

Sri Lankan workers back SEP campaign against sweeping privatisation

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party's campaign against the Sri Lankan government's plans to privatise state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is winning enthusiastic support from public and private sector workers.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government, in return for a \$US3 billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has launched a series of "reforms" of 430 of the country's SOEs. Some enterprises are to be sold to local or foreign investors, others will closed down or merged and some restructured.

These measures will slash the jobs, wages and working conditions of about 600,000 employees, driving up the costs of goods and services that they produce, drastically impacting on the vast majority of the island's population.

SEP campaigners have distributed thousands of Sinhala and Tamil-language copies of the party's May 28 statement, "Oppose Sri Lankan government's privatisation of state enterprises! Build workers' action committees to fight for jobs and wages!" which has also been widely shared in social media. The SEP is holding a public meeting at 4 p.m. on July 6, at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo to take forward this campaign.

The SEP statement explains that all opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the trade unions, as well as pseudo-left organisations such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), are providing overt or covert support to the government's reactionary privatisation agenda.

The SEP has called workers to form their own action committees in SOEs and other workplaces, factories, plantations and neighbourhoods, independent of the unions and all these parties in order to take the struggle against privatisation and other austerity measures into their own hands. The party's statement explains the need for a government of workers and peasants and the revolutionary socialist and internationalist program needed to realise this perspective.

The campaign has found growing working-class opposition to the IMF-dictated austerity measures and anger

at the treacherous role played by trade unions.

SEP campaigners have spoken with workers in the state-owned port, electricity, petroleum, telecom, water supply and drainage and insurance sectors targeted for privatisation. Many workers voiced their opposition to the IMF-dictated austerity measures and denounced the part being played by the trade unions.

Last Sunday an SEP team visited a railway workers housing district in Ratmalana, an outer suburb of Colombo. The government, which plans to transform the railway department into an independent authority, is working closely with the trade union bureaucrats to implement this major step towards privatisation.

Railway workers who spoke with the SEP team condemned the unions for supporting the government's plans. They said that the unions are promoting illusions that conversion of the railway department into an "independent authority" and privatisation are good for "hard-working" employees and declare there is no other alternative to end Sri Lanka's economic crisis.

The SEP has initiated the establishment of a Railway Workers Action Committee (RWAC) and is fighting to expand its membership and influence among railway workers.

"We all are against the conversion of the railway department into an authority but there's no leadership initiative opposing this," **T. N. S. De Silva**, an engine driver, said. He agreed to share the SEP statement and discuss it with his co-workers.

Jayantha, a railway workshop employee, who is already a RWAC supporter said: "We defeated the last attempt [in 2019] to establish the railway department as an authority but this time it is different. As explained in your leaflet, the government is going to privatise a lot of SOEs and it seems that this crisis has escalated. The railway trade unions are fully silent about this, your leaflet is the only one that has revealed this.

"I've been a member of several unions for a long time but they all are silent. Management and the trade unions, as you

say, seem to be working together to implement these plans for an authority and privatisation.”

SEP campaigners have also spoken with Telecom workers outside the company’s Colombo headquarters. The party has regularly campaigned among Telecom workers, winning significant support. Telecom workers told campaigners that management has ordered employees not to provide any information to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Union officials at Telecom are particularly hostile to the SEP’s fight for independent action committees and its exposure of the union bureaucrats’ ongoing collaboration with management. Indicating his basic agreement with the IMF’s austerity agenda, All Telecom Employees Union president Jagath Gurusinghe recently advised the government on how it could boost SOE profits.

Several Telecom workers angrily denounced the treacherous role being played by Gurusinghe and other union leaders, with several cursing them for backing the government’s policies. “I’ve participated in almost all pickets organised among Telecom workers. I thought union leaders were supposed to be doing something against privatisation,” one young Telecom worker said.

As the SEP’s May 28 statement explains, although the public education and health services have not been privatised, government funding and staffing levels have been cut and private operators increasingly allowed into these sectors.

Hemal Pradeep Kumara, a government school teacher in Bandarawela, totally opposes the cabinet decision to transform 430 state institutions into profit-making institutions. “I have watched on the TV news how almost all government ministers tell people that SOEs are loss-making institutions. It is clear that the parliament will not stop privatisation,” he said.

“If the government is going to do this then it will attack the conditions of the workers and kick out a large portion of the workforce. We now know that the IMF’s bailout loan conditions demand the elimination of half a million of jobs.

“Although these attacks have still not been implemented in public education, there’s a large number of teacher vacancies that have not been filled yet. This makes clear that institutions not included for privatisation will be faced with cuts,” he said.

A superintendent from the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), which is responsible for electricity power generation, transmission and distribution, explained how the IMF-dictated spending cuts were impacting that sector.

“In our branch, there are about 2,000 employees but there is a shortage of employees since there’s not been any recruitment for a long time. We manage our work with great difficulty because there’s shortages of spare parts and the

number of breakdowns has increased. When a transformer needs replacement due to being 10 to 15 years old we’re only able to do patch-up work to keep it operating. This can only lead to unnecessary breakdowns of systems.”

He said staffing shortages had increased following the introduction of a new scheme allowing employees to work overseas for five years without a bond on the condition that they remit \$US500 every month.

“In my branch two or three employees and engineers have recently migrated to Ireland since the government’s five-year scheme was introduced. Young engineers and skilled workers between the ages of 30 and 35 are going overseas. This means that some vacancies are filled from the next level without proper training or without skill development.

“Your article [SEP statement] is true and I agree with it but I do have one issue. How we can get the support of international organisations, if we refuse to pay debts and if we breach agreements? Previous governments have taken out loans and they must be paid. If a working-class government refuses to pay this won’t there be a crisis? Even India may not support us and international creditors could go to international courts,” he said.

SEP campaigners answered this important question, explaining the necessity for a turn to the international working class. A workers’ and peasants’ government would repudiate all foreign debt, nationalize all major industries, corporations and banks under workers’ democratic control, and would appeal to workers in South Asia and internationally for support and to do the same. A socialist revolution in Sri Lanka must be part of the struggle to end capitalism by the working class internationally.

That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the SEP is the Sri Lankan section, is building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unify the struggles of workers around the world.



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