

Sri Lankan trade unions call off one-day stoppage

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Bowing to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and on the basis of his fraudulent promises, the Trade Union Collective (TUC) in Sri Lanka called off a one-day strike scheduled for Tuesday. However, tens of thousands of bank employees, who are facing restructuring, struck for the day, defying a court ban.

The token 24-hour stoppage had been proposed by the TUC, a front of 50 trade unions covering the state, private and semi-government sectors, against proposed budget cuts. From the outset, the unions sought to scuttle the strike, even as opposition mounted among workers to the United National Party (UNP)-led government's cuts. These include the abolition of the existing pension scheme for public sector employees, further privatisation and the slashing of subsidies.

Last Saturday, the unions claimed that discussions with Wickremesinghe on their demands did not satisfy them. TUC convenor Saman Rathnapriya, the president of the Government Nursing Officers Association, urged the government to declare that "at least it would consider the demand on pension rights."

Rathnapriya told the *Island* newspaper that, after a discussion on Saturday, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena asked him "not to adopt a course of action inimical to the interests of the new government." Wickremesinghe promised to make a statement on the TUC's demands in parliament on Monday.

As soon as Wickremesinghe made the parliamentary statement, Rathnapriya declared that, "considering the concessions granted by the government," the unions had decided to "temporarily" call off the strike action. Rathnapriya insisted that the TUC had achieved "a substantial victory through negotiations."

This is a lie. Wickremesinghe and trade union bureaucrats were keen to avert a workers' struggle,

fearing it could become a catalyst for a social eruption against the coalition government, which also includes members of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

As a minor concession, Wickremesinghe declared that the monthly 10,000-rupee (\$US72) public sector employees' allowance, which is being already paid, would be added to basic salaries in three installments during the course of next year. A 25 percent tax increase on revenue licenses for vehicles would be reduced to 15 percent and the increase on charges for vehicle emissions tests would also be reduced.

As for the demand to increase private sector workers' monthly wages by 2,500 rupees, Wickremesinghe said the government would seek to implement it next May. This is an empty promise because it depends completely on the decisions of private employers. They have already ignored the government's request.

There was hardly any change to the budget proposal to replace the paid pension system with a new scheme by which employees will have to contribute. Wickremesinghe said the government would appoint a "committee to examine the possibility of amending the existing public sector pension scheme." Trade union bureaucrats would be invited onto this committee, fully incorporating them into the government's plans.

Likewise, Wickremesinghe said that in implementing other budget proposals, the government would seek the opinions of the unions. He said nothing about the demand for a halt to the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises—a clear indication that the government would not change this policy.

None of the discussions with the trade union bureaucrats even mentioned the demand for a wage rise for plantation workers. The plantation companies have rejected any increase whatsoever. The unions also did

not oppose the government's move to slash the fertiliser subsidy for poor farmers. Outraged farmers have already held several protests in various cities and are due to hold a demonstration in Colombo today.

The Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) was compelled to hold a limited strike because of the workers' opposition to the threats of privatisation or "restructuring." The government's proposal means state banks and corporations will be placed in the hands of a "State Holding Corporation," styled after Singapore's Temasek, for future restructuring. The union is seeking to divert employees' opposition into a futile effort to pressure the coalition government to modify its course.

In his statement, Wickremesinghe issued a thinly-veiled threat to the working class. He warned that "the government would not hesitate to take unpopular decisions for the future of the country." He declared that he was ready to relinquish power if he could not use it. Facing huge debts and dwindling export markets, the government is seeking a stand-by loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is insisting on the drastic slashing of public expenditure.

The government is clearly relying on the trade unions to help impose the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of workers, while extending more concessions to local and foreign investors and big business. Wickremesinghe several times insisted that his government was willing to negotiate on every measure with the unions and "civil groups."

TUC convener Rathnapriya, for his part, reiterated: "We are ready to engage in a constructive dialogue with the government and resolve all issues through negotiations."

While there is a certain division of labour, all the unions are working to suppress any fight by workers to improve their conditions. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) halted its bogus protest week on Monday. Many trade unions in the plantations are in the government and explicitly back the budget proposals.

The abandonment of the strike has proven, once again, that workers cannot advance their struggle within the straitjacket of the trade unions. They have to build their own action committees on the basis of a socialist program and fight for a workers' and peasants'

government, as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

Several workers expressed their hostility toward the unions' latest sellout in interviews with WSWS correspondents who were distributing the Socialist Equality Party statement "Sri Lanka: A socialist program to fight budget cuts."

A male nurse at Chilaw District hospital commented: "We knew that the union leaders would betray the strike. Saman Rathnapriya and union leaders were much concerned not to make any trouble for the government. They supported the bringing to power of this government. So the workers cannot fight for their rights against the government with those union leaders. Even if the government added our allowance to the basic salary, it is not enough to manage the spiraling cost of living."

A Katunayake Free Trade Zone worker explained: "Though the government promised to increase wages, it didn't. Before they came to power they promised many concessions to people, but nothing has been given. My monthly basic salary is 13,000 rupees. With overtime payments, I got only 16,000 rupees last month. My whole family depends on me. I have no any faith in the unions. They are not fighting for us. They are working with management and the government."

A railway worker in Kandy said: "It was a decision made beforehand to betray the strike. It is a conscious conspiracy of the trade unions and the government against the workers. We do not believe that the government will fulfill its promise. The union leaders derail the workers. As you said, the workers should build their action committees to fight for their rights."



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