

Sri Lankan Telecom trade union leaders betray strike

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27 December 2023

On December 18, about 7,000 Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) employees began a sit-in strike at the company's head office in Colombo and at regional offices to oppose management's decision to axe the 2023 end-of-year bonus. The sit-in strike followed a series of half-day stoppages starting on December 14.

The Telecom Trade Union Front (TTUF), which called the industrial action, demanded a year-end bonus equal to three months basic salary. In fact, employees are entitled to an annual bonus of four months basic salary with the first installment—equal to one month salary—regularly paid in April. Telecom employees won these payments decades ago through a series of struggles.

The striking workers also called for the rectification of existing salary anomalies and demanded the government end its privatisation of the state-owned enterprise (SOE). The TTUF, however, mainly focused on bonus payments, adding its anti-privatisation call to dissipate workers' deep-going anger over the sale of the company and the associated attack on jobs, wages and working conditions.

On December 21, SLT chief executive officer Janaka R. Abeysinghe released a circular declaring that the company would not pay any end of year bonus.

Instead, it would pay 35,000 rupees as “mitigation of economic hardships” for non-executive employees with a 45,000-rupee interest-free loan paid for employees in February 2024, subject to an “improved performance” by the company. The loan would be deducted from salaries in nine months. There would be no bonus payments for executive officers—mainly engineers—and a 75,000-rupee advance payment to be deducted from salaries in nine months.

State minister for finance Shehan Semasinghe told the media on December 21 that SOE staff would only

be “eligible for bonus payments based on the institution's financial performance in 2022.” Only employees of institutions that have paid “at least 30 percent of its post-tax profits as dividends to the Consolidated Fund, the government's central treasury” in last year, he said, would receive an annual bonus.

While Telecom workers rejected SLT boss Abeysinghe's proposal and continued their industrial action, trade union officials held marathon discussions with the management to organise a sell-out deal.

At midnight last Friday, the TTUF leadership accepted the so-called hardship payment of 35,000 rupees and a loan equal to a two-month salary payment, to a maximum of 200,000 rupees for non-executive employees, deducted in 10 months. Executive officers will only receive a loan of 200,000 rupees.

The union leadership's deal with management for a paltry “hardship payment” was endorsed without any consultation with SLT workers and is an outright betrayal of the strike.

Justifying TTUF's total capitulation, Sujeewa Managala declared: “We decided to end the strike, accepting the allowance proposed and go forward [with our demands], taking into account the issues before us. We cannot bankrupt this institution by continuing the bonus issue [struggle].”

In other words, the overriding concern of the union apparatus was the profitability and financial viability of the institution not the hard-won bonus and other working conditions of SLT workers. The same message was repeated day in and day out by SLT management and echoed in the *DailyFt* which declared that the SLT strike was “a big blow for the confidence of prospective investors.”

SLT workers who spoke to the WSWs reporters denounced the trade union leadership. “It is like a

mountain was in labour, but giving birth to a mouse! Now we receive a ‘hardship payment,’ and a loan,” one employee said. “But we can obtain a loan from other sources too. We struck work and picketed. One of our demands was elimination of salary anomalies. It was not solved. They [union leaders] said this was a fight against privatisation, but nothing happened.”

Another worker said: “The real value of a monthly salary is nothing like it previously was. Our current salary, which is already being deducted for loans, is inadequate to cope with the cost of living. If we take another loan, it will also be deducted from our current salary.”

During the strike, the TTUF leadership, including its convenor Jagath Gurusinghe, claimed that industrial pressure would force Telecom management to pay the end of year bonus. After totally capitulating to management’s demands, the TTUF, is now ridiculously claiming that an increase in the initial loan payment offered by management is a “victory.”

At the same time, the TTUF leadership, by focusing exclusively on the bonus and accusing the SLT chairman, CEO and other management officials of corruption, have refused to mobilise workers to fight the government’s privatisation measures. This has opened the way for the government intensify its efforts to sell off the company, including recent high-level discussions with an Indian investor to buy the Treasury-owned share of the institution.

Whether corrupt or not, the senior executives of Telecom and other SOEs are simply implementing the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity policies of the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Cleansing these institutions of these executives will not change these pro-market big business policies.

The latest betrayal of Telecom employees and other SOE workers contain vital political lessons and demonstrate once again that workers can only go forward to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions by mobilising independently of the trade union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties. This involves the establishment of action committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers at every workplace and every working-class neighborhood.

Delegates from these committees must decide what

actions should be launched to defend their rights, taking steps to unite with co-workers in other industries and the working class internationally.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) emphasises that the working class can only defend its rights in a fight for socialist policies, including nationalisation of the banks, big companies, including the SOEs, and plantations under workers’ democratic control. All foreign debts should be repudiated.

The implementation of these policies is inseparably connected to the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, as part of struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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