Striking Holcim workers in Sri Lanka occupy cement plants

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Nearly 500 contract workers at two Holcim Lanka cement plants in the towns of Puttalam and Galle in Sri Lanka have been on strike since May 19 demanding job permanency, better wages and working conditions. The striking workers together with their families are occupying the plant premises.

Amid growing anger against the company's exploitative conditions, the Inter Company Employees Union (ICEU) was forced to call the strike. However, the union is deliberately isolating the contract workers, refusing to expand the struggle to permanent workers, let alone calling the entire union membership on strike to defend the Holcim strikers.

The protesters at the Puttalam plant have blocked the main gate halting the transport of cement. The company and contractors are trying to break the picket with the help of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The government, which is desperate for foreign investment, is determined to end the strike and has deployed police including the riot squad. The police are threatening to arrest union leaders and activists.

On June 1 the striking contract workers and their families who are staying near the Puttalam factory gates and on a nearby make-shift platform were attacked by over 50 hired thugs with swords and clubs, allegedly organised by the local ruling party politicians.

Nine people, including an eight-year-old girl, were injured and sent to hospital. Four are still hospitalised. Workers asked for protection from police, who were present during the attack, but their appeals were refused.

In Galle, the company and contractors are trying to use scabs. The protesters were attacked by hired thugs armed with swords and clubs. One worker was injured in clashes. Workers have identified some of the thugs as ex-soldiers. Local politicians from the ruling coalition have been involved in these repressive moves.

The police have attempted to obtain a court injunction against the strikers—a common method in Sri Lanka of suppressing strikes. Trade unions use the court orders to justify calling off industrial struggles.

The union has also criticised Holcim for utilising the army against striking workers. The JVP and its trade unions have a long record of being pro-military and allowing the government to use the military to scuttle struggles.

Military spokesman Brigadier Ruwan Wanigasooriya denied the claim, but admitted that the army "requested" cement for the construction of army headquarters. If delayed, it would affect the army, the brigadier claimed, suggesting possible future involvement.

Holcim is a giant cement multinational based in Switzerland and operating in 70 countries with a total workforce of over 70,000. It established its Sri Lankan operations after the privatisation of the state-owned Puttalam Cement Corporation in 1996 under former President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

After Holcim took over, the workforce was cut from 1,500 to less than 900 and only 370 permanent workers. Some of the contract workers have worked for the company for more than 20 years.

The private companies hire these workers to the company on commission which is deducted from workers' wages. Some contractors are local politicians of Rajapakse's ruling coalition. Keeping workers on contract basis is the means to deny their basic rights and to subject them to brutal working conditions.

Workers in the production and transport sections are employed on a 12-hour shift system. Their basic monthly wage is less than 15,000 rupees ($115). They are paid a 12,200-rupee attendance allowance for 22

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days. For one day's absence, 567 rupees is deducted from their wages and, if more leave is taken, 1,065 rupees is deducted per day.

In the loading section, six workers have to load 4,500 cement bags during a 12-hour shift with the assistance of a conveyor belt. For an extra bag, they are paid only 1 rupee and 40 cents. The workers on "general duties" work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and are on daily wages of just 950 rupees.

One worker at the Puttalam plant told the WSWS: "With nine other workers I clean machines, roads and the garden of the factory. Though that work is essential we are not regularized. My all inclusive monthly wage is 29,000 rupees ($222). For my daughter's tuition, I have to spend a good part of the wage. For transport, electricity and water I have to pay thousands more rupees. It is difficult to manage with the rising cost of living.

"The government is not concerned about workers. The government politicians came with thugs and threatened us for engaging in a protest."

Another worker, who loads limestone into machines, said: "We have to work 12 hours per day and 20 days of such shifts per month. There's no fixed date for our wages so that we have to borrow essentials from the shops promising payment in the future."

One of the workers injured in the thug attack at Puttalam told the WSWS: "It's very difficult to live with my meagre wage. If I was seriously injured what would have happened to my family?" he asked. The mother of the eight-year-old girl who was injured said her daughter had been thrown to the ground by the thugs. "I'm afraid for my husband who has been working for eight years as a contract worker. That's why we joined the protest."

Holcim Lanka dominates more than 40 percent of local cement market and reaps huge profits. In the recent period, it has increased the price of a 50-kilogram bag of cement several times and profits have soared, even after paying the government's increased taxes.

The ICEU is playing a major role in policing this intense exploitation of workers. For years, the union has ignored the plight of contract workers and not included them in the collective agreement with the company.

The ICEU called this strike to defuse growing anger and unrest contract workers over their conditions. It is spreading the illusion that the isolated strike will force the company to make concessions.

The union is affiliated the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is part of bourgeois political establishment in Sri Lanka. In its "Our Vision" program published in February, the JVP promised to make concessions to investors to "transform" Sri Lanka to an industrialised country.

Far from organising a political fight against the company and the government, the JVP and the ICEU are seeking to contain the strike and prevent a broader eruption of the working class and rural poor in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Holcim Lanka workers have to break out of this straitjacket and turn to other sections of the working class in Sri Lanka and to Holcim workers in other countries. On May 18, workers in the Holcim plant in the northern Indian state of Chhattisgarh went on strike to demand wages in line with government wage board laws and the reinstatement of retrenched workers. Around 80 percent of workers in the plant are on contracts.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges the working class come to the defence of Holcim workers. We call on workers to build rank-and-file action committees at the Holcim plants, independent of the unions, in order to fight for their class interests. Workers need a political program to defeat the company's plans and the government's attack.

The fight to end the brutal contract system of exploitation is bound up with the struggle on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective to put an end to the profit system. The SEP calls for a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka as an integral component of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and the world.

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