

Sri Lankan plantation unions split over presidential candidates

W.A. Sunil
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Like virtually every other party in Sri Lanka, the plantation trade unions, which also function as political parties, are lining up in the January 26 election behind either the incumbent, President Mahinda Rajapakse, or the opposition's "common candidate," General Sarath Fonseka. Their stance is a further indictment of organisations that claim to speak for half a million, mainly Tamil-speaking workers, who are among the most impoverished sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Estate workers are being urged to vote for one of two militarists. While Rajapakse launched the renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Fonseka ruthlessly prosecuted it as the country's top general. Both are responsible for overseeing war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights, especially against the Tamil minority. The two candidates are making promises to improve living standards, but as soon as the election is over, the government will be compelled to make deep inroads into public spending to meet the demands of the IMF and foreign investors.

The two main plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Up Country People's Front (UPF)—were part of Rajapakse's ruling coalition, held posts in his cabinet and backed his criminal war. Along with the other unions, the CWC and UPF played a critical role in suppressing growing demands among plantation workers, particularly for better wages and conditions.

In September, the CWC was central to imposing a new agreement on workers, maintaining poverty-level wages for another two years. While claiming to oppose

the deal, the UPF blocked any independent political action by workers against employers and the government, and eventually accepted its terms. As a result, the daily wage has been limited to 405 rupees (\$3.50) and tied to productivity and other conditions.

In the midst of the current election campaign, the CWC has split. Two leading CWC members—national organiser R. Yogarajan and deputy president M. Satchithanathan—announced their resignation from the organisation on December 30. They immediately joined the opposition United National Party (UNP) and expressed their support for General Fonseka. Yesterday, they were joined by another senior CWC leader, M. Sellasamy, who was deputy minister of post and telecommunication.

The CWC split is one sign of deep hostility among workers to the CWC's repeated betrayals. Those leaders who have left, however, are seeking to promote the dangerous illusion that Fonseka offers an alternative to Rajapakse for working people. At their press conference, Yogarajan and Satchithanathan declared that only the right-wing UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe could provide "justice" for all the country's nationalities. They gave their "full support to common candidate Sarath Fonseka to bring 'a new future' to the country".

Yogarajan and Satchithanathan criticised the CWC for its "inability" to stand up for the interests of Tamil plantation workers and accused the government of having "no desire" to find "a political solution" to the issues that led to the country's 26-year civil war. These comments are particularly cynical as Satchithanathan had up until his resignation been deputy education

minister in the Rajapakse government and thus politically responsible for its policies—including the war.

Yogarajan and Satchithanathan spelled out their completely opportunist motivations. “In the past months we have seen that the people are not with this government,” Yogarajan said. Referring to the CWC’s electoral setbacks in provincial council elections, he said: “We failed to gain even one seat in the Western Province or the Sabaragamuwa Province. This shows that the people have rejected our alliance with the government.” The CWC breakaways clearly feel that the tide is turning against Rajapakse as sections of the ruling elite turn to Fonseka to carry out their agenda, and are looking for future positions under the general.

The split came a month after CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman declared the union’s support for Rajapakse in the election. He justified his stance by declaring that only by joining the government of the day could workers get anything. If Fonseka won the election, he explained, the CWC would consider joining him. After Yogarajan and Satchithanathan deserted, Thondaman reiterated his support for Rajapakse. Another CWC leader, Muthu Sivalinga, brushed off the crisis, saying the resignations would not affect the organisation.

After weeks of hesitation, the UPF finally decided to support Rajapakse in the election. After longstanding UPF leader and cabinet minister, P. Chandrasekaran, died last week, UPF leaders quickly reassured Rajapakse of the union’s continued support.

Other smaller plantation unions have backed Fonseka, including the Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA), the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC). As for the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU), it is affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has joined the UNP in backing Fonseka.

All these unions are simply offering their services to the two bourgeois candidates to dupe workers in return for petty perks of office. Both Rajapakse and Fonseka are committed to imposing the burdens of the island’s worsening economic crisis onto the backs of working

people. Sections of the ruling elite are backing Fonseka, not as a democratic alternative, but rather because they view the general as more capable of wielding the state apparatus to suppress any opposition.

It is time for plantation workers to draw the necessary political lessons from the long history of treachery of these unions. In the course of the pay dispute in September, there was widespread anger over the refusal of any of the unions to mount a campaign against the CWC’s sell-out deal. Discontent and isolated protests, however, are not enough. What is required is a political perspective around which workers can begin to fight to defend their rights.

A first step was taken by workers from the Balmoral Estate in Agarapathana. With the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), they formed their own action committee and issued an appeal to other sections of the working class to do the same. The action committee recognised the need to base its struggle on socialist policies. It consciously appealed for unity between Tamil and Sinhala workers on a class basis in opposition to the communal politics of all the parties of the Colombo political establishment.

The SEP is the only party fighting in this election to mobilise the working class and oppressed masses independently of all factions of the ruling class in the struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. Like other sections of workers, hundreds of thousands in the tea, rubber and coconut estates desperately need a decent wage rise. They also need proper housing, schools and hospitals. The SEP insists that society has to be restructured to meet the pressing social needs of the majority of working people, rather than the profits of a wealthy few. We urge plantation workers to study the manifesto of our candidate, Wije Dias, and to actively join our campaign.



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