

What a small group can do?

A mass movement against transport fares increase

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Handful of young activists including members of Progressive Youth Front and Labour Party Pakistan gathered on 18 March in Bharkoh Islamabad to protest against the increase of transport fares. The PPP government has increased the fare from Rupees 10 to Rupees 13 for a stop to stop fare. It was 11 in the morning and the group has chosen the time consciously because of students.

The Bharkoh students were angry on this increase and so were many hundreds who were travelling to Islamabad and Rawalpindi from this suburb of Islamabad on daily bases. Every person travelling from this small town going to Islamabad has to pay over 500 Rupees extra after the fare increase.

The activists have judged the mood very well and took the initiative with a handful of comrades. Within minutes of unfolding their banner, the small usual protest grew to hundreds and then to thousands. The youth has taken over. People joined all the time. The road to famous tourist area of Murree goes passes through here. That was closed down.

The electronic media came here with their live broad cast arrangements. The news spread on national level. Police was unable to control it. Pakistani police can control the large demonstration only by suppressions and they are not used to peaceful large rallies. Police was showing very aggressive tone. They started using lathi charge, tear gas shelling and on one occasion direct firing. One student was seriously injured by a bullets and this enraged the mob.

The negotiation started with the administration and within hours of the demonstration turning into mass rally. The administration agreed to withdraw the rise in fare and restored the previous one. The organizer of the original demonstration including our comrades announced the end of the demonstration as the main demands have been met. This was rejected by the mob in general who were angrier on police behavior.

The big guns of the political scene had arrived including the members of parliament and media went around them and presented them as the main organizer of the demonstration. They also agreed to stop the demonstration but the masses rejected them as well.

The mob turned violent and started burning the busses on the road. They damaged the government property. It was rule of the mob who was not led by any group. They were leading themselves. The movement spread to Islamabad main area and all the shopkeepers were forced to close their businesses. Main roads were under control of the young ones. They were proudly moving around with their sticks. Police had to run many times whenever they were confronted by this mob. I heard police officers saying that we have failed to control the mob. We need army to control it. That means they were inviting the most repressive institutions and want them to fire on the mob. The mob ruled the streets till late night and Islamabad was virtually closed down on the issue of transport fare increase.

Many dozens activists had already been arrested and police had tried every method of controlling the mob but were not successful.

19 March was another day of protests. It had now spread to Rawalpindi Faizabad area. This is an area where most of the private buses leave for other areas of Punjab.

Labour Party Pakistan Islamabad had announced on 18 March to organize a rally on 19 March against the arrests of the activists and to demand their immediate release. LPP general secretary Nisar Shah Advocate along with leading LPP activists were in the forefront of this demonstration.

On 19 March, roads were blocked by thousands of young ones. There was no clear demand of these young people. It was a manifestation of collective anger against continues price hike in every field of life. They were angry on government attitude towards the people. They have spoken at last, unfortunately in more violent manner. Rangers and para military forces were called in and they went ruthlessly against the protesters. At one time, they were short of tear gas shells. Dozens of people have been injured. Over 100 have been arrested included two Labour Party Pakistan activists, they are Akhlaq Ahmed and Basit Ali arrested from Faizabad on 2nd Day of protest. Both have been charged under 7 ATA that is anti terrorist law. They had nothing to do with unruly actions of the mob.

Labour Party Pakistan had started a campaign called Inkaar Tehreek (no movement) against the increase in transport fares last month in Lahore where several demonstrations were held. In Lahore also, a large numbers of people have refused to pay the increased fare and have in fact stop travelling by private buses.

In Chnghi Amar Saddu Lahore, Progressive Youth front activists small demonstration last week also attracted hundreds. The demonstration was also taken over by young workers and students who went on rampage to burn the buses and breaking traffic signals. These are the negative side of such initiatives where a small group initiative can be used by those who still have to learn how to protest and turn the protest in violent activities.

The Inkaar Tehreek initiated by Labour Party Pakistan is turning into a mass movement in several cities where the main demand has been to withdraw the increased fares of the private transport. The Tehreek also demand nationalization of the private bus companies and starting a government transport system with a minimum fare of Rupees two for one stop.

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