

# Sri Lankan opposition spells out anti-working class agenda

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The opposition United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—a coalition between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—is trying to use the Sri Lankan election campaign to exploit widespread disaffection with the government’s economic restructuring policies by promising to halt privatisation and lift living standards.

The UPFA manifesto declares that the alliance will “maximise the benefits of globalisation and minimise its adverse effects on society and the economy.” Emphasis is placed on managing foreign investment to build “a strong national economy” with “top priority” given to “welfare and the uplifting of the standard of living of workers and their family members.”

The opposition’s real agenda was, however, bluntly spelled out late last month by UPFA spokesman Sarath Amunugama in the rightwing newspaper *Divaina*. In an article headlined “Country’s economic foundation must be laid through domestic production,” Amunugama, who was education minister in the previous SLFP-led Peoples Alliance government, makes clear that the full burden of building the UPFA’s so-called “production economy” will fall directly on the working class.

In the course of his article, Amunugama ridiculed all efforts at national autarchy and protectionism and declared that all countries had to seek foreign investment. While hailing the economic progress of major countries like the US and Japan, he held up China as the model for Sri Lanka to follow. He praised China’s largest special economic zone, Shenzhen, and emphasised: “The state tax relief for investors, state patronage and the banning of strikes have made the region highly attractive to the world’s capitalists.”

China is also the favourite example of the JVP. Like Amunugama, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe and

his deputy Wimal Weerawansa regularly cite the high growth rate in China as evidence that Sri Lanka should follow the same road. None of them, however, explains the reasons why transnational corporations are flocking to China or the social consequences for ordinary toilers. The Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing has consolidated China as a low-wage export platform through a ruthless assault on living standards, which has created a huge and growing gulf between rich and poor, and the suppression of strikes and protests.

During the five years from 1998-2003, the regime has laid off well over 40 million workers by shutting down or selling off thousands of state enterprises. China’s remaining 180,000 state-owned enterprises are confronting a new round of savage job cuts and the further slashing of working conditions. Meanwhile, in the sweatshops of the special economic zones, the state and its trade unions ensure that any opposition to the harsh, unhealthy and dangerous conditions is crushed. These are the conditions that have spawned a flood of investment into China, providing large profits for foreign corporations and the re-emerging Chinese bourgeoisie.

While both the UPFA, and the JVP criticise the privatisation carried out by the United National Front (UNF) government, Amunugama made abundantly clear in his article that the assault on the state sector will continue if the UPFA comes to power. As far as he is concerned, public services represent an intolerable burden on the national economy that has to be removed. He specifically pointed to electricity, energy, transport and health—on which millions of ordinary working people rely—as “institutions that extract tax money from the treasury like Dracula...”

As for “the welfare and uplifting” of workers, Amunugama has something completely different in

mind. After explaining that the UPFA was seeking significant increases in productivity, he declared: “It is not possible to build up the economy without a major commitment to working more in the field, in the factory or in the nationalised institutions... Unless we change from an eight-hour work day to a twelve-hour work day this country can never be rebuilt...”

Amunugama blasted workers for turning Sri Lanka into “a paradise of the indolent,” adding: “Without the investment of wealth and labour, the economy cannot be developed. It is very clear that any economy cannot be developed through slogans or hunger strikes. So, what is needed is not more privileges, but more work.”

While lambasting workers, Amunugama went on to hail the virtues of the rich. “The (UPFA) Alliance needs the rich. Particularly, the local capitalists’ ability, dedication, eagerness to earn money is an asset for any society. The Alliance looks upon the private sector from this standpoint. Accordingly, this country needs thousands of entrepreneurs... Because of that it is necessary to induce the social layers who have the creativity and the capability to create wealth.”

There is no mistaking Amunugama’s embrace of Sri Lanka’s tiny wealthy elite, his hostility to the working class, and also his contempt for the populist and even “socialist” phrasemongering of his allies in the JVP. As its references to China make clear, the JVP’s agenda is no different. It supports globalisation and foreign investment, insisting only that it would negotiate terms beneficial to Sri Lanka. Should the UPFA come to power, even this caveat will rapidly vanish as Colombo is obviously in no position to lay down the law to the IMF, World Bank and foreign investors.

Amunugama concluded his diatribe against the Sri Lankan working class by emphatically declaring that the collapse of the Soviet Union signalled the end of socialism and any possible alternative to the capitalist market. “When we review the global political and economic reality, it is a clear fact that the socialist camp has completely collapsed,” he wrote, adding: “If anyone assumes that the socialist system will reemerge he should be sent to a place like a mental hospital.”

A decade ago there was a note of triumphalism when the defenders of capitalism made such declarations. Today, however, all the promises of a new world of peace and prosperity have proven to be completely worthless. The fact is, what collapsed in the Soviet

Union was not socialism but the Stalinist system of national economic autarchy. Moreover, the disintegration of Stalinism heralded the end of all programs based on national economic regulation. This is why every party in Sri Lanka—the UNF, the SLF, the JVP and their various allies—wholeheartedly embrace the program of economic restructuring.

The only alternative to the social and economic catastrophe being generated by global capitalism is the planned reorganisation of the world economy on a socialist basis: that is, to satisfy the needs of toiling humanity, rather than the profits of a handful of billionaires. The only party advocating such a program in the Sri Lankan elections is the Socialist Equality Party.



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