

# Oppose Sri Lankan government's attack on port workers struggle

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)  
20 July 2006

Colombo port workers in Sri Lanka face crucial political issues as their struggle for higher wages enters its second week. Port Minister Mangala Samaraweera has declared he will not discuss with striking trade unions, while the government's Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) has obtained a district court order against the unions involved.

Working people everywhere should oppose this attack on democratic rights by Mahinda Rajapakse's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and rally to defend the port workers and their campaign.

About 14,000 Colombo port workers started a work-to-rule (go slow) campaign on July 12 demanding a Rs. 3,000 (\$US30) rise in their basic salary, an increase to Rs.3.50 in the cost of living index and a minimum annual salary increment of Rs.200. They refused, from the outset, the meagre wage increase offered by the government, which was far short of their demands. The workers joined a massive lunch-hour demonstration in Colombo on July 17 to press for their demands.

At a press conference yesterday, Samaraweera declared he would discuss with the trade unions only after the workers returned to duty. Issuing a not-too-subtle threat, he went on to state that he was "inviting all employees who do not want to sabotage the SLPA to return to work." The SLPA workers would not receive the wage increase they have demanded, he insisted, because they were "among highest paid in the country". A "few unions, following an agenda of their own, are trying to blackmail the government to give in to unreasonable demands," he said.

The district court issued the enjoin order on Wednesday, at the request of the SLPA, on the spurious ground that the workers were only engaged in industrial action because of pressure and intimidation from the trade unions. In reality, the trade unions called the action as a means of defusing widespread discontent among the SLPA workers towards the Rajapakse government's attacks on living standards.

Since the start of the campaign, the unions have been intent on engineering a way of ending it by seeking a compromise with the president. In response to the court

order, and the port worker bashing campaign unleashed by the government, big business and the media over the past week, they have simply complained that they haven't yet received a copy of the order! While workers are continuing with the go-slow campaign, the trade union leaders have yet to inform their members where they stand. Instead of waging a fight throughout the working class against this attack on democratic rights, the unions are preparing to scuttle the struggle.

The demand for higher wages has been growing among port workers for several months. The official cost of living index has jumped from 4,304 in January this year to 4,730 in June—a rise of 426 points. In every sector, working people are finding it increasingly difficult to survive.

Last March and April, strikes by hundreds of thousands of government employees demanding pay hikes were blocked by the union bureaucracies. The lowest paid private sector workers, including plantation workers, have also shown their readiness to fight, but have been similarly thwarted by the unions.

After vacillating for months, the port trade unions were forced, under pressure from their members, to call a limited go-slow campaign. The front of 17 trade unions includes the Progressive Freedom Employees Union, affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the leading party in the ruling UPFA; the National Employees Union, connected to the opposition United National Party (UNP); and the All Ceylon General Ports Employees Union, run by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

In order to avoid any direct confrontation with the government, the union leaders evaded calling an all-out strike. They refused to appeal to the Trincomalee and Galle port workers to join the campaign, declaring that their numbers were too small. Nevertheless, even the go-slow campaign has deepened the Rajapakse government's political and economic crisis, thus pitting the workers into a direct conflict with it.

The SLPA authorities are complaining that, because of the industrial action, the port is losing over Rs. 100 million a

day. In addition, they have to pay \$US500 to the various shipping lines for each hour their operations are delayed, according to international marine regulations. The Sri Lanka Shippers Councils has released a statement saying that the number of containers handled per hour per gantry crane has dropped from 20 to between 3 and 5.

While big business is pushing the government to act against the go-slow campaign, citing their losses, the media has revealed its class hatred for the port workers, accusing them of enjoying “fat salaries”. This is yet another lie. On average, port workers are paid about Rs.25,000 (\$US250) per month, while some might get as much as Rs 30,000 (\$US300), with allowances such as overtime. This is a pittance, particularly in light of the sharply rising cost of living and the government’s slashing of free education and health care.

Acting on directives from the IMF and World Bank, the Rajapakse government is intent on stopping any wage increases and cutting subsidies, such as fuel, in order to reduce the budget deficit, and allowing prices to be determined by “market forces”. It is thus extremely concerned that the port workers’ struggle could become a catalyst for both public and private sector workers to join the fight for pay rises.

In order to scuttle the campaign, Rajapakse has extended a helping hand to the trade union leaders by appointing a three-member committee to handle it. The committee comprises top state bureaucrats—Tilak Collure, secretary to the ministry of ports and shipping, Mahinda Mahihahewa, secretary to the ministry of labor and Saliya Wickramasuriya, the SLPA chairman.

As Minister Samaraweera’s statements have now confirmed, the committee will not meet the workers’ demands. Rajapakse carried out a similar ploy earlier this year, when the government faced the public sector workers’ wage campaign. In the name of sorting out the issue, he appointed a commission which then acted, in conjunction with the unions, to suppress the workers’ struggle.

The line-up against the port workers has included the various chauvinist groups, who, along with the media, have resorted to accusing the port workers of supporting terrorism.

*The Island*, notorious for its Sinhala racist stance, wrote in a recent editorial that “the real threat of the Port being crippled emanates not so much from terrorists and their frogmen, but from the disruptive elements in the garb of trade unionists.”

Buddhist monk Elle Gunawansa, a leader of the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), the Sinhala chauvinist front in which the JVP is the leading organisation, appeared on the government-owned ITN television channel on the evening

of July 16 to attack the port workers’ struggle as “sabotage” by “anti-national forces” and to call for an end to the workers’ action.

The government-owned *Daily News* quoted “a spokesman for an importers’ association” saying “This is really what the terrorists, too, want to happen. They have also tried to attack the port to cripple the economy. Now our own people are doing the same.”

These comments must sound a warning. They indicate that preparations are being made by the government, in alliance with its communal allies and the media, for a vicious assault, not only against the port workers, but against the working class as a whole. They also demonstrate that the anti-Tamil communalism and renewed war provocations being fostered by these forces, along with the military, are aimed, not only against the Tamil masses, but at destroying the rights and conditions of ordinary working people throughout Sri Lanka.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* urge port workers to answer this vicious campaign, and the attempts of the trade unions to divide them along narrow sectoral and communal lines, by turning to other workers, in both the public and private sectors, and developing a common struggle for higher wages, the defence of living standards and working conditions, democratic rights, decent welfare services and against the privatisation of public sector enterprises. We urge the building of strike committees to organise and develop this struggle. Most importantly, we urge all workers to oppose the renewal of civil war, demand the withdrawal of troops from the North and East, and forge the unity of Sinhala and Tamil speaking workers in the struggle to build an independent socialist movement, as the only way to confront the assault of the Rajapakse government and the ruling elite.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>