

Over 1,000 workers protest in Colombo against Sri Lankan government's social attacks

Our reporters
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About 1,200 workers and retirees participated in a Monday lunchtime protest at Colombo Fort Railway Station on August 28 to oppose the Wickremesinghe government's attacks on pensions and new anti-democratic amendments to the country's existing labour laws.

The government is targeting the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and the Employee Trust Fund (ETF) in line with domestic debt restructuring policies ordered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Protesters chanted "Stop EPF/ETF robbery," "Do not force people to pay the debt," "Stop selling post and railway services," "No to slave labour laws," "Immediate wage rise to counteract the skyrocketing cost of living," and "Allocate sufficient funds for education and health."

Organised by the Collective of Trade Unions and Civil Society Organisations, the limited protest was called to defuse rising working-class anger over the government attacks. The alliance includes the All Telecom Employees Union (ATEU), the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU), the Ceylon Mercantile Industrial and General Workers Union, the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA) and the Workers' Struggle Centre (WSC) led by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). Several other unions and non-government organisations from the Free Trade Zones (FTZ) also participated.

These unions, which have called similar stage-managed events before, have no intention of mobilising workers in a genuine political and industrial fight against the Wickremesinghe government.

On July 25, around 2,000 workers, most of them from the private sector, protested outside Colombo Fort

Railway Station over similar demands against government austerity. That demonstration was organised by the UNITE trade union alliance, which includes the Inter-Company Employees Union (ICEU) led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU), and the FSP-led WSC.

Determined to prevent any confrontation with the government, the union bureaucracies deliberately restricted Monday's event to a lunchbreak protest, making it impossible for workers from outside Colombo to attend. If the unions had called a strike, tens of thousands of workers would have participated.

The protest was dominated by Samagi Joint Trade Union Alliance convenor Ananda Palitha. The alliance is connected to the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party. Until 2021, Palitha was a union leader in President Wickremasinghe's United National Party (UNP).

Police and military personnel blocked protesters from marching towards the Central Bank premises, citing a Fort Magistrate court order prohibiting 24 people, including FSP leader Duminda Nagamuwa, Mujibur Rahman from the SJB, and Vasudeva Nanayakkara from the Freedom People's Alliance from entering certain parts of Colombo.

Police then organised a phone call between Palitha and a Central Bank official who agreed to meet five union representatives. Palitha rejected this but then later told the crowd: "I've now spoken to a higher officer at the Central Bank after we said that we did not agree with five [union representatives] but said we needed a discussion on proposals by 20 people who

represent strong union alliances.”

The charade was yet another cynical trap organised by the unions who continue to work behind the scenes assisting the government to impose its brutal attacks.

Before dispersing demonstrators, several union leaders addressed the crowd promoting the usual falsehoods that the government could be pressured into accepting workers’ demands.

ATEU president Jagath Gurusinghe demagogically declared that if the government does not fulfill workers’ demands, “the struggle will only be ended after the government, including Ranil Wickremesinghe, are driven away.”

CBEU assistant secretary Shamal Nilange said: “If [the government] tries to touch the EPF, [we] as a working-class movement, together with the masses will organise a joint struggle.”

Given that the unions who organised Monday’s protest are committed to the IMF’s demands, these threats are completely bogus.

Socialist Equality Party members distributed hundreds of copies of a July 26 *World Socialist Web Site* titled, “Sri Lankan government’s employment bill aims to abolish workers’ basic democratic rights” and spoke with retirees, private sector workers, bank employees and postal workers.

A young National Savings Bank worker denounced the Supreme Court’s recent dismissal of two fundamental rights petitions seeking an order to invalidate the government’s attempt to reduce loans from the EPF/ETF funds. He accused Wickremesinghe of exerting influence on the court.

When WSWS reporters pointed out that the unions had not been able to pressure any concessions from the Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe governments, he replied: “Yes, of course. We all, as a country together, chased away Rajapakse but now a parasite president has come to power. All politics are bankrupt. We demanded that the will of the people be allowed, but no such thing has materialised. This is a crisis of capitalism.”

A sales worker from the Associated Battery Manufacturers in Colombo explained that he was only paid 30,000 rupees (\$US93) per month. “I’m a casual worker but came here to support the campaign. Seven or eight of us came from my work. We don’t have a union. I’ve been working there for one year and hope

to be made permanent,” he said.

A retiree spoke with WSWS reporters. He previously worked at the state-owned State Tyre Corporation and the State Fertilizer Corporation, both of which closed under a previous UNP government. He said that about 2,000 people lost their jobs at the Fertilizer Corporation, pointing out that the privatisation of state-owned enterprises has been implemented successive Sri Lankan governments.

Referring to the government cuts to EPF/ETF, he said: “This is the people’s money, it’s our country’s wealth but will now be lost under the government’s program. This is very dangerous, and we must protest this.

“Every country where the IMF intervenes has gone bankrupt. I know what has happened to many countries in the world and especially to Greece. We must keep putting on the pressure. Ranil [Wickremesinghe] wants to continue with a dictatorship but we want to drive him away.”



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