

Whither Sri Lanka's Trade Union movement?

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In October this year, the country's total workforce, stood at approximately 8,971,000 persons. The minimum wage rate of workers has remained static - at Rs.10,000/- a month, through 2019 and 2020. The cost of living on the other hand has increased many times over.

At today's prices, it costs a family of four (father, mother and two children) at least Rs. 20,000/- per month to have two basic meals a day.

Despite this, when the coronavirus hit the country, which in turn led to a lockdown, trade unions agreed with employers that they would not oppose a 'temporary' three-month pay cut for workers. The agreement between management and the trade unions did not take into account, the plight of daily-paid workers whose livelihood depended on a daily wage.

Today between 250,000 to 300,000 daily wage earners, have lost their means of sustenance. What was worse however, was that in the end, it was the TUs themselves who had to explain to their membership, the need for workers to accept a 'voluntary pay cut' to help employers run their factories. Workers were informed that unless they accepted the 'voluntary pay cut', factory bosses would close down their businesses.

However, though the three months have long come and gone, the Commercial and Industrial Workers Union says the salary cuts are still in place. This despite worker unions having helped employers in their hour of need.

It seems there is only a little trade unions could do to change this situation.

In the plantation sector, the estate workers have for over two years been demanding their daily wage be raised to Rs. 1,000/- per day, as estate workers receive less than 22 days work per month. Though their unions have been part of different governments, in the face of rising costs of living, estate workers' wages have remained static.

What ails Lanka's once mighty trade union movement?

Just 67 years ago, in August 1953, the then government, in the face of falling export revenue, attempted to raise the price of rice from .25 cents per kg to 70 cents per kg. This, along with a proposed cut to the free mid-day school meals, triggered mounting protests and culminated in one of the largest demonstrations in Lankan history, with nearly 200,000 people descending on Colombo's Galle Face Green.

A general strike called on August 12, 1953, shut down the country, and is remembered to this day as the greatest Hartal. The workers protest led to the resignation of then Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake.

Trade union agitation over the years, led to legislation being enacted on holiday leave, worker's

compensation, and benefits being extended to the expanding state and public sector in the 1950s and 60s. Wages Board was established to negotiate and fix minimum wages in largely unorganized occupations. Private sector employers were compelled to recognize and bargain with trade unions.

These were all achievements of the TUs. What then brought about the rapid decline of Lanka's trade union movement? The political defeat of the left at the 1977 general elections, following the poor record of the then United Front Government brought the UNP into power with a 5/6th majority.

Again the run-up to the 1977 election took place at a time when ethnic tensions were growing. The new government used the ethnic divide to split workers along ethnic lines weakening the TUs. Opposition to government policies was portrayed as support for separatist agenda.

When workers demanding a pay rise of Rs.5/- per day (Rs. 300/-) per month in April 1980, struck work, government claimed strikes were called to oppose government's development plans and in support of a separatist agenda. Emergency was declared and 40,000 workers were dismissed.

With a stroke of the pen, government more or less broken the back of the Trade Unions. (TUs)

Trade unions were further weakened during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising of 1989, when that organization and the government targeted and killed militant trade unionists who refused to follow their diktat. The killings drove terror into the hearts of ordinary workers, turned them into lamb-like 'yes men' and killed off their militancy. It also led to trade unions aligning themselves to different political parties to the disadvantage of workers' rights.

While trade unions won numerous workers' rights, today if workers rights are to be preserved TUs need to concentrate on at least protecting rights workers have won over the years rather than appeasing particular political leaders to the disadvantage of workers.

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