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Pakistan

# Brick kiln worker revolt against slave labour

- News from around the world -

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**Pakistani bhatta (brick kiln) workers are in revolt. Thousands protested last Friday in three cities against attempts by employers to maintain the Peshgi system. The largest demonstration was at Lahore where over 5000 workers protested against the Peshgi (advance) system and demanded that government should implement the Supreme Court decision in this regard. The demonstration also condemned the virtual bosses' strike, a shut down of production aimed at pressuring the government.**

The Peshgi system is a form of bonded labour, which allows employers to keep workers as virtual slaves if a cash advance has not been repaid. It was formally abolished 12 years ago by the Supreme Court, but the employers are trying to implement it again.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bhatta2.jpg>]

There are 1.8 million workers in brick kiln factories. Most of them work under inhuman conditions and the majority are like bonded labour because of the peshgi system. Under this system, the bosses offer advance money to workers, who cannot leave until they repay the whole amount. Most of the workers are illiterate and they do not know how much money is being repaid. They take advantage of this and impose many so-called fines on workers.

The demonstrations were organized by Pakistan Bhatta Workers Union, a union set up by supporters of Labour Party Pakistan in 2004.

There were demonstrations in Toba Tek Singh, Noshero Feroz in Sind as well as Lahore. At Toba Tek Singh police banned the rally and over 700 Bhatta workers were forced to have a public meeting inside the premises of Toba Press Club.

In Lahore, the district administration informed the Bhatta Workers Union in writing that the rally was banned. The rally went ahead after successful discussion with the police when it was made clear to the police that the rally would take place in any case, and the numbers about to demonstrate were also made clear!

The rally participants were carrying the placards "No to bonded labour, No to peshgi system, register the Bhatta, 500 rupees for 1000 bricks, Pain of one is pain for all, Workers united will never be defeated, Workers of the World Unite, Long Live workers unity and solidarity, Long Live Workers-Peasants alliance".

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bhatta3.jpeg>]

Mehmood But, general secretary of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union warned the bosses that they better stop taking the peshgies and it has been declared illegal by the courts. He said the bosses strike is just to blackmail the government into siding with the bosses. Bosses of the Bhatta factories have been on strike for a month, asking the government to intervene against the 'outsiders' within the union who are doing provocations and making the peace of the Bhattas disturbed.

I also declared another day of action across Pakistan at district level on 7 April. There was a storm of slogans from the workers. They came from all over Punjab, from 23 different districts. The workers movement made sure that the streets of Lahore were once again full of red flags. The workers are in revolt and they are not going to go back.

The union is fully mobilised and making a new history: the trade unions can become a mass force if the leadership is

ready to fight.