

To oppose government austerity, Sri Lankan workers need to build action committees and fight for socialist policies

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The growing wave of strikes and protests by Sri Lankan workers is rapidly moving towards a political confrontation with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government and the entire capitalist class.

The global crisis triggered by COVID-19 has sharply impacted on the Sri Lankan economy, propelling workers and the poor into struggle against the intolerable social conditions and attacks on democratic rights imposed by the government and its big business partners.

More than a million workers have been involved in strikes and demonstrations since the beginning of this year, including hundreds of thousands of teachers, health workers and other public sector employees, as well as plantation workers. This social unrest has intensified across the country in recent weeks.

- On December 8, more than half a million public sector workers held a one-day strike while tens of thousands of public sector health workers began a series of provincial level one-day sick note protests. Their main demands were for higher wages and improved working conditions.

On the same day over 500 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), port and petroleum corporation workers jointly demonstrated in central Colombo in protest against government's moves to privatise these enterprises.

- On December 13, about 10,000 workers in 12 tea estates owned by Agarapatana Plantation Company began a one-week strike in opposition to increased workloads and wage cuts.

- On December 14, about 16,000 postal workers held a one-day national strike.

Parallel to this industrial action, tens of thousands of poor rural peasants are maintaining protests that began in August to demand fertiliser and other agricultural subsidies.

The scale of this year's industrial action and number of protests have not been seen since the betrayal of the public sector employees' general strike by the trade unions in July 1980.

This year's strikes and protests have united workers across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic lines, highlighting a common class determination to defend living standards and social

conditions.

These struggles, and their betrayal by the unions, starkly reveal, however, that militancy alone is not enough. Workers can only defend their rights by mobilising independently on a socialist program. The unions, which are tied to the capitalist system and the state, are opposed to any such struggle and are doing everything to prevent it.

The trade unions were compelled to call this year's industrial action in response to popular anger over the pandemic health crisis, food shortages, the skyrocketing cost of essentials and government austerity measures. The unions soon betrayed the strikes, negotiating rotten deals with the government or big business.

On July 12, over 250,000 educators began the 100-day strike as part of their decades-long demand for higher wages. The government flatly rejected any salary increase.

The teachers' and principals' unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union and the Ceylon Teacher Services Union, called various protests to deflect teachers' anger. They then made a deal with the government, shutting down the strike and accepting just one third of the originally demanded salary rise, an increase that has not yet been implemented. The unions also agreed to the unsafe COVID-19 reopening of schools beginning on October 21.

This year, health workers have participated in at least 30 strikes and protests separately called by the unions, or under the Health Employees Trade Union Collective. In June, the union collective accepted a meagre allowance payment from the government and agreed to postpone a long-demanded wage increase.

The Sri Lanka Public Officers Trade Union Federation, which called the one-day national strike on December 8, initially wanted an 18,000-rupee monthly wage increase. But it told President Rajapakse that, "considering the crisis of the government," it would reduce its pay demand to just 10,000 rupees. Finance Ministry Secretary S. R. Attygala flatly rejected the union's new claim, declaring that the treasury had no money.

Similarly, private sector unions have backed the wage and job

cuts and high productivity demands of the big plantation corporations and the free trade zone companies.

All these unions have facilitated the Rajapakse government's relentless imposition of the economic crisis on working people. Slavishly appealing to the government and big business, the unions promote the illusion that workers can pressure the government and force them to increase wages, improve conditions and stop privatisation.

The government, however, confronts an unprecedented economic crisis and has no room to compromise. The growth rate last year fell to negative 3.6 percent, foreign reserves dropped this month to about \$US1.6 billion, and the government on the verge of defaulting on foreign loans.

Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse recently warned of foreign currency shortages into next year, but reassured the public that the government would not allow "famine" in the country. In reality, mass starvation is around the corner in Sri Lanka with many already going hungry. These worsening conditions are part of the global crisis of capitalism with no national escape route for any country.

The Rajapakse regime is doing everything possible to ensure big business and investors boost profits, while assuring international financiers that it will maintain repayments on its huge foreign debts.

In October, the Rajapakse government began removing price controls, unleashing rampant inflation. The price index rose to 9.9 percent in November, measured on a year-on-year basis, the highest in 12 years. In contrast to these brutal social attacks, the government has given big business and foreign investors big tax cuts and other concessions. Listed companies reaped a combined profit of 292 billion rupees in the first nine months of this year, surpassing all historical records.

The entire policy of the government is that peoples' lives are expendable. This is shown in its criminally negligent response to the pandemic that has led to nearly 15,000 deaths from COVID-19 and over 577,000 infections, even according to the highly undercounted official figures.

The Omicron variant, which is raging across the US, UK, Europe, Australia and other countries, is now in Sri Lanka. Colombo has completely ignored the highly infectious variant and continues with its murderous "living with the virus" policies.

The Rajapakse government's reaction to the rising militancy of workers and the rural poor is to utilise the unions to derail these struggles, while rapidly preparing for a brutal state crackdown.

This preparation includes the imposition of the draconian Essential Public Service Act, which covers about one million state workers and bans strikes and other industrial action with heavy fines and lengthy jail terms. None of the unions have opposed this draconian law.

Early this month, amid the deepening political and economic crisis, President Rajapakse suddenly prorogued parliament from

December 12 to January 18. Sri Lanka's big business *Dailyft* supported the decision, declaring that it would allow the president to "take stock so as to better reflect the current and emerging economic scenario and articulate tangible measures... [for] greater stability." The "greater stability," demanded by the ruling elite is for ruthless suppression of working class.

Throughout his presidency, Rajapakse has stepped up the militarisation of his administration. Colombo insists that it has "no money" for salary increases, public health and education or fertiliser subsidies for farmers, while lavishly boosting defence expenditure.

At the same time, the unions and pseudo-left groups continue their efforts to tie workers to the opposition bourgeois parties, such as Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, claiming that a "broader front" is needed to pressure the government.

These parties, which have a long record of suppressing the rights of workers and the poor, have no fundamental differences with the Rajapakse regime and would implement similar austerity measures if they were in power.

The working class faces enormous dangers and needs to take political matters into its own hands.

Firstly, workers urgently need to build action committees, independent of the unions and with their own democratically elected representatives, in order to take forward their struggles.

Second, workers need to break from every faction of bourgeoisie and their pseudo-left hangers on, and build a movement to take forward a political struggle against the Rajapakse regime and the capitalist profit system.

All foreign loans must be repudiated. The economy has to be reorganised from top to bottom to serve the needs of the majority, not the profit interests of a few. All large companies, plantations and banks should be nationalized and put under the democratic control of the working class.

To implement this program, workers must rally the rural poor and fight for a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the broader struggle for international socialism. Such a fight can only be carried out by uniting with the international working class. There is no national solution. The source of the attack on workers in every country is the crisis of global capitalism exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To organise this international struggle, action committees must join the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). We urge you to study our program and join us in this fight.



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