

Sri Lankan railway workers defy government ban on strike

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Striking railway employees in Sri Lanka have rejected the government's invocation of draconian essential services regulations to ban a national stoppage, which has entered its sixth day.

More than 5,000 workers, including engine drivers, station masters, guards, supervisory officers, signal officers, controllers and ticket inspectors are participating in the action. As a result of the strike, daily train trips have fallen from 350 to between 20 and 30.

The Railway Engine Drivers' Union began the strike at midnight on Wednesday. Other unions, including the Railway Station Masters' Union, the Train Controllers' Union, and the Railway Guards' Union, joined the stoppage the next day. The unions have put forward limited demands for pay increases through the rectification of salary anomalies related to grades.

President Maithripala Sirisena issued a gazette notification at midnight on Friday invoking the essential services regulations, which provide the government with the power to ban strikes in key industries. The move followed the failure of backroom discussions between Secretary to the President Austin Fernando and leaders of the Engine Drivers' Union.

Following the gazette notification, Fernando said the Railway Department would take steps to break the strike, including sackings and other repressive means.

Transport and civil aviation minister Nimal Siripala de Silva likewise told the media on Friday that all workers who failed to report for duty would be deprived of wages.

Yesterday, the general manager of Sri Lanka Railways, M. S. Abeywickrama, said workers participating in the strike today would be considered to have vacated their job and would be effectively sacked.

Under the guise of providing security to trains and

commuters, the government has mobilized police against the strike. This is another expression of the fear of the Sirisena government over mounting social and political opposition from the working class.

Over recent months, the government has faced a series of protests and strikes at ports and in the petroleum, electricity and oil sectors. Students have demonstrated throughout this year against the further privatization of higher education. In July, Sirisena imposed an essential services order against striking workers at the Petroleum Corporation and deployed the army against them.

In a bid to break the current strike, the Railway Department has hired retired staff and others to operate trains.

Pro-government unions, such as the Assistant Engine Drivers' Union, are openly assisting these efforts. That union's general secretary, Dhanushka Perera, declared on Saturday that the strike was illegal. He appealed to the government to intervene against it.

To legitimise their attack on the strike, the government has insinuated that it is a conspiracy organised by its political opponents. The president's secretary menacingly stated that the government was investigating whether there was a "hidden hand" behind the strike.

Dinamina, a newspaper that functions as a virtual government mouthpiece, likewise wrote on Friday that "the strikes and demonstrations coming one after the other, shows that there is an effort to inconvenience the government." The paper declared that "there could be political influence and interference behind it."

In reality, the unions called the stoppage in a bid to contain growing anger among workers over low wages and poor conditions.

Over the past months, a number of unions in different

industries have called token strikes, which they have either ended within days, or called off altogether at the request of the government. In every instance, the unions have promoted the fraud that impotent appeals to the government will create better pay and conditions for workers.

The rail unions are openly appealing to the government to strike a sell-out deal against the workers they falsely claim to represent.

After talks with the government again failed yesterday, Lal Ariyaratne, the convener of the Railway Supervisory Officers' Union, complained that the unions were "not asking a pound of flesh." He lamented that appeals to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had been rejected.

At a joint press conference of all striking unions yesterday evening, Indika Dodamgoda, president of the Engine Drivers' Union, declared they would not be "intimidated by threats." In the same breath, however, Dodamgoda appealed to Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, and stated that the union was prepared to "stop the strike" if a "reasonable" solution was proposed by the government.

In other words, the unions are seeking to suppress the stoppage, and prevent it from becoming a focal point for a broader movement of the working class.

In doing so, the unions are aiding the government's implementation of austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which include reducing the fiscal deficit from the 2014 figure of 7 percent of GDP, to 3.5 percent, through spending and wage cuts.

The government has stated that the Railway Department suffered losses of 11 billion rupees (\$US71 million) in 2014 and 7.7 billion rupees in 2015. These claims are being used to promote the privatisation and cost-cutting of the railways and other transport services.

In Sri Lanka, public transport, including railway and bus services, once provided a cheap means for workers and the poor to travel. Any loss was subsidised by the government as a welfare measure. Now the government is determined to make railway workers and passengers bear the burden.

Transforming the railways into a profitable enterprise is to lay the basis for their sale to private owners and operators. The national budget passed by parliament last week includes privatisation measures under the

guise of establishing "public-private ownership."

The government views the railway strike as a threat to this broader onslaught against the working class. For this reason, all workers must defend the railway employees from the government's attacks.

The strike underscores the need for a break with the corporatised unions, which are committed to enforcing the dictates of the government and big business. Independent rank-and-file committees are needed to coordinate a unified political and industrial struggle of the entire working class.

Above all, the austerity agenda of the government and the capitalist class demonstrates the necessity for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies. These include placing transport and other social necessities, along with the corporations and the banks, under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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