

Workers and youth denounce Sri Lankan May Day ban

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters in Sri Lanka are vigorously campaigning against the government's prohibition of May Day celebrations and its cancellation of the annual May 1 public holiday.

The government claimed its anti-democratic decision was in response to a "request" by Buddhist chiefs to stop working-class activities on that day because it coincided with "Wesak," a Buddhist holy festival.

The real reason is that the crisis-ridden Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government fears workers will use the international workers' day to express their opposition to the increasingly hated regime.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) booked and paid for Colombo New Town Hall for its May 1 public meeting and obtained police permission, as required by law, to hold the event. On Monday, however, Colombo municipal authorities informed the SEP that the hall booking had been cancelled. Several other trade unions and parties also have been subjected to the government ban.

SEP and IYSSE campaign teams spoke with workers and youth from different parts of the country and distributed hundreds of copies of the SEP statement "Oppose the Sri Lankan government's ban on May Day celebration." Many denounced the government and expressed their solidarity with the SEP-IYSSE campaign.

Shashika Dilshan, a paintwork supervisor from Homagama, spoke with campaigners outside central Colombo's Fort Railway Station. "Workers have always celebrated May Day, irrespective of prohibitions imposed [by the government]," he said.

"Whenever the government faces a challenge it tries to impose restrictions and this ban means that it will

attack other rights. In my opinion, the working class can't go forward without a revolution and so workers have to unite for that.

"I'd like you to take my photo because I want to encourage other workers. I'll put [the SEP statement] on my Facebook and share with my friends so they'll know about your campaign."

Roshan Sumedha, a Sri Jayewardenepura University student, opposed the May Day ban and said there were "no differences" between the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse and the current administration.

"The government's action is connected to its suppression of the democratic rights of workers, students and other people," he said. "University students have faced several police assaults on our campaign against the privatisation of education."

Referring to the international political situation and the possibility of another world war, Sumedha said: "This is a great danger to everyone in the world and I agree with you that the mobilisation of an anti-war movement of international working class is necessary."

An Agriculture Department worker commented: "I voted for this government in the 2015 elections and expected a change, but it's useless. Like the Rajapakse government, it is also attacking workers' rights. The cost of essentials is rising and the government also wants oil price increases, which will sharply impact on people."

"I'm married and have two children, and although my wife is also working it is difficult to manage on our current monthly income. People are angry about this government."

Saman Wickrama, a health ministry employee, joined the discussion, declaring: "Workers should not keep quiet about this kind of attack. When the Digana attack

[a recent anti-Muslim assault in the Kandy district] occurred the government responded by banning Facebook.”

SEP supporters also spoke with workers in the central plantations district.

K. Sathiyaseelan, a plantation worker from Dickoya estate, near Hatton, said: “I’m 47-years-old. As workers, we have celebrated May Day every year, and normally, on May 1, we have a holiday with full pay.

“I’ve not seen any trade union oppose the ban and or the May Day celebration date change. I’m a member of National Union of Workers and it will hold its May Day on May 7, which government says is now the holiday date. The Ceylon Workers Congress will also hold its May Day in Nuwara Eliya at that time. They support the government. Many people say that the unions betrayed our struggle for 1,000-rupee wage increase.”

K. Mahendran, 38, from same estate, commented: “Most youth abandon estate work to look for outside employment because estate wages are lower and the working conditions are harsh. Our wage is not even enough for food. We have to pluck 20 kilograms of tea leaves per day and if we don’t, then we lose the 140-rupee productivity allowance. We voted for this government expecting a better life but the situation is getting worse.”

Champika de Silva, an architect, from Balapitiya, about 80 kilometres south of Colombo, said: “I’m opposed to all the existing political parties. We’ve seen continuous workers’ struggles and student agitations recently but it is obvious that our rulers are not prepared to listen to their demands. At the same time, the left parties and the trade unions have proven unable to face this situation and seem to have lined up with the government.

“When there was war in the North, we were told that everything would be resolved when the conflict ended. The war has ended but have people’s living conditions improved in either the North or the South? On the other hand, defence expenditure has been increased, which shows that the government is getting ready for another war. I support your campaign for May Day.”

A regional council clerk said: “The government’s effort must be defeated because this is part of a program to deprive workers of all their rights. While Sri Lankan capitalist governments celebrate February 4,

the day they won freedom from the imperialists, they want to prevent workers from commemorating their day.”

A non-academic worker from Moratuwa University asked: “Should only Buddhist have rights? May Day is a long-standing tradition of workers.” He said the ban showed that the government is “preparing to unleash repression and other attacks on workers. Workers must be made aware of these attacks.”

This month the unions betrayed a 44-day national strike by about 15,000 non-academic university workers over wages and conditions.

Referring to the two main parliamentary parties—President Maithripala Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party—the university worker said: “Some people think that only two parties exist in this country but both these parties agree on this May Day ban.”



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