

Unions preparing to shut down Pakistan airline workers strike

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As the militant strike of 14,000 Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) workers enters its second week, the unions and their Joint Action Committee (JAC) are maneuvering to shut it down.

At a press conference yesterday JAC head Sohail Baloch appealed for talks with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League government, suggesting that Sharif name his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shabaz Sharif, or Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar, to lead the government negotiating team.

Baloch emphasized that the unions are in no way challenging the government, which has mounted a furious campaign against the strike, including threatening to fire and jail workers en masse and ordering a bloody attack on strikers in Karachi that left two dead and one dozen injured. Rather, the aim of the inter-union JAC, as Baloch again explained, is to convince the government to work with the unions in making state-owned PIA a profitable enterprise.

“We don’t want to blackmail the government,” declared Baloch. “Our differences with the government only relate to PIA’s privatization.”

Underscoring the unions’ opposition to a working class offensive against the Sharif government—which on orders from the IMF is implementing a brutal austerity program that includes the privatization of PIA and some 60 other public sector enterprises—Baloch declared, “Our doors are open and we are trying our best to pull the nation out of the present crisis.”

One of the JAC unions, the Pakistan Air Lines Pilots Association (PALPA), has already bolted the strike. On Saturday PALPA’s leadership called on its members to “resume” flight operations. In announcing the decision, PALPA President Amir Hashmi said the union had never wanted an all-out strike, because it would further weaken the finances of an already “sinking” company. He also decried the fact that the strike had become a focal point

for opposition to the government, saying, “[W]e are not a political party.”

Due to PALPA’s defection, PIA was able to put a limited number of flights in the air for the first time in four days Sunday, with departures from Islamabad and Lahore. Yesterday PIA reopened its head offices in Islamabad and Karachi and, according to news reports, was able to get at least one flight to land in Karachi. Support for the strike is strongest in Karachi, Pakistan’s largest city and commercial hub.

PALPA President Hashmi has also made statements that effectively invite further state repression of the strikers. He has told the press that PALPA has received “threats from protesters” and publicly appealed to the government to provide enhanced security to pilots so that they can return to work.

In fact the real threat to the safety of pilots, crews and passengers comes from the government’s haste to get planes in the air so it can break the strike. The Society of Aircraft Engineers in Pakistan issued a statement warning that the PIA planes that took off Sunday were not subject to the compulsory inspection and maintenance procedures, in flagrant violation of safety regulations.

PIA management meanwhile issued a memo to all employees Sunday threatening disciplinary action, including firing and prosecution under the Compulsory Service Maintenance Act (CSMA), if they did not immediately return to work. On February 1, the eve of the planned all-out strike against PIA, the Sharif government invoked the CSMA, rendering the strike illegal and imposing a six-month ban on all union activity. Under the CSMA, workers who defy a strike ban can be jailed for up to a year.

From the outset, the government has been determined to crush the strike because it fears it could become the catalyst of a broader working class challenge to the big business program of privatization, price-subsidy and

social spending cuts, and regressive tax increases supported by the entire political establishment and demanded by the IMF.

Pakistan Finance Ishaq Dar and other leading officials were meeting with IMF officials and renewing their commitment to the privatization program last Tuesday, February 2, when police and paramilitary Rangers were unleashed on strikers at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport. The security forces attacked the strikers with tear gas, water cannons, baton charges and rubber bullets. When all these failed to disperse the crowd, they opened fire with live ammunition, killing two PIA workers.

Soon after four JAC officials were seized and held without charge by unidentified security forces. The "disappeared" leaders were only released yesterday.

While the government calculated the bloody repression would cause the strike to collapse, it had the opposite effect. Within hours of last Tuesday's attack, all PIA flights were grounded for the first time ever. As reports of the security forces actions and the government's attempt to deny their responsibility for the shootings spread, there was a groundswell of support for the strike within the working class.

However, the JAC and the unions that represent workers at the other major enterprises targeted for privatization including Pakistan Steel Mills, Pakistan Railways and WPDA (the water and power utility) suppressed any and all calls for a joint struggle against the government and the IMF austerity program.

Instead the JAC reiterated its call for negotiations with the government on its four-point program and on Friday JAC representatives held preliminary talks with Privatization Commission Chairman Muhammad Zubair.

This program represents nothing less than a noose for the PIA workers' struggle. It accepts the government's goal of transforming PIA and by implication all public sector enterprises into profit-making companies. It offers the "employees" collaboration in realizing this goal, adding that if they "fail" to "reform" PIA "the government will have the freedom to do whatever it finds suitable."

In other words, if the unions cannot make PIA a profitable "public enterprise" by assisting management in slashing jobs, imposing speedups and lowering wages, they will give the government a free hand to sell off the company to private investors.

The unions that comprise the JAC are tied to, or even directly affiliated with, the various parties of the capitalist establishment, including the People's Pakistan Party

(PPP), the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat Ismaili and Sharif's own Muslim League.

Recognizing the unions' pliability and subservience to Pakistani capitalism, much of the media has been urging the government to work with the JOC to dissipate the workers' anger, terminate the strike on the basis of worthless promises of further consultation about privatization and, in the words of JOC head Baloch, "pull the nation out of the present crisis."

The government has yet to agree to formal negotiations and could at any minute seek to implement mass sackings or arrests. However, it has somewhat toned down its antistrike rhetoric, with workers no longer routinely portrayed as "enemies of the state," thereby opening the door to working with the JOC to end the strike.

The opposition parties are also being enlisted to pose as supporters of the anti-privatization struggle, the better to bring the workers' opposition under control. Thus the PPP, which when in office has imposed one IMF "restructuring program" after another and whose provincial government in Sind presided over the February 2 fatal attack on the PIA strike, is claiming to oppose PIA's privatization "inside and outside parliament."

Another establishment party feigning support for the worker is Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Khan visited the striking workers in Karachi on Saturday and attacked the government for "deliberately making the national airline a loss-making" enterprise. But in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI heads the provincial government, it is carrying out policies identical to that of the Sharif-led central government, including privatization of health services and the freezing of public sector workers' wages.



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