Workers and youth at Jaffna protest speak out against US-backed Sri Lankan regime

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On Saturday, thousands of workers and youth marched in Jaffna to protest the policies of the US-backed Sri Lankan regime of President Maithripala Sirisena, and the support Sirisena has received from the Tamil Nationalist Alliance (TNA) of R. Sampanthan.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members distributed the leaflet "Mobilise workers against Sri Lanka's Sirisena-Wickremesinghe-Sampanthan regime!" and interviewed marchers at the rally. They spoke to many working people and youth. The marchers all expressed their anger at the Sirisena regime and at the TNA, as well as their distrust towards the Tamil nationalist factions represented in the Tamil People's Council (TPC), which had called the protest.

Seven years after the Sri Lankan government carried out a bloody mass slaughter of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters at the end the Sri Lankan civil war, none of the disasters the war left behind have been resolved. Marchers spoke of their concern and sorrow over the fate of relatives who are still missing, called for the return of land still occupied by the Sri Lankan army, and demanded the release of political prisoners.

Sayanthan, a student at Jaffna university, said: "Like the others, I came here to mark my protest against the Sirisena-Ranil Wickramasingha government. When it came to power, it promised to solve the problems of the Tamil people with a 100-day programme. But nothing has been done in the last 21 months. Tamil voters elected the TNA as their representatives, but they have not done anything to release the political prisoners or to solve any other issues concerning the Tamil people. They turned out to be the friendliest possible opposition to the government."

Sayanthan also indicated his mistrust towards the TPC. "As far as I saw, I couldn't find any differences between the organisers of this rally and the TNA," he said, adding, "The organisers of this rally intend to manipulate the Tamil issue for their political needs. We need to take the fight in our own hands."

An accounting teacher told the WSWS: "I came from the Kurunagar area to participate in this rally. The world knows we fought for decades for our rights, but nothing remained except massacres and destruction. The new government made many promises. We were told the government is for good governance and change, but nothing has changed. The previous government was pro-China, the present government is pro-America."

She criticised the TNA's relationship with US foreign policy: "America and other countries that were silent during the killing of our people in the war are now invading Jaffna for their own interests. Last month, the American and Sri Lankan navies conducted a joint exercise in our waters with the support of Sampanthan. He is not interested in the release of political prisoners, his aim is to serve the government and America. The TNA has made us as political orphans. I think we all came here to protest this policy."

The demonstration was characterised by opposition of the marchers not only to the pro-Washington and pro-Colombo policies of the TNA, but also to those of the TPC organisers. The TPC tried to focus the rally on opposing the construction of Buddhist temples by members of the Sinhalese ethnic majority on formerly Tamil-owned land seized by the army—seeking a way to divide the growing sense of unity between Sinhalese and Tamil workers.

Speaking of the TNA and TPC, **Rajamanoharan** said, "There is no difference between the two factions. Both are with the government, so why couldn't they

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release the political prisoners? Why couldn't they find out the truth about the disappeared? It is simply because they didn't want to."

"No political parties including TNA speak about the destructive politics of America in other countries," he added. "Its intervention in Sri Lanka is for its interests and would create similar destruction. People are not much aware of these developments."

A bus driver who discussed historic role of Tamil nationalism with SEP members ultimately agreed that parliamentary politics or the armed struggle politics of the LTTE could not fulfill the democratic aspirations of the Tamil people. Speaking of the TPC, he said, "I joined in this protest with some hope that this rally would win our demands. It appears to me what you say about them is correct. They also cheat us."

The intervention of the SEP members in the rally was vehemently opposed by the TPC organisers. They demanded that marchers reject the SEP pamphlet, saying that the TPC was not distributing it. Afterwards, however, workers and youth surrounded SEP members in order to get more copies.

In his speech to the rally, TPC co-chair Wigneswaran covered up the slavish support he and the TNA extend to US imperialism, which seeks to transform Sri Lanka into a staging ground for war with China. He cynically complained that "our good governance government" is not fulfilling its promises and avoided any reference to the close relations between the government and the TNA, which carries equal responsibility for the continuing oppression of the Tamil masses.

While Wigneswaran appealed to the "international community" in Jaffna, Sirisena was participating in the UN General Assembly in New York. He received praise from UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon and High Commissioner for Human Rights Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein for "positive change" in Sri Lanka. After meeting Obama, Sirisena told the media: "President Obama said Sri Lanka was an example to others and that US will be with us whenever we need assistance."

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