

Sri Lankan court bans industrial action by Ceylon Electricity Board workers

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The Colombo District Court on Thursday extended its “enjoining order” prohibiting Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers from taking any industrial action until February 1. The court order was issued to more than 50 leaders of the 29 trade unions covering employees at the state-owned enterprise.

Trade union leaders were summoned to the District Court on Thursday and ordered to submit explanations by February 1 outlining their reasons why the court should not further extend its enjoining order. Union officials were also prevented from using social media or entering the premises of several state institutions.

CEB management obtained the court ruling even as it was stepping up its disciplinary action against workers who participated in a sick note strike action from January 3–5 in opposition to privatisation. Tens of thousands of electricity employees from across the country demonstrated in Colombo during the sick note protest. The court order therefore binds the hands of all employees attempting to fight the management witch hunt.

Yesterday CEB management sent letters suspending 15 employees, charging them with shutting down the company’s payment counters and “inconveniencing” electricity consumers during the sick note campaign.

Beginning early this week, hundreds of workers have received management letters demanding they explain their involvement in industrial action in defiance of the cancellation of employees’ leave and President Wickremesinghe’s Essential Public Services Act (EPSA). EPSA bans industrial action at CEB and the Petroleum Corporation. CEB management was ordered by Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera to take action against all those participating in the sick note protests.

These repressive measures follow similar court orders against Sri Lankan Port Authority workers and their unions. On January 9, a Colombo District Court judge extended an injunction order against the All Ceylon

General Ports Employees’ Union (ACGPEU) prohibiting it from staging a work-to-rule campaign for salary increases. The union had planned the work-to-rule campaign to begin on December 28.

This week’s court order and CEB management’s witch-hunting of workers foreshadows even deeper anti-democratic government attacks on employees at other state-owned enterprises earmarked for privatisation and the associated destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

The trade union leadership, however, bears responsibility for creating the conditions for the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe to unleash these measures. Rather than mobilise the working class in unified industrial and political action against these attacks they have called scattered and isolated protests, while insisting that the government can be pressured to change course. This political fantasy is accompanied by equally false claims that the courts can be convinced to rule in workers’ favour.

The courts have already made clear that they will not block any of the government’s austerity measures, including privatisation, which has been demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Last year Sri Lanka’s Appeal Court rejected a union petition against the sacking of 292 workers from the Cooperative Wholesale Corporation, insisting that the judiciary would not “obstruct the government’s economic reforms.”

While the Wickremesinghe government is terrified of any increase in industrial action by Sri Lankan workers, now part of a growing movement of the international working class, this fear is shared by the trade union leadership.

The sick note protest by CEB employees on January 3–5 has been followed by strikes and protests by thousands of public sector workers to compensate for high inflation and this year’s IMF-ordered increase in the value added tax (VAT).

Last week, and again on Tuesday, tens of thousands of health sector workers took nationwide action to demand a “special” 35,000-rupee (\$US100) monthly allowance. On Thursday about 14,000 non-academic employees from 17 state universities held a one-day strike to demand a pay increase.

The CEB trade unions have responded to CEB’s disciplinary action by complacently directing their members to write to management saying that they fell ill between the January 3 to 5. This pleading, which will not halt management and the government repression, is to block the development of a united struggle of the working class against the government and its IMF austerity assaults.

The only way CEB workers and the Sri Lankan working class as a whole can fight these attacks is by organising independently of the trade unions and all capitalist parties on the basis of a socialist perspective and through the development of their own democratically-controlled action committees.

As the recent statement issued by Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) makes clear: “CEB workers must 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!’”

Sri Lankan workers and their action committees must demand CEB management withdraw all of its interdiction and “explanation” letters, the dropping of any court action against the trade union leaders, and the abolition of all “enjoining orders.”

The SEP, which is ready to assist CEB workers form their own action committees and to take forward this fight, urges workers to contact us at: E-mail: wswscmb@sltnet.lk
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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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