

What are Sri Lanka's trade unions doing amid the mass anti-government upsurge?

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Sri Lanka's workers, youth and oppressed masses have taken to the streets across the island to demand the immediate resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his big business, Sinhala-chauvinist government and the dissolution of parliament. Facing immense hardships, they are demanding immediate relief from punishing price rises and shortages of food, medicine, fuel and cooking gas, and an end to daily power cuts.

This immense outburst of social opposition has staggered the Rajapakse regime and the entire ruling class. As in other countries, the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine have roiled Sri Lanka's economy and deepened the already stark gulf between the bloated capitalist elite and the working class and rural toilers.

The government is now scrambling to stay in power after more than three dozen MPs deserted to the opposition.

It announced a "temporary" default on foreign debt payments this week, and is preparing to implement savage International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures to secure a bailout loan. This austerity program includes: raising income and value-added taxes; increasing fuel prices and electricity rates; instituting a market-determined flexible exchange rate; cutting the fiscal deficit, i.e., slashing social spending; and "restructuring" the state sector through privatisation, corporatisation and contracting-out. These measures will wipe out jobs, cut wages and otherwise trample on the social rights of working people.

Workers now confront the question of how to oppose this class war assault of the government and the entire ruling class.

The trade unions that ostensibly represent them are doing everything they can to prevent the working class from mobilizing its industrial and political power and to tie it to capitalism and parliamentary politics.

Precisely because the unions have been suppressing the class struggle, including a powerful strike wave that predates Rajapakse's November 2019 election as president, the mass anti-government protests erupted completely outside them—just as they did independently of the opposition parties.

After remaining conspicuously silent for days as the "Gota got to go" protests swelled, the unions now claim to support the ongoing agitations. But they do so only with the aim of bringing them under control, and preventing them from developing into a challenge to capitalist rule.

Yesterday the Trade Unions and Mass Organisations (TUMO) announced it will hold a march on Saturday, April 16, in support of the protest that tens of thousands have been mounting in central Colombo for the past seven days to demand the resignation of

President Rajapakse and his government.

Thirty-four trade unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), Ceylon Mercantile and General Workers Union (CMU) and Ceylon Bank Employees Union, are affiliated to the TUMO, as are the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party's Workers' Struggle Center and fishermen group, and some non-government organizations (NGOs).

TUMO has chosen as the main slogan for its march "Bow to mass opinion! Inefficient government, go home!"

The TUMO says nothing about the composition or class character of the government that should replace the hated Rajapakse regime. But it is no secret it wants to pave the way for another capitalist government. Indeed, the TUMO's denunciation of the current government as "inefficient" echoes the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), which has denounced Rajapakse for "mismanaging" the economy, including by not agreeing earlier to implement another round of IMF austerity.

On April 4, TUMO issued a statement calling for intellectuals and professionals to join with it in preparing "a short term, midterm and long-term practical and scientific program to solve" the people's "burning social-economic problems." This program, it went on to make clear, would not be directed at mobilizing the working class and oppressed masses to impose solutions that correspond with their class interests. Rather it would begin and end with what is "possible" within the confines of crisis-ridden capitalism and under the continuing domination of the Sri Lankan political establishment.

Based on this program, explained the statement, TUMO will "take actions to pressure the rulers to bring short term solutions standing on the side of people" and prepare a "people-friendly constitution." It is calling on all trade unions, and professional groups, and civil organisations "to come together without colour and party distinction ... to make reality of this program."

In other words, what is being proposed is a popular front-type, multi-class movement, oriented to and most probably directly including parties of the capitalist establishment. It will be based on the canard that capitalism—which on a global scale is mired in systemic crisis, vomiting up reaction and threatening to engulf humanity in a global military conflagration—can be reformed. Such a movement will be used to tie the working class to the political establishment, suppress the class struggle and uphold capitalist rule, in which the trade unions today are thoroughly integrated.

There is a second trade union front, the Trade Union Coordinating Centre (TUCC). However, its politics are essentially no different. The TUCC brings together more than four dozen unions. Some of them are politically dominated by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), while others are independent unions that gravitate around the

JVP.

On April 8, the TUCC sponsored protests and a one-day token strike of public sector workers in support of the ongoing anti-government agitation. It has said that it will give the Rajapakse government until April 18 to resolve the current crisis.

