

Build action committees in every workplace! Fight for a united struggle against Sri Lankan government's austerity measures

Joint statement of workers action committees in Sri Lanka
10 March 2023

Our action committees among health, plantation, apparel, port, hotel, cinnamon workers and teachers in Sri Lanka call for the mobilisation of the working class in a joint struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and its big business attacks on our democratic and social rights.

We have participated in the one-day and half-day strikes and protests called by the trade unions, even though these actions were tightly controlled by the union bureaucrats. We were not consulted about the calling, or calling off, of these actions. Nor did the unions ask our advice on what our demands should be.

Last week's actions were organised by unions mainly affiliated to the Trade Union Coordinating Committee (TUCC). Many of the unions in this front are affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Other unions taking action included the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and the Health Trade Union Collective.

Unions affiliated to another front—the Trade Unions and Mass Organisations (TUMO)—did not participate but some organised its own protests on March 8, with similar demands to the TUCC.

The GMOA and several health and professionals' unions are holding more protests. These will begin on Monday with union officials claiming this will involve "huge action." Several other unions, including those affiliated to the JVP, have said they will also hold protests and strikes next week.

These union fronts must explain to their members why they are calling separate and scattered one- or half-day strikes. Some unions are calling sick-note protests. Others are working-to-rule and protesting by wearing black clothing.

These unions should answer why they have restricted the demands to opposing the government's income tax hikes, and fail to raise the host of other savage social attacks being unleashed by the government on International Monetary Fund orders.

These include huge fuel and electricity cost increases, higher VAT taxes and cuts to imported medicines and other essentials. And there is more austerity to come: the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, wage and pension cuts, and increased state-sector privatisation, including public education and health to mention just a few.

The trade unions completely ignore inflation, which last year almost hit 70 percent, and is now hovering at around 50 percent drastically reducing the income of workers and the poor.

The trade unions refuse to answer these basic questions because they are hostile to any unified working-class action against the IMF's policies and are seeking to derail and suppress workers' anger and opposition. Union bureaucrats claim that President Wickremesinghe and his government can be pressurised to accept their demands. Yet Wickremesinghe has flatly rejected any change in his brutal social attacks.

Following the March 1, one-day strike, Federation of Health Professionals president Ravi Kumudesh told the press: "If we call on workers to participate in a joint struggle, everybody would come onto the streets. We've been keeping people under suppression and telling them that we cannot call these sorts of strikes."

Kumudesh's statement bluntly reveals that the trade unions deeply oppose and fear any unified mobilisation of the working class to fight the government's attacks.

In fact, the union bureaucracies, and the political parties that control these unions, directly or indirectly support the austerity measures.

While the trade unions are doing their utmost to suppress and divide workers struggles, the government is stepping up its anti-democratic measures.

In a special statement to parliament on Tuesday, President Wickremesinghe declared that the IMF's "economic reforms are crucial to move forward." He warned: "If this program is disrupted through agitations, this government will act strongly on it."

Wickremesinghe's imposition of essential service regulations against the March 1 protests and the violent police attacks on recent student protests, demonstrates his readiness crush all popular resistance.

Brothers and sisters!

The struggle to defend our democratic and social rights cannot be straitjacketed by the trade union framework. The unions' limited protests have only been called to dissipate our anger.

Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic collapse is not a national question but part of a world capitalist crisis that has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and US-NATO war against Russia.

In this situation it is increasingly clear that our demands cannot be won by pressuring the government. What is required is a united, politically conscious struggle of the working class to fight for our rights. To take forward this struggle we advance the following demands:

- * Repudiate the foreign debt
- * No to IMF austerity
- * Stop privatisation
- * Stop jobs and wage cuts
- * Defend public education and the health service
- * A 75,000-rupee minimum monthly wage, indexed to the cost of living
- * Abolish high income taxes on workers and professionals!

Sri Lankan workers' determination to fight is part of a rising movement by millions of workers internationally who are facing similar social attacks. We must unify with our international class brothers and sisters for a common fight against global capitalism.

Last April-July we were part of the mass uprising involving millions of workers and the rural masses which forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the

country and resign. But the trade unions diverted this mass movement behind the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya and JVP and their calls for capitalist interim regime. This paved the way for Wickremesinghe to come to power and the intensification of the government attacks.

Brothers and sisters!

If our struggles remain under the control of the trade unions, which are bound by a thousand threads to the capitalist system, we will certainly be betrayed. The fight for our rights must be taken into our own hands. This can only be done by building workers' action committees in every workplace, factory, plantation and in our neighbourhoods independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties.

We have already initiated this campaign in the working class and amongst rural farmers and other toilers, and are ready to give you our fullest support in building your own action committees.

We also draw your attention to the campaign initiated by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Such a Congress would provide the political means for the working class to mobilise its strength, rallying rural poor, in the fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies. The Congress will be based on delegates elected from action committees of workers and rural toilers from across the island.

The friends and allies of the Sri Lankan working class are workers around the world now coming into struggles. Sri Lankan workers action committees should join forces with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International which provides the framework for uniting workers at a global level. Our action committees fully endorse this powerful initiative, and encourage you to give it your support.

Please contact us at the following email address:
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