

Sri Lanka's Post-Labor Politics Is on the Rise in Sri Lanka

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Organized labor has struggled to push demands and set the agenda during Sri Lanka's democratic transition.

For the past two years, Sri Lanka has been undergoing a democratic transition. On January 8, 2015, the regime led by [Mahinda Rajapaksa](#) was defeated by a diverse coalition made up of economic liberals, disaffected rural voters, and marginalized ethnic groups. The Rajapaksa regime militarily defeated the [Tamil Tigers](#) in the island's north and the east of the country in 2009 after a decades-long civil war.

Afterwards, the regime further embraced Sinhala nationalism and suppressed a political solution based on devolving government powers to Tamil and Muslim areas. The current bipartisan government led by the United National Party (UNP) and a section of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) claimed to rescue the country from the Rajapaksa regime's corruption and increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

Unfortunately, the dominant partner of the coalition, the UNP, which spent ten years prior in the opposition, has not changed its neoliberal identity. It is eager to pursue a more aggressive agenda for "[economic reform](#)." It says its proposed policies, from greater trade liberalization to budget cuts to social welfare, are necessary because the country is facing a debt crisis caused by the previous regime's accumulation of loans for mega infrastructure projects. Its most recent indication that it will give China majority control over a major port in the south of the island, for example, has sparked [massive protests](#), indicating a likely path of resistance ahead.

How should the labor movement respond? The unions and other progressive actors who supported the defeat of the Rajapaksa regime face a quandary. They are wary of openly challenging the current government because they fear it would create an opening for members of the former regime to undermine the tentative democratic gains that have been made over the past two years.

The ruling parliamentary coalition could become fragmented. This could further threaten a [political solution](#) based to resolve the long-simmering "ethnic question." The latter has defined Sri Lanka's postcolonial politics because Sinhala nationalism, claiming to represent the Sinhala majority, often violently discriminated against Tamils and Muslims then generating responses from both. After the defeat of Rajapaksa there is now a political opening because moderate sections within the mainstream and minority parties generally agree on the outline of an agreement, which progressives support.

The catch twenty-two for organized labor is the imperative to challenge the government's economic policy without undermining support for a political solution that strengthens democracy. This situation reflects the inherent weakness of Sri Lankan organized labor since at least 1980, when a general strike was crushed under Sri Lanka's first neoliberal regime led by the UNP. Because the

labor movement never recovered from its historic defeat, it is unable to set the broad terms of the government's agenda.

Still, organized labor must fight the proposed economic reforms. Failing to challenge the government's economic policy, including potentially massive changes to labor law, could create the ground for Rajapaksa and the poisonous Sinhala nationalism he represents to regain popular support, forgetting [the suppression of protests](#) under his own regime.

To avoid political disaster, unions must challenge the assumption that government can operate without the effective support of organized labor — the attempt to implement a post-labor regime.

The Decline of the Labor Movement

To understand the Sri Lankan labor movement's weakness, we must look back at a decisive turning point for organized labor in the transition from a social-democratic to neoliberal regime in 1977. Before that year, organized labor in Sri Lanka had been historically very strong. Over time they became part of the politics of patronage within the state. Members of the major left parties, including one of the world's most successful Trotskyist parties, joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in a coalition government in 1970. The party combined nationalist and social-democratic tendencies.

The left parties occupied key cabinet posts and advocated protectionist measures for industries based on import substitution. The government also nationalized the country's vast plantations, and expanded state-owned enterprises. Due to the downturn in the global economy, prices for Sri Lanka's primary exports including tea and rubber plunged, and average Sri Lankans became frustrated when they could not purchase basic goods. They voted in a new regime that claimed it would promote economic freedom and openness.

The UNP regime of [J. R. Jayewardene](#) came into power in 1977 and swiftly proceeded to smash the unions. This assault mirrored the neoliberal assault on organized labor in other countries occurring around the same time. Further, it adopted policies for economic liberalization, such as an end to price controls and, later, a floating exchange rate, in addition to slashing welfare.

[Inequality skyrocketed](#). Sri Lanka's economy continues to be defined by this neoliberal macroeconomic framework, combined with remedial measures for the poor and residual public-sector employment.

Unions have had difficulty responding. They have struggled to organize in the new industries of the export economy. These include the mostly women workers in the apparel industry and those who work abroad, mostly in domestic services, [earning a large chunk of the country's foreign exchange](#). Sri Lanka's rate of unionization remains between 10 and 15 percent, according to the International Labor Organization.

At the same time, Sri Lanka's post-liberalization governments have unanimously accepted that the state must "attract" investment by offering extensive tax concessions to investors and promoting the casualization of work.

