

SEP (Sri Lanka) holds successful May Day meeting in Colombo, despite government efforts to bar celebrations

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful May Day meeting at the New Town Hall in Colombo on the afternoon of May 1. The meeting's theme was "The rising wave of international class struggle and the fight for socialism."

Some 200 workers, students, youth, professionals and housewives, including SEP members and supporters from areas throughout the island, including war-ravaged Jaffna peninsula, attended the meeting, despite the government's efforts to exploit the Easter terror attacks by banning any May Day celebrations.

Following the April 21 terrorist bombings, which claimed hundreds of lives, President Maithripala Sirisena imposed draconian emergency regulations granting sweeping powers to the country's police and armed forces to arrest and detain civilians.

A hysterical campaign is now underway to intimidate workers and the poor, who have carried out strikes and protests over the past year against the government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

As part of this campaign, the government "appealed" for May Day rallies and marches, not to be held, "considering the security situation" within the country. Accordingly, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), former President Mahinda Rajapakse's Podujana Peramuna, the Tamil National Alliance and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) cancelled their earlier scheduled marches and rallies; while the SLFP and JVP held gatherings behind closed doors. As for the pseudo-left, they simply abandoned their planned marches and rallies. One, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), confined its celebration to a demonstration in front of the Colombo Fort railway station.

The SEP's meeting was chaired by K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP Political Committee and WSWs national editor. He sent revolutionary greetings to the SEP's sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world, and saluted those workers and the poor engaged in courageous struggles internationally against attacks on their basic rights. Ratnayake referred to the struggles underway during May Day 2019 in the US, Poland, Algeria, India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

"This wave of rising class struggle refutes the claims by the ruling elites and their pseudo-left and post-modernist lackeys that

neither the working class nor its revolutionary role still exist, and socialism now has no support." Contrary to these claims, interest in socialism is once again on the rise, and the response of the ruling classes has been to turn towards dictatorial forms of rule, including fascism.

Ratnayake stressed that Sri Lankan President Sirisena had also turned towards police state rule in Sri Lanka after the April 21 bomb attacks, and warned. "The working class must decisively intervene into the political situation, unite with its international class brothers and sisters, and advance its struggle for socialist policies."

He urged the audience to participate in the International Online May Day rally to be held on May 4–5, organised by the ICFI.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris explained the working class everywhere was entering into struggles as social inequality soars to unprecedented dimensions. She pointed to record military spending, and the draconian measures being implemented under the country's emergency laws, including labelling striking workers as "terrorists."

Peiris exposed the pernicious role of the various pseudo-left organisations, which had sought to save the ruling class. "An FSP leader, Duminda Nagamuwa, suggested that, instead of passing the new anti-terror bill, the government could utilise the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). He insisted that the PTA had enough powers to repress any extremist groups, while also admitting that it had been used to repress the masses. This is how these layers tacitly support the ruling class."

Kapila Fernando, SEP political committee member and IYSSE convener, explained that mankind was entering a new era. As the founder of scientific socialism Karl Marx had analysed, "the history of mankind is the history of class struggle." As long ago as 1988, the ICFI anticipated that the class struggle would become international, not only in content but also in its form. The new wave of working class struggles underscored this fact.

The meeting's main speaker was Wije Dias, SEP general secretary and member of the WSWs international editorial board. He began by drawing the attention of the audience to the perspective statement published on the WSWs on January 3, 2019, under the heading "The strategy of international class struggle and the political fight against capitalist reaction in 2019." Dias quoted from the document.

“Last week, we experienced in Sri Lanka a very sharp expression of the fundamental features of the world situation, outlined in that perspective document. The bourgeois government of president Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremasinghe has begun to use the horrible terrorist attack waged by a local extremist Muslim organization, financed and directed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to feverishly build up the military—police apparatus, out of fear of the developing class struggles of workers, rural poor and students,” Dias said.

