

SEP meeting in Sri Lanka warns of police-state measures

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a well-attended public meeting at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo on August 3 against the police-state measures being carried out by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris, who chaired the meeting, explained that the methods of repression employed for almost three decades against the country's Tamil minority during the civil war were now being used increasingly against working people as a whole. She said this was the significance of the recent operation by the police and military to round up hundreds of slum dwellers in Mattakkuliya, a suburb of Colombo city.

Peiris warned that the government would use similar methods to impose the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund. "The prices of all essentials have gone up. Well aware that its agenda will definitely be met with widespread opposition by the working class and impoverished masses, the government is preparing its police-state measures to brutally suppress any resistance," she said.

SEP political committee member Panini Wijesiriwardena gave a detailed account of the police-military operation against the Mattakkuliya slum dwellers. "On the evening of July 3, police brutally beat and arrested a young three-wheeler driver from Samitpura in Mattakkuliya, whom they accused of being a drug dealer. When residents responded by protesting outside the area's police station, police and military troops retaliated by unleashing a rampage against Samitpura dwellers, attacking them and smashing household equipment and vehicles.

"The following day, all residents aged above 14 years were herded into a nearby playground and about 200 people, including children and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, were arrested using three hooded informers to identify suspects. The authorities are clearly testing out fascistic methods to terrorise, intimidate and suppress the oppressed people," Wijesiriwardena said.

The speaker pointed out that autocratic methods were increasingly used by governments, in country after country, to impose pro-market policies. He explained that the military had been used as strikebreakers against striking truck drivers in Greece. "This is a worldwide phenomenon," he said. "Using such measures to impose expenditure cuts on public services and to privatise the essential utilities, such as electricity, gas and water, is becoming the norm."

The next speaker, International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) convener Kapila Fernando, explained that students were also being targeted. As funding for public education was slashed, police attacks on students had more become frequent. The government had enacted draconian laws to curb the democratic rights of students and suppress political activity. "The Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), which is affiliated to the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that helped to bring Rajapakse to power, is directly responsible for providing the government with a pretext for cracking down," he said, referring to the IUSF's use of thuggery and backward practices like "ragging"—initiation practices designed to humiliate and intimidate new students.

Fernando said the deterioration of public education was being used by the government to justify privatisation. "The thoroughly false claim is that the

aim of privatisation is to provide educational facilities to those who are not eligible, due to severe competition, to enter the government-run universities. This is a fraud. Successive governments have slashed government funding for education. By establishing private fee-levying institutes, the Rajapakse government is clawing back the right of free education that was won by the working class,” he said.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias delivered the main report. He started by pointing out that the experiences of ordinary working people were the complete opposite of what they had expected after the end of the three decades of civil war. “Not only has there been no let up in the enormous economic burdens they were forced to endure during the war but the attack on democratic rights has intensified during the past 14 months since the war ended. The conflict ended only to make way for a new and broader ‘economic war’ against all sections of the masses,” he said.

Dias referred to a recent *Sunday Times* report on a discussion between President Rajapakse and some trade union leaders. When the issue of granting a monthly pay rise of 2,500 rupees (\$US22) emerged, the president declared that he made no such promise in his Mahinda Chinthana [Mahinda Vision] for the presidential elections in November 2005.

“But it is well known that Rajapakse made this promise during the presidential elections held last January. That was in response to a similar false election promise made by the opposition candidate, former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, who was supported by the conservative United National Party and the chauvinist JVP. What Rajapakse said was a transparent lie, but, as could be expected, none of the union leaders challenged him.”

“Only the SEP and its forerunner Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) repeatedly warned that the war against the Tamil minority would be the launching pad for a broad-scale war against working people and youth from all communities. We insisted that the strengthening of the military and the police for the civil war was in preparation to establish a police-state throughout the whole country. During the war, parliamentary procedures were violated and immense powers concentrated in the hands of a cabal comprised

of military heads and a handful of top state bureaucrats working with the president,” he said.

Dias noted that ordinary people were starting to draw these conclusions. Pointing to the remarks of a woman who witnessed the police operation in Mattakkuliya, he explained: “That woman said she now realised how the military must have treated the Tamil people in the north and east during the war. This is an important connection that she has made through her own experience. It is the connection that we, as Marxist revolutionaries, explained from the beginning of the war. It shows how the ferocious anti-democratic measures of the Rajapakse government are creating the conditions for people to realise the validity of our perspective and program.”

Dias explained that it is the international financiers like the IMF and World Bank that dictate the economic and social policy of governments, including in Sri Lanka. In Greece, the Social Democratic government was forced by the European bankers to implement austerity measures despite the mass opposition of working people. “This is an international issue that can only be tackled by building an international socialist movement of the working class throughout the world. That is what the International Committee of the Fourth International and all its sections fight for.” Dias concluded by calling on members of the audience to study the SEP’s program and to join in the struggle to build a mass party for socialist internationalism in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.



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