At a press conference last Saturday, the president of the TUCC-aligned Federation of Health Professionals (FHP) said if the government did not reach a “justifiable solution” to the protests by April 18 “all the trade unions have decided to carry on the struggle by joining with people’s struggle [and] beginning an indefinite strike.”

The TUCC unions’ threat of a general strike is not aimed at mobilizing the working class against the political establishment and in the fight for measures aimed at resolving the economic crisis at the expense of domestic and global big business and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Rather by striking a pose of radical opposition, the unions are seeking to retain control over an increasingly radicalized rank-and-file who are demanding urgent action be taken to defend their sharply eroding living standards and oppose the government’s privatization drive. A second, related aim is to tie the working class to the JVP’s maneuvering with the government and other opposition parties.

Like the JVP, the JVP-led unions are calling for the setting up of an “interim government” based on the opposition parties after President Rajapakse and his government resign. They are also calling for fresh elections to bring a new government of professionals “free of looting, corruption and frauds” to power. This is nothing but another capitalist government. Significantly, the JVP has refused to rule out approaching the vampires of global capital at the IMF for “support.”

Recently employers in the Colombo free trade zone warned of growing unrest among workers over the surging cost of living. However, the unions are completely silent. At the same time, the General Secretary of the Free Trade Zone and General Workers Union, Anton Marcus, has denounced the ongoing protest against the Rajapakse government, calling them “unorganised, indisciplined and violent.” Like the ruling class, the unions are terrified by the mass anti-government upsurge and the growing demand of workers that they take action to defend their rights.

The last two years saw a wave of militant strikes and protests by public sector workers in the education, health, state administration, railway, port, petroleum and power sectors. There have also been continuous struggles on the part of plantation workers and strikes and protest in free trade zones.

Invariably, the unions have isolated and sold out these struggles, enabling the Rajapakse government to press forward with its drive to impose the burden of the crisis on working people. At the same time, the unions have collaborated with the government in implementing its profits before lives pandemic policy.

Last year about 250,000 teachers and principals engaged in a strike for more than 100 days, only to have the unions accept the government’s offer of a pay rise equal to just one-third of what the education workers had demanded. At the outset of the strike, the leaders of the main unions involved, including the CTU and JVP-affiliated Teacher Services Unions, said in a discussion with the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse that they “understand” the country is in “economic crisis.”

The media statement the leader of the Federation of Health Professionals, Ravi Kumudesh, made last month after betraying the health workers’ struggle is also highly significant. He admitted that unions had called limited strikes and protests to “manage” members who were pressing the union to fight for their demands.

Since June last year, President Rajapakse has again and again invoked the powers of the Essential Public Services Act to criminalise industrial actions at most public sector institutions. The unions have been completely silent about this draconian law. Nor have they condemned the threats made by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s elder brother, to use state violence to suppress the anti-government agitation, indicating their indifference to the democratic rights of the masses. And while they may criticize the authoritarian executive presidency, the unions truck and trade with the establishment parties that have upheld it for decades, and have no intention of making the fight for its abolition a lever for politically mobilising the masses against the capitalist establishment and for the reorganization of the economy on socialist lines.

In the present global capitalist crisis, working people cannot defend their rights or secure their basic needs by pressuring or pleading to the government and the capitalist class. Rather they must mobilize their independent class strength in the fight for a socialist action program to oppose austerity and the IMF and secure decent jobs, food, fuel and medicines for all!

To mobilize its class strength, the working class must break free of the suffocating political and organisational control of the pro-capitalist trade unions and build genuine organisations of working class struggle.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is calling for the formation of action committees in every workplace, factory and working class suburb, democratically elected and independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties.

These action committees will organize the fight for the essential measures needed to address the pressing needs of the people. These include establishing workers’ democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for the lives of people; cancelling the debts of the poor farmers; and nationalising the banks, large estates, major companies and fortunes of the super-rich so their resources can be redirected to providing decent living and social conditions to all working people.

The emerging network of action committees will serve as a rallying point for the rural poor and youth, and unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, rejecting the chauvinist and communal filth propagated by the capitalists and their political representatives.

As the authority of the action committees grows, they will become organs of working class political power, providing the basis to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement the above socialism program. The essential allies of Sri Lankan workers in this struggle are their class brothers and sisters around the world.

All workers and youth who agree with this program should join and build the SEP as the revolutionary leadership of the working class and oppressed masses.



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