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**Pakistan**

# **Women workers help line**

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**BUSHRA KHALIQ IS general secretary of the Women Workers Help Line** ([www.wwhl.org.pk](http://www.wwhl.org.pk)) and a member of Labour Party Pakistan. She visited the United States in June, 2010 to speak at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, and spoke in several cities at meetings organized by Solidarity and the International Socialist Organization. While in Detroit, she spoke with Dianne Feeley and David Finkel from the ATC editorial board. We began by asking Bushra about her perspective on the World Social Forum and the USSF, then about her own political work.

Bushra Khaliq: I have been involved with the World Social Forum since 2004, when I got the opportunity to attend the WSF at Mumbai, India. Then I attended the WSF in Nairobi, Kenya (2007) and Belem, Brazil (2009). I was also involved in organizing the social forum in Karachi, Pakistan (2006).

In Detroit, I have seen more young people taking a very active part in this year's social forum. Their enthusiasm and activism with so many innovative ideas were expressed during the opening march and demonstrations. I'm seeing more and more young people becoming involved and understanding the need to take to the streets.

Their concern with issues of war, the environment and jobs are very important for us in Pakistan. We are facing a deepening economic crisis over the next decade. It's a great opportunity for the social movement activists to connect with each other and exchange views on particular issues.

If the number of registrations at the U.S. Social Forum is around 15,000, that shows good participation and a qualitative as well as quantitative growth. I have seen this in the Social Forum and particularly in the Peoples Movement Assemblies. We have also heard that at the G-20 meeting in Toronto (occurring at the same time) there have been at least 600 protesters arrested so far. All this is a positive sign for the possibility of doing something effective and productive in the next period.

We believe in strong networking with like-minded organizations building workers' and women's solidarity. The struggles of the workers and women in all areas confront the same repressive forces trying to push them back. Solidarity and the ISO invited me to come to Portland and San Francisco as well as socialist conferences in Chicago and Oakland.

The Women Workers' Help Line

ATC: Please describe the project you work on.

BK: The Women Workers Help Line was founded in 2000, with technical and moral support from Labour Party Pakistan (LPP). Since then we have made tremendous efforts to build the women's movement in Pakistan, and raise the class question as well.

We organize women at the grassroots level with special attention to the informal sector and home-based workers, who are critical to our economy yet very much neglected and low-paid.

Women in Pakistan are supposed to bear full responsibility for managing the household. Due to the religious influence, women's mobility has always been restricted "which the factory owners really love, because they can keep the women workers in their homes and the women bear the double burden of low wages and domestic responsibilities.

Their wages are 1500-2000 rupees (about \$23; \$1 = 85 PKRs) per month; unfortunately the labor laws do not cover this category of workers; the government doesn't have the statistics for this sector and is reluctant to ratify the International Labor Organization Convention 177 (on home work, adopted by the ILO in 1996). All tools for home workers are their own responsibility.

Women's rights and workers' rights are not the priority of the government, and it is worse when the military is in power (as it has been for 33 of the 62 years of Pakistan's independence). The official minimum wage is 7000 rupees (\$83), but we are demanding a minimum of 15,000 (about \$178) per month. We also demand the legal recognition of these workers so their contributions can be acknowledged and they get the right to be "mainstreamed" within the labor movement. Then they would come under social security protection as well.

Bricklaying, farm workers and fishery workers are also unregistered, along with home-based workers, and aren't covered even under the health and safety law. We have almost 72 labor laws, but none of these workers are covered by them.

WWHL doesn't operate as a "hot line." It's a support network. We have a longterm vision, especially for working women who are unregistered, but also about women workers in the political process.

In the political parties women's participation is very low, particularly in the upper structures of the parties where very few women participate. Women make up 17% of the National Assembly, but they are the sisters and wives of the ex-politicians and generals, none of whom represent working-class women. So working-class women's issues are not properly discussed.

There is a legal quota for women representatives, but when a party takes a large number of seats most of the women are not directly elected (from a district) but from an at-large list. Only 16 out of 76 women in the National Assembly have won office through constituency elections. The at-large women tend to be political patronage and family appointments.

### Building Women's Leadership

ATC: What is WWHL's relationship to the LPP? Can you tell us something about its structures and how women become leaders?

BK: WWHL is politically affiliated with the LPP but with its own, independent structures. We don't have male members and all the officers are women. When we talk about the political orientation of the WWHL, we are very close to the social movements. If it's a question of the bricklayers or the industrial workers' movements, we are very close to them; but our struggles are all women.

Leadership development comes from the grassroots. Membership of the WWHL is open to all working-class women. At the same time we have supported the formation of home-based workers' unions. We have around 5000 WWHL members, then a general leadership body of 21 women and a seven-member executive council.

