Working Class of Pakistan Struggling for Safe and Healthy Working Conditions

Pakistan is the sixth largest country in the world in terms of population. Its Government has also ratified ILO core Conventions and undertaken obligations by entering into agreement with the European Union to comply with ILO and UN Conventions and Declarations for ensuring fundamental rights to the workers including the provision of safe and healthy working conditions to the workers. The safe and healthy working conditions for the workers is a pre-requisite not only for life and health of workers and welfare of their families, but also a most important human asset for raising productivity of the enterprise as well as of the nation.

The recent tragedy of an outbreak of fire at the Gadani Shipbreaking Yard last month caused havoc due to unsafe working conditions. This resulted in the deaths of 26 innocent workers and many more workers left with burn injuries who are still under treatment due to culpable negligence of the owner of the ship and contractor of the labour. This havoc has been caused while the 500 workers hired to dismantle the ship are daily wagers - which is the norm at Gadani Shipbreaking yard. The metal body of the ship became very hot due to oil inside, which has resulted accumulating flames. The welding of the ship was carried out before dismantling the ship, which led to these deaths. Many more were burned and admitted to hospital. Some are missing. These events tell of the agony of the working class in the shipbreaking industry, in which thousands of workers are employed. Had the employer and the Government observed safety regulations at the workplace, the said incident would not have taken place.

The working class all over the country, including All Pakistan Workers Confederation and National Trade Union Federation, have protested against the tragic killing of Gadani ship breaking workers due to unsafe working conditions and have asked the Government to establish a judicial commission to enquire into the culpable negligence of the contractor and the inspection machinery for causing this tragic incident and to bring the guilty parties to book. The trade union movement has been demonstrating against some employers and against Government policies that allow exploitation of workers in unsafe working conditions, causing such tragic incidents and occupational diseases at the workplace, instead of ensuring them safe and healthy working conditions.

The recent events at the ILO have highlighted that workers in the textile industry suffer from serious occupational diseases in the workplace. This must be addressed by bringing the safety and health laws into conformity with ILO Conventions 81, 155 and 176. Pakistan has also been recognized as the country with the tenth highest number of accidents in the transport industry due to non-observance of safety regulations. The Supreme Court of Pakistan has also directed the Provincial Governments to take special measures to ensure the safe working conditions of workers who are at risk of becoming victims of fatal accidents and occupational diseases due to unsafe working conditions. The nature of duties performed by workers in the electricity sector are the most hazardous, causing their tragic deaths due to their electrocution while working on the lines. That is the reason that the largest public utility, the Electricity Supply Company, has constituted a National Task Force to check for risks of accidents and to ensure safe working conditions for the workers and to impose punishment on management responsible for the accidents as a deterrent. The tragedy of Baldia Town Garment Factory, Karachi, resulted in the tragic deaths of more than 200 workers in a fire, which is a matter of national concern.

There is an urgent need not only to enforce the safety and health laws to ensure safe working conditions for the workers and prevent their accidents and occupational diseases but also to implement the relevant laws through an independent labour inspection machinery as per ILO Convention No.81, which has been ratified by the Government of Pakistan. According to an ILO report, there are only 569 Labour Inspectors – compared with hundreds of thousands factories in the country. The Government must address issues with the existing laws. It is not only a problem of implementation and enforcement, but also that many outdated labour laws were promulgated more than a century ago – for example, the Factories Act 1934, Boilers Act 1910, Electricity Act 1910. These must be reformed in order to meet the modern challenges and technological developments. There is also a need to move beyond provision of medical treatment for injured and sick workers and to carry out investigations and research into how unsafe working conditions that cause tragic accidents and occupational diseases in the workplace and for a preventative safety culture and for independent labour inspection machinery.

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