

Sri Lankan unions shut down pay campaign

Vilani Peiris

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Sri Lankan public sector unions have caved in to President Mahinda Rajapakse's ban on industrial action and ended their limited campaign for pay rises, despite previously declaring they would continue the campaign. Far from fighting Rajapakse's draconian emergency measures, the unions function as the industrial policeman for the government and big business in imposing the burdens of the country's deepening economic crisis on the working class.

The trade union fronts in the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), Water Board and the Ports Authority began a joint work-to-rule campaign last month to demand an initial 5,000-rupee (\$US44) interim monthly allowance as part of a broader wage increase. On November 16, however, Rajapakse used his extensive powers under the state of emergency to issue an Essential Services Order banning any action in these corporations.

The government used the country's long running civil war to justify the state of emergency but has continued it after the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. The public sector unions involved are affiliated to the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP)—which backed the war and have not opposed the state of emergency.

None of the unions has challenged the Essential Services Order—the first of its kind by the Rajapakse government—even though it has far-reaching implications for the entire working class. Under the order, union leaders and workers who continue to take action can be sacked or arrested and subjected to heavy penalties. Unions can be outlawed.

Soon after the Essential Services Order was issued, these unions shut down their campaign and agreed to the government offer they had previously rejected—a 22

percent wage increase effective from November, to be paid from next January. As a face-saving device, the unions called for the rise to be back paid to January 2009 and declared they would consider further action next year.

The pay rise falls far short of what workers need. Using the war as the pretext, 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.

As it announced an end to its work-to-rule campaign last month, the JVP-affiliated Ceylon Electricity Workers Union (CEWU) announced that it would carry out “tough action” in December to ensure the 22 percent rise was paid from January 2009. Speaking to the WWS this week, however, CEWU leader Ranjan Jayalal said that no action was now possible and blamed other trade unions, saying they wanted to wait until after the wage rise had been paid in January.

The union's decision to end its campaign has only encouraged management to carry out a witch hunt against electricity workers. “Now the administration is victimising workers who participated in the [work-to-rule] action. They stopped even normal transfers. Overtime work has also been stopped. Workers have to be paid their annual bonus on August 10. But still there is no preparation to give the bonus,” Jayalal reported.

Chandrasiri Mahagamage, leader of the JVP-affiliated All Ceylon Ports General Employees Union, was more explicit on the reasons for shutting down its campaign and agreeing to a monthly rise of just 2,000 rupees—down from an original claim of 8,000 rupees. He bluntly told the WWS this week that “the Ports Authority has no money to pay the workers' [full] demand”.

“The port is not like other workplaces. It works with international shipping companies. When we went on go-slow, three ships threatened to go other harbours. We have to protect our port,” Mahagamage added. In other words, the union’s overriding concern, like that of management, is to ensure the viability of Sri Lankan ports at the expense of workers. The ports are no different from other workplaces—everywhere the cry of management, government and the unions is that workers have to sacrifice to be “internationally competitive”.

Another bloc of “independent” trade unions—the Public Sector Salary Review Trade Union Committee (PSSRTUC)—has carried out isolated protests in recent weeks in support of a monthly 3,489-rupee cost-of-living allowance that has been due for nearly two years. The unions involved include the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HUTUA), Ceylon Teachers Union, Government Printing Workers Union, Railway Trade Union Joint Front and the Government United Workers Federation. The government has refused to pay the arrears and has promised only a 750-rupee cost-of-living allowance from next January.

The PSSRTUC’s limited campaign of one-day demonstrations has effectively ended. Convenor Saman Ratnapriya told the WWS that the unions would discuss further action on Friday, but that discussion has been postponed until next week. He said that the unions “have not yet decided to take any action” in consideration of “the situation in the country”.

While Ratnapriya did not spell it out, the “situation” can only refer to the dire financial crisis confronting the government, which was forced in June to accept a \$US2.6 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan. The IMF’s conditions include savage cutbacks to public spending that will inevitably impact on workers’ wages, jobs and conditions, as well as essential services. Rajapakse has now called presidential elections for January. Far from launching a political campaign against the austerity measures being prepared, the PSSRTUC is winding down any action, and in doing so tacitly assisting Rajapakse.

The PSSRTUC has also not publicly condemned Rajapakse’s Essential Services Order despite its implications for all workers. Ratnapriya said the PSSRTUC had written to the president over the issue but

not made its letter public. He did not oppose the use of such powers, but simply criticised the government for failing to demonstrate that the industrial action harmed the public and to consult with the unions.

Significantly, the PSSRTUC took part in a meeting with President Rajapakse and unions affiliated with his ruling coalition in October. Unions connected to the JVP and UNP were not invited. Rajapakse used the forum to accuse the opposition-affiliated unions in the oil, electricity, ports and water of being engaged in a “conspiracy” against the government—setting the stage for the invocation of his emergency powers just weeks later.

The response of the unions to the Essential Services Order is a continuation of their role in suppressing the working class. After plunging the country back to civil war in July 2006, Rajapakse repeatedly accused striking workers of undermining the war effort and betraying the country. On every occasion, the unions—whether aligned to the government, the opposition parties or so-called “independent”—caved in and ended their campaigns.

It is no different now that the military has defeated the LTTE. Confronting a worsening economic crisis, the government insists that working people must sacrifice to “build the nation” and the unions capitulate. At the same time, the police-state apparatus built up over a quarter century of war, including the president’s draconian emergency powers, is being maintained for use against working people.



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