

Okawa (Pakistan): AMP convention on international day of peasants banned, peasant activist arrested, households harassed by police

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AWP statement over arrest of peasant activist in Okara and administration's attempts to prevent International Day of Peasants event on April 17 (Sunday)

Press statement

The Awami Workers Party (AWP) strongly condemns the arrest of another leader of the Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) a day before the peasant organisation was set to hold a convention to mark the International

Day of Peasants' Struggle on April 17.

The party fears for the safety of Mehr Abdul Sattar, AMP general secretary, and other peasant activists held by the police on trumped up charges. It calls upon the police to immediately release Sattar or bring charges against him in a court of law. It rejects the use of terrorism and colonial-era laws for maintenance of public order to prevent peaceful peasant activists from exercising their constitutionally guaranteed right to assembly and protest.

An AWP party team present in Okara has reported that the district administration and the police are harassing peasant households to dissuade them from participating in the Sunday's convention. A police team had raided some villages and took away farming equipment including a harvester and grain stock on Friday without lawful authority.

The AMP had arranged the convention on 17 April, the international day of peasants, to press for land rights, a fairer distribution of agricultural resources and an end to state violence against peasant households associated with the AMP.

It would have been a peaceful assembly of Pakistani citizens struggling for their rights in accordance with the parameters set by the country's Constitution. In banning the assembly of five or more people under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, the Okara district administration and the police had only exposed the authoritarian character of state institutions and the military establishment's continued disregard for constitutional safeguards available to the country's citizens.

The peasant households affiliated with the AMP have tilled the lands for decades and over several generations now. The control of the land remains with Army-run companies and individual officers of the armed forces who use colonial-era lease agreements and state machinery to suppress peasant activists' peaceful struggle for their rights.

The AWP believes that the Okara district and police administration's response to the convention has called the bluff of the National Action Plan against Terrorism. Despite being prepared to end right-

wing extremism and terrorist outfits that feed on these ideologies, the NAP serves primarily as an instrument of the state institutions in suppressing dissent.

The administration's response also shows that despite a formal transition to parliamentary democracy since 2008 little progress has yet been made in the country to inculcate in the governments respect for democratic norms and practices. The governments continue to abuse the law at will and trample the constitution whenever needed to suppress democratic forces and their struggles.

The party calls upon all progressive political parties, civil society organisations and rights activists to use their organisational resources to press the government to respect citizens' constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms and to seek transparency in the implementation of the NAP.

April 16, 2016

AMP convention on international day of peasants banned in Okara

The Awami Workers Party condemns the ban placed by the DCO Okara on an upcoming peasant's convention being planned by the Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) and terms it a blatant violation of the human and constitutional right of peaceful assembly. The convention is being organized in connection with International Peasants Day on April 17 to call for land rights, a fairer distribution of agricultural resources and an end to state violence against peasants. It is telling that the authorities have cited the National Action Plan as an excuse to ban the convention, which is another instance of anti-terrorist policies being blatantly employed to suppress progressive politics and peaceful working class assembly.

The AWP would also like to draw attention to the fact that the Okara district administration and police had already been running a campaign of violence and victimization against the peasants of AMP for the past year in order to undermine their struggle for land rights. Four comrades of the AMP are already in jail under trumped-up charges for the 'crime' of peaceful protest against police violence and intimidation. This convention was going to draw attention to the unlawful actions of the police and local administration, another reason the DCO stepped in to prevent it. The authorities claim that the convention could cause 'public nuisance or danger to lives' is a completely transparent falsehood designed to cover up their own excesses and systematic repression.

The Awami Workers Party reiterates its full support for the AMP and will help to ensure the convention goes ahead as planned. The AWP calls upon the government and Okara administration to recognize all citizens' democratic right to assemble and not reserve this right exclusively for parties of the elite. The AWP further calls on the government to stop the abuse of anti-terrorism laws against political activists from progressive and working class organizations and the release of all comrades of the AMP imprisoned on bogus charges. The right of peaceful democratic protest is non-negotiable.

AWP will continue its sustained commitment to and support for the decades-long democratic and progressive struggle of the peasants of Okara Military Farms against eviction, dispossession and violence by the state and military and reiterates its call for comprehensive land reform and a just and equal distribution of agricultural, land and water resources in the country.

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