

Socialist Equality Party holds public meeting on Sri Lankan floods disaster

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a meeting at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium entitled “Sri Lanka’s floods disaster: who is responsible?” on June 8. The meeting discussed the social disaster created by the recent floods and landslides, the culpability of successive governments, and the necessity for a socialist program.

Flash floods and landslides at the end of May claimed at least 300 lives and affected about half a million people, mainly workers and the rural poor. Government authorities failed to issue an advance warning, leaving people to face the disaster totally unprepared.

Chairing the meeting, WSWS national editor K. Ratnayake said the media were almost silent about the disaster. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who boasted about “rebuilding lives,” were systematically avoiding any responsibility.

“In the past six months alone around 600 people have died due to disasters,” Ratnayake said. Apart from the floods, more than 200 died in a dengue epidemic. In April, 32 residents were buried alive when a garbage dump collapsed in Meethotamulla, a Colombo suburb.

The human cost of government’s dismantling social programs and disaster preparedness had increased yearly, the speaker said. Forty years ago, the President Jayawardene-led government began opening the economy to create cheap labour conditions for international capital and big business, after which successive governments tore up even the meagre social rights won by the working class.

Huge tax concessions were made to boost profits, Ratnayake explained. To suppress workers’ struggles, a communal war was provoked, which cost around \$US200 billion, with about \$75 billion directly spent on defence. Yet, when it came to the rights of the poor, governments said they had no money. For instance, the government cut

disaster management ministry funds by 30 percent this year.

These were policies instigated by the imperialist countries such as Britain and the US four decades ago, Ratnayake noted. The recent Grenfell fire disaster in London demonstrated the terrible consequences of these policies for workers everywhere. Capitalism cannot provide even the basic needs of the people.

International Youth and Students for Social Equality convener Kapila Fernando said the government was trying to wash its hands of any responsibility by blaming nature for the floods. In reality, “well-developed technology is available for pre-warnings but it cannot be utilised under profit-driven capitalism.”

Fernando said social rights, including health and education, had been gutted, with adverse consequences. “In Kandy, for example, school children now show signs of respiratory diseases. The main cause is the government policy of privatising healthcare in order to transform it into a profit-making venture. This situation cannot be changed within the capitalist system.”

The final speaker, SEP general secretary Wije Dias, quoted some Disaster Management Centre statistics. “Between 1974 and 2014, the number of people affected by floods in Sri Lanka is recorded as 2,934,655 and 46,719 were devastated by landslides.

“This shows that nature has given enough warnings for successive bourgeois governments prior to the latest floods. The criminal unpreparedness on the part of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime is not a simple mistake. It speaks for the anti-social attitude of capitalist rule toward the lives of working people. It affirms the historical need for the replacement of the capitalist system by an alternative social order.”

Dias said sections of the elite were nervous about the developing hostility among the broad masses. The *Sunday Times* was forced to react angrily to the arrogant response

of Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne, when it pointed out the unpreparedness of the disaster management centre.

Its editorial of June 4, stated: “He blames this paper for writing negative stories on the government. He goes on to ask if the ministry is supposed to keep blankets and water bottles for an impending disaster. The answer, Mr. Minister is ‘Yes.’ And the blankets don’t have expiry dates.”

Dias referred to the London fire catastrophe. “The inferno took place in the working class living quarters called Grenfell Towers, located in the midst of the wealthiest neighborhood in one of the richest cities in the world. The social inequality that has developed in bourgeois society has reached such a level now that the dwellings of working people have become eye sores in all the major cities around the world, with governments seeking to evict the occupants under dubious pretexts.”

As in Sri Lanka, Dias explained, about 100 people were buried when a landslide recently smashed through a mountain village in China’s Sichuan province. Bangladesh faced heavy rainfall last week, resulting in floods that washed away several families. It was a regular occurrence in that country.

Dias said that whether countries were developed or under-developed, they were prone to social disasters under capitalist rule, due to the criminal neglect of social needs in the pursuit of corporate profits. This criminality had reached unheard of proportions.

In every country too, repressive state machines were being strengthened to confront mass movements that were driven into struggles against austerity measures. That went hand-in-hand with the aggressive neo-colonial military interventions by imperialist powers, with the US in the lead.

“Capitalist governments in Sri Lanka use every opportunity to tighten the legal system and strengthen the police and the armed forces that were already built up to an unprecedented level during the 30-year civil war conducted against the Tamil minority,” the speaker said.

“When the floods and landslides took place, the government immediately placed the blame on the victims for their so-called illegal constructions. The clamour for new laws ensued immediately.”

Police-state preparations were a warning to working people of the end of the era of protest politics and all hopes of negotiated settlements under capitalist rule.

This made the fight for the socialist alternative to the profit system unpostponable. “Only the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections

continue the fight for world socialism, for which the Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, laid the foundation stone in October 1917.

“We again stress here the three fundamental principles of our struggle. They are: 1. The political independence of the working class. 2. The socialist program to resolve the social and democratic problems of the working class and oppressed masses. 3. Internationalism to unite the working class across national borders and to oppose every vestige of communal divisions.”

A young worker from Meethotamulla, where the garbage dump collapsed killing 32 people, asked how people could fight the powerful capitalist class. He said the government had declared that compensation for the garbage dump victims would depend on the size of the house in which they lived before the catastrophe. On that basis, his family would receive only 350,000 rupees, which was completely inadequate to buy a new house.

In reply, Dias explained that the weakness of the workers’ movement was fundamentally a question of perspective and leadership. “The bourgeois governments in every country rule by default. This situation is created by the treacherous leaderships of the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions, supported by pseudo-left groups.

“This is why the SEP proposes to build alternative organisations of the working class such as Action Committees and to rally the rural and urban poor and youth on an international socialist program. The SEP campaign for an independent workers’ inquiry into the garbage issue is aimed at that.”

Dias said the great betrayal carried out by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in 1964, by joining the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike, had attacked the political independence of the working class. “This had a huge retrogressive effect on all aspects of social conditions, including cultural life,” he explained. “Only the Trotskyist movement guided by the ICFI fought against this.”



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