

Oppose Sri Lankan government's suspension of salary increase for 1.4 million state employees!

Collective of Action Committees (Sri Lanka)
21 October 2024

The Sri Lankan government of President Anura Kumara Disanayake has suspended an inadequate wage hike previously announced by the former Wickremesinghe government for over 1.4 million public sector employees that was scheduled to be paid from January 2025.

Cabinet minister and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Politburo member Vijitha Herath told the media on October 15 that Wickremesinghe's promised wage increase had to be revisited.

The previous decision, Herath claimed, was taken without any consultation with the finance ministry and did not take into account the country's financial situation. "We have to go through the financial situation and will have to take a decision," he said.

In plain language, the new JVP/National People's Power (NPP) government has decided to abandon the already agreed salary rise for workers who are desperately trying to cope with the massive increases in the cost of living over the past four years.

The Collective of Action Committees (CAC) in Sri Lanka calls on the working class to oppose the JVP/NPP government's decision and prepare to take action to fight this attack. The CAC is an alliance of action committees of workers in the plantations, garment sector, railways, ports, health, education and among migrants.

A clear warning must be made. Herath's declaration that state sector employees should not expect a wage hike until the "financial situation" improves is directly in line with the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Sri Lankan big business. And this attack will not be confined to public sector employees, but also imposed on private sector workers.

While in office, the Wickremesinghe regime ruthlessly implemented the IMF's policies, slashing state funds for welfare, imposing punishing taxes and moving towards the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. Wickremesinghe mobilised the police and military and invoked draconian essential public services laws to stop workers taking industrial action for higher wages and in defence of jobs.

The newly elected President Disanayake, who has come to power with the blessing of key sections of the Sri Lankan capitalist class, is making clear that he will continue Wickremesinghe's reactionary agenda.

Attempting to justify his government's refusal to pay the agreed pay hike, Herath said the promise was made "close to the [presidential] election" by the previous cabinet, implying that Wickremesinghe was seeking to garner votes. "We [JVP/NPP] never said anything like this," Herath stated.

While Wickremesinghe was desperately attempting to win votes, he was forced to announce his inadequate salary hike after one million state employees walked out in a two-day sick leave strike on July 8–9. Their demand for higher monthly salaries and improved conditions was the most recent in a series of strikes and protests since early 2023.

The July 8–9 action, which included development officers, surveyors, village and state administrative office employees, postal workers, farm inspectors and health workers, brought most day-to-day activities at state offices and schools to a halt and even involved retired public sector employees.

According to the August 14 statement issued by the Wickremesinghe regime, basic salaries for state sector workers would be increased by between 24 and 50 percent, starting on January 2025. This meant that the minimum monthly gross salary would be 55,000 rupees (\$US187), the living expense allowance 25,000 rupees, and the yearly salary increment doubled.

But even if the proposed salary increase is paid, this would not compensate workers for the massive erosion of real wages through the enormous increases in the cost of living that have occurred since 2022.

Inflation in 2022 saw workers' real wages decline by 27 percent, and in 2023 by 22 percent. This was the backdrop to the mass uprising that erupted against the Rajapakse regime in April–July 2022.

According to Sri Lanka's Central Bank, a family of four in 2022 needed 88,704 rupees per month to live, and 103,283 rupees in 2023.

What was the response of the trade union leadership,

including the JVP unions, to this massive social assault?

They called two limited one-day general strikes to retain control of the seething anger of the working class, and then diverted this into calls by the JVP/NPP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) for an interim administration.

Although the mass protests forced Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country, the unions blocked any independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program, paving the way for the elevation of US-stooge Wickremesinghe into the presidency by the discredited parliament.

Revealing its true colours, the JVP/NPP opposed all calls for increases in wages during this year's presidential election campaign.

Addressing a gathering of industrialists and businessmen on September 4, Dissanayake denounced Wickremesinghe for promising a public sector salary increase, and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa for making similar pledges.

Dissanayake insisted that his party would not take any "unserious" actions and could be relied on to implement the IMF's program, "without doing anything to destabilise the economy."

It is now one week since Herath declared that the Dissanayake regime would not pay the promised salary increase. The response of the trade union leadership is a deathly silence. This is not an accident.

The State and Provincial Public Service Unions Collective, the Postal Trade Unions Joint Front, the Health Workers Alliance, the Ceylon Teachers Union and some JVP-controlled unions called the July 8–9 strikes this year, but refused to mobilise against the IMF austerity. In fact, the union bureaucracies worked to limit, scatter and isolate these actions, confining them to futile appeals to the Wickremesinghe regime.

Addressing a public meeting just after this year's two-day public sector strike, K.D. Lal Kantha, who heads the JVP's National Trade Union Centre, called for a halt to all industrial action, declaring it harmful to Dissanayake's presidential bid. Having adhered to Kantha's call, the trade unions are now silently expressing their support for the JVP/NPP government's pro-IMF austerity policies.

Why must workers wait until the "financial situation" facing this capitalist government improves?

This means a further intensification of the IMF-dictated assault on real wages, even more brutal taxes, and the fire sale privatisation of state-owned corporations and social services, on which millions of workers depend, along with the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs.

We call upon all state sector workers to fight the Dissanayake regime's vicious social assault, which is directed, not just against public sector employees, but the entire working class and the rural masses. Private sector workers must join this fight.

In waging this struggle, workers cannot rely on the trade

unions but must organise themselves independently of these corrupt, pro-capitalist apparatuses.

This requires the formation of democratically elected action committees in every workplace, in the plantations, and every other major working-class centre, which exclude all representatives of the trade union apparatus. We say:

* Workers must demand "Hands off the approved salary hike!" Pay increases that fully compensate for the past erosion of real wages paid to all workers. All wages indexed to the cost of living!

* No to IMF austerity! Repudiate all foreign loans!

* Oppose privatisation! All state-owned enterprises facing privatisation must be placed under the democratic control of workers!

* Reject all racial and communal divisions! For the international unity of the working class!

The CAC supports the program of the Socialist Equality Party to meet all the social requirements of workers and the poor. It includes:

* Seizure of the huge wealth accumulated through the exploitation of the working class by the wealthy elites.

* Placing the banks, big companies and plantations under the democratic control of the working class.

This struggle must be organised through a unified movement of the working class and the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates elected from workers' action committees and similar committees among the rural poor.

In every country, workers are coming into struggle to defend their social conditions and democratic rights, placing them on a collision course with the imperialist powers who are driving the planet towards a catastrophic nuclear third world war.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate these struggles internationally against the assault of global capitalism and its drive to war and social inequality. Action committees in Sri Lanka must join and build the IWA-RFC to wage this international struggle.

We urge you to contact us by telephone or via WhatsApp at +94773562327 to discuss with us how to organise an action committee at your workplace.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)