

Sri Lankan FTZ strikes: a harbinger of the class struggle

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Protests by workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZ) mark a turning point in the class struggle on the island and internationally. Significantly, the strikes and demonstrations over the past two weeks on this small island have erupted outside of the trade unions and the country's opposition political parties.

Incensed by government plans to impose a wage-cutting pension scheme, workers from the Katunayake FTZ ignored a decision by the unions to call off demonstrations on May 24, and stopped work in their tens of thousands. A week later, the government flooded the area with thousands of police, but their violent attacks on protesting workers provoked a stoppage by 40,000 throughout the FTZ.

A panicked government suspended passage of the pension legislation and made the police the scapegoat for the violence that resulted in the death of a young worker, Roshen Chanaka Ratnasekera. He died last Wednesday from a bullet wound and severe bleeding after being left untreated in a police station for several hours. The country's police chief has resigned and several other officers have been charged.

The protests in Sri Lanka are part of a rising international tide of class struggle that has led to upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in European countries and the US. The driving force is the continuing global economic crisis that has led to a dramatic worsening of living standards through the imposition of austerity measures and sharply rising prices for basic commodities, including fuel and food.

Garment workers have been engaged in bitter struggles over poverty-level wages and conditions.

Strikes by garment workers in Egypt against wage-cutting, layoffs and privatisations since 2007 were part of the unrest that led to this year's revolutionary upheaval in that country. Last September, more than 200,000 workers in Cambodia stopped work for four days, demanding higher wages to compensate for inflation. In December, Bangladeshi police shot dead four garment workers during fierce battles with tens of thousands of strikers calling for a doubling of their pay.

The chief obstacle in all these struggles has been the trade unions, which have imposed sell-out deals reached with employers and governments behind the backs of workers. The overriding priority of the unions is to maintain the "international competitiveness" of sweatshops in their country at the expense of workers.

The protests by young, mainly women, workers in Sri Lanka are being driven by similar processes. Having mortgaged the country to squander billions of dollars on the military and the island's civil war, President Mahinda Rajapakse is being compelled by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to slash government spending and implement pro-market restructuring.

The main purpose of the pension plan is to provide a boost to the stock market and private investors. Most FTZ workers, who work for an average of five years, will be denied long-term benefits, while being forced to pay into the scheme via their wages and termination pay-outs. For young workers forced to endure long hours and squalid living conditions for a monthly wage, including overtime, of around 12,000 to 15,000 rupees (\$US110-135), this is simply intolerable.

The protests since May 24 demonstrate that social tensions have reached breaking point, not only with the government but the trade unions as well. An editorial in the *Island* newspaper last week astutely observed that Rajapakse, whose government enjoys a two-thirds parliamentary majority, believed that he could “force the PSPS [pension scheme] down the workers’ throat” but the “grand leap has ended in a shameful pratfall.”

“The PSPS has been put on hold in view of workers’ protests,” the editorial stated. “The government was in an indecent hurry to rush the pension Bill through Parliament, albeit in vain. Instead of inviting trade unions and Opposition Parties to a discussion on that vital issue, the government worthies, exuding arrogance from every pore, began to bellow empty rhetoric vowing to implement the pension scheme come what may. (Alas, they are seen nursing their snouts!)”

The *Island* is no champion of workers’ rights, but it recognises from long experience that the unions play an essential role in buttressing bourgeois rule. By sidelining the unions, Rajapakse had opened the door for a revolt by garment workers that, in the tinderbox social conditions on the island, threatened to trigger a broader rebellion. After the deprivations of 25 years of war, the government is imposing the burdens of the economic crisis on working people. Since the fighting ended in 2009, it has continued to enforce an effective wage freeze despite soaring prices.

The unions and opposition parties have now stepped into the breach, holding limited protests and promising a fight to the finish against the pension scheme. Behind the militant rhetoric, they are preparing for talks with the government, which far from abandoning the legislation, is determined to implement it in amended form. All parties—government, opposition and the unions—are well aware that the IMF, acting on behalf of international finance capital, will brook no opposition to its demands.

If the unions fail to bring the protests under control, the military is being prepared for a crackdown. Soldiers were out in force on Saturday for the funeral of slain FTZ worker Ratnasekera—surrounding the church, preventing mourners from congregating and enforcing a

court order banning funeral speeches. Having massacred thousands of Tamil civilians in the final months of the island’s communal war, the Rajapakse government will not hesitate to use similar methods against the working class—Sinhala and Tamil alike.

These experiences hold important lessons for workers in Sri Lanka and internationally. Without breaking out of the straightjacket of the trade unions, working people cannot take a step forward in defending their basic rights. Having done so, however, they immediately confront a political struggle against the government and the state apparatus, posing revolutionary tasks, just as in Egypt.

Moreover, as FTZ workers are acutely aware, their exploiters are not simply local companies but major international corporations that can easily shift their business elsewhere. Any struggle to defend wages and conditions, whether it be in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China, Egypt or the advanced capitalist countries, necessitates a turn to workers internationally to fight for their common class interests based on the perspective of socialist internationalism.

Nothing less than the seizure of power by the working class at the head of the oppressed masses will put an end to a social order that condemns young FTZ workers to semi-slavery for less than \$1 an hour, while creating huge profits for transnational corporations. To wage such a struggle, new mass revolutionary parties of the working class are needed. In Sri Lanka, that means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party.

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