

Sri Lankan free trade zone workers protest against new labour laws

Our reporters
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Around 2,000 private sector workers staged a protest in front of Colombo Fort Railway Station on July 25 demanding that the government withdraw its proposed new labour laws and halt pension fund cuts.

The majority of the workers at the protest were from the Katunayake and Biyagama free trade zones (FTZ) located in the Colombo district. Some employees travelled from as far away as Nuwara-Eliya in the Central Hills district. Several hundred employees from Ceylon Electricity Board, Colombo Port, Sri Lanka Telecom and banks also participated.

The new Employment Act formulated by the government will replace 13 existing laws and abolish rights of workers won in decades of past struggle. Under the recent Domestic Debt Restructuring approved by the parliament on July 1, interest rates for the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees Trust Fund are to be cut drastically.

Both measures are to satisfy the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout loan of \$US3 billion approved in March.

The protest was called by the UNITE trade union alliance. It includes the Inter-Company Employees Union (ICEU) led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the FTZGSEU, the Workers Struggle Centre affiliated with the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and other groups.

The union alliance announced a massive protest in Colombo from all FTZs and other companies throughout the country. The unions called the protest to dissipate the growing anger among workers against the proposed labour laws, pension cuts and the precipitous decline in living conditions.

In fact, the unions did everything to block widespread participation, yet some employees travelled to take part in the protest, taking unpaid leave and others took part

on their day off.

Protestors carried placards and slogans including “Stop robbing EPF/ETF [pension funds] in the guise of debt restructuring”, “Withdraw the proposed slave labour law reforms immediately”, and “Drive away the repressive government that cuts EPF-ETF under IMF austerity measures.”

A protest was planned in front of the Central Bank to oppose the cutting of pensions. However, the police obtained a court order preventing any demonstration.

FTZGSEU general secretary Anton Marcus, warned of strikes by workers, declaring, “If you want to prevent it, these labour acts must immediately be withdrawn.”

In the same breath, he expressed the readiness of the unions to collaborate with the government, appealing for discussions “to formulate measures on how to reform the labour laws.”

ICEU leader Wasantha Samarasinghe falsely suggested that Central Bank governor Nandalal was hesitating to sign the papers to effect pension fund cuts. He declared the protest was just a “rehearsal,” and “we will continue the fight to defend the EPF/ETF until victory.”

Duminda Nagamuwa, the leader of the FSP-controlled Workers Struggle Group, thundered: “We will not allow Nandalal to loot the EPF. Tell the labour minister that we do not allow him to touch the [present] labour law.”

However, on May 31, several union leaders, including Nagamuwa, participated in a discussion called by Labour and Foreign Employment Minister, Manusha Nanayakkara.

The FSP union leader pleaded with Nanayakkara not to change the labour laws affecting the eight-hour day, female workers’ night shift and termination. He

demagogically declared that if he touched these laws, “we will settle accounts with you in the streets.”

At the same time, Nagamuwa suggested that the minister involve the factory management and workers’ representatives, that is, trade union officials, in the decisions-making process. He cited the example of work councils in Germany where union officials collaborate with company representatives in imposing corporate dictates.

In other words, while workers want to fight to defend their rights, trade union leaders are calling for the establishment of corporatist bodies that will impose the demands of companies and the government and blocking any unified struggle against the IMF austerity agenda.

WSWS reporters spoke to protesting workers on July 25.

A young worker from Next garment manufacturing at the Katunayake free trade zone explained, “We fear that we would lose our EPF/ETF. Around 100 of us came here. I am using my own leave.”

On the changes to the labour laws, he said, “I’m worried about the 12-hour working day [as new labour laws propose]. We find it difficult to work 12 hours continuously standing. Companies don’t think of us.”

He recalled the April-July mass uprising in Sri Lanka last year when millions of workers participated in two one-day general strikes. The continuing protests forced the former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country.

WSWS reporters explained how the struggle had been betrayed by the trade unions, backed by pseudo-lefts such as the FSP, by diverting the mass anger in support of the opposition bourgeois parties. He said that is true that the trade unions keep blocking workers.

The worker expressed his support for the establishment of independent action committees and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government. “This is the kind of government we all expect. Workers must come forward to solve their problems. If the trade union bureaucracies are concerned only about themselves, it’s wrong.”

A young worker from Star garments in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone said, “We make a little saving through hard work. Ultimately, we save nothing if the government makes these cuts.”

She had to apply for unpaid leave because the

management did not give normal leave. Ten busloads of employees from her factory came to the demonstration.

Another worker from Star garments spoke of the brutal police attack on workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone 12 years ago. “I heard that in 2011 there was a struggle in which one person died of police shooting.”

In May 2011, tens of thousands of Katunayake FTZ workers struck work against the proposed pension cut by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The police attacked protesters using water cannon, tear gas and batons and gunshots leading to the death of Roshan Chanaka, a 21-year-old employee and the injuring of more than 200.



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