

Sri Lankan unions betray power workers' strike

By W.A Sunil
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Sri Lanka's Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA), which covers Ceylon Electricity Board workers, shut down an eight-day strike by some 22,000 workers after concluding an agreement with the government on September 20.

The JTUA is a combination of 30 unions, which includes the Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (CEEU), the Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS) and the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS). The CEEU is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), while the SLNSS and the JSS are affiliated to the ruling coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP).

The JTUA's main demand was for rectification of salary anomalies. It also called for risk allowances for technical workers and an end to anti-union repression and the exploitation of national vocational trainees. Other demands included the resolution of financial fraud related to the CEB employees' provident fund and the imposition of retrogressive measures against top CEB officials and engineers already awarded large salary increases.

Under the new agreement, workers will only receive a 4 percent pay rise and payment of an outstanding 6 percent allowance already agreed earlier this year. The deal makes no reference to permanent jobs for casual workers or other strike demands. Payment of the increased allowance will be made in two installments with another committee appointed in three months' time to decide future increases.

The JTUA has also allowed management to penalise workers by cutting their annual leave by the number of days they were on strike. Significantly, it has accepted the agreement as "final and conclusive" and pledged "not to engage in trade union actions" on outstanding

demands.

Power and renewable energy ministry secretary, B.M.S. Batagoda, gloated about the agreement, telling the *Sunday Times* that the unions "gained nothing" from the eight-day walkout. The deal, he added, was similar to proposals presented to unions before the strike.

The UNP-SLFP government was acutely concerned that the power workers' strike would encourage industrial action by other sections of the working class angry over escalating attacks on living and social conditions and their democratic rights.

The government responded to the strike by cancelling leave and sending suspension letters to casual, contract and subsidiary workers. Police were dispatched to workplaces and security forces made ready to deploy against the strikers. In July, the government mobilised the army to crush the petroleum workers' strike.

While the JTUA leadership falsely declared that the strike would continue until its demands were granted, it openly surrendered to the government's threats.

JTUA convener and CEEU general secretary Ranjan Jayalal ludicrously claimed that the deal was "a win-win situation." Jayalal is a key leader of the trade union wing of the JVP, which is desperately attempting to boost its declining support base by posturing as opponents of the government.

Mechanical Workers Union president Kosala Abesinghe attempted to cover up the extent of the JTUA betrayal, telling WSWs reporters: "We didn't ask for a pound of flesh" and "softened our stand on the demands" because the unions were concerned about the strike's impact on "consumers."

Dozens of CEB workers have angrily voiced their disgust with the unions and their leadership on union Facebook pages. A worker from the CEB's consumer

section in Chilaw said: “The result of the strike is not as successful as we first thought. Many workers are disappointed and by striking for eight days we lost our leave.

“The trade unions can’t do anything more for the workers, and they are against any unified struggle of the working class. It’s correct that the working class needs an independent political program.”

Another worker commented on the Ceylon Electricity General Employees Union’s Facebook page: “Did we strike this long just to get approval for a pay scale we already have? The only thing we’ve got is a 4 percent increase. They wasted the days we struck. We shouldn’t be involved in this sort of struggle in the future.”

In a desperate attempt to deflect workers’ anger, the unions are claiming that the return to work was “temporary” and that if the government does not fulfill its promises, the struggle will resume. This claim is bogus, as the unions have already agreed not to take further industrial action over previous claims.

From the outset, the unions worked to derail CEB workers, covering up the political issues behind the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions and subordinating them to “anti-corruption” propaganda and retrogressive demands against senior managers and engineers. The unions peddle the lie that the rights of CEB and other workers can be defended by eliminating financial mismanagement and corruption.

The attack on CEB workers is part of the government’s broader economic program, including restructuring and privatisation of state- and semi-state-owned enterprises, as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

IMF representatives visited Sri Lanka in March, demanding that the government speed up these measures, including the restructuring of the CEB, Petroleum Corporation, Water Supply Board and Air Port and Aviation Service Authority.

The heads of these institutions signed a “statement of corporate intent” pledging to “improve productivity,” enhance employee and operational “efficiency” and introduce “institutional structural changes.” In other words, they have agreed to increase workloads, cut jobs, increase service charges and limit wage demands. Having used the army against striking petroleum workers, the government has again demonstrated in the

CEB strike that it will do whatever is necessary to impose its austerity agenda.

The political lesson of the CEB struggle is that workers need new organisations—independent of the trade unions, which are tied to the capitalist state—to fight for their interests on the basis of a socialist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon workers to build rank-and-file action committees at work places, plantations and in working-class neighbourhoods.

Above all, workers need to adopt a new political program. Only by fighting for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement the socialist policies as part of international struggle for socialism, can the working class defend its jobs, social conditions and basic democratic rights. The SEP is the only party advancing this perspective.

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