

Sri Lankan government imposes “essential services” laws

Saman Gunadasa
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Facing escalating protests by doctors and school development officers, the Sri Lankan government has issued a draconian decree declaring electricity supply, fuel, hospitals and 15 other sectors “essential.” The decree effectively criminalises all strikes and other forms of industrial action by tens of thousands of employees in these sectors.

Issued on January 28, the extraordinary gazette notification invokes the notorious Essential Public Services Act No. 61 of 1979—legislation with a blood-soaked history of crushing working-class resistance.

Elected to power in a landslide election in mid-November 2024, after falsely pledging to improve living standards, halt austerity and defend democratic rights, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government now confronts thousands of workers up in arms over its failure to fulfil these promises.

On January 23, around 20,000 doctor members of the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) held a 48-hour protest strike over the government’s refusal to grant their demands for wage revisions, allowances and improved working conditions. The walkout, which occurred amid a deepening crisis in the public health system, also involves ongoing industrial bans, including the withholding of prescriptions for medicines from private pharmacies.

On January 26, a group of school development officers began staging a “fast unto death” protest outside Colombo’s Presidential Secretariat because the government continues to reject their demands. Around 16,000 school development officers, who have been performing teaching duties in state schools but are not paid teachers’ wages, have been demanding integration into the formal teaching service for years.

At the same time, there is rising anger among thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers, and the prospect of future industrial action, over far-reaching structural reforms and privatisation measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Similar concerns are reflected in growing unrest among other public sector workers facing similar IMF attacks—measures that will drastically impact the rural poor, farmers and other oppressed masses.

This is the backdrop to Dissanayake’s draconian essential services order. Under the Essential Public Services Act,

workers who refuse to work, or participate in industrial action, can be dismissed without due process, stripped of pension rights, fined and imprisoned. The law allows the deployment of police and armed forces to enforce compliance.

Sri Lanka’s essential services law was introduced by President Jayawardene’s United National Party (UNP) government in 1977 to crush workers’ resistance to his administration’s pro-investor, free-market agenda. The draconian law has been invoked around 100 times by successive Sri Lankan administrations since then, and for the same purpose.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was undemocratically installed after the mass uprising that brought down the Rajapakse government in 2022, utilised the law 32 times against workers in just 26 months—the most intensive use of the measure for a comparable period. The JVP/NPP, having already imposed it four times, is following in his footsteps.

The JVP/NPP government imposed the Essential Services order on November 29, 2025, immediately following Cyclone Ditwah. The disaster claimed over 640 lives, displaced 230,000 people, and affected more than 1.4 million across 25 districts.

Framed as a response to Ditwah’s devastation, the decision represented far more than disaster management. It was a clear political signal that the JVP/NPP government will ruthlessly impose the IMF’s austerity measures, crushing all resistance from workers facing wage cuts, job losses, the destruction of public services, and any mass anger over the government’s inadequate response to the disaster.

This agenda was reaffirmed by IMF mission chief Evan Papageorgiou during a recent visit. He told the media that the Sri Lankan government would “safeguard the gains that were achieved on fiscal and debt sustainability,” making clear that the disaster would not alter this commitment. The IMF insisted that cyclone reconstruction costs had to be absorbed within the existing program framework, meaning even further pressure on wages, services and public sector employment.

IMF officials lauded the Dissanayake government for its commitment to “fiscal discipline” and “governance reforms”—euphemisms for spending cuts, privatisation, intensified labour exploitation and the curtailment of democratic rights to maintain international debt servicing and

increase corporate profits.

Within days of taking office in late 2024, President Dissanayake's JVP/NPP government rapidly abandoned its election promises and began attacking workers' struggles.

On December 2, 2024, Sri Lankan police violently broke up a demonstration of school development officers, arresting activists and initiating witch hunts against protesters. Hundreds of police, backed by water cannons, clearly demonstrated the government's readiness to crush all dissent by public-sector workers opposing austerity.

In March 2025, police arrested 27 student activists, including Madushan Chandrajith, convener of the Inter-University Students' Federation, during a protest outside the Ministry of Health demanding fair recruitment processes. Police brutally attacked demonstrators. The Maligakanda Magistrate's Court then issued a sweeping order prohibiting these students from holding future actions in key areas, including Hospital Square and the Ministry of Health—effectively criminalising the right to protest.

In August 2025, the JVP/NPP government deployed the military and police to break an indefinite national strike by around 17,000 postal workers, by clearing the Central Mail Exchange and acting as strike-breakers to move mail. Senior ministers issued ultimatums and threats of mass sackings against the striking postal workers.

In September 2025, the government declared electricity an "essential service," banning all industrial action after CEB workers struck in protest over restructuring issues. This anti-democratic attack was a continuation of the same measures used by previous governments, including the Wickremesinghe government's suspension of 62 CEB workers for protesting in 2024.

These repressive measures are in line with the JVP/NPP government's Protection of the State from Terrorism Act (PSAT), a new "anti-terrorism" bill to replace the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). While Dissanayake promised during the 2024 elections to abolish the PTA, his government quickly used it to arrest and detain two Muslim youth because they opposed Israel's genocidal war in Gaza.

Rather than abolish the PTA, the PSAT broadens the definition of terrorism to encompass strikes, protests and dissent against government policies, with all such actions characterised as potential "terrorist" acts.

Confronted with this anti-democratic onslaught, Sri Lanka's trade union bureaucracy has refused to organise any sustained campaign against the Essential Services orders, the new anti-terrorism legislation, or the government's accelerating attacks on workers' fundamental rights.

While JVP/NPP-affiliated trade unions maintain a deathly silence and actively block all anti-government action by their members, unions tied to opposition parliamentary parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna—have called only limited actions

aimed at defusing genuine working-class opposition.

The Frontline Socialist Party, which falsely postures as a left-wing opponent of the government, collaborates with this union apparatus, whitewashing its betrayals and channelling workers into dead-end negotiations and appeals to parliament.

Workers cannot trust any of these capitalist parties and their affiliated trade unions. To fight the government's anti-democratic measures and its IMF-dictated program, workers need to establish independent, democratically controlled rank-and-file action committees across all sectors—in hospitals, power stations, schools, offices, plantations and workplaces. Doctors, electricity workers, education workers, state employees, plantation workers, rural masses and students all face the same attack on jobs, wages, public services and democratic rights.

Sri Lankan workers are not alone. Internationally, workers are fighting similar attacks from a common enemy—global capitalism and its state institutions. In the US, nurses and other healthcare workers are striking against unsafe staffing levels, low pay and the privatisation of healthcare. In Europe, Asia and Latin America, workers are fighting job cuts, rising living costs and austerity imposed by governments acting on behalf of banks and corporations.

The fight against IMF austerity in Sri Lanka can only succeed as part of a broader struggle of the international working class. By linking up with their class brothers and sisters across borders, sharing experiences and coordinating struggles through rank-and-file organisations, workers can transform isolated national battles into a powerful global movement. The unity of workers internationally is the decisive force needed to defeat repression, overturn austerity and open the way for a socialist society based on social need, not profit.



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