

WORKING FOR OIL

COMPARATIVE
SOCIAL HISTORIES
OF LABOR IN
THE GLOBAL OIL
INDUSTRY

*Touraj Atabaki,
Elisabetta Bini
and Kaveh Ehsani*



Working for Oil

“It is astonishing how little is said currently about those millions of people who toil for oil—the colossal industry that anchors the whole of the global political economy. This important volume gives a new life to the field by bringing together valuable studies from different regions of the world. It is a must-read for those who want to understand the changing fortune of life and labor in the world’s most strategic energy sector.”

—Asef Bayat, *Professor of Sociology and Bastian Professor of Global Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

“*Working for Oil* offers a valuable compendium of social relations across the most vital industry of the twentieth century. Stretching from Iran to Mexico and the U.S. Gulf Coast to Norway and Siberia, these studies highlight both the integrating discipline of the capitalist marketplace and the extraordinary diversity with which workers and their communities have adapted to a technological imperative.”

—Leon Fink, *Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Illinois in Chicago, and the editor of the journal Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*

“While the literature on the petroleum industry is vast, research about oil workers is anything but. This collection addresses that gap, bringing together scholarship about labor from all oil regions of the world. The global and multidisciplinary approach is rich and complex, setting a high standard for future scholars and inviting them to follow suit.”

—Myrna Santiago, *Professor of History at the Saint Mary’s College of California*

“By attending to the complex role played by workers in the fossil fuel industries, this splendid book fills a major gap in contemporary analyses of the oil industry. The essays included in *Working for Oil* examine labor at important moments in the history of oil and at key sites around the world, while introducing us to the distinct experiences of organized labor, women, and migrant workers. Superbly researched, this collection promises to reshape debates and discussions in both labor studies and energy studies for years to come. Essential.”

—Imre Szeman, *Professor of English and Canada Research Chair of Cultural Studies at University of Alberta, and co-director of the Petrocultures Research Group*

“Without oil the world economy would grind to a halt. Petroleum not only fuels cars and airplanes, it is also used to produce plastics, fertilizers, and cosmetics. We all know about the multinational corporations dominating the oil market, but we never hear much about the people who actually do the work, and produce the world’s major commercial energy source. The present volume offers a completely new perspective. It is a pioneering exploration of the oil proletariat, covering the history of major production sites on five continents, and the daily lives and struggles of oil workers in these places. The book is indispensable reading for all those interested in the global history of labor.”

—Marcel van der Linden, *Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam*

“There is no convincing answer to the question why historians of the oil industry have ignored its workers nor why working class historians have ignored the oil sector, but this collection clarifies why both kinds of histories are the worse for it. *Working for Oil* is a game changer.”

—Robert Vitalis, *Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania*

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Working for Oil

Comparative Social Histories of Labor
in the Global Oil Industry

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ISBN 978-3-319-56444-9 ISBN 978-3-319-56445-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56445-6>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017938146

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Cover illustration: © Hybrid Images/gettyimages

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Introduction

Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani

This book brings together the works of scholars who situate oil workers and the social, political, economic, spatial, and cultural dimensions of labor relations at the center of their analysis. The contributions are cross-disciplinary, and based on historical archival investigation, or anthropological and sociological field research. While the role of oil workers and class and labor relations in the global oil industry was a major focus of scholarly attention during much of the twentieth century,¹ the period since the 1980s has witnessed a marked decline of interest in the topic, to the extent that at present the analysis of the vital role of labor in all aspects of the global oil complex is either overlooked, or dismissed as of little significance. The contributors to this volume aim to reopen this

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T. Atabaki et al. (eds.), *Working for Oil*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56445-6_1

important but neglected dimension of the social history of oil, by shedding light on the historical and contemporary experiences of people working in a wide range of jobs to produce oil and its byproducts in a number of major petroleum-producing regions that include Latin America, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Europe, the United States, and Africa.

When the editors began to conceptualize this volume, they quickly realized how little attention was being paid to the role of labor relations in the global oil complex, despite the fact that oil and its byproducts underpin the entire global political economy. Our invitation to a number of established scholars in various disciplines to contribute to this volume soon revealed the extent to which the topic had fallen out of favor. This collection aims to help reignite interest in the analysis of the various dimensions of labor in the global oil industry by adopting a number of different approaches.

First, the essays offer a multi-scalar approach to their subject matter, by intersecting various geographic scales of analysis—local, regional, national, and transnational. The contributions address the study of a wide range of those working in the global oil industry, including women, migrant laborers, and expatriates who move constantly between various sites, as well as the political and strategic impact that institutions and political actors have had on labor dynamics at local production sites. The historical contexts of shifting international geopolitics and the variegated logics of national governments, and national and multinational oil companies have affected local labor relations differently. At the same time, changes in labor relations at the local level have had important consequences on oil policies internationally. As this collection shows, the story of oil politics in several producing regions went hand in hand with that of labor policies in countries such as the United States. As oil workers organized collective forms of resistance, firms moved abroad and established their presence in areas with less stringent labor regulations, using a range of management tactics aimed at undermining labor activism. With the new wave of nationalization of oil in many countries in the 1970s, it became more difficult for the major international oil companies to move around as freely as they had from the 1920s onwards.

