

Sri Lankan ex-lefts promote the right-wing UNP

K. Ratnayake
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Amid developing protests of Sri Lankan workers and rural poor, the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) are seeking to shackle the movement against the government to the right-wing United National Party (UNP).

The NSSP and USP are supporting a UNP-led “joint opposition” against the government’s price rises and anti-democratic methods. The alliance includes the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil capitalist party; the Democratic Peoples Front, another Tamil bourgeois party based in Colombo; and the Sinhala racist organisation, Nava Sihala Urumaya.

Writing in *Irida Lakkima* on February 26, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratna took on the job of promoting this reactionary alliance as the defender of working people. He appealed to “everyone” to come under the UNP’s umbrella, as the means for opposing the imposition of the International Monetary Fund’s austerity measures and defending democratic rights, including of the Tamil minority.

A series of protests took place last month against President Mahinda Rajapakse’s huge price hikes for fuel and electricity. The government responded by deploying the security forces to suppress the demonstrations, killing one fisherman in the process. Among the island’s Tamils, there is bitter hostility to the continuing military occupation in the North and East and the abuse of their basic rights.

Working people should stop and think, however, before they swallow Karunaratna’s lies about the UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The NSSP’s claim that the UNP will lead a movement

against the IMF’s dictates is false. The UNP is a bourgeois party, which rests on powerful sections of big business. Despite its rhetoric against price rises, the UNP is committed to implementing the terms of the IMF’s loan conditions, including savage budget cuts and currency devaluation.

The UNP has been the champion of the pro-market agenda since the UNP government of J.R. Jayawardene launched it in 1977. The UNP ruthlessly implemented privatisations, huge job losses and the degradation of essential social services such as public education and health before losing office in 1994.

The UNP returned to power in 2001–04 under Ranil Wickremesinghe to impose its infamous *Regaining Sri Lanka* program, which was approved by the IMF. It wiped out hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs and slashed a range of price subsidies. Wickremesinghe would do the same as Rajapakse if he were in office today.

The NSSP’s Karunaratna also claimed that working people had “a big opportunity to fight for democracy” under the UNP. He was forced to note, however, that the UNP had introduced the present “dictatorial constitution”, before claiming it was now “severely criticising the built-up dictatorial powers.”

The UNP was the party responsible for the 1978 constitution, which grants autocratic powers to the president and was notorious for the anti-democratic methods that it facilitated in the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1989 and 1991, the UNP was responsible for unleashing the security forces in a bloodbath against Sinhalese rural youth that claimed 60,000 lives. Out of office, the UNP continued to support gross abuses of democratic rights under emergency regulations and anti-

terrorism laws.

Finally, Karunaratna argued that the UNP could resolve the “national question”, claiming that under Wickremesinghe, the party was “opposing the government’s communal and militarist policies.”

The UNP is just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The UNP was responsible for launching the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 and for prosecuting the war until 1994.

The UNP’s call for a “political solution” is not aimed at ending discrimination against ordinary Tamils but at establishing a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites, which is why the TNA has joined the alliance. The UNP and TNA have joined hands in supporting the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission set up by Rajapakse to cover up his government’s responsibility for war crimes.

The presence of the Sinhala extremist Nava Sihala Urumaya (NSU) in the UNP-led alliance underlines its utterly opportunist character. The NSU, like the Jathika Hela Urumaya from which it split in 2005, is bitterly opposed to any concessions to the island’s Tamil minority.

The USP is also part of the UNP-led joint opposition and, like the NSSP, has called for it to become the rallying point for those opposed to the government. The USP is preparing an additional trap for workers, calling for a National Independent Trade Union Centre to unite workers’ struggles. If such a centre were built, the USP claims that, “some trade unions could not betray the strikes.”

The purpose of the USP’s new union centre is not to strengthen the struggles of workers, but to strengthen the trade union bureaucracy against the emerging struggles of the working class. Under SLFP- and UNP-led governments, the unions—whether aligned to government or opposition parties—have played the critical role in sabotaging and selling out strikes. Any genuine struggle by workers will only develop as a rebellion against these treacherous organisations.

In his column, the NSSP’s Karunaratna declared: “The

left must go through this [UNP] platform because by this agreement people can be awakened. Those awakened people can go beyond and break capitalist boundaries.” But the opposite is the case. The UNP, with the support of the USP and NSSP, has established its front precisely to prevent working people going beyond capitalist boundaries.

Workers should learn the necessary lessons from the role of the ex-lefts in the revolutionary movement that erupted in Egypt last year. These outfits have fostered the dangerous illusion that the military junta that replaced the dictator Hosni Mubarak would provide an “enlarged democratic space” for the masses. They also called for unity with a “left leaning tendency” in the reactionary Muslim Brotherhood.

These pseudo-radical organisations, which are based on well-off middle class layers, have always been fundamentally hostile to any struggle for the political independence of the working class. Now they are integrating themselves fully into the political establishment in every country. In Sri Lanka, the USP and NSSP function as open propagandists of the oldest capitalist party, with a long record of viciously attacking the working class.

Workers and youth should reject this class collaborationist perspective, which can end only in disaster for the working class. What is necessary is the building of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class and rural masses to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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