

Sri Lankan unions scuttle islandwide bus strike

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Unions in Sri Lanka have succeeded in shutting down an indefinite strike by 35,000 bus workers, clearing the way for the destruction of thousands of jobs. The indefinite strike erupted on February 14, despite the opposition of trade unions, after workers at a number of bus depots run by state-owned Regional Transport Companies (RTC) had walked out several days before.

The strikers were demanding a 2,500-rupee (\$US25) monthly pay increase promised by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government in its 2005 budget and an 800-rupee allowance outstanding from 2001. Central in the dispute was the call for the reestablishment of the Sri Lanka Transport Board (CTB), which has been broken up into cluster companies or Regional Transport Companies (RTCs).

Mindful of the growing hostility to the UPFA's attacks on living standards and jobs, the unions were anxious to end the strike fearing it could encourage wider industrial action. Last week thousands of Co-operative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) workers began a national campaign against the closure of the company's retail section. Health workers, Ceylon Electricity Board employees, rail workers and non-academic university staff have also been engaged in protests.

The government called in union leaders for negotiations after the threat of mass sackings and the use of the military failed to break the determination of strikers. After two days of talks, leading officials from five unions signed a deal with Transport Minister Felix Perera on February 16 and called off the strike. The unions involved included those affiliated with the political parties in the UPFA. All of them had condemned the strike from the outset.

The key role was played by the All Ceylon Transport Workers Union (ACTWU), which is affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). When the first day of talks failed to produce any shift in the government's position, ACTWU leader Sepala Liyanage appealed for some kind of concession, however token, to allow the unions to impose a return to work. He suggested that the government at least present a timeframe for the introduction

of pay increases.

Liyanage had earlier attacked the strike as the product of "mafia involvement". In order to bolster his union's standing among bus workers and to give some credibility to the talks, the ACTWU organised a picket outside the transport ministry on February 16, the final day of discussions. ACTWU bureaucrats claimed that the agreement with the government represented a gain for workers.

While the agreement makes several paltry concessions to workers, it avoids any concrete government commitment to pay outstanding salary increases and lays the basis for axing thousands of jobs. Even the a token 1,000 rupee allowance may prove to be short lived. Treasury, which in January slashed 100 million rupees from the subsidy to RTCs, has only allocated enough funds to pay the allowance for three months.

The government agreed to reestablish the disbanded Central Transport Board in "a new form in three months". It is clear, however, that this "new form" will be the means to impose mass retrenchments and make further inroads into working conditions. The unions will function alongside management to demand that workers sacrifice and push up productivity to ensure the new entity is profitable.

Importantly, the deal includes a voluntary retirement scheme (VRS), which the unions will use to push through savage job cuts. Liyanage told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the government calculated that 15,000 RTC jobs were redundant. Finance minister Sarath Amunugama informed the *Sunday Leader* on February 20 that the revamped CTB would "be restructured" and "the VRS will be given to at least 17,000 employees".

The unions did not convene any meetings of bus workers to discuss the agreement or to vote on a return to work. Workers were first made aware of the decision to end the strike through the electronic media on the night of February 16 and through the print media the following day. Some waited hours before reporting to work, thinking that their colleagues in other depots may still be on strike.

There is considerable dissatisfaction and a sense of betrayal among bus workers. Posters appeared on buses in a number of areas proclaiming: “All trade union leaders sold us out for 1,000 rupees”. But there was no organised resistance to the agreement.

Workers at several depots told the WSWS that they did not know what to do, even though they opposed the union-brokered deal. At the Kalutara depot, workers who started the strike formed an independent committee but failed to follow up their initiative. Faced with government threats and lacking an alternative political perspective, the strikers effectively ceded control of the dispute to the union leaders who were hostile to the struggle from the outset.

Despite their misgivings, many workers held out the hope that the agreement, especially the reestablishment of the CTB “in some form”, would guarantee job security and the return of some previous benefits. In fact, there is no basis for guaranteeing decent jobs within the framework of the profit system. The “new” CTB will simply be a disguise for the same agenda of restructuring and privatisation that has driven governments for the last three decades.

The state-run CTB was established in 1958 when the Sri Lankan Freedom Party government of Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike nationalised the existing bus companies, along with other infrastructure entities, as part its bourgeois nationalist program. Far from being a socialist measure, it was a component of a nationally regulated economy aimed at strengthening Sri Lankan capitalism and defusing the demands of working people for more far-reaching measures.

Nationalised public transport provided subsidised fares for commuters and students. Workers in the state-run bus service were able to win concessions, including sports facilities, rest rooms and free health care. From the late 1970s, however, the development of globalised production began to undermine the basis for national economic regulation. In Sri Lanka, the United National Party (UNP) government of President J.R. Jayawardene was one of the first in the world to implement free market reforms, including the privatisation of state enterprises.

In 1986, the UNP began to liquidate the CTB by retrenching thousands of workers with negligible compensation. The workshops were privatised and the private sector was allowed to run bus services. Subsequently bus depots were decentralised and a handful of shares distributed to workers making them responsible for profitably running the operations. The trade unions accommodated completely to this agenda.

Throughout the subsequent two decades, government after government has come to office pledging to “revive public transport” only to cave in to the demands of the IMF and

World Bank for further restructuring. Funds for public transport, like the budgets for other essential services such as health and education, have been slashed to pay for financial incentives and tax breaks for big business and foreign investors. Those who have paid the price have been workers and commuters.

The present regime is no different. The UPFA sought to capitalise on the hostility to the previous UNP-led coalition by promising better public transport and to call a halt to privatisations. After narrowly winning last April’s general election, however, the new government has proceeded to implement the same policies as its predecessor.

The JVP, which prior to the election postured as a defender of ordinary people, is fully responsible for the government’s measures. Unlike the traditional parties of the working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party—which are largely discredited, there were illusions that the JVP would be different. Now in office for the first time, the JVP is playing a key role in suppressing opposition to the government on the basis of “defending the nation”.

Workers cannot advance a struggle to defeat the assault on jobs, living standards or basic rights while they maintain the slightest illusion that capitalist governments can be pressured through the trade unions to grant concessions. In every country, it is workers who are being pressured by the trade unions to sacrifice to make “their” corporations and enterprises profitable.

By itself, militancy is not enough. It is essential that workers base their struggles on an independent political perspective that unequivocally represents their own class interests. Only on the basis of an socialist program can they unite their struggles nationally and internationally to fight the dictates of the transnational corporations and their political spokesmen.



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