

Sri Lankan trade unions oppose mass mobilisation, abandoning victimised electricity board workers

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11 February 2024

Thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers participated in lunchtime demonstrations across Sri Lanka on February 7 to demand the reinstatement of 66 suspended colleagues. The protesters also opposed the government's moves to privatise the CEB and called for the withdrawal of a court order prohibiting CEB workers from taking any industrial action.

While workers have made clear that they are determined to fight these anti-democratic attacks, the trade union bureaucracy have done everything possible to prevent a unified mass mobilisation of CEB and other workers.

On January 22, amid the ongoing suspensions of electricity employees, the leaderships of 40 state-sector trade unions, including from the CEB, covering the post, ports, banks, railways, government development officers and public health, came together pledging action to defeat the government and management repression. Many of these unions are controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Addressing a press conference later that day, Niroshan Gorakana, leader of the JVP-controlled All-Ceylon Port Workers Union, announced that "huge actions" were planned. The first of these was to present a petition signed by the union leaders to the Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekara. This pathetic act, which occurred on January 29, was ignored by Wijesekara.

Gorakana also declared that there would be "joint actions, rather than isolated, separate actions" and a "strong protest" involving workers from other SOEs outside CEB head-office on February 5 to demand reinstatement of the suspended workers.

The protest did not occur, however, until February 7 and, rather than a mass demonstration outside the CEB's Colombo headquarters, CEB union officials demobilised their members, directing them to protest outside their respective workplaces.

About 150 CEB workers demonstrated outside the

company's Colombo head office but the 40 state sector trade unions, who promised on January 22 to mobilise their members, did nothing.

Instead, Ranjan Jayalal, Jagath Gurusinghe, Anupa Nandula and Duminda Nagamuwa, respectively the leaders of the All Ceylon Electricity Board Workers Union (ACEBWU), affiliated to the JVP, the All Telecom Employees Union (ATEU), the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) and the Class Struggle Center (CSC), turned up at the CEB head office, offering nothing more than hot air.

It was yet another indication by the trade union leadership that they do not oppose the government's escalating privatisation program and anti-democratic attacks. In fact, the union bureaucracy has no fundamental opposition to the Wickremesinghe government's International Monetary Fund-dictated cost-cutting and privatisation policies. The protests called by the unions are only designed to dissipate the mounting anger of their members.

ACEBWU leader and JVP central committee member Ranjan Jayalal claimed that bank, port, railway, insurance and other civil organisation employees were holding protests at their respective workplaces. This was a flat out lie. There were no protests at any of these workplaces.

Jayalal "warned" the government that it could not continue "repressing the trade unions leaders and employees ... you have only seven months more [to rule],"—hinting that a JVP-led National People's Power government would come to power in this year's scheduled national elections.

Jayalal told the demonstration that if the CEB employees were not "reinstated unconditionally," the unions would organise 66 families to set up camps in front of the company's head office.

Consumer Coordinators Association leader Priyantha Wickremasinghe openly told the protest: "No one is against

the restructuring [privatisation of CEB] and it should be done to serve the people and defend employees' rights. If that's the case we will give our support."

While the CBEU did not mobilise any of its members for last Wednesday's protest, Anupa Nandula, the union's vice president, shamelessly declared: "We will not isolate CEB employees. We are ready to face the problems jointly and crush the repression."

Duminda Nagamuwa, who leads the CSC, which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), demagogically denounced the power and energy minister. "If Kanchana [Wijesekera] and his government do not withdraw this repression, the trade unions movement will take strong actions," he declared.

Not to be outdone by other bureaucrats, ATEU president Gurusinghe offered up the same sort of empty verbiage.

None of these leaders presented any program to defeat the government's privatisation agenda and its associated attacks on democratic rights.

Committed to the defence of Sri Lankan capitalism, the unions function as an industrial police force for the government and big business, manoeuvring to stop a unified movement of the Sri Lankan working class against the privatisation of all SOEs, increased taxes, prices and tariffs, and cost-cutting to education, health and other essential services.

Predictably, the government and CEB management ignored the trade unions and are continuing their repression.

On February 8, CEB spokesman and Deputy General Manager Noel Priyantha told the daily *Morning*: "We suspended those workers according to the situation that prevailed on the particular days of the strike. Now, we are looking into the excuses, grievances, and other factors."

Addressing a parliamentary select committee last week, CEB General Manager Narendra de Silva said the company only had about 22,000 employees—down from 24,000—but admitted that there was a plan to reduce the existing workforce to just 18,000.

The response of the trade union leadership to the government job destruction policies is no surprise.

The Sri Lankan trade unions played a key role in diverting the April–July 2022 mass uprising which brought down the then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his regime.

This betrayal, which paved the way for Ranil Wickremesinghe to come to power, was followed by a series of strikes and various protests last year which were never aimed at bringing down the increasingly hated Wickremesinghe government, but at containing and politically derailing workers' anger.

Workers must draw political lessons from these

experiences. No amount of pressure will force the Wickremesinghe government to abandon its brutal austerity policies. Nor will the trade unions lead any struggle against these savage social attacks. Like all of Sri Lanka's parliamentary parties, they are committed to the IMF program and the defence of Sri Lankan capitalism.

Notwithstanding their empty denunciations of the government and management, the CEB trade union leaders have abandoned their victimised employees, directing them to reply to CEB "show-cause" letters, saying they fell sick on the three-day national protest in January.

The government's ruthless witch-hunt of workers for exercising their democratic rights is a fundamental issue and an attack of the working class as a whole. This is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has stressed that the fight for the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of the 66 suspended CEB employees must become a rallying point for organising unified nationwide class actions.

On February 1, the Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC) held a public meeting in Colombo, calling on the working class to mobilise its industrial and political strength to defend CEB employees and fight the government's privatisation policies.

The CWAC is an alliance of workers' action committees 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 Baragama.

The meeting urged workers to establish action committees at every workplace, including in the plantations and in working-class neighbourhoods, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties, to take forward this struggle.

This must include the preparation of a general strike against the government's IMF program as part of the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies including placing the banks, big business and key industries under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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