Sri Lankan SEP rejects government appeal and holds May Day meeting

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka rejected an appeal by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government to all political parties to call off May Day rallies and held a public meeting at New Town Hall in Colombo on May 1. Despite the efforts of the government and media to create a climate of fear amid the danger of renewed civil war, more than 200 workers, young people, professionals and housewives from different parts of the island attended.

The SEP issued a statement warning the working class that the attempt to stifle political activity on May Day was directed at suppressing any independent movement of workers, as President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the island towards war. The same pretext of "security" would be used to further attack the democratic rights of the working class. The statement was published on the *World Socialist Web Site* and thousands of copies were distributed to workers on the morning of May 1.

K. Ratnayake, a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, chaired the meeting. He began by condemning what amounted to an unofficial ban on May Day rallies and warned that it was the start of a new assault on the democratic rights of working people.

"While requesting the calling off of international workers' day, Rajapakse declared he was a 'friend of workers' in his May Day message. In the same breath, however, he appealed to workers to 'toil more for peace'. This is nothing but a demand for sacrifices from workers, while his government and his chauvinist allies, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP] and military hierarchy, are launching provocations leading to a full-scale war," he said.

Ratnayake explained that the crisis of world capitalist system was taking an acute form in the US where workers had increasingly joined protests against the war on Iraq and attacks on their rights. Mass struggles were also developing in Europe such as the recent protests in France against the First Job Act. In Sri Lanka, 25 years after the defeat of 1980 public sector general strike, there were signs of a new movement of the working class. Internationally, the urgent need was for an independent socialist perspective to unite the working class.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris emphasised the connection between the danger of war and the renewed attacks on the working class. She explained that the media had applauded the government's appeal to cancel all May Day rallies. An editorial in the *Island* blatantly attacked demands for wage rises, saying workers were not working eight hours a day properly. "These comments confirm that the bourgeois parties have decided to call off May Day as part of attempts to block any independent mobilisation of the working class," she said.

Peiris pointed to the deepening social and political crisis throughout the Indian subcontinent. She contrasted the media euphoria about high economic growth in India and China with deepening social inequality throughout the region. A World Bank report declared: "Asia is a puzzle. China, India and Japan have gained economic growth. But still 600 million in Asia receive a daily income less than $US1."

SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah pointed out that all the major parties had shut down their May Day rallies, including those who claimed to speak in the name of the working class. He warned that these parties would enforce the demands of government and business for sacrifice in the name of the war. The JVP had collaborated with Rajapakse in whipping up communal hostilities and clamouring for war.

Thevarajah explained that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) offered no alternative. "The LTTE, in line with its bourgeois nationalist perspective and communal outlook, has intensified hostilities. The only solution is to forge a unity between Sinhala and Tamil workers as part of the broader fight for the international

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unity of the working class to end the war and fight for socialism," he emphasised.

SEP general secretary and WSWS International Editorial Board member Wije Dias was the main speaker. He said the Rajapakse government confronted a very serious economic and political crisis. "It cannot tolerate not only the right to hold May Day but also any democratic right enjoyed by the masses," he said.

Dias warned of the danger of war, quoting a section of the SEP statement, which noted that "a shadowy coalition of layers of armed forces, associated Tamil militias and Sinhala extremists" was provoking violence in the North and East of the island. He pointed out that a Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission spokeswoman had confirmed that "some rogue elements in the security forces" were working with paramilitary groups in attacking the LTTE and its supporters.

Dias recalled that three years after the United National Party government plunged the country into bloody civil war, President J.R. Jayawardena had also banned May Day in 1987. "Today the ban on May Day has come in an unofficial form, reflecting the utter bankruptcy of the Rajapakse government and its knowledge that the degenerate old left leaders are ready to dance to its tune."

The speaker explained that global capitalism was engulfed in an irresolvable crisis, centred on the US economy. The Bush administration's response was to launch wars of colonial plunder, targetting Afghanistan, then Iraq and now Iran. "Under the developing crisis of global capitalism, imperialism will not simply collapse. Capitalist governments are ready to take any destructive step to avoid a collapse of the system. In the past this has led to world wars. Today that process of inter-imperialist rivalry has started again."

Dias said working people around the world were facing attacks on basic democratic rights in line with the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". Economic nationalism and patriotism had been whipped up to divide workers and justify anti-democratic measures, particularly in the US and Europe against immigrants. He pointed out that hundreds of thousands of workers and young people in the US had joined protests against the Iraq war and anti-immigrant laws.

Dias explained that the working class in Sri Lanka confronted similar attacks. "What the SEP said about Rajapakse during the presidential election campaign has been fully vindicated. We said that there would be no solution to the war under Rajapakse or [his rival] Wickremesinghe."

The Rajapakse government faced growing anger among working people over its broken promises and was relying on the trade union bureaucracy to divide the working class. In the public sector, the unions were trying to counterpose the higher grades to lower grades instead of conducting a unified struggle for better wages. It was the same between private and public sectors.

"Rajapakse knows that the class struggle is developing beyond the control of the trade union bureaucracies. That is why his government is provoking an escalation of communalism and attacks on democratic rights. Under these conditions, the SEP fights to unite the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in Sri Lanka and unify them with workers in South Asia and internationally around a socialist program."

Dias argued that a mass international mass movement of the working class was needed to defend democratic rights. He pointed out that anti-democratic measures were being carried out not only in backward countries like Sri Lanka but also in the so-called citadels of democracy like US.

"Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution explained the necessity of the working class in backward countries to lead the oppressed masses in the struggle for democratic rights. Under the present globalised economic and political conditions, the working class has to shoulder this task in every country. Whether in the US or Sri Lanka, all sections of bourgeoisie are incapable of, and hostile to, defending democratic rights."

Dias concluded with a call to the audience to join and build the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International. There was an enthusiastic response to an appeal for donations to the SEP's party fund. More than 10,000 rupees ($US100) was raised—well over the monthly wage of an average worker. Many in the audience stayed behind to speak to SEP members and purchase literature.

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