

Pakistan: Bush ally Musharraf mounts terror campaign against telecommunication workers

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More than a thousand Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) workers have been arrested in the six days since the country's US-backed military regime ordered army and paramilitary forces to seize control of the state-owned company's key installations.

The PTCL workers, who are waging a militant struggle against the government's plans to privatize the company, face a veritable reign of state terror. Those arrested are reportedly being held under the country's draconian anti-terrorism laws. On Monday, Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Sherpao said strike leaders could be tried as "terrorists." Pronouncing the PTCL workers' strike "illegal," Sherpao said that those who are "threatening the government against the privatization of PTCL are terrorists according to the law. They will face trouble if they continue their anti-state activities."

In a form of state kidnapping, police and security forces have seized the relatives of some union officials and militant workers who have evaded arrest and told their families that they will be released only when those who have gone underground surrender. The PTCL Workers Union Action Committee, 7 of whose 29 leaders are currently in government hands, reports security forces have also visited the homes of other workers and told them that they too could face anti-terrorism charges if they do not immediately return to work.

PTCL management has fired at least 28 union leaders and threatened to dismiss thousands of workers on short-term contracts if they do not break ranks with the strike.

On the evening of June 11, heavily armed security forces took over PTCL installations, with personnel from the Army Signal Corps assuming the functions of PTCL workers. The military action came just hours after the government had announced that it had set today, June 18, as the date to auction off 26 percent of PTCL shares.

The government and PTCL management claim that the majority of workers have now abandoned the strike and

that the Signal Corps are no longer manning the country's main telephone network. But this is belied by the continuing wave of repression.

Leaders of one traditionally important union, the PTCL Telecom Employees Union, have capitulated and publicly repudiated the strike, claiming its continuation and the struggle against privatization are against "the greater interest of the country."

But from the beginning, the PTCL workers' anti-privatization struggle has been characterized by strong rank-and-file distrust of the traditional union leadership. The creation of the inter-union PTCL Workers Union Action Committee, some of whose leaders are drawn from outside the union officialdom, came in response to worker complaints over the outcome of a strike last year over the company's use of casual labor.

On June 3, the unions and the action committee called off a 10-day worker occupation of PTCL's Islamabad headquarters and other key installations on the grounds that the government had agreed to an indefinite suspension of the privatization plan and PTCL had made significant concessions on other longstanding worker demands.

It was obvious, however, that the "suspension" was only a government ploy. This was not just because the regime of General/President Pervez Musharraf had exhibited fierce hostility to the occupation (it had deployed troops around PTCL facilities and indicated they could soon be ordered to strike) and repeatedly vowed that the privatization would proceed. The PTCL workers' struggle is a challenge to the authority and political legitimacy of the Musharraf regime and to the Pakistani bourgeoisie's basic class strategy of making the country a cheap-labor haven for international capital.

Despite the state assault on the PTCL workers, the Workers Union Action Committee is pledging to mount large protests today to denounce the sell-off of what is

one of the country's most profitable companies and to disrupt the government auction of PTCL shares. Sympathy strikes have also been threatened at other state-run firms.

Yesterday's edition of the *Dawn* reports it was told by a member of the action committee that the PTCL workers have not acted on earlier threats to jam the telephone network because of objections from unions at other firms facing imminent privatization and from the bourgeois political opposition to Musharraf.

The government meanwhile is boasting that the share auction—which is expected to include bids from a half dozen or more foreign telecom companies—will go off without a hitch. In recent weeks, the military regime has repeatedly lashed out at political protests with violence and massive mobilizations of security forces. For example, to prevent supporters of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from greeting her husband on his return to the country in April, the government detained tens of thousands of PPP activists and shut down much of the country's transportation network.

Dow Jones Newswires has reported, "All eyes are on a planned bidding Saturday to partly privatize Pakistan's largest phone-service provider." After noting that the sell-off of the 26 percent stake in PTCL is the biggest-ever privatization in Pakistan, the Dow Jones report added, "If the sale goes smoothly, analysts said other firms like Pakistan State Oil, the country's largest oil marketing company and Pakistan Petroleum Ltd., the second biggest exploration firm in Pakistan, will follow soon."

In a crude attempt to undercut popular support for the PTCL workers, the government and company have awarded them a significant wage hike (their first increase in seven years), said no permanent workers will lose their jobs for the first two years after privatization, and offered various incentives to those who accept voluntary retirement. The reality is that privatization is meant to pave the way for the introduction of technological and work-rule changes that will result in the elimination of thousands of jobs, something in the order of a halving of the current workforce.

While Musharraf and his prime minister, former top Citibank official Shaukat Aziz, boast that Pakistan is undergoing high growth, the country is officially experiencing double-digit inflation and unofficially double-digit unemployment, as well as mounting poverty and social polarization.

If the government has resorted to, in the words of the non-governmental organization Pakistan Human Rights

Commission, "brute force" in its campaign to smash the PTCL workers' struggle, it is because it recognizes their strike has the potential to become the catalyst for a working class-led upsurge of Pakistan's toilers. Such a struggle would be directed against the military regime and the Pakistani ruling class's twin policies of neo-liberal economic restructuring and aid to Washington in the extension of US military and geopolitical power into Central Asia and the Middle East.

However, the unions and organizations like the Pakistan Trade Union Rights Campaign have sought to confine the PTCL workers' struggle within the parameters of trade union militancy and protest politics, promoting professions of support for the workers' cause from the bourgeois opposition, whether it be Bhutto's PPP or the right-wing Islamic opposition, the MMA or Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal.

On June 13, the major opposition parties, including the PPP, MMA and Pakistan Muslim League-N (the supporters of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif), walked out of the National Assembly to protest against the privatization and army takeover of PTCL.

Insofar as these forces have sought to insinuate themselves in the PTCL workers' struggle, it is to defuse it while politically subordinating it to their maneuvers with the Musharraf regime and Washington.

Privatisation Minister Hafeez Sheikh said he was surprised by the PPP and PML-N members' walkout since the privatization of PTCL had been on the agenda of every government since 1992. Those "who had backed the privatization, were now opposing it," said Sheikh. "The only difference now is that our government has been able to create a conducive environment for the privatization of the company."

A key factor in this "environment" is the US government's political, financial and military support for the Musharraf regime. Bush's ally is waging the "war on terror and tyranny" against the Pakistani working class and in pursuit of an incendiary socioeconomic agenda that will accentuate Pakistan's already profound social inequality.



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