



Six years on, plight of workers remains unchanged in country

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he pain is still fresh for the families of Baldia factory fire victims.—Fahim Siddiqi/White Star

KARACHI: The empty blackened structure of Ali Enterprises, the Baldia factory, in which over 250 garment workers were burnt alive, still stands as a horrific reminder of the tragedy that took place in 2012.

Invited by the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and Association of Baldia Factory Fire Affectees (ABFFA), the families of the dead gathered here on Tuesday to mark the sixth anniversary of the fire.

Representatives of the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and local NGOs were also present on the occasion along with senior activists and trade unionists.

Families of deceased workers gather to mark sixth anniversary of Baldia factory fire

There were the aged parents, mothers, widows, siblings and children of the late workers. Little children who were just toddlers six years ago held on tight to framed photographs of their late parents.

Nasir Mansoor, the deputy general secretary of NTUF, said that the Baldia factory incident was one of the biggest accidents in the industrial sector and it still failed to bring any positive change to the lives of workers.

“Workplaces are still unsafe. There was a worker who recently died of electric shock, there are workers dying on a daily basis at the ship-breaking yards of Gadani, and there are casualties in coal mines, but we find no mention of workers or any facilities for them in the 100-day agenda of the new government,” he said.

“Workers are not even given the right to make unions in the organisations they work for, while big orders for clothing and other things are outsourced to factories and they are expected to work extra hours just like slaves without any benefits,” he said.

Saeeda Khatoon, who lost her 18-year-old son in the fire and who founded the ABFFA, said the heirs of the martyred and maimed workers are still awaiting justice even after six years.

“They have been knocking at the doors of courts at local and international level so that justice can be [served] to them. They are still protesting,” she said.

Karamat Ali, executive director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (Piler), said that institutions formed by the government for welfare of labour have failed to discharge their duties and they are fully safeguarding the interests of employers.

“The working conditions in all industrial entities including garment and textile factories that make goods for international brands are worse than slavery conditions.

“The owners of local factories, international brands, and the government departments related to labour have formed an anti-worker nexus and now there is hardly one per cent of 68,000,000 workers who have the right of making trade unions,” he said.

“Skilled workers here are not given even the minimum wages as prescribed by the government for unskilled workers. And there is a third party contract system in 95 per cent of factories, which is against the verdict of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The right of social security and pension is also only available to five per cent workers,” he said.

‘Death cells’

Gul Rahman, NTUF’s president in Sindh, said that factories like Ali Enterprises were no different than ‘death cells’.

“The supervisors of these factories are harsh and nasty. They ill treat and threaten the workers,” he said.

Zaheer Arif of the ILO said they have tried coming up with a compensation structure for the families of those who died in the Baldia factory fire.

“We designed the compensation structure with Piler, NTUF, Sindh Employees Social Security Institution (Sessi), etc, and money has already been transferred in the accounts of the family members of some 200 workers who could be identified,” he said.

Habibuddin Janaidi of the Peoples Labour Bureau said that even if the families were compensated, there is really no replacement or compensation for the life of a loved one. “Your loss can never be filled,” he consoled with the bereaved families of the late workers.

Liaquat Sahi, general secretary of the State Bank Democratic Union, said the government and the legislatures exposed themselves by their careless attitude towards workers, especially the families of the late workers of Ali Enterprises.

He added that he was surprised at the chief justice of Pakistan’s comments that he was not in favour of trade unions.

“Hearing him say such things is like witnessing the funeral of trade unions in this country,” he further said.

More speakers, including NTUF president Rafiq Baloch, Miriam Saage of ECCHR, Liana Foxvog of Clean Cloth Campaign, Abdul Aziz of ABFFA, Bashir Shakir of Pakistan Textile Federation, Niaz Khan of Carpet Workers Union and Riaz Abbasi of NTUF also regretted that all this is happening despite the ILO conventions, GSP Plus and Global Framework Agreements.

They said that international brands get their goods made in local factories while deceiving their buyers about not violating any labour or human rights and they use private social audit companies which issue them fake certificates after getting money from them, claiming that these factories are respecting the international labour and safety standards.

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