

# Sri Lankan government sends navy to suppress striking port workers

Our reporters  
12 December 2016

Hundreds of navy soldiers deployed by the Sri Lankan government violently broke up a protest by striking Hambantota Magampura Port workers inside the port on Saturday.

Since Wednesday some 480 workers at the port in southern Sri Lanka have been on strike, opposing its privatisation and demanding they become permanent employees of the state-owned Ports Authority. The Magampura Port Workers Union was compelled to call the industrial action because of the deep opposition of workers to the government's sale of the port.

While the strike was taking place, the cash-strapped government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on Friday sealed a deal to sell an 80 percent stake in the port to the Chinese state-owned Merchants Port Holdings Company. The Ports Authority will keep a 20 percent share. Workers fear they will lose their jobs as a result.

Striking workers occupied the upper floor of the administration building as part of their protest. They also prevented a Japanese K line container vessel, the *Hyperion Highway*, from leaving with around 5,000 motor vehicles on board. Another cargo ship, the Chinese-owned MV Hoyeranger, is still in the port, unable to unload goods.

Heavily-armed soldiers were led by Commander of Navy, Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, who was caught on camera threatening workers and manhandling a local journalist Roshan Dilip Kumara. Sailors reached the port by navy craft, shooting in the air to intimidate workers. Dozens of workers who were at sea in life saving boats to prevent ships leaving the port were beaten by navy soldiers using wooden poles.

Workers who were occupying the administration building and picketing its entrance were attacked with poles, rifles and kicked by naval ratings. Four workers

had to be hospitalised. One, Anura Dissanayake, 49, suffered a heart attack. Dhanushka Rikshan, 27, Dhammika Prasad, 35, and R. A. Jagath Priyashantha, 29, are receiving treatment for their injuries at Hambantota hospital.

Despite being dispersed by the navy, workers are continuing the strike and protest. Hundreds of navy soldiers are now occupying the port, allowing the Japanese ship to sail away.

After terrorising the workers, the navy is seeking to brand their legitimate protest as a "terrorist act." Navy spokesman Captain Akram Alavi, told the AFP: "We were called in because the action of the dock workers amounted to piracy. We want to make sure that the foreign vessels could have free passage." He claimed that detaining ships was a violation of international law and the navy was the competent authority to intervene.

Striking workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse recruited them as cheap labour.

In March 2013 they were hired for training, paid just 10,000 rupees (then around \$US83) per month. After one and a half years of training they were absorbed into a newly-established private company, the Magampura Port Management Company, which hired them for port work. At present their monthly salary is about 24,500 rupees (around \$167), all inclusive.

I.K. Omesh said he was married, with an 18-month-old child. "I got a loan by showing my company salary," he explained. "Now, if I lose the job, how can I pay my loan back? My whole future is at risk."

Another worker angrily said: "The navy commander tried to brand our action as a terrorist one and destroy it. Our struggle is a legitimate one. The ports minister says we will not be recruited to the Ports Authority. What shall we do if we lose our jobs?"

A third worker said: “We have information that there is a plan to arrest the leaders of the strike. However, there are others who are ready to take the leadership. We will carry on the struggle until we win our demands.” One striking worker commented: “All the workers have trained and done technical courses. The Mahinda Rajapakse government promised to give us jobs under the Ports Authority but didn’t. We oppose privatisation. This is a struggle against the privatisation.”

Another worker declared: “Foreign investors are coming here to exploit cheap labour. We are not ready to give our future into their hands. The Ports Authority and the government are not ready to recruit, because they want to allow foreign investors to exploit us brutally. We are not ready to accept that.”

The Magampura Port Workers Union is peddling the illusion that the strike and protest actions can pressure the government to accede to the workers’ demands.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Lal Kantha visited the strikers and asked them to keep pressurising the government. But workers cannot defend their jobs and fight the privatisation by appealing to the very government that is implementing this program. Lal Kantha did not even offer to call out members of JVP-aligned trade unions to back the strikers.

Former President Rajapakse and a group of MPs led by him are seeking to exploit the opposition developing among workers. Rajapakse urged the government to make the strikers permanent and absorb them into the Ports Authority. But he did not explain why his government did not do that and instead relegated them to working for a private company.

Other MPs, including Namal Rajapakse and National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa, criticised the government for sending in the navy and attacking workers. Yet the same MPs were in the previous Rajapakse government that deployed the army and police to suppress the struggles of workers and the poor.

In the Katunayake free trade zone in 2011, police fired on a protest killing one worker. In 2012, police killed a person while attacking protesting fishermen. In 2013, three young people were killed when the army was unleashed on protesting villagers at Weliweriya, in the suburbs of Colombo.

By deploying the navy, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe

government has sent a message, not only to Magampura workers but to the whole working class, that it will not bend to workers’ demands but use police-military methods to suppress their struggles. These methods were developed during the thirty years of communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Ports and Shipping Minister Arjuna Ranatunga arrogantly attacked workers’ rights. He said the government had the authority to “remove them” because the port workers were recruited by the former Rajapakse administration. He said the government was previously willing to negotiate with the Chinese company to recruit them. “After the strike, I cannot guarantee this,” he declared.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is facing a deep economic crisis, with declining exports, and rising debts and balance of payment deficits. The government is imposing the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund to impose the burden of the crisis onto workers by cutting state expenditure and “restructuring” state-owned ventures, including by privatising key sectors.

The sell-off of the Magampura Port is part of this attack. It was built with a \$1.4 billion loan from China, and the sale is swapping debt into equity. The government is seeking investment from China and other countries by offering resources, including land, cheap labour and huge tax-free concessions.

Only through a political fight against the government’s agenda can workers defend jobs, wages and other social rights, including free education and health.

The entire working class must come to the defence of the Magampura Port workers, opposing the repression and witch-hunt underway. This is critical for the defence of the democratic rights of the working class.

This assault once again shows the necessity for a fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and for socialist policies to defend the jobs, living conditions and social rights of workers and the poor.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**