

Sri Lankan court examines police shooting of FTZ worker

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An inquiry is currently underway in the Negombo Magistrate Court into the killing of Roshen Chanaka Ratnasekera during a police attack on protesting workers from the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) on May 30.

Ratnasekera, who was just 21, suffered a bullet wound to his leg. He was left untreated and bled for two hours in police custody, before being taken to a hospital. He died on June 1. The police have not yet released the official Judicial Medical Officer's report into the causes of Ratnasekera's death.

Ratnasekera was one of more than 200 workers injured when police attacked and shot at crowds demonstrating against the government's planned pension scheme, which undermined wages and benefits. In response to the police violence, the entire Katunayake FTZ of more than 40,000 workers stopped work, threatening to trigger broader protests.

Shocked by the extent of the unrest, the government temporarily withdrew the legislation, and sought talks with the trade unions and opposition parties. It is also desperately seeking to cover up its own responsibility for the police violence by putting the sole blame on the police officers involved.

The country's top police officer, Mahinda Balasuriya, was forced to resign. President Mahinda Rajapakse appointed a one-man judicial commission on May 30 to investigate the police attack on FTZ workers and report within five days. Three weeks later, no report has been issued.

The Negombo court inquiry is taking place within that context. Two police officers—R.M. Ratnayake and K.L. Ranasinghe—were arrested in the aftermath of the FTZ

protests and accused of Ratnasekera's murder. Formal charges have yet to be laid.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which is handling the case, has produced physical evidence—automatic rifles and cartridges—demonstrating that the police shooting took place. The CID alleges alleged that fire was directed at the protesters from three different directions.

At the same time, however, the police have used the court as a platform to try to shift the blame onto the workers and “outside agitators.”

Assistant Superintendent of Police Vijayanada Silva told the court on June 16 that around 15,000 FTZ workers had blocked the main road in an earlier protest on May 24 and torn down a portrait of President Rajapakse.

Silva claimed that the police had shown great restraint, despite being stoned by protesters, and “did not use force to disperse them.” He blamed the violence on unnamed “outsiders.” Workers who spoke to the WSWS dismissed Silva's claims, pointing out that the police had used tear gas and batons to disperse protesters.

Referring to the events on May 30, Silva acknowledged that the demonstration had been peaceful prior to the intervention of several government politicians, who had tried to convince workers that FTZ employees would be excluded from the pension bill. When these pleas failed, the police violence began.

Silva attempted to put the blame on workers for hooting at the police, then attacking with stones and clubs. There had clearly been prior preparations for a crackdown, however. As Silva explained, 400 police officers had been

deployed from various police stations, including personnel from the Special Task Force, which is notorious for its brutality.

Silva, one of the senior police in charge of the operation, claimed that the police were unarmed except for plastic shields. Yet he told the court that he heard gunshots and did not know who “would have given the order to fire.” He could not explain how the police came to have weapons.

Several workers have given limited evidence. A.D. Sampath Fernando told the court that he had heard the gunshots and had seen Ratnasekera on the ground. “He was bleeding. Another colleague and I took him to the factory. A little later police came and put him into a jeep by force and took him away.”

Two injured workers, Nalin Pradeep Kumara and Prasanna Sujith Kumara, explained that they had been shot by police. Sujith Kumara was injured near the hip and was in a wheelchair.

It is worth noting the absence of any trade union representatives or their lawyers from the court inquiry, either to refute police attempts to accuse workers of responsibility for the violence, or to demand justice for the dead and injured workers.

Far from defending workers, the unions, including the Free Trade Zone and General Services Workers Union (FTZGSWU) led by Anton Marcus and the Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU), are playing the role of industrial policemen for the employers and the government.

The protest on May 24 went ahead despite being called off by the unions, which intervened over succeeding days to try to bring the movement under control. The union leaders are now preparing for talks with the government, not to oppose the pension bill but to discuss amendments and assist in imposing the modified legislation on workers.

All factories in the Katunayake FTZ, with the exception of two badly damaged in the police attacks, have resumed work. Special Task Force officers have taken over security at the entrances to the FTZs and surrounding areas.

Several FTZ workers spoke to the WSWs about their opposition to the pension plan.

A machine operator from Ansell Lanka at the Biyagama FTZ said: “Now the Labour Minister [Gamini Lokuge] has announced that discussions with the trade union leaders are due to be held. What is the use of discussing with the union leaders? These discussions are dubious. Our experience is that when the unions discuss with employers we usually get betrayed or defeated.”

A worker from the AMP flower factory at the Katunayake FTZ angrily condemned the role of the unions. “When we came to the factory on May 30 there was a heavy police contingent in front of the zone gate. We opposed it.

“On that day we received a message from our union leader, Anton Marcus, asking us not to participate in any protest and saying that if we did so the union would not take any responsibility. However, workers from other factories had begun the protest campaign and they asked us to join them. The police confronted protesters and began to attack. How can we ignore our colleagues?

“The unions are a barrier to the unity of workers,” she said. “When workers from one union are fighting, others are not supporting them. The best example for this was when 26 unions held a joint May Day meeting and boasted about a joint struggle. What has happened now? After the killing of a FTZ worker, not one union has called a meeting. We see Marcus only on TV. Recently I told the union executive committee that we are very eager to see the face of Marcus. I am still waiting for a union conference to talk to Marcus.”

She explained: “The workers have not frightened but I think, like me, they are also thinking about how to win the struggle and on what program?”



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