

Sri Lankan unions rally behind presidential candidates of ruling elite

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The anti-working class character of the plantation unions in Sri Lanka has been underscored by their role in the present campaign for the January 26 presidential elections. The unions, which represent an estimated 500,000 tea, rubber and coconut plantations workers, are backing one or other of the two main ruling class candidates—the incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse or his chief rival General Sarath Fonseka.

Both men are responsible for ruthlessly waging the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended with its defeat in May. Rajapakse relaunched the war in mid-2006 and Fonseka, until last month Sri Lanka's top general, prosecuted it. In the final months of the war, the military's indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territories resulted in thousands of civilian deaths.

The war against the LTTE was accompanied by the systematic suppression of workers' economic demands and industrial action. When hundreds of thousands of mainly Tamil-speaking plantation workers took strike action in 2006, President Rajapakse denounced them for undermining the war effort. The plantation unions rapidly shut down all industrial action and accepted a poverty-level wage deal.

This year the unions played a similar role in enforcing the demands of government and employers. Although the war was over, Rajapakse insisted the workers had to continue to sacrifice to "build the nation". Without consulting their members, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and its allies signed an agreement in September with the Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF) for a daily wage of just 405 rupees (\$US3.50).

Amid widespread anger among workers, the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) and several other unions postured as opponents of the sell-out. But they deliberately delayed any industrial action for weeks then refused to initiate a campaign, saying it was too late.

Now all the same unions are lining up behind Rajapakse or Fonseka, promoting the illusion that their candidate is worker

friendly and concerned about democratic rights. In return, the unions, all of which are politically affiliated to, or directly function as, a political party, expect a payoff from the successful candidate. The leaders of the CWC and UPF are currently ministers in the Rajapakse government.

The CWC leaders, including Arumugam Thondaman and Muthu Sivalingam, held a press conference in early December to announce their support for Rajapakse. Thondaman is the minister for plantation infrastructure and Sivalingam is his deputy minister. Sivalingam showered praises on Rajapakse for "his untiring efforts to improve the living standards of the plantation community". Workers were "able to achieve many things in the fields of education, housing welfare, infrastructure," he declared.

All these claims are false to the core. The majority of plantation workers continue to live in cramped line rooms built during British colonial rule. Many lack basic amenities such as running water and electricity. The schools and medical facilities available on the estates are badly understaffed and under resourced. The latest wage deal not only kept pay well below the cost-of-living increases of 55 percent since 2007, but imposed conditions designed to boost production.

The opportunist character of the plantation unions was also on display. "We are now supporting the government candidate unconditionally," Sivalingam declared. "But if General Fonseka wins we will think about joining his government. But that remains to be seen at that time". He chided other unions for failing to join the government of the day—as the CWC has done on every occasion since 1977—saying all they were interested in was talking.

Many of the other unions are lining up on party lines. The Sri Lanka Freedom Workers Union (SLFWU) is aligned with Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC) includes two small unions controlled by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) that are part of the ruling coalition. All these unions supported the CWC sellout from the

outset and are backing Rajapakse.

General Fonseka is being promoted as a “common candidate” by the two main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—as well as their smaller allies. The UNP-affiliated Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) has yet to make a statement, but is certain to support Fonseka. The leaders of the JVP-aligned All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) were among the union bureaucrats summoned to party headquarters earlier this month to hear Fonseka’s speech and endorse his campaign.

Even though UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran is one of Rajapakse’s cabinet ministers, the union is still weighing its options. Chandrasekaran told the media on December 4: “We will not remain neutral. We will show our support to the candidate we trust will solve the ethnic issue and all issues of minorities including Muslims.” As of last week, the UPF was still trying to work out who was more likely to win and offer the better payoff.

The National Union of Workers (NUW) is taking a slightly different tack. It has joined the UNP-led United National Front (UNF) that is backing Fonseka but NUW leader P. Thigambaram has presented the general with ten demands as the basis for its support. The shopping list includes citizenship rights for all plantation workers, pay rises and better housing, health care and education. All of the issues for which the unions have refused to fight, Thigambaram now claims can be extracted from Fonseka in exchange for the votes of plantation workers.

The Sri Lankan economy, however, is in a worsening crisis—the product of years of massive defence spending compounded by the impact of the global recession. In July, the government was compelled to take on a \$2.6 billion IMF loan that comes with stringent conditions, including major cuts to public spending. Rajapakse has delayed these measures by putting off the 2010 budget, but a major assault on the living standards of working people will be launched as soon as the election is over—whichever candidate wins.

Sections of the ruling elite are backing Fonseka precisely because of his proven track record in waging the war against the LTTE. The general is not tied to any political party and has strong connections to the state apparatus, particularly the military, making him ideal from the standpoint of big business to impose the IMF’s austerity measures and suppress any opposition. The NUW is promoting the dangerous illusion that Fonseka will listen to workers.

The Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) is playing a similar role. DWC leader Mano Ganeshan, who also heads the

Democratic Peoples Front, has over the past four years postured as a defender of human rights. He formed the Civil Monitoring Committee, which collected evidence on disappearances, abductions, extra-judicial killings, particularly in the Western Province, and publicly accused the security forces of complicity.

Now instead of denouncing Fonseka for these crimes, Ganeshan is backing him in the election. At a press conference on December 2, he explained: “The Democratic Peoples Front is setting aside its past differences and supporting General Sarath Fonseka as presidential candidate.” Like the NUW, Ganeshan has his own list of terms and conditions, none of which Fonseka is likely to implement.

Ganeshan is rather embarrassed by Fonseka’s widely reported remarks to the Canadian-based *National Post* last year, in which the general declared: “I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese.” Other communities “can live in this country with us,” he added. “But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things.” Ganeshan simply dismissed the racist remarks, claiming the general had been “misquoted”.

The political line up of the plantation unions behind Fonseka and Rajapakse underscores the necessity of workers making a complete break with all factions of the political establishment and mobilising independently on the basis of a socialist program.

In opposition to the wage sell-out in September, workers on the Balmoral tea estate, with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), formed an independent action committee to fight for their basic rights and living standards. Their stance was bitterly opposed by all the trade unions as they sought to suppress opposition to the pay deal.

The lessons of that struggle must now be drawn by broader layers of workers. The SEP is the only party standing in the presidential election that represents the interests of the working class. SEP candidate Wije Dias is seeking to promote the widest possible discussion on the necessity of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for a socialist perspective. We urge workers and youth to support his campaign.



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