

The way forward for Ceylon Electricity Board workers fighting Sri Lankan government's austerity

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The Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers' three-day sicknote campaign which began on January 3 was a powerful demonstration of their militancy and determination to fight the government's IMF-dictated privatisation program.

Held in defiance of government and management threats, the protest campaign involved some 26,000 CEB workers, including over 10,000 who travelled from across the country to demonstrate in Colombo outside the CEB head office.

The lessons of this struggle are critically important, not just for CEB employees but for the entire working class.

While the CEB workers made clear that they were not intimidated by threats of state repression, the leadership of the joint CEB trade union front have consistently blocked the development of a unified nationwide struggle by Sri Lankan public sector workers who all face similar attacks.

The power workers protest—the first major industrial action on the island this year—foreshadows the inevitable confrontation by every section of the Sri Lankan working class against the austerity measures of President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government.

Colombo's agenda involves the privatisation of hundreds of state-owned enterprises (SEOs), including key institutions such as the CEB, ports, railways, Air Lanka, Telecom, the Engineering Corporation and Sri Lanka Insurance. This will involve the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and attacks on wages and hard-won working conditions.

On January 1, Colombo increased in income tax and the Value Added Tax (VAT) pushing up inflation by 3 percent and the cost of some essentials, previously exempted from VAT, by 18 percent. The government is also imposing further cuts in public education and health.

The IMF demands full implementation of its austerity program, which it openly describes as a "brutal experiment," or Colombo will not receive the remaining instalments of its \$US3 billion loan. The bailout is needed to repay defaulted foreign debts by Sri Lanka and to boost investors' profits.

Wickremesinghe insists that "there is no alternative to the IMF program" and is implementing various dictatorial measures to try and intimidate and suppress workers' struggles.

Last year, the government deployed police riot-squads to brutally attack protesting public sector employees, teachers and students.

On the first day of the CEB workers' three-day sicknote protest, Wickremesinghe imposed the Essential Public Service Act, banning strikes in the electricity, petroleum and transport sectors.

Restrictions have been slapped on electricity employees using social media platforms to take forward their struggle, and hundreds of armed police and navy soldiers with water cannons have been deployed near the Colombo protest site. Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera has ordered CEB bosses to take actions against employees participating in the protests.

While the trade union leaders are trying to paint these actions as empty threats, CEB and other workers need to understand that they confront a government backed by big business, international capital and the major powers and which is determined to defeat the working class. CEB employees and the entire working class must politically prepare to take on and defeat the government and all its vicious social attacks.

Sri Lankan workers are not alone in this struggle. They are one battalion of the international working class which is facing a similar onslaught on their jobs, wages and social conditions.

What is the role being played the trade unions?

On December 28, the leaders of more than 40 trade unions, including CEB, Telecom, Postal and state banks held a discussion in Colombo, boasting that they would organise a "joint struggle" if the government did not stop its sales of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

In the end, all they decided was to hold scattered and isolated protests. The only purpose of these actions is to sap workers' fighting strength and disarm them politically.

The unions involved are mainly controlled by the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), in plantations, the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Progressive Tamil Alliance, as well as the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna. These organisations, and the so-called independent unions, are all committed to the IMF program. Even when these trade unions do call any industrial

action, it is only to dissipate and derail workers' growing anger, thus allowing the government to implement its job-destruction policies.

After the three-day sicknote protest Power Workers Union leader and the JVP Central Committee member Ranjan Jayalal declared that the unions would organise another protest when the CEB restructure bill is presented to parliament.

If that proves fruitless, Jayalal said, the union will take legal action, and if that fails, there will be a strike. This is a political quagmire and simply designed to demoralise workers and dissipate their determination to fight.

The public sector trade unions have already called dozens of protests against IMF austerity, and for higher wages. This includes CEB workers and at the ports, postal service, Telecom, public health, the university sectors and the state administrative services. These actions, which have been limited to fruitless protests or token strikes to supposedly "pressure" the government, were betrayed by the union bureaucracies.

During the 2022 mass uprising against then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, the trade unions diverted millions of workers into one-day strikes to support calls by the SJB and JVP for an interim capitalist administration. Although Rajapakse fled the country and resigned, this political betrayal by the trade unions, backed by the Frontline Socialist Party, paved the way for the discredited parliament to elevate pro-US stooge Wickremesinghe into power.

The trade union leaders still insist that workers can defeat privatisation and other social attacks by using their industrial power to pressure the government.

CEB trade union bureaucrats declare that power workers' ability to shut down electricity and bring all industry to a standstill gives them a "unique strength." Similar declarations are made by the union leaders in the ports, telecom, the railways and other SOEs.

CEB workers and employees at other SOEs should not buy into this illusion.

Yes, workers have enormous industrial strength to bring the economy to a halt but without politically harnessing it and mobilising the entire working class on an independent program they can be defeated.

The 1996 electricity employees' strike was crushed by the regime of President Chandrika Bandaranaike using repressive emergency powers, arresting workers and threatening to seize their property. Instead of mobilising the entire working class to defeat the government and its repression, the power unions shut down the industrial action.

While the SJB and the JVP denounce the Wickremesinghe government, they are cynically exploiting workers' opposition to its IMF program and attempting to divert into support for these parties in this year's forthcoming elections.

Trade union leaders supporting these parties falsely tell

workers that future governments run by these organisations will solve their problems. The SJB and the JVP, however, have no fundamental differences with the IMF's demands and if elected would ruthlessly impose the international bank's dictates just as ruthlessly as the current regime.

We call upon CEB workers to fight for the following demands:

The immediate withdrawal of the Essential Public Services Act! The removal of all social media restrictions on CEB employees!

The organisation of united action, including strikes, by workers to defeat privatisation and other IMF measures!

Workers cannot depend on the SJB, JVP or any other capitalist party or trade unions to defend their rights. They must take the struggle into their own hands by forming democratically-elected action committees in every workplace, the plantations and in working-class neighbourhoods, independent from the capitalist parties and the unions.

What is required is the establishment of a network of these democratically elected action committees to decide on the common action needed, to fight all Wickremesinghe's social attacks.

Say no to privatisation. There is no solution for working people within the capitalist system. All SOEs, major private corporations and the banks must be placed under the democratic control of the working class. All foreign debts should be repudiated.

In struggle for this program, the working class must rally the rural masses and fight for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on elected delegates from the action committees.

The development of this independent movement of the working class will pave the way for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies, as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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