

Oppose the Sri Lankan government witch hunt against electricity workers! Prepare a counter offensive!

Statement of the workers' action committees (Sri Lanka)
22 January 2024

We, workers' action committees in Sri Lanka, call on every section of the working class to oppose President Ranil Wickremesinghe's repression of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees who engaged in three days of protest from January 3-5 against privatisation of the board.

During the past week, CEB management has suspended 66 employees on the absurd accusation of abandoning their duty to serve consumers. According to our information, the CEB is readying more letters to be sent to workers who engaged in the protest. A trade union leader, Kosala Abeysinghe, has been transferred to a branch outside Colombo.

It appears that the government is preparing the mass firing of CEB employees. Authorities are using the regulation issued on the eve of the CEB protest canceling all leave for employees and the President's invocation of the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) banning all industrial action including strikes in the electricity, petroleum and transportation services. The EPSA can be used to penalise workers by sacking and blacklisting, as well as hauling them into court where they can be fined and imprisoned.

The letters of interdiction to employees have stated that they have carried out a "serious act of misconduct." During their period of suspension, they will be paid half their salary.

The "crime" in the eyes of the government is CEB employees expressing their opposition to a so-called restructuring breaking the CEB into 14 sections, and then selling some into private hands and commercializing others. Employees justly understand that the "restructuring" will destroy jobs and slash wages and working conditions.

The government claim that workers deprived consumers of services is utterly cynical. Wickremesinghe's administration has already nearly tripled the tariff. This resulted in half a million people having their electricity disconnected last year because they were unable to pay unbearable bills.

The attack on our CEB brothers and sisters is an attack on us all! We all face the government's brutal austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Hundreds of state-owned enterprises (SOE) are in the firing-line of restructuring—privatisation or commercialisation—which will

bring the same job destruction, wage cuts and slashing of working conditions won in past struggles.

The same IMF austerity measures are sending prices and tariffs on essential goods and services skyrocketing, heaping the burden of the unprecedented capitalist economic crisis on workers and the poor. Millions are suffering from hunger, malnutrition and the collapse of public health and education creating untold social crises.

The Wickremesinghe government says the "country has no alternative" other than to implement the IMF policies. IMF officials last week said "the economy is on the path of recovery" and people should continue to swallow its deadly pills. "Recovery" means the government forcing people to pay for the huge loans taken for decades to patch up the capitalist crisis and create the conditions for boosting the profits of investors.

At the same time, the government uses repressive laws such as the EPSA and Emergency Regulation and is bringing in new laws such as the Online Safety Bill and Anti-Terrorism Bill to crush workers' struggles.

All opposition capitalist parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its National People's Power (NPP), as well as Tamil and Muslim groups—are fully committed to the IMF policies. The SJB and JVP/NPP, which are bidding for power, will ruthlessly implement the same austerity measures if elected.

What are the trade unions doing?

In fact, every section of the working class should have joined in united action to defeat these austerity attacks. However, the trade union leaders have prevented such united class action, calling scattered, limited protests and strikes. They have directed these actions at appealing to the very government that is unrelentingly imposing harsh measures and threatening and suppressing employees.

What are the CEB unions doing? Union leaders have limited the action of its members to appealing to the government, facilitating the witch-hunt. When management sent “show-cause” letters to workers, union leaders advised them to write replies saying that because of illness they failed to attend to their duties. This was nothing but bowing to the government’s threat.

Yesterday the CEB unions and several others met in Colombo to discuss what to do in the face of repression. They included the Ceylon Electricity Workers Union, the All Ceylon Ports General Workers Union, the Government Development Services Officers Union, the Association of Health Professionals and several other unions. This is what they have decided:

- To present a memorandum to Energy and Power Minister Kanchana Wijesekera on January 29, signed by all trade unions in the country, opposing the actions against employees. It also urged the CEB to halt its appeal to the court to ban industrial action. The Colombo District Court extended this ban up to February 1. On that day, trade union leaders have to explain why it should not be extended.

- To hold a token protest picket of employees of the SOEs earmarked for privatisation on February 5.

Such appeals will not work. Minister Wijesekera, who is presiding over the CEB restructuring and repression, has ordered harsh measures against workers protesting against the government’s policies. He deployed the military and police to crush the strike of Petroleum Corporation workers last March and sacked 20 trade union leaders and other activists.

Yesterday evening, the leaders of those unions, mostly led by the JVP, held a press conference and thundered against government repression.

These trade union leaders, however, oppose calling united action by workers against the repression and IMF austerity. They tremble because such class action will develop into a confrontation with the government and capitalist rule. These union leaders are bound hand and foot to the ruling and opposition parties and also support the IMF policies and the profit system itself.

How can workers defend their rights?

We call upon the working class to prepare and organise independent class action including a general strike to defend their living conditions and democratic rights. Opposition to the witch-hunt against CEB employees must be a rallying point for all class brothers and sisters.

Workers cannot rely on the trade unions and capitalist parties to defend their rights.

We call on you to form democratically elected action

committees in your workplaces, working-class neighbourhoods and in the plantations. No representation should be given to the union bureaucracies and capitalist parties.

We propose the following demands:

- Reinstatement all suspended CEB employees forthwith and unconditionally. Remove the ban on industrial action!

- Reinstatement sacked Petroleum trade union leaders and other activists!

- Organise solidarity action at your workplace in support of the CEB employees!

To fight against the government’s brutal IMF program:

- No to privatisation or any restructuring. Place all SOEs under the democratic control of workers.

- No to the repayment of foreign debts!

Our allies in this struggle are our international class brothers and sisters. In the US, the UK, throughout Europe, Australia, India and more broadly, workers have come into struggle to defend their rights from the attacks of corporations and governments.

All workers and poor people are facing the burden of a global economic crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the US/NATO-backed wars in Ukraine and Gaza and imperialism’s global military drive. In response, we say:

- Turn to the international working class!

- The action committees we build should be coordinated with international struggles through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

We urge you to take up these demands urgently. There is no time to lose. The reactionary Wickremesinghe regime is determined to press ahead with its counterrevolutionary policies. The two-faced criticisms of the opposition parties who all share this program is a sham to hoodwink the masses.

Our action committees include:

Port Workers Action Committee

Health Workers Action Committee

Teachers-Students-Parents Action Committee

Garment Workers Action Committee

Plantation Workers Action Committee

Action Committee of Workers Sacked from the CWE

Railway Workers Action Committee

Migrant Workers Action Committee

We are ready to give every assistance to form action committees in your workplace. We are ready to explain the above program and discuss it with you. Send us your proposals.



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