As Sri Lankan protests grow, Ceylon Workers Congress courts India's Hindu-supremacist BJP

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Amid mass strikes and protests against the Rajapakse government in Sri Lanka, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) invited Kuppusamy Annamalai, the leader in Tamil Nadu state of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for May Day. Annamalai attended the CWC's May Day meeting in Nuwara Eliya as a special envoy of India's Hindu-supremacist government.

After attending the CWC's May Day celebrations, Annamalai traveled to Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka to meet Tamil National Alliance (TNA) officials. This took place as millions of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, farmers and students of Sri Lanka were striking against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government over fuel shortages, power cuts, rising prices of essential food items and escalating attacks on living standards.

CWC officials did not try to hide, but reveled in their ties to India's BJP prime minister, Narendra Modi. "Annamalai came to Sri Lanka as a representative of the BJP, the party of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. We invited Annamalai here as an expression of goodwill with them," CWC Vice President Bharat Arulsamy told the press.

The CWC's invitation to the BJP exposes the CWC's reactionary politics and the role of union bureaucracies like the CWC. It vindicates the positions of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka. Fighting to end the robbery of the workers by the ruling elites requires the independent mobilization and organization of the working class in rank-and-file action committees, organized independently from the unions, uniting workers across national boundaries in a struggle for socialism.

The claim that Annamalai visited Sri Lanka to help Tamil tea plantation workers, who for 170 years have lived on poverty wages in tiny huts, is a fraud. Annamalai is a former Indian Police Service (IPS) officer and now leader of the BJP in Tamil Nadu state. But the BJP oversees the detention of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India in squalid camps, opposes attempts to protect workers from COVID-19 with scientific health policies leading to millions of deaths, and serves as US imperialism's military proxy against China.

The BJP government brutally suppresses strikes and protests by Indian workers and peasants and has pursued a policy of blatant legal discrimination targeting Indian Muslims.

The CWC invites BJP officials to its events because, just like the TNA, it is staggered and terrified by the growing upsurge of the working class in Sri Lanka. It is determined to strangle the movement and tie the working class to the executive presidency of the Rajapakse regime.

A few days before hosting Annamalai in Nuwara Eliya for May Day, Arulsamy boasted of the CWC's support for President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was charged with war crimes over the mass murder of Tamil fighters and civilians at the end of the 1983–2009 communal war. Arulsamy boasted: "Our late leader Arumugam Thondaman supported Gotabhaya Rajapakse to come to power. … Thondaman had given his full support to the Mahinda Rajapakse government in 2005. We have supported the Gotabhaya government ever since."

The CWC, while formally referring to the working class in its name, is essentially a bourgeois political party operating as a yellow union among Sri Lanka's upcountry plantation workers. The role they play, given tea exports' central role in the Sri Lankan economy, is to ensure that workers gather as much tea for the lowest possible wages. It has a notorious history of betraying plantation workers' struggles and, like all bourgeois parties and trade unions in Sri Lanka today, it is deeply discredited.

The anti-government protests that have erupted in Sri

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Lanka are part of a global upsurge of the class struggle. The tens of millions of deaths and the breakdown of global supply chains due to the disastrous official mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the constant threat of imperialist war and the international surge in prices are provoking mass anger worldwide.

Across the Indian subcontinent, political protests and strikes are growing. While protests are continuing in Pakistan amid the US-backed removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan, Modi's BJP government has faced mass protests against anti-Muslim legal measures, farmers' protests and strikes by hundreds of millions of workers in India.

The CWC's alliance with the BJP is a warning to Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers in Sri Lanka, including plantation workers, and to workers worldwide. The CWC's decision to invite a BJP official who is a former high-ranking police officer makes clear that it is not seeking to unify Sri Lankan workers' struggles with those of workers in India and internationally. Rather, this union is working with the most reactionary political forces to try to divide the working class along national and ethnic lines.

The strongest warnings must be made about the BJP. The Modi government is very nervously watching the increasingly militant and politicized struggle of Sri Lankan workers against the Rajapakse clan. It will not tolerate such a struggle indefinitely, as the BJP is itself terrified of facing an insurrectionary movement in the working class in India.

Workers in Sri Lanka must never forget how, in July 1987, Rajiv Gandhi's Congress-led government of India struck an Indo-Sri Lankan pact, and then helped slaughter opposition to the austerity measures of the right-wing United National Party government.

So-called "Indian peacekeeping forces" arrived in Sri Lanka's war-torn north with a few relief supplies. However, they promptly began massacring thousands of innocent Tamils. The Sri Lankan army, which had been fighting Tamil nationalist groups in the north and east, was freed up to suppress struggles in the south. There, they slaughtered over 60,000 Sinhalese.

There is little doubt that the CWC, like the TNA, are discussing plans for a new Indian intervention in Sri Lanka. Significantly, the CWC, which also supported the communal war against Tamil-minority peoples in the north and east carried out by the government of President J.R. Jayewardene starting in 1983, supported 1987 Indo-Lankan pact. Moreover, it was directly involved in the state crackdown on plantation workers' youth during the 1983–2009 communal war.

The key question facing workers in Sri Lanka and India is unifying struggles of the working class against the starvation, mass infection and war threat imposed by capitalist governments across the region. This requires a break with bourgeois organizations like the CWC, the building of independent, rank-and-file committees and the unification of Sri Lankan and Indian workers of all ethnic and religious backgrounds in a struggle for socialism.

The CWC, led by Soumyamoorthy Thondaman since the early 1950s, has set up its headquarters in Colombo 7, a super-wealthy neighborhood. His great-grandson, Jeevan Thondaman, is the current CWC secretary. The CWC leadership is appointed by Thondaman's heirs, who have amassed fortunes in Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu.

Other plantation unions—P. Thigambaram's National Workers Union, Mano Ganesan's Democratic People's Front, the Democratic Workers Congress, the Workers National Union, the Upcountry People's Front, and the All-Ceylon Plantation Workers Union linked to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—are no better. All are industrial enforcers of the state, seeking to get as many export dollars as possible while leaving workers with the lowest wages possible. They fear the danger that the toppling of Rajapakse would pose to their own privileges.

The class allies of Sri Lankan workers are not the Indian bourgeois BJP, but millions of workers in India and internationally. Workers and youth must be mobilized independently of these decrepit, nationally-based bureaucracies, in organizations like the Sri Lankan plantation action committees supported by the SEP, to oppose imperialist war and the bourgeoisie's plundering of the workers, based on a struggle for socialism.

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