

Sri Lanka unions protest 'religious' rescheduling of May Day

May Day Celebrations Postponed for the First Time in History: Unions Determined to Defy Orders

Saturday 9 June 2018, by [BORHAM Maneshka](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2018).

Long before the 1950s when Sri Lanka first began celebrating International Workers' Day, the country's workers still claimed this right by taking to the streets on the day, after a half day's work, even at the cost of suffering pay cuts, as a result. To them, it was a day won by the workers of the world after much struggle and therefore, a day to be celebrated despite the many obstacles faced.

Hence, notwithstanding various security concerns and other days of importance falling on the same day, Sri Lanka's workers say they have always gone on to celebrate the day reserved to celebrate their rights throughout the years.

This year however, the government decided to not only postpone May Day celebrations but to also cancel the May 1, statutory, Public, Bank and Mercantile holiday. The reason, the International Workers' Day to its misfortune coinciding with one of the country's most important religious festivals.

According to the government the decision was made after considering requests made by the Maha Sangha as the country's Vesak Week celebrations will last from April 28 to May 6 including the May 1.

With May Day celebrations being postponed for the first time in the country's history, it is a decision that has not found favour with many Unions and Left leaning political parties, with many determined to celebrate the Day, nevertheless.

As a result, around 17 Trade Unions with no political allegiance will hold their May Day rally in Colombo following tradition, defying the government's decision to not hold any rallies on the day.

Among these unions, is the United Federation of Labour. According to its President Linus Jayatilake, who also represents the Commercial and Industrial Workers' Union, they, along with other unions will not give in to the requests made by the government in this regard.

"The decision by the government goes against the rights of the workers" he says, adding that May 1 has always been traditionally celebrated on the particular day. Therefore, Jayatilake says, his union is not agreeable to the decision announced to postpone the International Workers' Day.

"It was the day the workers gained with the sacrifice of their lives and they have the right to celebrate it" he points out. Jayatilake was also displeased about what he felt was the government's efforts to prevent the unions from going ahead with their plans for the day.

"No grounds have been provided to hold our rallies and this is an obstacle" Jayatilake says.

However, the unions are determined to go ahead. So on May 1, at 11am they will commence their May Day rally at the Colombo Fort Railway Station and head to Hyde Park. "It will be a day of protest against the government's decision" Jayatilake says adding that they will voice their dissent on the day.

Pointing out that while on two previous occasions in the country's past its government had banned May Day rallies he says, the unions still celebrated the day in spite of this, and will do so this year as well.

He was also critical of various groups in Parliament including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Joint Opposition (JO) for their inability to take a serious decision with regard to the May Day being postponed on behalf of the workers and stand with them by holding rallies in Colombo.

"May Day has long been grabbed by political parties but by holding our rallies on the day we will also show them that we are aware of this" he says.

With over 4,000 workers and union members expected to join in, the Ceylon Teachers' Union will also be in attendance on the day. Its General Secretary, Joseph Stalin slammed the decision to postpone May Day labelling it as a grave injustice done to the country's workers.

Stalin claims no discussion was held with the Unions prior to such a decision being made. "We were never asked nor consulted" he says adding that workers too have an equal right to celebrate their holiday just as others have a right to celebrate a religious festival of the country. According to him the government must ensure equal rights to all its citizens.

"Vesak falls on April 29, so what connection does it have with May 1 while other countries have decided to celebrate Vesak on May 29 which only adds to the confusion?" he questions whether the government did not notice the clash prior to approving holidays for year 2018. Stalin says due to the cancellation of the holiday, state workers now have to apply for leave to attend the rallies.

According to Stalin, this is not a holiday granted by any capitalist government but gained by the struggle of leftist workers and therefore the unions will not allow this right to be taken away. "We will face all the obstacles and celebrate the day as usual" he assures.

Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union is perhaps one of the few who will not face an issue with attending. According to Shantha Liyanarachchi, a spokesman for the union, private sector employers have agreed to grant the workers May 1 as a holiday in return for them working on May 7. Nevertheless, he too is critical of the postponement. "We are part of an international trade union and how can we celebrate it on May 7 when others around the world will be on the streets on May 1?" he asks. Therefore his union too will join others this May 1.

The unions have also made their displeasure known going on to write to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Union (EU), the International Trade Union Movement (ITUM) as well as the Sri Lankan government.

Despite earning flak for not holding their May Day rally in Colombo on May 1, leader of the JVP, Anura Kumara Dissanayake says the party is in no way agreeable to the government's decision to postpone the holiday.

One of the few parties which will hold rallies on the day itself, the JVP rally this year will be held in Jaffna away from the Vesak hustle and bustle of Colombo. According to Dissanayake the only reason for the JVP's decision to not hold its rally in the city is due to the difficulties in organizing a large rally during the Vesak period. "Smaller unions and parties can manage but it will be difficult for us"

he says.

According to him the day is for workers' rights and it is unjust to change it through Cabinet decisions. "Governments arrive at decisions in various ways, delays and indecision are a result of issues such as this" he says.

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