That leadership is representative of grassroots structures; one of our executive council members, for example, is from the slumdweller's movement. During the past five years we've been working very closely with the slumdweller's movement in Lahore.

In the struggle of the lawyers' movement which forced (military dictator) Musharraf to step down in 2007-08, the role of women in the lawyers' movement was very important. We produced a whole book to document "Women in the

Lawyers' Movement." Women in Pakistan tend to be excluded, but women played a huge role in the forefront of this political and social upheaval.

There are brilliant examples of women who were initially reluctant to step out and speak with us. But we have gone door-to-door in their communities. We encourage the formation of a group of women, bringing them together as a unit to talk about the issues facing them.

If they are housewives, we discuss their educational and health issues. If we go to the factory areas, we talk about the factory laws and their rights as workers. We investigate where the factory laws are being broken, and we can call them into our offices for training. If they have the potential to become local political leaders, we can give them special training in that area.

We offer literacy training, but the second purpose of the school is to discuss the economic and social issues occurring around them, and finally involving them in marches and demonstrations. This is our strength – women led their own Women's Day and Labor Day marches. In April 2009, over 20,000 participated in a mass Punjab Tenants Association rally at the Okara military farm (part of an ongoing struggle against the military seizure of farmers' land).

WWHL members are not all members of Labour Party Pakistan, but we actively encourage them not to go to the religious parties. We encourage them to go to the parties that support socialism – there are seven left parties, with the LPP the most vibrant and active in building the social movements. Socialism is the only alternative for Pakistan.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) was the party of the masses, but after so many years its spirit has declined and the leadership is more the Bhutto family business. They are primarily concerned with following the course of the former Musharraf regime and privatization of state assets.

Our youth group call themselves "progressive young workers," age 16-24. This is the next layer of our leaders.

ATC: Can you outline the basic social conditions in Pakistan and the demands of the LPP?

BK: Twenty thousand children die of diarrhea every year. There are eight million children not going to school. Education is supposed to be universal – Pakistan signed all the international conventions, but they aren't met. Girls become home-based workers, staying at home with their mothers. This is more visible in the suburbs of the big cities, while in the countryside agricultural child labor is more prevalent.

Only 10% of Pakistan's budget is for social welfare – 0.5% for health, 2% for education – compared to 30% for debt service and 60% for the military.

Industry is in decline as all the nationalized industries have been privatized; even telecommunications have been sold to an Arab consortium. The assets sold off include railways, banks and the postal service. We still have a public school system and hospitals, poorly administered – in some hospitals medicines are free of charge but others charge high prices. Water and electricity have mostly been privatized.

These are our basic demands:

– Legal recognition for workers in the informal sector

â€¢ At least 10% of the budget for education and 5% for health care

â€¢ Uniform basic standards of education for all children (there are currently 28,000 unregistered, unregulated madrassas out of 40,000), and removal of hatred from the textbooks

â€¢ A 15,000 rupee monthly minimum wage

â€¢ End of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and the drone attacks. U.S. intervention must be opposed not only by the countries affected, but also by the U.S. population.

â€¢ End the privatization agenda.

Postscript: ATC: How has WWHL's work changed since the flood?

BK: Initially we were involved in providing relief items. On September 1 I visited Kot Addu and a few of the 300 camps in the Lakhay area and wrote up a report. The women and their families were facing the huge challenge of restarting life from scratch. The women I talked to were very worried about not having cash or in-kind goods to purchase clothes for their family, particularly their children, for the Eid-ul-Fitr [celebrating the end of Ramadan â€” ed.]. Winter will be approaching and they did not have warm clothes, blankets and quilts.

As the floodwaters receded, people were beginning to shift from temporary camps back to their villages. They were walking, riding cycles, tractor trolleys or donkey carts, and loaded down with usable items whether empty water cans, boxes, rations or animals â€” often goats and poultry.

Broken roads, caved-in bridges, tilted railway tracks, ravaged crops and the rotten smell of stagnant water presented a sad picture of the land, which was lush green with standing crops only a month before.

Some families returned to their ravaged villages only to find their houses have collapsed, either partially or completely. The majority in these villages are sick, suffering from fever and malaria. So the women not only take up reconstruction work without waiting for outside help, but they are also looking after sick family members.

Since most of the relief operations are limited to the camps, there is a real fear is that those returning to their villages will be forgotten. Being in their own devastated and destroyed houses does not mean they are safe and out of the misery.

Now we are more focused on following the rights-based campaigns:

â€¢ Gender-based discrimination/violence

â€¢ Women's representation and effective role in decision-making for reconstruction

â€¢ Post-disaster situation of women

â€¢ Impact of the environmental changes on working-class women

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â€¢ Demanding cancellation of the foreign debt, and more of the budget in the social sector to include women's development.

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