As a result, the oil industries of advanced economies had to become more aggressively competitive in search of access to reserves and market shares. They had to focus more rigorously on balance sheets, paying dividends, and control costs, while accelerating the introduction of new technologies. These technical advances both facilitated extraction from more

geographically challenging but less politically restricting fields, and allowed the reduction of labor costs and the creation of more flexible labor markets. New technologies and work organizations had led to the employment of fewer workers and hiring of more temporary employees who were often not unionized, but came with more specialized skills and a greater willingness to move around between the work sites. The more flexible and mobile workforce tended to be less embedded in local societies, and less organized and steeped in the history of trade unions and collective bargaining and strikes. Today the oil industry is characterized by a prevalence of contractors and contingent labor. Workers often work for several companies at a time, they are more precarious and vulnerable, and usually find themselves in unsafe working conditions, as was clear in the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Second, our contributors show that while there are significant similarities in the historical and specific experiences of those working in oil, there can be no universal history of labor in oil. While the category of “oil worker” comprised—and still comprises—a bewildering variety of skills, expertise, and tasks that has formed a highly intricate industrial and technical division of labor, encompassing pilots, deep sea divers, roustabouts, drillers, machinists, caterers, drivers, etc.; there have also been major differences in working for different employers. Employers in the oil business range from international oil companies to national oil companies, service companies, smaller independent producers, and a wide range of subcontractors that perform various technical tasks and provide vital services. They have been historically subject to various local and international constraints, and their relationship with workers and employees has been dependent on highly sensitive and shifting political and legal dynamics.

Third, this volume does not limit “labor” to manual or blue-collar labor, nor do contributors focus exclusively on work experiences within the sphere of production (oil fields, offshore platforms, refineries, along pipelines, etc.), or on relations with employees. It is assumed that the social lives of those working in various domains of oil production are not limited to their working time, but include their everyday experiences of leisure and reproductive activities (housing and domestic life, family dynamics, urban experiences, modes of consumption, etc.). Furthermore, it does not confine the politics of labor to its moments of confrontation with employers (strikes, labor negotiations) and political militancy. Relations of power permeate social relations, and even the absence of formal collective modes of labor organizing and activism are a state of political being that requires

analysis and explanation. Thus, the relative (and momentary?) decline of collective organization and representation are as integral to the analysis of labor relations in oil, as are the moments of spectacular militancy and successful bargaining with employers or confrontation with national governments.

In this collection, relations of power are not treated only in terms of class dynamics, but concern the handling of culturally imposed differentiations of gender, race, and ethnicity as well. The difficult experiences of migrant workers, the alienating and rootless conditions facing expatriate experts clustered in isolated enclaves, the double discriminations facing women working in various sectors of the oil complex, and the manipulation by employers of the tensions among workers and employees of different skin color or national and ethnic background, have been an integral dimension of the work experience in the oil complex, and continue to be so. The essays aim to engage the variegated social histories and lived experiences of labor in the global oil industry from these diverse and intertwined perspectives.

Last, this book attempts to situate its topic—the role and experiences of those working to produce petroleum and its byproducts—within the wider global, social, and political history of the long twentieth century. The histories of labor in oil cannot be envisaged in isolation from wider shifts and changes—cultural, political, economic, spatial, technical, social, and environmental—taking place worldwide. Oil underlies the contemporary civilization of global industrial and consumer capitalism, and the histories and experiences of those working to produce this commodity are embedded within the larger histories that include the transformations of international capitalism and finance, of colonialism, decolonization and nationalism, of global geopolitical conflicts, the Cold War, post-communism, and the rise and decline of the welfare state and the modes of regulation associated with it. In brief, the histories of labor in oil are embedded within the wider global histories of labor and the working classes.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The essays in this book are organized around a series of interrelated themes, and divided into three sections:

The first part, *The Political Life of Labor*, examines relations of power within the workforce, or between the workforce and employers, and the political institutions of the state. This theme embraces the organization of

various forms of collective representation, such as trade unions and associations, as well as the involvement of the oil sector and workers and employees in larger political changes.

Part two, *The Productive Life of Labor*, investigates labor relations in oilfields, refineries, petrochemical complexes, shipping ports, pipeline building companies, etc. The essays analyze the dynamics of various forms of skills, practical knowledge and expertise and their implications for the professional lives of those working within the oil complex.

Part three, *The Urban and Social Life of Labor*, addresses the reproduction of labor outside the workplace. The essays examine the dynamics of life in company towns and urban and other communities, gender relations, cultural dynamics and tensions, and the everyday frictions and negotiations between those working in various sectors of the oil complex and the larger local, national and transnational societies.

In the introductory chapter of the volume, Kaveh Ehsani draws attention to the recent decline of scholarly interest in labor studies among those who investigate the impact of oil on society. He argues that this important and disturbing development is not so much a reflection of the actual insignificance of labor in oil, as it is an indication of discursive and tactical shifts within the industry, and in the framing of its internal labor relations. What is of greater concern is the lack of interest or attention in the topic from critical scholars whose investigations of the impact of oil on society and nature has been increasing considerably in recent decades. Ehsani puts forward some provisional explanations regarding this trend, and frames this book as a fresh attempt to remedy this oversight.

The first section, on "The Political Life of Labor," addresses a variety of cases in which oil workers challenged and redefined national and international oil politics. In his essay, Stefano Tijerina investigates the early history of oil production in Colombia. By analyzing the incursions of American oil companies there during the 1920s and 1930s, the author relates his specific case study to the transformation of the global oil industry in the interwar period and after, characterized by US' imperial expansion in Latin America, and by increased forms of labor activism and resistance. Through a study of the efforts carried out by oil workers against foreign multinationals, Tijerina's essay argues that the Columbian government and Tropical Oil Company were effective in using violence against Colombian citizens to protect American oil interests, thus undermining the relationship between the state and civil society.

Focusing on a major political event of the twentieth century, Peyman Jafari highlights the significant role the oil workers had in the Iranian

Revolution of 1977–1979. His essay opens with an examination of the social and political transformations of the 1970s that prepared the ground for the popular upheaval against the monarchy. These included a drastic increase in oil production and revenues that threw the economy into disarray and stirred popular discontent. In the oil sector, these changes brought about significant political and institutional transformation in management structures, as well as in employees' living and working conditions. The author provides a detailed analysis of the ways in which oil workers engaged in the general strike, which brought them to the forefront of the labor movement and of anti-regime activism.

Helge Ryggvik's essay brings the reader to a different context, by investigating the turbulent and shifting politics of labor within the Norwegian oil industry. Norway's management of its oil sector is generally held as an exception to the prevailing notion that the abundance of oil resources leads to political corruption and poor economic performance. Ryggvik provides a more nuanced and less rosy picture, showing that labor relations in the Norwegian oil sector went through several phases that also had a significant impact on wider national relations of power. Initially, Norway's nascent oil sector was subject to the harsh labor regimes imposed by international oil companies whose expertise and investments were necessary to get the country's oil production up and running. However, Norway's wartime and postwar experiences of labor activism, and the establishment of a welfare state and a tripartite accord between corporations, the state, and labor unions, had created a space for Norwegian oil workers to press ahead with successful collective bargaining despite the government's reticence. As the industry became consolidated and the state more directly involved in managing the country's oil resources, this arrangement has weakened and Norwegian oil workers have been increasingly subjected to confrontational policies by a state that prioritizes commercial interests above inclusive social policies.

Andrew Lawrence's essay on the role played by Nigerian oil trade unionists in influencing national politics is a welcome departure from the prevailing trend in the literature that almost exclusively emphasizes the violence, corruption, and conflicts surrounding oil extraction from the country's Niger Delta. While acknowledging the disturbing consequences and the widely recognized negative aspects of Nigeria's oil industry, Lawrence points out that oil workers' trade unions have played a significant political role in shaping Nigerian politics during key moments of national crises.

Gabriela Valdivia and Marcela Benavides, in their essay on the recent history of the labor movement in Ecuador's oil industry, compare and contrast two periods in organized labor's reaction to the government's neoliberalization policy. While by the turn of the century, Ecuadorian oil workers forced the state to retreat from its intended scheme of privatizing the oil industry; in 2015, oil workers were absent when the large anti-neoliberal demonstrators poured into the street of Quito. Through multiple in-depth interviews with former workers of the Ecuador oil industry, the authors trace the roots of this more recent absence of labor politics within the oil sector. The authors highlight the consequences of grinding coercive policies against organized oil workers as one of the reasons behind their declining political presence and agency.

The second section of the book, "The Productive Life of Oil," explores a range of labor experiences within the workplace. Touraj Atabaki's essay examines some of the global shifts that took place in the oil industry on the eve of the First World War, leading to the rise of petroleum as a strategic commodity of vital importance. His essay focuses on transnational labor relations within the emerging Iranian oil industry, and its acute need and dependence on importing skilled and semiskilled labor to work in oilfields and refinery. Atabaki examines the complex relations between the nominally private Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and the various arms of the sprawling British Empire, especially the colonial Government of India. His essay highlights the life and time of Indian migrant workers in the Iranian oil industry prior to the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951.

In their essays, Tyler Priest and Betsy Beasley relate the history of oil in the US South to the wider history of post-Second World War American corporate capitalism and labor relations. By focusing on the refining industry in the US Gulf Coast, Priest challenges the idea that after the war oil workers experienced a period of decline in their ability to organize, and highlights the continued forms of activism carried out from the 1930s to the 1970s. He argues that the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) and its successor, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union, were able to obtain important concessions, until management started using a tool that was difficult to contrast: the contracting out of jobs and the introduction of other forms of manpower reductions, made possible by advances in technology.

Beasley's essay covers a similar territory, albeit more locally focused on the ways in which oilfield service companies challenged Houston's labor movement in the decades following the Second World War. Hers is not

only a local case study, but has larger implications for the history of postwar American imperialism and for an understanding of the ways in which the US used oil to establish its global power. As labor activism increased in postwar Houston, oilfield services' executives outsourced oil refineries abroad, or to subcontractors, and introduced various forms of automation. These undermined workers' ability to strike and redefine labor relations on the floor, by transforming blue-collar workers into a non-politicized white-collar workforce. At the same time, they promoted a new ideology of American imperialism that imagined the US as a manager of integrated global production rather than as a producer or exporter in its own right.

Both Priest's and Beasley's essays remind the reader that in the US, as elsewhere, oil companies have often used race to divide oil workers and undermine labor movements. In Gulf Coast refineries, despite the fact that workplaces remained segregated and were characterized by racial tensions, trade unions were able to introduce forms of racial equality that were not present in other industries in the American South. In the case of the oilfield services companies examined by Beasley, the effort to undermine blue-collar workers went hand in hand with management's opposition to African American and Latino oil workers, and civil rights gains.

The history that emerges from this collection does not deal only with capitalist countries or with global capitalism, but addresses the Soviet Union as well. Drawing on newly opened archives, Dunja Krempin's essay contributes to our understanding of life in the late Soviet period. By examining the Western Siberian oil and gas complex in the 1960s and the 1970s, the essay examines the forms of mobilization of workers in the late Soviet planned economy under Brezhnev. It relates the changes taking place in the 1970s to a longer history of modernization projects dating back to the interwar period, and to the employment of migrant communities in the early Soviet oil industry. Krempin does not deal only with the media campaigns carried out by the Soviet regime, but also with the working and living conditions of the oil workers who moved to Western Siberia. By doing so, she sheds light on some of the pitfalls of the Soviet planned economy that led to its demise a decade later.

The third section of this book, "The Urban and Social Life of Labor," examines the experiences of oil workers and local communities in and around company towns and enclaves, and highlights the importance gender has had in the history of labor in the oil industry. Elisabetta Bini in her essay examines the ways in which US oil companies transformed labor policies in Libya between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s. By analyzing the labor relations

introduced by American oil companies in oil camps and company towns, Bini argues that through expatriates US oil companies reproduced the gender, class and racial hierarchies that characterized other American camps across the world, based on racial and ethnic segregation, and on the elevation of white women to symbols and agents of America's corporate mission. Furthermore, she points out that after the establishment of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, gender played a crucial part in transforming labor relations in oil towns, as Libyans often considered American women as sexual objects.

Zachary Cuyler's essay focuses on another aspect of American labor policies in oil-producing countries, namely the role Lebanese workers had in operating the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, or Tapline, between the early 1950s and the early 1960s. It argues that, despite Tapline's effort to contain labor activism through forms of welfare capitalism, Lebanese workers organized trade unions and strikes that allowed them greater control over a crucial oil infrastructure and over their own work conditions. While workers adopted an anti-colonial nationalist discourse, Cuyler points out their demands were in many ways also shaped by the language and practice of Tapline's management.

The last two essays examine more contemporary issues, and adopt particularly original approaches to the study of their subject matter. Saulesh Yessenova highlights a little-known aspect of the history of the oil industry in Kazakhstan in the early twenty-first century, and examines the formation of the *munayshilar* (oil workers), a class formed in the local herding communities. Using an anthropological approach, she sheds light on the interactions—and conflicts—between the local traditions and the oil industry. Yessenova's essay shows the deep historical roots that lie behind what became one of the Soviet Union's largest oil fields, Tengiz, and points to the importance of examining the subjectivities that emerge around oil enclaves.

Finally, Diane Austin's contribution highlights the importance the category of gender has for the history of oil, an issue that has been long overlooked by scholars. By focusing on the US offshore oil and gas industry from the 1940s to the 1990s, Austin argues that men have greatly outnumbered women, despite the introduction of equal opportunity employment and civil rights laws from the 1970s onwards. By carrying out a range of interviews with women working in various sectors of offshore oil extraction in the Gulf of Mexico, the essay highlights the complexity and variety of women's experiences in the oil and gas industry, their background, and the challenges they face in juggling their working life with their family lives, and their expectations.

The collection of essays in this volume is largely derived from two international conferences, the first held in Amsterdam in June 2013 at the International Institute of Social History on the *Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Oil Industry*, and the second held at the University of Padua in October 2014 on *Labor Politics in the Oil Industry: New Historical Perspectives*.

The editors are very grateful to all contributors to this volume as well as to the other speakers and the audience present at the June 2013 and the October 2014 conferences. The 2013 conference was part of a larger project at the International Institute of Social History, on the *Hundred Years Social History of Oil in the Iranian Oil Industry*. We would like to thank the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO) for its generous support of the social history of oil grand project encompassing the June 2013 conference. We would also like to thank the Fund for Investment in Basic Research (FIRB) project *The Engines of Growth: for a Global History of the Conflict between Renewable, Fossil, and Fissile Energies (1972–1992)* of the Universities of Padua and Venice Ca' Foscari for their support in organizing the October 2014 conference.²

We hope the publication of this volume paves the way for others to explore and contribute to the analysis of the global social histories and experiences of labor in the oil industry.

NOTES

1. Peter Nore and Terisa Turner, eds., *Oil and Class Struggle* (New York: Zed Books, 1980) was probably one of the last major works dedicated to the comparative overview of the topic.
2. Fondo per gli Investimenti della Ricerca di Base (Fund for Investment in Basic Research, FIRB) project number RBFR10JOTQ.

Disappearing the Workers: How Labor in the Oil Complex Has Been Made Invisible

Kaveh Ehsani

The long twentieth century has been rightly defined as the century of oil, and despite ongoing market upheavals and the awareness of the planetary ecological crisis caused by the expanding consumption of hydrocarbons, the worrying fact remains that there are no realistic alternatives to crude oil and natural gas on the immediate horizon. They are the most valuable and widely traded commodities in the global economy, and crude oil remains the single largest item of international exchange. Revenues from oil exports form a major contribution to the current budgets of at least 90 governments, while the procurement of petroleum and its numerous derivatives are major budgetary outlays for many other countries.¹ In addition to fueling transportation and power generation, oil and gas provide the building blocks for a bewildering array of essential consumer products that underlie the contemporary global industrial capitalist civilization of mass production and consumption.²

Although petroleum's material, economic, and strategic significance is simply staggering,³ it is all too often overlooked that the extraction and processing of oil and its byproducts rely on the labor and expertise of men and women working across the numerous sectors of this industry. While oil

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and gas production and processing are capital intensive, labor and class relations within the industry have always been contentious due to their geopolitical importance, market pressure to minimize costs, and the technically challenging, hazardous, and harsh working conditions. The size of employment in oil and gas varies considerably depending on location and context. In the UK, 454,000 people were employed, directly and indirectly, in the oil and gas industry in 2014, before the collapse in oil prices reduced their number to 330,000. In the US 180,000 people work in “oil and gas extraction,” but once other related fields are taken into account, the figure is significantly higher.⁴ However, it is puzzling that, with a few notable exceptions, in recent decades the attention of historians and social scientists who investigate the social, spatial, political-economic, and environmental impact of oil has unmistakably shifted away from taking into consideration the agency and role of labor in oil.⁵ As a result, much of the present day scholarly work on the social impact of petroleum has gravitated toward framing “oil” as a form of landed property and asset owned by corporations or appropriated by governments, a questionable source of revenue (or rent), a strategic resource, or a forbidding tangle of technological infrastructures.

Two visual examples of this occlusion are the brilliant photographic books by the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, and the edited volume by the American photographer Ed Kashi and English Geographer Michael Watts.⁶ Burtynsky offers a graphic record of the various global landscapes created by petroleum. His book is organized in sections that portray the visual impact of oil extraction (wells, drilling rigs, tar sands), processing (refineries and petrochemical plants), consumption (networks of highways, motorbike racing, shopping malls), and disposal (auto junkyards, ship graveyards where tankers are dismantled). What stands out in these portrayals is that human beings only appear in the latter two sections, as consumers, or as precarious and destitute Bangladeshi workers laboring to dismantle decaying ships amidst devastated landscapes of pollution and abject poverty. In these disturbing photographs, the production and processing of oil appear as the work of vast industrial machines, without any living human contribution.

The second book, by Kashi and Watts is subtitled “50 years of oil in the Niger Delta,” and is a haunting record of the social and environmental desolations caused by oil extraction among the diverse communities of this ecologically unique region of Nigeria. Outlining the scale of extractions and its consequences, Watts concludes that “oil has brought only misery,

violence, and a dying ecosystem” (43). While the book’s contributing Nigerian authors highlight various aspects of the experiences of local populations living in the shadow of oil installations and pipelines, but aside from a few photographs with minimal caption (52–61), the identity and roles played by those working to produce the cursed black gold remain unexplored or irrelevant to the narrative. In a rare passage, Watts refers to the organized kidnappings of expatriate oil workers by desperate local vigilante groups fighting against the national state and the multinationals (38), but otherwise the question of who works on the extraction and export of petroleum remains unclear. The relevant subtext here is the presence and active maintenance of systematic spatial and socio-cultural separation between those working on the extraction side of the industry (often offshore, and always barricaded within fortified enclaves), and the local communities who suffer the consequences of oil extraction, and are no longer willing to accept false promises of illusory wealth and fast modernization. How and why this separation and alienation has been constructed and maintained, and its relevance to the dirty politics of oil extraction in the Delta, beg to be acknowledged and further explored.⁷ This silence and oversight has characterized the general trend in the more recent analytic social science literature on oil.

