

Coronavirus in Pakistan: Stop all non-essential work, grant paid leave to workers!

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According to official data, six people have died in Pakistan while 878 have tested positive for coronavirus at the time of writing this report. Real numbers are expected to be higher than these as Pakistan has largely failed to set up adequate testing facilities that could help attain an accurate picture.

The response of the Pakistani government to the pandemic is to ask citizens to practise social distancing and self-quarantine to protect themselves and others from the virus. Schools, universities and other public spaces have been closed in many parts of the country ? particularly the Sindh province where the provincial government had actually imposed a partial lockdown. Inter-city bus services have been suspended in some areas while all incoming international flights have been suspended for two weeks.

In short, while certain measures have been taken, and they have been taken rather late, industry is still running. The government is bent upon keeping the factories running. While a section of the ruling class might be in favour of closure of factories ? at times even with workers getting leave on full pay ? other sections as well as the state are bent upon keeping factories (along with grocery stores and pharmacies) open[1][2].

Meanwhile, some companies are allowing the salaried class to work from home as a measure of social distancing. The recent deaths of seven miners in an explosion in a coalfield in Balochistan[3] have, however, made it abundantly clear how staying at home is in fact a class privilege in most cases and not an option for most sections of the working class. Political assemblies have been banned but assembling of workers for production, be it extraction through mining or manufacturing in factories, continues as normal.

The government has also made it clear that it has no plans to delay work on projects within the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC, due to coronavirus[4]. Not only has the pandemic revealed the anti-working-class nature of the current government in Pakistan ? it has also unveiled the true anarchic and incapable character of capitalism itself. In all these years of capitalist rule across the world, not a single country could build enough hospitals and facilities, in short, a healthcare system, to deal with such a crisis.

Capitalist anarchy becomes evident in the form of Imran Khan?s government that lacks any kind of strategy or the political, social and technical acumen to deal with the spread of the virus. Different sections of the ruling class have different approaches to the crisis and a divide between the Centre and Sindh Govt is already evident. In times of severe crisis, the ruling class tries to reach a national consensus and we can see that happening in the form of Shahbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto giving full support to Imran Khan and even offering their services. This is important for the ruling class in this situation so as to maintain order, i.e. class rule. Exorbitant rises in charges for laboratory tests and prices of masks and hand sanitisers is an example of how the ?profit motive? of the capitalist class is panning out for the working poor.

At the same time, this is also a period of crisis for the capitalist class and particularly so due to the inner contradictions of this class that is certainly not a homogenous class. This explains why in such a situation even bourgeois governments can sometimes go for radical measures (such as nationalisation of private hospitals in Spain[5]) to rescue capitalism from the crisis or to save its future.

We have yet to see if the Pakistani government will take any such measures. But whatever happens, we as socialists should make no mistake as to the class character of these measures. If Spain has nationalised its private hospitals, the Spanish ruling class has done so for its own class, to ensure the safety of its present and future class interests. That is precisely why we demand nationalisation to happen under workers' control.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani government is taking some clearly class-based measures in this period of crisis. Advisor on Finance Abdul Hafeez Sheikh's strategy to mitigate the impact of the situation on the national economy is through relief to the affected groups and people like airlines, retail and SMEs (small medium enterprises)[6]. The working class does not feature in the government's affected groups for relief. Further tax cuts for capitalists are also on the table in the name of jobs creation[7]. Sheikh has meanwhile promised full payment of refunds to exporters within the current month[8]. All of this illustrates how the neoliberal government has an immediate interest in taking urgent action to stabilise businesses. The same government is, however, completely indifferent to the instability that the spread of coronavirus has brought about in the lives of workers and their families.

