

Pro-government thugs disrupt farmers' conference in Sri Lanka: A warning to working people

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka strongly condemns the forcible dispersal of a meeting of the National Farmers' Conference (NFC) entitled "Blood suckers and buffaloes in farming" being held in Uswewa village near Hambantota on February 12 by a mob of thugs affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led (JVP) National People's Power (NPP) government.

Private television channels showed how the mob attempted to physically attack the conference organisers. Wimal Wattuhewa, the co-convenor of the NFC and leader of the Farmers' Struggle Movement (FSM) controlled by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), said that the JVP/NPP thugs removed the background banner hanging in the conference hall and took it away. They also removed the wires of the loudspeakers.

The government's hostility towards the conference was directly expressed by a JVP activist named Sunil Ratnayake, who led the thugs. He introduced himself as a representative of the All Ceylon Agrarian Congress (ACAC), affiliated to the JVP. The ACAC had played a key role in rallying farmers' support for the JVP/NPP in presidential and general elections in September and November last year respectively. Its convener Namal Karunaratne was awarded with the post of Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Livestock for this service.

Ratnayake said that the farmers played a fundamental role in bringing the JVP/NPP government to power. He claimed the current government, in power for barely three months, had provided "everything" for farmers, including fertilizer subsidies and a guaranteed price of 120 rupees per kilo for paddy rice. This is a lie. Farmers have been protesting in various areas, insisting that the guarantees price was not adequate.

The JVP thug accused the conference organisers of being "puppets" of the opposition Samagi Jana

Balawegaya party (SJB) and former president Ranil Wickremesinghe, adding that farmers have now lined up with the ACAC and the government. He warned that he would not let anyone bring down the government which has a two-thirds parliamentary majority given by the masses. He declared "from now on, I would not allow to hold any bogus conferences anywhere in this district."

Despite clear evidence that pro-government thugs disrupted the conference, Hambantota JVP/NPP MP Nihal Galappaththi simply dismissed any government involvement and justified the thuggery, when asked by the media. According to *Mawbima* on February 13, Galappaththi alleged that "all parties other than the National People's Power are conspiring to stop the government's progress at various places [by holding such conferences]."

The fact that Galappaththi, a long-time JVP leader, has made these comments, indicates that such thuggish activities are being carried out with endorsement from the highest levels of the party.

Workers, youth and peasants must strongly condemn the thuggish and provocative actions of the JVP which are a serious warning. Just as it has branded the meeting's organisers as "puppets" of the SJB and Wickremesinghe, it will denounce anyone, especially workers, who comes into struggle for their basic rights as agents of the right wing and resort to state and goon squad repression.

The JVP has a history of violent attacks. During 1988-1990, JVP gunmen killed thousands of political opponents, including workers and trade union leaders, in a fascistic campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord under which so-called Indian peacekeeping troops were sent to the north and east of the island to disarm the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The JVP denounced the Accord in Sinhala communal terms

claiming it would lead to division of the country. The right-wing UNP government, having exploited the JVP-led violence to terrorise the working class, seized on the provocations to conduct a murderous campaign to suppress unrest in the south of the island, killing some 60,000 rural youth.

Five weeks ago, the acting Vice Chancellor of Peradeniya University banned a public lecture entitled “How to fight the IMF austerity program?” organised by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to be held on January 3 under the sponsorship of the Political Science Students Association (PSSA). The reason given for the ban was that the topic would “challenge” government policy. The IYSSE learned that the Prime Minister’s Office had directly approached the university administration about the meeting.

The denunciation of a meeting to be held by a farmers’ organisation as reactionary by a group affiliated with the JVP/NPP government is false. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and his right-wing government function as agents of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global finance capital and Sri Lankan big business. In the name of rebuilding the economy, Dissanayake has openly pledged to fully implement the IMF’s austerity program for slashing the living conditions of working people to the bone, to pay off foreign debt and boosting business profits.

Just a week ago, at an Export Awards Ceremony, Dissanayake insisted that the “only viable path for recovery of Sri Lanka is to continue on the current International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed path,” adding: “Either we can collapse with this foundation or we can stand firm on this foundation and build our economy on a firm footing.”

The reaction of the National Farmers’ Conference, aligned with the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, to the thuggish attack on its meeting has been cowardly appeals to the JVP/NPP government.

The NFC convener Wimal Wattuhewa told the media that the meeting’s aim was to “discuss whether we can find a way to urge this government to get certain things done”, including lifting the price of paddy. He made clear that neither the NFC nor the FSP were challenging the government, but simply pleading with it to address “a number of people’s aspirations” that brought it to power.

According to the NFC, the government will either “listen” to the farmers and increase the current guaranteed price of 120 rupees per kilogram of paddy by another 5 or 8 rupees or provide relief to the consumer by reducing

rice prices. In reality, the government’s austerity measures will place new burdens on farmers and consumers alike.

The FSP is yet to report the attack on the NFC meeting. When the SEP asked, Pubudu Jayagoda, a key party leader, dismissed what happened as just a normal incident. The FSP, “criticises” the government in the name of pressuring it to take “the right direction” and advises people that government must be “rescued” from the “old gang of robbers” (the traditional bourgeois parties) which are trying to overthrow it. When the struggles of workers and the poor become a challenge to the government, it is not surprising that the FSP leaders align themselves with the so-called “progressive government” against the masses.

The SEP opposes the fake-left politics of the FSP which is hostile to a socialist program and the independent mobilisation of the working class against the government and the capitalist system. The role of the FSP has been to defend the capitalist system by subordinating workers, the poor, and the youth to the various parties of the ruling class, in this case the JVP/NPP.

Any fight to resolve the problems facing the peasantry unavoidably comes into direct conflict with the capitalist system. Farmers face inadequate prices for their products and high prices for seed, agrichemicals and equipment, leading to punishing indebtedness. Agriculture is controlled by the banks, big corporations and large agribusinesses. These problems can only be resolved as part of the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to abolish the profit system and implement socialist policies that reorganize production, including of food, to meet pressing social needs, not corporate profits.

The JVP’s thuggish action on February 12 has highlighted the need for the working class to organise independently of the capitalist parties and their agents, such as the FSP, and to form action committees in every workplace and plantation as well as peasant committees in rural areas to fight against the austerity policies of the government and its repressive measures.



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