

Sri Lankan president sacks two ministers amid deepening crisis

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On March 3, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse sacked Wimal Weerawansa and Udaya Gammanpila, respectively the ministers of industries and of energy, from the cabinet.

The immediate reason for their dismissals was their public criticism of Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse, the president's younger brother, at a public meeting where they accused him of being responsible for the country's economic crisis.

The removal of two key allies in the campaign that originally brought President Rajapakse to power underscores the deep political crisis of the government and political establishment. The ruling class is being hit by the economic turmoil and, above all, by the rising struggles of the working class in opposition to the government's austerity measures.

Weerawansa and Gammanpila lead two small Sinhala racist parties—the National Freedom Front (NFF) and the Pivithuru Hela Urumaya (PHU)—that are partners of the ruling coalition led by Gotabhaya Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

The NFF has six MPs and the PHU one seat. They had banded together with other smaller organisations, including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Sri Lanka Communist Party, Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and the Democratic Left Front (DLF), to support the SLPP.

While complaining that they are being marginalised in the coalition, these parties, like all members of the government are sensitive to, and fearful of, the rising opposition of the working class and the rural masses.

On March 2, the 11 groups held a meeting to launch their alternative economic program, titled "The whole country to the correct path," that claims to be a solution to the country's economic crisis.

The program, which calls for foreign debt restructuring following discussions with creditor nations, criticises the four-decade open market policies pursued in Sri Lanka, and advocates curbing imports and developing local agriculture and industry. In other words, it is a thoroughly nationalist austerity program to impose the burden of the crisis on

working people.

Addressing the meeting, Weerawansa declared that the crisis was the deliberate creation of Basil Rajapakse who had failed as finance minister to take any measures to avert the economic devastation. The finance minister, he continued, had inflicted economic policies that aimed to bring the country under the control of the West, including the US. Gammanpila echoed these claims.

Following their cabinet dismissals, Weerawansa and Gammanpila intensified their denunciations of the finance minister, describing him as an "ugly American," a reference to his US citizenship, acting in the service of Washington.

As a proof, the two ex-ministers cited the recent deal with the US-based New Fortress Energy Company (NFE) to sell a 40 percent stake of the state-owned Kerawalapitiya Power Plant. They also alleged he was attempting to transform Sri Lanka into Washington's pawn in the geopolitical struggles between world powers in the Indian Ocean.

Weerawansa, Gammanpila and DLF leader and water resources minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara had filed cases in the Supreme Court against the government's agreement with the NFE. These were dismissed by the courts, which claimed the agreement has merits for Sri Lanka.

Notwithstanding their nationalist denunciations and anti-US posturing, the NFF, PHU and other parties in their alliance have backed the government's ruthless policies over the past two years. They supported its criminal COVID-19 herd-immunity policies, its forcing employees back to work in unsafe conditions, the militarization of the administration, and other anti-democratic measures, and consented to its austerity attacks.

Demonising Finance Minister Rajapakse and blaming him for the economic crisis is an attempt to cover up the crisis of capitalism and the government's desperate defence of the profit system. Halting the sale of a stake in the Kerawalapitiya Power Plant to a US firm will not stop the attacks on the wages and conditions of its workforce.

President Rajapakse is determined to stamp out any dissent in the ruling coalition and criticism of his rule as his

government prepares to unleash even more brutal attacks on all working people.

In early January, he sacked Susil Premajayantha, the state minister for education reforms, after he criticised the government's ban of the import of agro-chemicals and fertiliser. Premajayantha's mild criticism was in response to mass opposition to the ban in rural areas.

The global pandemic has shattered Sri Lanka's foreign earnings following a dramatic decline of exports, tourism and remittances from overseas workers. External reserves have dried up and pushed the government to the edge of a default with little foreign currency to pay for essential food, fuel and medicine imports. The result is power cuts, transport breakdowns and immense hardships for millions of working people.

The ruling class fears that the Russian invasion and escalating war in Ukraine and US-led NATO war drive against Russia, will deepen the financial crisis on the island.

International and domestic pressures are forcing the government to seek funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) "to solve the crisis."

Last week the IMF released a report on Sri Lanka demanding the government stop printing money, increase interest rates and taxes, devalue the rupee and step up economic restructuring.

On Tuesday, nine big-business chambers held a press conference and demanded the government seek IMF funding. Colombo business newspaper, the *Dailyft*, summed up the chambers' call to the government as, "bite the bullet today to avert disaster tomorrow."

The government has not yet decided to seek IMF assistance, but Finance Minister Rajapakse is scheduled to attend the IMF's annual meeting in Washington in April and will be involved in discussions.

While the government may be forced to ask for IMF funds, it will come at the price of brutal austerity measures. Some are already being implemented. On Wednesday, the government drastically devalued the rupee by about 15 percent against the US dollar. Unofficially, the devaluation is about 30 percent.

The real fear of the Rajapakse regime is the rising tide of working class struggles across the country. Last year Sri Lanka saw a series of strikes and protests involving hundreds of thousands of teachers, health and state administration employees and plantation workers to list just a few.

In February, and again last week, more than 50,000 health workers went on strike, demanding higher salaries and improved conditions, which were betrayed by the Federation of Health Professionals. Its leaders Ravi Kumudesh and Saman Rathnapriya issued a press statement which declared

that, because the country was in a crisis, they were not encouraging strikes but were concerned about "managing" members.

In plain language, "managing" members is an indication that the unions are losing control of their workers and their ability to defend the government and big business.

As the crisis deepens, the Rajapakse government is also seeking the support of the parliamentary opposition for its austerity moves and to take on the working class.

On Wednesday, parliamentary leader and minister, Dinesh Gunawardena, announced that the president had decided to call an all-party conference to "discuss the current economic situation in the country." No date or venue was announced.

Irrespective of any future all-party conference, the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and United National Party (UNP) have already called for an IMF program to "resolve" the crisis. Early this year the JVP asked the government to establish a joint mechanism to manage the crisis.

The working class must take this as an urgent warning and fight to defend their living conditions and democratic rights. There is no constituency among the capitalist parties that defends these rights. Workers must break from every faction of the capitalist class and build an independent movement of the working class.

This requires the building of their own action committees, independent of the trade unions, to prepare for united industrial and political action across the island, in alliance with the international working class. Such a struggle must be based on the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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