

Sri Lankan fishermen demonstrate to demand fuel price reductions

By Naveen Dewage
30 August 2018

Hundreds of multi-day trawler owners and their workers protested at Galle Face in central Colombo last week to demand the Sri Lankan government reduce recent rises in the cost of diesel fuel. In May the government increased diesel from 95 rupees per litre to 110 rupees, and in July lifted it again to 118 rupees (about 73 US cents).

The increases have crippled the small-scale fishing industry and drastically affected the living conditions of fishermen, farmers and other small producers and traders who depend on diesel and kerosene.

Demonstrators gathered at Galle Face on August 23 carrying placards with slogans that read: “We don’t need subsidies but reduced fuel prices,” “Don’t destroy the multi-day fishing industry” and “Rulers! Don’t pick pockets by hiking up fuel prices.”

The protest was called by the All Island Multi-day Vessel Owners’ Association (MVOA). The organisers had planned to present a letter containing their demands to Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena in the hope that this would pressure the government to reverse the fuel increases.

The government, however, responded by deploying police who blocked the rally, claiming it would “inconvenience the public.” A senior officer threatened to “take action” against the demonstrators telling them that they could only present their demands to the presidential secretariat.

Under pressure from angry demonstrators, MVOA president Sujith Fernando rejected the police threats, declaring that the fishermen had been deceived twice this year and they needed to do something that government would “feel.”

The fishermen rallied at Galle Face and then attempted to march toward the presidential secretariat only to be confronted by police armed with batons and

water cannons who brought in steel barricades to block the march. An anti-riot police squad was also on stand-by.

Police said they would only allow 11 MVOA representatives to meet with presidential secretariat officials. While angry fishermen said they would not move without a resolution to their concerns, MVOA officials directed the protesters to withdraw.

Sri Lanka has almost 4,650 multi-day vessels which supply deep-sea tuna to large seafood companies for export to Europe, America and other foreign markets. Around 30,000 families are dependent on the industry, which is a major source of foreign exchange for Sri Lanka.

Last week’s demonstration is part of a wave of protests this year by Sri Lankan fishermen against fuel increases, the rising cost of fishing equipment and other necessary items.

In May, tens of thousands of small-boat fishermen protested in coastal areas across the country over a 130 percent increase in the price of kerosene. Fishermen demanded the government reduce kerosene to its previous level of 44 rupees per litre. In the face of this mass opposition the government temporarily cut the kerosene price to 70 rupees per litre and promised subsidies but refused to lower diesel prices. Predictably, Colombo’s subsidy promises have not materialised.

The government’s fuel increases are in line with the social austerity and privatisation measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under the new arrangement Sri Lankan petrol, diesel and kerosene prices are directly determined by the world market. The IMF did not release the fourth instalment of a bailout loan until Colombo implemented the new “price formula.”

Multi-day fishing vessels, which spend several days at sea, usually consume between 10,000 and 15,000 litres of diesel which, together with food, bait, ice and other expenses, cost between 1.6 million to 2 million rupees each trip.

The income from each fishing harvest is then divided—half for the vessel owner and the other half equally between the workers. Losses are allocated in the same way amongst the workers as a debt and deducted from the income of the next fishing expedition.

Last week's hour-long discussion between MVOA representatives and a presidential secretariat official was futile. MVOA President Fernando told the media that the official would look into steps taken by the fisheries ministry and had suggested a possible future discussion with President Sirisena. Protesting fishermen denounced the empty promises.

Like the trade unions, MVOA claims that a meeting with Sirisena will resolve the disastrous situation facing workers in the fishing industry are bogus. The government functions as a direct tool of the IMF in ruthlessly imposing its austerity measures. The MVOA's claims that the economic problems facing small boat owners were solved by the temporary reduction in kerosene prices are also false.

Sunil, a fishing worker from Mahawewa, near Chilaw told the WSWS reporters that he had recently sold his fishing vessel.

"I'm a professional fisherman. Our last fishing expedition yielded an income of just 2.1 million rupees against an expenditure of 1.9 million rupees. When the workers' share, half of the profit, was divided among the six workers, each one only received 16,000 rupees. Forty-three days hard work were required for this amount, which is scarcely enough to eke out a living for two weeks let alone settle our previous debts."

Fishing vessel owners, he explained, face a real crisis. "One of my friends, a vessel owner, told me that he had to pawn all of his jewellery for the first time in his life last month to settle a 1.5 million rupee debt."

Rogus, a fisherman from Thoduwawa near Chilaw told the WSWS: "Every day the price of essentials increases which makes life hard. The cost of preparing fishing nets has also gone up by thousands of rupees. No lasting solution to our problems can be found from the government in power."

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