

Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation boss cites WSWS article, warning union leaders not to give information to websites

Saman Gunadasa**15 June 2023**

The *World Socialist Web Site* has learnt that Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation CEO Chandana Aluthgamage cited a May 30 WSWS article entitled “Oppose the witch-hunting of Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation workers” to warn union leaders not to provide information to online publications.

Aluthgamage issued his anti-democratic directive during a meeting with various Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC) union officials. The meeting was called to discuss the victimisation and forced transfer of Diwakara Athugala, general secretary of the Insurance General Employees Union (IGEU), and Nayomi Hettiarachchige, the union’s media secretary.

Referring to the WSWS article, the CEO reportedly said that because the IGEU general secretary provided information to websites, his disciplinary transfer was being extended—from Panadura, 28 kilometres from Colombo—to Kalawana, 127 kilometres away from Colombo. No evidence was provided to substantiate his allegation.

Hettiarachchige has been transferred to Panadura. SLIC management has also instructed the company’s security officers to block both victimised officials from entering the Colombo head office.

According to information provided to the WSWS, officials from other unions present at the meeting did not object to the CEO’s threats. Their silence further underscores the fact that these union leaders are not ready to defend workers publicising what is happening in their workplaces, a basic right crucial for themselves and the rest of the working class.

IGEU officials Athugala and Hettiarachchige have been victimised because they mobilised workers on

December 8 and March 15 to protest government plans to privatise the corporation. The SLIC is the country’s leading insurance provider and currently employs 2,500 workers in 154 branches.

Athugala and Hettiarachchi were sent forced transfer letters on June 5 after a “disciplinary inquiry” accused them of “using company e-mails for union affairs.” The use of company emails has been the general practice of the 15 different trade unions operating at SLIC.

Working-class opposition to the Wickremesinghe government’s moves to privatise hundreds of state-owned enterprises (SOE), one of the main demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for a \$US3 billion bailout loan, is rising across the island.

Privatisation of these enterprises will drastically impact more than half a million workers and several million of their dependents. Hundreds of thousands of jobs will be eliminated, wages cut and harsh attacks on pensions and working conditions imposed.

SLIC management has responded to workers’ opposition by banning all trade union activities, including meetings and discussions on corporation premises. It has transformed the Colombo head office into a virtual prison camp. The ongoing victimisation of IGEU leaders Athugala and Hettiarachchi is part of escalating repressive measures being unleashed by the government and state sector bosses to try and crush all working class resistance to its social attacks.

SLIC’s witch-hunting of union officials for using the company’s email service and for allegedly providing information to the media is a dire warning and must be opposed by all SOE workers and the entire working class.

While two SLIC union officials have been victimised, the real target of this attack is the entire working class. It is yet another indication that the IMF's austerity measures are incompatible with basic democratic rights.

The Wickremesinghe government has systematically used draconian Essential Services laws to criminalise workers' strikes and protests. It has unleashed the police to crush demonstrations by university students.

In March, the government deployed the military and the police to break up strike action by Ceylon Petroleum Corporation workers protesting privatisation. Twenty striking workers, including union officials, were victimised, and sent on compulsory leave. These workers were then sent letters on June 8 suspending their services.

Early last year, the previous government of Gotabhaya Rajapakse issued a circular to health workers prohibiting them from providing information to the public.

Wickremesinghe has maintained this anti-democratic gag while slashing funds to health and placing import restrictions on desperately needed pharmaceuticals.

Last September, the Ministry of Public Administration issued a circular titled "State officers giving information to social media." It threatened any worker who violated this directive with disciplinary action under the so-called Establishment Code.

That month, the government suspended Dr Chamal Sanjeeva, president of the Medical and Civil Rights Professional Association of Doctors and former Hambantota Regional Director of Health, charging him with "causing inconvenience to the government" by presenting "false" information to a media briefing about child malnutrition in Sri Lanka. He was witch-hunted for releasing the results of a survey carried out by a group of doctors, including himself, on child malnutrition in the southern Hambantota District.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), and the WSWS oppose these repressive measures. We have launched a campaign to mobilise the working class independently against privatisation and other IMF-dictated austerity demands.

That campaign and the SEP's forthcoming public meeting in Colombo on July 6, are receiving enthusiastic support from a wide layer of workers.

Elaborating on the program that the working class needs to adopt to fight the government attacks, our May 30 article said:

"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."

The SEP urges SLIC workers and all other sections of the Sri Lankan working class to take forward the fight for this perspective and to attend our public meeting.

Date and time: Thursday, 6 July, 4 p.m.

Venue: Public Library Auditorium, Colombo



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact