

Update on Bhatta (brick kiln) Workers' Fight

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Bhatta (brick kiln) Workers Union refuses to call off the strike

Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union refused to call off the strike call of Bhatta workers due to start on 18th April. They were asked to call off the strike to start the negotiation fixed for 20th April with the Labour Secretary and other high officials of the labour ministry. This was offered by the Labour Department director Punjab in an emergency meeting this morning at Lahore with the union leaders.

Bhatta Mazdoor Union leaders said that they want to negotiate with the government on 20th April, but the strike action will only end when chief minister of Punjab announce publicly that the Peshgi (advance) is over and the government will take all actions to implement the law.

In the meeting today at Labour department, several deputy directors of labour department were present who assured the union leaders that they will take actions that will collect the peshgies from the workers. The union leaders refused to believe their words and asked them to take actions in practice and then come for the meetings.

The union leaders agreed to meet the high officials of the ministry of the labour but said that the strike will go on.

In the meeting Mehmood But secretary Bhatta Mazdoor Union alongside with Mohammed Yousaf Baluch, national chairman National Trade Union Federation represented the union. While Mohammed Hanif Ramay from Mutihida Labour Federation and Ghulam Fatima from BLLF present in the meeting gave full support to the union strike call. The two were also invited by the Labour department for the meeting.

Over 1.8 million Bhatta workers will start an indefinite strike against the Peshgi system from 18th April all over Pakistan on the call of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union. It will be first national strike by the Bhatta workers in Pakistan. There will a public rally on daily basis in each district. The first public meeting will be held on 18th April at Qasur.

Bhatta (brick kiln) Workers national strike from 18th April

April 14, 2006

Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union announced today on 13th April at a press conference to go on a

nation wide strike from 18th April. Speaking at Lahore Press Club, Mehmood Butt alongside with dozens of Bhatta workers leaders across Pakistan declared since the government have not used its pressure on the Bhatta masses to implement on the decisions of the Supreme Court and Shariat Court of Pakistan for the cancellation of Peshgi (advance) system, we are forced to go on strike on all the 15000 Bhattas across Pakistan. Workers will go on indefinite strike from 18th April till the three point agenda of the union is met.

1- Effective implementation of cancellation of Peshgi system. Bhatta workers will not pay any Peshgi anymore. It is illegal to collect the Peshgies.

2- A minimum rate of Rupees 500 for making of 1000 bricks

3- All Bhatta be registered at the government and factory act should be imposed on all Bhatta, workers must have a right of pension and social security

Mehmood Butt said we will not tolerate anymore the system that makes the workers bonded. We do not want any more slavery system in Pakistan. Bhatta workers have been subjected to all sort of repressive measure adopted by the bosses with the help of the police and administration. Peshgi system is dead and can not be revived anymore, he declared.

Mehmood Butt said that Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union will fight any measure by the bosses to fail this strike. Bosses have gone on strike and failed. They led a failed strike that went on for a week only. It was first time that Bhatta bosses went on strike against the union. Now the union is announcing the strike that will be indefinite and will only end when government accept our demands It is class war. We are using our traditional method of peaceful strike and will show to the world that workers united will never be defeated.

Baba Bunta Masih, an leader of PBMU that only death can stop our strike from 18th April, if government does not listen to us till then. We will die or succeed. He hailed the decision of the Gujrat district administration that have announced public ally that Peshgi system is illegal. But they must use their influence to get it implemented, he said.

The Lahore Press Club hall was full of workers and journalists. All the main national print and electronic media was there. Over 45 minutes of questions by the media showed the interest of the media in this strike.

Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union has printed thousands of posters to send it all parts of Pakistan to prepare for the strike. If succeeded, this will be the first national strike of the Bhatta workers in decades. Mehmood Butt and most of the union leaders are member of Labour Party Pakistan and are affiliated with National Trade Union Federation.

Background Notes

April 14, 2006

Peshgi system is Punjabi name of Advances in shape of cash against future labour. This is a routine business in Brick Kiln industry of Pakistan. There are over 1.8 million of workers in this industry. The basis of this system is on exploitation of wages and physical independence of the workers. This advance cash makes the workers once in life a little rich but rest of his life is been spent in paying

back this amount. That makes the worker and whole family literary a slave at the Bhattas(brick kiln factory).

Peshgi System had been used by the bosses to pay low wages, more cuts in wages on the name of paying back the advances and moral pressure on the worker. This had been the basis for the slave system at Bhattas for long time. Several social movements in the past has taken up this case but were met with limited successes.

In 1988, the Supreme Court of Pakistan abolished the whole system after a massive campaign by some social organisations. The bosses went against this decision into Federal Shariat Court that this is an unIslamic decision. It took 18 years for the Shariat Court to decide. Finally on 10th October, fortunately, the Islamic court also decided against the bosses and upheld the decision. Over 90 percent of members of legislative bodies and administration and even judiciary are directly or indirectly engaged in this industry. Due to that, although, there is an Bonded Labour Abolition Act, but in the presence of these conditions, this law can not be beneficiary or even practiced.

The bosses did not accept the decision and they had never accepted any rights of the workers as they are paying Peshgies so it is their birth right to exploit the workers. They went into strike in March this year. The strike of the Bhatta bosses failed as there was internal wrangling. The Union had been demanding the implementation of the law but government did not listen.

So there is a lot at stake. The Union has taken a very bold step and today we got very good response by the workers and they are coming to the office to take the posters. The office is one room only with three full time staff that is paid a very meager wages. But over 100 workers are visiting the office on daily basis.

This is a new union just formed in 2004. the first national union of the Bhatta workers. The Union is based on Bhatta workers and are becoming known nationally, Last night most of the private tv channels showed the union leaders speaking in the press conference.