

Antiwar protest in Sri Lankan capital

A WSWS reporting team
13 March 2003

Several hundred Sri Lankan workers held a two-hour protest picket outside Fort Railway Station in central Colombo on March 8 to oppose US plans for war against Iraq. Nearly 100 young workers came from the Biyagama Free Trade Zone (FTZ) near Colombo, as well as employees from the railways, banks, port, hospitals and school. A large number of bystanders gathered to watch the demonstration and listen to speeches.

The protest was organised by the Alliance for the Protection of National Resources and Human Rights (APNR), a coalition of trade unions, non-government organisations and protest groups. These include the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, the United Workers Federation, the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), the Green Movement and the Movement for the Protection of Phosphate Deposits from Eppawala in the north central province.

The demonstration was organised under the theme “Do not spill blood for oil”. Protesters chanted “Join the world mass opposition to the war”, “Condemn the war threat against Iraq”, “Bush wants a puppet rule in Iraq!” and “No bombs to Iraq but food for children.”

WSWS correspondents spoke to some of the 75 workers who enthusiastically joined the rally from the Prices Candles factory in the Biyagama FTZ. Joseph, a young worker, told us: “The aim of this war is to subjugate not only Iraq but the whole people in the Middle East. America wants to keep the whole world under its authority.

“People in the US, Europe and worldwide are against this war. We have joined them. It is not enough to protest. Workers and the oppressed in the world must unite on a definite program. However, it is not clear to me what sort of program we should adopt.”

Joseph said he was not a member of any political party but the secretary of the trade union in the factory. He explained that workers from other FTZ factories,

including Joy Lanka and DB Garment, had also joined the protest.

A group of FTZ workers pointed out that they were facing exploitation by the same corporations that were looking to profit from the war. “America is an imperialist country. We are exploited by imperialist investors. They exploit women workers at low wages. We also could face repression by these powers,” they said.

Another worker explained: “Our mothers, sisters and brothers are working in the Middle East. Their lives are also in danger. They would lose their jobs. Any war on Iraq will affect people worldwide, as well as Iraq.”

A teacher, Prabhashini, said the claim by the US that it wants to destroy Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction was false. “The US itself once gave weapons to Iraq. What the US wants is to capture the oil resources in Iraq.”

Health worker Muthu Lakshmi Rajapaksa declared: “I am against this war as a mother. How many lives will be destroyed? How many small children would die?”

V.S. Piyaratna, a worker who had been retrenched from the Orex factory, recalled the earlier Gulf War waged by the US against Iraq, which had devastated the country and created countless tragedies. “This war goes against the progress of humanity,” he said.

A railway worker was one of the people who took and read copies of the WSWS Editorial Board statement “The tasks facing the anti-war movement”. He was critical of the media for “not providing truthful information and analysis”. He said that after reading the statement he understood that the war would bring very serious consequences.

Joe Seneviratna, a well-known art critic, said: “This war was planned a year ago. The US is fighting for a new world order. The crisis in US is very deep. Today CNN reported that US employers had cut 308,000 jobs

in February. This was the biggest job cut in a single month since the September 11 attack.

“This [the war] is not merely a wickedness of Bush. This is a result of the contradictions of capitalism. I am a reader of the *World Socialist Web Site*. I will read the editorial board statement and let you know my opinion.”

The speakers at the rally offered no analysis of what was driving the Bush administration to war and cultivated the illusion that Washington could be pressured to back down. Ceylon Bank Employees Union official C.W. Ratnayake told those gathered that “through building a powerful international public opinion war can be averted”.

APNR convenor Rev Mahamankadawala Piyaratana spoke pessimistically about the “disinterestedness of the masses in the war against Iraq”. “Some people think war will only affect Muslims and not others,” he added—a reference more to the views of the conservative Buddhist hierarchy than ordinary people. He prayed that everyone would be endowed with courage to oppose the war.

The WSWs reporting team distributed scores of copies of the editorial board statement and other articles, as well as the latest issue of the Sinhala-language edition of the *World Socialist Web Site Review*.



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