

A socialist program for public sector workers in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Struggles are emerging among thousands of public sector workers in Sri Lanka, including at the Ceylon Electricity Board, Sri Lanka Telecom and public universities, against declining living and working conditions. These protests are an expression of the deepening determination of the entire working class to fight for its interests—after years in which its struggles have been blocked by the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) expresses its solidarity with these protests. At the same time, the SEP emphasises that workers can win their demands only by developing a political struggle against the government on the basis of a perspective to bring a workers' and peasants' government to power to implement socialist policies.

The struggles that have commenced include:

* On August 2, Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers restarted their protest campaign over pay and conditions after the attempt by the trade unions to find a compromise with management failed. Workers engaged in a two-day sick note campaign from last Tuesday and picketing was organised for last Thursday in Colombo.

The SLT workers' demands include an increase in the monthly transport and meal allowance to 25,000 rupees (\$US225) per month, abolition of the recruitment system for SLT subsidiaries through Man Power Solution Company (MPSC), integration of MPSC workers into SLT, the filling of 50 percent of SLT vacancies from workers' children and removal of salary anomalies.

Three weeks ago, the Telecom Trade Unions Alliance (TTUA) called off its protest campaign, saying Telecom Minister Ranjith Siyambapitiya had promised to settle the issues. The management, however, rejected the workers' demands and insisted that the minister had no power to intervene because SLT was under private management. SLT was privatised long ago, but the government retained half

the shares.

The management has only agreed to increase the transport and meal allowance up to 11,250 rupees per month and to fill 50 percent of future vacancies with the children of its employees. Moreover, SLT has already taken punitive measures against union activists.

* On July 29, more than 1,500 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees, including Tamil-speaking workers from the North and East of the island, demonstrated in front of the CEB head office in Colombo, demanding ten months' worth of unpaid salary. On August 3, responding to the unions' limited call, tens of thousands of workers refrained from working, sending in sick notes.

After months-long protests in 2009, CEB workers were awarded a salary increase in November that year, but the government withheld ten months' arrears as a compulsory "sacrifice" to rebuild the country after its protracted civil war.

An alliance of CEB unions led by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-affiliated Ceylon Electricity Employees Union has called the renewed action. This union combine, together with its other public sector union counterparts, supported the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—which was defeated in May 2009—and strengthened the hand of the government to impose the economic burden of the conflict on working people.

* Amid rising resentment among non-academic workers in universities, the campus unions held a protest picket on August 4 in Colombo. Their demands include a salary increase, the rectification of salary anomalies and a halt to the privatisation of education.

In April 2007, thousands of non-academic workers from

15 universities launched a strike for the same demands. The Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC)—also led by the JVP—shut down the campaign without gaining a single demand, paving the way for the university authorities to witchhunt dozens of employees.

The re-emergence of workers' protests is a part of mounting opposition to the government's austerity measures and declining living standards.

In May, more than 40,000 workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) engaged in a battle, outside the unions, against the government's move to introduce a pension bill to further cut their salaries and benefits. Police violently suppressed their protests, killing one worker and injuring hundreds. The trade unions, including the Free Trade Zone and General Services Workers Union (FTZGSWU), did nothing to organise or defend these workers.

University teachers engaged in a campaign that lasted nearly three months to demand a 200 percent pay rise. On July 22, however, the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA) betrayed the campaign, accepting limited increases in allowances.

Workers now coming into struggle must seriously consider two fundamental issues.

Firstly, the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally confronts a universal counteroffensive on its past gains as a result of the deepening crisis of world capitalism. Over the past three years the global capitalist system has plunged into the greatest financial crisis since the 1930s. International bankers and their agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are imposing the full burden of this breakdown onto the backs of working people.

In America and Europe, workers are fighting savage cuts to wages, pensions, jobs, welfare measures and other benefits in a social counter-revolution by the corporate elite. A similar onslaught has been unleashed by the Sri Lankan government through its IMF-directed austerity measures, including the slashing of the budget deficit and pro-market reforms, such as the privatisation of education.

In its brutal attack on the FTZ workers, the government demonstrated that it is not ready to tolerate any opposition by workers to its pro-business policies.

Secondly, the trade unions and their bureaucrats do not represent the interests of the workers but those of the

government and corporate elite. If they have called limited protests, it is only to contain workers' discontent, let off steam and block any independent struggle.

The main lesson of workers' battles over the past few years is that they cannot fight for wages, other benefits and democratic rights without a conscious political struggle against the Rajapakse government and the profit system it defends.

Opposed to any such political struggle, the unions are sowing the illusion that workers can defend their interests by engaging in the futile exercise of pressurising the government and corporations. Their campaigns are in the main limited to token protests such as wearing black dresses and black armbands or staging sick-note campaigns.

To defend their basic rights and conditions, workers must break from the trade unions, the capitalist parties and their ex-left backers and develop new forms of organisation to develop their struggles. The SEP proposes that workers form rank-and-file action committees in every workplace and unite in common industrial and political action.

More militant action is not enough, however. What is required is a new political program. Workers cannot defend their class interests through a reformist and nationalist perspective. What is needed is a complete reorganisation of the economy in the interests of the majority of working people, rather than the profits of the wealthy few. Such a socialist program would involve the nationalisation of the banks and major industries under workers' control. These measures can be implemented only by the working class taking power, in alliance with the peasants and other oppressed masses as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

The SEP urges workers and youth to study the perspectives of the Socialist Equality Party and join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party needed to fight for this program.



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