

# Sri Lankan election: 110 unions and NGOs back right-wing, pro-US UNP

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In the lead-up to the August 17 general election in Sri Lanka, the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party (UNP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Maduluwawe Sobitha thera, a Buddhist priest who heads the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ) and represents 110 non-government organisations (NGOs), trade unions, professional and academic groupings.

Entitled a “Common Public Agreement which would protect, strengthen and continue the victory achieved on the 8th of January,” the MoU reflects the line-up of upper middle class groups that backed the campaign in the January presidential election to oust Mahinda Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena. The regime-change was the result of protracted behind-the-scene manoeuvring sponsored by the US to install a government supportive of its “pivot to Asia” and military build-up throughout the region against China.

The organisations involved in signing the agreement last month are promoting Sirisena and Wickremesinghe as “democrats” against Rajapakse who is seeking to make a come-back in this election. The US was not opposed to Rajapakse because of his anti-democratic methods of rule or corruption but because he has established close ties to Beijing. Likewise its support for Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, two bourgeois politicians steeped in crimes against the working class, was because they reestablished close links between Colombo and Washington.

Courted by Washington as far back as 2013, the *Sunday Times* reported that he had met with the US ambassador to Sri Lanka Michele J. Sison at the temple where he resides. Following the meeting, he told the media that the ambassador had praised his group for raising issues “which, if a foreign country had raised,

there could have been allegations of interference in the affairs of another country.”

While the pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party, United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party—have not signed the MoU, they are likewise extending their support, either directly or indirectly, to the right-wing, pro-US UNP and its alliance known as the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG).

After seven months of the UNP-led government in office, the task of selling this fraud is more difficult because many of the promises made in the January election have been broken. The MoU presents a long list of new policy pledges, including: a new constitution; better free education, health, child rights, arts and culture; assistance for farmers, fishermen and the self-employed; economic planning to narrow the gap between haves and have-nots; new anti-corruption legislation and new technology to assist the investigation of financial crimes and bribery, etc., etc.

No one should believe these promises. The UNP, the oldest capitalist party in Sri Lanka, introduced pro-market restructuring in 1977 and has championed it ever since. Along with the rival Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), it is responsible for the deepening divide between rich and poor, the decimation of social services such as education and health care, and the impoverishment of peasants and many small businesses. Under conditions of a deepening global economic crisis, the next government, whether led by the UNP or SLFP, will deepen the assault on the living conditions of working people.

The MoU also promises to revamp the state apparatus “without disturbing the national and religious harmony.” Since formal independence in 1948, the UNP and SLFP have both exploited anti-Tamil

communalism to divide the working class and buttress bourgeois rule. The UNP was responsible for the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms, which marked the beginning of nearly three decades of communal war that tore the island apart and produced widespread death and destruction.

The UNP is now planning to establish an advisory committee with representatives of the signatory organisations to the MoU to assist in the formulation of government policy. The Buddhist monk Sobitha stressed at the signing ceremony that he had agreed to the MoU on the condition that he become chairman of an unelected “Constituent Assembly” to draft a new constitution, if the UNFGG wins the August 17 election.

A number of trade unions are playing a prominent role in backing Sobitha and the UNFGG, but face opposition from their members who recall the UNP’s past attacks on the working class, including its sacking of hundreds of thousands of striking public sector workers in the 1980s.

Government Nursing Officers’ Association leader Saman Ratnapriya tried to reassure workers by declaring that the MoU was a means of pressuring the government. “We will support [the government] to protect the peoples’ rights and go forward. But we say to the people, if the government breaks its promises we will come out and fight.”

Workers should recall the record of these union bureaucrats under the Rajapakse government in suppressing any struggle by workers against its wage freeze imposed in the name of sacrifice for the war effort. When the unions threatened limited industrial action, Rajapakse asked whether he should stop his communal war to grant the demands of workers. The silence of all the union leaders signalled their support for the war and the government’s attacks on the living conditions of the working class.

The upper middle class organisations that signed the MoU are not only campaigning for the UNP but also preparing if the party loses the election. Washington is not about to allow Rajapakse to return to power and shift foreign policy back towards China. Wickremesinghe has emphatically declared that “the January 8th revolution must not be allowed to be reversed.” The upper middle class layers grouped around the MoU are a “colour revolution” in waiting,

should Washington decide to give the green light as it has done in countries like Iran and Ukraine.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that workers and the rural poor can only defend their fundamental interests by breaking from the ruling class as a whole. Both the Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe camps are equally committed to the ruthless implementation of austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. The capitalist parties are organically incapable of providing solutions to the economic problems and democratic aspirations facing the working people and youth.

The SEP is standing candidates in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya districts to educate and mobilise the working class and to build the necessary revolutionary leadership for the struggles ahead. We warn that both the UNP and SLFP are drawing the Sri Lankan working class into the maelstrom of geo-political tensions that is threatened to spark a new world war. We urge workers and youth to read the SEP’s manifesto for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally, and to apply to join our party.



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