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Pakistan

A historic gathering of workers and peasants

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On 29th January an historic gathering took place at Faisalabad, the third largest city in Pakistan. The event was jointly organized by the Labour Qaumi (National) Movement and the Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (Punjab Tenants Association), two movements of workers and peasants that, by their defiant activities in several Punjabi districts, have caught the imagination of thousands.

For the first time, these two important movements of workers and peasants in Punjab shared a common platform.

The famous Dhobi Ghat parade ground was a sea of red flags that caught the attention of the incoming crowd. Several bookstalls by left-wing organizations and publishers reminded me of the 1960s. Many hundreds visited the book stalls.

The high point of the conference must have been the arrival of peasants from areas including Lahore, Okara, Depalpur, Renala Khurd, and Kulyana Military Estate. After travelling from different areas of the country, over 3,000 peasants joined one procession. They wore their traditional dress and carried Dhool Damaka (drums).

Earlier on 27-28 January, 140 delegates from Labour Party Pakistan held their 5th congress in the same city and leaders of the two movements participated in the congress as delegates.

For two weeks prior to the conference, the city was decorated with the red flags of the Labour Party Pakistan and of the LQM. LQM activists worked day and night for two weeks in order to cover all the roads with signs. Normally only the parties of the rich are able to muster resources enough to color the city. In this case, however, activists' sheer determination to reach as many as possible got out the message of a new labour-peasant movement. Banners, posters and wall chalking signaled the message.

During a time of daily suicide attacks and bomb blasts, holding the workers-peasant conference was a significant development, uniting the under-privileged class under their own leadership. Aside from religious gatherings and rallies, it had been a long time since that many workers and peasants had gathered together in Punjab.

The conference took place in a tense atmosphere, so only committed activists and workers of the two movements participated. Altogether there were over 10,000 participated. Local city officials prepared for any unwanted incident by installing security doors and placing ambulances and fire brigade buses on the site. (We had hoped to mobilize 30,000 but in this atmosphere many local sympathizers stayed home.)

Following the end of the conference, a young worker from Faisalabad told me, "I have come here to see what a labour and peasant conference is. Now I have a telephone number of Mian Abdul Qayum, the LQM leader; I am going to organize workers in my factory". At present, there is no union at his textile factory in Faisalabad.

Several social organizations including South Asia Partnership (SAP), Pakistan Institute for Research and Education (PILER), Patan Taraqiyati Tanzeem, Women Workers Help Line and others mobilized the women for the event alongside with AMP and LQM. Over 1000 women participated: peasant women from Okara Military Farms and other areas as well as women workers from different factories.

The two main conference slogans were the issuing of social security cards to all industrial workers and land ownership rights to the Mozareen of Military Farms. But solidaristic and revolutionary slogans were very prominent:

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“Workers of the world unite,” “One’s sorrow is everyone’s sorrow,” “Long live working-class solidarity,” “Those who cultivate should sow,” “Asia is red,” “Give one more push to demolishing walls,” “Socialism is the only answer,” “Revolution is our path,” “Struggle is our strategy,” “Ownership of land or death,” “Trade union rights, our human right,” “Issue social security cards,” “Down with capitalism and feudalism,” “No to the IMF and World Bank,” “Down with American imperialism,” “No to drone attacks and religious fundamentalism,” “For a peaceful democratic Pakistan,” “Equal rights for women,” “No to discriminatory laws,” “Stop violence,” “Give peace a chance.”

The conference was chaired by Mian Abdul Qayum and the proceedings were conducted by Aslam Meraj, LQM’s secretary. Speakers stressed the need for worker and peasant unity to defeat the politics of the rich and feudal. They demanded that all agriculture land occupied by the Military Farms administration must be given to the tenants working on these lands for over 100 years. They called for implementation of the minimum wage in all factories and for a 15,000 rupees (\$160) monthly wage. They announced their intention to participate in the coming local government elections at Faisalabad and other cities. They condemned the atrocities by the military in Baluchistan and announced full solidarity with Baluch people in fighting exploitation and injustice. And they demanded the recovery of the missing persons.

