

The road forward for Sri Lankan workers after the betrayal of the CPC strike

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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A recent “indefinite strike” by Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) workers created a political crisis throughout the island. Although the trade unions called off the strike in less than 48 hours, it marked the high point to date in a series of struggles by working people against the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and its policies.

The Petroleum Trade Union Collective, a combine covering CPC workers, began the strike on July 24 on three demands: halt the sale of Trincomalee oil tanks to India, prevent the sale of Hambantota Port oil storage tanks to China, and speed-up renovations of the country’s main oil refinery at Sapugaskanda.

As these demands ran counter to the policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government immediately imposed a draconian essential services order and unleashed the military to suppress the strike. Government-sponsored thugs were also mobilised to attack picket lines, resulting in injuries to many strikers.

The trade unions quickly called off the strike—supposedly “temporarily.” But on August 1, union leaders met with President Sirisena then declared that no further industrial action was needed. This was on the basis of a promise that a clause was inserted into the lease agreement with China Merchants Ports Holdings (CMPH) for Hambantota Port that could be amended at any time.

Sirisena later suggested that other facilities, including the Trincomalee oil tanks, would not be sold to a foreign country, but did not rule out a sale to local investors. CPC also indicated that some renovations would proceed at the Sapugaskanda refinery.

None of these vague promises should be taken at face value. The government was desperate to end the strike,

which threatened to become the rallying point for other sections of workers confronting austerity measures. Moreover, with the assistance of the unions, the privatisation of Hambantota Port, including its oil tanks, has gone ahead, with the sole change being a meaningless clause that commits the government to nothing.

Workers supported the strike because they feared that the lease to CMPH would affect jobs and conditions of workers in the Petroleum Storage Terminal (CPST), a CPC subsidiary, after the Chinese company took over.

Since the 1980s, successive Colombo governments have systematically attacked the CPC monopoly by opening the door for the privately-owned Indian Oil Company and the transport of oil by private operators. Cuts to jobs and working conditions have taken place already following the partial privatisation of Sri Lanka Telecom, the country’s ports and power sector.

The betrayal of the CPC strike is a further demonstration that workers cannot defend their basic rights and defeat the government’s austerity measures through the trade unions. The root cause of the deepening assault on the jobs and conditions of workers lies in the worsening crisis of global capitalism, which can be fought only on the basis of a unified struggle by workers in Sri Lanka and internationally for a socialist program.

The unions are deeply hostile to such a perspective. They accept the framework of capitalism and are completely tied to the Colombo political establishment. They called the strike not to defend jobs and living standards of workers, but to divert the mounting opposition into reactionary nationalist channels, against Indian and China companies, and futile appeals to the government. Whomever the CPC facilities are sold to—whether local or foreign—workers will confront

continuing attacks.

The All Ceylon Port General Workers' Union (ACPGWU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), planned to hold a July 28 protest of Colombo port workers against the lease of Hambantota Port to a Chinese company but then abandoned it on the basis of President Sirisena's phony promise.

ACPGWU general secretary Chandrasiri Mahagamage railed against the lease, denouncing it as a "treasonable act." This anti-Chinese rhetoric has nothing to do with defending CPC workers but is part of the xenophobic campaign being whipped up by US imperialism as it prepares for war against China.

The working class confronts not only the treachery of the trade unions but the resort to police-state measures, which were developed during the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

To justify the invocation of the essential services order, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe condemned the CPC strike as an attempt to destabilise the government and declared no such actions would be allowed in a "situation of national crisis."

The Sri Lankan economy, which has been hit by the global economic downturn, is mired in debt, confronts falling exports and remittances, and a widening balance of payments deficit. As in other countries, the mantra of ruling class is: workers and poor must pay for the crisis!

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government came to power by exploiting the popular hostility to President Mahinda Rajapakse. It promised to improve the lot of workers and the poor and restore democratic rights. No sooner was the "unity" government formed, however, than it began to implement the IMF's austerity demands and crack down on protests and strikes.

To fight for their rights, workers have to embark on a fundamentally different political road, which firstly means a complete organisational and political break from the trade unions. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers to form independent Action Committees, free from the control of unions, in every workplace, working class neighbourhood and big estate. Committee leaders must be democratically elected and decisions reached through democratic discussion.

The Action Committees need to turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally in order to develop a unified struggle against the corporations and banks that oppress them all. In the recent period, postal workers, tea plantation workers, doctors and university students all have been engaged in protests and strikes. But in each case these struggles were kept isolated by the unions, political parties and protest organisations, and defeated.

Only by directly challenging the government and corporations, and the profit system itself, can workers and the poor defend their class interests. The SEP seeks to unify all sections of the working class and rural poor in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies and secure the democratic rights of all oppressed people.

The major companies, plantations and banks must be put under the democratic control of the working class, and the economy re-organised to meet the social needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy elite.

A struggle against capitalism requires a political break from all the capitalist parties—the United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the JVP and the smaller parties and factions, particularly their pseudo-left hangers-on such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party.

This fight can be waged only by turning to the international working class in the fight against imperialist war and for international socialism. The SEP calls for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader political struggle for a union of socialist republics in South Asia and internationally.

Workers need an internationalist revolutionary party to lead them in this struggle. The SEP, as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, urges workers, youth and intellectuals to join this struggle and build it as a mass revolutionary party.



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