

Sri Lankan workers strike in defiance of government's essential service orders

Our reporters
2 March 2023

Half a million workers from across Sri Lanka's public and private sectors joined strikes and protests on Wednesday in opposition to the savage International Monetary Fund measures being imposed by the government. The measures include a pay as you earn (PAYE) tax on workers' salaries, increased interest rates on bank loans, cuts in overtime payments, privatisations and tens of thousands of state-sector job cuts.

Those participating yesterday included workers from the petroleum, electricity, water supply, port, banking, health care, postal, railway, school and university sectors. The industrial action, in defiance of President Ranil Wickremesinghe's strike-breaking Essential Public Services Act, included full- and half-day strikes, sick-leave campaigns, "go slows," lunch-time pickets and other protests.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members intervened in yesterday's industrial action, circulating copies of a party statement: "Support the strike against the government's austerity attacks! Withdraw the draconian essential service orders! Fight for a socialist program to defend social and democratic rights!"

Health workers, including doctors, held half-day walkouts and protests across the island. Thousands of workers staged a half-day strike at the National Hospital, the National Eye Hospital and the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children in Colombo. They demanded the withdrawal of high bank interest rates and the new PAYE income tax, and called for lower electricity tariffs and other price reductions.

At Kandy National Hospital, nurses, doctors, health care assistants and other hospital workers walked out from 8 a.m. to noon, shutting down the outpatient department and several treatment clinics. Only emergency services were provided. Army personnel were deployed to the facility as strikebreakers.

Members of the Kandy Hospital Health Workers Action Committee, which was formed on the political initiative of the SEP, supported the strike and distributed the SEP statement amongst their fellow workers. Many health workers read it with great interest and held discussions with committee members.

Most of the health workers who commented said that they did not believe the strike could be won through limited industrial action and demanded ongoing action involving all health workers. Many blamed the trade union leadership for preventing a unified struggle.

Citing a government survey, yesterday's *Daily Mirror* reported that 44,540 public servants out of 148,451 in Sri Lanka's six

provinces walked out on strike. This included 36 percent in the northwest, 40 percent in north central, 49 percent in the south, 25 percent in central, 21 percent in the east, and 19 percent in Uva.

The survey also revealed widespread participation by government doctors across all provinces. This included 914 out of 1,322 in the northwest, 434 out of 690 in north central, 1,547 out of 2,472 in the central province, 942 out of 1,339 in the south, 454 out of 1,338 in the east, and 730 out of 918 in Uva.

A few thousand workers from the Ports Authority terminal and the privately-owned Colombo Dockyard Company demonstrated outside the main entrance to Colombo Harbour during their one-hour lunch break. Workers at the state-owned port terminals also staged a 24-hour go-slow, starting at 7.00 a.m. on Wednesday.

Hundreds of workers from the Kolonnawa oil installation centre and the Sapugaskande refinery took work-to-rule action and held anti-privatisation protests during their lunch break.

Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) members staged a one-day strike at 637 of its branches across the country and at its head office, with thousands participating. Workers from private banks also went on strike, crippling banking operations throughout the country. The CBEU is a member of the Trade Union Collective of Professionals, an umbrella body of 15 unions that includes the Government Medical Officers' Association, Ceylon Electricity Board Engineers' Union, and the Federation of University Teachers Association.

Power sector workers and employees of the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) held a one-day sick leave protest involving 22,000 workers, or 90 percent of the total workforce.

Water Supply and Drainage Board workers organised a march and held a protest outside their head office at Ratmalana, about 15 km south of the Colombo city centre.

University lecturers at state-owned universities such as Moratuwa, Kelaniya, Jayewardenepura, Peradeniya, Jaffna and Open University, Nawala in Colombo held token strikes, and tens of thousands of school teachers across the island protested by wearing black clothing. Hundreds of teachers and principals joined a protest in Kottawa on the outskirts of Colombo.

