

Sri Lankan railway union calls off drivers strike, after government threats and bogus promises

W.A. Sunil**13 September 2023**

The Locomotive Operating Engineers' Union (LOEU) leadership in Sri Lanka last night called off a train drivers strike, less than 48 hours after the walkout began. LOEU secretary S.R.C.M. Senanayake told the media that the union decided to end industrial action following undisclosed "assurances" from railway authorities and ministry of public transport officials.

The strike, which began on Monday midnight involved 84 of the service's 282 train drivers whose promotions have been outstanding for about 10 years and is blocking increases in their salaries.

The LOEU leadership shut down the industrial action without any discussion with their striking members who were continuing their walkout in defiance of an anti-strike Essential Service Order imposed by Wickremesinghe on Tuesday night. Railway authorities responded to the strike by cancelling more than 120 train services. The military were deployed under the pretext of assuring rail station and commuter safety.

Yesterday, the Railway Department issued a statement declaring that unless all striking drivers reported for work they would be considered to have left the service.

In line with its repressive measures, the Wickremesinghe government launched a slander campaign against the drivers. Describing the walkout as an act of "train terrorism," public transport minister and cabinet spokesman Bandula Gunawardena declared: "As a government, we do not surrender to this type of terror."

The government and media seized on the accidental death on Tuesday of two commuters and the serious injury of another, who fell from trains, to criminalise the strike and mobilise right-wing layers against the

strikers.

While the political establishment provocatively accuse the strikers of being responsible for these unfortunate deaths, it is the government that is to blame.

Successive Sri Lankan governments, including the current regime, have cut rail service funding and wilfully ignored safety warnings by rail workers. The service is seriously undermanned, with shortages of drivers, guards and station masters. The rail lines have not been repaired for years.

One of those killed was a Moratuwa University student who fell from a Colombo-bound Kandy train. Several passengers told the media that the government should be held to account for the deaths. One student said: "It is very regretful. A valuable life was lost. The rulers of this country must be responsible for that." A woman angrily cursed the political elite, stating: "Thunder must hit them."

The Wickremesinghe government is fearful that the rail drivers' strike or any other industrial action, will rapidly produce the sort of mass uprising that last year ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. There is widespread opposition among working people to the International Monetary Fund dictated attacks on jobs, wages and living conditions.

Wickremesinghe has regularly used essential service orders to suppress workers' struggles. In March this year these laws were employed against half a million workers from both public and private sectors who took national industrial action against the government's social austerity measures. The unions, however, have refused to fight these repressive measures.

The LOEU leadership has not condemned the

government's Essential Service Order or issued any call for other railway workers to defend the strikers.

Nor has any other railway union, including the All Ceylon Railway Employees Union, which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and Sri Lanka Railway Station Masters' Union (SLRSMU), taken any action to defend the striking drivers or denounce the government repression.

SLRSMU president Sumeda Somaratne told the media that his union did not support the LOEU strike, stating even if there were outstanding promotion issues, now is "not the time" to raise these demands.

Like the government, the unions fear the rising anger of rail workers over the attacks on their wages and conditions, and are consciously working to prevent unified working-class action.

The railway workers' strike is a part of a rising movement of the Sri Lankan working class. On August 28, over 1,000 workers protested against the government attacks on pensions, while thousands of government development officers demonstrated in several towns across the island on the same day to demand a wage rise.

In line with Wickremesinghe's IMF cost-cutting and job destruction policies, 430 state-owned enterprises, including the railway department, are targeted for privatisation/restructuring.

On July 24, Wickremesinghe's cabinet approved the conversion of the Railway Department into a corporate authority, the first step towards its privatisation. The cabinet also appointed a committee "to present suitable proposals for the department's restructuring under a more efficient framework."

These proposals will severely impact on jobs, wages and working conditions of 18,000 rail workers and their families and lead to increased fares for commuters.

Like all other trade unions in Sri Lanka, the rail unions do not oppose the IMF austerity program and privatisation. Instead, the unions deliberately maintain and foster divisions by grade in the 18,000-strong railway workforce and dissipate opposition through partial and limited protests. These unions have been notorious for calling off protests or strikes, citing bogus promises by authorities to "look into issues," as the LOEU bureaucracy did last night.

On July 23, the LOEU arbitrarily called off a train

drivers strike after accepting vague promises on staffing from railway authorities. The strike was over the introduction of six new train journeys without the hiring of more drivers and rail guards to operate the services.

On Monday, workers at the Maradana railway yard in Colombo held a wildcat strike in protest against the non-payment of incentives for months. The union called off the strike after four hours, after accepting a promise from the railway general manager to "settle the issues."

Rail workers and other sections of the working class cannot defend their jobs, wages and conditions through the trade unions, which operate as industrial police for the government and international capital. These struggles—whether on immediate issues at their workplace or against government's IMF measures—bring the working class into direct conflict with the government, the state and the union apparatuses.

In order to take forward the fight for all their rights, workers must take matters into their hands through building of their own action committees independent of the union bureaucracies. They need to turn to other sections of the working class in a political and industrial struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program.



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