

# Pakistan - Protest rallies: Release of youth, trade union leaders sought

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## ***Express Tribune* report on public rally in Islamabad.**

ISLAMABAD / GILGIT: Activists of progressive political parties, trade unions, youth and student organisations staged protest rallies in the federal capital and the picturesque Hunza valley of Gilgit-Baltistan against the incarceration of a youth leader and his comrades in Gilgit jail and trade union leaders in Punjab jails.

They demanded their release and withdrawal of false cases against them. They also expressed their concern over the retrenchment of thousands of workers from various organisations.

In Hunza, over 1,000 people including 300 women gathered at Nasirabad, Hunza to vent their anger at the highhandedness and brutalities of the security agencies against Baba Jan, chief organiser of Progressive Youth Front (PYF), activists Iftikhar Hussain and others in Gilgit Jail who have been detained for about a year.

Wajid Ali, a resident of Nasirabad, told The Express Tribune by phone that the protesters also marched on the Karakoram Highway later in the day to highlight the illegal detention of the leader.

Jan, along with other comrades, was arrested last August for protesting against the killing of a disaster-affected youth and his father at the hands of police during a protest rally demanding payment of compensation to the families displaced by Attabad Lake in Hunza.

The rally was addressed by leaders, notables and women condemning the authorities for implicating the detained leader in false cases, said Mumtaz Ali, another activist.

Jan's lawyer, Advocate Ehsan Ali, said that his client's bail plea had been accepted and he was expected to be released earlier this month, but was implicated in yet another case by the anti-terrorism court for "inciting sectarian hatred and promoting anti-government sentiments among prisoners", a charge he termed another tool to incarcerate the leader.

In Islamabad, the protesters though only over a hundred in number managed to put up an impressive show as majority of them included labourers. Their union leaders were implicated in what they termed fake cases and put behind bars apparently 'for raising voices for the rights of workers, labourers and youth'.

"Baba Jan has become a symbol of resistance," commented one of the participants. The establishment wants to suppress progressive voices in the sensitive region, he added.

Members and leaders of three left wing parties — Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), Workers Party Pakistan (WPP), Awami Party Pakistan (APP) — accompanied by activists of youth, students, Jammu and Kashmir Peoples National Party (JKPNP) Jammu and Kashmir National Students Organisation

(JKPNSO), workers belonging to workers' union from Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Gujranwala, Mardan and Swat converged in the capital to raise their voice and offer an alternative agenda for change.

They demanded the immediate release of Baba Jan along with other labour union leaders arrested on similar charges in different cities.

"It has become a sort of struggle between the ruling elite and the working class," said Sarwar Bari, a social activist and leader of APP. Baba Jan and other leaders are not being released for fears that they have challenged the system which is brutal for the working class, he explained.

Men and women holding banners and red flags gathered outside the National Press Club and raised slogans demanding the immediate release of leaders. Members of Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) Faisalabad travelled to Islamabad in a hope to secure release of their six leaders, who were languishing in jail for over two years.

"They were implicated in false cases of terrorism and other criminal activities by the industrial owners of the power looms and put in jail," said an activist of LQM, who blamed the Pakistan Muslim League-N ruling Punjab government for the arrests and subsequent sentence of the union leaders, which included Akbar Kamboh, Fazal Ilahi, Rana Riaz and three others.

"Together they were sentenced to 140 years in jail, can you believe it?" asked a former colleague of the arrested leaders, adding that none of the arrested men fired even a single shot.

When asked why he was taking so much pain for the arrested men while he was not being troubled, he replied, "Who can guarantee I will not be troubled tomorrow or my children would not be harassed into cheap labour without their due rights."

The participants dispersed peacefully after blocking the road in front of the press club for a few minutes and staging a demonstration for over an hour.

Those who spoke to the participants included LPP chief Tariq Farooq, WPP leader Dr Asim Sajjad, APP leader Dr Hassan Nasir, National Federation of Trade Unions leader Yousaf Baloch, NSF leader Aalia Amirali, journalist Abdus Sattar and others.

They vowed to continue a joined struggle against the exploitative system and for establishing a just and egalitarian society. They also vowed to resist privatisation plan and retrenchment of workers.

**Shabbir Mir / Umer Nangiana**

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<http://tribune.com.pk/story/414754/protest-rallies-release-of-youth-trade-union-leaders-sought/>