

Sri Lankan trade unions end protest with more futile appeals to government

Our reporters
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The National Resources Protection Movement (NRPM), a collective of more than 40 public sector trade unions, called a lunchtime demonstration in Colombo on February 20 to protest the Wickremesinghe government's IMF-dictated measures to privatise or restructure hundreds of state owned enterprises (SOEs).

The NRPM includes unions from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and Telecom, as well as the banks, postal, insurance and railway sectors. While the trade union leadership boasted that last Tuesday's demonstration would be "huge," it only attracted about 700 employees.

Demonstrating workers carried handwritten placards stating, "Reinstate suspended CEB workers immediately!" "Defend public property for future generations!" "Stop privatisation!" "Give us our benefits, they belong to us!" "Stop closing post offices and sub-post offices" and "Oppose selling Telecom!" and chanted the same slogans.

Prior to the event, the courts issued an order banning union protesters from entering the Finance Ministry, Presidential Secretariat, Central Bank, and the President's House or inconveniencing the public or traffic.

For the trade union leadership, the protest was a cynical attempt to dissipate rising working-class anger over the government's privatisation program. They ended the protest with a series of empty threats against the Wickremesinghe government, whilst at the same time making futile appeals for it to stop the privatisation and restructuring of the SOEs.

As a part of this exercise, the union leaders absurdly brought along a mystic and his assistants who held a "devil ceremony" that involved beating drums and crushing coconuts to "curse" the government.

Most of the trade unions involved in the campaign are affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and support its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP). Leaders of these unions are attempting to exploit workers' opposition to Wickremesinghe's measures to gain support for the NPP/JVP in this year's presidential election, due before mid-October.

Addressing the protesters, Ranjan Jayalal, general secretary of the Ceylon Electricity Workers Union and a JVP leader, said, "The letters of suspension [given to 66 CEB employees] should be withdrawn and the workers must be reinstated. Suppression of trade unions must be stopped and privatisation should be halted. This government has only seven months to govern [the country]..."

Fostering the illusion that an NPP victory in the presidential election will stop privatisation and solve all other issues, he declared, "The people of this country will bring a people's victory to this country." In other words, for Jayalal and other pro-JVP trade union leaders, the protest was an NPP presidential election rally.

To claim that the election of an NPP candidate as Sri Lankan president would stop privatisation is blatant lie. The NPP, just like the government and other opposition parliamentary parties, including Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), is committed to the IMF's austerity measures.

Anupa Nandula, deputy president of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, told the gathering: "Only a small section of the [Colombo] Fort area has come here but we will take this to a national level by tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, so we say very clearly to the government please stop selling [state-owned enterprises]." Contrary to Nandula's demagogic

claims, no protests were organised in the following two days.

Chinthaka Bandara, a convener of the Postal Trade Unions Joint Front, made similar empty utterances. “If the government does not stop selling national properties, their employees will besiege the Presidential Secretariat and we will mobilise the 22 million people in this country to stop the selling,” he declared.

Jagath Gurusinghe, president of the All Telecom Employees Union, said, “The government is going to sell state properties without listening to Great Buddhist prelates” or the parliamentary “sectoral oversight committee,” which told it not to sell Telecom because it would affect “national security.”

Repeating previous empty threats, he declared, “If the government does not stop privatisation we will call an indefinite general strike.”

Like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy and the parliamentary opposition, Gurusinghe’s principal concern is not workers’ jobs and basic rights but protecting the “national security” of the capitalist state.

Wickremesinghe plans to restructure or privatise hundreds of SOEs, includes key institutions like the CEB, Insurance Corporation and Telecom as well as the remaining parts of Colombo Port, the Petroleum Corporation, Air Lanka, Water Supply and the railways. More than half a million workers will be directly impacted by the associated job destruction, wage cuts and increased workloads.

CEB’s general manager has informed parliament that the company plans to reduce its workforce by 4,000, from 22,000 to 18,000. The government plans similar job destruction and cost-cutting measures at Air Lanka, the Petroleum, Insurance and State Engineering corporations.

The Wickremesinghe government, however, confronts growing opposition among SOE workers and a determination to fight. This is powerfully indicated by the series of strikes and protests in recent months.

Last November over 5,000 Telecom workers held a one-day strike and protested outside the Colombo head-office against the selling of the institution to private investors.

On January 3rd, about 22,000 CEB workers staged a three-day sick-note campaign against privatisation with more than 10,000 workers demonstrating near the CEB head office in Colombo. Thousands of CEB workers

protested again on February 7, near the head office, demanding the reinstatement of 66 employees who had been suspended for participation in the January action.

While Jayalal demanded the reinstatement of the victimised employees at the protest, he and the rest of the trade union leadership have abandoned these workers. They are being disciplined for breaching the regulations that cancelled leave and ignoring the proclamation of the Essential Public Services Act. The refusal of the unions to organise any unified industrial action across all state sectors to fight the government and CEB management’s witch hunting has opened the way for even deeper attacks on democratic rights.

The Wickremesinghe government’s privatisation of the SOEs and other austerity measures demanded by the IMF will not be stopped by futile appeals or demagogic threats. This is designed to throw dust in workers’ eyes and block a unified movement against the government and its policies.

The Wickremesinghe government has clearly demonstrated that it will not tolerate any opposition to its program from the working class. If the NPP or SJB come to power in the scheduled elections, these parties will impose the IMF’s demands no less ruthlessly than the current regime.

To defeat IMF austerity and Wickremesinghe’s state repression, the working class needs to mobilise its own industrial and political strength in a unified general strike against the government. To prepare this struggle, workers must build democratically-elected workers’ action committees in every workplace and plantation independent from all the bourgeois parties and the trade unions.

These action committees will pave way for workers to reach out to others facing similar attacks on living and social conditions and their international class brothers and sisters. The working class and poor masses cannot defend any of their democratic and social rights under the crisis-ridden capitalist system but need to the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based a socialist and international perspective.



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