

Brick Kiln Workers struggle in Pakistan and state oppression

Saturday 28 January 2006, by [TARIQ Farooq](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2006).

A criminal case has been registered against 60 leaders of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor (Brick Kiln) Union on 24th January 2006 in Qasur. Their only crime is to organize a rally in the city on 23rd January. The first investigation report FIR by police state that workers were raising provocative slogans. Then giving the detail of the "provocation" it states that they were demanding high wages and registration of the Bhattas (brick kiln factories). Only 20 of 250 factories in the district are so for registered at the Labour Department.

Brick Kiln workers in Pakistan have woken up. The union they formed in 2004 is on the rise. So is the state oppression against them. Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union is taking up the issues of bonded labour, wages and registrations of Bhatta,s (brick kiln factories).

On 23rd January 2006, over 1200 workers got together at Qasur, the largest gathering so far in the city of any workers group. They started their march from the office of the Assistant director Labour department. Carrying banners posters and red flags they marched over five kilometers through the city center to reach the district courts. Most of the government administration offices are located in the area.

They were demanding an end to Peshgi system (advance money) a minimum of five hundreds rupees per 1000 bricks and registration of the Bhatta,s.

At the district courts, there was a sit in on one side of the road. Short speeches were made here by union leaders and also by Labour Party Pakistan central leadership including Nisar Shah and Choudry Imtiaz Ahmed and myself. We gave full support to the union demand and asked the local administration to accept the demands.

Local police Chief, Mr. Ali Mohsan invited us for negotiations. We had half an hour round of discussion. He called the assistant director of Labour to have a meeting with us. Ten of us went to his office and he alongside his three labour officers promised to help the union and they accepted that the demands are genuine and are in fact a demand on the implementation of the labour laws.

Workers did not leave the area while we had negotiations. Later we held another meeting of workers to explain what has been discussed with the administrations. They all agreed with the proceedings.

A day later, we were informed by the national media that a case is been registered against 60 activists of the union including the national secretary of the union Mehmood Butt.

Mehmood Butt was a union leader at the steel factory of Mian Nawaz Sharif, the ex prime minister of Pakistan in the eighties. He was kicked out of the factory for forming the union, brutally beaten up by his gangsters and was dismissed from job. He became active in Left politics and was a founding member of Labour Party Pakistan in 1997. During 2004, he alongside with other LPP supporters started the first national union of Brick kiln workers in Pakistan.

Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union has now its offices in Lahore and Hyderabad. The membership of

the union is growing day by day. The union is spreading like fire all over Pakistan. The union helped to force the government for a substantial raise in the wages of the brick kiln works. The Minimum Wage Board of Pakistan has raised the making of 1000 bricks from 184 Rupees to 290 Rupees in December 2005. But there was no implementation of this raise.

The union also helped to free hundreds of brick kiln workers from bonded labour through court orders during the last two years. 1.8 million Workers are involved in brick kiln Bhattas. Most of them work under inhuman conditions. Majority are like bonded labour because of the Peshgi system. Under is system, the bosses offer some advance money to workers and they can not leave the place until they pay the whole amount back to the bosses. Most of the workers are illiterate and they do not know how much from the advance money is been paid. Bosses take the advantage of this and many so-called fines are imposed on workers in one or other way. That fine is also included in the advance money. One of the main demands of this rally was an end to the Peshgi system.

A social movement under the leadership of Bonded Labour Liberation Front in the end eighties forced the courts of Pakistan to take notice of this situation and Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered an end of Peshgi system in 1988. A law was made after this ruling on the name of Bonded Labour Abolition Act 1992. The bosses went to an Islamic court called Shariat Court against this ruling of Supreme Court on the excuse that this is un Islamic.

Qasur is a border area of Pakistan. Benazir Bhotto's Pakistan Peoples Party has won the National Assembly seat from this area. The local MP from PPP is Choudry Manzoor Ahmed who belongs to an entrust tendency, Tabqati Jeddojuhd (Class Struggle) within Pakistan Peoples Party, a section of Ted Grant/Alan Wood group. He is also president of Pakistan Trade Union Defense Campaign, a front organization of their tendency in Pakistan. But neither he nor any member of his group was to been seen in this class struggle that erupted in his constituency. We are trying to contact them to seek their support in this situation.

On 25th January, a local court in Qasur has granted temporary bail to the three labour leaders till 4th February who were nominated by name in FIR. The other 60 activists are described in FIR as unknown, giving a space to police to arrest any one in this case. The union has called all its members to the court on 4th February when they will appear in the court.

On 27th January, in a press conference in Lahore, I alongside with the union leaders have condemned the case and gave warning to the government that the government be withdrawn otherwise a national strike of the brick kiln will start from 17th March.

Please fax protest letters to the police chief in Qasur

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