

Sri Lankan unions mount phony campaign against state repression

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The Trade Union and Mass Organisation (TUMO) in Sri Lanka invited opposition political parties and key diplomats, including from the UK, Canada and Australia, to a seminar in Colombo last month to press President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government to halt its repressive actions.

The TUMO is a front of about three dozen trade unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Ceylon Mercantile and General Workers Union, and the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, as well as the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party's (FSP) Workers' Struggle Centre. A fishermen's group and some non-government organisations are also in the alliance.

The immediate reason for the August 24 seminar, entitled "People's movement against the repression," was the detention of Inter-University Student Front (IUSF) convener, Wasantha Mudalige, another IUSF leader Galwawa Siridhamma and student activist Hashan Gunatilake. On August 22, Wickremesinghe signed a 90-day detention order for their jailing under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The branding of anti-government protests as "terrorism" is a warning to the working class that the Wickremesinghe government will use all its extensive powers against the mass protests and strikes that have erupted during the past four months over the country's deep economic and social crisis. The government has just reached a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency loan that requires even deeper attacks on living conditions and will provoke far greater opposition.

The mass movement forced former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign. As he fled, he installed Wickremesinghe as acting president, recognising his long track record as an enforcer of IMF austerity. Wickremesinghe, who is deeply despised, was later installed anti-democratically as president through a vote in parliament.

The TUMO seminar, far from fighting state repression, was aimed at cementing a bloc with the opposition capitalist

parties, backed by the major imperialist powers, aimed at diverting such opposition into the dead-end of parliamentary politics. All the opposition parties support the IMF's austerity measures and in office would be just as ruthless in suppressing protests and strikes.

The parties that attended included the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and its allies, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Tamil Progressive Alliance, as well as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The SJB, the largest parliamentary opposition party, is a breakaway from Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). Its leaders have no fundamental differences with Wickremesinghe and share political responsibility for the UNP's long record of brutal repression against the working class. The UNP was directly responsible for the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that provoked the brutal communal war that devastated the country.

In the late 1980s, the UNP government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa carried out bloody suppression involving the mass slaughter of rural youth in the south of the island. The military and its associated death squads killed an estimated 60,000 youth. Many more were imprisoned and tortured.

Yet the TUMO and FSP are promoting the SJB, which only broke from the UNP in 2020, as a champion of democratic rights.

CTU general secretary and TUMO convener, Joseph Stalin, told the seminar that "serious repression is going on in the country. It is time for acting against this repression. None can defeat this repression acting alone. Because of that let us get together and take these actions forward sternly."

Such a pro-capitalist formation, however, is aimed above all at blocking independent action by workers and the poor that threatens bourgeois rule and the profit system. It is to paralyse the working class as the Wickremesinghe government widens its attacks on democratic rights.

SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, the son of the former president, told the meeting: "To take the country out of the

precipice, an all-party united program is necessary.” Blaming Gotabhaya Rajapakse for the repression and “extreme rightwing neo-liberal policies and tax concessions to billionaire rich,” he called for the rejection of “rightist policies and ultra-leftism” and a turn to a “social–democratic middle path.”

No one at the seminar challenged this concoction of lies and misrepresentations. The “social-democratic middle path” is nothing other than the harsh IMF agenda being implemented. In fact, the SJB called for talks with the IMF even before Rajapakse embraced such a strategy, well aware of the popular opposition that it would inevitably generate. As for repression, Sajith Premadasa has never repudiated the bloody methods of his father and would be just as prepared to use them.

The JVP was the immediate target of the UNP repression in the late 1980s. It had mounted a reactionary, chauvinist campaign against the 1987 Indo-Lankan accord that brought Indian troops into the north of the island to disarm and suppress armed Tamil groups. JVP gunmen killed hundreds of workers, trade union leaders and political figures who opposed their campaign. The JVP has, however, long since ended its “armed struggle” and socialistic demagogy, and functions as part of the capitalist political establishment in Colombo.

At the seminar, JVP leader Sunil Handuneththi postured as an opponent of the Wickremesinghe government and its repression, but he works hand-in-hand with the SJB and supports the IMF austerity demands. The JVP is promoting the lie that a general election will end the hardships facing working people. In reality, the JVP’s advocacy of “a legitimate government” is to better impose the brutal measures imposed by the current regime.

The seminar was a damning indictment of the pseudo-left FSP, a JVP breakaway, which enthusiastically supported a front with these pro-capitalist parties and political rogues. The FSP education secretary Pubudu Jayagoda jubilantly declared: “Let us unite our forces going beyond holding seminars and issuing statements ... The FSP promises that we will give our maximum support to bring all forces against this repression into a common platform.”

The working class and the poor must take a warning. During the protests and strikes by millions of workers and poor since April, the TUMO, together with the Trade Union Coordinating Centre led by the JVP, played a treacherous role. With the backing of opposition parties and the FSP, they did everything they could to limit and derail the mass movement.

Millions of workers participated in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6. The political perspective of the trade unions, however, was the same as the opposition parties—the

call for an interim, all-party government to better prosecute the attacks on working people.

By limiting the strikes, politically and organisationally, the unions paved the way for the installation of Wickremesinghe as president and are therefore politically responsible for his new round of attacks on democratic rights. Now the unions and fake lefts are seeking alliances with the opposition parties to prepare another political trap for workers.

The defence of democratic rights can be taken forward only by the independent mobilisation of the working class with the support of rural poor as part of the struggle for socialism. This requires a political offensive against the Wickremesinghe government, as well as all the capitalist parties that defend the profit system.

Workers should demand the repeal of the PTA, all emergency laws and the Essential Public Services Act, the immediate release of all detainees and the abolition of the autocratic executive presidency.

Such a political fight will take place only if workers take matters into their own hands. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the building of action committees in every workplace and neighbourhood, independent of all capitalist parties, trade unions and their hangers-on such as the FSP. Action committees should be built in rural areas also to fight for the interests of rural toilers, who face a similar social crisis.

The ally of Sri Lankan workers is the international working class. The action committees need to turn to working people in Sri Lanka and workers around the world who are increasingly engaged in a fight against similar attacks on democratic and social rights.

The Wickremesinghe regime’s repression and onslaught on living conditions are rooted in the capitalist system. The defence of democratic rights is therefore bound up with the fight against this system on the basis of a socialist program.

The SEP has called for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural poor based on delegates of action committees to advance a political program to defend their interests and lay the basis for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to fight for this program.



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