

Top Sri Lankan ministry official declares those opposing government austerity are “traitors”

W.A. Sunil
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Public Administration Ministry Secretary Priyantha Mayadunne addressed a meeting of his officials on Sunday to outline aspects of the “reform program” being planned by the Sri Lankan government.

“Any political party, mass organisation or trade union that disagrees with these things,” he declared, “will all be considered traitors by the future generation.”

Mayadunne’s remarks came as the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has begun imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands. The IMF has insisted that any bailout loan to the cash-strapped Colombo regime will only be forthcoming if its demands are implemented and Sri Lanka’s “debt sustainability” is assured.

These measures include reducing the fiscal deficit through cuts to state expenditure, increased taxes, the privatisation or commercialisation of state enterprises and the slashing of welfare programs. In other words, mass job destruction, wage and pension cuts in the public sector, the elimination of subsidies and further attacks on public health and education.

The public administration ministry secretary’s threatening comments are not just personal opinions but a clear warning to the working class. They are an indication that the government is preparing a repressive political campaign against all opponents of austerity.

Part of Mayadunne’s 15-minute speech explained the rapidly worsening danger of starvation. “Whether we like it or not we will definitely be sunk by next month. We have no guarantee that our agricultural products will be good in Yala [next] season. We are sitting on a volcano,” he said.

Mayadunne arrogantly attempted to blame the

population for Sri Lanka’s economic crisis and then brutally declared, “The people has to suffer the pain in order to understand. Only then can this country be developed.”

Mayadunne’s attack on ordinary people was a crude bid to hide the real source of the crisis. What is unfolding in Sri Lanka is a sharp expression of the global capitalist breakdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and brought to a new peak of intensity by the US-NATO instigated war against Russian in Ukraine. Successive Sri Lankan governments and the entire ruling class have desperately sought to defend the profit system by imposing its burdens on the people.

Mayadunne’s told the meeting that an “urgent contingency plan is essential” and said state employees must “postpone” all their “privileges” for at least a decade.

“Until the economy reaches \$US10,000 [per capita income level] no one has the right to ask for pensions and gratuities. There is a 17.5 billion-rupee [\$50 million] gratuity [lump sum retirement amount] to pay,” he said, insisting that there is no way to honor this amount.

Foreshadowing public sector job and salary cuts, Mayadunne continued: “The maximum bearable number of jobs in the public sector is 500,000 or at most 800,000. Therefore, what is most suitable is to retire and demand the pension without paying gratuity. Even if the trade unions shout, there is no money to pay. We cannot pay by printing money. Therefore, this is an era where everything must be sacrificed.”

Mayadunne said state employment, which stands at 1.7 million, had been bloated by previous governments and declared that he opposed salary increases for

workers in the sector under present conditions.

The ministry secretary's statements echo discussions now underway within the Colombo elite. In the face of mass opposition from the working class, governments have repeatedly postponed the full implementation of previous IMF economic reforms. International financial institutions have made clear, however, that no retreat is possible.

Accumulated opposition by the working class and the poor has deepened in the past months as prices have skyrocketed, along with shortages of essential items, such as food, medicine and fuel, and extended power cuts. This triggered the eruption of mass protests and demonstrations across the country in early April with tens of thousands of people occupying Galle Face Green in Colombo.

The trade unions were forced to call two general strikes, on April 28 and May 6. Millions of workers participated in the powerful national walkouts, supported by broad sections of the oppressed masses, shocking not just the Rajapakse government but the entire political establishment.

Relying on the treachery of the trade unions to end these strikes, Ranil Wickremesinghe, the newly appointed pro-US prime minister and finance minister, is working to impose the IMF program.

Wickremesinghe told Reuters on May 24 that the government's interim budget which he is currently preparing, would cut government spending "to the bone."

As a first step, the government has ordered all state institutions' authorities to only retain essential employees needed to maintain service. Accordingly, just 50 percent of the state sector workforce is being called in to work. This week, the labour ministry announced that all its offices will be closed on Fridays. Discussions are underway about more job cuts, as well as how wages and pensions can be slashed.

Neither the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the Tamil National Alliance, pseudo-left formations like the Frontline Socialist Party nor any other opposition party has opposed these imminent attacks. They all support the imposition of the IMF program.

Likewise, the trade unions are maintaining a sinister silence over the IMF demands and the government's moves to slash hundreds of thousands of public sector

jobs.

Over the past year, the unions have responded to strikes and angry demonstrations by teachers and health workers by telling the government that they "understand the economic crisis." The unions have blocked workers' struggles. When unable to hold back their members, they have called protests and strikes which they have quickly betrayed.

On Monday, the Alliance of Action Committees initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued a statement titled "Oppose job and wage cuts in the public sector! Build action committees to defend workers' rights!"

We urge workers to study this analysis, join us in the fight to urgently build action committees in every workplace, factory, estate and in working-class suburbs and prepare to defend their rights through the struggle for socialist policies.



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