

Sri Lankan president relies on trade union leaders for support

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Accompanied by at least six cabinet ministers, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga held an unprecedented meeting with the country's trade union leadership on the evening of May 16 to request their support for her government's repressive emergency measures and ongoing war against the Tamil separatists.

Kumaratunga summoned the union officials to Temple Trees just one day after convening all-party talks in a bid to secure a united political front following a series of disastrous military defeats on the northern Jaffna peninsula at the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

According to the pro-government *Daily News*, Kumaratunga and her ministers supplied the 84 representatives from 50 unions with a detailed description of the military situation in the North and sought their direct participation in the war effort.

Attending the briefing were unions affiliated to all the parties making up the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA), including the Stalinist Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), as well as unions led by the opposition United National Party (UNP), and the JVP. "Left"-led unions such as the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU) and the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) were also present. Only the Central Bank Employees Union and the centrist NSSP-led unions received no invitation.

The meeting's convenor, trade union leader and cabinet minister Alavi Mowlana, enthusiastically welcomed the union officials' agreement to participate in the gathering. "Minister Mowlana described this meeting as a landmark where all the major trade unions met the Head of State for the first time in the history of independent Sri Lanka," the *Daily News* declared.

As well as functioning as Minister of Provincial Councils and Local Government, Mowlana heads the unions affiliated to Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and is chairman of the Joint Federation of Trade Unions. Other ministers in attendance included General Anuruddha Ratwatte, the Deputy Defence Minister, and D.M. Jayaratne, Dharmasiri Senanayake, Mangala Samaraweera and C.V. Gooneratne.

Mowlana told the *Daily News* that Kumaratunga "sought the fullest cooperation of all trade unions in handling the present war situation, to which the trade unions responded by volunteering their services such as manning check points at

rural levels, distribution of food at hospitals".

Other reports indicate that Kumaratunga outlined her government's plans to carry on the war "until the LTTE is defeated". She asked the unions to help form "civilian protection committees" in workplaces and appealed for other suggestions to further the war effort. She exhorted the union leaders not to allow any strikes or industrial action until the "situation becomes normal".

On May 3, following the army's defeat at Elephant Pass, its key military base in the north, the government imposed blanket censorship, banned strikes and outlawed political meetings, processions and pickets. Distribution of leaflets and posters was also prohibited. It is now a crime to even advocate any basic political or industrial activity.

But passing such draconian and anti-democratic measures is one thing. Enforcing them is another. The trade union conference demonstrates that the government is heavily dependent on the union bureaucrats to police these measures against their members.

With the exception of five unions, all the assembled officials pledged to comply. The leaders of the UNP-affiliated National Employees Union expressed their full support for both the war and the emergency laws. On behalf of the union bureaucrats from the ruling PA, the Communist Party union leader W.H. Piyadasa asked Kumaratunga to develop a program for unions to participate in "security work" in order to release soldiers from check points so that they could be sent to the war front.

Piyadasa, who heads the Government Services Trade Union Federation, said: "We are at a critical point now. A question has emerged on the territorial integrity of the country. The government has to think about it and to take action on it." He attempted to justify his support for the emergency powers by asserting that the government had not used them to suppress strikes, as happened in 1980 under President Jayawardena. In the same breath, he said the PA government had to be careful to refrain from repressive acts.

LSSP union leader S. Siriwardana openly backed the government's regulations. "There is nothing wrong in enacting emergency laws," he said. He admitted, however, that he "had to stop strikes" due to these laws, even though "employers refused to take back the workers".

This was a reference to striking workers at the International Gift Design factory in the suburbs of Colombo who were forced by an LSSP-controlled union to call off their strike. Fifty-four workers lost their jobs as a result, when the employer refused to take them back. The workers who returned to work showed their opposition to the union's betrayal by forming another union. One worker said: "Because of these new laws we can't launch even a work-to-rule campaign. Our union leader was preparing to call off the strike even before the government imposed repressive laws."

There are other signs of industrial unrest. About 225 tea plantation workers at the Lacombe Private Estate in Maskeliya near Hatton held a wildcat strike on May 10 against wage cuts, defying the emergency regulations. Thirteen workers were later interrogated at length at Maskeliya police station. None of the four unions on the estate—the Ceylon Workers Congress, the Up Country Workers Union, the Ceylon National Workers Congress and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—supported the strike.

A wider conflict could erupt in the tea plantations, where the unions are at pains to pacify 600,000 workers who have demanded a struggle for higher wages. Discussions with the employers on a wage increase broke down for the fourth time on May 6 but the unions said they would not strike "in the context of the current situation".

Postal workers, who have been protesting against the government's privatisation plans, have demanded the removal of the long-standing general secretary of the Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers (UPTO). The union called off a planned protest strike on May 8 against a bill to convert the postal department into a corporation—the first step toward privatisation. The general secretary helped the government prepare the bill, forcing the union's executive committee to suspend him after a no-confidence motion. Postal union representatives will meet on May 28 to seek his removal. This threatens the government's plans to pass the bill by June as a condition of a World Bank loan to restructure the postal service.

Other unions have acted similarly. The Government Surveyors Union, whose members had been on strike since April 24, halted the action when the government imposed its new laws. "We will temporarily suspend our strike campaign on May 5 due to the situation on the northern war front," the union stated. "We will organise a blood donation campaign on Friday (May 5) and call off the scheduled protest march from Colombo to Kelaniya."

Seventeen state sector unions, including the Government Services Trade Union Federation and the Government Workers Union—which is affiliated to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—cancelled planned lunchtime rallies from May 8 to 12 demanding higher wages.

Faced by opposition among workers to the repressive laws and the ongoing attack on jobs and living standards, five unions

have criticised the government's emergency measures. They are the CMU, led by Bala Tampoe, the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, the postal workers UPTO, the United Public Services Nurses Union and the Government Medical Officers Union.

But these union leaderships have combined verbal objections to the new laws with enforcement of the government's requirements. Like the UPTO postal union officials, the leaders of the CBEU have halted a major campaign. They decided on May 15 to stop the union's long-standing agitation for a 35 percent wage increase and to accept the 21 percent offer of the private banks, agreeing to a three-year moratorium on further claims.

Moreover, none of these five unions have called for a campaign against the emergency powers, nor opposed the government's war against the LTTE. The nurses union has openly supported the war. The medical officers union has endorsed the position of the CMU and CBEU, but earlier issued a press release stating that "despite the curtailment of civil liberties" it supported the authorities "wholeheartedly".

As for the CMU and CBEU, their position on the war is evasive. They have called for a ceasefire and a "negotiated settlement" between the government and the LTTE. This is perfectly compatible with the demands by sections of the business community and the Western powers for negotiations. Even the PA-affiliated unions earlier called for mediation by Norway or any other country, while giving full support to the government's prosecution of the war.

The PA regime fears that the accumulated discontent among workers could erupt under the weight of the massive burden they are being forced to bear to finance the war—higher taxes, reduced public services and lower living standards. While the government has armed itself with draconian laws, it is completely reliant upon the trade union bureaucracy to control what is becoming an increasingly explosive situation.



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