

Sri Lankan workers picket to defend right to industrial action

Our correspondents
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About 2,000 workers from the railways, health services, universities, schools, telecom sector, ports, the media, the public service and Sri Lanka's free trade zones picketed in front of Colombo Fort Railway Station on October 3, opposing the government's use of the courts to outlaw industrial action over pay and jobs.

Sixty-seven trade unions covering the public and private sectors called the protest after the Supreme Court banned a teachers' boycott on marking advanced level exam papers. The court summoned five trade unions to issue an injunction ordering them to lift the boycott. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government took this punitive legal action after hundreds of thousands of public sector teachers joined a one-day strike on September 13.

Last week's protest is another demonstration of growing anger among workers against the government's increasing attacks on living conditions and democratic rights as a consequence of its costly communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The limited nature of the picket, on the other hand, highlighted the trade unions' role in undermining workers' opposition and suppressing the essential political issues confronting the working class.

The union leaders were careful to confine the campaign to a single issue. There was only one slogan on the placards: "Stop the suppression of trade unions through the judiciary!" Chants shouted in the picket revolved around this issue as well. There was no mention whatsoever of the war.

The relatively low attendance was not due to any lack of opposition among workers to the government's attacks. The trade union bureaucrats deliberately limited participation. The protest was restricted to a one-hour lunchtime picket and confined to Colombo. There was no broad campaign to build a mass rally.

Several workers spoke to the WSWS, criticising the unions' role. One teacher from a Colombo school said: "I didn't know about this demonstration and could not participate. We oppose Mahinda Rajapakse's government, which is brutally attacking the democratic rights of workers and other people. I blame the union leaders, because they did not organise this demonstration properly. Many workers were unable to join the action."

At a brief rally after the protest, Saman Ratnapriya, the

convener of the 67 trade unions, demagogically declared: "Some ministers of the government say that they have an 'injection' [referring to injunction orders] to curb the working class struggles. But we say now we have an 'injection' [meaning protests] to curb you... If you do not roll back your repression, the working people will force you to kneel down."

Sampath Rajitha, general secretary of the Joint Front of Railway Trade Unions (JFRTU) and other speakers made similar remarks. No speaker said a word about the war, which is behind the government's attacks on democratic rights and living standards. Rajapakse and his ministers have openly declared that because huge sums must be spent on the war, the government cannot meet workers' wage demands.

In response to strikes and protests, the government has denounced workers as traitors who are compromising "national security" or "helping terrorists". Police have been used to break up demonstrations and industrial action has been suppressed using the courts. Far from opposing this chauvinist campaign, union leaders say nothing about the war and tacitly accept the huge increases in military spending as legitimate.

Now the government, which has extended the war to the North as well as the East of the island, has presented its 2008 budget estimates to parliament, indicating a 20 percent increase in military spending. For working people, this only means further savage inroads into living standards and democratic rights.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in its leaflet for the rally, workers cannot defend their most basic rights without a political program to oppose the war. Yet the trade unions not only refuse to raise the issue, but are seeking alliances with political parties, which either actively support the war or have adapted themselves to it—all in the name of "broadening" the campaign.

In recent weeks, union leaders met with Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) to plead for its support. The UNP sent a few leaders and members of its trade union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), to the picket.

The UNP began the war in the 1980s, but when in government in 2001 embraced the so-called international "peace process". Its change of heart had nothing to do with

concern for ordinary working people. Rather the UNP was giving voice to the concerns of powerful business interests that increasingly regard the war as an obstacle to foreign investment and profits.

Having lost the presidential election in November 2005, the UNP has increasingly adapted to the restarting of the civil war by President Rajapakse and his government. As a sop to openly chauvinist parties, the UNP no longer calls for a return to the 2002 ceasefire that it signed and has effectively abandoned the limited agreements reached with the LTTE during negotiations in 2002 and 2003. While UNP leaders now profess concerns about deteriorating living standards, there is absolutely no doubt that a new UNP government would accelerate the market reforms demanded by the IMF and World Bank.

Yet the union leaders are attempting to dupe workers into believing that the UNP is concerned about their living standards and democratic rights. The opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in particular is campaigning for an alliance. United Workers Federation (UWF) President Lenus Jayathilaka, an NSSP leader, urged protesters on October 3 to build “a broad popular movement, keeping aside all [political] differences and ignoring party colours to face the government’s repression”.

At the same time, the trade unions have sought support from Sinhala extremist parties—the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—which demand that the government and military wage an all out war to annihilate the LTTE. The JVP did not join the picket even though its All Ceylon Teacher Services Union was one of the trade unions hauled before the Supreme Court. Both parties support the government—the JHU is part of the ruling coalition, while the JVP provides parliamentary backing.

For the October 3 picket, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued a statement “To defend democratic rights, workers must oppose war” and its members distributed thousands of copies among protesters and in other workplaces.

Workers who spoke to the WSWs at the October 3 picket expressed anger toward both the government and the union leaders.

A teacher from Chilaw said: “I read your handbill. As you say, I think the central issue in these attacks is the protracted racist war. In this demonstration, I did not see a single slogan against the war. If a foreigner sees this demonstration on TV, he would guess that this is not an action of the Sri Lankan working class. As workers who face the disastrous consequences of decade-long civil war, how can we picket without a single placard against this bloody war?”

“You know why they do not raise antiwar slogans? Exactly because they [union leaders] know they have to answer the question that President Rajapakse asked: ‘Do you ask me to withdraw the troops from the North and the East?’”

A teacher from Slave Island in Colombo said: “The right to strike is a basic right of the working class to defend jobs and

working conditions. This government has violated it in an unprecedented way. President Rajapakse and his ministers repeatedly say that they protect human rights, but what we are seeing is that they are violating every fundamental right of the people.

“How many people have been killed in this short period of Rajapakse’s tenure? How many have been disappeared and displaced?”

“The government and some media have denounced teachers for striking over salary demands. They say it is going against children’s interests. Do you think you can work and live without adequate income? Fighting for our demands is not wrong. The government, which accuses us, is destroying the education system.

“You cannot defend any right by joining the UNP, as our leaders say. I do not see any difference between those two parties [SLFP and UNP]. Just recall the 1980 general strike. The UNP government sacked 100,000 workers who demanded a small salary increase, and the UNP are the people who started the war.

“I did not completely read your leaflet yet. However, I agree when you say that the Sinhala and Tamil workers must unite on a socialist program against the war and to defend the democratic rights.”

A worker from the University Grant Commission in Colombo commented: “Judicial intervention against workers’ struggles violates a fundamental right of the working class. The Rajapakse government has resorted to suppression because it cannot solve any problem of the people, as it promised in the election.

“People cannot manage their cost of living. Last week, the government increased flour and bread prices again. More than three-quarters of our monthly salary goes on food and travelling. My monthly income does not exceed 10,000 rupees [about \$US80]. I have two children. I have to spend at least 3,000 rupees for their education per month. My wife has no job.

“I voted Rajapakse at the last presidential election. I have no trust in any political party, whether it is the UNP, JVP or JHU. They all cheat people until they get our vote. Although I joined this protest, I have no trust on the union leaders.” He explained the unions’ betrayal of a strike this June over salary demands. Although the government took punitive action, including suspending eight workers, the unions did nothing to defend them.”



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