

Sri Lanka: Government campaign of victimisation in workplaces

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling alliance is waging a campaign of violence and intimidation in public sector workplaces in the wake of his victory in the January 26 presidential election.

Pro-government thugs have ransacked a number of trade union offices and physically attacked union officials and members. Government authorities have suspended dozens of employees, transferred hundreds and closed down some union offices, particularly where workers were active in pay struggles against the government last year.

The victims are mainly from the unions affiliated to the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which both supported General Sarath Fonseka against Rajapakse in the election. These attacks form part of a concerted crackdown on the opposition, including last week's arrest of Fonseka on unsubstantiated allegations of planning a coup against the government.

Among the work places affected are:

* More than 150 workers have been transferred from 40 depots of the state-owned Sri Lanka Transport Board. The offices of the JVP-affiliated All Ceylon Transport Union (ACTWU) at 14 depots have been ransacked and confiscated.

* Some 180 Sri Lanka Port Authority employees have been transferred. Twenty workers were physically attacked inside the Colombo port. All Ceylon Port Workers Union (ACPWU) secretary Chandrasiri Mahagamage told the WSW: "The management did not consult the transfer committees, which include the trade unions. They have transferred workers who were active in past salary struggles and also supporters of Sarath Fonseka."

* About 100 Ceylon Petroleum Corporation workers have been transferred, some to distant places like Matara, Anuradhapura, Galle, Hambantota and Trincomalee. Thugs of the ruling party-affiliated trade union assaulted D. J. Rajakaruna, the media secretary of the JVP's Common

Employees Union. They also made a complaint to police that he spat on a photo of Rajapakse.

* In schools, more than 100 members of the Ceylon Teachers Union, Lanka Teachers Service Union, National Education Service Union and All Ceylon United Teachers Union have been transferred. Newly-established "teachers balancing committees" are arbitrarily ordering transfers in the name of evening out staffing levels in schools.

* Transfers of Sri Lanka Fisheries Co-operation employees have also been reported.

Workers in the government-controlled media outlets have been targeted. This indicates a further clampdown on the media, following the government's blatant use of its television stations and newspapers for pro-Rajapakse propaganda during the presidential campaign.

* In Lake House, the government newspaper publishing institute, four employees have been transferred to Anuradhapura and Mihintale in North Central Province, and Matara and Kataragama in the south. Workers said the management had prepared a further list of 103 to be transferred.

* The Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), a national television channel, has suspended 11 employees. Explanations have been demanded from another 22 who issued a statement against the misuse of government media institutions during the election. SLRC Producers Union secretary Kanchana Marasinghe told the WSW that management had declared that more than three employees must not assemble together and talk on the institution's premises.

* The president, secretary, treasurer and a committee member of the UNP-affiliated Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) at the government-run Independent Television Network (ITN) have been suspended. No reason was given, and the four were prohibited from entering the ITN premises without the general manager's permission. The JSS president, secretary and treasurer at the Lakhanda radio station were also suspended.

All the transfers have violated established procedures in these institutions, whereby the unions had been included in transfer boards as part of a corporatist arrangement. Some employees received their transfer letters after Rajapakse's announcement on February 8 of a general parliamentary election for April 8. That is illegal under the electoral legislation.

Several workers who spoke to the WSWS angrily condemned the victimisations. A Colombo Port worker said: "This is a direct attack on the democratic rights of workers. You have a right to campaign and vote for the candidate you like, and fight to improve your working and living conditions. The Rajapakse government has shown that it is against those rights. This is a very serious thing. As things are going, in coming days the government will increase the prices of essentials and cut down workers' benefits."

A victimised Lake House worker explained: "I am a senior store keeper. I have been transferred to Mihinthale, where there is no store. Now I have to work, not as a store keeper, but a caretaker. So informally I have been demoted. The unions have not informed us yet what they are going to do about the victimisations. I think all workers must unite and stand against this repression."

A teacher from Anuradhapura said: "I am now 56 years old. I am being transferred 90 kilometres away, on the claim that I am in excess. The real reason is that we have fought to defend our rights in the recent past, including by seeking a salary increase. It is illegal to transfer a teacher over the age of 55. This is a political victimisation".

A teacher from Kebitigollewa in the North Central Province said: "I have been transferred to a far away place, Dimbulaga. This is exactly political revenge as I supported General Fonseka in this election. The reason given in the transfer letter is 'for the need of service'. However, I am trained in the Sinhala medium and the new school where I have to report is a Tamil-medium one. So, how can I teach them? Our principal was also transferred because he supported Fonseka."

The unions, however, are opposed to the independent mobilisation of workers in a political struggle against the Rajapakse government, fearing any such movement will slip out of their control.

When the WSWS contacted the secretary of the pro-JVP ACTWU he said it had written to the transport minister, who had not replied. He said the union would "take tougher action" in consultation with other unions, but did not explain what the action would be. Other JVP- and UNP-affiliated unions told the WSWS they would file fundamental rights cases in the

Supreme Court.

These unions have no opposition to the economic agenda that lies behind this assault on basic democratic rights. Far from fighting Rajapakse's previous attacks on workers, the unions have functioned as the industrial policeman for the government and big business in imposing the burdens of the country's deepening economic crisis on the working people.

Last November, the public sector unions in the ports, power, petroleum and water sectors caved in to Rajapakse's use of emergency powers to issue an Essential Services Order ban on industrial action. They ended a limited campaign for immediate 5,000-rupee (\$US44) interim monthly pay rises.

The government is preparing to impose severe austerity measures on the working class, as required by the International Monetary Fund. Last July the IMF extended a \$US2.6 billion loan to the government on the condition that include deep cuts in government expenditure and the restructuring of government-owned corporations such as the Petroleum Corporation and Electricity Board. The present campaign of workplace intimidation is clearly to lay the groundwork for these measures once the general election is over.

The author also recommends:

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