

Mobilise the working class to stop the victimisation of Sri Lankan electricity workers!

Statement of the Collective of Workers Action Committees (Sri Lanka)

4 March 2024

As the suspension of 66 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers in Sri Lanka enters its second month, company management is now preparing to impose brutal punishment, including sackings. Charge sheets have been sent to 62 employees asking them to “show-cause” why they should not be dismissed or subjected to other penalties.

The CEB workers are being victimised because they joined tens of thousands of their colleagues in a three-day protest, starting on January 3, to oppose the Sri Lankan government’s privatisation of the enterprise.

In July 1980, the then government of President J.R. Jayawardene dismissed about 100,000 striking public sector under its draconian Essential Public Services Act (EPSA). Four and a half decades later, the Wickremesinghe regime is preparing to penalise CEB employees using the same law.

In March 2023, strike action by Ceylon Petroleum Corporation workers was crushed by the Wickremesinghe government, which deployed the military and interdicted 20 trade union leaders and activists for violating the EPSA. While they were later reinstated, disciplinary action against them continues.

The attacks on CEB and CPC workers make clear that the Wickremesinghe regime is waging war against workers who oppose privatisation and other austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. CEB management, on the orders of the Wickremesinghe government, has transformed the fundamental democratic right of the working class to take industrial action into a “crime.”

This major attack must be stopped forthwith. The Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC), an alliance of action committees in the ports, plantations, railways, health, education and garment industries, and among migrant workers, urges workers to mobilise and take industrial action, including organising a general strike, to defend the CEB 66.

The CWAC has read several of the CEB management letters and charge sheets. We are publishing below some of the details so that all workers can understand the vicious nature of this anti-democratic attack.

The letters demand that the named workers must reply to

management within 14 days to request an inquiry and explain why they should not be sacked from their jobs or suffer other punishment. CEB authorities declared that any employee who fails to reply within that period will be deemed to be guilty and punished.

The first charge, cited in one letter to a cash-handling clerk, states that by closing the cash counters on January 3, 4 and 5, or one or two days during this period, the worker has engaged in “serious misconduct.”

The second charge states that not attending work in the electricity supply industry, which has been proclaimed as an “essential service” under the EPSA, carries “rigorous punishments for violating its laws.” It also says that it is an offence to not attend work during the same period and in violation of a previous management circular canceling all employees’ leave.

Another charge alleges that the named worker has deprived the CEB of receiving monetary contributions and thereby caused financial loss to the company. One more charge states that any employee who commits one, or all of the above offenses, constitutes a breach of good faith with the company. The targeted workers have also been told that they will only be allowed to appoint another CEB officer or retain a lawyer in their defence if it is approved by the CEB general manager.

Under the EPSA, all industrial action, including strikes, affecting essential services are banned. Workers who do not comply can be convicted “after a summary trial before a Magistrate.” Anyone found guilty is “liable to rigorous imprisonment” of two to five years, or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US11–\$US25), or both. The “movable and immovable property” of anyone convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name will be “removed from any register maintained for the relevant profession or vocation.” Individuals found guilty of inciting, inducing or encouraging anyone not to attend work through a “physical act or by any speech or writing” are similarly punishable.

The CEB 66 are victims of the Wickremesinghe government’s IMF-dictated class war measures, which includes the sale of hundreds of state-owned enterprises (SOE). This

austerity program also involves increases in income and value added taxes, higher water and electricity tariffs, price hikes of other goods and services, and savage expenditure cuts in education and health.

As one suspended CEB employee correctly stated, “If this key institution [CEB] is allowed to be privatised and the opposition of its 22,000 workers defeated, then it will make it easier for the government to do away with the other SOEs.”

Defence of the 66 victimised workers is not just a struggle for CEB employees but the hundreds of thousands of workers in other state-owned companies that have been placed on the privatisation chopping block. If these attacks are allowed to proceed it will impact on about half a million workers in the state-owned sector, destroying jobs, cutting wages, and slashing hard-won working conditions.

But while the government and CEB management are advancing these brutal attacks, what are the CEB trade unions doing?

Currently these unions are organised in the Joint Trade Union Collective, which includes the All-Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (ACEEU), Samagi Employees Union (SEU), Sri Lanka Nidahas Electricity Employees Union (SLNEEU), Engineers Association and several other unions.

The ACEEU, SEU and SLNEEU are controlled by parliamentary opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—respectively.

While the CEB unions were compelled by the growing concerns of their members to call the January 3–5 three-day action, they have done nothing to mobilise CEB or other SOEs workers in unified national industrial action against this frontal attack by the government. Their response has been to issue feeble appeals to the government to reinstate the suspended workers, which of course are ignored.

The CEB union leadership, along with several of its counterparts at telecom, the banks, port, postal, railways and several other institutions, have sent a petition pleading with management to reinstate the suspended employees. Scattered protests were held outside CEB branches around the country on February 7 and a legal case has been filed in district courts against the suspensions.

The JVP-controlled trade unions oppose any genuine mobilisation of workers to fight the government’s assault. Instead they are calling on workers to support its National People’s Power (NPP) electoral front in seven months’ time when Sri Lanka’s presidential election is supposed to be held!

The working class must reject all such illusions. All claims that the election of an NPP/JVP or an SJB regime will defend the working class are blatant lies. Like the Wickremesinghe government, these parties are fully committed to the IMF attacks, including the privatisation and restructuring of the SOEs.

The trade union bureaucracies continue to claim that it is

possible to pressure the government to change course whilst insisting at the same time that workers must wait till the elections. However, the government is proceeding with its victimisation of CEB workers and even harsher measures against other sections of the working class opposing its IMF measures.

On January 22, the CWAC issued its statement, “Oppose the Sri Lankan government witch hunt against electricity workers! Prepare a counter offensive!” It explained that “the attack on our CEB brothers and sisters is an attack on us all!” and outlined the program required to defend the suspended employees and take forward the fight against the privatisation:

“Reinstate all suspended CEB employees forthwith and unconditionally! Call for industrial action, including the preparation of a general strike to defend them. Workers must demand removal of the EPSA and other repressive laws.

“This struggle should be linked to the demand: No to privatisation or any restructuring! Place all SOEs under the democratic control of workers! No to the repayment of foreign debts!”

The CWAC also called for a turn to the international working class to take up the struggle to defend the social and democratic rights of CEB employees and all other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Workers must take the initiative and build their own rank-and-file action committees at every workplace, in the plantations and their neighborhoods. The pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies and the capitalist parties should have no place in these committees because they oppose any genuine political struggle by the working class against the Wickremesinghe government.

These democratically-controlled action committees should determine what industrial and political action is necessary to defend the CEB 66 and to develop a genuine fight against the government’s privatisation policies and other social austerity measures.

Taking up this fight is urgent! Start discussions on these policies at your workplace and amongst young people, including students, and form action committees to advance this struggle.



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