

Pakistan: Unions shut down Balochistan government workers' strike as state threatens crackdown

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A two-week strike by thousands of long-exploited government sector workers in Pakistan's Balochistan province was shut down by an alliance of trade unions last Friday following a court order declaring their job action "illegal."

The strikers, who are confronting menacing threats of state repression, are demanding a pay hike of 25 percent, and allowances like those paid provincial government workers in other provinces. The demand for higher wages resonates among working people across the country, who are struggling to make ends meet as the cost of living skyrockets.

Announcing the strike's suspension, leaders of the All Balochistan Employees union and Workers Grand Alliance claimed the job action will resume in one month if progress is not made in negotiations with the provincial government, which is a close ally of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Islamist populist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Such delaying tactics, which provoked outrage among many workers, are the typical means by which trade unions the world over demobilize militant struggles and pave the way for their defeat.

In its order to both end the strike and a sit-in in the "red zone" of the provincial capital, Quetta, the Balochistan High Court called on negotiators on both sides to show "flexibility" in their talks. Making clear that in practice this means that the workers must give up their demands and accept whatever the government claims it can afford, Chief Justice Jamal Mandokhail declared threateningly, "Until the end of the protest, we will stay inside the court, and if the demonstrators don't leave everyone will go to jail."

The Balochistan public workers' struggle is part of a global upsurge of working class struggles in opposition to the capitalist ruling elites' prioritizing of profits over workers' lives and livelihoods amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. With virtually no health care system and social safety net, Balochistan, the country's poorest province by far, has been hard hit by the pandemic.

The province's impoverished workers and the poor have also been battered by a rapacious pro-market "reform" program championed by the International Monetary Fund and

implemented by Imran Khan and his PTI government. Despite the economic disaster triggered by the pandemic, the Khan government has relentlessly pressed ahead with gutting whatever remains of social welfare programs and prices subsidies, raised taxes, and shut down publicly-owned enterprises, destroying thousands of jobs in the process.

Tens of thousands of workers from various government departments, including schools and hospitals, joined the Balochistan strike, which began on March 29. They are all paid poverty wages, notwithstanding the critical nature of their jobs. For the next two weeks there were demonstrations and sit-ins in Quetta and other cities, effectively halting or disrupting government business, until the unions bowed before the anti-worker court-order and called off the strike on the evening of April 10.

That same day, teachers had boycotted the start of high school matriculation exams. A similar boycott by health care workers resulted in the postponing of a mobile polio vaccination campaign. On Monday, April 5, the strikers enforced a virtual cut-off of Balochistan from the rest of the country with a blockade of the highways that connect it to Pakistan's three other provinces. This protest impacted the transit of supplies for the US occupation forces in Afghanistan.

The strike in Balochistan followed a similar struggle in Islamabad, where the government was forced to concede a pay increase of 25 percent to federal government workers after a brutal crackdown on the strikers failed to break their struggle.

In Balochistan, workers defied a cynical ban of all public gatherings hastily imposed on the eve of the strike by the provincial government on the pretext of combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government deployed massive armed forces contingents to prevent processions of workers from entering key government installations, and to intimidate the daily anti-government demonstrations. For most of the past two decades Balochistan has been under effective Pakistan military occupation, as it employs torture, enforced disappearances, and extra-judicial killings to suppress a Balochi ethno-nationalist separatist insurgency.

The government refused to make any concessions to workers during the strike, instead demanding that they immediately return to work. Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan Alyani responded to the strike by remarking that the strikers should “all be in jail.” He contemptuously declared that the workers “do not perform their official duties properly.” If workers do their job “properly,” the chief minister went on, “we are ready to increase their salaries not only once but twice.”

Chief Minister Khan Alyani lamented the extra financial “burden” that the government would incur if it gave in to the strikers’ demands, which he estimated at 10 to 15 billion Pakistani rupees (US \$65.5 to \$98 million). He also complained about having to expand the allocation for pensions for retired workers, which has increased from 30 billion to 50 billion rupees during the last two years.

The Balochistan Chief Minister, who himself hails from one of Balochistan’s traditional large landowning families, went on to blame current and retired workers, who are aspiring for a livable stipend, for the utterly bankrupt state of social infrastructure in the province. “Will there be a time when the government will do nothing for education, health, roads, dams, social welfare, agriculture [since] we will only pay salaries, pensions and allowances?” proclaimed Khan Alyani.

Most of the government workers, including clerks, teachers and paramedics, sustain their families on a monthly wage of approximately 18,000 to 20,000 rupees, around \$US117 to \$US130. An increasing portion of the government workforce is employed as temporary workers, despite their years of service, denying them even the meagre benefits of a worker in a permanent job. The majority of Balochistan government workers are the sole bread winner in their households.

Balochistan has been impoverished and devastated by decades of abuse and negligence by Islamabad, despite its abundant natural resources and its strategic location. The latest United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report detailing socio-economic conditions in Balochistan, which dates from 2018, estimated that a staggering 71.2 percent of its 12.3 million population lives in poverty, compared to 38 percent for Pakistan as a whole.

Khan Alyani and his Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) represent a section of the province’s ruling elite, and play a critical role in sustaining the PTI’s “austerity” coalition at the federal level. Typical of the utterly corrupt bourgeois elite in the country, Khan Alyani’s declared wealth is more than 728 million rupees (or almost \$10 million), and includes properties abroad. Pakistan’s venal capitalist elite is infamous for hiding much of their wealth offshore.

The PTI government has admitted that an additional 10 million people across the country have fallen into poverty as a result of the pandemic. A more realistic estimation would produce a much worse picture, like the health impact of the pandemic itself. Officially, there have been 730,000 COVID-19

infections and more than 15,600 deaths. But the true figures, which are masked by barely existent testing and, in much of the country, basic health care facilities, are undoubtedly several times higher.

When compared with the rest of the country, the situation in Balochistan is even more horrific. The province conducts only about 1,100 COVID-19 tests per day. When several hundred doctors and other health care workers protested the lack of personal protective equipment to treat patients amid a surge in coronavirus cases in the province last April, Khan Alyani ordered the police to beat them and jail them.

Amid massive job losses and deepening poverty, only about 45,500 people in Balochistan received any assistance from the federal government, while the provincial government extended no assistance whatsoever. Designed as a face-saving measure by Prime Minister Khan, the federal government’s “assistance” was limited to an absurdly inadequate 12,000 rupees (US \$78) per household.

In the midst of yet another wave of the pandemic, fueled by more contagious variants, Prime Minister Imran Khan is refusing to take any measures to contain the surge in infections. A tally by Bloomberg estimated that at its current pace, Pakistan would take 10 years to vaccinate 75 percent of its population. The government refuses to allocate necessary funding for vaccination, claiming it cannot afford the cost.

The growing discontent within Baluchistan is not limited to government workers. Protests erupted earlier this month against the state-run Quetta Electricity Supply Company for power shedding, which in some areas extends to 22 hours a day. Protesters blockaded highways on April 1, bringing trade across Balochistan with Afghan cities to a halt.

Balochistan is also engulfed in seething sectarian tensions. When eleven coal miners from the Shiite Hazara minority were dragged out of their sleeping huts and brutally killed by Islamist fundamentalists in January, prolonged protests erupted in Quetta and the dead miners’ coffins were part of a several-day-long highway blockade.



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