

Nation-wide strike of Sri Lankan public employees demands president's resignation

Our reporters
11 April 2022

Hundreds of thousands of state employees held an island-wide strike and protests on Friday calling for the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government and opposing shortages and massive price increases. The union front organisation claimed that around half a million participated in the protest.

Employees of the state administration, development officers and health sector workers were among those involved. Demonstrations took place in a number of districts including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Rathnapura, Monaragala, Kandy, Matara, Kurunegala and Colombo.

The strike, following nation-wide anti-government protests, is significant. It indicates that the working class is supporting the struggle to oust the Rajapakse regime.

The protest movement has entered the second week. Workers, housewives, university and school students are holding protests and marches daily in many parts of the country. They are being driven by intolerable social conditions and attacks on democratic rights. Millions are suffering from skyrocketing inflation, shortages of fuel and other basic commodities, and electricity blackouts every day.

Many public sector workers on Friday displayed hand written placards and chanted slogans including: President go home! Let us oust the government! Do not allow racism! Stop increasing prices of goods and scarcity of commodities!

The Friday protest was called by Trade Union Coordinating Centre (TUCC), a collective of four dozen unions. Some unions are controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) while others posture as independent.

The unions were compelled to call the strike amid widespread pressure from their members to join the anti-

government protests. The TUCC, however, did everything to limit the action. Some employees were called to strike while others were asked to wear black arm bands to show their opposition to the government.

TUCC called the protest not to organise a genuine struggle by workers to oust the government but to divert the anger of workers and pre-empt the development of such a movement.

Ravi Kumudesh, the president of the Federation of Health Professionals, speaking in Colombo, thundered: “The government must go!” However in the same breath, he said it must be replaced by a government that “one can trust and rules based on the parliament.” If the government does not resign, he warned the unions will “come to the street after the New Year [April 13 and 14] and join the people’s struggle.”

Wasantha Samarasinghe, from the JVP-led Inter Company Workers Union, echoed Kumudesh, saying: “Go home, give people a chance to select a rule according to their wishes.” He warned: “If the government does not leave, the working class will come into struggle after the new year.”

These utterances are a sham. Pro-capitalist unions are seeking to let off steam and promote the discredited opposition parties such as the JVP as a progressive alternative to Rajapakse. There is no solution to the immense social and economic crisis facing working people within the capitalist system.

During the past two years, a series of struggles have erupted among workers in the public and private sectors. In every case, the trade unions—including some from the TUCC—claimed that pressure would compel the Rajapakse government to make concessions. When the government bluntly rejected their pay demands, union officials declared that they understood it is a financial crisis and shut down the strikes.

At Friday's protests, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members distributed leaflets of the party's latest statement laying out a socialist program of action for the working class to fight for class interests. Workers who spoke to the WSWS condemned the Rajapakse government and expressed their mistrust and the anger over the trade unions and the opposition parties.

Janaka, a clerk, said: "It is difficult to manage the cost of living. Inflation is rising speedily. Now it is 18 percent. The value of the rupee has collapsed. This herd of rulers must be chased out. That is why I came to this protest. I did not vote for any capitalist party. The people need an alternative government with a solution to the people's problems."

A laboratory technician from Mahiyanganaya hospital said: "In fact, we have to cut expenses for everything as the prices are increasing rapidly. I have two daughters and our family depends on one curry [meal a day]." He said that even if he did 250 hours overtime work, he would be paid for only 80 hours as the government has cut overtime payments.

"The trade unions are not ready to organise a united struggle against the rising cost of living or pay issues. They are working with capitalist parties and conspiring to betray workers' struggles. As you said it really suits to name the unions as the industrial police.

"The government says there is a huge debt to pay, but the people did not ask them to get those debts and it was not spent for us."

Sakthika Sathkumara, a development officer, told the WSWS: "I am not satisfied with having a one-day token strike in the middle of such a huge attack on the living and working conditions of the masses. Given the growing crisis in the country, an indefinite general strike by the working class should have been started by now.

"But none of the unions is calling for such a struggle. The reason is that if the workers unite, they will know how powerful they are as a class. If that happens, the unions will not be able to keep the workers under their control.

"In fact, it is the unions that are preventing the working class from entering struggle and making a real challenge to the government. As the government implements more IMF conditions in the future, it is the public service workers who will be hit hard. I think if the workers are politically unarmed they will not be

able to counter that attack. Workers must form action committees as their own independent organizations."



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