

Sri Lankan public sector workers take national industrial action over pay

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Around one million Sri Lankan public sector employees held a national two-day sick leave strike on July 8 and 9 in opposition to government spending cuts and to demand a higher monthly allowance. They were joined by about 250,000 public school teachers on July 9. The action, which was called by over 200 unions, brought most day-to-day activities at state offices and schools to a halt.

Those involved included development officers, surveyors, village officers, state administrative office workers and Samurthi Bank employees, educators, postal workers, farm inspectors and some health workers. Some retired public employees also participated in the protests.

In a separate development, nearly 1,000 railway station masters and line controllers walked out on strike on Tuesday to demand long overdue promotions. Yesterday, the Wickremesinghe government, having recently invoked the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) to ban all transport strikes, declared that the railway strikers had “vacated their posts.” The Sri Lanka Railways Station Masters’ Union (SLRSMU) responded by declaring that its strike would continue indefinitely.

Public Administration Ministry employees, most of them organised by the State and Provincial Public Service Unions Collective (SPPSUC), held protests in Colombo and at main cities in other provinces on Monday and Tuesday. The SPPSUC is demanding a promotion scheme and a 25,000-rupee (\$US82) monthly allowance, in line with allowances already paid to public sector executives.

More than 20,000 postal workers from over 4,700 post offices also participated in the two-day protest. They are demanding the filling of all vacant positions, permanency for temporary employees, and promotions. They are in several trade unions organised by the Postal Trade Unions Joint Front (PTUJF).

Educators who joined the campaign on Tuesday are demanding payment of a long-outstanding salary increase and condemning the brutal police attack on protesting

teachers in Colombo on June 26. Health Trade Unions Alliance members also held a four-hour strike on Tuesday at several hospitals to demand an availability and transport allowance.

Despite the efforts of the trade union leaderships to limit these struggles, this week’s industrial action reveals the groundswell of working-class opposition to the Wickremesinghe government’s austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These measures include slashing the fiscal deficit, increased revenue for the state treasury and the privatisation or commercialisation of state enterprises in order to repay foreign debts and boost big-business profits.

Many trade unions have held limited protests over the past year, calling for pay rises and promoting the illusion that these could be won by pressuring the government. They were silent, however, after President Wickremesinghe announced a 10,000-rupee monthly allowance from the budget for this year, a completely inadequate amount to compensate for the sharp declines in real wages since 2020.

With workers’ anger rising, the union bureaucracies were compelled to call this week’s action, with some trade union officials calling it a “general strike” and again insisting this would pressure the government. However, apart from scattered token protests of several hundred in different cities, they did not organise any unified action and urged strikers to stay at home. This was to avoid any political confrontation with the government, which is adamant that it will not grant any pay rises or allowances.

During a protest on Monday in Colombo, SPPSUC co-convenor Chandana Sooriyarachchi told the media that the government should not delay or refuse its demands. If it failed to do so, he said, “this sick-leave action will be extended” to unify all workers in further “joint actions.” The government should not “underestimate the power of working people,” he demagogically declared.

Ceylon Teachers Union General Secretary Joseph Stalin said the government had to allocate “sufficient money for teachers from the budget,” and threatened, “If not, we will fight together.”

The trade union bureaucracies, in line with the capitalist parties to which they are affiliated, are fully committed to the IMF’s draconian policies. Their denunciations of the president and his government are simply hot air, designed to hoodwink their members.

On Tuesday, Wickremesinghe and his top officials told the media that in order to grant a 20,000-rupee monthly allowance to state employees, the Treasury would have to collect an additional 275 billion rupees. This would require increasing the value added tax (VAT) by 2 to 3 percent on top of the current 18 percent rate, they said.

Addressing a public meeting, Wickremesinghe insisted: “We cannot do that. To do that we will have to raise VAT again [and] the people cannot bear it.”

At the same time, the cabinet approved his proposal to grant a salary increment to all employees who worked during the two-day industrial action. They would also be given a “commendation certificate” to be used as a merit when service promotions are considered. This crude attempt to pit workers against each other will have little impact, because the numbers attending work during the two-day action were negligible.

Yesterday, Transport and Highways Minister Bandula Gunawardena told parliament that this week’s strikes were aimed at launching “another Aragalaya [struggle]” to “destabilise the country” and accused the striking station masters and line controllers of engaging in “trade union terrorism.” “Another struggle” was a pointed reference to the April–May 2022 mass uprising against former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

This movement forced Rajapakse to resign but was betrayed by the trade union leaderships, supported by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, which subordinated workers to the parliamentary opposition parties that were campaigning for the establishment of a capitalist interim government.

While the trade unions warn the government “not to underestimate the power of the working class,” they, like their masters, the capitalist ruling class, are fearful of a mass working-class uprising and are doing their utmost to block and demobilise such a movement.

Wickremesinghe’s invocation of the EPSA against station masters, and similar threats against protesting teachers, are a sharp warning to the working class.

This week’s nationwide industrial action makes clear that the working class needs a unified industrial and political program to defeat the government’s austerity measures and its repressive actions. It also demonstrates that such a struggle can only go forward if workers take matters into their hands. They cannot rely on trade union leadership.

This means forming independent action committees in every workplace, the plantations and in poor urban and rural communities, with no place for pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies in these democratically-controlled committees.

The Socialist Equality Party has called on the working class to prepare a political general strike against the Wickremesinghe government and its austerity policies. There is no possibility of defending the social and democratic rights of the working class and rural masses within the profit system.

Instead of the government’s lying claims that VAT or other brutal revenue-raising methods are needed to pay for higher salaries, what is required is the repudiation of foreign debts and the seizure of the huge wealth accumulated by the wealthy elites. These steps can only be taken by placing the banks, big companies and the plantations under the democratic control of the working class.

Such a fight can be organised through the struggle to build a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses, based on delegates elected from workers’ action committees. This will pave the way for a unified movement to bring down the Wickremesinghe regime and the capitalist system, and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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