

Sri Lankan unions shut down government press workers' strike

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On Wednesday, the government press unions in Sri Lanka ended a strike and occupation by over 1,200 workers in protest against salary cuts and the non-payment of overtime. The unions shut down the industrial action, which involved printing, binding, office and all other work categories, after Minister of State for Media Shantha Bandara promised to pay salary arrears.

The strike, which began on Tuesday, was called by the Government Press Trade Union Collective (GPTUC), an alliance of several unions, including the Samagi Rajaye Mudranala Sevaka Sangamaya (SRMSS), Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya and the Podujana Mudrana Sevaka Sangamaya (PMSS).

These unions are controlled by the Samagi Jan Balawegaya (SJB), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the United National Party led by President Ranil Wickremesinghe, and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, respectively. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Government Press Workers Trade Union (GPWTU) joined the action separately.

The unions demanded the payment of arrears from previous incentive allowances and overtime payments for November. Workers said that they were previously paid an incentive allowance according to a piece-rate system, which meant they could earn over 60,000 rupees (\$US163) per month.

In August, the incentive allowance was reduced to employees' basic monthly salary, an effective 50 percent reduction in the allowance, after management claimed it had no funds to continue. Angry workers immediately marched to the office of Minister for State Media Bandara, who promised to submit a cabinet paper rectifying the incentive allowance cut.

The union alliance accepted this worthless promise

and called off all action. Three months later, the previous incentive allowance has not been restored and management has not paid overtime this month.

Striking Government Press workers this week were determined to maintain their strike until they won all their demands. The GPTUC, however, ended all industrial action midday yesterday, following discussions with Bandara and government printing department authorities.

PMSS president Nihal Chandrasiri declared, "We believe that the state minister will resolve the problem," while SRMSS secretary demagogically threatened: "If promises are not fulfilled we are ready organise a big struggle, joining with all other unions in the country." These claims are worthless. Union officials failed to explain why workers should accept the minister's word, after having broken his promise in August.

The attack on Government Press workers is a part of a broader and intensifying assault on the Sri Lankan working class. Presenting his International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated budget this month, President Wickremesinghe insisted on the necessity for government expenditure cuts and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. As well as moving to eliminate hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, the government increased taxes, which will drive up the price of essentials.

The Government Press plant is one of many state-owned enterprises being targeted for privatisation and attacks on wages, conditions and jobs. A large amount of printing work, including the production of school textbooks, has already been handed over to private companies. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that 55 percent of school textbook printing has been contracted out to private printers.

While the GPTUC called this week's strike action, its purpose was not to organise a genuine struggle for workers' demands but to dissipate workers' rising anger. All unions in the GPTUC and the GPWTU are controlled by political parties that fully support the IMF's dictates that workers and the poor pay for the economic crisis of capitalism.

Government Press workers, along with millions of other workers, participated in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6 against former President Rajapakse and his government and in defiance of the government-backed unions. Their unions, however, collaborated in limiting these actions, diverting workers into support for the demands of the opposition SJB and JVP for an interim, all-party capitalist government.

Government Press workers told WSWs reporters that their wages were being drastically eroded by the surging cost of living.

A worker from the binding section said his monthly basic salary is 32,000 rupees. "After deductions for loans, I only receive some 10,000–15,000 rupees. I'm from Kandy, stay in a boarding house and have to spend several thousand rupees on food. I used to go home on the weekends and so spend at least 4,000 rupees for travelling per month," he said.

Poor people are coming under attack from the current regime, he continued. "An SJB or JVP government will also not be able solve those problems."

Another worker from the same section explained that he had worked at the Government Press for 24 years but that his basic monthly salary was still 35,000 rupees.

"Many of us depend on the incentive allowance and overtime work payments. If they stop these legitimate payments we cannot manage our expenses. I do not believe ministers' promises," he said.

This week's strike by Government Press employees is part of a rising tide of working-class struggles against the rising cost of living and deepening wage cuts in Sri Lanka and internationally.

According to official government statistics, Sri Lanka's inflation rate hit 66 percent in October, with food inflation at 86 percent. While the government claims inflation eased last month, these steep rises have created an unbearable situation for workers and the poor. While workers' wages have been halved in real

terms, the trade unions, which unwaveringly defend the capitalist system, oppose any struggle for higher wages or to defend existing hard-won conditions.

The rapid shutdown of the Government Press workers' strike, following more empty promises from the government, demonstrates yet again workers that they cannot defend their rights through the trade unions, which have been transformed into apparatuses of the bourgeois state.

Workers can only go forward if they take control of their own struggles. This means forming action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and rural areas, independent of the capitalist parties and the trade unions, to organise unified action to defend their rights.

This involves a political struggle against capitalism and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, the repudiation of all foreign debts, and nationalisation of the banks, large companies and plantations under workers' democratic control as part of struggle for international socialism.



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