

Sri Lankan petroleum workers strike against privatisation, defying essential services laws

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18 October 2022

Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation (CPC) workers held a protest strike on Tuesday against privatisation despite the Sri Lankan government's threats to penalise them under the draconian Essential Public Services Act (EPSA).

Some 4,000 workers at various levels, including technicians, clerks, executive officers and engineers participated in the industrial action. As a result, all plants were paralysed, including the Kolonnawa distribution centre, Muthurajawela storage complex and the Sapugaskanda refinery in the Colombo suburbs. In the capital, hundreds of workers protested at the roundabout near the parliament.

However, at noon the trade unions halted the protest action, bowing to the government's threats. The protest had been called to coincide with parliament's debate on the government's amendment to the Petroleum Special Provisions Act, which will give private companies the right to import, store and supply oil.

The unions called the protest, not as a genuine struggle against the privatisation and to defend the rights of CPC workers, but to derail and suppress the workers' growing opposition.

After dispersing the token strike within hours, the union spokesman Bandula Saman Kumara said it was "not worth continuing the strike by disrupting the services" because the bill "will get passed somehow in the parliament." He said the unions would "find alternative ways to defeat the passing of the bill in Parliament."

That claim is bogus. For months, the unions have called futile protests to allow workers to let off steam, permitting the government's plans to go ahead. They will do the same in the future.

A worker told the WSW: "I participated in the strike to oppose the privatisation. The trade unions have called several futile protests to pressurise the government. I don't trust these unions. To stop the privatisation of public institutions we need a united struggle of the

working class. I read the WSWS articles and agree to building workers' action committees, independent from the unions."

An engineer said: "The government is continuing the privatisation process, intimidating workers. However, the employees organised under government-controlled unions also participated in the protests. The union leaders mislead the struggles. Workers must understand the union leaders' duplicity. We must organise ourselves to protect our rights, abolishing the capitalist system."

The protest was called by the CPC Trade Union Collective (TUC), a combination of 11 trade unions, including the Petroleum General Workers Union (PGWU), Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya and Sri Lanka Progressive Union. These unions are respectively affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is implementing the savage austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Determined to brutally suppress any workers' resistance, he is continuing to use the EPSA declared by his predecessor Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

At present, the government has brought the electricity, petroleum and health services under this draconian law.

Any person or organisation that violates essential services orders faces "conviction, after summary trial before a Magistrate" and is "liable to rigorous imprisonment" of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US11-25). The "movable and immovable property" of those convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name "removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation."

On Monday, Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekara declared that if any trade union or any worker disrupted CPC services, they would face action under the

EPSA.

The CPC human resources manager warned that disciplinary action would be taken against workers if they assembled at CPC premises during the protest. On October 4, the CPC authorities suspended the Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya union secretary Bandara Arambekumbura as part of this intimidation campaign.

The CPC is one of the key industries to be privatised under the IMF measures. The companies expressing willingness to enter the market include the Lanka India Oil Company (LIOC), China's Sinopec, Petroleum Development Oman and Shell.

The government plans to hand over more than half of CPC's 1,200 filling stations to such companies. These moves will lead to the privatising of all CPC's other facilities, including storage and refining.

The CPC privatisation is part of a broader program dictated by the IMF as a remedy to the unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Other so-called reforms include privatising or "commercialising" all state enterprises, slashing public education and health services, and increasing taxes and prices to siphon money from low-income earners.

Wickremesinghe told parliament on October 5: "By reducing the burden of SOE [state-owned enterprises], we can expand the [foreign] reserves by getting 2 to 3 billion US dollars."

The ruling class is determined to impose the burden of the world capitalist crisis that has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-led war in Ukraine against Russia on the working class. The Central Bank and the government have temporarily defaulted on massive foreign loans and are seeking to fill the government coffers to pay the international loan sharks.

The TUC has called several protests in recent months as workers' opposition to privatisation and the threat to jobs and conditions has developed. On August 22, the TUC called a protest to pressure the power and energy minister who had declared he would not reverse the program. On September 20, the TUC cynically organised a prayer to a mythical god asking it to halt the government's moves.

The political parties that control these unions fully support the IMF program. All the unions are responsible for the Wickremesinghe government's attacks on social rights. They oppose any independent struggle to defend the rights of workers.

Since April, millions of workers and poor people have participated in mass struggles demanding an end to the skyrocketing cost of living, shortages of essentials and

long hours of power cuts. They forced the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government. On April 28 and May 6, millions of workers joined general strikes in support of this struggle.

However, the unions, backed by pseudo-left groups like the Frontline Socialist Party, betrayed those struggles, diverting them behind the demands of the opposition SJB and JVP for a capitalist interim regime.

The workers cannot stop privatisation and fight for their rights through the trade unions. They are tied to the capitalist system and therefore support putting the burden of its crisis on the backs of workers.

The CPC workers' struggle against privatisation has again showed that without a political struggle against the government and capitalism, the working class cannot defend its rights. To fight against the government's IMF austerity offensive, the CPC workers and all workers need to build independent action committees in every workplace and neighbourhood.

Without fighting for socialist policies, however, workers and the poor cannot defend their right to decent jobs, wages and living conditions. That means the nationalisation of the major industries, plantations and banks under the democratic control of the working class and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is campaigning for a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural toilers to lay the foundation of a socialist mass movement to fight for this program. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, to lead this struggle.



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