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Mauritius

Privatising the privatisation debate

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Management consultants Coopers and Lybrand are helping the Mauritan government avoid public debate on privatisation.

The whole debate on privatisation and development strategy was itself privatised when Coopers and Lybrand organised a seminar on privatisation where several top Ministers, private sector organisations, heads of the public sector and the trade union movement were invited to find a consensus on how to privatise. The Finance Minister was to make the opening speech, but the whole event was to be chaired by the head of the Coopers and Lybrand Privatisation Unit, Peter Benson.

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Through the All Workers Conference, all trade union confederations boycotted the seminar, and demonstrators at the hotel distributed an open letter explaining why the All Workers Conference was not participating. Government had promised national debate on privatisation, it read, and now it is "privatising the debate."

"No consensus for privatisation exists in Mauritius. The All Workers Conference strongly opposes the process. Therefore we cannot participate in a seminar which aims at finding a consensus on how to privatise."

This intervention disrupted the consultants' high profile media campaign. In the end, the All Workers Conference probably got more media coverage than the Coopers and Lybrand seminar.

Two days later, the national public television station organised a prime-time debate with two representatives of the All Workers Conference, a ultra-liberal economist, and two representatives of Coopers and Lybrand. The pro-privatisation speakers kept scoring own-goals, the "independent" economist even saying that, if selling the country to multinationals would make money for the "nation", then it was better to do so. With no representative of government invited, the debate itself was effectively privatised, with labour representatives opposing paid consultants.

This TV debate transformed the All Workers Conference campaign on the necessity to oppose privatisation into a truly national debate. The "independent" commercial press was livid. Most editorials the next morning effectively said that "government should stop looking for democratic consensus on privatisation, and get on with it."

After all this unexpected publicity, the 4th All Workers Conference against privatisation on 10 March (Independence Day) was a great success. Organisers presented the government with a letter demanding that the government freeze the whole privatisation process until there has been real debate on what is wrong with the public sector, and what can be done to make it work better and more democratically; that the government sign an historic pact with the All Workers Conference and the trade unions promising that it will not dismantle universal, public and free services within the Welfare State; and that it stop trying to force privatisation through the sale or distribution of shares in privatised sectors.

The government has not yet replied. But someone at Coopers and Lybrand is burning the midnight oil to produce a slick, dishonest response.

Taxation

A second All Workers Conference White Paper was published in April, discussing taxation (the movement's first White Paper discussed privatisation). The new document is very timely, as the debate is shifting from privatisation towards how to finance the public sector, as the government launches a illusory "pre-budget consultation" process that will culminate in May/June with a new budget.

Sugar

An All Workers Commission on the Sugar Industry met in mid April for the first time. Sugar Industry workers are the most experienced and still the most influential section of the working class in Mauritius. They were in the forefront of the big general strike in 1979. Now they are threatened with factory closures, as part of the centralisation of the sugar industry, and attacks on work conditions.