

Sri Lanka: Michelin workers continue struggle, defying management's threats

Our reporters
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The campaign being waged by Michelin tyre factory workers in Midigama, southern Sri Lanka, is at a crucial stage. Management and top labour department officials, supported by the Inter-Company Employees Union (ICEU), which is controlled by the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), are attempting to break the Michelin employees' fight for job security and their defence of victimised colleagues.

Despite the concerted campaign against them, the workers remain on strike. They refused to return to the job on Wednesday, when management reopened the plant following a shutdown of several days in response to earlier industrial action by the employees.

The 1,500-strong workforce only learnt last month that the factory had been sold to CEAT, an Indian-based corporation.

Not knowing the real situation, workers began a protest campaign on the following demands: a three million-rupee (\$US10,008) compensation payment for each Michelin company worker; all workers to be reemployed by CEAT with full continuation of their service, and that if these conditions were not granted, workers be allowed to apply for voluntary retirement under Michelin's retirement scheme.

Michelin employees began their action on May 23. This included not working when they arrived for their shifts, holding meetings and staging protests outside the factory premises.

The company reacted by suspending Sampath Karunasena and summarily sacking two other employees—Chirangivi Seneviratne and Priyanga Dimuthu Kumara—without any investigation and in violation of existing labour laws. Workers responded by demanding the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of their victimised colleagues. The ICEU bureaucracy, in line with the pro-business policies of the JVP/NPP government, is completely responsible for this witch-hunt.

The transfer deal between Michelin and CEAT was organised in December last year. ICEU officials did not tell their members about the deal, let alone inquire how

workers' rights would be protected. Instead, the union leadership endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Michelin and CEAT in blatant violation of union members' democratic rights.

On Wednesday, 11 Michelin workers' representatives met with the Midigama factory management to press their demands. Management invited labour officials, headed by a deputy labour commissioner, and ICEU branch leaders, with top company head-office management officials participating online.

Worker representatives called on management to reinstate the suspended and sacked workers, and for copies of the MoU signed by Michelin, CEAT and the ICEU leaders to be released to all workers. Management flatly rejected the demand for the reinstatement of suspended and sacked workers.

Significantly, the deputy labour commissioner, operating as a mouthpiece for the company, claimed the workers were engaged in an "illegal strike" that must be stopped.

A Midigama management brief on the discussion, sent to all employees, relayed the warning of the deputy labour commissioner that workers would "suffer serious consequences" if they continued their struggle.

Midigama management did not attempt to address any of the real issues affecting workers. Sri Lanka's labour department and its officials are generally painted as sympathetic to workers. Once again, this has proven to be false.

Workers representatives' request for a copy of the MOU signed by the trade union officials was rejected. The ICEU branch leadership, who were summoned to the discussion by the company officials, still refuses to provide a copy. Supporting these trade union bureaucrats, the deputy labour commissioner declared that employees had no right to demand a copy of the MoU.

In fact, union officials have no right to sign any MoU impacting on workers' jobs, wages and service conditions without consulting their members.

Why are the union bureaucrats and the company,

supported by labour department officials, hiding the MoU from workers? What secrets does it contain that workers must not know? Why are state officials defending this deal? These are legitimate questions.

Yesterday morning, management sent a final-warning SMS message to all employees demanding that they return to work. It declared that if they did not end their industrial action, management would shut down production and not pay wages for days lost.

At noon yesterday, management sent another SMS declaring that continued action would not be tolerated and warning workers that “there is no alternative without resuming work at the institution.”

In simple language this means the plant will be closed, workers retrenched and production resumed with new employees.

Those employed in the upper-steam operation, services and production sections were directed by management to work on Wednesday while others were granted “shutdown leave,” until full production is prepared. This is an attempt to break the strike.

While upper-steam operation, services and production section employees reported for work, they refused to work until all suspended and sacked employees are reinstated.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has launched a campaign to mobilise workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to defend the determined fight being waged by Michelin workers.

On June 2, two leading members of the SEP—Aruna Malalagama and Pani Wijesiriwardane—addressed a meeting of about 200 Michelin workers.

Malalagama said that the SEP strongly supported the Michelin workers’ fight for job security and better working conditions. He stressed the need to defend workers’ rights against company and state repression. “We are following developments in your struggle. Your fight is part of a broader class struggle of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally,” he said.

Wijesiriwardane explained how employers, the government, the trade unions and the police were united against the Michelin workers’ struggle. “The core issue is the capitalist government’s policies, which prioritise profits over workers’ rights, making the fight political. To advance their struggle, workers should establish independent action committees in each workplace, not allowing union bureaucrats and capitalist political parties,” he said.

Stressing the necessity of uniting with the international working class, he added: “Your appeal to Michelin employees worldwide is an important step forward towards international unity.”

Michelin workers attending the June 2 meeting

unanimously agreed to form an action committee independent of the union, to continue their fight and to reach out to their international colleagues. The victimised workers have lodged a complaint with the labour tribunal and an initial inquiry is scheduled for June 16.

Like all international conglomerates, Michelin operates through a global production chain. Its decision to sell the Midigama factory is part of a global reorganisation of this giant corporation to boost its profits amid a worsening international economic crisis.

Nor is this reorganisation limited to Michelin. The CEAT manufacturing company operates across multiple plants with an extensive distribution network. The deepening crisis of global capitalism has seen corporations everywhere pursue profits-oriented restructuring, including layoffs and the imposition of harsh working conditions.

At the same time, the US and all the other imperialist powers are restructuring their operations in preparation for war to establish their hegemony over resource-rich regions—those abundant in oil, gas and heavy metals—and to secure labour and markets.

The burden of these developments is being imposed by capitalist government and companies through job cuts, low wages and brutal working conditions. To fight these attacks workers must develop a revolutionary strategy.

As an SEP statement issued on June 2 said: “Michelin workers in Sri Lanka now find themselves confronted with the same issues, particularly the questions of job security now facing millions of their class brothers and sisters internationally...

“Michelin workers need to turn to workers in public and private sectors across Sri Lanka to rally their support and to urge them to form similar action committees for a unified struggle in defence of the jobs and basic rights.”

The statement concludes with a call for Michelin and other workers “to align themselves with the fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unifying their struggles internationally against government and big-business attacks.”



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