

Sri Lanka: NSSP leader campaigns for IMF austerity agenda

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Wickremabahu Karunaratne, leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), is shamelessly promoting the Sri Lankan government's attacks on the living conditions and democratic rights of workers and the poor.

Functioning as a propagandist for the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, Karunaratne regularly holds media conferences and writes columns for the Colombo press critical of workers, students and farmers in struggle against the government's regressive social measures.

Karunaratne has been a close associate of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the right-wing United National Party for nearly two decades. The NSSP leader campaigned to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena as president, claiming it to be a "democratic revolution."

This was a blatant cover up. The "democratic revolution" was a US-sponsored regime-change operation to bring Sirisena to office in the January 8, 2015 presidential election. Having previously supported Rajapakse's war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic methods, Washington moved against him to end Colombo's close relations with Beijing and align it with US war preparations against China.

As soon as he became president, Sirisena established the National Executive Council and appointed Karunaratne to the 13-member unelected body. Karunaratne's function was to provide the government with democratic credentials as it rapidly consolidated its pro-US foreign policy. Other council members included former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, ex-army commander Sarath Fonseka and leaders of the Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya, the Tamil National Alliance and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

(JVP).

Though the NEC no longer exists, Karunaratne remains a cheerleader for the government, justifying all its austerity measures and anti-democratic moves.

In a July 10 column for the weekly Sinhala-language *Irida Lakbima*, Karunaratne declared was "no future" for Sri Lanka, "without freeing ourselves from the debt burden and unless we tighten our belts for a short period."

In order to repay debts borrowed at more than 8 percent interest, he continued, it was necessary to secure low-interest loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other institutions. This meant that Sri Lanka "must show savings" and an increase in the value added tax (VAT) introduced by Wickremesinghe "cannot be altered significantly."

Karunaratne, in fact, simply repeated the phrases uttered by Wickremesinghe and Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake in parliament to justify the government's measures.

Confronted with a balance of payments deficit, falling exports and huge debts, the government obtained a \$US1.5 billion stand-by loan from the IMF, pledging to implement its austerity agenda, including a VAT increase, cuts to education and health and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. Wickremesinghe and his ministers declared that the IMF demands were the key to Sri Lanka's future economic development.

Widespread protests erupted among workers, students and farmers against these attacks, as part of an upsurge by the working class internationally. While the Colombo government temporarily withdrew the VAT rise in the face of popular opposition, it is preparing to re-introduce tax increases with some cosmetic changes.

Karunaratne's call for workers and the poor to

“tighten belts” is in line with the efforts of the trade unions and pseudo-lefts to contain and divert workers seeking to fight these measures.

At an August 25 press conference, the NSSP leader attacked students opposing the privatisation of education and, in particular, the establishment of the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine, a private medical college that charges exorbitant fees for its courses. He denounced the protests, declaring that it was a “terrible campaign by some people” and that “some of the arguments are ridiculous.”

The private sector had been able to “intervene” in Sri Lankan education for a long time, he said, and currently had “freedom in all the levels. That is the situation today under the capitalist setup.” While cynically paying lip service to socialism—in the future—Karunaratne justified dismantling public education and opening opportunities to private investors.

“We are against capitalism and fight for a socialist setup,” he said, “but at this moment we have to defend democratic rights within capitalism. In medicine there is also a market for education and therefore investors are interested ... Even though this is bourgeois investment we are responsible to defend equal rights and equal opportunities within capitalism.”

Although free public education is limited in Sri Lanka, it is an important social gain of the working class and a key target for privatisation by successive governments.

Karunaratne and Citizen’s Power (Purawesi Balaya), another middle-class group that campaigned to bring Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to power, openly attacked the student protests, claiming they are helping the “fascist” Rajapakse return to power. The NSSP, Citizen’s Power and the Trade Union Movement for Social Justice have launched a series of meetings under this banner.

Rajapakse and his chauvinist supporters are attempting to exploit the popular discontent against the government to stir up Sinhala communalism and appeal to Buddhist reaction and the military.

Karunaratne has called for the pseudo-left milieu and the civil society fraternity to re-group, defend democracy and defeat Rajapakse’s “fascist movement.”

Writing in the NSSP’s *Haraya*, he declared: “The

Leftists in Sri Lanka should build a powerful campaign mobilising those who were active in replacing the Mahinda [Rajapakse] regime with the current government. This would be a force that would come into conflict with those who are trying to compromise with the joint opposition [of Rajapakse].”

Karunaratne and the pseudo-lefts use “fascist” as a term of abuse, stripped of any scientific content, in a bid to obscure the anti-democratic character of the current regime. While Rajapakse was certainly an autocrat, Sirisena was a senior minister in his government until just months before the presidential election. Wickremesinghe was a minister in the UNP government in the 1980s that launched the country’s civil war and brutally suppressed any opposition. The Sirisena-Wickremasinghe regime has already mobilised police and soldiers to suppress opposition protests.

The growing struggles of workers, students and the poor sharply pose the necessity for a political fight against the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe administration, which is backed by US imperialism and protected by pseudo-left formations such as the NSSP.

The Socialist Equality Party and its student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, urges workers, students and the poor to break from every faction of the bourgeoisie and their fake left supporters, and mobilise on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to fight the government’s austerity attacks.



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