

Sri Lankan government deploys army to break oil workers' strike

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On Tuesday night, the Sri Lankan government mobilised the army to take over key supply centres of the state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), including at Kolonnawa, Muthurajawela and Peradeniya.

The operation, conducted under the draconian essential services law, which enables the government to ban industrial action in key sectors of the economy, was aimed at breaking an indefinite strike by oil workers.

The strike began on Tuesday morning, halting the supply and distribution of petrol, diesel and gas throughout the country. Fearing the action could become a focal point for broader social opposition, the government immediately stepped in to suppress it.

The stoppage was called by a combination of unions. They included the Sri Lanka Independent Employees Union (SLIEU), which is controlled by President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and the Lanka Petroleum Common Workers Union, led by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The National Workers Union, affiliated to the United National Party (UNP) that is also part of the government, did not join the strike.

The unions called the industrial action to demand the government halt the sale of Trincomalee's oil tanks to India, acquire storage tanks for the CPC from Hambantota Port, which is set to be sold to China, and speed-up renovations of the main oil refinery at Sapugaskanda.

Workers joined the industrial action to express their hostility to privatisation. The unions' demands, however, were aimed at channeling opposition into nationalist denunciations of China and India, in order to divide the working class, and promote the fraud that workers' rights and conditions will be guaranteed if

nominal state-ownership is maintained.

President Sirisena issued the gazette banning the industrial action. Employees who do not report to work 24 hours after the government's draconian anti-strike legislation is invoked are deemed to have vacated their post and will be sacked.

This is the latest in a series of military deployments directed against workers' struggles. Last December, the government dispatched hundreds of navy personnel to break up a protest by contract workers demanding job permanency at Hambantota Port.

On Tuesday night, after police failed to enter the main fuel distribution centre, heavily-armed military commandos broke in through a rear gate and forcibly cleared out hundreds of workers.

Workers told the WWSW that soldiers shouted abuse and attacked them, before chasing them from the premises. Some were thrown over the parapet wall. Others were dragged outside.

Workers said the troops behaved as though they were in a war zone. Some claimed to have information that the operation was planned by former Army commander and current government minister, Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka, after a discussion on Tuesday evening at Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's official residence.

Fonseka is notorious for overseeing the brutal communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which ended in 2009.

Once the workers were forced out, police and thugs attacked them. Hundreds of army personnel and heavily-armed Special Task Force (STF) police officers were placed in front of the main gates.

At Kolonnawa, riot police were ready with batons, tear gas and water cannons. Workers tried to block trains transporting oil and bowsers, but were attacked

by the STF. Police arrested 16 people, including workers' leaders, dragging them into waiting trucks. All were later released.

Speaking at a public meeting yesterday, Sirisena made it plain the military action was aimed at intimidating the entire working class. "The government will not allow a small section to harass the majority," he warned.

"We have already declared the oil distribution as an essential service," Sirisena said. "After declaring the essential service according to powers vested in the constitution, we will not hesitate to take every step to ensure its implementation."

Referring to recent stoppages by health workers, the president said doctors regarded strikes as "playthings." He menacingly recalled that under the authoritarian rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, "even the trace of those who are shouting today could not be found." Sirisena said no one would be allowed to topple the government.

Speaking to the WWSW, workers voiced their hostility to Sirisena's strike-breaking attack. One said CPC workers had sacrificed their salaries and even donated blood to support the military in its brutal war against the LTTE. "But now the security forces who attacked us are using the same methods they used in the war," he said.

The major trade unions and capitalist parties paved the way for these military attacks by backing the reactionary war and calling on workers to "sacrifice for the defence of motherland."

The worker continued: "In this struggle, we fought against privatisation. During the last strike in April, Wickremesinghe promised not to hand over the oil tanks in Trincomalee and Hambantota to India and China, but he cheated us."

Another striker said most of the CPC workers voted for the Sirisena government, in the hope it would block privatisation. "But now this government has shown it is no different than the previous government of Rajapakse," he said.

The ongoing privatisation also underscores the bankruptcy of the unions, which have promoted the illusion that protest appeals to the government can limit the sell-off of state-owned assets, and secure decent working conditions. They have sought to obscure the fact that the privatisation agenda is being driven by the

deepening crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism and the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

SLIEU secretary Jayantha Pareira said that before the strike the unions had submitted a charter of proposals to the government on how to maintain the CPC as a profitable enterprise. He claimed the prime minister was pleased with the charter.

When they called the strike on Tuesday, the unions said they had been "cheated" and claimed the action would last indefinitely. After the strike was suppressed by the military, however, they met with Sirisena on Wednesday, and offered to resume essential services if the government withdrew the army. Union leaders issued a statement pledging further talks with the government to reach a "solution."

In April, the unions called an "indefinite strike" at the CPC, which they ended a day later after discussions with the prime minister. Sirisena responded to the stoppage by proposing that Fonseka take charge of the armed forces for two years to "discipline the country" (see: "Sri Lankan president calls on former army commander to 'discipline the country'").

In other words, the government's military attacks on workers form part of a broader move toward dictatorship.

The union leaders' backroom manoeuvres with the government show that workers need new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees—opposed to the unions—to defend their social and democratic rights and fight the turn to authoritarian rule.

These organisations must be based on a new political perspective aimed at establishing a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies, including placing the ports and oil services under public ownership and workers' control. To wage such a struggle requires the building of the Socialist Equality Party which is the only political party fighting for this program.



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