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Pakistan

Solidarity call for striking workers in Faisalabad

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In the Faisalabad region of Pakistan, the Labour Qaumi movement called a strike starting on 19th July to press the 17% wage rise accorded to private sector workers under the latest agreement.

Farooq Tariq of the Labour Party of Pakistan has sent us these daily reports on the movement.

19th July: Strike to go ahead despite the ban and threats

Faisalabad administration have imposed section 144 and banned all public gatherings from today. This is to prevent the strike call by Labour Qaumi Movement that starts tomorrow to press for better rates and wages for power looms workers.

The police inspectors have been calling all the main leaders of LQM and asking them to withdraw the call for a strike. Every LQM local sector in charge have been called by the police and pressurized to cancel the strike call.

The strike call by LQM was given after the local power looms bosses failed to implement the government fixed 17 percent increase in the rates of the workers. Although, the public sector workers have been given a 50 percent wage increase this year, the private sector workers would get only 17 percent wage and rates increased if the bosses agree to implement. The LQM leadership gave several notices to the bosses and the administration. However, neither of the two took it seriously.

Instead of listening to workers, a new police chief famous for fake police encounters have been posted in Faisalabad and a new District Administration Office (DCO) is been brought in to deal the situation. Police has also failed to arrest the murderess of the two labour leaders of LQM who were killed in their office on 6th July.

Police today also failed to protect the two Christian brothers falsely accused of blasphemy. Both were murdered today in district courts by an unknown person. There has been a violent reaction to these murders by the Christian youth. In retaliation, Muslims youth are also attacking Waris Pura area where the majority is Christians. At the time of writing this report, there are reports of cross firing in Waris Pura.

Workers leaders gathered today at LQM office and decided to go ahead with the strike despite all the threats and intimidations.

We need your support. We will keep you updated about the situation tomorrow. Please protest if the government uses violent mean to end this strike by arrests, lathe charge or firing.

The main stream media is ignoring the worsening situation of Faisalabad workers. Not a single report by any main stream media is been printed or broadcasted on the murder of the two labour leaders.

Workers are demanding to implement what government has already decided. It is not accepted by the bosses. Instead of arresting the bosses, the police are threatening the workers if they go on strike. Strike is our basic human right. It is the most peaceful act of protest that workers are engaged in. They will just refuse to work. They are not violent. They are not doing any suicidal attacks. They are exercising the rights that the constitution of Pakistan has granted them.

We have not accepted any authoritarian rules during the military dictatorship. We will not accept now either. Labour Party Pakistan appeal to all its supporters nationally and internationally to take notice of this gross violations of human and labour rights in Faisalabad, the third largest city of Pakistan.

20th July: Workers injured, arrested at the beginning of Faisalabad strike

Several workers have been injured by police tear gas shelling and by power looms bosses gangsters firing and stone throwing. Rana Tahir, district president of Labour Qaumi Movement is one of them. Over 100 workers have been arrested so far by the police which is all out in favor of the bosses. Workers are out in thousands from different parts of Faisalabad to reach the city center.

The newly appointed police chief of Faisalabad Aftab Cheema is famous for fake police encounters and is showing muscels now to the working class movement. He is been brought in to "control" the labour movement. Punjab Government of Mian Shahbaz Sharif cannot go very far on this road of repression.

Labour Party Pakistan appeals to all its supporters to denounce the use of police force against workers and condemn the actions of repression.

At least two district of Punjab have aroused in terms of class struggle. Power looms workers in district Jhang are on strike for the last fifteen days. In Faisalabad, over 100,000 workers have started their strike today despite all the police threats and heavy rains. Workers have started their processions from different parts of the city to reach the center of Faisalabad despite an imposition of section 144 that ban gathering of five or more in public places.

Today, the power looms bosses in Jhang district have paid a half page advertisement in Daily Express Faisalabad asking government to suppress the workers movement. The bosses alleged that Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) is linked to Mutihida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a sectarian mass organization in Karachi and is part of the coalition government of Pakistan Peoples Party at Center and in Sindh. The bosses claimed that 15 days strike has cost them over 9 billion Rupees and 15000 power looms factories are closed. They appealed the government to safe Jhang becoming anther Karachi.

Bosses are lying. LQM has nothing to do with MQM. LQM is an independent labour organization of mainly power looms and textile workers and the leadership is members of Labour Party Pakistan. The advertisement is an attempt to smear the LQM leadership and to provoke the Punjab government against the working class movement.

In Faisalabad, the local administration has imposed section 144 to stop workers marching to city center. They had used all the SHO in different areas top pressurize the workers for cancelations of the strike. The LQM leadership refused yesterday all the fake assurances of the local administration for mediation between bosses and workers. They have used this tactics several times and LQM postponed their planned actions. One such action of a strike was on 5th July, which was postponed on the assurances of the administration. Very next day, two leaders of LQM were gunned down in one of their offices.

There is no way back. LPP appeals to all its supporters to use all means to support the working class movement in Faisalabad and Jhang.

