

Sri Lankan president demands public sector employees “work” or “quit”

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Addressing a district development council meeting in Anuradhapura on August 21, President Ranil Wickremesinghe declared that public sector workers who supposedly do not perform their duties properly should immediately leave the service.

Directing his comments to public sector workers, Wickremesinghe menacingly declared, “If you want to work, then work. If not, go home. We are not prepared to pay you for nothing...”

He warned that Sri Lanka’s economic growth would contract by 8 percent this year. But at the same time, the president fraudulently claimed that this monumental crisis would be offset by agricultural development and tourism.

While Wickremesinghe issued these threatening statements at a local event, they echo the ruthless demands being made by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the precondition for a new bailout loan.

The IMF has repeatedly insisted that there will not be any such loan until the Sri Lankan government imposes “debt sustainability” measures. Wickremesinghe is a notorious long-time enforcer of savage IMF demands.

An IMF negotiating team arrived in Colombo on Wednesday for further discussions. The financial institution has insisted upon measures to destroy hundreds of thousands of state-sector jobs, the privatisation of government-owned enterprises, the widening of the tax net to include low-income families, and the slashing of subsidies and state expenditure on public education, health and other vital social services.

Wickremesinghe’s denunciations of state sector workers as lazy and an unbearable drain on public spending are not new. They are part of an ongoing government propaganda campaign to justify the mass job destruction and increased productivity being demanded by the IMF.

In June, Public Administration Ministry Secretary Priyantha Mayadunne gave an indication of the “reform program” being planned by the Sri Lankan government.

“There is no way we can go ahead with the current public sector. The ideal size is 500,000 or at the most 800,000,” he declared. In other words, Colombo is looking at axing almost one million state sector jobs.

Mayadunne then issued circulars allowing public sector employees to take unpaid leave and to seek foreign employment. While this initially produced a rush by state sector workers for jobs abroad, the global market will not absorb the massive number of Sri Lankan public sector employees whose positions will be destroyed.

Other job destruction and budget cutting plans, which will throw massive numbers into poverty and starvation, are currently being discussed by the cabinet.

On Tuesday, a cabinet spokesman told the media that the government plans to reduce its 2023 budget deficit to 6.8 percent of gross domestic product, down from this year’s expected 9.8 percent.

This will involve increased taxes and further expenditure cuts, including the “restructure” of state-owned enterprises, the closure of some “loss making” institutions and the adoption of a so-called voluntary retirement scheme. The first step in these brutal measures will be implemented in the state-run media outlets where thousands are employed.

Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera recently declared that the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), which currently has 26,000 workers, only needed 5,000 employees. He has already appointed a committee to propose measures to “restructure” the CEB and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC). On Monday, thousands of CPC employees demonstrated against these moves. Sri Lanka Telecom, which

employs approximately 4,600 people, and Sri Lanka Insurance, with about 2,700, are also being targeted for privatisation.

The government has announced that it is not hiring any new recruits to the state sector, even though there are desperate shortages of workers in public health and education, and other key social services.

All state workers' wages have been frozen, despite massive increases in the price of essentials. Last month, the official inflation rate rose to over 60 percent, with food inflation climbing to more than 90 percent.

Health workers' overtime has also been reduced, driving up workloads and endangering the health of patients. On Wednesday, government press workers went on strike to protest cuts to their overtime payments and allowances.

The Sri Lanka Government Officers' Trade Union Association (SLGOTUA) and the Sri Lanka Development Officers' Service Union (SLDOSU) did not challenge Wickremesinghe's slanderous attacks on public sector workers.

SLGOTUA president Pradeep Basnayake said the "system was not prepared for public servants to work with maximum efficiency." An SLDOSU representative even endorsed Wickremesinghe's remarks, stating, "Just like in all other fields, there may be a handful of people who do not do their duties properly in the public service. We do not deny that."

Over the past four months, millions of workers and the poor have been involved in huge protests and strikes opposing the unbearable cost of living and demanding the ouster of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

While Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign from his post, the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups, such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), betrayed this unprecedented movement, tying it to the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

Not one of the life-and-death social problems facing the masses has been resolved, but the new Sri Lankan president has been given time to prepare, and then unleash, even more repressive attacks on social and democratic rights.

This week Wickremesinghe moved to detain three student leaders under anti-terror laws, indicating his

regime's preparation to ruthlessly suppress all opposition to its austerity program.

All the opposition parties, including the SJB, the JVP and the TNA, along with the trade unions and the pseudo-left, have no fundamental differences with the IMF's dictates.

Workers and the poor can only defend their jobs, wages, living conditions and democratic rights by establishing working-class control of the production and distribution of all essential goods and services. This requires the seizure of the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations, the nationalisation of the banks, major companies and the plantations under democratic public control, and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

In order to fight for this a program, the working class must mobilise its independent political strength in alliance with the rural poor.

The Socialists Equality Party (SEP) urges workers and the poor to build their own action committees in workplaces, plantations and in the major economic centres, as well as rural areas, independent of the trade unions and capitalist parties.

The SEP calls for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses composed of the representatives of these action committees. Against the desperate attempts of Sri Lanka's ruling elite to establish an all-party capitalist regime, this congress will lay the foundations for the revolutionary struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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