

Pakistan: Students' March 2020

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This year the activities around “Students’ Union Restoration March” are expected on Friday the 27th November.

On 23rd November the federal education minister announced the closure of educational institutions for one month due to the increasing cases of Covid-19. The recent activities around Students’ Union Restoration are actually the continuity of the last two years’ student marches. However, this year’s activities have some important hallmarks.

Last year’s march had shuddered the echelons of power. These marches, held in more than 55 cities across the country, had one single demand of lifting the 36 years’ long ban on Students’ Union. The students demonstrated their immense power on the streets which compelled the government officials to at least verbally accepting the constitutional demands of students for unions. Bills were presented and deliberated in various provincial assemblies regarding restoration of students’ union. However, the government through traditional political intrigues convoluted the whole discussion of restoration of unions with “Code of Conduct”. Then the whole discussion of students’ union was wiped out from the horizon behind the façade of Covid-19 while in the same period new draconian measures were adopted against the students. The budget for HEC (Higher Education Commission) was cut by half. Despite the lack of internet and IT infrastructure in most part of the country, online education was initiated. Regardless of suspension of classes, not only fees were forcibly collected but they were also increased exponentially. The horrible incidents of sexual harassment also surged. The scholarships for students hailing from far-flung and backward areas of country were abolished.

This string of oppressive measures is still continuing but the fight back against these oppressions has also expanded. The students have fought a daring battle against online classes as poor IT infrastructure and lack of wide-ranging internet accessibility render it impossible for them to avail such classes. In the same way, from Balochistan to Peshawar to Gilgit they fought against harassment on university campuses. The students from Balochistan and ex-Fata held a successful long-march against abolition of reserve seats and scholarships. The medical students are also flexing their muscles against new oppressive administrative orders. The students’ reprisal against all kinds of oppression is a reflection of social unrest hitherto not expressing itself openly. Such circumstances give an extraordinary aura to this year’s students’ union restoration march.

Last year a big success for students’ movement was the establishment of “Students’ Action Committee”. Many such committees mushroomed in numerous cities across the country. These steps had historical importance since their roots can be traced back to the marvelous students-workers movement of 1968. This history of sacrifice and astounding struggle stretches from fight against Ayub Khan’s dictatorship to the fight against reactionary Zia dictatorship. The ruling classes were so terrified of the student organizations and their various progressive alliances that the dictator Zia Ul Haq cowardly imposed an altogether ban on students’ union in 1984. However, the subsequent ‘democratic’ governments not only kept the ban intact but also initiated such criminal steps which further depoliticized the students and pushed them towards reactionary elements. In 2007, despite the ban on the students union, the Students’ Action Committee fought a formidable struggle against Musharraf dictatorship. It is an irony of fate that at the time the meetings of Students’ Action

Committee used to be held in Imran Khan's (the current prime minister) Lahore residence. In Pakistan every ruler, when they were in opposition, exploited the students' power for their mean interests and when in power they subjected those same students to severe repression.

The heritage of Students' Action Committees is not confined to a specific era, region or country. It engulfs all the struggles of youth and students against oppression and exploitation everywhere in the world and, above all, the sacrifice and selfless struggles of students in Pakistan spanning almost five decades. Despite all regressive objective and cultural challenges, the formation of the present Students' Action Committee is a huge step forward. Historically, the Indian subcontinent has been the confluence of various cultures, some of which had been the cradle of human civilization. As a result, the formation of democratic structures plays a significant role in any movement. On the one hand the formation of Students' Action Committees in various cities has been proved to be timely; on the other hand it has demonstrated its potential to successfully arrange the activities of 27th November. They would also play an important part in the future struggles.

The Covid pandemic is posing a great challenge this year. Whereas the struggle demands sacrifices and selflessness, the planning of the battle and the preferences guarantee the success. In this regard, we have to analyze the objective conditions meticulously and farsightedly to develop a coherent analysis and perspectives. During the meeting, in which the decision regarding the November 27th march was taken, these points were raised. Revolutionary Students Front (RSF) put up before the Students Action Committee that we have to arrange our activities keeping in view the Corona pandemic and Covid-related lockdowns. But various representatives in SAC had other considerations. RSF adhering to democratic traditions avoided imposing its will on others and let them learn from their experience. Now is the time to learn lessons. We can compensate for our mistakes and avoid them through political farsightedness otherwise those who repeat their mistakes always go astray into the wilderness.

In view of the closure of educational institutions for one month, the students, especially the female students, would have to confine themselves to their homes. The hostels would be closed. The economic hardships have so much increased that basic necessities of life are getting out of reach for ordinary people. Consequently, the students would have to return to their homes. In this regard, the immediate watchword for the November 27th March must be the abolition of internet-less and basic IT infrastructure-less online classes. The students may come on streets in the future against such measures. These comparatively limited activities must be utilized as a preparatory ground for future struggles. Till the normalization of educational process, the political education of students is of utmost importance.

Definitely, last year's Student Solidarity March ignited the discussion around Students' Union; however there is still a long way to go and broader layers of students are still unaware of the importance of students' union. Even they can't differentiate between Students' Union and Student Organizations. We need to write on these issues and propagate. Social media can prove to be a good platform for this purpose. This duration must be utilized for conducting seminars and study circles for cadre building of youth. In this way, a collective leadership of youth can be developed. Despite all the impressive qualities, the individuals can't be a substitute for collective leadership. Only a collective leadership can further embellish the personal qualities of individuals. This political upbringing will create such unprecedented confidence in students that they would brave all kinds of oppression. In this way when the objective situation returns to relatively normal, massive gatherings can be held in major metropolitans across the country regarding Students' Union restoration. This would bring up a cap of politically conscious students that would have a deep understanding of Students' Union past, its historical role and its potential in the present era. Such students would not be lured by empty promises of the rulers rather they would snatch their due rights through their

collective power.

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P.S.

• Asian Marxist Review. November 26, 2020:

<http://www.marxistreview.asia/pakistan-students-march-2020/>