

Sri Lankan power workers oppose government restructuring plans

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Tens of thousands of workers took industrial action last week against the restructuring of the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). As part of the IMF austerity program, the government is dividing the CEB into four state-owned companies, paving the way for their eventual privatisation.

The widespread opposition among workers to the restructuring forced CEB trade union leaders to call limited action—a sick-note campaign involving 15,000 workers—on September 17–18 in a bid to let off steam.

Around 10,000 workers joined the two-day protest in front of the CEB headquarters in Colombo, including 7,000 on the first day, according to the trade unions, despite wet weather.

President Anura Dissanayake threatened workers, telling a public meeting at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation-owned oil storage complex in Kolonnawa on September 17 that the restructuring program would continue.

Dissanayake defended his government's new bill to restructure the CEB, replacing existing legislation, by declaring it "protects the country's power sovereignty" and "makes the CEB efficient." Referring to the industrial action, Dissanayake warned: "We can't work like that."

He reiterated comments by Energy Minister Kumara Jayakody on September 15, saying CEB employees who do not agree with the restructuring could resign. "No one can disrupt" the government's restructuring plan, he insisted.

His claim that the CEB will not be sold under the new bill is a lie. Whatever his claims, its purpose like the previous legislation is to break up and privatise the CEB.

Citing comments by Pubudu Niroshana Hadigallage, director of the Electricity Sector Reforms Bureau,

Lanka News Web reported on September 18: "The Ceylon Electricity Board will be dissolved and abolished from the exact date when all the provisions of the Electricity Sector Amendment Act No. 14 of 2025 come into effect."

Workers transferred to the new companies will have no guarantee of security of their jobs and working conditions. Those wanting to "voluntarily retire" will receive a pay-out after any debts are deducted.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners spoke to CEB workers at last week's protest.

A Wariyapola maintenance department employee explains that he owes about 2.5 million rupees from a housing loan from the Provident Fund. If he "voluntarily" leaves he will receive half or less of the proposed maximum compensation of 5 million rupees. "This is a trap," he said. "We joined the CEB with so many hopes. Now all of them are going to collapse."

A worker from the Akurella distribution centre denounced threats made by the president and energy minister telling workers to "go home if you don't like it". He said: "We cannot let that happen. No one has the right to tell us that. We didn't join the CEB to leave early. No one here likes the VRS (voluntary retirement scheme)."

With the workers enraged by Dissanayake's threats, union leaders have been compelled to further action. Sri Lanka Electricity Technicians Association president Kosala Abeysinghe told the *Daily Mirror* on Friday that the "third phase" of the strike would begin on September 21 and continue until Wednesday. "If the president continues to respond in the same way, we will be compelled to escalate matters further," he said.

The trade union bureaucrats are not opposed to the restructuring as such and only insist that they should be actively involved in the process. Their attitude was

spelled out in the slogan on a union picket board handed to CEB workers: “Do the restructuring properly.”

At a media briefing on September 18, the president of the Joint Electricity Workers’ Union, Charitha Sri Chinthaka, addressed Dissanayake fondly as “comrade President” and reiterated his desire to “resolve the issue peacefully.”

Workers must understand that the attack on their rights flows from the government’s determination to implement the IMF’s demands in full. On this the union leaders agree, telling workers that the IMF’s demands cannot be rejected because the economy must be restored.

But which economy are they talking about? It is the capitalist economy dominated by the banks, big business, foreign investors and loan sharks that are demanding that working people must bear the burden of the economic crisis.

It is impossible for CEB Workers or any other section of the working class to defend their fundamental rights within the framework of the profit system and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The Workers’ Action Committees Collective issued a statement titled “Resist the Power Minister’s threat! Form CEB action committees to fight the government’s restructuring program!” Published in Sinhala on the *World Socialist Web Site* and distributed among striking CEB workers, it called for the following:

CEB workers must take the struggle for their rights into their own hands. How can this be done? The first step is for the employees of the Electricity Board to form workers’ action committees at all CEB workplaces. The trade union bureaucrats should not be allowed in these committees. The workers should decide their demands and the actions to be taken to fight for them through democratic discussion.

By forming such committees, it is necessary to reach out to other workers who are under attack from the government like you and organise a united struggle. We propose the following program of action for such a struggle:

No to restructuring/privatisation! Place all

state institutions, whether or not they are subject to restructuring, under workers’ democratic control.

Secure all jobs, decent salaries and pensions indexed to cost of living and decent working conditions!

Refuse to pay foreign debts!

This struggle is a broader political fight against the Dissanayake government, which defends the capitalist profit system and global capital.

What is necessary is a unified struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to a socialist program including the nationalisation of all economic nerve centres, including all banks, big companies and plantations under workers’ democratic control.

In this fight, workers in Sri Lanka need to unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally who face similar attacks, by joining with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

This is the only realistic program to successfully advance the struggle of workers at the CEB and elsewhere in Sri Lanka.



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