

Sri Lanka: A socialist program to fight budget cuts

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan workers in the public and private sectors are expected to join a one-day token strike on Tuesday against the right-wing United National Party (UNP)-led government's proposed budgets cuts, which will drastically affect jobs, wages, pension rights and subsidies.

The Trade Union Collective (TUC), a combine of 50 unions from the state, private and semi-government sectors, has reluctantly called the strike to deflect mounting opposition among workers and the poor to the government's austerity measures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the TUC is seeking to head off any struggle by the working class against the government and is making last-ditch efforts, via discussions with the government, to halt even the proposed 24-hour stoppage. The SEP calls on workers to prepare to fight the government's assault on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The limited demands of the trade unions include stopping the government's plan to abolish public sector employees' pension rights from 2016 and introduce a scheme to which employees will be compelled to contribute. The unions are also calling for a halt to the privatisation and commercialisation of government institutions, and for the scrapping of moves to establish a new agency to control workers' pension funds, currently managed by the Central Bank.

Other demands include increasing private sector workers' monthly salaries by 2,500 rupees, raising the daily wage of estate workers to 1,000 rupees, and adding the 10,000-rupee public sector employees' salary allowance to their basic pay.

The government has also proposed slashing the current scheme of supplying subsidised fertilisers to peasants. This is a first step to abolishing the subsidy altogether—a major attack on the rural poor. Last week,

peasants from various parts of the country held a demonstration in Colombo against this proposal.

In their manoeuvring with the government, designed to scuttle any fight, the TUC leaders met with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on Saturday. They hoped to secure some vague promises, in order to cancel the proposed strike. The TUC convenor, Government Nursing Officers Association president Saman Rathnapriya, said the unions were “were willing to call off the trade union action if the government at least agreed to consider continuing with the pension scheme.” Another union leader lamented after the discussion that “none of the demands drew a favourable response [from Wickremesinghe].”

In TV talk shows, Rathnapriya made clear that the unions oppose any struggle against the government. He insisted that by making their demands the unions were not fighting against this government “which we fought to bring to power.”

Likewise, the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) declared a so-called protest week, ending today, which was confined to distributing leaflets, erecting posters and picketing. The JVP and NTUC are equally opposed to any fight that could threaten the government, instead seeking to curb and channel the anger of workers.

Workers can have no faith in any of these unions or parties of the political establishment to fight the budget cuts. Workers must build their own action committees in every workplace to advance a political struggle, based on a socialist program, against the government itself.

These same unions diverted the opposition of workers and the poor to the attacks on living conditions and democratic rights implemented by the previous administration of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Having helped bring the pro-US government of President Maithripala Sirisena to office in January's election, the unions are now nervous that workers' discontent could explode, throwing the regime into crisis.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are determined to impose the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). On Thursday, Wickremesinghe made a threatening speech, criticising the unions and declaring that the government would not be intimidated by strikes. He denounced the Government Medical Officers Association for holding a token strike on December 3. Wickremesinghe's real target is not the union leaders but the workers themselves, whose hostility the unions are trying to contain.

To try to strengthen his hand, Sirisena is pushing to have the budget passed in parliament by a big majority on Thursday. He is pressing dissenting MPs of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—a coalition partner in the UNP-led government—to support the budget.

Facing deep economic and financial problems produced by the global slowdown and financial turmoil, the government is demanding that workers and poor shoulder the burden, while making every possible concession to big business and foreign investors.

Similar budget-cutting and pro-business measures are being carried out internationally. Already, a section of the Sri Lankan ruling elite is discussing that due to heavy debts Sri Lanka may dip into a crisis similar to Greece, where the Syriza government is implementing severe austerity measures.

Wickremesinghe told a Colombo Stock Market event that his government had asked the IMF for "help in rewriting the tax code" and informed it that the government needed a standby loan agreement. He said the government's policy was to make Sri Lanka "a competitive platform and logistic hub to attract investments." The government can only make the country a "competitive hub" by slashing social rights, wages and conditions.

Without a political fight against the government, workers cannot advance their struggle. The government has already demonstrated that it will use force to suppress resistance to its measures. It has unleashed a brutal police assault on protesting students who were defending public education, arrested plantation workers who opposed higher daily workloads and attacked poor

farmers demanding clean drinking water.

Workers can defend their jobs, wages, pensions and social rights, such as education and health, and also defend poor farmers, only in the fight to abolish the capitalist profit system, which is incompatible with these basic rights.

All banks, major industries and companies and big plantations must be nationalised under workers' control. All foreign debts must be repudiated. The economy must be reorganised along socialist lines, for the benefit of the majority of the people.

Workers cannot allow their fate to be determined by the trade unions, all of which are committed to maintaining the private profit system. They have to break from the unions and build their own action committees.

Only the SEP explained in the January presidential election and the August general election that this government would further intensify the attack on the hard-won rights of workers and the poor.

The SEP called on workers to take up the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program, as part of fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. In this struggle, workers need a new revolutionary party. We urge workers to join the SEP and help build it as a mass revolutionary party to lead the working class in this struggle.



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