Sri Lankan union leader recalls how the unions helped bring the JVP/NPP government to power

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On Monday, tens of thousands of public-sector employees held lunchtime protests across Sri Lanka over the refusal of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government to address their demands in its 2027 budget. The unions are demanding an interim monthly allowance of Rs. 25,000 ($US80) to help workers cope with the rising cost of living.

The Provincial Management Service Officers Association (PMSOA) was among the trade unions that called the actions. Speaking to the press after a demonstration near the Colombo Municipal Council premises, its president, Prasanna Diyunuge, asked: "Did the labour movement and trade union movement matter to this government only as a means of coming to power?"

Addressing President Anura Kumara Dissanayake as "comrade Anura," Diyunuge urged him to "correct the error" by granting an interim allowance and thus avoid further industrial action after November 30. The PMSOA and several other trade unions have decided to call a one-day token strike if their demand is not met.

On November 18, when announcing Monday's action, Diyunuge had made similar remarks. Referring to the trade unions' role in bringing the government to power and asked: "Have you [the JVP] forgotten what we did, in discussions with you, to overthrow the previous governments?"

He was specifically referring to the unions' collaboration with the JVP during the 2024 elections to defeat President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government and promote the illusion that a JVP/NPP government would address workers' demands.

Although Diyunuge did not explicitly acknowledge his role in suppressing workers struggles to bring his "comrade" Dissanayake to power, his remarks point to precisely that record. Workers who are now taking action to defend their living standards, social conditions and democratic rights must draw the necessary lessons from the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy.

At the time, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) exposed how trade union leaders aligned themselves with the JVP/NPP election campaign and betrayed the working class.

On July 8–9, 2024, around one million public-sector employees and teachers participated in a one-day strike demanding wage and allowance increases. The Wickremesinghe government rejected the workers' demands. The JVP-led Development Officers Association (DOA), the All Ceylon Teacher Services Union and the PMSOA, led by Diyunuge, were all involved in the strike.

Two days later, K.D. Lalkantha, now a government minister and a longtime JVP trade union leader, warned at a union meeting that, with the presidential election approaching, holding strikes was a "reactionary act."

He declared: "Our vision should be to strengthen the electoral battleground. It is a crime that trade unions cannot adapt themselves to this change." He argued that the public would become alienated from the JVP because of the disruption caused by strikes.

In reality, Lalkantha was seeking to win the support of the business elites by assuring them that workers' strikes and other industrial action would be ended. Following Lalkantha's intervention, all the trade union bureaucracies, including those that had called the July 8–9 strike, abandoned industrial action and joined the JVP election campaign.

Mahinda Jayasinghe, secretary of the Ceylon Teachers' Service Union, was rewarded with the position of deputy labour minister in the present government. Chandana Sooriyarachchi, then leader of the DOA, became a JVP/NPP member of parliament. The JVP's Ranjan Jayalal, the general secretary of the Ceylon Electricity Board Workers' Union (CEB), has been rewarded with the position of mayor of the Kaduwela Municipal Council.

As part of their efforts to prop up the government, the JVP-allied union leaders continue to enforce the ban on strikes.

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Five days before the presentation of the budget, on November 7, the JVP/NPP used its notorious National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) conference to issue threats against the potential eruption of workers' struggles. Key speakers, including Dissanayake and NTUC president and agriculture minister K.D. Lalkantha, explained that the JVP's unions had to police workers in line with the needs of the government's "economic transformation"—that is, its brutal IMF-dictated austerity program.

Other trade union leaders, who peddled the illusion that workers' demands could be won by pressuring the Wickremesinghe government, have spent the past two years making mild complaints while continuing to spread the lie that the JVP-led government will pursue pro-worker policies.

The government's refusal to announce any substantial wage or allowance increase in its third budget has exposed the lies peddled by the union leaders, provoking anger among their members. This growing anger compelled the trade union bureaucracy to call the recent protests, while seeking to limit and politically neuter them.

In a WhatsApp message sent to PMSOA members before Monday's protests, Diyunuge warned them not to "bring politics" into the action. Those declaring that there should be "no politics" are the very trade union leaders who engage openly and behind the scenes in political dealings with bourgeois parties, including the JVP.

Diyunuge now stokes illusions that Dissanayake can be persuaded to "correct the error" of the budget. It would come as no surprise if the trade union leaders, after talks with the government, called off the protests while claiming that their demands could be won through further negotiations.

Workers are determined to fight to defend their rights and living standards. The union leaders, however, oppose any sustained mass movement against the IMF austerity measures and the government itself.

The treachery of the trade union bureaucracy is rooted in its pro-capitalist social position. Union officials function as the labour lieutenants of the bourgeoisie, enforcing job cuts, wage freezes and other attacks on the working class for the good of the "national economy," i.e. the profits of big business.

The emerging class struggle in Sri Lanka is driven by the deepening crisis of global capitalism. The imperialist wars against Iran, Russia, and the war plans against China have driven up living costs, provoking mass anger. Workers and young people are taking to the streets and launching strike action in the United States, across Europe, India, Bangladesh and many other countries.

Sri Lanka is one of the weakest links in the global economy. In 2022, the Sri Lankan economy collapsed, provoking a mass uprising by workers, farmers and the rural poor, which forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to resign.

That crisis has not been resolved. With the assistance of the trade union leaders, the JVP/NPP and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), the capitalist class channelled the uprising behind the call for an interim government and brought Wickremesinghe to power.

As Wickremesinghe found it increasingly difficult to suppress popular opposition, the JVP/NPP was brought to power to defend the capitalist system, with the crucial assistance of the trade union leaders.

The SEP insists that workers cannot win their demands by pressuring this government, any more than they could under previous governments. Nor can the fight against austerity cannot be waged through the union bureaucracies.

The struggle to defend the living standards, social conditions and democratic rights of the working class must be directed against the JVP/NPP government and the capitalist system it defends.

The SEP calls on workers to build rank-and-file action committees in every workplace, independent of the trade union bureaucracies and all capitalist parties, and to build a movement of workers across Asia and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Through such committees, the working class must prepare for a general strike, mobilising its collective strength as well as the rural toilers. This aim of this struggle must be to bring to power a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program.

The SEP is prepared to provide every assistance to workers in building action committees to mobilise the full strength of the working class. We call on workers to contact us to discuss these urgent tasks.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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