

CWC joins an unstable Sri Lankan government

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After five months of behind-the-scene negotiations, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has finally induced the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a political party/trade union based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers, to join her coalition government. While the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) now has a formal parliamentary majority for the first time, the inclusion of the CWC will only further destabilise an already shaky coalition.

CWC head Arumugam Thondaman announced the decision on September 3. As part of the pay-off, the CWC was given two posts in the government—CWC leader Muthu Sivalingam was sworn in as minister of community development on September 10 along with a CWC deputy minister. A 13-point CWC-UPFA agreement was announced on September 15, which includes a commitment to the resumption of peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and promises to improve social conditions in the plantation areas.

Senior UPFA minister Mangala Samaraweera, who conducted negotiations with Thondaman, hailed the agreement as a major boost for the government. Since the April general election, the UPFA has had to function as a minority government with just 107 seats in the 225-seat parliament. With the addition of the CWC's eight MPs, Kumaratunga now has a slender majority. Far from strengthening the government, however, the deal with the CWC will only exacerbate sharp divisions within the coalition, in particular over the resumption of peace talks.

Up until the April election, Kumaratunga had been a constant critic of the so-called peace process initiated in 2002 by the previous United National Front (UNF) government. She collaborated with the military top brass in provocative actions against the LTTE and encouraged Sinhala chauvinist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Just prior to sacking the UNF government in February, Kumaratunga formed the UPFA alliance between her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the JVP and several minor parties.

After the UPFA narrowly won the poll, Kumaratunga did an abrupt about-face and called for the resumption of talks with the LTTE. The government confronts a mounting financial crisis, compounded by high world oil prices and a protracted drought; it is also desperate for foreign loans, assistance and investment. Donors, however, have insisted that financial support be tied to resuscitating the peace process. World Bank country director Peter Harrold recently underscored the point, declaring: "There is a strong link between the peace process and assistance."

At the same time, Kumaratunga faces opposition from the JVP, which regards any concessions to the LTTE as tantamount to treason. While not openly calling for a renewal of civil war, the JVP has opposed any negotiations on the LTTE proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in the North and East. The LTTE on the other hand insists that the ISGA has to be the basis for any resumption of talks. The protracted deadlock over the issue is compounding what is already a very tense situation.

Kumaratunga has turned to the CWC not only to provide a parliamentary majority but to bolster her own position within the ruling coalition as she attempts to restart talks. However, the CWC insists that talks have to go ahead based on the ISGA proposals, while the JVP has threatened to withdraw from the UPFA if such negotiations proceed. The departure of the JVP with its 39 seats could cause the government to collapse.

The tensions have soon come to the surface. Shortly after the CWC joined the government, JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva told a seminar on September 7 that, while the government had a majority for the first time, the CWC had to adhere to the UPFA manifesto.

CWC minister Muthu Sivalingam responded aggressively, declaring that the CWC joined the government "on the assurance that ... the UPFA would resume peace talks based on ISGA". He called on Kumaratunga to resume peace talks and ignore the JVP, saying the government would be able to get the necessary votes to proceed from UNF and other opposition parties.

In comments to the *Sunday Leader* on September 11 and each time it has switched sides it has made similar Environment Minister AHM Fowzie, a key SLFP leader, played down the obvious rift, saying this was a government of many different ideas. He blandly called on the JVP and CWC to sort out their differences but gave no indication how their diametrically opposed positions could be resolved.

For the CWC's part, its alliance with the UPFA is the latest in a long series of opportunist manoeuvres. It was part of the previous UNF government and contested the April election under the UNF banner. Its decision to abandon the UNF and join the government is based on pure political expediency and has nothing to do with defending the interests of working people.

The CWC is now seeking to paint a rosy picture of Kumaratunga and the UPFA as being prepared to launch peace talks. Yet just six months ago, the CWC's present allies were branding the UNF's attempts to restart peace talks on the basis of the ISGA as an act of betrayal that would divide the island and hand the LTTE its demand for a separate Tamil state. This was the basis on which Kumaratunga arbitrarily dismissed the UNF government, of which the CWC was a part, in February.

More fundamentally, the peace process is not designed to establish democratic rights of the masses including Tamils. It has been pushed by the major powers and big business to secure a power-sharing settlement between Colombo government and the LTTE in order to implement an economic reform program dictated by IMF and the World Bank to establish cheap labour conditions. The CWC's concern over peace talks is bound up with protecting the interests of business rather than those of workers.

The other parts of the 13-point CWC-UPFA agreement are designed to bolster the position of Thondaman and other CWC leaders who face growing hostility among Tamil plantation workers over declining living standards. The CWC claims that the deal will provide 3,500 teachers to fill school vacancies in plantation areas; 20,000 new housing units annually; 2,500 posts for A-level graduates in the provincial council clerical service; and 1.2 billion rupees (about \$US11.5 million) to be spent annually over the next five years for plantation infrastructure.

The CWC also pointed to the government's promise to abandon a hydropower project at Upper Kotmale in the central plantation district. Workers in the area were concerned that the project threatened their housing and their jobs. Neither the CWC nor the government has explained how any of these promises are going to be fulfilled. Prior to the April election, the UPFA made a series of promises to lift pay, halt privatisations, extend welfare and provide jobs, virtually none of which have been carried out.

The CWC has been a partner in every government since

September 11 and each time it has switched sides it has made similar pledges. Yet Tamil-speaking plantation workers remain among the most oppressed layers of the working class on the island. In fact, the CWC has been the main instrument for privatising the plantations and driving down the conditions of workers. The daily wage of a tea plantation worker is just 147 rupees (less than \$US1.50), while rubber workers earn only 131 rupees per day.

Once the biggest trade union in the plantation sector, the CWC's membership has plummeted from nearly 400,000 in 1977 to 150,000 as jobs have been axed. Last month thousands of workers in the central hills area at Kotagala, Laxapana and Maskeliya stopped work to demand better wages and conditions, accusing the trade unions, including the CWC, of failing to defend their interests.

One aspect of the CWC-UPFA agreement is particularly significant: a plan to recruit 1,000 Tamil youth from the estate areas to the police force. The proposal to strengthen the police in the plantation districts is an indication that state repression is being prepared amid signs of growing restiveness among plantation workers over their declining living standards and a willingness to take action outside the CWC and other unions.

The inability of the UPFA government to meet the demands of plantation workers, or working people generally will further sharpen the tensions within the coalition. While the CWC's support may provide Kumaratunga and the UPFA some temporary benefits, it does nothing to resolve any of the government's fundamental problems. Just how fleeting the CWC's backing may be is underscored by the parliamentary seating arrangements: the two CWC ministers will sit on the government benches but the remaining CWC MPs will continue to sit with the opposition.



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