Still, unions occasionally play a role in democratic reforms. Many supported Chandrika Kumaratunga, who accepted devolution to Tamil and Muslim areas, in the election in 1994. This occurred after a particularly devastating phase of the civil war and social insurrection that resulted in the assassination of many leftist leaders and unionists by the UNP government and a Sinhala nationalist-Marxist group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or "People's Liberation Front."

The JVP originated as a militant group among poor rural youth who could not find employment in the

state bureaucracy in the late 1960s. Over time, it embraced a chauvinistic approach claiming to “protect the motherland,” coming into conflict with progressives who supported devolution, before its leadership was eliminated in a ruthless counterinsurgency in 1989.

Although all the major political parties in Sri Lanka maintain their own unions, the labor movement has occasionally come to consensus on policy. A national workers’ charter, for example, was drafted around the time of Kumaratunga’s election.

Since the 1980s, however, unions have been slowly replaced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as the vanguard of civil society.

Many NGOs take the question of state reform, especially war crimes accountability and devolution to Tamil and Muslim areas, and frame it in a narrow way, ignoring the economic concerns of the masses. This oversight became a major issue during a brief ceasefire between a UNP-led government and the Tamil Tigers from 2002 to 2004. Sinhala nationalist forces managed to link proposals for devolution to the government’s other plans for economic privatization.

Ultimately, both were defeated, and a coalition led by the nationalist yet effectively neoliberal SLFP under Mahinda Rajapaksa [won power in 2005](#).

Further Setbacks

Despite the opening of democratic space after the January 8 “revolution” against the increasingly dictatorial Rajapaksa regime, unions have struggled to push forward their demands. An NGO model for organizing that relies on donor funding has become more prominent.

Unions have seen their membership decline drastically over the past few decades. In response, there is a tendency to look to funding from international organizations, avoiding the inherent challenges of organizing on the job.

In addition, many left party factions have split between competing bourgeois coalitions, disagreeing over whether to support the current government or the opposition. Because of these two tendencies, the labor movement in Sri Lanka currently lacks an effective political strategy.

On the other hand, this absence is reflected in a narrow focus on piecemeal demands.

Unionists frequently concentrate on a few issues. They advocate re-establishing a cost-of-living index or ending subcontracted work through manpower agencies, by pursuing legal amendments. They have won a few gains under the new government, including a small [wage increase](#) for the private sector. They now face, however, a much bigger threat given the push to create a more “flexible” labor force.

The Sri Lankan state and international organizations encourage unions to adopt a legalistic approach — the ILO model, so to speak — rather than seeing the law as part of the neoliberal restructuring of the state apparatus. Why are regulatory institutions such as the Labor Department so weak? Why does it take months for workers to have their cases heard in court? How does this negligence reflect the emphasis of successive post-liberalization governments on underfunding the state and attracting investors, as opposed to providing secure employment to ordinary people?

The reason is simple: the state contains and domesticates working-class struggles, channeling them into never-ending legal cases, while capitalists shape the overall policy direction of the government to their benefit.

The challenges facing the labor movement in Sri Lanka parallel [those facing many unions](#) around the world. The situation is more urgent now that the current government is proposing an aggressive set of economic reforms that are linking changes from trade liberalization to budget cuts to labor law reform. These proposals are increasingly represented in the government's dismissive attitude toward "politically motivated" protest and dissent. This includes [suppression of a recent strike in a major port](#).

The danger is that Mahinda Rajapaksa's allies can step in and claim to support workers, even though they were silent on repression under the previous regime. A similar principle operates wherever nationalists claim to represent ordinary people's grievances.

Theory and Practice

What can Sri Lanka's unions do in the face of declining mass membership? There are two possibilities. The first is to contribute to discussions that challenge the "export-oriented" model of development. The current government argues Sri Lanka must embrace trade liberalization, but it ignores the vast history and experience of state-sponsored development of industry.

Sri Lanka's previous experience with import substitution didn't work out due to a downturn in the global economy along with bureaucratic mismanagement. Still, activists can at least reintroduce the possibility for public investment in sectors that sustain people's livelihoods, including agriculture and fisheries.

Second, unions can challenge the government by coming together, however tentatively, to organize brief, single-issue campaigns. A campaign opposing labor law reform, for example, might not be able to set the agenda yet, given the long-term need to organize and rebuild the labor movement. It could, however, bring activists together to work on the same issues. Union leaders acknowledge the sectarianism that plagues the movement. It will take time and effort to rebuild trust and construct an effective program.

The first step requires setting aside political differences and challenging the government — and any government — that seeks to undermine organized labor and its role as a representative of democratic rights in general. Only by doing so will activists decisively be able to put an end to the assumption that Sri Lanka is defined by a post-labor regime, in which governments can operate without the effective support or even consideration of organized labor.

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