

# Sri Lankan public sector workers hold nationwide protests to demand higher wages

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Tens of thousands of public sector employees demonstrated across Sri Lanka this week for wage rises and to protest against government attacks on their democratic rights. The island-wide actions, held on consecutive days beginning Monday, are another indication of the mounting working-class opposition to the Rajapakse government's austerity measures and escalating authoritarianism.

- On November 29, state employees, including development, agriculture research and village officers, and office ancillary staff, as well as postal and inland revenue department workers, protested outside their respective workplaces. Demonstrations occurred at the Colombo postal exchange office, the education ministry in Kandy and the inland revenue office in Galle Town.

The workers are calling for a 10,000-rupee (\$US50) monthly pay rise and for Colombo to withdraw budget plans to lift the retirement age from 55 to 65 years. They are also demanding an end to bans on public sector employees criticising government policies.

The protest was organised by the Sri Lanka Public Officers Trade Union Federation (SLPOTUF), an alliance of 35 unions that includes the All Ceylon Development Officers Union, the Agriculture Research and Production Assistants Union and the Sri Lanka Village Officers Union. Some inland revenue and postal department unions also participated.

- The next day, about 1,000 health employees held a motorcade procession in Colombo to the health ministry office, calling for a wage increase and other demands. Health workers held a two-day strike last month on the same issues. On Wednesday, about 50 ancillary health workers protested in front of the health ministry in Colombo.

- Yesterday, hundreds of non-academic staff protested outside their respective universities, including in Colombo, Moratuwa, Jaffna, Peradeniya and Matara. Sri Lanka has 15 state-funded universities.

Earlier last month—on November 8 and 9—over 100,000 health employees, teachers, development officers and other sections of the working class, including railway workshop employees and private sector workers, held strikes and mass demonstrations.

Rising inflation and the government's removal of almost all price controls has opened the way for sharp increases in the price of essentials and has fuelled the rising wave of strikes and protests.

In November, Sri Lanka's annualised inflation rate rose to 9.9 percent, measured on a year-on-year basis, the highest recorded in 12 years. Food inflation increased that month to 17.5 percent—up from 12.8 percent in October—while non-food inflation climbed to 6.4 percent, up from 5.4 percent, in the same period.

In the lead-up to last month's budget, the trade unions, in an attempt to dissipate workers' anger, falsely claimed that mass protests and limited walkouts would force the government to grant wage increases.

These myths were shattered by Rajapakse's brutal austerity budget that aims to make the working class bear the burden of Sri Lanka's long-running economic crisis which has been dramatically worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse declared on November 12, after presenting his budget: "There is absolutely no way [for at least one more year] we can spend public money on government sector employees."

The SLPOTUF leadership responded with a letter to President Rajapakse, appealing for an 18,000-rupee monthly wage increase for its members.

The union federation, however, later reduced its wage

demand to 10,000 rupees “considering the crisis of the government,” and slavishly told Rajapakse, “We are eagerly looking for your concerns and commitment.”

While SLPOTUF national organiser Pradeep Basnayake later admitted to the WSWS that the federation did not even receive a reply to its letter, it has issued a pathetic appeal to the finance minister to withdraw his statement that “the public sector is an unbearable burden” on the Sri Lankan economy.

Finance Minister Rajapakse’s “unbearable burden” comment is a clear indication that the government will unleash a brutal job-destruction and privatisation assault on public sector workers. This attack will not be combated by pathetic union appeals but the preparation of a political and industrial mobilisation of Sri Lankan workers against the Rajapakse government, something the SLPOTUF virulently opposes. Like their union counterparts across the island, the federation aims to divert workers into fruitless protests and then negotiate a rotten deal with the government, which it will then impose.

The government has also imposed an anti-democratic ban and harsh punishments on any public sector worker who dares to oppose its policies. Late last month, the public administration ministry sent a circular to all district secretaries threatening “disciplinary action” against public officers who “criticise the government and its policies.”

On Wednesday, Health Professional Collective co-secretary Ravi Kumudesh told a press conference that his alliance was ready to “join unconditionally any force that stands for public employees’ rights and dignity.”

Kumudesh did not name who those forces might be but going on the union collective’s past record, it will treacherously push health workers into a dead-end alliance with parliamentary bourgeois opposition parties, such as Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

Yesterday, the University Non-academic Trade Union Collective did everything it could to limit its actions, holding what it described as a “silent protest” and failing to mobilise its members.

Addressing a lunch-hour demonstration at Peradeniya University, one of the union collective’s co-presidents said that the action was just to indicate that there had been an injustice. “It is surprising that many are

participating in the demonstration. We did not inform the majority of members,” he said, adding, “We have no need for political ideologies.”

The unions, which function as an industrial police force for Sri Lankan capitalism, are becoming increasingly nervous about workers’ rising militancy and are desperately seeking to suppress it.

Sri Lanka public sector workers cannot defend their wages, jobs and democratic rights while they remain trapped inside these organisations. Workers need to build their own action committees, independent of the unions, and fight for the unity of the entire working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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