

New Sri Lankan government immediately axes hundreds of jobs

W.A. Sunil
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Sri Lanka's new Labour Minister Athauda Seneviratna inaugurated his term of office on May 11 by announcing plans to dismiss around 500 contract workers from the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (SLFEB). The minister's actions are a sharp warning of the anti-working class character of the newly-installed United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

The UPFA—a coalition between President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and several smaller parties—won the April 2 election by exploiting anger over the impact of the previous United National Front (UNF) government's economic restructuring and privatisation. Seneviratna was a leading member of the moribund left-wing Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) until he joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the 1990s.

Already 86 workers, male and female, have been terminated at the SLFEB, while the other sackings are expected to occur in coming weeks. The bureau was established to administer the private job agencies responsible for recruiting cheap overseas contract labour, largely for the Middle East, and to safeguard the welfare of overseas workers.

The minister attempted to justify his decision at a meeting of SLFEB employees on May 11, by saying that the contract workers were "political appointees" of the previous UNF government. The sacked workers vigorously deny the claim and confronted Seneviratna at the meeting, declaring that the dismissals were unreasonable. The minister contemptuously told them that those without money would be given a bus fare home and that female workers could be trained to work overseas.

SLFEB chairman Karunasena Hettiarachchi visited each of the bureau's divisions on May 12 and warned those about to be sacked to get out or they would be thrown out. None of the workers had received termination notices. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that when they

appeared for work the following day they were ejected from the work place by security guards. Three workers were physically beaten. The termination notices, which had been drawn up on April 30, were only handed to them later.

The sacked workers had been employed in all the bureau's 13 divisions, including general assistance, administration, data entering, permit issuing, conciliation, airport unit service, and research and publicity. Most were poorly paid—on a salary of 5,000 rupees (\$US50) a month. Each was employed on a one-year contract and a number of them had many months to go before it expired. Previously the bureau had given permanent positions to contract workers.

Many of the sacked workers are picketing the bureau on a daily basis to demand reinstatement or adequate compensation. In many cases, the dismissals have created severe financial difficulties. The minister and management have ruled out reinstatement but agreed to pay three months' salary to defuse the situation. After a discussion with picket representatives on May 19, management upped the compensation to a year's pay. Workers rejected the offer and picketed the Labour Ministry on May 20.

Job Losers Association spokesman Lal Kumara told the WSWs: "This is a political revenge because we were recruited by the previous UNF government." He refuted claims that the contract workers were "political appointees", saying: "It is a lie. The workers here are from all the districts of Sri Lanka. The minimum qualification was a general certificate at the ordinary level. But some of us are university graduates. Others have advanced level certificates. So they cannot say that we have no qualifications."

Lal also pointed out that there was no lack of work to be done and challenged management's claims that the bureau's income had been declining. "It is also a lie.

There are more than one million Sri Lankan migrant workers. Each worker has to pay an insurance fee of between 5,700 rupees and 6,200 rupees, according to their salary. Apart from that, the SLFEB charges 11,500 rupees per year to each private job agency and there are about 1,900 agencies.”

Many of workers are from low-income families. A 25-year-old female worker said: “I am from Kalutara, the eldest child in our family. I have a younger brother who has completed his advanced level exams but has no job. My father is working as a lathe operator in a private factory. His monthly income is only 7,500 rupees and he has a heart problem. His income is not enough for the family as the cost of living is skyrocketing.”

She explained that while supporting her family, she is also studying for a degree externally at the Kelaniya University. “Now as I have lost my job I am in a very difficult situation. In his May Day message, the labour minister promised to defend all the rights of workers. Is this the way that he defend workers’ rights?” she asked angrily.

Others had similar stories. A female worker from Matugama said she was supporting her five-member family and studying English and computer courses. She feared she would have to stop studying. Another woman, 39, explained that she had been looking for work for 18 years and had only been given a job after pleading with the minister last year.

A Tamil worker from Badulla said she was relieved when she got a job at the bureau last November. Both her parents were dead and she had to help support the family. “My father died as a result of the communal attacks on Tamils in 1983. Our house was set on fire. After that we lived in refugee camps for years. When I lost my mother I was 12-years old. My younger brother and I were brought up by our grandfather and grandmother. They earned a living by selling foods. I had no money to buy books and stationery during my school days or to pay for extra tuition classes. So I borrowed books from school friends.”

She explained that even with her job, it was difficult to cope. She spent 650 rupees a month on board, 1,000 rupees on meals and 600 rupees on bus fares. The rest was sent to feed her family and pay for her brother’s schooling. “I have not informed them that I lost my job as they would be shocked. We did not believe this government would treat us like this. Before coming to power they promised to give more jobs to young people. See what has happened.”

None of the trade unions have come to the defence of

the sacked workers. The two unions directly involved at the bureau are connected to the SLFP, the leading UPFA component, and to the opposition UNF. Neither has called for reinstatement.

The JVP is also part of the UPFA and has previously postured as a militant defender of workers’ rights. The secretary of the JVP-led Inter-company Workers Union, S. Amarasinghe, called on the government to provide fair compensation if the workers could not be reinstated. He did not condemn the government, as the JVP did ritually prior to the election.

The Democratic Left Front (DLF) has also come to the government’s aid. DLF leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara visited the picket line outside the Labour Ministry on May 20 but declared that “a permanent solution”—that is, reinstatement—was impossible. He offered his thanks to the labour minister for offering a dialogue on the issue.

Late last week, under pressure from the JVP and DLF, the Job Losers Association struck an agreement with the government for increased compensation to shut down the dispute. The agreement is due to be ratified this week.

The decision to sack the SLFEB contract workers indicates that the new government intends to rapidly press ahead with satisfying the economic restructuring demands of the IMF and World Bank, and cutting government expenditure.

The fact that many government workers are now employed on contract rather than in permanent positions is a product of previous UNF and SLFP-led governments, which systematically undermined workers’ rights and benefits. In carrying out the new round of attacks, the UPFA is relying on the JVP, DLF and others to contain any protests and opposition that emerges.



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