

Sri Lankan government deploys military and police against petroleum workers' strike

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In a sharp warning to the entire working class, the Wickremesinghe government this week deployed thousands of armed soldiers and police to break strike action by petroleum workers protesting privatisation in the retail fuel sector. The cabinet's privatisation decision is in line with the harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures being imposed by the government.

Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and Ceylon Petroleum Storage Terminals Limited (CPSTL) workers began their strike on Tuesday evening, refusing to fill and distribute fuel, leading to long queues of people seeking to refuel their vehicles.

Wickremesinghe responded by sending thousands of special task force members and police to take control of fuel distribution. TV footage showed heavily armed soldiers guarding petrol tankers leaving the CPC premises and distributing fuel to pumping stations.

Bandula Saman Kumara, the president of Sri Lanka Podujana Progressive Employees' Union-Petroleum (SLPPEU-P), quickly called off the industrial action. He told media that armed soldiers were "intimidating the CPC workers," visiting workers' homes and forcing "them to return to work."

The government also placed 20 striking petroleum workers, mostly union leaders, on compulsory leave. On March 29, the CPC chairman sent a letter declaring that CPC premises and CPSTL warehouse terminal service premises would be declared "prohibited zones" for strikers and that other employees were directed to report to work.

Addressing a press conference, Petroleum Minister Kanchana Wijesekara said he had "called in security forces to ensure the distribution of fuel" and demanded CPC management and law enforcement agencies "take disciplinary and legal actions" against strikers.

The government's strike-breaking against petroleum

workers is an attack on all Sri Lankan workers and another demonstration of its ruthless determination to crush all opposition to its austerity attacks. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class to oppose the government's repression and defend their class brothers and sisters at the CPC and CPSTL.

Wickremesinghe was elevated into the presidency last year via a series of anti-democratic manoeuvres. He made clear from the outset that he would ruthlessly impose the cost-cutting attacks on social services, jobs and living conditions being demanded by local and international finance capital.

Last week, after months of negotiations, the IMF approved a \$US2.9 billion bailout over four years to the Sri Lankan government. The IMF recently described its austerity demands as a "brutal experiment."

The strike-breaking assault on petroleum workers marks a new stage in these attacks on the social and democratic rights of workers. Confronted with a rising tide of popular opposition to his regime, Wickremesinghe is using his executive presidential powers to suppress all working-class opposition. He has used the draconian Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) to ban strikes and protests and has cancelled the scheduled March 9 local government elections.

On March 22, the government announced a new "anti-Terrorism Bill" to replace the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The new legislation, which is more repressive than the PTA, widens the definition of "terrorism" to include any action or statement criticising the government in Sri Lanka, any other country or international organisation. All resistance by workers and the oppressed to the government's "brutal experiment" is to be crushed with an iron fist.

The SEP forthrightly denounces the government's crackdown on the CPC union leadership. But we warn workers that they cannot place any trust in the trade

unions to protect their jobs and working conditions, or to fight the government's anti-democratic assaults. The union bureaucracy's reaction to the government's strike-breaking attack, and its new, even more repressive laws, exposes the bankrupt nature of these pro-capitalist institutions.

SLPPEU-P President Kumara complained about the military intimidation of striking workers but failed to challenge the deployment of military strike-breakers or even demand their immediate withdrawal from the CPC and the CPSTL premises.

Addressing a press conference after compulsory leave notices, including on himself, were issued, Kumara pledged the union's ongoing support of the government.

"Everybody knows that we have worked to bring this government into power. Therefore, we don't have a conspiracy against the government," he declared. The union is affiliated to Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party which is the basis for the Wickremesinghe government.

Kumara cynically attempted to cover up the government's privatisation policies. "The policy of the SLPP is not selling national assets," he said, but then cynically insisted that the union was "deceived by the government." Kumara's claim to oppose privatisation is bogus. For years he has been a loyal supporter of government plans to privatise the petroleum corporation.

Last October, during the parliamentary debate on CPC privatisation, the petroleum union leadership held a short protest strike to contain workers' opposition. The industrial action, which mainly involved union officials, was called off after a few hours.

Kumara said it was "not worth continuing the strike and disrupting the services" because parliament would pass the bill. He falsely claimed that the unions would "find alternative ways" to defeat it.

All the other CPC trade unions have directly or indirectly extended their support to privatisation, in defiance of enormous opposition from rank-and-file workers. Whenever workers have demanded a fight against the government's plans, the unions limit any action to short, tightly-controlled protests.

Ranjan Jayalal, a Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader and convener of the Ceylon Electricity Board trade union collective, issued an empty demagogic threat against the government on Wednesday. "We would say to the energy minister, we are sending you, not just on compulsory leave, but sending you and everybody [in the government] home," he declared.

Jayalal also falsely claimed that government control of the oil, electricity, postal, bank and port sectors still existed in a limited form only "because of the continuous fight carried out by trade unions."

This is a lie aimed at covering up the ongoing role played by all the unions in the privatisation and disinvestment of public institutions by successive Sri Lankan governments.

The JVP, which has no fundamental differences with the IMF's austerity program, is attempting to use the rising mass opposition against the Wickremesinghe regime to form its own government with other bourgeois parties. If elected, the JVP would ruthlessly implement the IMF's demands.

Workers should ignore the empty rhetoric of the union leadership who all defend the profit system and systematically collaborate with the ruling elite.

Last year, during the April-June mass uprising against the previous Rajapakse government, the unions diverted all working-class opposition behind the parliamentary opposition, opening the way for Wickremesinghe to come to power, and intensify the vicious social attacks on workers and the oppressed.

The SEP insists that workers in Sri Lanka and internationally need to form their own action committees, independent of the unions and all bourgeois parties, and take the struggle for their basic rights into their own hands on the basis of a socialist program.

Sri Lankan state sector workers and all other sections of the working class need to establish their own action committees and take up the SEP's campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Such a congress would lay the foundations for an independent political movement of the working class and the rural poor to establish a government of workers and peasants committed to a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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