WHY AND HOW HAVE LABOR STUDIES IN OIL BECOME IRRELEVANT? SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

This volume of essays places labor at the center of analysis of the “oil complex”⁸ rather than the more conventional “oil industry” or “oil sector,” both of which tend to exclude the wider web of social, spatial, cultural, and political economic relations that underline and make possible the global system of oil provision. “Oil industry” refers to the institutions and firms directly involved in procuring oil and its byproducts as a substance and commodity, while “oil sector” refers to the place of oil operations within a national economy, as a natural resource or a source of employment and revenue. Harriet Friedmann first coined the term “food complex” as a conceptual framework to help identify the social and political-economic networks that underlie the provision of strategic and industrialized food crops to the world system, such as the “wheat complex,” the “meat complex” and the “durable food complex.” For Friedmann, each complex has its own specific dynamics, defined by the crop and its numerous

physical and contextual particularities, even though all these crops are equally integral to the functioning of the world system. But more specifically, Friedmann's analytical framework took as self-evident that the analysis of various labor regimes (the productive work of women, households, peasants, wage laborers working for agribusinesses, independent farmers, etc.) is integral to understanding any of these global food complexes.

By contrast, raising concern over the impact of oil on the environment and society has not been accompanied by a similar interest in analyzing the labor and class relations attendant upon it. On the contrary, since the late 1970s we have witnessed a noticeable loss of interest in the topic, which nowadays seems to be considered as of little consequence, with a few noticeable exceptions (see footnote 5). The editors of this volume became aware of this conspicuous omission when we encountered more difficulty than we had anticipated in identifying and assembling historians and social scientists who work on the topic to participate in the conferences on which this collection of essays is based.⁹ In this introductory chapter, I aim to raise a number of questions regarding this apparent lack of interest in investigating the impact and role of labor in the oil complex.

The most conventional explanation is that the implementation of labor-saving technologies have led to a sharp decline in the number of people working across various sectors of the oil and gas industry. Oil and gas production and processing have always been capital intensive. Initial operations require heavy labor inputs for the building of extensive infrastructure (wells, offshore platforms, pipelines, pumping stations, work camps and the amenities needed for permanent living facilities, ports, access roads, airfields, refineries, etc.). Subsequent operations tend to require fewer and more specialized employees, highly trained to work in harsh, dangerous, and technically complex environments. Market forces and cut throat competition can bring further pressure on reducing labor costs. While several contributors to this volume take these technological considerations into account, the fact remains that demand for oil has expanded exponentially since the First World War, and with it the need for ever more complex range of workers and employees with various skills and expertise. The relative capital intensiveness of oil is not a sufficient explanation for the lack of scholarship on labor in the oil complex.

Another, related explanation emphasizes the increasing flexibilization of labor markets in the globalized economy, and the consequences of new international divisions of labor.¹⁰ Relentless casualization of labor markets, changes in stable and long-term labor contracts in favor of temporary jobs

and outsourcing, continued and ever increasing reliance on expatriate employees or migrant laborers moving between sites and unable to establish long-term local roots, increased pressures against collective bargaining and unionization, and the unraveling of the postwar welfare pact between corporations, states, and organized labor, have all acted as major factors in reducing the collective solidarities and the voice of labor across industrial sectors. While these drastic changes in labor markets have become commonplace in the neoliberal era, the effacing of labor in the oil industry cannot be explained by reference to these structural changes alone. In fact, most of these tactics have always been part of the repertoire of oil companies. After all, similar shifts have occurred in other manufacturing and extractive industries, but it is difficult to imagine entire scholarly fields dedicated to analyzing the social and political relations in auto industry, steel, or copper mining to ignore the place and role of miners or factory workers. Yet, time and again, we witness that the significance of labor is overlooked or even dismissed by scholars working on oil.

The spatial isolation of many oil and gas fields and installations has acted as another justification for overlooking the role of labor. Like many other mining operations, oil and gas fields are often located in remote areas or offshore, turning them into enclaves that appear to be disconnected from the rest of the national economy and society. The highly demanding and often harsh working and living conditions tend to attract outsiders, mainly migrants and expatriates. Maintaining this spatial isolation and encouraging internal stratification and fomenting racial, ethnic, and class friction among employees has long served as a strategy of labor control by oil companies. The combination of these factors can give the impression that those working in oil are a tiny labor aristocracy with no real attachment to affected local communities or the national society. However, as several chapters in this volume demonstrate, the built environment of oil and the labor practices of oil companies within enclaves have a significant impact on local communities and the wider national politics and social relationships, and ought to be integral to the analysis of the oil complex.¹¹

A notable example of the trend to overlook the role of labor and class relations within the oil complex is Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*.¹² Mitchell provides important insights into how the modern industrial economy based on hydrocarbons has made possible the emergence of liberal democracy and capitalist mass consumer economy, but at the same time he dismisses the political agency of oil workers by pointing out that technology and automation replace workers once crude production has

come online. He further argues that the concentration and employment of oil workers and employees is drastically reduced once the initial building of the physical infrastructure of extraction and transporation is completed. This dispersal and redundancies in turn undermines the formation of lasting collective agency and the ability of oil workers to intervene effectively in the wider corporate, social, and political domains. By contrast, for Mitchell, the geography of coal extraction and distribution (at least in the twentieth century) allowed coal miners to exert an influence that is simply not matched by the spatial characteristics of the modern day oil complex.

