

Sri Lankan rail union shuts down protracted strike

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The Locomotive Operating Engineers Union (LOEU) shut down a seven-day strike by railway drivers on September 6 with none of its demands achieved. The 300 workers, who began an indefinite strike on August 30, had been subject to a sustained campaign of media vilification, threats and scabbing organised by rail authorities with the backing of the police and military.

Like other sections of the working class, the wages of rail workers are being rapidly eroded by rising prices. The cost of living index, which rose 2.6 percent in 2003 and 7.9 percent in 2004, is estimated to increase by 14 percent this year. For the month of August, the annualised rate hit 16 percent. Apart from small periodic wage rises, state-employed rail workers have not received any significant increase in more than two decades.

From the outset, however, the LOEU leaders sought to confine the campaign to drivers. The union called for the establishment of a separate railway drivers' service with a new salary system. Presently, drivers are part of the Sri Lanka Technological Service (SLTS) that includes all technical services throughout the public sector. By establishing a separate service, the union claimed, drivers would be able to obtain a large pay rise.

By narrowly focussing the campaign, the LOEU effectively ensured that the striking drivers would be isolated. No appeal was made to other rail workers or working people more broadly who confront similar problems and are compelled to use the deteriorating train services.

Railway Minister Felix Perera immediately denounced the strike as "unjust" and refused to talk to the union until it called off the strike. The government deployed the armed forces and police at every major railway station to intimidate the strikers and ran the

trains using assistant and retired drivers.

To stir up public hostility against the strikers, Perera claimed that drivers already get 60,000 rupees (\$US600) a month and if their demands were met would be paid 80,000 rupees. In a country where many workers are earning 6,000 rupees a month or less, such a figure is a small fortune. In fact, the claim was a gross exaggeration. The base salary rates for drivers actually range from 8,820 to 12,550 rupees a month, supplemented by overtime pay and standby allowances.

An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on September 4 demanded that the government utilise its emergency powers to impose a ban on strikes and use the Essential Service Act to "command the strikers to return to work". The newspaper called on political parties, religious leaders and "all civic minded organisations" to condemn strikes "at a time of national emergency".

In the midst of the current presidential election campaign, the LOEU leadership was probably hoping to win concessions from the government or get support from opposition parties. Unions have exploited such tactics during previous elections. The calculation, however, proved to be completely wrong as all parties joined together to denounce the drivers' strike.

Ranil Wickremesinghe, candidate for the opposition United National Party (UNP), ignored the strike. But UNP parliamentarian and trade union leader Rajitha Senaratne publicly declared that the party's union in the railway sector would not support the strike.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which at times postures as "socialist" and a militant alternative to the existing unions, denounced the strike as a UNP plot aimed at discrediting the government. The JVP quit the government in June but has signed a election deal with the candidate for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Mahinda Rajapakse.

JVP union leader and MP Piyasiri Wijenayake told *Irida Divayina*: “Some persons from the UNP [United National Party] are conducting the railway strike. Those persons are trying to take political advantage through this strike.” The September 4 issue of the JVP newspaper *Lanka* went even further, declaring: “The UNP, the main opposition party, was going to call a wave of strikes with the aim of inconveniencing the government.”

The across-the-board opposition to the rail strike reflects fears in ruling circles of mounting social unrest over living standards. Assistant medical officers ended a four-day, island-wide strike for salary demands on Wednesday. Employees of the state-owned Timber Corporation and their families held a protest over jobs on Thursday. The victims of the December 26 tsunami continue to demonstrate in various coastal areas for financial assistance and proper homes.

The deeply conservative union leaderships are utterly incapable, however, of making any broad appeal to workers and the poor. Faced with a barrage of denunciations, the LOEU leadership rapidly caved in. LOEU secretary K.A.U. Konthasinghe offered the pathetic excuse to the WWS: “We were compelled to called off the strike as the authorities were not listened to us.” Asked why the union did to call for a common struggle to defend jobs and boost pay, he declared dismissively that it was “a big job”.

The other rail unions—more than 100 in all—did nothing to assist the strikers. Like the LOEU, these unions are based on narrow sectional, grade and trade divisions. Completely unsympathetic to the strikers, D. Welimaluwa, leader of the JVP-controlled All Ceylon Railway Engineers Union, told the WWS: “The minister said all trade unions must get together and forward our demands after discussing them ourselves. They [the LOEU] have gone beyond that.” Raja Kannangara, president of the Joint Front Of Railway Trade Unions, stated the same.

None of these unions has opposed the restructuring of the state railways. Last year the ruling SLFP-led coalition withdrew plans by the previous UNP-led government to establish a railway authority as a step towards privatisation. But a committee appointed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga recommended last October that any salary changes should be in line with an “overall restructuring plan with a view to strengthen

managerial and financial management capacity”.

Years of neglect and underfunding have undermined rail services and safety. Around 75 percent of train engines are older than 40 years. Signal, fire alarms and other safety systems are not functioning properly. Drivers recently told authorities that they could not take responsibility for any accident on the Colombo-Puttalam and Colombo-Badulla lines which have not been repaired for 10 years.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party standing in the presidential elections that solidarises itself with train drivers, rail workers and other sections of the working class in their fight for jobs, decent wages and working conditions. A struggle for these demands, along with the expansion and upgrading of rail and other vital public services, requires a complete break with the major parties, which all accept the dictates of the IMF and World Bank for market reform.

The collapse of the rail strike demonstrates that there is nothing to be gained through limited, sectional action aimed at pressuring the government for concessions. The working class can only fight for its independent class interests by waging a broad political offensive around socialist demands that directly challenge the government and its capitalist program. We warn in advance that such a struggle will be opposed not only by the major parties, big business and the media but by the union leaders who are tied to the political establishment and the defence of the existing social order.



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