



Pakistan: From workers? protests to workers? revolt

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Protests were held across Pakistan on Tuesday, May 19 under the auspices of the Workers' Solidarity Committee, WSC. The protesters included political activists, students and women. In many cities, workers laid off from different factories joined the protests or linked their own actions. All in all, protests and rallies were held in about 30 cities despite the political restrictions imposed by the government.

The main demands raised by the WSC are:

1. No dismissals or pay cuts! Non-essential work should be stopped but the workers should be sent on leave with full pay and assurance of job continuity at the end of the crisis!
2. Give bread and medicine! During this lockdown, food and basic medicines worth Rs. 30,000 per month should be provided to each family!
3. Automatic rent relief! No work, no rent!
4. No deductions in pension payments!

The aims of the SWC are to raise the voice of workers against the attacks of the ruling class, to organise the workers and to build up a mass movement for the protection of health and working class lives.

This front includes the Awami Workers? Party, the Pakistan Trade Union Federation, PTUF, the National Trade Union Federation, NTUF, Mazdoor Mahaz, the Women's Democratic Front, Mehnat Kash Thereek, the Revolutionary Socialist Movement, Workers? Democracy, Mazdoor Ikhath, the National Students Federation as well as other organisations. Although it was only founded around May Day this year, the number of protests and mobilisations, despite the political restrictions imposed in the last week, show the potential of this initiative.

Actions

The massive impact of the pandemic crisis and the growing number of workers? struggles were the reason for the formation of the WSC. Many activists felt that struggles were not only possible, but that they needed to be linked up and united. So, a number of left organisations and trade unions responded positively to the call for a united front, and they were joined by students and women?s organisations.

Initially, we thought that online video conferencing and demonstrations in a few cities would be a good start but, in the last few days before the day of action, the situation changed. In many cities, left organisations and trade unions were preparing for protests and contacted us. This points to a changing objective situation which meant that the call for united action fell on fertile ground.

The WSC protest was planned for a day on which workers in Karachi, Lahore and Sheikhpura also protested for payment of wages and bonuses. Members of WSC also joined these protests. Immediately after the lockdown, many workers were protesting against forced layoffs, non-payment of wages and reduction in salaries and allowances.

In Karachi, protests had already taken place in several factories, namely Roof, Lucky and International Textiles. To some extent, the successes of the workers in those factories, where the companies were forced to give in to their demands or at least to make concessions, has created enthusiasm among the workers. It demonstrated that owners and management can be challenged and defeated.

Also in Karachi, under the auspices of the WSC, two demonstrations were organised. The first of these took place at Ghani Chowrangi where the Mazdoor Kisan Party leader, Qamar Abbas, said, "Workers are constantly being fired from their jobs and so far about 700 have been fired from Ghani Glass. We have received reports of the dismissal of about 500 workers from Artistic Millionaire Korangi, 800 to 1000 workers from Al-Karam, 700 workers from Gul Ahmed, about 200 workers from Rajabi Textiles and all workers from Siddique Sons."

The second demonstration took place in Habib Chowrangi, led by the NTUF. The demonstration was led by a large number of local factory workers and trade union leaders, many of whom had taken part in various protests, even during the lock down. Members of the NTUF were also constantly involved in the struggle of Denim factory workers in Karachi. They had been protesting for three days when police and factory guards opened fire on them on 19th May.

Reporting on the injured workers, Abdullah Basit, the leader of the NTUF writes, "Korangi Industrial Zone is the largest industrial zone in Pakistan. Demonstrations have been going on in Denim Clothing Company Korangi since yesterday. Yesterday the management of the company promised to give bonuses, but as soon as the workers reached the gate of the factory this morning, the management closed the door and said that the owner has closed the company. Workers were sitting peacefully at the main gate, when the administration, with the help of police, opened fire and intimidated the workers with the help of political parties, but the workers remained united."

"Tariq Mahmood, the company's admin manager, knelt in front of the workers and announced that a bonus will be given on May 21. Denim Clothing Company Works for international brands and the company does not even follow the basic requirements of social distancing and hygiene and is in serious violation of labour laws. Contrary to the recently passed ordinance of the Sindh government, 15,000 workers have been fired from their jobs with no pay during the lockdown. But their struggle proved fruitful and all the big companies in Korangi Industrial Zone have now announced that they will pay bonuses."

In Lahore, near where the WSC has protested, 5,000 workers at the US Apparel factory started protesting in the morning against non-receipt of salaries and bonuses. The workers have made it clear that they will continue their protest if their employers do not pay. Thousands of workers from various factories in the industrial area have already been laid off and many are not being paid. In Lahore, laid off workers from BSI and DSI also joined protests. These struggles have increased the opportunities for organising more widely in the working class in the area.

In Sheikhpura, where the main demand of the workers' protest was the end of pension cuts, some distance away on Sheikhpura-Faisalabad road, the workers of Sapphire Textile staged a protest. They said that the employers had not paid their salaries for three months. If the owners continue to refuse to pay them, they are threatening to blockade the Sheikhpura-Faisalabad road.

This whole situation shows that a significant change is taking place below the surface, the working class is on the move! These strike actions are increasing and this is raising workers' confidence, which is sending this message to other workers in the area. That is to say, if we want to repel the attacks of the employers, we have to fight. It is clear that appeals and negotiations will not achieve much in the current economic situation of Pakistan.

We need an all-out struggle with mass demonstrations, mass strikes and occupations, we need to unite and coordinate the protests which would otherwise remain local or confined to individual workplaces. That is the only way to stop the impoverishment, hunger and health risks facing millions of workers, peasants and even sections of the "middle class".

New possibilities are certainly emerging, but we have to be aware of the weakness of trade union and left organisations in Pakistan. With this in mind, we must devise a strategy to work in this situation. In order to organise the struggles, it will be essential to build workplace committees and committees of action in the working class estates.

At the same time, we need to call on workers to join the trade unions, make them fighting organs and organise to overcome their fragmentation via merger on a democratic basis, creating industrial unions in every branch of the economy.

Whilst it is now essential for socialists to turn to the industrial areas and to work with the trade unions, we also have to understand the limitations of the trade unions and to formulate a revolutionary strategy and to win the working class to socialism. It is a difficult and arduous task, but there can be no better time to begin it than when the crisis of capitalism is pushing the workers into struggle.

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