

The Pause that Represses: Coca-Cola Pakistan Greet New Union with Death Threats, Abduction, Extortion and Dismissals

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The Coca-Cola factory in Multan, Pakistan, where workers are determined to resist management repression and fight for their rights.

Since forming a union at Coca-Cola's bottling plant in the southern Pakistan city of Multan in June 2009, members have met with death threats, abduction, firings, extortion, forgery and fraud. Management's vicious response to the workers' fight for a union is a story drenched with violence, corruption, sleaze and escalating criminality.

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The Multan plant is part of Coca-Cola Beverages Pakistan Limited. (CCBPL), jointly owned by Turkish bottler Coca-Cola Icecek (CCI) and The Coca-Cola Company (TCCC) based in Atlanta. TCCC, which sits atop the global Coca-Cola system, has been informed of every illegal action by the Multan management, at every stage. What is Coca-Cola, upright and socially responsible corporate citizen, doing in a dive like this? Workers throughout the Coca-Cola worldwide system are demanding answers - and want the company to clean up the operation and respect worker rights. The story begins with...

Extortion and Blackmail

The Employees' Union Coca-Cola Beverages grew out of the organizing efforts of the IUF-affiliated National Federation of Food, Beverages and Tobacco Workers (NFFBTW), whose membership includes 3 other Coca-Cola Pakistan plants.

Management's response to union organizing in Multan was immediately hostile. As the union prepared for its founding congress on June 19, 2009, management began a campaign of blackmail and extortion targeting the 36 sales and merchandizing officers (SMOs) at the plant identified as active union supporters. On June 8 all SMOs were ordered to sign stamped, blank legal documents (the type used for affidavits or confessions) and to hand over signed blank personal checks. Those who refused this clearly illegal order were ordered to stay in the plant and barred from their sales routes - resulting in lost sales commissions amounting to a third of their monthly income. For 20 days SMOs were harassed into handing over these checks illegally. Four who refused were ultimately dismissed, together with three "temporary" workers directly employed at the plant, all of them strong union supporters.

When the NFFBTW and IUF informed both the national management of CCBPL and TCCC in Atlanta

of the new union's formation on June 25, when it filed for registration with the District Labour Officer, management responded with escalating attacks on union officers in an attempt to force the union to disband.

Faced with threats and intimidation even before the union's registration, union officers took pre-emptive action by filing a petition on June 26 in the Punjab Labour Court for a "stay order" that prohibits management from taking action against them. Coca-Cola Multan management promptly violated the stay order through forced transfers and dismissals. Four union officers were sent home and told not to report to work. On June 27 union president Ghulam Rasool, who has worked at the plant for 18 years, was transferred to work a long-distance truck route to the northern province of Balochistan in order to eliminate direct contact with the Multan workers. Although this transfer violated the court order, the plant general manager dismissed the law as "irrelevant": The union has filed contempt of court charges against management for violating the stay order - a procedure that involves criminal charges against management.

Abduction...

Attempted registration was followed by "night visits" to the private homes of union officers on June 27 and 28; eight Coca-Cola Multan managers tried to force union officers to quit the union or sign a letter withdrawing the union's application for registration. On the morning of June 28, union joint secretary Riaz Hussain was abducted by managers, held in an unknown location and threatened until released later that day.

Through its intervention with TCCC, the IUF secured the reinstatement of the dismissed officers and the withdrawal of the union president's transfer, coupled with guarantees against any further harassment and intimidation. Local management promptly violated these guarantees. When the union officers returned to work on July 9 they were followed by security guards and management staff throughout the entire shift, generating a climate of fear in which union members were not able to communicate with their representatives.

Political manipulation

Management used their political connections to exert pressure on the trade union registrar to reject the union's registration. On July 10, the District Labour Officer finally succumbed. To avoid a lengthy legal wrangle, the union decided to submit a second registration application for the same union, renamed People's Employees Union CC Multan. The application is still awaiting approval...

Death threats...

Local management became more desperate as the IUF and the NFFBTW increased pressure on TCCC and CCBPL to respect trade union rights in Multan, resorting to death threats against union officers and their families. Unknown men began visiting the homes of the union officers, including general secretary Muhammad Ashiq Bhutta, who is also national information secretary of the NFFBTW. They delivered a clear message from Coca-Cola Multan management: withdraw from the union or you or your family members could have "an accident" and be injured or killed.

With support from the IUF and the assistance of the NFFBTW the union officers' families were quickly moved into hiding, some as far as 300 km away.

Creation of a management union

To further block any possibility of the workers winning legal recognition of their union, management set up its own 'union', called the "Workers Welfare (Mazdoor) Union". Through a combination of

bribery and threats, CCBPL Multan management secured registration of their fake union on August 13.

How fake is fake? When the People's Employees Union, the workers organization Coke Multan is trying to destroy, challenged management's attempt to register their organization, Muhammad Shafi, identified by Multan management as the Mazdoor Union's President, submitted a statement to the labour department on October 23 testifying that he was not the president of this organization, had never submitted an application for registration, had not attended a so-called founding meeting and that any signature or thumbprint was a fake. CCBPL Multan management ordered Muhammad Shafi to withdraw his statement. He refused and faced pressure and threats. In January 2010 management approached his family and friends to pressure him to withdraw his statement or face dismissal.

From fake union to fake labour contractor...

In addition to the 7 union members dismissed in the early stages of the union struggle, management last year dismissed 20 other direct Multan employees who were active union members. The termination letters were issued by 'Muhammad Saeed Awan Labour Contractor' despite the fact that these workers were directly recruited by CCBPL, and had never received payment from, heard of or ever seen Saeed Awan or any representative at any time during their employment at CCBPL Multan.

The dismissal letters contain no address letterhead for the shadowy 'Saeed Awan Labour Contractor'. The official government database on employers paying into the mandatory pension scheme contains no such entity on record as supplying labour to Coca-Cola or any other business in Pakistan. In response to three different addresses provided by the company, the hunt for Saeed Awan ended in a meeting at an office where the person who claimed to be Saeed Awan was not allowed to speak by his "minders" sent by CCBPL senior management. Tracing the source of the registered termination letters from the hastily constructed Saeed Awan Labour Contractor disclosed that they were in fact mailed from the home address of a Multan 'gate officer' who has stated that they were written not by him but by senior management, who ordered him to sign them.

The union has since documented the massive alteration of Multan union members' social security cards. Union members have been ordered to turn in their cards, which are returned with "Saeed Awan contractor" added in different ink after "Coca-Cola factory".

Through crude forgery of official documents and massive fraud, management is attempting to establish the fiction that union members at CCBPL are not in fact employed by the company where they have many years of service. This of course would exclude them from any collective bargaining relationship with Coca-Cola ...if Saeed Awan Labour Contractor really existed. However, if it did then CCB PL would be guilty of even more crimes under Pakistan law, since there is no legal provision for a "recruitment agency" which leaves workers with the status of "contract worker" not directly employed by the user enterprise.

CCBPL now claims a total of 283 workers at Multan are employed by 'Saeed Awan Labour Contractor'!

Not content with extortion, fraud, abduction, illegal dismissals, contempt of court and interference in the judicial process (blocking union registration), Multan management has recently opened the use of the Multan facilities to Moeen Qureshi, a well-connected politician, former Punjab state minister of sport and the cousin and brother-in-law of Amir Qureshi, Director of the CCBPL Southern Business Unit. Moeen Qureshi has on several occasions installed himself in the factor HR manager's office and summoned union members for meetings, threatening them and warning them to stop their

involvement with the union.

Coke's Multan management is as unprincipled as they are desperate to block workers from exercising their rights. Yet despite all these illegal acts and the relentless anti-union hostility of management for nearly a year, the union officers and their supporters remain steadfast in their determination to win union recognition and become the IUF's newest members in the Coca-Cola system.

The IUF holds TCCC in Atlanta responsible for what happens at its bottlers' operations worldwide. Violence, dismissals and pressure on workers to prevent trade union rights and recognition are criminal acts.

CLICK HERE TO SEND A MESSAGE TO THE COCA-COLA COMPANY AND THEIR BOTTLER COCA-COLA ICECEK (CCI), telling them exactly that!

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P.S.

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