



Sri Lanka: Joint union campaign against Rajapaksa's budget

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Taking advantage of the barrage of publicity that accompanied the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting the previous week, President Mahinda Rajapaksa last week presented his government's budget for the coming year to Parliament. Although long on the rhetoric of projected growth targets, the actual content of the proposals was short on measures that will improve the living conditions of the overwhelming majority of the country's population.

Two details in particular sum up the contrast between exaggerated promises and harsh reality. The monthly cost of living allowance for public sector workers, or 'servants' as they are called, is to rise by LKR1200 to LKR7800, that is, approximately, £6.00 to £39.00, some 20 percent, when official inflation figures are at 6.5 percent. This looks good, until it is remembered that the cost of living allowance is only a fraction of actual salaries and is not taken into account when calculating overtime rates, bonuses or pension entitlement.

Similarly, the introduction of a guaranteed pension for farmers over the age of 63 is an important principle in itself but the sums involved, LKR1250 or £6.30, per month, when the daily wage of some of the lowest paid workers in the country, women plantation workers, is LKR380, is so low as to be an insult to those who will receive it.

As part of the propaganda campaign to present himself as some kind of democrat, Rajapaksa earlier made a great show of encouraging people and organisations to submit proposals for the budget. To call his bluff, the Trade Union Coordinating Centre, which was initiated by the JVP-led unions some three years ago and has drawn in a number of other unions, launched its own 'budget campaign', involving meetings of union leaderships, workplace meetings and a conference attended by 500 workplace delegates.

At a press conference on November 18, leaders of the unions involved, including the JVP's Wasantha Samarasinghe, General Secretary of the Inter-Company Employees' Union, ICEU, and Anton Marcus of the politically unaffiliated Free Trade Zones and General Service Employees' Union, FTZGSEU, presented the campaign's 21 proposals to meet the urgent needs of working people, including not only the public and private sectors but also farming and fisheries. Speaking at the same meeting, PD Saranapala, a leading member of the Socialist Party of Sri Lanka and General Secretary of the GUMUA, stressed the need to develop the TUCC into a more broadly-based campaigning organisation, drawing in not only other unions but also the vast majority of workers who do not currently belong to any union.



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On November 20, the TUCC held a public rally at the Fort railway station in Colombo and then marched to the offices of the Finance Ministry to present the 21 proposals to the Minister of Finance. True to form, the Minister refused even to meet the delegation, let alone take any notice of the proposals. In response, the TUCC organised a demonstration in Colombo of some 2,000 workers on November 22, at the same time as Rajapaksa was presenting his budget.

Meanwhile, only 20 miles from Colombo, a bitter dispute at Ansell Lanka's factory at Biyagama provided a stark reminder of the reality of trade unionism in the 'Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka'. Ansell is an Australian

company that is one of the biggest suppliers of protective clothing in the world and owns both rubber plantations and factories in Sri Lanka. Since October 11, over 800 workers have been on strike against the sacking of the President of the FTZGSEU branch and other branch officials. This is now the longest strike in a Free Trade Zone in Sri Lankan history. More details of the strike and how to support the strikers is to be found at [//www.industrialunion.org/scab-made-medical-gloves-sicken-ansell-workers-in-sri-lanka](http://www.industrialunion.org/scab-made-medical-gloves-sicken-ansell-workers-in-sri-lanka)>

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