

Defend Sri Lankan free trade zone workers

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the brutal police crackdown unleashed by the government on protesting workers in Katunayake free trade zone (FTZ) on Monday. Police attacked workers with tear gas, water cannons, clubs and fired live bullets.

The SEP calls on the working class throughout the country to come to the defence of these workers, who have shown great courage in fighting to defend their conditions. This attack is a warning that President Mahinda Rajapakse will not tolerate any demands by workers to defend their pay and basic rights.

A series of protests have taken place since May 24 against government's planned pension scheme that will seriously undermine the benefits received particularly by FTZ workers. On Monday, the entire Katunayake FTZ of 40,000 workers walked out after police violently attacked protesting workers. Hundreds of workers were injured or arrested in clashes with 2,000 police, including the notorious special task force (STF), and hundreds of soldiers. (See: "Sri Lankan police fire on protesting free trade zone workers")

Clearly shocked by the determined resistance of workers, President Mahinda Rajapakse held an emergency meeting of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party. It announced that the pension bill would be suspended to allow discussion and agreement to be reached with trade unions and opposition political parties.

The SEP warns that this turn to the unions and opposition parties is the preparation to sell out FTZ workers. The government is under immense pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement the pension scheme as part of a raft of austerity measures. It fears that the FTZ protest will

encourage other sections of workers to take action.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has already announced an inquiry into Monday's clashes, warning that "stern action" will be taken against those responsible. This will be nothing but a witch-hunt against militant workers.

No faith should be placed in the unions and opposition parties, which do not oppose the IMF's pro-market "reforms" and have organised no campaign against the new pension scheme.

The Free Trade Zone and General Services Trade Union (FTZGSTU) initially called for the protest on May 23 then cancelled it. When workers walked out anyway, union leader Anton Marcus expressed his regret that production had been affected. He told Biyagama FTZ workers not to take action in support of those in Katunayake.

Inter-company Employees Union (ICEU) affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is now falsely posturing as the leadership of the protests only in order to better betray the movement.

Workers should recall that ICEU's campaign last year for a 5,000 rupee (\$US45.50) pay rise—around the time of the presidential election. After the election, the JVP and ICEU dropped the demand in favour of calling on Rajapakse to implement his promise of a 2,500 rupee rise. When the government broke its pledge, the unions including the ICEU did nothing.

In a hurried press conference on Tuesday, JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Dissanayake declared that the suspension of the pension was "a victory" for workers and called for the legislation to be withdrawn.

Such statements are simply to create false hopes.

The JVP and opposition United National Party know full well that the government is no more able to back down than its counterparts in Greece, Ireland and Spain which are implementing similar austerity measures in the face of mass protests.

For all Rajapakse's boasting about an economic recovery, his government is heavily in debt and is forcing workers to pay the bill. Wages have been frozen even as prices soar. Spending on public education, health care and welfare has been slashed and privatisation is expanding.

In return for cosmetic changes to the pension legislation, the JVP and UNP now are offering their services to the government to quell opposition to the scheme. That is the purpose of the proposed talks.

Workers must reject the empty posturing of the unions and opposition parties and turn to other sections of the working class who face similar attacks.

FTZ workers are in the same boat as workers in the plantations where the unions are colluding with employers and the government to maintain poverty-level wages. University teachers are under attack for demanding decent wages. Tens of thousands of shanty dwellers in Colombo city are facing forced eviction to make way for corporate developers.

Rajapakse insisted that workers sacrifice for his government's communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Now he is demanding the working class accept more burdens to boost corporate profits and "rebuild the country." To enforce his program against working people, he relies on the same police state methods that were used against Tamil civilians.

At the same time, the government promotes anti-Tamil chauvinism through its never-ending "victory" campaign in order to divide and weaken the working class. Only by uniting can workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—defend their common class interests and basic rights.

The working class as a whole confronts a political fight against the Rajapakse government which is the agent of corporate elite and international finance capital. The first step is to make a complete break from all of the opposition parties and the unions which have no fundamental differences with the government.

FTZ workers need their own independent organisations—action committees headed by their own elected representatives—and to turn to other sections of workers. These include FTZ workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia and other countries that have faced police violence for striking for decent wages. The global corporations pit workers in one country against those in other countries to drive down the wages and conditions of all.

Workers everywhere must come to the defence of their class brothers and sisters in the Katunayake FTZ and demand the immediate and unconditional release of those arrested. A common struggle should be developed against the pension scheme and other austerity measures. The SEP pledges its full support for the FTZ workers in waging this fight.

Above all, a clear political perspective and program is needed. A decent wage and a proper pension scheme are a basic right for all workers. But under capitalism, the most elementary needs of working people are subordinated to the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

Workers can defend and improve their living conditions only by reorganising the economy on the basis of socialist policies. That requires the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the fight for socialism internationally. The SEP urges workers to study our program and to join and build it as the mass party needed to fight for socialism.



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