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Pakistan

A workers' election campaign against feudalism and capitalists

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On 1st May 2010, over 5000 industrial workers participated in a public meeting at Suddar in Faisalabad. Renowned Punjabi poet Baba Najmi thrilled the crowd with his revolutionary poems. Class consciousness was at its best at this election meeting for Mian Abdul Qayum, Labour Party Pakistan's candidate for a Punjab Assembly seat. He is not a politician but a workers' leader of power looms and textile workers in Faisalabad, Pakistan's third largest city.

Since 2007 the Labour Qaumi Movement, chaired by Mian Qayum, has led many successful struggles for decent wages, conditions, social security cards and an end to bonded labor in this area. A member of Federal Committee of the Labour Party Pakistan (LLP), Mian Abdul Qayum spoke of himself at the May Day rally as a worker who is poor but not weak. He remarked "We know how to deal with the gangsters. Workers are with us and our seven-year struggle, which has brought positive results. We have formed unions and will do so in the future as well." He said he is contesting election with an aim of demanding the implementation of a minimum wage law for workers. He stands for labor rights, for reversing price hikes and against load shedding of electricity and gas.

He pointed out that the parties of the rich are wondering about how a worker can raise the money for an election and mentioned some even allege intelligence agencies are funding the campaign. "I want to tell them that here are my agencies, sitting in front of me in thousands who are behind my campaign." At that point I got up and gave Rupees 500 and appealed to everyone to donate, using the slogan that "we will give note (Rupees notes) and vote"! We received a spontaneous response not witnessed for many years as workers came up with five, ten and fifty Rupee notes. We raised 13000 Rupees (US\$ 160).

Later, a worker commented to me that LPP is reviving the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) revolutionary traditions from the 1970s.

Earlier on the program I spoke about how the PPP candidate appeals to voters on the basis that if he is elected, he will definitely be a provincial minister and thus situated to solve constituents' problems. I remarked that we know from experience just how much misery these ministers have brought. We know for sure that another minister means more problems for the workers.

I also took up the case of collaboration between the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) and said that in this constituency the ruling class fights each other to win this seat but at national level they are united on a neoliberal agenda of privatization and imperialist attacks within the tribal areas. Fortunately, there is a candidate from working class, so vote for him.

I also spoke about the rising unemployment and price hikes with no wage increases. There was a very energetic response from the crowd as they chanted militant slogans again and again. I spoke of the challenges to the working class and how there is an opportunity to make a difference through voting for a worker in this election.

At the rally there was a message of support from Abid Hassan Minto, president of the Workers Party Pakistan. Comrade Arif from the WPP brought their message that at an earlier May Day rally in Faisalabad, their president announced the party's full support for Mian Qayum's campaign.

This memorable meeting was the largest election rally held to date in Faisalabad. But the question remains: Can the LPP win the seat? Despite the massive May Day rally it is very difficult to say. The parties of the rich will use all the state and private power to win the seat. It is also a matter of prestige for both the PPP and PMLN. But the rally

revealed that there is a worker's candidate in the race and he has a militant and numerous following.

Industrial workers are campaigning for Mian Qayum with one car, over a dozen motorcycles, and many more are on cycles and on foot. It is clear that the LPP has developed a base. With few resources we find that after working 12 hours a day in the factories, workers nonetheless come to campaign for Mian Abdul Qayum until midnight. Workers are sacrificing because they believe they can make a difference and elect a worker's leader to the Assembly.

Mian Qayum is contesting the Punjab Assembly seat vacated by Mohammed Asif Ajmal, a member of the PMLN. With graduation [from high school or college] a condition imposed on candidates, Ajmal provided a fake degree for his candidacy in the 2008 general elections. In a tight race he managed to pull ahead of the PPP's candidate, Rana Aftab, by just 400 votes. Before losing in 2008, Aftab had been elected to the Punjab Assembly two times.

But when challenged about his degree last month in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Ajmal opted to resign. Yet once gain this fraudulent person is has been nominated by the PMLN, a party claiming to champion an independent judiciary and willing to launch Jihad against corruption.

Overall, there are 17 candidates are in the contest, including Rana Aftab, currently president of the PPP in Punjab. There are a total of 119,439 registered voters in the constituency. During the 2008 general election, 61 percent went to the polls to cast their votes. The winning candidate, supported at the time by General Musharraf, was Mohammed Asif Ajmal of the Pakistan Muslim League Q. He received 29413 votes. Later he shifted his affiliation to the PMLN.

There are 42 villages and 10 union councils in this PP 63 constituency of the Punjab Assembly. Around 14000 industrial workers are believed to be working in different textile and power looms factories there.

There is long history of enmity between two different tribes in this constituency, resulting in dozens of deaths. The PMLN candidate represents one tribe and the candidate of National Muslim League and former Member of Parliament represents the other. The LPP candidate, in contrast, appeals on a class basis against the feudal lords, gangsters and capitalists.

