

Sri Lankan government and unions form "civil defence committees" to police war effort

Dianne Sturgess

21 June 2000

Facing a military disaster in the north of the island, the Sri Lankan government is setting up an extensive network of "civil defence committees" in workplaces, villages and neighbourhoods with the co-operation of the trade unions. Under conditions of growing popular opposition to the government's attacks on living standards and democratic rights and the continuing war against Tamil separatists, the task assigned to these committees is to help the government place the entire country on a "war footing."

After suffering serious military defeats at the hands of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Jaffna Peninsula, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government announced draconian emergency laws on May 3. In the following week, Labor Minister D.J.M. Seneviratne invited leaders of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) and other pro-government trade unions to discuss means of assisting the government, including the formation of civil defence committees. On May 16 the proposal was discussed at the highest level when all union leaders were invited to meet President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The government demanded that heads of all government departments form such committees before May 31. The workplace committees are mainly comprised of union officials, union-selected employees or volunteers, government officials and, if available, police officers.

One of the functions of these committees is to prevent industrial action. In the words of one Stalinist (CPSL) union leader, apart from the looking after the "security of the workplace" the most important task of the committees will be "to settle industrial disputes". Without any hesitation he emphasised: "You must have peace in the south to conduct the war properly in

north."

In the tea and rubber plantations, where most workers are Tamil-speaking, the management is organising the committees, in collaboration with the police and union officials. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main union, and other plantation unions are participating in this program, seeking at the same time to avert an all-out strike for a pay rise.

At a meeting between union representatives and Labor Minister Seneviratne on May 23 to discuss the committees, one item concerned how to persuade workers to accept the two-day wage sacrifice that the government has demanded for war expenditure. Such discussion is an admission of wide opposition to the wage sacrifice.

The meeting also discussed union members manning checkpoints to enable the government to release soldiers for duty on the war front.

Local committees have already been formed in some areas, comprised of 20 "prominent" people. Officers in charge (OIC) of area police stations have asked grama niladharis (government village officers) and samurdhi niyamaka (government "poverty alleviation" officers) to become committee chairmen and secretaries. Police constables act as coordinators, exercising the actual authority.

OICs have instructed the participants to keep their membership and activities secret. The committees maintain surveillance over unknown visitors to the area, particularly Tamils, and supply information to the police. All Tamil residents must give their details to the local police station.

This apparatus is supervised at the highest levels of the government. Kumaratunga has appointed a special Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by Seneviratne. Other members include union leader Alavi Moulana, Deputy

Labor Minister Janaka Bandara Tennekoon and CPSL general secretary Raja Collure. Former minister C.V. Gunaratne was a member until a suicide bomber killed him on June 7.

The Colombo District Civil Defence Committee is headed by Internal and External Commerce and Food Minister Kingsley T. Wickremaratne. His fellow members include Western Province Chief Minister Susil Premajayantha Samurdhi, Youth Affairs and Sports Deputy Minister Jeevan Kumaratunga, Transport and Highways Deputy Minister Bennet Cooray and Kotte Mayor Chandra de Silva.

Parliamentarians P. D. Devaraj and R. Yogarajan—both CWC leaders—are members, as is Defence Ministry additional secretary R. Gammanpila, Colombo Government Agent U. C. Kumarasiri, Deputy Inspector Generals (DIG) of Police Victor Perera, Punya de Silva, Bodhi Liyanage, A K Ilangakoon and Jayantha Wickramaratne, and Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Bandula Wickremasinghe.

Trade union leaders from the opposition United National Party have pledged their full cooperation with these organisations, which follow closely proposals made by the Sinhala chauvinists.

Dr. Piyasena Dissanayake, secretary of the National Joint Committee, a Sinhala chauvinist group, told the *Sunday Times* on May 7: “Civilians can form vigilance committees to be deployed at checkpoints so that the soldiers can be sent to the North... Civilians can also help in transporting soldiers from the airport to the hospital.”

The formation of these committees has far-reaching implications. They are aimed at not only forcing workers and the oppressed to shoulder the war burden, but also at suppressing any mass opposition to the government itself. With the help of the union leaders, the PA regime is setting up a police state-style network. It indicates that the ruling elite fears a social explosion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact