

Sri Lankan SEP demonstrates in Colombo against privatisation and government repression

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka held a strong demonstration last Thursday outside the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC) headquarters in central Colombo to oppose management witch-hunting of SLIC employees and the Wickremesinghe government's plans to privatise state-owned enterprises (SOE).

The protest was part of the SEP's campaign to independently mobilise the working class on socialist policies against the government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. The party is holding a public meeting at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo at 4 p.m. on Thursday, July 6.

The SEP held the demonstration in response to an invitation from Diwakara Athugala, general secretary of the Insurance General Employees Union (IGEU) who, along with several other unions and non-government organisations, had organised a Thursday lunchtime protest.

Athugala and the IGEU's media secretary, Nayomi Hettiarachchige, were recently victimised and force-transferred by management, following previous protests over government plans to privatise SLIC.

Athugala invited the SEP to join the IGEU demonstration because the party has won strong support from SLIC workers because of its consistent opposition to privatisation and the government's austerity measures. The SEP decided to join the action, but with its own banners, placards and slogans and demarcating itself from the union, whose program is based on pressuring the government.

Athugala and Hettiarachchige, who worked at the SLIC headquarters in Colombo, have been forcibly transferred to Kalawana, 127 kilometres from Colombo, and to Panadura, 28 kilometres away, respectively. SLIC management victimised them for "using company emails for union affairs," even though the use of company emails has been a long-established practice of the 15 different trade unions operating at SLIC.

Management also sent warning letters to nearly 50 militant employees, accusing them of illegally "gathering within the institute," following a protest inside the Colombo head office on February 15 over a new, below-inflation three-year collective agreement.

During Thursday's protest SEP members and supporters carried placards reading "Withdraw punishment transfers of Athugala and Hettiarachchige," "Abolish all the repressive laws," "Build a workers' and peasants' government based on action committees," and "Build an international anti-war movement based on world socialism." They also chanted: "Abolish all foreign debt payments," "No censorship to freedom of expression," "Stop privatisation and commercialisation," "No cuts to jobs and wages," "Withdraw repressive laws" and other slogans.

SEP members distributed hundreds of leaflets titled "Stop state repression against insurance corporation employees" to SLIC employees entering the corporation headquarters on Thursday from 7.00 a.m.

SEP assistant secretary Saman Gunadasa addressed the gathering in Sinhala, which was translated into Tamil. He pointed out that Athugala and Hettiarachchige had been transferred because of their role in organising a protest against privatisation, one of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands being carried out by the Wickremesinghe government.

"The struggle against this witch-hunt is bound up with the struggle against the IMF austerity program. But like Wickremesinghe government, all the opposition parties agree with the IMF program and the pseudo-left parties, including the Frontline Socialist Party, have no alternative to the IMF program.

"We need a revolutionary program because the trade unions are working as a group with the administration and the government to defend the IMF program. Therefore, the working class cannot win the struggle against repression if it is tied to the trade unions and the opposition parties. It needs to organise independently. Thus, we appeal to SLIC employees to form their own action committees," Gunadasa said.

Noting that tens of thousands of workers are coming into struggle against similar austerity measures and government attacks around world, including in France, the US, UK and Australia, Gunadasa appealed to Sri Lankan workers to

establish unity with their class brothers and sisters globally in struggles.

SLIC workers, he continued, need to join the SEP's campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, which will be based on democratically elected representatives from action committees of workers and the rural poor throughout the island. The aim of this congress, he said, is to develop an independent movement of the working class, rallying rural poor, to fight for a government of workers and peasants based upon socialist and internationalist policies.

Most of the mainstream electronic and printed media ignored the SEP protest. The *Daily Mirror* on June 15, however, reported that the SEP "held a demonstration in Colombo today demanding the formation of workers' action committees to fight against the privatisation of state assets and to secure jobs and wages" and published eight photos. Derana, a private television channel mentioned that the SEP had staged a demonstration but without any video footage.

Union officials deliberately limited their protest to a few dozen SLIC employees and did not call for a mass mobilisation of the corporation's workforce. Altogether the demonstration, which included the participation of some NGOs, numbered about 100 people.

The aim of the union leaders organising their event was to contain and dissipate the rising working-class opposition to the government's privatisation agenda and other austerity measures. This was reflected in their slogans and speeches which appealed to the government to change course. Their placards read; "Halt unjust transfer of Diwakara," "Dissolve SOE Commission," "Stop repression of the insurance trade unions" and "Stop splitting insurance into two."

Union officials participating included United Postal Union convenor Chinthaka Bandara, All Telecom Employees Union (ATEU) president Jagath Gurusinghe and Trade Union Center leader Ravi Kumudesh, who is also and president of the College of Medical Laboratory Science.

Speaking with the media, Bandara said: "We urge Ranil Wickremesinghe to reverse the decision [to privatise SOEs] otherwise we will implement our plan to bring to the streets 8,000,000 government, semi-government and private sector employees."

This empty rhetoric was combined with a call on Wickremesinghe to "let democracy prevail [and] create the ground for the election of a suitable leader to run the country." In other words, the rising working-class opposition to the government's privatisation program should be diverted behind the campaign for an alternative bourgeois government.

Contrary to these claims, the Wickremesinghe government, and any other bourgeois regime that replaces it, will, amid the ever-deepening economic crisis, ruthlessly attempt to carry out the IMF's dictates that the full burden of this financial disaster be

imposed on workers and the rural poor.

Addressing Thursday's demonstration, ATEU president Gurusinghe promoted illusions in the Sri Lankan judiciary. The telecom unions, he said, had initiated legal action against the privatisation of Sri Lanka Telecom, referring to two fundamental rights petitions, filed by his and another union. Later that day the Supreme Court refused to grant leave to proceed to both petitions.

Victimised IGEU official Diwakara Athugala told the protest that the demonstration "is just a beginning" and promised an intensification of action "in the future" to stop privatisation. He did not elaborate, however, on what political program was required to achieve this.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of those participating in the union protest. Asked whether he believed claims by the union leadership that they could pressure the government to withdraw privatisation, one SLIC worker replied: "I understand that such methods are of no use."

Commenting on privatisation, a youth who joined the protest said: "These days privatisation of railway, health, SLIC, and telecom have become a popular topic. If these sectors are privatised the right to a living will be abolished."

Another youth referred to the US-NATO war against Russia: "The war has impacted on the whole world, particularly on Europe, because Russia was supplying gas to European countries. Sri Lanka has also been affected by the war because prices have gone up. This is a global phenomenon. We expect that the working class must take power and put an end to this corrupt system. Capitalism has existed for a long time in history and proven that it has failed. We don't need another example of this," he added.

A young female commented on the government's plans for new labour laws: "These [labour laws] are going to be reformed in order to favour the employers and allow a three-day work week and to cut overtime."

Asked to comment on the necessity for socialism, she replied: "Workers must unite for a single common aim... There must be struggles but they must have a common aim. We need to understand your program because [under capitalism] youth have no future."



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