

Sri Lankan union betrays Bata jobs struggle

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The Commerce and Industrial Workers Union (CIWU) in Sri Lanka has betrayed the bitter three-month struggle of Bata shoe factory employees, allowing the Canadian-based multinational to retrench 146 workers and impose harsher working conditions.

Bata workers occupied the factory on June 22, demanding the withdrawal of a company plan to reduce the workforce by 25 percent, and the reinstatement of trade union branch president who was suspended on a bogus “misconduct” charge. But the CIWU leadership isolated the Bata workers, diverted them into a harmless protest campaign and then told union members in September to report back for duty. Management has only taken the workers back in batches, with the last group allowed to report for duty on October 25.

Bata management utilised the CIWU betrayal to deepen its attack on the workforce. It imposed its original plan to retrench 146 workers on payouts of one-month salary for every year of service and an additional month salary for every year of service until the retirement age of 55. The company also refused to reemploy 31 workers, including union officials accused of “disruptive actions” during the occupation, and those arrested in a police attack on the striking workers’ picket. Those arrested could face criminal charges.

About 400 workers taken back by the company have not yet been paid three weeks’ wages owing to them prior to the occupation on June 22 and are now subjected to new employment conditions. A management letter informed workers that they would not be paid any wages or allowances for the period of the strike and they would be banned from any future activities against the company and its management.

The factory has been divided into three sections—manufacturing, administration and stock control—each in different locations, in order to drive up production and undermine the organised strength of the

workforce.

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the new conditions: “In some sections they have reduced the three shifts into two 12-hour shifts so workers have to do extra overtime of two and half hours. Supervisors and managers are much tougher on workers and not as friendly as before.

“During the strike about 50 non-strikers were given higher production targets. Management is now out to impose these rates on everyone and increase the workload. In one section, workers used to produce 500 shoes, now they have to finish 600 pieces without any rest. It is strenuous.

“Previously we could take loans from our Employees Provident Fund (EPF) every six months to balance our monthly budget or other important activities. Now the company says that the bank maintains these funds and we can only get access to the money on retirement at the age of 55.

“Our union leaders always told us that discussions were being held with the company, the labour minister, prime minister and other authorities, and that a settlement might come at any time. But eventually about 50 exhausted workers, particularly in the fire brigade section, formed a so-called organisation to defend jobs and they pressurised other workers to go back. And because there was nothing coming from the union, workers wanted to go back. But the company took us back batch by batch. Workers are now disillusioned with the union.”

One female worker explained: “The betrayal of the CIWU leaders has helped Bata management carry out an attack on workers that they could not have done in earlier years.” Another worker added: “The CIWU leaders let the struggle drag on without providing any effective leadership. Without any directions and hope, workers became exhausted and had no option but to go back.”

The Bata retrenchments were implemented under new labour laws introduced by the previous United National Front (UNF) government. The company, which invested in Sri Lanka in the early 1950s, justified the job cuts by claiming it was facing a financial crisis.

From the outset, the CIWU, which is controlled by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), promoted illusions in the “progressive character” of the recently elected United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. They sought to appease workers, asking them to “wait and see”, holding out the possibility of a government intervention.

In the lead-up to April’s general election, the UPFA promised to abolish the new legislation and help Bata employees. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a key ally of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the UPFA coalition, promised to protect Bata workers and organised a fasting protest to demand withdrawal of the laws. But once elected, the UPFA not only abandoned its promises on the labour laws but gave the police a green light to attack the Bata employees, including the eviction of occupying workers and the arrest of pickets.

The CIWU refused to mobilise any of its own union branches, or win support from the company’s 50,000 employees in 68 countries. The union claimed to have international backing, citing the AFL-CIO in the United States, but this bureaucracy, notorious for its betrayals of American workers, did nothing.

As the same time, the CIWU attempted to promote a national protectionist program, demanding that the government impose higher taxes on imported shoes. This policy only serves to boost corporate profits while pitting workers from different countries against each other.

While directing Bata employees back to work, the CIWU leadership sought to establish a Memorandum of Settlement with the company. Bata managing director Kim Bradley rejected this plea.

On October 22, NSSP and CIWU leaders, Linus Jayathilaka and Saranapala Silva, issued a written appeal to Labour Minister Athauda Seneviratna, urging his intervention to save the union branch at Bata. The letter pleaded with the minister to “take whatever actions you may deem fit to secure reinstatement for all the members of our union who have not yet been reinstated by the company”.

This pathetic appeal, not only covers up the UPFA

government’s role in suppressing the Bata struggle but provides a graphic demonstration of the inability of the unions to defend workers’ most basic rights, including jobs.



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