

Sri Lankan election: Pro-US UNP appeals to big business

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The United National Party (UNP), like the rival Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is campaigning for the August 17 general election on the basis of populist promises and lies. Its manifesto offers something for everyone—workers, farmers, students and the poor—but if the UNP wins, it will jettison its pledges and implement the austerity agenda being demanded by international finance capital.

The UNP has headed a minority government following the January 8 presidential election in which Maithripala Sirisena, backed by the UNP, defeated Mahinda Rajapakse. Sirisena, who nominally heads the SLFP, appointed UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister to implement a 100-days program that was meant to end the corruption and anti-democratic methods of the Rajapakse regime and boost the living standards of working people.

In the current election campaign, Wickremesinghe has made the “January revolution” his central slogan. At a public rally yesterday at Meerigama, he repeated: “If we decide to take forward the January revolution there will be no terror, no corruption and no drugs. And there will be job opportunities. We will be able to develop the cultivation.” Having “established good governance in 100 days,” he declared, “we can produce a new country in 60 months.”

Wickremesinghe has named his alliance, the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG). It includes the Sinhala Buddhist supremacist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the communal Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), which includes the National Union of Workers, Up-country People’s Front and Democratic People’s Front that have repeatedly betrayed plantation workers.

The UNP has also signed a “Common Public Agreement which would protect, strengthen and

continue the victory achieved on the 8th of January” with 110 trade unions, liberal groupings, non-government organisations and academic and professional groups based on layers of the upper middle class. These groups, along with pseudo-left organisations such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party, played a prominent role in promoting the fraud that the ousting of Rajapakse was a “democratic revolution.”

It was nothing of the sort. Backed by the US and prepared months in advance, Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga engineered the resignation of Sirisena as health minister and supported his candidacy against Rajapakse. Washington is not hostile to Rajapakse, who is seeking to make a comeback as prime minister in this election, because he is corrupt and anti-democratic, but because he was too closely aligned with China.

The regime-change operation in Colombo was part of broader US plans to undermine Chinese influence and encircle China militarily. Over the past six months, the UNP-led government has sharply shifted foreign policy towards the US and suspending various Chinese-funded projects, including the huge Colombo Port City construction.

The promotion of the UNP as a champion of democracy is a complete fraud. The UNP is the oldest bourgeois party in Sri Lanka, has always been closely aligned with the US and Europe, and has been responsible for savage attacks on the working class. It initiated the program of pro-market reforms in 1977, was responsible for starting nearly three decades of communal war, and unleashed military-backed death squads in the late 1980s that massacred tens of thousands of rural youth.

In 1980, the UNP crushed a general strike of public

sector workers by sacking 100,000 employees and will not hesitate to use any method, including police-state repression, to break working class resistance to its austerity agenda. In just seven months, the Wickremesinghe government has used the security forces against striking health workers and protesting students, and sanctioned the victimisation of militant plantation workers.

Wickremesinghe's promise to create "a new country" in 60 months is not directed to working people but to the country's corporate elites, to which the UNP, like the SLFP is intimately tied. At an economic summit in Colombo on August 4, the prime minister declared that he would make Sri Lanka more "globally competitive" in order to lift annual exports to \$US50 billion.

Under conditions in which commodity prices are slumping, including for Sri Lankan tea and rubber, and apparel exports to the US and Europe have fallen, Wickremesinghe's promise only has one meaning. A UNP-led government will make drastic inroads into wages, working conditions and budget spending in order to ensure that Sri Lankan exports are "globally competitive."

Wickremesinghe promised to encourage foreign investment by increasing "the country's competitiveness" with its Asian rivals and to create "a strong middle class" through a new round of privatisation of state land permits and government flats as well as loans to small businesses and investors.

The UNP manifesto has grandiose plans to build "45 mega economic development zones" provided with "similar facilities in South East Asia." Wickremesinghe has said Chinese and German investors, including Volkswagen, have already promised to build a shipyard and car manufacturing plant respectively. Villages will be combined into clusters to produce for world market, meaning farmers will be put at the mercy of multinational corporations.

At last week's economic summit, Wickremesinghe declared: "The economic pain of the country needs to be shared equally among all sections of the country and mustn't be burdened on the broader masses."

What nonsense! Whichever parties form government after August 17 they will ruthlessly implement the dictates of the International Monetary Fund in Sri Lanka. As has taken place in Greece, the burdens will

fall exclusively on the working class, and most heavily on the most oppressed layers of the population, the rural and urban poor.

Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake warned in May that government debt-servicing expenditure was "extremely high" and consumed 95.4 percent of revenue. With 8.8 trillion rupee debt at present, the next government must carry out a social counter-revolution and intensify the attacks on the working class. The IMF has already demanded deeper spending cuts as the pre-condition of any new loan.

Like the previous SLFP-led government, a UNP government will not flinch at using the police-state apparatus built up in three decades of brutal communal war against the working class. At the same time, its close connection to Washington will ensure that Sri Lanka is drawn into the cauldron of geo-political tensions that threaten to plunge the region and the world into war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is contesting in this election to prepare the working class for the struggles ahead. We call on workers and youth to reject the two big business parties—the UNP and SLFP—and all their allies and apologists. The only means for halting the drive to war and defending democratic and social rights is through the independent mobilisation of workers at the head of the oppressed masses in a revolutionary struggle for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

The SEP urges workers and youth to actively support our 43 candidates in the Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Jaffna districts, to study our program and perspective, and to apply to join our party.



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