

Pakistan: Workers' power in Faisalabad

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June 26, 2008 — More than 10,000 workers picketed a power loom factory in Sadhar Faisalabad for more than eight hours on 24 June. They were demanding the arrest of the owner of the factory and his gangsters. The factory owner, Asif, a Muslim League Q member of Punjab Assembly (MPA), directed his gangsters to open fire on the 300 workers protesting outside the factory for higher wages. Seven workers were shot and severely injured. They were rushed to the Allied Hospital in Faisalabad. One was in a critical condition.

On hearing the news of the shootings, the workers of all the power loom and textile factories of the area walked out in protest and picketed (*gherao*) the factory. The workers were led by the local leaders of Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), an organisation of textile workers, supported by the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) and several radical social movements.

The main leaders of LQM were busy elsewhere in Faisalabad, where workers has taken action for better wages. Almost half of the Faisalabad power loom workers had been on strike for the last two days on the instruction of the LQM.

Faisalabad is the largest textile city of Pakistan and third-largest city of Pakistan. A private television channel Express broadcasted live from the scene of the picket. This brought more workers to the spot.

Those who had fired on workers were forced to remain inside the factory. The police wanted to take them out, but the workers will not allow the police to enter the factory. They do not have any trust in the police. The workers demanded the arrest of Asif, who had fled the scene already. Hundreds of police was mobilised from all over the district. As police tried to enter the factory to rescue the gangsters, the workers resisted. Police fired tear gas, and fired in the air, and some fired directly at the picketers. The workers retaliated with stones and forced the police to retreat. In the meantime, more and more workers arrived and joined the picket.

Earlier, on June 8, the LQM had organised a workers' conference in the area. It was attended by more than 5000 people and was addressed by Labour Party Pakistan general secretary Nisar Shah, Sarwar Bari of the Pattan Development Organisation and other labour leaders. The speakers announced that that peshgi (advance) system is illegal and no boss can cut the peshgi from workers' wages. They also demanded a social security card for every worker and the implementation of labour laws. The conference set a very radical mood among workers. It was first large manifestation of workers' power in the area.

As we heard the news in Lahore, four of us left for Faisalabad immediately, a two and half hour drive from Lahore. When we arrived around 5.30 pm, police were already in retreat. As we waved our red flags, hundreds of workers came to shout slogans against police and for workers' unity and solidarity. We went to the besieged factory and workers started gathering around us. I warned the bosses of a nationwide campaign if the bosses are not arrested, particularly Asif the MPA. We also told workers not to burn factories and avoid violence. ``Violence will always play in the hands of the bosses and the state'', I declared. Earlier, some enraged workers had burnt three factories owned by the same boss.

As I finished my speech, I was told that yet another injured worker hit by a bullet had been found in a nearby field. I rushed the injured worker to hospital in my car. He had been hit in his foot. The injured workers told me that he was told by the gangsters to run away, he refused, then they fired around him; he did not run, they then fired at his foot. He was unconscious for some time and hours later. Workers feared he would be arrested if they dared to take him to hospital. I drove through hundreds of policemen and asked them to give way so I could take the worker to hospital.

A nearby main road was closed by hundreds of women belonging to the families of the workers. They took the decision on their own to close the road to create more pressure on the administration. This was the result of the speeches by LPP leaders at the conference who had asked the workers to involve women in the movement.

Eventually, the workers allowed the police to enter the factory.

I returned to the area with Aslam Meraj, labour secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan Punjab, who was at the hospital to take care of the seven injured workers taken there in the afternoon. We arrived to hear that the Punjab labour minister was rushing to the area. By now, all the main private media had arrived at the scene and it had become national news. Ashraf Sohna, the labour minister, arrived and came straight to where we were standing.

Aslam Meraj gave a brief account of what had happened and made it clear that until the workers' demands were met, we would not end the picket of the factory. The labour minister told the big crowd that he would get the Asif, the owner, arrested and would not leave Faisalabad until the arrest. He also said that all the demands of the workers would be met.

We then proceeded to negotiate with top police officers. Aslam Tareen, the senior superintendent of police in Faisalabad told us that he had arrested Asif and nine other gangsters, and recovered 15 sophisticated guns from the factory. On hearing this, we agreed to provide a safe passage to the arrested gangsters. We asked the workers to let the police van come close to the factory and take away the arrested ones. This was done, although some workers still threw stones in anger when the police van was leaving.

While we were leaving to return to Lahore at around 10 pm, all the roads around the area were filled by young workers. We were stopped at several places and when they recognised us, they allowed us to leave.

It was a workers' day at Faisalabad and in Pakistan. A new history of militant struggle has been written by the power loom workers. They have shown the power of the industrial workers.

By Farooq Tariq
