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Sri Lanka

Power to the Left - For a new era

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Presidential elections are taking place in Sri Lanka on 17 November. We publish here two political statements from the left. The first is the Manifesto of the New Left Front. Chamil Jayaneththi, a leading member of the NSSP (Sri Lanka section of the Fourth International) is the New Left Front's Presidential candidate. The second is from the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union (CMU).

Power to the Left - For a new era

What are our problems?

We are discussing the political economic and social problems faced by our society. People are suffering from poverty, unemployment and war. This crisis is based on the inability of our society to enter the path of development. Though they do talk about these problems, both Mahinda and Ranil are responsible for this situation. They sling mud at each other without giving solutions. It is left to the NLF to come out with a clear way out. What are the obstructions faced by our society?

– Firstly, we are under the pressure of Global capital. We are tied down in a debt trap. If the projects given to us were successful then we should have paid back the loans. This has not happened. Are we responsible for these endless repayments? Pressure exerted by the MNC system has crippled the internal market, suppressed local production and imprisoned our economy. We must press to cancel debts for which we are not responsible. We must use imports & exports, foreign exchange regulations, and customs to protect our market and the local forces of production. We have to renationalize, at least those enterprises which were run efficiently or which played a very useful role in our economy. We must abandon the so-called open economy of Global capitalism. We must join the Global Populist movement expressed by the World Social Forum. It is not necessary to pray to the MNCs for science and technology. We have to link up with the International Labour movement, in particular with that of Indian sub continent.

– Secondly, the war has pushed the society to barbarism. The economy and the market are divided between the State and the Tiger regime. There is anarchy in a no man's land. Prime land and coast in the North are occupied by the security forces. Army deserters, numbering over 30,000, have created an underworld power that affects all aspects of economy. War has become an industry with over 300,000 personnel in government forces and over 20,000 in Tamil Liberation Army. Supplies to these forces also employ thousands of people. Expenditure on arms and ammunition, equipment, transport etc. run into billions of rupees. Country has lost large number of Professionals to the developed world. Therefore, peace on the basis of a solution to the Tamil national question is a must. We always proposed, since 1974, a solution based on equality, autonomy and right of self-determination. Now it is clear that there is no other way out. A ferocious movement such as the LTTE is the result of repression made instead of giving a solution to the Tamil National problem.

– Thirdly, the absolutist nature of the State and undemocratic nature of the Constitution is a serious obstruction to any development programme. State still exists as an instrument above the villagers and the urban poor. It is there to safeguard public property and State revenue. Even the social services are done with a condescending attitude. Development is reserved for political leaders. State officials are unable to place themselves as facilitators for development. Kachcheri and courthouses operate without regard to time and money of those who seek relief. Often it is women who are neglected. Even the large number of elected representatives has not reduced this alienated nature of the State. Executive Presidency and the present Constitution on the basis of proportional representation have only

aggravated the problem. It is necessary to change this to create a participatory democracy based on workplace profession and worksite representation that strengthens all aspects of human rights. In particular environment laws, Trade Union rights and women rights should be defended.

– Fourthly, the stagnation of the village structure is a clear obstruction to development. Market has not really penetrated the village economy. Hence development based on market does not filter into village areas. Divisions of land holdings, absentee landlordism and other kind of absentee ownership of production instruments, lack of security to the produce, lack of preservation, rural usury, reactionary traditions, all these keep the village production at a minimum level. Agrarian reforms, extensive in nature are necessary to overcome this. A village development authority, which integrates the power of Divisional Secretarial, Pradesiya Sabha, Agrarian Services, Engineering Services, etc., is a must. While changing dictatorial constitution and bureaucracy with a democratic State structure, it is necessary to get the people out of reactionary conservative rural system to direct them into the path of development.

Ranil's solutions

Both capitalist camps have totally failed to address these issues in a rational manner. From time to time slogans are put forward in the name of national democracy. But nothing happened. Things have gone from bad to worse. Ranil has insisted on the validity of "Regaining Sri Lanka" and the open economy that started in 1977. Clearly, he is a conservative broker speaking on behalf of global capitalists powers. On Tamil national question he is prepared to go forward to the extent Global capitalist leaders agree. Already LTTE is forced to enter the camp of Open Economy. Tamil youth are expected to hand over the hard won resources of their motherland to the MNC system. There is no programme to change the State or the Constitution. If at all, he wants to stabilize the Presidential system. Except the rhetoric about the new golden era of Parakramabahu, there is nothing said about the changes necessary in the village power structure.

Mahinda - JVP economic plans

In spite of the shouting of "Marxist" JVP and claims to protect State enterprises, Mahinda led the Cabinet to the agreements signed in Kandy on May 16/17 with the WB and the donor countries. This is an agreement to privatize CEB, Bank, Water Management, Health, Airports, Harbours and major State Enterprises under the pretext of restructuring. Already phosphate deposit at Eppawala has been sold to a Chinese company. JVP and JHU too participated in this event but failed to make any protest, except on concessions to Tamil and other minorities. JVP's letter dated 25.4.05 to US Under Secretary of State, Christina Rocca, shows that they are prepared to make any sacrifice in order to get help to suppress Tamil people. To cover their betrayal of free education on 16/17 May 2005, they talk about an agreement made by Tara De Mel.

