

Sri Lankan Telecom workers protest against privatisation

Wilani Peiris

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Thousands of workers at Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT), both Sinhala and Tamil, joined island-wide lunch-time protests on November 25 and 28 against privatisation. Demonstrations were held outside SLT offices in several cities, including Colombo, Galle and Matara in the south, Anuradapura in the north central region, and Tricomalee and Kalmunai in the east.

The protesters chanted and displayed hand-made placards with slogans like “Stop the privatisation of profit-earning Telecom!”, “Sri Lanka has been bankrupted by privatisation!” and “Stop selling national resources!”

The rallies are part of a growing wave of working class struggles in Sri Lanka and internationally in opposition to soaring living costs and attacks on jobs and wages. Governments and corporations are imposing the full burden of the worsening economic crisis, accelerated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, on working people.

The protest was called by the Telecom Trade Unions Collective (TTUC), a group of 20 unions, including the All Telecommunication Workers Union (ATWU), Podujana Pragathiseeli Telecom Workers Union (PPTWU), Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS), Samagi Sevaka Sangamaya (SSS) and Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS).

These unions are all tied to the parties of the parliamentary establishment that support or are actually implementing austerity and privatisations. The PPTWU, SLNSS, SSS and JSS are controlled by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramun (SLPP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the United National Party (UNP) of President Ranil Wickremasinghe respectively.

The All Ceylon Telecom Workers Union controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuan (JVP) did not officially join the action but its members participated in protests.

The SLT is among several state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to be privatised as announced in the annual budget

for 2023 presented by Wickremasinghe on November 14, in line with sweeping pro-business “reforms” dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The SLPP, UNP, SJB, SLFP, JVP and the unions all support the IMF austerity program.

The TTUC called the protest with the aim of letting off steam and dissipating the workers’ growing anger. Earlier, the TTUC announced that protests would continue until Thursday this week, but called off the action on Monday, telling union members that the SLT chairman had called for a discussion.

The TTUC is attempting to demobilise workers by promoting the lie that privatisation can be stopped by advising and appealing to the government.

A TTUC leaflet issued on November 21 stated that privatisation of SLT was a threat to “national security and national economy.” Pointing out that SLT is a profitable enterprise and has earned 933 billion rupees for the first 9 months of 2022, the leaflet called on the government to transform SLT into “an independent institution without political interference” and subject to “regulation and auditing.”

SLT’s profitability is a direct result of the unions’ collaboration with management to slash the workforce and increase workloads. The TTUC is pledging its continued collaboration in policing the workforce to further boost profits.

Addressing workers after yesterday’s protest, senior vice secretary of the ATWU, Jagath Gurusinghe, declared that if the government did not withdraw the proposal for privatisation, “we will call [on] all Telecom workers to Colombo.” He blustered: “We will speak with other unions including power, petroleum and ports, about a joint struggle.”

In a press conference on November 21, the chairman of the PPTWU said he would speak with the SLPP general secretary Sagara Kariyawasam and resign from the party

if the government did not withdraw the proposal. Such rhetoric is intended to hoodwink SLT workers and cover up the rotten record of the unions in preparing the ground for privatisation.

Preparations for the privatisation of SLT started in the early 1990s under “free market” economic reforms carried out by then UNP president Ranasinghe Premadasa, the father of current SJB leader Sajith Premadasa. First, the telecommunications department was transformed into the SLT Corporation in 1991. In 1996, it became a publicly traded company under the SLFP-led government of then president Chandrika Kumaratunga.

In 1997 Kumaratunga government sold 40 per cent of SLT shares to Japanese Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Company (NTT). The NTT in 2007 sold 25 percent of its shares to Malaysian Usaha Tegas Sdn, a subsidiary of Maxix Communication Bhd.

This creeping privatisation was accompanied by mass layoffs. SLT’s workforce was slashed from 8,600 to 6,600 between 2000-2006 under a so-called voluntary redundancy scheme, with many workers replaced by low-paid contractors.

The unions bear responsibility for these historic attacks, having worked as adjuncts of SLT and the government throughout the restructuring process. These organisations ensured that workers’ struggles against privatisation and job destruction were limited to futile protests and were betrayed.

So far, successive governments have been unable to complete the privatisation process due to entrenched opposition from workers. Now, the Wickremasinghe government, facing enormous foreign debts and with depleted foreign exchange reserves, is seeking to resolve its financial crisis in part through the sale of SOEs.

In addition to SLT, the 2023 budget lists the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation, Sri Lankan Airlines, Waters Edge and Colombo Hilton hotels for privatisation. Other SOEs, including the Ceylon Electricity Board and the Petroleum Corporation are to be added to the list.

The privatisations are a part of an historic assault on jobs, wages and the democratic rights of the working class. The government aims to slash the public sector workforce by half or 850,000.

The TTUC and all other unions are collaborating with the government in implementing the IMF-dictated austerity measures and acting as industrial police to suppress workers’ struggles against them.

SLT workers joined with millions of their class brothers and sisters in general strikes on April 28 and May 6,

during the mass uprising against the former government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The telecom unions collaborated with other unions in betraying this struggle and paving the way for the installation of the Wickremasinghe government.

Workers must draw the necessary political conclusions from these experiences and take the fight for their rights into their own hands, independent of the corporatist unions and all capitalist parties.

What is required is the building of action committees in every workplace, factory, neighbourhood, and in rural areas to organise a common struggle of the working class, supported by the rural poor, against the economic onslaught of the ruling class. These committees will provide the basis for uniting the Sri Lankan working class with workers in India and internationally who face the same attacks.

Even if the SOEs are not immediately privatised and remain part of the capitalist state, there will be no end to the attacks on jobs, working conditions and public services. The only way to guarantee well-paid jobs, high living standards and basic social rights is through a political struggle aimed at abolishing capitalism, which is the source of social inequality and war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fighting to convene a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, which will be built through delegates elected from action committees of workers and the rural poor throughout Sri Lanka. This will take forward the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, which will implement socialist policies as a part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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