The LPP Campaign

Women workers are in the lead of this campaign to get one worker elected to a parliament dominated by feudal lords, capitalists and their representatives. A group of 10 are working round the clock to knock every door to give out a leaflet and a poster of Mian Abdul Qayum. The leaflet outlines demands for a minimum wage of 15000 Rupees, a minimum 8000 Rupees unemployment benefit for all adult unemployed, no to imperialist aggression and bombing in tribal areas of Pakistan, social security cards for every industrial worker, an end to discrimination against women workers and for a united fight of workers and peasants against the PMLN and PPP leaders.

During the first 10 days of the campaign, the LPP held 10 public meetings, 35 street corner meetings and mapped out a door-to-door campaign in all 42 villages. In contrast to the rich parties' leaders, the LPP candidate is moving around in the company of one car and scores of motorbikes and cycles. Traditionally the PPP and PMLN candidates travel with over 70 big cars and vans. They are protected by both a large number of policemen and their own armed security guards.

Despite all this, two public meetings on 25th April in the village Daroran showed the contrast. One was organized by PMLN and the other by LPP. At the LLP meeting there were more villagers, and most were the poor of the village. In a second LLP meeting at Chaenchal Singh Wale village later that night, several hundred villagers showed up to hear Mian Abdul Qayum despite the rain.

The PPP candidate says if he loses, it will be because of LPP campaign, the PMLN candidate says the same. We are clear if either gets elected, workers will lose. We are contacting Left-wing parties, social organizations and radical individuals and youth to support us.

Some say that we are in the third position after the PMLN and PPP candidates. But we have urged workers not to spoil their votes by voting for an enemy class. It does not matter how many votes we get, it does matter that we are standing and hopefully, we will have reasonable votes for the first time in LPP history. Over 10,000 workers in the last 10 days have attended our public and corner meetings.

Our initial finance appeal brought some results. But we need much more. We need to build a Socialist alternative, free of the influence of the capitalist class.

We need your support. Please come forward in whatever way you can. Above all, we need your money for a cause that unites us nationally and internationally. It is workers fight in Pakistan to unite the workers internationally.

Please find below an appeal we sent you on 10 April 2010 for more information.

Help us to put forward a credible alternative to the politics of the rich

An appeal to all friends in social and political circles

On 10 April 2010, Mian Abdul Qayum, a labour leader in Faisalabad, submitted his nomination papers as candidate for the Punjab Assembly constituency 63 Faisalabad. The other candidates will be from the Pakistan People's Party, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and National Muslim League. We need your support to contest this by election.

Who are our opponents?

The seat was declared vacant when Mian Asif Ajmal resigned after it was clear during a Supreme Court hearing that he had submitted bogus degrees to the election commission in 2008 to prove that he is a graduate. Asif Ajmal is an industrialist and owner of a textile factory. He was arrested by police in 2008 after he and his goons fired on his textile factory workers when they demanded an increase in wages and union rights. One worker was killed and over a dozen seriously injured. He spent nearly one and half month in jail but used his political influence among police and courts to secure his release.

He was elected in February 2008 election on a nomination of Pakistan Muslim league Q, but later joined PMLN. Mian Nawaz Sharif has nominated Asif Ajmal to contest this seat once again. Thus the person who used bogus degrees and deceived his constituency and the election commission is awarded candidacy by the PMLN, a party that claims to defend democratic traditions and to struggle for an independent judiciary.

The Pakistan People's Party Punjab president Rana Aftab is once again in the field to contest the election. He was defeated by Ajmal in 2008 after having been a member of the Punjab Assembly for two [earlier wrote three!] terms. He is rich farmer and an advocate by profession; he is a diehard PPP activist.

Amjad Warraich, a former Member of Parliament and leader of the National Muslim League, the new Muslim League under his leadership, has also announced his candidacy. His wife is member of the National Assembly and his brother is in the Punjab Assembly.

The Labour Party Pakistan has decided to put forward the candidacy of Mian Abdul Qayum. He is chairman of Labour Qaumi Movement and a member of LPP Federal Committee. We have decided to contest this election in order to challenge the hegemony of the big capitalist and feudal parties. We have little experience of parliamentary politics and know they favour those with a lot of money. Rich politician spend millions in violation of the Election Commission laws and no one take notice. Despite this, we have decided to fight back through entering the race.

Our candidate: Mian Abdul Qayum

Mian Abdul Qayum is a labour leader of textile and power loom workers. He is the founding member of Labour Qaumi Movement, a labor organization that has led many struggles of textile workers in Faisalabad and the surrounding area. Over 10,000 joined when the LQM organized a mass workers rally on the eve of the Labour Party Pakistan's Fifth Congress on 29 January 2010 at the famous Dhobi Ghat ground in Faisalabad.

