

Sri Lankan government deploys military to suppress striking television workers

W.A. Sunil**28 March 2008**

In a major attack on democratic rights, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse on March 17 instructed the military to suppress a strike by employees of Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), the state-owned television network. Two days later, he appointed a retired army general to oversee the administration of the corporation.

SLRC workers planned an indefinite strike from March 17 to protest against physical attacks and death threats that followed a violent incident last December involving a minister and his thugs. They were demanding the arrest of the culprits and an end to continuing police intimidation over the incident.

After a series of protests and futile appeals to the government, the SLRC unions were compelled by mounting anger among their members to call a strike. The unions included the Program Producers Association, Rupavahini Technicians Union, Producing Services Employees Union, Rupavahini Employees Union and Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya. The Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, which is connected to the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), did not back the industrial action, but its members defied the leadership and took part.

The attacks on SLRC employees began after Labour Minister Mervin Silva entered the TV station on December 27. His thugs physically assaulted a news director for failing to broadcast a speech made by Silva, in which he abused an opposition figure in foul terms. Angered by the attack, media workers prevented Silva from leaving and demanded an apology. Silva and his men had to be rescued by army commandos. The incident was broadcast live, provoking public outrage and acute embarrassment for the government.

No action was taken to discipline or prosecute Silva. Instead, in what amounts to a police witch hunt, the

Criminal Investigation Department (CID) interrogated 21 SLRC employees over the incident. Since January, thugs have physically attacked senior SLRC journalist Lal Hemantha Mawalage, a female librarian Ranjani Aluthge and Anurasiri Hettige, the president of Rupavahini Employees Union, which is affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

On the day of the strike, the security forces turned the SLRC premises into a battleground, with hundreds of heavily armed soldiers and police. Soldiers were detailed to guard the inside of the TV station, with a group from the Army Signal Corps taking over the control room. Only a small number of employees deemed "essential" were allowed to enter the building. Some 600 workers were locked out and forced to disperse.

The government justified its repressive action by declaring that the strike threatened to undermine the renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). President Rajapakse summoned union leaders to his office on the evening of March 17. Surrounded by the media minister, defence secretary and police chief, Rajapakse bluntly warned the unions not to "sabotage" the media, declaring that "media tigers" were helping the LTTE. "These institutions should not serve the Tigers' needs," he said.

None of the union leaders challenged Rajapakse's outrageous accusations or the presence of soldiers inside the SLRC. Armed soldiers have been deployed in the premises since December 27 and the number was increased after March 17. The union bureaucrats accepted the president's worthless promise to protect the rights of employees and called off the protest. Encouraged by the back down, Rajapakse appointed retired army general, Sunil Silva, on March 19 to the newly created post of additional director general to

oversee the SLRC administration.

The government is nervous that the protests by SLRC workers could encourage opposition from other sections of working people over deteriorating living standards and the abuse of democratic rights. Rising prices fuelled by the government's huge military expenditures and international inflationary pressures are producing growing social discontent. Last year, there were major strikes by government teachers, health workers and other public sector employees.

Rajapakse is particularly concerned about protests by SLRC employees because the state-owned television network is an important propaganda vehicle for defending the war, vilifying political opponents and justifying the government's attacks on working people and democratic rights.

The prostration of the SLRC unions flows directly from their support for the renewed communal war. The JVP in particular has advocated an intensification of the drive to destroy the LTTE's military capacity and called for sacrifice for the war effort. Rather than criticise the government's repressive methods and the use of the soldiers, union leaders have narrowly focussed their campaign on Silva, calling on Rajapakse to remove him.

The JVP's union leaders have been especially vocal in denouncing Silva's personal cruelty and criticising Rajapakse for continuing to support him. But they have already made clear that they will not lead a concerted campaign against the government. After their own union leader was physically attacked, JVP leaders declared that a general strike would be launched. The proposal was quickly dropped after the security forces suppressed last week's protest.

The campaign to defend SLRC employees has been subordinated to the Movement Against Suppression of Media (MASM), dominated by middle class radical groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), along with the Free Media Movement (FMM), several unions and the right-wing opposition United National Party.

After last year's strike by government teachers, the NSSP and USP and the teacher unions campaigned for a "broad front" with the UNP to press the government for concessions. The front was a convenient means for the unions to cover up their own capitulation to the government, shut down any industrial action and stifle

the opposition of members.

The MASM is playing a similar role. A statement issued March 14 appealed to the government "to take immediate steps to strengthen the legal framework to protect media freedom". Rajapakse gave his reply on March 17 when he sent the security forces to physically suppress the planned strike.

Last week's military operation against SLRC employees is a sharp warning to all workers that the government will stop at nothing to stifle any opposition.



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