

Sri Lanka: Union leaders in new conspiracy against striking Michelin workers

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Inter Company Employees Union (ICEU) has intervened into the Michelin workers' dispute to try and block workers' determined fight for job security and against management's victimisation of militant workers.

The Midigama workers' industrial action, including sit-in strikes and protests, began on May 23 over concerns about their jobs after learning about the transfer of ownership of the factory to the Indian-based CEAT company. On May 30, the workers decided to transform their struggle into an all-out strike.

On Sunday, the Michelin Factory ICEU branch secretary P.H.A. Sunpun Madhusanka sent a special message to his members urging them not to accept any job-transfer deal scheduled to be delivered to workers on June 9, until a 12(1) agreement regarding workers' benefits is signed.

The next day the union leadership circulated an eight-page document—supposedly a sample copy of a so-called 12(1) agreement—to confuse workers. It said that workers had to agree with the CEAT takeover company on July 1, and that the company had to accept service continuity, seniority, job security and other benefits previously won at the Michelin plant, along with a 200,000-rupee compensation payment to each worker.

The ICEU document ignored strikers' demands for the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of two sacked workers and one suspended worker, a three million-rupee (\$US10,008) compensation per worker, and clear confirmation of job security.

Michelin management, which claims the strike is “illegal,” has suspended Sampath Karunasena and abruptly dismissed two other employees—Chirangivi Seneviratne and Priyanga Dimuthu Kumara—without

conducting any proper investigation and in breach of existing labour laws.

The ICEU bureaucracy, which is aligned with the pro-business and anti-working-class policies of the JVP/National People's Power (NPP) government, has openly collaborated with Michelin management.

On May 22, the union, in a clear conspiracy against its members, signed a secret memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Michelin and CEAT. Workers are still being kept in the dark about its contents, with the union and the company refusing to provide their members with a copy.

Serious questions must be raised about the ICEU Michelin branch leader's letter:

* Why did ICEU general secretary Janaka Adhikari at a May 26 press conference claim that the MoU signed with two companies would secure all rights of workers?

* Why did ICEU branch leader Madhusanka fully approve Adhikari's “assurances,” and ask workers to transfer to CEAT, claiming that all their rights have been secured?

* Why is the MoU being kept secret? Is it because it secured the profit interests of both companies?

The ICEU branch leader's letter to Michelin workers has vindicated their independent fight to defend their basic rights and the campaign launched by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in support of their struggle. As the questions in the *World Socialist Web Site* article published on June 6 ask:

“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?”

While none of these questions have been answered by the ICEU, the union is attempting to persuade members to sign an agreement that they know little about. If workers resign from Michelin or accept an appointment letter from CEAT without knowing the full consequences, they face a disaster.

Michelin workers cannot trust the union bureaucracy and should decisively reject this trap. They need to take matters into their own hands by intensifying their industrial campaign, independent of the union and through their own action committee. This means turning to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks on their jobs, wages and working conditions.

The Michelin workers are fighting the profit-driven restructuring processes of both companies and the brutal cost-cutting attack and big business policies of the JVP/NPP government with the union bureaucracies operating as an industrial police force.

The ICEU and other unions are deliberately hiding the job destruction policies facing private and public sector workers alike. In April and May, two garment factories in Sri Lanka shut down, resulting in more than 3,500 workers losing their jobs. At the same time, the JVP/NPP, in line with International Monetary Fund demands, plans to axe half a million public sector jobs.

Michelin or other workers cannot defend their rights by pressuring management or but acting as an independent political and industrial movement. This means establishing action committees in every workplace, factory and plantation, independent of the union bureaucracies and the capitalist parties.

This is also requires aligning themselves with the fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unify their struggles internationally on a socialist program that fights big business, capitalist governments and the profit system.



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