

A tale of inviting foreign friends to Pakistan

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Pierre Rousset left Pakistan on 7th February after a two-week visit. A leader of the Anti Capitalist Party (NPA) in France, he was one of three international guests at Labour Party Pakistan 5th congress held on 27-29th January at Faisalabad [1]. The other two were Simon Butler of Socialist Alliance Australia and Arif Afghani from the Afghan Labour Revolutionary Organization (ALRO). Both had to leave shortly afterward.

We had hoped more friends from other countries to attend this historic event. However, objective reality and denial of visas resulted in only three being able to attend the congress.

By the beginning of December 2009 twelve international comrades informed us of their intention to be present at our congress. Comrade John Reimen from the USA was denied a visa. He was one of the main leaders of a wild cat strike in the Carpenters union and a close friend of mine for over 25 years. He had visited Pakistan in 1998, when he attended the first conference of LPP Sindh Chapter at Bhit Shah. Further, the Pakistani government did not clear the names of three Indian friends: Sandeep Chachre of Action Aid International as well as Roma and Ashok Choudry from Forest Workers Union.

Further, others sent their regrets. These included comrades from the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), the Revolutionary Socialist Party Australia, and the South Asia Alliance For Poverty Eradication (SAAPE). Worsening security conditions in Pakistan seemed to be a factor for some.

We had started inviting our international friends six months earlier, in order to give enough time to our friends to plan. The LPP believes very firmly in international solidarity and close working relationship with like-minded organizations. One of the strong points of our growth is the solid international network we have built over the last thirty years. We began to construct this network in 1980, during our exile, when the first Struggle Group was established in Amsterdam. We do our best to strengthen and sustain our international links. Over a dozen comrades from the LPP have attended conferences, seminars, workshops and rallies in other countries. This develops our international perspectives and strengthens our internal organization. We believe that Socialism is either international or nothing. Thus we see the Pakistan socialist movement as one part of an international movement for socialism.

We are keen to have direct links rather than just over the internet. Yes, we are regularly in contact with our friends in South Asia and other countries through the internet. We have also established a large email list, Socialist Pakistan News (SPN), with over 5400 members around the world. However, there is no match for face-to-face discussions.

Abroad, the image of Pakistan is of regular suicidal attacks, bomb blasts, political violence, military operations and drone attacks. The fact that it is a military hub for the imperialist armies and mainstream media meant that not many friends were keen to risk their lives to attend a conference. The two who came from France and Australia were also warned by friends and families about going to "the most dangerous place of the world." Fortunately, during their stay in Pakistan there was a rather unusual absence of suicidal attacks. However the day Pierre Rousset left there were bomb blasts in Karachi, with others following in different parts of the country.

But the world's image of Pakistan does not match the real situation inside Pakistan. Despite all that is happening, life goes on as usual. There is great resilience among Pakistanis. The great majority of Pakistanis are religious but not fundamentalists. Overall society is right wing but not to the extent that is been painted by the international media. It is also true that a great majority of the charity funding ends up in the coffers of religious institutions. However the intention is to provide concrete aid for the poor, particularly food and housing, with a religious touch. The reality is that independent educational and health institutions, such as the ones Christian missionaries set up in the 19th century, do not exist. And neither the federal government nor the provincial governments have established effective public education systems.

There are those, like the LPP, who would like to bring offer an alternative to the growth of religious fundamentalism and religious institutions by developing class-based organizations and movements. The Faisalabad meeting directly following the LPP congress was one such an attempt. Over 10,000 workers and peasants participated in order to discuss their rights. Posters put up all over Faisalabad, the third largest city of Pakistan, announced the holding of an international workers-peasant conference. Thanks to our three international guests it did have that message. [2]

The successful event was a step forward. To some it might have seemed unusual with no bearded men in turbans or other head coverings on the platform or even in the crowd. It was ordinary people, men and women together. We do not see many white-faced people anymore—they are mainly limited to Islamabad, where they work as diplomats and or in the security service.

After the conference Pierre Rousset went to Qasur, Okara and Gojranwala, the three neighboring districts of Lahore. He spoke at meetings and seminars. He brought into attention several new aspects of the capitalist globalization and also that it can not be cured in short term basis. He stressed the need for international solidarity and particularly with Pakistan in the present circumstances. He told about the Left views about the debate of Burqa in France. *Daily Dawn* Pakistan, the most read English paper has this to say about his ideas.

"LAHORE, Feb 2: A major left-wing political party of France is opposed to legal ban on Muslim veil and burqa, fearing the step will not only prove counterproductive for women rights but also draw a veil on exploitation of masses by the capitalist system."

Pierre Rousset, a member of the executive committee of the Fourth International, who was among founders of the left-wing NPA (New Anti capitalist Party) of France, which was formed in the wake of LCR (Revolutionary Congress League) self-dissolution, told *Dawn* on Tuesday that personally he was opposed to full veil but was of the view that the issue should be tackled through women and secular movements and not legal wars.

"Using legal force to ban an action considered as religious will only make rigid the followers of that religion instead of producing any positive result," Rousset said. He said the Sarkozy regime was using the neqab (veil) issue, like the swine flu, to divert public attention from real problems facing the French people due to the abusive capitalism.

He wondered that officials of French armed forces and interior ministry instead of the health department were appearing in TV talk shows unnerving the viewers with imaginary threats to the country's economy due to swine flu. Justifying the call for heavy allocations for overcoming the disease, the officials would urge the working community to forget labour courts and talk of economic functioning as the French economy was at the verge of collapse because of swine flu, added Rousset.

He admitted Islam-o-phobia had destabilized the Left movement, robbing it of the chance to describe secularism and women rights in its own way. The only way to come out of the quagmire, he believed,

was social struggle". [3]

The visit of comrade Pierre Rousset, Arif Afghani and Simon Butler provided local activists with an opportunity to hear something new, and from a different perspective. In an country where the atmosphere is dominated by religious gatherings, Pierre Rousset discussions on globalization, climate change, capitalist crisis, building of New Anti Capitalist Party, World Social Forum process, solidarity and social movements were exciting. We hope to repeat such tours more often.

By: Farooq Tariq

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [The 5th LPP congress: Bravura expression of the growing Left influence in Pakistan](#)

[2] See on ESSF: [A historic gathering of workers and peasants in Pakistan](#)

[3] See the full interview on ESSF: [French Left sees veil ban as counterproductive](#)