

Sri Lanka: A socialist program to fight for wages and conditions

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
8 July 2008

A one-day strike by hundreds of trade unions in the ports, plantations, transport, petroleum, electricity, education and health sectors and private companies is expected to bring much of Sri Lanka to a halt on July 10. With huge price rises devastating the living standards of working people, the unions are demanding a 5,000-rupee increase in monthly pay, an allowance pegged to inflation, and lower bus and train fares.

The government has refused to make any significant concessions, insisting that it cannot afford wage rises amid its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As far as the government is concerned, working people must bear the burdens of the renewed conflict, which has cost thousands of additional lives over the past two years and created hundreds of thousands of refugees. President Mahinda Rajapakse has already warned that strikers will be “severely dealt with”.

Far from challenging Rajapakse, the trade unions are working to reach an accommodation, emphasising that they are prepared to call off the strike if a deal can be reached. Determined to prevent a political confrontation with the government, the trade unions have organised no rallies or meetings on July 10. Above all the trade union leaders are seeking to maintain their control and prevent any discussion by the rank-and-file over how to carry forward their demands.

The refusal of the unions to wage a concerted campaign against the government flows directly from their support for its communal war. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), whose National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) has spearheaded the strike, was instrumental in Rajapakse coming to power in 2005 and in egging him on to launch attacks against the LTTE. While not part of the government, the JVP has supported it on all key issues, including last November’s budget, which made further savage cutbacks to services and jobs to pay for the huge defence expenditures.

The JVP’s decision to call a strike is a rather desperate attempt to stem the further erosion of its base of support, which has been hard hit by falling living standards. In an attempt to deflect attention from the issue of the war, the JVP added new political demands on July 4 in a letter rejecting the government’s offer of a pay rise of 1,000 rupees. Claiming that “corruption” was responsible for the government’s lack of money for the unions’ wage demands, it called for a reduction of the present huge cabinet and in the number of presidential advisers as well as the establishment of independent commissions for police, elections and the judiciary. As a final demand, the JVP also called for the postponement of upcoming provincial elections, in which the party will almost certainly fare badly.

JVP trade union leader K.D. Lankantha told the *Sunday Leader*: “If

the President acts on these four demands, then the July 10 strike can be called off. The government says that the strike would hamper the war effort as the country is spending a lot of money on the war, but the conditions we have laid down would help the government save money.” By accepting the war must be financed, the JVP is already preparing the stage for a massive backdown in which the party will receive a political payoff in return for ending the campaign on a settlement well short of the current wage demands.

It is not government corruption but its reactionary war, along with the growing international economic crisis, that is responsible for the economic burdens being imposed on workers. In last year’s budget, the Rajapakse government raised defence spending by a massive 20 percent over the previous year to a figure of 166 billion rupees in 2008. The figure amounts to more than 22 percent of the total government revenue of 750 billion rupees. It is being paid for by cutbacks to welfare and other essential services, by the slashing of subsidies, including on fuel, and by making only minor adjustments to public sector jobs and wages. For all its hot air about opposing the government and defending working people, the JVP voted for all these measures.

None of the other unions that have joined the strike, including those affiliated with the United National Party (UNP), and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), have advanced an alternative program to that of the JVP. The conservative UNP is hoping to capitalise on the groundswell of popular hostility to rising prices. The NSSP, a middle class radical outfit, claims to oppose the war, but has now joined with the JVP, a chauvinist supporter of the war, without a word of criticism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that it is not possible for the working class to fight for the most elementary demands without a program to end the war. Again and again, sections of workers have come into struggle against the government—on the docks, in the plantations, in the schools, universities and health institutions—only to be sold out by union leaders who, far from challenging Rajapakse’s war, agree with it and accommodate to his demands at the expense of working people.

The latest example is the recent teachers’ strike. In its efforts to undercut the planned sick-note stoppage, the government actually used the war as the pretext to take the unprecedented step of shutting down schools throughout the country. As the teacher unions had called no meetings or protests, there was no way of judging the support for their demands.

In a meeting with union leaders on June 27, Rajapakse once again declared that everything must be subordinated to the war. “My prime intention is to extricate the north from the grip of terrorists [the LTTE]

as in the case of the east. It is the duty of all teachers to protect children in the same manner as our valiant soldiers protect the country,” he said. Far from in any way challenging Rajapakse, the union leaders accommodated themselves to his justification for what was effectively a government lockout aimed at intimidating teachers. Workers would be fooling themselves if they think those who have called the July 10 strike will react any differently.