The fact that all social gatherings are banned but factories are to remain open, mining is to continue and CPEC projects are to be completed on time reveals the fact that the pandemic is not only a medical issue, it is very much a social issue and a class issue. The unprecedented situation and the state's subsequent and rather late response to it has also revealed the class character of the state. Already, textile exporters and clothing brands are setting the stage for potential mass layoffs of daily wage earners[9][10]. That is, however, a matter of little concern to the government that is interested in providing relief and stability to businesses and exporters alone. Finally, the fact that production process remains untouched by lockdowns in Pakistan reveals the semi-colonial status of the country in the epoch of imperialism.

Factories of the biggest car maker in Europe are being shut down[11]. The British government has said it will cover 80% of worker salaries for at least the next three months up to a maximum of £2,500 (\$2,900) a month[12]. This does not by any means suggest that western governments are inherently better than ours. It simply reveals how the bourgeoisie of the imperialist centres, thanks to centuries of loot and plunder of colonies and semi-colonies, are simply capable of throwing bigger crumbs at its working class sometimes as compared to the national bourgeoisie in the semi-colonial countries. It also illustrates that generations of militant and revolutionary class struggle in imperialist countries have resulted in gains for the working class there. After all, every pro-worker reform has been granted when the ruling class could see that the alternative was revolution or widespread unrest. Reforms, it has been rightly said, are a by-product of revolutionary struggle.

Meanwhile, we also have to take into account the gendered impact of coronavirus. Research has shown that during times of economic crisis, global gender inequalities mean that women and girls, particularly in poor countries, are the first to reduce the quantity or quality of the food they eat or to forgo essential medicines[13]. The likelihood of gender-based violence also increases with worsening economic crises[14].

The plight of women and girls in Pakistan is likely to worsen as the economic crisis will deepen even more with lockdowns. Meanwhile, school closures mean that lives of parents will be affected and particularly so in the case of working women in Pakistan. This is because childcare remains the primary responsibility of

women in most Pakistani households. Rich and privileged women from the ruling and middle classes pay other women from the working class to take care of their children. Working-class women have to take care of their own children. More often than not, they have to leave their children unattended at home if they go to work ? either another female family member will take care of the children in this case or the eldest female child will be responsible for caring for her siblings.

In the wake of coronavirus, everyone has been further pushed into the confines of the home. The situation is even worse in semi-colonial countries like Pakistan where the concept of day-care centres and kindergartens does not exist to begin with. Now, with schools shutting down, children are to spend more time at home. This places an added burden on the working-class family, particularly working-class women, as they either lose some of their wage to stay at home and care for the children or lose the job altogether. The economic impact multiplies in this scenario, and particularly so with rising prices of essential commodities such as food and medicines. All of this once again illustrates how the economy under capitalism has always been sustained by the double burden on women of unpaid reproductive work within the home alongside their exploitation in the productive sphere.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic has further amplified the plight of healthcare workers in Pakistan, including doctors, nurses and paramedical staff. They are dealing with the surge of patients coming in due to the spread of the virus despite not having adequate protective equipment[15]. Some doctors have had to be quarantined[16][17]. Doctors have gone on strike to protest against the lack of protective gear[18]. Meanwhile, for a population of 220 million, Pakistan has less than 2,500 ventilators[19]. By contrast, Germany with a population of 83 million has 25,000 ventilators with 10,000 more on the way[20]. The Balochistan province, which is the second most hit area, has only 49 functional ventilators.

These are unprecedented times for our generation and socialists need to respond to the situation with revolutionary demands and action. We reject in the most categorical terms the restrictions on political rights of the working class, which comprises the mass of population, while there is no restriction on continuing work in the factories. This does not mean that leftists will hold assemblies if the risk of infection is high or that they would be unwilling to control travel to and from certain areas to rein in the pandemic.

The main question is, who shall determine this? Will it be state authorities, bourgeois governments and their institutions or the labour movement, particularly the trade unions that organise these factory workers? We can be certain that the biggest capitalists and their political representatives are planning how to use the new situation to their advantage so that, at the end of it, they will be stronger. The Left, the political representatives of the working class, should be thinking in exactly the same way, how should the working class deal with this crisis, what should be its strategy or, in political terms, what should be its programme? Yet the Left in Pakistan is not thinking in these terms. Of course, they raise demands to protect workers and their families but they do not link these to strengthening the working class within society, organising it for the struggle to overthrow capitalism and advance towards socialism.

