

Sri Lankan port minister threatens to sack striking workers

Our reporters

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Sri Lankan Port Minister Arjuna Ranatunga has declared that the striking workers at Hambantota's Magampura Port will lose their jobs if they do not stop their protest and return to work immediately.

Nearly 500 workers went on strike on December 7, opposing the government's plans to privatise the port and demanding to be made permanent employees of the government's Ports Authority. Since 2013 they have been working as hired casual employees.

Last Friday, the government underscored its determination to privatise the facility by signing an agreement to sell 80 percent of the port company's shares to China's state-owned Merchants Port Holdings Company.

In a press conference on Monday, Ranatunga told the workers: "Give up the protest, go home and come to work fresh the next day. We have thousands of applicants waiting to take up duties."

Ranatunga also alleged that the strikers "damaged government properties." Workers denied the accusation as malicious propaganda, aimed at suppressing their struggle.

Speaking on behalf of the government, the minister accused the strikers of being stooges of the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and trying to "destabilise the employment status" of the Ports Authority.

"If I make a new company tomorrow, I will not take any of these employees because they are still influenced by the political forces and they cannot be trusted," Ranatunga added.

The aim of this virulent campaign by the government, backed by the media, is to justify the government's violent measures to break the strike. These have included deploying military, police and security forces, recruiting strike breakers and threatening legal action against the strikers.

The government organised a brutal military operation on Saturday, deploying hundreds of navy soldiers to disperse the workers, who had occupied the port, and to release two ships. The strikers were attacked by soldiers with poles and rifles, and kicked. Four workers were hospitalised as a result. On Monday, the police forcibly removed barricades that workers had manned to prevent vehicles entering the port. Navy personnel are currently occupying the port.

Yesterday, the port management brought workers from another labour hire firm to load a ship with vehicles. However, these workers refused to work, walking off in support of the strikers. Navy soldiers were later seen handling the port work.

Such labour hire companies have mushroomed in recent years, exploiting unemployed workers by hiring them as cheap labour and taking a part of their wages as fees.

The striking workers were recruited under the Rajapakse government as trainees. After a training period, however, they were not made permanent. Instead, they were recruited to a newly set-up Magampura Port Management Company in 2013.

Speaking to WSWs reporters, strikers explained their living conditions and expressed anger toward both the current government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and its predecessor, the Rajapakse government.

A financial division worker, Asantha, said he had once considered working for a bank but thought he could earn a better salary at the port. "But my hope was shattered. There are many like me. Most of them have passed accountancy courses. All together our monthly income is only 30,000 rupees (about \$US200). But the Ports Authority has now recruited several political supporters of the government on around 65,000 rupees monthly payment."

He explained that the Rajapakse government had also

repressed workers. He said the workers had opposed being integrated into a private company in 2013 and attempted to launch a protest. However, Rajapakse's government suppressed their opposition by sacking several workers who took the initiative to organise them.

Ruvan, another worker, told the WSWS he had high hopes when he joined the Ports Authority. "They [the previous government] promised us permanent jobs but nothing happened," he said.

"We are now clear that both governments [Rajapakse and Sirisena-Wickremesinghe] are treat workers the same. Today they [management] are trying to get outside workers. A ship has come into the port and the plan is to break our struggle."

A driver, with two children, said he worked from 2006 for 375 rupees per day during the port construction. "I earn about 50,000 rupees per month with all allowances now but have to pay 35,000 a month for a bank loan. Almost all the workers have taken bank loans as the company told us that we will be employed until we are 55 years old. Workers are heavily indebted now and face big problems because of the threat of losing their jobs."

Some workers have come long distances from areas like Gampaha, Kalutara and Polonnaruwa. They have to pay at least 3,000 rupees a month for a boarding room without basic facilities, and spend extra money on food and travel.

The Magampura Port Workers Union (MPW) leaders only called the strike because of growing opposition among workers to privatisation and job insecurity. The union is seeking to limit the strikers to a protest perspective of trying to pressurise the government, which has no intention of reversing the privatisation or giving in to their demands.

An MPW leader, Buddhika Prasad, told the WSWS that the union "does not oppose the hiring of new workers from outside to operate the port. If we did so, we would be attacked again." At the same time, he claimed: "The vigil will continue until we get our demands."

Prasad sought to block the striking workers from talking to WSWS reporters, declaring that such discussions would make the "situation confused." The union leaders' concern is that workers will discuss the political issues they are facing.

As a part of their efforts to divert the workers, the MPW leadership have persuaded them to participate in religious observances organised by local Buddhist monks.

Ex-President Rajapakse is seeking to exploit the workers' struggle as part of his bid to retake office. Yesterday he told the media: "If we come to power we

will make them permanent." He seems to think that workers are suffering from amnesia. Under his government, workers faced similar repression.

Moreover, as a part of the privatisation program begun during Rajapakse's rule, the South Terminal of the Colombo port was leased to the same Chinese company. Likewise, the present government plans to lease Colombo port's East container terminal to an Indian company.

Rajapakse is trying to take advantage of the growing popular opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, which is being rapidly discredited by its implementation of the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

The Magampura strikers should reject the bogus promises of every faction of the capitalist class, which serve only the interests of big business and international finance capital. Workers have to turn to their colleagues in other ports, and the working class as a whole, to defend their rights.

The repression unleashed against the Magampura workers is a warning to the entire working class. To defend their jobs, living conditions and social rights, workers must organise as an independent political force and fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program, which would include placing the ports and other basic industries under social ownership and democratic workers' control.

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