

Power workers demonstrate against Sri Lankan government's privatisation deal

Our reporters
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About 2,000 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers demonstrated across Sri Lanka on Friday against the sale of the Kerawalapitiya Yugadanavi power plant and other privatisation measures. Those involved included workers from Kuliyaipitiya, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Galle, Ratnapura, Jaffna, Laxapana, Kelanitissa, Lakwijaya and Sapugaskanda.

The Rajapakse government signed the secret privatisation deal with the US-owned New Fortress Company at midnight on September 17 with most of its cabinet, let alone the rest of the Sri Lankan population, unaware of the agreement.

The deal includes the sale of 40 percent ownership of the West Coast Company, which currently controls the Kerawalapitiya Yugadanavi LNG power station, to the American company, along with rights to the production and supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to other power stations.

According to the limited information currently available from the CEB engineers' union, and the media, the company has been given the right to extract LNG from the deep sea, along with its storage, classification, and sale. The agreement is valid for a 15-year period but can be extended.

According to the same reports, the government will be paying a higher price for the LNG supplied by the company. The Kerawalapitiya Yugadanavi power station, which has a 300-megawatt (MW) capacity, requires 35,000 British Thermal Units (BTU) or 1.2 million gallons of LNG per day. A British Thermal Unit (BTU) currently costs \$US1.45 which means the government will have to pay the company about \$50,000 a day.

The government is also required to buy LNG from the New Fortress Company for all future power plants. Under the contracts, the government must also purchase

a specific amount of LNG units, irrespective of whether they are used or not. If the LNG is not purchased the government has to compensate the company at about four-fold the current price, i.e., \$5.50 per BTU.

The CEB workers' protests are part of the developing resistance of the Sri Lankan working class to the government's privatisation plans and its escalating social attacks on the masses in response to the national economic crisis worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Friday's demonstration was called by CEB United Trade Union Alliance (UTUA). This involves the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led Ceylon Electricity Employees Union, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)-controlled Sri Lanka Nidaha Sewaka Sangamaya, and the National Employees Union, which is run by the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB).

The unions have initiated the campaign not to organise a genuine struggle against privatisation but to dissipate and divert workers' opposition with false claims that the government can be pressured into changing policy.

Asked about the campaign, UTUA convener Ranjan Jayalal told the *World Socialist Web Site*, that the alliance would develop "huge" action against the agreement and involve religious groups, political parties and mass organisations. The aim of this type of movement is to consciously disorient CEB workers and keep them tied to one or another section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

The UTUA has met in recent weeks with several bourgeois parties, including the SJB and JVP, to "discuss" the campaign. These parties have no fundamental disagreement with the Rajapakse government's policies. SJB leaders were in the United National Party, which originally initiated Colombo's privatisation policies, while the JVP was part of the

subsequent SLFP-led administrations that continued these measures.

These organisations, in fact, have come together because they are afraid that CEB workers and the developing opposition in the working class as a whole will come into direct political conflict with the Rajapakse regime and undermine capitalist rule.

Addressing the media on October 27, Jayalal boasted that CEB workers would be mobilised in Colombo on November 3 and that if the government's Yugadanavi agreement was not "withdrawn" before that date, there would be "an indefinite strike." He demagogically "challenged" the government to try and maintain the power plants by "using the army and its henchmen."

Jayalal's posturing will not defeat the Yugadanavi agreement or similar deals being organised by the Rajapakse regime, which is mired in an economic and financial crisis. The privatisation of public enterprises has been dictated by the International Monetary Fund and is an essential part of the government's big-business program. Along with the CEB, Colombo is moving to privatise the ports, the petroleum corporation, the railways and other state enterprises.

CEB workers are hostile to this agenda and the ongoing government attacks on living standards. As one CEB worker from Chilaw told the WSWs: "Privatisation should be stopped. It will impact on workers and the ordinary masses. The government has responded to the economic crisis by already deciding to cut public sector workers' wages and under privatisation workers' rights will be suppressed. It's a lie that the parties related to the government are opposed to the agreement," he said.

"The increase in the prices of essential items is unbearable. After deductions for loans, my [monthly] salary is only 30,000 rupees (\$150). My job involves recording and writing electricity bills for 2,000 houses a month but we have to bear the travelling costs of this ourselves," he added.

A CEB consumer coordinator from Kandy denounced the unions for not organising a genuine struggle against privatisation. "Other than distributing a leaflet 27 unions did not organise the protests. That's the reason for the low participation [on Friday]. The trade unions declared that there would be a large fight against privatisation of the port, but the same thing happened there," he said.

A CEB worker from Galle called for a unified struggle to stop the privatisation of public enterprises. "Privatisation cannot be stopped by just one struggle. The government would suppress it. We saw this in its preparation of police repressive actions against the teachers' struggle. We have to win the support of the working class and ordinary people," he said.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, workers need to build action committees at every workplace, independent of the trade unions, which act as the agents of the capitalist class, and fight to mobilise the industrial and political strength of workers in unity with their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and internationally.

While the CEB is a strategic sector of the Sri Lankan economy, and its workers have immense industrial power, industrial strength alone cannot defeat the Rajapakse government's policies. What is required is a unified political struggle by the entire working class in defence of jobs, working conditions and social rights.

Against the Rajapakse regime's privatisation policies, Sri Lankan workers must mobilise their independent strength and fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program that places all key industries, including the banks, under the democratic control of the working class.



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