

Sri Lankan bank workers defy court injunction

A correspondent
31 March 1999

Over 4,000 commercial bank workers in Sri Lanka staged a noontime picket and a half-day walkout on March 25, defying a district court order. On the same day more than 20,000 state bank workers also went on a half-day strike in support of their wage demands. These commercial and state bank employees are members of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union.

A district court judge in Colombo, A.W.A. Salam, issued an injunction order on March 24 against the union after considering a petition filed by the bank employers. This injunction prohibited strikes, go-slows, refusal of work, picketing and demonstrations until the court hears the case on April 5 and makes a decision. The court injunction was an *ex parte* order in which the court heard only the petition of the complainant employers. The union will be given a hearing only on April 5.

Although the court order was publicised through the mass media, commercial bank workers picketed in their workplaces and staged the walkout anyway. According to some bank workers, union leaders tried to present a legal cover by saying that since they did not receive the court order, the action would not be found illegal. But the workers were overwhelmingly in support of the walkout at any cost. A group of workers from a commercial bank told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were not ready to abandon their action despite the court order.

On March 20 there was a membership meeting of the commercial bank section of the union attended by over 2,000 employees. In this meeting workers voted for the union actions. They are demanding a 35 percent wage increase while the employers offered only 20 percent. The union is arguing that since the banks are making huge profits, wage increases are not impossible.

Last year when the commercial bank employees

started the agitation for their wage demand management was able to get a court injunction similar to the present one. It was later withdrawn, however, in expectation of a compromise with the union. But union bureaucracy was unable to scale down the wage demand to the level of the employers' offer because of the opposition of the membership, and it was compelled to call new action.

The intervention of the courts against the bank workers began in 1997 under the People's Alliance (PA) regime, when the attorney general himself went to the courts demanding an injunction against the Central Bank Employees Union, which was also agitating for a wage increase. Accepting the injunction, the union bureaucracy terminated the agitation. A court case on the issue is still pending.

The commercial bank employers, in their fresh application for the injunction, said that the agitation would hamper bank work and affect foreign and local investors' confidence.

Serious political issues are posed before the bank workers, but the bureaucracy, based on the program of pressuring the employers to come to a compromise with the union, politically disarms the workers. The employers have already demanded the government to appoint an arbitrator to settle the question of a wage increase. If appointed, the arbitrator's decision would be legally binding on the union.

The defiance of the court order by the bank employees indicates the growing class tensions in Sri Lanka. On March 26 a sick note campaign--a protest campaign to stay out of work on sick leave--was waged by the non-medical workers and doctors in government hospitals throughout the country. Thousands of the non-academic staff of the universities and affiliated colleges went on a one-day strike the same day.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact