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Pakistan

Gorja - a great victory for textile workers

- News from around the world -

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The 39 days strike by some 15,000 textile workers at Gojra ended in a stunning victory for the workers. This did not come without sacrifices by the workers involved in the strike. Twenty-eight workers are still in jail waiting their plea of bail application to be heard. On 15th August, a meeting of representatives of striking workers, power looms bosses and district administration lasted well over seven hours at District Coordination Officers House in Toba Tek Singh.

The meeting agreed to raise the workers wage from Rupees 97 (\$ 1.61) to Rupees 160 (\$2.66) per day. They agreed that all the power looms factories will be registered by the government. Social security cards will be made for the workers. A social security hospital will be built in the district.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/textile_workers.jpg]

The wages had not been raised for the last 18 years, an unprecedented freezing of wages by the local textile bosses.

There are a total of 20, 000 workers at Gojra, a town 40 kilometers away from Faisalabad, the hub city of textile industry in Pakistan. The workers were subject to all sorts of oppression during these years. The town is divided by two gangster groups who a long history of conflict with each other. This has resulted in dozens of murders from both sides. But these groups were united in suppressing the workers.

The strike started on 8th July by some 70 percent of the power looms workers of the town. A day earlier, they had a public meeting where well over 3000 attended, demanding an immediate raise in the wages. The workers formed a union and gave a 15 days notice for the acceptance of the demands.

On 8th July, one worker was kicked out of a factory and was accused of forming the union and attending the meeting. This sparked an immediate walkout of the workers in that particular street. Within two hours most of the workers of the town left the factories in protest. "Now or never" was the slogan. The strike has started.

A local advocate Saif Cheema played a vital role in supporting the workers. His house became the center of the strike. He helped the workers to set up a strike camp in the town center. The Toba Tek Singh district secretary Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) put the workers in contact with the Faisalabad power looms workers movement called Labour Qaumi Movement. Majority of the leadership of LQM are member of LPP.

The cooperation of the two movements played a decisive role in sustaining the strike. The district leaders of Awami jamhoori Tehreek, the left alliance in Pakistan, gave full solidarity to the striking workers.

The striking workers were tortured by the gangsters of the local textile bosses on several occasions and the local police did not take any action against them. The workers were harassed by the police who took several striking workers in day custody without charges. But the workers were determined to go on.

When the well circulated Daily Express Pakistan printed a lie that most of the power looms were working, the striking workers burnt copies of the paper in protest. This gave an excuse to the local textile bosses to manipulate the situation and some of the journalists turned against the striking workers. The local journalists were mainly close friends of the bosses. They boycotted the strike news and no reports of the strike were printed in most of the local and national news papers.

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On 1st of August, the local police dismantled the strikers camp late at night. This was to sabotage a public meeting the next day where I was supposed to speak in solidarity of the workers. On 2nd August, over a 1000 workers attended the public meeting. It was agreed on our suggestion to put up the camp next morning come what may. It was also agreed that a national and international solidarity campaign be started. The meeting was full of emotions and the workers were really happy to hear us and some of the trade union leaders from Lahore.

The attempt to set up the camp on 3rd August resulted the arrest of 28 workers including the president of LQM comrade Mian Abdul Qayum. The workers were physically assaulted by the local police and a strike leader was garlanded with shoes round his neck to humiliate the workers. He was paraded in front of the bosses by the local police.

A case was registered against me and 30 others with charges of provocative anti- government speeches and breach of section 144 of the penal code. The arrests and registration of the case made the strike known to many through the electronic and print media. The news could not be suppressed by the local hostile journalists.

Despite the arrests and tortures, the workers were able to set up the strike camp once again. It became the rallying point for the workers. Hundreds of workers will get together everyday at the camp and distribute their leaflets. The police had to give in on this question.

On 5th August, over 80 workers were arrested who were going to Toba Tek Singh to meet the local administration. The whole district was cordoned by police and many workers were not allowed to enter the district. Still over 400 workers were able to gather at the district courts to protest against the arrests. The local administration invited the representatives to start the negotiations. It was accepted. Several rounds of negotiations were held between 5th to 15th August.

The union made it clear that we are not just demanding the release of the arrested workers but main demand is better wages and conditions. It made it clear that more workers are ready to go to jail but the strike will not end.

I went again to Gojra strike camp on 8th August from Lahore alongside with other leading comrades of LPP. Speaking to workers at the camp, I invited the Gojra police to arrest me as well because a case has been registered against me as well. This was to show complete solidarity with the striking workers and to show that we will not leave them. The police did not come to arrest me while they were just outside the camp. The press conference on the same day at Toba Tek Singh was well reported all over the country.

A delegation of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan went to the town on 11th August to meet the local administration to protest the violation of the human rights. They also spoke at the strike camp in Gojra. Two LPP leaders were part of the delegation.

The national and international solidarity campaign to send protest letters to general Musharaf, Labour minister and minister interior resulted also a good pressure. Finally the district administration took a firm position to help the workers.

The 39 days strike by those who had been earning less than two Dollars a day ended in a success. The workers are happy. The camp is taken away by the workers themselves. The strike ended only when a culture of resistance, solidarity, determination and sacrifices was very evident. It was clear to the bosses and administration that the strike will not end. Although, only 70 percent of the local workforce participated but it never went down than that. The leaders are still in jail. But hopefully, they might be released on 19th August on bail.

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The workers at Toba, Kamalia and other towns are contacting us to help them in their wage increase. We are planning a power looms workers convention in the end of August to demand the increase of the workers in the whole area and Pakistan.

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