

LTTE joins government strikebreaking against Sri Lankan health workers

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The fact that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is backing the Sri Lankan government's attempts to crush an island-wide strike by health workers speaks volumes about its class character and the real purpose of its peace talks with Colombo.

Some 80,000 workers began an indefinite strike on September 17, directly challenging the ruling United National Front's (UNF) attempts to implement IMF demands for budget cutbacks and privatisation. Faced with rising prices and desperately low wages, the vast majority of health workers have backed the campaign for substantial pay increases.

The UNF government has refused to make any concessions and denounced the strikers, blaming them for endangering patients' lives. In a flagrant breach of Sri Lankan law, it has sent members of the armed forces into the hospitals to take over the duties of the striking workers. The Health Ministry has sacked 1,600 casual workers and recruited hundreds of scabs to replace them. At the same time, the police have been used to harass, intimidate and even detain strikers.

The LTTE has decided not to defend the workers, but to openly back the government. On September 23, its leaders in the Northern Province city of Jaffna convened a meeting at the Jaffna base hospital—a major state-run facility—and told workers they should end their strike on “humanitarian grounds”. The LTTE's argument dovetails exactly with that of the government and the Colombo media, serving to cover up the fact that full responsibility for the undermining of the public health system, and the resultant threats to patients, lies with the government and its policies.

The Jaffna hospital workers engaged in a heated exchange with the LTTE officials, demanding to know why they had decided to oppose the strike, yet had supported earlier industrial action by doctors. In the

end, the workers defied the LTTE's warnings that the military would be sent into the hospital, and resolved to remain on strike.

According to media reports, similar incidents have taken place in other areas. Jaffna regional leader Illanpirai reportedly ordered a return to work at the town's main teaching hospital, warning that LTTE cadres would replace the strikers. In Vavuniya, LTTE leader Amirthab told the press that 20 LTTE members had been sent to the local hospital to compel strikers to go back. The same orders were apparently issued in eastern Batticaloa, where workers again defied the LTTE in at least one major hospital.

Leaders of the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUSA) have confirmed these reports, which have not been denied by the LTTE. Wickramabahu Karunaratne, leader of the opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), attempted to justify the LTTE's actions when he told the BBC that the organisation was simply seeking to preempt the dispatch of Sri Lankan troops to the hospitals. But his claim fell flat when the LTTE failed to issue any denunciation of the government once the military had entered the hospitals.

The LTTE's response to the strike demonstrates that it serves the interests, not of the Tamil workers and oppressed masses as it has always claimed, but of the bourgeoisie. Confronted with a significant movement of the working class, involving Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers fighting to defend their basic rights and common interests, the LTTE has chosen to support the Colombo regime.

For two decades, the LTTE waged a war for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island, insisting that only in this way could the democratic rights of the Tamil minority be defended. Its real agenda, however, was to establish a base for the

Tamil bourgeoisie to develop its own relations with imperialism and to exploit the working class. This was proven beyond a shadow of doubt when, having agreed to enter peace talks with Colombo aimed at winning a share of power, the LTTE immediately abandoned its demands for a separate state.

Chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham signalled his organisation's orientation at the outset of the negotiations when he pointedly backed the government's perspective for Sri Lanka to become "a successful Tiger economy." This was nothing less than an open endorsement for Colombo's efforts to implement the IMF's economic restructuring program.

The dominant sections of Sri Lankan business have been insisting on an end to the war to encourage foreign investment, to press ahead with the IMF agenda and to coordinate efforts to deal with opposition from an increasingly restive working class. The LTTE wants to carve out a niche for itself as the policeman for these policies among the country's Tamil minority. This is the real meaning of its support for the government's strikebreaking. With the peace negotiations stalled, the LTTE is using the current situation to send an unmistakable message to big business and the major powers: that it will function as Colombo's dependable and trustworthy ally.

Any illusions that the LTTE will balk at lining up with, or directly implementing, violent reprisals against the working class should be immediately dispelled. In the course of the civil war, in order to foment communal sentiment, it sought to blame Sinhalese workers, villagers and the poor for the crimes of the Colombo government, deliberately targeting them for attack. In 1996, the LTTE bombed the Central Bank building in Colombo, killing 100 innocent bank employees and wounding more than 1,400.

A year ago, LTTE officials on the northern island of Kayts issued death threats against members of the Socialist Equality Party after the local fishermen's union, which the SEP had been instrumental in establishing, refused to hand over funds to build an LTTE office. The threats were followed by an unprovoked knife attack on SEP member Nagaraja Kodeeswaran, along with notices appealing for "all people to wipe out them and their party's work".

The SEP warned that the LTTE's actions were aimed, not just at its own members, but at suppressing

any struggle by Tamil workers for their own independent class interests. The attack on the SEP was a sharp indication of the role the LTTE was preparing to play under a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo. These warnings have been strikingly confirmed in the LTTE's attacks on the health workers' strike.

The health strike itself has revealed the fundamental, organic strivings of Sri Lankan workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—to unify their struggles across racial, language and religious lines.

In opposition to all forms of communal politics, the working class must turn to a genuinely progressive solution to the political, economic and social crisis. This necessitates joining and building the Socialist Equality Party—the only party that has consistently opposed the war, demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan troops from the north and east, while at the same time rejecting the LTTE's call for a separate Tamil Eelam. The SEP fights for the unity of all Sri Lankan workers with their counterparts throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally, through the formation of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam.



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