

# 10 Years of Tenants struggle in Punjab

Tuesday 29 June 2010, by [TARIO Farooq](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2010).

Anjaman Mozareen Punjab (AMP) is organizing a mass peasants rally on 29 June at Okara on the eve of 10 years of AMP movement. On 29<sup>th</sup> June 2000, Major General Chattha asked the tenants working on Military Farms Okara to change their status to "Thakedari" (contract) system. The tenants rejected this order and felt that the move by the Military regime under General Musharaf is to vacate this land from the peasants and use it as corporate farming or to lease it to military officers.

It was just after 8 months of the military dictatorship of General Musharaf and the regime had started to attack the trade unions and was implementing neo liberal agenda by force. They had successfully imposed the 15 percent general sales tax. They have attacked the Railways Workers Union and crushed their initial resistance to their regime. The Military junta thought that it would be easy to ask the tenants to change their status and then they would be able to get this land vacated. They were proved wrong in their assessment.

The tenants contacted different political parties and social organization to help in their fight for land rights. Over 68000 acres of land were cultivated by tenants of different public sector agriculture farms including the one occupied by military. The resistance did not start immediately. They were dozens of meetings of the tenants on the issue and then they came to a conclusion to form an organization to organize the resistance. Many elderly peasants were opposed to the resistance strategy and they were ready to change the status but wanted a good price for contract system. The young and some college and university students and graduates belonging to tenant's families had other ideas than that. They went along all the meetings and decided to fight the military dictatorship.

Labour Party Pakistan got in contact with the movement in September 2001. It was after the organization AMP was formed and they had already decided to resist. The AMP had also invited the Jamaat Islami and their peasant wing called Kissan Board. The Kissan Board leadership was advocating a conciliatory strategy and they were of the opinion that tenants can not fight military dictatorship. LPP agreed with resistance strategy and decided to help build the movement.

AMP struggle started with a slogan Malki Yaa Mout (death or ownership). Women and youth came in the forefront and fought courageously many attempts of the military dictatorship through rangers and police to vacate this land. Nine peasants were killed by direct police and rangers firing, several dozens injured and many hundreds arrested. Over 100 FIRs were registered against the leadership of AMP during the struggle. It was a struggle owned by almost all the political parties in opposition, social organizations and trade unions. It was the first organized resistance to the military dictatorship. It inspired many nationally and internationally. AMP became an icon of struggle and a reference point.

The strategy to resist but not by arms was successful. The resistance came through street blockades, occupation of roads, blockade of roads, barricades around the villages, use of wooden sticks to fight the police and rangers, rallies and demonstrations, usage of internet, solidarity rallies in large cities of Pakistan, media stories against the repression, successful usage of courts etc. The most successful resistance was through blockade of main roads leading to Okara and Lahore.

In 2002 and 2003, there was Gaza like situation for three months around 19 villages of Okara. It was a siege and no one was allowed to enter the villages until the tenants agree to sign the contract system. During 2002, tenants were forced to sign the contract after a complete siege of 19 villages for three months. While the tenants organized their resistance inside the villages and the rangers and police could not enter the villages, the rangers would not allow any person to enter or leave the villages. It was a cat and mouse story. The siege became an international story and many foreign journalists wrote very sympathetic article in favor of the tenants. So were the pages of several Pakistani main stream media who were inspired with courageous stand of the poor tenants against the very powerful army.

The high point of the struggle was the refusal of the tenants to pay 40 percent share of the crops that was paid for generation by the tenants to the military farms administration. This was the most successful strategy and more and more tenants joined the struggle actively as this was their bread and butter question as well.

The movement is still on. The promises of Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party to hand over this land to the tenants have not been fulfilled. Both parties praised the struggle of the tenants several times and agreed that once in power, they will decide in favor of the tenants. It has not been done despite the two parties in power for the last two years.

The rally on 29 June will again bring together thousands of peasants on the roads. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010, Mehr Abdul Sattar, Nadeem Asharaf, Malik Saleem Jakar, Choudry Shabir and Mohammed Hanif addressed a press conference in Lahore to announce the programme of the rally. They gave three months notice to government of Punjab to decide about land ownership in favour of the tenants. They said that our rally will remain in Okara on 29<sup>th</sup> June , and if the Punjab alliance government of PPP and PMLN do not act within three months, we would have no options but to march to Lahore.

They will do what they have said. If Punjab government wants to separate the army from civilian aspects of life, this is a test case for them. Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee have asked all the social movements and trade unions to come and help the struggle of the peasants of Punjab for land rights, the only way to fight feudalism in Pakistan.

**By: Farooq Tariq**

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