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Thank you very much!

ESSF Support to Labour Education Foundation (Pakistan) - A brief report 2019/2020

Monday 15 March 2021, by [Labour Education Foundation \(Pakistan\)](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2021).

Dear members of ESSF and all those who contributed to ESSF solidarity funds,

Thank you very much for your consistent support to Labour Education Foundation (LEF). The Labour Education Foundation since its establishment in 1992/93, has mainly taken up issues of Labour rights and also taken up the issue of democracy in Pakistan. It is part of several national and international networks and has been recipient of several notational and international awards in this regard. LEF and ESSF has a long-term partnership regarding protection and promotion of workers rights in Pakistan.

Workers' rights

Some of the main projects that LEF has carried out with the support of some International labour rights organization has made significant difference in the lives of the working class in Pakistan. ESSF support has been instrumental in all these initiatives. Lately, In February 2021, The Islamabad High Court appointed a five-member commission to look into the lives of the **brick kiln workers**, the most exploited section of working class in Pakistan, one of them was an activist of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor (Brick Kiln Workers) Union, a union helped and developed by LEF with some assistance of ESSF. The Union is fighting against bonded labour and also for workers' union rights, wage increase, and implementation of health and safety measures.

ESSF support was used for the workers to help them to fight for their rights, Forced Labour, Minimum Age Convention, Worst Forms of Child Labour, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), Equal Remuneration, Workplace Harassment Act and CEDAW articles through gender inclusiveness training which strengthened the struggle of workers' rights in two provinces.

Awareness about labour rights, human rights, information regarding union formation and support provided for legal cases were the most appreciated efforts in this regard. Workers' rights campaigns, facilitated workers to get compensation from the Wage Compensation Court, reflected the views of the workers in district-level government institutions, wrote letters to the prime minister to reinstate the workers, mediated between the workers and the employers and arranged demonstrations against the violations of rights. They volunteered in helping to create a vast group of capacitated workers who can play a role in empowering others.

Labour Education Foundation motivated **women workers** to play an active role in the relevant unions. Gender awareness and discussion about women's rights were carried out in several training workshops with women workers. Women were facilitated to think about how they learn to differentiate between girls and boys, men and women and how it affects negatively the overall status

of girls and women around them. Some women shared that they used to consider themselves inferior to males but now they have learned that they are equal human beings.

Labour Education Foundation also helped developed community-based organization at the most under-developed areas of Lahore. These organizations are playing a role in solving the social issues faced by the community.

Labour Relief Campaign

The Labour Relief Campaign, initiated by Pakistan's Left and Progressive movements was initiated with the objective to provide monthly rations to working-class families affected by the coronavirus-induced lockdown. Door to door rations was provided to more than 4500 families in nine cities across Punjab, including Lahore, Faisalabad, Okara, Sheikupura, Toba Tek Singh, Pakpattan, Gujranwala, Quetta and Qila Saifullah. Labour Education Foundation was instrumental in this campaign during the coronavirus days after February 2020. Political workers, trade unionists and students from different social and political movements are volunteering with the Labour Relief Campaign. The funds are generated through sympathizers and active supporters of the collective Left project in Pakistan. The selection of recipient families for rations was carried out by worker unions in each city, and rations are then prepared and delivered by volunteers.

The origins of the Labour Relief Campaign begin in the aftermath of the deadly earthquake of October 2005 in Pakistan. Our workers prepared relief trucks loaded with rations and necessary equipment and sent them to the areas affected by the earthquake. Relief camps were also set up for the earthquake victims. Similarly, the relief campaign continued during the devastating floods of 2010 and 2012 in Pakistan. The campaign does not have a permanent secretariat or any salaried employees. All arrangements are carried out voluntarily with the support and help of progressive social and political movements.

This year, the campaign was re-launched by Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement, with the help of Progressive Students Collective, Progressive Academics Collective, Labour Education Foundation, Folio Books, Aurat March, Progressive Labor Federation and Pakistan Kissan Rabta Committee.

Most of the factory workers were working on contract were out of jobs almost three months. Workers were under paid or were not paid at all for months due to order cancellations and lockdowns. Though the government instructed employers not to fire workers during the lockdown and to pay their wages but reality was different and according to the estimates by unions around half a million garment and textile workers were jobless soon after the pandemic. These were the workers who were helped during the Campaign.

The others who were helped were home based workers (HBW): Their work was already not regular, sometimes only seasonal and wages were low, but because of COVID, the majority of the workers were out of work since March.

Now the situation is that the middleman first does not pick the finished goods, then does not pay. Goods are accumulating in shops, while purchasing power is not as before.

In some sectors like shoe making, buckles making, toys making and packing work is going on, but the majority of HBW involved in garment-related work are still without work: only cropping work is on.

Self-employed women are unable to start work as there is less demand from the market. In addition, the prices of raw materials have already increased, which has raised the price of their own products.

LEF was a major actor in launching of the **Labour Relief Campaign**, formed in collaboration with trade unions, students, and political activists to provide relief and to raise the concerns of workers.

To stay in contact with workers was a big challenge because of Covid-19, and during this period contacts were maintained through the phone. Availability of the Internet was a major issue so LEF provided connection packages to workers, including some of HBW leadership and active members.

We organized Zoom meetings to disseminate information regarding Covid-19. Home-based workers were present in these sessions. Terms of Reference (TORs) were developed in collaboration with LEF staff and some representatives of HBW to conduct meeting in the field when the lockdown was ended.

In collaboration with different workers' groups in Lahore, during the months of May and June, 3 demonstrations were arranged, following the Standard Operating Procedures (SORs) [1] and maintaining social distance to raise the issues of workers and to demand that workers should not be laid off and should be paid during lock down period.

Labour Relief Campaign was working with the objective of providing monthly rations to working-class families affected by the coronavirus-induced lockdown. Trade union leaders were involved in developing lists for the distribution of food items.

LEF facilitated 1409 people for registration in Ehsas - cash grant [2] and around 30 percent got it, including HBW as well. Some women do not have national identity cards so it was not possible for them to apply for that.

We arranged 7 online meetings with workers in 10 districts to stay in touch with field organizers and active members, to provide rations, and to learn about the situation of workers in these areas.

All these experiences increased the understanding, importance and value of organizing to raise a joint voice.

We enhanced collaboration and networking along with other trade unions and progressive groups to demand their rights, including social security, and to avoid this kind of vulnerabilities in the future.

We highlighted the importance of struggling and demanding appropriate and worker-friendly safety nets to deal with such situations of crises.

We understood the need to create and focus on other different forms of organizing, like at the community level.

It was clear that learning and adopting new communication technologies to stay in touch and to be active even during the time of the pandemic was pertinent.

The challenge is that how to convert these matters into an opportunity to strengthen workers' rights movement - trade unions in Pakistan needs strengthening themselves and they may take time to adopt new strategies.

Report by Khalid Mahmood
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Footnotes

[1] In reference mainly to usage of masks, sanitisers and keeping distance while working during Covid.

[2] Ehsas Programme is launched by the government in Pakistan to support people in poverty and those who lost jobs during lockdown.