

Oppose the Sri Lankan government's ban on May Day celebrations

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
25 April 2018

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) strongly condemns the Sri Lankan government's cancellation of May Day meetings and rallies scheduled for May 1, which amounts to an effective ban on marking the international workers' day.

The SEP vehemently opposes the government's decision to prevent it, as well as several trade unions and other organisations, from holding May Day events. This is a frontal attack on the democratic rights of the working class.

We call on all workers, oppressed people, youth, students and intellectuals to join the SEP in protesting against this blatant attack on a constitutional right enjoyed by the working people of Sri Lanka for more than three quarters of a century.

The SEP made the necessary payment to the Colombo Municipal Council to reserve the New Town Hall for its May 1 public meeting. The party also obtained police permission for the meeting, as required by the law. On Monday, however, the SEP received an undated letter from Acting Municipal Commissioner, Engineer L. R. L. Wickremaratne, cancelling the allocation of the Town Hall for our meeting.

Wickremaratne noted in his letter that as "the government decided to cancel May Day meetings on May 1, heeding a request by Chief Buddhist sangha (clergy)," the municipal council also decided not to allow meetings at its premises.

Other organisations that have planned May Day events on May 1 have come under similar attack. They are an alliance of 14 trade unions, including the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, Ceylon Mercantile Industrial & General Workers Union, Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union, Ceylon Estate Staff Union, Ceylon Teachers Union and Federation of Media Employees Trade Union, as well as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).

The government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe early this month cancelled the May Day public holiday, heeding a "request" by Buddhist chiefs not to permit working-class activities on that day because it falls on "Wesak Week," a traditional

Buddhist holy festival. Accordingly, the government arbitrarily shifted the May Day holiday to May 7.

* The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) demand that the government and other authorities rescind this effective ban on May Day, imposed by cancelling facilities for meetings and rallies on May 1.

* We warn the working class that the government's decision to sabotage May Day is an indication of the wholesale attack being prepared by the government to tear up the democratic and social rights of the working people and youth.

The ban is an extension of the anti-democratic offensive already waged by this capitalist government through attacks on peaceful demonstrations and legitimate protest actions by students, unemployed youth and rural poor. The government also has shown its viciousness against workers' struggles by using the military as scabs to break strikes.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is determined to use the full force of the bourgeois state to crush the hard-won democratic rights of the working people, in order to implement the socially counter-revolutionary measures demanded by imperialist finance capital.

The government's imposition of the Buddhist hierarchy's so-called request to block workers' rights to hold May Day celebrations is completely illegal and unconstitutional. The constitution says, at least in name, that all citizens and their organisations are equal before the law, while guaranteeing them freedom of expression and assembly. The government's actions clearly discriminate against all non-Buddhists and atheists, and violate their fundamental rights.

The government's move to bar any mobilisation of the working class and the oppressed stems from the fear that it would deepen the already festering political crisis of capitalist rule. The ruling coalition headed by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe is in tatters.

The growing opposition of the masses to the government was sharply expressed in the local council elections, held in February, where the United National Party (UNP) of

Wickremesinghe and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Sirisena, both lost their vote base. The gains were made by the rival Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse. This was not because of any popular approval of Rajapakse, who was defeated three years ago, but because of the widespread hostility toward the present administration.

On a daily basis, protest actions of different sections of workers, students, farmers and professionals, and oppressed Tamils in the north, continue to erupt, objectively challenging the whole political establishment. Most significantly, these struggles across the island coincide with an international offensive of the working class, propelled by the systemic crisis of world capitalism, affecting class relations and political stability in every country.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is preparing to impose further ruthless attacks, dictated by the International Monetary Fund, on the social conditions of the working people. It is pushing for immediate price increases on fuel and electricity that will have a chain effect on the cost of all essentials. The government must pay foreign debts totalling \$US2.9 billion this year and \$4.9 billion next year, and the price will be extracted from workers and the poor.

The government is aware that these attacks will trigger waves of struggles that cannot be curbed without unleashing the full force of the military that was used in the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. From this flows the government's decisions to do away with all the basic democratic rights of the working people. As part of moves toward the establishment of a military police-state, the government is engaged in discussions with Facebook to establish an office in Colombo to curb social media.

Successive governments since formal independence in 1948 have resorted to anti-Tamil discrimination to divide workers along ethnic lines when the ruling class faced political crises. Such actions included abolishing plantation workers' citizenship rights in 1948 and making Sinhala the only official language in 1956. In 1972, a coalition government led by the bourgeois SLFP, joined by the former Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party, gave the foremost place in the constitution to the Buddhist religion.

Since then systematic provocations have taken place, triggering the anti-Tamil war in 1983 that continued for nearly 30 years. Although Rajapakse militarily won the war in May 2009, communal provocations did not stop. Instead, extremist Buddhist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena, Ravana Balakaya and Mahasohon Balakaya, have been nurtured, unleashing terror against Muslims as well as Tamils.

The UNP, SLFP and Rajapakse-led SLPP are competing with each other to win the favour of the Buddhist hierarchy,

giving it substantial bribes to obtain its blessings and to receive its "advice" on how to use a religious cover for the anti-democratic and anti-social acts of the ruling capitalist class.

The May Day celebration, established by Socialist International in 1889, is a fundamental democratic right of the international working class. The Sri Lankan working class has observed this day as a right for decades. The government's attack has far-reaching reactionary consequences and must be defeated with all the political strength of the working people and youth.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and the IYSSE call for the strongest mobilisation of workers, poor, youth, students and members of the intelligentsia and professionals to join a public picket in front of the Colombo Fort Railway Station at 4 p.m. on Friday April 27.

The SEP insists that the government's attack on May Day has demonstrated, once again, the unavoidable necessity for the working class to break from every faction of the capitalist class, and lead the oppressed, on the basis of an international socialist program, for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government. This is the only way to defend the democratic and social rights of the working people and prevent capitalist dictatorship and the threat of a Third World War being prepared by the imperialist powers.



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