

Sri Lankan justice minister calls for strike ban in key sectors

K. Ratnayake
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Late last month Sri Lankan Justice Minister Ali Sabry publicly called on President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to take tough action and ban strikes in key sectors of the economy. Sabry made his appeal on NethFM radio, during a nearly 90-minute conversation about the problems confronting the Rajapakse government.

“There are key strategic economic sectors, such as the ports, customs, CEB [Ceylon Electricity Board], Petroleum Corporation, GMOA [in fact, he meant the health sector]. Strikes must be banned in all these,” Sabry said.

Strikes in these institutions are a “crime,” he continued, adding that the right to strike should be removed from the constitution. “The army cannot strike, the police cannot strike and, like them, nor should other economically strategic [institutions].” The president “is a bit soft,” Sabry said and added, “We expected a president who would act a bit ruthlessly.”

Sabry is a senior corporate lawyer, having previously represented major companies, and one of several technocrats and academics, who rallied to support Rajapakse’s presidential election campaign in 2019. Known as *Viyathmaga*, the right-wing group promoted Rajapakse’s “national security first” and “strong rule” for economic security election campaign.

The COVID pandemic has sharply deepened the political and economic crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism over the past two years. The country is on the verge of a foreign debt default with around \$US7 billion in loan repayments due in 2022, with similar amounts in the coming years, and sharp falls in state revenue. Facing a foreign reserve crisis and revenue shortfall, the Rajapakse regime is slashing imports, leading to increasing prices and shortages of essentials.

Strikes and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of workers have erupted in the health,

electricity, petroleum, ports, education, plantation and garment sectors over wages, privatisation and austerity measures. There is also widespread popular anger over the government’s criminal response to the pandemic. Rural districts have been engulfed by farmers’ protests. Sabry’s remarks reflect the fear of the Rajapakse government and the entire ruling elite of this rising mass opposition.

Sabry told NethFM that protests by electricity board employees were the result of actions by corrupt elements among engineers and insinuated that the unions were using incidents such as the transfer of employees, as an excuse for strike action.

These claims are bogus and used to slander workers taking action over the rising cost of living, shortages and moves towards privatisation. Contrary to Sabry’s claims, the unions have been doing their utmost to dissipate social anger and suppress workers’ strikes and protests.

Targeting the state sector, Sabry said it was overcrowded with massive numbers of workers, many of whom were sitting idle, and now employed 10 times more than it did at independence in 1948. The 52 state-owned enterprises suffered a loss of 200 billion rupees (about \$US1 billion) during the past ten years. In contrast, he said, the private sector earned huge profits in the last two years.

Sabry’s references to the state sector echo the ongoing demands of the International Monetary Fund for downsizing and privatisation. Successive governments, including the current Rajapakse regime, have already privatised some state-owned sectors.

Sabry declared that “unpopular decisions” have to be made and referred to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who broke strikes and sacked thousands of workers in order to “save” the country during the

1980s. She was called “iron lady,” he said. Sabry also referred to Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, who used police-state measures to stop strikes during that time.

Sabry’s remarks are not accidental. Similar sentiments have been expressed by other government ministers. In April last year, state minister, Dilum Pamunugama called on Rajapakse to “act like Hitler.”

On January 21, Minister of Lands M. S. Chandrasena criticised those in parliament denouncing the Sri Lankan president for acting like Hitler and added: “But when we see the problems of the country it needs a leader like Hitler.”

Sabry’s call for strike bans and other calls from the ruling party for Rajapakse to act like Hitler are a clear indication that the regime is preparing for class war. The ruling elite, however, has been emboldened to openly call for the suppression of democratic rights and for dictatorial methods because of the betrayal of trade unions.

When struggles erupted in education, health, port, power, petroleum, the plantations and other industries, the unions deliberately promoted illusions that the crisis-ridden Rajapakse government and big business could be pressured to grant workers’ demands. They consciously worked to divert struggles from a unified political fight against the government attacks, and have opened the door for attacks on the democratic rights of the working class.

While the circumstances in Germany in the 1930s and Britain in the 1980s were different from today, the rise to power of Hitler and Thatcher’s attacks on workers were facilitated in both cases by the treachery of the opportunist organisations of the working class.

Hitler came to power with the assistance of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which directed the German Communist Party to oppose united front action by the working class against the Nazi party and its stormtroopers. Thatcher was only able to carry out her class war offensive, closing steel plants, coal mines and other state-owned industries, because the Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress, assisted by the fake lefts, opposed a unified mobilisation of the working class against the Tory government.

Several unions in Sri Lanka have publicly opposed Sabry’s comments and asked whether the government was planning to suppress the unions. Ceylon Teachers

Union (CTU) secretary Joseph Stalin struck a phony militant posture, declaring: “If this sort of thing is really done, then all the trade unions will definitely unite against it.”

Last year, however, the CTU and other educators’ unions betrayed a determined 100-day online strike by over 250,000 teachers, accepting a paltry wage increase and supporting the reopening of public schools, as COVID-19 infections continued to surge. These unions blocked teachers from uniting with other sections of the working class to fight the government’s austerity policies.

Last year, Rajapakse imposed the essential public services act on many state institutions, banning all industrial actions and imposing heavy punishment on anyone violating its regulations. Not a single trade union opposed this repressive law.

The Rajapakse regime is not alone in advocating state attacks on the working class. Parliamentary opposition leader Sajith Premadasa recently told a Colombo meeting that Sri Lanka needed an “elected dictatorship” and praised Thatcher. “Ms. Thatcher was called ‘Iron Lady’ because she did what she had to do without fear,” he declared.

The working class must take a sharp warning. The trade unions, assisted by the pseudo-left, are paving the way for the ruling regime to intensify their attacks on basic democratic rights. As in every country, the crisis-ridden ruling class is responding to the rising opposition of the working class to austerity and the profit-drive response to the pandemic with increasingly authoritarian moves.

The working class must respond by mobilising independently of the trade unions and in defence of their jobs, wages, working conditions and basic democratic rights. Workers must form their own action committees in every workplace and fight for the class unity of workers across the island on a socialist program and in alliance with the international working class. The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation that advances this perspective.



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