghanistan’s current labour law came in force through a presidential decree issued on 17 January 2007. By May 2008, it had been approved by both houses of parliament and was published in the Official Gazette (no. 966) on 16 Qaus 1387 (6 December 2008). It reinstated some rights for female and teenage workers like paid maternity leave for female employees. Until then, the 1987 labour law passed by the government of Dr Najibullah was enforce, from which the Taleban had deleted the right of employees to form trade unions and the right of women to employment (This means, though, that there was even a labour law under the Taleban.)

(9) According to the ILO, of which Afghanistan has been a member since 1934, (the country has ratified 19 ILO Conventions including five of its eight Fundamental Conventions: Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951; Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957; Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958; Minimum Age Convention, 1973; Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999. The ILO conventions not ratified by Afghanistan include: the [Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948](#) and the [Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949](#).)

(10) [Amendment 4 May 2014] This morning, a National Labour Conference took place in Kabul's Microrayan, organised by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled and with participation of Minister Amena Safi Afzali, participants from the trade unions and the chamber of commerce, with around 500 participants.