Wednesday's strikes and protests powerfully indicate the determination of workers to fight the government's social attacks. By contrast, the trade unions did everything they could to limit the industrial action. Like Wickremesinghe, they fear that the rising working class opposition to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity program will develop into the sort of mass uprising

that last year ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

During Wednesday's protests, trade union leaders issued the usual hollow denunciations while allowing the government to buy time and prepare a state crackdown against the working class. In most cases the unions restricted the strikes and protests to a single issue—the PAYE tax that has impacted many state and private-sector workers.

All Ceylon General Port Employees Union (ACGPEU) General Secretary Niroshan Gorakana declared that Wickremasinghe's Monday night extension of the essential service order to the transport sector, including the ports, would not stop the port workers' strikes and work-to-rule campaign. The union is affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

If Wickremasinghe did not withdraw the essential services order, he declared, his union was ready to unite with health, bank, university, petroleum, electricity, water supply and telecom workers and “reply with an indefinite general strike next week.”

Gorakana's empty demagogy was a crude attempt to cover up the capitulation of the port unions, and his own ACGPEU, to the government's essential services order by downgrading its planned one-day strike to a “go slow” campaign.

CBEU President Channa Dissanayake declared, “Our strike is successful [and] this is our beginning. We are ready to pay tax, but the tax thresholds must be reasonable. Professionals and intellectuals are in a grave crisis and are deciding whether to leave the country or not.”

In other words, the CBEU leader is not opposing the PAYE tax, but appealing to the government for cosmetic changes. As Wickremasinghe has made clear, however, he will not modify these taxes.

Contrary to the union leadership's claims, the savage austerity measures will not be changed by pressuring the government. In fact, most of these unions are affiliated to the political parties of the bourgeois establishment and totally committed to the IMF program.

As explained in the SEP statement: “What has objectively emerged is that the working class directly confronts state power. In opposition to the ruling class's reactionary preparations, the working class must organise its own independent counteroffensive...”

“Workers should take the struggle for their social and democratic rights into their own hands. The SEP calls for the formation of their own action committees, independent of all capitalist parties and trade unions, in every workplace, factory, plantation and in the neighbourhoods. Similarly, the rural poor should take steps to build such action committees.”

The SEP statement explained the significance of its campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses on the basis of these action committees. This, it continued, would develop the basis for a mass revolutionary movement of the working class and rally the rural poor to establish a government of workers and peasants committed to a socialist program, as a part of broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

SEP campaigners interviewed protesters, many of whom voiced their dissatisfaction with the trade union leadership. A Ports

Authority navigation division employee said on February 28 that workers were ready for a general strike but they were betrayed by the union leadership.

At 2.00 p.m. that day, the trade unions, including the JVP-led ACGPEU, the Sri Lanka Freedom Employees Union, which is affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and the United National Party-affiliated union organised a discussion and called for a “go-slow,” not a strike. They claimed this would pressure the government. This was opposed by workers from the navigation division.

SEP members distributed party statements outside the main entrance to Colombo Harbour. A worker attached to the SLFP trade union spoke to campaigners. He had participated in the February 22 protests at the Fort station, where the trade union leaders had previously announced a March 1 general strike.

“We were asked to hold a [protest] picket during our lunch break,” he said. “A discussion was held between 40 trade unions and the government, but it failed. The government did not agree. They do not care about us, but we must keep pressing [the government].” He acknowledged, however, that the government will “continue with its privatisation measures” and other IMF measures.

R. Prabha, a CEB Jaffna office worker who participated in the protest, said: “The price of essential goods has skyrocketed, but our salary is in no way sufficient to deal with the cost of living. We are forced to take out loans to meet expenses. That is why we have come to this struggle. For the past two years we've not been paid any sick leave allowances or our bonus, and management has cut all our overtime work.”

She also criticised the Wickremasinghe government's cancellation of the scheduled March 9 local government elections: “They previously announced the elections, but now say there is no money. But it's not a money problem, they just realise that we won't for vote the government. Knowing that they would lose the elections, they've anti-democratically stopped the elections.”



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