

Sri Lankan union leaders betray port workers struggle

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About 14,000 Colombo port workers ended their “go-slow” campaign on July 21, a day after a deal was organised by union officials and the government. The eight-day campaign, the biggest port employees struggle in the last 25 years, was in pursuit of a 3,000-rupee (\$US30) increase in basic salaries and other improvements.

Despite widespread support for the campaign, the union leadership accepted a 1,500-rupee allowance for the next three months, until the National Administrative Committee presents its recommendations. Other demands made by port workers, such as a 200-rupee rise in the minimum increment and an increase of the cost of living allowance, were ignored. The betrayal came in the face of a vicious media campaign, coupled with a legal assault, against the port workers.

The go-slow campaign, which was virtually regarded as a national crime by Sri Lanka’s ruling elite, held up 15 ships, with another 15 reported to have discharged their containers at other ports. The Sri Lanka Association of Vessel Operators (SLAVO) threatened to impose a \$20-\$40 recovery surcharge on every container if the industrial action were not ended by July 22.

A measure of the establishment’s concern was reflected in two orders issued by the Supreme Court on July 20, which “restrained port unions from engaging in any trade union activity which would reduce or undermine the full productivity levels of the ports of the country”.

The orders were in response to a “fundamental rights” petition filed by the chairman of the Joint Apparels Association Forum (JAFF), who claimed that his “right to engage in the lawful occupation of his choice” had been violated. JAFF is the peak business council of apparel manufacturers, Sri Lanka’s main export. The court directed the police, armed forces, Minister of Ports, and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) chairman to ensure there was compliance with its orders.

The Supreme Court rulings were an addendum to an enjoining order given by the District Court of Colombo the previous day to restrain the unions involved in the go slow, on the spurious claim that employees had been intimidated into taking industrial action by the unions. In fact, the union leadership worked to prevent all-out strike action by the port workers, who have seen their wages and conditions rapidly eroded. Consumer prices rose by a record 17.7 percent in June with drastic increases in fuel, transport fares, electricity, water, cooking gas, rice, bread, vegetables, milk powder and other essential items.

According to some reports, straight after the Supreme Court ruling the Navy was ordered to take over operations at the Jaya Container Terminal (JCT). But the government backed off when workers threatened full-scale strike action in defiance of the court orders if the navy went in.

While the union bureaucracy worked to isolate the port employees from other sections of the working class, the government and the media maintained a campaign of lies and slander against them.

In a widely seen television interview, the Minister for Ports Mangala Samaraweera falsely claimed to have seen a port worker’s pay slip, which, he said, was for about 100,000 rupees for one month. Samaraweera, however, refused to divulge that this included pay arrears for the previous 10 months, overtime and other outstanding payments. He cynically declared that if he had known how much they earned earlier, he would have become a port worker rather than a government minister.

In reality, the average take home salary of a port worker is about Rs. 25,000 (\$US250). Moreover, only a fraction of employees are directly involved in container handling and able to earn additional allowances and overtime.

Nevertheless, the ports minister’s brazen lies were taken up by the private and government-run media alike, which claimed that the port workers were “ruining the economy.”

An editorial in the *Island* newspaper declared towards it. that,

“[Port workers] must realise [Sri Lanka] is a poor country and the salaries they draw are princely in the eyes of a vast majority of the work force. Even the medical and engineering PhDs, in pecuniary difficulties, might wonder why they never thought of becoming crane operators.”

This theme was repeated in an editorial in the government’s *Daily News*, which said that “striking workers need to place the national interests above sectional interests.”

“A gravely undermined economy,” it continued, “would only compound the hardships and misery of the people. Therefore, mindless trade union action which mars very badly the people’s prospects of progress must be avoided.”

These attacks were seized on by Sinhala chauvinist organisations, such as the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), which accused the port workers of supporting terrorism, citing an alleged Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam plot to blowup some ships in the port. This was echoed by JAFF, which issued a statement claiming, “[T]his situation is worse than the repercussions if the Tigers had been successful in their recent plans to attack the port. This could be construed as an act of treason.”

But while big business, Sinhala racists and the media hurled venom against the port workers, the reaction of the union leadership and the so-called left parties was extraordinarily timid. None of them held a press conference or issued a leaflet to refute the slanders.

From the outset, the port unions decided to limit industrial action to the Colombo port, with no arrangement or strategy to call for support from employees at SAGT, the privatised port terminal in Colombo. SAGT, which currently handles 40 percent of Colombo’s port cargo, was used to cushion the effect of the go-slow, increasing its workload by another 15 percent.

Instead of mobilising port workers throughout the country and making an appeal for international support, the union leadership used the government and media attacks to pressure employees into abandoning their struggle.

Chandrasiri Mahagamage, a spokesman for the SLPA Joint Trade Union Federation and leader of the All Ceylon Ports General Employees Union, which is affiliated to the Sinhala chauvinist party, Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), admitted to WSWs reporters that the union leadership wanted to end the industrial action, but was concerned about the growing hostility of the workers

“The country has been faced with a crisis and we want to end the go-slow campaign, but the workers have been provoked by the government’s reaction to the go-slow. We cannot go before the workers. If we tell them to stop the campaign they would beat and kill us,” he said. “If the media people who say that the workers are unreasonable could come with me and defend me from the workers I can tell them to stop the agitation. Therefore, we ask the government to take steps to end the campaign through the involvement of authentic officials.”

On July 20, the ports minister and the SLPA Joint Trade Union Federation leadership held a six-hour meeting. One of the sops the government threw to the unions was a proposal to include them in “a progress review committee”, which would comprise the ports minister, ministry officials and SLPA management and meet every two months. The next day the union leadership announced it accepted the minister’s proposals and had “decided to call off the go-slow, taking into consideration the country’s future”.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with a number of port workers about the settlement. Many voiced their disgust with the government and media attacks, and the actions of the union leadership.

Expressing his frustration with the outcome, Godamunna said: “If port workers had a well thought-out program for the struggle at the outset we would have been successful.” He accused the union officials of not coordinating the port workers, let alone providing leadership. “We had to depend on either the media or gossip to find out what was happening and then decide on what we should do next,” he declared.

Kamal, another port employee said: “The unions had no program to educate workers on this particular struggle. Instead, union leaders tried to spread fear and uncertainty among the workers.” The government pledges, upheld by the union leaders, could not be trusted, he said.



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