

Sri Lankan unions promise to protect new pro-US administration

By W.A. Sunil
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Sri Lankan trade union officials have warned against “any attempt to destabilise” the new pro-US United National Party (UNP)-led government. Their comments are a warning, directed not only to the supporters of former President Mahinda Rajapakse but to workers as they come into conflict with the right-wing administration and its social austerity measures.

During the campaign for the August 17 general election, key unions lined up with other upper middle-class formations, including pseudo-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party, and the NGOs, to back the UNP’s electoral front, the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG). The UNFGG gained only 106 seats in the 225-member parliament, not enough for an absolute majority. After the election, the UNP struck an agreement with President Maithripala Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to form the next government.

Last week, Trade Unions Collective for Social Justice (TUCSJ) convenor Saman Ratnapriya told a media briefing in Colombo that if any party attempted “a political coup to destabilise the government, ignoring people’s will, we will come to the streets against them.”

Ratnapriya, who is chairman of the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA), said the unions, along with “civil organisations,” worked hard to defeat former President Rajapakse’s bid to return to power. In an expression of his servility to the state apparatus, Ratnapriya thanked the police and the electoral bureaucracy for ensuring a “peaceful election.”

The GNOA, the Government Paramedics Union, the Ceylon Teachers Union and the Railway Services Joint Trade Union (RSJTU) are among the unions involved in the TUCSJ. Officials from the railway and

paramedics unions made similar statements, voicing their readiness to protect the incoming right-wing government.

The unions are concerned that negotiations on the formation of the new government are taking too long. SLFP parliamentarians are bargaining for senior ministerial positions. Meanwhile, Rajapakse’s supporters in the SLFP and its electoral front, the United People’s Freedom Alliance, are campaigning against the coalition negotiations between President Sirisena and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Addressing an August 26 press conference called by Purawesi Balaya (Citizens Power), Ratnapriya called on Sirisena to “make way” for the UNP to form a single government instead of trying to establish a government with the SLFP. Purawesi Balaya is an alliance of union officials, academics and NGOs.

The TUCSJ backed Sirisena in last January’s presidential elections. Before this month’s general election, it was among 110 organisations, led by the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ), that signed a “memorandum of understanding” with Wickremesinghe to endorse the UNP’s election campaign.

During the elections, these formations denounced Rajapakse and his government’s anti-democratic actions, corruption and lack of “rule of law,” while channeling popular opposition into support for the UNP. Rajapakse lost to Sirisena in the January election, in a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington, which was hostile to Rajapakse’s close ties to Beijing.

In an attempt to hoodwink workers about the rail union’s support for Sirisena and the UNP, RSJTU secretary Sampath Rajitha told the media that if the government failed to implement election pledges, in

particular its promise to increase basic monthly wages by 10,000 rupees (\$US74) by September 1, the union alliance would take industrial action.

This is empty posturing. Over the past decade, TUCSJ officials, collectively and separately, derailed struggles over wages and working conditions by health and rail workers and teachers against the former Rajapakse government. The union officials' main concern today is to stabilise the incoming UNP-led regime, which will step up the attacks on jobs, wages and social conditions.

Others lining up behind Sirisena and the UNP include the free trade zone and plantations workers' unions. Free Trade Zones General Workers Union leader Marcus Antony told the *Sunday Times* that he was confident the government would introduce legislation to increase private sector wages by 2,500 rupees per month.

An interim budget introduced by the UNP-led minority government before this month's election made a vague promise to increase private sector pay. The big business elite has categorically rejected this, saying companies would be forced to shut down if the wage rise was implemented.

All the plantation unions, which also function as political parties, have decided to endorse the "national government" proposed by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. The Progressive Tamil Alliance (PTA), a coalition that includes the National Union of Workers, the Democratic Workers Front and the Up Country People's Front, ran in the elections as part of the UNFGG.

Yesterday, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union and a partner in the previous Rajapakse administration, announced it would support the UNP-led government. The CWC made clear that it wants a cabinet post for its leader, Arumugam Thondaman.

Last month, the CWC called off go-slow action for a wage rise by about 200,000 tea plantation workers, claiming that the industrial campaign would resume after the general election. Other unions in the PTA opposed the tea plantation go-slow protest from the outset, saying it was undermining the Sirisena government. The plantation companies have rejected workers' wage demands and insisted on a major increase in productivity.

Sirisena's incoming UNP-led government has made it abundantly clear that it will attack workers' wages and jobs.

Addressing the Asian Economic Promotion Forum in Colombo on August 25, leading UNP official Harsha De Silva said that for Sri Lanka to become "the most efficient and competitive" producer of goods and services in the region, the government must implement "tough" economic reforms. He also warned that stock market volatility would increase Sri Lanka's economic problems. De Silva is tipped to be the economic affairs or finance minister in the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

As workers come forward to defend their jobs, wages and living standards against the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the unions will accuse them of "destabilising" the government and seek to suppress resistance to its austerity measures.

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