

Sri Lankan Telecom workers strike against privatisation

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On Monday, over 6,000 Sri Lankan Telecom (SLT) workers held a one-day strike against privatisation. The national walkout, which also involved Tamil-speaking Telecom workers from the Northern Province, included a demonstration outside the corporation's head office in Colombo.

The privatisation of Telecom and other state-owned enterprises, and the destruction of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, are part of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government.

While police blocked Telecom workers when they attempted to go towards the presidential secretariat in Colombo, protesters marched along the roads surrounding Telecom headquarters. Workers carried hand-written placards stating, "Stop Profitable Telecom Privatization!" and "Stop Selling National Resources!" and chanted the same slogans.

The action was called by the Telecom Trade Unions Collective (TTUC) of 18 different unions. It includes the Podujana Pragathiseeli Telecom Workers Union (PPTWU), Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS), Samagi Sevaka Sangamaya (SSS), Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS), the All Ceylon Telecom Workers Union (ACTWU) and the All Telecommunication Workers Union (ATWU).

These unions are all tied to capitalist parties that are implementing or supporting the IMF measures. The PPTWU, SLNSS, SSS and JSS are controlled by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The ATWU is aligned with the Trade Union and Mass Organisation Collective (TUMOC) that includes

unions affiliated to the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party.

The Telecom workers' protest is a part of a wave of workers' struggles erupting in Sri Lanka and internationally, including in France and across Europe, against the rising cost of living and ruling-class assaults on jobs, wages and working conditions.

On March 1 and 15 more than half a million Sri Lankan workers stopped work and protested to demand the withdrawal of increased Pay As You Earn (PAYE) income taxes. They also called for a 20,000-rupee interim allowance and cuts in electricity price hikes.

The TTUC called Monday's protest not in order to organise a genuine struggle against the IMF measures but to politically contain and dissipate workers' rising anger.

The TTUC, like every union front, including the Professional Trade Union Alliance and the TUMOC, claim workers can defeat the social attacks by pressuring the government with isolated one-day strikes and sick-note campaigns. Behind their empty rhetorical denunciations of the government, these unions are all working to prevent a unified political and industrial fight by the working class against the Wickremesinghe regime.

The TTUC failed to fully participate in the March 1 strike, calling instead a lunch-hour protest. On March 15 it organised a sick-note campaign but limited participation to less than 30 percent of the Telecom workforce.

Addressing protesting workers outside Telecom's head office in Colombo, ATWU President Jagath Gurusinghe said the SLT, "is not a loss-making company but a huge profit-making company." It provides the government with "more than 25,000 million rupees annually in the form of taxes and

dividends,” he said, asking, “Should an institution like this be restructured?”

Gurusinghe’s statement makes clear that he and the other unions do not oppose the privatisation of loss-making public enterprises and fundamentally agree with privatisation and related job destruction.

The TTUC president also appealed to the government, warning that the privatisation of Telecom would “jeopardise national security.” In other words, the principal concern of the union coalition is to defend the country’s capitalist state, the very apparatus that is being mobilised to crush all working-class opposition.

Wickremesinghe has consistently assured the IMF that his government will sell all state-owned enterprises. Addressing a March 23 press conference, he declared: “We have to pay the debt. We cannot pay the debt by keeping these [public sector enterprises].” Asked by a journalist why Sri Lanka should sell off state-owned enterprises, he responded: “Why should the state engage in business? That’s not our mandate.”

The privatisation of Telecom began in the early 1990s under the “free market” economic reforms imposed by then UNP President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the father of today’s SJB leader Sajith Premadasa. As a result, over 2,000 Telecom workers jobs were destroyed between 2000 and 2006 under a so-called voluntary redundancy scheme, with vacancies filled by low-paid contract workers.

TTUC leaders cynically denounce the Wickremesinghe government over its current privatisation moves, which includes the sale of its remaining 49.05 percent of shares. But the unions over more than two decades have endorsed all previous privatisation policies and blocked workers from fighting these attacks.

The Wickremesinghe regime, which is rapidly imposing what Peter Breuer, the IMF mission chief in Sri Lanka, describes as a “brutal experiment,” is bolstering the state to crush all popular opposition.

This includes broadening its essential service bill to suppress all strike action and protests, and the introduction last month of a draconian Anti-Terrorism Bill. Under the proposed legislation, any person and any act against government policies is defined as “terrorism” and can be subjected to capital punishment or 20-year jail terms and massive fines.

The working class cannot fight state repression and

defend jobs, working conditions, social and democratic rights through the trade unions which operate as direct agents of the capitalist state and the international capital.

Workers must break from the unions and take matters into their own hands through the building of independent action committees at every workplace, factory and plantation, as well as in urban neighbourhoods and among the rural toilers. Such organisations will open the way for workers to develop a unified struggle, in alliance with their class brothers and sisters internationally, against government and big business attacks.

This is in line with the Socialist Equality Party’s fight for a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses. Such a congress would be based on democratically elected representatives of action committees from across Sri Lanka to take forward the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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