

Sri Lankan police fire on protesting free trade zone workers

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On Monday, thousands of police officers launched a violent attack on free trade zone (FTZ) workers in Katunayake who were protesting against the Sri Lankan government's private sector pension bill. During the resulting clashes, police twice opened fire with live ammunition. Altogether, more than 200 workers were injured and about 100 arrested.

After the confrontation, which included the mobilisation of thousands of troops, the government shut down the FTZ for two days. Thousands of police and security personnel have been stationed in the area, which is close to the capital, Colombo. All vehicles are being checked and any FTZ workers who live outside the zone are being prevented from entering.

This is the second police crackdown against FTZ workers in months. In February, the police attacked striking workers at the Hong Kong-owned Bratex factory, an undergarment producer in Katunayake, and arrested several workers on trumped-up charges.

Monday's protest was held in direct defiance of the Free Trade Zone and General Services Workers Union (FTZGSWU), which had called on workers not to stage any industrial action. The demonstration was a continuation of the struggle initiated by the FTZ workers on May 24 against the pension bill, which will effectively cut wages and require at least 10 years of continuous employment to qualify for a monthly pension amounting to just 15 percent of a wage.

Workers in zone No.1 of Katunayake FTZ, which has three zones, began the walkout. By about 9.30 a.m. thousands of workers had joined the demonstration, which was peaceful until the police intervened.

Between 11.30 a.m. and noon, according to workers, police entered zone No.1 through the main gate and began to attack the protesters with batons and tear gas. When workers

retreated into factories for their safety, the police forcibly entered the premises and continued the assault. Angry protesters retaliated with whatever they could find. The police then fired live ammunition at workers, injuring a number of them, one critically.

After hearing about the police attack, at around 3.00 p.m. thousands of workers from zones No.2 and 3 joined the protest, condemning the police action and demanding the release of their arrested colleagues. By this stage, about 40,000 workers, mostly young females, were involved. They flooded onto the main road running through the FTZ, demonstrating and chanting slogans against the government.

With the police unable to control the large crowd, the government deployed police special task force (STF) officers and hundreds of soldiers. Army officers asked for a return to work, but the workers demanded the release of all those arrested. When the police refused to do so, outraged workers attacked the police station with stones.

Some 15 police personnel, including high ranking officers, were reportedly injured, and several police vehicles damaged. Police again opened fire on about 500 workers who stormed the station, wounding at least eight.

Inspector General of Police, Mahinda Balasuriya, claimed that the protesting workers had tried to grab arms from the police station—an allegation that protesters denied. Balasuriya defended opening fire on the demonstrators. "When a large crowd stormed in, police fired in the air and then later fired at them to control the gathering," he declared at a press conference.

Speaking to the WSWs, one worker said some of those arrested could not walk because of severe injuries. Their clothes had been drenched in blood. "The police dragged captured workers along the ground, while beating and kicking them," an eyewitness said.

Local residents and FTZ workers at Biyagama, closer to Colombo, and Koggala in south also condemned the police attack.

A female worker, a FTZGSWU member, told the WSWs: “This is a war against workers. The police attacked us like beating animals. They used bamboo, batons and finally they fired at us. Our union asked us not to join the protest. But how can we do that when police attacked our colleagues? The police severely damaged factory buildings and vehicles too.”

She insisted: “We will not allow the government to plunder our money and the protest will continue until the [pension] bill is abolished. We do not fear death to defend our rights.”

A pavement hawker at Katunayake commented: “What a crime this government is doing! What a painful toil these workers bear for a meagre wage. See, how the police brutally attacked them. My hatred has no bounds.”

The unrest spread to the Biyagama FTZ yesterday. A worker from Ansell Lanka said about 1,000 employees held a demonstration. “Our union [the FTZGSWU] told us not to join any protest. But with our pressure, the union allowed us to join the campaign. However, there is no genuine program to fight against the bill. Although the government said it has suspended the bill, we need to defeat it completely.”

This hostility to the union leaders is based on bitter experience. The Joint Trade Unions Alliance (JTUA), consisting of 26 unions, including the FTZGSWU, Health Services Trade Union Alliance, Ceylon Bank Employees Union and United Government Workers Confederation, which is controlled by the ex-radical Nava Sama Samaja Party, had called a walk out against the pension bill on May 24, but later cancelled it without any explanation.

The unions are now desperately trying to contain the anger of workers. At a press briefing on Monday evening, Inter Company Employees Union chairman Wasantha Samarasinghe, declared that his union, which is connected to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), would call a strike in three FTZs on Tuesday.

Samarasinghe’s aim is to prevent the unrest from spreading into all 12 FTZs in Sri Lanka, which employ 120,000 workers and are crucial to the country’s export earnings.

President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government has been stunned by the eruption of FTZ workers, and clearly fears that they could become the focus for a broader movement of the working class against its austerity measures. On Monday evening, the government said it would suspend the pension bill for two months and exempt FTZ workers from it.

The unions rushed to celebrate the announcement. At a JVP press conference yesterday, parliamentarian Anura Kumara Disanayake hailed the suspension as “a victory.”

Rajapakse is simply making a tactical turn to placate the FTZ workers, while seeking support from the trade unions and opposition parties to re-introduce the bill at a later date. The International Monetary Fund insisted on the creation of a market-based superannuation fund as one of the conditions for lending the government \$US2.6 billion in 2009.

At present, female workers can withdraw their full savings from the statutory welfare funds when they marry, or reach 50 years of age. If the pension scheme is introduced, they will have to work for at least 10 years first, and will not be entitled to payments until they turn 60. Instead of a lump sum, they will get a small monthly pension, estimated to be only about 1,900 rupees (\$US17.27) per month for the low-paid garment workers.

Rajapakse has also moved to whitewash the police violence and deny any government responsibility for it. He has appointed a retired judge, Mahanama Thilakeratne, to investigate Monday’s clashes. The *Sunday Times* website reported that the inquiry’s purpose was to find out who ordered the deployment of police to the FTZ.

The newspaper claimed that Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, had been advised not to send in the police. This is an absurd proposition. Such a bloody police attack could not occur without a directive from the very top.

The real aim of the inquiry is to identify militant workers in preparation for a witch-hunt throughout the FTZ.

The authors also recommend:

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