

A wave of class struggles in Sri Lanka: Workers must fight for a socialist program to defend their rights

The Socialist Equality Party
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Protests involving thousands of workers in public and private sectors have erupted in Sri Lanka against declining living conditions, job destruction and attacks on democratic rights. These struggles are a sign of the mass social upheavals to come against the pro-US government and the capitalist class as whole.

* Government nurses are currently in a two-week long protest campaign, picketing and distributing leaflets. On Thursday, a section of National Water Supply and Sewerage Development Board employees started another protest. The non-academic staff of higher education institutions, including 13 state universities, held a one-day strike on February 7. The previous day, workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) demonstrated in central Colombo. The main demand of all these workers is a wage increase because of the increasingly intolerable cost of living due to taxes on essentials and the devaluation of the rupee.

* Some 1,100 Sri Lanka Telecom contract workers have been on strike since December 24, demanding job permanency. Around 200 CEB hired hands held a protest for more than three weeks, starting from December 26, on a similar demand, after the CEB sacked 1,400 manual workers last year.

* On February 3, about 1,000 Colombo Harbor workers protested against privatisation. In December, the government deployed navy soldiers to suppress a struggle of nearly 500 Hambantota/Magampura Port workers who were demanding permanent jobs.

* A hundred and fifty locked-out Global Star Logistics workers at Seeduwa, near Colombo, have been protesting near the factory since January 13, demanding reinstatement.

* In January and early February, thousands of tea plantation workers at Agarapathana and Nanu-Oya in the central hills districts came out in protest against wage cuts under a new collective agreement, which was imposed with the backing of the trade unions.

Showing the depth of the social unrest engulfing the country, university students have intensified their campaign against the privatisation of education. Peasant agitations have also erupted in rural areas, demanding compensation for losses caused by the drought and protesting against the government's attempt to grab land for big companies.

In the war-ravaged north and east, Tamil workers and the poor are in continuous protests against the suppression of democratic

rights by the ongoing military occupation, the non-return of land seized by the military and disappearances of people during and after the protracted communal war.

These struggles have come into direct conflict with the policies of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The government has unleashed the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposing heavy taxes on almost all goods and services and privatising state corporations and education.

Yet, the trade unions have called these protests to defuse anger among workers, but are limiting them to sectoral demands in order to divide the working class. The unions are terrified that unified action would develop into a political challenge for the government. Almost all these unions helped elect the pro-US President Sirisena, thus diverting the mass discontent against the former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Colombo Port, CEB and nurses' protests were called by unions affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP and its unions helped Sirisena to come to power. As widespread discontent has developed, they have called protests, calling on workers to make futile appeals to the government to meet their demands. University non-academic unions, which back the government, are peddling similar illusions.

Workers and the poor cannot pressure the government into granting their demands, as claimed by the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups, such as the United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party. And another fake-left group, the Nava Sama Samaja Party, has been directly helping the government's measures against workers and youth.

The government's attacks are driven by the mounting crisis of the global capitalist system, which is undergoing an economic breakdown similar to those prior to World Wars I and II. Sri Lanka is being battered by this crisis.

In the sharpest expression of the world turmoil, newly-elected US President Donald Trump's administration has advanced a reactionary nationalist agenda. It is seeking to aggressively assert US hegemony over the globe while intensifying attacks on the working class at home. The US ruling cliques are in a ferocious struggle over which country should be the first target of attack—Russia or China? This is intensifying the war tensions between the major powers, threatening a Third World War.

This nationalist drive is erupting in all the imperialist countries. The British ruling class has opted to withdraw from the European Union. The German and Japanese governments have started their own re-militarisation drives, intensifying the geo-strategic tensions. India, the regional power, has allied increasingly with US war preparations against China.

The Sri Lankan government is deepening its military and political ties with Washington, while ruthlessly continuing the austerity policies that began under Rajapakse's regime. Indicating the depth of its crisis, the government is seeking to borrow \$US2.6 billion this year to avert bankruptcy. The Central Bank governor has characterised the country's economy as being in "hospitalised" conditions, under treatment by the IMF.

The government is increasingly unleashing military-police methods to suppress the struggles of workers and poor. Wickremesinghe recently warned that the government will "defeat the extremists who are trying to interrupt the country's economy through marches, strikes and campaigns." The government is equipping and training security forces and introducing draconian new "counter-terrorism" laws.

Concerned about the social unrest, the opposition led by Rajapakse has launched a vicious chauvinist campaign, claiming that the government is going to divide the country by ceding a part to Tamils. Making appeals to the military as "war heroes," Rajapakse is seeking to re-take power to again attack working people.

Rivaling Rajapakse's communalist campaign, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is also invoking the supposed revival of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, in order to maintain the military occupation of the north and east and divide workers along ethnic lines.

Sirisena won the 2015 presidential election because the pseudo-left groups, trade unions, the JVP and Tamil parties falsely painted him as a democratic alternative who would improve living conditions.

These bogus claims have been shattered. Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and WSWs stated at the time: "Rajapakse heads an autocratic regime that is responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths during the war against the LTTE, and police-state measures against opposition to its austerity program. The SEP warns, however, that Sirisena, if elected, would be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in prosecuting the interests of the ruling class. All the opposition parties gathered around the 'common candidate' have blood on their hands."

This warning has been proved to the letter. Workers must come to grips with the political issues and prepare consciously to fight for their rights. The same trade unions, fake-lefts, NGOs and political parties are seeking to set other political traps, saying the government is preparing a "democratic constitution" and people must wait for that. At the same time, pseudo-lefts are attempting to form "left fronts" to pressure the government. Workers must reject these frauds.

* Workers cannot subordinate the fight for their democratic and social rights to any faction of the ruling class and pro-government and opposition trade unions. They do not represent the interests of workers and the poor.

There is a growing opposition to the trade unions and bureaucracies who are limiting and suppressing workers' struggles. In many tea estates, workers held protests in October last year over wage demands, defying the unions' opposition. A section of plantation workers formed an action committee at the Deeside estate, totally independent of the trade unions, to campaign for their rights with the SEP's help.

Workers must build new organisations in the form of action committees in workplaces and estates, democratically elected by themselves, and completely independent of the unions. They must take decisions to develop the class struggle by unifying with every section of workers, rejecting the sectoral barriers imposed by the unions.

* Struggles of workers have erupted in every country against the attacks imposed by the capitalist classes. Sri Lankan workers have to unite with these workers internationally to fight against the threat of world war and for an international socialist program.

The growth of class struggles, involving tens of thousands of workers, has been seen in imperialist centres, including Europe, America and Australia, and also in China, India and Bangladesh. Millions of workers came out in the US, Europe and many other countries opposing President Trump's attacks on immigrants.

* To fight against the attacks on living conditions, jobs and social rights such as education, health and price subsidies, and the assault on democratic rights, workers need a political program.

Big business, estates and banks must be nationalised under workers' control and foreign debts must be repudiated, in order to organise the economy for the benefit of the vast majority of society, ending the capitalist profit system. The working class must take the leadership of poor peasants and youth, including students, for a united struggle against capitalism.

These tasks can be fulfilled only by establishing a workers' and peasants' government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

Above all what is required is the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class to fight for socialist internationalism. We urge workers, youth and class-conscious intellectuals to study the perspective of the SEP and to join and build it as the mass party of socialist revolution.



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