

# **Sri Lanka: Breakdown of trade union movement and enslavement of workers**

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**The past year, has been strangely, free of strike action. This is surprising given that the cost of living has been continuously rising, while at the same time wages of ordinary workers has been halved and large numbers have been laid off. This is in stark contrast to the status of workers in the 1930s up to the 1970s when Sri Lanka's labour organisations grew into vibrant and powerful movements.**

From the period following universal franchise until the mid-1970s, workers and unions secured recognition of their rights through enactment of national laws and ratification of Conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Wage Boards were established to negotiate and fix minimum wages in largely un-unionised occupations. Private sector employers were compelled to recognise and bargain with trade unions.

Non-judicial forums for conciliation and arbitration of labour disputes were established. Paid holiday leave, work breaks, and limits on working hours for shop and office workers were introduced. Women workers were guaranteed paid maternity leave and protection from arbitrary dismissal. Private sector workers became eligible for social security benefits on retirement. Employers in the private sector were not allowed to fire workers without prior permission of the Labour Commissioner, which entrenched job security.

The reversals which are affecting the working class today however, did not commence with the Easter Sunday attacks or in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The deterioration of workers rights commenced over a period of time, with the breakdown of the trade union movement.

The liberalising of the economy after the 1977 elections which brought the UNP to power, led to a shift away from the country's socialist orientation. Since then, governments have been deregulating, privatizing, and opening the economy to international market forces. The breaking of the general strike of 1980 where the then government invoked emergency regulations to dismiss 41,000 or more public servants, broke the back of the trade union movement.

The 'National Question' which evolved into a civil war, divided the once united labour movement along ethnic lines. The final nail driven into in the coffin of the trade union (TU) movement occurred during the abortive JVP uprising of 1989 when militant workers and TU leaders were killed for daring to challenge the diktat of either the JVP or the State.

Opportunistic politicians to this day continue dividing workers along communal and religious lines rousing pseudo-patriotism to cajole workers into accepting actions inimical to their own well being. Today there is scarcely a squeak from trade unions against the rising cost of living, salary cuts and job losses caused in the aftermath of the coronavirus.

Instead under the National Labour Advisory Council Agreement, workers' salaries have been slashed

by over 50%, with unionised workers receiving around Rs.14,500/- per mensem! On the plantations tea estate workers receive Rs.700/- per day for less than 22 days work a month, as plantation companies across the estate sector ask workers to stay at home every few days to avoid paying the monthly incentive tied to minimum days mandatory work. Citing the pandemic, plantation companies have stalled talks for a basic wage hike from the Rs.700/- per day to Rs.1,000/-.

It costs a family of four a minimum of Rs. 27,550/- to have two basic meals a day. That is without taking into account the cost of basic health needs, children's education, travel (bus fare) or leisure etc! The Governor of the Central Bank has pointed out the informal sector - daily paid workers - comprise nearly 60% of the country's total workforce, and of this number approximately 24% comprising nearly 660,000 lost their jobs overnight during the lockdown.

Paddy farmers and agricultural workers have fallen into a deep debt trap, having taken loans upon loans in the aftermath of many crop failures caused by recent droughts. Farmers in the Polonnaruwa District are deeply indebted to micro finance companies who are now taking over lands of the peasants who are unable to keep up with mortgage payments. Most of the victims are women. Many factories in the Free Trade Zones, have not paid even the agreed minimum payments to workers. Payments have been delayed and are most times paid on a staggered basis if at all.

A study by the United Federation of Labour showed around 200,000 workers - mainly minor staff - in the hotel industry have been furloughed.

In these days of crisis, where labour rights are being demolished, workers need a trade union that is modern and responsive, especially in an era where we see a coming together of employers and the state to suppress workers hard-won rights.

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