

# Sri Lankan bus workers denounce union betrayal

Our correspondents  
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Sri Lankan bus workers angrily criticised union leaders after they shut down last month's bus strike. Workers launched the campaign on their own initiative, but the union brokered an agreement with the government to end the industrial action. Many workers did not know the details of the deal or the government's plan to retrench thousands of employees until they spoke to correspondents from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

One worker at the Gintota bus depot told the WSW: "We launched this struggle by our own efforts. Not a single union leader came forward to support us. But they went into discussions with the minister with the intention of betraying the struggle. We are disgusted with the unions."

Many condemned the unions for ending the strike without achieving their demand for a 2,500-rupee pay increase and for accepting a 1,000-rupee interim allowance instead. One worker from the Elpitiya depot in the rural south said: "This promise of 1,000-rupee interim allowance was to prevent the development of the struggle. Even this cannot be trusted until it is given. This is a total betrayal."

Another worker from the same depot had over 20 years experience. He had worked as a driver for the former Central Transport Board (CTB) and later for the Regional Transport Companies (RTCs). He said that when he became a driver he was initially paid a monthly salary of 3,000 rupees and a bonus of around 500 rupees. "Even after 20 years I receive only 6,000 rupees and a 1,000-rupee bonus".

He pointed out that after deductions for loans workers do not get their full wage. The bonus is still withheld, as in the past, when workers take leave without pay, and are not always paid on time. "Our pay day is set for the eighth of every month. But now we usually don't

get paid on that day. Sometimes we have to go on strike to demand the payment of our salary."

He went on to explain that after the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) came to power, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) started a union branch at the depot. "But they ignored our struggle. I am fed up with these trade unions," he said.

He condemned the transport minister who told national television that the government could not afford the pay increase because of overstaffing and the need to maintain an aging bus fleet. "We are not the ones responsible for this state of affairs," he said. "We work to earn a salary to live. During the general election they promised to give a 70 percent wage increase".

A worker at the Ambalangoda depot said that he had worked for four years as a contract driver but the unions have not demanded permanency for casual employees. He accused the union leadership of collaborating with management in disciplining casual workers and transferring them.

Another worker from the same depot said that many employees there had voted for the UPFA thinking that the JVP, as part of the ruling coalition, would push for their demands. "The JVP trade union branch leader," he said, "did not even come to the depot during the strike".

A worker at the Ratmalana depot said the majority of workers there did not want to end the strike without winning their demands. But they were also concerned about the government's threat of mass sackings. He said that some believed that they would keep their jobs if the Central Transport Board was reestablished.

A worker at the Thalangama depot questioned the government's statements. "If the government is going to reestablish the former transport board and improve the bus service why are they planning to retrench

workers?” He pointed out that it was impossible to live on the current wage. “If we have two or three children our salary is not enough for meals and education.”

A driver from Horana depot remarked: “I must tell you that these trade union leaders betrayed this struggle. The union leaders worked to stop our fight.” He explained that early in the strike a union official showed workers a bogus fax saying the strike was off. “Workers hooted at this leader and chased him away. Now they say we will get our full wage demand in three months. We will go on strike if we don’t get it.”

He said that after the resumption of work management had begun persecuting employees. “Previously, for instance, a driver could leave work if he finished driving even up to 15 minutes early. Now they don’t allow this. So we have to keep working for the remaining 15 minutes. But then we have to drive the bus for an hour or more to complete the trip and for no additional pay.” He said that many workers were disillusioned by the betrayal and may accept the retirement scheme.

He claimed that the depot had been instructed not to run buses on unprofitable rural routes. He pointed out that previously there had been regular bus services operating according to a timetable even at night. Buses ran every 30 minutes or one hour. “Now, if there are not enough passengers we might wait hours until a bus gets a considerable crowd”. He said that there were about 100 buses at the Horana depot but only 60 were in a fit state to be used.



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