Sri Lankan trade union leaders line up with President Wickremesinghe

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Sri Lankan working people face unbearable living conditions with rampant inflation and scarcities of essentials, including food, fuel and medicines. Last month the inflation rate rose to 60 percent and food inflation to 90 percent. In spite of seething anger among workers and the poor over the continuing attacks on their democratic and social rights, the trade unions are suppressing their struggles.

Far from in any way defending the working class, the unions are pledging their support for President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government, even as it prepares to unleash the savage austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The health and plantation unions are prominent among those directly backing Wickremesinghe.

In an extraordinary move, Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) leader Saman Rathnapriya has been directly integrated into the state apparatus. On August 2, Wickremesinghe appointed him to the newly-created post of Director General of Trade Unions. He is also a leader of the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), a grouping of unions in the health sector.

Rathnapriya's close collaborator—FHP president Ravi Kumudesh—met with Wickremesinghe on Saturday morning and promised to block the struggles of health workers.

"Even the groups which are totally opposed to you believe that amidst this kind of crisis you have the ability to play a role," Kumudesh declared, adding: "We can't afford to struggle frequently. This is a time [when] we all should get together and sacrifice and build the country. Only you can make that change happen. We are not your enemies or adversaries."

After grovelling to Wickremesinghe, Kumudesh went the same day to a rally organised by the Trade Union Coordinating Committee (TUCC), the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and anti-government protesters in Nugegoda, on the outskirts of Colombo. He is a co-convener of the TUCC.

Kumudesh demagogically told the rally: "Up to now none of the expectations of the 'struggle' [anti-government protests] has been fulfilled." He then thundered: "This struggle is not going to end unless the victory is achieved."

The actions of Rathnapriya and Kumudesh are a graphic exposure of the role of the trade unions. While making empty declarations that they will "fight to the end," they pledge to Wickremesinghe to sabotage that fight. They keep workers straitjacketed to the capitalist class and its political servants.

Health workers have been in the forefront of protests and strikes since late 2020. As the COVID-19 pandemic struck, unions were compelled to call industrial action because of a groundswell of anger among health employees over the lack of safety measures and medicines, inadequate facilities for patients, increased workload, and stagnating salaries and allowances.

Unions shut down all action after discussions with health authorities and government ministers without achieving any of the workers' demands. Both Rathnapriya and Kumudesh later publicly declared that the unions only called the strikes and protests to "manage" workers' anger.

Now, amid an unprecedented crisis of capitalist rule, the unions are being drawn even more closely into the government's plans to suppress the opposition of working people to the austerity agenda that it has to impose.

Wickremesinghe, a long-time IMF enforcer, is acutely conscious that former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was forced to flee the country in the wake of general strikes in April and May involving millions, followed by mass anti-government protests in June.

After assuming his duties as Director General of Trade Unions, Rathnapriya spoke to the *Aruna* newspaper of his plans to ensure the government would not be toppled by the working class and rural masses.

Glorifying his new political boss, Rathnapriya said that when Wickremesinghe was first appointed as prime minister in May, prior to becoming president, many people, including himself, believed Wickremesinghe was the person to "reconstruct the fallen economy of the country."

Rathnapriya explained how he had sought to rein in the

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working class. “At that time, I told the trade unions not to put forward inappropriate slogans. Now he [Wickremesinghe] is the president. We must give him support believing he can do this job.

“When there’s a grave economic crisis in the country, without solving the problems, changing the government month after month is not practical.” Rathnapriya insisted working people must “give time” to Wickremesinghe.

Kumudesh and Rathnapriya were both co-conveners of the TUCC which, together with other unions and organisations, called one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6. Millions of workers participated. Rural and urban poor people also rallied around these strikes.

However, the unions deliberately limited these strikes to one-day actions and subordinated them politically to the demand of the bourgeois opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—for an interim government, in other words, another capitalist government.

The unions, like the rest of the Colombo political establishment, were terrified by the mass upsurge of working people and the threat it posed to capitalist rule.

After being installed as president, Wickremesinghe immediately set out to suppress anti-government opposition. He imposed the emergency rule, extended the Essential Public Services Act ban to all industrial action in key sectors and unleased a police-military crackdown against anti-government protesters occupying Galle Face Green in central Colombo. Dozens of protest leaders have been arrested.

The suppression of working-class opposition by the unions opened the door for this police-state repression. Significantly, health was one of the sectors subjected to bans under the Essential Public Services Act. Health workers face fines and jail terms for failing to turn up to work. Rathnapriya, Kumudesh and the health unions have taken no action to oppose this draconian measure.

Wickremesinghe is now seeking to rally the whole Colombo political establishment to implement the austerity program of the IMF. This will include sweeping privatisations of the state-owned enterprises, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, an end to state subsidies for education and health, and increased taxes on those least able to afford them.

Wickremesinghe is seeking the support of the unions and, in the case of Rathnapriya and Kumudesh, they are already on board. In an earlier interview, Kumudesh told the WSWS that he “personally” supported going to the IMF for emergency funds even though he knew the harsh conditions that would be attached. Rathnapriya is a former MP of Wickremesinghe’s right-wing United National Party, which has always backed and implemented the IMF’s demands.

The unions in the plantation sector, including the Ceylon Workers Congress, National Union of Workers and Democratic Workers Front and Up-Country Peoples Front, have all agreed to be part of Wickremesinghe’s all-party government. All of them support IMF austerity.

The plantation unions, which also function as political parties, have a long and sordid history of backing one or other capitalist government in Colombo and being given comfortable and lucrative ministerial posts. While their leaders serve in government, the unions function as industrial police for plantation companies in sabotaging workers’ struggles for higher wages and decent working and social conditions.

Workers should draw the necessary political lessons to prepare for the inevitable struggles that will erupt to defend jobs, wages, pensions, public health and education, as well as basic democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers as a matter of urgency to take matters into your hands to defend your rights. Build action committees, independent of trade unions and all capitalist parties, in every workplace, plantation and neighbourhood.

In this struggle, workers need to turn to the rural masses who are facing similar attacks. The SEP urges rural toilers to build their own independent action committees in towns and villages.

In opposition to any interim or all-party capitalist government, the SEP has initiated a campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates democratically elected by the action committees. Such a congress can advance the fight for socialist policies to address the pressing needs of the masses and a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement them.

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