

Sri Lankan trade unions hold “delegate conference” to derail growing class struggles

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On April 10, Sri Lankan trade union officials held a delegates’ conference to discuss the Wickremesinghe government’s \$US2.9 billion loan deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB).

But rather than fight these measures, the conference made clear that the trade unions would redouble their efforts to block a mass working-class movement against the government.

Attended by over 200 high-level union bureaucrats, the event was held a week after President Wickremesinghe announced that he would present the IMF deal to parliament on April 25 and that, following its approval, key points of the agreement would be enacted into country’s law.

The ATB, which gives the president police-state powers to crush any opposition by the working class, youth and rural masses to his government’s policies, and the IMF-dictated measures in particular, would be presented on the same day.

The April 10 meeting was called by the Trade Union Collective (TUC) around the following slogans: “Abolish oppressive anti-terrorism bill!” “Stop selling national resources!” “Abolish oppressive tax system!” “A cost-of-living allowance indexed to inflation!” and “Immediately stop the state repression!”

The TUC is a union front of more than 100 unions, including the National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Delegates also attended from the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA), Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA), Health Trade Union Collective (HTC) and the Workers Struggle Centre, which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

The main address was given Professor Indika Karunaratne, president of the SLMA and vice-president of the Organisation of Professional Associations. The economic crisis confronting Sri Lanka, he declared, was the result of fraud, corruption, wastage, mismanagement and unnecessary constructions by Sri Lankan governments. Constantly

repeated by the parliamentary opposition parties, trade unions and pseudo-left parties, this claim is used to hide the fact that the economic catastrophe in Sri Lanka’s collapse is part of the global capitalist crisis, exacerbated by COVID-19 and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. It serves to politically disarm the working class and prevent the development of a mass socialist movement against Sri Lankan capitalism.

Karunaratne said that if the IMF loan was “successfully utilised,” the unions would not oppose it. Vietnam, he insisted had “successfully” used an IMF loan,” without mentioning the fact that the country is ruled by a repressive Stalinist regime that imposes low wages and harsh conditions on the working class.

Karunaratne boasted that he, along with other union bureaucrats, previously met with IMF officials to discuss how the loan could be “successfully utilised.” Union officials from OPA, GMOA and FUTA also participated in this high-level discussion. The above-mentioned unions openly support the IMF austerity program.

Aruna Shantharachchi, a Sabaragamuwa University economics professor and FUTA spokesperson, told delegates that Malaysia’s Khazanas Model or Singapore’s Temasek Model could be used as an alternative to the privatisation of state enterprises demanded by the IMF.

Under these models, public enterprises are controlled by a single state-owned corporation that has imposed harsh restructuring attacks on workers’ jobs and conditions. Khazanas and Temasek are also involved in international investment ventures. The Ukraine war and COVID-19 disruptions of international supply chains and markets, however, have heavily impacted on these models which are both now confronting a crisis.

Shantharachchi’s promotion of these models, under conditions where privatisation of state-owned enterprises, including Sri Lanka Telecom, Lanka Hospital and Petroleum Corporation, is already underway, is in order to block a unified political and industrial struggle of workers against these attacks.

Shantharachchi “criticised” the IMF, claiming it had directed the Wickremesinghe government not to use the loan to “develop the production economy” but to “provide relief” for the rural and urban poor.

The IMF directive, he said, was “a political intervention” and aimed at preventing non-traditional parties coming to power. According to Shantharachchi, the IMF has intervened to undermine support for the JVP from poor Sri Lankans.

In reality, the IMF has demanded that relief currently being provided to the poor be slashed and limited only to the most vulnerable sections. Moreover, even if the JVP won power, it has made clear that it would implement IMF demands. JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake has repeatedly stated that the only alternative for Sri Lanka is to go to the IMF.

While union delegates at the April 10 conference pledged to work “determinedly,” “unitedly,” “with unyielding effort” and “unrelenting courage” to pressure the government, they failed to announce any program of struggle. In other words, they “pledged” to do nothing against the austerity and anti-democratic measures.

In discussion following the main reports, Wasantha Samarasinghe, a JVP leader and the convenor of the NTUC, referred to the postponement of presentation of the ATB to the parliament and claimed that “government had to take a step back due to our measures.”

While the ATB was not presented to the parliament on April 9, Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe told the media one day after the union conference that it would be presented to parliament on April 25.

These developments vindicate the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 11 which stated: “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.”

TUC convenor and College of Medical Laboratory Science president Ravi Kumudesh declared that Wickremesinghe once posed as “democrat” but has become a “dictator.”

Contrary to Kumudesh’s lament, Wickremesinghe has a notorious record—as prime minister and cabinet minister in previous governments—of imposing IMF demands and launching anti-democratic attacks. Kumudesh, moreover, played a leading role in elevating Wickremesinghe into premiership in 2015, promoting him as a “democrat.”

Kumudesh cynically told delegates that the unions could work to bring down Wickremesinghe with the sort of popular struggle that last year brought him to power.

Wickremesinghe, however, came to power not because of popular uprising but because the trade union bureaucracy, including Kumudesh and the pseudo-left parties, betrayed this movement, diverting it into calls by the Samagi Jana Balavegaya and JVP for an interim capitalist government.

FSP propaganda secretary Duminda Nagamuwa told delegates that in order to defeat the government’s attacks and the ATB, it was necessary to build a “power outside the parliament.” This “outside power,” however, is the “people’s councils” promoted by the FSP, which aim to pressure the government and keep workers chained to the profit system.

The April 10 union conference was therefore directed entirely towards preventing the working class from organising a unified political offensive against capitalism, the root cause of the government’s attacks.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in its April 17 statement: “The treacherous role of the trade unions confirms once again that the working class can only advance the struggle against austerity and defend its social and democratic rights by taking matters into its own hands. This requires the building of action committees at every workplace, plantation and neighbourhood, independent of the unions and the bourgeois parties and their fake-left hangers on.”

The Wickremesinghe government and the dictates of international finance capitalism can only be defeated by bringing a workers’ and peasants’ government to power to implement socialist policies. This is why the SEP calls for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on the democratically elected delegates from independent action committee to take forward the struggle for such a government.



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