

Sri Lanka: unemployed youth speak to WSWs

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In the course of the Sri Lankan presidential election, Mahinda Rajapakse, the victorious candidate of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), promised to create 2.4 million jobs over the next six years. His rival, Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP), matched him with a pledge of “millions” of jobs. Interviews with working class youth—the social layer bearing the brunt of Sri Lanka’s endemic unemployment—reveal there is widespread scepticism and distrust toward these promises.

The interviews below were made with a section of unemployed or underemployed youth living in the district of Grandpass, in Sri Lanka’s capital Colombo. Colombo graphically demonstrates the social polarisation that exists across the country. Luxury homes, five star hotels and modern supermarkets are located a short distance from overcrowded slums, where unemployment is acute and social problems rampant.

Grandpass is one of the poorest areas of the city. The average size of the houses that line its streets is less than 100 square feet. It is not uncommon to find two families sharing one of these homes. There are some small two-story houses that have been built by the few able to find a job in the Middle East and save some money. On vacant blocks, however, the poorest people live in rough shacks made from planks and tin sheets. There is no drainage or access to essential services. During heavy rain, the narrow laneways in the district fill with water and the houses are regularly flooded.

Suranga, a 24-year-old man who lives a hand-to-mouth existence selling hand made strainers from a small shop in front of his house, was among the Grandpass residents who spoke with a team from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and *World Socialist Web Site* during the recent election campaign. He related how poverty and unemployment were the cause of his situation:

“I did Advanced Level mathematics. I sat the examination twice. The marks I received were a few points short of what I needed to go to university. I struggled to find a job for three or four years, but in vain. My father is a labourer and

had to pay for the education of five children in my family. How could my parents find the large sum of money, the tens of thousands of rupees, that a computer course would cost?

“Mahinda [Rajapakse] and Ranil [Wickremesinghe] are full of pledges about providing employment. Even if the promises were implemented though, would they be enough to solve the unemployment problem in this country? Every year, 300,000 to 400,000 people complete their ordinary and advanced level examinations and enter the job market. That is just the people who are starting to look for work. One thing is certain to me—the pledges to provide jobs won’t be honoured.

“With the assistance of another friend I make strainers and supply them to boutiques. Marketing them is difficult. There are some months when what we earn is not enough to meet even one week’s expenses.”

Suranga’s comments point to the dimensions of the unemployment crisis facing young people. Out of around 200,000 candidates who sat for the Advanced Level examination this year, more than 50 percent qualified to enter a university. As a result of budget cutbacks to the free education system, however, only about 16,500 were able to enrol. Even with a degree, most graduates join the jobless queue.

While the official unemployment rate in Sri Lanka was 8.9 percent in 2003-04, the actual level is far higher. The Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) counts a person as employed if they work just one hour a week. There are also cases where people who have been laid off are still counted as employed.

Among youth aged 15-18 years, the unemployment rate is 36 percent. A recent Central Bank survey reported that 30 percent of youth aged between 19 and 24 years were out of work. Between 40 to 50 percent of the unemployed only completed grades 5 to 10 at school.

Fazal, an unemployed man in his mid-20s who lives in Gemunu Mawatha, a district of Grandpass, said: “I got good results in Advanced Level, and I don’t have a job. During last year’s election, the UPFA [the United Peoples Freedom

Alliance in which the SLFP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, JVP, were the main partners] promised to provide 45,000 jobs for graduates and much more to other people like us. I'm asking you, did they keep that promise? I approached every possible authority to find a job. I applied to each and every scheme they launched. I talked to members of parliament, to ministers, but I'm still unemployed.

"In addition to these rubbish promises about jobs, the presidential candidates pledge they will set aside funds to reduce the prices of essential goods. Why the hell didn't they do that years ago?" Fazal angrily demanded.

The 2000 Sri Lanka National Youth Survey (SLNYS) found a high proportion of youth aged between 20 and 29 years are still financially dependent on their parents as they have no jobs. One consequence of this poverty is that many people are not marrying.

Ifthikar, 35-years-old, survives by doing private tuition. He explained that most of the residents in Grandpass are casual laborers, small time traders or street hawkers. Women from the area seek work as housemaids in the Middle East, and their families survive on the money they send back. Numbers of unemployed young men and women have been compelled to engage in criminal activity, such as drug distribution, to survive. There are instances of people working as paid assassins or thugs. Poverty has forced some women into prostitution.

Anomi is a 27-year-old unemployed woman. She studied up to ordinary level, but due to the lack of facilities at her school was unable to pass the examination. She did not have enough money to pay for tuition. She told the SEP team: "There are seven members in our family. I am the eldest and I have to look after the needs of the others. So marriage is unthinkable. I have done many shady jobs to keep my family alive. As a result, I lost my memory once and had to seek psychiatric treatment."

Another local man said: "I am from Ampara and I came to Colombo eight years ago seeking a job. I worked as a waiter. No hotel employed me for more than three months. If a hotel worker asks for a few rupees more in his salary, he will immediately be shown the door.

"I married five years back and have two children. They are not going to school. We are living in a rented slum in Babapullewatta, in Grandpass, with a youth who has come to Colombo from the war-ravaged areas in the Eastern province. There are hundreds of youth here from the east, as well as from the plantation areas in the central hills. There are no jobs there for youth."

A local barber, 55-year-old Chandradasa, related how he was sacked from a labouring job as punishment for participating in the general strike in July 1980 by the UNP

government. "It was our right to go on strike but in the end we were thrown out of work. Ever since then, I have had to do various temporary jobs to survive. If I had my permanent job, then I would get a pension when I reached retirement age. No government can provide a solution to our problems."

The SEP campaign group also met Nimal, a 12-year-old boy working as a kitchen hand in a hotel. Child labour is common. Nimal explained: "I only studied up to year 4 at school. About two years ago my father was put in prison on charges of being involved with a local criminal gang. In our family, there are three other children who are younger than me. My mother works as a servant in neighbouring houses and does many other odd jobs. But what she earns is not sufficient to feed us and pay for our schooling, so I work.

"Six month ago, I was working in another hotel. I was paid only 50 rupees [50 US cents] per day. In this hotel I am paid 75 rupees a day. My house is close by, but I don't get an opportunity to go home even once a month. Except for the five or six hours when I sleep, I have to work the rest of the day."

The unemployment, exploitation and appalling living conditions in areas like Grandpass are testimony to the inability of the Sri Lankan ruling class to address any of the social problems confronting working people in the 58 years since independence. Inequality has particularly worsened in the last 25 years, as successive UNP or SLFP-led governments have imposed International Monetary Fund and World Bank-dictated free market policies on the masses.

There will be no solution from Mahinda Rajapakse's new government. It will already be shelving its promises of job creation as it moves to meet the latest demands of international capital and Sri Lankan big business.

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