

Pakistani troops seize telephone network, strike leaders arrested

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Pakistani troops and other security personnel seized control of at least 150 Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) installations spread across the country on the evening of Saturday June 11. The army action, which saw heavily armed troops storm into PTCL facilities and expel the unionized workforce, came shortly after Pakistan's US-supported military regime fixed June 18 as the date for selling off a major chunk of the state-owned telephone company's shares.

According to Pakistani press reports, at least 20 PTCL union leaders and workers have been taken into custody. Others have been forced underground, as security forces raid union offices and workers' homes.

Those caught up in the dragnet are threatened with severe legal reprisals. The government has painted the workers' threat, made during an earlier strike and repeated last week, to paralyze the country's telecommunication's network unless the PTCL privatization plan is cancelled, as a conspiracy to damage state assets.

In a bid to further terrorize the PTCL workers, the government has obtained a ruling from the National Industrial Relations Commission proclaiming the job action called by the nine-union PTCL workers' joint action committee in response to Saturday's privatization announcement and army action an "illegal strike." Under the Pakistan military regime's draconian anti-worker Industrial Relations Ordinance (2002), workers who participate in an "illegal" strike can be fired en masse.

This raises the distinct possibility that the military regime and PTCL management will try to purge the most militant workers. Company officials have said that with the technological changes that will accompany privatization up to half of the company's 65,000 workers could be made redundant and lose their

jobs.

Pakistani soldiers and paramilitary forces now occupy PTCL facilities, their rooftops and grounds, while telecommunications technicians from the Army Signal Corps have assumed responsibility for much of PTCL's operations. Declared Major-General Shaukat Sultan, director-general of the military's inter-service public relations department, "We have deployed appropriate security personnel depending on the nature of the installations."

The decision of Pakistan's president and chief of armed services, General Pervez Musharraf, to deploy the military against the PTCL workers is a measure of his fear that their resistance to the privatization of one of Pakistan's most profitable companies could become the rallying point for popular opposition to his authoritarian regime and to the neo-liberal economic policies it has pursued on behalf of Pakistani and international capital.

Musharraf and his prime minister, former top Citibank executive Shaukat Aziz, have been touting Pakistan as one of the world's fastest growing economies. But it is conceded by virtually the entire Pakistani press and political opposition that poverty and economic insecurity have grown substantially under Musharraf's rule. In a comment on last week's national budget, the liberal daily *Dawn* deplored that more than half of all government spending will go to the military and debt-servicing, and that the government is instituting tax cuts for the well-to-do under conditions where the rich and upper-middle class already systematically evade taxation. "The danger," warned the *Dawn*, "in pursuing growth single-mindedly without any consideration of equity is that the expanding sea of poverty may at some point engulf the islands of prosperity..."

The military strike against the PTCL workers has been several weeks in the making.

For 10 days beginning May 25, PTCL workers occupied the company's headquarters in Islamabad and other major facilities across the country. The government responded by encircling them with troops. But fearing the political impact of trying to smash the workers' occupation with troops, it ultimately chose to rely on the union leaders and the assistance of the bourgeois opposition parties to terminate the strike.

For their part, the union leaders—and this goes for those affiliated with the Pakistan Socialist Movement and the Pakistan Trade Union Rights Campaign—sought to maintain the PTCL workers' strike at the level of a militant trade union struggle. While the PTCL workers' struggle was and is objectively a direct political challenge to the Musharraf regime and the Pakistani bourgeoisie's plans to make the country a cheap-labor haven, the unions have fostered the illusion that the workers can pressure the government into withdrawing its privatization plan. To this end, they have encouraged them to seek the support of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and even the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Mahjlis-i-Amal (MMA).

On June 3, the inter-union committee declared the workers had won a signal victory and ordered the strike ended. PTCL management, they said, had agreed to 28 of the workers' 29 demands, including long-delayed pay raises. And while the 29th demand—the scrapping of the privatization plan—had not been won, they said the government had agreed to an indefinite postponement of the share sell-off planned for June 10.

But no sooner did the workers end their occupation and return to work, than government ministers began affirming that the privatization plan be fully implemented and the share sell-off would go ahead. Facing an increasingly irate membership, the union leaders were forced to threaten a new strike and set June 15 as the date for paralyzing all PTCL operations.

This time, however, the government was not going to be caught off guard. No sooner did negotiations with the unions collapse on Saturday than it deployed the military to take over PTCL's facilities.

The struggle now unfolding in Pakistan is of decisive importance for workers all over the world. It lays bare the antidemocratic character of the Musharraf regime—a

regime proclaimed by the Bush administration as a key US ally in the worldwide struggle for democracy and against terrorism and tyranny. Is it any wonder then, that there has been nary a report of the military action against the PTCL workers in the US and Western press?



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