

Sri Lankan government intensifies witch-hunting of Ceylon Petroleum Corporation union leaders and activists

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The Sri Lankan government has stepped up its victimisation of 20 Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) trade union leaders and activists by issuing them interdiction letters on June 8.

Two months ago they were placed on compulsory leave after CPC workers walked out on strike on March 28 in protest against plans to privatise the state-owned enterprise (SOE). The Wickremesinghe government responded by deploying thousands of armed police and army personnel to break the industrial action and force the strikers back to work.

The witch-hunting of CPC union leaders and activists is another clear warning to the Sri Lankan working class that the Wickremesinghe government will brutally suppress all opposition to privatisation and the other International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures now being implemented.

None of the unions operating at the CPC, including the Petroleum General Workers Union (PGWU), the Sri Lanka Podujana Progressive Employees' Union-Petroleum (SLPPEU-P), the Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS) and the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya, have mobilised their members to fight the government organised strikebreaking or the witch-hunting of workers. These unions are affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party respectively.

Nor has any other Sri Lankan union raised objections to the state repression of the striking petroleum workers.

Last October 4, CPC management suspended SLNSS secretary Bandara Arambekumbura after he told the media that the crude oil being imported by the CPC was of substandard quality. Hundreds of workers held lunch-break demonstrations on October 4 and 6 to protest Arambekumbura's suspension. Management refused to reinstate him and instead escalated its anti-democratic measures, issuing a gazette notification on October 24 restricting CPC employees' right to assemble in their workplace.

The ongoing persecution of CPC workers is part of a wider crackdown on the working class by the Wickremesinghe government.

Last month, Insurance General Employees Union (IGEU)

general secretary Diwakara Athugala, and Nayomi Hettiarachchige, the union's media secretary, were forcibly transferred because of their role in organising protests against the privatisation of the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC).

The transfers followed a disciplinary inquiry by SLIC administration which threatened the IGEU officials with dismissal if they were found guilty. The administration also sent warning letters to about 50 militant workers after they initiated protests against a new collective agreement inside SLIC's head office in Colombo on February 15.

Instead of mobilising petroleum workers and other state-sector employees against the ongoing witch hunt, the CPC union leaders have simply complained to the Human Rights Commission, presenting it as the personal victimisation of the 20 union leader and activists.

CPC workers have repeatedly come into struggle against social attacks by successive Sri Lankan governments.

In October 2018, about 4,000 employees, including technicians, clerks, engineers and executive officers, defied Essential Services Orders and walked out on strike against privatisation, halting work in all CPC branches. On August 22 last year, they struck again and about 1,500 marched from Victoria Park in Colombo to the Ministry of Power and Energy opposing privatisation.

While CPC workers have consistently demonstrated their determination to fight, the leadership of the CPC unions have completely abandoned the struggle against privatisation and the associated attacks on jobs and working conditions. This is in line with the capitalist parties to which they are affiliated, which all endorse the IMF-dictated measures.

This was made clear in a statement to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) by SLNSS President Jagath Wijegunawardane, one of the victimised officials.

"An investigation against us is ongoing. Those supposed to be made aware in the country have been informed. The current president [Ranil Wickremesinghe] and the former president [Gotabhaya Rajapakse] have been informed. We have complained to the Department of Labour and the Human Rights

Commission and we hope to file a court case. No campaigns have been organised,” Wijegunawardane said.

In an attempt to dissipate workers’ anger, the CPC leadership and those heading other state-sector unions keep making timid appeals to the government, imploring it not to privatise profit-making state-owned enterprises. As Wijegunawardane said to the WSWS, “Now, when the CPC is making profits of 160 million rupees per month, why is it being privatised?”

But the Wickremesinghe government’s policies are determined not according to whether any particular state-owned enterprises is making profits or losses but the dictates of the IMF.

The IMF has demanded that 430 state-owned enterprises, including CPC, Sri Lanka Ports Authority, Ceylon Electricity Board, Sri Lanka Telecom, Water Supply and Drainage Board, SLIC and state-owned banks must be privatised or restructured.

This will result in a massive assault on the jobs, wages and working conditions of over 500,000 workers. At the CPC alone this will mean the destruction of 3,700 jobs from its current 4,200-strong workforce, further cuts in already reduced overtime payments and sackings over minor offences.

Several CPC workers spoke to the WSWS about the attacks on their working conditions and salaries. One worker from the filling branch said that CPC employees were under financial stress. “Medical bonuses were not paid in September last year and in April this year, and overtime is limited. We previously used to do 140 hours of overtime but this has now been cut to 100 hours,” he said.

“Three of our ordinary employees have met the minister and asked about the 20 [witch-hunted] employees on compulsory leave. The minister [Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekara] was threatening and said that they should not ask about them,” the filling branch worker explained. The trade unions will do nothing about the victimisations, he noted and said that if a worker was suspended for a month or two over a minor offence in the past they could be reinstated but now such a worker would be fired immediately.

A worker in the motor garage section said: “There are 150 employees in my section but there’s no freedom there. If you want to take leave [from work] you need to do it carefully because otherwise, they [the administration] will suspend you. Employees are in a precarious situation, vacancies are not filled and now nobody can talk about rights. The trade unions are completely silent about all this.”

Another worker declared that the union leaderships were tied into the politics of their respective parties and did not support the April 28 and May 6 mass strikes last year against the Gotabhaya Rajapakse government, or the protests by port and telecom workers against privatisation. He added: “They [union leaders] are compromised by relationships with the government.”

On 12 August last year when the government gazetted its

amendment of the Petroleum Products (Special Provisions) Act and allowed privatisation of the CPC, the trade unions did not mobilise workers to fight this but filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking to declare it unconstitutional. The amended bill authorised foreign corporations to import, store and distribute fuel in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the government approved China’s Sinopec, Australia’s United Petroleum and America’s RM Parks, and handed over 150 fuel stations to each of these companies.

As part of its anti-democratic assault on workers, the Wickremesinghe government, which relies on the political assistance of the trade unions, is bolstering the state apparatus. Along with the existing Public Security Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill, it is attempting to pass a modified and even more repressive Anti-Terror Bill which includes measures to censor the media and social media platforms. These are aimed at brutally repressing workers coming into struggle against the government’s IMF measures and in preparation for dictatorial forms of rule.

Workers must reject the refusal of the unions to mobilise against the government’s social austerity measures and anti-democratic attacks and organise independently. What is required is a united struggle of CPC, SLIC and other SOE workers to fight all the IMF austerity policies and associated state repression. Workers must demand the dropping of all charges against the 20 witch-hunted CPC employees and other victimised workers and their immediate and unconditional reinstatement, including the payment of all outstanding remuneration.

This means a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a revolutionary socialist program. Action committees must be built by workers at every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood, independent of the trade unions. Sri Lankan workers need to link up with their class brothers and sisters globally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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