

Pakistan - Strength of the street: Karachi 1972

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A short history of the mass strike in Karachi in June, 1972 following the killings of three striking factory workers by police.

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Within a year of coming to power in late 1971, the popularly elected prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, crushed a major strike by industrial workers in Karachi. This intervention by the state marked the beginning of the end of one of the most protracted labour struggles in Pakistan's history. Starting in the late 1960s, this movement was pivotal in shaping the transition from military rule to democratic forms of governance. Bhutto's Peoples Party had itself come to power through the overwhelming support of the working class, students, and radical left groups, the key participants of this movement. It is indeed ironic to note that the PPP was also instrumental in suppressing the worker's struggle.

It is this reaction by a government that came to power on the populist slogan of roti kapra or makan (bread, clothing, and shelter) that is thought of as a watershed event in the working class history of Pakistan. As a belated gesture towards rethinking this particular moment in Pakistani history, I will briefly elaborate on the events that preceded the shooting in Karachi in June of 1972.

Historical background

In 1969 yet another military regime came to power in Pakistan. Promising democratic reform it introduced a new Industrial Labour Ordinance. The Ordinance was liberal democratic in orientation and after years of state repression breathed new energy into the labour movement. Taking advantage of the clauses for registration and constituting collective bargaining agents (CBA), moribund and underground unions started coming to life again. New alliances were made as communist groups and student activists assisted the working class leadership in reorganizing their trade unions. The labour groups now under a more radicalized leadership began using new tactics of encirclements of industries (gherao) to demand bonuses, better working conditions, back pay, and the reinstatement of their dismissed comrades.

As Bhutto assumed power there was a general sense of elation among the workers because they were encouraged by the initial anti-industrialist rhetoric of the People's Party. Workers, sensing a labour friendly government, intensified their demands and during the first few months of 1972 periodic lockouts and encirclements of industries continued in the two major industrial areas of Karachi.

On February 10 1972, President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto addressed the nation to present the salient features of the new labour policy. As Bhutto laid out new benefits for the workers, he also warned them of the dire consequences if they did not refrain from participating in 'lawless behaviour'. He asked the working class to desist from their 'gherao and jelao' politics, otherwise Bhutto raged, 'the strength of the street will be met by the strength of the state'.

The events

A few months later Bhutto's government fulfilled his threat. The first of a series of confrontations finally came on June 7 1972 when workers encircled a textile mill in the Sindh Industrial Trading Estates (SITE), the largest industrial area in Karachi, to demand for their back pay and for their portion of the workers' participatory fund. The management responded by calling the police who initially used tear gas to disperse the workers. The workers, however, regrouped and by late afternoon about 5000 people had encircled the factory. The police then opened fire claiming that they had been fired upon. Official reports accounted for three dead and scores injured including three policemen. The bodies of two workers were retrieved by the police while one was taken away by the retreating workers.

The very next day the funeral procession of this worker commenced from the nearby labour colonies near a thoroughfare called Benaras Chowk. The police contingent that was waiting at the crossroads opened fire as the marchers walked onto the main road killing ten people and injuring a dozen. These two incidents on two consecutive days triggered off a wild-fire strike in all the labour areas of the city and industrial production in SITE and the Landhi-Korangi (the other major industrial area) ground to a halt for twelve days. Over 900 hundred units were closed, workers wore black badges and red and black flags flew from nearly all factories in Karachi.

Eight labour federation leaders along with eight workers' representatives organized a Joint Action Committee to respond to the series of events that had occurred. The action committee held the police officers and the district commissioner responsible for the killings and demanded their immediate suspension. In its negotiation with the Action committee, the state was unwilling to discuss the issue of suspension of the officials. After not meeting the labour leadership for two days, on the 15th of June, the Provincial Labour Minister unilaterally announced that an agreement had been reached. The government's offer contravened to the agreements that the labour leaders had negotiated earlier with the provincial government.

The Joint Action Committee had been taken by surprise. Clearly the government strategy was to undermine their status and to portray them as incompetent in front of the workers. However, it was also becoming evident to the Committee that, because of economic hardships, the strike could not be sustained indefinitely.

Fearing that prolonging the movement might aid the government's plan to manipulate the situation to its own advantage, the Action Committee decided to accept the state's demands. But prior to giving its reply to the government, it sought to bring the issue before a people's court (awami adalat).

On June 16, labourers and their leaders met at an open rally near Benaras Chowk. At this meeting the workers vociferously opposed the idea of ending the strike and asked the leaders not to compromise with the government. The following day workers again assembled in a city park. The leaders tried afresh to convince the workers to resume their duties. The workers remained militant and kept on shouting slogans like 'khoon ka badla khoon'. The workers maintained their defiant posture until a shop floor leader, Bawar Khan, took the microphone and finally succeeded in

persuading them to end the strike.

Discussion

The scholarly work that is available on the period celebrates labour militancy in the late 1960s as a sign of maturing labour consciousness and as an example of unprecedented labour solidarity. Yet class solidarities and alliances are created at specific moments of the struggle for certain immediate goals, and can co-exist with other solidarities that may encompass differences in language, region and ethnicity. This internal differentiation within the working class existed in Karachi. In immediate post-independence Pakistan, the Mohajir (migrants from India) workers formed the majority of the rank and file and also occupied the leadership positions among the already volatile and diversified labour population. The Mohajir-dominated leadership played an important, some would say heroic, role in its advocacy and struggle for labour rights in Karachi. Yet, the leadership may have also managed to retain, much to its advantage, the cultural and linguistic tensions between the higher skilled local workers (Mohajir) and the less skilled up-country migrants mostly (Pakhtoon) through a rhetoric of class solidarity and proletarian politics. By the late 1960s, however, the ethnic make-up of Karachi's labour population had changed considerably. The light and heavy industrial complexes and foreign firms, where working conditions were better, were mostly populated by skilled Mohajir workers. Whereas the textile mills, where working conditions were far worse, tended to employ up-country migrant labourers. Hence, the relationship between a predominantly Mohajir trade union leadership and the up-country rank and file was marked by a cultural distance.

This relationship may have also resulted in bringing the strike to a close. During the strike, in press statements the leaders continuously portrayed the movement as an exploding volcano. The mob-like character of the labour struggle, in the opinion of the leaders, needed to be checked and directed as it could set a dangerous precedent for anarchic violence. Not unlike the state, the predominantly urban leadership sought to contain the chaotic potential that they saw in the workers. Workers, especially up-country migrants, were conceived of as peasants who needed to be educated into being part of the trade union culture. An illustrative moment in this pedagogical process in the 1972 movement came when, Bawar Khan, the shop-floor leader who was allied to the leadership, used his rhetorical skills and requested the, until then defiant, workers to think of the leadership as being their generals. He went on to state that, unlike the generals of the Pakistani army who had surrendered in East Pakistan, these generals would not desert their jawans (lit: foot soldiers, meaning the labourers themselves) and would never surrender. This emotional appeal touched a mainspring among the workers and they agreed to the terms laid down by the leadership. Bawar Khan's speech informs us about the workers themselves, but it also explains how the leadership viewed the workers. The language of soldiers and generals does not conform to the ideal of voluntary contractual relationship that is commonly linked with bourgeois and modern notions of the trade union movement. Rather it falls back on the imagery of the unquestioned trust and loyalty of a more authoritarian era.

It seems that at this juncture the trade union leadership, irrespective of its revolutionary and radical rhetoric of class warfare, was merely pushing for liberal democratic rights of association, speech, and state welfare. In their understanding of the situation the workers were not yet disciplined and trained enough for the final revolutionary transcendence beyond a capitalist bourgeois order.

After the firing at Benaras Chowk in June 1972, the thoroughfare was named Shaheed Chowk (Martyrs' Square) by the workers who lived in the surrounding communities. In the late 1980s this same chowk was renamed Bacha Khan Chowk, after the famous Pakhtoon nationalist leader, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. These changing names are minor suggestions of the social and political

processes that Karachi's population has witnessed over the last few years. But they are also an indication of how a growing ethnic polarity among the industrial labour force itself has taken over the earlier constructed arguments on working class solidarity. The story of the labour movement that unfolds after 1972 may be intertwined with the narrative of how Shaheed Chowk was renamed Bacha Khan Chowk. A story that may still be unfolding.

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P.S.

• libcom.org. December 5, 2014:

<https://libcom.org/article/strength-street-karachi-1972-kamran-asdar-ali>