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Millions join Sri Lankan general strike to demand ouster of Rajapakse government

Millions of workers throughout Sri Lanka participated in a one-day general strike yesterday demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. The strike, which was almost total, involved workers from government and state-owned corporations and private sector companies.



A section of general strike demonstration in Colombo on April 28 [WSWS Media]

Government sector workers from the ports, electricity, petroleum, water, health, railway and education, as well as state administration, provincial government and local council employees, joined the industrial action. Only a handful of employees—members of the ruling party—reported for work at the port and petroleum corporations.

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A majority of state and private bank workers walked out as did hundreds of thousands of estate workers from the island's central plantation districts. Plantation workers, who are among the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class, have been hard hit by the economic crisis.

Workers from many of the country's free trade zones (FTZ), including at Katunayake, Wathupitiwela and Koggala, also participated. Most FTZ workers are young.

Although limited by the trade unions to just one day, yesterday's massive strike was a powerful and significant intervention by the working class into Sri Lanka's deepening political and social crisis.

The debt-ridden Sri Lankan economy has been seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, leading to sharp and ongoing price increases and shortages of food, fuel and other essentials.

The nationwide anti-government protests and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people and yesterday's general strike are part of a widening surge of working class struggles internationally in opposition to government attempts to impose cost-cutting and austerity measures.

The agitation erupted over the rampant inflation, shortages of essentials, including foodstuffs, medicines and fuel, and extended daily electricity cuts.

Workers and youth across the island began demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government at mass demonstrations in early April. These continued throughout the month, including an ongoing three-week occupation of Galle Face Green in Central Colombo.

Sri Lanka's official inflation rate is now 18.7 percent and food inflation is 30.2 percent. Last week, John Hopkins University Professor Steve Hanke estimated, however, that the country's annualised real inflation rate was a staggering 119 percent, the third highest in the world.

Yesterday, striking workers protested in every major city, poor rural peasants joined some of the demonstrations, and there was support from small traders who closed their shops in many towns.



Health workers mobilised outside Kandy Hospital on 28 April [WSWS Media]

In Colombo, over 5,000 harbour, petroleum, railway, electricity and bank workers, as well as teachers, demonstrated outside Fort Railway Station and marched to Galle Face Green.

A worker from Katunayake told WSWS reporters that she and her fellow employees decided to join the strike because their unions had been silent. “The people of this country are suffering from the price hikes in essentials. We have tolerated so much but cannot survive on our current salaries. When people from all over the country started demonstrating we thought that we could not just wait and see,” she said.

A teacher who joined the Colombo protest said: “The cost of living is unbearable. Rice, dhal, sugar, petrol and cooking gas, everything has gone up. We cannot manage our family expenses on the salaries we’re now earning. A recent small salary increase has been washed away by inflation. Social inequality has widened in the country with a big portion of the national wealth heaped up by a handful of big capitalists.”

While millions of workers participated in yesterday’s general strike, the Rajapakse government is preparing even greater social attacks on working people. On April 12, it defaulted on \$52 billion in foreign loans, and last week a government team headed by

Finance Minister Ali Sabry held four days of talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to secure a bailout loan.

The IMF is demanding Colombo increase taxes, drastically cut state expenditure, and unleash an extensive privatisation program. These measures will see even greater increases in the price of essentials and the brutal slashing of jobs, wages, pensions and the remaining welfare programs.

The mounting anti-government protests and working class struggles have precipitated a political crisis for the Rajapakse government. It now has a fragile wafer-thin majority, after some partners of the ruling coalition withdrew.

Notwithstanding his weakened position, President Rajapakse is biding his time and preparing to take on the working class, conscious that the IMF-dictated assault on the working masses cannot be implemented peacefully.

On April 19, police opened fire on protesters in Rambukkana, killing one person and injuring two dozen others. The demonstrators were demanding fuel at a previous price. Last week, President Rajapakse ordered the mobilisation of the military in all 25 districts across Sri Lanka to “maintain law and order.”

In the face of these reactionary preparations, the trade unions are doing their utmost to politically disarm workers.

A leaflet issued by the collective of 100 unions and supporting organisations that called yesterday’s walkout declared: “As working people we must pressure to bring about a government with popular power that could fulfil the mass expectations and remove these failed rulers.”

But who should the workers “pressure,” who will bring about the next government and how will it “fulfil” mass expectations? None of these obvious questions are answered.

In fact, these unions are appealing to the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the other main capitalist parties, for an interim regime and elections to divert the mass working class opposition into parliamentary channels and the defence of capitalist rule.

These parties, and any interim government they might form, have no alternative to the IMF austerity policies, having demonstrated this in the past. They will be just as ruthless as the Rajapakse regime.



Koggala Free Trade Zone workers protest on 28 April [WSWS Media]

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party powerfully intervened in many areas during yesterday's strike, distributing thousands of SEP statements outlining the party's socialist program of action for the working class.

Calling for the abolition of the autocratic executive presidency and the repeal of all repressive laws, the statement said:

Against the IMF's austerity program that the Rajapakse government and opposition parties are all intent on carrying forward, we present a socialist program of action that puts the basic social needs of working people ahead of the profits of big business.

- * Take the production and distribution of all essential goods and other resources critical for public lives under the democratic control of the workers! Nationalise banks, large corporations, large estates and other major economic centres under workers' control!

- * Repudiate all foreign loans! Reject the austerity demands of the IMF and the World Bank representing international banks and financial institutions!

- * Seize the enormous wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

- * Abolish all the debt of the poor and extremely poor peasants and small business holders! Reinststate all the subsidies including fertiliser subsidies for the peasantry!

* Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions! Index wages to the cost of living!

The statement called on workers to take matters into their hands by building action committees, independent of all the capitalist political parties and the trade unions. These democratically controlled committees will provide the organisational foundations to rally the rural poor and fight for a workers' and peasants' government that will begin the socialist reorganisation of society.

In Colombo, SEP members joined the strikers' demonstration, distributing over 2,500 SEP statements and discussing the party's socialist program.

In the Central Plantation District, plantation workers action committees and SEP members organised two successful demonstrations. Strike action in Up-Cot, like other major plantation areas, shut down all production.



Glenugie Estate workers marching to Maskeliya town on April 28 [WSWS Media]

The Alton Estate Workers Action Committee organised a protest march in Up-Cot town with about 200 workers and youth participating. In the Maskeliya area, over 750 workers join a demonstration organised by the Glenugie Workers Action Committee and the SEP.

In Chilaw, Kapila Fernando, convenor of the Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee and a member of the SEP, addressed hundreds of striking teachers and government employees. Fernando explained the SEP's program of action to fight the Rajapakse government attacks and the capitalist class as a whole.

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