

Sri Lankan unions betray railway workers' strike

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Sri Lankan union leaders shut down a seven-day national strike by 5,000 rail workers on Wednesday after a government-appointed Cabinet Sub-Committee made a vague promise that “recommendations” on workers’ demands would be submitted to the cabinet and resolved within two months.

Announcing an end to the walkout, Locomotive Engineers Union (LEU) general secretary Indika Dodangoda claimed that union talks with the sub-committee were “successful.” He provided no concrete details about the talks or so-called recommendations which will resolve nothing for rail workers.

The shameless betrayal was in response to the strikers’ determination to defy threatened mass sackings, criminal charges and strike-breaking activities under Sri Lanka’s repressive Essential Service act. Above all, the unions feared that the strike, which posed a direct challenge to the government’s austerity policies, would draw in other sections of the working class.

The rail unions initiated the strike, which began on December 6, in response to growing anger over low wages and poor working conditions. But just as they have done on every other occasion they aimed from the outset to sabotage the industrial action and then, using bogus promises from the government, or limited concessions, to shut down the strike as soon as possible.

The unions made desperate appeals to President Maithiripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe during the strike, while refusing to mobilise wider support for the industrial action. Rail workers from other unions, however, began to join the strike.

Fearful that the industrial action was spreading, President Sirisena proclaimed that the state-owned railway was an essential service allowing the government to sack all workers who refused to immediately return to work.

A call was made to retired drivers, station masters, controllers and guards to become strike breakers and the Inspector General of Police ordered to mobilise police to break picket lines and suppress protests. Under the pretext of providing security to the rail services, railway authorities threatened to mobilise the military “if necessary.”

On Tuesday, the sixth day of the strike, railway management issued dismissal notices to the union leaders and declared that similar letters were in preparation for all those who defied the Essential Services order.

Sirisena, feigning concern about students just beginning their GCE O-level exams, made a special “appeal” to the strikers to return to work. He also appointed the cabinet sub-committee to open another round of talks with the union. The sub-committee provided the unions with the political escape route they were looking for to end the industrial action.

Railway Supervisory Management Service Union Combination (RSMSUC) officials, who had been forced by rank-and-file members to participate in the strike action, decided on Tuesday that they would return to work, claiming concern about the situation facing GCE students.

Attempting to cover this betrayal, RSMSUC convener Chanda Kumarasinghe declared that if the government attempted to attack “our fraternal unions, we would be compelled again to take a direct union action.”

His claims were so much hot air. The RSMSUC refused to hold a single meeting of the general membership involved in the strike and adamantly rejected calls for unified action. The unions’ betrayal of the striking railway workers flow directly from their ties to the government and the capitalist rule it represents.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government saw the rail workers’ struggle as a direct challenge to its cost-cutting measures, privatisation of state owned industries and

other economic policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

The railway workers and the rest of the working class cannot ignore the vital political lessons of this important struggle and its grotesque betrayal.

The seven-day walkout by railway workers is one of numerous struggles by Sri Lankan workers, rural poor, youth and students over the past several months. This includes port, oil, Ceylon Electricity City Board and health workers who have taken action against the government attacks on living and working conditions, along with university students who are battling against the privatization of public education.

While Sri Lankan workers have demonstrated their determination to fight, the railway union leaders, like their counterparts throughout the island, have consistently sabotaged any genuine struggle against the escalating government assault on living and working conditions.

The government, under the conditions of increasing public debt, rising demands from the IMF and global financial instability, is stepping up its class war attacks and turning to military-police methods of rule.

The essential political lesson of the railworkers' strike is that the working class cannot defend its wages, jobs, living conditions and basic democratic rights without breaking from the unions and organising itself as an independent political force. What is urgently required is revolutionary leadership.

Sri Lankan workers must take the initiative and build action committees in every work place and neighbourhood to mobilise working people, housewives, youth and students on an alternative socialist program to defend the democratic and social rights of workers and the oppressed. This struggle must aim at establishing a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a federation of socialist states of South Asia and internationally.



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