

Pakistan steps up privatization drive after unions suppress airline strike

Sampath Perera
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The government of Pakistan is pushing forward with its IMF-dictated privatization drive after the pro-capitalist trade unions suppressed a militant week-long strike by Pakistan International Airline (PIA) workers. The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government has also seized on the unions' betrayal of the strike to victimize hundreds of PIA workers.

The all-out strike at PIA began on February 2 and quickly succeeded in grounding the airline's entire fleet for the first time ever. The inter-union Joint Action Committee (JAC) called the strike off on the evening of February 9, although the unions had secured nothing more than a worthless promise of talks with the government.

The PIA strike evoked a massive outpouring of working-class support after the government sought to bloodily repress it. Throughout, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N government were gripped by fear that the strike would trigger a broader working class upsurge against the government's privatization program. But the JAC and the trade unions, both public and private sector, systematically isolated the PIA strike.

The government has made clear that it views the privatization of PIA—a 26 percent share in the airline is to be sold off in the coming weeks—as a crucial test of its ability to implement its entire privatization, including the sell-off of Pakistan Steel Mills and the giant water and power utility WAPDA.

In 2013, the PML-N government pledged to privatize 68 “loss-making” public sector enterprises in return for a US \$6.64 billion IMF bailout. However, in recent months the IMF became increasingly impatient over the government's hesitation at implementing a plan it knew would be met with mass opposition.

The fear and crisis the PIA strike engendered in the government and ruling elite was palpable. After the JAC reluctantly announced that it was ending a campaign of partial walkouts and was calling an all-out strike to begin Tuesday, February 2, the government hurriedly announced a phony six-month postponement of the privatization of PIA. Later that same day, February 1, Sharif invoked the Compulsory Service Maintenance Act (CSMA) to criminalize all job action at PIA and ban all union activity for six months. The government announced that workers who defied the strike ban would be severely punished.

On the first day of the strike, the central government, closely collaborating with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) provincial government in Sindh, mounted a bloody crackdown in Karachi where support for the strike was strongest. After attacking workers with tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets, the police and paramilitary Pakistan Rangers opened fire with live bullets, killing two PIA workers and injuring a dozen more.

This lethal assault was meant to break the strike, but it had the opposite effect, galvanizing support across the country. Sharif and his ministers responded by threatening to fire the strikers en masse and jail them for up to a year, but, following the counsel of much of the media and the PPP and other establishment opposition parties, they above all relied on the unions to smother the strike and the broad social opposition it had inspired.

As soon as the JAC had succeeded in maneuvering to shut down the strike, the government launched an offensive against the workers. It invoked the blatantly anti-democratic CSMA to terminate 11 daily-contract workers and, according to press reports, issued show-cause notices to 167 permanent workers identified as “active protesters.” The “show-cause” notices are a first step to implementing vicious sanctions, including firings, fines and jailing. According to JAC spokesman Nasrullah Khan the witch hunt is far more extensive than the press has reported, with over 500 workers targeted to date.

The government is determined to make an example out of the PIA workers, so as to intimidate the working class, reassure the IMF from which it may soon have to seek additional loans, and impress investors.

The IMF increased pressure on Islamabad to make good on its privatization pledge at a loan review meeting that coincided with the first days of the strike. According to an unnamed Pakistani official who attended the meeting, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar was given a “brutal” “dressing down” by IMF officials after he proposed to renegotiate the deadline for the privatization of the PIA and warned of the danger of social unrest.

Before the meeting was over, Dar had changed his tune and publicly reiterated the government's commitment to the privatization plan.

This week Secretary of the Privatization Commission Ahmed

Nawaz Sukhera announced to the upper house of Pakistan's parliament that the government is moving ahead with the PIA's privatization forthwith.

The JAC's role in suppressing the strike was entirely predictable. It was comprised of unions that are affiliated to parties of Pakistan's ruling elite, from the PML-N to the PPP and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. All of these parties agree with the government's pro-market reforms and making Pakistan a profitable and "globally-competitive" site for foreign investors.

While the JAC claimed to oppose the privatization of PIA, this was a lie. Its "four-point program" accepted the government's goal of making PIA a profit-making enterprise and offered the unions' collaboration in realizing it. Furthermore, the JAC declared it would give the government "freedom to do whatever it finds suitable"—i.e., privatize PIA—if the unions' efforts to make the airline profitable failed.

The JAC opposed any appeal to other workers to join the PIA strikers in a challenge to the government's privatization drive and the IMF-austerity program of which it is a core element. Like the government, the PIA unions feared a broader anti-privatization struggle could rapidly escape their control and develop into a working-class challenge to the entire political and social order. In the same vein, Pakistan's main unions and union federations, like those representing the railway and WAPDA workers, limited their "support" to the PIA workers to empty pledges of solidarity.

Within days of the strike's launch, the JAC leaders began closed door negotiations with the government and insisted that they were "trying our best to pull the nation out of the present crisis."

The announcement ending the strike provided further proof that the unions were conspiring with the bourgeois political establishment and state against the workers they purported to represent. JAC Chairman Sohail Baloch said, "A kind friend advised us to call off the strike," adding later, "We have decided to end our strike on assurances given by a mediator." Never did he identify who this "kind friend" and "mediator" were but undoubtedly they are major figures within the ruling class. Given the role the military plays in Pakistan's political life there is a very real possibility that it played a major behind the scenes role in ending the strike.

Under the "Karachi operation," which is supported by the PML-N, the PPP and other establishment parties, the military now occupies Pakistan's largest city in all but name in the guise of cracking down on "terrorism" and "crimes."

The "assurances" Baloch claimed to have secured in ending the strike have already proven to be worthless as the government victimizes the most militant PIA workers, in addition to pressing forward with the sell-off of the airline.

In carrying out this abject betrayal the unions were assisted by Pakistan's pseudo-left, above all Lal Khan's "The Struggle" group and the Awami Workers Party (AWP). The

pseudo-left sung praises to the militancy of the workers, the better to keep them trapped under the leadership of the pro-capitalist unions and to deny the political character of their struggle: that the fight against privatization is a challenge to the class strategy of the entire Pakistani ruling class and requires the independent political mobilization of the working class on a socialist program.

Lal Khan wrote a series of articles that covered over the JAC's ties to the political establishment and its acceptance of the government's demand that PIA be made profitable. At the end of some of these he issued a rhetorical call for a "general strike" to be organized by "a united front of all the trade unions and progressive political forces"—that is, by unions beholden to Pakistan's elite and sections of the political establishment. For decades Khan has promoted the lie that the openly bourgeois and pro-imperialist PPP is the "mass socialist party" of the Pakistani working class.

The role played by the AWP is no less criminal. It cheered on the launching of the ongoing military offensive in the northwest of the country against Islamist fundamentalist militants, an action coordinated with Washington and which has been used to provide political cover for the imposition of a raft of draconian "anti-terrorism" laws that are being used to attack the working class and left-wing opponents of the government. This offensive has also served as the pretext for the occupation of Karachi by the para-military Rangers who shot down the PIA strikers on February 2.

The author also recommends:

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