

Oppose the Sri Lankan government's witch-hunt of Ceylon Electricity Board employees

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
14 January 2024

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon the working class to oppose a Sri Lankan government-ordered witch hunt against the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees who were involved in a three-day sick note protest in early January against privatisation of the institution.

Tens of thousands of employees from across the country participated in the January 3–5 industrial action to oppose the Wickremesinghe government's job destruction and held demonstrations outside the CEB head office in Colombo.

CEB managers in the company's respective branches, following orders last week from Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera, have prepared letters demanding explanations from all workers involved in the action.

CEB workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that although some letters have already been sent, the remainder are expected to be delivered on Tuesday because today is a government holiday.

The government-ordered letters constitute a major attack on workers' fundamental right to take industrial action to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions. The working class must step forward and support all electricity employees as part of the struggle to defend its own democratic rights. An attack on one is an attack on all!

CEB management's "show cause" letters refer to President Ranil Wickremesinghe's December 18 gazette declaring that all electricity supply, as well as the distribution of petroleum products and fuel, are essential services under Essential Public Services Act (EPSA). The CEB letters also reference a January 1 management circular cancelling leave for all employees.

The letters state that all employees failing to work

between January 3 and January 5 must write to their immediate superiors within three working days and explain why "disciplinary action" should not be taken against them.

"If you fail to do so... your service will be terminated, considering that you have accepted the guilt," it added. This letter will be sent to thousands of employees because a majority of CEB's 26,000-strong workforce were involved in the protests.

The EPSA, under which the CEB employees are now being called to show cause, is a draconian measure that bans the right to strike and other forms of industrial action. Those deemed to be in breach of these laws can be sacked and blacklisted. They can also be hauled before the courts which have the power to impose severe punishments, including imprisonment, fines and seizure of their property.

CEB employees' decision to defy the EPSA measures and hold a three-day protest, the first industrial action by Sri Lankan workers in 2024, has sent shock waves through the ruling class and its widely-despised Wickremesinghe government.

Fearful that other workers facing privatisation, cutbacks and other austerity measures will take action, Colombo is determined to punish CEB employees and discipline the working class as a whole.

Parliament in the next few weeks will be presented with a bill to restructure the CEB breaking it into 14 separate entities with some sold to private companies and others commercialised.

The CEB is one of hundreds of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) earmarked for privatisation or commercialisation resulting in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. Other major institutions targeted this year include Sri Lanka Telecom, Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation, the remaining sections of the Sri Lankan

Port, the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB), the railways and several state banks.

This sweeping “restructuring” is an essential part of the cutbacks being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Other measures include increases in taxes and tariffs which are driving up the cost of essential goods and services, and drastic cuts to welfare programs, public health and education.

The IMF has warned Colombo that if it fails to implement its demands, the remaining installments of its \$US3 billion bailout loan will not be paid. Last year the IMF delayed payment of its second tranche, due in September, until December after the government integrated harsher measures in its 2024 national budget that was ratified in parliament.

CEB employees told the WSWS that the trade union leadership has complacently responded to the company’s threatening letters, instructing union members to write back to management telling them that they were ill.

The January 3–5 protest was initiated by the CEB Joint Trade Union Collective (JTUC), which involves several unions, including those controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Samagi Jana Balavegaya and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

While the JTUC was compelled to call the protest amid the rising anger and determination of workers to fight, the union bureaucracy has blocked any genuine struggle against privatisation, even though this job destruction program has been apparent for years.

Last year, trade unions covering workers in the state-owned sector have overseen the destruction of hundreds of jobs.

* On September 30, the government eliminated all 292 jobs at the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment, forcing workers onto a compulsory retirement scheme.

* In June 2023, Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation management forcibly transferred the general secretary of the Insurance General Employees Union and another union leader for daring to mobilise workers against the privatisation of that company.

* In March 2023, the Power and Energy Ministry moved to suppress strike action by over one thousand workers at CPC by placing 20 union leaders and other employees on compulsory leave. Almost one year later

they still have not been reinstated. The CPC trade unions have failed to fully inform their members about these victimisations, let alone call industrial action to defeat this anti-democratic attack.

The refusal of the Sri Lankan unions to fight these blatant victimisations has created the conditions for this week’s assault on CEB employees.

We warn electricity employees, and the working class as a whole, that the CEB trade union leaders are disarming and blocking workers from fighting the government’s assaults.

It is just nine months since the Wickremesinghe administration agreed to the IMF’s austerity dictates. The Sri Lankan trade union bureaucracy and the political parties that control them have no fundamental differences with these brutal social measures. Instead of mobilising workers in a political and industrial fight against the government, they have called isolated protests to dissipate workers’ anger, while insisting that Colombo can be pressured to change course.

We urge CEB workers turn to their class brothers and sisters, calling on them to organise united action to defeat every government attack on workers. All workers in the state and private sectors must prepare solidarity actions to demand, “No to witch-hunt against our CEB colleagues!” and “Withdraw the EPSA!”

The CEB struggle shows once again the need for workers to take matters into their hands by establishing their own action committees, independent of the trade unions and fighting to defend all their basic rights. The SEP is ready to assist workers in forming these committees.

At the same time, the SEP emphasises that the working class can only defend its social and democratic rights in a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of struggle for international socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact