

Hundreds of thousands Sri Lankan workers join one-day strike against government austerity

Our reporters
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Hundreds of thousands of public and private sectors workers across Sri Lanka defied government essential service orders and walked out in a one-day strike yesterday against the Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Public health employees, including doctors and nurses, port, power, postal and telecom workers and railway locomotive operators went on strike. Private and public sector bank workers, academic and non-academic university workers and school teachers also took industrial action. Services such as hospitals, schools, universities, the postal department, telecom and the electricity board came to standstill.

Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking workers, including those in war-ravaged Jaffna in the north, participated, cutting across the communal divisions promoted by sections of the ruling elite.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated measures include Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax on workers' salaries, higher bank loan interest rates, increased electricity and other tariffs, cuts in overtime payments, state sector privatisation and the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs. Strikers demanded the reversal of all these measures and the payment of a 20,000-rupee allowance to compensate for the cost of living.

In an attempt to break the strike, Wickremesinghe on Tuesday extended essential service regulations—already banning action in the power, petroleum, port, health and transport sectors—to the railway and postal services. Postal workers' leave was also cancelled.

Ahead of the national walkout, Cabinet spokesman and Media and Transport Minister Bandula Gunawardhana told the media that branded workers' action as "treason," saying they were "sabotaging" negotiations for a \$US2.9 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) from the IMF. Anyone who violates the essential services order, he declared, "will face the full force of the law."

While the government deployed armed soldiers at railway stations and the Colombo port in readiness to break the strike, workers took industrial action in these sectors. When striking port workers' attempted to leave port premises they were blocked by soldiers and there was a tense standoff.

Yesterday's strike action powerfully demonstrated workers' determination to fight the government's austerity measures. This was not the aim of the unions that called the action—mainly the

Trade Union Coordination Centre (TUCC), a collective of dozens of unions including the Health Professionals' Federation (HPF) and Government Medical Officers Association, and the Trade Unions and Mass Organisations (TUMO).

The unions are desperately manoeuvring to keep this growing mass movement tied to the parliamentary opposition parties, such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which are also committed to the IMF's program.

In line with this agenda, the health, power and telecom workers' unions restricted all action to a sick-note campaign. Colombo Harbour workers were told by their unions to report to duty but not to work. In most cases, workers were directed to stay home and discouraged from organising any protests.

The petroleum trade unions refused to participate in the national walkout. Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* why his union was not joining the strike, Asoka Ranwala, leader of the JVP-controlled Petroleum General Employees Union, declared that other unions were involved in talks with the government and there would be no strikes.

Thousands of workers from a range of unions, however, joined yesterday's national action. Ranwala's position flows from the pro-capitalist politics of the JVP and its support for the IMF's demands.

JVP leader K.D. Lal Kantha, who is also president of the JVP-controlled National Trade Union Centre, told a meeting of unions and professional associations on Monday, that his union front "does not agree with the plans for a continuous strike" beyond March 15.

The unions, like the government itself, fear the rising working-class opposition and are doing their level best to suppress this movement.

HPF president Ravi Kumudesh openly admitted this on March 2, a day after the last one-day national strike. "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," he declared.

The Wickremesinghe government, which confronts an immense financial economic crisis, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia, is determined to unload its full burden on workers and the rural poor. While the unions insist that exerting more pressure on the government will

force it to reverse its social attacks, Wickremesinghe has repeatedly insisted that the IMF program must be implemented to the letter.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and workers action committees intervened in Wednesday strike, circulating copies of a joint action committee statement titled, “Build action committees in every workplace! Fight for a united struggle against Sri Lankan government’s austerity measures.”

The statement insisted that “the struggle to defend our democratic and social rights cannot be straitjacketed by the trade union framework.” It warned, “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.”

The statement explained the SEP’s call for a Socialist and Democratic Congress of Workers and Rural Masses was to lay the foundations for an independent political movement of the working class and the fight for workers’ and farmers’ government and a socialist and internationalist program.

Striking workers who spoke with SEP members yesterday expressed their anger over the government, and denounced the trade unions.

A group of about 200 striking teachers from several schools in Homagama, 22 kilometres from Colombo, protest for an hour from 10 a.m., at Homagama town. They carried placards with various slogans, including “Bring down unaffordable cost of living,” “Reverse unfair tax policy” and “Resolve teacher-principal salary anomalies.”

One teacher described the unbearable living conditions, including the lack of sufficient food and other essentials such as proper clothing and medicines, confronting her family and several of her students.

“The problem I have is that these [strike] actions are not being taken with any consistency. Look at this protest, which will also be stopped by the unions shortly without any idea of what we are going to do next,” she said.

Ruchira Madhava, a teacher from another major school in Homagama, who participated in a meeting of the Teacher-Student-Parent Action Committee prior to yesterday’s industrial action said: “I fully support this strike and it must be a part of a united struggle against the capitalist system. But we as workers definitely need to break from the trade unions and wage an independent struggle.

“Workers in Sri Lanka have been confronted with global finance capital. So we don’t have any chance to change this situation within the capitalist system as trade unions claim. The IMF’s policies can only be defeated as a struggle in international scale, to demolish the capitalist system,” he said.

In Bandarawela, 193 kilometres from Colombo, a postal worker explained how the unions were trying to derail the struggle.

“I heard that there would be protests in the centre of the city at 10 a.m. We went there at that time but there were none. Other news said that it was at 1 p.m. and so I went again. There were

only a few people there and I didn’t see any union leaders. Actually, the union leaders are working to demoralise us and dissolve this fight. It is true what the SEP says. This battle makes it clearer that we need to build action committees in our work places as our own organisations,” he said.

A Bank of Ceylon employee in Pelawatta, Matugama explained that the majority of workers who participated in yesterday’s strike did so in defiance of threatened disciplinary action by the bank’s Human Resources Department.

“Today’s crisis has gripped all oppressed sections of the society, so everyone wants to fight against the government’s attacks. There’s every possibility to organise a unified struggle. As you have explained, we can only wage this sort of unified struggle through building the action committees independent of the trade unions,” he said.

A non-academic worker from the University of Moratuwa criticised the unions for opposing united action: “How can we wage a united struggle with these unions? The academics’ unions have already agreed to pay the taxes. Their only demand is for reduction of the taxes. Non-academic workers are not paid enough to pay taxes but we all must demand demolition of the new tax policy and a wage according to the cost of living.”

He referred to Government Nursing Officers Union leader Saman Ratnapriya, and said that he was “the best example of how the unions betray workers.” Ratnapriya has defended the government’s austerity program.

In Jaffna striking teachers protested near the main bus terminal and were joined by Jaffna University employees. They held hand-written placards with slogans such as “Cancel all taxes,” “Do not impose schools’ electricity charges on parents,” “Provide a solution to promotion issue” and “Provide allowances to principals and teachers.”

One teacher said: “As a government worker, I cannot provide for my family because of the unprecedented price increases of everything. We need salary rises because government workers have no other way to improve their incomes. In fact, I have had to pawn my wife’s thaaly [valuable traditional jewellery worn by married Hindu women], and today, I’m even going to pawn my ring.”

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka, he added, was forcing many teachers to seek work overseas. “This is creating vacancies in teaching and many schools have shortages of teachers in science subjects to Advanced Level [university entrance] students, and also in English,” he said.



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