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Pakistan

The first victory for striking workers

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This afternoon (22nd July), after 17 days of strike by over 20,000 power looms workers in the Jhang district, the bosses agreed to meet the demands. The district coordination officer (DCO) announced at the textile workers' strike camp that all workers would be issued social security cards. At a meeting the director of social security, the district administration and employers jointly agreed. This will be first time that industrial workers in the Jhang district will be able to receive the benefits of social security, including free health service, special marriage and death grants and free education for their children at social security schools.

Only 2.1 million workers out of 45 million Pakistanis in the labor force have secured social security cards. That is less than four percent of the total. By law, every worker must be issued a social security card, however many bosses never register their workforce with the social security department. Most factory owners pay for a very few workers while the rest remain at their mercy. Why is this so? The answer is that bosses are required to pay at least seven percent of each worker's total wages into the social security system.

The labor department responsible for implementing the law enjoys their cordial relationship with the bosses. In fact since 2003, the government in Punjab has banned factory inspections by the labor department, thus giving the owners a free hand.

In the private sector, one of the labor movement's main demands is that workers be issued social security cards. Already over 10,000 workers organized by the Labour Qaumi Movement in Faisalabad are enjoying this benefit, and now the textile workers in Jhang, under the LQM leadership, have won the same victory.

The second demand, to increase the wage by 17 percent has not yet been met. However, the owners and administration agreed with the labor leaders that the outcome of the negotiation in the Faisalabad strike will be implemented in Jhang as well.

Bawa Latif, senior vice president the LQM, who was responsible conducting the Jhang strike, told me jubilantly that "finally we have our day." For 17 days, workers have remained in several strike camps in Jhang. The tactic of establishing strike camps and holding daily demonstrations workers went very well for the first two weeks. The confrontation was between the workers and bosses. From the beginning women and children played an important role. In the end it was their public presence in a city that had been dominated by religious fanatics which forced both the owners and the administration to accept the demands.

On 19 July the LQM leadership decided to change tactics by relocating the camps to the front of the DOC office and blocking entry. This added direct pressure on the district administration. Hundreds of children and women blocked the office day and night. By 20 July the DCO asked the LQM leadership to remove the camp. But the LQM refused and explained that everyone was ready to go to jail.

When I was consulted about the possibility of resisting, we agreed to stand firm. Along with the leadership of the National Trade Union Federation I spoke at a press conference in Lahore on 21st July told said that strike will not end until our demands are met. The media seemed very interested and instead of firing questions about the strike, journalists asked when we would strike in Lahore. We told them it will have to coming to Lahore as well. Today the Urdu and English papers reported our remarks at the press conference and this also put pressure on the administration.

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The DCO must have realized that repression would only inflame the struggle not diminish it. So we heard good news.

Meanwhile in Faisalabad, where over 100,000 workers have been striking for three days, negotiations failed. After three rounds of talks among owners, the district administration and the labor leadership, no agreement was reached. The bosses claim to be threatened by the LQM leadership. They say the question of their security is at the top of their agenda. In a strange move, they informed the media that they have also gone on strike: against LQM gangsters. They announced that the factories will remain closed as if they were responsible for striking. But everyone knows that it was the strike of the workers that closed them down!

Turning the bosses' agenda on its head, the LQM leadership announced at the meeting that they are concerned about the security of the workers. Since the strike began both bosses and police have employed repressive tactics and 25 workers have been injured. The violence must stop; the just demands of the strikers for a wage increase along the lines as announced by the Punjab government's minimum wage board should be adopted. Another round of talks is scheduled tomorrow, 23rd July.

In the meantime, four of the main LQM Saddar leaders remain illegally detained at the Thekriwala police station: Fazal Ilahi, Mohammed Babar, Mohammed Riaz and Akbar Kamboh. They are being detained without charges filed against them. In the Ghulam Mohammed Abad area of Faisalabad police have brought charges against 300 workers, including Rana Azeem, for attacking a factory boss and having an illegal gathering. So far no arrests have been made.

So far there is no sign of disunity or any indication that a section of workers might play the role of strike breaker. Thus the partial victory in Jhang can pave the way for an even greater victory in Faisalabad as long as the working class remains united and the factories closed.