For an independent movement of the working class to fight the privatisation of Colombo Port! Oppose anti-Indian campaign! Fight for a socialist program!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
5 February 2021

The Sri Lankan government announced on Monday that it will "develop" the Colombo Port's Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) under the Ports Authority, reneging on an earlier agreement with India and Japan to run the terminal as a joint venture. The government, in an attempt to appease India, has offered to develop the port's West Container Terminal (WCT) as a privately-owned facility.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's cabinet took the decision in response to agitation by the port unions, which lined up with Sinhala-Buddhist extremists, to demand the terminal not be sold to India. The unions' virulent anti-Indian campaign was launched to divide workers' opposition to privatisation and pit them against their class brothers and sisters in India.

Following the government's announcement, Commercial, Industrial and Services Progressive Union leader Shyamal Sumanaratne declared that they "won the demand not to hand-over the terminal to India." Sumanaratne's union is run by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

Notwithstanding Sumanaratne's bogus claim, the working class has achieved nothing. The government's privatisation program will continue at the port, and across the rest of the country, slashing jobs, wages and driving up workloads.

Rajapakse, who previously imposed the essential services act to force port employees to continue working amid the deadly pandemic, renewed this repressive measure last Friday with union backing. The draconian legislation was earlier imposed to "reopen the economy" and suppress any industrial action by port workers.

The struggle against the privatisation of Colombo Port sharply highlights the geopolitical issues confronting the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.

The Indian government is determined to have a foothold in Colombo Harbour as part of its drive to undermine China's influence in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has deepened the transformation of India into a frontline state in the escalating US-led war preparations against China.

New Delhi planned to hand over management of ECT to India's Adani conglomerate, not only because of the economic benefit of this deep-water naval facility, but primarily because of the aforementioned geo-strategic calculations. The terminal is located adjacent to the now Chinese-owned Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) that was privatised in 2013.

The port unions intensified their agitation against privatisation in response to India insisting that the ECT agreement, signed in May 2019, be implemented. Early last month, Indian Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka for this purpose. Rajapakse agreed to Jaishankar's request.

Along with the SLPP-controlled Commercial, Industrial and Services Progressive Union, other organisations joining the campaign included the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's Ports Employees Union, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's All Ceylon Port Workers General Union, and several other unions.

Other formations involved in the so-called "national movement to defend the ECT" included the Jathika Bikshu (Buddhist monks) Federation and similar extremist elements. The National Freedom Front and Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, racialist allies of the ruling government coalition, supported the campaign, as did the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). It shamelessly jumped on the bandwagon, praising the anti-Indian campaign as a "mass movement" to defend the port.

Last Monday, after the unions called a work-to-rule and threatened to launch a strike, the government backtracked and announced that it was withdrawing from the ECT deal.

The Sri Lankan government firstly feared that the port workers' opposition, notwithstanding the chauvinist character of the union campaign, would encourage other sections of the working class to come into struggle. Anger is rising amongst workers over the government's sharp attack on social rights and its criminally dangerous response to COVID-19.

Secondly, President Rajapakse is nervous that the

© World Socialist Web Site

"opposition" of these right-wing nationalist elements—the very forces that he mobilised in the recent elections—would expose the fragility of his regime.

As an SLPP senior minister told the *Indian Express*, agitation over privatisation of the port was posing "a threat to his [Rajapakse's] position as aggressive nationalists and civil society groups extended support to the port workers. The President was becoming unpopular."

Once again, the unions have demonstrated that they are nothing but tools of the capitalist state and extreme-right forces, operating as a political police force against the working class and endorsing all of Rajapakse's moves towards dictatorial forms of rule.

During their anti-Indian agitation, the unions wrote to President Rajapakse calling on him to hand over the WCT to the Indian company, instead of the ECT, and pledging to develop the ECT as a profitable "national asset." In other words, collaborate with management to ensure that the destruction of jobs, working conditions and increased productivity at the facility.

In short, the unions have no fundamental opposition to the government's big business program and want to enhance their involvement in the suppression of strikes and workers' demands.

Port workers have consistently fought against privatisation of the port, only to have the union sabotage and betray their struggles.

In 1999, port workers took industrial action to oppose privatisation of the South Asia Gateway Terminals (SAGT). The struggle was betrayed by the unions. In 2013, the port unions endorsed the privatisation of CICT.

When the Sirisena-Wickremisinghe government signed an agreement in May 2019 to hand-over the ECT to India, the then opposition SLPP, with the backing of port unions, denounced the deal as a sellout to India. This was a key plank in Rajapakse's presidential election campaign in November 2019.

Port workers' opposition to privatisation erupted once again, just a week before last year's election campaign, and saw about 10,000 workers striking on July 31 for three days. The unions whipped-up anti-Indian chauvinism and brought in Buddhist groups to derail workers' opposition.

Port employees have been hard hit by previous privatisations of port facilities. Over the years about 10,000 permanent jobs have been destroyed by private investors and cost-cutting by Ports Authority management. Permanent jobs were axed and replaced with contract workers toiling in extremely exploitative conditions with few social benefits or pension rights.

On Wednesday, the Indian High Commissioner Gopal Baglay met with the Sri Lankan president and prime minister to voice New Delhi's displeasure over the government's unilateral decision to break its ECT agreement. India, backed by the US, will not take this issue lightly nor allow Sri Lanka, or any other country in the region, to undermine its geostrategic preparations against China.

The FSP has played a filthy role supporting the union's anti-Indian campaign and happily rubbing shoulders with the reactionary chauvinist groups and the union bureaucracy.

After Monday's government decision, FSP leader Pubudu Jayagoda told the media: "The government has knelt down before the mass power. The slogan we put forward has won." Jayagoda jubilantly said his party will continue with building "such mass movements."

For the FSP, "mass power" consists of unity with the bureaucracy and Sinhala-Buddhist extremists, not the working class, the poor and oppressed youth. In April last year, the FSP wrote to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse offering to assist in the government's response to the pandemic "despite having differences."

The working class can only advance by rejecting these opportunist outfits and independently mobilising its political and industrial strength against all the attacks of the Rajapakse government. Workers must build their own action committees, free of the union bureaucracy, to exercise their independent power.

Workers must reject the poison of nationalism and patriotism, including anti-Indian chauvinism, which is used to divide and weaken the working class. They must unite across ethnic lines, and with their class brothers and sisters in India and internationally.

Amidst rising social opposition and deepening political divisions, President Rajapakse will step up his attack on democratic rights and moves towards dictatorial rule.

The only way forward in the fight to defend all social rights and defeat privatisation is the nationalisation of the big banks, corporations and estates under the democratic control of the working class and the repudiation of foreign debts. The working class must fight for a workers' and peasants' government, rallying the rural poor and other oppressed masses to implement this program. This is part of the struggle for international socialism and inseparable from the building of an international movement against imperialist war. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and build it as a mass party to advance this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site