

Sri Lanka: Reflecting on May Day 2016

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Media was unusually attentive of May Day 2016 mainly because of the assumption that May Day 2016 would be critically decisive for the future of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and ex-president Mahinda Rajapaksa. Although he has been out of power for 16 months, it seems that the politics in Sri Lanka, at least in many peoples' mind, still continues to revolve around Rajapaksa.

During the last 50 years, May Day has, as an occasion where the wage-earning class is supposed to show its strength by raising demands to protect its living and working conditions and upholding its solidarity with their brothers and sisters in other countries, lost its meaning in Sri Lanka. The sad story that brought about disastrous outcome for the Sri Lankan working class began in 1964, when the principal working class party in Sri Lanka, the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) deviating from its original principles, entered into a coalition government with the SLFP as its junior partner. Since 1964, May Day has become an event to show the strength of the political parties seeking governmental power. Thus, May Day has been transformed into a part and parcel of parliamentary politics. Only a very few working class organizations have stood for the independent working class principles.

Reflecting on May Day 2016, I tend to identify three categories of May Day rallies, namely, (1) rallies for political power, (2) rallies for political deals and (3) rallies for worker rights. Three may day events, namely, the SLFP rally at Galle, the UNP rally at Campbell Park, and the Joint Opposition rally at Kirulapana may be grouped in the first category as they were directly aiming at either maintaining and preserving the governmental power that they at present exercise or capturing the governmental power that they lost some time ago. We may easily put into the second category, the May Day rally organized by the LSSP breakaway group, CP breakaway group, Nava Samasamaja Party and the trade union led by Saman Rathnapriya who played a key role in betraying workers struggle planned for November 15 last year. All these groups are shameless lackeys of the UNP-led government. The same thing is true of the LSSP, the CP and the DUF as they are seeking a 'deal' with the MR wing of the SLFP.

May Day rallies organised by the Frontline Socialist Party and the Joint Trade Unions were the only ones that stood for defending and protecting workers' rights. When we look at the demands, participation, it is interesting to note that these two rallies demonstrated the dismal situation of the working class and other toiling masses under neoliberal system followed by the two bourgeois parties since 1977. Ironically, these two May Day rallies received least attention by the media when they reported May Day 2016. Where is the JVP? In my view, taking into considerations its past activities and the present inside debate, it comes somewhere between 1 and 2.

Two spheres of Political Activity

In addition to the terminal objectives of the organised parties and unions, we may look at the May Day 2016 through the prism of their orientation. Politics moves in two separate plains though, in certain times, two of them overlap and reinforce each other. In parliamentary democracies where regular elections are held and people are given an opportunity to change the government, political movements tend to focus more on this sphere and concentrate their work in this field of action. In broad sense, this work may be named parliamentary politics as it is invariably oriented towards electing as many a member as possible. In spite of the fact that inherent problematic of representation prevails, in parliamentary democracies this kind of politics is of great importance. Such a system even allows under certain conditions for radical subaltern parties and organisations to come to power.

The second sphere in which politics moves is the social sphere. The difference of this sphere from the first sphere is that the second sphere is not directly aimed at capturing governmental power. At least, capturing the governmental power is not the proximate objective. The action programme of the social sphere takes the forms of protests, resistance, campaigns, underground activities and the like. The most recent examples for this kind of social sphere activities are French workers and students struggle against labour law reforms and Brazilian peasant movements for land rights (MST). Closer to home, we may cite the movement against pension reforms, struggle for clean water in Rathupaswala, the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) massive demonstration in front of Fort Station against the Budget 2016. The principal difference of these struggles from parliamentary politics is that the social politics are non-linear in their progress, and multiple in their forms and objectives. For example, Zapatista movement in Mexico works as a government in many respects but does not seek governmental power.

Changing Equation

Kirulapana, Campbell Park, Galle Samanala Park and BRC rallies are essentially aiming at power in parliamentary arena while the FSP and Joint Trade Union May Day rallies may be put in the social politics sphere. It is interesting to note that media coverage pre- and post- May Day were largely biased towards the first kind of rallies. Their mono centric linear character is easy to be grasped and easier to be reported. Before the budget, media has raised curiosity which May Day rally was bigger and would attract many people. If the role of the media is confined to reporting what can be seen, this media bias may not be taken for granted. However, if the media looks at political dynamics rather than just reporting it is imperative for them to focus also on what goes on in the social sphere. It is true that at present, X, Y and Z are the main variables in the equation of parliamentary politics. However, the changes in the social sphere would definitely transform this equation inserting new variables with substantial parametric values. It is from this perspective that I consider the Joint Trade Union demonstration and rally significant. It is also interesting to note how the municipal bureaucracy acted in allocating grounds for different organizations. As I am aware Joint Trade Unions asked for Hyde Park for its rally. It was almost given. However, at the last moment it was given to the son of Minister Rajitha Senarathna just to gather and to march to Campbell Park allocating a muddy ground for the Joint Trade Unions.

After May Day, it is interesting to note that the working class has posed the need of united action as the 'yahapalana' government began its austerity programme by introducing increased VAT as a first step of neo liberal attack of third kind. Both the President and the Prime Minister have warned more such 'attacks' on living standards of the ordinary people would come in June. These June attacks may include pension and EPF reforms, reforms of labour laws. If the Joint Trade Unions gathering more

strength by inviting other independent unions face this threats, the other layers of toiling masses would definitely join this massive 'popular bloc' of subalterns. Hence, we can expect a revival for pre-1964 independent politics of the working class against all bourgeois parties and their lackeys who go after as Lenin said for "sops".

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P.S.

*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=144965