

Sri Lankan ex-lefts issue phony call for a hartal

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The Sri Lankan ex-lefts of the United Socialist Party (USP) have issued an appeal to opposition parties and the trade unions to call a hartal (a general strike and shutdown of businesses) to fight for wage rises and a list of other demands for working people.

The USP made this call as resistance grows among workers and rural poor to the government's imposition of International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures that are severely impacting on living standards. But the USP's militant-sounding appeal for action is the means for politically shackling the working class to the official opposition parties—that is, to a section of the Sri Lankan ruling class.

The lead article of the March-April issue of the USP newspaper, *Rathu Tharuwa* (Red Star), proposed a list of limited demands: a rises in the monthly wage for private and public sector workers to 12,500 rupees (\$US100); an increase in the daily wage for plantation workers to 750 rupees; and economic relief for peasants and fishermen.

“The USP insists that trade union leaders and political parties in the opposition must call a mass Hartal uniting all people including workers, farmers, fishermen and house wives,” the USP stated. The opposition parties include the right-wing United National Party (UNP), the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Democratic Peoples' Front (DPF).

The USP and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), another ex-radical group, are already in a front led by the UNP, along with the TNA, DPF and Nava Sihala Urumaya (NSU), to “oppose” price hikes. The leaders of the USP and NSSP, Siritunga Jayasuriya and Wickremabahu Karunaratna, share platforms at their

protests and function as cheerleaders for these parties.

A hartal has a particular political significance in Sri Lanka. On August 12, 1953, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), supported by the Stalinist Communist Party, called a hartal against the UNP government over price rises. What was meant to be a one-day protest, erupted into a semi-insurrectionary movement across the island.

The LSSP and CP, which are now part of President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling coalition, previously invoked the 1953 hartal to demonstrate their revolutionary past. In fact, the LSSP and CP called off the hartal after the first day, leaving the masses to face government repression. In the aftermath of the hartal, the LSSP, which had already been backsliding politically, subordinated workers to its parliamentary manoeuvres with the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), resulting in a SLFP government in 1956. The end product was the LSSP's open betrayal of socialist internationalism when it joined the SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

The NSSP only broke from the LSSP in 1978. The USP subsequently split from the NSSP. None of these splits was conducted on a principled basis. The NSSP and USP are both thoroughly steeped in the opportunist politics of class collaboration. Having subordinated workers to the SLFP—the current ruling party—these two parties are now trying to dupe the working class into putting their faith in the UNP.

The UNP, a pro-imperialist party, has a long record of anti-working class policies. To suppress the hartal in 1953, the UNP government imposed emergency laws and a curfew that resulted in nine workers being shot dead by police. The UNP was responsible for initiating pro-market

restructuring in 1977, launching the island's bloody civil war in 1983 and massacring some 60,000 rural youth in its crackdown on the JVP in 1988-1990.

In 1994, the NSSP and USP politically backed the SFLP-led government of Chandrika Kumaratunga, claiming that it represented a progressive alternative to the UNP. Having opened the door to successive SLFP governments that stepped up the war and pro-market restructuring, these pseudo-radical outfits now claim that the UNP will defend the interests of working people.

The other opposition parties are also part of the Colombo political establishment. The TNA, which acted as a mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), is now seeking a power-sharing arrangement to secure privileges for Tamil bourgeoisie. The JVP, a Sinhala chauvinist party that backed the war, was part of Kumaratunga's government in 2004. The NSU is a small Sinhala extremist party.

The USP is also promoting the trade unions as a means of struggle. A recent USP leaflet declares: "History has recorded victories won by the working class using the trade union strength." It calls for "anti-capitalist socialist policies" and "a mechanism to take unified decision on the problems faced by the working class." That mechanism must be a "workers body comprised of nationally selected representatives of all trade unions."

The USP falsely equates the working class with the trade unions that have been responsible for countless betrayals of workers. Like their counterparts internationally, the globalisation of production has transformed the unions into industrial policemen for government and big business to ensure the "international competitiveness" of Sri Lankan capitalism. No longer do the unions defend even the most elementary rights of workers.

The USP and NSSP are veterans of numerous treacherous trade union alliances. The recent case of the so-called independent United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) is instructive. It was formed with the USP's assistance to protest against price hikes and demand wage increases, but acted instead to suppress any action by workers.

The USP complained that the UTUC "belatedly planned

a protest on February 23. Later it was postponed to [February] 29. Finally it did not hold any agitation... The independent trade union centre, supposed to be left leaning was completely paralysed." What "paralysed" the UTUC was the unions' refusal to wage a political fight against the government and President Rajapakse's reactionary campaign denouncing all strikes as part of a "Western conspiracy."

Now the USP is proposing a hartal waged by a body of "nationally selected representatives of all trade unions" together with the representatives of the bourgeois opposition. To subordinate the working class and rural masses to these political scoundrels is a recipe for disaster. None of these organisations is opposed to the government's agenda of imposing the burdens of the worst global crisis since the 1930s onto the working class.

Workers can only advance their interests in a rebellion against the rotten trade unions and the creation of their own independent organisations—rank-and-file action committees. To defend its basic rights, the working class must establish its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie—the Rajapakse government and the opposition parties alike. The USP and NSSP are organically hostile to such a struggle.

Rather than pressuring the Rajapakse government for concessions, the working class has to mobilise independently in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka to implement socialist policies as part of the broader struggle to abolish the crisis-ridden capitalist system internationally. This is the perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party fights.



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