

Low turnout in Sri Lankan strike reflects no confidence in the unions and opposition

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Despite growing opposition among workers to President Mahinda Rajapakse's assault on living standards and democratic rights, there was only limited participation in a one-day general strike on Tuesday. The low turnout expressed the deep distrust among broad layers of workers in the trade unions and official opposition parties, which called the strike action.

The stoppage was limited to a token protest against the government's decision to increase electricity prices by up to 60 percent. This massive price hike—a direct attack on working-class families—is only part of the government's austerity measures, dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The government clearly fears a social eruption. It unleashed an intimidation campaign against the strike, illegally cancelled leave for state employees and, in an unprecedented move, the defence ministry ordered every public sector institution chief to hand over the names of strikers. Police commandos were deployed at electricity board offices and soldiers mobilised to several workplaces, including the railways.

Cabinet minister Maithripala Sirisena, the general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, branded the strike “unpatriotic”, just as the government denounced all opposition during its brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sirisena declared that the strike was a bid to “destabilise the country.”

In reality, the organisers called the stoppage to head off rising social unrest and divert it into harmless protest channels. Their aim was not the organisation of a working-class struggle against the Rajapakse government. On the contrary, in order to avoid any confrontation with the government, they urged strikers to remain at home. In some places, like Colombo Port and the Water Board, they cancelled the strike and

called a lunchtime picket.

The stoppage was organised by the Coordinating Committee for Trade Union Alliance (CCTUA), led by the Sinhala communalist and pro-capitalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Other opposition parties, including the right-wing Democratic Party, Tamil National Alliance and pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), joined the strike call. The big business United National Party (UNP) supported the call, but did not ask its affiliated trade union to join the strike.

In the government sector, including electricity, water, railway and bus services and hospitals, only a few thousand workers participated. Several thousand public school teachers, mainly in rural areas, joined the strike. University teachers at Jayawardanapura and Kelaniya in Colombo's suburbs, Ruhunu University in Matara, Peradeniya University and Jaffna abstained from lectures.

Trade unions claimed employees from 200 private sector factories stopped work. However, there was no significant participation in the plantations and free trade zones, where about one million workers are employed. Police dispersed a march of about 500 workers in the Ratmalana industrial area.

On Tuesday evening, JVP leader and CCTUA convenor Lal Kantha claimed the strike was a complete success. This was not the last struggle, he stated, but he and other union leaders who addressed the media failed to say what their next action would be.

Workers who spoke with Socialist Equality Party members and *World Socialist Web Site* reporters blamed trade union officials for the poor turnout. A worker at the Kandy railway station said: “No one came here and convinced us of today's action.” A Chilaw hospital worker said his colleagues opposed the

government's measures but had no "confidence in trade union leaders." A Water Board worker said there was no strike at his workplace because of "the government's threats and trade union leaders backsliding."

The unions are thoroughly discredited among workers, following one betrayal after another. During the civil war against the LTTE, when the government used that war to suppress workers' struggles, the JVP backed the government, proclaiming that the "motherland is first."

Since the war ended in 2009, the opposition-aligned unions have called limited protests to defuse the anger among working people, as the government has ruthlessly implemented the demands of the IMF to cut the budget deficit to 5.2 percent of gross domestic product by next year. This austerity program is part of a global drive to impose the burden of the global economic crisis on the back of the working class.

In order to enforce its measures, the Rajapakse government is increasingly utilising the police-state powers that it built up during the war against the LTTE. But the unions and opposition parties are seeking to tie workers to the UNP, which has just as a repressive record as the Rajapakse government, and other equally reactionary parties.

At a separate electricity price protest last week, another trade union front, led by the Public Health Officers Union and Ceylon Teachers Union, invited the UNP and the Democratic Party to participate. The Democratic Party is led by former army commander Sarath Fonseka, who executed the Rajapakse government's slaughter of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final stages of the civil war.

The pseudo-left groups, the NSSP and the USP, are in the forefront of promoting the UNP as a defender of democratic rights and living conditions. NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne praised the unity with the UNP unions in the electricity price protests. The USP newspaper *Red Star* wrote: "It is a welcome sign that the divided trade union movement is getting united for class actions."

The working class needs to draw key political lessons from the strike. No trust can be placed in any of the ruling class parties, including the UNP, Democratic Party and JVP. The government's attacks and repression can be fought only in a conscious struggle

against the entire political establishment and the bankrupt capitalist profit system itself.

Workers must take matters into own hands, first by establishing rank and file committees, independent of, and opposed to, the trade unions. This requires a socialist program, based on the fight for a workers' and peasants' government. This is part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. It means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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