

Sri Lankan union leaders prepare to sell out Bata workers

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Nearly three months after Sri Lankan Bata shoe factory workers launched a bitter fight to defend their jobs, the Commerce and Industry Workers Union (CIWU) is moving to sell out the struggle. Union leaders are seeking to extract from the striking workers their consent for a compensation package that will allow management to carry through its original plan to retrench 146 workers.

At a meeting of about 500 Bata workers, held at Ratmalana on September 16, CIWU leader Linus Jayatilaka claimed that the union leaders were “ready to fight”, but the struggle had to end because workers were facing hardships. His statement revealed the union’s treacherous role in trying to wear down the dispute and ultimately force workers to accept the company’s blueprint.

Jayatilaka began by saying there was no ground for compromise with Bata, because workers wanted to stop the retrenchments while management wished to retrench workers with compensation. He said union leaders had discussed various formulas with the management and the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government’s Labour Minister, Athauda Seneviratna. The company had agreed with the minister’s proposal that it should pay one month’s salary per year of service and for each year ahead until retirement age. As a compromise, Jayatilaka said, the union now proposed one and half month’s salary per year of service and one month’s salary per year until the age of 55.

The union’s capitulation is not the result of workers’ demoralisation. To resist Bata’s plan, they occupied the factory on June 22 when management sacked a union leader on trumped-up charges. Management issued dismissal letters to all 595 workers when they refused to vacate the factory premises. The UPFA government

mobilised hundreds of armed police to forcibly remove the workers on August 3. Again, the police brutally attacked strikers outside the factory on August 12 after they stood as a human barrier at the gate to prevent the movement of shoe products. Since then, police have been stationed inside the factory, and containers of shoes and some plant machinery have been shifted to other places to continue Bata’s operations.

Jayatilaka’s speech revealed the tactic of deceit used by the union to push through its “compromise” formula. Instead of consulting them openly at a meeting, the union sent letters to every employee, asking them to state whether they were for or against the union’s proposal. But the ploy backfired. Jayatilaka admitted that out of 450 workers who responded, about 300 opposed the union’s package. Only 150 had agreed, while others had not yet replied. Nevertheless, Jayatilaka indicated that the union would proceed.

Union leaders have taken this course without reference to the fate of the 27 workers who face police charges, including for the occupation of the factory premises, obstruction of management, obstructing the transport of goods and unlawful assembly. Jayatilaka said management was not ready to re-employ them, but the union would intervene in their legal cases.

Workers at the meeting denounced the union’s actions. Speaking to the WSWs, one female employee who has worked in the factory for 15 years stated: “There were heated arguments. Workers asked what would happen to the jobs. What will be the fate of those who face court cases filed by the police? A lot of workers said they wanted to go back to work. Workers expressed dissatisfaction with the union.”

She said there was confusion among workers about what to do. Some were proposing to form another union, but the CIWU officials warned that to do so

would be detrimental to their efforts to secure a compensation package.

In preparing their outright betrayal, the CIWU leaders have obtained the services of Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU) general secretary Bala Tampoe, a veteran trade union bureaucrat with a history of “left” rhetoric and opportunist deals. He has been assigned to hold discussions with Bata management and the Employers Federation.

Bata is seeking to downsize its manufacturing operations in Sri Lanka by outsourcing to sub-contractors and increasing imports from cheaper sources such as China. To increase pressure on the union, management has insisted it will not budge from its plans. Two weeks ago, managing director Kym Bradley told the media that the factory had reopened with 58 non-union workers.

The union’s position on the Bata struggle is not a product of the failure of the workers to win wider support. The CIWU leadership has called out no other CIWU branches, nor has it asked other workers for backing. Even so, hundreds of workers in the Ratmalana industrial area came out to oppose the August 12 police attack. More than 1,500 workers and youth, including sacked Bata employees, joined another protest demonstration on September 1 in front of Fort railway station, in central Colombo. But the trade union leaders have tried to limit the participation of other workers.

From the outset, CIWU leaders promoted the illusion that a “progressive camp” in the government would support the Bata workers. But they could not maintain this lie after the government mobilised the police. Before the April election, President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s UPFA coalition, which includes the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), declared that it would solve workers’ problems. Once in government, the UPFA demonstrated its commitment to big business.

The union also demanded that the government stop shoe imports to protect the local market. This protectionist response only assists companies such as Bata to pit workers from different countries against each other. Bata employs about 50,000 workers in 68 countries. But the CIWU leaders did not appeal for their support. Instead, they turned to the trade union

bureaucrats in the United States.

Jayatilaka told workers that the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) had appealed to Bata chairman, Thomas Bata, on behalf of the Sri Lankan workers. He did not say what was the basis of its appeal. The AFL-CIO is notorious for collaborating with corporate bosses in launching attacks on the working class in America and internationally.

The CIWU is controlled by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which has won support in some workplaces by adopting a militant posture. The Bata workers’ struggle erupted amid developing unrest throughout Sri Lanka. Plantation workers in central tea-growing areas such as Hatton and Maskeliya recently took industrial action, defying unions and demanding decent wages. Non-academic employees in universities are striking for higher pay, while government health workers have begun a campaign for similar demands.

But the CIWU’s role has shown that it is no better than other trade unions. Its activities have been directed at preventing any independent movement of workers in unity with their counterparts overseas. Based on a nationalist perspective, the CIWU leaders isolated the workers to a protest campaign, which they claimed would place pressure on Bata and the government.

This program is inherently bankrupt and futile. Under conditions of globalised production, corporations such as Bata are relentlessly downsizing their workforces and exploiting new sources of cheap labour to maximise profits. The starting point of a genuine struggle to defend jobs is a complete break from the present union leadership, which keeps workers tied to the existing political framework, and a turn to other sections of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally on the basis of a socialist program.



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