“Last year the government used the Wesak celebrations of the Buddhists to cancel all meeting hall and park bookings for May Day 2018. This year it has used the more murderous incidents, which killed nearly 300 men, women and children and seriously injured more than 500, to remove the right to celebrate May Day, a right the working class of this country won through many years of struggle, beginning in the days of British colonial rule.

“We are proud to state that the SEP members and supporters rallied to the call to defy the government’s “requests” and publicly hold our May Day, outside this hall, last year and inside the same hall this year.

“This is in contrast to all the Stalinist, Social Democratic and pseudo left parties, which heeded the government’s call to participate in an all party conference, the purpose of which was to approve all the repressive laws and practical anti-democratic measures against the workers and oppressed people of all communities,” Dias stressed.

As a revolutionary party, the SEP considered May Day as an occasion to look back and see how far our perspective and program has been in line with objective world developments, and how realistic have been the revolutionary tasks we have undertaken in relation to the development of the class struggle. This is essential, in order to take the necessary steps to advance our party work to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Dias reviewed the aggravation of the world capitalist crisis, since the collapse of the world’s banking system in 2008 and the downward revisions of economic growth in every country. The many measures adopted by the World Bank and IMF had failed to create any recovery in the capitalist economy. Even the savage austerity measures adopted by bourgeois governments had not succeeded in encouraging investors. And this was impelling the ruling elites to resort to fascism and military rule.

But the working class struggles was intervening, Dias said, arousing a supportive response from middle class layers, as in France with the Yellow Vest movement. The Matamoros workers in Mexico took powerful strike action, while millions of Indian public sector workers launched a strike, breaking out of the pro-capitalist perspective of the two Stalinist Communist parties and union bureaucracies there. In Sri Lanka 100,000 plantation workers launched a struggle for a 100 percent wage increase. Many sections of the middle class, small shop keepers and university students held a 10,000-strong rally to support this plantation strike.

Workers were beginning to defy the trade unions and break from them, in order to organize independent rank and file committees or action committees, Dias explained.

At the same time, all the sections of the ICFI were fighting to develop a global, socialist anti-war movement, Dias declared, emphasizing that “No country can escape the malignant repercussions of the strategy of world war being pursued by the imperialist countries, particularly the US. With the coming to power of Donald Trump, the US war machine is directed more and more against China. US military relations with India and Sri Lanka have taken giant strides in this reactionary project.

Dias pointed out that the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government was now taking advantage of the terrorist bombings to develop even closer relations with Washington and the US military machine. An FBI team was already in the country, to further develop government relations with the US military machine under the pretext of helping the terrorist investigations.

All the findings, Dias said, from investigations and comments by officials, revealed that the government knew about the attacks well in advance. They were directed by ISIS operatives, who spread themselves to different parts of the world after their defeat in Syria, and likely with the knowledge of the US.

It was highly likely that the government, as well as its masters in Washington, had consciously planned for a provocation in order to divert the working class towards communal carnage.

Wije Dias concluded, “These criminal acts raise, once again, the necessity of building the SEP as a mass party, to mobilise the working class, independent of all factions of the capitalist parties. This task requires an intransigent struggle against all the old “left” parties as well as those of the pseudo-left, and groups that seek to block the independent political path of the working class as the leader of the rural poor and youth of all communities.

“The perspective of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally, is the only viable program to assert the social and democratic rights of the people. The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, is the only party that fights for that program.”

After the speeches, the audience unanimously approved a resolution issued by the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee in Sri Lanka’s central tea plantation district, to support the international campaign for the release of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, both now in jail for their courageous work in exposing the war crimes carried out by imperialist countries, including the US.

Expressing its powerful support for, and interest in, the international socialist program and perspective of the SEP, the audience donated over 33,000 rupees (\$US190) for the SEP’s party building fund. The enthusiastic gathering also purchased over 5,400 rupees in party literature. The meeting concluded with the singing of the “Internationale.”



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