

Victory Within Minutes

By Farooq Tariq

Rana Tahir called me from Faisalabad on 11th July afternoon. There were a lot of slogans raised in the background while he was speaking. He told me that he is with striking workers of Touseef Textile in Ghulam Mohamed Abad area of Faisalabad. The factory owner Haji Salamat is not paying the government fixed wage rates to the workers and has told everyone to leave the factory if they do not agree to work on his conditions.

Rana Tahir is district president of Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) and member of General Body of Labour Education Foundation. LQM is a labour organization in Faisalabad and other cities whose two leaders were killed on 6th July in Faisalabad while they were sitting in one of their office. Most of textile factories were closed for three day to express solidarity with the slain leaders. Workers just walked out.

Rana Tahir asked me to send sms to all the journalists informing them that around 700/800 workers of this textile factory are on strike. Labour Party Pakistan has established a sms list of all the leading journalists of Pakistan. Whenever we hear news that has to be conveyed to the main stream media, we send a sms with all the local contacts numbers. It has worked very well and normally few journalists show their interest and the news is then taken up by the electronic and print media. This helps to put up pressure on the bosses. A few telephone calls from the media are enough to frighten most of the bosses of these small factories.

We sent the sms to all the journalists. The workers had no union at the factory. They were not paid the wages and the wages were less than most of the workers in the same capacity in the same city. Faisalabad is hub of textile factories and power looms. LQM has become the main labour force in the city. The workers at factory did not have any contact with LQM before the strike. They walked out on 9th July and thought that this will be enough. The boss did not listen and threatened them of a complete lay off. On 11th July, some of the workers contacted LQM leadership and they arrived at factory.

The workers meeting outside the factory was attended by all of the 800 or so workers. The LQM leadership told the boss that he has to accept the demands of the workers that are totally according to the labour laws and minimum wage board. Haji Salamat Ali, the owner of the factory was paying Rupees 48 for a dozen of a hosiery product; the normal rate of such labour was Rupees 63. He was not ready to increase the price of this labour. The rates had not been increased for the last two years. The protest meeting on 11th July, the media campaign and a Gherao (picket) of the factory by the workers did not help. The situation remained the same on 12th July as well.

Then the strategy to counter the factory owner was changed to a new but very innovative tactics. The LQM leadership decided on 12th July to Gherao the residence of the boss. They have used this tactics successfully in some other cases.

The bosses want to remain in peace at their homes and it does not matter what is happening to their workers. They want to rest at best and a peaceful neighborhood. LQM announced publically that they will Gherao the home of the boss on 13th July. The police officer called the leadership of LQM and threatened them to arrest if they go to the home of Haji Salamat. Rana Tahir told me that they ignored the warning and told the police in very cool manner, "you do your duty and we will do

ours. We will be there tomorrow in hundreds”.

Early this morning several police vans arrived at the home of the boss for “protection”. So everyone in the neighborhood knew that there is something wrong here. The striking workers gathered at the factory and then started their march to the home of the boss. Fortunately, they were not stopped by police.

Police had seen the power of LQM on 7th July when thousands of workers took out a massive rally to condemn the murder of Mustansar and Azeem Randhawa, the two slain leaders of LQM. They did not dare to touch the leadership of LQM marching this morning to the home of Haji Salamat. While near the home, the workers saw massive police presence. They were happy to see that. This meant that the plan is successful. The presence of police near the home of the boss was a sign that the whole administration of the district is active and knew that the striking workers are on the move. Meanwhile the main stream electronic media channels also arrived at spot to cover the happenings.

The leadership of LQM had told the workers to be cool and calm and no violence at all. They were sitting outside the home of the boss for five minutes only when he and his son Rahil Anjum approached the leadership of LQM. They never expected his factory workers knocking the door of his home. Within minutes they surrendered. Haji Salamat Ali accepted all the demands of the workers and asked them to go back to factory and start work on 58 Rupees a dozen rates, which was 10 Rupees more than the previous one. The workers accepted the offer and the strike was over with a proud record of a victory within minutes.

The whole factory workers have announced to join LQM and be part of the labour movement in the city.

Rana Tahir called me after the victory and told that this has worked again. How for this tactics will be successful, we do not know, but we know that it works at present, when this will not work, we will find another inventive, ingenious and rebellious strategy.

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