REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Labor in Pakistan

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Pakistan, at its independence in 1947, inherited only nine percent of the total industrial establishment of British India. The fragmented and low concentration of industrial capital was mirrored by the weakness of organized labor. The nascent Pakistan government followed an import substitution model to rapidly industrialize the economy. Within these policy parameters, labor was continuously asked to play its "proper and subordinate" role in relation to industrial growth.

In the past fifty years, the Pakistani state has sponsored anticommunist trade unions, banned leftist and popular trade unions, and passed draconian labor laws that effectively prevented collective bargaining or the right to strike. The military takeover of the Pakistani state in 1958 intensified repression of labor. This ten-year period culminated in social and political pressure that produced the breakup of the country and the rise of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). This phase also witnessed unprecedented labor mobilization in which labor organizations aligned themselves with the PPP under the leadership of Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto. Instead of delivering on his electoral promises of egalitarian democracy and workers' rights once in power, Bhutto brutally crushed the radicalized labor movement and instituted labor policies that primarily strengthened the state's penetration of trade union politics. Bhutto's removal from office by a military coup in 1977 resulted in an even more ruthless approach to organized labor.

In the last decade, driven by an agenda sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and neoliberal economic policies, the Pakistani economy has rapidly integrated into the global economy and its regime of flexible capital. This has resulted in the privatization of key state industries and the opening up of export processing zones to attract foreign capital. These processes have increasingly changed labor relations, giving rise to a subcontracting culture along with an effective suspension of labor laws.

"Labour in Pakistan," December 26–28, 1999, the first conference of its kind in Pakistan, had the formative agenda of initiating a dialogue and discus-

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 58, Fall 2000, pp. 314–317
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900003744 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sion between trade union activists and academics on Pakistani labor history and on the changing labor relations in the late twentieth century. The multidisciplinary synergy provided by the interaction between these two groups allowed for the investigation of a number of key questions within the context of social, political, economic, and cultural change in contemporary Pakistan. The conference was organized in Karachi, Pakistan, by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) in collaboration with the Changing Labour Relations in Asia (CLARA) project of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.

Focusing on the necessity of generating and recording historical materials for further research, the introductory remarks by Karamat Ali (PILER) were marked by their emphasis on creating a central archive pertaining to trade union politics. A general appeal was made to the participating trade union leaders and activists to donate reports, meeting memoranda, pamphlets, posters, photographs, newsletters, correspondences, etc. Participants were also requested to be interviewed either on tape or on camera in order to consolidate, along with a print archive, a collection of audiovisual resources at one primary site.

The keynote address was given by I. A. Rehman, the director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Rehman, a distinguished journalist and political activist, spelled out the major themes that became the central discussion agenda for the following three days. The speaker stressed how the process of globalization had reduced the number of factory-based organized workers. A majority of workers were employed as casual or contract laborers and/or in the informal sector with female home-based production processes and child labor becoming dominant forms of labor relations. The speaker argued that in light of these changes, Pakistani trade union politics cannot be divorced from the larger struggle for democratic norms and social justice in the country. Moreover, he stressed that there was an urgent need to rethink traditional forms of trade union politics and strategies for organizing labor. He deemed it necessary to link the process of labor rights to the struggle for citizens' rights and to the subsequent construction of a vibrant civil society.

The following three days of presentations were divided into sessions on labor history, the construction of class and community, the legal aspects of the labor problem, the history of leftist parties, and contemporary changes in labor relations. The discussions and responses provided further nuances and subtleties to the arguments put forward in the opening session. Papers by Khizer Ansari (Royal Holloway College), Rifaat Husein (PILER), and Kamran Asdar Ali (University of Rochester) provided an historical perspective on the labor movement and demonstrated the historically diverse and fragmented nature of the working class. These presenters emphasized that labor's organizational efforts need to take into account the fundamental role that ethnic/cultural difference and religion play in the creation of working-class aspirations, consciousness, and politics. They showed how within postcolonial Pakistan the transformation of the peasantry into industrial labor produced hybrid formations that combined horizontal cleavages with vertical affiliations. The papers stressed how section-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900003744 Published online by Cambridge University Press

al loyalties based on caste, religion, language, region, and kin were amalgamated with horizontal loyalties based on class.

A major contribution to the conference was the analysis of nonfactory-based work processes and the level of union formation in these sectors. Detailed examination was presented on the working conditions and plight of mine workers, rural labor, white-collar bank employees, bonded laborers in brick manufacturing, child labor, and home-based female labor in the garment and other industries. These presentations served to strengthen a set of pivotal papers by Yunas Samad (Bradford University) and by Asad Saeed (PILER). Saeed's paper emphasized the declining numbers of factory-based workers and the expansion of the nonformal sector, which has increasingly absorbed the majority of the working population in Pakistan. Samad's paper elaborated on the narrowly focussed trade union politics of factory-based unions and collective bargaining agents, which helps to further weaken labor's bargaining power in the ever shrinking formal sector. Samad raised the issue of organizing within the informal sector and argued for developing strategies to organize industrywide trade unions.

A number of veteran trade union leaders gave reflexive and critical accounts of Pakistan's labor history and trade union movement. These analytical and first-person narratives were invaluable in their scope and content, as they shall serve as important documents for any future historical understanding of the labor movement in Pakistan. Linked to this were academic papers presented by Jaffar Ahmed (Karachi University) and Mohammed Waseem (Quaid e Azam University) on the history of the Left and the communist movement in Pakistan. Taken as whole, these sets of papers created a lively debate among the trade union activists (those who had participated in past struggles) and the academics (those who sought to represent those struggles). The back and forth exchanges opened up productive avenues for retrospection, for collaboration, and for a detailed analysis of past and present histories.

The last session looked into the legal and political problems that hinder the process of labor organization in the informal and formal sectors. Reemphasizing the political process itself, the discussion crystallized around the issue of how labor politics needed to address the diverse forms of prevalent working conditions and, in doing so, also not ignore lived experiences within working-class communities. The meeting regarded a larger social movement on democratic reform and on a rights-based agenda as the major form through which working men, women, and children in Pakistan could acquire their legitimate place in society. The participants unanimously proclaimed that only such a political process could lead to a new and inclusive meaning of citizenship within the context of Pakistani politics.

The workshop ended on a positive note of further cooperation and continuing dialogue between the participants. Proposals were also made for regional cooperation and sharing of experiences with researchers and activists from South Asian and Middle Eastern countries. A tentative timetable was proposed to organize a comparative regional labor workshop by the end of the next two

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years. Concrete undertakings were further given by all the trade union activists and leaders for providing resource material for the archives. They were persuaded to identify key individuals who could be a part of a proposed oral history project on Pakistani labor history. A consensus also developed on long-term and short-term research agendas that would incorporate historical and contemporary situations. Finally, a commitment was made to develop a social-action-based form of research that would enable a close association among the participating academics and labor activists.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900003744 Published online by Cambridge University Press