

Sri Lanka: To defend democratic rights, workers must oppose war

The Socialist Equality Party
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Thousands of Sri Lankan workers will participate in a picket tomorrow near Fort Railway Station in central Colombo to register their opposition to the government's use of the courts to outlaw legitimate industrial action over pay and jobs.

Workers in public sector education, the railways, telecom, the ports, health, the media, state and private banks, and free trade zones are expected to take part. The protest is one more symptom of the hostility among ordinary working people over the government's growing attacks on democratic rights, jobs and living standards as it intensifies its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The picket has been called against a Supreme Court decision last month ordering five teacher unions to lift a boycott on the marking of advanced level exams. The government sought the judicial ruling after a one-day strike on September 13 by public sector teachers over pay demands.

Increasingly the government and private employers have resorted to legal action to block strikes and protests. Over the past 18 months, the government has sought and obtained court orders against railway unions, dock workers and Sri Lanka Telecom employees. Encouraged by these successes, a soap manufacturer, Swedeshi, and Airport Garden Hotel also obtained injunctions to stop industrial action.

Facing mounting anger from their members, 67 unions called the picket tomorrow. Their leaflet condemns the government's actions, then rhetorically warns that "the government will fall into a deep crisis in the face of the strength of the working class if it gets ready to suppress legitimate trade union struggles using such vicious methods".

But for all their bluster, the unions are doing their utmost to avoid a political confrontation with President

Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. The fact that the "campaign" is limited to a one-hour lunchtime stoppage is symptomatic of their stance. More fundamentally, the leaflet is silent on the central issue confronting all working people—the communal war being waged by the Rajapakse government.

It is no accident that the attacks on the democratic rights of workers are intensifying. The government is spending billions of rupees buying bombs, bullets and warplanes to wage all-out war against the LTTE. At the same time, it is slashing spending on wages, subsidies and services, as well as continuing to implement privatisation and market reform. As prices soar, the government insists the working people have to bear the burden.

Opposition to the war and falling living standards is met with punitive measures—bans on strikes, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and murders. Last month, Rajapakse even outlawed political campaigns aimed at bringing about "governmental change".

Rajapakse and his ministers are quite open in demanding working people sacrifice for the war. A month before taking legal action against teachers, President Rajapakse bluntly told the union leaders on August 13: "We do not have money to allocate for this. Do you say that we should withdraw the military from North and East?" The union chiefs had no reply to the question.

On September 19, deputy finance minister Ranjith Siyambalapitiya told parliament: "The government, so far this year, has spent 50 billion rupees (\$US500 million) to procure weapons and ammunition for the war and therefore cannot grant any wage increases." This sum is additional to this year's already massive defence budget of 139 billion rupees—a 45 percent increase over last year.

Siyambalapitiya made one correct point, when he pointed to the hypocrisy of “some elements [who] insist on taking forward the military push and giving economic concessions to the people.” He was referring to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) MPs, who posture as militant defenders of working people and demand pay rises for public sector workers while being in the forefront of jingoistic agitation for war.

The truth is that workers cannot defend their living standards and democratic rights without a struggle against the government and its renewed war. But on this central issue, the leaders of the 67 unions are incapable of taking a principled stand.

During last year’s campaign for pay rises, the government accused union leaders of “helping the enemy” and “harming national security”. Far from challenging the government and its war, these same 67 unions called off the campaign and agreed to take part in phony salary commissions that produced nothing for workers.

Now these unions are engaged in various manoeuvres with parties that are known for their hostility to the working class and support for the war. Last Thursday, union leaders reported they had met with opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to plead for his support. Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) leader Neil Wijethilake justified this appeal to the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in classic opportunist fashion, saying it was necessary “to widen the protest action despite the fact that the UNP could get an advantage from such an alliance”.

For the middle class radicals of the NSSP, a “broad campaign” means the forging of unprincipled alliances with the various parties of the political establishment. To claim that Wickremesinghe and the UNP will defend democratic rights is to hoodwink workers into ignoring its entire history of repression, communalism and waging war. The union leaders have also met with the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is part of the ruling coalition and notorious for its Sinhala chauvinism and support for the war.

What is needed is not unity with political charlatans and warmongers but with other sections of workers and the urban and rural poor, who confront the same social and economic problems as public sector workers. The working class must advance its own independent class strategy against the war and in defence of democratic

rights and living standards.

Workers must reject the Sinhala chauvinist politics upon which the Colombo ruling elites have relied for decades to divide working people and which produced this protracted war. They must also reject the Tamil separatism of the LTTE, which represents the interests of sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie. A unified class struggle is needed by workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike—against their exploiters.

No faith can be placed in the so-called international peace process, as has been previously advocated by the leaders of the 67 unions. The major powers are not interested in peace as such, but in opening up Sri Lanka and the subcontinent for exploitation by foreign investors. Their duplicity is most obvious in the case of the Bush administration, which is waging brutal neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while, publicly at least, calling for Sri Lankan peace talks.

The working class must advance its own socialist alternative. The Socialist Equality Party fights for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the security forces from the North and East where they function as an army of occupation. A common struggle for a workers and peasant government—a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam—is needed to reorganise the economy on socialist lines to meet the needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the privileged few. This is part of the broader fight that must be waged by the working class for socialism throughout the subcontinent and internationally.

We urge workers to study our program and perspective, to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and to join and build the SEP as the mass party of the working class.



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