

# The Bhatta Workers strike ends with a victory note

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Bhatta (brick kiln) workers national strike ended yesterday on 26<sup>th</sup> April with a victory note. A Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union convention held at Lahore Press Club decided to end the strike after government and bosses both gave in some concessions. The strike has started on 18<sup>th</sup> April on demands of ending Peshgi (advances), better wages and registrations of the Bhattas.

After eight days of strike, many bosses felt the pain and agreed in several areas that they will not take back the Peshgies and wages will be increased. The government official assured the union leadership that they will make sure that Bonded Labour Ablition Act is implemented. Under the Act, any brick kiln owner who takes back the peshgi by force is liable to five year imprisonment and Rupees 50,000 (\$950) fine.

The convention held in Lahore on 26<sup>th</sup> April was attended by over 200 representatives of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union. Every district sent at least two representatives to take a final decision on the strike. Reports after reports made it clear that the strike has achieved its goal. The bosses are on retreat and government has started to listen. The mood among the delegates was of jubilation. They were proud what they have done.

“The union is a power and it is the union power that forced the bosses to listen to us and have meetings with us” Baba Jan Masih from Sheikhpura district told the convention. An old worker of 75 year, but was one of the main leader of the strike. His dedication inspired many youth who took it to themselves to fight for the union rights.

“ I was picked up by the brick kiln bosses in a van and they took me to their place and asked me why are you not working? I told them proudly that we are on strike, they said who would listen to us, we want a deal with you, you bring back the workers to the Bhatta for work, and we pay you Rupees 30,000 and we will not ask back the Peshgi. I told them Peshgi system is over and you have no right to ask that money, I will not take any money from you, I am a union man and will do what union will ask me to do” ‘Said Moahmmed Riaz from the same district in the convention. “We will never betray the union” was the message of the day.

It was decided unanimously to call off the strike after hearing the reports of the area and union leadership discussions with the government.

“Strike has ended but not the struggle” was another message heard again and again in the brick kiln workers convention. We will come back if the bosses will not act what they have promised. The workers told the convention.

There has no direct deal with any brick kiln bosses, It has been district to district agreement and in several cases, the minimum rates of making the bricks have increased over 100 percent. Before the strike the rate was 150 to 250 Rupees for 1000 bricks in different districts. Now it has gone up from 250 to 350 in many areas. The government minimum rate is fixed Rupees 290, but bosses have another notification that says it is Rupees 220. The union has demanded Rupees 500 for 1000 bricks.

On the demand of implementation of the courts decision about the abolition of Peshgi system, the labour secretary and labour department assured the union that they will take actions against those who will violate this law.

Younas Rahoo president PBMU and Mehmood But secretary of the union addressed a press conference afterward in the press club to formally announce the end of the strike.