Pakistan airline workers defy government repression, continue strike

Sampath Perera
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The strike of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) workers continued for a fourth day on Friday, grounding the entire fleet of the state-owned airline.

The workers' defiance in the face of Tuesday's bloody crackdown against the strike and threats of mass firings and jailings marks a significant intensification of the class struggle in Pakistan.

Following a long-running campaign against privatisation of the airline, PIA workers struck Tuesday, defying a ban Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) government had imposed the day before on all industrial action. When the ban failed to pre-empt the strike, the government ordered a brutal attack on workers at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport, where the strike was most strongly supported. The attack left two workers dead, PIA communications manager Inayat Raza and aircraft engineer Saleem Akbar, and a dozen more injured.

The police and paramilitary Rangers, armed with the sweeping powers given them by Sharif's "anti-terrorism" laws, deployed water cannons, tear gas, baton charges and rubber bullets against the workers, then ultimately fired live bullets.

At a court hearing yesterday on the death of the workers, it was revealed that the shooting started after an unidentified "bearded man"—presumably a high government official or intelligence officer—was overheard telling security forces to open fire.

With anger seething across the country over the murder of the workers, Malir District and Sessions Court Judge Khalid Hussain Shahani criticized the police for refusing to register a legal case over the killings and for washing the crime scene with "the intention to destroy forensic evidence."

All indications are that the attack on Tuesday's protest was approved at the highest levels of the federal and Sind provincial governments, the latter led by the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Following the bloodshed, Sharif threatened to terminate the strikers' jobs and jail them for a year.

But by this time the strike was spreading to airports across the country, quickly leading to the grounding of PIA's entire fleet for the first time ever and throwing the government into crisis.

Yesterday, after a high-level meeting at Sharif's office, a "close aide" told *Dawn*, "There will be no going back, come what may."

The government is determined to crush the strike, which is challenging the massive privatization program Sharif vowed to implement in 2013 so as to secure a US $6.64 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout. At issue for the government is not just the $1.1 billion that still remains to be released to Pakistan, however critical that money may be to the crisis-ridden economy. The reputation of Pakistan as a market for local and, more importantly, desperately sought foreign investment depends heavily on the scorecard issued by the IMF.

In recent months, the Sharif government has come under increasing pressure from the US-dominated IMF to make good on its commitment to privatize 68 state-owned enterprises branded as "loss-making." Last month it pushed legislation through parliament to set the stage for PIA's privatization, but because of mass worker opposition announced it was postponing the sell-off for 6 months.

This, according to a Reuters report, led to angry exchanges at a meeting between Pakistan government and IMF officials held in Dubai from January 26 to February 4 to decide whether the next loan tranche should be released.

According to Reuters, which spoke to Pakistani officials "with direct knowledge" of the situation, the IMF officials hectored Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and other government officials at the meeting for equivocating on implementation of the privatization program for fears that it would lead to mass social unrest.

"It was embarrassing and brutal," a senior government official told Reuters. "It was nothing less than a dressing down. If the IMF still doesn't penalize us, then all I can say is, 'We're very lucky'." Another senior Finance Ministry official confirmed this account with Reuters.

According to a report in the *Express Tribune*, the IMFs review panel was "extremely critical of the government's failure to move ahead with privatisation deadlines," but has agreed, under the circumstances, to a six-month delay in the PIA's privatization and will recommend to the IMF's board of directors that the next tranche of the loan, $497 million, be released.

In its statement on Thursday, the IMF noted that "measures pertaining to the energy sector reform and restructuring of loss-making public enterprises are yet to be implemented." These measures, which will mean huge increases in electricity charges, a massive assault on workers' jobs and wages, and the dismantling of public services, were termed by the IMF as "critical" for "long-term resilience of the economy" in the face of "a weak cotton harvest, declining exports, and a more challenging external environment." In other words, a further assault on the social position of the working class is necessary as a new economic crisis is looming.

Both the government and IMF have made clear the privatisation program will not be shelved. Addressing a press conference Thursday alongside the IMF Mission Chief, Finance Minister Dar reaffirmed the government's resolve to "convert loss-making state-owned enterprises into profitable enterprises."

But to move forward the government and Pakistani ruling elite must defeat the opposition from the PIA workers and the working class as a whole.

With the government's attempts to crush the strike having thus far backfired, sections of the corporate media, such as *Dawn*, are counselling Sharif to take up the unions' offer of talks and collaboration in making the airline profitable. They are also urging the opposition parties not to exploit the government's predicament.

The strike is being organized by a Joint Action Committee (JAC) comprised of representatives of the various PIA unions, which are themselves affiliated to the establishment parties, from the PPP to the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami.

As the government moved forward with its plans to privatize PIA over the last two months, the unions repeatedly delayed any job action directed at grounding PIA flights.

While calling for the privatisation to be stopped, the JAC's four-point program stipulates that "employees be provided a chance to reform the airline," i.e., to make it into a profitable enterprise. "If the employees fail to do so," it continues, "the government will have the freedom to do whatever it finds suitable."

This is a disastrous formula for the workers. Similar union collaboration with management allowed Sharif to slash PIA's workforce from 17,000 to 14,000 in past years.

In keeping with their acceptance of the fundamental premise of the privatization program—that state-owned enterprises must be profitable concerns, not providers of public services—the unions have issued no appeal to workers at the other companies targeted for privatization, let alone the working class as a whole, to join them in a working-class political offensive against the big business Sharif government and the IMF. Such an offensive would be aimed at making big business, not the workers and toilers, pay for the capitalist crisis, by bringing to power a workers' government.