

The first days of Bhatta Workers strike

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Contents

- [The strike will continue \(...\)](#)
- ["We want actions and not \(...\)"](#)

The first day

The first day of Bhatta (brick kiln) workers national strike for indefinite period started on 18th April was marked by violence, kidnappings arrests and torturing of Bhatta workers by the bosses and police all over Pakistan. Over 20 workers got injured, several dozens arrested or disappeared and many more tortured in different parts of the country mainly by the owners of the brick kiln factories (Bhattas). In most cases, police sided with the bosses and did not register the cases against the owners.

Despite all this, workers in many districts of Pakistan refuse to work and went on complete strike. The strike call was given by Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union (PBMU) against the non implementation of the courts decisions for abolition of Peshgi (advance) system. The system makes Bhatta workers bonded and are treated as slaves by the Bhatta owners. The other demands include a minimum of Rupees 500 for making 1000 bricks and registration of all the brick factories by the government.

After Supreme Court of Pakistan, federal Shariat Court also decided to abolish this Peshgi system. The bosses refused to accept the verdict and continued to force the workers to pay the so-called advances. The PBMU after launching a campaign and mobilization of the workers decided to call a national strike of the workers, the first of its kind in history of Pakistan. There are over 1.8 million workers involved in this industry, mostly un-unionized. The PBMU has only nearly 4000 membership and was established in 2004.

A complete strike was observed mainly in Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP). But the news of the strike is reaching in other parts of Pakistan and more and more workers are calling the union office for posters and information to start the union and strike.

Today, there were public meeting organized by the Bhatta workers at Qasur, Rawalpindi and Wah cant despite a ban on the public meetings. At Qasur where most of the PBMU leaders were present, workers remained in front of the Labour department for over eight hours. Speaking at the public rally Mehmood Butt, general secretary PBMU vowed to continue the strike for n indefinite period if demands are not met. Over 400 workers participated in this public meeting despite police had warned to arrest any one if they participate in the meeting. Several leaders of Labour Party Pakistan including myself also spoke in solidarity with the union. There was a very militant mood among the workers and they felt that it is the time to do something. They stressed the need for unity among the workers.

At Rawalpindi, over 800 participated in the first public meeting of PBMU and a complete strike was observed in all 250 factories in the district. At Wah, 150 workers went to police station to protest over the torturing of workers by the bosses. Here 13 workers got injured by the gangsters of Bhatta.

At Raiwind, some 16 workers have disappeared after they were taken by men in police uniform. They were picked up as they were leaving for the public rally organized by the union in Qasur. Police stations in different close by towns and Raiwind police is denying the arrests of these workers. They include Manzoor Masih, one of the main leaders of the union in the area. The Qasur district Police Officer DPO has been given an application to register a case against the Bhatta bosses for kidnapping, so far no case is been registered.

Complete strike is also observed in Toba Tek Singh, Faisalabad, Gujrat, Qasur, Gojranwala, Lahore, Sialkot Sheikhupura and other districts of Punjab.

Government has invited the Union leaders for discussion on 20th April. The labour secretary of labour department and other high officials of the ministry will take part in the negotiations. The PBMU has decided to meet the ministry officials but refused to call off the strike as was demanded.

Today in another development, the government used some of "their" organizations among Bhatta workers to declare that they are not part of the strike. They include one section of Bonded Labour Liberation Front BLLF (Ghulam Fatime Group). They have issued press releases printed by some papers that they have nothing to do with the strike and the strike be called off. There has been many complaints against this group of corruption and nepotism in using the funds of BLLF.

The Bhatta Owners Association also held their national convention today in Lahore and asked the government to take action against the outsiders and NGOs who are provoking the "innocent" Bhatta Workers for their own ends. According to their press release, over 500 participated in their convention.

The Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union has called a press conference tomorrow in Lahore to protest against the arrests and torturing of workers. The union asked workers to remain on strike until government declare in clear terms that Peshgi system is over and that they will take actions against the bosses who are not accepting the decision of the courts.

Please send messages of solidarity to this email.
farooqtariq@hotmail.com

Please forward this message to any email list that is related to trade unions social movements, democracy and rights.

The second day

The strike will continue despite all the gangsterism

Dozens of Bhatta (brick kiln) workers with minor injuries turned up in a press conference organized by the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union in Lahore this afternoon on the second day of their national strike action.

Manzoor Masih who was released at one am from the illegal custody from Raiwind Police told reporters that he along dozens of other workers were stopped by the gangsters of the Bhatta bosses to attend the public meeting of the striking workers in Qasur on 18th April morning. Later, they were

arrested by police for no reason. When union contacted the District Police Officer of Qasur, on his orders he was released. He showed the injuries to the press reporters.

Shoukat Ali from Depalpur told reporters that he and his brother asked a raise in the rates but were confined to a room by the bosses. They later called the police and told them that there are two dacoits in their custody and they had also a revolver. When police arrived, they were already severely beaten up by the gangsters of the Bosses. The police did not believe the story of the bosses that they were dacoits and were freed on the intervention of the police. But the police have not registered a case against the bosses. Shoukat also showed many lashes at his body to the press.

Maqbool from Nankana Sahib District told the reporters that he was beaten up yesterday by the Bhatta owners gangsters because he had a union card hanging around his neck. He told reporters that while he was in Lahore today, his father has been beaten up and kidnapped by the same people. "My mother told me on the phone that they have taken my father to an unknown place" Maqbool told the press.

Three Bhatta workers from Wah Cant told the press that there was firing by the bosses yesterday and the police has not registered the case.

Mehmood Butt told the press reporters that despite all the atrocities and gangsterism, the strike will continue. He told that more areas have joined the strike. "Our posters that have announced the strike have been photocopied and distributed by the Bhatta workers in several areas. There are some workers who are forced by the bosses that they work but they will also come out once they get a chance to escape" Mehmood Butt told the press conference.

"We are meeting the labour ministry tomorrow and will demand that our demand is met" he told the reporters.

PBMU has called the nationwide strike of 1.8 million workers. They are demanding an implementation on the orders of the courts for the abolition of Peshgi (advance) system at brick kiln factories. They are also demanding better wages and registration of all the brick kiln factories.

"We want actions and not words, the strike will continue" Mehmood Butt

Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union (brick kiln workers union) today on 20th April announced after meeting with the labour secretary of Punjab government at Lahore secretariat that we want a written agreement and not words of support. The labour secretary assured the union that the government will take actions against those brick kiln owners who are deducting the Peshgi (advance) amount from the workers wages.

Over an hour meeting with the representatives of the union and the government could not break the ice and the union decided after the meeting not to call off the strike. "we want actions and arrests of all those bosses who do not accept the courts decisions of abolition of Peshgi system. We have enough of word, now it is time of action" declared Mehmood Butt, the general secretary of PBMU in a press release issued to the national papers.

Over 100 Bhatta workers leaders were waiting outside the gates of secretariat for the outcome of the meeting. After a meeting of the union, they decided to continue the strike for an indefinite period. The strike has started from 18th April 2006 all over Pakistan. An "intelligence" employee of the Pakistani government told the union leaders today that we have reports of the spreading of the strike all over.

More and more areas are joining the historic strike by the most exploited section of the Pakistani working class. Their demands include a real abolition of the Peshgi system, more wages and registration of all the Bhattas.

Farooq Tariq

general secretary

Labour Party Pakistan

40-Abbot Road Lahore, Pakistan

Tel: 92 42 6315162 Fax: 92 42 6271149 Mobile: 92 300 8411945,

labourpartypk yahoo.com www.laborpakistan.org www.jeddojuhd.com