

Sri Lanka: “Independent” public sector unions kowtow to Rajapakse

W. A. Sunil

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A Sri Lankan trade union alliance known as the Public Sector Salary Review Trade Union Committee (PSSRTUC), which declares itself to be “independent” of political parties, held a delegates conference on November 5 to discuss a campaign over salaries.

There is widespread discontent among public sector workers over the erosion of pay and conditions. Over the past three years, President Mahinda Rajapakse has exploited his communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to effectively freeze wages even as prices have soared. After the LTTE’s defeat in May, the government has continued to oppose any public sector wage rise in the name of rebuilding the nation.

Last week’s union conference was not to organise a political fight against the Rajapakse regime for decent wages and conditions, but to contain and suppress the rising opposition of workers. During the war, these unions bowed to the government’s insistence that pay demands had to be shelved to support the military effort. Since the end of the war, they have continued their collaboration with Rajapakse.

The PSSRTUC is made up of 17 trade unions and fronts, including the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), the Postal and Telegraphic Officers Union, the Ceylon Teachers Union, the Government Printing Workers Union, the Railway Trade Union Joint Front and the Government United Workers Federation.

No specific pay demand has been raised. But the unions are calling on the government to implement a monthly cost-of-living allowance of 3,158 rupees (\$US27) that is due but has not been paid. They are also calling for the rectification of longstanding, major pay anomalies across various grades and positions in different sectors.

Even if granted in full, the demands would not make up for the erosion of real wages. Soon after winning office in 2005, Rajapakse gave public sector workers a long overdue monthly allowance of 2,500 rupees. In 2007, he announced a 375-rupee monthly cost-of-living allowance, but stopped it in January and imposed a wage freeze for 2009 citing the lack of funds. Over the same period, the official inflation rate has risen from 3.6 percent in

2005 to 26.2 percent in December 2008.

Last week PSSRTUC convenor Saman Ratnapriya declared that the aim of the conference was to organise a protest campaign to bring “big pressure” on the government to extract concessions. He announced another “massive protest” on November 18 in front of the Fort Railway station in central Colombo. President Rajapakse has already ruled out any pay increase this year and, even with elections due early next year, has only made vague promises about a wage increase in 2010.

PSSRTUC leaders habitually declare that they are “independent” of political parties and silence any critics by insisting that there will be “no politics” in the unions. In recent years, layers of workers have turned to these “independent” unions out of disgust with the major political parties and the repeated betrayals of their affiliated unions.

The PSSRTUC, however, has very definite politics, which were on display on October 26—just 10 days before the delegates’ conference. Ratnapriya and Sampath Rajitha, the secretary of the Railway Trade Unions (JFRTU), accepted an invitation to meet with President Rajapakse at his official residence to “present proposals relevant for the development of the country.”

The topic underlined the meeting’s purpose. Since the end of the war, Rajapakse has announced an “economic war” and demanded that workers sacrifice to build the nation. The government is facing a worsening economic crisis produced by its massive military budgets and compounded by the global recession. To avert a balance of payments crisis, it was forced in July to accept a \$2.6 billion IMF loan and the attached austerity measures, including the slashing of public spending.

Rajapakse called the meeting to enlist the support of the unions in helping to suppress the demands of workers, particularly for pay increases. Most of the unions represented were aligned with one or other party in the ruling coalition. While the “independent” unions attended, no invitation was extended to unions in the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC), Ceylon Electricity Board and Ports Authority (CEB) that are affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP).

The reason soon became apparent. Rajapakse used the meeting to launch a vicious attack on the unions in the CEB, CPC and ports over their work-to-rule campaign, describing it as part of an “international conspiracy” to destabilise the country. The JVP and UNP, he said, were part of the plot and the unions involved would be dealt with. The obvious implication is that any campaign by workers over pay or conditions is also part of this “conspiracy”.

Rajapakse’s threat was not directed at union leaders affiliated with the UNP and JVP but rather at the working class. The UNP and JVP both supported Rajapakse’s war and assisted in the suppression of workers’ demands. Their pay campaign has been very limited from the outset and was called off prior October 26 in the belief they would have an audience with Rajapakse.

By participating in the meeting, the so-called independent unions lent their support to Rajapakse and helped to legitimise his threat. In comments to the WSWs, Rajitha backpedalled furiously saying that he had declared that a campaign for a wage increase was not a “conspiracy”. He explained that he had tried to convince Rajapakse that the unions were not engaged in a “political struggle” against the government.

“We told the president if the government failed to give any concessions to workers it would be a big problem as there was already unrest at workplaces. The president said that public sector workers would be granted a pay hike in January 2010 but did not tell how much it would be,” Rajitha said.

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The remarks are very revealing. The “independence” of the PSSRTUC consists in assuring Rajapakse that it will wage no political campaign against his government, its economic policies or its anti-democratic methods. Instead, Rajitha advises the president that the government risks a revolt among workers, which the unions will not be able to contain, unless he grants a few minor concessions.

At the same time, Ratnapriya and Rajitha joined openly pro-government unions bureaucrats in loyally presenting their helpful suggestions for “developing the country.” Rajitha proposed shifting railway offices from private to government buildings and forcing evacuating unauthorised squatters from railway land. Following the meeting, the PSSRTUC issued no public statement condemning Rajapakse’s threat or defending the unions under attack.

At last week’s delegates’ conference, Ratnapriya tried to pass Rajapakse’s remarks off as a joke. “When workers demand pay the government says that their struggles are ‘foreign conspiracies’. If the government says so we are not to hesitate to accept it. We ask the government to stop ridiculous stories,” he blustered.

But Rajapakse’s threat is not a joke. In the course of the war,

Rajapakse repeatedly denounced striking workers for undermining national security and on more than one occasion mobilised the military to break strikes. Since May, the government has been boosting the security forces and has maintained the draconian state of emergency that gives the president the power to outlaw strikes and make arbitrary arrests.

Workers need to draw some lessons from the role of PSSRTUC leaders in sabotaging the previous pay campaign in March 2006. More than 300,000 public sector workers took part in a one-day strike even though many were not members of unions affiliated to the PSSRTUC. Far from extending the campaign and opposing Rajapakse’s preparations for war, the PSSRTUC leaders did everything possible to restrict and eventually shut it down.

Speaking last week, Ratnapriya attempted to justify the unions’ treachery by blaming workers. “The government told us to tighten our belts for the war. Though we were not ready to tighten our belts, the working class and the ordinary people were overwhelmed by the wave [support for the war]. Although we tried, we were unable to elevate the working class.”

This is simply a lie. The advocates of “no politics” in the unions never conducted a political campaign against Rajapakse and his war, and, as they promised him in person, will not wage a political struggle now against the president’s policies, lies and threats. These “independent” union leaders objectively line up with the government in helping to suppress any struggle by the working class.

Without a political program, it is impossible for workers to defend even their most basic rights and living standards. A struggle for pay inevitably brings the working class in political conflict with the government and all of the unions—pro-government, pro-JVP, pro-UNP or so-called “independent”. The only alternative is that advocated by the Socialist Equality Party—to launch a struggle to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers and oppressed masses independently of all factions of the ruling elite in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies.



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