

# Pakistani autoworkers wage 18-month struggle against Suzuki

Steve Dean  
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For almost 18 months, 150 automotive workers who were sacked from the Suzuki Motor plant in Karachi, Pakistan, have waged a struggle for reinstatement and for union recognition. Suzuki dismissed the casual workers last year after they formed the Pak-Suzuki Motor Company Star Workers Union and began to campaign for improved working conditions.

Most of the company's workforce—850 out of 1,200—were casual workers, allowing Suzuki to avoid paying even basic entitlements. The existing union, Pak Suzuki Motor Company Workers Union, which was officially recognised as the Collective Bargaining Agency (CBA), supported this situation.

As the new union began to gain support, the company moved rapidly to crush it. In June 1998, as the workers tried to enter the plant to start work, local police, acting under management instructions, selected out Star Workers Union members and barred their way.

The workers were then informed that their services were no longer required. Ahmed Ali, 29, an active member of the new union, was stopped from entering along with his brother. "I remember that particular day when we were gate-stopped. There was a very tense situation at the main gate. Dozens of armed police and rangers were pointing their guns straight at us. The company made all these arrangements in an attempt to intimidate us."

Since being locked-out the workers have mounted a legal challenge to the sackings and to gain union recognition. They have organised public demonstrations and media statements explaining their case and exposing the company's repressive campaign.

Some of the sacked workers wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site* to explain what had happened and the conditions they faced in the plant.

Iftikhar Ahmed, 27, said: "The average daily production target at the plant was 135 vehicles. The 850 contract workers carried the workload in the plant. Unfortunately

they were denied all entitlements, annual leave, bonuses, sick pay, promotion and insurance. These terms were enforced upon these workers by the management with the help of the CBA union."

Inayat Ismal, a welding supervisor, said the management used the offer of apprenticeships and training to pay low wages. "Our intentions were to become trained, skilled and well-paid workers. However, the harsh reality was that the company and the CBA union built our hopes up for nothing just to keep a low paid workforce."

Mohammad Yousuf, who joined the company as an apprentice in 1990, spoke bitterly about the deceptive practice. He said the management had promised that after three years he would be made permanent. But he and 200 other apprentices were refused permanency by management and the CBA union refused to assist them.

"We all were engaged in regular production and we worked hard to maintain our skills and efficiency. We were not looking for normal payment because our main object was a secure and good future with Suzuki. I cannot believe that I was paid only 300 rupees per month (US\$6)."

Syed Zahid Hussain said the CBA was completely unwilling to lift a finger to assist casual workers when they tried to oppose the bad working conditions and the fake apprenticeship scheme. "We went to the CBA for help. After hearing what we said, they claimed they could only support the 300 permanent workers at the plant. This is when we started the new union."

Mohammed Irfan, a 24-year-old skilled worker, is the sole supporter of his family. "I sensed the frustrations among many workers in the plant. Only a few were getting good facilities while most of us had nothing. After meeting leading figures in the union I decided to join to change things. The management, however, sacked us."

The close relationship between the company and the

CBA union was revealed further by a letter sent to the Internet site *LabourNet* earlier this year. Written by its general secretary Shah Fakhre Alam, the letter attempts to discredit the Star Workers Union and its founder Aijaz Ahmed, but reveals instead that the CBA union is little more than a company union intent on suppressing workers' grievances.

“The CBA enjoys excellent relations with management and there is absolute industrial peace in the company,” Shah Fakhre Alam wrote. “We believe in peaceful and purposeful bargaining and during our tenure all matters were settled through bilateral negotiations. Aijaz Ahmed has resorted to all kinds of unethical and devious means to disturb the industrial peace and harmony in our company and spoil the cordial relations that exist between the CBA and management.”

As the sacked workers made clear, however, the CBA union's “cordial relations” with the company were responsible for poor working conditions and safety standards. A lack of safety procedures for the heavy pressing machines caused a high frequency of accidents. Two workers, Mohammed Yasin and Mohammed Ramzan, suffered serious injuries last year.

Ramzan lost his finger in an accident in the press shop. After medical treatment he asked the company for compensation. His request was treated as an act of rebellion. As a known supporter of the Star Workers Union, his employment was terminated.

Yasin was directed to use a sheering machine on which he had no experience. He declined at first but was pressured by his shift supervisor. His right hand was sliced by a sheering blade and after 13 hours of surgery was finally amputated.

He was advised by the doctor to take six months' sick leave and to travel to the United Kingdom to have a false hand fitted. The company ignored the doctor's recommendation and turned down Yasin's request for leave. It also denied him any assistance for medical treatment and the 100,000 rupees to which he was legally entitled under government regulations. Even after complaints to the Joint Labour Director, nothing has been done to enforce the regulations.

The sacked workers remain committed to their struggle despite company and police intimidation and mounting personal hardship.

The Star Workers Union's founder, Aijaz Ahmed, who had worked as an interpreter, said: “During the last year I have spent all my savings and sold my car. The company has spent over 4 million rupees to fight us and has bribed

many officials in the Labour Department. I have been constantly harassed by state police in an attempt to stop our movement and I am under surveillance.”

Mirza Shahid Baig, a 33-year-old welder, said: “My one and only crime was that I was an active member of the Star Workers Union. I am now jobless, without any income and with a family to support. Despite all this hardship our ideology is clear and immovable, we will follow a legal course to win justice.”

Khair Mohammed, a 44-year-old skilled worker who now lives with his extended family, explained that things were very tough: “I have made every effort to find some decent work but it has been fruitless. I have been jobless for over a year and to survive I have to do odd jobs to earn money. I am very encouraged to continue our fight now that it is being brought to international attention.”

Zeeshan Ahmed, 21, said, “I was targeted by the company and sacked. I did not do any wrong and my record is clear. I have tried everything possible to get a job, but unemployment is very high. I have qualifications but I cannot afford the money to go back to college to learn more skills. I am dedicated to this movement of workers and I am proud to be so young and contributing to such a big struggle.”

The workers have asked for letters of support and financial assistance. Protest letters can be sent to the Chairman of Suzuki Motor Company Japan, Mr. Osamu Suzuki: (fax) 81-053-448-9365, (tel) 81-053-440-2438. Copies can be sent to:

Aijaz Ahmed  
B-54, Block 4-A  
Journalist Society  
Gulshan-E-Iqbal  
Karachi, Pakistan  
Email: [Unionism@yahoo.com](mailto:Unionism@yahoo.com)



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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