This rather oversimplified argument could be true only if the geography of oil is reduced to upstream extraction (mainly fields, offshore platforms, and pipelines), to the exclusion of midstream and downstream industrial operations (refineries, petrochemicals, ports) that do require sustained concentrations of substantial and variegated workforces in dedicated built environments, over extended periods of time. In fact, oil production and refining have historically been significant sites of labor activism and agency, as demonstrated by a few examples in chronological order: The 1905 labor clashes in the Baku refinery and oil fields played a major role in the first Russian Revolution; the Bayonne-NJ refinery strikes of 1915–1916 involved thousands of workers, and forced the Standard Oil of New Jersey to develop a nonunion employee representation plan which served as a model for corporate welfare capitalist schemes of the 1920s; in 1938 the refinery workers of Aguila Tempico played a critical role in the nationalization of Mexican oil industry; the Venezuelan oil workers strike of 1936 set the stage for the passage of the country's landmark 1943 Hydrocarbon Law redefining the relationship between host governments and foreign oil firms; the 1945 strike in the US by 43,000 refinery workers across 20 states inspired a general wave of strikes by workers in other industries, but also provoked the drastic backlash of the 1947 anti union Taft-Hartley Act; the 1946 general strike of Iranian oil workers sparked the oil nationalization movement that was eventually crushed by the CIA led coup d'état of 1953; in 1979 another general strike of oil workers played a crucial role in the Iranian revolution; the defeat of the 2002–2003 Venezuelan oil workers' strike by the populist government of Hugo Chavez was followed by the firing of 18,000 oil workers, and disabled what was once a functioning oil company.

Thus, the conventional arguments about the irrelevance of labor and class relations in oil are neither convincing, nor historically accurate. As contributors to this volume show, the reasons behind the relative recent decline in the collective presence of oil workers in the larger political and

social life of oil producing nations cannot be presented as only the byproduct of the technological or logistic and geographic characteristics of the oil sector itself. Rather, it has been equally the consequence of policies and strategies adopted by corporate employers and national governments concerned with maximizing revenues and minimizing the potential of labor unrest to actively fragment, isolate, and reduce the possibilities of more radical and collective engagements by those working in the sector. In the next section I will use a more detailed case study of the Iranian oil industry to demonstrate these points.

OIL WORKERS IN POST-REVOLUTION IRAN: A CASE STUDY OF MAKING LABOR INVISIBLE

The case of developments in the Iranian oil industry after the 1979 revolution is instructive in presenting a more nuanced and historically substantiated analysis of the disappearing role of labor. Iranian oil workers have played a major role in Iran's turbulent political history since the turn of the twentieth century. In terms of ownership and control of oil and gas resources, the history of oil in Iran can be divided into three distinct periods: From 1908–1951 the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC, now BP) had monopoly control over Iranian oil; after the defeat of oil nationalization movement (1949–1953) a consortium of multinational oil companies took control, with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) acting as the intermediary between the Consortium and Iranian employees. In 1973 Iran formally nationalized its oil industry, but international oil companies continued to maintain a high presence and exert considerable influence. This arrangement lasted until the 1979 revolution when a general strike of oil workers and employees led to the expulsion of foreign oil companies and the full nationalization of the oil industry.

As long as the oil sector was controlled by foreigners there were strong nationalist sentiments to force the AIOC and later the Consortium to train and employ more Iranian workers and cadres. On occasions, Iranian political elites and the professional middle classes voiced support for workers' demands for improvements in wages, living conditions, training, and workplace safety. But, throughout the twentieth century, it was the nationalist demand for the greater Iranianization of the workforce and especially of the management that was a recurring theme in negotiations with foreign oil companies, and not the modification of the repressive labor practices. In fact, whenever labor activists or political organizers

attempted to establish independent trade unions, foreign oil companies and Iranian political elites united in treating them as a subversive and communist inspired threat to national security during the Cold War.

Thus, labor issues were always part of the frictions and bargaining between foreign oil companies and the Iranian political elites, but only in a limited and paternalistic manner. Their aim was to make the oil industry more “Iranian,” without making any concessions to workers’ legal and political rights. As I will argue below, once the oil sector was completely nationalized in 1979, the postrevolutionary Khomeinist state began to treat oil workers’ demands for autonomous self-representation in much the same way as the previous regime and the international oil companies had, namely as a political threat to national security and the commercial profitability of the oil sector. The experience of labor in the Iranian oil industry indicates that oil workers appear as significant social actors when they engage in spectacular collective actions (such as the labor strikes of 1929, 1946, and 1979), but they become “invisible” to scholars, policymakers, and the general public, once these spectacular interventions during rare moments of political openness are passed. Without independent unions and representative associations, the voice of labor in oil is silenced and its presence is rendered invisible.¹³

The impact of oil workers and employees on modern Iranian society goes well beyond those scattered moments of labor protest. From its inception at the turn of the twentieth century, oil and its related fields have been one of the largest and most significant industrial sectors, with its highly trained workers and employees coveted by other branches of the economy, especially the booming sectors of energy, transportation, and manufacturing. They carried with them the work habits, technical skills, organizational experiences, and political cultures accumulated in the oil complex. Although labor militancy in Iran predated the emergence of the oil industry in 1908, oil workers nevertheless had moved to the forefront of the labor movement in the interwar years, and spearheaded the attempts to establish independent trade unions and workers’ representation.¹⁴

Oil cities and company towns, such as Abadan and Masjed Suleiman, originally started as isolated enclaves where thousands of destitute migrants lived and worked in abject poverty, in the vicinity of oil facilities and fortified living quarters of European expatriates. However, by the 1930s these enclaves had been transformed into major urban industrial cities. These were migrant cities, where living and working conditions were harsh, but economic opportunities attracted all sorts of people. In these cities, oil and refinery workers and their families intermingled with soldiers, housewives,

peasants and tribesmen, bureaucrats, expatriates, itinerant laborers, merchants, students, political activists, artists, prostitutes, smugglers, and people of various ethnic, regional, religious, and national backgrounds. As a result, the built environment of oil created a habitus where the everyday life of oil workers became embedded within the urban life of these booming oil towns,¹⁵ creating a political dynamic where labor struggles over work conditions often mingled and overlapped with urban protests over living conditions and collective demands for what Henri Lefebvre calls “the right to the city.”¹⁶ Thus, when in 1979 oil workers succeeded in playing a pivotal role against the monarchy by going on a mass strike, their eventual success relied heavily on these networks of urban solidarity.¹⁷

When internal strife in postrevolutionary Iran led to violent conflict, oil cities such as Abadan became important nodes of resistance against the attempts by Khomeinist forces to impose their hegemony on political rivals. But soon, internal clashes were compounded by international sanctions and the onset of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). The Iraqi invasion led to the physical destruction of some of Iran’s main oil cities and undermined these nascent forms of urban and labor politics. During the war the refinery city of Abadan and the adjacent port city of Khoramshahr, both situated on the border with Iraq, were destroyed and their population of half a million were scattered as refugees. The war led to the consolidation of the Khomeinist new regime, which relied on a combination of nationalist-Islamist mobilization and repression. While some refinery workers maintained a nominal level of production in Abadan throughout the war, the forced dispersal of the urban population effectively ended the possibility of any alternative politics emerging there.

Throughout the war, state propaganda exalted the heroic role of oil workers and employees who had expelled the foreign multinationals, taken over the operations of the oil and gas industry, regulated and ensured that exports continued, and supplied the country with fuel and energy. The prevalent discourse of the 1980s, a decade defined by revolution and war, was to use oil (its revenues and its material possibilities) to ensure social justice, defined as more equitable distribution of goods and services. The oil and gas company towns built during this decade reflected this political attitude, exemplified by the newly built gas refinery town of Kangan designed with the explicit goal of integrating the local community into the urban amenities and labor market.¹⁸

The end of the war and the period of reconstruction witnessed a drastic shift in state priorities, from populist redistribution to emphasizing the

need for the commercial viability of all branches of the economy.¹⁹ Subsequently, since the 1990s the energy and oil and gas sectors have been subject to creeping privatization of midstream and downstream operations by dozens of subcontracting companies notorious for their predatory labor practices.²⁰ Having repressed independent trade unions, the state began to target workers' job security by gradually replacing permanent work contracts with temporary and increasingly precarious ones.²¹ The Majles (parliament) authorized significant changes in labor laws in the name of creating a more flexible and competitive labor market that did away with contractual protections and welfare benefits for workers and employees. As a result, private subcontractors can now dismiss their employees at will, avoid offering adequate wages and salaries, as well as the benefits and protections that are no longer mandated by law.²²

In 1997, there were approximately 150,000 employees in the Iranian oil and gas sector, although the exact numbers are unclear and treated as sensitive state secrets.²³ Subsequently, the Ministry of Petroleum announced that it had reduced the formal workforce by nearly 40%.²⁴ However, this figure was disputed by investigative journalists, critical scholars, and labor activists who revealed that actual employment in the sector, especially of blue collar workers, had continued to increase, although this new working class of oil now fell within the category of "invisible workers." Many were no longer formally registered so as not to appear on the records and balance sheets of the National Iranian Oil Company, its many subsidiaries, or the private subcontractors that had proliferated in the sector. These invisible workers included migrants recruited through subcontracting human resources companies, and bused in and out from distant provinces such as Sistan or Azarbaijan to work for long hours in extreme conditions, without any assurance of renewed employment; unpaid military conscripts; or undocumented refugees (mainly from Afghanistan), whose wages are well below the official minimum wage. Others are experienced and skilled workers who are now removed from the public-sector roster, hired by private subcontractors on short-term contracts, often off the books, without paying benefits, or seldom adhering to the watered down labor laws. Labor protests and strikes against these changes have been quickly and ruthlessly quashed. As a result, the period after the Iran–Iraq war has witnessed an effective erasure of the visible presence of oil workers in national politics and awareness.

Another major factor contributing to the erasure of the role of oil workers is the discursive shift that has taken place in public perceptions, and