

Thousands of workers protest against privatisation in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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Around 3,000 workers from Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) and Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC) protested in central Colombo on Thursday against privatisation. Hundreds of bank workers also demonstrated in the capital, as well as hundreds of state sector workers in provincial cities, including Matara, Kalutara, Badulla and Negombo, against the government's ruthless austerity measures.

The SLT and SLIC workers went on strike and began the picketing in the morning. They displayed placards reading "Protect the Telecom built by peoples' taxes," "After 40 years of privatisation the country is bankrupt," and "Stop selling State Owned Enterprises (SOEs)," and chanted similar slogans.

The protest was called by the Telecom Trade Union Collective (TTUC), a group of 20 unions, and the Insurance Workers Collective (IWC), an alliance of 15 unions. The unions called the protest, held in front of the main railway station at Colombo Fort, to contain the growing opposition among workers and divert it behind opposition parties like the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

There is growing anger in the working class over the soaring cost of living and attacks on wages, jobs and living conditions, as well as democratic rights. The latest protests are part of a resurgence of workers' struggles throughout Sri Lanka and internationally as the ruling class seeks to make working people pay for the deepening economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

SLT and SLIC were earmarked by President Ranil Wickremesinghe in his recent budget among the SOEs to be privatised without further delay, along with others including the Sri Lankan Airlines, and the Water's

Edge and Colombo Hilton hotels. The budget's austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also include slashing government subsidies, major tax increases on working people and the devaluation of rupee, fueling hyperinflation.

In order to disarm the working class, the unions are promoting the lie that privatisation can be stopped by exerting pressure on the government through protests and appeals. The union bureaucracy had been silent on the IMF's brutal program for months before suddenly calling the protests on Thursday—the day the budget was voted on in parliament. Politicians endorsed the budget by a majority of 43 votes.

At the Colombo rally, TTUC and IWC leaders shouted that they would fight the privatisation. All Telecommunication Workers Union (ATWU) senior vice secretary Jagath Gurusinghe thundered: "You [the government] have no right to sell these enterprises. You are here only for five years. Only a section of Telecom and Insurance workers came here today. Don't compel us to bring out all the workers from not only telecom and insurance but also from banks, the electricity board and the petroleum corporation. Stop the privatisation without delay."

The trade unions, however, have consciously divided the workers' protests. On December 5 and 6, the Trade Unions Coordination Centre (TUCC) and Trade Unions and Mass Organisation Collective (TUMOC)—as well as unions at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), Sri Lanka Railways, Colombo Port and two main Free Trade Zones in Katunayake and Biyagama, all called separate protests against the budget. Even though the bank workers' protest was called on December 8 in Colombo, the unions kept them two kilometres away from the SLT and SLIC workers who were opposing

the same budget.

The unions in the SLT and SLIC have connections with capitalist parties including ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and the opposition SJB and the JVP. All these parties without exception are committed to IMF-dictated austerity.

SLT and SLIC workers joined millions of other Sri Lankan workers during the mass uprising from April to July against the former government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The union bureaucracy was responsible for betraying that struggle by promoting the SJB and JVP's call for an "interim government," thus paving the way for the installation of President Wickremesinghe.

Now, under conditions of growing opposition to austerity and the potential for a renewed popular uprising, the unions are preparing a new political trap to derail the movement by subordinating workers to the bourgeois opposition parties.

Workers need to draw decisive political conclusions from the unions' betrayals and take the fight against the privatisation and other social attacks into their own hands.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened among protesting SLT and SLIC workers. They distributed the statement "Sri Lankan workers need action committees to fight IMF austerity measures" and won an enthusiastic response from workers, who said they would study the party's call for building action committees, independent of the unions, to take forward their struggle.

One Telecom worker said the union leaders "are connected to various political parties and we have come here today without considering the unions. Whatever union we are in, we have all gathered to focus on the organisation [telecom] and the country."

An insurance worker expressed disgust at the union leaders' betrayals, saying: "They are agents [of the ruling class]. We made proposals to the unions in the past, but in vain. I suggest that our employees should leave the unions."

Another SLT worker said: "We do not want to highlight the trade unions. We have united today for a common goal. We have no divisions here."

When the union officials noticed that the SEP

statement was widely distributed among workers at the rally they deployed goons to grab the leaflets and attack the SEP campaign team. Campaigners challenged the union thugs, insisting on their democratic right to circulate the leaflets.

Union leaders then tried to provoke workers against the SEP by denouncing them through their public addressing system as "saboteurs who support the government." But their provocation failed to gain any support from workers. The attack on the SEP, and on the basic right of workers to read about its socialist program, testifies to the union bureaucracy's alarm and fear of SEP's exposure of its treacherous role.

To break the stranglehold of the unions requires the building of action committees in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood, and among the poor in rural areas. In this way, working people can take the fight for social and democratic rights into their own hands, and build a powerful movement for a workers' and peasants' government, committed to socialist policies. At the same time, through such committees, the Sri Lankan working class will unite with its class brothers in South Asia and internationally, in the global fight for socialism.



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