

# Sri Lanka: Big business parties issue false pledges on unemployment

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Once again, the right-wing ruling United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led-alliance are making promises to solve the unemployment crisis, trying to garner the votes of young people. The problems facing the youth, however, are an indictment of these parties and the capitalist system they maintain.

Early this year, the government statistics department declared that the overall unemployment rate had fallen to 4.7 percent. Even according to these understated figures, joblessness was as high as 21.7 percent for 15- to 24-year-olds, and 31 percent among young females. For the 25–29 age group, the rate was 8.7 percent, and 16 percent for women.

These figures shatter the boasting by the previous president, Mahinda Rajapakse, that his SLFP-led government reduced unemployment to a historical low.

Although more recent figures are not available, unemployment is seriously affecting the plantation areas. Low education levels, due to poverty and successive governments' indifference, have deepened the problem.

In its election manifesto, the SLFP's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) declared: "Employment opportunities will be created for the 400,000 youth who join the labour force each year and prudent economic management will be adopted to ensure zero unemployment and thereby eliminating the use of poverty and unemployment as a political slogan."

This is a bald-faced lie to deceive young people. The UPFA did not explain why it could not implement such a "prudent economic management" during its decade in office, which ended just six months ago. In reality, its policies, like that of the present UNP-led government, follow the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The UNP-led front's manifesto, named "Five Fold Process," likewise promised to create one million jobs within five years. This was mainly based on supposedly regaining the GSP+ subsidy—a concessionary tariff from the European Union powers. This "solution" amounts to the provision of cheap labour platforms, similar to the Free Trade Zones that the UNP established in 1978 under the banner of a "free market economy."

Only one "employment sector" developed under the governments of these parties. That was the recruitment of youth for the communal war against Tamils and for the military-police machine that has been built up against the workers, poor and youth. Unemployed youth, mainly from rural areas, were recruited to the three security forces as cannon fodder.

Any other jobs created were increasingly casual and contract-type positions, without proper pension schemes or leave entitlements, under "hire and fire" conditions. Today, 54 percent of the labour force consists of contract or casual workers, who confront ruthless exploitation. This is only an indication of the future that youth face under the corporate profit system.

The rosy pictures of future prosperity painted by the SLFP and UNP are utterly fraudulent. The country has been drawn into the deepening global economic crisis since the 2008 financial breakdown. From imperialist centres to backward countries, youth are facing unemployment and poverty. Sri Lanka is no exception.

For young people, the future depends on the fight to overthrow the profit system and establish a socialist society as part of the struggle for international socialism. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is contesting the general election in three districts—Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Jaffna—proposes spending billions of rupees for public development

projects to produce new jobs. Working hours of workers must be reduced, without any loss of pay or conditions, to increase job opportunities.

Such a program can be implemented only through the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government that carries out socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the big banks and large companies, and the repudiation of foreign loans.

Young people spoke to SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaign teams, voicing their disgust about the conditions they endure.

In Colombo's busy Slave Island area, **Koisar Musthan**, 23, explained his experience with the promises offered by the main political parties. The government demolished his family's home to release land for investors. Both he and his father work, but their income is not enough for day-to-day living. "I am currently working as a waiter in a restaurant near Galle Face," he said.

"I studied up to Ordinary Level. I have a certificate of one-year experience in data entry. At the time of the [January] presidential election I was asked to register [by the ruling party area politician]. Nothing happened after that. This time also, they may come with such things. This is how they deceive our hopes for jobs and a better life."

Musthan listened intently when campaigners explained the serious situation facing all youth and the workers. He took the SEP election manifesto to read.

**Suresh**, 21, from the Shannon Estate in the Hatton area of the central hills, said: "I am the sixth child in my family. I studied up to Advanced Level but I could not sit for the examination since I could not spend the money for extra classes. Though our school had classes up to Advanced Level, it had insufficient resources.

"If we were to take the examination, we had to attend extra classes. Only my parents were working. My elder siblings had married and gone separately. My brothers too studied up to Ordinary Level and gave up their education to work somewhere in Colombo."

After describing his dire poverty, Suresh poured out his hatred for the main political parties. "I am frustrated with the election process," he said. "I have no faith in anyone. There are many more youth like me."

**Gopinath**, 21, from the Deeside division of Glenugie Estate at Upcot, also in the central hills, sharply

criticised the plantation unions, which function as political parties. He finished his Advanced Level but his parents, who are plantation workers, could not afford for him to continue his education.

Gopinath described the state of his school. "There were donated buildings but the school did not have the required resources and support staff. Not just the school I attended, but other schools, lacked basic facilities, such as toilets and water. This is common in the plantations."

Referring to the general election, Gopinath said: "The CWC [Ceylon Workers Congress, the main plantation union] leaders were in the previous government. Thondaman [the CWC leader] said he would solve our problems. Now, other union leaders have joined the current government. They say they will solve our problems. This is how they are working."

Gopinath said he would not vote for any party. After some discussion, he said: "I am hearing about your party's policies for the first time. I can agree with them."



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