

Sri Lanka: Post-election witch-hunt extends into workplaces

Our correspondents
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Pro-government management, union officials and thugs have extended President Mahinda Rajapakse's post-election campaign of intimidation and violence into workplaces. Employees have been physically attacked, prevented from entering workplaces and served with suspension notices.

The main targets at present are officials and activists in trade unions affiliated to the main opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP). But the same methods will be used against workers who stand up for their rights as President Rajapakse begins to implement International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity demands.

The attacks on union activists and workers are part of a broader crackdown on political opposition. Claiming that opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, had attempted to carry out a coup, the government has arrested his supporters, sacked sympathetic army officers and closed opposition newspapers and websites. There have been widespread reports of threats, physical assaults and arson directed against opposition supporters.

In workplaces, up to Tuesday, incidents of intimidation and violence have taken place at state-owned bodies, including the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB), the national television network Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and the newspaper group Lake House.

*At the Petroleum Corporation, officials of the pro-government Nidahas Seveka Sangamaya trade union forced employees who allegedly voted for Fonseka to

physically worship before a large picture of President Rajapakse. Those who refused to comply were not allowed to report for duty. Fearing further harassment, a female executive officer, who was forced to kneel and worship Rajapakse, resigned her job.

D. A. Rajakaruna, the media secretary of the pro-JVP CPC Common Employees Union told the WSWs that management was preparing transfer letters for more than 100 workers. Rajakaruna said that union officials were not able to report for work. A pro-JVP website reported that union offices at a number of CPC facilities had been attacked.

CPC employees, along with workers in the water, electricity and port sectors, took industrial action last October in support of pay claims. President Rajapakse invoked his sweeping emergency powers to outlaw the campaign, which was quickly followed by a complete capitulation by the unions. The targeting of CPC workers after the election is a clear warning that the government intends to use similar methods as it presses ahead with the IMF demands for the restructuring and eventual privatisation of the CPC.

* A group of drunken pro-government thugs went on a rampage in several departments of the state-owned newspaper group, Lake House. Two workers, U. M. Premaratna and Ananda Sudasinghe, were hospitalised. Premaratna is the organiser of the UNP-affiliated National Employees' Union (NES) branch. Sudasinghe is the assistant secretary of the pro-government union but a supporter of Mangala Samaraweera, who split from the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and backed Fonseka.

Premaratna told the WWS from his hospital bed: “It was around 3.30 in the evening. I was at the web-marking department. A high-ranking officer at Lake House came to the place with a group of people. They were drunk. They may have been outsiders. The officer said he had to settle accounts with me, and suddenly the group started to beat me.

“My co-workers took me to the office medical officer. She cleaned my wounds and asked me to go to the hospital. So I was admitted to the Nawaloka Private hospital. The hospital informed the Judicial Medical Officer and he came to see me yesterday”. Premaratna was discharged after two days.

* Pro-government thugs attacked the offices of the pro-JVP Common Transport Employees Union located in bus depots of the government-owned Central Transport Board (CTB). Union offices in Pettah, Narahenpita, Moratuwa, Udahamulla, Bandarawela, Badulla, Kandy and Yatinuwara have been destroyed or closed down by the SLFP-affiliated trade union. A worker at the Bandarawela CTB depot told the WWS that several employees had been barred from entering the work place. Others faced punitive transfers.

* At Rupavahini TV, management has victimised scores of employees who supported Fonseka and resisted the government’s use of the state-owned media as its vehicle for election propaganda. Authorities have sacked Herbert Kumara Alagiyawanna, a program producer, and suspended Ravi Abeywickrema, Kanchana Marasinghe, Gamini Pushpakumara and Daya Mahinda Gunatilake from January 28. Marasinghe is the secretary of the SLRC Producers Union and Alagiyawanna is the convenor of the SLRC Union Alliance. Marasinghe told the WWS that management was preparing to suspend four more union activists on charges of “misconduct”.

Amnesty International issued a statement on February 1 calling on the Sri Lankan government to end the attacks on journalists, political activists and human rights defenders. It noted that opposition supporters and journalists had been arrested and several prominent

editors had received death threats in a “serious clampdown on freedom of expression”. Amnesty International has a list of 56 journalists who face serious threats.

Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa dismissed criticisms, saying: “So far I have not received any complaints. No media group has contacted me to complain, especially after the elections. I saw a statement by Human Rights Watch but they should contact me directly.” The government, however, has been directly involved in shutting down the offices of the *Lankaenews* website and the pro-JVP newspaper, *Lanka*. *Lankaenews* journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda has disappeared and *Lanka* editor Chandana Sirimalwatta was detained by police last Saturday.

The bitter infighting in the Colombo political establishment following the presidential election underscores the country’s deep-going economic and social crisis. While sharp tactical differences exist between the government and opposition particularly over foreign policy, Rajapakse and Fonseka share the same essential program. Both were responsible for the ruthless communal war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam last May. They are equally determined to impose new burdens on working people.

In the course of the election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party insisted that the working class should place no faith in either section of the ruling class. In the face of any major struggle by workers to defend their rights, the two factions would rapidly bury their differences to join forces against working people. The outburst of violence in workplaces is a clear warning that workers have to be organised independently of all sections of the bourgeoisie on the basis of a program to refashion society on socialist lines.



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