Speakers came from all over Pakistan as well as from France and Australia. They included Rasul Buksh Paleejo, leader Awami Tehreek, Pierre Rousset of France’s NPA, Simon Butler of the Socialist Alliance Australia, Mehr Abdul Sattar, secretary Anjuman Mozareen Punjab, Bushra Khaliq, secretary of the Women Workers Help Line, Asim Sajad Akhtar organizer Peoples Rights Movement, Younas Rahu, secretary Labour Party Pakistan, Sindh Chapter, Mohammed Yousaf Baluch, chairman National Trade Union Federation, Safdar Sindhu, secretary Pakistan Trade Union Federation, Ayub Qureshi All Pakistan Trade Union Federation, Atif Jamil Pegan of Harmony Foundation, myself and several others.

Several more on the platform included Jamil Umer of the Awami Jamhoori Forum and leader of the Coordination Committee of Progress parties, Mohmmmed, Tehseen executive director of the South Asia Partnership, Sarwar Bari, executive director Patan Taraqiyati Tanzeem, Khalid Mahmud director Labour Education Foundation, Begum Sabeeha head of Khaksaar Tehreek, Nasim Bajwa, an eminent human rights lawyer from the United Kingdom, Zulfiqar Shah of PILER, Ashraf Nadeem, Mian Ashraf, Noor Nabi, Shabir Ahmad and Malik Saleem Jakar of AMP, Baba Jan LPP Gilgit Baltistan, Abdul Jalal, LPP Swat. Nasir Mansoor, LPP national labour secretary.

Speakers saw the conference as an historic beginning of today’s working-class politics in Pakistan. “It is new start and it will not be the last event in this regard, we reject the economic and political policies of the present government, which are dictated by American imperialism.” They noted that Washington stands empty-handed before the people of Pakistan.

They commented that IMF and World Bank policies are adding misery and poverty to the everyday life of the working class. They refused to accept the dictates of IMF and World Bank. They demanded that the government stop privatization and provide subsidies for agriculture’s input. At the same time they demanded that the government must end discriminatory legislation: All citizens of Pakistan must be treated equally in the eyes of the law and constitution. Finally, they noted they were sick and tired of the in-fighting of the Pakistan People’s Party and the Muslim League Nawaz. They do not battle over issues of concern to the working class but only on how to share power and status.

Speaker after speaker stressed the need for an independent politics from those parties of the rich. Many pointed to worker and peasant unity at the conference as a practical alternative. Speakers urged the government to control poverty, price hikes, unemployment and the power crisis.

Pierre Rousset, a leader of New Anti Capitalist Party France (NPA) and organizer of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres (ESSF), said that the French workers had secured their social security rights after years of struggle. Nonetheless, aided by the WTO, multinational companies were trying to deprive ordinary people throughout Europe from their basic rights. The response is concrete international solidarity by the workers of all countries.

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Simon Butler of Socialist Alliance Australia conveyed revolutionary greetings from socialists in Australia, mentioning that Pakistan and Australia might be opponents in the cricket match but the workers of both countries will unite to fight poverty and unemployment together.

For all those attending, the conference was very positive. Most felt the power of unity: “We did this despite all the threats of security. The police kept pushing us to restrict the event inside the grounds, however, we carried out our own plan and we did well” Rana Tahir, one of the main LLQM leaders, told me.

“It was like an Eid day for the Faisalabad power looms workers. We are all happy with the outcome. It is beginning of working class politics in the city. Just, six years on, LQM did what the big parties cannot do. It was a challenge to fill the ground and we did it. “We feel the power, the power of the working class to change the society. If we can do this, we can do many more things in support of the workers. Now the administration has to listen to us and take us seriously” he commented after the rally.

The conference also passed several resolutions.