

Sri Lankan power workers demand higher wages

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Thousands of workers from the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) held a national one-day campaign on July 17 to demand a pay rise and the restoration of previous conditions. Most of the CEB's 14,000-strong work force participated in the industrial action, an indication of growing opposition to the Sri Lankan government's attacks on living conditions.

Nearly 1,000 power workers demonstrated outside the Fort Railway Station in central Colombo, despite police intimidation. Sri Lankan authorities also deployed armed police, including commandos, to prevent picketing outside the CEB's head office.

The national protest was called by the United Trade Union Front (UTUF), an alliance of several CEB unions led by the Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (CEEU), which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The Trade Union Combine (TUC), another CEB union coalition, did not participate, bowing down to government demands for wage restraint. Leading unions in this front are the pro-government Sri Lanka Nidahas Viduli Sevaka Sangamaya and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)-led Billing Officers Union (BOU), the Control Room Employees Union (CREU) and the Engineers Union (CEBEU).

Power workers' demands include a 40 percent salary rise and the restoration of overtime hours, the previous retirement age and medical benefits for dependents. The last pay rise for CEB workers was in 2006 and, although the next official increase was due in January 2009, it is still outstanding. Inflation last year in Sri Lanka hit just under 30 percent, the highest in Asia.

In a bid to slash costs, CEB management cut overtime and reduced the retirement age by three years, from 60 to

57. Medical operation compensation for employees has been increased—from 800,000 rupees (\$US875) to 900,000 rupees—but the CEB ended medical benefits to employees' dependents.

While the CEB workers' claims raise critical political questions, the UTUF has restricted the campaign to a passive sick note campaign while sowing the illusion that the government can be pressured into granting their claims.

Over the past three years, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has used its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suppress all workers' demands, insisting on sacrifice for the war effort.

Following its military victory in May, the government continued to impose the burden of deepening economic crisis on working people and suppress all opposition. The attack on CEB workers' wages and conditions is part of a broader onslaught on all public sector employees.

In early March, Rajapakse imposed a wage freeze on all public sector employees for 2009, citing high defence spending and the impact of the global financial crisis on the Sri Lankan economy. Two months later, Rajapakse declared that his government would wage an "economic war" in order to overcome the economic crisis and called on workers to sacrifice for "nation building".

These demands were reiterated last week at an Uva Provincial Council election meeting in Moneragala in the central hills. Rajapakse told the meeting that working people should toil, just as Sri Lankan soldiers had "defended the motherland". Soldiers did not "demand a lunch hour" and were prepared to go "without sleep," Rajapakse declared.

The CEB workers' claims therefore bring them into direct conflict with the government. M.M.C. Fernando, secretary of the power and energy ministry, made clear on the eve of last Friday's campaign that the government

would not give into CEB workers' demands. He also revealed that CEB management cannot make any decision on the demands of its employees "without the approval" of President Rajapakse.

Power privatisation

On March 3, at the peak of the communal war, the Rajapakse government passed the Electricity Bill, which opened the way for a private sector takeover of the state-owned power industry. The response of both trade union fronts to the privatisation and its public sector wage freeze has been to divide workers and limit action to harmless protests aimed at letting off steam.

The two CEB union fronts blocked the struggle against the Electricity Bill, calling off scheduled protests after the government falsely claimed that it had no intention of introducing the legislation.

When the legislation was submitted to parliament in March, the JVP-led union front held a one-day protest and opposed further action. The Sinhala chauvinist JVP fully supported the war declaring that it took priority over workers demands. While JVP union leaders Ranjan Jayalal and K.D. Lankantha claimed to oppose the Bill, they opposed any struggle against it.

Last week JVP union leader Ranjan Jayalal told union members outside Fort Street Railway Station that if the government failed to grant workers' wages and working conditions demands, "We will go for a tough trade union action." But this week the union front called a press conference and announced that the so-called "tough trade union action" would be another protest on August 28.

This posturing is simply designed to obscure the JVP's support for the Rajapakse government, its war and its budgets. Last month the JVP presented its own program for "nation building" to Rajapakse, indicating that it accepted it would enter the government.

The Trade Union Combine (TUC), the other CEB union alliance, is equally pernicious. When the WSWS contacted its convenor Ananda Nimalaratne, he said: "The wage demand is legitimate but the government has declared it cannot increase salaries this year due to financial problems. So we have decided to not pressurise the government in the present circumstances."

WSWS also contacted NSSP union leader, Priyantha Wickramasinghe, who is in alliance with Nimalaratne.

Attempting to cover up his union's support for the wage freeze, Wickramasinghe said: "We did not participate in the recent struggle because they did not invite us. They did not join with us in the strike we called in April. We are discussing organising a campaign but have still not decided when it will take place."

Last March, Wickramasinghe and NSSP leader, Wickramabahu Karunaratne supported the government's Electricity Bill, claiming it was "progressive" when compared with the legislation presented by the former United National Party government. However, there is little difference between the two bills. The Rajapakse government plans to sell electricity generation and distribution to 200 private companies in October.

CEB workers can only go forward in struggle for united action with all other sections of the Sri Lankan working class—public and private sectors—now under attack. This requires a political break from the existing union formations and the development of an independent political struggle for a socialist perspective.

The Rajapakse government's "economic war" and the global financial crisis has resulted the destruction of hundreds of thousands of private sector jobs in Sri Lanka. Conditions for the IMF loan now being negotiated will entail a massive restructuring of the public sector and deepening attack on living conditions to increase government revenue.

Working people can confront these attacks only by fighting for a workers and peasant government—a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.



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