

# Sri Lankan government launches major police operation against Bata strikers

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The Sri Lankan government launched a major military-style police operation on Tuesday against retrenched workers occupying the Bata shoe factory at Ratmalana on the outskirts of Colombo.

More than 400 Sri Lankan police were deployed against some 500 unarmed workers who had occupied the factory for over a month to demand the withdrawal of the company's retrenchment plan and the reinstatement of a sacked union leader.

Officers with automatic weapons were mobilised from seven stations, along with a riot squad armed with tear gas, water cannon, batons and shields. Numerous police vehicles, including two trucks, were at hand as well as ambulances and two Fire Brigade trucks.

Police stormed the factory complex by forcibly breaking open the gates and destroying the makeshift tent set up by employees near the entrance. Workers were told to leave or be physically evicted. After they reluctantly left, around 50 police were stationed inside the compound.

The police arrested one worker but he was later released. Another 13 strikers accused of damaging factory property were summoned to the Mount Lavinia Courts and released on bail. The workers accused management of manufacturing the charges for which no evidence was provided.

The operation was organised at the highest levels of government. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that a union leader had phoned Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse as the police were entering the factory compound. Rajapakse refused to intervene, saying the order had come from the top. Who is above the prime minister, the workers exclaimed, other than President Chandrika Kumaratunga?

The previous day Mount Lavinia Court magistrate Mohomed Mackie issued an evacuation notice under

the Criminal Procedures Code that sanctioned the use of force, including the deployment of military personnel, to end the occupation and arrest workers. The order was based on a letter from the Attorney General declaring the workers' actions to be illegal trespass.

The magistrate issued his ruling despite a pending union appeal against an Enjoining Order issued against the occupation by the Colombo District Court on June 30. Workers had refused to leave the premises and the appeal was due to be heard on August 6.

Preparations for the police operation had been underway for over a fortnight. The company's managing director Kim Bradley met with the Inspector General of Police on July 21 and told the press that action would soon be taken against the occupying workers. "We are very confident that there will be a lawful outcome of the process and Bata will be back in business very soon," he said.

Following the meeting, the company offered to re-employ 449 workers, if 146 retrenched employees accepted the government's formula for compensation. Bradley stressed the proposal would be the last opportunity for "recalcitrant workers to rejoin the company". The strikers condemned the offer and demanded the full reinstatement of all 595 people sacked by the company.

Immediately prior to the police action, Bradley approvingly told the press: "Sri Lanka is a democratic country and I have no doubt that the wheels of justice would move soon with the Court Order and the letter from Attorney General's Department stating that the union members' action [is] tantamount to illegal trespass. I am confident that the police would move in soon to evacuate the troublemakers."

Angry workers condemned the actions of the United

Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and the “justice” of the courts and the police.

A female worker, a mother of two who had worked at the factory for 21 years, told the WSWS: “Since I am a widow, this job is the sole income for my family. I get about 8,500 rupees [\$US85] per month, which is barely sufficient to make ends meet. We received no salary for the last month and face hardships running our families.

“I voted to bring the UPFA to power believing this government would stop the retrenchments. But neither government ministers nor opposition MPs came to talk to us during last 44 days of the factory occupation. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP, a UPFA partner] also promised to look after us but they are no different to other ruling parties.”

Lal Perera, a father of three with 24 years service, told the WSWS that the police operation was an attack not only on Bata employees but on the whole working class. He called on workers throughout the country to denounce the attack. He said the police had brought the ambulances because they were prepared to use violence, while counting on the media to distort the story against workers.

“I was a member of the volunteer fire brigade and we treated the factory as our own place. Now the section I worked in was also downsized from 18,000 slippers per day to 4,000. The production was subcontracted to another company,” he said.

Another female worker said the government’s move was not a surprise. “We knew that the police under this same president shot workers from Ansell Lanka in 1995, killing and injuring several,” she said. Within months of coming to power in 1994, President Kumaratunga and her previous Peoples Alliance government deployed armed police against striking Ansell Lanka workers. One was shot dead.

“There’s no difference between the previous United National Front government and this one,” she explained. “Both operate on anti-worker programs. Bata management put forward the retrenchment plan under the UNF government and now it is implemented during this UPFA government. We are fighting for reinstatement of all the sacked 595 workers and no compromise on compensation.”

The workers began the occupation on June 22. The Bata Shoe Company of Ceylon was established in the 1950s by its Canadian-based parent corporation, which

operates in 68 countries with around 50,000 employees. Bata is trying to down size its manufacturing operation in Sri Lanka by outsourcing to individual households and by boosting cheap imports from countries such as China.

Throughout the protracted struggle, the occupying workers have been left isolated by the Commerce and Industrial Workers Union (CIWU), to which the Bata factory union is affiliated. Rather than mobilise support from other sections of the working class, the CIWU leaders, members of the Nava Sama Samaja Party, have promoted the illusion that the government would assist the Bata workers.

At one point, Prime Minister Rajapakse was even brought into negotiations, but nothing was resolved. When talks reached an impasse, the CIWU launched a campaign to encourage a boycott of Bata shoes but made no appeal for industrial action from other sections of workers on the island or internationally.

Just before the police action on Tuesday, the CIWU leaders attempted to persuade the strikers to accept the court order and leave the factory. On Thursday, a CIWU representative effectively accepted the retrenchments, telling a press conference that negotiations would now focus on better compensation.

Far from helping the Bata workers, the UPFA government has sought to shut down the occupation as quickly as possible in order to appease foreign investors. The purpose of the huge police operation on Tuesday was not simply to deal a blow against the Bata employees but to intimidate the working class as a whole under conditions of growing unrest over jobs, pay and conditions.



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