The Awami Workers Party is a good example of this. The AWP has recently published its programme for dealing with the Covid 19 crisis. It certainly has some very good immediate demands that one must endorse, such as the demand to conditionally release prisoners or the demand to pray at home. They are also right to demand that the government ?Take emergency measures to recruit more healthcare workers including retired doctors, nurses, paramedics and community health workers?[21] and to call for public control over private hospitals and for emergency taxation of the rich to pay for these and other necessary measures.

All well and good, but the AWP knows perfectly well that the government of Imran Khan is not going to implement such measures unless it is forced to implement them. Who is going to force them? And how?

The AWP not only does not answer this, the crucial question, it does not even ask it! Their programme is a strategy for the government, not for the working class!

The only way the bourgeoisie can be forced to grant such a reform is to win it as a concession through class struggle. The example of the NHS in England has shown us how workers' organisations forced the bourgeoisie to grant a pro-workers reform because it can see that the alternative is revolution or widespread unrest. Therefore, every demand for pro-workers reforms has to be combined with a call for revolutionary class struggle. Appeals made on the ruling class usually fall on deaf ears unless there lies in the appeal a direct interest of the ruling class as a whole or one or more of its sections. Certainly, bourgeois governments are not interested or willing to fulfil any pro-workers demands without the profit incentive. They don't want to, and they will not do it voluntarily, but can be forced to make concessions. In the final analysis, it is a question of the balance of forces and of the leadership of those forces. Certainly, a revolutionary leadership will lead to a different result than a reformist one.

To make our pro-workers appeals heard, the appeals have to be aimed at the workers who must wage a class war to the extent that the bourgeoisie is forced to grant concessions in order to prevent a potential revolution. The Pakistani Left needs to see the labour movement as an agent in its own right. Many of the AWP proposals rely on the government to take measures. For example, the demand for a workers' support fund is imagined through a possible expansion of Benazir Income Support Program, which is a government-run institution. Instead of demanding that such a fund be formed under workers' control, the AWP demand wants the fund to be 'highly coordinated between other agencies and provincial govts'[22].

We must question if there lies any wisdom in thinking that the bourgeois government of Imran Khan, or for that matter of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Narendra Modi or any other neoliberal despot, will care for the needs of the working class in the current situation. We must do away with such illusions in the national bourgeoisie and the state if we are serious about making any pro-workers gains. The nation-state is there to defend the interests of the bourgeoisie and we have to be very clear about that. At times, the bourgeoisie will even implement some good measures – but it will do so with the profit interest in mind. This is what makes them act differently than how a workers' government would and this is what makes them stand opposed to immediate workers' interests. And this is precisely why socialists combine specific demands to the state always with a call to the working class to fight for these demands, and take control over how these measures should be fulfilled.

In the current period of crisis, there are those who have made it abundantly clear that socialism for them is a distant dream that they agree with ideologically, but they do not see any possibility of thinking about it in the here and now. With the rapidly increasing number of deaths and layoffs, the coronavirus pandemic bears the potential for leading to a pre-revolutionary situation. But some of the vocal ones amongst us think that while we all agree with the structural flaws of capitalism (in true academic fashion), now is not the time to focus on that – instead, according to them, we must focus on fixing the problem from within this crumbling system.

What should be done as opposed to the above-mentioned approach? Socialists will have to advance transitional demands in this period of heightened crisis, demands that address an immediate problem along with paving the way to socialism as a reality in the here and now. We will also have to be clear that even though the pandemic bears the potential for leading to a pre-revolutionary situation, advancing it into a revolutionary situation shall not happen spontaneously. Workers' organisations and parties as well as trade unions will need to get their act together to make the crisis morph into a revolutionary situation.

