

Sri Lankan trade unions launch bogus campaign against Wickremesinghe's anti-terror bill

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The Sri Lankan trade unions have responded to the Wickremesinghe government's Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB) with another round of cynical claims that popular pressure and legal action will compel the government to abandon the new laws.

The union campaign is a fraud aimed at politically derailing the rising working-class opposition to the legislation, by tying workers and the rural masses to parliamentary opposition parties.

The Anti-Terrorism Bill, which the government claims is needed to stop terrorism and protect "national security," is aimed at suppressing the growing wave of working-class struggles against the brutal International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures being imposed by the government.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained last week, the far-reaching law would mean that any person or organisation criticising government policies, including its austerity measures, and/or anyone demanding that people oppose those policies could be charged with "terrorism" and punished with 20-year jail terms or execution. Internet publications can also be targeted.

On April 3, the United Trade Union Collective (UTUC) held a media conference, announcing that it was holding a protest the following day outside the Colombo Fort Railway Station. The protest, the collective declared, was to "force" the government to repeal the bill.

The UTUC is an alliance of more than 100 trade unions, which includes the National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), the Professionals Trade Union Association (PTUA) and the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU). The NTUC is led by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Government Medical Officers Association secretary Haritha Aluthge declared that the April 4 protest would be the "largest-ever demonstration in recent history" and

predicted 10,000 people would attend. The trade unions, however, did not inform their members and only 1,000 participated, many of them bureaucrats and their immediate associates.

Addressing the media, UTUC convenor Ravi Kumudesh said union agitation would continue until the legislation was withdrawn. CTU general secretary Joseph Stalin declared that the bill "should be legally defeated through courts." In other words, the union bureaucracy simply repeated the empty statements issued about the Anti-Terror Bill by the parliamentary opposition and various human rights groups.

On April 7, Minister for Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakse announced that presentation of the bill to the parliament would be postponed until the end of the month. The government, he said, would wait until the Supreme Court determined whether certain clauses in the bill contravened the constitution or not.

This is just a ruse. The government will simply make cosmetic changes to the clauses criticised by the Supreme Court and then ram the draconian law through parliament.

Yesterday, Wasantha Samarasinghe, leader of the JVP-controlled NTC, told another trade union meeting that pressure could be applied to the government. He ludicrously claimed that the unions' April 4 protest had forced the government to "take a step back."

The so-called union campaign, however, is entirely in line with the posturing of the bourgeois parliamentary opposition parties.

JVP propaganda secretary Vijitha Herath told the media on March 28 that the party would organise various activities, including a Supreme Court challenge, and trade union protests.

On April 1, Lakshman Kiriella, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) parliamentary group leader, said his

party would also challenge the bill in the Supreme Court because it “violates” the constitution.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) echoed these positions. Addressing a meeting in Jaffna last weekend, TNA leader M. A. Sumanthiran called for “a vigorous struggle” to unite everyone behind a Supreme Court challenge to the bill.

None of these opposition parties calls for the complete abolition of the bill. Like Wickremesinghe, they support IMF austerity and anti-democratic measures to crush working-class resistance to the escalating social assault.

SJB leaders were former leading figures in Wickremesinghe’s United National Party and fully supported the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to prosecute Colombo’s 26-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the associated anti-democratic social assault on workers across the island. Similarly, the JVP backed use of the PTA during the war, which ended in May 2009.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained from the outset, the Wickremesinghe government and the former Rajapakse regime, declared war against the working class and the rural masses. This brutal assault is the response of the ruling class response to the economic collapse confronting Sri Lankan capitalism, a historic crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Wickremesinghe regime is adopting dictatorial methods to impose the burden of this crisis on working people. In France, President Emmanuel Macron is using anti-democratic measures against the mass strikes and protests against his government’s pension cuts.

David North explained in the April 8 statement on the forthcoming International Online May Day Rally:

“With ever greater frequency and intensity, the capitalist state is assuming direct leadership, on behalf of the ruling class, of the war against the working class. In countries as different in their economic development as Sri Lanka and France, the working class confronts as its central enemy the leader of the state—in Sri Lanka, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in France, President Emmanuel Macron. Despite their use of democratic phraseology whenever it is politically convenient, their decisions, relying on the police and military for their enforcement, assume a blatantly dictatorial character.”

President Wickremesinghe’s Anti-Terrorism Bill is to further strengthen the state apparatus against workers and the rural masses, and is another step towards dictatorship.

Those claiming that the bill can be defeated by pressuring the government and through court proceedings are trying to politically hoodwink workers by promoting futile appeals to the very state which is launching the attacks.

Against the illusion-mongering of the trade unions, bourgeois opposition parties and pseudo-left parties, such as the Frontline Socialist Party, the SEP states that the anti-terrorism bill can only be defeated in a unified independent political and industrial struggle of the working class and the rural masses against the government and the profit system.

Such a struggle will not be led by the trade unions, which are hostile to this perspective and tied by a thousand threads to the government, big business and the banks.

That is why the SEP calls on workers and rural toilers to build their own action committees at every workplace, factory, estate and neighbourhood, independent of all trade unions and bourgeois parties and take forward their struggle on the following demands:

- Immediately withdraw the anti-terrorism bill!
- Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), Essential Public Services Act and other anti-democratic laws, such as the Public Security Act under which emergency regulations can be imposed!
- Abolish the executive presidency!
- Establish a new democratic constitution, guaranteeing all basic rights!

These demands can only be realised as part of the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to a socialist program. To fight for this, the SEP is calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on the independent, democratically elected action committee delegates. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and fight for this program.



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