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Pakistan

Massive peasant conference demands end of feudalism

- News from around the world -

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A peasant conference held in Lahore on 4th February 2007 demanded an immediate end to feudalism. Organized by the Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee PKRC (Peasants' Coordination Committee), it was attended by well over 6000 people, making it one of the largest gatherings of peasants in such a conference. During the six hours of the proceedings, speakers stressed the need for land reform and an end to the militarization of agriculture.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/landreform2.jpg>]

The conference was held at the massive Minar-i-Pakistan ground in Lahore. It was here that in 1940 a resolution was passed at a public meeting of the Muslim League for the creation of a separate country for Muslims. The ground has often been the scene of large public rallies in the past.

Today's conference was one of the largest gatherings organized by the forces of the Left in years. The PKRC is an alliance of 23 peasants' organizations and is supported by the progressive forces in Pakistan. By organizing this conference, with thousands in attendance, it has become the largest peasant organization in the country.

The most popular slogan of the conference was "long live worker and peasant unity". The participants raised slogans against the WTO, privatization, military rule, religious fundamentalism and imperialism. They came to the conference in processions led by traditional "Dhols" (drums) and chanting revolutionary songs.

Hundreds of peasant women also participated in the conference and raised slogans against discriminatory laws. They demanded equal rights and an equal share in every field of life. The women demanded an end to feudal behaviour and respect for their views.

Formal permission to hold this rally was only granted a day before the conference. This was done following a Lahore High Court order to the city government of Lahore to permit the holding of the conference. It is ironic that the Lahore district government has formally announced many times that political parties can only hold public meetings at this ground. But although the PKRC had asked permission a month before, the city government had not even bothered to reply two days before the date of the conference. It was thanks to the intervention of the Lahore High Court that the PKRC was able to hold this meeting as planned.

It was mainly several peasant movements that made this conference a historic one. The Anjuman Mozareenm Punjab AMP (Association of Tenants) is fighting for land rights over military farms at Okara, Lahore, Renala Khurd and Depalpur. They brought over a thousand peasants to the conference. The Labour Qaumi Movement of power loom workers in Faisalabad was another group that brought hundreds. Another tenants' organization from Lahore, the Ghareeb Itehad Anjuman Shamsia, the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union, the Pakistan Kissan Committee, the Pakistan Ghareeb Kissan Tehreek (Pakistan Poor Peasants Movement), Pakistan Kissan Itehad (Pakistan Peasants Unity), Sind Hari Tehreek, Women Workers' Help Line, the National Trade Union Federation, the Pakistan Workers Confederation and other workers', peasants' and social groups also participated in large numbers in the conference.

Speakers included Abid Hasan Minto, convener of the Awami Jamhori Tehreek (the Left Alliance) Farooq Tariq, secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan and the PKRC, Bushra Khaliq, secretary of Women Workers' Help Line, Afzal Khamoosh, president of the Pakistan Mazdoor Kissan Party, Shoukat Choudry, secretary of the Pakistan Mazdoor Mehaz, Abdul Hakeem, secretary of the Awami Tehreek, Shama Bhatti Sindhiani Tehreek, Naseem Shamim Malik of the Pakistan National Workers' Party, Mehr Abdul Satar, secretary of the AMP, Taj Marri of the Inqilabi Jamhoori Committee, Irfan Mufti, secretary of the Pakistan Social Forum, Asim Sajad Akhtar of the Peoples' Rights' Movement, Yousaf Baluch, chairman of the National Trade Union Federation and others.

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The speakers demanded an end to the feudal system and land reform, protested against the unjust distribution of water and demanded an end to bonded labour. They criticized the policies of the present military regime and declared that it has created unprecedented crises of a social, political and economic nature. They said that without ending feudalism, democracy cannot really be achieved. The feudal class, alongside the capitalist class, is exploiting workers and peasants with a growing intensity. The military government protects the feudal class. The military itself owns more than 12 percent of the land in Pakistan.

Speakers criticized the sloganeering of the MQM (a sectarian political group), which calls for an end to feudalism. But the MQM is part of the present regime and is sharing power with the feudal class. How then can it be anti-feudal? It is only the progressive forces and the Left that are persistently advocating an end to feudalism, capitalism and imperialism.

The speakers declared that it was necessary to build an anti-imperialist movement in Pakistan to oppose the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, to oppose the implementation of the neo-liberal agenda and to fight for the democratic rights of the workers and peasants.

They pointed out that the resent military regime, with the assistance of religious fundamentalist forces, is accelerating the privatization of the economy, leading to widespread unemployment, price hikes and the ending of state concessions to the workers and peasants. We can see no implementation of pro-labour policies in Pakistan. Speakers demanded a minimum wage of Rupees 8000 (\$135) a month and trade union rights for agricultural workers.

The conference rejected the WTO and its agricultural policies. It condemned the multinational companies who are taking over the economy with the help of the military regime. Most agricultural land near the big cities is being bought by the multinational companies, thus forcing a large scale migration of the peasantry into the cities. The WTO "cure" is in fact a recipe for suicide. We reject the idea that the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank can end poverty. On the contrary, they are responsible for increasing poverty. Another demand raised by speakers was to oppose corporate farming in Pakistan.

The conference demanded the restoration of state subsidies to the peasantry and reduced charges for electricity and gas for the farmers. It demanded an end to privatization of agricultural state institutions. Speakers also demanded control of local communities over their natural resources and an end to the exploitation of natural resources by the multinational companies. They demanded an end to military operations in Baluchistan and the tribal areas and the restitution of those who have been "disappeared".

It was also demanded that the Pakistan government issue a Pakistani passport to Ihsan Ullah, an exiled bhatta workers' leader, and for him to be allowed to return to Pakistan.

There were several bookstalls at the conference. Food was available at a cost of Rupees 10 (\$ 0.20). The PKRC leadership thanked Action Aid Pakistan and other radical social organizations for their help in organizing the conference.