Sri Lankan SEP member victimised by Elastomeric management

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B.A. Sarath Kumara, a long-standing member of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, has been suspended and threatened with dismissal by Elastomeric Engineers Company Ltd (EECL).

EECL produces various types of rubber components including castor wheels, mainly for the European market. Major automakers such as Ford, BMW and Audi buy its products. It employs about 300 workers at Piliyandala, about 16 kilometres out of Colombo, and Horana Industrial Estate, some 40 kilometres from Colombo. In 1995 a leading Swiss rubber components company, Gislaved Gummi AB, bought 54 percent of EECL as a part of major restructuring program.

Sarath Kumara has been in the forefront of all the struggles waged by Elastomeric workers to improve their conditions. When management tried to close the plant in 1997, he organised an action committee—the Elastomeric United Action Committee—which fought the shutdown. The committee mobilised workers from Elastomeric and local factories, oppressed people of the area and students of the nearby Moratuwa University to wage an effective campaign based on an internationalist and socialist program.

The immediate reason given for his suspension was his refusal to work overtime on June 12, even though he had obtained the consent from his superior to leave the factory at the end of his normal shift in order to see a doctor, because he was not well. When Sarath arrived at the factory the next morning, security guards were under instructions not to allow him in. He later received a suspension letter demanding an explanation.

In his reply, Sarath denied the accusation and declared his suspension to be unreasonable and a breach of agreed service conditions. He called on the company to lift the suspension order and reinstate him.

The management has been speeding up the work inside the factory for several years. At the beginning of the last year it laid off 76 workers who were just finishing their probation period. In recent months more than 100 workers have been dismissed on various pretexts. In April workers were promised a pay rise after going without an increase for more than a year, but management has reneged on this commitment.

The destruction of jobs has meant higher workloads. Whereas about 30 machinists worked at Elastomeric Technologies two years ago, now there are only 8 machinists for the same output. Sarath Kumara earlier worked at Elastomeric Tools and Dies as a machinist but was transferred to the factory.

The very fact that workers are ordered to do compulsory overtime, as in the case of Sarath, demonstrates the harsh working conditions that prevail in almost all Sri Lankan factories. While he has been victimised because of his militant record, the action against him also illustrates a wider process.

Since the Peoples Alliance government placed the country on war footing and announced harsh emergency regulations, including the outlawing of any industrial action, the employers, both local and foreign-owned, have become more aggressive against workers.

Elastomeric workers are demanding Sarath's reinstatement and have called on the leadership of the Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU), the sole union functioning in the factory, to defend him. In spite of this demand the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leadership of the union has refused to organise any campaign and told workers that it would inform them "later" about future action.

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