Sri Lanka: Ansell Lanka sacks hundreds of workers

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The Ansell Lanka Company in Sri Lanka's Biyagama free trade zone (FTZ) last week terminated the jobs of nearly 300 workers who were on strike for nearly two months over speed-up and a witch-hunt against the trade union. The Free Trade Zone and General Services Workers Union (FTZ&GSEU), led by Anton Marcus, isolated the strikers and strengthened the hand of the company to sack them.

Ansell Lanka is a branch of the Australian-based Ansell company, which is a global manufacturer of protective clothing and latex rubber goods. Out of a workforce of around 2,000, some 800 FTZ&GSEU members went on strike from October 11. One demand was reinstatement of 11 union branch activists who were dismissed because they opposed increased workloads. Ansell set new work targets, including an increase to 70 pieces every minute in the packing section. As a result, workers' monthly productivity incentives were reduced by around 5,000 rupees ($US38).

The FTZ&GSEU deliberately isolated the strike. It made no appeal to other employees in the factory or workers throughout Sri Lanka's FTZs to defend the strikers. Marcus did not even call out his union's other members.

Instead, Marcus and his union issued futile appeals to the Australian parent company, as well as the Australian and US ambassadors in Colombo. Marcus also wrote to President Mahinda Rajapakse, Labour Minister Gamini Lokuge and Economic and Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, pleading for help.

Rajapakse's government, which is desperate to attract foreign investment, has defended the company's interests. Its determination to suppress industrial action was demonstrated in 2011 when it deployed police commandos to break a major strike in the Katunayake FTZ, resulting in the killing of a worker.

Ansell ignored an agreement reached with the labour minister, labour commissioner and union representatives to hold an inquiry into the sacking of the 11 union activists. Instead the company threatened to relocate to another country if the government failed to end the strike on its terms. Management used contract workers to maintain production. It obtained a court order to remove workers camped in front of the plant after making false complaints to police that the strikers attacked the contractors.

On November 22, management sent letters to the striking workers with an ultimatum to return to work by 6 am on November 26 or lose their jobs. Isolated and facing the prospect of being sacked, over half the strikers returned to work. Having done nothing to defend them, the union advised the remaining 294 workers to report back on November 30. Management, however, declared they would have to formally ask for reinstatement, which would be up to the company.

On Marcus's advice, the victimised workers filed cases at the labour tribunal against the company's decision. The labour minister assigned the issue to an arbitrator, to be appointed by the labour commissioner. Such arbitration, which can drag on for years, usually delivers in the company's favour. Indicating that the sacked workers will not be reinstated, the company credited pension dues to their bank accounts.

In two articles published on WSWS's Sinhala language site, the Socialist Equality Party warned Ansell workers they would be betrayed by the FTZ&GSEU unless they broke from the union and took the struggle into their own hands. The SEP called for the formation of a rank-and-file committee and a turn to mobilise support from other sections of the working class, based on socialist policies. The SEP's warning has been completely vindicated.

Marcus and the FTZ&GSEU have a long and notorious record of sabotaging workers' struggles and defending the interests of companies.

The Bratex garment workers' strike in 2011 in the Katunayake FTZ was a particularly graphic example. About 1,700 Bratex workers stopped work to demand a salary increase and oppose the suppression of their right to organise. The company responded by sacking 38 workers. Marcus abandoned the sacked workers, after saying that he would take the dispute to the National Labor Advisory Council (NLAC), a corporatist body of government, employer and union representatives.

Marcus also worked with the NLAC to close factories, retrench workers and cut wages and working benefits when Sri Lankan industrialists were hard pressed following the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008.

The FTZ&GSEU is affiliated to the Geneva-based IndustriAll federation, which works closely with European Union governments. The union lodged a futile complaint about Ansell Lanka with the OECD, which consists of the world's main industrial countries.

Ansell workers who returned to work told WSWS reporters they have been subjected to various punishments. Some were transferred to other sections. Others had their workload increased. Heavy work was given to workers suffering from illnesses.

Ansell Lanka's actions flow from a decision by its parent company to slash production costs. The company stopped annual medical tests for workers and increased the price of breakfast from 5 to 10 rupees. The permanent workforce has been systematically reduced during the past few years through so-called voluntary retirement. Instead the company is hiring contract workers recruited on lower wages.

Like other FTZ factories in Sri Lanka, Ansell Lanka continues to suppress the democratic right of workers to organise to defend their class interests. In 1994, when thousands of Ansell workers demonstrated against the suppression of their union rights, one worker was killed in police shootings.

The FTZ&GSEU's betrayal of the Ansell Lanka strike is not an isolated incident. It is a part of an international phenomenon: the utter bankruptcy of the trade unions and their transformation into the open defenders of corporate interests.