

# Pakistan: KESC security guards and Karachi police open fire on protesting workers

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Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers demonstrating against nonpayment of their salaries were brutally attacked on Monday when KESC security guards and Karachi police opened fire on them, injuring at least eight.

In a further act of repression and intimidation, police have arrested 27 people, including several leaders of the KESC Labour Union, the government-recognized CBA or Collective Bargaining Agent.

Workers had gathered outside the KESC headquarters to protest nonpayment of salaries after four months without pay.

Privatized under the Musharraf dictatorship, KESC has repeatedly used goon attacks to break workers' resistance to its attempts to eliminate a third of the workforce. It is alleging that the protesting workers tried to storm the company's main office to commit acts of sabotage. Despite several workers sustaining injuries during the shooting, the company claims its security guards fired shots only in the air. Subsequently, a massive police operation was mobilized against the protesting workers.

KESC is attempting to justify its ruthless tactics and intimidation campaign against the workers by slandering them as "terrorists" and "criminals." The company's use of such language signals its willingness to use any means necessary to crush the workers' resistance.

The KESC workers have been waging a militant struggle against the retrenchment of 4,500 employees since the beginning of the year, but the unions have twice corralled them back to work after the government intervened.

Tension, as Monday's protest underlines, remains high. The protestors included both current employees and laid-off workers, including some of the small minority who accepted a meager voluntary redundancy package that the company has thus far refused to honor.

According to KESC Labour Union (CBA) President

Akhlaq Ahmed Khan, management had not paid workers in four months, prompting them to gather outside the company's main headquarters Monday to demand compensation. The workers had hoped to be paid before Eid al-Fitr and grew increasingly frustrated as the holiday approached and it became clear that they wouldn't be. The crowd swelled to several hundred by the early afternoon, with workers carrying signs and chanting slogans.

Union leaders have categorically rejected company claims that the workers had pelted security guards with rocks and even fired on them. They insist that the demonstration was peaceful and that private security guards opened fire on the protestors indiscriminately and without provocation. According to A.A. Khan, workers were harassed by the KESC's security chief (retired) Col Asif and (retired) Col Wahid Asghar when they arrived outside company headquarters. Subsequently, the KESC security chiefs ordered the guards to open fire on the protestors. Clearly such an order would not have been given without the explicit approval of management.

"A heavy contingent of police and Rangers surrounded the office, and after the initial clash between protesters and security guards, reinforcements flocked to the scene and the number of protesters swelled from a few hundred to thousands," reported the *Express Tribune*. The police then clashed with the workers, firing into the air and using tear gas against them.

Despite the brutal crackdown by the KESC security guards, the police and the paramilitary Rangers, the KESC workers continued protesting for several hours. KESC claims three of its security guards were injured during the demonstration and the police claim three of its officers were hurt.

KESC workers report that some of their colleagues were arrested by the police when they went to register a First Information Report with the police against KESC CEO

Tabish Gauhar, charging that he had instigated the attack on them .

According to the PPP-affiliated People's Workers' Union (PWU) general secretary Lateef Mughal, "The court has granted physical remand till September 8. The police have registered cases against the workers under Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act."

On Tuesday, KESC released a statement spuriously accusing workers of sabotaging and shutting down the company's offices, installations and networks, thereby disrupting power supplies to certain parts of the city. It is demanding that police take further action to stamp out continuing protests over the nonpayment of wages and Monday's attack.

The KESC workers have shown great determination and militancy, but their struggle has repeatedly run up against the strict limits that the unions, including the supposedly "nonpolitical" CBA, have imposed on it. The unions have directed the workers to appeal to the PPP-led central and Sindh provincial governments—rightwing governments committed to imposing IMF austerity measures—to come to their defence and are utterly opposed to making the KESC workers' struggle the spearhead of a working-class political and industrial counteroffensive.

On July 26, the CBA, backed by other unions, called off a nearly three-month-long strike involving thousands of workers. The strike was sparked by KESC's refusal to restore the original positions of some 4,500 employees it had categorized as "non-core" and "surplus" and upon whom it is seeking to impose low-wage contracts with pay, benefits and conditions far inferior to the rest of the workforce.

In response to the strike, KESC launched a brutal campaign to intimidate and demoralize the workers. The company, along with much of the bourgeois media, blamed the KESC workers for the power cuts that took place during the three-month strike, although KESC has a notorious record of blackouts and brownouts that long predates the strike. 400 workers were fired during the strike. Many were also arrested on bogus assault and sabotage charges. Armed thugs with links to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) attacked one of the rallies held by the KESC workers, injuring several of them. On June 25, the bullet-ridden bodies of two KESC workers were discovered. The strike, however, did receive significant support from working people across the city.

In its response to the strike, the Pakistan People's Party's (PPP), which heads the federal government in addition to the Sindh provincial government, has once

again revealed whose class interests it represents. The PPP's support made it possible for KESC to utilize the police and the courts to attack the strike. Nevertheless, the trade unions clung to a strategy of pressuring the government and pleading to the big business PPP and other rightwing political parties.

Instead of mobilizing the working class behind the striking KESC workers, the unions accepted a sell-out deal brokered by the government under which the core issues in dispute were to be settled through the establishment of a government-sponsored Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC). The DRC was supposed to have begun work 5 days after the end of the strike, but it has yet to even meet.

The unions' determination to end the strike is underscored by the fact that the interim agreement they claimed to have reached with the company on a whole series of issues, including the reinstatement of fired workers and payment of back wages, quickly proved to be nonexistent. The company has denied ever agreeing to such terms.

On Tuesday, PWU leader Aslam Sammo complained that the Sindh Governor is refusing to intervene on behalf of the workers, once again demonstrating the unions' determination to subordinate workers to the very political establishment that is leading the attacks on the working class. Recently, union leaders have also appealed to MQM leader Altaf Hussain to intervene. The MQM is currently embroiled in a bitter turf war with rival parties in Karachi, sponsoring vicious gangs that target Pashtuns residing in Karachi. Communal-ethnic violence between gangs backed by the PPP and MQM has already killed nearly a thousand people in Karachi this year.



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