

SEP (Sri Lanka) calls May Day meeting in Colombo

The Socialist Equality Party
19 April 2018

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will mark May 1, the day of international working class solidarity, by holding a public meeting in Colombo New Town Hall at 3 pm. In doing so, we are opposing the government's attempts to sabotage May Day celebrations in Sri Lanka.

The SEP urges workers, youth and progressive intellectuals to participate in this event. We also invite them to enrol for the Online Mayday Rally on May 5, being broadcast via the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

On March 28, President Maithripala Sirisena announced a cabinet decision to postpone all May Day meetings, rallies and marches scheduled for May 1. He "requested" that May Day rallies be held on May 7, which has been proclaimed a holiday.

"The government's decision," the president declared, "was taken on the advice of the sacred Buddhist clergy" and "all arrangements have been made for religious celebrations throughout the country, in the first week of May with splendour." Buddhists commemorate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death on the day of the full moon in May, which is known as "Wesak."

The government's decision to undermine May Day is in line with its promotion of reactionary Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism. It is bound up with the enormous political crisis of the government. Amid a growing wave of strikes and protests, the government fears that May Day could become a focal point for the hostility of workers, the oppressed and rural poor, and a threat to bourgeois rule.

Workers have waged a series of strikes in different sectors, including the universities, ports, electricity, petroleum, postal, railway, health and plantations,

despite the efforts of the trade unions to derail and suppress them. The working class is opposing the government's ruthless attacks on living and social conditions in implementing the austerity program of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Rebellious struggles have also emerged among students against government attacks on free education, and among poor peasants on issues such as cuts to essential farm inputs. In the North and East, which are still suffering the destruction caused by Colombo's communal civil war, mass protests are taking place against the ongoing military occupation and refusal to return homes and lands.

The partners in the ruling coalition, Sirisena's faction of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), suffered humiliating defeats at the local council elections in February—a clear manifestation of the hostility of voters towards the government.

The government is now in disarray. An opposition faction of the SLFP parliamentary group, led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, moved a no-confidence motion against the prime minister. Wickremesinghe survived the vote, but 16 ministers voted against him and are now threatening to sit with the opposition. In a desperate bid to patch up the potential split, Sirisena used his autocratic executive powers to prorogue parliament for three weeks until May 8.

Behind the scenes, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are preparing police-state measures to take on the working class. The government has no alternative but to impose the country's massive debt burden and financial crisis on working people.

Rajapakse heads a new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), that is seeking to exploit widespread public disaffection by posing as an opponent of the

ruling coalition. Rajapakse, who is notorious for his autocratic methods of rule, is preparing right-wing forces and stirring up communalism in his bid to come to power and brutally suppress the working class.

None of the establishment parties—government and opposition—including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), are opposed to the IMF-dictated austerity agenda or the suppression of the democratic rights of working people. The JVP has already bowed to the government’s “request” and announced it will not “obstruct Wesak” by holding May Day on May 1. It has also declared that it will address a rally in Jaffna, in a calculated provocation to stir up communal animosity.

On March 28, the propaganda secretary of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), Pubudu Jayagoda, called on all “progressive forces” to unite and “force the government” to lift the May Day shutdown. The FSP is posturing as a militant opponent of the government as it seeks to cobble together an alliance of pseudo-left organisations to block any independent political mobilisation of the working class.

May 1 was declared International Labour Day by the Second International when it convened in Paris in 1889 during the centenary year of the French Revolution. It was to commemorate the struggle for the eight-hour day by American workers in Chicago in 1886 and their bloody suppression. The celebrations were not contingent on whether May 1 fell on a holiday or a working day, or had the consent of employers or the government of the day.

The first May Day celebration in Sri Lanka was held in 1927 by the trade union movement led by A.E. Gunasinghe. When Gunasinghe defended British colonial rule against the opposition of the working class, amid the crisis created by the Great Depression, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) organised the first May Day rally in 1936 on a broad socialist program.

The political degeneration and backsliding of the LSSP after formal independence from Britain in 1948 was expressed in their adaptation to the Sinhala supremacism of the SLFP. It helped the bourgeois SLFP government of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike take office in 1956 and in return that government made May 1 a holiday. In 1964, the LSSP openly betrayed the principles of socialist internationalism expressed in

May Day and joined the SLFP government of Madame Bandaranaike—a move that ultimately led to the island’s bloody 30-year civil war, which erupted in 1983.

Governments repeatedly used the war as a means to suppress any struggle by the working class. May Day was banned on two occasions—first by President J. R. Jayewardene in 1987. Then in 2006, as Rajapakse prepared to break a ceasefire and resume hostilities, he “appealed” for May Day rallies not to be held, citing “security reasons.”

In both instances, politically advanced sections of the working class and the oppressed defied those bans and held public rallies on May 1. In 1987, the Revolutionary Communist League, the precursor of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), took the initiative to defend the right of workers to celebrate May Day.

This year May Day comes amid intense geo-political tensions and the growing dangers of world war, epitomised by the latest US-led missile strikes on Syria that threaten to trigger a conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. At the same time, there is a growing radicalisation and movement of workers and youth opposed to war, as well as attacks on social and democratic rights.

The urgent task confronting workers around the world, whether in advanced or backward countries like Sri Lanka, is the building of a unified international anti-war movement of the working class to abolish capitalism and reconstruct society along socialist lines. On that basis, we call on workers and youth to attend the May Day rally organised by the SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

Long live the May 1, International Labour Day!
Build the internationalist revolutionary party for world socialism!



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