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Pakistan

Employers' terror against Karachi weaving loom workers

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Dressed in big coats of sandy, white or clear blue colours, the weaving loom workers fill the small union office – all men; it is a male trade here. We are in Etehad Town in the outskirts of Karachi, capital of Sindh, principal industrial and port metropolis of Pakistan. Several of those present had just been freed under bail. Their crime, like that of their comrades then still imprisoned, was wishing to set up a union in enterprises which live under a veritable regime of employer terror: the Etehad Power Looms Labour Union, affiliated with National Trade Union Federation. For this, they were arrested by paramilitary Rangers, tortured, imprisoned, accused of racketeering and brought before an anti-terrorist court.

They take turns to speak with great eloquence of their condition. They have a lot to say. Of poverty and of this dread of unemployment which led them to accept working under unacceptable and inhuman conditions. In this region where temperatures can reach 48 degrees in June (it is already reaching 38 in April), the workshops are suffocating. However, if a worker has the audacity to request the installation of a ventilator, he is immediately sent home without hope of return... In the eyes of the bosses and their guard dogs, the workers have only one right: to give in, shut up, suffer.

But how can workers be deprived of all rights, even the most elementary ones, to this extent? Quite simply because legally they don't exist: the factory itself is not declared, it has no legal existence; a little like the clandestine workshops in France (in the textile sector, also!). Except that here, we are talking about large scale enterprises, wildcat industrial zones which rise up in the view of and knowledge of all, with the active complicity of the governing parties and the "forces of order". Except that here there is no need to employ immigrants without papers to subject workers to a regime of totalitarian exploitation.

The companies in question are indeed highly respected. They are formally installed in the controlled industrial zones. They are concerned about their advertising and are hypocritical enough to publish charters of good conduct on the Internet; but the bulk of production is carried out elsewhere, half an hour's road journey from the centre of Karachi. There are good reasons for going here. If popular protest against super-exploitation becomes pressing, trucks come to take away raw materials and machines. One or two days later, the factory is working again, at some kilometres distance.

The employers use a variety of means to impose their law. Permanent indebtedness is one of the most traditional mechanisms of subjection of workers: a loan is "agreed" initially which can never be repaid, because wages are so low. If that is not enough to keep a trade unionist quiet, the blacklist is a fearsome measure of coercion. The worker dismissed by one boss will not be taken on by another. Worse, his brothers risk also being blacklisted– "even my cousins!" said one of those present. Through debt and the threat of forced unemployment, the employers hold families as hostages.

The employers' mutual understanding locks in the system. Conscious that too much is too much, some entrepreneurs would be ready for wage concessions, but are prevented from doing so. The local employers have decided to inflict a very heavy fine on anybody who agrees to increase wages.

Beyond the company henchmen, the army and police are under orders. Thus, it was at the request of their employer that seven trades unionists were arrested by the Rangers on March 21, a little before my arrival, then severely tortured: Saif Ur Rehman, Naik Muhammad, Irshad, Muhammad Rome, Nizam Uddin, Akhter Ali and Hazrat Yousaf. Following a first wave of protest, six detainees were handed over to the police on March 23, the seventh, Hazrat

Yousaf, being freed.

As the workers were employed illegally, the employer claimed that the (undeclared) wages that they had received had been extorted from him. The trades unionists were tortured again to sign false confessions of racketeering, which they refused to do. On March 24 they were taken before the Karachi anti-terrorist court. The judge ordered that the victims should receive medical care, but refused to order an investigation on the recourse to torture.

Numerous mobilisations took place in Pakistan, under the initiative notably of the National Trade Union Federation, combined with an international solidarity campaign waged by the trade union movement, but also involving the European Union, mobilised on the torture cases. The six detainees were finally freed on the night of May 14 -15 (after a bail payment of 600,000 rupees). It is a significant victory. Release under bail is very rarely granted in the context of anti-terrorist courts. The Etehad Power Looms Labour Union immediately mobilised in honour to the freed trades unionists and to reaffirm its demands.

The affair is however far from being closed. Twelve trades unionists who have been brought before the anti-terrorist court: Saif Ur Rehman, Bacha Wali (Naik Muhamed), ?Akhter Ali, Nizam Uddin, ?Muhammed Rome, Irshad, Abdul Muhamed, Muhammed Amin, ?Sana Ullah, Azam Khan, Khan Zareen, Umer Gul.

Lahore, Faisalabad, Gilgit

Lahore: Pearl Continental

The policy of criminalisation of popular and trade union movements is being employed across the country. It was denounced by the UITA federation of international trade union organisations in the case of the struggle of the employees of the Pearl Continental hotel in Lahore. Their union has waged a very difficult struggle to win recognition, against the obstruction of the management, threats and collusion with the local authorities. It finally won the union elections last February.

The management of the hotel then used a tactic already tried and tested, having a bedroom vandalised and set on fire to accuse the union leaders of criminal acts. A month later, new charges were added, falling within the ambit of anti-terrorist laws which could justify prison sentences of up to 20 years. Is there any need to point out that the owner of the Pearl Continental hotel chain, Sadruddin Hashwani, is one of the richest men in the country?

The UITA has launched a campaign of solidarity with the Pearl Continental union leaders (See <http://www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/campaign...> and Pakistan hotel union leaders jailed and face criminal charges after union wins recognition election!)

The "Faisalabad six"

In Faisalabad, the big centre of textile production in the Punjab, six union leaders have been sentenced to 590 years in prison by an anti-terrorist court. Here as in Karachi power loom workers are involved (even if in this case the existence of the enterprises is legally declared).

The police arrested a seventh loom worker, Mehmood Ahmad, under the same charges as the first "Faisalabad six" although he was not present at the places the incidents took place. For two years, he had escaped arrest, but had to

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resume work in the neighbourhood of Sadhar to help his family survive. It was there that the police found him.

This new arrest provoked a strong reaction from workers in the sector. Many factories emptied and the main road, Jhang Road, was blocked by more than 5.000 workers according to the information we have received. The leadership of the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) was able to negotiate with the police from a position of strength, threatening to organise a strike involving the whole town. On May 15, Mehmood Ahmad was released.

The accusations against the Faisalabad six do not hold water. They have appealed to the supreme court of the province. The appeal has been judged admissible in principle, but the date of the hearing is still not fixed.

While the legal process proceeds at a leisurely pace, three other union activists have been detained on similar charges. Thus, the Faisalabad 6 have now become 9.

Gilgit: the "Hunza five"

We will bring more news soon on the situation of the "Hunza five", also being prosecuted under the anti-terrorist court in Gilgit, in the north of the country, for having defended the rights of the people of the Hunza valley, devastated by a natural disaster.

For now we will only say that the solidarity campaign has yielded its first results. Twelve days after having been beaten and tortured for the second time, Baba Janb and his comrades were finally seen by a doctor. The national press has begun to publicise their situation, which is very important, since it is feared that their forced transfer to a prison of high criminality had the objective of having them discreetly killed by common criminals.

The manoeuvres of intimidation continue in Gilgit. Thus, six activists of the Progressive Youth Front were arrested on May 13 when sticking up posters, but after protests were released by the police – who moreover did not know what to charge them with in order to keep holding them in detention.

The Hunza five have also appealed to the court to request (at least) their released under bail, but the hearing has already been postponed three times under various pretexts. The hearing is currently programmed for June 5.

Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Gilgit... and in many other places also, like the military farm of Okara or the village of Dehra Sehgal, not far from Lahore, Pakistani activists need our solidarity.