



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Pearl Continental Karachi workers sit-in over labor disputes, Pakistan, 2010

24 February

2010

to: 20 March

2010

**Country:** Pakistan

**Location City/State/Province:** Karachi

**Location Description:** Pearl Continental Hotel

### Goals:

Reinstatement of the four illegally dismissed union leaders; forcing the hotel management to negotiate prior labor disputes.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

### Methods in 5th segment:

- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 162. Sit-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Pearl Continental Karachi hotel workers; union leaders

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Not Known

**Partners:**

Supporters, including family members, fraternal unions, social and human rights activists

**External allies:**

Pearl Continental union in Rawalpindi; Pakistan Medical Association; The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) affiliates; Internet-based press

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not Known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Pearl Continental Karachi union
- Pearl Continental Karachi workers
- supporters (rallying outside hotel)

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Pearl Continental Rawalpindi union

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

## Groups in 6th Segment:

- Pakistan Medical Association
- UIF affiliates

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 4 days*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Pearl Continental Karachi Hotel management; Sadruddin Hashwani, chair of the Hashoo Group, the conglomerate which owns hotels through Pakistan Services Ltd.

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

### Campaigner violence:

Not Known

### Repressive Violence:

Police assault, arrests, and detention of supporters outside the hotel

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The workers and union leaders sitting in won the reinstatement of the illegally dismissed union leaders. In terms of discussions about previous labor transgressions, the Pearl Continental Karachi case has yet to be reviewed by the ILO's International Labour Conference.

The union survived through the campaign.

The sit-in action, which seems to have been initiated by the dismissed union leaders, soon involved 200 hotel workers. Supporters outside the hotel provided continual support, even helping fellow supporters to be released from jail. Solidarity also came from another Pearl Continental union and online supporters.

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The Pearl Continental is a luxury hotel in Karachi, Pakistan, “located in the heart of the business hub and 15 km from the airport, [it] is a preferred choice for discerning corporate and leisure travelers,” according to their website. In September 2001, Pearl Continental management abruptly fired 300 workers due to a 'decline in bookings,' initiating a many year struggle between management and the Pearl Continental Karachi union. For years following, management brutally sought to destroy the Pearl Continental Karachi union through anti-union dismissals, intimidation, violence and false imprisonment. In the face of this, union members remained loyal to the trade union and nonviolent struggle for basic labor and human rights.

In 2002, three union leaders were illegally jailed while management and the police worked to link them to various alleged criminal acts. The following year, the Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

determined that serious violations had been committed by hotel management and encouraged the government to do a full investigation of mistreatment of union members. Neither the hotel management nor the Pakistani government responded to the recommendation. In 2009, after seven years of struggle the cases of those illegally arrested were thrown out of the courts.

By early 2010, Pearl Continental Karachi union members had been struggling for over eight years when four elected union leaders were illegally dismissed, including the union President, Vice-President, and Vice-Chairman. To protest the illegal terminations, on February 24, the leaders refused to leave the hotel while union members and supporters held a vigil outside.

Soon, the leaders were joined by 200 union members, who conducted a sit-in in the basement of the Pearl Continental Karachi Hotel. Supporters, including family members, fraternal unions, and social and human rights activists, continued to rally and shout slogans outside in solidarity. Those sitting in and supporting outside vowed not to move until the illegal dismissals were withdrawn and hotel management agreed to negotiate outstanding issues from 2002. Hotel operations were able to continue through emergency hiring of agency workers and the import of workers from the Karachi Marriott hotel.

On March 1, less than a week into the sit-in, police assaulted the supporters outside the hotel, including women and children, arresting and detaining them. After supporters held a protest action outside the prison, those arrested were released and returned to the supporters' camp outside the hotel. Hotel management, through the use of warrants and court orders, tried to incite more police repression, but the sheer numbers of supporters around the hotel made the police hesitant to forcibly remove those sitting in or to assault supporters outside. Internet-based press organizations encouraged letter writing for international readership to encourage the company to negotiate rather than rely on police force.

In addition to the support outside the hotel, the Pearl Continental Karachi workers received support from the Pearl Continental union in Rawalpindi, a member of the same affiliated hotel workers federation, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF). The Rawalpindi workers held regular daily rallies and boycotted all meals in the workplace in solidarity with the Karachi workers.

On March 19, almost four weeks into the sit-in, union members escalated their action with the declaration of a hunger strike by two union members. The two strikers had already spent over three weeks in the hotel basement and soon became seriously ill. In response, the Pakistan Medical Association sent a doctor who insisted on entering the hotel. After the involvement of the Medical Association, Representative Sadruddin Hashwani, chair of the Hashoo Group, the conglomerate which owns hotels through Pakistan Services Ltd., agreed to reinstate the four dismissed union officers.

The sit-in lasted for 25 days, ending on March 20, when a direct representative of the hotel's owner directly intervened in the first time for the more than eight-year history of the conflict. Mr Hashwani, one of the richest and most influential men in Pakistan, was known previously to ignore the law and basic protection of human rights for workers. Ultimately, one of the hunger strikers and three of the union members were hospitalized.

The union sent their thanks to IUF affiliates and thousands of other supporters who sent protest messages to engage in the struggle. Immediately following the declaration of the hunger strike, the IUF wrote a letter to Pearl Continental management and the Federal Labour Secretary of Pakistan, holding them both responsible for allowing the situation to escalate into a potentially life-threatening situation. It called attention to the eight-year history of brutal repression by the company and the failure of the government to respond to obvious violations of Pakistani and international law. The case awaits review at the ILO's International Labour Conference.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

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