

Sri Lankan president recruits union leaders to police public sector workers

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Just a week after last month's one-day public sector strike, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse recruited 21 union leaders to fill newly-created posts of trade union coordinating secretaries in key government ministries. Their job description includes an explicit reference to needing to "protect the government"—in other words, in the first instance, to undermine and sabotage the campaign for substantial pay increases.

The one-day strike, the first major industrial action by public sector employees since 1980, came as a shock to the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Around 300,000 workers walked out on March 16 in support of their demand for a 65 percent pay rise, despite efforts by government-aligned unions to prevent their members from taking part. The stoppage was called by the Trade Union Committee for Public Sector Salary Review (PRSSTUC)—a coalition of some 200 independent unions.

Rajapakse, who only narrowly won the presidential election last November, is concerned that the public sector campaign will attract support from other workers and the rural poor. There is already widespread anger and resentment among working people over rising prices, particularly of fuel and transport, as well as the impact of the government's economic restructuring on jobs and living standards.

When PRSSTUC leaders suggested that their members abstain from voting in the March 30 local government elections, Rajapakse reacted angrily, publicly attacking them for their "irresponsibility". He summoned a meeting of trade union leaders affiliated to the UPFA on March 22 and offered to establish the 21 coordinating secretary positions. Those present included representatives from unions affiliated to Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) as well as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and

Communist Party of Sri Lanka (SLCP).

The meeting was organised by SLCP leader and Public Services Trade Union Federation (PSTUF) official W.H. Piyadasa who campaigned for Rajapakse during the presidential election campaign. He has already been paid off with the post of director at the state-owned National Savings Bank (NSB), with a large salary as well as a vehicle and driver. According to the *Ravaya* newspaper, the coordinating secretaries will receive the starting monthly salary of a government administrative officer—23,750 rupees, which is three or four times the pay of ordinary workers.

The day after their meeting with Rajapakse, Piyadasa and SLFP union leader Allavi Moulana held a joint press conference at the Nippon Hotel in Colombo to oppose the PRSSTUC call for an abstention. Piyadasa shamelessly defended Rajapakse and the UPFA, declaring: "We as working people will not work to bring down this government we brought to power with the full support of working people." Their unions refused to support a further PSSRTUC protest on April 3.

Already a number of coordinating secretary positions have been filled. Jagath Hemachandra, secretary of the Ceylon Workers Federation and LSSP assistant secretary, has been appointed to the science and technology ministry. Tudor Ranasinghe of the Sri Lanka Freedom Government Trade Union Federation has been posted to the disaster management ministry.

Ranasinghe told the WSWWS he had a "long list of duties" but admitted that one was to "protect the government". This included reporting on the political activities of workers inside the ministry, particularly "any disruptive activities". He justified accepting the job by claiming that the previous United National Party-led government had 64 such posts.

Others taking the new appointments include: D.M Aberatna, secretary of the Government Workers Federation, to the railway ministry; D.C Weeraratna, secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Trade Union Federation, to the Prime Minister's office; Hemesiri Jayalath to the Presidential secretariat office; and Bandu Jayasinghe from the Sri Lanka Government Trade Union Federation to the health ministry.

These government-aligned trade unions have now called on workers to end their campaign and to wait for a report from the new salary commission appointed by Rajapakse. According to the press, however, the report will have to conform to this year's budget proposals. As a result, the new proposals are unlikely to be substantially different from the ones that workers have already rejected. In line with IMF and World Bank demands, salaries will be tied to productivity targets and a "review" of the number of public sector jobs.

The 21 officials appointed as coordinating secretaries will function as nothing less than political policemen for the government in enforcing these policies. Their willingness to accept such posts is another indication of the decay of the trade unions and the political degeneration of the LSSP and CP, which are now nothing more than flunkies for the SLFP.

Rajapakse's decision to make the appointments is a sign of desperation. There is no guarantee that these union bureaucrats are going to be able to fulfill the role assigned to them. During the one-day strike on March 16 and the April 3 protest, many members of government-aligned unions defied their leaders and joined the campaign. The emergence of independent, or non-party affiliated, trade unions is itself a product of the disgust and hostility felt by workers toward the leaderships of the longstanding unions.

While the PSSRTUC leaders have organised a limited pay campaign, they are not prepared to wage a political offensive against the government. PSSRTUC convenor Saman Ratnapriya told the WSWS that the committee was waiting for the government to make new proposals before taking any further action. Asked about the newly-appointed coordinating secretaries, his attitude was live and let live. "It is their choice. We are not interested. But we are continuing the struggle," he said.

In reality, Rajapakse's decision to install the union bureaucrats is a further warning that his government has no intention of granting any significant wage rise to

public sector workers and is preparing to launch a vicious counter-offensive against the working class, with the help of its new industrial police.



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