

Pakistan: Textile workers' protests convulse Multan

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The industrial city of Multan, Pakistan's sixth largest, was convulsed by protests of textile workers, Monday and Tuesday, angered by repeated power outages that have resulted in pay and job cuts for tens of thousands.

The protests were initiated by the Power Looms Association, most of whose members work out of their homes, in a contracted-out, "cottage industry" that makes cloth for garment manufacturers. Chronic electricity outages, which are depriving large parts of the country of power for from 10 to 20 hours per day, have robbed the power-loom workers and the laborers who assist them of their livelihood. In Multan alone, half a million people—the power-loom operators and laborers and their families—are said to be dependent on the power loom industry.

For months the power loom workers have been agitating for an end to the power outages or, at the very least, that the government-owned national electricity utility, WAPDA, guarantee them a set number of hours of electricity per day and adhere to a schedule when imposing power cuts. "Our workers and labourers are forced to starve," said Khaliq Qandeel Ansari, the general-secretary of the Power Looms Association Monday. "Due to the power cuts there is no work."

On Tuesday workers blocked rail lines. The previous day the protests had taken a violent turn, with protesters attacking the offices of the local WAPDA subsidiary, the Multan Electric Power Company (MEPCO), and a bank, and torching several vehicles. Security guards at MEPCO opened fire, injuring several protesters. According to press reports, the police and the power loom workers subsequently fought a four hour-long pitched battle, with police using baton-charges and teargas to disperse the crowd.

Pakistan's new prime minister, Yusuf Raza Gilani, who himself represents a Multan constituency in the

National Assembly, has blamed Monday's unrest on "miscreants" and insinuated that they were the work of the government's right-wing opponents who want to "divert people's attention from real issues."

Recent weeks have seen repeated provocations by elements loyal to President Pervez Musharraf, the US-supported military strongman, who has been shorn of much of his power in recent months. To quash constitutional challenges to his phony "re-election" as president and to intimidate the opposition and populace, Musharraf imposed martial law for six weeks late last year, but in the February 18 national and provincial elections his political allies were routed.

The provocations have included staged attacks on pro-Musharraf politicians, which have then been used to denounce and discredit both the new government and the lawyers who have been demanding the restoration of the more than 60 supreme and superior court judges whom Musharraf purged under his martial law regime.

The most violent of these provocations occurred in Karachi on April 9. It began with a brawl between anti- and pro-Musharraf lawyers—or at least persons who claimed to be lawyers—and ended with a fire in which six people died. Several other persons were killed from gunfire during the melee.

The pro-Musharraf Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) has claimed that some of its lawyer-members were attacked by members of the Karachi Bar Association (KBA) when they initiated a protest against the roughing up of the former Chief Minister of Sind, an MQM leader. The KBA president says the fighting broke out when MQM supporters invaded their offices.

Musharraf was quick to seize on the Karachi events to denounce the lawyers' movement. "I appeal to the lawyers not to spread anarchy," declared Musharraf. "Law and order should be maintained."

Gilani's denunciations of the Multan protests are a reactionary slur. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Monday's riot in Multan was instigated by Musharraf loyalists or by the pro-Musharraf PML (Q), the MQM's Punjab-based ally.

In an editorial Thursday, the *Dawn* was forced to concede that the claims the Multan protest were part of a right-wing conspiracy have no foundation; "The bottom line is that people are fed up—with spiraling inflation and food shortages, joblessness and underemployment, the ostentatiously rich exploiting the miserably poor, crime without punishment. The electricity shortage is only one indigestible ingredient in the bubbling brew of discontent and almost any provocation can trigger a free-for-all."

The new government, its democratic and populist pretensions notwithstanding, responded to the unrest in Multan with savage reprisals akin to those employed by Musharraf against working class unrest and political opposition. Police have been mounting late night raids on the homes of workers involved in the protests. A report in the April 16 *Dawn* says police have registered cases against 1,500 people and, moreover, that the workers are being charged under the country's draconian Anti-Terrorism Act.

On Wednesday the Interior Minister announced that all rallies and public meeting would require government approval to be held. The previous government comprised of Musharraf's cronies had imposed similar restrictions and with the same justification—the need to minimize terrorism.

Pakistan's new government—which is comprised of Pakistan's two main traditional parties, the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif), and the Pashtun-based Awami National Party and the Islamic fundamentalist, JIU-F—has promised that it will soon introduce a package of measures to provide jobs and relief from spiraling food prices.

But at the same time Finance Minister Ishaq Dar is warning that the government must take harsh measures to scale back a burgeoning budget deficit. Dar told an April 9 press conference that if a combination of tax increases and spending and price-subsidy cuts is not implemented in the coming budget, the deficit will soon be "almost unmanageable."

On Thursday, the government raised the price of petrol and diesel by 3 Rupees a litre.

Traditional bitter political rivals, the PPP and PML (N) fought over which party should assume the finance portfolio in the coalition government, neither wanting have to take political responsibility for unpopular measures.

The World Bank in a statement issued March 28 said "Pakistan's new government must take rapid action, backed by the international community, to avoid an economic crisis in the nuclear-armed nation." It added that "painful" adjustments are needed because of "high global prices for food, oil and commodities."

Such "painful" adjustments will come under conditions where Pakistan's toilers are already facing extreme hardship. The government says food prices in March were up 20 percent on the year. Others say the increase is significantly higher, noting that there have been shortages of some key staples including wheat-flour.

A World Food Programme report issued last week said food prices rose at least 35 percent in Pakistan last year and warned that because of the continuing price surge half of the 160 million Pakistanis are at risk of not having enough food.



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