Mahinda for repression

By this agreement Mahinda accepted the way forward given in Ranil's "Regaining Sri Lanka". Mahinda has not rejected this agreement though he openly renounced Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) and devolution. It is not clear how he is going to have discussions with Prabakaran sans federalism, sans devolution and sans Tamil identity. His shouts about discipline and law and order, with the above programme to bring him close to extremism that attacked the working class and the minority groups. He plans to deal with both urban and national unrests, not by discussions and concessions, but by military and police actions.

Left is rising world over

These two leaders give us two options. Either to become vassals of Global capital with poverty and displacement or to drift in to barbarism of a chauvinist dictatorship with the division of the country. World over people are challenging both these ends. In all continents new movements have developed that reject dictates of the global capital and dissociate from chauvinism and religions fundamentalism. People have come out of the setback felt at the time of the collapse of Berlin wall. There is a new interest in Marxism. There are victories in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, etc. It is possible to put forward a third way out. Walden Bello says "what we are all about is demystifying economics, what we are all about is people grasping production and consumption and putting that into comprehensive national non alienated development". This takes us back to discussions on development that took place in 70/75. We see that the left leaders then made two mistakes. On the one hand, they thought that with a coalition under chauvinist capitalists they could carry out national democratic tasks. On the other hand they attempted to implement isolated socialist projects in this backward surrounding. Hence while corrupt and bureaucratic elements thrived, people lost their democratic power to intervene. Chauvinist discrimination raised its ugly head. At the same time local industrialist and producers were harassed and intimidated. Finally, capitalists threw out left leaders and pushed the government towards open economy even before JR came to power. We must correct these mistakes and move forward with the Global populist movement. We can start at this point and move on until serious victories are made by the working masses in the developed world. Hence, we have to struggle on the basis of this programme to build a mass movement. Such a movement will be able to resist the regime, irrespective of who wins. There will be fights of working masses combined with national liberation struggles. We must use this election to make people aware and to bring them together into a left movement to fight back and give leadership to struggles of all oppressed.

Please cast your vote and give your support to build the left that is committed to a new era of people's struggles.

New Left Front

STATEMENT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CEYLON MERCANTILE INDUSTRIAL AND GENERAL WORKERS' UNION (CMU)

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2005

The first Presidential Election in Sri Lanka was held on 20th October 1982, under the Constitution adopted by the UNP-dominated Parliament of Sri Lanka on 31st August 1978.

President J. R. Jayawardene utilized the huge majority he had gained in the Parliamentary General Election of 1977 to frame the 1978 Constitution. It contained special provisions for the election of an Executive President, who would be the Head of State, Head of the Executive and of the Government, and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The President could appoint and dismiss the Cabinet of Ministers and dissolve Parliament itself. The President could also "declare war and peace", or proclaim a State of Emergency under the Public Security Act, enabling the President to make Emergency Regulations thereunder, amending or suspending the operation of any written law, subject to parliamentary approval within a specified period.

The CMU denounced the provisions for the Executive Presidency in the 1978 Constitution as being completely undemocratic, and accordingly called for a boycott of the 1982 Presidential Election. We declared that no candidate, if elected President, should be vested with the powers of the Executive Presidency, irrespective of who the candidate might be, and whatever a candidate might promise to do or not do, if elected.

Presidential elections were held in 1988, 1994 and 1999. The CMU did not call for the support of any of the presidential candidates in those elections, as they were also held under the same 1978 Constitution. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga promised, prior to her first election as President in November 1994, to abolish the Executive Presidency. She did not do so, however, even after she was re-elected as President in 1999, under the same Constitution.

Now, Mahinda Rajapakse, the Prime Minister appointed by President Kumaratunga, has stated in his election Manifesto that he expects, if elected, "to present a Constitution that will propose the abolition of the Executive Presidency and to provide solutions to other issues confronting the country." He says that this will be done "with the consensus of all". That is impossible, since it would require the consent of the UNP and its political allies, including the Ceylon Workers' Congress and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, which are all opposed to the removal of the Executive Presidency.

Even Mahinda Rajapakse's most vocal allies, the JVP, have laid it down in their written agreement with him, that it is agreed "to terminate the Executive Presidential system before the end of the tenure of office of the 6th Executive President which is commenced from the year 2005." This really means that they want Mahinda Rajapakse to be the Executive President for the next six years. They obviously expect him to give them Ministerial portfolios and other positions, with their perks and privileges, in that event. Mahinda Rajapakse's manifesto also envisages a 6-year period for his Action Plans to be implemented under him as President.

