

The decline of the labour agenda

Zeenia Shaukat

An edited version of this article appeared in Dawn Magazine on April 28, 2013. Link: <http://dawn.com/2013/04/28/the-voiceless-worker-2/>

As Pakistan goes to polls, the labour agenda in the election manifestos of political parties reflects their limited understanding of workers rights. Nearly all manifestos promise to raise wages, expand social security, and facilitate employment creation through privatization. This suggests the dominant thought among ruling elites that sees workers as charity seekers. It also implies an agreement with the neoliberal line that gives the charge of workers welfare to the private sector.

This attitude of the ruling elite is neither new nor surprising. The state of Pakistan has had an uncomfortable relationship with workers since the start. Through a series of systematic, policy and institutional measures, it has succeeded in crushing the spirit of the workers, rendering, as it stands today, the 58mn labour force voiceless and clueless in the face of rapid political and economic developments deeply impacting their lives.

Oddly, no party spoke of unionization, the biggest cause of workers' powerless status. Despite Freedom of Association guaranteed by the constitution, less than 3% of the total workforce is unionised. The exclusionary Industrial Relations Act (IRA) has ousted 80% of the country's labour force from the ambit of this right. No labour law covers agriculture labour, 45% of the workforce.

Such ruthless disenfranchisement of workers suits all. The neoliberal regime that Pakistan is allied with demands deregulation of the labour market in the name of removing "distortions and irritants". So while constitutional provisions guaranteeing the right to association; prohibition of forced and child labour; right to equality; and secure work conditions; stay, violations abound. As is evident in limited unionization, a bonded labour force of over 1.7mn, a child labour force of over 3mn (disputed stats) and the agriculture workers' nil access to minimum wages. Merely 5% of the workforce has social security coverage. Over 260 Ali Enterprises workers gutted in a fateful fire last September explain the vulnerabilities of the country's working class.

Despite their autocratic and capitalist character, our colonial masters had a better track record of labour rights. The Trade Unions Act of 1926 freely allowed unions formation to all except those in the armed forces. (It did extend to the civilian employees in the armed forces). Unions were also free to establish political funds and participate in the political process.

The state's obsession with restricting labour rights has roots in the capitalist structure inherited from the colonial rule. Post independence it translated into the fierce protection of private ownership of the means of production (primarily of land). Along with rapid industrialisation, the state undertook to develop and protect private capitalism with the help of foreign assistance. The interventionist state took charge of industrial policy, five years plans and also directly set up large industrial units later privatized.

The state's aggressive capitalist posture demanded a pliant labour force to secure profits. The agenda was pursued ruthlessly. The TUA 1926 and the Industrial Disputes Ordinance 1947 were replaced with a regressive IRO 1969. The model replicated in later years translated into the slashing of industrial trade unions now restricted to single plant level, and the plucking out of agriculture workers from labour law's definition. Union formation and functioning was made a daunting task. The right to strike became conditional to fulfilling cumbersome mandatory procedures, making the strike option counterproductive.

As a political device, the interventionist state created and patronised the All Pakistan Confederation of Labour in the '50s to counter major trade unions of that time. As trade unions became more independent and the ineffective confederation crashed, an exercise of fragmentation of trade unions was launched.

The restricting of the tripartite engagement between workers, employers and government for labour issues has also been progressively pursued. Tripartism is disregarded during the rule-making exercise of labour laws by the labour ministry's bureaucrats. The last tripartite consultation in 2001 prior to the promulgation of the IRO 2002 never incorporated any recommendation in the said IRO.

The undermining of labour rights has taken a toll on Pakistan's political system eroding the capacity of workers to support to the tumultuous political process. The powerful 1968 workers mobilization toppled the Ayub Khan regime. It was instrumental in extracting a favourable deal from the Bhutto government.

Later, Gen Zia successfully crushed the trade unions through human rights violations, ban on trade unions, the introduction of contract system, and privatization, the latter two measures spelling the death of secure employment. There was a 40% decline in the unions membership during his time squashing the institutional arrangement for resistance. His disenfranchisement of labour was laid on such solid foundations that the country had little difficulty in adopting to the IMF's structural adjustment programme signed by the 1988 caretaker government and pursued by the latter governments till today. It lists the same restricted labour rights menu that Zia and his predecessors implemented. He and General Musharraf had a comfortable authoritarian run on the back of a shattered and disempowered labour force.

Today, Pakistan's workers battle an indifferent state, the might of a deregulated and unregulated market system and an unaccountable employer. The absence of organization has deepened the inequality crisis. Agriculture workers produce exportable wheat but struggle with severe hunger; industrial and services workers remain speechless in the face of powerful contractors. Women get much less wages than their male counterparts all across. Pakistan has ratified 35 ILO conventions and implemented none. Sadly, none of this is a concern for political parties eager to double the wages if elected.

The writer is Co Manager Programmes at the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research