

# Sri Lankan port workers speak out against union leadership

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9 June 2022

Anger is mounting among Sri Lankan port workers, particularly at Colombo Port, over their unions' betrayals of a national general strike on May 10–11 against the Rajapakse government, and their increasing collaboration with port management.

Colombo Port, which currently employs about 9,000 workers, is the country's principal harbour and, because of its location on key international trade routes, is among the top 25 busiest port facilities in the world.

Thousands of Colombo harbour workers, along with millions of other workers across the island, participated in one-day national general strikes on April 28 and May 6, to protest intolerable rising prices and shortages of essential items, and to call for President Rajapakse and his government to resign.

The port workers were key participants in another general strike, which began late on May 9, following a brutal attack on anti-government protesters in Colombo by Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) goons. Angered over the violent attacks, Colombo port workers and Colombo National Hospital employees immediately walked out in protest and marched to Galle Face Green. Colombo postal workers also went on strike.

Confronted by these spontaneous walkouts and concerned that they could escalate out of their control, the trade unions were compelled to issue an official call for an indefinite national general strike, starting on May 10.

President Rajapakse reacted by using his emergency powers to deploy the military on to the streets, issuing the armed forces with "shoot on sight" orders against so-called rioters angry over the SLPP thug attacks.

Capitulating to Rajapakse's state crackdown, the unions called off the general strike on May 11. In line with calls by the Sri Lankan Ports Authority and the shipping agents' organisation, the port unions ended all industrial action and have deepened their collaboration with management.

These betrayals are not an accident. The trade unions in Sri Lankan were silent over the mass anti-government protests that began in early April and escalated throughout that

month.

Confronted with the mass protests, the unions eventually called one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6. These were aimed at trying to dissipate workers' anger and divert it behind calls by the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) for a capitalist interim regime and general election.

Since the betrayal of the May 11 industrial action, the Port Trade Unions Alliance, which called the previous walkouts, has been particularly receptive to demands by the government and international shippers' for no further industrial action.

The Alliance includes the All Ceylon Port General Workers Union, the Samagi Employees Union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya and the Sri Lanka Freedom Employees Union. They are affiliated to the JVP, the SJB, current Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, respectively. Other unions covering port workers include an SLPP-controlled union, which kept working during the recent strikes, and the pro-business Independent Port Employees Union.

Shocked by the recent walkouts, Ceylon Association of Shipping Agents chairman Shehara De Silva wrote to the Sri Lankan Ports Authority chief declaring: "This [strike] could lead to a loss of confidence as a transshipment hub and business shifting out of Colombo to competitor ports... Such consequences will have a very far-reaching effect on the revenue" of the Ports Authority and other companies running terminals.

The Ceylon Association of Shipping Agents called on the union alliance to order their members to resume work at Colombo harbour, describing it as a vital "nerve centre of the country."

Like other unions in Sri Lanka, the Port Trade Unions Alliance were rattled by the general strikes' powerful demonstration of the industrial and political strength of the working class and quickly moved to assure management of their ongoing collaboration. On May 18, the port union front issued a leaflet which stated: "Allowing the new political

and economic culture demanded by the struggle to go ahead, trade unions and management have formed a united committee. It will take action to establish the new culture in the harbour, eliminating fraud and corruption.”

What is the real meaning of this “new culture” and the “united committee” with management? While no details have been provided about the makeup and operations of the “united committee,” its purpose will be to suppress strikes and maximise the exploitation of workers to maintain profits.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, port employees, like workers throughout the island, can only defend their jobs, wages, working conditions and basic democratic rights, by building action committees, independent of the unions, to take up this struggle. The port unions, like their counterparts across Sri Lanka, do not defend the working class but the capitalist profit system.

Port workers disgusted with increasing union collaboration with management and the betrayal of general strike action have begun discussing the formation of an independent action committee. We urge other port workers to deepen this discussion by reading the Socialist Equality Party’s program of action and contacting the party for further discussion.

The following comments are from Colombo Port workers:

**A worker at the Naval Engineering Division** said: “Workers came out on an indefinite strike, determined to chase away the government after it attacked the protesters. The workers know that when they strike, harbour and shipping is stopped and that it shows the strength of workers. We were opposed to the trade unions’ abandonment of the strike, at the very moment when the government feels uncertain.”

Commenting on the Galle Face Green protest, he added: “Their fight is legitimate. They wanted to chase away the government but they are silent on the question over who will take the political power after chasing away the government. They do not have a program.”

**Another Naval Engineering Division employee**, said: “Workers disregarded the unions and joined this fight. The trade unions were forced to call all workers to come on strike because of their mounting opposition.”

He opposed the trade unions’ insistence that a continuation of the strike would “affect public life” and that it had to be called off. They made these claims in order “to save the government,” he said.

“Stoppages in Colombo harbour directly affects mainly Indian and Bangladeshi transshipments. In their struggle, Sri Lankan workers have to get the support of our friends in the Indian and Bangladeshi ports. We cannot win the fight without establishing the unity of the Sri Lankan workers with the Indian workers,” he said.

Referring to the Socialist Equality Party analysis and program, he added: “I totally agree that such a unity can be created through an international socialist program.”

In 1979, the Port Commission, which previously administered the harbour, merged with the Port (Cargo) Corporation and the Port Tally and Protective Services Corporation to become the Sri Lankan Ports Authority. While the Ports Authority initially employed about 22,000 workers in 1979, modernisation of facilities, new technology and increased exploitation saw the systematic destruction of thousands of port workers jobs.

Despite widespread opposition from port workers, two major private terminals—the South Asia Gateway Terminal (SAGT) and Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT)—now operate in the harbour. Today the port only employs about 9,000 workers.

**A technical section worker** who has worked at Colombo port for 17 years said: “Since its establishment the Ports Authority workforce has been halved. The trade unions have collaborated in slashing jobs and our struggles for better wages have been scuttled. We now depend on overtime work to earn enough to cope with the rising cost of living.”

He explained, the port’s tug section did not have an adequate workforce and the naval engineering section had unfilled technical officer and work supervisor vacancies. This situation, he said, existed in many other sections. Workers were having difficulties properly doing their jobs but this did not concern the unions.

“While the unions seek to divide workers on grade differences, we fight to unite workers. We need the unity of all workers to fight the job cuts that the government is preparing.”



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