

Sri Lanka: Bid to file a case over the new appointments to National Labour Advisory Council

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Sri Lanka's new government appointing a woman workers' leader to a top body on industrial relations has been challenged by the very same trade union federation she represents.

Lalitha Ranjani Dedduwa Kumara, chief organizer of the Textile Garment & Clothing Workers Union (TGCWU) affiliated to the United Federation of Labour (UFL), as well as Chamila Thushari of the Dabindu Collective - a partner organization of the ruling National People's Power (NPP), have been appointed as new Labour representatives of the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC).

UFL was removed from the NLAC by the Ranil Wickremesinghe government in 2023.

Appointments are done by the Minister of Labour. The stated purpose of the tripartite advisory council is to provide for consultations and cooperation between the government and the organization of workers and employers at the national level on matters relating to social and labour policies and international labour standards.

Congratulating the two women on their appointment to the National Labour Advisory Council, which has a history of almost twenty-five years, the first female Labour representative to the council has attacked the decision to remove UFL - which she leads - from the NLAC, and has threatened legal action.

"However, on what basis was United Federation of Labour - a Federation led by women and having more women membership than both the above Unions put together left out of NLAC?" UFL chairperson Swasthika Arulingam asks on social media.

"I will wait for the 15th before taking legal steps which will not only affect the credibility of the NPP but will permanently break the solidarity between women lead unions which I was part of building."

This is the second time that women have been appointed to the NLAC since the appointment of Attorney at Law Swasthika Arulingam on July 13, 2021, as the representative of the United Federation of Labour.

Manusha Nanayakkara, who was the Minister of Labour in 2023, removed four main trade unions from the National Labour Advisory Council, claiming that those trade unions do not have the required number of members.

The Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZ & GSEU), The Ceylon Mercantile Industrial General Workers' Union [CMU], Ceylon Estate Staffs' Union as well as the United Federation of Labour are the trade unions that have been so removed.

55 organizations and 150 activists who issued a statement against this exclusion, strongly accused then minister of taking the 'extraordinary' decision to remove the only female representation in the advisory council.

"When the UFL was excluded from the NLAC by Manusha Nanayakkara several women and men whom currently sit with the NPP including Lakmali Hemachandra Member of Parliament signed the letter supporting the inclusion of UFL in the NLAC. The position of these signatories should not change simply because they are sitting in power." Swasthika Arulingam further added.

Lakmali Hemachandra, MP, is the President of the Textile Garment & Clothing Workers Union (TGCWU).

The representative of TGCWU, one of the eight trade unions under the UFL chaired by lawyer Arulingam, has been appointed to the NLAC.

She is also a Vice President of United Federation of Labour.

After assuming power in December 2024, the new government has arbitrarily appointed new representatives to the National Labour Advisory Council without a public call, trade union leaders have alleged. They say that Labour Minister Anil Jayantha Fernando, who chairs the National Labour Advisory Council, has not given any reasoning for the appointments.

"The organizations and institutions represented in the NLAC will be selected by the Hon. Minister from among "most representative" organizations of employers and workers in the different sectors of the economy," states the official website of the NLAC.

Just like the last time, the new government has this time too, taken measures to remove The Ceylon Mercantile Industrial General Workers' Union [CMU] from the NLAC. The Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZ & GSEU), the leading union representing workers in the Free Trade Zone, which won legal action against the removal of its union from the top body, has once again secured a place in the NLAC.

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