

Sri Lanka: Ceylon Electricity Board witch-hunting workers opposed to privatisation

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Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) management is stepping up its victimisation of workers who participated in a three-day protest earlier this year against the privatisation of the state-owned enterprise. Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera announced last week he is intensifying his efforts to sell-off the CEB.

In January 3–5, tens of thousands of workers participated in a national sick-note protest to oppose the privatisation of the CEB. Management responded by suspending 66 employees, only exempting four because they had applied for leave prior to the industrial action. It has now initiated inquiries into 15 of the 62 targeted workers.

These workers have been charged with violating President Ranil Wickremesinghe's proclamation of the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) on the CEB and management's cancellation of leave for all company employees.

Following trade union advice, the 62 interdicted workers wrote to CEB's general manager rejecting all charges and demanding an inquiry conducted according to the country's labour laws. Their letters call for the process to be "non-political, transparent and independent," and that all 62 workers be reinstated during the inquiry.

While several victimised employees have now been ordered by CEB management to attend the inquiry, the union leadership have told these workers not to provide any information to "outsiders." The CEB unions claim that that "outsiders" are seeking to "politicise" the issue.

This is directly aimed against *World Socialist Web Site* reporters and the Socialist Equality Party, the only party and media outlet in Sri Lanka closely following developments in the CEB and opposing the escalating

government and management attacks. We alone have defended the witch-hunted CEB employees and sought to alert and mobilise workers across the island to oppose and defeat these anti-democratic measures.

By contrast, the trade union bureaucracy continues its isolation of the victimised CEB workers, further exposing them to management's bullying actions and opening the way for the government advance its reactionary privatisation agenda. We urge workers to denounce this union censorship and to come forward to defend all victims of the government's repression.

On March 8, Power and Energy Minister Wijesekera told the media that he had made 46 revisions to the previously published Electricity Bill and sent it to the legal draftsman to prepare a new version. He plans to present the revised version to cabinet and then the parliament for approval in April.

Amendments were being made, he said, in response to "feedback from stakeholders, political parties, and trade unions." The main purpose of these changes is to allow "competitive bidding" in the tender process and therefore benefit investors. The trade unions have declared that they support the "restructuring" of the CEB—i.e., attacks on jobs, and hard-won working conditions—and that the privatisation of the enterprise is unnecessary. In reality, the restructuring of the CEB is in preparation for its sale.

Minister Wijesekera wrote on his X account on March 13 that he and other government officials had held discussions with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) team currently in Sri Lanka about the CEB and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC). The IMF team, he said, discussed the "recent electricity tariff cut, and reviewed the progress on commitment on CEB and CPC and their balance sheets."

The IMF wants both these enterprises privatised. On

Tuesday, cabinet approved the power and energy minister's proposal to separate the Sapugaskanda Oil refinery from the CPC, and to run it as a separate entity so "necessary investments could be made by both local and foreign private sectors."

The CEB unions falsely claim that the IMF's privatisation demands and the victimisation of CEB workers can be halted by pressuring the government.

To this end, the unions held discussions on March 11 with the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party and have called a public protest in Colombo. The unions have also filed court action opposing the victimisation of CEB employees, and presented a petition to the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission over management's breach of workers' rights.

The unions have declared that workers must wait until the JVP-led National People's Power (NPP) wins government after this year's scheduled elections and that this will resolve all problems. The JVP-controlled All-Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (ACEEU) and several other unions are widely promoting this political dead end.

At a February 20 protest rally, ACEEU leader and JVP central committee member Ranjan Jayalal declared: "The people of this country will bring a people's victory to this country" and called on workers to wait seven months until the NPP/JVP regime comes to power in the presidential election. The JVP, however, is publicly committed to the IMF program.

Last week an ACEEU branch leader and JVP member intervened to stop an SEP team distributing copies of a Collective of Workers Action Committees statement entitled "Mobilise the working class to stop the witch hunt of electricity workers!" at the company's Homagama office.

The same branch leader also claimed that "interventions by Buddhist prelates and consumers," had compelled the government to "indefinitely postpone" introduction of the CEB restructuring bill to parliament. There was no urgency, he claimed, to call for protests that would only see workers "roaming the streets" and "burning under the hot sun."

This is a blatant lie. The Wickremesinghe government has not "indefinitely postponed" the CEB bill but, as the Power and Energy Minister Wijesekera

publicly stated last week, is rapidly moving to implement a new version of its privatisation program.

Privatisation or commercialisation of state-owned ventures is a key component of the IMF's demands, which are reviewed by a specialised team every six months. Regular evaluations of the IMF savage austerity program determine whether installments of the IMF's \$US3 billion bailout loan are provided to the government.

In opposition to the reactionary efforts of the trade union bureaucracies to politically tie the CEB and other state sector workers to the NPP and other bourgeois opposition parties, the SEP and Collective of Workers Action Committees urges workers to organise independently of these pro-capitalist formations.

In order to defeat the Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures and its antidemocratic attacks, workers must take matters into their own hands. This means forming democratically controlled action committees in every workplace, the plantations and other major economic centres. Trade union bureaucrats, capitalist parties and their hangers-on will not be admitted.

The working class and the oppressed masses can only defend their democratic and social rights in a political and industrial struggle to bring down the Wickremesinghe government and its IMF measures.

What is required is a workers' and peasants' government that implements socialist policies. This includes the repudiation of all foreign debts and the nationalising of the banks, big companies and plantations, placing them under democratic control. The SEP urges workers and young people join our party and take forward this struggle for socialist internationalism.



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