

The Desire for Peace

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On March 24, over a hundred people came together for an inspiring peace rally endorsed by dozens of South Asian organisations in Jackson Heights, a largely *desi* area of New York. The primary demands of those assembled were addressed to India and Pakistan. No More Military Conflict: Remove All Troops From the Borders; No More Nuclear Build-up: Money For Social Programs And Education, Not for Military And War; Solidarity Among People And Cross-Border Relations; and U.S. Out Of The Region – read the publicity fliers. The passion of those present, along with the rousing speeches by many activists and organisers, even persuaded many assembled across the street to walk over and join the rally.

The Jackson Heights rally was not a “one-off” event. Several rallies have been held all across the US and Canada calling for peace in South Asia. (For a partial list see http://www.mindspring.com/~akhila_raman/vigil_main.htm) There have also been initiatives by groups such as the International South Asia Forum (INSAF: <http://www.insaf.net/>) and Dialognow (<http://www.dialognow.org>) to foster exchange of ideas between Indians and Pakistanis. What was unusual about this particular event was that the group primarily responsible for organising it was a workers union called the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA).

Formed in 1998, the NYTWA is the unofficial union of taxi workers fighting for their legal rights, health benefits, and opposing mistreatment by the police and the city's administration. The majority of taxi drivers in New York are immigrants, with about 60% from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Given this composition, one might expect significant tensions between members, reflecting the differences between their native country's governments. But this has not happened. Indeed, the first big strike (involving over 20,000 drivers staying off work) organised by the NYTWA was on May 13, 1998, just after the nuclear tests conducted by India had unleashed a wave of jingoism in the subcontinent.

Bhairavi Desai, an organiser with the NYTWA, explained one reason for the lack of antagonism during the course of the Jackson Heights rally: "We are in American. No one knows who is from India and from Pakistan...This country treats us as less than human because of the colour of our skin." The other reason flows from the very rationale of unions in general – the common bond of being exploited workers. New York taxi drivers have a tough life. They typically work 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, and make barely enough to cover their living expenses. The economic control over this \$1.5 billion business rests with the garage owners who rent out the taxis, the brokers, and the city's Taxi and Limousine Commission which regulates the industry and earns fabulous fees in exchange for the right to drive taxis. The New York City police, famous for its brutality towards immigrants (recall the shooting of West African Amadou Diallo or the brutalization of Haitian Abner Louima), makes things worse, especially through fines for even trivial infringements of traffic rules.

Under such circumstances, the seventeen draconian laws passed by Mayor Rudolph Guiliani on April 27, 1998, including increases in fines, some up to \$1000, for rude behaviour, smoking and speeding, merely provided the immediate trigger for the very successful May 1998 strikes. The sheer success of the event was reflected in Police Commissioner Howard Safir (praised by Mayor Guiliani as the city's "greatest police commissioner") calling the strikers "terrorists", a term of abuse that has become all too common since September 11, 2001.

The TWA has grown in strength since then but it has been a continuous process of struggle. It is this struggle that provides a firm basis for the unity among the drivers from the different countries of the subcontinent. As Vijay Prashad observed in his *The Karma of Brown Folk* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000): "The most profound bonds are built in the heat of the struggle, especially when one demonstrates to the collectivity that one is prepared to share the burden of other's misery."

At the Jackson Heights rally, Javed Tariq, a Pakistani taxi driver from Pak Pattan and an active NYTWA member, explained why they organised the rally. "Many of us are from regions close to the border. We have families living there and we are naturally worried about what would happen to them. After all, one of our motivations for working so hard so far from home is that we can save some money and send it to them." When asked for his assessment of the reasons for the situation in South Asia, he focused on two reasons: lack of education and the growth of religious fundamentalism.

Both are clearly immense problems. The events in Gujarat in India during the last week have demonstrated, yet again, the immense dangers resulting from the latter. With one act of religious hatred feeding off the other, the need for solidarity among people of

different communities and religions is absolutely necessary. The same can be said of the populations across the borders. Given the overwhelming odds, peace would require tremendous perseverance by all. The pity is that there are many who are unconcerned. As we were discussing this problem my friend Mir Ali Raza reminded me of the inspiring lines by Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

Ek tarz-e-taghaful hai so wo unko mubarak/ Ek arz-e-tamanna hai so hum karte rahenge
(There is a mode of denial, to which they are welcome/But there is also the articulation of desire, which we will never cease.)

Truly, we cannot cease this struggle for peace and justice.