

Pakistani workers revolt against PTCL privatization

Security forces poised to attack occupation

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Workers at Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL)—who have been occupying the company’s Islamabad headquarters and other facilities since May 25—are threatening to sever the country’s communications network next Monday, unless Pervez Musharraf’s military government abandons its plans to privatize what is Pakistan’s largest and most profitable public-sector enterprise.

The military government, meanwhile, has made it clear that it is ready to use the full power of Pakistan’s security forces against the PTCL workers. On May 30, the *Dawn* reported that 600 police and Frontier Constabulary had taken up positions on the grounds of the PTCL headquarters and that “knowledgeable sources” were saying security forces might soon storm the complex.

While no attack has yet been launched, large numbers of security personnel remain in position at the PTCL headquarters and military helicopters regularly fly overhead. Paramilitary forces have also been deployed outside telephone exchanges across the country. According to news reports, a growing number of union leaders and activists have been seized by security forces. Malik Maqbool Hussain, a member of the PTCL Workers Unions Action Committee, was detained and interrogated for several hours by one of Pakistan’s intelligence agencies.

Government spokesmen have repeatedly threatened harsh measures against the PTCL workers. According to the *Daily Times* of June 2, Federal Information Technology Minister Sardar Awais Leghari vowed “an iron hand would be used” if “national assets are damaged.” He also insisted that the company will proceed with its privatization plan.

The 60,000 PTCL workers began job action after the government announced that on June 10 it will begin selling off its 88 percent share of the telecommunications company. The strike escalated on May 25 when workers, who were picketing outside the PTCL headquarters, responded to reports that negotiations between the company and a nine-

union joint action committee had failed, by breaking through police lines and taking the building over. PTCL facilities in cities across the country were also soon occupied.

For over a week, all PTCL operator services and equipment as well as line repair and installation have been at a standstill.

According to the Pakistan Trade Union Rights Campaign, the leaders of the action committee swore on the Muslim holy book, the *Koran*, that they would never compromise on the workers’ demands, after rank-and-file workers voiced scepticism about the union leaders’ commitment to the struggle against privatization.

The workers’ confidence in the unions was undermined by their calling off a strike last year against the layoff of 30,000 temporary workers, after management compromised on some of its demands.

Because of its support for the US conquest of Afghanistan and the assertion of US military and geo-political power in the Middle East and Central Asia, the Musharraf regime has won fulsome support and considerable military and financial aid from the Bush administration. But Washington has also lauded Pakistan for its implementation of IMF-style economic restructuring.

Thanks to a surge in foreign investment, Pakistan has experienced increased economic growth in recent years. Yet, even in the Pakistani media, it is widely conceded that poverty and social inequality have increased during the five and half years since Musharraf seized power.

In addition to selling off public sector enterprises and slashing state expenditure on public and social services and price supports, the Musharraf regime has implemented a reactionary revision of the country’s labor laws. Under Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO) 2002, Pakistan’s federal and provincial governments may ban any strike by declaring it “prejudicial to the national interest,” and should workers defy such a ban, they are liable to be fired. IRO 2002 denies agricultural workers—the largest single

component of the workforce—the right to even form unions or bargain collectively.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, who was a top executive at Citibank until he returned to Pakistan to become finance minister, has repeatedly vowed that he will push through a new phase of neo-liberal economic reforms to attract further foreign investment. The privatization of PTCL is seen as pivotal to this new phase. Declared Privatization Minister Hafez Sheikh last month, “The government is moving to privatize some of its biggest state-owned companies this year as part of an effort to open up its economy and attract more foreign investment.”

With privatization, thousands of PTCL workers’ jobs will lose their jobs. According to industry experts, the company would have to cut its workforce in half to meet the standard industry ratio of employees to telephone lines. Under a recent management offer, only permanent employees with at least 10 years’ seniority would have any guarantee against the loss of their jobs under privatization.

Although PTCL is one of the country’s biggest profit earners, the workers have not had a pay increase since 1998.

The PTCL workers’ struggle is a significant challenge both to the US-backed military regime’s privatization program and to its attempt to stifle opposition to growing economic insecurity and inequality through the suppression of basic democratic and worker rights.

But the leaders of the inter-union strike committee are working to confine and contain the PTCL workers’ struggle at the level of union militancy, while encouraging the workers to look to the bourgeois political opposition to Musharraf—especially Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)—for support.

This includes those in the leadership of the strike who are supporters of the Pakistan Socialist Movement, which is affiliated with Committee for a Workers’ International, a grouping that emerged from the British Militant group. On June 1, the Pakistan Socialist Movement and the Pakistan Trade Union Rights Campaign were among the sponsors of a meeting to support the PTCL strike that was addressed by various legislators including from the PPP, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (the party of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif), and the alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, the MMA or Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal.

The PPP has long spouted populist and socialist phrases, but is a party beholden to the capitalist great landowner Bhutto family and, more fundamentally, the Pakistani bourgeoisie. On May 26, the PPP’s central information secretary issued a statement denouncing the government’s privatization program as “a conspiracy against the country and its people and a criminal method to benefit the cronies of the administration.” Yet, when Benazir Bhutto was prime

minister, her government followed the diktats of the IMF and World Bank and initiated a privatization program.

Likewise, the PPP’s attitude to the current military regime is two-faced. Bhutto welcomed Musharraf’s ouster of her bitter rival Nawaz Sharif. Only after Musharraf had rejected her overtures did she become an opponent of the military regime. Moreover, during the past six months, the PPP leadership and the military regime have been involved in secret negotiations, in which Bhutto has offered to support Musharraf remaining president if he will agree to new elections this year.

On June 2, the PPP and the rest of the opposition in the National Assembly, which was elected in bogus elections in 2002, staged a brief walkout to oppose PTCL’s privatization. Later that day, the PTCL inter-union committee welcomed MMA legislators when they visited the workers occupying the telecommunication company’s Islamabad headquarters.

The Musharraf regime is hoping that the PTCL workers’ militant struggle can be defused through a combination of threats of bloody violence and the intercession of the opposition, whose claims to support the workers have been trumpeted by the union leadership. Indeed, even as the government prepares for a possible violent assault against the strikers, the union leaders are promoting the false notion that with the support of the likes of the PPP and MMA, the Musharraf regime can be pressured into abandoning its privatization plans, which are pivotal to its and the Pakistani bourgeoisie’s export-led growth economic strategy.



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