

Sri Lankan trade unions seek alliance with opposition parties

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On April 3, several trade unions in Sri Lanka, organised under the nationalist banner of the National Resources Protection Movement (NRPM), held a public meeting at Hyde Park in Colombo together with opposition party parliamentarians. The trade unions had announced that the meeting was called to oppose the “selling of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and national resources.”

The Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU), Postal Trade Unions Joint Front (PTUJF), All Telecom Employees Union (ATEU), Ceylon Electricity Board Technical Engineers and Superintendents Union and the Federation of University Teachers’ Associations (FUTA) called the meeting.

The meeting was held amid growing opposition among SOE employees to the government’s “restructuring program,” which is part of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) austerity agenda. The restructuring involves the privatisation and commercialisation of some SOEs and the closing of others earmarked as unprofitable.

Fundamentally opposed to any united action by the working class to defeat the IMF program, the trade unions called scattered protests and peddled the illusion that the government could be pressured to halt the privatisation process. The government has ignored the limited protests and expedited plans to restructure SOEs since last year. A bill is being prepared to restructure the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and discussions are underway to privatise Telecom, while the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment was closed down last year.

Trade union leaders are now calling for a broad front with opposition parties, aimed at pressuring the government to halt its sweeping restructuring plans.

We warn workers that this is a political trap to subordinate them to capitalist parties. All the opposition parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and National People’s Power (NPP), the electoral front of the

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—are fully committed to the IMF’s program. If they come to power, they will implement these measures just as ruthlessly as President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government.

We urge workers to reject the trade unions’ call for an alliance with capitalist parties and to mobilise their independent industrial and political strength to defeat Wickremesinghe’s assault on basic social rights—jobs, wages and working conditions.

The SJB, Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Freedom People’s Congress—a splinter group from ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—and the Sinhala chauvinist United Republic Front (URF) all sent representatives to the meeting. The Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) also participated.

The NPP/JVP did not send a representative. The JVP-controlled All-Ceylon Electricity Employees Union (ACEEU) had announced a protest in front of the CEB building and a march. However, the union leaders canceled the demonstration and did not participate in the Hyde Park event.

It appears that the JVP/NPP thought it disadvantageous to appear on the same platform as the SJB, its electoral rival. More fundamentally, as it vies for power, the JVP has blocked virtually all their trade union agitations against the IMF’s austerity measures, to demonstrate their willingness to carry them out in government.

At the Hyde Park meeting, CBEU president Channa Dissanayake demagogically declared that the SOEs were being sold off to “loot money”. To avoid this, he called for “all the opposition parties to stand up against injustice.”

What a fraud! Dissanayake was among the trade union leaders who urged former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to seek assistance from the IMF as an unprecedented economic crisis battered Sri Lanka, provoking a mass

uprising during April-May 2022.

Speaking to *Morning* on May 3, 2022 he appealed for help from the IMF, saying that “there is no solution within our borders to this impending crisis.” He was expressing the fear that all banks were “at the brink.”

Postal trade union front convener Chinthaka Bandara declared that he wanted to “bring political party leaders onto the stage to express their opinion to the country regarding the sale of this national property”.

In a nationalist rant, Bandara lamented that “foreign forces” were “today in the queue” to buy SOEs, “not Sri Lankans.” He regretted that local investors are losing property in Sri Lanka. In other words, he supports the “restructuring” of SOEs and workers losing their jobs, as long as local investors buy them.

Jagath Gurusinghe, All Telecom Employees Union leader, accused Wickremesinghe of working to sell off the property of the entire country: “He wants to sell everything without doing any work and collect only taxes and sit on the throne.”

FUTA secretary Athulasiri Samarakoon said the government was subjecting education to market forces. “The government has a policy to gut the free education system that we got after 1947,” he said, adding, “Divisions based on parties and ideologies should be thrown away and all should unite to protect free education.”

None of these trade union leaders has the slightest intention of defending the social rights of the working class. Their appeal for unity with opposition leaders is aimed at diverting and suppressing rising anger and unrest in the working class.

All of the parties present at the meeting have long records of imposing the demands of big business on the working class.

SJB’s Mujibur Rahman was on the stage but did not speak. His party, a breakaway from Wickremesinghe’s right-wing United National Party, advocates the IMF austerity program. It criticised the previous Rajapakse government for not opening discussions with the IMF soon enough.

Stalinist Communist Party MP Weerasumana Weerasinghe boasted that his party had a record of “protecting the state institutions.” He then declared that those not represented at the meeting had to be treated as traitors. In fact, his party’s real record is of associating with SLFP and SLPP regimes and supporting their austerity programs and attacks on democratic rights.

The propaganda secretary of the fake left FSP, Duminda

Navagamuva, appeared on stage with the trade union leaders and opposition parties to cover up their sordid records and support for IMF austerity. He disappeared after a while on the pretext that a representative of the right-wing Motherland People’s Party was going to attend. Yet his political conscience was not troubled by sitting there with members of other capitalist parties—SJB, SLFP and even the Sinhala-chauvinist URF.

In 2022, the FSP backed SJB and JVP calls for an interim administration to save capitalist rule. Although Rajapakse fled the country and resigned, this political betrayal paved the way for the discredited parliament to elevate Wickremesinghe to the presidency.

The working class cannot defend its rights by relying on this pro-capitalist union-party bloc. Workers need to organize independently of all capitalist parties and their trade unions. Democratically elected workers’ action committees should be established in every workplace.

This is basis for unified action by the working class, including the preparation of a general strike, against the Wickremesinghe regime and its IMF austerity program.

Against capitalist restructuring to destroy jobs, slash wages and intensify workloads to boost the profits of big business, the demand of workers should be: Place all SOEs under the democratic control of the working class!

This struggle must be linked to fight to place the banks, big companies and plantations under workers’ control and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

The SEP insists that the fight for these demands requires a political struggle to overturn the profit system, establish a workers’ and peasants’ government and reorganize the economy in the interests of the majority of people, not the wealthy few.



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