

# Sri Lankan government spreads bomb scare to scuttle general strike

Our correspondents  
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In a blatant effort to scuttle tomorrow's one-day strike by hundreds of unions, the Sri Lankan government has mounted a "terrorist" scare, claiming to have information that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could set off bombs in the South this week.

At a press conference on Monday, Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena said that the LTTE would launch a major attack to mark "Black July"—the vicious anti-Tamil pogroms in July 1983 that triggered the country's long-running civil war. "In such a situation would it be reasonable to call workers out?" he said. "We have received information and it is our duty to protect the state institutions".

Tomorrow's strike spearheaded by unions affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP) is to demand a 5,000-rupee monthly wage increase, cost of living rises and reduced bus and rail fares. President Mahinda Rajapakse has rejected the demands saying that government has no funds while it is fighting its renewed war against the LTTE.

Media and Information Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa, another member of Rajapakse's huge cabinet, was also present at the media conference. Asked about the government's response to the strike, he would only say: "It is a secret". The government has extensive powers under the country's emergency regulations to suppress the strike or to detain strikers. These include the imposition of essential services orders to ban industrial action that is "disrupting or threatening the maintenance of supplies and services also essential to the life of the community".

Both the JVP and UNP back the communal conflict against the LTTE and have, directly or indirectly, supported the renewal of emergency powers. The chauvinist JVP, which advocates intensifying the war, has voted to renew emergency powers every month. The right-wing UNP has occasionally abstained but has never voted against the draconian measures.

Media and Information Minister Yapa accused the trade unions of calling the strike to undermine military gains in

the war. "Some elements in the opposition want to reverse what the security forces have so far achieved," he declared. The allegation is tantamount to branding strike leaders and opposition politicians as traitors, paving the way for a round of arbitrary detentions.

As part of the campaign of intimidation, the military and police have boosted their numbers, particularly in the capital and surrounding suburbs. Over the past week, the security forces intensified their cordon-and-search dragnets in largely Tamil areas.

Lakshman Hullugalle, director of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS), warned in the *Island* on Monday that "special security measures would be in place countrywide... to meet any security contingency" caused by the strike. Hullugalle specifically identified "terrorist attacks" and "attempts to intimidate employees who report for work" as actions that would be targeted.

The government is also resorting to disinformation. The state-owned *Daily News* published a story today claiming that the education unions would not take part in the strike. Teachers' union official Nissanka Fernando was featured prominently as saying that opposition parties must join with the president "to eradicate terrorism and develop the country". In fact, all that had taken place was that several small pro-government teachers' unions had backed away from the strike.

The pro-government United Trade Union Front issued a leaflet on Tuesday hysterically denouncing the strikers for undermining national security. Repeating claims that the strike was aiding the LTTE, the leaflet declared: "Are we to defend the country or to defend the Tigers [LTTE]?" The front is provocatively planning pickets today in Colombo to oppose the industrial action.

Western Province Governor Alavi Maulana, a union leader for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has also condemned the strike. Maulana said that the parties calling the strike were being discredited because "they are taking these actions in the south when there is a decisive war in the north."

The JVP-led National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), which has spearheaded the strike, has completely accommodated to the government's pro-war demagoguery. Union leaders have been at pains to insist that the strike will not disrupt the war effort. Ever since Rajapakse came to power in 2005, the JVP has fully backed his renewed war and supported the government on key issues, including the budget with its huge defence expenditures.

NTUC-affiliated unions organised pickets in several places in Colombo on Monday and Tuesday. But these have been largely token affairs. On Monday, less than 100 workers participated in the picket organised by four JVP-affiliated trade unions outside Lake House, the state-owned publications. As one JVP leader explained, only delegates had been called out.

Addressing the picket, JVP rail union leader Sumathipala Manawadu made clear that the JVP unions would bend over backwards to ensure that the strike did not affect the war. "We are not against the war. We were the people that supported it directly. We donated blood for the war. We gave one day's wage for the war. We are ready to sacrifice everything for the war. It is false to say that the one-day strike will be an obstacle to the war. Are not the war operations being waged on Saturdays and Sundays and public holidays?" he said.

The NTUC is already working to minimise the political impact of the strike. For many workers, the strike will be little more than a public holiday—without pay. At this stage, the NTUC has called no rallies, marches or meetings for tomorrow. Like the government, the JVP is concerned that the strike has the potential to spiral out of control, in conditions where inflation is running at 30 percent and many working people are struggling to make ends meet from one day to the next.

As Manawadu emphasised, the JVP's top priority is the war. Over the past two years, JVP-led unions have repeatedly caved into the government's insistence that it has no money for wage rises because all its resources had to be devoted to the military. The huge expenditures on the war are a major factor in the country's rampant inflation and savage cutbacks to government services and subsidies.

Without a political program to oppose the war, the working class cannot defend its most basic rights, including pay and conditions. We urge all workers to seriously consider the issues raised in the Socialist Equality Party's statement entitled "A socialist program to fight for wages and conditions" and published yesterday on the WSWS.

Several workers spoke to the WSWS. An Inland Revenue Department employee, who took part in Monday's picket, told the WSWS that he would strike because a wage increase was essential. "I support this campaign because of this. I am

not a member of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. I don't agree with their politics. They support the war and the emergency regulations. They are the people that brought this government to power. They incite communalism through their media.

"I don't support this war. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must unite. I accept that a united movement of workers must be built. There is no such a movement right now. I have no understanding how such a movement could be built. I have no definite idea why the oil and food prices are going up. I think it is because the oil monopoly is in the hands of big imperialist companies and food production is also under their control."

Yesterday, about 200 employees of the national television network, Rupavahini, and the government-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation held a lunch-time picket to support the strike. One worker told the WSWS: "Even a wage increase of 5,000 [rupees] is not enough. After deductions, I get around 18,000 rupees per month. I cannot accept that salaries cannot be increased due to the war."

Reflecting the illusion among many workers that the strike would force the government to make concessions, he said: "The trade union combine must put big pressure on the government, [then] I think we can win those demands".

Rupavahini workers experienced state repression directly last December when President Rajapakse ordered the military into the television studios to suppress a strike by employees. Workers walked out after a government minister, Melvin Silva, and his thugs physically attacked a news editor who refused to broadcast one of his speeches.

Most of the picketers were very wary about commenting. One Rupavahini employee said that although soldiers had now been withdrawn, a large number of intelligence officers had been inserted to monitor workers. "Employees are upset about the situation. [There is] no peace of mind. And the trade union leaders do not care." he said.



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