

Sri Lankan workers denounce government's witch-hunting of electricity employees

Our reporters**28 January 2024**

The Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC) in Sri Lanka and Socialist Equality Party members campaigned last week among electricity, railway, port and transport workers for the forthcoming public meeting to oppose the government's witch-hunt of Ceylon Electricity Board workers. Called by the CWAC, the meeting will be held on February 1 at 4 p.m. in the Jayasekera Management Centre in Colombo 2.

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees staged a three-day nationwide sick-day protest, beginning on January 3, in opposition to the government's plans to privatise the state-owned enterprise. The government immediately responded to the walkout by directing CEB management to initiate repressive measures against workers involved in the action.

Sixty-six employees have already been suspended on spurious claims of "misconduct." CEB trade union leaders have also revealed that management has prepared another 74 suspension letters to be imposed in coming days, taking the total number to 140.

CEB management is using the suspension of leave for all workers, which it issued just before the early January protests, and the government's anti-strike Essential Public Services Act, as the pretext to victimise workers.

Last week Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera ordered CEB management to "expedite work related to CEB reforms, cost reduction mechanisms" and the "outsourcing payment collections."

The CEB trade union officials and others from related unions met on January 22 and decided to present a petition to the Power and Energy Minister Wijesekera today and to hold a protest on February 5. These

officials oppose any mobilisation of workers in united nationwide industrial and political action against Colombo's privatisation measures and other International Monetary Fund cost-cutting attacks, fearing this would bring them into direct confrontation with the government.

Last week the CWAC issued a statement—"Oppose the government's witch-hunt against electricity workers! Let's prepare a counterattack!"—warning that this repression will be directed against all workers.

Campaigners distributed Sinhala and Tamil copies of the CWAC statement and other SEP literature. Most workers knew about the government's repressive actions against CEB employees and angrily denounced it.

A Ceylon Government Railway (CGR) employee, who has worked with the company for over 35 years and lives in CGR-owned flats at Dematagoda in Colombo, was outraged over the government repression.

The government, he said, "rules tyrannically" and President Ranil Wickremesinghe has "a dictatorial mentality." He then referred to the new Online Safety Bill, which provides the government with wide-ranging powers to suppress social media. "Yesterday, he got the parliament to pass the online bill which gives him dictatorial powers," he said.

"I strongly condemn the action against the CEB employees. We are all workers and when they are victimised, we must rise to defend them. In my opinion we must, in words or deeds, support them against the government's repressive acts. If CEB workers are threatened today, then we will later face the same

measures,” he said.

“The government is like a puppet that dances to the tune of the IMF. It does what the IMF dictates—to sell off our wealth and the resources owned by the state. There’s nothing merciful about what the IMF is doing,” he continued.

Referring to the refusal of the trade unions to call joint action by all workers facing privatisation, he added, “And all the union leaders depend on the government and they are like puppets.”

A CEB worker from Kelanitissa power station, located on the outskirts Colombo, said: “We are not exactly sure what our trade union leaders are going to do but our colleagues have no faith in them. We are not given any advice on how to continue the struggle. In fact, they should have taken action [against the victimisations] earlier but they are not mobilising us.”

“We are ready to unite [with other workers] but the trade unions don’t want that. We are all waiting to see whether the union leaders plan to take any further action. We pay union dues from our salary but don’t hear anything. I think that other [SOE] workers need to join us in united actions,” he said.

When campaigners explained the necessity for workers to form their own independent action committees to carry forward the struggle, he replied, “Yes, even without the union leaders, we can come forward.” He agreed to come to the public meeting to further discuss these issues.

In Kandy, Health Action Committee (HAC) members spoke with CEB employees. One worker said that the response of the trade unions to the witch hunt and suspension of 66 employees was not serious.

“I called our union leaders but they seem to take these issues lightly. Even during the January 3 to 5 protests, the unions played a pretending role. These protests did not produce any results and then the witch-hunting started. We must defend our jobs and we must also defend the rights of the people,” he said.

He referred to management imposition of cuts in promotions, bonuses and other allowances, and said there was rising disgust among workers towards the trade unions. “More than 50 percent of employees say that they would quit the unions,” he added.

SEP campaigners also spoke with Colombo Port workers living in Ports Authority accommodation. A logistics department worker discussed the government

attacks on wages and living standards.

“Everything that is happening is in line with the IMF’s demands. The 18 percent VAT (value added tax on goods and services) has impacted our lives and we face hikes in electricity bills and Pay-As-You-Earn taxes. Petroleum and Electricity Board workers also face this situation and our salaries have been badly cut, he said.

“The rulers live a luxurious life, but we suffer. We are taxed, but they are not. We have a lot of discussions at the office about our falling living standards but we do not see any solution from the government,” he continued.

Referring to the victimisation of CEB employees, he said, “This is in order to intimidate other employees and means that if the port workers go on strike, they would also face the same situation.”

A CEB employee from the North Western Province told campaigners: “I totally condemn this attack by the government, but this witch hunt cannot be stopped unless we unite and launch a counter-attack. This repression will be extended to workers in other sectors as well. And it is also accelerating privatisation and austerity measures.”

He voiced his agreement with the CWAC statement and its perspective but wanted more details on how a workers’ and peasants’ government could repudiate foreign debts and said the dominant powers would impose sanctions on Sri Lanka.

Campaigners answered this, explaining the necessity for Sri Lankan workers to fight for a socialist and internationalist program in unity with workers all around the world and stressed the importance of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International to take forward this struggle.



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