

Sri Lanka Telecom workers strike against privatisation and social cuts

Our reporters**29 November 2023**

Last Friday, about 5,000 Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers held a one-day national strike to oppose the privatisation of the state-owned enterprise and the associated attacks on working conditions and benefits. About 2,000 strikers travelled from all parts of the country to demonstrate outside the corporation's head office in Colombo.

The walkout reflects the rising working-class anger against the government's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated policies, which include the restructuring/privatisation of 430 (SOEs). The industrial action was called by the Telecom Trade Union Front (TTUF).

Demonstrating SLT workers carried placards that read, "Stop selling off profit-making institutes," "Oppose the sale of Telecom, cuts to employees' privileges and violations of employees' rights," "Unite against the looting of EPF-ETF [pension funds]," "Save Telecom from tyrannical rulers," and "Privatisation is fraudulent and unsuccessful."

Workers shouted slogans and marched around the SLT head office—along Duke Street, Bristol Street and then Lotus Road. Police attempted to stop workers in Duke Street, claiming that they had a court order banning the march. Dozens of police officers and riot police personnel, along with a water cannon, were mobilised to block the protest. SLT workers, however, continued their march around the corporation headquarters. Their protest lasted from 10.00 a.m. until 3.00 p.m.

While SLT workers demonstrated their courage and determination to fight the austerity measures, the trade unions are working to prevent a unified movement of the working class against the Wickremesinghe government and promoting illusions that it can be pressured to change course.

The TTUF is an alliance of 13 telecom unions, including the All Telecom Employees Union (ATEU), Sri

Lanka United Trade Union (SLUTU), Podujana Pragathiseeli Telecom Workers Union, which is affiliated to the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, and the All Ceylon Telecom Workers Union (ACTWU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

TTUF leaders addressed the protest making demagogical denunciations of the government's privatisation plans.

ATEU president Jagath Gurusinghe thundered: "Today we have initiated the first step to stop selling the profit-making telecom... Our fight will not end today, it will end when Wickremesinghe withdraws his criteria of selling [the SOEs]." He declared that Telecom, "would not be sold out" and threatened "a united struggle" with other SOE employees, but provided no details.

SLUTU president Athula Botheju said, "Ten thousand families depend on this institute," then warned, "We will extend this protest to an island-wide strike, if the government does not heed to our demands."

While these union officials have previously made similar calls, they have consistently blocked a united movement of the working class against the government's measures.

In fact, the restructuring/privatisation of the SLT began in the early 1990s with the active collaboration of the union bureaucracy and saw the SLT workforce slashed from 8,600 to 6,600 between 2000 and 2006. The workforce is now just 6,000 with many more jobs threatened under the government's privatisation plans.

In April, over 6,000 telecom workers held a one-day strike against privatisation and have also participated in joint protests with unions in other sectors such as banking, electricity, health, universities and the ports.

On July 25, around 2,000 workers, mainly from the Katunayake and Biyagama free trade zones, demonstrated against the government's proposed new labour laws and

calling for a halt to pension fund cuts. On August 28, over 1,000 workers protested in Colombo against the government attacks on jobs and working conditions.

All the unions, including those at SLT, have restricted these actions to futile appeals to the government while doing all they can to block a united struggle of the working class, and claiming that legal action will stop privatisation. The unions, and the political parties to which they are affiliated, have no fundamental opposition to the government's IMF-dictated measures.

Earlier this year Gurusinha and the TTUC filed a fundamental rights petition in the Supreme Court. The petition demanded nullification of the cabinet's decision to sell off the government's remaining 49.05 percent shareholding in SLT in May. On June 15, however, the Supreme Court refused to grant leave to proceed with the petition.

In another exposure of class character of the courts, the Appeal Court on October 3 also dismissed a petition against the termination of 292 workers of the state-owned Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE). The petition was filed by the CWE trade unions, which repeatedly told the workers that the court would grant a favourable judgment.

The Appeal Court judgment stated: "In these cases, the courts uphold the principle of non-interference with government policies, affirming the importance of deference to the executive branch in economic matters, particularly during times of crisis, as long as those policies remain within the bounds of legality and reasonableness."

In April, Gurusinha told a Telecom workers' protest that the SLT, "is not a loss-making company," and rhetorically asked, "Should an institution like this be restructured?" In other words, Gurusinha has no opposition to the privatisation/restructuring and associated job destruction of so called loss-making public enterprises.

The unions fear that any unified industrial action by the working class will escalate beyond their control into the sort of mass movement that brought down the previous Rajapakse government. Thus, they are particularly hostile to the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in these struggles and its fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program against the government's brutal attacks.

On Friday, one Telecom union leader told SEP campaigners distributing copies of a WSWS article titled "Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe's 2024 budget

deepens attack on workers and the poor," that they were disrupting the union protest.

SEP campaigners insisted on their democratic right to campaign among SLT workers and continued their work. The unions are acutely nervous that workers will adopt the SEP's perspective, disrupting their increasingly desperate efforts to keep workers trapped within their framework of appeals to the government.

Several workers talked to SEP campaigners, voicing their concerns about the union leadership.

A technician from a telecom office in Bandarawela, 200 km from Colombo, said: "We are not sure whether we can achieve our demands by protests. We could win certain rights, although not 100 percent, and sometimes, we have not won. We don't know why united struggles are not being organised by the unions."

A young technician attached to the Chilaw telecom office, 80 km from Colombo, said: "We have no confidence on whether we can stop the government's agenda, but we participated today because we must unite with the others. We feel that no matter how much we protest, our demands will not be met. I'm not even sure about my job. If workers from the other institutions united with us, then that would be effective. I don't think the current protests will bring us success."

Sri Lankan Telecom workers cannot place any trust in the trade unions which function as industrial police for the government and its IMF agenda. To defend their jobs, social conditions and basic rights, workers must form their own action committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, and take forward a unified industrial and political struggle against the Wickremesinghe government.

What is required is the building of a united political movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor, that is aimed at overthrowing the government and bourgeois rule and for the establishment a workers' and peasants' government, committed to socialist policies.



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