

Sri Lankan unions sell out railway workers and call off strike

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Railway trade union leaders unilaterally shut down indefinite strike action yesterday after a morning meeting with Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and members of a railway cabinet sub-committee. None of the workers' demands were granted and no mass meetings called to discuss the betrayal.

Desperate to end all industrial action the rail union leaders, like the government itself, feared that the strike could escalate out of control, drawing in other sections of the working class to challenge Colombo's social austerity and cost-cutting privatisation agenda.

The hurriedly convened Sunday morning meeting was held at Sirisena's private residence in Polonnaruwa, his traditional parliamentary constituency.

Speaking to journalists outside Sirisena's residence after the meeting, rail union leaders repeated their usual pathetic claims: "The president has promised to provide solutions to our demands." These lines that have been used at least half a dozen times in the last few years in order to shut down strike action by railway workers.

Government minister and spokesman for the cabinet sub-committee Sarath Amunugama, however, detailed the terms agreed by the unions. The sellout deal includes the following:

1) Railway, health and education sectors will be transformed into closed services with concrete proposals for these changes to be presented to the next cabinet meeting.

2) There should be no new recruits and examinations held in the railways until the next discussion between the two parties.

3) Matters regarding administrative and salary issues of railway officers are to be discussed with the representatives of the relevant trade unions.

4) No disciplinary action will be taken against trade union officials involved in the strike.

5) The railway strike to be stopped, with immediate

effect.

Even a cursory glance at these conditions makes clear the grotesque nature of the betrayal.

The first condition was a recommendation already made by the cabinet sub-committee as an initial first step in the process of privatising the railways.

Beginning under British rule, the Department of Railways has always existed as a government owned enterprise. Privatisation of Sri Lanka's rail service, which has been demanded by the International Monetary Fund, has been consistently and vehemently opposed by rail workers.

The second condition goes against workers' demands that all job vacancies be filled at the department in order to reduce workloads. Consecutive Sri Lankan governments and rail management have refused to fill these job, claiming that the department has too many employees and this discourages prospective private buyers.

The third condition is aimed at breaking up the Railway Trade Union Alliance (RTUA), the joint union organisation involved in last week's strike. The next round of negotiations will separate engine drivers, station masters, railway guards and supervisors.

The fourth condition, that there be no disciplinary action against union officials involved in last week's strike, is a basic democratic right and won by workers long ago.

These are the retrogressive conditions, re-packaged by unions as a "promised solution" by President Sirisena, now being imposed on railway workers.

From the very outset, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government made clear it was determined to defeat the strike and that none of the railway workers' demands would be granted.

Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera told a cabinet meeting that "wages cannot be increased out of fear for strikes" while Minister of Youth Affairs and Southern

Development Sagala Rathnayake denounced the strike as “a terrorist act.”

Rathnayake said the strike would be crushed in the same way the “separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam was defeated... We will take every possible action to defeat this ugly trade union terrorism.”

Meanwhile, Sirisena declared that “it is a myth” if the workers thought that “the strike is going to hurt the government.”

Railway officials were instructed to recall all relevant retired railway workers to run the trains while the Sri Lankan military supplied drivers and transport vehicles to supplement the additional road transport provided by the Sri Lanka Transport Board. Government- and privately-owned media units were directed to launch a vigorous provocative campaign to instigate the public against the strike.

The unions did everything they could to prevent strike action and when that was not possible betrayed the walkout at the first opportunity. This agenda is not just an expression of the bankrupt and anti-working class character of the RTUA but the reactionary role played by the trade unions nationally and internationally.

In the face of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s strike-breaking and other class-war actions, the RTUA did nothing to mobilise the support of other railway employees, let alone the rest of the Sri Lankan working class who are subjected to the same declining social conditions.

Behind the government’s attacks on workers’ wages, conditions, jobs and social welfare services is the deepening economic and political crisis of the world capitalist system and its sharp expression in Sri Lanka.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government faces a mounting financial crisis with falling export earnings and a massive foreign debt of \$50 billion.

In July, Central Bank governor Indrajith Kumaraswamy revealed that Sri Lanka will have to pay an average \$3.9 billion per year for the next four years to cover current loan instalments and interest. This means, he said, that the country needs to borrow at least \$2.5 billion, every year, from international markets.

“We have very little room to manoeuvre and if we lose fiscal discipline and lose the IMF program, we will be downgraded by the rating agencies,” Kumaraswamy said.

This year, the government hopes to borrow another \$1.5 billion from China and \$250 million from the Asia Development Bank.

Yesterday a *Sunday Times* editorial stated: “The

government is clearly facing a financial crunch. In such circumstances, calls for higher wages seem unreasonable. The foreign reserves of the country are dwindling by the day, merely to prop up the rupee vis-a-vis the US dollar.”

Finance capital demands that the entire burden of the crisis be imposed on the working people. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, like all other capitalist rulers around the world, is determined to fulfil these demands. The political orientation of the working class must be based on an understanding of this objective reality and a new political program.

It was on this basis that the Socialist Equality Party statement on August 11 on the railway workers’ strike advanced the following program and one that has been vindicated by the RTUA’s betrayal:

“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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