

Sri Lankan union leaders respond to US trade war with class collaboration

Our reporters
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The Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA), which includes 25 unions covering private sector workers, and various pseudo-left groups held a May Day rally this month at the Sirisena playground in central Colombo.

The union alliance includes the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU), Commercial and Industrial Workers' Union' (CIWU), Ceylon Bank Employees' Union (CBEU) and the All-Telecom Employees Trade Unions (ATETU).

Although the JUTA represents well over 100,000 workers and May Day is a national public holiday in Sri Lanka only about 1,500 people joined the rally.

The low attendance indicates growing working-class distrust of the union apparatuses, which have blocked any struggle against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures being imposed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

The May Day rally occurred amid growing working-class opposition to the IMF agenda and rising concerns that hundreds of thousands of jobs would be destroyed by US President Trump's imposition of a 44 percent tariff on Sri Lankan exports to the US.

Addressing the rally, FTZGSEU leader Anton Marcus, reminded those in attendance that 150,000 jobs had been eliminated in factory closures during COVID-19, and declared that similar job losses should not be allowed to happen again.

The US-initiated tariff war has created a crisis across the world, he said, warning that "there is no escape for Sri Lanka," and that apparel owners were using the situation to "force workers to do more work."

Marcus told the rally that the government could not resolve this crisis on its own and that "in order to find solutions [it] has to involve the relevant stakeholders." In other words, enlist the support of the trade union

bureaucracies!

When Trump announced his tariff hikes in early April, Marcus's FTZGSEU called for discussions with the US president. The basis of that discussion, the union said, must be for a consensus to "revise the tariff for American goods to our country, compared to the concessions given to our exports to that country."

The union also called for the establishment of a parliamentary committee, including the unions, to discuss the issue. Marcus criticised President Dissanayake for appointing a tariff crisis committee that included company bosses but not the trade unions.

The FTZGSEU leadership's principal concern is not the jobs and working conditions of its members but the collapse of Sri Lanka's apparel industry, whose single largest market is the US. These comments make crystal clear that it is ready to collaborate with Colombo and its appeals for concessions from the US and other imperialist powers.

Marcus's references to the 150,000 apparel job losses when COVID-19 hit Sri Lanka in 2020 is a sharp warning of how his union will respond to Trump's tariff war.

When COVID-19 hit Sri Lanka in 2020 the then Rajapakse government convened the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC)—consisting of government officials, company CEOs and trade union leaders, including the FTZGSEU—to negotiate and impose mass retrenchments and wage cuts. Then, when the government adopted "let it rip" COVID-19 policies being embraced globally, the unions forced employees to return to work in unsafe conditions.

Addressing the May Day rally, CEBU president Channa Dissanayake told the crowd that the mass uprising in 2022 that brought down the Rajapakse

regime had changed Sri Lanka's political leadership. In a vague reference to the JVP/NPP government, he said: "People have a lot of expectations. It has already passed six months, but there is no clear change."

In fact, last year's election of Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP government, are a direct result of the unions' betrayal of 2022 mass struggle. The trade union bureaucracies derailed the mass movement into a parliamentary blind-alley by supporting calls by the JVP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) for an interim capitalist regime. This paved the way for the ruling elite to elevate the pro-US Ranil Wickremesinghe into the presidency.

Confronted with mounting popular opposition to Wickremesinghe's implementation of the IMF austerity demands, the dominant sections of ruling elite last year swung their support behind Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP, regarding it as the only viable political tool to impose the IMF's dictates.

Echoing the CBEU president, ATETU leader Jagath Gurusinghe told the rally: "We need to appeal to the comrades of this reformist government because the working class gave them power to have a system change."

The dominate theme of all the May Day speeches was for a "broader alliance" of all trade unions which, they claimed, would increase political pressure on the Dissanayake government.

The rally passed a resolution calling for a national minimum monthly wage of 65,000 rupees (\$US217) for all state, private and plantation sector employees; formulation of a national labour policy; the immediate withdrawal of all privatisations of state-owned enterprises; and the abolition of all repressive laws, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Online Safety Act.

Behind the feigned concern about the wages, jobs and democratic rights, the unions have no intention of organizing a unified independent struggle of the working class to fight the government's attacks. Rather they aim to prevent such a movement emerging by promoting illusions in Dissanayake's pro-capitalist big business regime.

The rally also passed a resolution calling on Israel to halt its genocide of the Palestinian masses. In essence, the resolution constituted an appeal to Israeli Prime

Minister Netanyahu who has repeatedly emphasised, with US backing, that he would stop at nothing less than the ethnic cleansing of all Gaza.

JTUA's May Day rally once again showed the trade union bureaucracies' support for the government, big business and the imperialist powers and its nationalist opposition to the original spirit of May Day—the fight for the unity of the international working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) calls on the workers to take the fight to defend their jobs, and for decent wages and working conditions and democratic rights, into their own hands. This requires a break from the union bureaucracy and the establishment of independent action committees at every workplace and neighbourhood. The source of assault on the living conditions and democratic rights of workers in every country is the capitalist system which is in deep crisis globally.

This fight can only be taken forward in a united struggle of the international working class on a socialist program. That is why it is crucial for workers in Sri Lanka to join and to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to discuss and coordinate action committees formed in every workplace.



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