

Sri Lankan Collective of Workers Action Committees hold public meeting to defend victimised electricity employees

Our reporters
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The Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting on Thursday in Colombo. The event was to mobilise support in defence of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees who took action to oppose the privatisation of the state-owned company but have now been targeted in a government-ordered witch hunt.

CEB employees held three days of protest—from January 3 to 5—to oppose the government’s privatisation policies and other harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The CWAC is an alliance of action committees established by workers in the port, health, garment, plantation, railway and education sectors, as well as sacked Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) employees, overseas migrant workers, and farmers from Beragama in Sri Lanka’s south. About 50 attended the meeting, including delegations of workers from their respective action committees.

CWAC and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members campaigned in Colombo and other areas in the lead-up to Thursday’s meeting, distributing thousands of leaflets in Sinhala and Tamil, mainly related to the CEB witch hunt.

The meeting was chaired by Salitha Sinhabahu, a port employee, with the main report delivered by SEP Political Committee member W.A. Sunil. A Tamil translation of the meeting was provided for those attending from the plantations.

Welcoming participants, Salitha said the collective of action committees “stands with the 23,000 electricity employees who are waging a struggle against the privatisation of their institution.”

He explained that 66 CEB employees have been suspended and are now being investigated by management.

“We also have information that the CEB authorities have prepared 75 more suspension letters. The trade unions are appealing to CEB authorities and the government to withdraw these suspensions which are aimed at suppressing these workers,” he said.

Salitha told the meeting that to defend their basic rights workers had to build their own action committees because the trade union leaderships were blocking workers from taking united action against the government attacks.

Delivering the main report, Sunil explained that the repression of the CEB was pre-planned. “The day before their [January 3–5]

protest, management cancelled all the leave of CEB employees until further notice,” he said.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe also proclaimed the electricity and petroleum sectors as essential services under the draconian Essential Public Services Act. This meant that repressive measures could be used to penalise workers taking industrial action in these sectors with harsh jail sentences, fines and blacklisting, thus barring them from future employment.

“CEB employees were banned from using social media and a court injunction imposed by the government against the protest was extended till February 1,” he said.

Sunil told the meeting that to defend the witch hunted CEB workers, and fight the government’s privatisation measures, workers had to organise joint class action, including strikes, picketing and demonstrations.

What is necessary, he continued, is to “build the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers through development of independent action committees and measures taken to prepare for a political general strike against the Wickremesinghe government.

“The other essential factor here is to build the unity of the Sri Lankan working class together with their international class brothers and sisters. To lay the basis for this international struggle we have established an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

“The working class can defend its social and democratic rights only in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government that would implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism,” Sunil said.

K. Kandipan, representing plantation workers, told the meeting that the victimisations were not limited to electricity workers.

“This repressive government will extend it to every section of employees coming into struggle to defend their rights. Again, this is not limited to Sri Lanka. Capitalist governments elsewhere are unleashing repressive measures against workers,” he said.

He then explained how Alton Estate workers in Maskeliya had been subjected to state repression after they took strike action for higher wages in February 2021.

“On the basis of bogus charges, 24 workers were arrested and 38 workers were summarily sacked from their jobs. The main estate trade union, the Ceylon Workers Congress, conspired with the management and the police and did nothing to defend these

workers,” he said.

Kandipan said several workers got together and decided to form an action committee. “In several other estates workers are now discussing the formation of action committees because the bureaucracies are using the trade unions to suppress workers’ struggles,” he added.

Dehin Wasantha, a non-academic worker from the University of Moratuwa, addressed the meeting, explaining how he and Lakshman Fernando, an SEP fulltime worker, had been brutally attacked by thugs of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-controlled trade union at the university. His left-hand fingers were fractured, requiring extensive treatment for a month. Fernando was also grievously injured.

“I fully agree with the support of the action committee collective’s meeting to defend electricity workers,” Wasantha said. “The CEB trade union leaders say that they will go to court to stop the suspensions of workers. But the government has made these draconian laws to be specifically used against workers. It is ridiculous to try and stop the suspensions through the courts because the government is using Essential Public Services laws against employees,” he added.

“Wickremesinghe is determined to implement the IMF’s harsh austerity measures and wants to suppress all class struggles. It is important to develop an independent movement of the working class to prepare a counter offensive and that’s why workers need to form their own action committees,” Wasantha said.

Sampath, a Colombo ports worker, condemned the CEB witch hunt and said that port workers were facing the same problems. He referred to the escalating attacks on workers’ conditions and living standards.

“The taxation attacks on our salaries, mean that there is nothing left in our pay. We were previously able to manage with our salaries. We could build a house and send our children to get a good education,” he said.

Many workers, he continued, were now being forced to do additional work to supplement their income, “depriving them of the opportunity to enjoy their lives with their families.” Sampath explained how the ports’ trade unions have divided workers and no longer represented their interests.

Wasantha Wijesiri, a teacher, said, “We campaigned among teachers, parents and students, explaining to them that the victimisation of CEB workers is an attack on all of us. We have a responsibility to defend the electricity employees.”

Wijesiri spoke about the determined struggle that teachers waged in 2021 for decent salaries. “The teachers trade unions were hostile to a united struggle of workers and then, when the government offered an insufficient salary increase, they accepted this and called off our 100-day strike.

“These attacks cannot be defeated by exerting pressure on capitalist governments. The working class should organise and unite independently of the trade unions and capitalist parties,” he said.

Athukorala, a health worker, said: “There are many difficulties and shortages in hospitals, including doctors and other staff, but we are banned under a ministry order from exposing these things

to the media. The trade unions have divided workers, which is to the advantage of the rulers. To end these divisions, we have formed this action committee. We call on other workers to do this and to raise your voices to defend your rights.”

Thilaka Gamage, a farmer from Beragama, told the meeting about the economic burdens facing farmers. “To purchase a kilogram of sugar today, we must sell 4 kilograms of paddy, but to harvest a paddy field, costs us 25,000 rupees [US\$80] to hire a machine. These costs mean that we’re unable to pay for medications if we get sick,” he said.

Gamage said that all the capitalist parties had cheated farmers and insisted that only the solution for the farmers was a working-class solution.

Kusum, a retrenched garment worker of Koggala Free Trade Zone, spoke. “We—the more than 600,000 workers from the garment sector—must fight to defend electricity workers. This is the way to unite workers in struggle,” she said, and condemned the treacherous role of the trade unions.

She explained how Free Trade Zone and General Workers Union (FTZGWU) general secretary Anton Marcus had betrayed workers. When a garment factory was closed in the Koggala Free Trade Zone, Marcus promised the workers that he would ensure that they were given good compensation.

“This proved to be a bogus promise,” Kusum said, explaining that Marcus had acted on behalf of the owners who got their spoils from the closure but not the workers their compensation. “The workers need socialism to solve all these problems,” she said.

Following these contributions, the CWAC presented a resolution on future action to defend the victimised CEB workers. Extracts from the resolution, which was passed unanimously, are published below:

“This meeting strongly condemns the President Ranil Wickremesinghe government’s witch hunt against the CEB employees who took protest action against its privatisation agenda. We demand that the suspended workers be reinstated immediately and unconditionally.

“This meeting opposes any suspension of employees or any punitive actions, and considers such actions are a violation of basic democratic rights.”

“The attack on the CEB employees is an attack on other workers and we all face the attacks dictated by the IMF.”

The resolution called for workers to form action committees in all Sri Lankan workplaces and neighborhoods to unite and coordinate their struggles. It also decided that these action committees should align themselves with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to internationally coordinate their struggles.



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