

Mass roundup in Sri Lankan capital: a sharp warning to the working class

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The July 3 military-police attack on thousands of slum dwellers in the Colombo suburbs is a sharp warning to the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. The brutal assault, followed by the roundup of the entire adult population in the Mattakkuliya area, has demonstrated the police-state methods being brought forward against ordinary working people in the “economic war” declared by President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government.

The police launched the provocation against local residents by forcibly arresting and badly beating a young three-wheel taxi driver. When hundreds of people protested in front of the area’s police station, defence authorities immediately sent the police riot squad and soldiers to attack them. The police and the army went on a rampage, smashing houses and vehicles, and physically attacking and terrorising local residents.

The following day, some 8,000 residents were marched to an open field where hooded men pointed out more than 200 people, who were then taken into police custody. Unable to provide any justification for these mass arrests, the police were ordered by the courts to release 176 people, but 31 were detained for “further investigation”.

The attack came just five days after the government presented an International Monetary Fund-approved budget to parliament, pledging to slash the deficit at the direct expense of workers and the poor by increasing taxes on essentials, extending a wage freeze on public sector employees and slashing subsidies to government enterprises, including the electricity, oil and port corporations. These measures will mean large-scale job losses. Moreover, despite soaring prices, no additional funds were allocated for the government’s meagre welfare schemes, such as cash-for-work.

It is inevitable that workers will resist these attacks and class struggles will erupt. The Mattakkuliya attack is aimed at intimidating and terrorising working people, starting with the most oppressed layers, by bringing into Colombo the methods of repression developed in the island’s north and east during the 26-year civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Eelam (LTTE). Throughout the war, Tamil villagers were regularly rounded up for mass arrests, and thousands still remain in military-run camps, more than a year after the LTTE’s defeat.

Following the government’s operation in Mattakkuliya, the state-owned *Daily News* published a vicious editorial backing it, under the title “Mob rule.” The editorial declared: “The storming of police stations by angry mobs has now become common in this country... It is therefore time that the authorities view this phenomenon with the seriousness it deserves before matters get out of hand and anarchy rules society.”

As the newspaper admitted, there have been numbers of cases where ordinary people have demonstrated against police brutality, not only in Colombo, but throughout the island. These protests reveal the depth of hostility and opposition to the Rajapakse government’s police-military repression, in both the north and south. The government-orchestrated events in Mattakkuliya are aimed at sending a message to workers, youth and rural poor everywhere that no social protest will be tolerated.

Expressing its support for the government’s methods, the right-wing Sinhala weekly, *Irida Divaina* published a July 10 article under the headline: “Mattakkuliya operation of Summitpura drug peddlers.” It claimed: “[T]he whole police department was shaken up by the exciting incident of taking over the police station by a group of drug dealers and underworld criminals who attacked the Mattakkuliya police.”

The media and the government are vilifying these downtrodden people, who were exercising their democratic right to demonstrate outside the police station, as “mobs”, “drug peddlers” and “underworld criminals”, simply because they have demanded an immediate end to police repression. Likewise, during the war, the government repeatedly sought to intimidate striking workers and anyone else who fought against the lowering of living conditions by branding them as “terrorists” or “terrorist supporters”. Similar labels are now being attached to protesters in the slums of Colombo.

Driving these developments are powerful economic interests. Mattakkuliya is one of the areas targetted by a government plan to evict more than half a million shanty dwellers in Colombo and hand over their land to investors and big property developers. Significantly, Rajapakse has placed the Urban Development Authority under the command of the defence secretary, his brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was one of the key figures leading the final four years of bloody war against the LTTE.

The silence of all the opposition parties on the Mattakkuliya assault is highly significant. Neither the right-wing United National Party (UNP) nor the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has opposed it. They will take the same position as the government steps up its attacks against the working class. These parties have no fundamental difference with its pro-market economic program or its police-state methods, just as they supported the war in the north and east.

The ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) have likewise remained completely silent about the police-military violence in Mattakkuliya and the government's assault on basic legal and democratic rights. Instead, they are busy working with the trade unions to divert and derail working class opposition to the budget attacks on wages, jobs and living conditions.

While the war concluded more than a year ago, the Rajapakse government is strengthening its military machine—defence still accounts for 15 percent of budget expenditure. At the same time, nearly all the emergency regulations remain in force, handing sweeping powers to the security forces. Rajapakse is openly moving toward increasingly autocratic forms of rule, assuming powers to appoint key officials and proposing constitutional changes to allow him to re-contest presidential elections indefinitely.

The emerging police-state rule in Sri Lanka is an advanced expression of processes underway internationally. Driven by the dictates of the major banks and corporations, governments in every country are increasingly resorting to state repression in order to unload the burden of the global economic crisis onto working people.

Symbolising this shift, during the G20 summit in Toronto last month, the Canadian government mobilised thousands of police to crack down on protesting youth, trade unionists and social and environmental activists. The annual summit had been called to coordinate the austerity measures being imposed to repay the massive public debts incurred in the bailouts and stimulus measures that propped up the financial system in 2008-09.

Working people must recognise the dangers developing around them. Decades ago, they would not have tolerated the kind of attack on defenceless people witnessed in Mattakkuliya. Today, all the old parties and organisations, which previously claimed to defend democratic rights, have lined up with the government. Workers and young people must come forward themselves, against the shameless cowardice and collaborationism of the unions and ex-radicals, to oppose the attacks on the slum dwellers, as part of the struggle to defend the essential democratic rights of the entire working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers to demand the release of all those arrested in Mattakkuliya and the payment of compensation for the damage caused to homes and belongings throughout the neighbourhood. Resolutions should be issued from workplaces, and meetings should be convened to discuss the political significance and implications of this attack.

The WSWS and SEP have consistently warned that the Rajapakse government, having won the war in the north and east, would turn on working people and the poor in the south with its enormously strengthened military capacity. The SEP was the only party to consistently oppose the war and demand the withdrawal of the military from the north and east.

The struggle to defend democratic rights and living conditions necessitates a political struggle against the government and its props, including the trade unions and ex-radicals. A workers' and farmers' government must be brought to power to reorganise the economy for the benefit of the vast majority of society, instead of the wealthy few.

This requires the development of an independent political movement, uniting the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working class across ethnic lines, fighting for the program of socialist internationalism in Sri Lanka, across South Asia and around the world.



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