

Military crackdown on Sri Lankan protesters: A warning to the working class

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka condemn the brutal military operation against unarmed protesters at Weliveriya, just northeast of Colombo, on August 1, that killed three youth and wounded scores of other people, including journalists.

This was a calculated attack, carried out on the Rajapakse government's orders. It was intended to intimidate workers, young people and the poor throughout Sri Lanka who are entering into struggle against the administration's escalating assault on living conditions and democratic rights.

The crackdown was against protesting working people, youth and housewives in ten villages around Weliveriya, in Gampaha district, who were fighting for a basic need: clean water. They demanded the closure of the Dipped Product rubber gloves factory that they accuse of emitting large quantities of chemical waste, polluting water in the area and creating serious health hazards.

After months of campaigning without receiving any answer, people gathered for a mass protest, blocking the main Colombo-Kandy highway.

Fearing that the demonstration would resonate with working people across the island, the government sent an entire army battalion—hundreds of soldiers and crack commandos, armed to the teeth—to crush the protest. Police riot squads and commandos had already been mobilised against the protesters, but the government decided to unleash military terror as a “lesson” to the working class.

First, the troops threatened media personnel. Some were beaten, and their cameras and phones were damaged. The army did not want to leave any trace of its attack. Then soldiers started shooting and beating

people. They raided houses, churches, convents and other places. Troops dragged out people, including women, elderly and children, from hiding and mercilessly beat them. The attack started at about 5.30 p.m. and went on until late at night—under the cover of darkness after the power supply was disconnected.

Two 17-year-old students, Akila Dinesh Jayawardena and Amila Ravishan Perera, and a 29-year-old Biyagama free trade zone worker, Nilantha Pushpakumara, died of gunshot injuries. About 40 others were injured and many remain hospitalised. In a display of outrage, thousands of people thronged to the funerals of Dinesh and Ravishan held this week.

In an attempt to quell the anger, the government announced that President Mahinda Rajapakse had ordered the payment of compensation to the victims' families. This cynical gesture cannot hide the truth that Rajapakse and his government are responsible for the crime that has been perpetrated.

Government leaders and the military and pro-government media are piling lie upon lie in their slanders against the demonstrators. Just after the bloodletting, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared that the army had acted in “self-defence.” The government's parliamentary leader, cabinet minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, repeated the same story on Tuesday, adding that “people” had fired shots at the security forces. No evidence has been produced to substantiate these allegations. Instead, scenes of fleeing people throwing a few stones at soldiers are being depicted as a dangerous assault on the army.

The military issued a two-page statement, declaring that “saboteurs” instigated the violence, forcing the army to “control the situation.” It claimed that a “terrorist conspiracy” was taking place, with “local and foreign forces seeking to create instability in the

country.” The statement ended with a thinly-veiled threat that “[people] should not subscribe to their aims.”

The meaning of all these statements is that any opposition to the government will be branded as “terrorist” and inspired by “foreign forces,” and crushed militarily. During the final stages of the 30-year communal war that ended in a military bloodbath in 2009, the Rajapakse government labelled any struggle by sections of workers for improved wages and conditions as support for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and utilised the trade unions, and in some cases the security forces, to suppress them.

Weliweriya residents are correctly drawing the conclusion that the army is carrying out a war against them, just as it did against innocent Tamils during the civil war in the north and east. As the SEP warned during the war, the military forces that killed thousands of Tamil civilians are now being used to suppress the struggles of working people elsewhere on the island.

In May 2011, police killed a worker at the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone when thousands of workers protested against the government’s attempt to impose a fraudulent pension scheme. Police shot dead a fisherman at Chilaw-Wella in February 2012 when thousands of fishermen protested against fuel price increases.

Rajapakse’s government is facing a deepening economic crisis under the impact of the worsening global capitalist breakdown. It is borrowing heavily on international money markets to finance infrastructure investment, hoping to woo international investors by offering them lavish tax breaks. At the same time, it is slashing social spending and increasing taxes to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), leading to a sharp deterioration in the living standards of workers and the poor.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class to come forward to defend the people of Weliweriya. That requires a clear-cut political program in opposition to both the government and the opposition parties in parliament—including the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—that are now posturing as defenders of the Weliweriya protesters.

In parliament, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe did not criticise the crackdown on protesters as such, but only the methods used. “Why was the army, rather than the police, deployed to the Weliweriya area?” he asked, adding the government had other methods to “disperse public demonstrations and protests.” He did not oppose the use of troops, merely suggesting that they should have been deployed as a last resort.

JVP propaganda secretary Vijitha Herath denounced the attack, but portrayed it as the result of the government seeking to protect one of its supporters, the owner of Dipped Product. This is an attempt to divert attention from the underlying source of the government’s violent repression—its pro-market policies and austerity measures, with which the UNP and the JVP have no fundamental differences.

The various pseudo-left groups have also stepped in to blur the political issues facing the working class. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) continue their alliance with the UNP. Despite Wickremesinghe’s support for some form of crackdown on the protesters, the pseudo-lefts still promote him as a defender of democratic rights.

The Front Line Socialist Party (FSP), a breakaway faction of the JVP, has offered a helping hand to the government to rein in widespread outrage over the murderous attack. After the military crackdown, FSP provincial council member Varuna Rajapakse attended a meeting called by economic development minister Basil Rajapakse, the president’s brother, supposedly to discuss how to solve the water crisis.

The working class and the oppressed masses can defend their democratic rights only by breaking from all the various capitalist parties and their pseudo-left apologists. This means mobilising independently to bring to power a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. This is the perspective advanced by the SEP and IYSSE.



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