

Striking Sri Lankan bus workers defy government threats

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Tens of thousands of workers from Sri Lanka's state-owned Regional Transport Companies (RTCs) launched a national strike on February 14, to fight for long-promised pay increases. The stoppage, which erupted despite the opposition of the trade unions, is the first major workers' struggle since the coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power last April.

Workers are demanding the 2,500-rupee (\$US25) per month salary increase promised by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government in its November 2004 budget, and an 800-rupee rise outstanding from a government-wide salary allowance granted in 2001. Their demands also include the re-establishment of the Sri Lanka Transport Board (CTB), which was downsized and transformed into RTCs, also known as cluster bus companies, two and half decades ago.

The strikers are defying intense pressure from the trade unions affiliated to the ruling UPFA coalition, as well as the opposition United National Front (UNF). They walked off the job from almost all depots after workers at Kalutara spearheaded the struggle by forming an independent committee last week. The strike is cutting across the ethnic lines previously exploited by the major political parties to divide the working class.

The walkout is an expression of a growing militancy among workers in the face of the Kumaratunga government's attacks on living standards and jobs, and the privatisation of state-owned industries. Concerned that other workers in the state sector will join the struggle and intensify its political crisis, the government has threatened to place the bus depots under police and army control and to use the armed forces to run buses.

To use the security forces against strikers the government may invoke sweeping emergency powers put in place in the wake of the tsunami. These draconian measures allow the military to take over facilities and direct employees to work under penalty of sacking and legal action. These emergency regulations were not aimed at assisting tsunami victims, many of whom have received little or no aid, but at the growing discontent over the disaster and more broadly deteriorating living standards.

The government called in the union leaders, who have condemned the strike, for a "discussion" on February 15,

seeking ways to stifle the struggle. But the talks failed to end the strike.

The dispute began on February 8, when thousands of employees from the Kalutara, Matugama, Horana, Panadura, Galle and Ambalangoda bus depots walked out. Two days later workers at nine other RTCs launched a one-hour strike amid picketing campaigns near bus depots around the country. In Galle and Ambalangoda, the government deployed police units to intimidate pickets who were seeking to prevent non-strikers entering depot premises.

When Kalutara and Ruhunu bus workers defied an ultimatum to report to work, the government announced on February 12 that it had sacked 2,200 strikers. Workers responded by calling the island-wide strike.

At present, around 35,000 workers are employed in 11 RTCs. Their average take-home salary is just 5,000 rupees (\$US50) a month, which is inadequate even for a small family. "We simply cannot live on the salary we get. We voted for this government expecting them to fulfil their promises on a salary increase. Now we are really hurt by the way the government behaves," explained a bus conductor from the Ambalangoda depot.

The bus workers have not had a pay rise since 2001. In that year, government workers received a 1,200-rupee salary allowance, yet bus workers were given only one third of it, or 400 rupees. The RTCs said they had no money but promised to pay the full amount later. Nothing has happened since then, while the cost of living index has risen from 2,899 in 2001 to 3,986 in January 2005—equivalent to 2,720 rupees.

Finance minister Sarath Amunugama announced a 2,500-rupee pay rise last November for government employees. But the government refused to extend the increase to state-owned corporations, including the RTCs. During the general election campaign last April, it was a different tune. The UPFA and affiliated trade unions exploited the anger among bus workers toward the UNF government, promising to "revive the state transport service".

Of all the trade unions, that led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the second largest constituent of the ruling UPFA, has taken the lead in attacking the strikers. When in the opposition, the JVP posed as the champion of workers' rights,

but once in office its true colours have emerged. The JVP-controlled union has echoed the government's assertions that the strike will ruin the state-owned transport companies.

Chairman of the JVP-led All Ceylon Transport Workers Union (ACTWU), Sepala Liyanage, told the *Daily Mirror* on February 10: "We are not involved in bringing about this strike." He declared there was obvious "Mafia involvement in this [strike]".

After the tsunami, the JVP declared that all efforts have to be directed to "rebuilding the country" and that industrial action had to be prevented. Its attitude to striking transport workers makes clear that this nationalist demagoguery has one purpose: to subordinate the interests of workers to the profits of business.

Unions affiliated to the other UPFA partners—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Sri Lanka Communist Party (SLCP)—also announced that they were not supporting the strike.

The striking workers, however, have ignored the union leaders. On February 14, Liyanage complained to the same newspaper: "The entire strike has got out of hand. The workers have taken the issue into their own hands." Nimal Abeyasiri, the leader of the SLFP union, likewise remarked that members were not listening to "orders" anymore.

Wijesinghe, a driver from Elpitiya depot in the southern rural area expressed revulsion at the union leaders' role. He told the WSWs: "None of the union leaders worked to get the salary increase. The JVP built a union recently. But they are also in the same boat. Now they avoid workers' campaigns."

A worker from the Horana RTC said: "The union leaders are trying to break the struggle by misleading workers. The state and other media have also launched a reactionary campaign to try to isolate the struggle." He expressed appreciation for the interest of the WSWs and requested support in order to protect workers' rights.

The government has insisted that it cannot grant workers' demands. Transport minister Felix Perera told the media that the RTCs were "inefficient" and unprofitable. But the deterioration in the bus services is entirely due to official policy. The state-owned transport service was once an important subsidised service for the poor masses. It was among the concessions won by working people to try to maintain their social conditions.

Under the open-market economic policy of the IMF and World Bank over the past 25 years, the CTB has been drastically downsized, paving the way for privatisation. Bus depots were divided into several cluster companies and workshops were sold to the private sector. Most of the 18,000 or so private buses are owned by around 15,000 small operators.

RTC bus fares also rose phenomenally, placing burdens on ordinary people. Without sufficient revenue, some of the RTC cluster companies have failed to pay salaries on time. Over the years, successive governments have sought to totally liquidate

the state bus and railway services, which remain only because of workers' resistance to privatisation.

The mainstream media has joined the campaign against the bus strike. In an editorial, the *Daily Mirror* branded the strike "unfair" and blamed workers for the deterioration of the bus companies. An *Island* editorial warned workers that "depots must run in the same manner as private bus companies," that is "if they bring in money, they will have their jobs and be paid".

The unanimity of the government, opposition parties, trade unions and the media against the striking workers demonstrates their nervousness about growing unrest among other sections of the working class. The resentment and anger has been compounded by the devastating tsunami, which claimed 40,000 lives and left nearly half a million homeless. There have already been protests over the lack of basic aid.

RTC workers have defied their union leaders and declared their determination to fight for their jobs and decent wages. However, militancy, no matter how determined and courageous, is not enough. The government is implementing a definite program dictated by the World Bank and IMF which is making deep inroads into the living standards. Working people need a political program and party on which to base their struggles to defend their class interests.

In response to the government's call for workers to sacrifice to keep the RTCs afloat, the demand should be raised for a massive injection of funds from the state to provide decent jobs and conditions and an efficient public transport system. Other workers in hospitals, schools and industry are in exactly the same boat and should support the strikers.

The government will undoubtedly plead that it does not have the money. This simply raises the necessity of a workers and peasants government and socialist policies to reorganise society to meet the needs of working people, rather than the profits of a few. For such a struggle, Sri Lankan workers need to reach out to their class brothers and sisters around the world who confront similar attacks by international finance capital. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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