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Pakistan

Losing lives to form trade unions

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On 6th July while Mustansar Randhawa was listening to a worker who had not been paid his wages by a textile boss, an unknown person with a Kalashnikov entered the front room and fired. Mustansar tried to save his life by running to the next room but 10 people were determined to finish him off

I met Mustansar Randhawa (32) briefly on 19th June 2010 in Faisalabad, less than a month before his murder. He was one of 30 participants in trade union leadership training at the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) office. The LQM is a community-based labor organization established in 2004. It has become the main labor organization in Faisalabad, and is now spreading to other cities.

I had been invited by the Labour Education Foundation, the organization conducting the program, to speak on "globalization and its impact on the working class in Pakistan." Mustansar Randhawa and Hamid Shah were introduced to me as two newcomers to the movement. Both have been active in small-scale industrial zone of Faisalabad.

Latif Bawa, the LQM vice president told me, "They are doing an excellent job. They have set up an office on Sargodha Road and have put up over 5000 posters asking workers to contact the office about any labor issue and raise the demand that there should be a social security card for every worker." Latif added that Mustansar was to be "our next candidate for Punjab Assembly constituency 64. We are expecting another MPA to be disqualified because he has also used a fake graduation degree; the case is pending in the courts."

Mustansar told me that he had read a lot about me and heard me speak at public meetings during Mian Abdul Qayum's recent campaign: "I want you to come for my election campaign. You will see the response of the working class and peasantry in my constituency. I have a good reputation and will fight courageously." Mustansar was very enthusiastic about the workshop and was eager to participate in future training. We need well-educated worker activists but there are too few opportunities to attend such workshops. At his request we took a group photo.

Later, while driving to Sarghoda Road, I saw the Labour Party Pakistan election symbol of an Apple on the back of a car just ahead. As I passed the car, I looked over and saw it was Mustansar driving with Mian Abdul Qayum. We exchanged smiles — and that was the last time I saw Mustansar.

On 6th July 2010, while Mustansar was listening to a worker who had not been paid his wages by a textile boss, an unknown person with a Kalashnikov entered the front room and fired, hitting Mustansar's younger brother, Naseer. Mustansar tried to save his life by running to the next room and locking the door but some 10 people were determined to finish him off. They broke the glass, the assailant fired at him and killed him on the spot. The workers sitting next to him at the beginning of the attack said "It all happened within a minute."

It was one pm and the news spread like wildfire. Mustansar had become a popular leader of the LQM. He was not a factory worker but a community leader in his village, which was adjacent to Faisalabad. On the eve of the LPP's fifth congress, he attended the LQM gathering at the famous Dhobi Ghat ground and decided to become part of the movement.

Mustansar was asked to start work in an area of Faisalabad dominated by gangsters. There was no union and the LQM did not have much influence in the area. The bosses used gangsters to terrorize the workers, who were very

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poorly paid. Some gangsters even terrorized the owners of small factories and power looms to demand kickback money.

After meeting the leaders of LQM, Mustansar prioritized building trade unions. While showing Rana Tahir, the president of LQM Faisalabad, the office he rented for trade union work, he remarked that "You do not have to worry about the gangsters, we will deal with them. We are just asking workers to form unions and join the LQM. I am not afraid of any bloody bugger." And he was not. Despite all the threats, he posted flyers all over and distributed thousands of leaflet asking workers to come to the newly established office of NTUF and LQM. Within three months of joining the movement, he was elected president of the National Trade Union Federation Faisalabad division.

When I attended his funeral and the protest demonstration I noticed these flyers everywhere. In fact it was the only poster to be found in his village. At a time when religious posters dominate walls all over Pakistan, a poster inviting workers to join a union was very refreshing to see.

Ashfaq Butt, one of main LQM leaders in Faisalabad, told me yesterday that Mustansar was with him the day before. He had called to say he needed help in processing several labor cases at the Labour Department. The two spent two hours dealing with several cases in which workers had not been paid minimum wages. Mustansar successfully argued the case of five workers whose employment had been terminated. Although the power loom boss accused them of taking advance money and not returning it, he agreed to take the five back.

After hearing the news of Mustansar's death as well as the death of his younger brother, thousands of workers left their factories. Almost all factories in Faisalabad closed and two days later were still not open. Mustansar was loved by many.

He was the rising star of the new leadership of LQM influence is spreading to other cities. Jhang, adjacent district saw some of largest workers rally yesterday in protest against the killing.

Workers gathered in Pansra, 20 kilometers from the Faisalabad city center, and started a solidarity action. It was mainly young power loom workers who marched. When they arrived in Faisalabad more than four hours later they were over 5000. With wooden sticks in their hands they asked shopkeepers to close their business in memory of the two labor leaders. Hardly anyone resisted. The famous eight bazaars of Faisalabad around Ghanta Ghar were also closed for a while.

Workers wanted to settle scores with those who argued against closing the shops. Then the LQM leadership intervened to keep the emotion under control. When the driver of one of the public vans abused the marcher's three public vans had their glass smashed. The police were silent spectators yesterday—they realized any attempt to intervene would only aggravate the situation.

The leadership of LQM gave the police a 24-hour deadline to arrest the 10 people mentioned in the first investigation report (FIR). The police chief assured us he would do his best to arrest the murderers.

We decided to keep the office open where the two lost their lives in the struggle to build a labor movement. Anwar Awan from the area has taken the responsibility to mobilize workers to staff the office's security.

While having some rest after a whole day of activities at Anwar's home in the afternoon, we learned that Anwar had once been one of the main leaders of Anjman Sapa Sahaba, a fanatical religious group banned by the government. He left them two years back to join LQM. In his late 20s, Anwar gave me a glimpse of the days to come. People from

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all different traditions and backgrounds will join us as we become a mass force. In this way Mustansar will remain alive in the shape of Anwar Awan, Hamid Shah and other comrades.

Anwar told us that the gangsters cannot defeat us. Certainly we have come out in the thousands today and both gangsters and working people must have realized the power of the working class. We will not sit idle but will defend ourselves if attacked.

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