

Trade Unions under attack in Pakistan - We have no option but to fight back

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Trade unions activists in several cities are facing arrests, tortures and kidnapping by the bosses and state agencies. Workers are fighting back against these attacks with utmost sacrifices.

The announcement by Pakistan Peoples Party government to lift restriction on trade unions activities has brought a new wave of unionization in many private industries.

The bosses are not used to it. They have made tremendous profits under general Musharaf 8 years of dictatorship. Although, he is still there as “president” but there is some breathing space. Wherever workers have tried to form new unions, bosses have tried their best to intimidate the union activists with false cases, arrests, tortures and kidnapping. Pakistan people Party government has yet to show any action against these bosses.

Along with several trade union leaders, I addressed a press conference today on 18 May at Lahore Press Club to bring eyewitness to these tortures.

Malik Tahir of New Khan Metro Bus Workers and Staff Haqooq Union Lahore showed several wounds on his body to the media. He was kidnapped and tortured on 16 May evening at Lahore by the bosses of the private bus company. His only crime was to attend a press conference and demonstration of the union to condemn the sacking of 80 drivers and conductors by the New Khan bus company. After the union was formed, over 80 members of the union were terminated including all the main leadership.

The Union was registered as a union on 6 May 2008 by the labour department. It the first union formed in the bus company. A Muslim League member of parliament Mr. Umer Hayat Rokri owns the private bus company. He was a member of Musharaf supported PMLQ. After 18 February, he changed his political affiliation and joined PML Nawaz Sharf group. He is one of the most known transporters and owns several hundreds of busses. His bus company has the major share of the transportation inside Lahore . Lahore has no public bus service.

There is no permanent worker at the bus company. Every one is on contract. The wages are very low. The drivers are paid a maximum of Rupees 5500 (\$90) and conductors Rupees 2500 (\$48) a month plus a commission system of 2.5 percent of the daily income. That brings less than \$ 50 a month in most cases. But there a lot of fines on the drivers and conductors. The bus company has a record of maximum numbers of accidents. The reason is that drivers are asked to complete the whole route three times a day in any case. There is no way that drivers can do that in 8 hours time. If they try to do that, there are accidents. When there is an accident, the company takes care of the bus but not the employees. They have to take care themselves.

There is no worker registered at the social security and none of him or her has any social security card. The company has a group of gangsters at the depots and they beat the drivers and conductors for any small mistake. There is no workers protection at all in the bus company. No labour law was practiced at the company. Under Musharaf dictatorship, the bus company went on without been

noticed by labour department for any violation of the labour laws.

Some workers decided to fight back against this brutal behavior even at the cost of their jobs. Secret meetings of the workers went on for some time after the general elections. Finally, they decided to form the union. They contacted LPP office and the first poster of the union was printed by Pakistan Trade Unions Resource center run by Labour Education Foundation in Lahore . When workers went to fly-post the poster at different bus depots, several of them were beaten by the gangsters and later were handed over to police. The police registered false cases against the leaders and arrested three of them. Two were released on bail, while one is still in jail.

This all was going on while I was visiting UK from 8 May to 15 May. On my first day at the LPP office on 17 May, I was shown marks on the body of Malik Tahir who was brutally beaten up on 16 May night. This was going too far. The textile union leaders also called us from Qasur and Faisalabad who told us about attacks on their members as well.

At Faisalabad , five workers are in jail for the last 8 days. The police on the instruction of the textile bosses have registered a false case against them. They all belong to Labour Qaumi Movement, an organization fighting for textile workers right at Faisalabad . LQM mobilized over 2000 workers in protest but police did not released them. At Qasur similar incidents has happened and the boss who kidnapped and torture on union activists is still not arrested despite a case is registered against him after a massive demonstration by the union in the city.

We decided not to sit quite but to fight back. As a first step, we called all the labour leaders to a press conference to tell their stories to the media.

There were more journalists than we expected.. Almost all the private television channels were there and most of the print media as well. It was a well-crowded press conference. We do not know how many will actually print or broad cast our news but we had very friendly encounter with the journalists.

We announced at the press conference that on 22 May, Labour Party Pakistan will Gherao (picket) the bus company in Lahore in protest if the bosses are not arrested for kidnapping and workers are not given their jobs back. We also announced the LQM would block Faisalabad , the third largest city on Friday 23 May.

There is no way back. We have to fight. The workers have shown their real commitment to form the unions. However, the PPP government is yet to fulfill their promises of a free and fair atmosphere where workers can freely form the union. We appealed to the PPP government to take notice of the situation or we will have no option but to organize demonstrations, rallies and strike for the defense of our basic democratic right to form the trade unions.

Labour Party Pakistan mobilise thousands at May Day rallies in Pakistan

Over 10,000 participated in May Day rallies organized by Labour Party Pakistan and its sympathizing organizations. They include Women Workers Help Line (WWHL), National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) and Labour Education Foundation (LEF). This May, we had the largest mobilizations ever. No other Left or Right political party in Pakistan could

match this mobilization.

At Lahore, WWHL mobilized over 1200 working class women to raise the issue of home based workers. This was the largest women rally in Lahore. Another 500 workers were organized by NTUF and LEF in a rally that joined the main rally of Pakistan Workers Confederation.

At Faisalabad, LQM organized the largest rally of the city with over 3000 workers mainly from textile sector.

At Karachi, NTUF organized a seminar with over 1300 participant and later LPP organized a rally with over 500 participating. NTUF seminar was the largest gathering at Karachi.

At Murdan, over 250 women participated in a WWHL seminar, the largest women mobilization in this religiously dominated city in North West Frontier Province.

At Sanghar in Sind, over 2000 participated in a joint rally of different trade unions and LPP. This was the main rally in the district.

At Moro in Sind, over 500 participated in workers rally organized by LPP in cooperation with different trade unions.

At Qasur in Punjab, over 400 power looms workers gave a sit in to demand the arrest of a power loom boss who had attacked a worker. The police had to act on the demand immediately to end the sit in. This was an LPP rally with different trade unions.

At Hyderabad in Sind, over 700 participated in a May Day rally by LPP, NTUF and LEF.

At Bahawal Nagar in Punjab, over 500 participated in a joint rally of LPP and other social and trade union organizations.

At Multan, LPP participated in a joint rally with other trade unions attended by hundreds.

Similar May day smaller meetings were organized in several other cities and towns