

Sri Lanka: Low turnout in general strike expresses lack of confidence in unions

Our correspondent
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Tens of thousands of workers joined yesterday's general strike in Sri Lanka despite a vicious government intimidation campaign. The exact turnout is difficult to gauge as the unions led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP) refused to call mass meetings, rallies or marches to fight for their demands.

While government ministers proclaimed the strike a complete failure, JVP parliamentarian and union leader K.D. Lankantha declared it was "70 percent successful". The turnout appears to have been patchy and far less than the JVP and UNP expected. The stoppage was strongly supported among plantation workers, but the majority of private and public sector workers did not participate.

The relatively low turnout was not due to any lack of opposition among workers to the government's attacks on living standards. Nor was it because workers swallowed the government's claims that sacrifices are needed for its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There is widespread support for a 5,000-rupee monthly wage rise, continued cost-of-living allowances and reduced bus and rail fares.

Large sections of workers, however, have no confidence in the trade union leaders, who have repeatedly caved in to the government's opposition to any wage rise. In response to President Mahinda Rajapakse's insistence that all resources be devoted to the war, the unions have shut down a series of strikes over the past two years, including on the docks, in the plantations, among teachers and health workers. The chauvinist JVP, in particular, fully backs Rajapakse's communal war.

The strong support among plantation workers demonstrates the contradictory character of the strike.

The JVP-led All Ceylon Estate Workers Union has almost no influence among these largely Tamil-speaking workers, who are hostile to the JVP's Sinhala supremacism and its support for the war. Yet up to 90 percent of workers from the central hill districts, such as Hatton, Thalawakele, Nuwara Eliya, Bogawantalawa and Bandarawela, took part in the stoppage.

The strike by estate workers does not represent any swing of support to the JVP, but is an expression of their increasingly desperate economic situation under conditions where inflation is currently running at 30 percent. Plantation workers are among the lowest paid and most exploited sections of the Sri Lankan working class. In stopping work yesterday, they defied the leaderships of the major plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF)—which issued appeals not to strike. The CWC and UPF, which also function as political parties, are both partners in Rajapakse's ruling coalition.

Among other sections of workers who have previously taken action for a pay rise, the turnout was low. Last October, around 200,000 teachers participated in a one-day protest. Yesterday, less than half that number took part in the stoppage. A significant section of non-medical staff at major hospitals joined the strike, as did the workforce at the Government Press and Government Factory. Few transport workers took part. Several hundred workers from private firms participated.

Those who did take part had to defy a concerted government campaign of intimidation. On the pretext of having intelligence about a bomb scare, police and soldiers were stationed at many government workplaces, railway stations, bus stands and other locations throughout Colombo. On Wednesday, police arrested local union leaders at Angoda Hospital, who

were only released after workers immediately stopped work. On Thursday, the government dispatched ministers and provincial councillors to workplaces to bully and intimidate workers.

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared on Wednesday that the strikers were playing into the LTTE's hands. If the government granted the 5,000-rupee demand, he said, "the defence expenditure would have to be curtailed which is what the LTTE wants... So there could be some connection between the two (the unions and the LTTE)".

Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, speaking in the parliament on Wednesday, warned that "the government had the right to crush trade union action". He added: "Trade union actions were crushed even in China through its hire-and-fire policy". This last comment was a shot at the JVP, which occasionally claims to be "socialist" and maintains close ties with the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy.

There is every indication that the JVP-controlled National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) is already accommodating to the government's pro-war propaganda and preparing to shut down the current pay campaign. NTUC leader Lalkantha told the *Irida Lakbima* newspaper on Sunday that if the government were prepared to make some sacrifices for the war then "we can ask the masses to accept the 625-rupee increase offered by the government and to 'be patient'."

Speaking on the "Swarnavahini" television program on Tuesday, Lalkantha reiterated the JVP's total support for the war, saying: "From the inception of the war we joined society to line up behind it. We even asked other trade unions not to engage in trade union actions". He promised: "We will carry out our strike without pushing the country into anarchy".

In the wake of the strike, the government has not budged an inch on the pay demands. Speaking in parliament yesterday, Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa warned that the UNP and JVP would suffer "dire consequences" if they resorted to strike action again. The JVP and the NTUC announced no new plans for industrial action, saying only that union leaders would hold discussions about the campaign.

The Socialist Equality Party has warned from the outset that without a political program to oppose the

war, the working class cannot defend even its most basic rights. We urge workers who are looking for a means of fighting for pay and conditions to seriously study the SEP's statement "A socialist program to fight for wages and conditions", which calls for the formation of action committees to take the campaign out of the hands of the unions and advances a revolutionary perspective to take forward the struggle.



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