

Sri Lanka: As 200,000 workers stop work, unions prepare to retreat on pay demand

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Despite the efforts of Sri Lankan trade union leaders to limit industrial action, an estimated 200,000 public sector workers put in sick leave notices and did not turn up for work on Monday in support of demands for a 65 percent pay increase. The “satyagraha” or passive protest organised by the Public Sector Salary Review Trade Union Committee (PSSRTUC), a grouping of “independent” unions, followed a one-day stoppage on March 16 in which around 300,000 workers participated.

The reduced participation was evident in the railways where virtually all workers took part in the March 16 strike. On Monday, only employees in the running sheds and workshops as well as yard workers and office staff joined in. Engine drivers, station masters, guards and controllers were instructed by their unions not to stop work. Postal and hospital workers in the war zones of the North and East joined the campaign, but the Tamil teachers union expressed only “moral support”. Less than 1,000 workers took part in a union rally at Viharamahadevi Park in central Colombo.

The restricted character of the campaign is a clear warning to workers that the PSSRTUC is not prepared to conduct a political struggle against President Mahinda Rajapakse and his ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government, even though that is precisely what is required. Some of the unions that supported the March 16 strike pulled out of Monday’s protest, openly declaring their loyalty to the government. Now the PSSRTUC leaders are looking for a means to shut down the campaign.

Many workers, including those who defied their unions to join the March 16 strike, are contemptuous of passive “satyagraha” campaigns as useless, time-wasting exercises. The supine attitude of the trade unions was epitomised by a pathetic “prayer” offered by one leader at Viharamahadevi Park. He declared that “the wisdom will dawn upon the president and the government to amend the

salaries review Circular 1-2 of 2006 of January 12” and offer “a new wages policy on the basis of social justice”.

The government has demonstrated its “wisdom” by unleashing a vicious media campaign against public sector workers and mobilising the armed forces, both as blacklegs and to intimidate and harass workers. Under pressure from the IMF and World Bank to cut spending, Rajapakse, who is also finance minister, has no intention of making significant concessions. But he is nervous that the public sector campaign will snowball into a movement involving broader layers of workers and the rural poor who have been savagely hit by rising prices.

The government deployed troops at the main hospitals and railway stations on Monday. According to the director of the Colombo national hospital, 200 navy personnel were “called in to help with hospital work”. Hundreds of police, including riots squads, were stationed near Viharamahadevi Park during the protest rally.

On the same day, President Rajapakse used the annual meeting of the Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, the trade union affiliated with his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), to warn union leaders to “act with responsibility.” He added: “Not merely agitating only for their rights, workers should also show concern for their fellow citizens and also do their duty by the country and its economic development before they resort to trade union action to demand their rights.”

The president declared in no uncertain terms that public sector workers would not get their pay demand. He falsely claimed that public sector workers already received a minimum monthly salary of 11,600 rupees (\$US116) as compared to a private sector minimum of just 3,800 rupees. The current minimum is 9,600 which, after deductions of several thousand rupees for loans, is insufficient to cope with the rising cost of living.

Speaking at Viharamahadevi Park, PSSRTUC convener Saman Ratnapriya played down the government’s role,

blaming the previous salaries commission chief, Tissa Devendra, for creating the “present situation”. He dismissed the mobilisation of troops, demagogically declaring: “Although the government has mobilised the military, they cannot do the job of workers.” He concluded with an appeal to Rajapakse for talks—another sign that the PSSRTUC is preparing to back down. The unions have already indicated they are prepared to accept a minimal “interim” offer.

Union leaders attempted to prevent the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) from distributing its statement with a clear call for a political offensive against the Rajapakse government based on socialist policies. A group of Ratnapriya’s supporters threatened to use physical force to stop SEP members distributing the leaflet and evict them from Viharamahadevi Park. Its spokesman announced that the PSSRTUC had banned the distribution of all leaflets and declared that “workers don’t want politics”. When challenged over these anti-democratic methods, Ratnapriya baldly replied: “There is no such democracy anywhere.”

The SEP nevertheless distributed several thousand copies of its statement, “The way forward for Sri Lankan public sector workers”. Workers were deeply concerned over declining living standards, the direction of the union campaign and more than willing to discuss politics.

A group of drivers from the Colombo irrigation department office told the WSWs: “The mobilisation is very weak. Our leaders do not want to organise the struggle properly. Key sections of the railways are working and the trains are running without any disruption. There have been no meetings in work places to convince workers to support the campaign.”

A postal worker from Nugegoda explained: “We participated in this struggle because we cannot manage on the present salary. My full salary is about 13,000 rupees, but after deductions for loans and other claims I get only about 9,700 rupees. The trade union leaders asked us to vote for this government and we did so. I understand we cannot win our struggle this way. We have to organise a common struggle of working people.”

After reading the SEP statement, another postal worker from Moratuwa said: “I can understand how our salary problem is bound up with the economic policies of this government and how the international working class has faced similar attacks in their countries. It is good for the working class in this country to develop an international unity [with other workers] in our struggle to defend our rights.”

A nurse condemned Muruththetuwe Ananda, the leader of the Public Service United Nurses Union, for opposing the campaign. “The government has avoided any solution for the salary problem. But the trade union leaders have been failed to mobilise broad sections of working people. The government is giving more and more concessions to the capitalists and businessmen.”

Speaking about the danger of renewed civil war, she added: “We have had the bitter experience of war. In those days, bomb blasts took place everywhere. Thousands of people have died on both sides. We have lost the lives of precious young people in the war. So people must oppose the war. The JVP and JHU must stop their communal campaign. We have to demand the money being wasted on war is used for the welfare of the people.”

A clerk from agriculture department in Ratnapura explained that she had been one of 150,000 employees sacked after the unions shut down the 1980 general strike by public sector workers. She recalled reading at the time the *Kamkaru Mawatha*, the newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist League (the SEP’s forerunner). “I finally got my job back in 1996. I have no trust in the trade union leaders. They have no clear program for the struggle except to put pressure on the government.

“The working class needs a political perspective. Other sections of the working class and the poor people must be united in a single movement. And, as you say, the working people need international unity in their fight to defend their rights. But the union leaders are against such a fight. All of them told workers to vote for Rajapakse. Is that not politics? That is their politics and the working class wants an independent political movement.”



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