There is, therefore, really only one issue that will be decided by the people who may vote for Mahinda Rajapakse or Ranil Wickremasinghe on 17th November 2005. That is which of the two of them is to be vested with the powers of the Executive Presidency for six years, under the 1978 Constitution. Whether or to what extent the one or the other of them can fulfil the expectations of the political parties and other organizations and groups that support them, and the people who may vote for them, will depend mainly on the economic, political and military realities of the situation in which they could exercise those powers, if elected; and not on their individual beliefs, intentions, or capabilities.

The differences between the political parties of the two principal candidates are not on fundamental social or economic issues. Both the UNP and the SLFP, and the JVP as well, are committed to the maintenance of the present capitalist economic system in this country, which is subject to the global market economy. The governments that are headed by either of them are, therefore, subject to the conditions that are imposed by global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for the grant of foreign loans and for foreign investment, on which they depend for their development projects, as well as for the servicing of existing loans and public expenditure. They are also subject to strict limitations in relation to foreign trade by the World Trade Organisation. They differ on such questions as whether or to what extent there is to be further privatization of public enterprises or sale of national assets, beyond what has already taken place under successive regimes headed by the UNP and the SLFP.

The two candidates differ on the important question of whether they should deal with the LTTE directly, or not; and, if so, on what basis. That is, whether to negotiate with the LTTE or not, in regard to the question of the administration of the Northern and Eastern provinces, large parts of which continue to be under the military and partially administrative control of the LTTE, and in relation to which the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan State cannot be exercised.

The constitutional basis on which Mahinda Rajapakse has given written undertakings to the JVP and the JHU, in compliance with their Sinhala Nationalist demands, precludes his even having discussions with the LTTE, on a basis that will be acceptable to the LTTE, if he is elected. On the other hand, even Ranil Wickremasinghe's more realistic position on the question of negotiations with the LTTE, in regard to the administration of the Northern and Eastern provinces, may not lead to meaningful negotiations with them, without the support of the SLFP, if he is elected.

The continuance of the existing Ceasefire Agreement entered into with the LTTE by the previous UNP Government, and continued so far, with reservations, by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Government, is thus uncertain. On the other hand, the present State of Emergency might well be extended, with further heavy increases in Defense expenditure, if Mahinda Rajapakse becomes President. This is likely even if it is Ranil Wickremasinghe who becomes President.

Apart from the above-mentioned matters, a matter of special concern to our Union, as an independent mass organisation of workers, is that there is only one reference to workers in the entirety of Mahinda Rajapakse's Agreement with the JVP. All that is stated therein is that "in resolving the problems faced by workers, farmers, factory owners, entrepreneurs, the business community and consumers... the proposals of the JVP shall be accepted and (he) shall agree to act in conformity with those proposals." There is no indication at all as to what those proposals would be, in relation to workers, or farmers, or factory owners or entrepreneurs, or the business community, or consumers.

Mahinda Rajapakse's Manifesto contains promises and assurances to various sections of the population, such as students, farmers, women and public servants. The only reference in it, that could apply to the millions of wage earners in the private sector, however, is to a low interest housing loan scheme that is to be offered to them, with the participation of the Employees' Trust Fund, and State and private banks, whatever that may mean. That is all that the Manifesto has to say with regard to the vast majority of the workers of our country, on whom its economy depends. There is no mention of any of the major problems facing workers today, such as employment on a casual basis or through labour contractors, even by big capitalist companies, on extremely low wages and without any security of employment whatsoever. Retrenchment of permanent workers without adequate compensation, and the establishment of a National Minimum Wage by law, which all the trade unions represented in the National Labour Advisory Council have requested, have also received no mention.

A particularly significant omission in the Manifesto is that it contains no reference to the Workers' Charter, that was intended to incorporate basic human rights for workers, such as Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise and Bargain Collectively, together with basic guarantees in relation to Wages and Terms and Conditions of Employment of workers. Mahinda Rajapakse was removed and replaced as Minister of Labour by President Chandrika Kumaranatunga in 1997, when he was seeking to have the Workers' Charter implemented in law. Though it was abandoned by the People's Alliance Government thereafter, he could not have forgotten it.

According to the Manifesto, its contents are to be "translated into Action Plans to be implemented over a 6-year period, and such implementation will be entrusted to the relevant ministries".

The implementation of Mahinda Rajapakse's plans, whatever they may be, would thus depend largely on the Prime Minister and the other Cabinet Ministers whom he may appoint, if elected. He would have to choose them from amongst the Members of the present Parliament, elected at the General Election of 2nd April 2004. Whoever he may trust amongst them, to help him build "A New Sri Lanka", as envisaged in his Manifesto, our Union cannot, in relation to Sri Lanka as it is today.

Having regard to the policies of the UNP under the leadership of Ranil Wickremasinghe, both as Prime Minister and as Leader of the Opposition, our Union cannot, in any case, expect anything beneficial to the working people from a government headed by him, but rather, the contrary.

In the circumstances, our Union does not expect any of the major problems facing our people today to be resolved by whoever may be elected to be the President of Sri Lanka on 17th November 2005.

Bala Tampoe - General Secretary