

New Sri Lankan government targets political opponents at workplaces

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Since taking office following last month's general election, the United National Party (UNP) government in Sri Lanka has unleashed an intimidation campaign against public sector workers at many workplaces. Newly-appointed UNP managements are working with thugs from the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS—National Workers Union), the UNP's trade union wing, to attack and victimise workers.

The immediate target has been political opponents of the government, including supporters of the previous Peoples Alliance (PA) administration. According to trade union sources, more than 1,500 workers have been threatened, manhandled, assaulted and prevented from going to work at the Central Transport Board, Sri Lanka Railway, Co-operative Wholesale Establishment, Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Lake House (the government-owned newspaper company), Lanka Salt, Mattegama Textile Mills and other state-run enterprises.

Some of the workers were attacked by hired thugs at their houses, forcing entire families to stay away from their own homes, at least during night time.

* At the Central Transport Board, some 417 workers have been blocked from workplaces in the Northwestern and North Central provinces. The management has sent letters asking them to report to work immediately, but attackers have been waiting for them on the way. The workers have been unable to even draw their salaries for December. Some assistant depot managers were physically attacked in remote towns such as Kuliyaipitiya, Wariyapola, Nikawaratiya and Galgamuwa. At the Galgamuwa depot, the assistant manager had to be hospitalised, three workers were attacked and their families were threatened by UNP thugs, forcing them to stay out of their homes at night.

* In the Sri Lanka Railway, managers and thugs have

pressured 2,000 newly-recruited casual workers to resign. Nidahas Dumriya Sevaka Sangamaya (Independent Railway Workers Union) officials threatened to call a strike but 600 workers have been forced to quit already. Railway workers' annual transfers, earlier approved by the railway authorities, have also been canceled.

* About 300 Colombo harbour workers, employed by the Port Authority of Sri Lanka, have been forced to resign.

* In the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, 15 members of the Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (Independent Workers Union), which is affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main constituent party of the PA, were attacked and prevented from reporting to work.

* Three Lanka Salt employees at Hambanthota in Southern Province, three Mattegama Textile Mills workers in Kurunegala district in Northwestern Province and some Peoples Bank employees were threatened and chased away from work.

* A Lake House Newspapers union leader and a Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation manager, both PA supporters, were demoted without being given any reason.

On January 1, a delegation of union leaders led by former PA minister and SLFP union leader Alavi Moulana met the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission chairman to report these incidents but were asked to submit applications on an individual basis, with no inquiry scheduled until January 22.

A union spokesman said: "Our members want to report to work, but they have been prevented from doing so and they fear that these public institutions will consider them as having vacated their posts. When those workers went to log complaints, some police

stations refused to record them and in some cases police officers have refused to give copies of complaints logged by workers.”

Under Sri Lankan labour laws, if an employee fails to report to work for seven days without official permission, he or she will be considered as having resigned.

This intimidation is a warning that wider repression is being prepared against the entire working class. The aim is not merely to intimidate the UNP’s political and trade union opponents, but to clear the way for economic measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

IMF residential representative Nadeem Ul Haq has hailed the appointment of an economic reform minister, responsible for privatising government-owned corporations. In a speech, he highlighted the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and the Ceylon Electricity Board as loss-making ventures, hinting at drastic restructuring measures, probably leading to privatisation, and a severe onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions.

Economic Reform Minister Milinda Moragoda has vowed to revive the methods utilised by former UNP President J. R. Jayawardene to push forward such measures. “The 1977 momentum has begun to die down,” he said. “If we are to focus on a growth-oriented economy, we need another 1977 set of dramatic reforms aimed at accelerating growth.”

When it came to power in 1977, the UNP regime initiated the so-called open market economic reforms, which brought unprecedented attacks against jobs, wages, living conditions and democratic rights. To prepare the ground, Jayawardene first unleashed an intimidation campaign, particularly aimed at public sector and plantation workers. Opposition union leaders were attacked and chased away from workplaces by JSS thugs, who took control. The government then began the “dramatic reforms,” including privatisation and public sector restructuring, which led to hundreds of thousands of retrenchments.

A 1980 general strike against these measures was betrayed by the leaders of the “left” parties—Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Communist Party and Nava Sama Samaja Party. The Jayawardene regime then brutally suppressed the strike and thousands of workers were summarily sacked. At least one worker, Somapala, was

killed in police attacks. This is the “momentum” that the UNP regime seeks to revive.

Both the UNP and PA regimes failed to complete these measures due to political instability, working class resistance and the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the north and east. The new government was brought to power with the support of big business and the imperialist powers to resume the offensive and is under pressure from the financial institutions to do so. In a press interview, the IMF representative Ul Haq said: “What we would encourage them to do is accelerate the reform plans and move into a much more structured aspect of the program.”

Clearly, the UNP authorities are conscious that their measures will provoke opposition. That is why they have wasted no time in launching workplace thuggery and violence, mobilising reactionary elements for the confrontations ahead.



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