

Another vicious police attack on Bata strikers in Sri Lanka

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On the afternoon of August 12, Sri Lankan police attacked striking workers who were blocking the compound gate in front of Bata Shoe factory warehouses in Ratmalana on the outskirts of Colombo. The workers were lying down on the road in an attempt to stop vehicles loaded with stocks of shoes from leaving.

Around 250 police armed with tear gas, water cannons, batons, shields and automatic weapons attacked the workers when they refused to disperse. Both male and female employees were dragged away by police. According to the strikers, many of the policemen were drunk and some were not wearing identification numbers.

More than 15 workers were injured in the assault and taken to hospital. Attempts by the police to stop the injured being admitted for treatment failed when other workers objected. Even so, they remained under police custody while at the hospital.

Thirteen workers, including three women, were arrested. While most were released the next day, three employees—H.M.W Ariyadasa, Sunil Shantha and W.S. Sajeevaka—remained in custody and were later remanded at the Welikada prison in Colombo on the orders of the Mount Lavinia magistrate.

In the course of the attack, the police destroyed makeshift huts that had been erected by workers outside the factory as part of a sit-down hunger strike (satyagraha). A contingent of 50 to 100 police, including commandos, has now been stationed in the factory warehouses and in the surrounding area. Workers have been warned to keep away.

This was the second police attack on the Bata strikers this month. On August 3, hundreds of armed police, along with a riot squad, forcibly removed about 500 workers who had been occupying the Bata factory since

June 22, demanding the reinstatement of a trade union leader and the withdrawal of a management plan to retrench 146 workers. Bata wants to downsize its manufacturing operations in Sri Lanka by outsourcing work to individual households and increasing imports from cheaper sources such as China.

Since the end of the occupation, police have been stationed permanently inside the plant as workers continued protests outside. The latest police operation allowed management to move more than 10 containers of shoes out of the factory compound together with some plant machinery. Bata management has since told the media that the next part of its strategy is to dismantle more of the factory's machinery and sell it to suppliers.

The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government has been directly involved in authorising the police operations against Bata workers. Prior to the August 3 police raid, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse responded to a plea from a union official to intervene by declaring he could do nothing as the orders "had come from the top".

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which at times postures as a defender of workers, issued a press statement last week "denouncing" the latest police action. But the JVP's criticism of relatively junior police officers was a crude attempt to deflect criticism from the UPFA government, of which it is an integral part.

It is likely that further provocations are being prepared against the Bata workers. On the night after the police attack, a fire broke out at a Bata warehouse complex at Katubedda just a few kilometres away, reportedly causing an estimated 60 million rupees (\$US600,000) worth of damage.

According to one of the three security officers at the

warehouse, four masked men armed with a pistol entered the premises and forced them at gunpoint to gulp down a bottle of arrack, a strong alcoholic drink. The intruders then set fire to building. The management and the media immediately claimed the fire was an act of “sabotage” and pointed the finger at the protesting workers.

Workers vigorously denied any involvement and noted that there had been no damage to company property in the course of their protracted occupation of the factory premises.

Despite the police operations, the company is demanding even tougher state measures against the Bata strikers. On August 12, after the picket-busting operation at Ratmalana, Bata’s managing director Kym Bradley told a press conference in Colombo that the company was coming to the conclusion that “law enforcement authorities are helpless to protect the company from the unlawful and illegal acts”.

He warned that the result of ongoing resistance by workers “would be the loss of considerable number of jobs” and “at a time when numerous countries are seeking to attract foreign capital, this type of affair will not help to promote investments in Sri Lanka”.

Throughout the protracted dispute, the Commerce and Industry Workers Union (CIWU), to which the Bata Union is affiliated, has kept the strikers isolated. The CIWU leaders, members of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), have refused to organise any industrial support from other sections of the working class, either in Sri Lanka or from the 50,000 workers employed in Bata operations in 68 other countries.

The union continues to promote the dangerous illusion that the government—which has worked closely with the company from the beginning—can be pressured to assist the Bata employees. During the strike, the CIWU leaders have continuously expressed confidence that a so-called “progressive camp” in the government’s ranks would act to resolve the dispute.

Just one day before police swooped on the picket, the NSSP issued a leaflet to a meeting attended by 1,000 workers who had come to express their solidarity with the Bata strikers stating, “let us put pressure on the government to tame the Bata employer”. While leaders from unions such as Bank of Ceylon Union, Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union and the Joint Health Services Union addressed the

gathering, there was no call for joint industrial action to defend the Bata workers.

The CIWU has pointed to a protest by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) outside the Bata museum in Toronto, Canada as proof that it is organising international support for the Sri Lankan workers. But the token character of its efforts is underscored by a letter from CIWU leader Linus Jayatillke on the OCAP web site declaring that Bata management “has become more receptive to our demands” as a result of this international campaign.

The efforts of the CIWU and NSSP leaders are above all aimed at preventing the Bata dispute from becoming a focus for the growing hostility and anger of broader layers of workers—including those in the oil industry, public hospitals and plantations—against the UPFA government. But such a political offensive by the working class, based on a socialist perspective and a broad turn to workers internationally, is precisely what is required.



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