How Sri Lanka's "lefts" prop up the rightwing UNF government

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On September 29, just hours after trade union leaders had called off a 13-day strike of 80,000 health workers, a high-ranking government delegation met representatives of a number of "left" parties at Visumpaya, a top security state complex in the heart of Colombo. What took place there should be taken as a warning of what is in store for workers in the name of "peace" and the settlement of the country's 20-year civil war.

The meeting was held behind closed doors and went unreported at the time. None of the participants has made a public statement about the proceedings. On October 3, however, *Lakbima*, a Sinhala-language newspaper run by a close crony of the ruling United National Front (UNF), leaked some interesting details.

The government delegation included Minister of Constitutional Affairs Professor G.L Pieris, Minister of Economic Affairs Bandula Gunawardene, Minister of Agriculture S.B.Dissanayake, Minister of Lands Rajitha Senarathne, the United National Party President Malik Samarawickreme and a senior treasury official.

Also present were representatives from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSP), the Democratic Left Front (DLF) and the United Socialist Party (USP). All these groups are the product of the disintegration of the LSSP, which broke definitively from Trotskyism when it joined the bourgeois government of Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964. The NSSP only broke from the LSSP after its expulsion from the second Bandaranaike government in 1976. The DLF and the USP subsequently splintered off from the NSSP, also on a completely unprincipled basis.

In the almost 40 years since the 1964 betrayal, all these parties have proven time and again that they are at the disposal of the ruling class. In fact, the labour leaders are so much part of the political establishment that none of them would have blinked an eyelid when Pieris phoned and invited them for a discussion over dinner and cocktails. This is the way political business is transacted within Colombo's ruling circles.

The fact that Peiris called the meeting is a measure of the government's crisis. The UNF faces mounting opposition among workers and farmers to its economic restructuring plans. In the course of the health workers' strike, the government sacked 1,400 striking casual workers and illegally deployed the military in hospitals to try to break the strike. These tactics provoked sympathy from other workers, many of whom joined a rally of 10,000 in central Colombo on September 29. The following day a section of rail workers was due to commence a two-day strike.

Peiris, a seasoned bourgeois politician, decided it was time to call on the services of the labour leaders. According to the *Lakbima* report, the participants at the Visumpaya gathering agreed to form a block of parties to back the government's attempts to negotiate a peace deal with the LTTE. The UNF is currently attempting to restart negotiations by offering to establish a limited interim administration in the North and East provinces of the island.

The NSSP and the DLF issued a statement on October 2—three days after the meeting—calling for a "Peace Deployment Council" with "all parties and organisations and political factions that stand for an interim administration for the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island". The stated purpose of the bloc was to counter a chauvinist campaign being waged by Sinhala extremist groups that regard the proposal as a betrayal of the Sinhala Buddhist state.

But behind the UNF's attempts to reach a deal with the LTTE lie the demands of big business for the government to press ahead with a comprehensive economic reform package, including privatisation and cutbacks to services, jobs and conditions. The resulting opposition from workers has provoked concern in business circles and

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calls for the government to end the unrest. So it is not surprising that the Visumpaya meeting also discussed this issue.

According to *Lakbima*, the parties to the discussion expressed concern that workers were moving into action on "narrow demands" such as salaries, to the detriment of major national questions such as the peace issue. In other words, the UNF, which previously called on workers to sacrifice for the war effort, now insists they should sacrifice for the peace.

The NSSP-DLF statement of October 2 explained the Peace Deployment Committee should also take quick steps to resolve trade union demands. This, it advised the government, "would create a majority opinion in the working class to deal profitably with the government...Get into discussions directly and see that the demands are granted. Desist from creating unnecessary problems."

One participant told the WSWS: "We requested of the team of ministers that the attacks on the living conditions of the workers and the moves for privatisation should be put off.... We asked why do you want to provoke workers struggles now?... The ministers were amenable to our request, but they pointed out there were divisions within the cabinet too on this question."

There is of course no full public transcript of the exact course of the discussion. But one can safely assume that none of the labour leaders opposed the government's economic program outright or denounced the repressive measures used against striking workers. They were involved in a friendly chat about how best to accommodate the working class to the UNF's agenda. All of the parties present had played a similar role with the PA government during its term of office between 1994 and 2001.

This was confirmed on October 12 by comments made by NSSP leader Vikramabahu Karunaratne in his regular column in *Lakbima*. He began by noting that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is conducting a Sinhala chauvinist campaign against the peace talks, has been able to exploit the discontent of workers. "The JVP is trying to use it to create political turmoil. Thereby it wants to strengthen the jingoist forces and create such a government by hook or crook," he wrote.

Karunaratne's answer to the dangers posed by the JVP was to advocate that trade union leaders strictly limit any demands to those that government and big business can afford. "[E]ach concrete victory would lead to a systematic development of the class struggle. And new leadership would emerge. Politically this will create the ground to bring pressure for the victory of the peace process," he declared.

His model was the rail strike of September 30-October 1. Its virtue, according to Karunaratne, was that the union leaders had limited their demands to a pay rise and had not opposed the government's corporatisation of the rail network. "If one were to proceed with this demand one would directly clash with the government. Therefore the United Front of the Trade Unions did not present the demand and fought to minimise the damage," he explained

His argument is nothing but an opportunist rationalisation for propping up the UNF government and supporting its pro-business policies. Karunaratne completely omitted the fact that corporatisation is a step towards eventual privatisation and will result in the loss of 10,000 jobs from a workforce of 17,000. Far from combatting the influence of the JVP, his "tactic" will only ensure the JVP wins a wider audience among workers disgusted with the betrayals of the NSSP and all the old leaderships.

The NSSP and the LSSP played a similar role in 1987 when the United National Party government confronted military defeat in the north of the island and working class unrest in the south. President J.R.Jayawardene signed an accord with New Delhi to allow Indian "peacekeeping" troops to suppress the Tamil minority in the north, while the Sri Lankan security forces were freed to be used against opposition in the south. The NSSP and LSSP backed the Indo-Lankan accord and, in the name of defending "peace," helped Jayawardene suppress the workers' struggles.

What all these opportunist groups oppose, above all, is any independent role for the working class. For them, politics revolves in small circles around the established parties—the UNP and PA—that have created disaster after disaster for ordinary working people. To combat the dangers posed by the UNF's agenda and chauvinist groups such as the JVP requires a political struggle to unite workers around their independent class interests on the basis of a socialist perspective. That is impossible without a thoroughgoing political break from all the capitalist parties and their "left" hangers-on.

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