

Sri Lanka: 300,000 public sector workers strike for higher pay

Our reporting team
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Sri Lankan public sector workers held a one-day strike on March 16 throughout the island to demand a 65 percent pay increase to make up for rising prices and deteriorating living standards. An estimated 300,000 workers took part across many departments, including postal, health, education, local government and technological services, railways and state-owned factories.

Nearly 10,000 striking workers assembled in Viharamahadevi Park in central Colombo and marched three kilometres to the presidential secretariat near Galle Face. The trade unions had planned to hand over a memorandum to President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Police barricaded the road, using barbed wire and steel fencing, several hundred metres from the presidential secretariat, which is designated as a High Security Zone. Heavily-armed Special Task Force (STF) police commandos were deployed behind the barricades. Only 10 union representatives were allowed to proceed to the presidential secretariat.

Angry demonstrators sat down on the road for nearly an hour despite the scorching sun, causing a huge traffic jam. They carried placards with slogans such as “Is Mahinda Chinthanaya [Rajapakse’s election program] only to serve the big people”.

The strike was the biggest industrial action in the public sector for almost 25 years. A general strike in 1980 was defeated by the government of President J.R. Jayawardene, opening the way for the imposition of IMF-dictated “open economic policies”. Living standards have plunged drastically under successive United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) coalition governments.

According to conservative official statistics, the inflation rate was around 10 percent throughout 2005 and reached annualised figures of 11.1 and 10.3 percent in January and February respectively.

With local elections due on March 30, Rajapakse, who claims to represent “the common man”, was desperate to prevent a major stoppage, the first since he won the country’s presidential election last November. In a bid to

avert the strike, he announced the appointment of a new salary commission with directions to present proposals for incorporation in the 2007 budget due in November.

The Public Services Salary Review Trade Union Committee (PSSRTUC)—an umbrella organisation of nearly 200 state sector unions—was reluctant to call the strike. However, after Rajapakse refused to grant an interim pay rise of 3,000 rupees (\$US29) a month, the unions felt they were in no position to call off the action.

There is widespread resentment among workers not only over falling living standards but against the entire political establishment. In recent years, membership of unions directly affiliated to political parties has slumped, leading to the rise of hundreds of “independent” trade unions. Many of these supported Rajapakse during his presidential campaign.

A worker from the planning section of the Colombo municipal council explained to the WSW: “I joined this job in 1973. Our current wage is not enough. That’s why we joined this struggle. Bus fares and living expenses have gone up. A family with two children needs 25,000 rupees (\$US240) per month to have a decent life.”

A hospital worker from Welioya in the eastern province pointed out: “What has been offered is really a wage cut. The government must take the responsibility for settling this wage problem.”

Hundreds of workers from the state-owned Co-operative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) joined the strike without any call from their union. “When we learnt about this struggle we spread the message and joined this campaign. We want to urge union leaders to intervene on our demands,” one group explained. The experience of the CWE workers was typical of many others.

Teachers in the north and east of the island—the centre of the country’s longrunning civil war—joined the strike. Other workers in these areas would have joined the strike but simply did not know about it. “We also like to join this strike because the higher prices affect us too. Why we were not informed?” an administrative officer in Jaffna asked. The teachers also raised the demand for removal of soldiers

from near their schools.

Right from the outset, trade union leaders attempt to minimise the number of workers involved and to narrow the focus of the campaign. Before the strike, the unions tried to claim that the salaries commission and top treasury officials had simply made “an error” in proposing pay rises of 46 to 65 percent for executive grades while offering lower grades only 25 percent.

The union leaders appealed to the government for an interim pay increase of 3,000 rupees a month pending proposals from a new salaries commission. Rajapakse, who is also finance minister, rejected the proposal. The union memorandum presented to the president on the day of the strike simply reiterated the same demand.

The PSSRTUC leaders who addressed striking workers all attempted to deflect anger from the president and his government. Saman Ratnapriya, president of Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), claimed that the president’s program of “Mahinda Chinthanaya” was being subverted by the actions of higher administrative officers.

Rajitha Sampath, president of the Railway Services Trade Union Joint Front, admitted that his unions had campaigned to bring to power a government that was not solving the problems of workers. He offered nothing but empty bluster, declaring “we will come to streets and fight for our demands”.

B.K Piyadasa, from the Local Management Assistant Officers Union, made a cringing appeal to Rajapakse, declaring: “The president promised to discuss with us. Honorable, Your Excellency we appeal you to listen to what we have to say and provide a solution for our salary issue.”

Trade unions affiliated to Rajapakse’s SLFP boycotted the strike, as did those of the opposition UNP. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed Rajapakse’s election, refused to back the stoppage and in some places actively campaigned against the strike. It is engaged in a reactionary communal campaign under the slogan “motherland first” to undermine the current ceasefire between army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The PSSRTUC leaders insisted that their campaign was “non-political” but the strike has revealed that workers are directly confronted with political issues. To wage a unified campaign involving Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers throughout the island, it is necessary for the working class to oppose the divisive communalism of all of the establishment parties and to advance a socialist perspective on all issues, including the war.

There is no point in begging Rajapakse for concessions. His government is under intense pressure from international finance capital to restructure the public sector and slash

spending. Reforming the civil service, cutting the wage bill and reducing the losses of state-owned enterprises were among the guidelines set by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank in its 2005 publication “Sri Lanka—Improving the rural and urban investment climate”.

The Rajapakse government is desperate for international loans to plug the holes in this year’s budget. With a projected deficit 100 billion rupees (\$US1 billion), he is seeking 76.8 billion rupees in low-interest loans from international agencies such as the World Bank and IMF. At the same time, the government has launched an aggressive campaign to attract \$1 billion in foreign investment this year by introducing new tax and other inducements.

In a leaflet distributed at the Colombo march, the Socialist Equality Party explained: “The trade union leaders try to reduce the issue to a question of the evil character of members of the Devendra Salaries commission. But the responsibility lies with the government that appointed the committee. To defend living conditions as well as to achieve genuine democracy and a genuine peace to end the civil war, the working class must campaign against the policies of the government.

“The Rajapakse government is controlled by international financiers on whom it is dependent to secure the funds necessary for its survival. In order to attract investments from transnational companies, the government is cutting welfare expenditure and reducing the real wages of the workers to levels below those of other competing countries.

“Workers cannot avoid a struggle against the Rajapakse government. It is not possible for workers to win their demands through a ‘non-political’ strike or demonstration as the trade union leaders would have it. The working class must have a policy and a perspective that measures up to the challenge before it. Precisely because the capitalist class is driven by international economic forces, the working class must mobilise the oppressed masses on the basis of an international socialist program.

“The authority of controlling wages and living and working conditions of the working class should not be left in the hands of the capitalist class and its state. What is necessary is a workers’ and peasants’ government. That can be achieved only through the building of the Socialist Equality Party to mobilise the working class on the above perspective.”



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