

## **Pakistan: Remembering Mahmood Butt - interview on his life and struggle.**

Thursday 21 February 2019, by [ALI Sher](#), [BUTT Mehmood Ahmed](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2012).

**Mehmood Butt is veteran left unionist and is currently the general secretary of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union. The plight of brick kiln workers or Bhatta Mazdoor's has highlighted over the years. Butt's own connection with the trade union movement over the last thirty years is essential in understanding current state of the ruling class.**

**About a month ago, a Bhatta Mazdoor convention was held, in Lahore. Over 200 unionists had traveled from around the district. Today as you see it, what is the current state of the Bhatta Mazdoor union and what is the current challenge faced by the worker?**

Today, in Pakistan, the most cruelty-taking place of workers is amongst the Bhatta Mazdoors. Workers in the line of work are living below the necessities of satable life. Despite the amount of work a brick kiln worker puts in, it seems in relation to the ruling class, these workers are living the life of slaves.

A big reason for this is this because his work is not being valued. The minimum wage requirements, which have been specified by the Government of Punjab, are not being followed. Today, the amount of minimum wage was agreed upon in July, was Rs665.75 per 1,000 bricks wage rate. We don't see any of that being followed.

If you look at the owners, about 11 months ago, the workers did a strike and the rate was doubled. The owners did not follow. The owners recently increased the rates to around Rs 7,000 to 7,500 per 1,000 bricks while there are not paying the government of Punjab minimum wages.

The Owner is very quickly making progress and increasing their assets but the people who are there to work, the Brick Kiln worker their families are falling into this vicious cycle of slavery.

One of the factors behind this that they have classified this under Pakistan's Factory Act of 1934. The factories may have been registered but labor is not being registered, which is what should happen. Workers should be given social security cards, which will provide for families with health, injury or even death services.

So if a social security were made, a Bhatta Mazdoor would be registered. Otherwise, workers go to the owner for loans or advances, in times of sadness and happiness. This is because they don't get any services.

This work is such, these are working people, there not like any ordinary worker, you would never find them in a chowk or waiting at bus stop. If they were ordinary, then the owners would never be able to fill their trolleys put it on the brick kiln, and then take it out everyday. This is very specialized and difficult form of labor, which is important in making bricks.

Now, due to the Owner's greedy and outdated thinking, today this industry and work, for brick kiln workers will not help them progress, there families progress, or there societal progress increase.

But for the owners, their assets are increasing; every year a new brick kiln is set-up.

So this injustice, and the inability to enforce laws, is the Pakistan and Punjab government's weakness. The inability to enforce the minimum wage has been central. Since the last announcement of minimum wage six months ago, the owners have not paid, and from two years earlier they did not pay that either. This is the duty of the government to ensure how the societal status of brick kiln

workers improves.

### **How can the status of brick kiln workers improve?**

This industry is one of the most neglected by the government. What's the reason for this?

They are purposefully doing this. The government has the institutions; over here the district labor officials are there, secretary labor sits, and other as well. But the issue is in these institutions, political involvement by owners who are members of the mainstream political parties such as the Pakistan Peoples Party, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz.

Due to their involvement, there has never been enforcement of any law related to brick kiln workers, despite the presence of laws. There is the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992, which has never been enforced.

Today, the powers of enforcement have been devolved according to the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment, but there has been no step that shows that the government is working for brick kiln worker.

It is important, that in the current system, that the Peshki (advance) system is completely abolished. See the owners now with vengeance are doing Katotia (deductions) and taking advances. They are doing everything. They have made this ruling-class system, and are basically buying and selling human beings. One brick kiln owner is buying labor from the other, which is against the law and has penalty equivalent to a life sentence.

Never has it occurred that a case has been filed against a brick kiln owner. The reason for this is simply that any of the laws related to labor or the worker, have never been enforced.

Wherever there is a capitalist owner, or large landowner interest at stake or the government's interest at stake, right away their enforcement of the law. So we think that in Pakistan, where there are hundreds of thousands of brick kiln workers, this is a big industry, in which many people work, capital investment is very present. We see that there is no value for the labor.

Owners are simply extending their powers, while the rights of workers and their lives have not extended. Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor in this regard, is creating awareness about this industry and the way it works. Most of all, we want to make sure that brick kiln workers who are in the factories, understand the law that is made for them.

The owners have created an atmosphere of fear, so the workers are working in fear and cruelty.

Wherever, workers want to leave, the owners in many cases have used force to keep them, sometimes with fake cases. The reason for this is that this labor is not found easy. The owner knows that if ten workers leave, that moving forward finding ten more would be difficult.

Overall, so despite it being democratic rule, the police always sides with the owners, fake cases are routinely registered, and we think that there is more corruption-taking place today.

### **Do you think that the situation for Brick kiln unions has deteriorated further since you began unionizing?**

When we started out there wasn't much work happening related to brick kiln workers, but there were various groups working in various ways, for brick kiln workers. What we did was organize this in the manner of a trade union, under the platform of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor union, which is registered in Punjab.

So the first thing we fought for was against this 16 year-old case that was registered in the Sharia court by the brick kiln owners. We won the case in favor of the workers. This was regarding Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992, which the Supreme Court had created. The owners had went to the Shariat court saying that Supreme Court had given the wrong decision in favor of the act. So that was settled almost 16 years later.

What should have happened was that case should have been settled two months after it was filed.

They said that it was against the Islamic law. That act was result of a movement by the Brick kiln workers, which led to a law being made that said that anyone who indulged in bonded labor would be penalized and sentenced. The owners challenged that, but eventually even the sharia court ruled

that no religion even Islam, could allow for a human being to live like a slave.

With that they ruled that this is a factory and it has to be registered according to the Factory act. So we feel that the owners have to get away from this fake compliance and that government should implement the law.

The PBMU's position on this is that minimum wage should be increased. The 1000 bricks of work should give its due of 1200 rupees minimum wage and every worker should be registered in every brick kiln factory. We should note the total amount of workers and women who are working and this should be registered with the labor department.

Most of all their rights according to the factory act, should be provided to the workers and the government can do this, only if it leaves behind the political interference that is rampant, then the law can be implemented. Today, the Brick kiln worker, which is faced by slavery and suppression, then the workers, can come out of this situation.

Child labor is also very prevalent in these factories, the government says it's not occurring but the amount of child labor is a lot. Brick Kiln workers have no resources or avenues through which their children can get an education, as a result they are forced to make them work. This should be stopped as well.

There should be dispensaries and schools at the factory, so children can study at the factory and then if any health issue arises for workers they can get check-ups at the factory, as there are minimum of two to three hundred workers at every factory.

### **In this regard, what is the health status of most brick kiln workers?**

You can do the tests; most workers have illnesses and are facing health issues. This is because no timely healthcare or first aid is being provided, especially for breathing issues. There are no safety laws, to prevent such illnesses; owners don't provide anything such as helmets or masks, so you can see that they are working under the conditions of fear.

In other factories, you will see workers wearing masks or helmets; there is none of that. Even in the law, there is provision for tea or brown sugar, from the owner, but there is none of that. So there is nothing, which shows that worker will be protected or their future children will be protected so that they can progress. There is nothing but slavery and nothing else.

### **Moving on to your early career as a unionist during the Zia dictatorship, the same political actors were present. You started working at the Ittefaq foundries which was owned by the family of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Can you give a little bit of background on your struggle then?**

I was around 17 or 18 years of age, and I think it was 1979. General Zia Ul Haq had returned to power and I had joined as a new enlistee to work. The scene was that pretty much of a concentration camp, there were no such things as law and it was out of sheer cruelty that work took place. It was just work and they were taking more work.

Overtime would be forced upon workers, and they would never give a full payment. They would give with Basic pay, a single payment. This situation continued until 1986 when Benazir Bhutto came to power, they removed the ban on unions.

So we started to work on unionizing, and from the side of the owners gunda-gardi (hooliganism) began. The owners would use various techniques and tactics through their gundas (hooligans). We had three unions, two of them they hijacked but the third one called Peoples Inquilaabi (revolutionary) Union, we worked in Ittefaq foundries and Brothers Steel Mills, until 1989-1990.

Actually, what had started to occur due to the strength of the workers, the owners started to close down the factories. They would do it on the grounds that there was a technical fault. In these circumstances, they send the workers home and give half a month's pay. They did this to weaken the powers of our union.

Basically, it was a useless camp they were running and the capital they generated from there was

solely through the abuse of workers. They would abuse labor overtime four at a time, through sheer force.

So by 1994, they kicked us out of the factory. After that we had filed a case, they terrorized us and me in particular.

**It is said that you faced a certain amount of abuse while leading the PIU. What was your role and how did the owners abuse you?**

I was the general secretary of PIU. In the end, they had asked us to resign and in the end we were in a confrontation. The confrontation was with Nawaz Sharif's uncle Farooq Barkat, they beat me, abused me a lot. They took pins and forced them on my thumbs.

**So during the confrontation, you ended up going to the workers for shelter?**

We had different shifts, there was a morning shift and night shift, and during those times there were no mobile phones and we kept in contact through the workers. They had planned on several occasions to kill me but we would find out and I would not go to duty or I would change the shifts. The issue was there gundas would roam the factories and they had picked up one of our office bearers, but then we protested and had several rallies. During that time, Nawaz Sharif was the Chief Minister of Punjab. Attique was the name of that boy, who was picked up.

So we continued to struggle in the foundry, and then they closed the factory. Then the Musharraf era would come and our case would remain in the courts through the 90s, but there was no result in the courts. It was all their show at the time, it was their government, and there was so much cruelty.

**During those times, it seemed as if the trade union had more of a stature back then. Would you say that trade union movement over the years has withered and do you think that unions can have that impact in today's age of capitalism?**

During that time, the role of the trade unions was slightly better because of campaigns against privatization of government institutions. We tried our best to bring the various unions onto one platform.

But the political involvement, which has become prevalent and lack of training in regards to trade unions, because of that the depression that has set in regarding unions has meant people started to worry more about their own personal and political interests, workers rights started to be overlooked. This increase took place during the Nawaz Sharif era.

The big trade unions, they broke them and they got rid of the ideological leadership within in these unions. They ended up splitting into various factions. Because of this trade unions are basically a question of depression.

There was a time that the Kot Lokpat area in Lahore was place, where the trade union movement was on the rise and it was very strong trade union movement and General Zia's martial law came and sabotaged it. After that I think, that General Musharraf era also sabotaged the trade union movement.

**How did the martial laws sabotage the trade union movements in the country?**

I think and what my experience in Pakistan has taught is that whichever government came whether it was in the form of a dictatorship or civilian rule, the first war that they always engage in is against the trade unions.

They do this through the labor policy and the goal is to make sure that this force should be stopped some how. If you look at any time, the first thing they will do is create a Industrial Relations Ordinance, IRO one, two or three. Musharraf came out with new IRO, which used to push the labor policy backwards.

If you compare it to the 1969 labour policy by Air Marshall Nur Khan, now the labor policy is even more diluted than that. So they have pressed and suffocated the labor even more. That's the situation.

**In the context of left-wing politics in this country, how do you view the role of Bhatta Mazdoor Unions as the environment in which many workers come from heavily politicized and conservative backgrounds?**

Trade union's have typically had secular approach; there is no space for religion or other issues. We had heard that the religious parties in the form of Jamaat-e-Islami and others, had thought that doing trade unions was a sin.

We saw a shift during the dictatorship of General Zia Ul-Haq, in which they started to welcome religious parties into trade unions. In the bigger institutions such as PIA, Railways and so on, they have developed religiously inclined trade unions.

So they brought this in, before this it was only secular. They did not have trade unions on religion, ethnicity and it was progressive organization. Trade union's are a progressive endeavor and wherever they have involved religion they have made mess of the movement.

They are taking institutions backwards and they are taking workers away from real politics. On a broader level though when it comes to left-wing politics, Pakistan People's Party which was once considered a leftists and pro-worker entity, has changed and also embraced the role of capitalists. Then there is Nawaz Sharif's party, which is a capitalist party.

These parties have also made trade union wings and are working for their parties. In the same regards, left-wing parties in the past have been unable to work on scale as the mainstream parties. I think now this new party, which has been made, Awami Worker's Party; the role has to focus on working class people. More importantly, we have to make sure that labor movements and struggles are introduced to the ideology of the left. Because the real ideology is the ideology of the left, it is the ideology of the workers.

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**Sher Ali and Mahmoud Butt**

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