In the current period, the working class, trade unions and workers' parties should campaign for the disclosure of trade secrets and all research results of state and private institutes. If a vaccine is found, it

must be made available to all free of charge and must not be misused for profit. Obviously, private corporations will certainly resist such a demand. After all, it endangers their profits, their very business purpose. Therefore, this must be combined with the struggle for workers' control and the expropriation of the industry without compensation.

The struggle for workers' control is by no means limited to the health sector alone. Just like striking workers in Italy rightly argue that their health is more important than the profits of the corporations, workers in Pakistan who are forced to mine and manufacture products by endangering not just their health but also lives should be urged by the Left to follow suit. In the face of such a crisis, the question also arises as to which sectors and activities should be maintained and which not. But who will determine what is essential work and for whom? Packing in bags groceries of middle-class elites in Lahore at the counter in supermarkets is certainly non-essential work if we look at the interests of the majority, i.e. the working class. These workers should be granted paid leave. In short, it is a question of combating the class-specific nature of the measures. This can only happen, however, if the working class, above all the trade unions and left parties that organise workers, presents itself not as the social partner of capital and government, but as a social force in its own right.

The responsibility for this crisis lies with the bosses and the capitalist governments, who turn a blind eye to agricultural malpractices, cut health budgets, lie about scientific evidence and put business interests (keep working!) before public health. And they will do their best to try and make us pay for their crisis through layoffs, leaving millions without sick pay, bearing the brunt of the unnecessary excess deaths. Despots of the world are coming up with all kinds of nonsense ideas about coronavirus because they are well aware of the fact that it is the working class that will bear the brunt of the pandemic in the form of deaths, layoffs, poverty and food shortage. Be it Boris Johnson's herd immunity concept or Imran Khan's 'hot and dry weather' theory, these ridiculous notions will have to be combated with the force of class struggle. After all, the indifference inherent in these stupid theories is going to impact the working class far more severely. Therefore, the working class will have to fight against not only stupid ideas but also against reactionary measures such as layoffs, and that too, severely.

Our demands:

- Tax the wealthy to provide for whatever can be provided. Sadly, the amount of wealth generated in Pakistan will be less than what could be collected by taxing the rich in England but that doesn't mean nothing can be done. Workers to control what is to be done with the taxes collected, where to spend them;
- Workers' and farmers' own organisations decide what counts as essential work, distribution of basic food supplies, maintenance of social order and so on;
- An immediate, swift and complete nationalisation of the entire health sector under workers' control;
- Stop giving relief to businesses and divert those funds towards increasing the budget for health;
- Increase supply and capacity of healthcare work. Build new hospitals on immediate basis;
- Roll back MTI in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab immediately;
- Roll back privileges granted to members of government and Parliament as well as civil-military bureaucracy to serve the public;
- Nationalise all private and military-run hospitals under healthcare workers' control;
- Care for unemployed and precarious young people through immediate measure of providing basic necessities for free;
- Workers committees to be formed in workplaces;
- Increase corporate tax and end all tax exemptions to capitalist class;
- All resources of the army regarding health facilities be made available for civilian population;
- Private banks to be banned from charging interest on loans that poor people, farmers, etc. take to avail medical treatment or cover for job losses;

-Minimum wage of Rs50,000 per month, indexed against inflation (1% rise in wage with every 1% increase in inflation), benefits for unemployed and pensions at par with minimum wage;
-Free tests and quarantine facilities for all. Provide sanitisers, masks and regular free testing to workers and their families in workers' neighbourhoods and katchi abadis as they do not have the privilege to practise social distancing while sharing one room with their entire families;
-Non-essential industries (automobiles, electronics, etc.) should rest, with workers employed in these industries either relocated to essential industries if required or granted leave on full pay during the crisis. If capitalists cannot pay for that, the business shall be nationalised without compensation under workers' control.

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