

Sri Lankan unions and government prepare witch-hunt against "saboteurs" and "inefficient" workers

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Trade union leaders in Sri Lanka are going to extraordinary lengths to insist that the government allow them to conduct a witch-hunt throughout the public sector to identify and take action against "saboteurs and inefficient officers". To these ends, the trade unions associated with the parties of the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) government have reached an agreement with President Chandrika Kumaratunga to set up "advisory councils" in all government departments and institutions.

Already the establishment of these committees is well advanced. In mid-March, Kumaratunga, who is both defence minister and the finance minister, called for talks with union leaders to rapidly establish councils in her areas of responsibility. In the Central Bank each of the trade unions was to nominate a representative to the advisory council by this week with the object of making its operations more "efficient".

The character of these new advisory councils was spelled out at a meeting on February 21 between Kumaratunga and about 60 key union officials from the People's Alliance Trade Union Committee. Alevi Moulana, a cabinet minister as well as a leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) unions, led the delegation. The SLFP is the majority party in the ruling coalition, which includes the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), whose union leaders also played a prominent role. The SLFP-affiliated Sri Lanka Independent Workers Union (SLIWU), the LSSP's Government Workers Union (GWU) and the CPSL-led Public Services Trade Union Federation (PSTUF) all participated.

After a three-hour discussion, Moulana issued a press

statement noting: "It was agreed, to enhance the performance of every ministry, department, corporation or statutory boards, trade union officials should meet and hold discussions once a month with respective heads and chief officers of such institutions chaired by ministers in charge of the subject concerned and with the participation of deputy ministers."

Kumaratunga said she was "extremely pleased about the proposal". After a trial period in her own ministry she indicated she would instruct other ministers to implement the proposals. She has also agreed to hold discussions with the trade unions to review the performances of government institutions every three months.

During the meeting, trade union leaders submitted a list of public servants whom they claimed were inefficient, corrupt and "sabotaging the development plans" of the government. The union press release noted with pride that the president had agreed to take action after examining the list and to form "People's Committees" comprising union officials, ministers and heads of those institutions.

Prior to the meeting, union leaders had launched a provocative campaign against officials they branded as corrupt, inefficient and saboteurs. During a picket held in the capital Colombo on January 18 they shouted slogans against these officials, demanding their punishment or removal.

W.H. Piyadasa, leader of the CPSL-led Public Services Trade Union Federation, made clear in a statement prior to talks with Kumaratunga that the initiative came from the union bureaucracy. "Our proposal was the formation of representative committees, comprising the minister and the trade

union leaders to scrutinise the progress of work in all departments and to prevent sabotage by anti-state officials, this was not [previously] implemented. But the government has now realised the seriousness of the situation.”

With the support of the union leaders, a large number of government workers have already been branded as supporters of the opposition United National Party (UNP) or working against the PA's rule. These include 600 workers and officials at the state-owned Sri Lanka Transport Board, 300 government teachers and seven officials from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

The campaign has also become a vehicle for attacking anyone suspected of opposition to the continuing war in the North and East against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At the January 18 union picket, one of the slogans called for the removal of the director general of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Eric Fernando, who was accused of being an LTTE supporter.

Another slogan was directed against Dr. Navamalar Kanagaratnam, director of Jaffna state hospital in the northern province. It implied that, as a Tamil, she was pressuring Sinhala doctors to leave the hospital. The Government Medical Officers Association—a union that has been in a campaign against the impact of government policies—issued a statement denying the claim and pointing out that Sinhala doctors were leaving Jaffna because of inadequate security. Dr. Kanagaratnam has threatened to resign if the accusation is not withdrawn.

The union calls for greater “efficiency” and “productivity” are not made in the interests of the working class but assist the government in implementing the demands of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for economic restructuring. Already the government has slashed jobs and cut back on health, education and welfare programs in order to try to bring government spending into line with IMF demands.

This is not the first time that PA-affiliated unions have played such a role. Most of the present union leaders were union officials during the period of the previous SLFP-led coalition government between 1970 and 1977. At that time they were involved in forming “advisory committees” at the behest of department heads. In the name of advancing “national socialist

development” these committees supervised increases in workloads and suppressed opposition to the government.

Today, the union leaders have abandoned all talk of “socialist development,” to which they paid lip service in the past. Now they emphasise that for “national development” it is necessary to “enter the world market which is in the process of globalisation” and adhere to the demands set by the IMF and World Bank.

S. Siriwardena, general secretary of the Ceylon Commercial and Industrial Workers Union, explained in an interview with the Sinhala weekly *Ravaya* late last year that workers had to consider the government's point of view. “The government does not see it the way the workers see it. Government has to think about the politics and the country's economy. Within this globalisation process we have to enter the world market. We have to invite the foreign investors. We cannot forget local investors.”

In the same newspaper, CPSL trade union leader W.H. Piyadasa commented: “When we see where the world is going in today's globalisation it is obvious that the private sector can have vast influence. We cannot fall back to a backward situation in developing the country.” He concluded on the same note as Siriwardena, saying: “We cannot see things in the same way as our employees see things.”

In country after country around the world the unions have undergone a profound transformation, dropping any pretence of defending the basic rights of workers as they support the demands of big business for greater “productivity” and “competitiveness”. In Sri Lanka, which has been devastated by a protracted civil war and ongoing political and economic instability, the union leaders are playing a particularly venal role: begging the government to be permitted to enforce the IMF dictates and to hunt out and victimise any opposition among workers.



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