

A socialist perspective for public sector workers in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
3 November 2009

Two public sector industrial disputes have erupted in Sri Lanka over pay and conditions fuelled by widespread discontent among workers about the government's austerity measures that have led to a sharp deterioration in living standards.

The Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) Joint Trade Union Front held a meeting of members on Sunday to press for a 5,000-rupee (\$US44) interim monthly allowance as part of a wider wage claim that the government has rejected. Officials representing unions in the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, the Ports Authority and the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board were also present. A limited work-to rule campaign from November 11 was announced across these sectors.

On Thursday, 17 public sector unions will hold a conference of delegates to decide on a campaign to back their demands for a 3,158-rupee monthly cost-of-living allowance that is due but has not been paid, as well as the removal of several major pay anomalies. The unions include the Health Services Trade Union Alliance, the Postal and Telegraphic Officers Union, the Ceylon Teachers Union, the Government Printing Workers Union, the Railway Trade Union Joint Front and the Government United Workers Federation.

The Socialist Equality Party warns, however, that the trade unions are intervening not to wage a political struggle against the government, but to contain and suppress the deep-seated anger of workers throughout the island—private and public sector alike. Many of these unions are aligned with the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the United National Party (UNP)—which on all the key issues have no fundamental differences with President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government.

President Rajapakse, who is also finance minister, is insisting that working people must bear the burdens of the worsening economic crisis produced by his communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the global recession that has hit Sri Lankan exports hard. The LTTE was defeated in May, yet the government is expanding the military as it prepares for the permanent occupation of former LTTE-held areas in the North and East.

Forced to seek a \$2.6 billion IMF loan in July to avert a balance of payments crisis, the government is now implementing the IMF's demands, including a reduction of the budget deficit to 5 percent of GDP, increased taxes and an end to losses by state-owned bodies such as the Ceylon Electricity Board and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation.

The inevitable result will be further attacks on the living standards of workers, including the wages, jobs and conditions of those in the public sector. Rajapakse has suppressed wage rises across the public sector since 2006 and imposed a complete freeze this year on pay, as well as jobs. At the same time, the official, understated cost of living index has risen by nearly 50 percent from 141 in January 2006 to 207 in October 2009.

The CEB Joint Trade Union Front, which organised the meeting last Sunday, is led by the JVP-affiliated Ceylon Electricity Workers Union (CEWU). Several unions aligned to the UNP also took part, including the National Employees Union (JSS). All of these unions, in line with the full support of the JVP and the UNP for the war, helped suppress wages to aid the military effort.

As Ceylon Petroleum Corporation Common Services Union leader D.J. Rajakaruna recently declared: "This [5,000 rupee] payment was due from January, but we decided not to carry out any trade union action due to the war situation in the country. Now that the war is over, we cannot accept excuses any more."

However, Rajakaruna and his union are aligned to the JVP, which, just as it supported the war, fully backs the recruitment of tens of thousands more soldiers, the permanent military occupation of the North and East and the mass detention of 250,000 Tamil civilians in military-run camps. On October 20, the JVP and UNP voted in parliament with the government to approve an additional 34 billion rupees for the military on top of 200 billion rupees already allocated to the defence budget for this year.

Likewise, while the UNP and the JVP criticise aspects of the IMF loan, they are not opposed in principle to the loan or the attached austerity measures. UNP leader Ravi Karunanayake even boasted at the time that it was "the UNP that asked the government to go for the IMF facility instead of turning to private banks". Both parties criticise the government for "waste and corruption" but

never identify the real source of the present economic crisis—the profit system itself.

Not surprisingly, even before their campaign is off the ground, the UNP- and JVP-aligned unions are backpedaling. Last week, the CEB union front announced it would set the date for a three-day general strike to press for its pay increase and an end to electricity privatisation. By Sunday, the union bloc had transformed its plan into a work-to-rule. A letter last week from JVP parliamentarian and union leader K.D. Lalkantha appealed to President Rajapakse to intervene “to resolve the issues immediately in an amicable manner”.

The 17-union public sector combine that has called the November 5 delegates conference has no different perspective. A flyer for the unions pathetically begged Rajapakse to “give relief to government servants” and chided him for abandoning “the government’s promise to give concessions to public employees by the 2010 budget”.

It should be recalled that many of these unions were part of the Public Services Salary Review Trade Union Committee in 2006, which presented a series of similar demands to Rajapakse for a 65 percent salary increase and the removal of salary anomalies. When the government accused the unions of undermining war effort, the union front abandoned the campaign, saying the “prevailing situation is not conducive for struggles”.

Confronting a worsening economic crisis today, the government has no intention of making concessions to workers. In fact, it has just delayed the 2010 budget in a bid to put off even harsher measures until after elections due next year. Last week Rajapakse flatly refused to meet with Ceylon Petroleum Corporation union officials on their pay demands and branded electricity, oil, water and ports unions as “conspirators” seeking to destabilise the country.

Rajapakse’s use of the language of war against workers seeking a pay rise is not accidental. If the unions are unable to contain the working class, the government will use the anti-democratic measures and police-state apparatus built up in the course of the 26-year war against the working class. The president has already used the armed forces as strike-breakers on several occasions over the past four years and threatened to invoke sweeping emergency powers that the opposition parties vote for each month.

At the meeting last Sunday, CEB Billing Officers Union (BOU) leader Priyantha Wickramasinghe objected to any suggestion that the campaign was directed against the government. The BOU is affiliated with the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), a petty-bourgeois protest party. Wickramasinghe insisted: “We are not engaged in a struggle to bring down the government. If the government falls, that can’t help. What we need is a wage increase.”

The issue could not be more bluntly posed. It is impossible for

workers to fight for the most elementary demands such a wage increase without a political struggle against the Rajapakse government. Viewed through the prism of parliamentary cretinism, Wickramasinghe sees the only alternative to the present government as being the JVP and UNP. In fact, what is required is the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies.

Such a struggle is only possible through a complete break with the trade unions and the political parties to which they are affiliated. The SEP calls on workers to take matters into their own hands and form action committees independent of the unions. Delegates from these committees should hold their own conference to decide on their demands and to map out a political and industrial campaign to fight for them.

Central to that campaign must be the perspective of socialist internationalism. For more than six decades, successive governments have exploited anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and shore up bourgeois rule. Even though the military conflict is over, the army is still being expanded to occupy the North and East. The only way to unite workers is to oppose this divisive communalism and the government’s anti-democratic measures. Workers must call for the immediately freeing of all Tamil civilians and the unconditional withdrawal of the military from the North and East.

Workers, the rural poor and youth cannot secure decent living standards within the framework of capitalism. A workers’ and farmers government is needed to reorganise society from top to bottom to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a wealthy few. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers and youth to study our perspective and to join and build the SEP as the mass party of the working class.



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