

Sri Lankan railway unions cave in to government's strike ban

By Saman Gunadasa
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The Railway Trade Union Alliance (RTUA), a front of several rail unions in Sri Lanka, bowed to the government's draconian essential services order and abandoned an earlier decision to take strike action every Friday to back their demands.

At a press conference on Friday, the RTUA appealed to the government to revoke the essential services order. Failing that, it would file cases against the government with the International Labor Organisation (ILO) and Human Rights Council in Geneva—a futile move designed to cover over their betrayal.

On Thursday, President Maithripala Sirisena imposed the essential services order to suppress strike action under emergency laws at the request of Transport Minister Arjuna Ranatunga. However, some 3,000 union members, including railway engine drivers, regulators, operators, station masters, and oversight managers defied the ban and took strike action. Most of the 340 daily train services were halted due to the strike.

The RTUA called the strike, demanding a salary increase of 320 rupees (\$US1.80) to rectify an anomaly compared to the salary of lower grade workers.

The railway employees had taken industrial action on June 21-22 after negotiations with Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera collapsed when he flatly rejected any pay rise. After the two-day strike, the union front wound industrial action back to a token stoppage every Friday. Now the unions have abandoned any campaign.

According to the essential service order, any worker defying the ban could “after summary trial before a Magistrate, be liable to rigorous imprisonment for a term not less than two years and not exceeding five years.” In addition, “all property, movable or immovable, of the person convicted, shall be forfeited

to the Republic.”

The railway authorities have complained to the police that employees have been striking “illegally” and called for legal action against them. Police told the media that an investigation was underway following an official complaint lodged by Railways General Manager Dilantha Fernando.

The rail strike is the first industrial strike action by government employees since the imposition of emergency rule. President Sirisena seized on the terrorist bombings on April 21, targeting three churches and three luxury hotels, to justify the draconian measures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in its May 2 statement (“Sri Lankan SEP denounces political parties’ support for President Sirisena’s police state measures”) condemned the “far-reaching, anti-democratic measures” and warned that the main objective was to suppress the struggles of the working class. Government and opposition parties have joined with openly racist organisations and the media to whip up a vicious anti-Muslim campaign to divide the working class.

Even though infighting within the government continues between the President and the Prime Minister, there are no differences over the imposition of the essential service order. The ruling class as a whole is fearful that the railway workers' struggle could encourage other sections of workers to fight for their social rights.

In calling off strike action, the RTUA sent a pathetic appeal to the President, Prime Minister, and the ministers of trade union relations and transport to convince them that the essential services order went against ILO regulations. Several other unions, including the Ceylon Bank Employees Union and the

Government Medical Officers Association, took part in the RTUA press conference to back its appeal to the government.

All of this is to block a fight to defend democratic rights. The railway union front has held dozens of protests since 2006 during the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse over the same demand. Last August rail employees supported an indefinite strike, but when the government imposed an essential services order, the unions abandoned any action.

Finance Minister Samaraweera has rejected any pay increase saying if it were granted other workers would make similar demands. “[I]f the government agrees to everything they [the unions] say there will be an even bigger problem of salary anomalies of workers in other fields,” he said.

The cash-strapped Colombo government is implementing the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce the budget deficit by 2020 by slashing welfare programs and price subsidies. The IMF is also insisting on the privatization and commercialisation of state enterprises. The Railway Department, which has been designated as a loss-making enterprise, is earmarked for commercialisation in preparation for its sale.

The RTUA’s betrayal has once again demonstrated that workers cannot defend their democratic rights and fight for jobs and decent working conditions through the trade unions. The unions which represent employees by grades, pit one section of workers against another even in the same trade, which only divides workers and plays into the hands of employers.

When the April 21 terror attack took place, the trade unions shut down protests and strikes, including by teachers scheduled for May. Such is the anger among teachers, however, that the unions have been compelled to call strike action for the middle of this month.

The government’s decision to impose the essential service order is another warning to all workers that the ruling class is preparing police-state forms of rule amid growing unrest among the working class.

The SEP calls on all workers, including railway workers, to form action committees independent of the trade unions in workplaces, large estates and working class neighbourhoods to defend the democratic and social rights of the working class.

To prosecute such a struggle, workers need a political

program and party to fight against the assault of the government and ruling class. The working class must politically break from every faction of the ruling class, rally the rural poor and youth, and fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism. The SEP alone fights for this program.

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