

Fight for fishing facilities at affordable prices! Reject communal provocations that divide Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen!

Kayts Fishermen's Action Committee in northern Sri Lanka
20 March 2023

We publish below a recent statement issued by the Kayts Fishermen's Action Committee in Sri Lanka.

As fishermen we, like every worker and the poor in Sri Lanka, are in dire straits, unable to continue our work and forced to eke out our existence on an income inadequate for living.

The most central problem is the skyrocketing cost of living together with rising prices for fishing equipment, kerosene and diesel. The decline in the harvestable fish population, which is a result of a breakdown in the ecology of the sea caused by the profit-driven sea industries, is also a big problem.

Last August, the Wickremesinghe government increased the price of kerosene overnight from 87 rupees (US24 cents) to 340 rupees per litre, a hike of more than 290 percent. Although the cost of kerosene was reduced on March 1, it was by a negligible 50 rupees. The government has also wiped-out fuel subsidies and rejected the provision of any concessions. Although the dreadful kerosene rationing system has been eased to some extent, these problems persist.

The fuel price hikes mean that most small-scale fishermen have had to limit distant fishing, forcing us to use outdated, inefficient and unsafe fishing methods. We need at least 20 litres of kerosene for just one trip in an engine-powered fishing boat.

Nets and net-making materials, as well as boat maintenance, are far too expensive. Fishing net prices are now 100,000 rupees, up from around 50,000 rupees three years ago. Big bottom trawlers often damage underwater fishing nets, causing us considerable losses.

Lots of poor fishermen who use kattumarams—a primitive catamaran-type boat made by tying together several large logs—cannot sail because they cannot afford to repair their decaying boats.

Fishermen lack cheap transportation to take their catch to market and do not have a guaranteed price for their fish but rich middlemen, merchants and large fish-exporting companies are reaping huge profits.

Declining fish prices mean a sharp decline in our income. It is now common in Eluvattivu, an island adjacent to Kayts, to see fishermen who lack modern storage methods, disposing of their unsold fish along the seashore.

The 26-year communal war waged by consecutive Colombo governments since 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is another major reason for our social misery. In the north, significant numbers of people were displaced and lost all their personal belongings at some point during this war.

In 1990, residents of the northern peninsula islands had to flee to safer places as the Sri Lankan military advanced. Those families were only able to return after 2000.

Our homes were destroyed by the war, and we are still living in semi-built houses. Like most Jaffna Peninsula residents, we too face drinking water problems because of the high-salt content of the ground water. Our roads are poor and in an underdeveloped state. All these issues have worsened our living conditions and we cannot even adequately feed our children and give them a good education.

These deepening problems are not natural but are a product of the unprecedented capitalist crisis in Sri Lanka, intensified by COVID-19 and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has led to supply chain breakdowns and is the prime reason for the fuel price increases.

The Wickremesinghe government, which is implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures in exchange for a \$2.9 billion loan, is

placing the burden of this crisis on all workers and the poor.

President Wickremesinghe has declared that he will not allow any disruption to the IMF's program. He has banned strikes and mobilised the military and police to crush protests by workers and students, arresting opponents of his government's brutal social measures.

Although we are facing unbearable poverty and social misery, the fishermen's cooperative associations, which were formed decades ago, have done nothing to defend our rights.

Most of these associations support the Tamil capitalist parties, such as the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kattchi (ITAK), Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Tamil People's Forum, and the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF). But these parties and associations all support the IMF's policies.

As well as opposing the Sri Lankan government and Tamil political parties in the island's north, we also reject the policies of their counterparts in India and its southern state of Tamil Nadu. These organisations seek to provoke communal enmity between poor fishermen on both sides of the Palk Strait which separates northern Sri Lanka and India.

Last month, Sri Lankan Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda, leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), proposed permits for Tamil Nadu-based small fishing boats in the Palk Strait. His call was made amid the Sri Lankan navy's arrest of Tamil Nadu fishermen, who were accused of "intruding into territorial waters."

On February 28, more than 40 northern fishermen's associations held a joint meeting with ITAK, the TNA and the communalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party. They issued a statement opposing this proposal and threatened to bring local fishing boats into the streets as a protest. The EPDP also has a history of similar communal provocations.

Tamil and Sinhala bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka, and the capitalist parties in India, are whipping up nationalism to divert the rising anger of workers and the poor and tie them to their respective national states, and the capitalist profit system.

In Tamil Nadu, around 91 percent of the state's 200,000 fishing families live below the poverty line and face escalating social attacks from the central government and the Tamil Nadu state administration.

Our enemies are not our class brothers in India, but the Sri Lankan and Indian ruling classes who are the obedient servants of imperialism. Our hatred must be directed

against them, not Indian fishermen and their families.

To fight for our rights, we must build action committees of fishing workers, independently of these capitalist parties and the fishermen's associations.

We have established the Kayts Fishermen's Action Committee (KFAC), not just in the north but also among our brethren in the south and are ready to help you establish your own action committees. We draw your attention to the March 10 "Joint statement of workers action committees in Sri Lanka" which calls for the building action committees in every workplace.

We raise the following demands:

? Kerosene, petrol and diesel must be made available for fishermen at previous prices!

? Provide us with fishing equipment at an affordable price!

? Cancel all the debts of fishermen and for payment of an allowance during the off season! This allowance must be paid to all fishermen!

At the same time, we emphasise that the IMF austerity attacks can only be defeated in a unified struggle of all workers and the poor in Sri Lanka and India with their international class brothers and sisters.

We support the Socialist Equality Party's call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses consisting of delegates from action committees of workers and the rural masses, including fishermen. Such a Congress would take up the struggle for a government of workers and peasants committed to a socialist program. Such a program must include the repudiation of all foreign debts and nationalisation of the big companies, plantations and the banks under workers' democratic control.

We urge you to join this struggle. You can contact us at this email address:

action.committees.sl@gmail.com



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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