

Sri Lankan trade union leaders call for “broader unity” to pressure the Wickremesinghe regime

Our reporters
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An alliance of Sri Lankan trade unions and other organisations held a May Day rally at Sirisena playground in central Colombo last week. Addressing the event, union leaders called for “broader unity” between all the unions which, they claimed, would increase political pressure on the Wickremesinghe government to end its austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Similar illusions were peddled during the limited strikes and protests held on March 1 and 15, with half a million workers participating on each occasion. President Wickremesinghe, however, has made clear that he will not change any of the IMF-dictated austerity measures, declaring them necessary to resolve the economic crisis facing Sri Lankan capitalism.

A total of 14 unions were involved in last week’s rally. This included the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU), Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), Commercial and Industrial Workers’ Union’ (CMU), Ceylon Bank Employees’ Union, Post and Telecommunication Officers Union, and the All-Telecom Employees Trade Unions. Various non-government organisations, such as the Dabindu Collective, Women’s Centre, Revolutionary Existence for Human Development (RED) movement, National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, the Peasant Movement, Plantation Movement for People’s Land Rights and the National Union for Transgenders were also involved.

While the unions convening last week’s May Day rally represent over 100,000 workers across various sectors, only 1,500 or so people attended. This indicates both the growing distrust and hostility of broad layers of the working class to the union apparatus, as well as its determination to block any mass mobilisation.

FTZGSEU General Secretary Anton Marcus told the rally that apparel workers had suffered the loss of 150,000 jobs following the closure of 40 factories and another 73,000 due

to the shutdown of numerous small factories during COVID-19. He failed to explain, however, how his union responded to this brutal job destruction. In fact, workers have faced ongoing job losses since the pandemic began in 2020, as well as the deepening of the Sri Lanka’s financial crisis following the outbreak of the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Rather than defend jobs, the FTZGSEU and other unions supported the government’s lifting of COVID-19 measures, sending workers back into their factories and workplaces lacking minimum safety measures and reduced wages. Last September, when Esquel Company announced it was closing several factories, Marcus directed workers to accept so-called voluntary retirements with meagre compensation.

Attempting to justify the small attendance at the May Day rally, Marcus declared that there had been many struggles against the Wickremesinghe government’s Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB), the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and for abolition of increased Pay As You Earn income taxes, and for lower prices of essentials.

“Those involved in those struggles should be here today but they have joined the May Day celebrations of other political parties,” he said, referring the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

“However much we fought, we have failed to stop the government’s program,” Marcus said, admitting to the futile character of the unions. He insisted, however, that trade union “unity” was needed to apply more pressure.

This was echoed by CTU General Secretary Joseph Stalin. “Why should all trade unions unite?” he asked rhetorically, then replying, because Wickremesinghe considers his main enemy to be “working people and the trade unions” and the union leaders “terrorists.” This was a reference to the government’s planned ATB, which considers industrial action by workers to be “terrorism” and those calling such

actions as “terrorists.”

Notwithstanding Wickremesinghe’s rhetoric, his regime is entirely dependent on the unions to contain and dissipate workers’ demands, limiting them to isolated one-day actions and futile protests. The derailment of workers’ struggles by the trade unions is being used by Wickremesinghe to step up his drive towards dictatorial forms of rule.

The CTU and the JVP-controlled Teacher Services Trade Union have played a key role in this process. In 2021, they betrayed the 100-day strike for higher wages by over 250,000 teachers and principals and signed an agreement for a one third of teachers’ original pay demand.

Addressing the rally, FHP leader Ravi Kumudesh cynically blamed workers for installing Wickremesinghe as president following last year’s April–July mass uprising that brought down former President Rajapakse and his government. “We must blame ourselves because we have appointed a representative who rules in the interests of international agents and because we just stand aside and idly observe,” he declared.

Kumudesh’s false claims are typical of the union bureaucracy. The trade unions, backed by pseudo-left parties such as the Frontline Socialist Party, diverted the mass movement behind SJB and JVP demands for an interim capitalist government under Rajapakse. Thus, they blocked the development of an independent movement of the working class against the Rajapakse regime and Sri Lankan capitalism and the necessary struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies.

“If someone like Wickremesinghe is re-elected in any future election,” Kumudesh continued, “then we must teach him how to rule with the masses or otherwise we must elect a person who knows how to rule.” In other words, the union bureaucracy is wanting greater collaboration with future governments and will maintain its role in subordinating the working class to their needs.

Speakers at the rally, including those from the fake left parties and organisations, were totally silent about the mass strikes and protests in France and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Instead, they blamed Sri Lanka’s unprecedented economic crisis on the corruption of past and present rulers, obscuring the fact that the island’s financial predicament is part of the global crisis of capitalism.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) reporters spoke to some of the workers attending the rally.

A teacher from Ragama, about 20 km from Colombo, voiced her dissatisfaction over the betrayals of the unions and noted: “This is an international working-class day, that is why we must join this sort of event. I trust socialism but I’m not attached to any trade union or any political party. I am ready for any struggle, that is why I bought a book,” she

said referring to the Sinhala-language of *Why study the Russian revolution?* that she purchased from the SEP’s literature table.

A mother of two children from the Negombo fishing community about 40 km from Colombo said: “We came to the workers’ day today. We are fighting for fishermen’s rights because we’re suffering and our children have no future. My husband and I must work very hard just to survive and pay for our daily expenses.” Having participated in the mass uprising against the Rajapakse regime, she added, “We still continue the struggle that started last year.”

The union bureaucracy’s calls for “unity of all trade unions” and its bankrupt calls for workers to exert more pressure on the government and employers, is being advanced in the face of rising popular anger against the Wickremesinghe regime and deepening working-class distrust of the unions.

Workers can only defend their rights by building their own independent organisations of political and industrial struggle. That is why the SEP is urging workers to form their own action committees in workplaces, plantations and major economic centres, as well as in rural committees, independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties.

The defence of the democratic and social rights of the working class and the rural masses involves a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe regime and the capitalism system. This is the reality facing the working class in every country.

The SEP has advanced a political perspective and program to take forward this fight. We are calling for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates from those action committees to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies and address all unresolved democratic tasks.



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