

Gojra: A great Victory for Textile workers

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The 39 days strike by some 15,000 textile workers at Gojra Pakistan ended in a stunning victory for the workers. This did not come without sacrifices by the workers involved in the strike. Still 28 workers are in jail waiting their plea of bail application to be heard on 19th August 2006.

On 15th August, a meeting of representatives of striking workers, power looms bosses and district administration last 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.

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 kilometer away from Faisalabad, the hub city of textile industry in Pakistan. The workers were subject to all sort 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 actions against them. The workers were harassed by the police who took several striking workers in day custody without charges. But workers were determined to go on.

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

On 1st of August, the local police dismantled the strike camp late at night. This was to fail the next day public meeting 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 leader was garlanded with shoes in 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 for charges of provocative anti government speeches and breech of section 144. 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.

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 the month to demand the increase of the workers in the whole area and Pakistan.

Some back ground material

Monday, August 14, 2006

Daily Times

Looms closing down as protests continue in Gojra

Workers demand increase in wages, protest police torture

By Faisal Ghumman

LAHORE: About 75 percent of Gojra's power looms have been closed down after a series of protests by workers demanding better wages and a number of workers have been arrested, according to a fact finding team of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

The Toba Tek Singh district coordination officer (DCO) has formed a committee consisting of workers and loom owners to resolve the issue.

Gojra's industry has been in turmoil for the last 35 days, after about 8,000 power loom workers went on strike demanding an increase in their wages. Workers said they should be paid equal to the workers in Faisalabad. The protests prolonged because the district government did not take notice, the Labour Department did not interfere, and there was a "conspiracy" between police and loom owners, the HRCP team said. The fact-finding team consisted of members of HRCP and Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), led by HRCP Legal Adviser Mehboob Ahmed Khan.

A number of power looms in Gojra were unregistered, the workers told the team, "politically influential" loom owners exploited workers, wages had not been revised in 18 years and there was no monitoring by labour officials.

Arrests and alleged torture by the police worsened the situation, but no action has been taken against Gojra City station house officer (SHO) Adnan Sheikh so far, according to the HRCP team. Wages depended on types of looms, they said. Loom 64 workers got Rs 95 a day (making 100 metres

of cloth), loom 72 workers got Rs 100 and loom 105 workers, Rs 116, they said. They said wages in Gojra were about half of those in Faisalabad. "I work on loom 105 and get Rs 116 a day," said Irfan Ansari, "but workers in Faisalabad get Rs 190." He said the workers would continue to protest until their demands were fulfilled and action was taken against the Gojra City SHO. "The owners do not seem serious," said Shaukat Ali, another worker.

Saifullah Cheema, a lawyer and a member of Pakistan People's Party, is pleading the workers' case. He told the team that the SHO arrested about 27 labourers on August 3 after a "peaceful gathering" at his house on August 2 to make a strategy. He said the police registered two first information reports against LPP Secretary General Farooq Tariq, National Trade Union Federation Chairman Yousaf Baloch and him under 16 MPO, and indicted workers in false cases.

On August 5 when a delegation of workers was going to meet the Toba Tek Singh DCO, the police blocked all routes, checked all the buses for power loom workers and arrested 80 of them, Cheema said. The workers were tortured during the arrests, he alleged.

He said the Gojra City SHO humiliated a workers' leader in front of loom owners when he was in police custody. "Asghar Zargar was garlanded with shoes," he alleged, which was a "disgrace to humanity" and a violation of human rights.

He said the workers were released after the DCO's intervention, but the SHO registered a case on 56 workers under Sections 188 and 506 of Pakistan Penal Code "in retaliation". About 30 workers had been sent to Jhang Jail in "false cases", the team was told.

DCO Nawazish Ali told the team that a five-member committee (two representatives of loom owners, two representatives of workers and a district government official) was scheduled to visit Faisalabad to survey power loom wages in the city. He said the SHO's alleged humiliation of the worker was a violation of human rights and workers should file an application against him. The fact-finding team demanded immediate action against the SHO, the withdrawal of illegal cases against workers, and the release of imprisoned workers. They said wages of Gojra's workers should be the same as those of workers in Faisalabad.

They said power looms workers should be registered by the Labour Department and labour laws should be enforced to ensure standard wages, social security, and health facilities for employees. Bonded labour should be eliminated from the power loom industry, it recommended.

Global bodies told about workers' plight

Daily dawn

By Our Correspondent

TOBA TEK SINGH, Aug 8: The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) has informed more than 6,000 international trade union organisations about the excesses faced by textile workers specially powerloom workers in Toba and sought their help in this regard.

At a press conference here on Tuesday, LPP central secretary-general Farooq Tariq said Pakistan is the only country where textile workers were being paid the lowest wages. He said powerloom workers were forced to work for 12 hours instead of eight hours a day.

He claimed the powerloom workers at Gojra had been on strike for the last one month, but the police

and the administration were backing factory owners instead of supporting the poor workers.

He said more than 100 workers were arrested, out of whom 35 were still in Jhang district jail. He alleged the Gojra SHO tortured 27 workers at the police station to please the factory owners.

A PPP leader, Saifullah Cheema, said only solution to end the workers' strike was to announce a raise in their wages.

Awami Jamhoori Party leader Rana Azam said if demands of Gojra workers were not accepted, the workers of Toba would also be forced to go on strike.

LPP women's wing in charge Begum Nazli Javed, Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor union central secretary-general Mahmood Butt, LPP's Punjab secretary Afzal Saroya and district secretary Tariq Mahmood were also present on the occasion.

They condemned the Toba DCO for giving wrong information to the BBC Urdu service about the arrest of 80 workers by the Sadar police some three days ago.

They also demanded withdrawal of cases registered against trade union leaders, political activists and powerloom workers.