

Over 50,000 Sri Lankan workers strike and protest against Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures

Our reporters**9 February 2023**

Over 50,000 workers joined strikes and demonstrations across the island yesterday to fight the latest round of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated social attacks being enacted by the Wickremesinghe government. While the action mainly centred on the new taxes on wages, protesters also denounced unbearable increases to the cost of living.

Thousands of workers from the government-owned Petroleum Corporation held a half-day strike, as did about 30,000 employees from public and private sector banks. Around 5,000 government university teachers and 20,000 doctors from public sector hospitals walked out in a one-day strike. Cancer treatment, maternity wards, emergency services and children's wards were exempted from the doctors' strike.

Around 6,000 workers from the ports observed a half day work-to-rule and thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers, apart from those attending to breakdowns, participated in a sick-leave campaign.

In Colombo, thousands of port workers and Water Supply and Drainage Board employees joined a lunch-hour demonstration outside the Fort railway station in protest against rising inflation. They demanded that the government withdraw its income tax increases. This was followed by a one-hour demonstration organised by several Ceylon Petroleum Corporation trade unions, and around 4,000 CEB employees demonstrated outside the CEB headquarters. Later that afternoon, approximately 4,000 doctors, university teachers, engineers and other professionals protested in Colombo's Hyde Park.

Indicating its preparedness to unleash state violence against the working class, the Wickremesinghe government deployed hundreds of police personnel, including riot cops equipped with water cannon trucks, near protest sites in Colombo. The government also dispatched the military to the Fort area, but it kept some distance away.

Yesterday's strikes and protests are the latest stage in a growing movement of workers that began late last year against President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government.

In early December, Sri Lanka Telecom, insurance and banks employees protested in Colombo against privatisation and other

austerity attacks. On January 9, thousands of public sector health workers held a one-day strike demanding wage increases and opposing austerity measures. In mid-January tens of thousands Petroleum Corporation workers, bank employees, as well as doctors and engineers held a week of protests. This was followed on January 25 by protests by 5,000 port workers against the government's new Pay as You Earn tax which deducts between 6 and 36 percent from monthly salaries, starting at about 100,000 rupees (\$US273).

The Wickremesinghe government's IMF-dictated measures also include privatisation and restructuring of public sector enterprises to eliminate jobs and cut wages and working conditions; sharp reductions in government expenditure, including subsidies; and further increases in electricity, water tariffs and other utilities.

While workers have powerfully shown their willingness to take action against the government's social attacks, the trade unions have kept workers separated and restricted the protests to the income tax, hoping to prevent a nationwide industrial and political struggle.

When the police arrived at Fort station in an attempt to disrupt the demonstration, they were denounced by angry protesters. One worker shouted, "If you attack us with water cannons, we will stop the work at the ports." Another worker said: "If you attack, we will see what will happen next." Concerned that they provoke an immediate industrial backlash, the police did not proceed.

Fearing that workers' opposition could develop outside union control, All Ceylon General Port Employees Union general secretary Niroshan Gorakana intervened in an attempt to calm the angry workers. The union is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

"These activities will still continue. We will give you an opportunity to vent your anger. Do not get involved in disruptive acts," Gorakana anxiously told workers.

Gorakana went on to declare that if Wickremesinghe did not abolish the new tax policy by February 17, "We all get together and go for a total strike. We will bring everybody to one place and wage a struggle." It was an appeal to Wickremesinghe that

if he did not change course, the trade unions may not be able to control this growing movement of Sri Lankan workers.

Addressing protesting CEB workers, Ranjan Jayalal, leader of the JVP-affiliated Electricity Employees Union, said: “We will bring the government to its knees and win our demands. We will not let the CEB be sold off. We oppose the burdens that the people will have to bear with these heavy electricity prices.”

The demagogic remarks of Jayalal and Gorakana are an attempt to hoodwink their members. The JVP, with which their unions are aligned, has no fundamental differences with the IMF’s demands. It is cynically attempting to exploit the rising popular anger in order to win power in the next general elections. If successful it will implement the same measures.

Contrary to union claims, Wickremesinghe’s austerity program will not be pushed back through mass pressure. Wickremesinghe delivered his policy statement to parliament during the protests, declaring that he would not change the new tax regime. Indicating that he would implement the IMF’s policies to the letter, he said: “Remember, I’m not here to be popular... I’m ready to make unpopular decisions for the sake of the nation.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in yesterday’s protests distributing a statement titled, “Workers, how to fight government austerity?” SEP campaigners discussed with workers the significance of their action and the program required to take it forward.

The SEP stands in solidarity with workers coming forward to fight the austerity measures, the statement said, pointing out that this “is a part of rising international class struggles against attacks by capitalist governments throughout the world.” It noted that the unions had called yesterday’s actions to foster false hopes that workers can pressure the government and, in this way, “divert the growing anger among workers and dilute it.”

The statement called on workers to form their own action committees at workplaces, factories and neighbourhoods, independent of all the parliamentary parties and the unions, in order to take the struggle against the government’s attacks into their own hands. It explained the need for an independent movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor, through these action committees and directed towards the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Such a congress would fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to the policies of international socialism.

While many workers enthusiastically took the SEP leaflet, trade unions leaders at the port workers protest attempted to provoke a physical assault on SEP campaigners. Several workers, however, intervened to defend SEP members’ right to campaign. The union leaders’ attempt to stop distribution of the SEP statement failed.

Several workers spoke to the SEP campaigners about the government’s social attacks and the role being played by the

trade unions.

One worker from the Colombo Dock Yard, said: “The government is imposing income taxes on the salaries we earned three years ago. Apart from this job, I have no other income but the price of all goods has increased.

“We have no one to speak with about this situation. They [trade union leaders] are deaf. How can we believe that a new government will be able to rule properly? So far, this government has not done anything for us and now no one can solve the problems.”

The dock yard worker expressed some illusions in the JVP. “They [the JVP] must be voted into power and let’s see whether they can rule well. At the moment we only hear the voice of the JVP,” he said.

SEP campaigners explained that a future JVP government would defend the profit interests of the capitalist class. The worker responded by saying that he wanted to know about the SEP and its call for the repudiation of all foreign debts under a government of workers and peasants.

A young CEB worker at the protest said trade union claims that workers could pressure the government had “failed.” If the CEB is privatised then “electricity will be cut for poor people, who cannot afford to pay,” he said.

SEP members also campaigned at Peradeniya Hospital near Kandy, circulating copies of the party statement among protesting doctors and other health workers. A group of nurses said that they had considered voting for the JVP, hoping that it would resolve the difficulties facing ordinary people.

SEP members explained that the JVP is committed to the IMF program and played a video clip of JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayaka telling parliament that unfavourable decisions which “conflict with the people” would have to be taken. The nurses said that they had not heard this before and that it revealed the JVP would also implement the austerity measures.



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