Sri Lankan power workers on strike

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Despite government threats and a campaign of intimidation, 22,000 workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) in Sri Lanka are continuing to strike. The stoppage, which began last Wednesday, has disrupted power supplies in several areas of the island.

The unions covering technical engineers and superintendents have also threatened to join the strike after the government reneged on a promised salary increase of 10 to 13 percent. Those unions said they may hold a two-day protest strike starting today, then consider whether to continue the action.

The power workers' strike was called by the CEB Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA), a combination of unions. These include: the Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (CEEU), controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) as well as the Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS) and Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), affiliated to the ruling coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP).

The unions have sought to limit the strike to demands that wage discrepancies be rectified. The stoppage, however, is an expression of growing anger in the working class over the government's attacks on social conditions.

Other demands include an end to the exploitation of national vocational trainees and repressive measures directed at the unions, along with the payment of risk allowances to technical workers.

The unions are also calling for the resolution of a fraud case involving the CEB employees provident fund over accusations that up to 5 billion rupees was "misplaced" and allegedly invested in treasury fund bills.

The unions have sought to divert anger among workers into demands that top CEB officials and engineers be punished over large salary increases.

According to the JTUA, the salary disparity between lower grades and executive positions has expanded to a ratio of 1:9 because of pay increases for the latter. The unions are demanding it be reduced to the previous ratio of 1:6.

The CEB has employed hundreds of trainees from the National Vocational Training Authority and contract workers to slash costs. They are paid between 750 and 1,000 rupees a day. Though the JTUA has postured as an opponent of this exploitation, it has not demanded that they be given permanency and salary increases.

Amid government fears that the strike could become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class, the military has expressed its readiness to intervene.

Military spokesman Roshan Seneviratne told the media on Sunday that since the start of the strike, security forces have been on stand-by to assist in CEB operations. In July, the government imposed an essential services order, which was used as the pretext to deploy the army to break a strike of Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation (CPC) workers.

The union leaders are also in backdoor talks with the government aimed at ending the stoppage.

After the "failure" of negotiations with CEB authorities, the JTUA, headed by CEEU general secretary and JVP leader Ranjan Jayalal, held talks with labour minister W.D.J. Seneviratne last night. JSS union leaders met with law and order minister Sagala Ratnayake, reportedly asking him to request that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe intervene in the dispute.

These sordid union moves come amid a government campaign to intimidate workers. Before the strike, CEB authorities cancelled leave for all workers. Last Thursday, the government demanded that all casual and probation employees immediately report for work, warning that those who did not would "be deemed as having resigned from their posts."

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The JTUA was compelled to call the strike amid growing anger among their members over government attacks on conditions. However, the aim of the unions is not to organize a genuine struggle to defend workers' rights, but to let off steam and suppress mounting opposition.

Since 2015, the JTUA has organized a series of campaigns over the same demands. Each time, it has used the government's bogus promises to shut down any further action.

CEB workers who spoke to WSWS outlined the deterioration of their working conditions.

A technical worker from Chilaw said: "My monthly income is 50,000 rupees [$US326]. I have two children who are still at school. My salary is not enough to manage family expenses when the cost of living is rising.

"I am a member of the United National Party and I voted for this government in the last election. But it is no different from the former Rajapakse government. All of them are responsible for the situation at CEB. They are all complicit in handing over electricity generation and distribution to the private sector."

A maintenance worker from Weligama in Matara said: "We are continuing our struggle and the workers in different unions have united for the fight. But I don't believe that the government will give us our demands."

To prevent the emergence of working class pickets and demonstrations, the union has promoted religious spectacles as a diversion. On September 13, the unions organized an event outside CEB's Colombo head office, breaking coconuts and calling for workers to pray to God.

Ranjan Jayalal said union leaders would meet with senior Buddhist leaders. He called on workers to meet monks in their villages to organise protest campaigns at CEB offices.

These actions show the utter bankruptcy of the unions, which promote religious and communal divisions along with the fraud that protests will force concessions from the government.

In reality, the attacks on CEB workers are part of a broader austerity agenda dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), including for the privatization and restructuring of state-owned enterprises. The IMF has demanded that the CEB, CPC, Water Board and Ports should be fully commercialised, claiming their debts are a burden on the economy.

According to recent reports, the CEB operated at a loss of 16.6 billion rupees in the first four months of 2017. This was an increase of 197 percent over the same period last year. The IMF has also called for increased consumer prices and service charges to mitigate the losses. This will deepen the social crisis facing working people.

A partial privatisation of the CEB began in 1990. In 2009, the Rajapakse government passed a bill to outsource the generation and distribution of power, which provoked widespread resistance from workers. The unions diverted opposition into a bankrupt protest campaign based on limited demands. They have never called for a struggle against privatisation.

An IMF report on Sri Lanka on July 27 declared that the "further delay of SOE (state owned enterprises) reforms," including at the CEB, was a major "risk" facing the country. The government will inevitably seek to eliminate this "risk" by pushing through further privatisation and by slashing jobs, working conditions and wages.

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