

An appeal to Sri Lankan garment workers: How to fight tariff war attacks on jobs and wages

Garment Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka)
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Already facing low wages and dire conditions, garment workers now face brutal attacks from the tariff war instigated by US President Donald Trump.

The Garment Workers Action Committee (GWAC) in Sri Lanka appeals to apparel workers across the country and internationally to urgently prepare to fight to defend their jobs, wages, working conditions and basic rights.

Trump's global tariff war once again shows that this is an international struggle. We call on all our class brothers and sisters in the apparel producing industries across South and East Asian countries, and who now face the same attack, to organise unified action to defend their rights. Such action must be extended to workers in the giant US and European retailers which purchase apparel from client countries.

Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar face massive tariffs—44, 49, 48, 46 and 44 percent respectively. Trump's 90-day tariff increase “pause” will not alleviate, let alone solve, the crisis impacting on the industries in these countries. The US-provoked trade war measures are engulfing the world, pushing it into recession and towards a global conflagration.

The US is Sri Lanka's single largest market for apparel, earning \$1.5 billion or 40 percent of the country's total apparel exports last year. The *PublicFinance.lk* think tank estimates that the new tariff rates will see a 20 percent fall in exports to America and an annual loss of \$300 million. The collapse of the apparel sector will result in factory closures and massive job losses, as well as the slashing of wages and working conditions.

Currently, more than 350,000 workers are directly employed in Sri Lanka's apparel industry, with about 600,000 indirect workers. Most garment workers are paid a paltry average monthly wage of around 35,000 rupees (\$US116). Forced to achieve difficult production targets, they are compelled to work overtime to earn more. Apparel companies are increasingly using low-wage contracting companies to slash production costs.

Trump's tariff war is not limited to the apparel industry but will have a drastic impact on all countries exporting to the US

and precipitate a global trade crisis.

Shocked by the US tariff hikes, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has called for “national unity.” President Dissanayake convened an All-Party Conference (APC) on April 11.

All the opposition parliamentary parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, United National Party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna and Tamil Arasu Kachchi—participated in the conference and agreed to back the government.

Dissanayake has informed the Trump administration of his readiness to accommodate its demands. Big-business lobby groups—the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and the Joint Apparel Association Forum—are calling on the Dissanayake government to grant more tax cuts and other concessions. Desperate to support Sri Lankan and international investors, Colombo will move to impose the full burden of the crisis on the backs of the working class. These attacks will come on top of the International Monetary Fund's savage austerity program now being continued by the JVP/NPP government.

Treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracies

While workers need to prepare to fight these escalating attacks, the trade union bureaucracies are politically disarming workers and getting ready to back the government and employer attacks.

Anton Marcus, the general secretary of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU), has called on parliament to establish a committee with company and trade union representatives to deal with the situation. Marcus has suggested that Sri Lanka could “win” Trump's heart by exempting tariffs for the largest imports from the US and reducing tariffs on other imports.

On April 4, S.P. Nathan, the general secretary of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), sent a written appeal to the Trump administration calling on it to “reverse to the previous tariff

rate" because thousands of Sri Lankan workers would lose their jobs.

This pathetic appeal to the fascistic regime in Washington, which is every day expelling immigrants, jailing opponents of the Gaza genocide, gutting social services, health and science, and destroying tens of thousands of public sector jobs, will fall on deaf ears.

As in the past, the Sri Lankan trade union bureaucracies, including the FTZGSEU, CMU, the JVP-controlled Inter-Company Workers Union (ICWU) and others, have responded to every crisis by deepening their collaboration with Colombo governments and the big companies.

During the 2008 global financial crisis and associated world recession, the trade union leaders joined the government's National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) and supported factory closures and mass layoffs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapakse formed a COVID-19 "tripartite task-force" consisting of employers, labour officials and trade union leaders. Its task was to impose company proposals for lay-offs, wage cuts and keeping workers labouring in unsafe conditions. At least 150,000 lost their jobs following the closure of 40 factories and another 73,000 due to the shutdown of small plants.

During Sri Lanka's economic collapse in 2022, which triggered mass struggles involving millions of workers, the trade union apparatus did nothing to fight the lay-offs of thousands of workers. Likewise, the trade unions supported the incoming President Ranil Wickremesinghe government's IMF policies and are now assisting the Dissanayake regime to impose IMF austerity.

What should workers do?

Earlier this month, Vogue Tex garment workers held a powerful sit-in strike on April 8 and 9 when the company suddenly announced, citing the US tariff increase, that it would not pay a regular annual holiday bonus to its employees. While the determined industrial action by Vogue Tex workers made clear their willingness to fight, apparel workers can only go forward if they adopt a new strategy.

The Garment Workers Action Committee warns apparel workers that they must not allow the union bureaucracy to impose government and big-business demands as they have in the past.

Workers must take the fight to defend their wages and working conditions into their own hands. This is why the Garment Workers Action Committee calls on apparel workers to form action committees, democratically elected by themselves, in all factories and their neighbourhoods. The

union bureaucracy and representatives of the parliamentary parties, which defend the capitalist system, cannot have any place in these independent committees.

These working-class committees can discuss and decide on what actions, including protests, strikes and factory occupations, should be taken to counter employers and the government attacks. They should coordinate with workers elsewhere, throughout private industry and the state sector.

Apparel workers must demand:

- No to job cuts, the slashing of wages and working conditions! No to increased workloads.

- Oppose all closures, prepare for industrial action, including factory occupation. Reject the meagre compensation decided by employers and union bureaucrats. Demand compensation on full pay until new jobs are provided.

- Workers should be paid wage increases to compensate for the erosion of real wages. All wages must be indexed to the cost of living.

- Fully paid medical leave. Decent housing and health facilities.

Like the fight against IMF austerity, the struggle against the devastating consequences of the US government's tariff war is international. Workers are not responsible for the global economic crisis and the escalating tariff war.

President Dissanayake has responded to the tariff crisis calling on "everyone to prepare to face it as a nation." But why should workers sacrifice their rights for the sake of big business? Working people cannot defend their jobs, wages, democratic rights and their future within the profit system.

Sri Lankan apparel workers must unite with their international class brothers and sisters. This can only be achieved by joining and building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and File Committees, a democratic organisation of international working-class struggle founded on the initiative of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We directly appeal to apparel workers in Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Laos and other South and East Asian countries to join us in this struggle. We are ready to discuss this with you and assist in the formation of workers' action committees.

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