

Sri Lanka police attack railway workers

Panini Wijesiriwardane
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Sri Lankan police violently assaulted dozens of protesting substitute railway workers on Tuesday afternoon at Colombo's Fort Railway Station. Five workers were arrested. The railway workers had begun a "fast until death" protest on Monday outside the railway station to demand job permanency.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Railway Employees' Union (SLFRE), which is affiliated to President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, called the protest to try and deflect rising anger among the more than 3,000 railway workers who have been employed as temporary hands for about six years and fear that they could lose their jobs at any time. The Railway Department recently terminated the employment of 15 technical assistants.

Sri Lankan Transport Minister Kumara Welgama visited the protest on Tuesday, just before the police attack, promising to grant permanency to all workers and calling on them to end their action. SLFRE officials promptly obeyed and called-off the "fasting" protest. This was opposed by substitute railway workers, who have long experience with lying promises from the government. At about 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, hundreds of angry workers, chanting their demands, gathered inside the station and blocked the coastal railway line.

Within minutes, hundreds of riot police equipped with automatic rifles, batons, tear gas and water cannons stormed the station and attacked the protestors. Some workers were beaten and dragged along the railway platforms.

Commuters were also assaulted. Video footage showed one bleeding commuter shouting at the police and repeatedly asking, "Why do the police treat us like this? We are innocent people. We are the people who voted for this government. Why do they assault us?" One police officer tried to cover up the attack and convince the commuter that he had been assaulted by

the "people." This was repeatedly denied by the wounded commuter who said, "No, No, it was done by the police, not the people."

During the assault several workers explained their demands to the commuters, pointing out that most of them had been temporary employees for more than five years and were paid only Rs 385 per day, or an average Rs 11,000 [\$US85] per month.

While some trains and rail tracks were reopened to promote tourism in the North after 2009, following the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, no new permanent railway jobs were created.

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters spoke to protesting workers on Tuesday morning.

One worker said: "The government and management have cheated us so many times. Every time they said we would be made permanent but it never happened. I've worked more than five years for the railways but my maximum monthly salary is only 11,000 rupees. As a family we need at least 30,000 rupees per month to survive, so I work another job in the night. We can't do this continuously."

Speaking to the WSWS, SLFRE organising secretary W.B. Shelton whitewashed the Rajapakse government, saying that railways management were "responsible for this issue. They want to discredit the government. If the [Sri Lankan] president was aware of this issue he would resolve it. We are fasting to make him aware."

A group of workers opposed Shelton's claims, explaining that the unions had been fighting for their demands over the past two years and had sent several letters to President Rajapakse. Railway workers demonstrated on February 7 outside the Transport Ministry and presented a petition to the secretary of the State Management Service.

"We have sent the copies of these letters and the petition to the president," one worker explained. "He knows everything. We are blaming the government.

The president himself should be responsible for this. He promised us decent permanent jobs, that is why we voted for him.”

Another worker said: “Whilst we are not permanent, we have to do all the professional jobs. We do lathe work, welding, electric works, etc. Permanent professionals doing that work draw more than four times our salary. That’s why the government doesn’t want to make us permanent. They are exploiting us for a meagre wage.”

In 2000, the Railways Department employed more than 17,000 workers. Successive governments, working in conjunction with the unions, have reduced the workforce to 14,000. There are restructuring and privatisation plans to slash this to just 7,000.

The Central Bank Annual Report claims that the railways lost 3.8 billion rupees in 2012 and 5.2 billion rupees in 2013. It demanded increased ticket prices and other charges. The International Monetary Fund has called for the state-owned enterprise to be privatised.

Tuesday’s violent police attack on railway protesters is a threatening message from the Rajapakse government to all public sector workers and the entire working class that it will not tolerate any opposition to its austerity program.

The government-affiliated SLFRE has blocked the fight of substitute rail workers. None of the other rail unions have called for these workers to be made permanent. At the time of writing, no Sri Lankan trade union had condemned the violent police attack.



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