

# Petroleum workers in Sri Lanka protest against privatisation

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On Monday, around 1,500 Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) employees held a demonstration against the Sri Lankan government's plan to privatise the state-owned company. The protesters assembled near Viharamahadevi Park in central Colombo and marched about two kilometres to the Energy Ministry.

For nearly three hours they chanted slogans in front of the Ministry, displaying placards with slogans such as, "Stop selling the CPC," "If the CPC closes, oil prices will rise," and "Defend the nationalised refinery."

The protest was called by Petroleum Trade Unions Collective (PTUC), a group of 11 trade unions including Petroleum General Workers Union (PGWU), Progressive Workers Union, Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS) and Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya.

These unions are affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sri Lanka People's Front (SLPP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) respectively. The SLPP is the dominant party in President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government.

While workers are determined to fight the privatisation agenda, the PTUC called the protest as a means of letting off steam to dissipate workers' anger.

Union leaders handed a letter to the Ministry requesting that the privatisation be halted. This futile appeal has already been rejected, repeatedly, by Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera. On Sunday, Wijesekera told the media that he spoke with the trade unions and refused their demand.

The government proposes initially to sell 800 of the CPC's 1,200 filling stations to foreign companies such as Lanka Indian Oil Company (LIOC), China's Sinopec, Petroleum Development Oman and Shell. Ultimately, it intends to liquidate all the corporation's

assets, including storage, refining and other facilities.

The privatisation of the CPC is part of a broader program of austerity dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which the Wickremesinghe government is determined to ruthlessly implement. The working class and poor are being made to bear the full burden of an unprecedented economic crisis, intensified by the pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

Sri Lanka's foreign reserves have dried up, the tourism industry has collapsed, and remittances and exports have fallen steeply. The government had no funds to import oil, leading to a lack of fuel for vehicles and electricity generation. Lengthy power cuts are continuing.

Protests by workers and poor people culminated in a mass uprising, beginning in early April, demanding the resignation of then-President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, and an end to the social disaster. On April 28 and May 6, millions of workers held one day strikes in which CPC employees participated. This powerful movement forced Rajapakse to flee the country.

The Wickremasinghe government, however, is ramping up the attacks on living standards. In addition to the CPC, it aims to privatise the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and a committee has been appointed to plan ongoing restructuring and privatisations.

Addressing the protesters, SLNSS general secretary, Nishantha Ranaweera, demagogically declared: "If the government cannot manage the corporation, the workers can do it." PGWU president Asoka Ranvala said: "If the Minister is not ready to hear workers, we are ready to mobilise the common people to chase away the parliament."

Such statements are an attempt to hoodwink workers.

These unions and the political parties to which they are affiliated are fully committed to the IMF's agenda.

During the general strikes in April and May, the unions sought to divert the mass movement behind the demand for an interim government made up of all the capitalist parties.

Workers cannot fight against privatisation and defend their jobs and wages within these pro-capitalist organisations. Workers must take the decision-making into their own hands in order to build a unified movement of the entire working class against austerity. This requires the building of action committees, independent of the unions and capitalist parties and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

The ruthless attacks on the living standards and basic rights of the working class can only be defeated through a political fight to bring down the government and abolish the profit system. Production and distribution must be placed in the hands of the working class, which will reorganise the economy along socialist lines.

In order to lay the foundations for a workers' and peasants' government, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has called for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural toilers to be built by action committees in every workplace and plantation.

SEP campaigners discussed this program with workers at Monday's protest.

Kamal Ratnayake, a worker in the supply division of the CPC said: "I came to this protest against privatisation and to defend our rights, but I have no trust in these unions."

Recalling the protests against the Rajapakse government, he said: "We joined those protests. But what happened? Gotabhaya went but another vicious man has replaced him." He agreed that "workers cannot defend their rights by replacing one capitalist government with another. Workers need an alternative political movement to fight for their rights."

Anuradha Sri Nalaka, a clerk, denounced the government and the media campaign against CPC workers. "They say that we are getting massive salaries. This is not true. Overtime and other allowances have been reduced."

He added: "It is difficult to manage with the salaries we get with the rising cost of living. I earn about 42,000 rupees [\$US115] after deductions."

Discussing Wickremesinghe's proposal to form an all-party government, he said: "All the governments came to power by fooling us. The Rajapakse government gave various promises. But what happened? The people have fallen from the frying pan into the fire. Wickremesinghe wants people to bear the burden."

A worker from the Muthurajawela storage facility on the outskirts of Colombo, said: "They called several protests against giving filling stations to LIOC, handing over the Trincomalee oil storages to India. But their limited, token strikes failed to stop anything."

He spoke about the JVP's campaign for a new government with a new mandate. "I don't believe in the JVP. I experienced what they did in 1989-1990. They attacked workers and left organisations. They joined the [former president] Chandrika Kumaratunga government."

The worker said he would study the SEP statement distributed among protesters calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress. He said: "I agree that working people can't get their rights under capitalist governments. I also agree with building an independent political movement of the workers."



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