

Thousands of Sri Lankan electricity workers hold three-day anti-privatisation protest, defying government threats

Our reporters
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About 26,000 power workers in Sri Lanka began a three-day sicknote campaign on January 3 to protest the privatisation of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). They did so in defiance of government and management threats.

On Wednesday and Thursday an estimated 10,000 workers, including from the country's north and east, demonstrated outside the CEB headquarters in Colombo. The government responded by mobilising the police and its armed riot squad. Hundreds of navy soldiers were also deployed with water cannons.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe has issued an extraordinary gazette declaring electricity supply and fuel production as essential services. Under these orders, any employee who does not attend work and is convicted "after summary trial before a Magistrate," can be imprisoned for two to five years, fined between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US6 to \$16), or both. Their "movable and immovable property" can be seized by the state and their names "removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation."

CEB acting general manager Narendra Silva issued a circular cancelling the leave of all workers from January 2 until further notice. Social media censorship has also been imposed on CEB employees, effective from December 19, banning workers from "revealing the board's secret information," making defamatory, false or political statements or "declarations that can provoke people and defame the institute."

Minister of Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekera has instructed CEB management to take action against any worker who fails to follow all directives from the board administration.

The three-day sicknote action was called by the CEB Joint Trade Union Collective (JTUC). It includes the All Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (ACEEU), Samagi

Employees Union (SEU), Sri Lanka Nidahas Electricity Employees Union (SLNEEU), Engineers Association, Electrical Superintendents Union, Clerks Association, and the Drivers Union. The ACEEU, SEU and SLNEEU are controlled by parliamentary opposition parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) respectively.

This week's action by CEB workers is part of a developing working-class opposition to the Wickremesinghe government's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures and associated attacks on democratic rights. About a million public sector workers participated in a series of struggles in November and December demanding higher wages and protesting the IMF measures. These struggles are in line with mounting strikes and protests by workers internationally.

Sections of the ruling elite are fearful that the government's repressive actions against CEB workers will backfire and lead to the struggle spreading to other sections of the working class now facing the same IMF-dictated assaults.

The concerns were spelled out in an editorial in the *Island* on Thursday, which accused the Wickremesinghe government of failing to understand the lessons of the 2022 mass popular uprising that forced the resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse and brought down his government.

"Let the government be urged to abandon its belligerent approach, get the representatives of the protesting CEB unions around the table and try to arrive at a negotiated settlement," the newspaper advised. In other words, make a deal with the unions to block the working class and ensure the privatisation plan proceeds. In fact, the CEB unions have already signalled their willingness to carry

out such a betrayal.

While the deep-seated opposition of CEB workers to privatisation has forced the trade unions to call strikes and protests, the unions are opposed to any mobilisation of their members in a genuine struggle against the Wickremesinghe government. Their aim is to restrict workers to limited protests, while smothering them in demagogic denunciations and promises about future struggles against the government.

JTUC convenor and ACEEU secretary Ranjan Jayalal told a media briefing on Wednesday that if the government did not immediately withdraw the privatisation bill, the unions would organise a “big” struggle.

“Kanchana Wijesekera should immediately withdraw this [the privatisation act],” Jayalal said. “If he fails to do so, we will come to the parliamentary circus on the day that the act is presented to the parliament after this three-day action. We have decided to strike from 12 noon on the day before the act is adopted in the parliament.”

Yesterday Jayalal told CEB workers outside the state-owned company’s Colombo headquarters: “We don’t care about [government] circulars. If we have to die during our struggle, we are ready to happily accept death.... We will end this struggle with a victory.”

Desperate to contain workers’ opposition, Jayalal and other union leaders have repeatedly made similar empty threats. Like other government sector unions, the CEB union front has insisted that isolated protests will force the government to change course.

Jayalal also told the media on Tuesday that if the act was passed, unions would take legal action. While he admitted that he could not predict any future legal decision, the courts have already made clear that they will not block privatisations. Sri Lanka’s Appeal Court has rejected a petition filed by unions against the sacking of workers attached to the Cooperative Wholesale Corporation, insisting that it would not “obstruct the government’s economic reforms.”

Sri Lanka’s public sector unions oppose a unified struggle of the working class against privatisation. On December 28, the leaders of about 40 unions from the power, telecom, postal, bank, insurance and other state-owned sectors met at the postal auditorium in Colombo.

The meeting, they fraudulently claimed, was to coordinate a unified fight. They told the media after the event that if the government did not end its privatisation policies, they would organise a “large, united struggle.” Contrary to these claims, the unions are doing their

utmost to dampen down the willingness and determination of public sector workers to fight.

The privatisation of CEB is integral to the government’s IMF-dictated policies and privatisation of hundreds of state-owned enterprises, including the Petroleum Corporation, Ports, Railway and Sri Lankan Airlines. These IMF demands, which must be met in return for its \$US3 billion bailout loan to Sri Lanka, will result in the direct destruction of about half a million public sector workers’ jobs.

Under the current plan, which has been approved by cabinet, the CEB will be divided into 14 separate parts with power generation, transmission, distribution, trading, supply and procurement sold off to private entities. On January 3, Power and Energy Minister Wijesekera revealed in a note on X/Twitter that the plan had already been presented to the parliament.

The majority of Sri Lanka’s public sector unions, which are controlled by the opposition SJB, JVP and SLFP and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, do not oppose the IMF’s demands. If elected, the so-called parliamentary opposition would ruthlessly implement these austerity measures.

In order to fight the government’s privatisation agenda and all of the IMF’s brutal demands, workers have to take matters into their own hands.

This means building action committees, democratically controlled by workers and independent of the trade union bureaucracies and all the capitalist parties, at every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood.

What is required is a unified independent political and industrial struggle of the working class, rallying the rural poor, against the Sri Lankan capitalist elite. The aim must be to abolish capitalist rule and establish a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies.



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