

## Greeting May Day (Pakistan)

Saturday 1 May 2010, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2010).

The May Day is venerated in summing up the victories attended by the working classes in their fight to earn their due rights. It is with just pride that they stand in defiance up against all forces of exploitation. German-polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg informs: 'The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia'. The workers there, according to Rosa, decided in 1856 to organise a day of complete stoppage in favour of the eight-hour day. The day of this celebration was to be April 21. The first to follow the example of the Australian workers were the Americans. In 1886, they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage. On this day 200,000 workers left their work and demanded the eight-hour day. This May 1 affair did not end the same evening. It was followed by a series of actions including Haymarket Affair on May 4, 1886 in Chicago. At a rally to express solidarity with striking workers, a bomb was hurled at police. It resulted in the deaths of eight police officers. In the internationally publicised legal proceedings that followed, eight Anarchists (a fact often disregarded) were tried for murder. Four were put to death and one committed suicide in prison. Paid in life of Anarchist revolutionaries, the Haymarket affair is generally considered the origin of international May Day.

Over the years, May Day has been recognised as a global event celebrated as a symbol of the rights and dignity of the working masses. The workers in Pakistan face even greater challenges as they greet May Day 2010 when a party born out of mass struggles is in power for the fourth time. Incidentally, May Day was declared a public holiday by first PPP government (once annulled by Nawaz Sharif during his second stint in power) when Bhutto government introduced a number of working class reforms. The two succeeding PPP governments, headed by Benazir, proved distinctly anti-working class. Fourth and present PPP government has completed two turbulent years in power. Unlike 1970s, present PPP leadership does not even pay a lip service to trade union concerns. On taking oath, Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani announced a minimum wage of Rs 6000. Not a single concrete step, in two years, has been taken to ensure this minimum wage. Exact figures are hard to acquire but roughly over 70 percent industrial units refuse to abide by legal minimum wage.

Instead of addressing trade unions' grievances, present PPP government replaced Musharraf-era Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO) 2002 with an even anti-workers Industrial Relations Act (IRA) 2008. It was promulgated on December 14, 2008. Ironically, in 2004 PPP while in opposition had suggested: 'All workers shall have the right to participate in elections to reserved seats for workers and peasants and to carry out duties as an elected representative on all such seats at the district, provincial and federal level without penalty hindrance or discouragement by employer'. In IRA 2008, even this pledge was not upheld. There are almost two dozen sections in IRA 2008 (soon to be replaced with IRA2010 as IRA2008 expired on April 20) criticised by trade union leadership.

In a country where hardly 5 to 7 percent (almost 2.2 million in a work force of 45 million) workers are unionised, IRA 2008 provided legal cover to cancel the registration of a trade union and dismiss the trade union leadership in case of 'illegal strikes'. Unlike Britain or Sweden, trade union movement in Pakistan has not been able to unite under one umbrella. Pakistan Workers Confederation (PWC) was a step in that direction but it has not yet translated into a counterpart of British Trade Union Congress or Swedish LO.

It was therefore a welcome step provided in IRO 2002 that every union had to affiliate with a federation while at least ten unions, at least one from every province, to build a federation. Now two unions can join hands to form a federation. At the same time, union registration process has become even complicated. Similarly, under the IRO 1969 an employer could be fined as well as imprisoned for violating labour laws. Under IRA 2008, imprisonment has been quashed. Another controversial clause in IRA2008 is the CBA-term. It has been reduced from three years to two years. The promulgation of banking Ordinance 27-B in banking sector during Musharraf period remains effective. The Karachi Shipyard workers were denied trade union rights under Musharraf dictatorship. These workers still await for the restoration of their constitutional rights.

The record of PMLN is not envious either. While Sharif brothers keep cursing Musharraf regime, they are, however, not ready to lift ban on labour inspections, imposed during Musharraf dictatorship in Punjab province. Scandalously, the workers at Hamza Board Mills, in Toba Tek Singh, owned by Sharifs had to go on strike for minimum wage March last year.

Meantime, workers in government services such as clerks, teachers, para-medical staff, agriculture sector, charitable institutions (NGOs, religious organisations) or armed forces cannot unionise. Though one in no way should compare an elected government with a military regime yet it is hard not to notice a continuity in economic policies of the two. Privatisation is the hallmark of these neo-liberal policies followed by Shaukat Aziz as well as Yusuf Raza Gilani. The PPP government plans to sell eight major public sector establishments. As a first step, recently federal government announced to bring people from private sector as members of board of directors in eight major public sector organisations which include PIA, Pakistan Steel, PASSCO, Pakistan Railways, Utility Stores and National Highways Authority.

The direct negative impact of privatization has been seen on working class. At least 600,000 workers have lost their jobs during the 15 years of privatisation. Most of the privatised factories practice contract system with a scant respect for labour law. On the other hand, despite conditions not favouring unions and working classes, there is an upsurge in labour movement. Privatisation process has come to a halt. Last time, PPP government announced to privatise Qadirpur gas fields. Even before a process could be initiated, the decision was taken back in view of militant workers' protests.

More and more workers are coming together to form unions. Peasants at Okara military farms remain defiant. The textile workers in Faisalabad, organised by Labour Qoumi Movement (LQM), have re-established militant traditions once witnessed there in 1970s. The (LQM) has gone a step further as LQM Chairman Mian Qayum is contesting upcoming bi-elections for PP-63 from Faisalabad.

Similarly, women workers are becoming more vocal and affirmative in their actions. First time in Pakistan, Home Based Women Workers Federation has been registered with NIRC with active support by Labour Education Foundation, a national level labour organisation. An equally important development is the success of Women Workers Helpline, busy organising working women. Demonstrations against contract labour and privatisation or manifestations for winning short working hours, better wages, social security and above all dignity have become a daily occurrence across Pakistan at factory floors.

The workers in fact are stretching their muscles worldwide. Greece, Turkey and Portugal have recently seen mass strikes attracting international attention. Red shirts in Thailand have become a front page headline. Workers in Iran have begun to assert themselves like never before. In Bolivia, neo-liberal myths have been successfully challenged by nationalisation drive while Venezuela's 'socialism for 21<sup>st</sup> century' has inspired an entire continent. From Cairo to Cape Town, workers in Africa are back on streets. Judging this changing mood and increased working class militancy, Hugo

Chaves has called for a Fifth International. Let us greet this May Day in Pakistan by welcoming Hugo's call. (ends)

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