

Sri Lanka: Bogus union campaign for sacked Ansell strikers

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The Geneva-based IndustriAll Global Union (IGU) and its Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU) affiliate in Sri Lanka are conducting an online protest campaign in the name of defending sacked Ansell Lanka workers. This campaign is an outright fraud. These unions isolated the almost two month-long Ansell strike and paved the way for its defeat.

More than 800 Ansell Lanka workers in the Biyagama free trade zone (FTZ) went on strike on October 11 over increased workloads and the sacking of 11 leaders of the branch union affiliated to the FTZGSEU. Determined to suppress the strike, the management hired contract workers to carry on production. Ansell, an Australian-based multinational with branches in 42 countries, produces protective clothing and surgical and industrial gloves.

The company issued an ultimatum to strikers to return by November 26. Seeing no defence offered by the FTZGSEU or IGU, more than half the workers returned to work. On the advice of FTZGSEU leader Anton Marcus, other strikers tried to return a few days later but the management shut the door.

At the end of last month, a Sri Lankan court directed Ansell Lanka to take back 51 sacked workers temporarily until it heard their case. But the company insisted they had to do whatever work it assigned them, effectively barring them from reporting back.

The IGU boasts on its web site that it has 50 million members in 140 countries and fights for workers' rights. In a statement issued on November 21, the IGU said "it was mobilising solidarity" behind the FTZGSEU, which had "organised and defended" Ansell workers for 20 years.

This is a canard. Throughout the Ansell strike, the FTZGSEU and IGU organised no struggle in Sri Lanka

or internationally in defence of the victimised workers. The FTZGSEU did nothing to mobilise its members or campaign among other workers in Sri Lanka to rally support behind the Ansell workers.

An Ansell worker explained: "As the union didn't take any step to defend us, we were compelled to return to work. Now we are facing various punishments. The workload has been further increased. Many have been transferred to different sections. The annual bonus, which was to be paid in December, has been stopped."

FTZGSEU leader Marcus did the same to the Palla footwear workers in the Katunayaka FTZ. Some 170 workers who went on a go-slow campaign demanding a pay increase were sacked on December 2. The union simply asked workers to file a court case against the company.

As for the IGU, it pleaded for "mediation" with the management, which was refused. Its "mobilisation of solidarity" consisted of soliciting online protest letters demanding the company reinstate the sacked activists. It said: "You can take action. Tell Ansell's CEO and managing director to negotiate with workers [in] Sri Lanka."

The IGU and FTZGSEU, knowing full well that the multinational will not heed any of these pleas, are spreading illusions among workers that the management can be pressured to be lenient. Marcus wrote to the Sri Lankan government, Ansell in Australia, and the Australian and US embassies, appealing for their intervention.

IGU claims that it has drawn international support from the American AFL-CIO, International Trade Union Confederation and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). None of these union federations defends workers' interests but instead imposes the requirements of the big corporations. The ACTU, for

example is currently assisting Ford and General Motors shut down their auto assembly operations in Australia, at the cost of thousands of jobs.

At a meeting in Geneva, the IGU executive “resolved” to call on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to deny the “renewal of tax duty concessions to Ansell” and “ensure all locked out workers’ reinstatement with back pay.” It also asked Ansell management to end the lockout and “participate in good faith dialogue with the FTZGSEU.”

This is another fraud. Rajapakse’s government is notorious for using emergency laws and military methods to suppress workers’ struggles. In May 2011, the government deployed police commandoes to attack protesting Katunayaka free trade zone workers, killing one worker and maiming others.

Far from defending workers’ rights, the IGU and FTZGSEU are only concerned to obtain recognition by the government and Ansell, offering their services as the best means to secure management’s interests via “good faith dialogue.”

Ansell Lanka has a long record of suppressing the democratic right of workers to organise. In 1994, thousands of Ansell workers protested against union busting. The police, deployed by Rajapakse’s predecessor, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, fired on the demonstration, killing one worker.

The attack on the conditions and basic rights of Ansell Lanka workers is not isolated to Sri Lanka. It is a part of the ruthless global restructuring by transnational corporations to slash costs and boost profits amid a deepening crisis of global capitalism. In the second half of 2012, Ansell’s profit fell by 15 percent or \$US55 million, with the company blaming declining demand and increased international competition.

Worldwide, unions are helping companies in each of their “own” countries to eliminate permanent jobs and lower labour costs so that they can compete on the world market. To fight this offensive, workers need an internationalist strategy based on a socialist perspective. Ansell Lanka workers have to break from the trade union straitjacket and build their own rank-and-file action committee to mobilise broader support from the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. As part of this global struggle, instead of appeals to the Rajapakse government, what is required is the fight for

a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.



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