

Sri Lankan trade unions undermine workers struggles

W.A. Sunil
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The Trade Unions Coordination Centre (TUCC) and the Trade Unions and Mass Organisation Collective (TUMOC)—two trade union groupings in Sri Lanka—called protests on Wednesday and Thursday. They raised slogans such as “No to a government defending thieves,” “Stop illegal arrests,” “Obey the demands of the people,” “Defeat Gotabhaya [Rajapakse]-Ranil [Wickremesinghe] conspiracy!”

The unions called the protests in a bid to deflect the rising anger among workers, youth and the poor over the ever-increasing prices and shortages of essentials. Angry protests are erupting every day near fuel distribution stations across the country over the acute shortages of petrol, diesel and kerosene.

The anti-government movement has been intensified after the attack by thugs on anti-government protesters occupying the Galle Face Green on May 9 demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. The attack was orchestrated by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

Facing mass opposition, Mahinda Rajapakse resigned as prime minister along with his cabinet, and United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was installed last week in his place. Wickremesinghe, a former prime minister well known as pro-market and pro-US, will preside over the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program.

The trade unions did not organise this week's limited protests to fight for the pressing needs of workers but rather to let off steam. The protests were characterised by demagogic denunciations by union leaders of the government and new prime minister. None indicted the capitalist system, which is in deep crisis internationally and imposing ever greater burdens on the working class.

Wasantha Samarasinghe, a TUCC leader and president of the Inter-company Employees Union, told protesters on Wednesday that the unions would continue to demand the prosecution of those responsible for the May 9 attack. He blamed the hardships facing workers on thievery by those in power, not the profit system itself.

Ravi Kumudesh, president of the Federation of Health Professionals, promoted the illusion that Wickremesinghe could be pressured to make concessions for working people. Wickremesinghe, he said, had come to power because of the people's struggle and should not turn his back on them by making a deal with President Rajapakse.

Joseph Stalin, general secretary of the Ceylon Teachers Union, told a protest on Thursday that President Rajapakse was trying to hold onto power by appointing Wickremesinge prime minister. “We are continuing this struggle until the Gota-Ranil government goes home,” he declared.

The unions are not demanding an end to the draconian state of emergency imposed after the one-day general strike on May 6. Already the president has deployed the military onto the streets to intimidate people and impose a curfew.

Millions of workers participated in the May 6 strike. The rural and urban poor and small businesses rallied behind the working class in a hartal. It followed a mass one-day general strike on April 28.

Hundreds of thousands of workers also walked out indefinitely on May 10, after anti-government protesters were attacked by the SLPP mobs. But this was under conditions of a 24-hour curfew that prevented workers from going to work anyway. Unions called the strike off on May 11, replacing it with limited protests.

The massive mobilisation of workers not only shocked the government and political establishment but also the unions that called the strikes. The response of union leaders was to try to wind back and demobilise the working class to prevent it from threatening capitalist rule, to which they are all tied.

All these unions have a long record of betraying the struggles of workers, including 100-day teachers strike and health workers strikes and protests last year.

Far from alleviating the social catastrophe facing working people, Wickremesinghe is preparing to implement austerity measures that will worsen the hardships. In a speech to the nation on May 16, he warned that the coming months “will be the most difficult period of our lives and we all have to make sacrifices.”

Addressing parliament on Wednesday, the prime minister asked all public sector employees in unessential services not to report for two days because of fuel shortages. Schools were closed from yesterday for the same reason. In parliament on Thursday, he cited the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and warned of looming food shortages and starvation.

In a press conference on the same day, the Central Bank Governor Nandalal Werasinghe emphasised that electricity, water and fuel prices had to be increased.

Workers are angry about the unions’ role as the government and the big business impose new burdens. Several workers spoke to WSWS reporters:

A worker at the ATG company in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone condemned the government’s recent deployment of security forces at all free trade zones.

“Wickremesinghe is same as the former person, Mahinda Rajapakse. It is difficult to say any changes in alleviating shortages, including fuel,” he said and emphasised that the unions did not give adequate support to workers’ struggles.

A nurse from the Kandy General Hospital said that her salary is not enough to manage the rising cost of living. “Our travelling costs are going up. The price of a loaf bread has increased from 60 rupees to 170 rupees within a few months. This alone shows the unbearable increase of cost of living,” she commented.

The protests by the unions are “useless unless we have program to defend our rights,” she continued. “Because the hartal and strike on May 6 were more successful than the trade unions expected, they

abandoned the [planned] May 11 general strike. I think this strengthened the government’s hand.”

A worker from an Electricity Board substation in Chilaw said, “The CEB administration had suspended most overtime work as part of its austerity measures. We depend on overtime work to earn enough income to meet our needs.

“The unions called off the recent strikes without consulting members, as they always do. Really serious discussion is needed to understand the real situation we are facing, but there’s no such discussion.”

Shyama, a primary school teacher, said: “In fact, we participated in the strikes not because the unions said so. I have never been a member of a trade union. Many of us went on strike because we thought our participation would contribute to the struggle to end the hardships faced by the masses in this country.”

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has urged, it is imperative for workers to form action committees, independent from the trade unions and all the capitalist parties and their hangers on. Such committees need to be built in workplaces, factories, plantations and working-class suburbs throughout the country.

By building a network of such action committees, Sri Lankan workers can organise a unified industrial and political struggle against the government and turn to their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally who are facing similar attack on their social and democratic rights.

Such a struggle should be based on the fight for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies to meet the needs of working people.



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