

Sri Lankan protest reveals discontent over wages

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A protest by 250 workers in the Colombo suburb of Ratmalana last Thursday pointed to the growing unrest among working people in Sri Lanka over rising prices and deteriorating living standards. At the same time, the organisers—ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—demonstrated their determination to block any independent political struggle against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, which has suppressed real wages for the past four years.

The protest was limited to just 90 minutes and involved private sector industrial workers from the nearby Bata, Singer, ABM and Acme Aluminium factories, which employ several thousand workers. The four trade unions involved are all NSSP-affiliated—the United Federation of Labour, the Government Federation of Labour, the Corporation, Cooperatives and Mercantile Workers and the Commercial and Industrial Workers Union.

The main demands were a 2,500-rupee (\$US22) increase in the monthly wage for public and private sector workers and an 180-rupee allowance for every unit rise in the official cost of living index. Rajapakse promised the 2,500-rupee rise during presidential and parliamentary elections earlier this year but reneged on his pledge after being re-elected.

Rajapakse suppressed wage increases as he renewed the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-2006 and military spending soared. Following the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, the government has continued to impose the burdens of the country's economic crisis and huge debts on working people, opposing any pay rises.

Under the terms of an International Monetary Fund loan, the government has to drastically slash the budget deficit. In the budget announced in June, it imposed a further wage freeze. At the same time, Rajapakse has increased taxes on various essentials, lifting the prices of items such as milk powder and flour. Rajapakse has promised to fulfil his election promise at the next budget in November, but, under pressure from the IMF, is likely to make further inroads into living standards.

Public sector workers received their last wage increase in 2006 and private sector workers in 2005 even though inflation has risen sharply. At the same time, factory owners have been cutting back on other benefits. At the Acme Aluminium factory, for instance, workers lost their cost of living allowance three years ago.

A machine operator working at the ABM factory told the WSWS that his wage was not enough to live on. "Even the 2,500-rupee demand is not enough. I think workers want an increase of more than 7,000 rupees... It is very good that the war has finished. But what did workers get after the war? Nothing!" Asked about the government's pro-IMF measures, he said: "We oppose the IMF policies. I think all workers have to unite to defeat the austerity measures that are being put on the working class."

A worker from the Singer company said: "I have 18 years' service and I get about 20,000 rupees monthly. We private sector workers do not even get the allowances given to public sector workers." He said public and private sector workers in all the trade unions had to get together and fight to win their demands.

Such a struggle would inevitably lead to a political confrontation with the Rajapakse government, which has made clear that it will use the police-state apparatus built up in 25 years of civil war to suppress the demands of working people. Earlier this month, the government mobilised soldiers and police to detain several hundred shanty dwellers in the Colombo suburb of Mattakkuliya who protested against an unjust arrest.

The NSSP and its trade unions called the protest not to initiate a political campaign against Rajapakse but to defuse mounting anger among workers and prevent a fight against the government. The slogans of the trade unions bombastically called for militant struggles—"Come onto the streets, come onto the streets to fight for our demands!" and "We are coming for the pay fight, we will strike and come to fight! We will come

for the big fight!”.

NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne briefly addressed the rally, posturing as an opponent of the government. “The government is protecting big businesses while increasing the prices of essential goods. Even the price of bread has increased. We know that the workers in this country are not sleeping. They are ready to fight,” he said.

Karunaratne went on, however, to sow the dangerous illusion that “big pressure” would force Rajapakse to make concessions to workers. “He [Rajapakse] earlier joined with us, clasping our hands, to win working class rights. He earlier joined with us in campaigns and protests. Rajapakse cannot remember those struggles. But we can remember. Workers can remember.”

Like every bourgeois politician in Sri Lanka, Rajapakse poses on occasions as a defender of working people and the poor. He has appeared at meetings of unions affiliated with his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to exploit the discontent of workers for his own political purposes. Karunaratne is simply duping workers when he claims this posturing demonstrates Rajapakse has any concerns for workers.

Rajapakse is a ruthless defender of the capitalist system and proponent of Sinhala supremacism. He was part of the SLFP-led government that crushed the general strike at the end of 1976. As a cabinet minister, then prime minister, under former President Chandrika Kumaratunga in the 1994-2001 and 2004-2005 SLFP coalition governments, Rajapakse helped to implement the pro-market agenda of the IMF and World Bank that led to deepening social polarisation.

Karunaratne was a member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in the 1970s when it was part of the SLFP coalition. The NSSP was formed in a split from the LSSP in 1978 but it never broke with the LSSP’s opportunist politics. Over the past 30 years, the NSSP has been involved in sordid manoeuvres with all the major parties—most recently with the right-wing United National Party. Central to the NSSP’s outlook is an organic hostility to the fight waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the ruling class.

During the renewed war against the LTTE, Rajapakse relied on the unions to suppress the struggles of workers. He denounced workers for striking during the war as “traitors”. Far from leading a struggle against the government, the unions—including those affiliated to the NSSP—caved in and called off their limited campaigns.

After the LTTE’s defeat, Rajapakse proclaimed an “economic war” to “build the nation” and demanded further

sacrifices from working people. In late 2009, the president used his sweeping emergency powers to ban industrial action by port, petroleum, electricity and water workers calling for wage increases. Again the trade unions—including those affiliated with the NSSP—fell into line.

Last week’s protest is part of wider moves by the trade unions and opposition parties to contain the growing discontent of working people. The NSSP is also supporting a petition campaign by the Trade Union Confederation (TUC)—a grouping of so-called independent trade unions—aimed at pushing Rajapakse for higher wages. Unions affiliated with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) are each threatening industrial action to pressure the government for a monthly wage increase of 8,000 and 10,000 rupees respectively.

The SEP warns that the Rajapakse government is not preparing to make concessions, but to use its police-state apparatus to suppress workers. The working class can only defend its independent class interests by breaking from every faction of the capitalist class and its appendages, such as the ex-radicals of the NSSP. A first step is the building of action committees in workplaces and working class neighbourhoods to fight for decent wage rises in line with the cost of living.

Worsening living standards and the deepening gulf between rich and poor are a product of the economic crisis not only in Sri Lanka but of global capitalism. There is no conjunctural solution. Workers in Sri Lanka must wage a political struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the fight for socialism throughout the region and internationally.



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