

Sri Lankan Tamil leaders back suppression of oil workers' strike

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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) hailed the Sri Lankan government's mobilisation of the military to suppress recent strike action by Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation (CPC) workers. TNA leaders R. Sambandan and M.A. Sumanthiran accused the strikers of attempting to bring down the government.

The TNA, which includes the main Tamil bourgeois parties, heads the current parliamentary opposition but supports the pro-US government in Colombo.

Sambandan and Sumanthiran made their anti-democratic comments during a parliamentary debate on July 27 over President Maithripala Sirisena's proclamation of the petroleum sector as an essential service. The oil workers launched an indefinite strike on July 24 in protest against government plans to privatise the state-owned CPC.

Using its draconian essential services law, the government mobilised the military to take over the main CPC supply centres. After the troops entered CPC premises and drove out the workers, the union leaders met with Sirisena and officially called off the strike (see: "Sri Lankan government deploys army to break oil workers' strike").

During the parliamentary debate, Sambandan attempted to present the government's crackdown as "democratic" while denouncing the strike as "anti-democratic." Echoing Sirisena's and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's denunciations of the striking workers, Sambandan said the unions had crippled fuel distribution and the essential services order was necessary to guarantee fuel supplies "to the people without any impediment."

Sambandan claimed the strike was part of a "conspiracy" organised by a group of opposition MPs led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse. He warned the oil workers: "You can't topple the government

through strikes." He repeatedly urged the government to "take bold decisions" to suppress workers' struggles.

Sambandan declared: "I must caution this government. The country's economy is in a very serious state. The country is mired in debts. The country must be redeemed from this position."

The TNA leader continued: "If the government failed to take bold decisions [this] would encourage the joint opposition [the Rajapakse group]." He called on the government to "demonstrate that you are governing efficiently and effectively" and "silence the joint opposition."

Sambandan praised former Sri Lankan army commander and current government minister Sarath Fonseka as an exemplary leader. Fonseka led the final bloody military offensives against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in 2009 that killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Several CPC workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* the government's strike-breaking operation was planned and organised in direct consultation with Field Marshal Fonseka. In April, President Sirisena suggested Fonseka should resign from the government and be reappointed as army chief in order to "discipline the country."

The TNA's Sumanthiran told the parliament that strike action was "the ultimate weapon," adding threateningly: "If the workers abuse it, they are putting their own rights at risk." He said the unions had been irresponsible and the government had "no alternative but to use the [essential services] law."

Sumanthiran denounced ongoing protests by the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) as criminal, saying they "put patients' lives in danger." GMOA members are demanding that the government

take over a substandard private medical college.

The remarks of Sambandan and Sumanthiran make absolutely clear that the TNA supports police-state measures to suppress the working class and prop up the government and capitalist rule.

In January 2015, the TNA, along with the pseudo-left groups, academics and others, played a key role in the campaign to elect Sirisena as president. Sirisena and his supporters exploited the mass opposition to the Rajapakse government's assault on living conditions and democratic rights.

Under the pretext of fighting "corruption" and for "democracy," the campaign to bring Sirisena to power was part of a US-led and Indian-backed regime-change operation against Rajapakse. Washington and New Delhi were not opposed to Rajapakse's war crimes or his anti-democratic rule. They were hostile to his close relations with China, their chief geo-political rival in the Indo-Pacific.

The TNA's denunciations of CPC strikers and GMOA members are not accidental but are another indication of the reactionary character of Tamil nationalism.

The Elam People Revolutionary Front, a TNA partner, the Tamil National People's Front and the Tamil People's Council have recently criticised Sambandan and Sumanthiran for backing the government. These organisations, however, have said nothing about the TNA's denunciations of the CPC workers.

This silence is tantamount to political consent. These Tamil nationalist parties share the TNA's views. While the Colombo media quoted Sambandan's and Sumanthiran's speeches, *Virakesari*, the Tamil daily, published an editorial endorsing their statements.

The TNA and other factions of the Tamil bourgeoisie are seeking to secure their privileges by backing Washington's aggression against China and lining up with the Sinhala ruling elite in the joint exploitation of the working class.

The TNA has supported all the attacks on the living conditions and democratic rights of the workers and the poor and assisted the government to block an international investigation into war crimes committed during the decades-long war against the separatist LTTE.

In the almost three years since taking office, the

Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has been thoroughly discredited among working people. The bourgeoisie, Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike, live in mortal fear of the mass opposition and developing workers' struggles against the government's austerity program. In the country's North and East, Tamil workers and the poor are hostile to the ongoing military occupation and the devastating conditions created by the war.

What is necessary is a unified movement of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, across ethnic lines, on the basis of a socialist program. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and encapsulated in its struggle for a workers' and peasants' government—a socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—as part of the fight for socialism across South Asia and around the world.



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