Sri Lankan power, port and petroleum workers protest against privatisation

Our reporters
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On Wednesday, thousands of workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), the Sri Lanka Port Authority (SLPA) and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) demonstrated against the Rajapakse government's agreement to sell the Kerawalapitiya power station to the US-based New Fortress Energy.

About 4,000 CEB workers from all grades participated in the campaign, including 3,000 who travelled from districts across the island to join a protest outside the CEB's head office in Colombo City.

On the same day, almost 300 Colombo Port workers demonstrated outside the SLPA main office while about 200 CPC staff protested in front of the Kolonnawa oil storage facility in the Colombo suburbs. Dozens of Sapugaskanda oil refinery workers also rallied outside the facility in Colombo's north-eastern suburbs.

Workers held hand-written placards and chanted slogans demanding that the government "Stop selling CEB" and "Stop the privatisation of national assets." The separate protests were organised by the Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA) of the CEB, SLPA and CPC unions.

A day before the demonstrations, the CEB chairman issued a circular cancelling the leave of all workers and threatening disciplinary action against any employee responsible for disrupting power supplies. These threats were defied by CEB workers who joined the campaign by taking sick leave. The JTUA, fearing any confrontation with the government, refused to organise a strike but directed those workers travelling to Colombo to apply for leave.

Sri Lankan police attempted to secure a magistrate's court injunction to stop CPC workers protesting at Kolonnawa but the judge refused, saying police already had the power to take action against the demonstration.

The Rajapakse government's privatisation with the New Fortress Energy (NFE) was secretly signed on September 17. It includes the sale of a 40 percent share of the West Coast Company, which currently controls the LNG power station at Kerawalapitiya. NFE will have the rights to the production and supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and supply power stations built in the future.

The protests of CEB, CPC and the SLPA employees are part of a resurgence of class struggle action against government and big business attacks on jobs and social conditions by workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

While the alliance of the CEB, CPC and SLPA unions was forced to call yesterday's protests in response to the growing concerns of their members, the limited and separate actions are aimed at containing workers' opposition and tying it to the opposition capitalist parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

These parties have no fundamental differences with Colombo's privatisation deal and have, both in and out of government, ruthlessly endorsed job-cutting privatisations and other attacks on the social conditions of workers and the poor.

Addressing protesters outside the CEB's head office yesterday, CEB union convenor Ranjan Jayalal declared, "Although we don't want to take strike action, we think the government will understand that this protest is a signal and will withdraw the agreement."

Demonstrators should not fear Colombo's threats, he continued, because "the government doesn't have a spine. That's why they signed the agreement in secret."

These comments are a deliberate attempt to politically disarm workers, even as the government is preparing to launch a brutal assault on democratic and

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social rights, not just against these state-enterprise workers but the entire working class.

On October 29, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette re-imposing the essential public services act that bans strikes and industrial action across many state institutions, including the CPC and the SLPA. Any state-sector worker violating these measures, or encouraging others to take any form of industrial action, can be punished with harsh jail sentences, heavy fines and blacklisting.

While the unions have raised the slogan "Protect national assets," they refuse to defend the independent interests of the working class and oppose the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program that would place these industries under the democratic control and ownership of the working class.

The hostility of unions to an independent industrial-political movement of working class was clearly exposed when union leaders at the SLPA protest opposed the distribution of a WSWS article entitled "Build Action-Committees to defeat the privatisation of Ports, Power and Petroleum sectors" and tried to block WSWS reporters from speaking with workers.

The union bureaucrats were so desperate to prevent any discussion on the SEP's socialist program that they mobilised thugs to threaten WSWS reporters and Socialist Equality Party members and lyingly told police that they were attempting to disrupt the protest.

Addressing protesters at Kolonnawa, Podu Sevaka Sangamaya leader Ajith Padmasiri proclaimed, "Today is a historic day because the CEB and CPC workers have joined together. We will not let the government sell these out. We carry forward these struggles until victory."

Illusion-mongering claims that pressure on the government will stop privatisation are a political trap. Colombo's measures are dictated by the economic crisis, massive foreign debt, and the profit interests of the capitalist class. It has made crystal clear that it will not change course and is determined to crush any opposition to its policies through class-war methods.

Protesting workers who spoke with the WSWS voiced their opposition to the Rajapakse government and the unions.

Ranasinghe, a worker from Norochchola power station in Puththalama, said that workers cannot stop privatisation by pressuring the government, noting, "The government is in a severe economic crisis and needs to attract foreign investments to get rid of that crisis. That's why it wants to privatise public assets."

The government had done nothing to control the pandemic, he said, but had used health regulations to suppress workers' struggles and imposed repressive state laws to be used against the working class.

A mechanic from CPC said that public utilities were needed to benefit the public and the future generations. He said, "Like many other people, I voted for this government but now I understand that it cheated the people." Referring to the teachers' pay campaign, he continued, "It was totally justifiable. Everyone is facing problems. The farmers are protesting, and the cost of essentials has gone up to unbearable levels."

Wasantha, an SLPA Services Division worker, said, "Privatising public assets is not only devastating our jobs and working conditions but is a deadly attack on future generations. Workers cannot bear these attacks anymore and have now reached the limit of their tolerance."

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