

JVP/NPP leader foreshadows strike ban in Sri Lanka

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Former MP and candidate for the ruling National People's Power (NPP), Lakshman Nipuna Arachchi, declared at an election meeting in Kesbawa on October 31 that strikes by workers would be unnecessary under the new government. The NPP is the electoral front of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

“Remember the words I say to you today. Such strikes will be relegated to a thing of the past. Against whom are they [workers] going to strike? If they have issues, they can discuss them with the government and resolve,” he said.

Nipuna Arachchi stated that under the JVP/NPP rule the “need to have a strike will end” and to set an example the JVP would dissolve its own trade unions.

These comments by a righthand man of newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake signal the preparation to ban industrial action, all in the name of ending the “sufferings” of people caused by strikes.

“We are passing a transitional period until November 14 [day of general elections]. Because of this you must build a strong government. Why? That is, in order to take forward the country without any interruption,” Nipuna Arachchi continued.

The meaning is simple: Strikes will be banned and the workers' right to organise abolished so as to take the country forward.

These remarks come in the wake of the newly-elected President Dissanayake's assurances to big business and foreign investors that the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) harsh austerity program of increased taxes, privatization, and jobs and essential services will be implemented in full under his rule.

Dissanayake and the ruling class as a whole are fearful that working class opposition will erupt against the austerity program. In 2022, a months-long mass uprising over intolerable social conditions brought

down the government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse, who fled the country.

Beginning in early 2023, hundreds of thousands of workers have engaged in strikes and protests to oppose the attacks of the previous government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe on their living and social conditions.

Now the Dissanayake government has refused to pay the inadequate 25 percent wage hike announced by the previous regime to 1.4 million public sector workers, emphasizing the treasury has no money.

Nipuna Arachchi's comments are a sharp warning that the new regime is preparing to eliminate the basic democratic right of workers to organise and fight for their class interests.

Other repressive measures are in train. The new Public Security Minister Vijitha Herath told a weekly cabinet briefing on October 30 that the government has abandoned its pledge to abolish the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), promised in their manifesto for the September 21 presidential election.

To justify the banning of strikes, Nipuna Arachchi repeatedly referred to the suffering they cause—the stock-in-trade argument of big business against any industrial action.

“If children go to school, either teachers or principals were on strike. If you go to hospital, doctors, nurses or attendants were on strike. If you want to go somewhere, either the [state owned] CTB or private buses were on strike. We had a bitter history of strikes,” he declared.

The hostility of the JVP/NPP towards strikes is an expression of its deeply entrenched hostility to the working class. It is appealing to sections of middle class and other backward elements of the working class to create a battering ram against the opposition of workers to the austerity agenda it will implement.

From its very formation, the JVP based itself on reactionary Sinhala populism dressed up as socialistic phrase-mongering derived from Stalinism which it has since ditched. Its preparation to ban all strikes is a clear expression of the fascistic character of its program which has been inherent in its virulent Sinhala patriotism.

It is precisely for this reason that sections of the ruling class have turned to the JVP as the means to crush any opposition in the working class amid the deep crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism and the fragmentation of the traditional parties of bourgeois rule.

Nipuna Arachchi's comments echo those of JVP trade union leaders in recent months.

Just two days after the July 8-9 strike by around one million public sector employees, the JVP's National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) president K. D. Lankantha announced the NTUC's decision. He declared that any suggestion of strikes at this time of preparation for the September 21 presidential election was "a blatant reactionary act."

The NTUC leader continued: "Our vision should be to strengthen the electoral battleground. If the trade union movement cannot change to accommodate this change, it is 'a crime'." He declared that the JVP trade unions would not engage in strikes that cause suffering for people and antagonize them.

A few days later, another top JVP leader, Nalinda Jayatissa, told a YouTube channel that under the JVP/NPP government the party and state become one. Managements and trade unions would work together—a recipe for corporatist class collaboration of a fascistic character.

Other trade union leaders inside and outside the JVP are now openly lining up with the Dissanayake government's campaign against the democratic rights of the working class.

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) United Trade Union Alliance Convener and NPP parliamentary candidate Ranjan Jayalal was responsible for scuttling the fight by CEB workers against privatisation. He told the media as the government has pledged to review taxes affecting employees and to adjust salaries every six months there was no need for strikes.

The Ceylon Teachers Union leader Joseph Stalin told media that if the government addresses the problems

faced by teachers and public servants, there will be no strikes in the country. He was the trade union bureaucrat who betrayed the 100-day strike by teachers in late 2021 by accepting just one third of the pay rise demanded.

The working class can only counter the IMF's austerity program and the attacks on its democratic rights by organising itself as an independent political force, breaking free from the trade union bureaucracy and establishing its own independent fighting organisations.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and rural toilers to form Action Committees, independent of the trade unions and establishment parties including the JVP, in factories, workplaces, plantations and rural areas. A network of Action Committees must be established to coordinate the fight to defend basic social and democratic rights that reaches out to workers internationally.

The SEP is calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural masses comprising delegates from the action committees to discuss, formulate and implement a political and industrial strategy to oppose the government's austerity agenda on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The SEP is campaigning for this program in the November 14 general elections, running 41 candidates for three electoral districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the north and Nuwara Eliya in the central plantation area. We urge workers and youth to support our campaign and vote for our candidates, but above all join the SEP to build the necessary revolutionary leadership for the class battles ahead.



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