

Sri Lankan railway unions end strike, after “promises” from President Sirisena

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Sri Lankan railway unions called off a 12-day indefinite strike on Monday following instructions by President Maithripala Sirisena that they resume work. Union officials told the media that Sirisena had promised to address their demands. Like all previous promises, Sirisena’s assurances are worthless but always seized upon by the union bureaucracy to shut down industrial action and impose a sell-out.

A press release from Sirisena’s media unit declared that the president had “pointed out that it is their [the unions’] duty to carry out their activities without hampering the day-to-day life of the general public.”

More than 2,000 railway workers—members of the Locomotive Engine Drivers Union, Drivers Union, Station Masters Union, Supervising Managers and Guards Union—walked out indefinitely on September 26, demanding rectification of salary anomalies. They also called for repair of defective railway engines and railway lines, and an end to the practice of forcing drivers to pay for damage in accidents caused by faulty engines and lines.

Sirisena’s direct intervention came after railway strikers defied an Essential Services Order he imposed on October 3, under the draconian Public Security Act. Under these measures all employees who do not report to work are deemed to have resigned. They also prohibit any obstruction—by word or deed—of employees. Violation of these repressive laws is punishable with heavy jail terms and fines.

The following day, Ashok Abeysinghe, the state minister for transport and aviation services, directed the general manager of Sri Lankan railways to strictly implement these laws.

On the same day Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera declared that the railway unions’ demands were unreasonable and could not be granted. Preparing the ground for a witch-hunt and victimisations, he

declared that the strike was “politically motivated.” In order to hoodwink the strikers, Samaraweera also claimed that a new salary scale would be established for all state services employees starting next January.

In a significant development, Minister for State Transport and Aviation Abeysinghe told the media on October 5 that the army was ready to intervene in the situation. Abeysinghe revealed that Army Commander Shavendra Silva had met with him and requested that a section of the army be permitted to train as engine drivers. Abeysinghe said he gave the permission.

Silva had previously stated on October 1 that the army was “ready to do whatever it takes to ensure public security and to maintain order in the public services if required.” The army, he continued, “could intervene in various sectors on short-term basis to maintain the operation of public services disrupted by the ongoing strikes” and to continue essential services.

Normally the government of the day imposes an essential services order to break strike action and then invites the military to maintain those services. That the army commander “requested” that it intervene was an indication of the nervousness of the Sri Lankan ruling elite about the escalating strike action across the country and its preparations to suppress workers with dictatorial methods.

Other industrial action last month included an indefinite national strike by university non-academic employees which began on September 10, and, coinciding with the railway workers’ strike, a two-day national walkout by over 200,000 teachers on September 26 and 27.

The government, however, refused even to meet with the teachers’ unions, forcing them to announce another five-day action, planned to begin this week. Sri Lankan government administrative officers also took strike action to demand a “rectification of salary anomalies.”

Shocked by these developments, Sirisena and Prime

Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe called a special cabinet meeting on September 27 and appointed a sub-committee to “study” the situation and report back on the strikers’ demands.

The manoeuvres were intended to secure the assistance of the unions in controlling the situation. After discussions with the cabinet sub-committee on September 30, the teachers’ unions claimed they had “an approval from the committee to rectify wage anomalies” and called off this week’s planned strike. No details about the so-called approval, however, were provided.

In an attempt to justify shutdown of the planned national strike, the Ceylon Teachers Union leader Joseph Stalin said: “We think this [committee’s promise] is a premise to a solution.” The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled Ceylon Teacher Services Union leader Mahinda Jayasinghe claimed that cancellation of the action was “only temporary.”

While the teachers’ unions claim that salary anomalies will be resolved, they have abandoned the teachers’ other demands, including the allocation of 6 percent of GDP for education and pension rights for all teachers recruited after 2016.

On Monday, Pradeep Ratnayake, leader of the university non-academic workers’ union front, attempted to blame the salaries commission for not informing them about revised salary scales already approved by the cabinet. The union front is desperate to call off the determined month-long strike. The non-academic union front has also abandoned other demands, including the establishment of a pension scheme for university employees.

Notwithstanding the bogus government promises and equally false union assurances, the cash-strapped government faces a huge debt burden and falling economic growth.

Last week Treasury Secretary R.H.S. Samaratinga directed government ministries and departments to slash their expenditure by 10 percent. It follows a previous treasury order that these institutions cut spending by 15 percent. According to a new circular, departments and ministries must “cut all non-essential expenditures.”

Whatever government is established after the scheduled November 16 presidential elections will deepen International Monetary Fund-directed austerity measures, and brutally impose the escalating financial crisis produced by the international economic down turn and geopolitical tensions onto the working class and the poor.

All of the capitalist parties contesting the November

elections are calling for “strong rule” and “strengthening national security,” using the April 21 terrorist attacks as a cover to advance anti-democratic forms of rule. At the same time, the military, as made clear by Army Commander Silva, is getting ready to directly intervene.

The strike wave in Sri Lanka demonstrates that the working class can only defend its social and democratic rights through a politically unified fight against the government’s attacks. Workers cannot defend their rights or improve their social conditions without a political struggle against the capitalist profit system. The trade unions are hostile to this perspective. Their formulations about “rectifying salary anomalies,” in fact, pit one section of workers against another.

Railway workers, teachers and all other sections of the working class face common problems: the right to a decent living wage, adjusted in line with the rising cost-of-living, a proper pension and other social rights, including high-quality health and education.

In order to fight for these basic demands, workers need to build their own action committees in workplaces and working-class neighbourhoods, independent of the trade unions and their bureaucrats. Such action committees must rally the support of the poor and youth and, above all, call for unity with its international brothers and sisters.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class to fight for socialist policies and workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the struggle for international socialism. The SEP is intervening in the presidential election in order to develop this struggle.



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