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Pakistan

490 years of jail sentences for labour leaders in Pakistan

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On November 1, a protest demonstration and rally was held in Lahore by Labour Party Pakistan to denounce the 490 years of total jail sentences to the 6 labour leaders of Faisalabad. On average, every one of the six will be spending 81 years in jail. An anti-terrorist court judge announced last evening this long term sentences to the six power-loom workers' leaders who led a strike in July 2010 in Faisalabad to demand better wages. The judge has announced the jail sentences for each of seven charges. The maximum sentence in one case is ten years. All the jail sentences will begin at the same time, so each one of the labour leaders will spend at least 10 years in jail.

The Anti-Terrorist Court's judge Mian Muhammad Anwar Nazir sentenced six Labour Qaumi Movement's leaders: Akbar Ali Kamboh, Babar Shafiq Randhawa, Fazal Elahi, Rana Riaz Ahmed, Muhammad Aslam Malik and Asghar Ali.

Four of them were arrested on 22nd July 2010 by Faisalabad police after a strike call by power-loom workers for a 17% increase in wages as per announcement of the government. Two other leaders Ansari were also arrested under same charges four months back.

They have been accused of burning a factory during the strike. This is a fabricated charge. The facts are that on the day of strike on 20th July 2010, the factory owner in Thekri Wala started firing on the workers who were leaving the factory to demand for better wages. After hearing the firing by the gangsters of the factory owner, some workers dared to go inside the factory and forced the gangsters to stop firing.

After workers went to the city with the main rally, the owner conspired to burn some old cloths and fire in one room, pretending that the workers had burnt the factory. During the trial, the workers' advocate raised the point if the factory was burnt then how was it able to function in two days later.

More than 100,000 power-loom workers in Faisalabad district went on strike on July 20, 2010 for the increase of wages which had been announced by the government during the presentation of budget 2010-11. The government announced a 17 % rise in the minimum wage for the private sector workers. Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), an organization of the power-loom workers in Faisalabad, Jhang and other districts, had been in negotiation with power loom owners for three weeks for wage increase.

The local police asked the workers' leaders on the evening of the strike day to come to the police station for negotiations. All four leaders went to police station of Thekri wala themselves and they were arrested. Initially, they were not charged with anti terrorist sections. ??These were included after a few weeks when the bosses went all out to crush the movement.

It was reported that during the strike the workers remained peaceful but the owners of factories and their henchmen and police remained violent against the striking workers. The owners and their henchmen resorted to violence by throwing stones and bricks at the peaceful march of workers from one side of the protest, while police used tear gas shells on the workers from the other end. 25 workers were injured including Tahir Rana, the president of LQM Faisalabad district, who was critically injured.

On the day, around 100 workers were also arrested.?The print and electronic media reported that thousands of

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workers from different areas of Faisalabad district had marched despite a police ban on public gatherings.

Labour Qaumi Movement leaders are members of Labour Party Pakistan. In January 2010, they organised a massive workers and peasant conference at famous Dhobe Ghat of Faisalabad on the eve of the LPP fifth congress in the city. Over 10,000 participated in this massive gathering.

In April that year, the chairman of LQM contested a bye-election for Punjab assembly seat and got reasonable votes of around 9 percent.

All this was not accepted by PMLN and the law minister Rana Sana Ullah Khan. They decided to have a go on the movement.

Sudhar is the suburb of Faisalabad where a big number of power loom factories is located. This area had been a scuffle ground between workers and owners for the three years as the workers organized themselves effectively in huge number there. ??

The appointments of Aftab Cheema as DPO and Nasim Sadiq as DCO of Faisalabad last year by Mian Shehbaz Sharif, the chief minister, was mainly to control the rising movement of workers. These two officers played clever shots and tried to pacify the movement while making promises with LQM leadership to re-investigate the case against arrested workers but did not fulfill these promises.

Instead they have supported owners of the power looms in their actions against workers.

It is now clear that the PMLN leadership in Faisalabad alongside with police and judiciary is all out to crush the labour movement. Never in history of Pakistan such harsh sentences were announced to labour leaders for an incident where they were not involved.

Every one here in Pakistan from the labour movement is shocked on these harsh jail sentences.

Anti-terrorist laws are frequently used against protesting industrial workers in Punjab. over 13 trade unions leaders are facing such charges of terrorism in Punjab. their real crime is fight for better life and demanding higher wages. The Punjab government is all out to crush any trade union movement in factories which is challenging their authority. Police is very often used in such cases.

The Faisalabad workers are singled out by the Punjab government because they are political and they are members of Labour Party Pakistan. We are not giving in.

Today, I spoke to Asma Jehanghir the former chairperson of Supreme Court Bar association and she promised to look into the file to take up the case for bail in Lahore High Court. She participated in one the protest rally on 1st march 2011, for the release of the four labour leaders. She was also shocked to hear the news.

Four of us will be leaving for Faisalabad tomorrow to participate in the meeting of LQM and chalk out the future course of action.

Please protest where ever you are, Please take up the case with your organisation and pass a resolution to condemn the jail sentences and issue press releases to the newspapers.

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