

SEP and IYSSE demonstrate against Sri Lankan government's May Day ban

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) picketed the Colombo Fort railway station last Friday afternoon against the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's May Day ban.

The government barred meetings on May Day, claiming to be acting in response to a "request" from leading Buddhist monks who did not want May Day celebrations to be held during the "Wesak" week, a holy Buddhist festival. The government also cancelled the scheduled May 1 public holiday and directed the Colombo Municipal Council to deny access to halls for May Day rallies and demonstrations.

The council informed the SEP last Monday that the party's scheduled booking of Colombo New Town Hall for its May Day public meeting had been cancelled. As required by law, the SEP had applied for, and been given, police permission for the event.

Almost one hundred SEP and IYSSE members and supporters participated in Friday's picket, denouncing the government ban and other anti-democratic attacks. This included a substantial number of Tamil-speaking people from the war-ravaged Jaffna Peninsula and plantation workers from central Sri Lanka.

The demonstration, which lasted for about an hour, attracted the attention and interest of workers and youths returning from work and studies. SEP/IYSSE campaigners distributed hundreds of Sinhala- and Tamil-language copies of the SEP statement "Oppose the Sri Lankan government's ban on May Day celebrations."

Pickersets chanted slogans opposing the government's social austerity measures and called for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program. While a police team was sent to the railway station, it did not attempt to block the

demonstration, fearing this could trigger wider opposition from workers and youth already angered by the May Day ban.

Journalists from the Sinhala-daily *Rivira* and the Tamil-daily newspaper *Virakesari* covered the picket. On Saturday, *Thinakkural*, another Tamil daily, published a front page report on the protest and the ban on the SEP's May Day meeting. The event was broadcast live on Facebook and watched by some 60 people as it occurred. By Sunday, it had received several hundred views.

SEP Political Committee member and WSWs national editor K. Ratnayake addressed Friday's protest. His remarks were translated into Tamil by SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah.

Ratnayake rejected the government ban, declaring: "Neither this government, nor the bourgeois ruling class and Buddhist establishment have any right to change May Day or obstruct May Day celebrations on May 1. It is none of their business."

The real reason for the government decision, Ratnayake explained, was its fear that May Day could become a "rebellious expression" of the mounting popular anger to its social austerity measures. "The ruling class in Sri Lanka is terrified about an independent intervention and political movement of the working class," he said.

Ratnayake told the demonstration this year's May Day occurred under conditions of a growing crisis of world capitalism, intensification of imperialist war and counter-revolutionary social measures, but also the emergence of working-class struggles internationally.

"The working class and youth in Sri Lanka," he said, must dedicate this May Day to "clarifying what should be their own strategy to oppose imperialist war and the destruction of their social and democratic rights. This

government is attempting to prevent this clarification by banning our May Day.”

The ruling class attacks, he warned, could not be reversed by futile appeals to the imperialist powers and their lackeys in Sri Lanka and India, as claimed by various opportunist organisations such as the Frontline Socialist Party, the United Socialist Party and the Nava Sama Samaja Party.

“The working class in Sri Lanka, in unity with its international class brothers and sisters, must stand up on the basis of the program of international socialism against imperialist war and destruction of social rights.”

Ratnayake concluded by urging all participants to register for the International Online May Day Rally organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 5 and to gather near New Town Hall at 3 p.m. on May 1 for another SEP protest against the May Day ban.

Shashika, a paintwork supervisor from Homagama, participated in Friday’s picket. “May Day is workers’ day so this ban is a grave attack on workers,” he told the WWS. “Under the current economic conditions, the ruling class has nothing to offer for the working class other than those attacks.

“The capitalist class treats us workers like slaves. But those slaves can win by driving the capitalist class down. Through the labour of workers, the capitalists further enrich themselves. I believe that the working class can make conditions better in this country and worldwide, and so I fully support your struggle and call upon others to do so.”



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