

Pakistan: Power cuts spark mass protests across Punjab

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Mass protests have erupted in Pakistan's largest province in response to prolonged electricity power cuts that have disrupted daily life and exacerbated the economic crisis ravaging the country.

The demonstrations in the Punjab entered their fourth day on Tuesday, with workers across the province blocking roads and storming government offices. A general strike was also observed in the industrial city of Faisalabad on Tuesday. The Pakistani police have responded to the province-wide protests in typically brutal fashion.

The protests began spontaneously on Saturday, after days of extended power cuts lasting up to 10 hours in urban areas of the Punjab and 20 hours in rural areas. Workers in cities including Lahore, Sialkot and Gujranwala took to the streets to demand that the government bring an end to electricity cuts. Demonstrators in Lahore blocked The Mall—one of the city's main roads, burned tires and chanted slogans against the Lahore Electricity Supply Company (LESCO) for constantly depriving them of electricity. In Gujranwala, heavily armed riot police fired tear gas at furious protestors and arrested dozens of people.

Workers and students continued to protest in Lahore on Sunday. "Punjab University students lost their temper at around noon," reported the *Dawn*. "Raising slogans against the federal government, they joined the men, women and children from the adjoining Shah Di Khoi in their march up to the Canal Bridge Road near the Jinnah Hospital underpass and blocked it for traffic."

On the same day, power-loom workers staged rallies across Faisalabad, the center of Pakistan's crucial textile industry. Thousands of the city's workers have lost their jobs in recent months as chronic power cuts lead industrialists to close their factories. Pakistan's

business elite have long complained about the power cuts, citing their damaging impact on economic output. A number of factory owners took part in the Faisalabad protests. Demonstrations in the city turned violent as clashes erupted between textile workers and shopkeepers who refused to shut their doors and join the protests.

Demonstrations in Lahore intensified on Monday, when cities and villages experienced between 16 and 22 hours of unscheduled power outages. Protests in the Darogawala area of Lahore became violent after employees at a petrol pump refused to close down despite numerous pleas from the protesters. A security guard at the pump opened fire on the protesters, killing 16-year-old Amir Hamza and seriously wounding another protestor. The killing of the youth incensed the demonstrators, who responded by torching the filling station. Protesters later attended a rally staged by Hamza's relatives to demand that the security guard be arrested.

In a separate incident, Imran Haider suffocated to death in an elevator in Shah Alam Market on Tuesday after he had been trapped inside for hours due to power cuts in the area. According to reports, Haider tried desperately to contact friends and relatives by cell phone for help in his final hours. But rescuers were unable to break into the elevator due to the lack of power.

While Pakistan has long been plagued by an energy crisis, the gap between power generation and demand has widened in recent years. The Musharraf dictatorship promoted privatization as a solution to Pakistan's power crisis, but following the sell-off of the Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) the new owners failed to make good on promises of new investment, further exacerbating the country's power

shortage.

Recently, a serious water shortage has reduced hydroelectric generation to an alarmingly low level. On Sunday, the electricity shortfall increased to 5,500MW, about 40 percent of the estimated peak demand of 13,500MW. The water shortage is due to the continuing cold weather in Pakistan which has delayed the melting of mountain snow. Pakistani officials expect the water shortage to increase next month when farmers have to sow summer crops.

Recently, Islamabad reiterated its determination to go forward with a long-delayed plan to build a pipeline to import natural gas from Iran for power generation. However, the pipeline project is opposed by Washington, which in recent months has stepped up its efforts to isolate Tehran economically. The Obama administration has threatened Pakistan with sanctions should it follow through on its deal with Iran. Last week, the US State Department released a list of 12 countries that could be hit with sanctions unless they significantly reduce shipments of Iranian energy supplies, including Pakistan, India, and China.

The Pakistan Muslim League (N), which heads the Punjab provincial government, is attempting to exploit the growing anger over power cuts to add further pressure on an already weak and deeply unpopular federal government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif accused the PPP government of deliberately harming the province through power cuts that last from 12 to 18 hours each day. "I would not like to voice provincial prejudice but only Punjab is suffering due to step-motherly treatment by the central government while there is no load-shedding (power cuts) in Sindh cities," he cynically declared.

While public outrage has been directed above all against the federal government, which in addition to its failure to resolve the energy crisis has imposed big business economic "reforms" and drastically escalated the counterinsurgency war in the tribal areas, workers in Punjab did not discriminate when smashing billboards belonging to the various political parties. Indeed, Pakistan's venal elite has shown time and again that it is unwilling to make the investments needed to increase power generation, regardless of which political party or US-backed dictator has been in power.

The ongoing energy crisis is but one example of the incompatibility of the profit system with the basic needs of the working class and rural toilers. More than six decades after "independence," life for ordinary Pakistanis remains defined by poverty and social inequality. The miserable social conditions in the country have led politicians and journalists across the country to warn of Egyptian-style unrest in Pakistan, with power cuts considered one of the likely triggers. "The crisis is worsening by the hour and there is a dire need to provide immediate solution to it failing which there is a possibility that scattered protest may begin taking on the character of a serious campaign against the sitting government," the English-language daily *The Nation* warned in an editorial on Tuesday.



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