

Sri Lanka: SEP meeting advances socialist program to fight government attacks

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful meeting at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo on August 9. It followed extensive campaigns at workplaces, universities and working-class areas.

The event, entitled “Defend living conditions and democratic rights. Fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government!” was attended by a broad range of workers, fishermen, white collar employees, housewives, students and youth.

Chairing the meeting, SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris briefly reviewed recent strike action over wages and conditions by health, postal, graphite mining and university non-academic workers. She also referred to demonstrations by poor peasants against government attacks on living standards.

Peiris said these struggles were not isolated events but an expression of increasingly militant action by workers internationally—in India, China, the US, UK and France. In every country, the trade union bureaucracies were doing their best to isolate workers and impose the cuts to jobs, wages and living standards demanded by the ruling classes.

SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardane explained the international and national background to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s attacks on Sri Lankan workers. He reviewed the lessons of the recent non-academic workers’ strike and explained that its betrayal by the trade unions was another example of how these organisations had been transformed into political tools of the employers and governments.

IYSSE convener Kapila Fernando reviewed the situation facing students and youth. Students, he said, had fought successive government attacks on free

education but the Inter University Students Federation isolated students from workers and promoted illusions that the government could be pressured into withdrawing its cost-cutting measures. “All talk that the government will improve and facilitate free education is utterly false,” he said.

Fernando emphasised that the government feared a unified movement of Tamil and Sinhala students and was intensifying its provocations to keep the students divided along ethnic lines. He referred to police operations at Jaffna University and the deploying of military units to attack student demonstrations in other parts of Sri Lanka.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias, the final speaker, reminded the audience that it was just one year and seven months since Maithripala Sirisena became president and almost a year since United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected prime minister. “No Sri Lankan government had drawn so much opposition from working people and the youth in such a short time,” he said.

“Our meeting’s title—‘Defend democratic and social rights!’—is the slogan being raised in every corner of the country today in the protest marches, pickets and strikes by workers, rural poor, housewives, students and youth of all communities. The second slogan—‘Fight for a workers and peasants government’—refers to the objective political perspective required by all those fighting to win their demands,” Dias explained.

The speaker said an official directive ordering non-academic workers from all 15 Sri Lankan universities to end their strike was a desperate attempt to force the workers to abandon their longstanding struggle for decent wages and working conditions.

In opposition to the SEP’s warnings that the non-

academic workers needed to adopt a political perspective and turn to other sections of the working class and the poor, the unions claimed they could “pressure the government to solve the problem,” Dias said. “They also claimed that they would go to Geneva and lodge a complaint with the UN Human Rights Council to bring pressure on the government. This demagoguery was to hoodwink workers while the union prepared the sellout of the strike.”

The unions’ appeals to the UN and major powers, including the US, to support workers’ demands echoed the political methods used to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse, Dias said.

“The union bureaucracies, along with the pseudo-left parties and ex-radical groups, were at the forefront of the US-initiated regime-change operation to remove the Rajapakse in January 2015 over his political relations with China.

“These organisations do not represent the aspirations of the working class but the upper-middle-class layers that aspire to cultivate closer relations with the imperialist powers. Their task is to prepare the psychology of the masses to support imperialist policies. This is under the conditions where the US is stepping up its military preparations against China as part of its geo-political strategy to maintain global domination.”

Dias said the advanced nature of US war planning was indicated in a recent report to the Pentagon by the RAND organisation. “Advising the Pentagon and the White House on a long and intense war with China, RAND insisted that three tasks be fulfilled beforehand: planning, a system of civilian control and the ability to communicate with China.”

These tasks, the speaker warned, meant that the US must pacify and control the popular opposition that is bound to emerge across the Asian region and to establish regimes that endorse Washington’s geo-strategic aims.

Dias said that as mass hostility mounted against Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, the unions and the pseudo-lefts were intensifying their defence of this regime, which they helped to put in power. This was indicated, he said, by their bogus claim that “although the government does not fulfill all the demands of the people it can be eventually brought to the correct path if continue to exert enough pressure.

“This stands in complete contradiction to the whole experience of the class struggle for more than 100 years. The capitalist economy on a world scale is in a systemic crisis and, in direct proportion to the depths to which it sinks, the ruling elites in every country are turning ferociously against democratic and social rights of the masses. Either imperialist war or socialist revolution—either barbarism or socialism—are the alternatives posed before the world working class by the developing global situation.”

Appealing to all those in attendance to join the SEP, Dias said the International Committee of the Fourth International was the only organisation with an international socialist perspective to guide the working people and youth to prevent imperialist war.



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