

Sri Lankan union abandons victimised workers

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Textile workers sacked and victimised by the police in February during a government-backed strike-breaking operation in a free trade zone near Colombo have been isolated and deserted by the trade union that claimed it would defend them.

On February 14, the Sri Lankan government mobilised police to surround the Hong Kong-owned Bratex undergarment factory in the Katunayake free trade zone (FTZ) and arrest striking workers. More workers were arrested after hundreds of strikers protested outside the local police station.

About 1,700 lowly-paid Bratex workers, mostly female, had struck on February 11 to demand a 3,000-rupee (\$US27) per month wage increase, recognition of trade union rights and bonus arrears. None of the unions called the strike; rather it broke out because the unions had collaborated with the employers and government for years to hold down wages to an average of less than 15,000 rupees.

After calling in the police, the management locked out the strikers until February 21 and then summarily sacked 38 of them. Five arrested workers are facing court on May 20, for allegedly attacking several company officials.

The Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU) and its general secretary, Anton Marcus, isolated the Bratex strike and refused to make any call for the country's 250,000 FTZ workers and other sections of the working class to come to the defence of the victimised workers.

Instead, Marcus advised the accused workers to surrender to the police, and said he would take the dispute to the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC), a corporatist government-employer-union body, while claiming that he would initiate a "national and international campaign."

World Socialist Web Site warned, the Marcus reference of the dispute to the NLAC was a warning of his readiness to wash his hands of the victimised workers. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government reconvened the NLAC in 2008, when Sri Lankan exports, particularly garments, were hit by the global financial crisis, in order to utilise the services of the unions to police the job- and wage-cutting requirements of employers.

Two months on from the sell-out of the Bratex strike, Marcus and the FTZ&GSEU have abandoned the sacked and victimised workers. An angry Bratex worker told the WSWs: "I am also a member of this union but what is the use of it when it is doing nothing to protect us? Now we have to work without our colleagues."

What Marcus meant by an "international campaign" has now been illustrated by a call from the Brussels-based International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWU), to which the FTZ&GSEU is affiliated, for President Rajapakse, the Inspector General of Police and the Bratex chairman to intervene to end the harassment of workers.

The ITGLWU appealed to the company for an "immediate start of dialogue" with the workers, that is, negotiations with the FTZ&GSEU. This promoted the false illusion that the company and the government could be pressured to reinstate the sacked workers.

In reality, the police action against the Bratex strikers demonstrated the government's determination to keep FTZ wages suppressed in order to attract investment. Aided by the unions, the government is desperate to crush any resistance by garment workers because the textile industry accounts for about 45 percent of the country's exports.

The multinational companies that buy Bratex products, like the US-based Vanity Fair, Viania, RedcatsUSA and Fruit of the Loom, extract super-profits globally from such

sweatshops, which are in fierce competition with rivals in Bangladesh, Vietnam and other cheap labour platforms.

Three trade unions—the FTZ&GSEU, the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Free Trade Zone Workers Union and the Progressive Workers Union—operate in Sri Lanka’s four main FTZs.

Workers are legally barred from forming trade unions in FTZs and instead are compelled to take part in so-called advisory councils elected under company supervision. At some factories, unions have been formed but are not recognised or have cultivated connections with management through advisory councils.

While all the FTZ unions have the same basic outlook of serving the interests of investors, the FTZ&GSEU and Marcus are playing the major role in holding back workers. Marcus boasts that his union has 16,000 members in various FTZs. But none were called upon to defend their Bratex colleagues.

As the demand for a pay rise has grown among FTZ workers, Marcus has promoted appeals to employers to grant wage increases as a means for higher productivity and profits. At the end of last year, the FTZ&GSEU launched a campaign asking workers to wear yellow “three Bs” wrist bands calling for “Bigger Pay, Bigger Profit with BOI.” The BOI, or Board of Investment, is the government agency that manages the FTZs.

Marcus boasts about the “25-year heritage” of his trade union, but it is a record of treachery and collaboration with companies and governments. He began his union career in the late 1970s in Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) led by Bala Tampoe, a veteran political opportunist, who falsely claimed to be a Trotskyist. He also joined Tampoe’s now defunct Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP).

Tampoe provoked widespread anger within the CMU and in the working class when he refused to call out the union in support of striking public sector workers in 1980. In response to their demands, the United National Party government sacked 100,000 workers as a means of suppressing any opposition to its pro-market agenda. Tampoe and other “left” leaders stood by while the UNP enforced its victimisations with police violence.

Marcus and several other RMP leaders split from Tampoe in 1982 ostensibly over his betrayal of public sector worker, but did not break with his class collaborationist politics.

Marcus used his credentials as a “militant” and a “socialist” to form the Industrial, Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) and later made an appeal to FTZ workers. He formed the Free Trade Zone Workers Union (FTZWU) in 2000 and merged it with the ITGWU to constitute the FTZ&GSEU in 2003.

Far from defending workers, the FTZ&GSEU has been instrumental in blocking opposition to the loss of jobs. When the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) ended in 2005 about 400 factories closed down in Sri Lanka within a year. Many foreign investors left the country without even giving workers prior notice or paying their accrued entitlements. Marcus appealed to the government to force companies to give notice and pay entitlements. When predictably the government refused to legislate, he did nothing as thousands of workers lost their jobs.

The response of the FTZ&GSEU to the loss of jobs following the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008 was similar. In a letter to President Rajapakse in February 2009, Marcus urged him to organise “dialogue between social partners in order to overcome the challenges posed by the world economic crisis.” Together with other union leaders, he participated in the government’s NLAC and accepted the retrenchment of 60,000 workers and cutbacks to the benefits for the remaining workers.

In opposition to the FTZ&GSEU, workers in the FTZs and all other sectors must come to the defence of the victimised Bratex strikers. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to demand the reinstatement of the sacked workers and the dropping of all police charges. This struggle requires a conscious break with the politics of class collaboration and the building of an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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