

Over 100,000 Sri Lankan workers walk out to demand higher wages and better conditions

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Thousands of health employees, teachers, development officers and other sections of the working class, including railway workshop employees and private sector workers, held protests and strikes across Sri Lanka on Monday and Tuesday over wages and conditions. The action follows anti-privatisation demonstrations last week by electricity, port and petroleum employees.

The mass walkouts are another indication of rising social anger against the Rajapakse government and its big business program which is ruthlessly driving up the cost of living and eliminating meagre social support, while forcing teachers and other employees to return to work amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

* On Monday, an estimated 50,000 development officers held a national sicknote protest over seven demands, including the abolition of salary anomalies, a monthly salary increase of around 15,000 rupees (\$US75) and the establishment of a proper promotion scheme. There are about 100,000 development officers employed at different state departments across the country. Media reports indicated that more than half were involved in the campaign.

* On Tuesday, public hospital nurses and paramedics walked out in a one-day sicknote action. Union officials told the media that nearly 50,000 health employees were involved in the strike. The hospital workers want rectification of salary anomalies, a special duty allowance increase of 3,000 rupees and higher overtime payments.

The strike was called by the Collective of Health Professionals (CHP), an alliance of 16 unions. While the CHP has called a series of protests and strikes over the same demands in recent months, it has limited the walkouts and then shut them down following bogus promises by the government that it would resolve workers' demands.

Health employees blamed the unions for not fully mobilising their members for Tuesday's strike, resulting

in lesser numbers participating.

A nurse from Kandy national hospital told the WSWs that union officials had discouraged members from participating and that only about 500 of the 2,000 nurses at the hospital joined the walkout. "There was no discussion with members before the strike. Workers can't be mobilised by just distributing a leaflet," they said.

The health unions, like their counterparts across the island, have deliberately divided workers. The Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), led by Buddhist monk Muruththetuwe Ananda who backs the Rajapakse government, and the All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), did not participate in Tuesday's action. Instead, the ACHSU called a separate lunch-hour demonstration.

While health workers are determined to fight for their longstanding demands, the unions are desperate to prevent any political confrontation with the government. This week's one-day protest was called to dissipate the rising anger of health workers, who for almost two years have been working extended hours attempting to treat COVID-19 patients in the country's dangerously understaffed and underfunded hospitals.

* Also on Tuesday, thousands of public-school teachers and principals demonstrated in several parts of the island. This included about 3,000 teachers in central Colombo and over 1,000 in Kandy with a similar number mobilising at Hatton in the Central Hill Districts. The protests were called by an alliance of some 30 teachers and principals unions, including the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU) and Ceylon Teachers Services Union controlled by the JVP.

Thousands of teachers, principals and parents also demonstrated outside the Mawanella police station, about 25 kilometres west of Kandy. They were demanding that police arrest a local Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna

politician who is alleged to have physically assaulted a parent during a protest the previous week. While police later arrested the politician, and three others involved in the attack, they were bailed by a local magistrate.

The teachers' demonstrations followed the unions' shutdown on October 25 of a determined 100-day strike and boycott of online education services by 250,000 teachers demanding higher salaries. Teachers have been fighting for increased wages for over 20 years.

The Rajapakse government refused to grant the teachers' pay claim but later "offered" one third of the amount being demanded to be paid in instalments over the next three years. Desperate to end the dispute, the unions accepted the reduced amount, demanding that it be paid in one instalment, and then shut down the strike, ordering teachers to return to work. This week's protests, and similar demonstrations the previous week, were a cynical attempt by the unions to dissipate members' anger.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse met with the teachers' unions and said the government would pay its reduced salary offer in one instalment. The unions readily agreed to the meagre rise, ditching teachers' longstanding pay claims. Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse later told the media that Colombo's deal should not be seen as a salary increase.

This week's union-controlled protests were timed to coincide with Finance Minister Rajapakse's annual budget proposals, which will be presented to parliament today, and were aimed at promoting the illusion that the government can be pressured. The JVP-controlled unions are demanding the government budget increase workers' monthly wages by 10,000 rupees.

Finance Minister Rajapakse, who confronts a collapse in export earnings, a falling currency and massive foreign debt repayments has made it abundantly clear that he will be unveiling a ruthless austerity budget. "The people will not gain anything. Instead, we will be taking from them," he told journalists last week. He plans to cut the fiscal deficit by two-thirds to 4.5–5 percent of gross domestic product, down from last year's 14.7 percent.

Confronted with this crisis, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rajapakse government is prioritising profits over lives and implementing "herd immunity" policies. This criminal agenda has been fully backed by the unions and has seen the health unions abandon their members' demands for increased work safety.

The reactionary role of the trade unions is bringing Sri

Lankan workers into conflict with these organisations, which defend the Rajapakse government, and are hostile to any independent political mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist profit system.

Alongside the increase in workers' struggles, farmers are continuing their protests, calling for fertiliser and other necessities for cultivation. On Tuesday, hundreds of housewives demonstrated in Colombo and other parts of the island demanding a reduction in the price of essentials and an end to food shortages.

Contrary to the union claims that the Rajapakse government can be forced to grant concessions, Colombo has passed an essential public services act, which covers nearly one million state sector workers and criminalises all industrial action and strikes in these institutions. At the same time, it is moving to whip up communalist tensions to try and divide the working class.

The unions, which function as industrial police, have not opposed the government's anti-strike laws and its racist moves. Workers cannot develop a genuine struggle for their social and democratic rights through these organisations.

What is required is the establishment of rank-and-file action committees, independent of the unions and controlled by workers to defend jobs, wages and to fight for improved social conditions. These committees must unite workers across the island and turn to the international working class, as part of the struggle for socialist policies and a workers' and peasants' government.



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