

Sri Lanka: JVP leads campaign to impose budget burdens

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is part of the Sri Lankan government for the first time, is in the forefront of imposing the burden of last month's budget on working people. The JVP joined with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and other smaller parties in forming the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) to contest the April general elections, promising to lift living standards.

The budget measures, however, fell well short of the UPFA's election pledges. Of the promised 70 percent wage increase for government workers, it included a rise of only 40 percent spread out over more than a year and tied to a one-hour increase in the working day. Those on government pensions also received an increase. But already these rises to compensate for past inflation are being eroded by current price increases. The cost of living went up by 127 points to 3,826 in November alone.

The government's ability to pay for these measures, as well as modest increases in spending on public education, health and other projects, is in doubt. The entire budget was premised on large increases in tax revenue and borrowings that, according to financial analysts, are unrealistic. If it is unable to reduce the large budget deficit, the government will immediately come under pressure from international financial institutions to axe its limited spending proposals.

The UPFA's broken promises are already generating opposition and protests. With the SLFP, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party deeply compromised by their previous terms of office, the JVP, which is based on a mixture of Sinhala extremism and populist demagoguery, has taken the lead in fending off criticisms and insisting that working people have to make sacrifices.

In parliament, the media and other forums, JVP cabinet ministers and MPs have aggressively defended the budget proposals. Its parliamentary group leader Wimal Weerawansa opened the budget debate for the government by characterising the opponents of the finance bill as "swine that shun milk-rice" for refusing to accept the budget's supposed rewards.

Weerawansa made great play of the government's refusal to meet with the IMF and World Bank prior to the budget. He immediately added, however, that "there is no going without the international community... [But] we should not become the followers of the international community. We should rise as one nation improving our own identity and then move with the international community."

These comments are simply absurd. The Sri Lankan government has no choice but to go cap in hand to the international financial institutions to seek loans and the seal of approval necessary to attract foreign investment. The budget itself refers to the provision of funds from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank for "awakening programs" and Amunugama has already announced plans to meet IMF officials for discussions on the government's policies.

Conscious that its own base of support, particularly in rural areas, could rapidly erode, the JVP lobbied prior to the budget for programs to ameliorate widespread economic hardship. After its announcement, however, the JVP MPs have outdone their partners in the ruling coalition in demanding that working people accept the budget measures.

The proposal to end the eight-hour working day provoked immediate and widespread resentment among workers. The finance minister was compelled to make a statement in parliament declaring that the longer hours would be "voluntary". He immediately added that the trade unions aligned with the parties of the UPFA had indicated their intention to accept the measure.

The JVP, however, went one step further, insisting that the longer working day had to be compulsory. At the annual conference of the Lanka Postal Employees Trade Union in late November, JVP union leader and minister for rural development, Lal Kantha, told delegates: "We work 18 hours a day. Why can't government workers do the same, we call upon the trade unions to opt voluntarily for an extra hour's work."

Lal launched into a vicious tirade against government workers, declaring: "In any government department there

are those who freeload and sleep during work hours.... We must abolish this method of working.... It is the duty of the trade unions to inculcate the 'work ethic' amongst the workers."

Lal indicated that the government intends to impose tough new guidelines that link salaries to productivity, declaring: "We shall pay workers not on a daily basis but for work done.... No development will take place if the state employees shirk." The public sector, he said, would be cleaned up "from top to bottom".

Connected to the plan to "clean up" government departments and enterprises is the proposal to hire 60,000 unemployed university and high school graduates as cheap labour to undermine the conditions of existing workers. In his budget speech, the finance minister openly declared that recruitment was aimed at bringing about "a new work ethic" in the state sector.

Prior to coming to office, the JVP was in the forefront of protests by unemployed graduates demanding jobs. Now, without a murmur of criticism, it hails the government's plan to employ these young people in low-wage, insecure positions as a victory.

Over the past decade, the JVP has exploited the disaffection of workers with the betrayals of the existing trade unions, including those of the LSSP and Communist Party, to make significant inroads. The JVP unions have postured as a militant alternative fighting in defence of jobs and conditions and attempted to dupe their members with socialist phrasemongering.

Lal's comments, however, once again make clear that the JVP has nothing to do with socialism. Having joined a capitalist government, the JVP leaders have set about imposing the dictates of the market onto the backs of workers. It is not at all surprising: the JVP hails the Stalinist regime in China, with its cheap labour sweatshops and police state measures, as the model of "socialism" for Sri Lanka.

The JVP is using a mixture of threats and appeals to nationalism to try to overcome the opposition of workers. At the annual conference of the JVP-controlled Lanka Electrical Employees Trade Union, Lal declared: "We will not privatise the CEB [electricity board] but will surely work together to make it profitable."

Lal's remarks presage another round of cutbacks to jobs and conditions that will only pave the way for the enterprise to be sold off at some future date. The budget includes a target of 2,500 million rupees to be obtained from state-owned enterprises to help bridge the government deficit. The money can only be extracted in one of two ways: by slashing jobs and conditions or by selling off the enterprises to private business.

The JVP justifies its attacks on workers as necessary under its formula of "Rata Perata" [country forward]. The party has already opposed a campaign by telecom workers for a minimum new-year bonus of 75,000 rupees on grounds that Sri Lanka Telecom cannot afford to pay the 650 million rupees required. Of course, while working people will be compelled to sacrifice for the "good of the nation", big business will reap the profits. In fact the budget granted new corporate tax concessions along with the virtual abolition of capital gains tax.

In Sri Lanka, where the ruling class has resorted to communalism to buttress its rule for decades, nationalism takes particularly reactionary forms. The JVP has vigorously opposed peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) aimed at ending the country's protracted civil war. Prior to the election, it accused the previous United National Front government of betraying the nation to the LTTE. After coming to office, the JVP threatened to quit the UPFA if the negotiations on the LTTE's demand for an interim administration went ahead.

While claiming that there was no money to improve the conditions of workers, the JVP strongly supported increased funding for the Sri Lankan military. During the debate on the defence funding on December 6, JVP leader Weerawansa declared: "National security is of utmost importance for any country. Today our government has the responsibility to face the challenge of fortifying the armed forces. We have to take measures to strengthen national security and the armed forces."

The JVP's insistence that workers have to sacrifice for the nation recalls its fascistic "Defence of the Motherland" campaign in the late 1980s against the Indo-Lanka Accord, under which Indian troops were stationed on the island to enforce a peace deal. JVP thugs forced workers at gunpoint to participate in their protests and strikes and its gunmen killed scores of workers, unionists and political opponents who refused to take part.

There is no doubt that the JVP would turn to such methods again if faced with concerted opposition to its chauvinist policies.



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