

Pakistan: Narrative Report of assistance by ESSF France to Labour Education Foundation (LEF) 2020-2021

Wednesday 4 May 2022, by [Labour Education Foundation \(Pakistan\)](#), [MAHMOOD Khalid](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2022).

Thank you very much for the consistent support by Europe in Solidarity Without Borders (ESSF) France and donors to the ongoing work and projects of Labour Education Foundation.

Established in 1993 as a non-government organization, Labour Education Foundation (LEF) is an initiative of renowned trade union leaders, human rights and women rights activists to organize, capacitate and advocate for workers' rights and provide informed input to trade unions and various civil society organizations for promoting workers' rights.

LEF has been devoting considerable resources to support and enable formal and informal sector workers to organize themselves, develop their knowledge, claim their rights and transform unequal power relations.

The LEF, mission for a democratic, progressive, just, peaceful and developed society where working class—men, women and youth—empowered to claim and protect its social, economic and political rights has been assisted by the consistent support by ESSF over the years.

LEF work for conscious, informed and gender sensitized workers, women and youth groups challenging the existing situation as part of the movements for ensuring economic emancipation, gender equality, promoting constitutional, legal and labour rights, eradicating violence and working for a democratic and nuclear-free society has been strengthened by ESSF support.

During 2020/2021, one of the major area of work done by LEF was to help sustain and strengthening the work of Pakistan Brick Kiln Workers Union Punjab. The union is dealing with the cases of bonded labour, wage increase and political and social liberation of the brick kiln work, one of the most exploited sections of Pakistan society.

One of the themes that was taken up during the period for January to December 2021 was "Strengthening the Rights of Brick Kiln Workers to Challenge Bonded Labour". This work assisted by other international organisation got support from ESSF as well. During this campaign, several activities were organised like workshops, seminars, training sessions, capacity building meetings, registration of workers for the social security and helping getting the national identity cards.

Although women are equally doing work with men at brick kilns but the name on the ledger (wage book) is entered only of their men. But after attending sessions on gender equality and their legal rights, brick kiln family-head women workers, raised their demand for enrolling their names on the ledger book for receiving their wages by themselves. As a result, the employers accepted their

demand.

Another result is that 118 new members joined the union and the membership of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union was increased from 7950 to 8068 during the reporting period.

Another Area of work of LEF has been empowering the human rights defender in different trade unions and community organizations. through capacity-building trainings. The workers through this type of trainings developed their links with other trade unions and civil society organizations. The General Secretary of Bhatta Union was appointed member of Bonded Labor Committee constituted by the Islamabad High Court along other top officials which resulted the Islamabad High Court banning all sorts of bonded labour in any part of the capital.

Labour Education Foundation provided legal support to the political, social and trade union activists. Some of the top lawyers of Pakistan were engaged voluntarily to present the cases of the workers for wages increase, trade union rights and against bonded labour.

• **Capacity Building Sessions**

A total of 10 orientation sessions were conducted during the reporting period in seven districts of Punjab. A total 657 workers including 243 women attended these sessions. The topics covered were labour laws and labour rights, bonded labour, modern slavery, unionism, occupational health & safety, team building, organizing strategies, and gender equality. These sessions were addressed by prominent human rights activists of Pakistan.

• **Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labour:**

The preparatory meeting with office bearers of Brick kiln Owners Association Pakistan and PBMU representatives was held on 17th of December 2021 in Lahore, where both parties agreed to work together on their core issues like provision of basic facilities at the kilns. A provincial consultation on bonded labour was held on 23rd of December 2021 in Falettis Hotel Lahore. In this consultation members of the brick kiln workers' union from Districts Toba Tek Singh, Lahore, Sheikhpura, Vehari, Khanewal, Multan, Bhakhar, Mandi Bahaudin, Gujrat, and Sheikhpura participated. Trade union members, civil society organizations, brick kiln owner's association, and government departments were also partaken in. The brick kiln workers, owners and relevant departments supported the demand for Union to ensure the provision of clean drinking water, washrooms, basic health facilities along with first aid and education for the children of brick kiln families. The General Secretary of Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union Mr. Muhammad Shabbir handed over the written demands to the Vice President of the Brick Kiln Owners Association Pakistan Mr. Malik Bashir for taking the desired action. The demands of the implementation of minimum wage rates according to government's notification and registration of workers in social security and old age benefits institutions were deferred to be settled down through future negotiations. On the process of minimum wage rate calculations, Union and employers' association agreed to meet with government jointly for better representation from both sides.

• **May Day Rally:**

Due to COVID 19 pandemic and announced lockdown from April to June, it was not possible to celebrate International Labour Day in person so a webinar was conducted. Over 100 workers and civil society organizations representatives participated. In this webinar, the present situation of labourers especially the post-pandemic situation was discussed and the way forward/suggestions came up for the plans of action.

- **Contribution to the monthly newsletter:**

The project activities were published in LEF's monthly newsletter which is a good source to disseminate information and knowledge to a big number of workers. The newsletter is being sent to many trade unions, government institutions, and civil society organizations (the newsletter is distributed to around 3000 organizations and individuals and uploaded on LEF's website as well), besides this, project activities were also

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The spread of Covid-19 in Pakistan as well as all over the world caused worse financial situation for workers. A number of local and export-driven companies in the garment industry, manufacturing for European and US brands, illegally fired their workers during the pandemic. For example, Nishat Apparel, owned by Mian Mansha, arguably the richest man in Pakistan, dismissed nine hundred workers at the onset of the lockdown — claiming the company did not have enough resources to take care of its workers.

The government launched Ehsas (care) Emergency Cash Program in April to provide financial assistance of 12,000 Pakistani rupees (\$75) each to some 12 million families affected by the coronavirus crisis. But the criteria of applying and selection in that programme was very complicated and the majority of workers who have lost jobs did not get the support.

Workers Welfare Board, as a result of enquiry of corruption in the institution, stopped payments of workers for the educational scholarships of workers' children, marriage grants and death grants. This resulted in many losses for workers and their families. Different unions organized protests against this policy of the WWB of stopping the payment of workers. The matter is still not solved and workers are protesting from time to time. LEF helped workers and trade union activists to claim their due rights announced by the government. Also helped workers to campaign against job losses and helped them to organise demonstrations and rallies in several districts.

LEF also helped youth movement of Pakistan to demand for the lifting of the ban on students' unions. LEF brought women workers on Aurat March on the International Day of Women. The Aurat (Women) March is now attended by hundreds of women. A new young layer of women activists has come forward., Organisations like LEF are in the forefront to link the working-class women with those from middle classes and organise joint demons on the day.

Overall, LEF has achieved project targets. It has completed all the activities which were planned for the year. The orientation sessions, which were conducted through Zoom, remained very effective. However it could not replace in-person activities, because most of the women worker did not have android phones and they live in remote areas; therefore, the internet signal remained weak during the sessions. Capacity building trainings helped workers to understand labour laws which translated into rights struggle. Training on developing market linkages for HBWs enabled them to develop linkages with the market. Around 65% of women developed their linkages with the market but due to Covid-19 pandemic and market lockdown, they could not sustain their linkages with the market. Training through Social Media was one of the best training (shared by the union leaders) to advocate their rights struggle. Many of the participants of social media training became more active on Facebook and YouTube after the training.

Unions being part of the training workshops started advocacy initiatives regarding wage rates with government departments and have also succeeded in getting rise in wages rates after negotiations with employers.

ESSF support for LEF proved vital for uplifting the socio-political consciousness of working class in Pakistan. We hope to continue this cooperation for the year 2021/2022 also and in future years to come.

Long lives the worker's unity and solidarity without borders

Khalid Mahmood

Director

Labour Education Foundation
