Sri Lanka: Political lessons of the Hambantota port strike

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns the Sri Lankan working class of the serious implications of the unprecedented level of state repression unleashed by the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe against striking port workers in Hambantota.

The government responded to the eight-day walkout by more than 480 workers to defend their jobs, by unleashing all the weapons in its armoury—court orders, ministerial ultimatums, the police and armed navy battalions, strike-breakers, state-sponsored provocations and a hysterical media barrage.

The brutal repression is a reflection of the grave economic and political crisis facing the ruling class. Hit by a deepening global downturn and the growing erosion of popular support, the government, with the active support of the trade unions and the so-called left parties, is determined to destroy all the hard-won social and democratic rights of the workers and the rural poor.

These factors point to the urgent need for the building of the new revolutionary leadership of the working class to rally and lead the rural poor and youth on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to put an end to capitalist profit system.

The port workers walked out on December 7, demanding permanent jobs with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA). They were originally recruited as casual employees in 2013 under the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and promised they would be made permanent. The workers' demands for permanency took on a new urgency after the current government hastily signed an agreement with the Chinese-owned Merchant Port Holdings to transform the Hambantota port into a privately-owned joint venture. Merchant Port Holdings would have 80 percent ownership and the SLPA 20 percent in the new company.

The government first attempted to paint the port workers as supporters of the former Rajapakse regime. Its despicable attempts to isolate the strikers failed amid growing public support for the casual workers. Despite the small numbers involved, the strike rapidly brought work at the port to a standstill and prevented ships from leaving.

On December 10, the government mobilised hundreds of navy soldiers, led personally by the navy commander, Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, who brutally attacked the strikers with poles and rifle butts in an attempt to end the walkout.

Four workers were hospitalised in the navy attack but a video recording of a journalist being manhandled by Vice Admiral Wijegunaratne during the assault went viral on social media. After a squad of workers mobilised from another labour-hire firm to blackleg on the strike rejected their assignment and walked out, the government began using navy soldiers to handle port work.

On December 14, the government obtained a seven-point court order overturning the port workers' right to strike. Simultaneously, Ports and Shipping Minister Arjuna Ranatunga issued an ultimatum: Any employee who did not return to work by 2 p.m., on December 15 would be regarded as a deserter.

Deprived of political leadership and a program to combat this full-scale anti-democratic assault, the Hambantota port workers were forced to abandon their struggle and return to work on December 15.

Political responsibility for this political setback lies with all the so-called "left" organisations that helped bring the Sirisena-Wickremesinge government to power, and the trade unions, including the Magampura Port Workers Union (MPWU), which isolated the

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striking port workers from the rest of the working class.

Nava Sama Samaja Party leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne, speaking for Sri Lanka's "pseudo-left," claimed that the brutal government assault on the workers' right to strike was a "mistake" by the navy commander. Karunaratne made this claim even after Prime Minister Wickremesinghe publicly admitted he ordered the navy mobilisation and after Deputy Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardane justified the navy attack, declaring: "Once the workers seized the ship, they were no longer protesting civilians. They became pirates."

Former President Rajapakse also attempted to hide the reactionary nature of the government's mobilisation of the navy, saying: "[T]he use of the Navy by the government was a move to discredit the war heroes that defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam."

Head of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) trade union faction, K. D. Lal Kantha, met with the port strikers, promoting illusions in the MPWU and claiming they could win their demands if they exerted "enough pressure" on the government. Lal Kantha remained completely silent about what his own union was going to do to support the strike.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party intervened to warn the strikers about the threats they faced and to discuss the necessary political preparations, particularly the need of an independent program of the working class to fight against the profit system, the root cause of the attacks on jobs and democratic rights.

Although the MPWU leadership tried to stop workers talking to the SEP, declaring that such discussions would lead to confusion, the relevance and political truth of the SEP's warnings have been proven by events.

As soon as the strike ended, the government moved to establish an armed navy battalion permanently within the port premises and refused to provide any guarantee about the future jobs of the casual workers. Meanwhile, there will be witch-hunting inquiries against those who led the industrial action.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, under the impact of an escalating economic crisis, is imposing increasingly regressive social policies and throwing overboard its "good governance" posturing—the bogus rhetoric peddled by the "pseudo left" and which brought it to power, with US backing, two years ago.

To attract foreign investors to its planned new Free Trade Zones, the government and its support base of local cronies are taking drastic steps toward the destruction of all the social and democratic rights won by past generations of workers.

The ruling elite is in a cut-throat competition with its counterparts in the region to secure international investment. That is why it is a fatal myth for workers and the poor to believe they can secure a sympathetic hearing from any section of the capitalist class and its political representatives. The government assault and the harsh conditions facing Hambantota port workers are not an accident but the general situation confronting wide layers of the working class.

Without a political perspective and a revolutionary leadership, working people cannot defend their basic rights and past gains. This is why the SEP calls for the formation of Action Committees, independent of the trade unions, to take forward the fight for the fundamental democratic and social rights of all sections of the working class. What is required is the overthrow of capitalist rule and the establishment of a workers' and peasant' government to implement a socialist program as part of a federation of Socialist Republics of South Asia.

The achievement of this task depends on the building of the revolutionary party of the working class based on socialist internationalism. The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is engaged in the building of such a party and appeals to the most thoughtful and serious layers of workers and youth to join its ranks.

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