

Sri Lankan trade unions' treacherous role in suppressing the growing struggles of workers against government austerity

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The Sri Lankan trade unions are desperately seeking to suppress and contain rising working-class struggles against the harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) measures being carried out by the Wickremesinghe government.

This was very much evident on March 1, when half a million public and private sectors workers across the island took industrial action in protest against the government's social attacks. The actions were in defiance of anti-strike essential services orders.

The unions are fearful that the rising wave of strikes and protests will replicate the sort of movement that last year ousted then President Gotabaya Rajapakse and lead to major revolutionary confrontations with the Wickremesinghe regime and the bourgeois state.

These concerns were openly voiced by Federation of Health Professionals (FHP) president Ravi Kumudesh who told a press conference yesterday that his union was suppressing workers' demands for unified industrial action to fight the government's social assault.

"Every health worker in one voice has demanded we go on strike [but] what would happen if everybody engages in a strike? Does anybody think that we cannot do that? No we can do that," Kumudesh said.

"If we call on workers to participate in a joint struggle, everybody would come onto the streets. We've been keeping people under suppression, saying that we cannot do this sort of strike," he stated.

Kumudesh's remarks are a clear admission not just that workers want united action against IMF austerity, but that their demands are being deliberately suppressed by the unions. When the unions call strikes and protests it is in order to keep control while limiting these job actions to one-day or half-day strikes. Such protests are invariably restricted to a single issue. On March 1, Kumudesh's union, along with the other health sector unions, limited industrial action to a four-hour strike.

Likewise, the FHP and most of the unions covering

professional workers have centred all their protests on the government's new regressive Pay as You Earn (PAYE) tax rates which have severely impacted the take-home pay of thousands of workers.

The new rates, which were announced in last November's budget, are just one of the brutal demands being made by the IMF. Others include the restructure, privatisation and destruction of tens of thousands of state-sector jobs, wage and overtime cuts, higher electricity tariffs, and the elimination of various social subsidies.

The unions' separation of the PAYE tax rates from the IMF program is no accident. It is in line with their support and that of their affiliated parties for the IMF's demands. Last June, when an IMF team visited Colombo to demand that the then government impose an austerity program, the unions—some openly and others silently—agreed.

Not surprisingly, Kumudesh is an explicit advocate of the IMF dictates. In an interview last June with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Kumudesh said he "personally" supported going to the IMF for emergency funds, even while admitting that harsh conditions would be attached.

Under pressure from its members, the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) called a one-day strike on Wednesday. CBEU chairman Channa Dissanayake demagogically declared, "If the government does not positively respond to their demands, the CBEU and trade unions within many other sectors have already decided to take stricter actions in coming days."

Early last year, however, Dissanayake told the *Morning Star* that Sri Lanka faced a "possible banking-sector crisis" and urged the government to seek IMF assistance.

Rather than demanding the abolition of the tax increase, the unions are now begging the Wickremesinghe government for a "fair tax" system. Leading these calls are the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) and the Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA).

The GMOA, along with other health unions, restricted industrial action on Wednesday to a four-hour strike, with its secretary Dr Haritha Aluthge telling the media: “If the government continues to ignore us, we will launch stricter trade union actions at any moment after 8 March.”

These threats, however, are desperate appeals for the government to make some cosmetic changes. They are a warning that unless the unions are provided with something to sell to workers, they will not be able to contain the rising unrest.

There is ample evidence of how the trade union leaders worked to prevent unified action on March 1. Last month, the All Ceylon General Port Employees Union (ACGPEU), which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), threatened the government, declaring that unless the tax measures were modified, there would be strike action in the ports on March 1. On Wednesday, however, its strike threat was turned into a so-called “go-slow.”

To justify its capitulation to the government’s essential services strike ban, ACGPEU secretary Niroshan Gorakana manufactured a fairy story, saying: “The government had planned to deploy a group of persons trained in operating various machinery in the Colombo Port to carry out operations if port employees went on strike.” According to Gorakana’s twisted logic, the union’s “go-slow” action “defeated” the government’s strikebreaking plans!

Early this week, when the unions realised that it would be too difficult to stop workers from protesting, they kept their membership in the dark over what kind of actions would be taken on Wednesday. Colombo Harbour workers told the WSWS that when they approached the union, wanting to know what action was planned for March 1, they were rebuked and silenced by the union leadership.

Likewise, the Joint Trade Union Alliance of the Ceylon Electricity Board (JTUACEB) limited the March 1 action to a “sick note” protest.

JTUACEB convener Ranjan Jayalal, a leading member of the JVP, declared during a strike in February that if Wickremesinghe did not withdraw the tax policy by April, “We will chase away the government... If the government requires a general strike, then we will do it and it is certain this fight will end up with a victory.”

The manoeuvres and empty posturing of Gorakana and Jayalal are in line with the open capitalist policies of their party, the JVP, which is committed to the IMF’s entire program.

While unions in railways, postal departments, teachers and school principals, claimed that they supported the national action on Wednesday, they refused to call their members to strike and instead held limited protests. The teachers’ and principals’ unions asked their members to report to work

wearing black clothing or arm bands.

These unions played the same role during last year’s mass uprising against the Rajapakse government. The unions called one-day general strikes on April 28, May 6 and 10, only after workers began joining the mass protests independently of the unions. These strikes, moreover, were aimed at diverting the mass movement into demands for an interim government—i.e., an alternative bourgeois government—as advocated by the opposition parliamentary parties such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the JVP.

Thus, the unions, backed by the pseudo-left organisations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), betrayed the mass movement, paving the way for Wickremesinghe to come to power. Now, as the working class is coming back into struggle against the Wickremesinghe government’s IMF measures, the unions are playing the same treacherous role.

As an SEP statement distributed to workers on Wednesday explained: “The trade unions and pseudo-left groups are tied to the capitalist system, its parties and the state, and are hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class against the government and employers’ attacks on social and democratic rights.

“Workers should take the struggle for their social and democratic rights into their own hands. The SEP urges workers to form their own action committees independent of all capitalist parties and trade unions in every workplace, factory, plantation and neighborhood. Similar steps to build such committees should be taken by the rural poor.

“The SEP is fighting for an independent political movement of the working class, supported by the rural masses. The action committees should facilitate this mobilization around basic demands addressing the social and democratic rights of the workers, youth and rural poor.”

The statement explained the SEP’s call for building a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, which will be based on these action committees. The SEP began advancing this program in July last year during the mass uprising. Its purpose is to develop an independent movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor, to establish a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies, as a part of a broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers to join with the SEP in that struggle.



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