

Oppose military deployment in Sri Lanka's free trade zones

Apparel Workers' Action Committee
18 May 2022

The Apparel Workers' Action Committee (AWAC-Sri Lanka) calls on the working class to oppose the deployment of the military in the free trade zones (FTZ), to demand their immediate withdrawal and to come to the defence of FTZ employees.

The military deployment in the free trade zones was taken a day after the one-day general strike and hartal on May 6. Hundreds of thousands of FTZ workers participated in the April 28 and May 6 general strikes along with millions of other workers around the country.

These workers demanded the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government and the end to the scarcity and skyrocketing prices of essentials, including basic food items, medicine and fuel, and daily power cuts.

The statement of the Board of Investment (BOI)—the state authority under which FTZs operate—declared that it had been “communicating with the Sri Lanka Police and the Army to ensure the safety of all the workers in order to facilitate transporting them to all respective factories without a hitch.”

A BOI spokesman told the media that the police, Army, Navy and Air Force soldiers had been moved into FTZs. He added that the action was taken because “groups of protestors entered the facilities and called out the workers to participate in the industrial actions.”

This claim is false. Like millions of other workers, FTZ workers joined the strike to take action against their intolerable living conditions.

Immediately after the May 6 general strike, the President declared a state of emergency facilitating the mobilization of the military throughout the country. Under the state of emergency he can deploy the military and police with powers to arrest people without a warrant, ban strikes, protests and meetings, impose curfews and media censorship, and proscribe political parties and any other organisation.

On May 10, the president mobilised the military onto the streets with orders to “shoot on sight” any so-called rioters and looters.

Hundreds of Air Force soldiers were deployed near the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. They can be dispatched inside the Zone where the factories are located at any moment.

This military deployment is a major attack on the democratic rights of FTZ workers. The AWAC warns that this repressive move can be extended to the other centres of the working class in both the private and public sectors.

More than 1,600 factories operate under the BOI employing more than 500,000 workers. Many of the factories are located in just 14 FTZs. Some companies are directly owned by foreign investors while others are joint-ventures with Sri Lankan big business. The majority of companies are manufacturing apparel for global brands. All production is for exports.

The government, BOI and the FTZ companies were shocked by the two recent general strikes. Along with their class brothers and sisters elsewhere, FTZ workers are moving rapidly to fight against their unbearable living conditions.

The government and big business are imposing the full burden of the country's economic crisis onto the backs of workers and the poor. Anger is brewing among FTZ workers hard hit by low wages and harsh working conditions.

BOI chairman Raja Edirisuriya called on employees to protect the only foreign exchange earning sector and investors to safeguard the economy of all Sri Lankans. “Exports are the only sector that has continued to keep the economy afloat from COVID to date,” he stated. Edirisuriya bemoaned the fact that Sri Lanka lost \$US22 million because of the strike on May 6 and urged workers to continue to work.

The BOI and the multi-national companies clearly fear

that the growing unrest among workers will affect their profits. They are getting ready to impose even harsher and more exploitative conditions to compete in the crisis-hit world market. The government has unleashed the military to intimidate workers and to prepare to suppress any further struggle.

In May 2011, the entire Katunayake FTZ workforce spontaneously stopped work to protect their pensions—the employees' provident fund. Police fired on the unarmed strikers killing worker Roshan Chanaka and injuring dozens. The government is ready to use ruthless military and police powers to defend foreign investors.

Last week the police carried out a witch-hunt inside the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. One Electricity Board worker was arrested last week. A worker said that three more were arrested but later released after the intervention of lawyers.

The trade unions have supported the military deployment. They took part in a discussion with the FTZ Manufacturers Association and the security forces and backed the use of soldiers on the pretext that they would "provide maximum protection to workers and property."

The unions are notorious for collaborating with the companies and the state. After a brief lockdown in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, FTZ factories were reopened. Trade unions were instrumental in forcing employees back to work in unsafe conditions.

Many struggles erupted last year and early this year against harsh working conditions, low wages and job cuts in factories such as Next Garments and Smart Shirts in Katunayake. In each case, the unions betrayed these industrial actions.

Once again it has been demonstrated that the trade unions are in the service of the companies and the state and do not represent workers or fight for their needs. Now they are backing the deployment of the military in preparation to suppress workers.

The AWAC urges workers to build democratically-elected action committees, independent of trade unions and all capitalist parties, to fight for their rights. The unions, like the capitalist parties, are against you and defend big business.

The President Rajapakse has installed a new Prime Minister to rapidly implement brutal austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund in the guise of solving the country's economic problems. But his policies are designed to make us pay for their crisis.

The AWAC was initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) as part of its campaign for workers to build action

committees in all workplaces, estates and working class suburbs. We in the AWAC are ready to assist FTZ workers elsewhere to build action committees.

The AWAC also supports the program advanced by the SEP to address the dire social and living conditions facing the working class:

- For workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential goods and resources critical for the lives of people! Nationalise the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres!

- Repudiate all foreign debts! No to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank that represent the international bankers and financial institutions!

- Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

- Cancel all the debts of poor and marginal farmers, fishermen and small business holders! Reinststate all subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for farmers!

- Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions!

- Index wages to the cost of living!

- Allocate tens of billions to social programs, including free education and free healthcare, guaranteeing high quality services to all those who need them!

The SEP has explained it is necessary to fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement these policies.

We urge you to support the fight for this socialist program.

The AWAC is fighting to unite with international class brothers and sisters. In every country, workers are facing similar ruthless attacks unleashed by governments and corporations.



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