

How to fight to reinstate 62 Sri Lankan victimised electricity workers

Wimal Perera
24 April 2024

It is about 100 days since 62 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers were suspended by management, on orders from the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, for protesting against the privatisation of the state-owned enterprise. Apart from a series of toothless appeals to management and the judiciary, the CEB trade unions have abandoned any fight to reinstate the victimised employees.

The witch-hunted 62 were among tens of thousands of electricity workers who participated in a three-day anti-privatisation campaign on January 3–5. Workers joined the protest in defiance of the government-imposed Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) and management’s cancellation of all leave.

The CEB authorities started issuing suspension letters on January 15. The victimisations were not just aimed at intimidating electricity workers but also terrorising employees in scores of other state-owned enterprises (SOEs) on the government’s “restructuring” chopping block. This International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated program includes the privatisation or commercialisation of these institutions, and the closure of all so-called loss-making SOEs.

The victimised workers are being brought before separate management inquiries. The trade union leadership has advised them to individually respond to CEB authorities by writing letters stating that they took legitimate sick leave during the protests.

CEB management, however, can ignore these replies, sack the workers, or haul them before the courts for violating the EPSA or impose other punishment. Such are the dangers now facing the CEB 62, who are the class war victims of the Wickremesinghe government’s ruthless attacks.

The fight for the unconditional reinstatement of the witch-hunted workers is an urgent task. This struggle is inseparably connected to the defence of the fundamental democratic right of the working class to take political and industrial action to defend jobs, wages and working conditions and to develop the broader fight against IMF austerity.

What is the trade union bureaucracy doing?

On April 16, Ranjan Jayalal, leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled All-Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (ACEEU) and convener of the CEB trade unions collective, complained to the web-based *Morning* that CEB management’s “lack of interest” had “delayed the ongoing legal process and justice for the suspended workers.”

The “hostility” of Minister of Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekera, he said, had made “the issue more complex.”

Jayalal said that the suspended employees and the unions, on the advice of “prominent lawyers,” had lodged separate court cases, adding that he was “hopeful about the ongoing legal action.”

The JVP trade union leader’s “hope” for a legal remedy is the open abandonment of the 62 victimised workers and the outright refusal of the CEB unions to mobilise their members to overturn the management witch hunt.

Contrary to Jayalal’s claims, the reinstatement of the CEB workers will not be achieved through the judiciary or appeals to the government and CEB management.

In fact, a Sri Lankan District Court in January, following requests by CEB management, issued an enjoining order against the CEB trade unions, banning them from organising any protests against the restructuring program. This order has been continuously extended, with the next legal hearing scheduled for tomorrow.

As a Colombo Court of Appeal judge declared last October during a hearing of a trade union case against the closure of the Cooperative Whole Sale Establishment (CWE) and the termination of 292 jobs: “In these cases, the courts upheld the principle of non-interference with government policies, affirming the importance of deference to the executive branch in economic matters, particularly during times of crisis, as long as those policies remain within the bounds of legality and reasonableness.”

The closure of CWE—a government-owned wholesale and retail trading company providing essential goods, mainly

food items, to consumers—was imposed under the current restructuring program.

Taking advantage of the treacherous role being played by the union bureaucracies and their refusal to mobilise workers to fight the IMF-dictated measures, the government is intensifying its privatisation measures.

On April 17, the government gazetted its Sri Lanka Electricity Bill to restructure the CEB and will present its planned schedule to parliament today. Determined to push the measure through parliament, Minister Wijesekera told the media last Friday that even if all 24,000 CEB employees took legal action, he would not withdraw the bill.

Last month, the Ceylon Insurance Corporation was divided into two companies, which will be privatised in the near future. Suresh Shah, chief of the government's SOE Restructuring Unit, has also declared that Sri Lankan Airlines would be fully restructured by August and sold off in September.

There is a widespread support among CEB workers for their victimised colleagues and rising anger over the union leaderships' refusal to fight this attack, or even tell them what is going on with the 62 workers.

As one suspended employee told the WWS: "None of our colleagues working in the Board has any idea what is happening to us. The trade union leaders are doing nothing to inform us or give us any details on what they are doing about us. They just ask us to wait and see while trying to console us by saying that we should not fear and that we will get the jobs back.

"Some of our colleagues blame the union leaders who should have known that such a situation [witch-hunt] would occur. The union leaders asked us to join the protests, and we did, but now they are silent."

The unions should have had measures in place to counter these sorts of attacks, he said, adding that he had no faith that there would be any legal redress.

JVP union leader Jayalal has repeatedly told rallies that workers should vote out Wickremesinghe and his government in the forthcoming elections, hinting that they should support the JVP-led National People's Power (NPP) to halt the government attacks.

This claim is a fraud. Like with the Wickremesinghe regime, the JVP/NPP and all the other opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, are equally committed to the IMF's brutal attacks.

The treachery of the trade union bureaucracies cannot be allowed to go unanswered. Their abandonment of the 62 suspended CEB workers is another stark demonstration that the trade unions and their leaders will not fight to defend workers.

The CEB employees can only defend their colleagues by

taking this fight into their own hands through the establishment of independent, democratically-controlled action committees in all branches of the CEB and across the country. Such an initiative will enormously strengthen workers fighting the CEB witch hunt and the broader struggle against the IMF-dictated attacks.

Delegates from these action committees need to discuss and decide on the action they need to take, and how to mobilise working-class support across the island, while reaching out to their international class brothers and sisters who face the same struggle.

Sri Lankan workers must understand that the refusal of the CEB trade unions to mobilise workers to fight the victimisations is a warning that the union bureaucracy as a whole opposes a unified, nationwide struggle of the working class against the Wickremesinghe regime and the IMF.

As the statement issued on January 22 by the Action Committee Collective in Sri Lanka made clear, the defence of the democratic and social rights of the working class and rural and urban masses is a political fight against the Wickremesinghe regime.

The government's IMF-dictated privatisation, job destruction program can only be halted through the independent action of the working class as part of a broader program for a workers' and peasants' government, including nationalisation of the banks, the big corporations and plantations under workers' control and the repudiation all foreign debts. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party as part of the struggle for international socialism.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact