

Sri Lankan union bureaucrats prevent SEP member speaking

Panini Wijesiriwardena

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At a delegates meeting of the Trade Union Confederation (TUC) in Colombo on June 10, union bureaucrats physically prevented a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) representative from speaking. The assault was aimed at preventing any discussion of the critical political issues facing the working class.

The TUC comprises 10 trade unions and fronts, including the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), the Postal and Telegraphic Officers Union (PTOU), the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and the Railway Trade Union Joint Front. They claim to be “independent unions”—that is, not tied to the major political parties, like most unions.

The meeting was called to demand the 2,500 rupee (\$US22) salary increase that President Mahinda Rajapakse falsely promised to public sector workers during his campaign for re-election in January. The TUC has abandoned its previous salary demands for a 5,000-rupee increase and the rectification of pay anomalies.

Panini Wijesiriwardena, a member of the SEP and CTU, criticised the TUC leadership’s acceptance of Rajapakse’s promises. “Even the demand for a 5,000 rupee-increase was not adequate to compensate for the skyrocketing cost of living,” he said. “Scaling down it and adapting to the president’s false promise is a gross betrayal. These unions have shown they are not ready to fight for the interests of members.” Wijesiriwardena called for a democratic discussion of the political issues before any decision was taken.

As soon as Wijesiriwardena started to warn that the Rajapakse government was preparing to implement the

International Monetary Fund’s austerity measures against the working class, TUC president Saman Ratnapriya interjected, ordering him not to raise political issues. When the speaker continued, a group of thugs rushed to the stage, grabbed the microphone and attempted to assault Wijesiriwardena, but were prevented from doing so by other delegates.

CTU president Joseph Stalin tried to justify the thuggery by saying Wijesiriwardena “always inserted political agendas into the trade union’s annual general meetings” and “tried to sabotage union activities”. In reality, the catch cry of “no politics” has a definite political content—to block criticism of the government right at the point when Rajapakse is about to bring down a budget on June 29 that will impose new burdens on working people.

During Rajapakse’s war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), these trade unions bowed to his government’s demand not to press for pay rises or to take strike action in the interests of “national security”. In 2006 and again in 2007, the TUC shut down pay campaigns, by public sector workers and teachers respectively, after just one day despite the support of hundreds of thousands of workers.

In the wake of the LTTE’s defeat last year, the government confronts huge debts and a worsening economic crisis as a result of high levels of military spending combined with the impact of the global economic downturn. Having borrowed \$2.6 billion from the IMF last year, Rajapakse is now under pressure to slash public spending, raise taxes and restructure or sell off state-owned enterprises.

Again, the TUC leaders have come to Rajapakse's aid. Just before the delegates' meeting, TUC president Ratnapriya told a press conference that there would be no political discussion. "This [meeting], in fact, is not an attempt to gain political advantages [against the government]," he declared.

His ban on political discussion did not prevent Ratnapriya from telling the meeting that Rajapakse had won massive support from state sector workers at the election. "More than 70 percent of postal votes were drawn by President Rajapakse. They believed that the president would act upon his promise of a 2,500-rupee wage increase."

The whole tenor of Ratnapriya's remarks was designed to promote the illusion that workers could pressure Rajapakse to honour his promise. He dismissed suggestions that the government faced economic difficulties, saying: "If the growth rate is going to be 6.5 [percent], why can't the government increase the wages?" He continued: "I don't believe that the Rajapakse government is in a financial crisis because it has allocated vehicle loans for members of parliament over the interest rate of 4 percent."

Rajapakse has already demonstrated that he has no intention of keeping his promise. Two days before the delegates meeting, the government presented expenditure details for 2010 to parliament. The allocations included no provision for a \$2,500-rupee wage rise for public sector workers.

Under the terms of the IMF loan, the government had to cut the budget deficit to 7 percent of GDP last year, 6 percent this year and 5 percent by the end of next year. Last year the budget deficit blew out to 9.8 percent of GDP, causing the IMF to withhold the third installment of the loan in February.

Ratnapriya was simply covering up for the government when he declared that it did not face a budget crisis. The country's public debt rose to 86 percent of GDP last year—the second highest figure of any South Asian country after the Maldives. Debt repayments will amount to 44 percent of overall

expenditure this year. Defence spending is being maintained at 202 billion rupees (\$US1.8 billion) despite the end of the fighting. Spending on education and health care is to be cut again.

In line with the IMF's demands, the government is hinting that state subsidies for key state-owned enterprises such as the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and Ceylon Electricity Board will be further cut back. That can only mean further job losses, cuts to conditions and/or sharp price rises. All of this is in line with the growing market pressure on governments around the world to drastically cut spending to deal with the so-called "sovereign debt crisis".

The TUC was determined to silence Wijesiriwardena in order to block any discussion of the crisis of capitalism, the onslaught being prepared against workers and the necessary steps that must be taken by the working class to defend its basic rights. When the TUC bureaucrats declare "no politics" in the unions, it means a ban on socialist politics and on any criticism of their own adaptation to the Rajapakse government.

Workers cannot defend even their most basic rights without a political fight against the government and the capitalist order, based on an internationalist and socialist program. That is impossible through the unions, which are defenders of the profit system.

The SEP calls for the widest possible discussion among public sector workers. We call for the establishment of action committees in workplaces as the first step in turning to other layers of workers and building an independent political movement of the working class to fight for a workers' and farmers' government and a socialist program.



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