21st July: Strike to continue

It was a day for the workers in Faisalabad. Over 100,000 struck today, despite all police threats and heavy rain on 20th July. Efforts by both police and bosses to block their strike and rallies were stymied by the workers' brave and courageous actions. The bosses had gangsters fire on the workers and pelted with stones. As for the police, they used a record number of tear gas shells and baton charges. Several workers have been injured by either police tear gas shelling or by these gangsters. Rana Tahir, district president of Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), was injured and more than 100 workers have been arrested.

Thousands of workers, coming from different parts of Faisalabad, reached the city center. Workers showed their contempt for Section 144 "which prevents public gatherings. It is just a piece of paper.

The end result has been a partial victory for the power loom workers. They were featured on all the private and public television channels in Pakistan. Most media reports were accurate: They reported that violence was started by the bosses and their security guards and also by the police. The only reported violence against property was a factory was burnt and a police motorcycle set on fire. But how did these fires happen? The media reported that the factory owner fired at the workers, injuring several. In retaliation workers burnt the factory. Again, when police started firing tear gas shells in the Ghulam Mohammed Abad area, workers retaliated. The police ran away, leaving their motorcycle behind, and it burned.

For most of the day, Faisalabad saw some glimpse of the 1970s, when the workers controlled the city. The whole city witnessed the power of the working class as they moved into action. They were everywhere and the police were unable to control them. The media reported that Faisalabad was a city of war between the power loom bosses and police, on the one side, and the workers. Women were in the forefront of confronting the police. And youth played a leading role.

The media blamed the administration for not listening to the LQM demands in time. Today, after a whole day of confrontation in which workers had the upper hand, the administration assured the leaders of the Labour Qaumi Movement that all their demands will be met once the workers are off the roads. The LQM leadership has all that in the past. They told the administration that the strike will not be over until the demands are met.

Over 100,000 workers struck more than 20,000 power looms factories in the city. When the call was announced on the 16th July by the LQM leadership at a public rally in Jhang workers there had already been on strike for 15 days. But neither the bosses nor the police took the warning seriously. They mis calculated, probably thinking that with two LQM leaders murdered, on 6th July, in their office by some 10 gangsters must have a demoralizing effect on the will of the working class to act. They must be regretting their mistake.

The workers' demands were simple. They said implement a 17% increase in the minimum wage as recommended by the government for the private sector. However the government indicated that the individual owner has to agree. Meanwhile, public sector workers received a 50% increase.

Yet this year saw one of the highest rates of inflation in the history of Pakistan. The Pakistan Peoples Party Government has withdrawn all subsidies and increased the prices of electricity, gas, petroleum and almost all

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household items - as demanded by the IMF. Inflation was ten fold and every single family was affected.

Instead of listening to the workers, the Punjab government prepared other plans. They put one of the notorious police officers to head up the department, Mr. Aftab Cheema. Brought in to "tame" the labor movement, he is known for fake police encounters and the killing of criminals. But the Punjab Government of Mian Shahbaz Sharif cannot go very far on this road of repression.

On 19th July, almost all the main LQM leaders were threatened by police inspectors. Police from six different districts were called into Faisalabad. This was all to stop the peaceful action of the working class. But once the working class came into action, the balance of power shifted.

The news channels telecast the police as they fired on the workers and also showed that workers fought back. The power looms workers revived the Intifada movement. The television channels showed stone- pelting youth facing down the police equipped with rifles and guns.

The power loom bosses in Jhang district paid for a half-page advertisement in the Daily Express Faisalabad asking the government to suppress the workers movement. The bosses alleged that the Labour Qaumi Movement is linked to the Mutihida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a sectarian mass organization in Karachi and part of the coalition government at Center and in Sindh. The bosses claimed that 15 days strike has cost them over 9 billion Rupees and that 15,000 power looms factories are closed. They appealed to the government to prevent Jhang from becoming another Karachi.

Of course the bosses are lying. The LQM has nothing to do with the MQM. The LQM is an independent labor organization of mainly power loom and textile workers; its leadership has members of the Labour Party Pakistan. The advertisement is an attempt to smear the LQM leadership and to provoke the Punjab government against the working- class movement.

On 21st July at 3PM, I along with the main leaders of the LQM will address a press conference at the Lahore Press Club. We will encourage the movement to continue and spread to other districts as well. The will of the working class to change their situation can never be defeated. Leading members of the Labour Party Pakistan met in Lahore on 20th July to chart out a strategy of support to the movement. It was decided that National Trade Union Federation will organize a massive solidarity rally in Lahore on 6th August. We support the struggle of the power loom workers and demand immediate implementation of the minimum wage in all private institutions.

During the second week of August a Workers Solidarity Conference will be organizing in Lahore. All the trade unions and social movements will be contacted for these actions.

The Labour Party Pakistan appeals to all its supporters to denounce the use of police force against workers and to condemn these repressive acts. The LPP appeals to all its supporters to use all means to support the working class movement in Faisalabad and Jhang.