

Sri Lankan opposition cynically exploits struggles of workers and farmers

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A key factor in Sri Lanka's deep political crisis is the rising tide of opposition among workers, farmers and young people against the impact of the economic restructuring measures demanded by the IMF and World Bank on behalf of international finance capital. The policies of privatisation and cutbacks to public spending, along with financial and other incentives for investors, have widened the gulf between rich and poor and led to increased poverty and unemployment.

While the United National Front (UNF) government has been the immediate target of strikes and protests, its program is a continuation of policies carried out by the previous Peoples Alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhala chauvinist organization that postures as socialist, has capitalised on the widespread disaffection with both major parties and with the PA's partners—the ossified Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party, by presenting itself as a more militant alternative.

The latest wave of strikes and protests erupted following the signing of a formal alliance between the JVP and Kumaratunga's party—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—on January 20. In every case, the JVP, along with sections of the SLFP, cynically exploited the discontent not only to attack the UNF but also to intensify pressure on Kumaratunga to sack the government. For months, the JVP's Sinhala extremist demagogues have been denouncing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for selling out the country in peace negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

When Kumaratunga finally sacked the UNF government on February 7, the JVP and SLFP leaders immediately shut down the various struggles, declaring all problems would be solved when their alliance won

office at the April 2 elections. This pattern of deceit is evident in all of the recent strikes and protests:

On January 26, some 17,000 workers employed in the government railways—virtually the entire workforce—stopped work in an indefinite strike to demand the scrapping of the newly established Sri Lanka Railway Authority. The authority, which replaced the former government Railways Department, is an independent, commercial enterprise and represents a step towards full privatisation. Railway workers fear that many will lose their jobs and that long-established conditions and entitlements will be eroded.

When workers struck last year, union leaders sent them back to work stating that Transport Minister Tilak Marapona had agreed to higher compensation for retirees and guaranteed to maintain rights under the new authority. Despite these assurances, however, the government began to hand over elements of the railway system to the private sector and to sell railway properties.

Such was the anger among railway workers that pro-UNF unions were also compelled to support the strike. Virtually the entire rail network ground to a halt as daily services were cut from 320 to 20 trains. Government attempts to drum up public support by vilifying rail workers fell flat as commuters expressed their anger over the decision in January to increase fares by 40 to 60 percent.

Both the prime minister and transport minister held a series of talks with union leaders to attempt to end the industrial action. After marathon negotiations with pro-UNF leaders, the government announced that it had reached a memorandum of understanding promising to postpone the setting up of the railway authority for two years. In addition, union representatives would be included in the administration of the railways.

The SLFP- and JVP-led unions immediately denounced the deal as a wretched betrayal and claimed that the strike would continue. But the rhetoric only lasted 48 hours. The day after Kumaratunga dissolved parliament, these same leaders called off the strike, declaring it was pointless continuing industrial action with only a caretaker administration in power. A future JVP-SLFP government, they pledged, would look into the demands of the railway workers.

Among private sector workers, there is widespread opposition to the government's changes to the country's labour laws, which made it far easier for employers to summarily sack employees. Under amendments to the Termination of Employment Act passed in January, the labour commissioner no longer has the power to determine the amount of compensation paid to retrenched workers. Instead, lower levels of compensation will be paid according to a fixed formula.

Last December, the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU) held a one-day strike against the planned amendments and threatened to call a general strike if they were passed. Since then, the CMU bureaucrats have taken no action.

The JVP, however, decided to exploit the issue. On January 19, the day before the JVP signed an alliance with the SLFP, the JVP-affiliated Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU) organised a hunger strike outside the labour ministry. Each day five or six workers appeared at the offices, while JVP officials thundered that the fast would continue until the amendments were repealed.

The tune rapidly changed on February 9, however. The ICWU leaders visited the handful of workers taking part in the fast and announced that the protest was no longer required. "There is no authoritative government to discuss with," they declared. "These problems will be discussed with the future government that comes to power after the election."

Health workers have been pressing for strike action after the government reneged on the promises it made to end an indefinite island-wide strike last year. Around 80,000 non-medical staff in public hospitals took part in the industrial action to demand an immediate end to pay anomalies. The strikers defied government intimidation but were sent back to work by union leaders, including those from the JVP-led

organisations, after the UNF promised to look into a pay rise in the budget.

This year the JVP and PA union leaders refused to call any industrial action but instead launched a limited hunger strike on January 19. As unrest among health workers grew, the government, concerned about another national strike, agreed to substantial pay increases. The pay rise is to be paid in installments, however, and does not address the demand of workers for back pay. Nevertheless, union leaders called off the protest on February 2 and no further action is planned.

There have been continuing protests by small farmers against government actions that have severely eroded rural incomes. Last year's decision to cut subsidies for fertiliser, which increased the price of a 50-kg bag from 500 to 850 rupees (\$US8.62), has particularly incensed farmers. In January alone, protests took place in rural areas near the towns of Hambantota, Anuradhapura and Kabithigollawa.



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