

Sri Lankan president invokes emergency powers against workers

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse imposed an Essential Services Order from midnight on Sunday on unions and workers at four state-owned corporations, banning their work-to-rule campaign for pay demands in the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Ceylon Electricity Board, the Water Board and the ports.

Under an Essential Services Order, all strikes and industrial action are illegal. Workers breaching the order can be punished, including by sacking. Legal action can also be taken against workers, as well as unions and union leaders. In the guise of “maintaining supply of services and goods essential for the life of the community,” the government can mobilise the armed forces as strike breakers.

Rajapakse has previously threatened to invoke his draconian emergency powers, but this is the first time he has done so. The government has maintained a state of emergency—even though the army defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May—on the pretext that security threats remain. The Essential Services Order makes clear that the real target is the working class.

The government is confronting a deepening economic crisis produced by huge military budgets and compounded by the global financial crash. Amid his victory celebrations in May, Rajapakse declared an “economic war”, insisting that workers had to sacrifice to build the nation.

In July, faced with a looming balance of payments crisis, the government was compelled to accept an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan with stringent austerity measures attached, including slashing the budget deficit and restructuring the Ceylon Petroleum

Corporation (CPC) and Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). Rajapakse has imposed a freeze on public sector wages and jobs, fuelling resentment and opposition among workers whose pay has been undermined by soaring prices.

The limited pay campaign by unions linked to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the United National Party (UNP) in the CPC, CEB, Water Board and the ports takes place amid protests and industrial action in other areas. Following previous protests, the JVP and UNP-led unions called a three-day work-to-rule campaign from November 11 to demand an additional 5,000-rupee (\$US44) interim monthly allowance.

President Rajapakse denounced any industrial action from the outset. At a meeting of loyal trade union bureaucrats on October 26, he attacked unions allied to the opposition JVP and UNP as “conspirators” destabilising the country. He warned they would be dealt with sternly.

Opposed to any political struggle against the Rajapakse regime, the unions attempted to strike a deal in a meeting with government representatives on November 9. The government offered a 22 percent increase—considerably less than the unions’ original demands. While the increase was to be payable from November, the payments would only begin in January 2010. Well aware that the offer would be unacceptable to workers, the unions announced their work-to-rule campaign.

At the same time, K.D. Lal Kantha, head of the JVP’s National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), indicated the willingness of the unions to compromise and called on Rajapakse to intervene directly. He told the *Daily Mirror* that the NTUC would accept a 22 percent increase if paid

from January 2009 and consider “payment of arrears on a stage by stage basis staggered even for three years”.

The unions’ concessions only encouraged Rajapakse to prepare tougher measures. On November 10, pro-government unions staged a menacing demonstration in central Colombo against the work-to-rule campaign. Many of those involved were not union members or workers but street hawkers rounded up for the protest.

In a press briefing on November 11, army spokesperson Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara warned that the armed forces were “on standby” to maintain essential services if the industrial campaign went ahead. On the same day, the government tried to deploy navy personnel in sections of the Colombo port but they were forced to withdraw after workers protested and threatened to walk off the job.

Pro-government thugs, some armed with clubs, were also brought into the port. As the port is under tight security, that would only have been possible with the sanction of the military or police. A crane operator was critically injured and hospitalised after being assaulted.

Last Friday, thugs were brought to the CPC storage terminal at Kolonnawa, on the outskirts of Colombo. Workers chased them away, denouncing them as provocateurs. The incident fuelled widespread anger, forcing CPC union leaders to call an “indefinite strike” over the pay demands.

The unions had already exempted “essential services” from the strike and directed workers to provide fuel to hospitals, government-owned bus and train services, the military and police. The government, however, prevented workers entering the CPC fuel storage on Sunday and the same night imposed the Essential Services Order.

The following day, the CPC unions called off the strike and sent workers back to work. CPC trade union leader D.J. Rajakaruna told the WSWS that this was not “a retreat” and discussions would be held about future action. The port unions quickly followed suit, calling off their work-to-rule campaign in return for a 1,000-rupee monthly increase to the basic wage and a 2,000-rupee allowance, payable from January 2010.

The Water Board union leaders had already called off their bans last Friday, directing workers to wear black

armbands in an impotent display of opposition. A two-hour protest stoppage is due to be held at noon today. The CEB unions have continued the work-to-rule but, according to Ceylon Electricity Workers Union secretary Ranjan Jayalal, the campaign will end today.

Rajapakse’s use of the emergency powers against workers is a warning that the government will stop at nothing to suppress any resistance to its harsh austerity measures. In the course of the war over the past three years, Rajapakse repeatedly denounced striking workers for undermining national security and the military. Now he is using the police-state measures built up during the conflict directly against the working class.

Without a political struggle against the Rajapakse government, it is impossible for workers to defend even their most basic rights. The trade unions have functioned throughout the pay dispute as the industrial policemen for the government, deliberately limiting the scope of the demands and the campaign. The JVP, which supported the government’s war to the hilt, is now subordinating workers to Rajapakse’s so-called nation building.

After the LTTE’s defeat in May, the Socialist Equality Party warned that the government would turn the war against the country’s Tamil minority into an economic war to impose the burdens of the worsening financial crisis onto working people. The only way forward for workers is to break out of the shackles of the trade unions, unite across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic lines and mobilise independently against the Rajapakse regime in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies.



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