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Sri Lanka

Workers protest against pension reform

- News from around the world -

Publication date: Wednesday 1 June 2011

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The Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA) of Sri Lanka comprising 26 trade unions including the powerful Lanka Bank Employees' Union, Ceylon Mercantile Union and Free Trade Zone General Employees' Union has been organising protests against the government's planned pension reform bill. A violent clash in Katunayaka Free Trade Zone on Monday May 30th has left one young man in a critical condition.

Joint Trade Union Alliance says that it has also taken measures to file a fundamental rights petition against the assault that took place on Monday in Katunayaka Free Trade Zone.

The problem started with the arrival of several ministers including Sarath Gunaratne and Priyadarshani Fernando claiming to distribute leaflets to the factories to make the workers aware of the benefits of the proposed pension scheme. They came with a large group of security personnel. NSSP leaders of the area informed UPU news that the arrival of these ministers at a time when the government has announced that the pension will not be applicable to the free trade zones is quite strange.

Workers were provoked into hooting and work stoppage. Police who came with the ministers wanted to stop hooting and that started the clash which ended with one worker critically injured. Trade union activists of JTUA shut down free trade zones after clashes between police.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's ruling party later said it has decided to suspend the pension bill in parliament, and the government said the free trade area where the clashes took place would be closed on Tuesday to "restore industrial peace". Police said they fired tear gas and live ammunition while scuffling with several thousand striking employees at the free trade zone near Lanka's only international airport, located about 33 km (20 miles) north of the commercial capital, Colombo. In the first big union action to hit Mahinda regime since the end of the genocidal war in 2009, a union backing the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna party also backed the JTUA led strike over a pension plan that was opposed even by the employers.

Authorities said at least eight people were wounded by police including by gunfire after warning shots were ignored, and 15 officers were hurt when an estimated 5,000 people began throwing rocks and stormed a police station, damaging vehicles. "When a large crowd stormed in, police fired in the air and then later fired at them to control the gathering," Inspector General of Police Mahinda Balasuriya told a press conference.

The JTUA leaders blamed police for turning violent what it called a natural protest to the intervention of ministers.

"We won't stop our campaign unless the government releases the arrested employees and conduct an impartial inquiry why the police fired live bullets at unarmed employees," said Linus Jayathilaka, president of the United Federation of Labour and the deputy leader of the NSSP, to UPU news. The JTUA supported by pro JVP unions, which have in the past been a significant force whose actions became a political challenge, oppose the new pension plan on the grounds it will not guarantee retirement savings and will dissolve both the Provident Fund and the Trust Fund. Employers have complained too, saying it is an additional cost. The government has been faulted for failing to explain the plan. On Monday, Labour Minister Gamini Lokuge said free trade zone employees were exempt from the new pension proposal, according to the government's Information Department.

The strike has affected more than 120,000 employees in the 12 free trade zones across Lanka, which has been trying to attract major foreign investment. The 265 companies in the BOI-run free trade zones account for about 13

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percent of the annual income in exports.

A protest in the capital Colombo on on 1st June gatehred two thousand people. A protest in the free trade zone is planned for 4pm tomorrow.

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