

Striking Karachi newspaper workers appeal for support

24 December 1999

The following was received from striking workers at the Daily Finance in Karachi, Pakistan.

The entire staff of the *Daily Finance*, a newspaper published in Karachi, Pakistan, went on strike December 22. They are demanding the payment of wages, which have not been paid for more than two months.

The *Daily Finance* is a Karachi-based financial newspaper that has been published for the last nine years. The work force is entirely made up of casual workers, which allows the owners to avoid paying even the most basic benefits. For several months these workers have not been paid on time and in some cases their salaries have been delayed for two months or more.

What makes the situation worse is that Eid, a Muslim festival, is only two weeks away while staffers have not been paid yet. Eid is due on January 9, 2000, while the *Finance* staff has not yet been paid for November.

One of the worst abuses involves a staff member, Mohammed Shafi, who was injured two weeks ago in an automobile accident. His leg bone was fractured. He was admitted to a local private hospital, but the hospital would not release him after the operation, because he was not able to pay the hospital bill of Rs 40,000. He has not been paid for three months and the owner owed him Rs 40,000. When he telephoned about the payment of his salary, the owner, Sajjad Ali Shah, refused to talk to him.

On Wednesday he had to ask his colleagues to provide him with some money so he could buy medicine. The situation was really unbearable and many of the workers started to cry.

The workers then decided to go on strike to obtain payment of their wages and, more importantly, Shafi's benefits. However, the owner refused to talk to them. The workers decided to go on a protest strike and to

delay the newspaper's inside pages for at least three hours.

All the staff members, including reporters, news desk staff, computer operators, copy pasters and page makers, stopped working at 6 PM. The management began to threaten them that they would be sacked if they continued this strike and so forth. But the workers were determined and said they wanted a definite date for the payment of salaries and the immediate release of Shafi's money.

The entire staff participated in the strike, which was slated to last three hours.

A committee was formed to lead the negotiations and propose future strategy. The committee members proposed that work should not be resumed until the owner's arrival in the office, as he was still avoiding talking to the staff. All comrades approved the suggestion and the strike was extended until the owner showed up and a dialogue began.

The owner came in about 10:15 PM and told the staff members that they could leave the office if they wanted to, as he did not have the money to pay the salaries. He said that he would close down the newspaper, as it was not profitable for him. He even abused the workers for making life miserable for him and he abused an elder staff member, who is about 65, for participating in the strike.

His attitude made all the comrades angry and they decided to leave the office immediately. However, the committee proposed that the owner would remain under pressure if the workers remained on the premises because the owner would not like his assets—computers, scanners, printers, etc.—to be damaged or destroyed. After a brief discussion this proposal was also approved and the strikers stayed on the premises.

After a while, management representatives came to the strikers and stated that they could not immediately

provide a date for the payment of back wages because the newspaper's payments have been delayed by advertising agencies and management has been arranging some credits for their salaries. They urged the protesters to give management one day in which to arrange the finances and after that they would be paid immediately or be given a definite date for payment, certainly before Eid.

The management spokesmen were told that they would be informed about the decision of workers after a while. The strikers held a meeting after that and it was unanimously decided to give management one day in which to come up with concrete results. The strike was called off for the time being with the understanding that the protest would not end until the workers win their demands.

About 11:00 PM the entire staff resumed work. A complaint has been lodged with the Karachi Union of Journalists, while other related bodies will also be informed within the next 24 hours. The staff members have also decided to extend their movement to the all contract workers.

It should be noted that newspapers have been classified as an "industry" in Pakistan. The owners have been earning millions of rupees from this industry. Newspaper workers, on the other hand, including editorial staff members, are highly underpaid. The average salary for a reporter [and sub-editor] is around Rs 5,000, per month, which is the equivalent of US\$98. If you take into account that in Pakistan the official inflation rate is above 6 percent and unofficially above 12 percent, this will give you some idea of the living standards of workers in this "industry."

Workers at the *Daily Finance* appeal to all those who read this report to send their protest to the chief executive of the company, at the following fax number: 92-021-2415353. Also to the chief executive of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf at the following Email address: CE@pak.gov.pk



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