

WSWS speaks to Sri Lankan workers about general strike

By our correspondents
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During Thursday's general strike in Sri Lanka, WSWS teams spoke to workers in the capital Colombo, the city of Kandy, the towns of Hatton and Bandarawela in the central plantation districts and Jaffna town on the northern Jaffna peninsula. The extent of the walkout was difficult to gauge as most of the unions—affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP)—held no meetings, marches or pickets.

Workers felt intimidated by the government's mobilisation of the security forces and denunciations of the strike for undermining its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many were angry that the unions had made little effort to organise the strike or guarantee that strikers would not face reprisals from employers. The more far-sighted drew a connection between the limited campaign of the unions and the fact that the JVP and UNP supported the war.

All those interviewed spoke of the increasingly desperate situation they confront as a result of rapidly increasing prices. The official inflation rate has hit more than 30 percent, with fuel, transport and basic foods items skyrocketing. While international price rises have certainly contributed, the war and its associated huge increases in military spending are a major factor in the soaring inflation. Increases in the defence budget have also resulted in cutbacks to subsidies, welfare and other essential services.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members distributed thousands of copies of the statement "Sri Lanka: A socialist program to fight for wages and conditions". The SEP statement explained that without a political program to oppose the war the working class would be unable to defend even its most basic rights and conditions. It warned that the present union leadership would inevitably cave in to government threats and pressure precisely because of the JVP's support for the government's communal war.

We publish below a selection of interviews. All names have been withheld to protect the workers from reprisals.

The highest turnout for the strike was among plantation workers. This appears paradoxical as most estate workers are Tamil-speaking and deeply hostile to the JVP's Sinhala chauvinist politics and its support for the war. As those

interviewed make clear, however, workers stopped work not because of but despite the JVP and in opposition to their own pro-government unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF).

A worker from a tea estate in Hatton explained that he defied his own union's call not to join the strike. "A CWC official came to our estate and told us not to participate in the strike. CWC vice president Muthu Sivalingam, who is a deputy minister in the government, also appealed to us, through the government TV channel, not to strike. But workers here, members of every union, did not heed their call.

"We want a good salary increase. With the rising cost of living, even 500 rupees [about \$US5] per day would not be enough to buy our food. Yet, we get only 200 rupees per day, plus an incentive allowance of 90 rupees. How can we live on this meagre wage? But our union leaders joined the government, received ministerial posts and are enjoying a luxury lifestyle. They are working to defend this government, not us.

"We don't have any faith in the JVP either. They are always playing a double game. They are in the forefront of supporting the government's racist war. [President Mahinda] Rajapakse spends a lot of money on this war. The war must be stopped and then the government could use that money for our salary increment."

A worker from the Aislaby plantations in Bandarawela said workers there joined the strike because they could not live on their low wages. She explained that she had previously worked in a chocolate factory, but now worked on the estate because she could not leave her children.

"The work here is very difficult and yet we are treated with contempt, just because we are working in an estate. Earlier, we thought the JVP was good, but they supported the government in re-starting the war. We are all suffering because of the war, which will never end."

"Both sides [the government and the LTTE] are calculating the death toll of the other side. Will the same parties who consider these lives to be worthless, solve the problems of the masses?" she asked.

In other areas, workers also expressed no faith in the union leadership. Over the past two years, the JVP-led unions have

repeatedly capitulated to government demands to put the war first and called off major strikes for pay rises and to defend jobs.

In the city of Kandy, a worker from the government-owned Yatinuwara transport board depot said: “Workers here were ready to strike without hesitation but some pro-government unions disrupted the strike and Sri Lanka Independent Workers Union leaders threatened to sabotage the stoppage. We are facing severe salary problems—we are not paid on time or only in installments—and the cost of living allowance recently approved by the government is not being paid.

“The JVP union not only did nothing to organise the strike but also tried to introduce certain demands for their own political advantage. It was obvious that they were hesitating or preparing to drop the demand for higher salaries.”

At the University of Moratuwa in Colombo, less than 10 non-academic staff out of 650 participated in the strike due to the lack of confidence in the JVP. One university worker explained he was unhappy because the strike was unsuccessful. He said the main reason for the rising cost of living was the war. “The government is using the war against us,” he commented.

He said that he had voted in the 2005 presidential election for Rajapakse because of his promise to pursue an “honourable peace”. “I thought that it would be better than a UNP peace. But instead Rajapakse launched war after assuming office with the help of the JVP. That is why workers have to act independently without believing any political party. We cannot believe the union leaders or the JVP. They have all betrayed us in the past.”

A public school teacher in Colombo said he was embarrassed because he felt he could not participate in the strike, even though a large pay increase was needed. He accused union leaders of taking no initiative to mobilise teachers. “No person or organisation came to meet us in order to organise this strike. When the government launched a vicious campaign against the strike, there was no one to take the responsibility for the risk that we had to face. Actually, we feared being sacked from our jobs.”

A railway workshop employee at Ratmalana near Colombo expressed similar sentiments. “My salary is only about 19,500 rupees a month, which is even less after I pay various loans. I do not earn enough for our family. We need to go on strike, but the unions organised nothing at our workplace.” He said that workers in his workshop had no confidence in the JVP. “Last August we had a struggle to reduce our working day to eight hours, but the JVP betrayed it.”

He opposed the government’s war, saying: “Many civilians live in that area [in the northern war zone]. Not all are LTTE members. Many civilians are being injured and killed by the government’s bombs.”

A Colombo National Hospital attendant explained why she joined the strike: “Everything has gone up to an unbearable

level. Every month I have to borrow around 5,000 rupees. At the end of each month, I pay the retail shop and then borrow again for the next month.

“I voted for Mahinda Rajapakse, hoping he would do something for us. However, now I have realised it was an illusion. Every passing day, things are getting worse. Now I see there is no difference between the UNP and this government. When we ask for a small salary increase, they say they cannot give it because of the war. Yet the politicians and high officials are increasing their salaries many-fold.

“We cannot bear the present cost of living for the war. It must be ended. If the government fails to give our demands, we should go for a big struggle with the support of all the workers. I have no idea of the political issues, but after what you have said, I think the workers have to pay their attention to them. I will read your leaflet.”

The northern town of Jaffna in the midst of the renewed war is under virtual military occupation. The Ceylon Tamil Teachers Union and pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance supported the strike but no teachers participated. Only a small number of non-medical hospital workers stopped work. As the war has been extended to the north, the military has intensified the deployment of troops in the town and its suburbs.

A teacher from Jaffna Hindu School explained: “The strike is justified, but we can’t engage in strikes in the north. That is the situation—we live under military oppression. If we did not report to work, we would be treated in a different manner. We don’t have basic democratic rights. We don’t have any confidence in the trade unions to protect us—the trade union leaders look after their own interests.”

Another teacher added: “We are living in dire conditions. People who once ate three meals a day have now reduced to two. And the standard of meals has dropped—a lot of people eat only bread [without curry]. We also wear very low quality clothing. Even if the government increased the salaries, the prices would still rise, severely affecting those people who are poor than us. The government should stop the war. We need peace.”

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