Sri Lankan government launches police witch-hunt to break garment workers' strike

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7 March 2011

In another act of police-state repression, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government has mobilised hundreds of armed police to break a courageous strike by mostly female textile workers in one of the government's free trade zones near Colombo. Several striking workers have been arrested, and nearly 40 sacked, at Bratex, a Hong Kong-based undergarment producer, in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ).

The government and the company have been able to mount this offensive only because, far from mobilising other workers to defend the Bratex strikers, the Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU) has intervened to undermine the struggle.

On February 11, around 1,700 Bratex workers called an indefinite strike, demanding a 3,000-rupee ($US27) monthly wage increase and recognition of the FTZ&GSEU branch, which has about 300 members. The FTZ&GSEU did not call the strike, however—the Bratex workers walked out spontaneously.

Essentially, the strike erupted because all the trade unions have collaborated with the government in holding down FTZ workers' wages in order to attract investment on the basis of cheap labour. The average monthly wage at Bratex, even with overtime payments, is less than 15,000 rupees ($US135).

FTZ workers have no trade union rights whatsoever. Instead, unions have sought recognition from companies via advisory councils set up in factories in the name of communicating workers' grievances to management.

Bratex rejected the FTZ&GSEU's plea for negotiations and called the police on February 14. On that evening, police surrounded the factory and arrested two strikers—Amal Shantha and U.W. Gayan Pradeep—as they left the premises. When hundreds of workers went to the police station, demanding the pair's release, the police brutally attacked them and arrested three more workers.

Bratex closed down the factory, locking-out workers until February 21. It then sacked about 38 workers for allegedly participating in the February 11 and 14 incidents.

Workers told the WSWS that the company had also provided the police with a list of 20 "wanted workers" and supplied vehicles for the police to search for them. FTZ&GSEU secretary Anton Marcus actually advised some of these workers to surrender to the police, claiming that if they did not do so, the police harassment would be intensified.

Arrests have been made on vague accusations of physically attacking several officials but workers have denied the allegations. Those arrested were later released on bail, consisting of both cash and surety guarantees. The case has been scheduled for May 20, without workers even being informed what the precise charges are.

FTZ&GSEU official Asela Dharmapriya Disanayake was detained and assaulted when he visited the police station to see the arrested workers. Disanayake told the WSWS that the police had threatened him.

The police witch-hunt is just the Rajapakse government's latest demonstration of support for Bratex, going back to January 2010, when the company refused to make scheduled bonus payments to workers.

In February 2010, after Bratex workers protested, demanding a wage hike and union rights, Siripala Amarasingha, a presidential assistant, arrived at the plant with armed personnel. He boasted to the workers of his record in suppressing 23 labour disputes and warned them against any union involvement. Workers were then granted a meagre 1,300-rupee monthly pay increase but refused union rights.

In an attempt to justify his union's craven response to the latest police attack, Marcus told the WSWS that his union would legally challenge the police, raise the matter in the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) and seek to launch a "national and international campaign".

Marcus's diversion of the strike into the hands of the NLAC is a warning of his readiness to enforce the requirements of the company and the government. The NLAC is a corporatist body of government, employer and union representatives, which the government reconvened in

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2008 when Sri Lankan exports, particularly garments, were hit by the global financial crisis.

During 2009, Marcus and other union leaders agreed in the NLAC to the retrenchment of tens of thousands of workers and the slashing of conditions in order to bail-out troubled companies. An estimated 60,000 workers lost their jobs that year.

Marcus's "international campaign" has primarily consisted of collaborating with union bureaucracies, such as the American AFL-CIO, which visited Sri Lanka last year to "investigate" conditions in the FTZs. The AFL-CIO is seeking protectionist measures in the US. It also works closely with the Obama administration, which has sought to apply economic and diplomatic pressure to the Colombo government in order to defend US interests in the strategic island, and combat China's growing influence.

Last year, Marcus declared he would seek support from the multinational companies that buy Bratex products. But it is these companies, like the US-based Vanity Fair, Viania, RedcatsUSA and Fruit of the Loom, that extract super-profits globally from cheap labour platforms such as Sri Lanka's FTZs. More than 250,000 lowly-paid workers—80 percent of them female—are employed in these FTZs.

Sri Lankan garment workers, who have not received an adequate wage rise since 2006, are now being hit by soaring living costs. Last month, inflation officially rose to a 25-month high of 7.8 percent on an annualised basis, compared to 6.8 percent in January. Food prices are rising much faster, as even the Central Bank has acknowledged.

The Rajapakse government, aided by the unions, is determined to crush garment workers' struggles because the industry accounts for 45 percent of total exports. Last year, the industry's export revenue totalled $US3.3 billion, a slight increase from 2009, when it declined by 22 percent as a result of the global financial crisis and the loss of US and European Union tax concessions.

The government is desperate to attract foreign investment, having secured only $375 million worth last year, far short of its $1 billion target. *Sunday Times* economic analyst Nimal Sandaratne blamed "labour legislation where investors find a lack of freedom to hire and fire," adding that "Sri Lanka is no longer a cheap labour country. There are other countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh where labour is probably cheaper."

Acutely nervous about the growing unrest in the Sri Lankan working class, the Rajapakse regime is sending a message that it will not tolerate workers' struggles. It is intent on implementing International Monetary Fund-prescribed austerity measures, including price increases for essentials, new taxes, reduced subsidies and cuts to education and health.

The police crackdown is part of increasingly violent repression by governments and employers around the world. During the past several months, garment workers in Bangladesh and Cambodia, and air traffic controllers in Spain, have experienced similar strike-breaking operations.

Several Bratex workers spoke to the WSWS about the brutal working conditions and inadequate wages. Chandrawathi commented that instead of granting a wage increase, the management had unleashed the police. She added: "The zone is like a slave camp. Therefore all the workers should be united to fight for and defend our rights."

Chandrawathi criticised the FTZ&GSEU for not defending workers' rights, making many workers reluctant to join the union. "Although workers pay membership dues, the union did not help to bail-out the arrested workers, and workers had to collect the funds. No other union came to help us and we were isolated. That is why the management and the police were able to suppress our struggle," she said.

Another female worker, Mallika, explained: "We work from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. with two hours of overtime. Sometimes they force us to do overtime until 2.00 a.m." She said workers who had more than 20 years' service at Bratex received about 20,000 rupees per month, but the average monthly wage was 13,000-15,000 rupees. "From that we have to pay 3,000 rupees for accommodation and about 7,000 for food. After we spend money on our ailments, nothing remains in our hands. Some workers have pawned their jewellery to pay for medical treatments."

Mallika denounced the government's claims that living conditions would improve after its war against the Tamil separatist movement, the LTTE. "The government promised to give relief to the people after the war and increase wages. But we got nothing. Instead the cost of living is ballooning."

The Socialist Equality Party urges all workers to come to the defence of the Bratex strikers, and demand the dropping of all police charges and the reinstatement of all the victimised workers. It is clear that the fight for basic rights, well-paid jobs and decent living standards cannot be advanced through the FTZ&GSEU or other unions, which are completely wedded to the profit interests of the Sri Lankan elite. Workers have to establish their own action committees and turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally, in the fight for socialist policies and workers' and farmers' governments to reorganise society in the interests of the working class.

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