

Two workers killed as government seeks to crush Pakistan airline strike

Sampath Perera
4 February 2016

Government security forces fatally shot two striking Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) workers Tuesday, after failing to break up a demonstration with baton charges, water cannon and tear gas. The shooting occurred outside of the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, where the strikers were campaigning against the impending privatisation of the state-owned airline.

Mounted by local police and the paramilitary Karachi Rangers, Tuesday's brutal assault left at least 12 others strikers injured, several of them critically, including three with gunshot wounds.

Workers responded to the attack by expanding the strike across the country. On Wednesday, PIA was forced to announce it was suspending all international and domestic flights indefinitely. "You cannot take away our bread and butter," a PIA striker in Islamabad told the *Financial Times*. "We will fight till our last blood."

There are reports a third striker may have been killed by the security forces in the attack on the Karachi protest. Yesterday, as the government deployed more security forces at the country's airports, the Joint Action Committee that is coordinating the strike announced four of its members have been missing since Tuesday night.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Muslim League government are determined to break the strike, including through the murder of unarmed workers, so as to demonstrate their commitment to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated privatization program. PIA is at the top of the list of state enterprises targeted for privatization as a condition for a 2013 US \$6.64 billion IMF bailout package.

Following Tuesday's shooting, Sharif vowed to fire workers who joined the strike en masse and to jail them for up to a year. He also said PIA employees who broke ranks with their fellow workers and cross picket lines will be rewarded.

The mass mobilization of police and Pakistan Rangers against the strike is a stark warning to the working class. The Rangers have been deployed in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and the commercial hub, for more than two years in a

purported anti-terrorism operation. This operation has been directed increasingly openly against opponents of the government and military. Tuesday's attack on the PIA strikers underscores that the true aim of the government's "war on terror" is to strengthen the coercive forces of the state against the working class.

With the murder of the PIA workers provoking outrage across Pakistan, the police and Rangers issued hasty denials that they had opened fire with live bullets at Tuesday's protest, claiming that they had used only rubber bullets. These claims are simply not credible.

Both the police and Rangers are notorious for their gross violations of human rights, including abductions, torture and extra-judicial killings or summary executions.

Published videos and photos from Tuesday's demonstration document the brutality of the police and paramilitaries, including their use of tear gas, water cannon, and baton charges. The security forces also set upon three journalists from prominent media houses who were covering the protest.

Immediately after the attack, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan rushed to the defence of the security forces. Branding the strike "unlawful," he went on to praise the attackers claiming that "they risk their lives while saving people and maintaining peace." "Police have denied shootings. Rangers have denied firing shots. Then who used firearms?" asked Khan. Without a shred of evidence he claimed the "situation showed" some among PIA protesters "must have fired the bullets."

Such lies are intended to cover-up the government's own role, and at the highest levels, in ordering the brutal suppression of Tuesday's walkout. On Monday evening, Sharif had invoked the Essential Services Act banning the anti-privatization strike set to begin the following day and providing a legal pretext for its violent repression.

Earlier Monday, workers had rejected a phony last-minute government announcement that the PIA privatization was being postponed for six months.

While the central government has continued to issue a

tirade of threats against the strikers, the PIA chairman has resigned and the Pakistan People Party's-led provincial government in Sind, where Karachi is located, has announced compensation for the dead and injured.

Sind Chief Minister Syed Qaim Ali Shah claimed he would take up the workers' grievances with the government. But speaking to reporters following a meeting with a delegation from the PIA Joint Action Committee he did little to disguise his support for the crushing of the strike, calling the workers' protest "not good for our country, its reputation and its economy." He went on to praise Sharif as "kind" and declared himself confident that the prime minister would redress any genuine worker grievances.

The Sharif government has pledged to the IMF that it will privatize PIA and three other state-run enterprises by June and another six by the end of the year. These include high-profile targets such as Pakistan Steel Mills and the power distribution companies belonging to the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) whose privatization have been long delayed due to worker resistance.

The significance of the PIA strike has been noted in the international media. "Analysts," reported the London-based Financial Times, "say the outcome of PIA's strike will set the tone for moves to privatise other SOEs [state-owned enterprises]."

The privatisations are only one among many drastic economic "reforms" dictated by the IMF. Since 2013 the budget deficit has been brought down from 8.4 to 5.4 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by imposing brutal cuts in power subsidies, increasing taxes, and other austerity measures. The IMF is now pressing for a 27 percent cut in the government's development budget.

The impact on the working people and the poor has been devastating. Not a week passes by without sections of the working class, ranging from teachers to municipal and health care workers, taking to the streets or striking to demand the government pay them back wages. It is in this context of mounting social opposition that the government was forced in recent years to push its privatisation program to the backburner.

However, workers were well aware that the government was plotting to bring the privatization program forward and that any sell off to private investors, whether domestic or foreign, will be accompanied by a major attack on jobs and wages. They are also aware that privatization will result in cuts to vital public services. In their anti-privatisation campaign, WAPDA workers frequently point to the Karachi Electric Supply Company, which after privatization slashed power generation capacity, thereby denying an essential utility to rural communities in order to increase its profit margins.

In October the IMF acknowledged the "political obstacles" and "legal challenges" the government faces in implementing the reforms it is demanding. However, it has already complained that the loan targets are overdue. In December the government annulled a law barring the PIA being owned privately, via an emergency order, and tabled a bill to the same effect in the parliament this month.

Sharif, the scion of a family of industrialists, entered politics as a protégé of the dictator General Zia-ul Haq. Exploiting popular anger with the previous PPP government over its imposition of IMF restructuring, support for the US counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, and complicity in US drone strikes in Pakistan, Sharif came to power promising pro-investor reforms. Under US pressure to do more in support of the Afghan War, his government ordered the military to occupy North Waziristan and has ceded it ever more power over security and foreign affairs.

As around the world, the capitalist elite has used the "war on terror" to justify sweeping attacks on democratic rights and to build up an apparatus of repression whose real target is the working class. In addition to deploying paramilitaries armed with special powers in Karachi, the Sharif government, following the December 2014 Peshawar school terrorist atrocity, gave the military sweeping new powers including the right to try civilians in military courts.

A December Reuters report said that of the 100,000 arrested under the new terror laws, just 2,000 had any connection with the Pakistan Taliban and other insurgent groups. In Karachi the PPP, MQM and other establishment parties have complained that their activists are being targeted by the army "counter-terrorism" operation.

As Monday's criminalization of the impending PIA strike and Tuesday's murderous attack demonstrate, Pakistan's government and craven capitalist elite are turning to repressive laws, the security forces, and bloody violence to suppress workers' opposition to the social incendiary dictates of the IMF.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact