Sri Lankan unions call for further strikes and protests over pay

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Despite a relatively low turnout for a one-day general strike on July 10, Sri Lankan trade unions are calling for further action in support of their demands for a 5,000-rupee rise in monthly pay, cost-of-living allowances and reduced railway and bus fares.

Tens of thousands of public sector employees including in the hospitals, railways, the Government Press, Government Factory, Ceylon Transport Board and Ceylon Electricity Board, as well as teachers and plantation workers, took part in the July 10 strike.

The limited character of the stoppage was not due to a lack of support for the demands—broad layers of working people have been hit by soaring inflation of more than 30 percent. Rather there is a widespread lack of confidence in the unions, which have repeatedly caved in to the government over the past two years.

Prior to the strike, President Mahinda Rajapakse summarily rejected the pay demands, declaring that any rises would undermine the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He accused the trade unions and workers of engaging in strikes to help the "Tiger terrorists".

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), whose National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) spearheaded the strike, fully backs Rajapakse's renewed communal war. Far from calling for an end to the war, the NTUC leaders insisted that the strike would not disrupt the war effort. They called no rallies or protests on July 10.

Following a union meeting on July 16, NTUC leader K. D. Lalkantha, who is also a JVP parliamentarian, announced a further three-day strike to force the government to grant the 5,000-rupee rise. Lalkantha indicated that the NTUC would approach other unions to participate. No date has been fixed.

A leaflet issued by the NTUC pledged "to continue the struggle until we get complete victory". Clutching at straws, it listed a series of empty government promises, and in some cases rumours, as "gains". These included a government offer, prior to the stoppage, of a small 625-rupee allowance and another "promise" to lift private sector wages by between 15 and 45 percent. No private employers have agreed to any increase.

Irida Lakbima reported on July 13 that a presidential secretariat official said the government would give 2,000-rupee wage increase in its November budget. Despite the lack of any official confirmation, the NTUC listed the rise as another gain for strikers.

All this bluster about "victories achieved" and "struggle to the end" is to obscure the fact that the NTUC is desperate for a face-saving deal to put an end to the campaign. The decision to call the strike was not in response to the increasingly desperate situation facing workers, but to bolster the JVP's declining support in urban and rural areas.

While the JVP proclaims its sympathy for working people, its MPs voted last November for the government's war budget, which included a record 166 billion rupees for defence at the expense of the jobs and wages of its employees, and cutbacks for welfare, education and health.

A trade union alliance known as the "August 4 movement" has also called for further action in support of the pay demands. The grouping includes the Health Services Trade Union Alliance, as well as several other public sector unions, including several associated with middle class radical outfits such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).

At a meeting on July 19, these unions called for a day of protest on September 9 and again on October 7. Far from challenging the NTUC perspective, the NSSP is promoting the dangerous illusion that the JVP is being pressured by the masses to wage a genuine struggle for their interests and against the war. Their only criticism of the NTUC was that it had failed to collaborate closely

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enough with their alliance and unions associated with the main opposition party—the right-wing United National Party (UNP).

While posturing as opponents of the war, the NSSP issues futile appeals to the Rajapakse government to reenter peace talks with the LTTE as the means of ending the conflict. Rajapakse, however, was directly responsible for destroying the so-called peace process, sponsored by the major powers, when he plunged the country back to war in July 2006 and tore up the 2002 ceasefire this January.

Following the strike, the government has again made clear that it has no intention of backing down. Far from paying higher wages to public sector employees, it is looking for more money for its communal war. Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told Reuters just before the strike that the government would need an extra 50 billion rupees this year for the military.

President Rajapakse has ratcheted up the pressure on the unions by effectively denouncing them as traitors. At a meeting with provincial councillors on July 11, he declared that the strike was "organised by reactionary indigenous and alien conspirators, at a decisive moment for the Motherland". He hailed the low turnout as proof that workers had done their patriotic duty in "thwarting the strike".

Addressing the Federation of Self-Employees on July 14, the president said: "The LTTE must be crushed militarily. The government has brought down the LTTE from a fighting force to the level of useless rhetoric. However, the strikes in the south give the terrorists a breathing space." Directly referring to the July 10 strike, he declared menacingly that "this is the first time in Sri Lanka certain anti-government elements got together with the LTTE to destabilise the south".

The government is preparing to step up its campaign of intimidation against workers. On the eve of the strike, it directed officials to collect information and take disciplinary action against the workers who went on strike the following day. Explanations were to be demanded from permanent employees and casual employees dismissed if they were unable to give acceptable reasons for their "absence" on July 10.

In public hospitals, most non-medical staff went on strike. The government deployed personnel from the security forces to carry out work in several hospitals. Letters demanding a formal explanation have now been sent to employees in the medical supply department and health education bureau. Teachers, rail workers and other transport workers also report that officials are compiling details of those who went on strike. At the Ceylon Transport Board, security officers have been directed to take statements from strikers.

Workers have reacted angrily to the threats of victimisation. On July 14, several hundred health workers from government hospitals, including Colombo National, Kalubowila and Kandy hospitals, held a lunchtime demonstration in protest.

A worker from Kalubowila hospital told the WSWS: "Prior to the strike, the government attempted to intimidate workers. On strike day, provincial government politicians came here with their thugs and threatened us. The government also deployed security personnel to do the work of strikers.

"When we ask for a salary hike, the government says it cannot grant demands because it has to finance the war. However, there is no such limit regarding politicians and high officials. How many years has this war been going on? You cannot see an end of this war under capitalist governments.

"Workers must fight for their rights. However, the trade union leaders have no proper program. They were unable to mobilise the full strength of workers for the strike. Now the government is seeking to take advantage."

If the campaign is left in the hands of the unions, its outcome is a forgone conclusion. The NTUC and JVP, which have repeatedly declared that the war is the first priority, will buckle to government pressure, with the "August 4 movement" trailing along behind as their left apologists.

We encourage all workers to seriously consider the political issues raised by the Socialist Equality Party statement entitled "A socialist program to fight for wages and conditions", which establishes the basis for the independent mobilisation of the working class against the war and deepening economic crisis.

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