

# **Pakistan: Swat workers pay the price for Talibanisation**

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**All 44 factories have been closed rendering 40,000 workers jobless for more than two years. Over 55,000 workers employed in hotel industry are out of jobs. Lady Health Visitors have set bright example of workers' struggle**

Working class people in Pakistan have had different impressions of Swat created in their minds after reading newspapers and watching the electronic media in the last three to four years. Swat has become important news for all of us due to the increased militancy of the Taliban after 2007. The events in Swat are distant happenings for many Pakistanis from working class backgrounds as it was a tourist area which most people could not afford to visit.

Before the launch of military operations in Swat and neighboring areas there was intense hatred towards the Taliban and Mullahs among the common people of Swat. This hatred for political Mullahs was a result of the policies followed during the five-year rule of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which did not deliver any improvement to the lives of the working class people of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (at that time North-West Frontier Province). Even worse, particularly for the Swat region, Taliban groups like Mullah Fazallullah's were given a free hand to operate in the area, allowing them to take over through their militants and propaganda tools like FM radio. Political activists of the area have no doubts that this freedom of operation was given to the Taliban under the strategy developed by the military establishment after the US occupation of Afghanistan. Even the creation of the MMA before the elections in 2002 was part of the new strategy.

Why did the working class youth of Swat turn towards the Taliban? On the one hand, the social gap between the working class and the Khans of the area had widened so much over the last couple of decades that people did not relate any more to the traditional Jirga system under the tribal rules. On the other hand very high levels of corruption among government functionaries did not allow common people to exercise and assert their economic, social and political rights. During a discussion with a group of commoners in Matta tehsil, the second biggest tehsil of Swat district, it was evident that they would not have taken any responsibility under the tribal system to safeguard the Khans from the wrath of the Taliban. Unemployed youth of the region found it very easy to get a job from the Taliban with lot of money and authority. They used this money and authority to settle scores against Khans and in most cases in their personal feuds as well.

At the same time there are many instances where law enforcement agencies including local police and the military did not stop the Taliban from killing common people and government functionaries in the process of imposing their Sharia rule in the region. In one such instance the Taliban cut the throat of a police inspector in the main crossing of Matta city at a time when 42 armed policemen were present at the police station just a couple of yards away. This crossing was nicknamed "Khuni Chowk" after so many throat-cutting incidents there. Police officials could not save their own officer from being killed in such a horrible manner because they did not have "orders" from their superiors

to do so.

The losses sustained by the common people of Swat and adjacent areas during the military operation are evident from the destroyed homes, schools and orchards. Without going into the question of whether the military operation against the Taliban was successful or not, one may ask what conditions are common people in Swat living under now? Military and police checkpoints every couple of kilometers and the heavy military presence inside the towns and cities of the whole area has created such an environment that this region does not look like a normal place to live. How can business and economic activity take place in this environment to ensure a livelihood for working class people?

Even before the launch of military operations 75% of the industry in Swat district was closed due to shortages of electricity and other infrastructural problems. In some cases industries were closed by their owners because of the heavy Bhata (protection money) demanded by the Taliban. Before the military operations, 44 factories were working in the Swat district. These factories employed almost 40,000 workers, mostly local, but with some technical and higher officers from Punjab and Sindh provinces. These factories produced cosmetics, silk, plastic, shoes, food and medicines. Now the situation is that not a single factory is working, with some factories' buildings destroyed during the military operation. All 40,000 workers have been jobless for more than two years. No owners are ready to re-open their factories due to the threat of loss of more capital. Not a single effort has been made by the provincial or federal governments to help the families of the workers who have been rendered jobless. In fact the whole Swat region is practically controlled by the military and no one dares to talk to them about any concessions in this regard.

The biggest earning industry for the people of Swat before Talibanisation and the military operations was the tourist industry. There are more than 90 high quality hotels in the area. More than 55,000 workers employed in the hotel industry are now completely out of jobs. No tourists are willing to go to Swat even after more than a year of military operations. There was a package announced by the hotel owners association last month that would have provided free lodging at hotels for tourists for one whole month but not a single tourist came to visit from outside Swat. The hotel industry is not very pleased with the presence of military check posts on roads because they think it is the biggest hindrance stopping the tourists from coming to Swat.

The other big issue is that there is no space available for workers of the hotel and other industries to raise their collective voices under the banners of their trade unions. The biggest adverse influence of the closure of industries has been on the families of workers who have seen their lives worsen, lacking basic necessities to live on. In many cases parents were unable to pay examination fees for their children studying in high schools. Many workers are forced to move to other areas in search of jobs. In contrast to this situation where workers cannot even think of launching any protest against government inefficiency, just before the Talibanisation of this area in 2007 workers of the Matta Tehsil celebrated International Workers Day with zeal and jubilation. The whole main bazaar of Matta Tehsil was decorated with red flags and banners. Now this seems like a distant dream.

Fruit orchards are another very important source of income for the people of Swat. These are mainly a source of income for the feudal Khans and aristocrats of Swat but a large number of workers get job opportunities in the season. There are 75 different kinds of work involved, from cultivation to delivering fruit to markets. Thousands of workers are employed in this profession and despite the exploitation by feudalists it is the only way for workers to earn some money for their families.

Exploitation of workers becomes very easy in the security risk areas and women workers are especially vulnerable. A few years ago almost every home in Swat produced beautiful embroidered cloths that were sold all over Pakistan and in some cases other countries as well. Some of the women

were also involved in making decoration pieces and other works for the market. Even then the women involved in this profession were exploited in terms of the rates paid to them. There was no recognition of their work by the state and their families themselves. These women workers were being doubly exploited. But now the situation for these women has become worse. There is great fear among these women about going out in the market to purchase material to be used in making embroidered cloths but on top of that there are no orders for them to work on.

Other examples of exploitation include the case of construction workers. All the construction contracts in Swat for schools and other government building that were destroyed by the Taliban or by bombing during the military operation were awarded to the military itself. This situation does not allow construction workers to raise a voice for their rights. There is no trade union in Swat for construction workers and no other platform available to even ask for the implementation of the minimum wage. In some cases these workers were only given food and shelter to work for the most "powerful" contractor in Pakistan. This situation is reminiscent of cases of bonded labour at brick kilns.

One bright example of workers struggle in Swat after the military operation was observed last year when Lady Health Visitors (LHVs) got together and were able to raise their voice for a raise in their monthly salary up to the minimum wage (Rs. 6,000 at that time). This news was published in all major newspapers and was noted by the Prime Minister. Due to the brave struggle of the LHVs of Swat, the salaries of all LHVs in Pakistan were raised to Rs. 6,000.

The solution for the protection of workers' rights in Swat lies first of all of course in the peace situation. There must be peace in the area in order for job opportunities to be created for the people of Swat. But this peace is not easy to come by in the midst of the big games being played in our region by imperialist forces. The government can, however, ensure some things. Implement the minimum wage, i.e Rs. 7,000 after the raise announced by the government on May Day. Ensure the protection of jobs of workers - a right provided under the labour laws of Pakistan. Provide social security protection to all workers in areas on war footings. But the most important factor in this situation is to provide a space to the workers under the military's boots and guns to raise their voice collectively by organizing themselves in trade unions and associations.

**Khalid Mahmood**

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\* From Viewpoint:

<http://viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Swat%20workers%20pay%20the%20price%20for%20Tali%20banisation&f=full-12-june-11.php&y=2010&m=june>

\* Khalid Mahmood is Director Labour Education Foundation and Member Executive Committee International Federation of Workers' Education Associations