

Sri Lankan government prepares to suppress the struggles of workers

By W.A. Sunil
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As the civil war in Sri Lanka escalates, President Mahinda Rajapakse has intensified his efforts to block any action by workers to defend their living standards and democratic rights.

Addressing a public meeting on July 27 at Kandegama, the president declared: “It is the responsibility of everyone to save the country. No one has the right to betray the country’s security. Every trade union leader should be prepared to find solutions to the problems through discussions.” Speaking in Colombo on August 1, he again warned: “People should be more conscious of their responsibilities and also of their motherland prior to taking any step towards securing their rights.”

These appeals to “responsibility”, “national security” and “the defence of the motherland” have a definite political meaning and a long history in Sri Lanka. Throughout the country’s protracted conflict, the ruling elites in Colombo have repeatedly insisted that working people pay the costs of the war—in the carnage of battle and through the deterioration of living standards.

On August 13, Rajapakse held a meeting to enlist the support of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its National Trade Union Centre (NTUC). Gathered at his official residence were JVP MPs K.D. Lal Kantha, Piyasiri Wijenayake and Wasantha Samarasinghe, who are also union leaders.

The president appealed for the unions to solve industrial disputes through discussion and not by industrial action, “taking account of the prevailing situation of the country”. All the JVP leaders readily agreed. The party, which openly advocates ending the 2002 ceasefire, has been campaigning throughout the island on the theme “all for the motherland”.

Rajapakse narrowly won last November’s presidential election with the JVP’s backing. He

promoted himself as “a man of the common people” and issued a long list of election pledges, including substantial pay increases and concessions to help the poor. No sooner was he installed in office than the promises were broken. The Rajapakse government has continued the assault on living standards through privatisations, economic restructuring measures and budget cutbacks.

The result has been growing social unrest over skyrocketing prices for essential goods and services. During the seven months to July, the cost of living index has jumped 368 points from 4,304 to 4,672. In March, hundreds of thousands of public sector employees launched a protest campaign for increased pay, expressing deepening dissatisfaction among broad layers of working people.

In July, Colombo Port workers initiated a campaign for higher wages, while Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) employees prepared action against privatisation plans. Responding to concerns in business circles, the government sought and obtained court orders to ban the campaigns. A court injunction banning any struggle by port workers has since been extended until November 27.

Rajapakse is in no position to make any concessions to the working class. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have halted all lending to pressure Colombo to accelerate market reforms. As a result, the government has been compelled to borrow money on the international money markets at far higher interest rates in order to meet day-to-day expenditure.

The *Lanka business online* commented yesterday: “Since 2005, Sri Lanka has found it difficult to qualify for low interest program loans from multilateral lenders such as the World Bank, because its macro-economic policy framework is weak on fiscal prudence and

economic reforms, forcing it to rely more on commercial dollars.”

Rajapakse’s decision to plunge the country back to war will only compound the economic crisis. Not only will military expenditure inevitably rise but the conflict will also lead to a downturn in much-needed foreign investment. As fighting drags on, it will take its toll on businesses and infrastructure.

Already critical of the handling of the port and CPC protests, big business is demanding government action to maintain “industrial peace”. The Ceylon National Chamber of Industries (CNCI) wrote to Rajapakse on July 25, urging him to take decisive action against “irresponsible and selfish trade union actions”.

An editorial in the *Sunday Island* on July 30 criticised the government’s failure to immediately crush the industrial campaigns. “The unions have already drawn first blood by getting at least part of what they want via the strike weapon. It will be only matter of time before other unions follow the CPC and port example,” it warned.

The corporate elite is well aware that it can count on union leaders, who have consciously worked to undermine and weaken the struggles of workers. The real fear, however, is that the unions may not be able to contain popular resentment and anger. Commenting in *Ravaya* on August 6 on the court bans, Jayaratna Maliyagoda, the leader of the Ceylon General Workers Union, warned: “If strikes are suppressed in this way they would explode sharply. The government should realise this.”

Maliyagoda’s remarks point to the underlying motives for a return to war. Unable to meet the basic social needs and aspirations of working people, Rajapakse is resorting to the same reactionary stratagem that the ruling class has used in every crisis: to whip up communal suspicion and hatred to divide the working class. In prosecuting its war to defend the Sinhala Buddhist state, the government is preparing class war against working people.

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