The lack of any concerted political opposition to the war has enabled Rajapakse to create a climate of fear and intimidation. Workers, farmers and students protesting over their deteriorating economic circumstances and lack of services have been accused of undermining the war effort and “aiding the terrorists”. Any even limited criticism of the government is met with menacing threats or worse. Hundreds of people have been “disappeared” or murdered by death squads linked to the military that act with impunity.

The fact that hundreds of thousands of workers are preparing to join the July 10 strike throughout the island is an indication that present economic conditions have become intolerable. The inflation rate has now hit 30 percent in Sri Lanka—10 times the figure in 2004. With the exception of the wealthy few, every layer of the population is struggling to make ends meet as the price of fuel, transport and basic foods continues to skyrocket.

While soaring international oil prices are certainly a significant component, the fact that inflation in Sri Lanka is the highest by far in South Asia indicates that the huge and rising cost of the war is the major factor. Bus and train fares have risen by exorbitant amounts to pay for the fuel, bullets and bombs of the military in its intractable war against the LTTE.

Left in the hands of the current union leaderships, the present strike action will, in one way or another, inevitably be betrayed. All of the parties involved in the current campaign understand that a general strike movement of the working class not only challenges the government of the day but capitalist rule as a whole. That is why they have only reluctantly called the strike for one day, have planned no protests or rallies, and may yet call off the campaign at the last minute. For all their talk about the plight of the working class, the union leaders and affiliated parties are seeking to pressure the Rajapakse government as well as improve their own political positions.

Time and again, Rajapakse has made clear that there is no room even for limited compromise on wage demands. His government relaunched the war in 2006 precisely because it had no answer to the pressing economic crisis that was provoking strikes and protests. Like all his predecessors, Rajapakse did not hesitate to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class along communal lines. In the name of “national security” and “the war against terrorism”, the government will not hesitate to resort to open repression in its efforts to suppress any challenge from the working class.

Workers have to take stock of the situation. To fight for their basic rights and decent living standards, it is necessary for the working class to advance its own program to end the war. There is no doubt that there is a widespread recognition that the war is bad and has led to terrible suffering, but that alone is not enough. For far too long, Sri Lankan politicians of all stripes have propped up capitalist rule by driving a communal wedge between Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers who face the same class oppression and the same miserable living conditions.

The SEP insists that the starting point of any program to fight for the interests of the working class is the rejection of all forms of

communalism, racism and chauvinism. Only by unifying all workers regardless of language, religion or ethnic background can the working class draw behind it the urban poor and rural masses, who are also in dire economic straits, to fight for its own class interests on the basis of a socialist program.

The first step in ending the war is to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the security forces from the North and East. All the parties of the Colombo political establishment decry such a demand as tantamount to aiding the LTTE and therefore treasonous. In fact, it is the essential precondition for unifying working people of the North and East, who have lived under virtual military occupation for more than two decades, with their class brothers and sisters in the South in a joint struggle not only against government but also against the LTTE. Far from representing the Tamil masses, the LTTE defends the interests of layers of the Tamil bourgeoisie who seek a more equitable arrangement with their Sinhala counterparts.

The struggle for immediate wage rises and better conditions must be linked to a broader socialist perspective to put an end to a system that benefits the wealthy few. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom so that the wealth created by working people is used to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not to boost the profits of a few. The SEP calls for the formation of a workers’ and farmers’ government on the basis of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the wider struggle for a united socialist states of South Asia and internationally.

None of these demands will be taken up by the existing trade unions and parties. A complete political break is needed from these mechanisms, which serve to shackle the working class to present political establishment. As a first step, the SEP calls for the formation of action committees of democratically elected delegates to take the current campaign out of the hands of the union leaderships. Such committees of trusted workers’ representatives should reformulate the demands of the strike to meet the needs of working people—the latest surveys show that a doubling of wages is needed to catch up to skyrocketing price rises. More fundamentally, these committees should initiate the widest possible discussion of the political program required for the struggle against the Rajapakse government. In carrying out these tasks, the SEP pledges its full support.

Above all, a new mass party of the working class is required to prosecute this political struggle. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International and fights alongside its co-thinkers around the world for the perspective of world socialist revolution. We call on workers, youth, students and intellectuals to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, seriously study our program and apply to join and build the SEP.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact