The way forward for Sri Lankan public sector workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Hundreds of thousands of public sector workers are taking part today in industrial action for a 65 percent wage increase to enable them and their families to cope with rising prices. Many more workers, as well as the urban and rural poor, are looking at this struggle and considering what they can do to reverse the steady deterioration of living standards.

However, far from transforming the campaign into a broad movement against the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and its ruthless agenda of market reform, the trade union leaders have from the outset sought to confine and limit it. Some have refused to take part and actively tried to sabotage the campaign. Others have pulled out, saying they will work with the government to "solve the problem".

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that nothing will be gained by pleading with the UPFA government. What is needed is a revolutionary perspective and leadership. Public sector workers must recognise that they are engaged in a political struggle, not only against the government, but also against its corporate backers and the agencies of global capital. They need to reach out to the broadest layers of the working class and oppressed on the basis of socialist policies.

For three decades, successive governments have implemented the dictates of the IMF and World Bank. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been destroyed, state enterprises sold off, funding for essential services such as health and education slashed and the pay and conditions of public sector workers undermined. Despite his claims to be "for the common man", President Mahinda Rajapakse, like his predecessors, is preoccupied with transforming the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

The present dispute erupted when the government tried to implement the recommendations of its salaries commission for a 65 percent increase for the top public sector grades and next to nothing for the vast majority of state employees. When resentment boiled over into demands for strike action, Rajapakse announced a new salaries commission—to make "proposals" in nine months time to be considered for the next budget. This is nothing but a transparent ruse to defuse the campaign.

National Council for Administration head Tissa Devendra spelled out the real attitude of the government in comments to the *Daily Mirror* on March 22. "When you increase [wages] for the state sector, others will also ask for more. This will increase the charges of services and have a ripple effect," he said.

Peter Harold, the World Bank's country director for Sri Lanka, reminded the government it could not afford higher public sector salaries and hinted that aid might be cut off if it did not follow orders. "Sri Lanka is too dependent on external finances. It is not logical that 50 percent of the public expenditure is financed by the donor agencies," he declared.

Workers cannot put their trust in the present trade union leadership. The Public Sector Salary Review Trade Union Committee (PSSRTUC)—a coalition of some 200 "independent" trade unions—has emerged because of widespread disillusionment with the trade unions linked to various political parties. These new unions have promised to fight for workers' rights in individual work places, but their record speaks otherwise.

The PSSRTUC was shocked when 300,000 workers stopped work on March 16. It is already backing away from the demand for a 65 percent increase, calling instead for an interim monthly rise of 3,000 rupees ($US30) "until new salary proposals are formulated".

When Health Sector Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA) and Post and Telecommunication unions initially called for abstention in the March 30 local government elections as a protest, they were immediately hammered by sections of the PSSRTUC sympathetic to the government as well as various political parties.

Rajapakse denounced the proposed abstention, saying, "working people should not submit to a few people's demand". The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-affiliated All Ceylon Trade Union Federation (ACTUF), which refused to take part in the March 16 strike, objected that abstention would affect not just the government, but also other parties. Leader of the Communist Party-aligned Public Services Trade Union Federation W.H. Piyadasa "supported" the wage demand but condemned the call to abstain and hailed Rajapakse as a man who implements his promises "to the letter".

In the face of this barrage, the HSTUA and other unions relented. They had never intended their call as an active boycott aimed at involving broad layers of working people.

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Nevertheless, Rajapakse and his allies were terrified that the stunt would seize the imagination of voters disgusted and alienated from the entire political establishment and damage the UPFA's electoral prospects.

The hostility of the PSSRTUC leadership to a political struggle against the government was revealed at the meeting of delegates on March 26 that decided on today's protest. HSTUA leader Saman Ratnapriya responded to a speech by an SEP delegate by ruling out any discussion of the political issues involved in the strike and declaring, "we need to build big bargaining power".

The SEP unequivocally warns that without a socialist perspective this campaign is facing defeat, no matter how large or apparently militant. The leaders who shout "no politics" in the trade unions are preparing to lead their members into a blind alley once again. Behind closed doors, there will be plenty of politics in the discussions with government ministers and state bureaucrats, but it will not be in the interests of the working class.

The same slogan of "no politics" was used to oppose the intervention of the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), in the last major public sector strike in 1980. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Communist Party and NSSP all vigorously opposed the RCL's demand for a political struggle against the government of President J.R. Jayawardene and its program of economic reforms. Public sector workers are still paying the price for that catastrophic defeat, which resulted in the sacking of 150,000 employees.

The SEP advocates the following political planks as the basis for the campaign against the Rajapakse government for decent wages and conditions.

Internationalism

Workers and young people around the world are confronting the same relentless attacks on living standards and democratic rights—aimed at defending corporate profit. Millions of French workers and youth are currently engaged in a struggle against the First Job Contract legislation that will permit the arbitrary sacking of young workers. Public sector workers in Germany took strike action in early March to oppose longer working hours. Last Monday, a million British local government workers stopped work to oppose cutbacks to pensions.

In every country, working people are told that they have to sacrifice for "their nation". Yet, the natural ally of workers in Sri Lanka is not the corporate elite in Colombo but the international working class. The dictates of the World Bank and IMF cannot be defeated on one small island. This, on the contrary, requires the building of a broad international movement.

An end to war

The struggle for decent living standards is inexorably bound up with a class solution to the country's destructive civil war. The Rajapakse government insists there is no money for public sector salaries even as it pours billions of rupees into the defence budget. Its chauvinist allies in the JVP demand that more money be spent on the military as they agitate for a return to war. Rajapakse's "peace plan" is the opposite side of the same coin: a power-sharing deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to accelerate market reforms and the exploitation of all Sri Lankan workers alike.

The working class must advance its own solution to the civil war. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must reject the divisive poison of communal politics and unify around their common class interests. The demand must be raised: not a man or a rupee for this racialist war! To establish the basis for class unity, workers must call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East and fight for a Sri Lankan and Eelam Socialist republic as part of the united socialist states of South Asia.

A workers and farmers government

The working class must establish its political independence from all the parties of the ruling class—right and so-called "left"— and advance the demand for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies. This requires a complete break with trade union politics, which is limited to pressuring the government for concessions within the framework of the profit system. Workers cannot leave the power to control wages and living standards in the hands of the capitalist state, which invariably puts corporate profit ahead of the pressing social needs of the vast majority of society. In this struggle, the working class needs to turn to the rural poor, who are also facing the brunt of government policies, including cutbacks to subsidies and the lack of services.

Above all, the fight for this political program requires the building of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), as the new mass revolutionary party of the working class. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, to study the program of the SEP and ICFI and to join and build this international party.

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