Mian Abdul Qayum, himself a textile worker, has been able to organize LQM in every area of Faisalabad. The union has accomplished much through of its militant actions and its expressions of solidarity with other movements. At present, he works full time for LQM and the workers of the Faisalabad textile sector pay his expenditures. His partner, Shamim Qayum, is also a LQM activist and organizes women workers.

Mian Abdul Qayum has been arrested several times during the last few years during the struggle of the textile workers. He led a strike that lasted 20 days and resulted in a complete victory of power loom workers but spent 28 days along 24 other power loom workers in Jhang jail. Since the LQM was established over 10,000 power loom workers have received their social security cards. There was none when the LQM was formed in 2003. The LQM has been able to help workers in winning wage increases, releasing blocked payments, and forming new trade unions in several factories. In general labor dignity is being restored.

The LQM is an independent labour organization supported by several left political currents and social organization and movements. The Labour Education Foundation, a radical social organization, has helped the LQM in trainings, workshops and organizing workers. Most of its leaders are formally members of Labour Party Pakistan. The LQM formation is a departure from the traditional trade unions that have been unable to grow during the last decade because it is a community-based labor organization and not just at the work-place. The LQM combines activism at both the work place and within the community. It has formalized many informal sector workers and revived the workers' tradition of picket lines at the work place and at the homes of the bosses.

The LQM strategy to press the demands of the workers varies from case to case. It has held hunger strike camps, public rallies, seminars, workshops, Gherao (pickets) of factories, bosses' homes, police stations and at the labor department, as well as demonstrations and other forms of protests. It has held very militant but peaceful struggles.

Mian Abdul Qayum's decision to contest election against the parties of the rich is an important step in promotion of working-class politics. It will pave the way for more independent actions of the working class not only in the parliamentary field but also outside. After the election of Mai Jhoori in Baluchistan by election last month, the contest of Mian Abdul Qayum will also be closely watched by many in Pakistan and internationally.

Our election program

Although this is a Punjab Assembly by election, the LPP is contesting the election on a revolutionary program with transitional demands. In a meeting on 9th April 2010 at Labour Qaumi Movement in Faisalabad where the party discussed the campaign's priorities, it was decided to take up three issues forcefully: opposing the price hikes, supporting labor rights and opposing the load shedding of electricity and gas. The first two are directly linked with the lives of workers and the other is linked with the survival of local power looms industry and infrastructure. There has been a massive price hike because of the conditionality's of the IMF and World Bank loans. We will also take up oppose the neoliberal agenda and as well as the role imperialism and the multi-national companies play. We will raise the issue of labor's right to form unions and fight for workers' rights to a decent life.

Importance of this election

This election has been announced at a time when the PPP government is making important decisions to implement the neoliberal agenda. Price hikes are out of control. Important public sector institutions are for sale. The infrastructure is collapsing. The load shedding of electricity is over 12 hours. Most of the power looms are closed because of shortage of electricity and thousands of workers have been laid off temporarily. Workers are very angry and there is a possibility of a grand backlash against the PPP government through this election.

The area where the election is taking place is the same area where thousands of workers have gathered on the call of Labour Qaumi Movement for defense of worker rights and better job conditions. The PPP Punjab president is also running in the election so workers have the opportunity to punish the PPP for their policies. This is also an election where both the PPP and PMLN have put up candidates against each other, unlike the previous by elections. The PMLN nominated a person who has been involved in firing workers, forging educational certificates and other criminal activities. We call on workers to reject the candidates of both parties and vote for a worker.

A strong vote or particularly the victory of a textile worker in a by election would generate enthusiasm among the working class in Pakistan. It would open up an alternative path to those parties of the capitalists and feudal forces.

This is the first parliamentary election that LPP is contesting since the 2002 general elections. The LPP has carried out good street work against military dictatorship, and has fought for workers rights and the right of peasants to own land. The LPP can make a difference in this election if it gets the right support from its friends.

What you can do

We need your support in different fields but have little time left. The election is on 15 May 2010.

1- Please help us financially,

2- Please take off time to go the constituency. It is called PP 63 and it covers the areas next to Faisalabad airport, Sadhar, Thekiwala, Pansera on Jhang Road. Please come and help in the election campaign to go to door to door.

3- Please help us in transport. If you have a car, small van or jeep, please lend it to us with a driver for at least a week before the election campaign. We have to cover a long distance and we need a lot of transportation.

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4- Please help in printing of literature, posters and leaflets. If you can get it printed, we can provide you the text and designs.

5- Please help us in designing banners and help in printing on cloth.

6- Please give suggestion in promotion of the LPP election symbol, APPLE. Unlike the PPP and PMLN, who have very violent election symbols, we have a peaceful symbol.

7- Please take a day off 15 May to help on the Election Day.

8- Please suggest any other way to help us.

Please contact me for any help and I will put you in contact with the people involved in that area.

Labour Party Pakistan appeals to all its supporters, friends, comrades and members to come forward to help in the campaign of Mian Abdul Qayum.