Tens of thousands of public sector workers in Sri Lanka protest austerity budget

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan public sector workers joined a nationwide "Day of Protest" on November 23 against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's 2027 Budget, despite efforts by union leaders to prevent a united struggle.

The government's third austerity budget follows International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands for spending cuts and pro-business restructuring. It offered no substantial general wage increase to offset workers' declining purchasing power, only small increases in selected allowances.

In the last week, public sector engineers, government executive officers, irrigation technical assistants, disaster relief officers and more than 10,000 non-academic employees in state universities held protests. There will be further protests in the coming weeks, including a one-day strike and protest campaign across state universities today, as announced by Dhammika S. Priyantha, Co-Chairman of the University Trade Union Joint Committee. Several other public sector unions, including teachers' and principals' unions, are preparing strike action for November 30 over unresolved salary demands.

The November 23 demonstrations demanded a Rs. 25,000 (US$75) interim monthly allowance for all state employees. Organised by the Joint Centre for Trade Union Coordination, it involved unions covering development and management services officers, healthcare workers, technical and welfare officers, teachers and principals.

Trade unions in the public education sector did not call their members out for workplace demonstrations or stoppages. Instead, the Principals' Grade Officers' Association and the teachers' unions called on teachers and principals to report to schools dressed in black to protest the budget.

Groups of workers at hundreds of government offices and hospitals held lunchtime protests outside their workplaces.

In Colombo, nearly 600 Colombo Municipal Council employees, carrying a banner demanding a "Rs. 25,000 Interim Allowance," marched from the Municipal Council to the clock tower near Lipton Circus. They then staged a protest lasting approximately 30 minutes. About 200 healthcare workers also held a lunchtime protest in front of Colombo General Hospital.

The protest in central Kandy was held in front of George E. de Silva Park and was attended by development officers, retired teachers and principals, and employees of the postal, railway and other government departments. Some 500 workers participated.

Around 1,000 public sector employees protested at several locations across the Northern Province. Demonstrations took place at divisional secretariats in the Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya, areas that were ravaged by the country's decades-long civil war.

Alongside the Rs. 25,000 allowance, protesters demanded six-monthly salary adjustments, lower living costs, the removal of taxes on essential goods, an end to repression, the repeal of anti-democratic laws and action on medicine shortages in public hospitals.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality members distributed the SEP's statement calling for a united struggle against the budget, independent workers' action committees and socialist policies.

Speaking to SEP members, Dilshan, a nurse at the Colombo National Hospital, expressed his anger and frustration with the JVP/NPP government. During the election campaign in late 2024, the trade unions fostered illusions in the JVP/NPP. Recalling this experience, Dilshan said: "Actually, we were deceived during the elections. I was told that this was a socialist government. If anybody had such illusions, the record of the JVP/NPP government over the past two years and this budget have shattered them."

Dilshan said the budget offered him only around Rs. 6,000 extra (US$18), with Rs. 3,000 payable in June 2027 and the balance in 2028. Rising living costs would erode these payments before workers received them, he said.

He also acknowledged that the government's promises to provide tax concessions for education and healthcare and

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increase funding to these sectors had not been fulfilled.

Working in the National Hospital's demanding cardiology department, Dilshan described equipment and staff shortages that increased workloads and made taking leave difficult. Many healthcare workers were leaving their jobs or migrating, he said, although moving into another occupation was difficult.

Dilshan agreed with SEP and IYSSE members that workers could not secure their demands by pressuring a government that is implementing the IMF's austerity program. "It is clear that the government is filling the treasury by imposing massive taxes on workers and cutting down wages to repay IMF loan instalments and interest in 2028. This is unfair," Dilshan said.

He also expressed his disillusionment with the union bureaucracy, saying: "I have problems with the trade union leadership. However, I believe we need leadership and a group of people standing behind us. It was with that in mind that I participated in this protest. Otherwise, I have no confidence in them."

Government employee T. Vijayachandran in Jaffna criticised the budget for offering only "a few trivial concessions" and abandoning the government's previous promises. He said the unions had failed to unite workers in a broader struggle because the leaders "regulate things this way to keep the workers under their control." He condemned the JVP-affiliated union leaders for betraying workers' struggles after the party came to power.

Responding to the SEP's proposal to build independent workers' action committees, he expressed support, stressing that such organisations must be democratic and independent and must not "bow to pressure from the government."

In the southern city of Matara, a postal worker said his colleagues supported the protests, although their union leaders had not called them out. Some postal employees worked on the land or drove three-wheeler taxis after work to meet household expenses, he explained.

"The government is tied to the IMF program and is implementing what the IMF dictates. Workers must fight against this," he said. "While the government refuses to increase our wages adequately, it provides concessions to the capitalists without limit. I fully agree that we must unite with other workers to fight against these policies."

Trade union leaders are claiming that they can still secure a wage increase because the 2027 budget is still at the committee stage. The third and final reading of the budget is scheduled for December 14. While blocking a united struggle against the budget, union leaders are urging workers to wait until November 30, claiming that the government still has time to reconsider its decision. This is despite repeated warnings by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and his ministers that the government will not grant any wage increases.

The illusions that were built up by the unions in the JVP/NPP are being shattered, and union leaders are seeking to deflect responsibility. Provincial Management Officers' Association President Prasanna Diyunuge, who led the protest at Colombo Town Hall, complained to the media: "Did the labour movement and trade union movement matter to this government only as a means of coming to power? Now that it has come to power, the question arises as to whether the government has forgotten the labour movement and the trade union movement."

Referring to President Dissanayake as "comrade Anura," the union leader urged the government to "correct the error" by granting the Rs. 25,000 allowance, to avoid further industrial action after November 30.

The government responded to the protest movement by issuing threats. A leaflet issued by the JVP's National Trade Union Centre warned workers not to engage in sabotage, as the government had presented a budget that "leads the economy and society towards a transformative era." Deputy Minister of Labour Mahinda Jayasinghe denounced the protests, claiming that they "cannot be justified" and that "we are in no way prepared to bow to protests of this nature."

The SEP denounces the government's threats and attacks on the working class. We call on workers to take the fight into their own hands by building action committees in every workplace, independent of the treacherous trade union bureaucracy.

These committees must oppose the unions' efforts to limit and sell out the developing struggles. They must fight to mobilise the entire working class, along with the rural toilers, and forge links with workers in India and other countries, in a powerful movement against austerity, and for the reorganization of society along socialist lines.

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