

The Sri Lankan ex-lefts and the FTZ workers

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The insidious role of various ex-left and pseudo-radical organisations in buttressing capitalist rule has been graphically exposed in the strikes and protests that have erupted among Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers in Sri Lanka over the past two weeks.

Tens of thousands of Katunayake FTZ workers have participated in walkouts and demonstrations against a planned pension scheme. What has shaken the government and the Colombo establishment as a whole is the fact that the stoppages have taken place largely outside the control of the trade unions and threatened to trigger a broader revolt by the working class against deteriorating living standards.

The government was forced to suspend passage of the pension legislation after thousands of police not only failed to suppress protests on May 30, but their violent actions provoked a stoppage by the entire 40,000-strong Katunayake FTZ workforce. Newspaper editorials criticised President Mahinda Rajapakse's blunder in not consulting with the trade unions and opposition parties to defuse anger among workers.

As the trade unions now scramble to curb the movement of FTZ workers, the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) are desperately attempting to revive illusions among workers that the union leaders will defend their rights. In his weekly column in the *Irida Lakabima* last Sunday, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratna shamelessly falsified the record, presenting himself and officials from the Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA) as "proletarian leaders" in the forefront of the fight against the pension legislation.

Karunaratna is well aware of the widespread distrust and hostility among workers to the trade unions, which function in Sri Lanka, as in other countries, as industrial policemen for the political and corporate elites. "Many thought there will not be an uprising of working people. As many trade union leaders have joined the government, many people thought it would not be possible to bring workers out... [But] the JTUA was able to launch the biggest struggle in recent

times," he wrote.

The NSSP leader also took a swipe at the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its unions for failing to support the first protest by FTZ workers on May 24. He listed all the unions that did take part and named their leaders as "future fighters for the working class." Anton Marcus, leader of the Free Trade Zone and General Services Union (FTZGSU), was singled out for special mention as having played "a significant role in this struggle." NSSP union leaders were presented as "working class leaders."

The whole column is a sham. Responding to bitter opposition among workers to the government's pension scheme, the JTUA, a coalition of 26 unions, did finally call for a demonstration on May 24. Like other union actions, it was designed to let off steam, not challenge the Rajapakse government. Workers were told not to strike, but to take leave where possible and join workplace meetings. Those who remained at work were encouraged to wear black clothes and hoist black flags to show their opposition.

Even this limited campaign was called off, however, in favour of a token picket against the pension scheme. While these "working class leaders" were addressing 300 of their supporters in central Colombo, workers in the Katunayake FTZ, north of Colombo, had taken matters into their own hands. Some 25,000 walked out of their factories on May 24, blocked the road to the Bandaranaike International Airport and tore down a huge poster of President Rajapakse.

The "significant role" played by Anton Marcus was to rush from central Colombo, not to provide leadership to the protest, but to call for workers to disperse. He falsely claimed that the government had abandoned its pension legislation and that workers had won. Marcus was immediately shouted down by workers, who grabbed his megaphone and forced him to leave. Likewise, the NSSP union leaders scrambled to reach the demonstration and played no role in its organisation.

FTZ workers have already had bitter experiences with the JTUA and its “proletarian leaders.” In 2009, Marcus, along with other union leaders, took part in corporatist talks with the government and employers that gave the green light for the destruction of 50,000 jobs.

None of the unions has challenged the effective wage freeze imposed by the Rajapakse government. They quickly abandoned their campaign early last year for a 5,000-rupee (\$US45) increase in the monthly wage, instead of calling on Rajapakse to implement an election promise for a 2,500-rupee rise. After the president reneged on his pledge, the unions dropped their demand.

Since May 24, the unions have been working might and main to bring the movement of FTZ workers back under control. After the government suspended the pension legislation following the May 30 confrontation, all the unions proclaimed that a “victory” had been won and vied with each other to claim credit. In fact, the government has simply taken a step back in order to present the pension scheme to parliament in amended form—with the assistance of the unions and opposition parties.

In his column, Karunaratna held out the prospect of an alliance with sections of the government. “Now those supporters of the government, trade unions affiliated to old left parties including Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Communist Party and Vasudeva [Nanayakkara] have started to work uniting with the JTUA,” he enthused.

The LSSP, CP and Nanayakkara, one of Karunaratna’s former NSSP colleagues, do not oppose the government’s pro-market agenda. They have supported every attack on the democratic rights and living standards of the working class. If these parties and their unions are joining hands with the JTUA, it is only to better stifle and sabotage any independent initiative by workers. All of them, including Karunaratna, agree with the government that the pension scheme, in one form or another, has to be passed to meet the demands of International Monetary Fund.

Karunaratna recognises that the FTZ protests are just a symptom of the class struggles to come. He concluded by declaring: “Because of the FTZ upsurge, a big awakening has occurred in the country, sharpening the class struggle that cannot be halted... All have learned a lesson from this.”

Karunaratna is seizing the opportunity to offer the NSSP’s services in cobbling together yet another opportunist bloc—this time with the LSSP, CP and any other parties that

can be roped in—to prevent any independent mobilisation of the working class.

Since its inception in 1978, the NSSP has attempted to tie workers to one or other capitalist party—first, Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), then the JVP and most recently, the right-wing United National Party (UNP). Just before the May 24 protest, Karunaratna sent NSSP and JTUA union leaders to meet with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to organise a joint campaign over the pension bill.

Workers should draw diametrically opposed conclusions. Their instinctive hostility to the unions and capitalist parties is well-grounded, but completely inadequate for the fight that is underway. Whether they are aware of it or not, workers are in a political confrontation with the government, which is carrying out the IMF’s dictates. To wage this struggle, workers have to establish their organisational and political independence from all of those parties and individuals that seek a compromise with the Rajapakse regime.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates the formation of rank-and-file committees led by elected and trusted workers, independent of the unions. Workers cannot rely on the LSSP, CP or any of the other treacherous old organisations, but must turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka, Asia and internationally who face similar attacks on their living standards. The basis for uniting workers is the fight for an internationalist and socialist program to abolish capitalism and reorganise society to meet urgent social needs, not private profit. To implement such a program, it is necessary to take up the struggle for political power and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government. That is the perspective for which the SEP in Sri Lanka fights.



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