

Oppose the witch-hunting of Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation workers

S.K Keerthei, Jotipala Dadigama
30 May 2023

The Wickremesinghe government and management of the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC) have unleashed repressive measures against workers who are opposing the privatisation of the state-owned entity and fighting to defend their jobs, conditions and basic rights.

SLIC management has banned all trade union activity, including meetings and discussions at the corporation's Colombo head office, and ordered all employees leaving the office premises, even during lunch breaks, to register their fingerprints in a fingerprint-recording machine.

In other words, the basic right of workers to discuss and organise in their own workplace has been abolished by management and the SLIC's head office transformed into a virtual prison camp. The corporation currently employs 2,500 workers in 154 SLIC branches across Sri Lanka.

The latest victims of these anti-democratic measures are Diwakara Athugala, general secretary of the Insurance General Employees Union (IGEUE), and Nayomi Hettiarachchige, the union's media secretary, who organised protests on December 8, 2022, and March 15 this year, against privatisation of the corporation.

Management has initiated a "disciplinary inquiry" against these officials, accusing them of "using company e-mails for union affairs." SLIC workers have said that a final decision from the nearly eight-day investigation will be announced soon and that if the union officials are found guilty, they could lose their jobs.

There are about 15 trade unions operating in SLIC, all of whom have previously used company e-mails to conduct union activities. SLIC administration's sudden decision to witch hunt the two union leaders is aimed at

intimidating other workers and blocking any struggle against privatisation.

SLIC management, no doubt following government orders, also sent warning letters to nearly 50 militant employees, accusing them of illegally "gathering within the institute" after they held a protest inside the Colombo head office on February 15 over a new, below-inflation three-year collective agreement.

According to a previously existing agreement, workers were to be given a 20 percent salary increase in the first year and a 10 percent salary increase for the remaining two years of the contract.

Under the proposed new agreement, the salary increase in the first year will only be 6 percent, with no indication of any salary increases in the remaining two years. Inflation is running rampant in Sri Lanka with last month's understated official year-on-year inflation rate hitting 35.3 percent.

The witch-hunting of SLIC workers and union officials is part of escalating state attacks on workers and the oppressed masses who are becoming increasingly hostile to the government's imposition of International Monetary Fund demands for wholesale privatisation and the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes the witch-hunt at SLIC and stands unconditionally in defence of the jobs and democratic rights of all insurance corporation employees. At the same time, the SEP rejects the illusions being peddled by the unions, including officials like Athugala and Hettiarachchige, that the workers can win their demands by pressuring the government.

Workers can defend their jobs and democratic rights, not by appealing to the government and management who are carrying out these attacks, but through the

independent mobilisation of the working class in a political counter-offensive against the Wickremesinghe administration.

Privatisation is a key plank in Colombo's brutal, IMF-dictated program. Having pledged to implement the IMF's demands in exchange for a \$3 billion bailout loan, President Wickremesinghe is determined to crush all opposition.

In addition to already existing anti-democratic laws, such as the Essential Services Act, which are already being used to suppress workers' struggles, Wickremesinghe is also attempting to push an Anti-Terror Bill through parliament as quickly as possible. If implemented, all opposition to his government's policies can be branded as "terrorism" and ruthlessly suppressed, with harsh jail terms.

The current assault on insurance corporation employees can only be understood within this context and must be strenuously opposed by all sections of the working class.

Workers must organise industrial action, including pickets, strikes and demonstrations to demand the withdrawal of the charges against Athugala and Hettiarachchige, an end to the repression of the insurance corporation and the immediate end to all privatisation of state-sector enterprises.

At the same time as it is attacking SLIC workers, the government is preparing to shut down the General Insurance Division, one of the SLIC's two main divisions, claiming that it is making a loss. The closure of this division, which deals with health, business, motor vehicle, house owner and travel insurances, will directly affect the jobs of about 1,500 employees.

Established in 1962 as a state corporation, the SLIC was transformed into a sole ownership company under the Treasury Secretary in 1993 and then privatised in 2003. In 2009, the insurance trade unions took successful legal action in the Supreme Court, demanding that the corporation be brought back under government, which subsequently occurred in 2009.

How to defeat privatisation?

Any fight against the government's privatisation agenda will bring the working class into a political confrontation with the capitalist state as demonstrated in the recent strike by petroleum corporation workers. Rather than being pressured to change course, the Wickremesinghe government deployed thousands of

police and military troops to break the strike and send 20 striking workers, including trade union leaders, on compulsory leave.

The trade unions and pseudo-left parties, like the Frontline Socialist Party, have done everything possible to prevent the working class from understanding the political and organisational questions posed by that dispute or the lessons of the mass movement that last year brought down the Rajapakse government. Not a single trade union, including the insurance unions, organised industrial action, let alone protests, to support the petroleum workers.

SLIC workers should not be fooled by the illusions now being promoted by the unions that the privatisation of this corporation can be halted through the Supreme Court. With the Sri Lankan economy confronting the most serious crisis in the country's history, the ruling class cannot grant even a temporary respite.

The government's privatisation agenda and its broader austerity measures can only be defeated by a unified movement of the working class, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions and based on a political strategy that challenges the government and capitalist rule. This means that workers need to establish independent action committees in every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood, including amongst SLIC employees and reach out to their international brothers and sisters via the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Sri Lankan action committees need to fight for the perspective advanced by the SEP for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. This congress, which will be based on democratically elected delegates from workers' action committees across the island, is to lay the necessary foundations to fight the Wickremesinghe regime and bring to power a government of workers and peasants that will implement socialist policies and secure the needs and rights of the workers and oppressed masses.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact