

Sri Lankan election: Rajapakse promises “economic war”

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President Mahinda Rajapakse’s election manifesto “Vision for the Future” runs to more than 100 pages of lies and false promises. But there is one important remark that rings true: the president is promising an “economic war” and that is exactly what workers will get—whether he or his main bourgeois rival, General Sarath Fonseka, wins office.

Rajapakse uses the term “economic war” to boast about his glorious economic achievements and to conjure up a rosy future for Sri Lanka as “the emerging Wonder of Asia”. There will be an “economic war” after the election but it will not be the fantasy that Rajapakse is concocting. Just as Rajapakse imposed all the burdens of the war on working people—thousands dead, hundreds of thousands displaced, towns turned into wastelands, skyrocketing prices—so he will force workers to sacrifice for the profits of the corporate elite.

Neither Fonseka nor Rajapakse speaks about the real situation confronting the Sri Lankan economy and the people. Whereas Fonseka ridiculously blames every economic woe on the corruption of the Rajapakse regime, the president simply denies that there are any problems at all!

Rajapakse absurdly claims that he doubled per capita income over the past four years and will double it again in the next six. The president brags that his policies have ensured that the island has emerged from the global crisis unscathed. He boasts that the Colombo share market has the “honour” of being the second fastest developing in the world!

Rajapakse’s figures are like the accounting methods of the racketeers at the Colombo stock exchange. No nation in history has doubled its per capita income in just four years. Estimated GDP growth over the past four years was just 6 percent annually. How did Rajapakse pull off his statistical swindle? He simply included in his figures the soaring price rises that hit nearly 30 percent in 2008. You don’t get extra rice just because the cost of a kilogram keeps rising, and it is the same with economic growth.

The fact that Rajapakse gets his statistics from the country’s

Central Bank underscores the degree to which the whole state apparatus as well as the political establishment has been degraded by the island’s civil war. Lying has become a way of life for state officials and politicians alike.

The reality is that Rajapakse mortgaged the island to the hilt to pay for his war. Government debt reached 90 percent of GDP last September. Public finances are not in a state of meltdown only because Rajapakse received \$2.6 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stave off a balance of payments crisis. Rajapakse called the election early because he knows economic conditions are going to worsen. With the IMF’s tacit agreement, he put off the budget in order to hide the consequences of his economic policies until after the election.

Far from there being money to spend on election promises, the next government is going to have to reduce public spending even further. As part of the IMF’s austerity measures, the budget deficit must be slashed by 4 percent by 2011. Given that neither candidate intends to cut the police or the military, the funds will be stripped from public education, health, welfare and price subsidies. Public sector workers, whose pay has been frozen already, can expect further demands for sacrifice. Restructuring and privatisation will be accelerated, with the electricity and petroleum sectors at the top of the list.

Anyone who thinks Rajapakse will live up to his manifesto should recall the long list of broken promises in his *Mahinda Chintana* or Mahinda Vision for the 2005 election. He pledged peace and instead plunged the country back into a brutal, communal war. He promised jobs for young people and instead sent them off to their deaths. All his claims to improve living standards and services like education and health have proven false. The cost of living has skyrocketed. Poverty levels have increased.

Rajapakse underlined the meaning of his “economic war” last May when he hailed “our heroic troops” who were “on duty not for eight hours but 24 hours a day for a full three years”. He called on workers to remember their sacrifices, follow their

example and “not think... of the hours worked”.

For four years, Rajapakse, with the assistance of all the trade unions, suppressed even the most limited demands of workers for decent wages and conditions. He repeatedly accused striking workers of sabotaging the war effort and supporting the LTTE. He used the military and police to break strikes. Late last year, the president used his emergency powers to ban industrial action by port, electricity, petroleum and water board workers.

Whether Rajapakse or Fonseka wins the election, the next government will use the same police-state measures that were developed in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the new “economic war” against the working class. That is why the size of the military and police is being maintained and the state of emergency and other repressive laws are still in place.

Rajapakse’s plan to transform Sri Lanka into a “Wonder of Asia” is not aimed at ordinary working people but is a sales pitch to big business and foreign investors. He is promising to turn the island into a hub of everything—“to develop our motherland as a Naval, Aviation, Commercial, Energy and Knowledge hub, serving as a key link between the East and West”. He pledges new ports, a new international airport, to drill for offshore oil and to turn the island into “one of Asia’s foremost commercial centres”.

Insofar as this grandiose project is not a complete fantasy, Rajapakse is hoping to exploit the growing international rivalries—particularly between the US and China—to leverage foreign investment and aid for the island and greater profits for Sri Lankan businesses. His latest “vision” signifies a far-reaching assault on the social position of workers to ensure a ready supply of cheap labour. It also means that Sri Lanka will be drawn into the competition and conflict between the major powers.

All these plans are built on the most shoddy foundations. Contrary to the myth promoted in the Sri Lankan and international media, the global economic crisis is not over—it is just beginning. The present apparent stabilisation was purchased with massive bailouts to the banks and major corporations to the tune of trillions of dollars. Already major debt crises have emerged in countries like Greece and Ireland, where governments have imposed horror budgets that force working people to pay the costs.

Far from being immune to these economic storms, Sri Lanka is particularly vulnerable. All of its export industries have been savaged by the global downturn leading to the loss of tens of thousands of jobs. To date, remittances from Sri Lankan

workers have not been affected, but that will rapidly change as economic turmoil hits in the Middle East. Like governments elsewhere, the next president will not hesitate to make the working class sacrifice to prop up the bankrupt capitalist system.

One further warning needs to be made. Following the LTTE’s defeat, Fonseka and Rajapakse claim they will solve the “ethnic problem” and enable all communities to live in harmony. Like the rest of their promises, it is a lie. Both men are responsible for terrible war crimes, the incarceration of a quarter of a million Tamil civilians and the military occupation of the North and East, which will only engender further communal tensions and conflict. In the course of the campaign, they are deliberately stirring up chauvinist sentiment by accusing each other of betraying the motherland by siding with Tamil politicians.

Working people have to take stock. Disgust, anger and frustration are not enough. Regardless of who takes office—Fonseka or Rajapakse—workers face very real dangers: a savage assault on living standards, police-state measures and the whipping up of communal tensions and violence to divide the working class. All this underscores the complete political bankruptcy of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, which in more than six decades has been unable to meet the basic social needs and democratic aspirations of working people.

The working class can only counter the onslaught being prepared through its own political mobilisation, independent of all factions of the ruling class. In opposition to a President Fonseka or a President Rajapakse, the demand must be raised for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. The SEP and its candidate Wije Dias are the only ones that fight for this perspective. We urge you to support our campaign.



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