

Mass protests in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces against Wickremesinghe's Anti-Terrorism Bill

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Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northern and eastern provinces were brought to a standstill on Tuesday by a mass hartal (strike and business closure) in protest against President Ranil Wickremesinghe's new Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB).

As the WSWs has previously warned, "The Bill is so broad and vague that any anti-government political activity can be defined as terrorism." So-called terrorist acts can be punished by life imprisonment or capital punishment.

But they can include such things as "wrongfully or unlawfully compelling the Government... to do or to abstain from doing any act; unlawfully preventing any such government from functioning." That is a clear attempt to outlaw the mass opposition that exists to sweeping social cuts being implemented on behalf of international finance.

Tamils and Muslims across the provinces participated in the action which shut down schools, universities, some public sector offices, private transport services and other businesses. Courts were unable to operate due to the lack of lawyers. Only hospitals, banks and main administrative offices were open. Sri Lankan army personnel and Special Task Forces police officers were deployed to patrol the streets.

Both provinces have been under military occupation for decades, even before Colombo began its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983.

Workers were previously scheduled to hold island-wide demonstrations near their workplaces and institutions to protest the ATB. However, the trade union bureaucracies in Colombo sabotaged the planned protests, using the flimsy excuse that the government had postponed its parliamentary submission of the draconian measure.

The hartal was called by nine Tamil nationalist parties, including the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi, the Tamil People's Alliance and the Tamil People's National Front. These discredited bourgeois parties initiated the action in order to contain rising anger against the government's repressive measures and its escalating attacks on social conditions.

The Anti-Terrorism Bill is to replace the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which has been in operation since 1979 and has been used by successive Colombo governments,

particularly against the Tamil masses. While these parties called for a withdrawal of the ATB, they did not demand the repeal of the PTA. They also called for an end to new Sinhala settlements in the north.

The Tamil nationalist groups have an on-off approach towards the Wickremesinghe regime with no serious concerns about the democratic rights of workers and the poor. Their political manoeuvres are directed towards pressuring Colombo to negotiate the devolution of political power in the north and east and to secure privileges for the Tamil elite.

Colombo's 26-year war against the LTTE was the culmination of ongoing communal discrimination against the Tamil minority since independence in 1948. It was used by the Sinhala elite to weaken and divide the working class across ethnic lines.

The war, which devastated the two provinces killing, and displacing tens of thousands of people, ended with the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. According to the UN, numerous war crimes were committed by the Sri Lankan military during the conflict. At least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final weeks of the war.

There are still regular protests by Tamils in the north and east demanding that the government and the armed forces release information about the hundreds of people "disappeared" by the military.

Tuesday's hartal occurred amid rising anger over the deepening economic crisis and Colombo's ruthless implementation of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity demands.

In April-June last year, Tamil and Muslim workers and the poor united with the Sinhalese masses across ethnic lines in nationwide protests and industrial action that ousted former President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government. On March 1 and March 15, workers from the northern and eastern provinces joined nationwide strikes and protests against IMF austerity measures.

On Tuesday, Udayan, a three-wheel taxi driver, told the WSWs: "I extend my support to this hartal. We have suffered a lot over the years with the PTA and this new law will also be

used against all people.”

A public transport bus driver said: “We were forced to work by the state Transport Board authorities today but we are giving our full support to this protest. The unions in our depot, however, because they are involved with many of the political parties, do not support such protests. That is why we weren’t able to participate in this protest. Even the Tamil parties that called this protest did not plan and organise it properly.”

On April 20, the Trade Union Collective (TUC) leadership held a press conference in Colombo declaring that it would call island-wide protests outside workplaces against the ATB on April 25. The demonstrations would also demand an end to the privatisation of national resources, the abolition of the unjust income tax system and a reduction of electricity tariffs.

The TUC is a combination of several unions, including the Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU), the Ceylon Teacher Service Union, the Development Officers Union (DOU) and the All Ceylon Port Workers Union (ACPWU) controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Other front members include the All Telecom Workers Union (ATWU) and the Sri Lanka Professionals Trade Union.

When a WSWS correspondent telephoned and asked why the protest had been cancelled, JVP leader Wasantha Samarasinghe, who is also president of the ICWU, claimed no action had been planned for April 25. This is a lie. Samarasinghe publicly announced this date at the April 20 press conference.

The WSWS asked the general secretaries of the ATWU and the DOU—Jagath Gurusinghe and Chandana Suriyaarachchi respectively—the same question. They said the protests were cancelled because the government had postponed its ATB submission to parliament.

“We planned to do it with a hartal in the north and east, but we postponed the protest because the Bill was not presented to parliament. We’ll do it when it is presented,” Gurusinghe said.

Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe initially announced that the ATB would be submitted on April 25 but then postponed in response to popular opposition. It would be tabled with changes, after “everyone” has submitted proposals, he said.

The “postponement” is just another political manoeuvre, aimed at derailing mass opposition. Any changes will be cosmetic, while retaining all of the legislation’s draconian components. The purpose of the bill will remain to bolster Sri Lanka’s state apparatus to brutally crush rising popular opposition to government attacks on social and democratic rights.

Last week, President Wickremesinghe threatened university and school teachers boycotting the marking of students’ university entrance exams that he would declare education an “essential service.” This would mean harsh punishments, including jail and fines, could be imposed on any teacher taking industrial action.

Both the government and the union bureaucracies fear the rising anger of Sri Lankan workers, who, in line with workers around the world, are taking action to demand jobs, improved wages and living standards. As the Sri Lankan ruling elite is strengthening its repressive apparatus, the trade unions are doing their utmost to prevent a working class fight to defeat this anti-democratic assault.

On April 25, Samarasinghe told a press conference that the TUC would meet foreign ambassadors, UN and International Labor Organisation officials, human rights organisations, opposition parliamentary party leaders and religious figures to pressure the government to withdraw the ATB.

While the TUC and other union leaders in Sri Lanka offer limited criticisms of austerity and the ATB, they are affiliated to parties, such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the JVP, which back the IMF program and the anti-terrorism laws. If these opposition parties came to power, they would ruthlessly implement the IMF’s demands themselves.

No amount of pressure will change the crisis-ridden ruling elite, its dictatorial moves and attacks on living and social conditions.

This is why workers need to build their own action committees in every workplace, plantation and major economic centre, as well as in the rural areas. The development of these action committees will create the conditions for workers in the north and east, as well as in the south, to oppose the communal politics of the Tamil nationalists and the Sinhala elite.

Workers’ demands must include: Abolish the executive presidency! No to the ATB! Repeal all repressive laws including the emergency, essential services and PTA legislation! Release all political prisoners! No to IMF austerity!

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class and rural masses to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates of their action committees. Such a Congress will serve as a power centre of the masses in the struggle for their democratic and social rights. Fighting politically along these lines, the working class will prepare the ground for a workers’ and peasants’ government, committed to the reorganisation of society as part of the transition to international socialism.



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