

Striking Sri Lankan railway workers need a political perspective

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Railway workers in Sri Lanka remain on strike after walking out on Wednesday over longstanding demands for pay rises and the resolution of salary anomalies. The strikers have defied demands by Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera to end all industrial action. Government and management attempts to run a face-saving skeletal service have failed.

The strike was called by the Railway Trade Union Alliance (RTUA), which includes unions covering workers vital for the rail system's day-to-day running. This includes engine drivers, railway guards, station masters and supervisory managers.

The RTUA called the strike in response to demands from rank-and-file members determined not to allow the union leaders to again postpone work stoppages on the basis of more false government promises.

The union alliance was due to call a two-day walkout on July 30–31 but union officials called it off at the last minute, claiming that Transport Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva had promised the government would adopt a cabinet sub-committee recommendation within a week and grant workers' demands.

The recommendation, however, was vehemently opposed at a July 30 cabinet meeting by Finance Minister Samaraweera, who said any increase in railway workers' wages would lead to a wave of pay demands from other state sector workers.

“Wages cannot be increased every time workers threaten strikes,” he declared, and accused the government of being “spineless” when confronting workers. This is not the opinion of just one minister, or the current administration, but outlook of the ruling class as a whole.

When the strike began on Wednesday, Samaraweera cancelled a scheduled 6 p.m. discussion with the unions, making clear there would be no compromise.

At the same time, a call was issued to all retired engine drivers to report to work the next morning. Steps were also announced for the establishment of a strikebreaking system to coordinate passenger transport services between the Sri Lanka Bus Transport Board and the three armed services. The media reported on Friday, however, that no railway retiree had come forward to blackleg on the strikers.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's coalition government launched a sinister media campaign denouncing the workers for striking without prior notice. This was aimed at whipping up opposition from other workers due to return home after the strike began at midday. Media interviews with stranded commuters, however, overwhelmingly supported the strikers.

Over the past year, the RTUA has been forced to call several strikes and demonstrations over the same issue, but has shut them all down, citing bogus official promises.

Last December, the RTUA halted national strike action, claiming that the cabinet sub-committee would provide a solution to the outstanding pay demands. This proved to be another false promise.

In May, the government-owned *Dinamina* newspaper cited cabinet spokesman Rajitha Senarathne saying the recommendation had been approved. Accepting this lie, union leaders postponed a scheduled May 8–9 strike.

RTUA officials are now desperately attempting to divert the escalating political confrontation with the government by falsely claiming that the cabinet has agreed to resolve salary issues but is being held up by the finance minister's opposition.

Once again, in the face of growing militancy by railway workers and other sections of the working class, the RTUA is making futile appeals to Sirisena to

intervene and resolve the issue. Sirisena has made it categorically clear where he stands: last December he issued an Essential Services Order illegalising strike action by railway workers.

Sympathetic posturing by the transport minister and cabinet spokesperson toward railway workers is a total fraud. These are tactical moves by the same ruling class, which fears that railway workers' strike action will attract support from other sections of working class who are equally hostile to the government's big business policies and its attacks on their social conditions and democratic rights.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime has pledged its unwavering commitment to International Monetary Fund demands to reduce the fiscal deficit by slashing spending on public transport, education, health and other vital social services. This includes transforming the railways into a semi-government entity, in line with preparations to privatise the state enterprise. This plan, in fact, is part of the cabinet sub-committee proposal that purports to solve workers' wage and salary anomalies demands.

The trade unions are fundamentally opposed to any unified struggle by railway workers, or other state sector employees, against this job destruction program because it means challenging not just the current government but the capitalist system itself.

Instead, the unions divide railway workers and other sections of the working class. They have separated engine drivers, station masters, guards and supervisory officers from low-ranking workers, including technological assistants and labourers. There are more than 100 different unions in the railways alone.

The railway workers' strike is part of a growing movement of the working class against the government, seen in recent actions by university non-academic, water supply, postal and electricity workers, and teachers, along with protests by students, unemployed youth and rural poor.

This is part and parcel of an emerging wave of class struggles against the austerity measures of capitalist governments in every country. Recent examples include teachers in the US, technical workers in Germany, railway workers in France, truck drivers in Brazil, China and Argentina, and nurses and health workers in New Zealand. To this list must be added the millions of transport workers and hundreds of

thousands of rural farmers drawn into struggle against Narendra Modi's government in India.

The principal obstacle confronting workers in every country is the unions, which function as a last line of defence for the ruling elites and the capitalist profit system. The working class cannot defeat the attacks on jobs, conditions and basic rights while they remain tied to the unions.

The unavoidable political challenge facing striking rail workers and every other section of the working class is to break from the unions and establish independent organisations under the leadership of the working class to rally the rural poor and youth.

Railway workers must take the initiative and build rank-and-file Action Committees to organise a united struggle of all railway employees, and call for active industrial and political support from workers in the state, private and plantation industries and from the oppressed masses.

Railway workers are involved in a political struggle against the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and all other sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite. This can only go forward on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective to establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies, as part of the wider perspective of establishing a socialist federation of states in South Asia and internationally.

This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We call on all class-conscious workers, the rural poor and youth and students of all communities to join the SEP and take forward this fight.



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