

Sri Lanka: JVP unions submit budget proposal to government

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) trade union front in Sri Lanka submitted a wage proposal this month directly to President Mahinda Rajapakse for inclusion in the deliberations on the November budget. Far from preparing for a struggle against Rajapakse, the JVP and its unions are indicating their willingness to collaborate with the government.

The JVP-affiliated National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), Independent Ceylon Teachers Union, Socialist Estate Employees Union and State Press Office Assistant Union sent a letter to Rajapakse on October 6 calling for a monthly wage increase of 8,000 rupees (\$US71) for public and private sector workers. The unions have announced workplace meetings from October 27 to campaign for their proposal.

This campaign is partly designed to boost the flagging credibility of the JVP unions, which have been responsible for a series of betrayals since Rajapakse came to office in 2005. The NTUC claims to have 300 public and private sector trade unions, but their membership has declined sharply. The other unions in the front have been formed recently and have only a few hundred members each.

The decision by the JVP unions to write directly to President Rajapakse, who as finance minister is responsible for drawing up the budget, is significant. Even the previous limited union campaigns have involved putting demands to the government, government departments or private companies. The unions' letter to Rajapakse is more in the character of offering suggestions to the government.

The JVP and its unions are well aware that the government is preparing to announce further austerity measures in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the slashing of the budget deficit. A wage freeze has already been in place since 2006. Other measures being prepared include higher taxes on public sector employees, an

increased consumption (VAT) tax, the restructuring of key government corporations, a pension cut for new recruits and severe reductions in price subsidies.

Any fight for decent wages and against further attacks on living standards requires the independent mobilisation of the working class in a political struggle against the Rajapakse government. But that is precisely what the opposition parties, including the JVP, and their unions oppose.

When asked by the WSWs this week why the NTUC had submitted a budget proposal, convenor Samantha Koralearachchi ignored the question. After declaring that he didn't believe that the government would give a salary increase in the present economic situation, he declared that the unions were "making preparations for a long struggle".

Koralearachchi's posturing about "a long struggle" has nothing to do with launching a political fight against the Rajapakse government. Rather the NTUC leaders are conscious of the discontent and anger among workers over sharply deteriorating living standards and are "preparing" to contain any movement by promoting the fatal illusion that the government can be pressured to make concessions.

The NTUC's letter outlines the extent of falling real wages. Since the 2006 wage freeze, workers have received minimal cost-of-living allowances that have fallen well short of the rate of inflation. Over the past four years, cost-of-living increases for public sector workers have totalled 5,250 rupees a month, whereas what was required to match inflation was a rise of 13,842 rupees. Private sector workers have received even less—1,000 rupees a month. The daily wage of plantation workers increased by just 405 rupees under an agreement rammed through by the unions last year.

The NTUC and other unions are directly responsible for this plunge in living standards. The JVP helped Rajapakse take power in 2005 and backed his decision to restart the

communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). When workers' struggles erupted over wages and the government denounced them for undermining "national security", the NTUC backed down and called off the campaigns. In parliament, the JVP, while in opposition, voted for the continuation of the state of emergency that gave Rajapakse sweeping powers and for the government's huge defence budgets.

In late 2007, the JVP urged the government to announce a wage increase to quell the widespread opposition among workers to the 2008 budget. When Rajapakse ignored the appeal, the JVP rhetorically declared that it was going to defeat the budget by voting against it. At the last minute, however, JVP parliamentarians voted for the budget, declaring that "national security" was paramount.

After the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, demands grew among working people for improved wages and conditions. Unions connected to the JVP and opposition United National Party (UNP) were forced last November to call limited protests by ports, electricity, petroleum and water workers for a wage increase. But when Rajapakse banned industrial action under his emergency powers, the union leaders again called off the campaign.

During presidential and parliamentary elections in January and April this year, Rajapakse pledged that he would grant a 2,500-rupee increase in the monthly salaries of public sector workers. He urged the private sector to do the same. As soon as the election was over, Rajapakse ignored the appeals of the trade unions, dumped his promised wage rise and brought down an interim budget in June that imposed further taxes and cut price subsidies for essential goods.

The government is no more willing to grant the NTUC's 8,000-rupee wage increase in November than it was in June. Rajapakse confronts a serious economic crisis stemming from the huge debts that accumulated in the course of the civil war, compounded by the ongoing global economic turmoil. He is under pressure from the IMF to slash the budget deficit from nearly 10 percent of GDP last year to 5 percent over the next two years. As in other countries around the world, the watchword of his budget will be "austerity".

In preparation for an expected popular backlash, Rajapakse held a meeting on October 11 with the leaders of pro-government unions affiliated to his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP). The plantation unions that are part of the ruling coalition—the Ceylon Workers

Congress (CWC) and Up-country People's Front (UPF)—were also represented. The president used the occasion to call for their support for the government's "development goals" and stressed the need for "a disciplined society".

While the unions affiliated with the JVP were not present, the NTUC has indicated by its letter that it will help rein in any opposition by workers. The end of the war has not brought any shift in the JVP's fundamental orientation. In the current situation, its chauvinist slogan of "the Motherland is first" means that workers will have to sacrifice to help the country out of its economic crisis. The JVP, which began as a guerrilla outfit based on Sinhala chauvinism and Maoism, long ago ditched its socialistic phrase-mongering and integrated itself into the Colombo political establishment.

The working class cannot defend its basic rights, including decent wages, jobs, working conditions and democratic rights, within the capitalist system. These rights can be secured only by reorganising the economy on a socialist basis to meet the needs of working people and the poor, not the profit requirements of the wealthy. This involves a political struggle against the Rajapakse government and the fight for a workers' and farmers' government.

Workers must break from every section of the capitalist class, and the trade unions on which they rest, and fight to build an independent political movement based on a socialist program. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).



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